

# HEROES OR CRIMINALS



*Gabriel Timar*

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by

**GABRIEL TIMAR**

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Although this novel is a work of fiction, some of the episodes are similar to actual events, and placed in the vicinity where they occurred. However, the names of the communities were altered. The characters are fictional and any resemblance to people living or dead is purely coincidental.

## Chapter One

Although the troopship U.S.S. Charleston docked in San Diego just after sunrise, the disembarkation of the Marine Battalion began only after 11 o'clock. The weather was pleasant in the spring of 1939, much better than the climate the marines had to endure at their last duty-station. There was quite a crowd at the wharf, relatives awaiting the return of their sons, husbands, or fathers, while others just came for the spectacle of a parade. They were not disappointed. The parade impressed everybody, as nobody marches better than the Marines do.

Following the City of San Diego Police Marching Band, the battalion left the wharf. After the crowd dispersed, the longshoremen began unloading the ship's cargo. Two armed sailors and a petty officer led young Mark Kende handcuffed from the brig to the bottom of the gangplank. His uniform stripped of all Marine Corps insignia looked strange; even the buttons were civilian. Another sailor, carrying his duffel bag, dumped it on the ground. The petty officer removed the handcuffs, then handed Mark an envelope containing his wristwatch, money, and other personal effects.

"Good luck, son," the old sailor said. He was pointing at the duffel bag and the gate leading to the street.

Mark was deeply hurt. The navy should have had the decency of having fellow marines escorting him off the ship. He crossed the roadway, fuming.

At the gate, a familiar figure, his mother was waiting and waving frantically. Mark wondered how she found out that he was coming home.

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Despite their ancient Hungarian name, the Kende family was not rich in the early nineteenth century. Capitalizing on the fact of their name implying aristocratic

origins, the Kendes managed to get into the military easily. Most of them had become cavalry officers and had successful careers.

Near the turn of the century, the family still could not boast great generals, scientists, scholars, or politicians apart from Francis. Although his career was undistinguished, after reaching the sublime rank of colonel in the Fifth Hussars and fathering three sons, he retired to a small house in Grinzing, on the outskirts of Vienna, and decided to have a good time. A widower, he managed to live quite well, supplementing his pension and the income from the estate through his second favorite pastime: training horses for dressage. However, his first favorite pastime was the chasing of women in the imperial court and the theatres of Vienna.

Society overlooked the gallant adventures of the colonel, but his death raised many eyebrows in high society.

The mystery surrounding Francis' passing instantly became the main topic of conversation in the ladies' coffee circuit, meeting regularly in the shadow of the Burg, the Imperial Palace. In the lavish cafés on Kartner Strasse, the ladies talked about the demise of Francis.

"Can you imagine Colonel Kende dying in the bedchambers of Angelica, Doctor Deroff's twenty-year-old daughter?" the widow of Major Waldhoffer told her friends in the Café of the Hotel Sacher, sitting just under the crystal chandelier across the ornate Venetian mirror.

"If my memory serves me right, he was sixty-five years old," Mrs. Schoenfeld, the wife of a bank manager replied, while picking at the Sachertorte with her fork.

Mrs. Waldhoffer remarked with a sardonic smile, "You ought to know, my dear."

"Angelica was an artist. Francis' appreciation of fine arts, old wine, and young women was well known. Imag-

ine, he tried to seduce my cousin, Sonja,” Erica Lang, the retired headmistress of an exclusive girls’ school added.

Anybody could seduce her, Mrs. Waldhoffer thought while thoughtfully sipping her coffee. She smiled and declared, “According to Mrs. Deroff, the colonel wished to view the etchings of her daughter. Francis was known for sponsoring budding female artists.”

“Very nice of him,” Mrs. Schoenfeld said.

“He always had something else in mind, I’m sure. Actually, he was not rich enough to support an artist very long,” Mrs. Waldhoffer suggested.

“Maybe,” Erica Lang added.

“When they took him to the undertaker, Francis wore full dress uniform, but for some unknown reason, he removed his boots,” Mrs. Schoenfeld said.

“It is not a pre-requisite of art appreciation,” Erica Lang remarked.

“I think some hanky-panky was going on in the bedchambers besides the viewing of the etchings,” Mrs. Waldhoffer said. She smiled meaningfully.

The plot thickened. On the following week, the colonel’s obituary appeared in the papers, and the three friends discussed the matter further over their coffee and Schwartzwalder cakes.

“According to my maid, Putzy the undertaker took the body for embalming, removed the colonel’s uniform, and found Francis not wearing underpants,” Mrs. Schoenfeld said.

“Where did she hear that?” Erica Lang asked. “I know the mortician, Herr Stauss well. He is a discreet person, even if it were true, he would not have divulged it.”

“It is hard to believe an officer going out in a January snowstorm wearing full dress uniform and greatcoat, but no underpants,” Mrs. Waldhoffer mused.

“I’m sure it is true. Putzy is most reliable. She’s second cousin to the undertaker’s assistant. I’m sure he mentioned the lack of underwear because he knew Putzy would keep it a secret. Of course she mentioned it only to me, because she knew I would not gossip,” Mrs. Schoenfeld said.

The controversy reached the tabloids; arguments raged about the underwear and the boots, but eventually, the ladies’ coffeehouse circuit accepted the contrived explanations of Angelica’s parents.

“One cannot doubt the word of a respected physician of the Emperor, like Doctor Deroff,” Erica Lang declared.

“Regardless, I have doubts about the virtue of Angelica,” Mrs. Waldhoffer mused.

Although the storm over the boots and the underwear subsided, the circumstances surrounding Francis’ death became the most enduring legend within the family.

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Francis’ only son, Istvan, started his adult life as an officer-cadet in the Fifth Hussars. He distinguished himself in the battle of Koenigraetz, and the commander of the regiment promoted him to captain. Although he figured on Kende eventually becoming a general, he was disappointed when the handsome captain retired early, in order to marry his sweetheart, a beautiful chorus girl at the Orfeum.

As the captain’s pension was just enough to keep them from starvation, Istvan took on a rather lowly regarded but well paid civilian job, becoming the trail-boss of cattle herders conveying the beasts from the Great Hungarian Plains to the Viennese market. After two or three trips, Istvan decided to go into business for himself. He borrowed money, bought the cattle, delivered, and

sold them to the Austrian slaughterhouses. He was wildly successful.

Istvan had a secret: he drove the herd almost to the gates of the city, stopped for the night, treated the cattle to rock salt, and in the morning gave them as much water as they could drink. As he sold the beasts by weight, in a couple of years Istvan Kende became a rich man. However, he did not rest on his laurels. He bought a large tract of land on the plains of Hortobagy and started raising his own cattle.

In the early twentieth century, the economy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was booming. The beef was a much sought after commodity within the country and abroad. The high quality Kende cattle found its way to the markets in every corner of Europe.

The couple had two sons: Zoltan and the younger Endre. The elder wanted to get into the military, and after graduating from the Moravske Budejovice Military Academy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, he started his professional career as a lieutenant of the Fifth Hussars. Endre shocked his father, declaring that he wanted to be a priest. Now Istvan Kende had a problem.

“As my older son wants to become the supreme commander of the army and the younger, the Pope, I’ve nobody left to run the family business after I die,” he said to his wife.

Therefore, he converted all his assets into shares of the world’s best industrial corporations, and placed everything into perpetual trust managed by a Swiss banker, the co-owner of the Julius Bauer organization, the most distinguished private bank in Switzerland. The so-called Kende Enterprises Trust invested in industrial ventures in Britain, Sweden, Germany, Switzerland, France, and the USA.

According to popular belief, cavalry officers, especially the rich ones, were habitual drinkers and womanizers. The communist government promoted this image in the late twentieth century. In fact, most Hungarian army officers came from the lower middle classes. By virtue of their training, which began at the age of ten, most of these youngsters became dedicated professionals. Undeniably, there were exceptions.

Although he was rich, Zoltan Kende lived the Spartan life of a professional soldier. Being a sober, thinking person, his commanders believed he was destined for Staff College and later to the small, select group of generals. He fought with distinction throughout the Great War, and when it was over, he managed to stay in the army as the Commander of the First Battalion in the Fifth Husars. Just before the death of his father, Zoltan married the fiery, highly educated, artistic Angela Knezits, the daughter of a rich landowner, having vineyards in the vicinity of Eger. Their only son, Mark, was born in 1921.

Becoming a father changed Major Zoltan Kende. Standing over the baby's crib, he remarked, "I'd better be more careful, take fewer chances in show jumping and at the ski slopes."

"You'd be heartbroken if you didn't risk your neck a couple of times a day," Angela replied. "Why do you want to take it easy all of a sudden?"

"Because I want to be around to bring up my son the right way, carrying on the proud traditions of the family."

"Don't worry, if something happened to you, I'd make sure little Mark grows up to be a man like his father. I promise," Angela said. She affectionally kissed her husband.

"Thank you, darling, life is not worth living without taking a few chances."

A week later Zoltan cracked a couple of ribs when he fell from his horse in a cross-country race.

“Perhaps you were right, darling,” Angela consoled her ailing husband. “You ought to take it easy.”

Actually, the boy turned out exactly as they wished. Young Mark or Marcus as his mother called him was an intelligent, studious child, learning to speak German fluently from his Austrian nanny by the time he started school.

Growing up in the married officers’ quarters of the Franz Joseph Cavalry Barracks in Budapest, the home of the Fifth Hussars, Mark’s playmates were not the children of the other officers, but the cavalrymen, especially the sergeants. They treated little Mark like a prince. By the age of six, he learned to ride better than the average hussar did, and a couple of years later, he could dismantle the Manlicher carbine blindfolded. His marksmanship became legendary; the sergeants teased their hussars with the nine-year-old prodigy on the firing range.

In addition, Mark knew more about the deeds of the Fifth Hussars than the official chronicler of the Regiment. From the age of four, he used to sneak out of his bedroom and stand behind the heavy brocade curtains of his father’s study, listening to the conversations of Zoltan Kende and his brother officers. Mark knew how far he could push his luck, and the family never caught him.

His favorite story was the one his father told his friends with gusto. “Early in my career, I was on maneuvers with my hussars in a God-forsaken corner of the country. The village where we billeted had only one house good enough to accommodate an officer. Its owner, the widow of the postmaster, supplemented her meager pension by renting two rooms to transient gentlemen. I lived in one of the rooms while a musician took the other. The fellow played a variety of instruments at all

hours of the day and night. After returning from the tiring exercises, I often asked the guy not to play late into the night, but he brusquely replied, 'I'm a professional musician, sir, I must practice.' I was lost for an answer."

"Was there any way of dissuading him from playing his instruments after dark?" one of the guests asked.

"I tried everything, but to no avail. Therefore, I decided to retaliate. At three in the morning, when everyone in the house was sound asleep, I quietly got up, took my service revolver, sneaked outside to the window of my musician neighbor, and fired all six bullets into the flowerbeds."

"Wow! That was brutal!"

"It was. The maestro woke up and screaming from the top of his lungs, abused me, but I just smiled and quietly remarked, 'I'm a professional soldier, sir; I must practice too.' He was lost for an answer."

"I bet you, from there on he was careful and stopped his practice at sunset," one of the guests said.

"Damn right! He even told the landlady that I scared him, saying that one never knows what those crazy hussars might do," Kende finished the story.

Apart from listening to the tales of the Fifth Hussars, Mark took his schoolwork seriously. When he was in grade three, his parents enrolled him in the best elementary school in downtown Budapest. At the age of eight, when most parents escort their children, Mark took the streetcar for the half hour ride to the top elementary school in the country on his own every morning. He was an honors student, actually the top of the class.

As it was the norm with families having military traditions, when Mark became ten years old, he enrolled in the Koszeg Military School. It was the first step to becoming a regular officer in the Royal Hungarian Army.

The strict discipline and the harsh treatment by the upperclassmen did not bother Mark. He took to the new lifestyle like duck to water. In fact, he enjoyed the way of life at Koszeg. During the first furlough near the Christmas of 1931, wearing his brand new blue uniform, Mark proudly strutted in the parade grounds of the Franz Joseph Barracks. He made a point of reporting as a proper soldier to his former playmates, the sergeants. Everybody who knew him was sure of Mark eventually becoming an officer in the Fifth Hussars.

Although only a child, Mark noticed tension at home. His father was morose, apparently having a lot on his mind. He argued with his wife often, and neglected the man-to-man talks with Mark, which the youngster had enjoyed very much. When the Christmas vacation passed, Mark returned to the military school with a heavy heart, sensing something wrong at home.

At the end of the first semester, he topped the class and earned the distinguishing two gold stripes and two buttons on the collar of his jacket. At the end of the academic year, Mark returned to Budapest for the summer vacation. From the railway station, his mother did not take him to the cavalry barracks; instead, they went to an elegant apartment on the west side of the Danube. As they entered the building, Mark asked his mother what happened, why they moved out of the cavalry base.

“A lot of things have changed recently, Marcus. You’re not going back to Koszeg.”

“Why?” he asked. The question sounded like an explosion. “I like it there! Besides, how am I going to be an officer if I have to study in a miserable civilian school?”

“Marcus, your father decided to move to America,” Angela Kende explained patiently. “We are taking a ship next month.”

“Why?” Mark cried out. “Why can’t we stay here? Did Dad leave the army?”

“Yes, Marcus, he left the army. He went to the United States, bought a ranch to raise and train horses. He thought it would be better for all of us to live in America.”

“Then, how am I going to become a cavalry officer?”

“There is an army in the U.S., Marcus. You could be an officer in the American Army. I’m sure they have a good cavalry too.”

“They cannot be as good as the Fifth Hussars,” Mark replied with conviction.

“Perhaps you’re destined to make them as good as your father’s old regiment was. In fact, I’m sure you’ll make a fine American general someday.”

Mrs. Kende spent several hours trying to placate her distraught son. She was not very successful. For the first time in his life, Mark cried himself to sleep.

Although Mrs. Kende quietly packed up Mark’s uniform, sending it back to the Koszeg Military Institute, she made sure Mark’s white (summer) dress uniform, made-to-measure, stayed in the closet. She intentionally forgot to return Mark’s military ID card to ease the boy’s transition from cadet to civilian. Until they departed for America, Mark could wear his beloved uniform.

In mid-July, the S.S. Ivernia docked in New York. When Mark and his mother got off the ship, Zoltan Kende was waiting for them. Although he wore civilian clothes and riding boots, his military bearing betrayed the former officer. He still looked like an officer in the cavalry.

They got into a brand new Ford station wagon. In a couple of hours, they reached their new home: the Golden Saddle Ranch just outside White Plains in New York State.

Mark read the sign over the entrance and asked, "What does it mean, Father?"

"Golden Saddle is the name I chose for the ranch. Here we raise and train horses, Marcus. We are also renting mounts to people."

"Did you buy many horses?" Mark asked.

"I did, and we are getting a few more as soon as we finished building the new stable."

"Who is going to look after the horses?"

"I hired a few former cavalrymen. They are experts," Zoltan Kende replied. His son's questions amused him.

"Where do you ride?"

"We have several riding trails where the customers might prove to themselves that they could remain in the saddle irrespective of the terrain. A so-called trail-master leads them through the course. When you learn English well enough, I'll give you a job. You can be a trail-master."

"That will be great, Dad. I promise I'll learn fast."

"Every one of the pathways ends on a large, flat, green pasture. There the trail-masters might permit the customers to gallop their horses."

"That is a very good idea, Father."

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As it was very lucrative, Zoltan Kende also trained horses for dressage and show jumping. The Golden Saddle Ranch was a well-thought-out, moneymaking enterprise catering to the rich upper crust of New York State's society.

For the rest of the summer Mark was happy, as he could ride as much as he wanted. In a few weeks, Zoltan made him a trail-master to guide the customers through a variety of twisting pathways. Since the stable boys and

the ranch hands spoke only English, by the end of the summer, Mark picked up the language.

In the fall, Mrs. Kende packed up her son and took him to a boarding school near the City of New York. After much haggling, the teachers settled Mark into grade five, one year lower than he was supposed to be by age. However, before Christmas, the principal transferred him into grade six.

For a while, the other kids teased Mark because of his accent and did not accept him as an equal. The minor conflicts escalated into a spirited fistfight, Mark taking on three of his classmates at the same time. The outcome was never in doubt: Mark lost. When one of the teachers, Mr. Wessel tried to find out where Mark got the black eye and the bruised knuckles, the boy insisted he fell on the stairs leading to the dormitories.

The teacher realized that Mark has been in a fight and lost, but stubbornly refused to name the other parties involved. The youngster accepted the appropriate punishment rather than identifying his opponents. His toughness endeared him to the others and from that day, the class accepted him as an equal.

Although the English language was his weakness, by the end of the academic year, he earned a B-minus. In the other subjects, he soon took his customary position at the top of the class.

Mark made the football team as well. First, he was a running back, but it did not satisfy him. He yearned for the position of quarterback, wanting to become a leader. However, he never made it because his passing was not accurate enough. Later, as he grew too big, too strong, and too fast for anything else, he became a linebacker and the undisputed leader of the defense. His friends got him interested in automobiles and motorbikes. One of

his classmates often lent his bike to Mark for a little practice. Eventually, he learned to ride it.

Mark always spent the weekends and the school holidays at home on the Golden Saddle ranch. His father decided to train him for show jumping. For a while, the boy enjoyed it, but when he realized being too big and heavy, he lost interest in equestrian contests. Besides, his love for cars and motorcycles was growing rapidly.

A frightful row followed. Zoltan Kende wanted his son to become a champion rider regardless of his size, but Mark was not interested. In the end, Zoltan gave his son a solid thrashing. When it was over, he asked Mark, "Do you know why I beat you?"

"Yes, sir," Mark replied, "because I do not want to do any show jumping."

"No." Zoltan shook his head. "It was because you disappointed me. I respect your wishes. I'll not force you to train for show jumping. If you want those mechanical monstrosities, so be it. I'll get you a motorcycle and want you to become the best motorcycle rider ever. In fact, I don't care what you want to do, as long as you're the best at it."

As promised, Zoltan bought his son an Indian motorcycle as soon as Mark was old enough to ride it on the public roads.

Dealing with the fair sex was not exactly Mark's forte. He was shy in the company of girls, and despite the efforts of a dancing instructor, he became a bad dancer. The school he attended was for boys only, and he seldom had an opportunity to meet young ladies.

In the spring of 1938, after taking a particularly large group with a number of unruly children through the most difficult trail, he decided to go to town and meet his buddies in the Starlight Café, a little diner halfway between the Golden Saddle and the city.

Mark got on his motorcycle and started out. A couple of miles from the ranch, he noticed an elegant car standing by the roadside and the lady driver signaling him to stop. He immediately recognized Mrs. Bergman, one of their customers.

“Can I help you, Mrs. Bergman?” Mark asked politely.

“I hope so. This monster quit on me. Can you fix it?”

Any man, irrespective of age, training, or profession pretends to know something about cars. Mark was no exception. However, when he looked under the hood, he was completely lost.

“I cannot repair it, Mrs. Bergman, but if you don’t mind the jump seat, I can give you a ride to the nearest garage.”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate it,” the woman said. Without much ado, she climbed on board. She hugged him tight; during the ride, she appeared to be frightened.

At the garage, Mrs. Bergman talked to the mechanic, gave him the key to her car, and returned to Mark.

“I don’t want to impose on you, Mark, but the garage has no spare vehicle to loan me until they fix mine. Could you take me home?”

“With pleasure,” Mark said happily. It was nice having a woman on his bike holding him tight.

Mrs. Bergman again climbed on the jump seat, and directed Mark to an elegant apartment building in the heart of the city.

“This is it. I don’t know about you, but my throat is completely dry. Why don’t you come up and have something cold to drink?” Mrs. Bergman asked.

Mark’s throat was also dry, and the prospect of having a drink with a distinguished lady made him feel good. The elegant, middle-aged woman did not treat him like a

child. Perhaps she behaved this way in the company of a grown man. He never experienced anything like this before.

In the apartment, she had Mark sit on the couch in the living room and gave him a large glass of orange juice.

“Just wait a minute, Mark, I’m going to slip into something more comfortable.”

She disappeared and in a few minutes came back wearing a red silk gown. As she sat next to Mark, the gown parted slightly, exposing her left thigh way above the knee. Although Mark noticed it, the sight excited him, but he did not think it was polite to say anything. Secretly, he hoped she would not realize the mishap for a while, as Mrs. Bergman had very nice legs.

“What do you do when you’re not at school?” she asked.

“I have a lot of things to do, Mrs. Bergman. I take many groups through the trails, and occasionally, I train some of Dad’s horses.”

“Are you always involved with horses?”

“No, I read a lot and do some target shooting. We have our own range. One of these days, I may get into the competitions.”

“Are you that good?”

“I may not be the best you’ve ever seen, but I’m good,” Mark replied with confidence. “I could teach you shooting if you’re interested.”

“No, thank you,” she said absently. “May I suggest something?”

“Sure!”

“Why don’t you take a shower? Your hair is full of dust from the road.”

Mark was lost for an answer. He did not know why Mrs. Bergman wanted him to take a shower, but as she was so nice, he did not want to disappoint her.

“If you think I should take a shower, I will.”

“Follow me,” the woman said. She showed Mark into a bathroom with a shower cabinet. “Use this red towel,” she instructed him, her lips curving in a pleased smile at his obedience.

Mark stripped and entered into the shower cabinet. As soon as he started the water, he heard noises. He did not care, but just let the hot water run down his back. Suddenly, the door of the shower cabinet opened and Mrs. Bergman stood there stark naked.

“May I come in?” she asked. “I just realized I’m also dusty.”

Mark was lost for an answer. He just stared at her, as Mrs. Bergman squeezed into the tight little compartment.

Whatever followed was wonderfully hazy in Mark’s memory, but he remembered ending up in Mrs. Bergman’s bed. The highs and the lows of pleasure alternated. In the end, Mark realized it was the most enjoyable thing he had ever done in his life. Evidently, he fell asleep for a few moments, and when he woke, Mrs. Bergman was holding on to him.

“You’re a great little man, Mark. I envy the girl you will marry,” she said.

“Why, Mrs. Bergman?”

“You’re a natural born lover, always knowing what to do. How many girls have you taken to bed?”

“None,” Mark said, blushing. “I’m not very good when it comes to girls.”

“Lack of confidence, my friend. If you can sweep someone like me off her feet, you can have any woman you like.”

“Really?”

“That’s right. You must be more confident and very patient. However, you’d better go now, because my husband will be back in an hour, and if he catches you in my bed, it will be a major scandal.”

“Can I see you again?”

“At the riding trails, we may meet, but I’m not going to bed with you again. You’re too good and it could become habit-forming.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Remember, Mark, I’m a married woman.”

“I understand,” he replied, sheepishly. Mark started dressing nervously.

At the door, Mrs. Bergman kissed him fully on the lips.

“This is to remember me by.”

All the way to the Starlight Café, Mark was fighting his emotions. In one moment, he felt great, gloating over the great deed of managing to seduce a lady like her. He did not realize immediately that Mrs. Bergman orchestrated the seduction.

His thoughts shifted between the highs of the orgasms and the let down of falling asleep. Mark’s mood fluctuated between self-pity and the feeling of victory. Next, the sense of guilt started overtaking his thoughts, because he made love to someone else’s wife. Eventually, the memory of pleasure won over the sensation of being physically dirty.

Mark was the only customer at the Starlight Café, sitting at the bar, sipping a soda, and letting his mind wander. *Polly, the waitress is not a bad looking girl, although her derriere is a little bit larger than it should be.* In his mind’s eye, he stripped her, but she was not as good-looking as Mrs. Bergman was. He concluded that

Polly might be good in bed, but he was not going to try seducing her.

From this day onward, Mark's life changed drastically. He gained confidence in his dealing with the fair sex. Every good-looking woman became a target. Guiding groups of riders on the trail, he always picked a woman whom he would like to take to bed. Mark treated those females with distinct courtesy. From the first moment, he gave them little signs of desire. Nobody taught Mark the art of seduction, but apparently, he was a natural.

Although he was quite successful with the older generation, the young girls shied away from him. Mark was not yet seventeen when he had to juggle his schedule not to have two of his middle-aged lovers in the same troop.

In a new group, a cute little dark-haired girl, Susan Goldberg, just about his age, caught Mark's attention. As he liked her very much, he decided to make friends with Susan, and if possible, get her into his bed. His older women taught him a lot about the art of seduction, and since he wanted Susan very much, he pulled out all the stops; he knew patience was most important, and had never tried rushing a woman into a sexual relationship. However, if he persevered, success would not elude him.

Near the middle of June, well before his seventeenth birthday, Mark finally managed to invite Susan for a ride. It was just the two of them riding to a little brook off the regular trails, as Mark wanted to make his move in a romantic setting. He helped Susan off her horse and held her just a little longer than was necessary.

After tying up the horses, Mark guided her to the edge of the crystal-clear little pool in the middle of nowhere. They sat down on the grass and talked. As Susan was an intelligent girl, they chatted about many different things, ending up holding hands.

It was a strange sensation. Mark felt happy, yet sad, pulling the girl closer and finally kissing her. The emotion punctuated by the kiss was unknown to Mark. Technically, it was the same as the kisses of his sex-starved, middle-aged partners', but Susan's lips tasted different. To touch her was fulfillment; evidently, Mark was in love.

"Why don't we take a swim? There is nobody around and no one would see us," Susan suggested suddenly.

"Great idea!"

"Alright, turn your back while I undress and get into the water."

Mark dutifully turned away.

"You can look now," she said a little while later. When he turned, saw Susan in the water up to her neck.

"The water's fine," she said. "Come on in!"

"Now you turn your back," Mark said. Without waiting for Susan's reply, he began stripping.

They were in the water for about half an hour. When they got out, did not care about seeing the other's naked body. They made love on the carpet-like green grass. Although Susan was not a virgin, she had not had much experience in the art of love. Regardless, it was the greatest sexual experience in the young life of Mark Kende.

"I think I'm in love with you," he said, kissing Susan's breast.

"I loved you from the moment I set eyes on you," she replied.

They finally untangled their limbs and began dressing when Mark noticed a lone horseman standing over the bushes. It was Zoltan Kende. He obviously saw what was going on, gave his son a long look of disapproval, and then spurring his horse, galloped away.

"Who was that?" Susan asked in a frightened voice.

“My father; I’m in for some heavy weather.”

“Just tell him we are in love. He should understand.”

As soon as they got back to the clubhouse, Mrs. Goldberg picked up her daughter with the car. After Susan left, Mark decided to go to the Starlight, have a cold drink and gloat over his latest success. However, his father called him into his office.

“Yes, Father. What can I do for you?”

Instead of an answer, Zoltan Kende stepped up to his son and slapped his face hard.

“If you touch that Jewish slut again, I’m going to throw you out of this house. Do you understand?”

“But, Father, I love her.”

Zoltan slapped his son again.

“I’m not going to be the grandfather of a Jew! As I was saying, if you as much as talk to her, I’ll throw you out, period. Now, get out of here.”

The sting of the slaps was only a minor discomfort compared to the pain of his father’s disapproval of Susan. Mark did not understand his old man’s hatred of Jews.

“What is the difference between them and us?” he asked himself.

Riding his bike towards the Starlight Café, the injustice of his father had begun weighing heavily on his mind. By the time the diner came into view, Mark knew the conflict with his father would not go away. Eventually, he would have to leave the Golden Saddle. Thus, he opened the throttle and rode on to White Plains.

Mark did not know anybody outside the Golden Saddle well enough to discuss this problem. For a moment, he thought of Mrs. Bergman or Mr. Wessel, his favorite teacher, but the topic of Susan, the love he felt for her, and his father’s hatred of the Jews were all too per-

sonal. Therefore, he kept his own counsel, taking the action he thought best.

First, he stopped at the cemetery parking the bike outside the gate. He walked around, checking the headstones until he found the one he thought suitable for his purposes. On a headstone, the plaque said: "Roger Stormont, born May 12<sup>th</sup> 1919, died December 18<sup>th</sup> 1920."

"This is it," Mark grunted. He jotted down the name, the dates, and hurried back to his bike.

In the City Hall, at the Register of Births and Marriages, he asked for a copy of Roger Stormont's birth certificate.

Although it was near closing time, the clerk politely asked Mark if he wanted the large certificate or the pocket size. He bought both, paying the enormous fee of \$ 1.50 and left the City Hall.

Next, Mark headed for the army recruiting station, but finding it closed, he continued down the street to the marine corps recruiter. The office was still open, although the sergeant was in the process of packing it in for the day.

As Mark entered the tiny office, the old marine looked up. "Don't tell me you want to enlist."

"Yes sir, I want to enlist."

"Aren't you a little too young to become a soldier?"

"No sir," Mark said. "I have my birth certificate with me."

"Let me see," the sergeant replied. With a deep sigh, he sat down behind his desk. Obviously, he was going to have to work overtime.

During the next half an hour, Mark enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps under the name of Roger Stormont and received a travel voucher to Parrish Island.

Having three days to make the trip, he rode his motorcycle to Susan's house and rang the doorbell. Mr. Goldberg answered.

"Good afternoon, sir. I'm Mark Kende, Susan's friend. Could I see her for a moment?"

"No," came the gruff reply. "I don't want a god-damned Nazi hanging around my daughter," he said. Susan's father slammed the door in Mark's face.

He was puzzled, but did not try to argue, got on his bike and started toward the Starlight Café. "Why did Goldberg call me a Nazi? What is a Nazi anyway? Did Susan's father know about Dad's hatred of Jews? What was the idea of hating someone, just because he or she was of a different religion?"

Mark avoided church as much as possible because he had had an unnerving experience in Budapest when he was in first grade. The priest giving the religious instructions in the school started fondling him and he did not like it. He told his mother about the incident, and from that day on, she did not insist on Mark's going to church.

At the Starlight, he parked the bike, and then asked Polly to let him leave it there. He promised to pick it up next day. Mark walked down the road to the bus stop, went to the terminal, and took the Greyhound to South Carolina.

## Chapter Two

The Parrish Island base was not the friendliest place Mark had ever visited. Following rigorous medical examination, the training started in earnest. Mark found the other recruits frightened, confused young men who did not know why everybody yelled at them. The drill-sergeants did not try to comfort them; in fact, they tried brainwashing everybody. Thanks to his early exposure to the Hungarian cavalry and the tales they'd told, Mark understood the general principles of military training; whether the force is the U.S. Marine Corps, the Bengal Lancers, or the Royal Hungarian Army, the first step was always the crushing of the recruits' individuality.

The equipment of the marines including the clothing, the rifle, and all the little things were far superior to the stuff the soldiers of the Royal Hungarian Army received. Mark thought it a good sign.

The first couple of weeks in boot camp were the toughest training Mark ever had to endure. Fortunately, he was in good shape and knew what to expect. The recruits needed a great deal of physical strength, stamina, and determination to survive. Sometimes, Mark finished the grueling marches running on adrenalin. Three of the recruits left the corps because they just could not hack it.

The antics of the drill-sergeants did not bother Mark, being used to similar treatment from a young age; but his buddy, Brad Kelly suffered a great deal.

"Don't let it bother you," Mark consoled him. "I have seen this before. The sergeants of the Fifth Hussars were much worse. They incessantly swore at the recruits, and sometimes beat the poor bastards."

"How did the hussars put up with them?"

"They broke. Even at the military school I went to at the age of ten, the upper classmen beat us and gave us

senseless orders. It was not easy. At times, I was on the verge of giving up.”

“You must be tough.”

“No, I just know what to expect,” Mark explained in his polite, carefully learned English. “If you survive the boot camp, it is downhill from there on. When I compare the martinets I knew to our drill-sergeants, I must admit our noncoms are polite gentlemen, although they demand much more of us than those brutes. Just hang on, Brad, and don’t let them break your spirit.”

“How do you survive under these circumstances?”

“It is easy, keep your eyes and ears open, your mouth shut, and carry out the orders. If you do it long enough, you’ll end up a general.”

Life in boot camp became a little easier when the firearms training started in earnest. Although the Garand rifle was much different from the Manlicher carbine, Mark learned to dismantle and assemble his new weapon blindfolded faster than lightning. None of the instructors could match his speed. However, when it came to the actual firing of the weapon, his previous experience with the bolt-action firearms of the Hungarians paled before the joy of working with the semiautomatic American weapon. His marksmanship also kept him on the “honor’s list” of the noncoms.

When the training period finished, each young marine got a week liberty before having to report to Camp Lejeune for further training. Brad took the bus to his parents’ house. Remembering the circumstances of his enlistment left Mark disinclined towards taking leave, and so he reported to camp early rather than visit his parents.

He was sitting in the mess hall alone, when his new Platoon Sergeant, Gil Ross, walked in.

“What are you doing here, Stormont? Why didn’t you take your leave?”

“I have nowhere to go, sir,” Mark replied.

“How are you going to kill the time?”

“With your permission, sir, I would like to take some target practice.”

“What for?” Ross’ brow arched in curiosity at the request. “I hear you’re already the best shot in the platoon!”

“I’m a professional soldier, sir. I have to practice to maintain my skills.”

“You’re crazy, Stormont,” Ross said, shaking his head even as he smiled in amusement. “I’m going to issue as much ammunition to you as you want.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Three days after the conversation, Sergeant Ross gave Mark a chance to use a sniper’s rifle with a telescope. Mark was happy with his new weapon and practiced endlessly. By the time the others came back from liberty, he was expert enough to hit a target at a thousand yards with reasonable consistency. Soon he had earned a marksman’s badge, which he wore proudly. Sergeant Ross was beaming with pleasure talking about the marksmanship of his platoon. Every chance Ross had, he showed off with the talent of his newest sniper: young Roger Stormont.

By this time, Mark could call himself a Private First Class. This fact lent him status. He considered himself somebody and wrote a long, passionate letter to Susan, explaining how much he loved her, but she never replied.

When he told his friend about Susan, Brad consoled him, saying, “Women don’t like soldiers. They know a guy in the military would never make a lot of money. She wanted you while you were a civilian with excellent prospects. Forget about her.”

“But I love her,” Mark said.

“Crap,” replied Brad. “Love is a feeling that starts in your heart, ends up in your pants, and in the end it hits you in the pocketbook.”

In early October, the corps was looking for volunteers to undertake an important, dangerous mission in the Philippines. There was a sheet of paper on the company’s notice board for the interested people to sign up. As Mark saw the name of Sergeant Ross on the top of the list, he immediately added his. Ever loyal to his friend and comrade as the Marines always were, Brad Kelly also signed up, saying succinctly, “I can’t let you run off somewhere and kill yourself because of that little bitch. You need someone to watch your back.”

The volunteers took another month of grueling jungle training in the Panama Canal Zone, before boarding the cruiser Annapolis for the Philippines. The early days of the crossing were rough. Most of the marines became seasick, but eventually they got over it, and enjoyed the rest of the trip. The young platoon commander, Lieutenant Weston, proved a most decent fellow, a good officer. He took good care of his men and listened to the advice of Platoon Sergeant Ross, a grizzled veteran of the corps.

The Annapolis docked at Manila and the marines disembarked in the stifling heat.

“This is supposed to be the coolest month in the Philippines,” Brad remarked. “I’d hate to see the hottest.”

“We shall see, said the blind man,” Mark replied.

They moved to a tin-roofed building just a few hundred yards from the docks. It was hot inside, and when the rain came down, it sounded like the inside of a drum at a jazz concert. Already two platoons of marines stationed there. As the others did not complain, the newcomers decided not to bitch about the housing.

The marines learned about their job: it was not easy but not very difficult either. Their platoon boarded an old, converted ferryboat named the Compass Rose, sailing across the Sulu Sea to the shores of Palawan Island. As the old ship had cramped quarters for a whole platoon, the marines spent most of their time on the deck. On the sides behind the railings, they placed sandbags for cover and set up machineguns on both sides, converting the old steamer into a Man-O-War. Although the Compass Rose was not exactly a battleship, she seemed better armed than any vessel the smugglers might have had.

For a week to ten days at a time, they hunted for arms-smugglers and certain rebel groups, threatening the calm serenity of the islands. Sometimes, they chased ships and small boats close to shore, or landed trying to catch up with the bad guys in the jungle.

After a tour on the steamer, the marines remained on shore for two to three weeks.

One day, sitting in the mess and listening to the rain drumming on the tin roof, Brad remarked, "Manila is a pleasant city if one can make peace with the incessant rain and the stifling heat."

"I could put up with any place," declared Mark sturdily, "as long as I had good food and a woman like Susan."

"I cannot guarantee you a Susan, but I'll look into the matter when we get some liberty," Kelly promised. "I've heard of a place not too far from the harbor. It looks like a factory and the marines call it the Pumping Station. Allegedly, they have a few girls there who don't mind sleeping with soldiers."

"We shall see."

Mark's first mission to Palawan was anticlimactic. They did not find any of the bad guys on sea or on shore. The platoon landed a few times in or near a village, but

by the time the combat team reached the map reference allegedly held by the rebels or the smugglers, the enemy disappeared in the jungle. It was an exercise in frustration.

On Mark's second outing, the marines managed to corner a converted Chinese Junk between the Island and the reef. The lieutenant realized the Junk was much faster than the Compass Rose was, and in the open sea, it would get away easily. Therefore, he told the captain to try blocking the entrance at the reef, alerted the platoon, and took the loudspeaker.

"Standby to be boarded," his voice boomed in the direction of the Junk.

The enemy vessel stopped as ordered. According to intelligence, this particular Junk was a notorious arms-smuggler, selling weapons to different religious, rebel groups in the Western Pacific area.

Sergeant Lander led the boarding party of three marines, armed with pistols rather than rifles. The rest of the platoon saw the team docking the inflatable boat by the Junk and boarding it. The marines soon disappeared from sight. In a little while, the Junk started moving toward the old steamer.

"Standby to retrieve the boarding party," shouted someone into a speaking tube on board the Junk, as it was nearing the Compass Rose.

"That sounds fishy," remarked Ross. "If those guys searched the ship and did not find anything, why didn't they just hop into the inflatable and come back?"

"It might be more comfortable just stepping over onto the other ship," the master of the Compass Rose suggested.

Ross was not buying the skipper's argument. After a brief discussion with the lieutenant, he deployed the ma-

rines behind the sandbags, in case the smugglers on the Junk decided to shoot it out with the Compass Rose.

Weston did not expect the Junk to make a run for it because the steamer partially blocked her path to freedom. Apparently, the Junk was friendly and came alongside the Compass Rose. As soon as the two ships were abreast, only a couple of feet apart, the sails of the Junk dropped and two machineguns opened up, sweeping the deck of the Compass Rose. The captain for a moment was lost, and did not know what to do. As he did not want to chance a collision with the Junk, he cut the engines and thereby opened the channel for the smugglers to escape. Meanwhile, the Junk's master fed full power to the engines and the ship started gaining momentum.

"She is getting away," the lieutenant shouted, just as a high-powered 8mm bullet from one of the machineguns struck him. The officer collapsed. Although the marines returned the fire, the Junk was accelerating.

Mark swiftly clicked his bayonet onto his rifle, and vaulting the rail of the steamer dropped on the aft deck of the Junk.

"Follow me," he cried and headed for the first machinegun. The gunner had not had time to turn his weapon on Mark, but tried to defend himself with a machete, not much use against a bayonet handled by an expert. Mark thrust his bayonet into the chest of the smuggler. Sensing his fellow marines following him, Mark took a deep breath and charged the second machinegun. Just like the first one, the guy had not had a chance against the bayonet.

Pushing the second gunner's lifeless body out of the way, Mark rushed the wheelhouse, finding the captain fumbling with a large revolver, but at the sight of the young marine and his bloody bayonet, he gave up and raised his hands.

Mark thrust his weapon under the nose of the captain. "Stop the boat!" he ordered.

Sergeant Ross, Brad Kelly, and two panting marines followed. The small group boarded the Junk a few steps behind Mark, killed several smugglers, and captured three. However, they were too late to help Sergeant Lander and his team; they were all dead with their throats cut.

When the boarding party triumphantly returned to the Compass Rose, Mark finally noticed that one of the smugglers had succeeded in wounding him during the battle. He had a deep cut on his forehead, more painful than dangerous. The medic patching him up jokingly remarked, "Your wound is good enough for a purple heart, but not for a ticket home."

Mark did not want to disappoint the guy by telling him that he had no desire to go home, and so he bantered with the fellow, joking about missing life Stateside.

After the medic fixed the dressing over his wound and left him alone to think about the experience, the reaction to his first hand-to-hand fight finally overwhelmed Mark. His hands started trembling uncontrollably and tears welled up in his eyes, as the fatigue of post adrenalin surge coupled with the realization of having killed two men. In the heat of the battle and shortly thereafter, he was unaffected, but when the pressure was off and the hormones subsided, his control vanished. Mark kept seeing the dead smuggler's eyes looking at him when he plunged the bayonet into the man's chest. Although Mark managed to suppress the outward signs of stress in a few minutes, inside he suffered. Apart from Sergeant Ross, nobody noticed the young marine's horror.

"You'll see those accusing eyes for a while, Stormont," the sergeant said, after taking his subordinate aside for a quiet talk. "It's not easy to get over your first

kill. Think of it this way; his dead eyes looking at you are a damn sight better than is your ghost haunting him. You should be alright in a few days.”

*Sergeant Ross must know what he is talking about. Perhaps he still has nightmares about his first kill. They towed the Junk to Manila and handed the prisoners over to the authorities.*

*For days after his bayonet charge, Mark was debating the sense of it all. He justified his own action easily. I'm a soldier, therefore, I had to follow the orders and route the bad guys. As far as the killing of the smuggler is concerned, my conscience is clear. If I did not plunge my bayonet into his chest, he would not have hesitated to kill me.*

However, the motivation of the smugglers seemed to escape Mark.

“Why did the rebels have to resort to violence?” he asked Brad. “Why did the government employ troops against them? Would it not be easier for the concerned parties to sit down and sort out their differences? Perhaps neither party is willing to compromise.”

“If they had, we'd have nothing to do,” Brad said.

In two weeks, the wound on Mark's forehead healed and only a small scar remained. His purple heart came through and he was very proud of it. His courageous charge on board of the Junk earned him the nickname of “Bayonet Roger.”

During the off periods, the marines regularly visited the fleshpots of Manila, spending most of their money on beer, women, and songs. Up to this point, Mark had stayed clear of the women. He was still hoping to hear from Susan, but her letter never came. Thus, on the first week following their second rest period, he gave up on her, and accompanied Brad to the city.

“I shouldn’t fret over Susan. The little bitch thought she nailed the son of a rich man,” he confided in Brad. “Regardless, she was the best screw I ever had.”

“I think you’re on the way to recovery. I’d better square you away. Instead of getting drunk, I’d rather blow my money on the girls,” he declared. “Let’s go to the Pumping Station.”

“Yeah, I drink only for the sake of my companions,” Mark confessed honestly. “But those slim, lithe Philippine women are looking more and more appetizing.”

“I’ll introduce you to one of my favorite Filipinas, Catherine. We’ll have an excellent dinner with her and the bedroom acrobatics following the marlin steaks will be something to remember.”

Brad was right. Catherine, a professional, was very obliging, never saying no to the wildest wishes of her partner. Most men liked that, but to Mark she was only a machine to have enjoyable sex with. He did not like the Filipina’s sneaky, submissive personality.

In his view, the women of Manila excelled in bed, but lacked individuality. Regardless, Private First Class Mark Kende was a happy, satisfied young man.

Because Lieutenant Weston was still in hospital recovering from the fortunately nonfatal wound, Captain Cook took out the next patrol. The trip was uneventful. The smugglers, perhaps because of the loss of their Junk, scaled back the activities. The marines landed at a couple of sites, but did not find the elusive rebels. The Compass Rose started the journey back to Manila.

Palawan was still on the horizon when the radio came alive. The battalion exec ordered the patrol to proceed to the northern tip of the island.

“Just got a message about an American missionary in danger,” the captain announced. “Battalion ordered us

to extricate a hapless clergyman and escort him to safety in Manila.”

The ship immediately changed course, heading toward the map reference stated in the battalion’s order. In the chartroom, Captain Cook sifted through the maps and found the one showing the area in question. The Mission Church, perched on the top of a hill surrounded by dense jungle, appeared to be the main feature of the community.

The Compass Rose anchored just outside the reef, Captain Cooke ordered Sergeant Ross to take a combat team with Corporal Burgess’ squad, including Mark and Brad Kelly ashore to escort the pastor to safety.

The marines landed in two inflatable boats. After they mustered on the beach, Ross checked the map, issued his orders, and the team set out to find the wayward clergyman. The route took them through dense jungle foliage with only a narrow, winding trail leading to the top of the hill where the Mission Church was supposed to be.

The sortie started with an accident. The marines covered about five hundred yards on the trail, when the point man, Corporal Burgess, inadvertently stepped into a hole severely injuring his foot. It did not look broken, but the corporal could not walk.

“Private Beasley, escort the corporal back to the beach and wait for us,” Ross ordered.

“Yes, sir,” the marine replied. Burgess leaning on his escort, the twosome disappeared in the direction of the beach.

“Stormont, take the point!” Ross ordered.

Mark took the map and began leading the small group toward the mission church. When they reached the edge of the jungle, on the clearing, in front of the church, they found a large crowd nailing the pastor to the church

door with long rusty spikes. They already drove the long nails through his palms and ears, while the mob was dancing and singing around him.

“Fire one round over their heads,” Ross ordered.

The ragged volley had the desired effect. The crowd drew back and the leaders melted into the nervous mob. Nobody wanted to lift a finger to help the pastor.

The marines marched to the church, passing the low stone wall surrounding the building. Sergeant Ross began removing the nails from the minister’s hands and ears. Suddenly, a shot rang out and Ross collapsed. The marines froze for a moment.

“Fix bayonets,” Mark roared, “take cover, and keep your eyes peeled.” He quickly pulled the wounded Ross off the church stairs.

“Kelly,” he shouted, “look after the sergeant.”

Brad crept up to them with his medical kit, bound the nasty bullet hole on the chest, and laid Ross on the ground.

Looking around, Mark saw the marines taking cover behind the wall surrounding the church. “Fred, check in the back. I don’t want anybody surprising us from behind.”

“Yes, sir,” the surprised marine replied. He started moving along the wall to the back of the church.

Meanwhile, the crowd fearing another volley from the semiautomatic weapons of the marines drew back to the huts about a hundred yards from the church.

“Don’t move,” Mark said to the dazed and semiconscious Ross.

Jumping to the stairs, he pulled the nails out of the pastor’s palms, and dragged the minister down behind cover.

“Brad, make a stretcher for the sergeant,” Mark said to Kelly. He turned to the clergyman. “Can you walk, sir?”

“I can, but I’m not going with you. I’ll stay with my flock.”

“No dice, I’m afraid,” Mark said. *This guy is completely out of his friggin’ mind.* “I have orders to take you back with us. Either you come peacefully or I shall hogtie you and throw you over my shoulder, sir.”

“Since you put it that way, I have no choice. I can walk, but I’m going with you under protest,” the surprised man replied.

“Wise move, sir.”

The marines accepted Mark as their leader without questions. He sent two men to the edge of the forest to cover their withdrawal, and then ordered two guys to grab the improvised stretcher carrying the wounded Sergeant Ross, and with Brad Kelly at the point, the team hit the trail. Ross apparently tried to talk, but Mark interrupted him. “I’m going to take the team through the jungle according to the training manual, sir. I’ll do it just the way you would. It seems you have a bullet in your lung, sir. Therefore, Sergeant, save your strength; please shut up, relax and enjoy the trip.”

Taking the appropriate formation, the team started for the beach. After the first hundred yards in the bush, the marines encountered a small group of men armed with rifles blocking the trail. As they saw each other, the rebels opened fire, but did not hit anybody.

As his team took cover, Mark checked the map, but could not find an alternate route. There was nothing else to do but fight their way back to the beach.

“Brad,” Mark said to Kelly, “come with me. We shall outflank the bastards. Couter,” he said to the oldest man in the group, “if we don’t come back, you’re in charge. Dig in, watch your rear and the flanks, fire a red flare, and wait for help. If you fail, I shall haunt you for the rest of your miserable life. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” the surprised man replied. Mark behaved exactly like an old sergeant major.

Kelly followed Mark through the thick bush. They successfully flanked the rebels, just the way the training manuals described the maneuver. From short range, their accurate, rapid-fire killed three of the rebels on the spot and the rest melted into the jungle.

The roadblock eliminated, the little group arrived at the beach without further incident and took the inflatable boats back to the Compass Rose.

By the evening, Sergeant Ross and the pastor were in the Manila Base Hospital. This time Mark did not have a nervous reaction to killing two men, but Brad was heartbroken.

“Only the first one is tough. Do you remember what Ross told us after we took the Junk?”

Next afternoon, Mark was getting ready to visit his favorite girl, the “little sex-machine”, when the company commander called him into the office.

“Well, my little dark-haired beauty must wait,” he told Brad with genuine disappointment, before scurrying to obey the summons.

Mark marched into the captain’s lair, standing stiffly at attention. “Private First Class Stormont reporting as ordered, sir.”

“At ease, son. You did a damn good job out there. Sergeant Ross recommended you for the Silver Star. You took charge in a difficult situation and pulled off a successful mission,” the captain said.

“Thank you, sir,” Mark answered as he shifted to a parade rest. “However, as I was supposed to be in command, I would like to recommend decorating Private First Class Kelly. He accepted the danger associated with the flanking maneuver without hesitation. I would not be standing here if he weren’t with me.”

“Very well, Stormont, I’m going to recommend Kelly for the Bronze Star. Dismissed!”

On the way to the Pumping Station, Mark figured that he did not get the decoration for his courage or leadership but for his brazen move of telling Platoon Sergeant Ross to shut up.

Catherine was waiting for Mark with Kelly’s lady. The young marines were looking forward to an evening full of fun and were not disappointed. The fact the girls charged money for their love-making did not bother the two men. Mark and Brad got back to the base just before curfew, feeling happy and pleasantly tired.

The ceremony of decorating the two marines was something to remember. Mark was very proud of his medals, wishing he could let his father know about being a marine, seeing combat, and earning a couple of medals.

Sergeant Ross left the hospital in a week, but the doctors did not permit him to take part in the next sortie. Therefore, Lieutenant Weston promoted Mark to corporal, a squad leader. The youngster was on top of the world.

It was April of 1939. Mark’s platoon was due for another sweep. On the last evening in town, Mark planned to have dinner with Catherine, but Captain Cook ordered him to the command post.

“Corporal Stormont reporting as ordered, sir.” Mark sounded off as he entered the office.

“Stand at ease,” the captain said. “I’m puzzled about you, Stormont. I have a report here, which says that according to your mother, Lillian Stormont, you died at the age of one. Yet, you’re here. Can you explain that?”

Mark knew the captain had him nailed. There was not much sense trying to brazen it out. “No, sir,” he replied.

“I have another curious letter with your photograph attached. A certain Mrs. Kende of White Plains claims that you’re her long lost son. Explain that to me!”

“My real name is Mark Kende, sir,” he replied quietly.

“Then tell me: why on earth did you enlist under the name of Roger Stormont?”

“Because I was under age, sir; I used his birth certificate.”

“Idiot,” the captain said angrily. “I was just about to promote you to sergeant and now I find you enlisted under age. The matter has to be rectified. When was your eighteenth birthday?”

“It is coming up on August twenty-first, sir.”

“Shit,” grunted the captain.

Mark just stood there quietly.

“Look, Kende, I have to hand you over to the JAG lawyer at headquarters. You will be removed from the force.”

“Could you delay my return until August, sir?”

“If it were a couple of weeks or perhaps a month, I could try, but three months is too much.”

“Could you send me on an offshore mission to Palawan, sir, and claim that I’m missing in action? I’ll hide out for the three months.”

“And screw the island girls to death? No, my friend, I couldn’t do that.”

“Could you throw me into the stockade, sir, for three months?” Mark begged. “Just tell me what I should do to stay on the force and I’ll take care of it.”

“What are your friends calling you?”

“The guys call me Bayonet Roger, or just Bayonet,” Mark hesitated a moment before adding, “but my mother calls me Marcus.”

“Alright, Marcus,” the captain started in a fatherly tone. “I tell you what we are going to do. I’m going to change your service record to your real name, discharge you, and ship you back to the U.S. with the next troopship. It is going to happen and there is nothing you or I can do about it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied. He had tears in his eyes.

“The JAG wants to lay charges against you in civilian court for enlisting using someone else’s birth certificate. I’ll try to dissuade them. However, even if they do lay charges, I doubt you’d go to jail. If you pleaded guilty, the judge would suspend your sentence. Then on August 22, a day after your eighteenth birthday, take your real birth certificate, march into the nearest marine corps recruiting center, and enlist. Tell the recruiting sergeant that you already have a service record and a serial number. In addition, I’ll give you an official letter to hand to the recruiter. You will not have to go to boot camp, and the corps will send you back to us. Do you understand me?”

“I do, Captain, sir, thank you,” Mark replied. The tears were running down his cheeks.

“Don’t cry, son. Even though you’re under age, you’re one of us, a helluva marine. I hope you will come back soon.” He stood up and shook hands with Mark.

“Can I go out on the town tonight, sir?”

“As long as you will not disappear.”

“On my word of honor, sir,” Mark replied seriously.

“Report to my office at 0800 to meet the JAG lawyer,” Captain Cook ordered. “Wear your rank insignia and all your ribbons.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark sounded off.

“Dismissed, Corporal.”

Catherine had to work unusually hard that evening because Mark was more active and demanding than ever

before. I'm not going to see the best little sex-machine of Manila for a while.

Despite Brad asking what happened in the captain's office, Mark did not tell him because he feared Kelly persuading him to desert and lay low for three months.

The meeting with the lawyer in the morning was short and painful. Mark had to pack up his belongings into a duffel bag, put on the prison garb, and move to the stockade awaiting repatriation.

After the first night in the uncomfortable cell, the jailer took him to the interrogation room where Sergeant Ross was waiting. Mark stood at attention.

"Corporal Kende reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease, Corporal. Let's sit down, son." After they took their places at the table, he asked, "What gave you the idea of enlisting under age, using someone else's birth certificate?"

"I had to leave my father's house, sir. He was going to throw me out because of my bad choice of a girlfriend."

"It happens all the time. Eventually, fathers make peace with their sons' choices. Mothers are much more difficult."

"You don't know my father, Sergeant. He would have me thrown out for sure. The old man has a pathological hatred of Jews, and my Susan was Jewish."

"Are you sure your father would have kicked you out just because of this?"

"He would for sure. You see my father is an old-fashioned cavalryman. His convictions and honor mean more to him than anything else."

"No doubt he was an officer," the sergeant said. "What gave you the idea of using someone else's birth certificate?"

“I grew up in cavalry barracks, sir. At an early age, I learned about the paramount importance of appropriate paperwork in the armed forces.”

“So you’re an army brat.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Anyway, Bayonet, I think you’re born to be an officer. When you go home, do not reenlist until you have your high school diploma. Try getting into West Point, but if you can’t make it, take a university course, and enroll the ROTC program. In three years, you would have a university degree and a reserve officer’s commission. With a little finesse, you could become a professional soldier.”

“Thank you, sir. It makes sense.”

“Anyway, to help you along, we prepared a special permit for you to wear your decorations,” Ross explained. “It would command respect in West Point or at the ROTC course. The Regimental Commander can issue such permission. His top kick, the regimental sergeant major, a friend of mine, said he is going to get it for you. Give me your home address and we will send the permit there. I’m sure it would reach there before you.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Mark replied. He gave Ross the postal address of the Golden Saddle.

They chatted for a while, and before he left, Ross promised to visit him as soon as the platoon returned from the sweep. However, this did not happen. Three days later two sailors escorted Mark on board the Charleston.

## Chapter Three

The moment Mark left the wharf area, he dropped his duffel bag, and ran to his mother where she stood waiting for him.

“Marcus,” she cried, clinging to him tightly, while Mark said nothing as she leaned against him, her head on his shoulder. Tears of joy ran down the cheeks of Angela Kende, but Mark cried because of the shame and humiliation of arriving in handcuffs.

“You have grown, Marcus,” Angela fairly purred in glowing approval as she pulled away to admire her son. “You have become a real man.”

“I wish the marine corps thought so,” he said bitterly. “It is nice to be home with you, Mother, but I’d rather be with my unit in the Philippines.” Although Mark had not spoken Hungarian for a long while, the words came easily to him.

“I need you here and now, Marcus. You’re the master of the house,” she hesitated a moment before adding more softly, “Since your father passed away two months ago. Now you’re all I have.”

The sudden death of his father hit Mark like a sledgehammer. “What happened?” he cried out in shock. “He was so strong and healthy. Was it an accident?”

“No, it was a strange disease.”

“What did the doctors say?”

“They didn’t know what to do,” his mother sighed heavily. “He started having a fever with tremendous headaches, and after two days, he could not get out of bed. The third day he lost consciousness and on the fourth he died.”

“How about the autopsy?”

“I could not permit such an indignity,” she said in an offended tone.

Mark did not want to make an issue of the matter, but thought she should have been more determined to find out what killed her husband. He picked up his duffel bag, and hand in hand with his mother strolled across the road to a waiting taxi. As soon as they got in, Mrs. Kende said to the driver, "To Hotel Shamrock." She turned to Mark. "It is so nice to have you back."

After they arrived at their hotel, Mark enjoyed the luxury of having a bathroom all to himself, but his thoughts wandered. His father's image kept creeping into his mind's eye. He was not the American rancher and riding school director, but the handsome, confident lieutenant colonel of the Fifth Hussars in the Royal Hungarian Army.

Mrs. Kende had a suitcase full of Mark's civilian clothes, but in the past year, he had outgrown almost every piece. Therefore, he wore his marine corps issue trousers and the only item fitting him in his old wardrobe, a white, long sleeved sweater.

They had lunch in the hotel's cafeteria, discussing plans to spend the afternoon buying clothes for Mark. After the dessert he asked, "Tell me, Mother, how did the marine corps find you?"

"They didn't," she replied, setting her fork down on her plate. "I found them."

"What do you mean?" Mark wondered.

"Well, after you disappeared, your father and I were desperate. When your bike turned up a day later, we had the White Plains Police look for you, but they did not find anything. About a month later, we hired a private investigator." Mark's mother paused for a moment to take another sip from her coffee before continuing. "For a while, he had no news, but one day the detective came to the ranch and had a long talk with your father behind closed doors. On that day, he became a new man. I knew he had

good news about you. When I pressed him, he said you were alright; he was immensely proud of you, but I couldn't get anything else out of him."

"It had to be about the time when I shipped out to the Philippines," Mark mused thoughtfully. "Did he say anything else?"

"I kept asking him, but he always evaded the answer. About a week before his death, I forced him to address the issue of your whereabouts. He weakened and promised to tell me everything after your eighteenth birthday."

"That had to be about two months ago, at the time when I got my Purple Heart."

"Anyway, after his death, I checked his diary. I found your nom de guerre, unit number, and the fact that you won a medal. He knew all the time you had volunteered for the army. "

"The marine corps, Mother, not the army," Mark corrected her.

"It makes no difference, Marcus. I told our lawyer to get you back. He was a fast worker, building a case out of the fact that you were under age, and enlisted using an assumed name. For a while, the navy wanted to charge you with forgery in civilian court, but the lawyer talked them out of it."

For a moment, Mark was mad at his mother. He wanted to swear at her, but controlled his anger. The little woman forcefully interfered in his career, causing him pain, shame, and disappointment. *Well, this is what mothers are supposed to do in a situation like this.*

He decided not to tell her about the deep scars his departure from the corps left in his heart. Mark Kende had grown up in the marine corps. He would not shame the corps. Instead, he took a deep breath and declared, "Let us go and buy some civvies that would fit me."

By the evening, he had everything a fashionable, young man should have. During the shopping spree, Mark sneaked into a military supplies store and purchased spare ribbons of his decorations.

Rushing in and out of the shops and department stores, they did not have time to talk about the future. By the late afternoon, Mrs. Kende was exhausted. Returning to their hotel and dumping the loot, she suggested having a cup of coffee. In the cafeteria, she sat next to her son, enjoying the fact that they were not alone anymore.

“I cannot get used to this miserable, weak American coffee. I could use a real espresso,” Mrs. Kende said.

“I’m afraid you cannot have one here, Mother,” Mark apologized. “If you told me earlier, we could have found an Italian restaurant. They are certain to have it.”

“Never mind, I’m sure they would know how to make an espresso coffee on the ship.”

“What ship?” Mark looked at her in surprise.

“The S.S. Ivernia, the one that brought us to America. I reserved two first class cabins for us, leaving New York in about two weeks from now.”

“Where are we going?”

“Home,” she said, “home to Hungary.”

“How about me?” Mark asked in an indignant voice. “I want to return to the marine corps.”

“I thought you wanted to be an officer.”

“Yes, I would like that. Therefore, I must start studying immediately to get my high school diploma and try enrolling in West Point. If they won’t take me, I’ll re-enlist.”

“No, you won’t,” Mrs. Kende said sharply. “We will go to Hungary and you can take the last year of your high school education. After graduation, we get you into the Ludovika Academy in Budapest. You will become an officer in three years, just the same as if you had gone to

West Point. You'll end up serving with the Fifth Hussars like your father, grandfather, and great-grandfather before you."

Mark thought about it for a while, and then kissed his mother's hand. "I'll do as you suggest, but I don't want to serve in the cavalry. My heart would not be in it; I want to be an infantry officer."

"I don't care," she sniffed disdainfully. "Those hussars are frightful snobs anyway. If you want to be an infantry officer, it's fine with me."

Mark nodded, his expression growing thoughtful. "As this is settled, what are you going to do with the ranch?"

"I think we should keep a share of it. I sold a third, my share, to Mr. Wessel and he is going to manage it for us. One day, you may get into trouble like your father did and need a place to hide from the vicious tongue of the society ladies."

"Actually, what happened to Father? Why did we have to move to America in such a hurry?" Mark changed the subject.

"It is a long story," Mrs. Kende said. She took a deep breath. "As you know, your father was fiercely loyal to his country. He fought in the Great War on both fronts and earned several medals. He felt it was not the enemy defeating the army, but the home country rabble. Therefore, he decided to get even with the communists, socialists, and the business people someday. With his fellow officers, he spent many nights talking about how to settle the score with those traitorous people."

"How did they plan to do that?"

"They did not know at first, but a scheme slowly evolved. Some officers and many civilians thinking like him blamed the loss of the war on big business, which they equated with the Jews. It was unfair, but in the

minds of those people, it was justifiable.” She sounded quietly regretful, even ashamed.

“What is so special about the Jews?” Mark asked.

“They are a tenacious, cohesive social unit, placing very high value on education and the subsequent hard work,” his mother explained. “Therefore, in comparison with the rest of the country, the Jews became disproportionately wealthy. Usually, it was not inherited wealth, as most Jewish professionals or businessmen earned what they had through hard work. For these reasons and the traditional jealous, mean attitude of the people, anti-Semitism became a prominent feature of Hungarian politics.”

“Ridiculous,” Mark said interrupting. He remembered Susan, and how much he had loved her.

“Anyway,” his mother continued, “in those days, an army officer taking the military oath of allegiance had to declare that he was not, and would not become a member of any political party while serving in the army.”

“Damn right! An officer should not temper orders with his political affiliations,” Mark said.

“Your father disregarded this clause of his oath. A fellow officer and friend, Feri, talked him into joining a little ultra-right-wing party, which eventually became the Hungarian Nazi Party, the Arrow Cross.”

“Why did Father join the party?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps he thought this was the group, which would eventually get even with the traitors. As far as his oath was concerned, your father felt joining a party was a minor misdemeanor, as the army did not censor his friend Feri, a major and staff officer in the reserves for entering politics.” She paused here, biting her lip before continuing. “Unfortunately, the colonel of the Fifth Hussars took a dim view of your father’s contravention of the officer’s oath. He offered Zoltan two alterna-

tives: immediate retirement or court martial. Zoltan chose the latter, hoping his war record would save him from any major punishment, but he was wrong!”

“What did the court-martial decide?”

“They were rough on him. He lost his commission, given the equivalent civilian pension commensurate with his rank, time of service, and threw him out of the army.” Tears filled the eyes of Mrs. Kende as she was rehashing painful memories.

“That must have been terrible.”

“It was. Compounding your father’s distress were the rumors about the colonel of the Fifth Hussars having a Jewish grandmother. Therefore, in Feri’s and your father’s interpretation he was a Jew. According to the ideology of his party and the mistreatment by his quasi-Jewish commander, your father felt justified in his deep seated hatred of Jews.”

“What happened to Uncle Feri?”

“Nothing. He claimed to be a reservist, and his business politics. The army accepted his defense.”

“Why did we go to America?” Mark asked.

“For an officer losing his commission is a fate worse than death. As your father felt ashamed, he had no place in Hungary. We lost our status in society and most of our friends shied away from us. He was feeling like the disenfranchised Huguenots of the seventeenth century, and decided to head for America to start a new life. Shortly after his arrival in the U.S., your father searched for and joined an American anti-Semitic organization supporting them morally and financially. Of course, after he died, I stopped the payments immediately.”

Mrs. Kende finished the story of her husband’s disgrace with tears in her eyes.

“I cannot condone what Dad did,” Mark spoke after a time. “But I understand him. He did what he thought

was right. However, being an officer he had to stay away from politics. If he didn't like it, he should have quit the army."

"Oh, I know. I told him a million times not to follow that fool Feri, but he did not listen. Your father could have become a great general, but no, he had to get involved in politics! I will never forgive him for that."

"Whether Uncle Feri is a fool, a saint, or a monster, is immaterial. I just don't understand what Dad had against the Jews. However, as I want to become an infantry officer, I do not care about his beliefs, and have no wish to involve myself in politics."

"I'm glad to hear that, Marcus."

The trip across the continent took three days. When the train rolled into the White Plains station, Wessel was waiting for them. He was perhaps the only friend Zoltan Kende had had since leaving Hungary. There were similarities between the two men. When the Great War started, Wessel, a student at Heidelberg interrupted his studies, and volunteered for the army. He ended the war as a captain in the Third Uhlans, a heavy cavalry regiment. After the armistice, Wessel returned to the university and graduated as a teacher of the English and French languages. Jobs being scarce in Germany in those days, and he immigrated to the United States. Within a few days, he found a job teaching French and German in the private school where later Mark enrolled. Apart from teaching, Wessel also served as the fencing instructor of the school.

Zoltan Kende had met Wessel after Mark's epic fistfight. They both instantly hit it off. The German became a regular visitor at the Golden Saddle. At the funeral of Zoltan Kende, he had supported the fainting Angela when the undertaker's men lowered her husband's coffin into the grave.

Wessel never married, but had a lady friend, a fashionable artist. During the school holidays, she spent several days at the Golden Saddle with him. Although she did not like getting near the horses, she painted them often. Mark was sure of Wessel retiring eventually from teaching and marrying the lady in question.

As they drove through the gate of the Golden Saddle Ranch, Mark said, "I'm going to be happy sleeping in my own bed."

When they turned into the driveway to the main building, Mark noticed a house under construction.

"This is going to be my home," Wessel said. "It is only about a hundred yards from yours. I'll have the office transferred here and manage the estate from my living room."

After a few days at the Golden Saddle, Mark and his mother packed up whatever they thought would be required to start a new life in Hungary. They had the huge steamer trunks shipped to New York to the berth of the Ivernia. Their suitcases, containing clothing and other items that they may need on board, had a sticker saying, wanted. These bags would end up in their stateroom.

Wessel tried to dissuade Angela from going back to Hungary saying, "Look, Angie, Europe is a powder keg with a lit fuse. War is imminent. Why do you want to go there?"

"Because it is my home," Mrs. Kende replied.

Apparently, she was determined to return to her native land. Wessel drove them to New York Harbor, to the berth of the S.S. Ivernia; before Angela Kende stepped on the gangplank, the German could not resist remarking, "You can still change your mind..."

His suggestion went unheeded, and Mrs. Kende with her son boarded the elegant steamship.

When Mark moved into his cabin, with its own bath, soft carpeting, Venetian mirrors, and luxurious furniture, it dazzled him. *Nice. This is certainly a huge improvement over the brig of the Charleston.*

The first dinner on board was something to remember. Mark had to wear his tuxedo; his mother put on an elegant black evening gown. In the sumptuous dining room, the white-jacketed stewards guided them to a table they shared with the second officer of the ship and a German couple, with their 18-year-old daughter and 15-year-old son.

The man introduced himself as Captain Dieter von Horstenfeld, his wife Lena, their daughter Stella and son Gunter. The captain wore the ribbons of his decorations on his tuxedo. Therefore, Mark decided to pin his ribbons on his tuxedo the next day, since he had the official permission to wear them.

When the steward introduced himself, telling the guests that he would serve them during the crossing, the German explained how to address him and his family. "Call me Herr Kapitan, or Herr Kapitan von Horstenfeld, my wife Doctor von Horstenfeld, my son Master Gunter, and my daughter Fraulein Stella."

"Of course, sir."

Apparently, Europeans addressed each other by their academic, social, or professional titles. The steward was an old pro and never made a single mistake.

During the dinner, they talked about many things, but after the dessert, the purpose of their trip dominated the conversation.

"My husband died, and since we have no relatives in America, I decided to go home to Hungary. We shall live in our condominium in Budapest or on my family estate. Besides, I want my son to have a decent education and it is only possible in Europe," Mrs. Kende said.

Although Mark disagreed about Europe being the only place to get a proper education, he did not say anything.

“Dieter decided to repatriate because he felt the Fuehrer and the Fatherland needed him,” Mrs. Horstenfeld said.

“What’s your profession, Mr. hmm, Captain von Horstenfeld?” Angela Kende asked politely.

“Please call me Dieter. During the war, I was a bomber pilot. I graduated as a mechanical engineer in 1922 from the Berlin University and moved to America. I worked for Pratt-Whitney designing and building aircraft engines. I know my country needs the knowledge I accumulated.”

“No doubt you’re going to be very valuable for Germany,” Mark said.

“I aim to do my part. We need to reexamine the style of warfare in the light of the new technologies.”

“Do you think these changes could lead to the elimination of the infantry?” Mark asked.

“The infantry is here to stay, my friend. Take it from me; I spent four years in the army, most of it in combat. Whatever the technology, the infantry remains the fist of an army. Technology only gives one side a slight advantage. It is still the quality of the fighting men on the field who would decide the final outcome.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Mark said relieved. Thinking of Sergeant Ross, Mark remembered his mentor saying something similar. According to Ross, indeed the fist of the army was the infantry, the officers’ corps the brain, but the sergeants were the soul of the force.

Around the dinner table, they talked about politics and the last war for a long time. Even the ship’s second officer put in his ten cents’ worth. He served on British destroyers during the war and expressed his admiration

for the courage of the German U-Boat crews. Captain Horstenfeld was surprised about Mark's military record and asked about the young man's plans.

"Mark is going to enroll in the Ludovika Academy and become an infantry officer," his mother replied instead of Mark.

When they said good night, the captain expressed his desire to continue their interesting conversation at the next meal. The Horstenfelds went to their cabins, Angela Kende retired to her stateroom, but Mark decided to explore the ship. He went on the aft promenade and enjoyed the fading rays of the sun in the early summer evening. He noticed Stella Horstenfeld on the deck, standing with her back to him. *Certainly, she is pretty in her powerful Germanic ways. She is not big, not fat, and wears her long hair piled on the top of her head to make her look much taller than she is.*

Mark remembered an occasion about a couple of years before, on the Golden Saddle; in an unguarded moment of sincerity, Zoltan Kende tried to teach his son about women. "Marcus, assess women like horses. Watch their gait. The graceful ones usually perform well in bed."

As she walked around a bit, Mark realized Stella was moving with the grace of the white Lipizzaner of the Viennese Riding School. He feasted his eyes on the girl for a while, and then approached her.

"The sunset is beautiful, Miss Horstenfeld, isn't it?" He said in a courteous tone.

"Wonderful," she replied, looking over her shoulder at him.

"Are you looking forward to living in Europe?"

"I'm excited about going to Germany, but I'm a little scared. I don't remember much, since I was very young when we left. I fear, I'm more American than German."

“I have a slight identity crisis myself,” Mark admitted ruefully. “Perhaps I assimilated the American ways much faster than I should have.”

“How would you fit into the Hungarian society, Mr. Kende?”

“Please call me Marcus.”

“Only if you call me Stella.”

“It’s a deal. However, to answer your question: I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“I’m also afraid of the German way of life,” Stella added.

“To be honest,” confided Mark, “I’m not too excited about living in Hungary.”

Stella smiled softly at that. “It is so nice to have you here, someone who understands my problem.”

They talked about integration into European society, and eventually Mark put his arm around Stella’s waist, pulling her closer. She put her head on Mark’s shoulder and they enjoyed the magnificent sunset together.

Next day, the Horstenfelds with the exception of Stella were seasick; Mark’s mother was not feeling a hundred percent either. Stella came to lunch alone and had a long conversation with Mark. At dinner, it was again only the two of them at the table. Mark feeling brazen ordered a glass of sherry for Stella and red wine for himself. Over the course of the evening, the girl had two additional glasses of sherry. Leaving the dining room without any discussion, they headed for Mark’s state-room. The athletic wrestling and gymnastics session on the king-size bed was exciting and mutually satisfactory.

Like a proper lady, Stella was back in her own bed by ten o’clock, leaving Mark to nurse the bruises her pearly teeth left on his neck and shoulder. He never met a woman quite like her; she was strong as a bear and in the

moments of high excitement, Stella bit, scratched, and kicked like a wildcat.

The following morning, Mark got up early and went for a long run on the promenade. There was nobody around, only a few sleepy sailors swabbing the decks. When he finished his exercises, he returned to his stateroom, had a shower, and went to have breakfast. He found only von Horstenfeld at the table having black coffee. He greeted Mark cordially and made an interesting proposition. "I could help you into the officer candidates' school of the SS right away. They accept foreigners of Arian descent. As you speak German like a native, seem well educated, and have combat experience, they would admit you. I'm sure they would take into consideration your service in the U.S. Marine Corps."

"While I appreciate your offer, sir, I'm a Hungarian. My place is in the Royal Hungarian Army."

"How about your service with the American Armed forces?"

"That was different. At the time, I felt that I was an American. I have an identity crisis, just like Stella."

"I know about her problem. I may have to send her back to America. My brother is living in Philadelphia and Stella could stay with him. Believe me I'd miss her, but going back may be in her best interest."

"I might decide to return to the U.S.," Mark replied, thinking to smooth Stella's path back to America. "If I cannot get into the Hungarian Military Academy, I would come back and re-enlist with the marines."

"If that happened, you should consider the SS. They are the elite of the German Armed Forces."

"It is too early to say, sir."

"I understand, but if you change your mind, give me a call. Here is my address in Germany."

He handed Mark an elegant business card with embossed family coat of arms and a regimental crest. It was a work of art. Curiously, the captain's address was in Berlin. *Horstenfeld might not have gone to the States as a poor immigrant, but had a definite target in mind. Otherwise, he would not have so much influence with the SS.* "I appreciate your offer, sir. I'll think about it," Mark said.

"If you were in Germany, perhaps Stella would decide to stay with us. I think she likes you."

"And I like her," Mark replied quickly. He felt a little apprehensive talking about the girl.

The captain departed, leaving Mark alone with his thoughts. The SS may have been the elite of the German armed forces, but Wessel thought that it was Hitler's private political army.

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Mark went to the promenade and sat in a comfortable deck chair. The weather was calm; he enjoyed watching the blue waves of the Atlantic sliding by. The *Ivernia* sailed smoothly toward the east; the rising sun illuminated the deck. He closed his eyes and thought of Stella.

She was something new in Mark's life. Stella was not like Susan, the warm, comfortable, sweet lover. The thoughts of Susan still hurt a little, as she was the only woman to whom he had made love wholeheartedly without reservation.

For the remainder of the crossing, Mark had five exciting sessions with Stella. However, the thought of having to spend a whole night with her frightened him. *Her future husband must be a guy made of chrome-vanadium steel.*

When the ship docked in Hamburg, Stella made Mark swear to come and visit them in Berlin. However, he knew he would not keep this promise.

Mark and his mother did not travel to Hungary directly. They took a train to Munich and after resting a couple of days, they went on to Geneva, as Mrs. Kende wanted to introduce Mark, the new principal beneficiary of the Kende Trust at the bank.

The account's manager at the Julius Bauer Bank, Mr. Pernini, treated them with the utmost courtesy. He explained the terms of the trust. "According to the will of the late Istvan Kende, the heirs would never gain control of the account, as it is in perpetual trust. You only get the returns. I have to open separate accounts for both of you to hold your share of the proceeds."

"I see," Mrs. Kende remarked.

"According to the last will of your late husband, we froze his account. In case you decided to remarry, you would not be eligible to receive any stipend from the trust. Therefore, we are going to use his account to purchase an annuity for you. But until you find yourself a new spouse, you may draw a generous amount of money each month."

"I understand," she said uncertainly.

"Mark should have an account of his own. We shall deposit his annuity starting on his eighteenth birthday. I'll arrange to have his signature and thumbprint taken, and then we'll find a suitable password for him," Pernini explained.

The financial transactions were never Mrs. Kende's strong suit; thus, Mark had to explain to her what she should do to assure adequate funds in Hungary. He knew he had to tough it out till August 21<sup>st</sup>, when he would start receiving an annuity.

From Geneva, they traveled to Vienna. Spending a few days in the imperial city, his mother showed Mark the sites. In addition, they visited the former residence of Francis Kende. According to the terms of the trust, the bankers kept the house in mint condition for the use of the family. Before continuing the journey, they visited an old lady, Angela's nanny. She was happy to see them and surprised at Mark's command of the German language.

"He talks like a native Austrian," she said.

"At home we spoke German often. You know my late husband graduated from the Moravske Budejovice Military Academy. We were a bilingual family," Mrs. Kende explained.

After a delightful evening in the opera, Mark's homesickness for the U.S. eased a little. *After all, Europe has a few redeeming features although everything is so different, complicated, and subtle.*

Next day, they took the Orient express to Budapest. At the Western Railway Terminal, a familiar face greeted them. Peter Knezits, his mother's older brother, was waiting for them. Although he was a colonel in the army, he wore civilian clothes.

At the sight of his little nephew, Peter remarked, "Marcus, you grew into a strong, well-built young man." He hugged Mark.

"A man grows up in the marine corps quickly," Mark replied. He loved his uncle very much and firmly believed he had no better friend anywhere in the world than Peter. It was nice to see him again after so many years.

## Chapter Four

Although Mrs. Kende settled into the traditional way of life in the upper crust of Hungarian society easily, Mark had a rough time. His troubles started when he tried to finish his high school education. None of the better institutes accepted him into their graduating class. The first school's principal complained about Mark's perceived shortcomings in the Hungarian language, literature, and history.

"You're too far behind the average student in the graduating class," he said.

"I can pass any examination in the Hungarian language or history before the opening of the school year in the fall. Give me a chance," Mark challenged.

The principal shook his head. "It won't work. You're too far behind."

There was no way of convincing the guy to give Mark a chance at taking an exam. This educator was not the only one turning down Mark's request for a test; they all did.

The only exception was a Roman Catholic high school. The principal implied he would consider giving Mark the test sometime in September if the family donated a considerable sum to the school's library. Mrs. Kende was willing, but Peter vetoed the idea.

"Angie," he pointed out, "if you must pay so much to get him admitted, would it not be better to enroll Marcus in an expensive private school?"

"It might be the best," Mark intervened. "To be honest with you, Peter, I have no desire to go to school with immature children at all. I prefer to study on my own and take the tests as required. I'm sure I would graduate by next spring."

“That is no good,” Peter replied, “if you’re not registered as a student in a public educational institute, they might call you up into the army.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Without a high school diploma, you would be an enlisted man for three years. The best you could do is buck sergeant in the end.”

“I could be a sergeant at the marine corps shortly after my eighteenth birthday,” Mark said, interrupting.

“That is in America, but we are in Hungary now. You need a high school diploma to get into the reserve officers’ training course.”

“But I don’t have one,” Mark cried. “Even if I returned to the States and finished my schooling, these snubs would not accept it. Perhaps I should go back to the U.S. to study, and try getting into West Point...”

“Well, Marcus,” Peter said patiently, “there is a way. I know of an expensive private school in Budapest, the Roser Institute. If you have some of the science courses in your American high school transcript, they would perhaps tutor you for the rest of the summer, and let you take the matriculation exams in the fall.”

“Why didn’t you say that earlier?” Mrs. Kende asked.

“To be honest with you, Angie, the Roser Institute is not a well respected high school. Mr. Roser is known to graduate the stupid sons of rich people.”

“Would I qualify?” Mark asked sarcastically.

“If you passed their tests, you would get a high school diploma. It is all that matters. The army would accept the Roser matriculation,” Peter said.

“I know I’m deficient in Hungarian grammar, literature, and history, but I’m equally sure of having all other subjects covered,” Mark said. “To grade eleven, my GP

average was above 3.5. If I stayed in America, I would have graduated at the top of the class.”

With a mysterious smile, Peter replied, “Don’t worry about the exams, Marcus. We’ll enroll you in Roser’s, and everything should be alright. Once you have the high school diploma, you’d be a cinch to get a reserve officer’s commission.”

“Can we try it, Mother?” Mark asked.

The principal of the Roser Institute treated Mrs. Kende and her son as visiting royalty, making them sit on the huge, overstuffed armchairs. As he smelled big money, Mr. Roser discussed their problems and the possible solutions at length. After an hour, he agreed to Mark taking the graduating exam of grade 12 and the matriculation on the last working day in August. This would permit him to volunteer for the army and getting the full benefit of a high school diploma.

Mr. Roser insisted on Mark taking one-on-one instruction from the teachers of the Institute for the remainder of the summer. The timetable set out ten hours a week. In addition, Mark was supposed to study at home for the written and the oral tests. The fees shocked Mark. Mr. Roser charged the equivalent of two thousand U.S. dollars for the instruction and the exams.

Without batting an eye, Mrs. Kende paid the enormous fee on the spot in cash. At the door, when they parted, Mr. Roser remarked, “If you work hard, young man, you’ll graduate by September.”

“I only need a chance,” Mark replied. *I’m as good as graduated.*

The instructions started in earnest. Mark surprised the teachers by arriving punctually and thoroughly preparing for each session. Doctor Stern, the mathematics instructor, actually asked Mark directly why he was at Roser’s.

“You’re good enough to take the matriculation exam at any institution and pass with flying colors.”

“None of the other schools would take me with my American high school transcript.”

“This shows how conservative the educational establishment is. No matter how good you are, they don’t take you because you studied in America. Although I took my university degree with straight A’s and my doctoral dissertation came through with ‘Magna cum Laude,’ they don’t let me teach in a regular school because I’m of the wrong religion. In this country, it doesn’t matter what you know; your family background, religion, and who you know counts,” Stern explained bitterly.

“To be honest with you,” Mark replied, “I don’t understand the Europeans. In Germany, for example, a person insists on the waiter calling him ‘Herr Kapitan’, ‘Herr Doctor’, and so on. In America, everybody is just mister so and so and that’s it.”

Stern sighed. “This is a centuries-old European disease; the title is always more important than the man...”

“Ridiculous.”

“Whether it is or not, we must live with it. By the way, I’m supposed to give you the examination questions, and have you practice them. I must do that because if I don’t, I’ll be fired and would not get a job anywhere else. My title of doctor would not feed my family.”

Mark was impressed with the honesty of the young man. From there on, they did not waste much time on mathematics; instead they discussed matters, which interested both of them. Eventually, they became good friends.

When the time of the examinations came, Mark passed all tests with the highest marks and the school issued him the official high school diploma Magna cum Laude of the Roser’s Institute.

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As soon as Mark signed the papers to volunteer, the recruiting officer told him to report for duty at the Oedenburger Infantry Regiment's base in Sopron, near the Austrian border on the first day of October.

He asked Peter what was going to happen.

"Nowadays, we draft every young Hungarian male into the armed forces for two to three years. Guys like you, having a high school diploma comprised about four to five percent of the recruits. You'll wear a single gold chevron on the sleeve of your jackets, but that's all the consideration you'll receive. In fact, the noncoms pay more attention to these recruits, often giving them a rough time. You'll take the same basic training as the rest does."

"What happens next?"

"On December sixth, you'll take the military oath of allegiance and become a fully-fledged soldier. The guys with high school diplomas would receive a promotion to corporal. You'll get a brief furlough, report at an army training facility for four months of reserve officer's training."

"Do I get a commission after four months?"

Peter shook his head. "No, Marcus, if you made the grade, and passed all the exams, they would promote you to staff sergeant, officially called cadet sergeant, and send you back to your unit."

"Great. What kind of assignment can I count on?"

"Although you'll do the work of regular noncoms, you should have some officers' privileges. Remember, the unit commanders are supposed to treat you like any other staff sergeant, but give you the toughest jobs," Peter said.

"Why? A sergeant is a sergeant. In the marine corps, they were treated equally."

“There is a method to our madness. By the fall, most of the cadet sergeants should perform as well as the regulars. Following the fall maneuvers and the basic training of next year’s recruits, you’ll get another grueling four months training. The survivors of the course become ensigns, which is the lowest rank in the officers’ corps. Following another brief furlough, you’ll return to your unit, and the establishment would consider you a trained officer. After next December sixth, the army would most likely demobilize you.”

This is an easy way to earn an officer’s commission,” Mark mused. “In America, I would have to have a university degree.”

“Wait for your basic training, Marcus,” Peter said. “It is not going to be easy.”

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The basic training was brutal, but not nearly as tough as the Marine Corps’ boot camp. Later, the reserve officers’ training course presented no difficulty for Mark. He graduated at the top of the class, easily earning the promotion to cadet sergeant.

As the Germans attacked Poland before Mark started his basic training, in the barracks everybody was talking about going to war. Most speculated on the Hungarian Army taking on the Romanians, the Czechs, or the Serbs, one after another or perhaps all of them at the same time. The officers were gung-ho about having to fight, the sergeants figured it would be a difficult task, but the enlisted men dreaded the thought of war.

During the spring war games, Mark, serving as a platoon commander, distinguishing himself. His unit gave the best performance in the maneuvers. In addition, he won the divisional target shooting championship with both the rifle and the pistol. As a reward, the battalion

commander gave him and his platoon a couple of weeks of extra leave.

In the middle of the summer in 1940, his mother rented two rooms at their clubhouse at Siofok on the shores of Lake Balaton.

“We are going to have a good time there,” she told Mark. “I was here earlier this year; the place is still beautiful,” his mother said. “The exterior of the buildings were recently repainted, adorned with the Club’s crest, and the yellow walls with blue trim look great.”

“If my memory serves me right, those are the club’s colors,” Mark replied. The well-manicured lawns and the little fountains helped create the impression of a fashionable resort with excellent facilities accommodating the nation’s upper middle class.

“You’ll have fun here, Marcus,” Mrs. Kende said.

“Yeah,” Mark said sarcastically. “Many guests brought their eligible daughters in the hope of snaring the appropriate husband.”

“It is not true,” his mother sturdily demurred. “Most people came because of the quality of the people frequenting the resort. Some sailing enthusiasts keep their boats at the club’s marina, spending most of their time out on the lake,” she explained. “Granted, there are a few rich industrialists or landowners among the guests looking for partners in high stakes card games.”

“I bet everybody finds whatever he or she is looking for in the elegant setting of the MAC,” Mark mused.

A young cadet sergeant like him was not out of place there, as long as he wore civvies since the officers had to put on full dress uniforms for dinner. Thus, Mark decided to wear his tuxedo.

The food was outstanding, but he felt a little constrained. The large dining hall was full of men in tuxedos, officers in dress uniform and well-dressed ladies. The

waiters moved like ghosts soundlessly among the tables. Conversation was subdued, and only the occasional pop of a champagne bottle betrayed the fact that people were having a good time.

“Marcus, you must go to the five o’clock tea every day,” his mother suggested.

“What is that?” he asked.

“It is organized in the grand hall. A well known band from Budapest provides live music for all the young people.”

*I bet the place turns into the hunting ground for husbands,* Mark thought, but replied, “I’ll see, Mother.”

The five o’clock tea turned out to be a disaster. The young crowd danced to the live music while the husband hunting was in full swing. At the first occasion, Mark managed to stay away from the huntresses, but it was not easy. Otherwise, the event was no fun. The mothers or the chaperones of the girls were watching like hawks and pouncing at the smallest sign of impropriety.

Although several young ladies took aim at the Kende fortune, Mark was like an eel, always slipping out of their grasp. These girls drew the line at a peck on the cheeks and a little bit of holding hands. Otherwise, their policy was firm. “Only after the wedding, chum”.

After three days, Mark had enough of the five o’clock tea. He slipped away, looking for a place where he could have a peaceful drink and meet some real women. After crossing the railroad tracks, he was roving the streets of Siofok. It was early in the evening. The streets were teeming with tourists and locals enjoying the cool temperature. At a street corner, he bumped into a fellow Oedenburger noncom, Corporal Pataky. He was not in uniform either.

“What the hell are you doing on this side of the tracks, Sergeant?” Steve Pataky asked.

“I’m fed up with the snubs in the MAC—the exquisite club—; I’m looking for some real people.”

“Am I real enough for you?”

“You are, but unfortunately your anatomy is not quite correct. By the way, how did you get here?”

“My mother lives here. After Dad died, she sold our land, and bought a plot on the north side of the railway tracks. That is the MAC’s side. She built a small hotel with five rooms and named it the Royal Hungarian Yacht Club, which made the joint respectable and highly regarded,” Pataky said.

“So, you actually live here.”

“Yes, but I don’t mingle with the respectable crowd. I find my own kind of people.”

“Perhaps that is the gang I’m looking for,” Mark mused.

“If you wish, I can take you to a little tavern where the food is good, the drinks are not watered, the girls are easy to get along with, and the pianist is blind.”

“Alright, Steve, lead the way.”

They crossed into the older part of the town, arriving at a building with the sign of Whale Inn, suggesting excellent seafood dishes. Indeed, the quality of the dinner was outstanding.

After sunset, a single pianist wearing dark glasses played the most fashionable songs. As there were no gypsy musicians, the Whale was most un-Hungarian. Later, a number of young ladies drifted in, and sat at one of the two large vacant tables.

Pataky pointed at the women. “You may ask any one of those girls for a dance.”

“I’m a hopeless dancer.”

“You don’t have to take any more than five steps. They are not looking for husbands, romance, love, and understanding. These are business girls; the ones at the

tables with the red checkered cover normally charge five pengos for the night and the ones at the blue tables would cost you fifteen.”

Quick mental arithmetic revealed that the five pengos would be the equivalent of one U.S. dollar. *That's a gift.*

After dinner, Pataky picked a little brunette from the red table, and told Mark to meet him next day for lunch in the Royal Hungarian Yacht Club.

“I hope you'll recover by that time,” Pataky remarked. He winked.

Curious about the Hungarian professionals, Mark selected a slim blonde from the blue table. Her name was Ilona; she claimed to be a nurse at the local hospital.

“I work only a couple of nights each week at the Whale,” she said.

They spent a few pleasant hours in the girl's little apartment. Although Ilona was not as compliant as the Filipinas, Mark thought he had far more fun with her.

In the morning, Mark had a long swim. He was lying on his towel sunbathing on the deck when Peter appeared.

“Hi, Marcus,” he said. Peter sat down on the next deckchair. “Your mother asked me to have a talk with you.”

“About what?”

“She thinks you should start thinking about getting married.”

Mark sat up as if hit by lightning. “Getting married?”

“Someone has to carry on the name of the family,” Peter replied simply.

“That is stupid. First, I want to stay in the army at least until I manage to live out my childhood fantasy. After that, I want to return to America, to the Golden Sad-

dle or perhaps study at a university. A wife doesn't fit into these plans at all, not yet anyway."

"Look at your responsibilities," Peter pointed out. "You're in the army and the country is on the verge of war. If you served in the front lines, and were killed in action, the Kende family would die out with you. You should have a wife and father a few children."

"If I had a chance of dying in action, it would be rather irresponsible to leave a couple of orphans and a widow, don't you think?"

"You have a point, Marcus, but your mother doesn't think so. She asked me to talk you into getting married."

"Would she mind if I lived with my future wife for a few months before the wedding?"

"That would not be socially acceptable."

"Tell me, Peter, how in the name of God am I going to select a wife?"

"Go to the five o'clock tea, find a nice girl, and take her for a walk on the jetty. Make sure she is from a good family, has lots of money, and good connections."

"What happens if she turns out a dead fish in bed?"

"In that case, you should get yourself a lover," Peter said. He gave Mark a big smile.

"No way, Peter. I know what happens when a man breaks his word. My father is a case in point. I'm sure he committed suicide, because he knew he broke a sacred oath. He did not shoot himself, as that would have been an admission of guilt. I'm different. I intend to keep all my oaths. If I promise a woman to love her until death do us part, I'm going to keep it. If I found the right girl, I'd marry her without a moment's hesitation. However, I'm not going to get married and have children, just because my mother wants to show off with her grandchildren."

"Wow," Peter said. "That was a mouthful. Why are you mad at your mother?"

“I’m not mad at her, but if she minded her own business, I would be Sergeant Mark Kende of the U.S. Marine Corps. I would have liked that.”

“What’s wrong with the Hungarian Army?”

“Nothing. Just the Hungarian way of life bothers me. Too much attention paid to traditions and appearances. I hate that.”

“Reluctantly,” Peter sighed, “I agree with you, and I’ll try to convey these thoughts to your mother.”

## Chapter Five

In September 1940, some parts of Transylvania ceded to Romania by the Trianon Treaty of 1920 returned to Hungarian rule. By order of the High Command, the colonel of the Oedenburger Regiment selected the First Battalion to move in and temporarily garrison a small, pleasant city in recently liberated Western Transylvania. The residents were Hungarians who resented having to live under Romanian rule for more than twenty years.

The battalion traveled by train to the former Romanian border and marched on foot to its destination. The commander, Major Kerekes reluctantly rode at the head of the column; like every infantry officer, he hated horses.

Next, the "A" company came, led by Captain Toth mounted on a sedate bay. The platoon commanders were on foot. Following "A" company, the carriage of a high official came who would take possession of the communities on behalf of the Hungarian Government. Companies B and C, the baggage train, and the rearguard platoon formed the occupying force.

The column covered the five miles from the border to their destination in five hours because they stopped at every village to wave the flag and accept the gratitude of the locals. The ecstasy of the people forced tears into the eyes of most soldiers.

When the column entered the city, the enthusiasm of the inhabitants surpassed all expectations. The official's speech at the City Hall was moving, full of well-constructed patriotic phrases, which was the style in those days and fitted the occasion. Mark heard the speech twice before in the villages when the high official rehearsed the same address.

The troops moved into the barracks vacated by the Romanians and the officers billeted at willing private residences. The cadet sergeants stayed with their troops in the bachelor officers' quarters. In the evening, the mayor hosted a reception in the City Hall for the officers and civilian dignitaries.

Mark volunteered as duty officer on the first day. At the reception, he would have to drink toasts with many people, and did not like the after-effects of the booze. His buddies, fellow cadet sergeants, Kulich and Vekai, later told him about the abundance of liquor, the lack of food, and the number of elderly matrons gracing the party.

In the next few days, Mark enjoyed walking the streets of the euphoric city. Beautiful, young girls just kissed and thanked him. He never understood what the thanks were for, since he never fought for the reattachment of the city to the mother country. Simply put, he was at the right place at the right time.

Mark found the real pick-up joint of the town: the cake shop, just a few hundred feet from the medieval castle in the heart of the city. Most of the "cake-shop-girls" were students, but a few others also frequented the establishment. On the course of his hunting expeditions, Mark sampled the excellent cakes while acquiring three invitations for dinner and a date to go to the movies. Each dinner date was a bust, since the girls came from notable families and were actively looking for husbands.

The movie date turned out to be interesting. Sophie, a twenty-six-year-old licensed pharmacist, worked in her father's business. After the movie, they dined in a little, well-hidden restaurant. Sophie confessed to being married to a Romanian army officer, but refused to leave with him when the city reattached to Hungary. She was sure her husband would start divorce proceedings in the near future.

After dinner, they took a horse drawn carriage to Sophie's home. Hoping for a sizeable tip, the driver took his time getting to their destination. During the exciting thirty minutes, Sophie's panties somehow found their way into Mark's pocket.

After leaving the carriage, she said, "If you were a real gentleman, you would return them the next time we meet."

"I will. When can I see you?"

"Anytime, just drop into the pharmacy during the day, buy a couple of aspirins, and tell me where you want to meet. I shall be there."

"How about the King's Hotel?"

"I know the place well. Just let me know the room number and I'll get in through the back entrance."

"Done," Mark said. "Do you prefer dry or sweet champagne?"

"A sweet person like me drinks sweet champagne." She kissed Mark on the cheek, and disappeared into the house.

The battalion commander decided to have two days of rigorous workout for his troops. None of the cadet sergeants had a chance to leave the barracks. When the exercises were over, Major Kerekes inspected the troops in the morning, and as a sign of his satisfaction gave every off-duty soldier an evening pass. Mark hoped he could get away early enough to make the necessary arrangements for a heavy date with Sophie.

However, in the early afternoon, while exercising his platoon on the parade ground, a messenger from the battalion ordered him to attend an immediate, emergency briefing session. Mark handed the troops over to Pataky, and headed for the meeting.

The battalion exec, Captain Kiss conducted the briefing, as the commander was busy at a reception with the mayor and other high-powered civilian dignitaries.

After everybody took a seat, Captain Kiss started. "Gentlemen, yesterday two of our soldiers were murdered in ghoulish fashion. The city police began the investigation. Two officers from the Judge Advocate General's Department in Budapest are on their way to conduct an inquiry."

There was a stunned silence in the room.

"It is hard to believe that in this friendly city someone would kill Hungarian soldiers. Nevertheless, we believe the murders are the work of a Romanian terrorist group: the Iron Guards. They oppose the reattachment of any territory to Hungary. In the interest of safety, you must order your men to be careful; be wary of young women inviting them to their homes. If they want a woman, there are places where for a few pengos they can have fun. I'll give you the addresses and the going rates. These places are safe; the police, the City Health Department, and the battalion's surgeon cleared them."

Everybody was surprised at the vigilance of the captain.

"I have one more item on the agenda. We do not trust the police entirely. Although Captain Osian is a competent, professional investigator, he is an ethnic Romanian. I do not wish to accuse him of anything, but in view of our military police taking over the investigation, I want an officer to work with him. Can I have a volunteer?"

The room was silent as the grave chambers of King Tut. Nobody had any training in police work, law, or criminology.

“Don’t you guys read murder mysteries?” Kiss chided the group. “This is your chance to earn a reputation like Sherlock Holmes.”

Although Mark was a great fan of Conan Doyle, reading the exploits of the famous detective at every opportunity, he hardly thought this qualified him to work with a policeman who may be crooked or biased. Besides, not so long ago, Sergeant Ross warned him against volunteering. When he felt the eyes of Captain Kiss on his face, he looked away.

“Sergeant Kulich, who is your favorite author?”

“P. Howard,” replied the blushing cadet sergeant.

“That won’t help,” said the captain. “How about you, Sergeant Vekay? What do you read?”

“I read the English classics only, sir.”

“I assume you’re reading those books with Sergeant Kende, is that right?”

“He helps me often, because his English is much better than mine,” Vekay replied.

“Do you think Sergeant Kende reads detective stories?”

“Yes, sir. He is a fan of Conan Doyle, Edgar Wallace and many others.”

Kiss turned and looked at Mark. “It seems I found my volunteer. Sergeant Kende, report to my office after the meeting. I shall give you the authorization to represent the army in the police investigation until the professionals arrive from Budapest.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied. He wanted to strangle Tom Vekay.

The Central Police Station was in the back of City Hall. Captain Osian, a big man about fifty with a small, Hitler-style toothbrush moustache, stood up to greet Mark. He took the authorization, read it, and then asked the visitor to sit down.

“I know this is not much of an office,” Osian said in flawless Hungarian, “but this is the only one I have. I’m sure it will close soon and I’ll be retired when your military police take over my city. What can I do for you, sir?”

“Please understand, Captain, that I’m here to make sure all evidence related to the murder of our soldiers will be collected, properly catalogued, labeled, and preserved for our investigators.”

“In other words, your Commander believes I’m going to compromise this investigation in favor of my compatriots,” Osian said bitterly. “After all, I’m only a stinking, cheating, and thieving gypsy. Let me assure you, Sergeant, if I wanted to cover up something, I could do it easily.”

“I believe you. I don’t know anything about the investigative techniques.”

“May I ask you, Sergeant, do you want to see the murderers behind bars?”

“Of course.”

“Are you willing to take your chances catching them?”

“What chances?”

“Being killed or injured--”

“What are you referring to?” Mark asked, interrupting suspiciously.

“If you’re willing, I want to use you as bait.”

“How?”

“I know where and how they grabbed their victims. If we parked you there, perhaps they would attempt to abduct you. When they make their move, my men would be ready to take them down,” Osian said.

“With due respect, sir, could I have a couple of my men participating in the take-down?”

“You don’t trust me either, do you?”

“Let me put it this way, Captain Osian, if the situation were reversed, would you trust me entirely?”

“Touché, my friend,” the Romanian said. He smiled at Mark. “You’d make an excellent policeman.”

“I’m not so sure about that, but I appreciate your compliment.”

“Let us meet tonight at seven o’clock here in my office. Bring your men and have them armed with pistols; I’ll have civilian overcoats and hats ready for them. By that time, I shall prepare a plan and we could discuss the details.”

“I have to inform my commander about the operation. Do you mind?”

“Not at all,” Osian said. “In fact, it is better this way. See you at seven.”

Flanked by Corporals Pataky and Vitek, Mark arrived at Osian’s office at seven o’clock sharp. Apart from the captain, four other civilians were in the office. Osian introduced them as his detectives. All had Hungarian names.

“Well now, as we are all here, let me tell you how we are going to catch the culprits. As we found both victims in the same vicinity, with mud on their boots, I concluded they were killed in the open and not inside a house.” Osian used the tone of a professor lecturing his students.

“Are you sure the mud came from the same area where the bodies were found?” Mark queried.

“Obviously, you have read Sherlock Holmes, my friend. Yes, it has. That was the first thing I checked.”

“Thank you.”

“The second piece of evidence was a strong sedative in the stomach of each victim,” the captain continued. “We know both had Wiener Schnitzels with mashed potato and cucumber salad for dinner, no more than thirty

minutes before their death. This more or less pinpoints the restaurant where the victims ate.”

“Did you check with the restaurant staff?” Mark asked.

“No, they may be involved. If I asked, they would realize we are on to them and move the operation,” said the captain.

“How were the victims killed?” Pataky asked.

“Apart from many other wounds, their throats were cut from ear to ear, their genitals chopped off and forced into their mouths. In the end, a knife was thrust into the left eye of each victim,” Osian explained.

Corporal Vitek turned chalk-white, appearing to be on the verge of fainting or throwing up.

“Take deep breaths, Corporal,” one of the detectives said.

“As far as the murder weapon or weapons are concerned, they were razor sharp knives. One of them had a long, narrow blade, no more than twelve millimeter wide,” Osian continued.

“What are your plans, Captain?” Mark asked.

“As I was saying, there is only one place where the soldiers could have been picked up. Witness testimony suggested the two soldiers coming into the area without escorts and entering the restaurant. An elderly man coming home saw them,” Osian said.

“How did you get his testimony?” Pataky asked.

“Actually, he was the guy who later found the bodies.”

“Is he reliable?” Mark queried.

“No. He is the town drunk, a resident of the area. Actually, he is an artist practically living in the pubs.”

“How did he find the bodies?” Pataky asked.

“They were in his garden, under the bedroom window. As I don’t know if he was part of the conspiracy or not, I had him cooling his heels in jail.”

“Very well,” Mark said, “let’s get it over with!”

“Alright,” Osian said.

They set out in small groups. The only person in uniform was Mark, since Pataky and Vitek wore borrowed civilian overcoats.

Mark almost fainted when they reached the restaurant. It was the same place where he had the intimate dinner with Sophie a few days ago. The thoughts of the murderers using a sedative, and Sophie, the wife of a Romanian officer, being a pharmacist, sent cold shivers running down his spine. *Was she involved?*

At the restaurant, Osian sent Pataky and one of his detectives inside the place and set up the other two teams outside.

Then Mark entered the restaurant, taking a table across the room from Pataky and his partner. He sat down facing them, making sure they saw him well. In a few minutes, a slim dark-haired woman entered and walked by Mark’s table, dropping a glove right in front of him. Mark picked it up and handed it to her.

“Thank you, Sergeant Major,” the woman said. “How nice of you. While we lived under Romanian rule, there were very few gentlemen wearing uniforms.”

“Thank you, Madame,” Mark replied. He quickly introduced himself. *If she were an Iron Guard, Osian would get her. If not, I had picked up a spectacular woman.*

“My name is Marie. Are you alone, Sergeant Kende?”

“I am.”

“May I offer you a glass of wine from our private stock and sit with you for a moment?”

“It will be a distinct pleasure.”

“Thank you,” Marie replied. She sat down, and signaled the waiter. “Luke, bring us a bottle of wine from my private stock.” She turned to Mark. “Where are you from, Sergeant?”

“I’m from Budapest. Do you live here, Madame?”

“Oh, yes, I was born here, went to school in Satu-Mare, and I’m now teaching in an elementary school.”

“What are you doing here?”

Marie blushed. “Do I have to spell it out for you? Teachers don’t make a lot of money.”

The waiter appeared with a sealed bottle of red wine and showed it to Marie. She nodded. He poured a few drops into her glass. After tasting it, she said, “It is alright.”

Next, he filled Mark’s glass, then Marie’s, and placed the bottle on the table.

“May I take your order?” he asked.

“We are not yet ready,” Marie said.

As soon as the waiter disappeared, she turned to Mark. “Cheers. Let us drink to the continued good health of my white glove.” She emptied her glass.

Mark cautiously sipped his wine.

“Have you had supper?” he asked.

“To be honest with you, I haven’t. In fact, I have a nice cold plate already prepared in my house.”

“And if we came to terms, you’d invite me to sample those home-made goodies,” Mark finished the sentence for her.

“Brilliant, Sergeant, you’re very perceptive.”

“Although I hate such negotiations, I want to make sure that neither of us would be embarrassed.”

“Hush,” Marie said, interrupting, “I’m sure you know how much of an honorarium a gentleman should pay a lady.”

“Very nice of you. Allow me to take care of the bill, and let us go.”

“Luke,” Marie said, “the bill, please.”

The waiter came, stood between them and Pataky’s table. Mark fixed his eyes on his glass. For a while, he was lost, but quickly realized what he must do.

“Come with me,” he said to the waiter.

He stepped a few meters away from Marie and gave a five-pengo coin to the waiter. The wine may have been one fifty, no more.

“Luke, old man, how much should I pay Marie?”

The waiter was lost for words. In the Philippines, Mark used to negotiate with a man for the services of Catherine and the other girls. To him this was the proper *modus operandi*.

“I don’t know,” Luke replied uncertainly, “perhaps ten would be sufficient.”

At this point, there was commotion behind Mark’s back. He spun around and saw the civilian detective grabbing Marie, pinning her arms behind her back, while Pataky drew his forty-five and fired a shot in the air.

“It was a blank, ladies and gentlemen, please remain seated,” the corporal announced. “The police will be here in a moment.”

The front and the back doors of the restaurant swung open and Osian entered with his men, their guns drawn.

The handcuffs clicked on the wrists of Marie. The captain took a wide-mouthed bottle from his pocket, pouring the content of Mark’s glass into it.

“Mark,” Marie said, “help me, please. This is a horrendous misunderstanding.”

Her dark eyes were full of tears, and for a moment, Mark weakened, but obviously, Osian knew what was going on.

“Take her to holding,” the captain announced and the detectives led Marie away. Mark moved to say farewell to her, but checked himself in time.

“Our man and your guy saw her drugging your drink. You were very clever leaving her at the table alone with your glass,” Osian said.

“What is going to happen to her?” Mark asked.

“We shall give her a body search, question her, and if the evidence warrants, lay charges,” the policeman answered. “I’m sure by the morning I’ll have her murdering buddies behind bars.”

“Keep me posted, Captain. I’d better take my boys back to the base,” Mark said.

Outside the restaurant, the captain and his men got into an old paddy wagon with their prisoner and disappeared.

“Let’s go home,” Pataky said. “It is much safer at the base. We can return the civvies tomorrow.”

Mark handed in his report to Captain Kiss in the morning. The battalion exec ordered him and his corporals to stay on base until further orders, keeping themselves available on a moment’s notice.

At eleven o’clock, the commander called them to his office. First, he put Mark on the carpet. Apart from Major Kerekes and Captain Kiss, two officers were present, both wearing the colors of the Judge Advocate General’s Department on the lapel of their jackets. One was a major and the other a lieutenant. Obviously, they were the investigators from Budapest. After the formal introductions, the officers wanted to hear the details of the previous night’s events.

Mark told them everything, including the challenge of Osian to help capture the murderers.

“That was beyond the call of duty, Sergeant,” said the major and turned to the battalion commander. “He should be mentioned in the dispatches.”

“Of course,” Kerekes replied.

“If the major will permit,” Mark said, “I’m not the only one who should be mentioned. Corporals Vitek and Pataky took as many risks as I did.”

“I believe the sergeant is right. Perhaps the two corporals should be mentioned as well,” Captain Kiss suggested.

“They will be,” Kerekes replied. “Do you have anything else you want to say or ask, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let us hear your concerns,” the major from Budapest said.

“What is the status of the murder investigation?”

The lieutenant looked at his boss, and the major nodded imperceptibly.

“Well,” the lieutenant started, “the suspect, Miss Marie Radulescu, was searched after the arrest. The detectives found a long-bladed knife strapped to her thigh. The width of the blade was eleven millimeters, consistent with some of the wounds of the victims.”

“She was in a business where the knife may have been her last line of defense against an aggressive customer,” Mark stated.

The lieutenant looked at his boss and the major nodded again, obviously enjoying the situation.

“There was dried blood at the joint of the blade and the handle, but the quantity was not enough to establish whether it was human or animal blood,” replied the lieutenant.

“It proves nothing,” Mark said.

“The test of the content of your glass revealed the presence of the same drug the pathologist found in the

victims. We found a vial originally containing the tranquilizer in the woman's purse."

"I see. What has happened to her?"

"She is in our custody," the major said. "Under the weight of the evidence, she revealed their plans. Miss Radulescu and her partners were planning to rob you, Sergeant, but they did not intend to kill you. This is what she said, but we do not believe her."

"Did she give you the names of her associates?"

"Yes, she did, but only a couple of hours ago. They are long gone."

"Who questioned her?"

"Captain Osian was the lead interrogator."

"Could I visit her?" Mark asked.

"Why?"

"I just want to make sure she is alright, and will have fair legal representation."

The officers looked at each other dumbfounded. They did not understand Mark's passion for fair play, law, and order instilled into him in America.

"If I were you, I would not visit her," Kerekes remarked.

"Besides, she is in the base hospital under guard," the lieutenant stated. "The questioners were rather aggressive. You see the police do not observe the same stringent regulations as we do when it comes to interrogation. They occasionally torture the suspects."

The world started spinning with Mark. He forced himself to maintain his calm. At first, he did not want to hear any more about the case he so unwittingly solved for Osian, but his sense of decency overcame the other feelings he had.

"Regardless, I would like to see her," Mark said.

The officers looked at each other. First, the lead investigator, and then his lieutenant shrugged.

“Alright, Kende,” Major Kerekes said, “you may see her.”

“Thank you, sir. May I have permission to leave?”

“Yes, Sergeant, you may leave,” Kerekes said. “I thank you.”

Mark saluted and marched out.

The officers called in Pataky and Vitek as well, but let them go in a matter of minutes. When they left the building, Mark stopped in the middle of the parade ground.

“Would you guys cover for me for an hour? I want to check something,” he said.

“Of course,” Pataky replied. He knew Mark had something on his mind. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“No thanks, Steve, I must do this alone.”

“We’ll cover for you,” Vitek said.

Mark left the base and headed for the pharmacy about half a mile away. As he entered, he looked around, but did not see Sophie anywhere. Stepping to the elderly man serving the customers, Mark calmly asked for her.

“She is not here,” the man said. “Sophie left last night to join her husband. I’m sorry--” Tears welled up in the man’s eyes; he had to be her father.

Mark instantly knew where Marie got the tranquilizer to use on the soldiers. “Thank you, sir,” he said, leaving the pharmacy.

Half a mile is not too long to walk, but if someone had so much on his mind as Mark did, it would seem a long, long way. *I do not understand why I was not the first soldier the enemy killed. Perhaps Sophie was just testing the process. Besides, why did the Romanians have to kill Hungarian soldiers?*

Mark could not sort out what was wrong with this case. He did not think about the fairness or the injustice

of the Trianon Treaty or the rectification of its errors. He simply tried to understand Marie and her compatriots. *Why did they have to kill those soldiers? Did the soldiers endanger their lives? Did they want to intimidate the Hungarian civilians? Was it possible to justify killing innocent people because they wore a uniform?*

*On the other hand, would the brutal killing of the soldiers justify the violent questioning and torture of Marie? However, if one kills innocent people, could he or she expect mercy from the other side? Violence begets violence.*

Suddenly, Mark understood why this horrible chain of events took place. Uncivilized, indoctrinated people cannot sit down and sort out their differences; thus, they resort to violence.

Why was the so-called cradle of modern Christian civilization, Europe, the hotbed of hatred and violence? The answer came to him instantaneously. European society was not merit, ability, and achievement oriented. To them roots, religion, and social standing were more important than achievements. As long as the traditional values were satisfied, one could not do anything wrong even if it was a vile murder.

When he reached the gate of the base, Mark longed to return to America where life was much more to his liking. Granted, many things could and should improve there, but in his microcosm, the definition of right and wrong was always clearer on the other side of the Atlantic.

Next, he headed for the base hospital. The orderly, a lance corporal, did not let Mark see the prisoner at first, but after phoning the commander's office, he relented. At the end of the corridor was a private room with an armed guard at the entrance.

A single bed stood in the middle of the heavily curtained, dimly lit room. Marie was laying there, her head slightly elevated. The glint of steel handcuffs on her wrist caught Mark's attention; the white sheet covering Marie contrasted well with her dark hair.

She looked at him as he stepped closer; the hatred in the dark eyes burned Mark.

"How are you, Marie?" he asked.

She did not answer. Mark noticed her swollen, battered face and the dark circles around her eyes. Her left foot was hanging out from under the sheet; with horror, Mark noticed the nail from her big toe was missing. He was appalled but controlled himself.

"Why, Marie, why?" he asked.

She still did not answer.

"By the way, Sophie left. She is not here anymore."

There was an imperceptible flash in the dark eyes; then Marie suddenly spat at Mark. The bloody spittle landed short of the target on the scrubbed floor. She started coughing violently and blood appeared at the corner of her mouth.

"Nurse," Mark shouted. He believed that she was in danger of choking.

The orderly came in slowly, apparently unconcerned.

"Yeah?" he said.

"First," Mark said as calmly as he could, "when I call you, Lance Corporal, you'd better move fast. When you get here, stand at attention, and call me sir. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," the orderly said. He stood at attention.

Mark pointed at Marie. "Look after her," he ordered.

“If the sergeant wishes, I’m carrying out the orders of Doctor Gach. If you wish to inquire about the treatment of the prisoner, talk to him. He is in his office.”

“Just as well.”

Entering the doctor’s office, Mark saluted and inquired about the condition of Marie. Gach was a first lieutenant, his rank insignia displayed over the white lab coat.

“Are you a relative?” the doctor asked.

“No, sir, I’m the guy who captured her.”

“Congratulations,” Gach said with bitter irony in his voice. “Did you question her?”

“No, sir.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I just want to make sure her rights are observed.”

“What rights?” The doctor asked in a bitter, offended tone. “Miss Radulescu has no rights. I could have operated and saved her, but the regimental surgeon forbade it. I cannot do anything for her. She will be dead by tomorrow morning.”

“Why, for heaven’s sake?” Mark asked in horror.

“Sit down, Sergeant. Apparently, you’re the only civilized human being around here. I was asking the same question, but the chief told me she was a murderer, and there was no sense in doing anything for her because she would hang anyway.”

“Aren’t accused murderers given a fair trial around here?”

“Apparently not; however, before you say anything, which I may have to report to my commanding officer, let me assure you, I agree with you.”

“Can you give her something to ease the transition?”

“Come with me, Sergeant,” the doctor said. He stood up, went to the glass cabinet taking a silver box

containing the needles and the syringe. From the drawer of his desk, he took a vial. "This is morphine. I'm going to give her a large enough dose to keep her asleep for several hours. I shall repeat it before I go off duty. If she is lucky, she'll die before the effects wear off."

"Why didn't you do it earlier?"

"I gave her a smaller dose, because I was hoping the boss would change his mind and let me operate."

"Actually, what happened to her?"

"One of her ribs broke, penetrating her right lung, cutting a couple of arteries," the doctor explained. "It would be an easy operation to fix her. Let's go."

They went to Marie's room and the doctor pulled up a stool and sat near the patient.

"I'm going to give you a shot to ease the pain," he said. He filled the syringe.

Marie just looked at the doctor without saying anything. She seemed completely unconcerned.

"Do you want to stay?" the doctor asked Mark.

"No," he replied, "I just want to acknowledge her courage."

The doctor looked dumbfounded.

Mark faced Marie, stood at attention, and saluted. There was a little smile on her lips.

## Chapter Six

The battalion remained in Transylvania for a while. The garrison duty was pleasant, the young officers and the cadet sergeants enjoyed their stay. They were the toasts of the town and most left feeling nostalgic about their service in Transylvania. Mark and his fellow cadet sergeants left to attend the second semester of the reserve officers' training course.

Unlike the others, Mark was happy to leave, because the memories of Marie gave him the shivers. Before his train departed for Budapest, he went to the cemetery, found the unkempt grave of Marie Radulescu and left a single white rose by the headstone. Although she was the enemy and fought using underhanded methods, her courage demanded respect. *When my time comes, I hope I will face death with the same calm courage as Marie did.* He stood at attention and saluted the grave.

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The second term of the reserve officers' training course was no easier than the first four months. In fact, it was much tougher, since the instructors paid more attention to the ability of the candidates to improvise than in the first four months. Quite a few cadet sergeants failed.

At the end of the course, Mark attained the rank of ensign. He returned to his unit and resumed command of the same platoon. His relationship to his friend Steve Pataky, now holding the rank of sergeant, did not change, although regulations did not permit fraternization while on duty.

The declaration of war on June 27 in 1941 was a shock to Mark. Although Hungary entering the free-for-all distressed him, he did not question the decision of the government.

As he was convinced about his platoon eventually ending up in the front lines, Mark trained the soldiers at a ferocious tempo. Sometimes even Steve Pataky thought that Mark was asking too much of his men, but the young ensign had not relented.

“If they want to come home alive, they must train, train, and train,” Mark said.

In the late summer, Mark went to the lakeside for a week only, and spent the rest of his leave at her mother’s family estate. He had nothing to do but just lie in the sun and read. In the evenings, he had a simple meal with an excellent, rare red wine, from the family’s private stock. His uncle, Peter came to examine the books of the estate, and spent a memorable evening with Mark. They talked about life in the Army, what the future may hold, and last but not least the most important topic as far as Mark was concerned: women.

“If you ever manage to spend some time in Budapest, Marcus, I will introduce you to my friends in theatrical circles,” Peter promised.

“That would be nice.” Mark smiled. “I’ve always wanted to meet the celebrities.”

“It is not a good idea to go after them. You’d better stick with the chorus girls. They are just as pretty, and a lot easier to get along with.”

Eventually, Peter introduced Mark to the lady postmaster of a neighboring village. She was famous for her good looks and loose morals. Mark spent a couple of wild nights with her in the Hotel Castle, promising everlasting love to each other. Nevertheless, when the lady was not looking, Mark slipped an envelope with a sum of money into her handbag. Obviously, she appreciated such expressions of love.

In late 1941, Hungary was technically at war, but as far as the reservists were concerned, it was at peace. In December, the army discharged most of them.

Some of the discharged reservists started university, while others took civilian jobs. Mark dreaded the thought of demobilization because, despite his unpleasant experience in Transylvania, he enjoyed being an officer and a platoon commander. He continued working his soldiers hard, as he was sure of the High Command eventually sending the regiment to the front lines. Mark wanted to lead a well-trained unit, firmly believing what he called the Sergeant Ross doctrine: "Well trained soldiers have the best chance of surviving in war." Consequently, his was the best platoon in the regiment.

The dreaded day of demobilization was looming. On the second week of December, the army discharged several reservists. A few ensigns departed, including Mark's friend, Tom Vekai. He was somewhat older, having already graduated from university with a degree in the English and Russian languages. Mark was sorry to see him go.

The officers organized a farewell party for the discharged reservists at the best hotel in town. Mark reluctantly drank more than he wanted to because he had to toast all the guys returning to civilian life. The next morning, he woke rather late with a serious hangover. As he had nothing important to do that day, he let Steve Pataky drill the soldiers.

Mark was having lunch at the officers' mess with a couple of excited ensigns, looking forward to demobilization. They barely finished the soup when a messenger came inviting Mark to the office of the battalion commander. This meant demobilization and the end.

The major had Mark wait for a while, before inviting him to the inner sanctuary. Battalion Commander

Major Kiss was new at his job. Contrary to his predecessor, he did not shy away from the dirty work.

“Sit down, Ensign, smoke if you like.”

Mark sat down.

“I’ve heard nice things about you, Kende,” Kiss began without further preamble. “I understand you’re due for demobilization any day now. Is that so?”

“Unfortunately, yes, sir.”

“What is the problem? Aren’t you looking forward to civilian life?”

“Well, sir, I don’t know how to say this, but, I really do not want to be discharged from the army. I like it here.”

“May I assume that you wouldn’t mind extending your military service?”

“I wouldn’t,” Mark blurted out. “I’d love to stay in the army.”

“Well, we are both very fortunate. I have a request from Budapest for an officer who can speak English and German fluently. I understand your German is flawless and you took most of your education in the United States. Is that so?”

“Yes, sir, it is.”

“In that case, I’m going to do a little bit of finagling. As you have shown extraordinary skill in training your platoon, I’m going to recommend your promotion to the rank of lieutenant in the reserve. We are going to demobilize you for a day and immediately recall you to active duty.”

Mark thought the heavens were opening.

“Next, I’ll assign you temporarily to the staff of the Fifth Army Corps Commander, Major General Vaskuti-Seidl in the city of Szeged. The corps is in action against Serb irregulars and you may actually see combat. How-

ever, after a few months, I want you back. The Oedenburger Infantry Regiment is your home and alma mater.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mark replied. He tried to control his elation.

“Of course, in the army, the administration is slow. What we discussed here must go to the Regiment first, then all the way up to our Army Corps Commander and all the way down again. That may take some time. Therefore, hand over your platoon to Ensign Rethy and take a couple of weeks off. You will get your orders at your home.”

“What will happen to my platoon?” Mark asked. “I trained them to be specialists.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get your precious platoon back as soon as you return,” the major said. He smiled, thinking it was nice to see a young officer concerned about his men. Kiss was a regular, fought in the Great War, and appreciated Mark’s strong attachment to his unit. Such behavior was common during the war, but unheard of in peacetime.

The major decided to keep Mark with his beloved platoon as long as possible. *Eventually, he’ll make an excellent company commander*, Kiss thought. “Dismissed, Lieutenant,” Kiss said.

The battalion’s clerk had Mark’s promotion, demobilization, and recall to active duty posted the same afternoon, and the machinery started. In the evening, the battalion’s tailor stitched the lieutenant’s single gold star on the green lapel of Mark’s jacket.

The train to Budapest left after midnight and arrived late, around ten o’clock in the morning. By ten thirty, Mark reached the family home at the foot of the Castle Hill in Buda.

His mother opened the door, wearing a pink silk dressing gown. As always, she was beautiful. She hugged and kissed her son.

“Are you home for good, Marcus?”

“No, Mother,” he replied removing his greatcoat. “I only have a few days off. I got a temporary transfer to the Fifth Army Corps in Szeged.”

“I see you were promoted; we must have a party to celebrate.”

“Thank you, Mother, organize the party if you wish, but please, promise me you’re not going to foist some well-mannered young lady on me, hoping that I will marry her.”

“No, I won’t. Peter told me about your feelings regarding marriage. Anyway, have a rest now. My masseur is coming any minute. After I finished with him, you might take me to lunch.”

“I will, Mother,” Mark replied. Before he could have asked about the dinner, the doorbell rang.

“This must be Michael,” his mother said with excitement in her voice. She rushed to open the door.

The visitor, a muscular young man, gave her a warm smile, but it froze on his lips when he saw Mark.

“Michael, this is my son, Marcus.”

They shook hands and before Mark could say anything to satisfy the requirements of civility, she took Michael by the arm and started toward her bedroom.

“We’ll be ready in about an hour,” she said. The key clicked, and the lock engaged.

Anger welled up in Mark. *The bastard is messing around with my mother! I’m going to tear him into little pieces.*

He went into the bathroom, had a quick shave, a shower, and put on clean underwear. In less than fifteen minutes, he was ready. He moved an armchair in the liv-

ing room to face the hall, and left the door open. *I'm going to see him coming out of the bedroom and then I'll get him!*

Mark sat in the chair for about five minutes fuming, composing his speech to Michael. He was almost done when a little voice, like that of the devil sounded off in the back of his mind. "What is your problem, Marcus? Michael is doing the same thing you did to Mrs. Bergman and half a dozen middle aged American matrons. If it was okay for you, why are you mad at Michael?"

Mark's subconscious mind objected. "He is screwing my mother!"

"Mrs. Stone, Mrs. Bergman, and Mrs. Hawthorn all had sons your age when you had relations with them, the little voice argued. Be reasonable, Marcus! Your mother is a radiant forty-five-year old woman full of vitality and energy. She needs men as much as you need women."

"Yeah," Mark said to himself. His anger subsided and he felt ashamed. "After all, my mother is human too."

He pulled the chair back into its regular position and taking a book off the shelf, settled down to read, hardly noticing the entrance door closing. When his mother came to the living room, her perfect hairdo appeared slightly disheveled, but she was in an ebullient mood.

"I'll be ready in a jiffy, Marcus," she said.

"Alright, Mother," he replied absently.

They had lunch at an elegant restaurant in the downtown area. This establishment was famous for the quality of the food and the discreet separation of the tables. In this place, one could have discussed state secrets without fear of eavesdroppers overhearing.

After they ordered the food, Mark asked innocently, "Where did you find this masseur?"

“Countess Pardovich recommended Michael; he is very good.”

“I bet he is.” Mark suddenly remembered his affairs with older women.

“Anyway, Michael is studying physical education, and since he’s from a poor family, he supports himself by giving a massage. He has only two or three regular customers like me.”

“No doubt the countess is one of them. Do you know who the others are?”

“No, I don’t. Why are you so interested in Michael?” she asked suspiciously.

“No particular reason. The fellow made a very good first impression, and I wanted to know more about him.”

“Thank you,” Angela Kende replied, apparently relieved.

“It’s alright, Mother, don’t worry about it,” he said. From the way his mother looked at him, Mark understood the essence of her relationship to Michael, but he no longer had any objections.

Mrs. Kende organized a small gathering to celebrate Mark’s promotion. The Pesthy family arrived first. In the old days, when they lived in the Franz Joseph Cavalry Barracks, Major Pesthy was Zoltan Kende’s executive officer, but now he commanded the Battalion. His wife, Aunt Gabby, was one of the best-looking women on the base, and their daughter, Judy used to be Mark’s playmate.

She turned into a striking young woman with long jet-black hair and ocean blue eyes. Judy was slim, about five feet six; her legs were somewhat stronger than the rest of her body suggested. Nevertheless, judging by her walk, Mark felt God created Judy to make love. She was a student at the University of Engineering, perhaps the on-

ly female in the class of a hundred men studying mechanical engineering.

They sat in the drawing room waiting for the others when Mrs. Kende remarked, "You became a beautiful, young lady, Judy."

She blushed.

"We are having problems with her," Aunt Gabby remarked. "She doesn't want to get married. Her mind is set on designing racing cars. Isn't that stupid?"

"Quite to the contrary," Mark got into the fray. "I wish I had a calling like that."

"I never thought you'd end up a soldier," Judy remarked. "You never fought back when I beat you, even though you were much stronger than I."

"I watched you do that once," Mark's mother said. "Do you know what Marcus told me afterwards?"

"No, but I'm curious," said Judy.

"I asked him why he let you beat him without defending himself. Marcus was five at the time, but like a grown man, he declared: Mother, I can't possibly strike a woman!"

"If I only knew," Judy smiled and gently put her hand on Mark's sleeve. "I apologize, Marcus. I promise never to beat you again."

"That is a relief," he said.

The others began arriving. Peter Knezits came with his latest conquest, a diva from the Theatre of the Operettas; Tom Vekai came alone. Mark was genuinely happy to see him. Tom had found a responsible position at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The dinner was exceptional even by stringent Hungarian standards. After the last course, the men withdrew to the study, ostensibly for cigars and brandy, but in actuality, they talked about women, while the ladies sat in the salon complaining about their husbands.

Mark's dress uniform with a lieutenant's single gold star on the green base of his lapel was impressive, but paled in comparison to Major Pesthy's, which displayed a row of medals, including a brand new decoration on the red war ribbon with the swords, suggesting he earned it in combat. In traditional military circles, it was bad form to ask an officer how he won a certain medal. However, it was quite acceptable for someone else telling the story.

Peter Knezits also wore his uniform, with the rank insignia of a full colonel in the cavalry. By rank, he was far above Mark, a lowly lieutenant; if Peter were not his favorite uncle, Mark would sip his drink standing at attention. He taught Mark riding; he was the one taking his career in hand when they returned from the U.S. Peter arranged for special dispensation by the Minister of Defense, permitting Mark to wear his American decorations.

"I see you were not demobilized, Marcus," Peter said. "Instead, they are going to send you to the front lines."

"I'm going to be a staff officer and interpreter, but I'm sure to get into the fight somehow. I'm not looking forward to it because I know how it feels having to kill in combat."

"That is an advantage over your fellow officers. I expect you would be promoted further or decorated," Peter said.

"I would appreciate it, but I'd gladly give up all honors if I could bring back every man in my platoon."

"It will never happen," Peter said, shaking his head. "In the last war, an entirely different affair than this one, we usually lost about half of our guys. Not all killed of course, but many wounded and transferred, while a few were captured. As an officer, I felt responsible for every

death or injury in my unit. This is why war is hell for an officer.”

“I learned that much,” Mark replied. “I believe I could cope with the responsibility, die if I had to, but mutilation or capture terrifies me.”

“You talk like a professional,” Peter said. “I felt that way in 1915. I was wounded a couple of times, but fortunately I recovered. Although being wounded was bad, that was not the most difficult to bear.”

“What was the worst? Was it the hand-to-hand combat?” Tom asked.

“When the cavalry is charging, the hussars don’t think about dying; in fact, their mind goes blank, the adrenalin is pumping, the trained reflexes take over, and every move is automatic. The charging cavalry wants to get it over with, trample the enemy in the mud. No, my friend, the hand-to-hand combat is not the worst thing in a war. Am I right, Francis?” Peter asked the major.

“You are,” the terse reply came.

“Of course you might not know about Francis getting the big medal for leading his battalion, perhaps in the last cavalry charge of military history,” Peter continued.

“When was it?” Mark asked innocently.

“I’m surprised you never heard of it. The charge of the battalion made most of the papers. Anyway, it happened at Perwomaïsk in the Ukraine. The German and the Russian infantry were slugging it out from their trenches the same way as we did during the Great War. The Germans couldn’t advance because of the stubborn defense of Ivan. The German battalion commander cursed like a trooper; his officers were silent not knowing what to do. Finally, they asked for artillery support, which was not available. However, Francis’ regiment was just disembarking at a railway siding a couple of miles

from the spot. The German general asked Colonel Pongracz, the commander of the regiment, to have a look and perhaps lend a hand to their beleaguered allies. The old man took the short ride with his hussars, and when he saw what was happening, ordered the Regiment to draw swords and led the charge personally against the Russian trenches.”

“Right into the teeth of the Russian machineguns,” Mark said, interrupting.

“He couldn’t have been bothered. The colonel on his gray horse led the charge. In a matter of minutes, the terrified Russians were out of their trenches running, and the hussars with their shining sabers, were cutting them to pieces. Francis led the First Battalion,” Peter continued.

“I believe the Russians thought we were completely crazy. They ran thinking it was contagious,” Pesthy said interrupting.

“Congratulations, Major,” Tom Vekai said. “I don’t think I’d have the nerve to attack in such a way.”

“It wasn’t too bad,” the major continued. “We caught Ivan completely off guard, not expecting our attack. They hardly fired a shot. We were on top of them in a matter of minutes.”

“I thought a bayonet charge was the hardest thing a man could be asked to do,” Mark said. “The infantry reaches the enemy much more slowly, the charge is less glamorous, and the fighting may last longer.”

“You ought to know,” Peter said, “but even if you’re right, that is still not the hardest thing to bear in a war.”

“What do you consider the worst?” Mark asked.

“Living with the lice,” the colonel replied swiftly.

“Lice?” Mark asked.

“Yes,” Peter said. “I suggest that you order three sets of new long underwear and shirts, all made of pure silk. Lice cannot stand the texture.”

“Unbelievable.”

“If you want to be absolutely sure of keeping the buggers away,” Pesthy said, “have two blankets, one for you and one for your horse. At night, take the blanket off the horse and give him yours. Lice cannot stand the smell of horses.”

“Thank you, Uncle,” Mark said, “you may have saved me a lot of trouble.”

“While we are trying to make your life in the front lines easier, let me tell you about a couple of golden rules,” Peter continued.

“I’d appreciate it.”

“According to the first rule, you should never volunteer for anything because you’d endanger your unit, the men you’re so keen on bringing back,” Peter said.

“I understand that. Sergeant Ross in the marine corps taught me never to volunteer.”

“He must have been an excellent soldier.”

“He was my mentor. I survived in the Philippines only because I followed his advice every step of the way. He thought I must be decisive and never hesitate in a combat situation. According to Ross, my training should cover almost any situation, which may occur.”

“Sound advice,” Peter agreed. “In the last war, I’d say he was right on the money, but this time the fighting is somewhat different.”

“Why?”

“This is a mobile war and our generals have no idea how to manage it. They have grave misconceptions about tactics and strategy,” Peter said.

“Remember, Marcus,” Pesthy said seriously, “most officers are trying to fight this war as they fought the last

one. Colonel Pongracz proved the higher echelons right, even though our much publicized cavalry charge belonged to another era. Now, it will be even more difficult to get the generals thinking the right way.”

“I appreciate that,” Mark argued. “However, is it not the duty of the staff officers to point out the misconceptions of the generals?”

“It is,” said Peter, “but consider this: when the Great War ended, the Austro-Hungarian Army stood on enemy territory. We were not defeated on the field! The socialists, the communists and the home country rabble defeated us.”

“I’ve heard that often from my father,” Mark said nervously.

“Anyway,” Peter continued, “the staff officers of the last war, the guys who never lost a battle, are the generals today. Those of us, who were battalion commanders in the last war, and saw the stupidity of the higher echelons, are the colonels and lieutenant colonels in staff assignments. We are trying to change the minds of those boneheads, but they do not believe us. They claim we shouldn’t argue with them, should not tell them how to win, because they did it once and can do it again. The generals believe they would win this war using the same tactics. That is wrong because this is an entirely different war.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Lose gracefully, I suppose,” Peter said. He shrugged. “Anyway, as a junior officer, you should not be too concerned with strategy. Just carry out each order in the manner they tell you. Remember the second rule of combat: attaining the objective takes precedence over losses. Your job is to devise ways and means to do it with the least losses. Improvise, use your imagination keeping in mind the third rule, which says: if you win big, your

commander gets the credit, but if you lose, you'll face court-martial alone."

"Thanks," Mark replied sarcastically.

"There is one more thing, I should warn you about," Pesthy said seriously. "This is going to be the most important later in this goddamned war. If your commander orders you to withdraw from a position at a certain time, stick to the timetable, no matter what happens."

"What happens if I cannot hold?"

"Train your men in the execution of forced withdrawal. It is in the training manuals, but nobody bothers to practice it. Most people are convinced the war will end when the Germans take Moscow. I'm sure it won't; in fact, that would be the beginning of the end," Peter said.

"Don't you believe in a German victory, Uncle?"

"Did you ever look at the world map, Marcus?" Peter asked slowly. "You would see Britain and its colonies colored pink. The Dominions of the British Commonwealth are striped, the French possessions are gray, and the Soviet Union is green. The other countries, like Germany, Italy, and us are flyshit in comparison. Now, you tell me: how do you expect us to win?"

"I agree with Peter," Pesthy stated. "The only way for us Hungarians to survive the turmoil of this century was to stay out of this war. We had nothing to gain by going to war."

"That was not possible," Peter said. "We hitched our wagon to the Germans' for better or worse."

They debated the pros and cons of going into a full-fledged war against the rest of the world for a while, but in the end, Tom suggested cutting the discussions short and joining the ladies.

For the rest of the evening, Mark was busy courting Judy, but she was playing him as a fisherman plays the bass. Mrs. Kende watched them from the corner of her

eye hoping for something to happen. She did not hope in vain; Mark invited Judy for lunch the next day in the officers' club.

After the guests left, before falling asleep, Mark thought of Judy. *She would perform admirably well in bed, but getting her between the sheets would be difficult.*

On their strategic date, Mark barely managed the first kiss, but on the same day, his orders came through. To the dismay of his mother, he had to suspend the courting.

As Mark boarded the express train to Szeged, he had to contend with a multitude of thoughts. Judy's kiss was upsetting, rekindling the memories of Susan. Although her lips tasted better than Susan's did, this girl was different.

*With Judy, we share many childhood memories. Our family background, heritage, and social status were similar. Since we have so much in common, she would be a good wife, but I should not rush into anything. First, let us see how good she is in bed.*

## Chapter Seven

The strange, double-barreled names like Vaskuti-Seidl, the name of the Fifth Army's commander, are rare in Hungary. The first half is Hungarian, usually the name of a town or a village, while the second is pure German. The families having such names were usually of Austrian origin, descendents of officers in the Imperial Army, who distinguished themselves fighting the Hungarians during the revolutionary war of 1848-49. The Emperor awarded those soldiers Hungarian titles with the matching estates confiscated from rebellious noblemen. Some of the soldiers later assimilated into Hungarian society while many retained the Austrian identity.

A colonel who never lost a battle, Vaskuti-Seidl was a decorated soldier from the Great War. In 1919, he retired to his estate, but when the war became a distinct possibility, he wrote a passionate letter to Regent Horthy asking for a command. As experienced generals young enough to take charge of field operations were rare, the High Command reluctantly promoted Vaskuti-Seidl to major general and gave him the Fifth Army Corps garrisoned in Szeged.

Shortly thereafter, the Minister of Defense mobilized the Fifth, moving them to the southern front with orders to clear the Yugoslavian troops and administration from those territories, which were recently reattached to Hungary.

Mark reported for duty a day after New Year's, but there was hardly anybody at the corps' headquarters. Colonel George Nemeth received him.

"You'd better check in at the Hotel Royal and come back tomorrow morning at eight," he ordered.

The hotel was full; the manager told Mark about line officers doubling up, and installed him into a room

with one occupant. The roommate, Lieutenant Paul Berkes, a cavalry officer, graduate of the Ludovika Academy, was a nice guy; they hit it off well. However, their budding friendship almost came to an abrupt halt during the first night. Berkes was snoring. It was not a gentle snore, but the cross of a railway engine with a faulty bearing and a charging, trumpeting bull elephant. The windows were trembling from the sound. At breakfast, Mark politely mentioned it to Berkes, but the hussar just smiled and simply stated, "If you whistle, I stop."

In the morning, the colonel showed Mark into a small office, actually just a glorified closet having a desk and a chair. If a second person came into the room, the door had to remain open. Someone left a large basket, full of papers on the desk.

"I want you to examine these documents and catalogue them. They are all in English. Obviously, some of these papers may suggest spying while the rest is just garbage. Separate them in two piles, but do not throw out anything," Colonel Nemeth said.

"I understand, sir."

"Very well, go at it," the colonel said. He left Mark believing that his young subordinate knew what to do.

After a hard day at the office, Mark had dinner in the hotel with Berkes. Following the sumptuous meal, they sat in the café and had a few drinks while the hussar entertained Mark with the adventures of his men.

They talked and joked for a while, and around ten o'clock they went to bed.

As soon as Berkes' head hit the pillow, the railway engine started and the elephant began trumpeting. According to the instructions, Mark started whistling. Although he was not a musician, he had a good ear and a fair repertoire of operettas. There was no effect. After

midnight, Mark got up and went to the corridor to enjoy a little quiet.

Suddenly, the neighbor's door opened, and another man wearing pajamas came out. Apparently, he was not surprised to see Mark.

"Do you live next door?" the man asked.

"Yeah."

"He snores too loud, but you whistle very well. Do you do requests?"

Mark did not want to offend the man by saying anything; instead, he quietly wished him good night and returned to his room. Waking up Berkes, Mark told him to stay awake for fifteen minutes. Although the hussar promised faithfully, he was fast asleep in a minute and the snoring started again.

In a little while, somebody knocked on the door. Mark got up again, opened it, and found a young man wearing pajamas facing him.

"What can I do for you?" Mark asked.

"Is your roommate Lieutenant Berkes?"

"How did you know?"

"I recognize his snoring from a mile. I'm Lieutenant Vas, from the end of the corridor. I slept in the same dormitory with Berkes at the Academy. We managed to tame him."

"I'm Lieutenant Kende. How did you do it?"

"It's going to cost you a couple of bottles of champagne."

"If it works, you're on, buddy!"

"Whistle the Aida March. It works, I guarantee. Have a good night."

Mark returned to his room and went to bed. For a short while, he listened to the snoring, and then whistled the march from the opera Aida. The noise stopped im-

mediately. "I gottcha fella," Mark thought, then turned to the wall and instantly fell asleep.

The next day, Mark did not find anything of interest in the pile of papers, but reported his findings to the colonel. He gave Mark some more papers, some in English, and a few in German. He was busy all day.

In the evening, the hussars drank up the two bottles of champagne in a matter of minutes, while Lieutenant Vas told Mark the story of taming Berkes.

"As in the academy, twenty of us slept in one dormitory, so snoring was frowned upon. We had to do something about Paul's nocturnal concerto. Therefore, while one guy whistled the Aida March, two others started beating him with their belts. After the first week, it was not necessary to beat him because after the first few bars, the snoring stopped." He paused a moment to smile in reflection. "It was crude," he added, "imaginative, but effective."

They went to bed around eleven o'clock, and as soon as Berkes started snoring, Mark whistled the Aida March and the noise stopped.

Next day, Mark attacked the papers furiously. There must be something else to it, he mused, figuring this was not a simple matter. On the bottom of the basket, he had found several pieces of papers with numbers. They had to refer to something, but he could not make the connection. By the afternoon, he was sure of something strange about the papers. He reported his suspicion to Nemeth.

"Put the goddamned papers into a cardboard box, seal and send it to Budapest. Let the professional cryptographers look at them."

"Yes, sir."

"Meanwhile, we'd better make use of your talents. I want you to go to the Southern Territories and report on the progress of cleaning up the place. Find the town of

Srobran, and report to the commander of the First Battalion, Major Silavec. He'll tell you what is going on. However, do not believe him; visit each of his companies and see with your own eyes what they are doing. The First Battalion is way behind schedule and I want to know why. After you come back, report directly to me," the colonel said.

"I understand, sir. Should I take the train?"

"There are no trains. I could give you a car or a motorcycle if you know how to drive them.

"I can handle both."

"You're the type of officer we need around here. I'll make sure you get what you need. Do you have a proper kit?" Nemeth asked.

"I believe I do, sir, although I have only my side-arm."

"That won't do you much good. Many irregulars, so-called chetniks are roaming the countryside. As I see, you have a few decorations. I assume you have seen combat. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

"What kind of weapons would you like to take with you?"

"I don't know what's available, but I could use either a carbine and a bayonet, or a submachine gun, sir."

"Can you handle the newest German submachine gun, the Schmeisser?"

"I'm sure I could," Mark replied confidently.

"All right, Lieutenant. Go to your hotel, have a good rest, and report here tomorrow morning at 0700. Plan to stay a couple of nights under field conditions. Master Sergeant Boros is going to have everything ready for you. Dismissed."

Mark saluted and left wondering why the colonel sent him to the boondocks so suddenly. *Perhaps I stumbled onto something I should not have.*

Berkes also came home early. He was frustrated because the Army Corps Commander kept his hussars in reserve. They had nothing to do except clean their equipment and exercise the horses.

When Mark told him about going to the south, the hussar exploded. "You bastard, just a goddamned reservist and you get the glamorous assignments. You had the chance to march into Transylvania, catch spies and terrorists while I was teaching city boys to ride. Most of them did not know one end of the horse from the other. Finally, I whipped them into shape and now they keep us in reserve, sending you to the front. There is no justice."

"If you're looking for justice in the army, Paul," countered Mark, "you're looking at the wrong place."

"Damn right," Berkes said. "I'm going to bed."

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Master Sergeant Boros was near retirement. In many respects, he was the Hungarian version of Sergeant Gil Ross of the Marines.

Boros was a lifetime soldier; the ribbons on his chest attested to his prowess as a fighter. Moreover, like his American counterpart, the sergeant was a most efficient administrator. He had Mark's orders typed, signed, and sealed.

"I considered giving you a car, Lieutenant, but on account of the condition of the roads, I figured you'd be better off on a motorbike. I requisitioned the appropriate leather clothing for you. You can pick it up at the warehouse. The bike is also there, a five hundred cc BMW all fuelled and ready. It is a powerful machine. If you have limited experience, be careful because it may take you into the first ditch as if you were a pumpkin."

“Rest assured, Sergeant, I have plenty of experience with motorbikes. I used to own a seven fifty cc Indian.”

“That is big enough. It accelerates better than the BMW, but this one has a lower center of gravity; therefore, it is much better on rough roads,” the sergeant said.

Mark walked over to the warehouse and picked up the equipment. When he took his new weapon, a lifetime love affair with the Schmeisser began. He loved the light, sleek weapon, and its precise mechanism.

The 15-mile ride to Srobran took about an hour because of the bad road coupled with the worsening weather. He found the battalion command post in the town hall. Major Silaveczech appeared happy to see someone from the HQ, but Mark shortly discovered that the motorbike was more important to the major than he was. Silaveczech figured he acquired a speedy messenger in Mark and his BMW.

“I can tell you what is happening around A and B, but I’m completely cut off from Charlie Company,” the major explained. “They are east of here, somewhere near the village of Chabia on the banks of the River Tisza. The rumors reaching me suggest Charley Company is locking horns with a large chetnik unit. I sent a mounted messenger, but he won’t get back before the evening. You could make it in an hour on your motorbike.”

“Say no more, Major. With your permission, I’ll have a cup of coffee somewhere and leave immediately. Just give me a map of the area, and I’ll find out what is going on.”

“I appreciate it, Lieutenant. I’ll order an espresso for you. In fact, I need one as well.”

They had the coffee, exchanged pleasantries, and Mark departed. The road was snow-covered and the strong northwest wind almost pushed the bike off the road. After bucking the elements for half an hour, he

reached a farmhouse. According to his map, this was the halfway point to Chabia. He did not stop but kept going. In another fifteen minutes, machinegun fire ripped into the monotonous roar of the BMW's engine from the southeast.

As Mark did not want to ride directly into enemy fire, he stopped, and with his field glasses scanned the road ahead. The weather was improving; the blizzard was over, but the blowing snow still obscured his vision somewhat. He found the road clear, without any sign of life. He started the engine and continued until the faint outlines of the village appeared about half a mile ahead.

It was eerily quiet, nobody shooting at anything. Mark stopped again, and through the blowing snow, carefully examined the road, finding a number of soldiers dug in on the south side. Identifying the Hungarian uniform, he realized that this was the lost Charlie Company. Their left wing rested on a large, stone-rimmed well about a hundred feet from the last house of the village; the right was exposed parallel to the road. He stopped the bike, got off, checked the Schmeisser, and continued on foot. As he got near the soldiers, one of them jumped out of the foxhole, held his rifle on Mark, and shouted, "Halt! Who are you?"

He stopped and identified himself, constantly scanning the open field. When the soldier was satisfied, he climbed back into the foxhole.

*The training of these guys certainly leaves a lot to be desired.* "Where is your Company Commander?" he asked the soldier.

He pointed toward the village. "First Lieutenant Tors is up the line that a way, somewhere by the well, sir."

"Where is the enemy?"

“I don’t know, sir. They are shooting at us from somewhere over there,” the soldier said, pointing toward the embankment of the irrigation channel about five hundred feet away.

Mark thought it would be better to lie down because his dark leather outfit stood out well in the snow. If the enemy had a good marksman, he could have picked Mark off easily. He decided to chance the run to the dugout of the Company Commander, crossed the road to have the embankment partially shielding him. In the ditch, which was not very deep, he kept running in a crouch, until reaching the end of the line.

In a large dugout, he found the company commander. After the introductions, First Lieutenant Bela Tors told him about a strong enemy force blocking their entry into Chabia.

“How large of a force?” Mark queried.

“I don’t know. They have several machineguns; we cannot advance against them.”

“Did you try flanking?”

“It is not possible. On our left is the village. I don’t dare send anybody that way because the place is lousy with chetniks. On the right flank, it is an open field. I intend to wait until dark.”

Mark looked at the village. He did not need the glasses to pick out a safe route to the foot of the irrigation canal. One could get through among the buildings without exposing himself to marksmen in the attics of the houses.

“May I take a look?” he asked the first lieutenant.

“Look as much as you want.”

Mark un-slung his Schmeisser, switched off the safety, and stepped out of the dugout. After running fifty paces, he reached the village, and continued walking among the houses. Apparently, nobody noticed him; he

slowly approached the foot of the irrigation channel. There was no one around.

Stepping into the dry waterway, Mark started moving cautiously toward the enemy. He was sure the large force Tors mentioned could not have been more than a few untrained men. *If the commander of the chetniks had any idea about the fundamentals of infantry tactics, he would have sent someone to guard the foot of the channel.*

Mark reached a slight bend. Carefully, he peeped around the corner and saw five men sitting around eating. The sixth chetnik was looking over the top of the embankment with field glasses. They had two ancient, water-cooled machineguns set up about a hundred feet apart on the wings.

While weighing his options, Mark decided to wipe out the enemy alone. Stepping out of the bend, firing short bursts of his Schmeisser from the hip, he ran toward the five chetniks. The men dove for their rifles, but it was too late. The Schmeisser's rate of fire was lethal and the close range made it impossible to miss. Mark automatically shoved a spare clip into his weapon and looked over his victims. They were all civilians, each armed with a rifle. The unarmed lookout from the top of the embankment slid down the slope and raised his hands immediately after Mark fired the first shot.

Looking at the chetnik, Mark realized the enemy was only a boy, no more than fifteen years of age. Kicking the rifles away from the bodies of the others, he kept the Schmeisser trained on the boy. He saw the fear in the kid's eyes. The poor child did not know what he was getting into, joining the chetniks. Just like Marie, this fellow did not weigh the consequences. The Company Commander would have him executed on the spot. *I'm not*

*having his death on my conscience.* “Turn around,” he snarled at the boy.

“Please...” the kid pleaded.

“Shut up and turn around,” Mark hissed. He watched the boy turning around with tears in his eyes. “Now, run for your life!”

The boy looked back with disbelief on his face.

“Go on if you want to live. Move!” Mark said quietly.

The boy broke into a run on the bottom of the channel. When the young chetnik was about fifty feet away, Mark fired a short burst into the bank, then slowly climbed to the top of the embankment and signaled to Tors.

In a few minutes, the company occupied the channel and took possession of the two machineguns.

“I think most of them got away,” Mark said. He intentionally justified the inaction of the company commander. “This was only a rearguard. The main force is gone; the town is yours.”

As there were no tracks in the snow, Tors realized his error of grossly misjudging the size of the opposing force. He was grateful for Mark’s explanation.

“I have to search the village house by house. When I finish that, I can consider the town mine,” Tors said.

“Go ahead,” Mark replied. “Just let me go into the first house where the fire is going and I can sit down thawing my frozen bone marrow.”

“I give you a couple of men to make sure you’re all right. There are too many chetniks around.”

It was not difficult to find a house with the fire going. The Serb family was looking at Mark as if he were the devil incarnate. Regardless, he peeled off his leather jacket, pulled off his wet boots, and filled them with oats as he learned during basic training, hung his wet socks over the fireplace, and settled down by the fire. The fam-

ily soon realized they had nothing to fear and started going about their business.

The peace and quiet did not last long. Half an hour later, a single shot rang out followed by heavy rifle fire. Mark reached for his Schmeisser and stepped to the window. There was nothing to see.

In another twenty minutes, machinegun fire tore up the silence. That was too much to ignore. Mark dumped the oats out of his boots, put on his damp socks, the leather coat, and signaled the soldiers to follow him. They found the first lieutenant, but as far as Mark was concerned, it would have been better not finding him. He stood over the dead bodies of seven civilians while a sergeant, white in the face, picked up the light machinegun.

“Chetniks,” Tors said. He pointed at the bodies.

Before Mark had a chance to ask what happened, from the attic of the neighboring house a single shot hit the helmet of the first lieutenant. The response was heavy rifle fire and a squad, with bayonets fixed, charged the house.

Not knowing if the rifleman got the chetnik in the attic or not, Mark took cover behind a large tree. The soldiers came out of the house, herding a couple of women, an old man and two children about ten or eleven years of age. The soldiers had them standing with their backs against the wall of the house.

“Sergeant, the machinegun...” Tors ordered.

Mark wanted to say something, but his vocal chords were crippled. The sergeant’s face turned chalk-white contorted with pain; he was looking at Mark begging for help.

“Just a minute, First Lieutenant,” Mark said quietly. He managed to overcome the temporary paralysis in his throat. “The Geneva Convention forbids shooting civilians.”

“That may be, but the written orders of General Vaskuti-Seidl take precedence. Do you think I like doing this? Why do you think I took my time occupying this goddamned place? I liberated several Serb villages and I’m having nightmares about the executions, but orders are orders, I must do it. Therefore, Lieutenant, please shut up. Don’t make it any more difficult than it is. Sergeant, the targets are there, aim, and fire.”

The man hesitated.

“Fire,” Tors shouted.

The sergeant slowly stood up from the light machinegun, imperceptibly shook his head, and turned away, ostensibly to throw up.

“You,” Tors shouted. He pointed at one of his men. “Take over the machinegun, aim, and fire.”

There is no private brave enough to refuse the direct order of his company commander. A young soldier kneeled behind the machinegun and fired, mowing down the civilians who fell like rag dolls and remained motionless.

Suddenly, someone fired several shots at the small group of soldiers. Everybody hit the dirt. It was clear where the shots came from.

A squad quickly formed up and proceeded against the building. As in the case of the last house, the soldiers herded seven or eight civilians out.

“Bayonet them; they are not worth the bullets!” Tors ordered in frenzy. Obviously, he was afraid of another machine-gunner turning sick before finishing the job.

The soldiers stopped for a moment in disbelief. Nevertheless, they carried out the order, although some of the men had tears in their eyes. The screams of the victims and the begging for mercy etched into Mark’s mind forever. *A commander should not force his soldiers to*

*commit such brutal, wholesale murder.* He felt like emptying the magazine of his Schmeisser into Tors.

As Mark could not stop this particular massacre, he decided to prevent a further bloodbath. He stepped up to First Lieutenant Tors, gently putting his hand on his shoulder.

“Bela, you need a rest,” he said quietly. “Go to the house I was in; they are decent people. I’ll finish cleaning up the village.”

“I guess you’re right,” Tors said uncertainly. With two soldiers, he started toward the house.

There were no more executions that day in the village. By the time the soldiers searched every house and collected some weapons, it was two o’clock in the afternoon.

Mark walked back to the house where Tors was resting, and found the first lieutenant sitting on a chair, just staring.

“Well, how are you?” Mark asked.

“Lousy. I’ve had enough of this bloodshed. I’m sick and tired. I don’t want to be a soldier anymore.”

“Get hold of yourself, Bela. The village has been secured; there are no chetniks anywhere; I collected twenty rifles from the residents.”

“How many did you execute?”

“None,” Mark replied.

“The orders are quite specific; we must execute everybody possessing a weapon.”

“They came and handed them over voluntarily,” Mark lied. “For that I cannot execute a man.”

“True.” He paused a moment, then asked, “What happened to the bodies of the people we executed earlier?”

“I told your sergeant to organize a burial detail.”

“They won’t be able to dig graves in the frozen ground. We should push them under the ice on the river.”

Mark was on the verge of throwing up. Such insensitivity was unbelievable. He said farewell to Tors, got on his motorbike, and headed for the town of Srobran. The fact of managing to save a few lives placated his conscience. Actually, the men found the weapons in the houses while searching them, but Mark did not permit the executions.

The major was happy to hear of Charlie Company securing the village of Chabia. Mark did not talk about the details to Silavec, since he was sure the major would eventually learn what had happened and report the body count to headquarters.

Able company occupied an all-Hungarian village where the locals treated the troops as liberators. Next day, Mark managed to find Bravo Company. These soldiers faced an entirely different situation, as the population of the village they garrisoned was a mix of Hungarians and Serbs. The main occupation of the troops was to keep the two factions apart. The hatred between the races in the Carpathian Basin had deep roots and several hundred years of tradition; one cannot eliminate it by executive order or peaceful persuasion.

After returning to Szeged, Mark prepared his report and with the help of Master Sergeant Boros, had it typed. The colonel was satisfied and told him to take the next day off. In the hotel, he found a note from Berkes, telling him the hussar was going to spend the night in Budapest with his fiancée, and would not return until noon the next day. Not knowing what to do in a strange city, Mark headed for the most likely pick-up joint, the Virag Cake Shop in the heart of the city, hoping to meet a young lady who was not really a lady.

He was lucky, striking gold on the first try. In a half hour, he made the acquaintance of a woman in her late thirties with a sensational figure, the walk of a leopard, and the manners of a courtier; finding out if she was a lady or not took some doing. Tania Borsoff came from Budapest and she was returning to the capital that evening.

Mark invited her for lunch at the Royal, and they had a long talk.

“As you may have guessed from my accent,” she said, “I’m Russian.”

“We are at war with Russia. How come you’re not interned?”

“I already acquired Hungarian citizenship. Besides, I’m considered an enemy of the state in the Soviet Union.”

“You? Why?”

“I come from an aristocratic family and a long line of professional soldiers. My father was a colonel; he fought against the Reds. After the victory of the Bolsheviks, we left Russia. My father bought a small vineyard near Lake Balaton and lives there, but I work in Budapest.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a freelance translator and interpreter,” Tania replied.

“What languages do you translate from?”

“Russian, French, English, and German.”

“Could you teach me Russian?” Mark switched into English.

“Sure, if you lived in Budapest, I could. It would be expensive though,” Tania replied in Hungarian, realizing Mark’s English was much better than hers was.

“How did you get to Hungary?”

Tania took a deep breath and started, "As I was saying, I come from an old, respected Russian family with roots in the military. My father was an officer in the cavalry and my mother a ballet dancer. Mama enrolled my sister and me in the Royal Academy of Ballet in Saint Petersburg. Apparently, I was talented because I had a small part in the gala performance of the Nutcracker when I was twelve years old. Then the revolution came. The Reds killed my mother on the family estate and Father escaped to Crimea with his Cossacks. Eventually Catherine, one of our instructors took both of us there. It was not easy traveling from Saint Petersburg to Odessa in those days, but we managed."

"Everything is difficult in a war or in a revolution," Mark said. He thought of the events in Transylvania and the Southern Territories. The battered face of Marie and the dead bodies in the little village on the banks of the Tisza flashed before his mind's eye.

"Where have you seen war or revolution?"

"Remember, I'm an officer in the Army. I serve in the Southern Territories."

"What is it like?"

"It is brutal," he said quietly. Mark tried to close his mind to the horrors he had seen recently. "I'm not supposed to talk about it."

"Anyway, we got to Odessa," she continued, "found my father, and for the time being we were all right. I know now about him and our ballet instructor. They were lovers for many years. When the resistance in the south ceased, the Reds captured my father together with Admiral Kolchak. However, Dad somehow managed to get away and told us how the Reds killed the Admiral. Do you know they nailed all his decorations to his chest with long, rusty nails?"

“I did not.” Mark replied. He realized how bad a revolution must be; much worse than the clear-cut, organized slaughter of a war. “Why did they do it?”

“It was retaliation. The Whites did not take prisoners; they executed every Red soldier they captured.”

“I think it was unnecessary cruelty. I believe in fighting fair.”

“There was nothing fair about the revolution in Russia. Anyway, Catherine, on my father’s instructions, took both of us and we boarded a rusty, old steamer for Romania. After a long adventure-filled journey, we reached Budapest.”

“What did you do when you got there?”

“Like the other refugees, we lived in the railway cars at one of the stations and queued up every day at the soup kitchens. Eventually, Catherine found work for us with the Sarazani Circus. The job was not easy. We were going to school in the morning, and dancing in several acts in the evening. The circus people put pressure on us to learn the tightrope or the trapeze, but despite living in poverty, Catherine resisted them. Unexpectedly, Dad arrived. He had enough money to buy a small vineyard near Lake Balaton. Catherine lives with him there; my sister married a rich merchant in Miskolc, and I went to university.”

“Quite an escapade,” Mark said.

“It was hard slogging rather than a glamorous adventure. Although it was tough to learn the language, in the end everything turned out alright. We managed to obtain Hungarian citizenship and Budapest became my home. Anyway, we were talking about me for a long time; how about you?”

“There is not much to tell,” Mark replied. “I was schooled in the U.S. and my mother brought me back to

Hungary a couple of years ago. As I always wanted to be a soldier, I volunteered for the army. That is all.”

“I find you interesting though. You must be rich.”

“What makes you think so?”

“The wine you ordered was a rare vintage, the most expensive on the menu. Your ring has a black star sapphire in it.”

“It was my father’s,” Mark said, interrupting.

“It is worth more than what I make in a year.”

“I never thought it was such a valuable item. Actually, our family is quite well off.”

“Do you have a wife or a fiancée?”

“No. I’m not the marrying kind. You’re not married either. Why?”

“I do not like talking about that.”

“Subject closed. I would really like you teaching me Russian.”

“Why?”

“I expect the High Command to send my regiment to the front lines. It would be advantageous if I spoke Russian.”

“You’re on,” Tania said. “My hourly rate is ten pengos, as much as a lawyer’s fee. Are you still interested?”

“If I get my money’s worth, I am.”

They chatted for a while; suddenly Tania realized she missed the afternoon express train.

“Do you see what you did? You made me miss my train! Now I have to wait for the midnight commuter, which takes seven hours to reach Budapest,” she said.

“There is another express in the morning; it would get you there in three hours.”

“But I already gave up my room.”

“I have a spare bed in mine; my roommate is in Budapest.”

“I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

Tania smiled, and thoughtfully said, “If you promise to behave like a gentleman--”

The definition of gentlemanly behavior is rather shaky, especially when a man is sleeping in the same room with a desirable woman. By Tania’s interpretation, Mark was a true gentleman, as he made sure she reached climax three times during the night. Next morning, she left with the express, leaving Mark her address and phone number in Budapest.

After Tania left, Mark went to his office, but had nothing to do. He was sitting behind his desk counting the cobwebs on the ceiling. Around ten o’clock, Colonel Nemeth called him.

As Mark entered his domain, he sounded off. “Sir.”

“Sit down, son,” Nemeth said. “Have a cigarette and relax.”

“I don’t smoke, sir.” Mark sat down.

“I have a report here from First Lieutenant Tors, endorsed by Major Silavec, recommending you for the highest decoration. Apparently, you cleaned out the chetnik rearguard single-handedly from an irrigation channel. Is that so?”

“Yes sir, but--”

“No ifs and buts, Kende; you’re a brave man. As we are short of heroes, I put it up to the general, and he decided to award you the Officer’s Cross Second Class. The presentation will take place this afternoon on the parade grounds. Go home and put on your best uniform, sword and all that junk with the decorations you have so far. Report to my office at 1400 hours sharp. You’re getting a big one!”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied. He thought the interview was over, but the colonel did not dismiss him.

“Now, tell me what made you attack the rearguard alone?”

“I’m ashamed to say, sir. It was an opportunity to get rid of the enemy. My first platoon sergeant taught me that in a combat situation the soldier deciding first has the advantage. When I saw them, I was sure they were not rearguards of a large force, but untrained civilians. Having a Schmeisser and surprise on my side, I knew I could take them. By the way, those civilians held a company of trained infantry at bay. They deserve the decoration, not me.”

“I agree with your assessment. Chetniks never attack in force. They are experts at the hit, run, and disappear tactics. We should learn their methods.”

“It would be a good idea,” Mark mused.

“That is going to be your next assignment, son. Read all combat reports by the battalion commanders, and wherever you can find something on the tactics of the chetniks, summarize the reports and write me a tactical handbook by the end of the month.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mark said. This is an assignment I’m going to enjoy.

“By the way, you’re going to dine with the general and the officers’ corps tonight. You and the other decorated officers will be the guests of honor. Is your wife here?”

“I have no wife, sir. I’m only twenty years old.”

“Is that so? Then tell me how did you get those foreign decorations?”

“I enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps under age. By the time they caught on to me, I was a corporal and had a couple of gongs. Since I was still underage, they booted me out of the corps.”

“Their loss is our gain,” the colonel said.

## Chapter Eight

The decoration ceremony was a memorable event. The honor guard consisted of a platoon of infantry and a squadron of hussars, Paul Berkes commanding. General Vaskuti-Seidl was a big man, wearing a chest-full of medals. He had the same attitude as the Duke of Wellington had whose contempt for his own troops was legendary, although the historians did not publicize this personality flaw of the hero of Waterloo too often.

Mark stood at the head of the line, followed by three other officers, five noncoms, and a few enlisted men. When the general stepped up to the officers, the adjutant read the much-embellished heroic deeds leading to their decoration, one by one; Vaskuti-Seidl pinned the medals on their chests and then shook hands with each of them. When he got to the noncoms and the enlisted men, the adjutant simply stated the name of the soldiers and one sentence about the reason for decorating them. Although the general pinned on their medals, he did not shake their hands, but just saluted, and moved to the next man.

Mark had not had time to look at his Officer's Cross, as he stood in rigid attention throughout the ceremonies. Later, when he examined the gong, he was happy. Not only because it was one of the highest decorations an officer could receive, but the white cross with the swords on the red ribbon was very impressive and looked great on his dark green dress uniform jacket.

Although Mark was one of the guests of honor, as a junior officer he had to sit near the end of the table next to Paul Berkes. The hussar could not stop admiring the Officer's Cross.

After the speeches were over, Berkes remarked, "I've said it many times that you're a lucky son of a bitch. I'm sure you went looking for some suicidal chetniks to

shoot, get a medal, become a hero, and annoy me. Nevertheless, I congratulate you.”

“No, Paul,” Mark replied directly. “I was not looking for someone to kill. I stumbled on five unfortunate chetniks and fired on them strictly out of fear. I’m not a hero.”

“At least you’re honest about it,” the hussar replied.

The dinner with the general was anticlimactic. Before the waiters served the first course, an adjutant read the name and the decoration of each medal winner. The general proposed a toast to the Head of State, Regent Horthy, congratulated the decorated officers, and made a short speech. Apparently, General Vaskuti-Seidl was a tactless person, quite unlike the other generals of the Royal Hungarian Army. His remarks did not suit the gala occasion, as he expressed his dissatisfaction with the slow progress of cleaning up the chetniks. The officers, detecting a barely perceptible accent when Vaskuti-Seidl spoke Hungarian, concluded that the general’s first language was indeed German.

Next morning, the headquarters at Szeged were buzzing like a beehive, as many things happened at once. First, a German SS general arrived in an elegant Mercedes staff car. Vaskuti-Seidl treated the visitors with unusual courtesy.

Following the official conference at headquarters, he invited the Germans to his private residence.

Berkes was very happy. Finally, he was taking his hussars south, hopefully into battle. They were to patrol the western banks of the Danube, as the Army Corps Commander suspected chetniks bringing in weapons from Romania on the east.

“I’m going to win a medal like yours. It will look very nice on my blue dress uniform,” Berkes remarked.

He packed up his belonging and before he left, hugged Mark and said, "I want to ask you a favor, old buddy."

"Shoot."

"If I lost a leg or an arm, promise you would smuggle a loaded gun to my bed," Paul said seriously. "I do not wish to live as a cripple."

"You have my word." Mark agreed with Berkes' philosophy; he would not want to live as a cripple either.

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Mark buried himself in work. Reading many reports by infantry unit commanders, he realized the chetniks' tactics were brilliant, well executed, but utterly ruthless. They did not shy away from torture, mutilation, and dismemberment of their victims. Such brutish acts resulted in a highly successful strategy of intimidation. After the third day of reading the reports, a pattern began to emerge. Mark felt he understood the enemy. The arrival of a messenger shook Mark out of his preoccupation with injury.

"Colonel Nemeth wishes to see you, sir," the soldier reported.

He stood up, and marched into the lair of his commander.

"I have new orders for you, Lieutenant," Nemeth said. "You're moving to the south. I'm attaching you to the staff of Colonel Hesser as an interpreter and intelligence officer. Sergeant Boros has your orders typed up. He will arrange for a car and a driver to take you to the Southern Territories."

"Thank you, sir. When do I have to leave?"

"First thing tomorrow morning."

"What should I do with the material I collected from the various reports regarding the tactics of the chetniks?"

“Take it with you. Colonel Hesser has his hands full with insurgents and partisans. You might put your knowledge of the chetniks’ tactics to good use.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I hope you’ll make good on this assignment, Kende. I would like to see another medal pinned on you,” the colonel said.

After leaving Nemeth’s office, Mark was wondering what he could do as an interpreter and intelligence officer to merit another decoration.

Next morning, the drive to his new duty station was uneventful. They arrived at a small city near the border of Yugoslavia by the River Danube. The Army had established the Regimental Headquarters in the Hotel Park, an old building having all the facilities to satisfy the needs of discriminating guests.

The supply officer gave Mark a small room on the third floor all to himself. When the military took over the hotel, they converted one of the private dining rooms on the main floor to an administrative center for staff officers. In this room, Mark had a desk, the size other lieutenants had. Captains had large ones and majors even larger.

Mark barely managed to learn where the toilets were, when Colonel Hesser called him into his lair. He entered, stood at attention, and reported to the colonel like a proper soldier.

“Sit down, Lieutenant,” the colonel said. “Smoke if you wish. I’m glad to see a real soldier around here. You see I’m surrounded by policemen and politically motivated civilians masquerading as officers.” Mark knew the colonel called him a proper soldier because of his recently acquired decoration.

“Anyway,” Hesser continued, “I expect an insurrection any minute. Therefore, I must secure this building.

Right now, the chetniks could walk in here whenever they wish and kill most of us before anyone could intervene. Your first task, Lieutenant Kende, is to take command of the guards' platoon and make sure my headquarters are secure."

Mark did not expect such an assignment.

"Sir, may I speak freely?"

"Of course. I always want you to speak freely. If you believe I'm doing something stupid, tell me, but be discreet about it."

Mark suddenly realized the colonel did not have a single frontline decoration. Evidently, he had never seen combat and attained his high rank because of other qualifications. In the army, an officer had to be good at something to reach the sublime rank of colonel.

"I have no idea how to secure a building, sir, but I believe I know something about the chetniks. They are determined and brave to the borderline of insanity, but they are not suicidal. I also know they have agents everywhere. By now, they probably know my assignment, room number, and shoe size," Mark said.

The colonel laughed. "You seem to have a sense of humor, my friend. As I was saying, I'm going to put you in charge of the guards' platoon immediately and give you the list of people you could call upon to serve as officers of the day. Your predecessor was yearning to go out on the field. Thus, I'm sure he'd be delighted to hand over the platoon to you."

"Thank you, sir."

"I understand you're also an English and German interpreter. When we need such expertise, I'll call upon you, but please concentrate on our security."

"Yes, sir."

"Come with me, Lieutenant."

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Mark immediately arranged to have chicken wire put on the exterior of all ground floor windows to prevent a chetnik riding by on a bicycle and throwing a hand grenade into the building. The other officers smiled at his efforts. However, word soon came of the chetniks murdering a prominent Hungarian community leader by throwing a grenade into his house through the glass window. The blast killed the man, his wife, and injured one of the children in the house. Hearing the details of this grisly murder, the headquarters' staff began respecting Mark, and forgave him for introducing bothersome security measures like the mandatory identification procedure. Everybody entering the building now had to show his or her pass. There were no exceptions; even Colonel Hesser had to present proper identification.

The civilian employees of the establishment presented a problem. About twenty people worked at the hotel, the cooks, the waiters, the janitors, and a couple of people in the office. If the chetniks wanted to smuggle a few hand grenades and a gun into the building, they would hold the wife or the children of a hotel worker hostage, blackmailing the guy into carrying the goods inside the headquarters. Therefore, Mark introduced mandatory body search of all civilians entering the building. At first, there was uproar about it, but after Mark called a meeting of the hotel workers and explained them why it was necessary, they calmed down. To do the body search of female staff and visitors, Colonel Hesser acquired the services of two young policewomen from Szeged.

Mark also rearmed the guards' platoon. He issued them submachine guns and pistols. The soldiers stood guard with the Schmeissers and in the building carried their .45 caliber pistols in shoulder harnesses, allowing them to draw faster than from the conventional military holsters.

It took about a week to organize the security of the headquarters; the colonel was very happy with the arrangements. From here on, Mark had very little to do, although he conscientiously checked up on the guards and regularly reviewed the methods used in the body searches.

During the night, Mark often woke to the noise of firing, as the city was full of partisans; after dark, they ruled the streets.

Following a morning briefing, Hesser called Mark to his office. "Last week, several prominent Hungarians were brutally murdered and mutilated. Even our officers are not safe. Here, look at the photographs."

The pictures were graphic; it was hard to look at them without having to throw up. "I'm going to introduce a dawn to dusk curfew, and order the patrols to shoot anybody they find on the street without challenging," Hesser declared.

"That won't go over big," Mark mused.

"I don't give a shit," Hesser growled. "The killings must stop, period."

The open rebellion of the Serb population followed the introduction of the curfew, leading to several fire-fights on the streets. The soldiers in accordance with the standing orders immediately executed those unfortunate rebels they captured or the ones who surrendered. Eventually, the army encircled the insurgents and forced them to withdraw into the inner city where most of them simply vanished.

Wanting to exterminate the partisans, Colonel Hesser ordered a number of raids on different parts of the city. If anybody was found without proper identification, the patrol took him or her to a detention center where a military tribunal examined each detainee. If the court found a person guilty of being a chetnik or a parti-

san, they would promptly execute him or her. The decision of the tribunals was final.

A few days later, SS storm troopers appeared in the city. The German commander reported to Colonel Hesser as a matter of military courtesy, citing an invitation by General Vaskuti-Seidl and offering to help rout the partisans. Although Hesser welcomed the SS, the Germans did not help much. Instead of hunting for chetniks, they moved into the Jewish quarters of the city and started deportation of younger people.

As it was against the Geneva Convention, Mark complained to Hesser about the execution and deportation of civilians, but the colonel brushed him off saying, "This is not a regular war, Marcus. When the Government signed the convention there were no partisans in such numbers. Besides, the orders of the Army Corps Commander take precedence over the Geneva Convention."

Mark did not wish to argue, but asked the colonel several times to send him back to his unit, or permit him to volunteer for the front lines in Russia, but his requests were denied. "I couldn't sleep with some idiot watching over my security," the inevitable response came. Late in January, Mark was at his desk when the colonel called him into his office.

"Listen, Lieutenant," Hesser said in his usual official tone, "Detention Center Number Two found an Englishman. They do not want to hang him and his wife until someone who understands English has examined their papers. Go there, check the documents, and do what you think is best."

Mark saluted and left for the Detention Center. Although it was not far, he rode in a large car, similar to the taxis in Budapest. The Detention Center was set up at a small soccer stadium by the river. The detainees huddled

in the middle while the tribunal deliberated in the home team's dressing room.

Mark entered the makeshift courtroom between two hearings and reported to the chairman of the tribunal, Captain Vari of the military police. He studied the written orders of Colonel Hesser.

"I'm surprised at the broad powers given to you, Lieutenant. Are you on a very special mission or is your father a major general?"

"My father has been dead for a long time, sir, and I don't know if my mission is special or not."

"All right, Lieutenant," the captain said, "you may interrogate the accused, examine his papers, or do whatever you want with him. Sergeant," he turned to one of the noncoms serving as bailiff. "Find Horowitz and his wife, take them to processing, and come back here for the lieutenant."

Mark had the distinct feeling of discomfort. These men, a captain, and a couple of young ensigns were holding court in the dressing room of a football stadium, handing down irrevocable judgments. The sentences were always death and the executions took place in the evenings. *This is not due process!* While he was waiting, two military policemen brought in a young man in chains.

"Order," the captain shouted, "court is in session!"

Everybody stood at attention.

"Sit," the captain said in the tone with which one would command a dog.

The two military policemen made the accused sit down on a bench and they sat by his side.

"What is the name of the accused?" the captain asked.

"Josip Vukovic," replied one of the guards.

"Can he speak Hungarian?"

“No, sir.”

“Has he any papers to identify him?”

“Yes, sir. He has a Croatian railway employee’s pass.”

“Is it in Hungarian?”

“No, sir.”

“Then it is no good. Where did you catch him?”

“Near the Vojvodina building; it was five minutes after the curfew. He tried to run, but we caught him,” the other guard explained.

“Was he armed?”

“Yes sir, he had a long bladed jackknife on him.”

“Let me see the weapon,” the captain ordered.

The guard stood up and handed over a large pocketknife. The captain sprung it open, checked the edge, and let the two ensigns look at it. Each of them handled the knife, nodded, and returned it to the captain.

“Has the accused got anything to say?” the captain asked.

“He doesn’t understand you, sir,” the guard said.

“Better that way,” the captain said. “Stand up!”

The guards made the accused stand.

“Josip Vukovic,” the captain started, “based on the evidence, this court has determined that you’re a partisan. You carried the instrument necessary to fight the legal government of this country. The sentence for that is death. Therefore--”

“If the court please,” Mark said, interrupting.

“What do you want, Lieutenant?” the captain asked in a tone betraying annoyance.

“Is this man permitted any defense?”

“Yes, he is, but he has no lawyer and we do not waste time finding one for him. He is a chetnik. However, if you want to defend him, you’re welcome.”

“Thank you, sir, I’ll defend him,” Mark said.

“Let us hear your defense.”

“May I see his railway pass?” Mark asked.

“No problems,” the captain said, “here look at it.”

Mark examined the small, black folder with a photo of Vukovic, his date and place of birth and his address.”

Mark turned to the guard. “Sergeant, do you know this city well?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How far is this address from the Vojvodina Building?”

“It is next door.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Mark said. He turned to one of the ensigns sitting behind the bench. “Tell me, Ensign. Do you carry a pocketknife?”

“Certainly,” the startled reply came.

“May I see it?”

The ensign handed over a large knife.

“If the court please, this knife is about the same size as the one carried by the accused. Does it mean the ensign intends to use this knife on me or on the accused?”

The court was silent.

“Furthermore,” Mark continued, “I respectfully submit that the accused was just taking out the trash or was otherwise intent upon re-entering his residence when he was caught. Therefore, I do not understand how the charge of him being a partisan can be substantiated.”

“He was carrying the knife!” The other ensign stated. “He had the weapon on his person. Therefore, he is a partisan.”

Because of the ensign’s stupidity, Mark lost his patience, but somehow managed to control his anger. Suddenly, an idea entered his mind; actually, it was an old joke.

“If the court please,” he said, in a subdued tone, “if you found Mr. Vukovic guilty of being a partisan on the

sole basis of his carrying the murder weapon on his body, I would respectfully charge all of you with rape, as you carry the required instrument on you all the time.”

For a few seconds, there was silence in the room. Evidently, the honorable judges were either insulted or did not understand the desperate attempt to save the accused. However, Captain Vari realized the gist of what Mark had said, and burst out laughing.

“Bravo, Lieutenant, that was funny,” Vari said. “Where did you get your law degree?”

“I do not have one, sir,” Mark replied, blushing.

“The court finds Mr. Vukovic not guilty. However, if you, Lieutenant Kende, come into my courtroom and interfere with my serving justice again, I’ll have you shot. Now take your client out of here and get on with your work,” the captain said.

Mark saluted and pushed the now freed Vukovic out of the room. The Serb never knew how close he came to death. They went to the other dressing room, finding a sergeant of the military police sitting behind a desk processing the detainees. When he saw Mark, he stood up, and then saluted.

“I want to see the Englishman, his wife and their papers,” Mark said brusquely.

“Just a minute, sir,” the sergeant said. He signaled his helpers. From the shower room, a couple of military policemen led an elderly, handcuffed man and woman into the room.

“Here they are,” the sergeant said. He handed Mark an envelope. “These are their papers.”

Mark immediately switched to English, “Are you two claiming British citizenship?”

“Yes, sir, we are British subjects,” the man replied.

“On what grounds?”

“We have our passports. I’m a retired Colonial Civil Servant.” The man’s accent betrayed him foreign birth, as he sounded like a Serb who had learned English very well.

Mark opened the envelope and looked at their papers: a couple of passports issued to citizens of British Colonies. Their home country was India. “Mr. Horowitz, how did you get these passports?”

“I studied in England a long time ago, sir, obtaining a diploma in land surveying, but I ran out of money and could not enroll in university. I sat for the Indian Civil Service examination and passed. I served twenty-five years in East Bengal, retiring two years ago from the post of District Surveyor in Chittagong. As I was born here, I returned here with my wife. That is the full story.”

“I understand you’re claiming British citizenship,” Mark said. “As you’re enemy aliens, the state would intern you for the duration of the war. Do you wish to be interned?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Why?”

“I have several very good reasons, sir. First, I see people condemned to death for just being Serbs and missing the curfew. In addition, as an ethnic Serb and a British subject, I would be a prime candidate to charge with spying. My conviction in these military courts would be a cinch.”

“I have seen how the justice system works around here, and I don’t blame you. Anything else?”

“Yes, sir, yesterday we went to the Hotel Park to give ourselves up, but I noticed SS officers marching into the building. As we are Jewish, I was frightened and went home to discuss the matter with my wife. We decided to give ourselves up to the Hungarian Military Authority before the Germans took us away. However, this morn-

ing, the police picked us up and brought us here,” the man explained.

Mark was not surprised. The interment camp was preferable to whatever else might happen to them. Perhaps they were wise.

“All right, Mr. Horowitz, you and your wife are coming with me to the Park. I’ll have you locked up there, until we can arrange to send you to the internment camp.”

Mark turned to the sergeant and switching to Hungarian, said, “These people are enemy aliens. Escort them to my car. I’m taking them to the Hotel Park together with Mr. Vukovic.”

“Begging the lieutenant’s pardon,” the sergeant said, “these two are already sentenced. Their execution is set for this evening. I cannot release them.”

Mark was shocked and said to Horowitz, “The sergeant tells me that both of you’re already sentenced to death. Is that so?”

“I did not know that,” the man said, turning white as chalk.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Mark replied. He turned to the sergeant. “I believe these people are much too valuable. They may have strategic information, which I want to get out of them.”

“Begging the lieutenant’s pardon, I cannot release them, unless you give me a written order.”

“I have no time to waste, Sergeant. You may examine my orders signed by Colonel Hesser, and I’m going to give you a receipt for these people. You will get them back to hang or shoot if the colonel so orders. Now move!” Mark said.

The sergeant had no further objections. He just glanced at Mark’s orders, took the receipt for the Horowitz couple, and told two military policemen to escort them to the waiting car. Vukovic followed them

closely, and when they left the detention center, Mark waved farewell to him. The man broke into a run and disappeared around the first corner. *I wonder if he was a chetnik.*

They all got into the car, and Mark turned to the prisoners. "Listen, Mr. Horowitz, I'm going to take you to your house and give you fifteen minutes to pack up the essentials you may need in the internment camp. Then I'll take you to the Hotel Park."

"Thank you, sir. If we survive this mess, we are going back to Chittagong to our old house and never set foot in Europe again."

"I don't blame you." Mark fully understood their feelings. For a fleeting moment, he thought that perhaps he would have been better off re-enlisting in the marine corps. However, by now he would be either an officer or a staff sergeant likely winding up with a similar dirty job.

At the Hotel Park, Mark herded the Horowitzes into the lockup, and informed the senior intelligence officer of the two enemy aliens. The fellow was happy because he did not have to interrogate them; he sent a telegram to Budapest asking them to pick up the internees.

Mark spent the afternoon writing his report about the Horowitz couple and the trial of Josip Vukovic.

Next morning, the colonel called Mark to his office.

"I see you did a fine job with the enemy aliens," Hesser said. "We are shipping them to the central internment facility."

"Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me. If Vari hanged them, we would be in a hell of a mess. However, I take a dim view of your interference with the work of my military tribunal."

"Respectfully, sir, they are worse than kangaroo courts. That poor bastard, Vukovic, did not even under-

stand what was going on around him. They may have hanged him for nothing.”

“For nothing, you say,” the colonel retorted angrily. “Then can you tell me what this is?”

Hesser took a wad of photographs from the drawer and slapped them on the desk in front of him. “These corpses are two young cavalry officers. They just came into the city last night to have a little innocent fun and relaxation. Look at them!”

Mark picked up the pictures and with horror, he recognized the face of Paul Berkes. The empty sockets of his eyes were staring at Mark, accusing him for not being there in his hour of need. The shock numbed his mind.

“The pathologist told me that most of the mutilations took place while the subjects were alive,” Hesser continued. “I understand Paul Berkes was a friend of yours. Are you still in the mood for clemency and chivalry?”

The brutality of those murders surpassed anything Mark has ever imagined. Poor Paul, he was just a happy-go-lucky hussar. He would have died happily with a saber in his hand charging the enemy trenches. However, to die of infinite pain with his hands tied behind his back and the chetniks hacking away at his body had to be the ultimate humiliation. Tears welled in Mark’s eyes. He was ready to lash out at every Serb and kill anybody who may have had the slightest connection to the death of his friend. However, the sense of justice had deep roots in his mind. To massacre people for just being Serbs, as Captain Vari did, was not his way. He wanted to find the murderers of Paul and carve them up slowly, just as they had done to his friend. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Mark desperately wanted to avenge the horrific death of Berkes, but he did not know where to start looking for the murderers.

“I’m sure you want to avenge your friend’s death,” Hesser said. “If you wish, I can give you one of the tribunals and you could hand down the death sentences to those goddamned partisans.”

“No, thank you, sir,” Mark stammered. “Although I want to carve up the bastards who did those things to Paul, I cannot find them and don’t think it is possible to get at the real culprits. I’m a soldier. I’m prepared to fight and die if I have to, but I do not and could not kill civilians randomly. If I did that, Paul would haunt me. I beg you, sir, please send me back to my unit, or transfer me to the front lines in Russia. I want to go where the enemy is clearly defined. This type of war is not for me.”

“Let me think about it,” the colonel said brusquely. “Dismissed.”

Mark saluted and withdrew. In the privacy of his room, he let his feelings run free. Lieutenant Mark Kende cried himself to sleep, just like a little child.

## Chapter Nine

In the last days of January, the High Command suddenly ordered the Fifth Army Corps back to Szeged, and sent other units to take their place. Mark was among the first ones leaving the Southern Territories.

Reporting to Colonel Nemeth, Mark found he had a new assignment. He became the corps' courier officer, carrying secret documents in an attaché case chained to his left wrist, from Szeged to Budapest. From the moment the adjutant of General Vaskuti-Seidl clicked the cuff on his wrist, his escorts, two armed sergeants, stuck to him like leeches.

Mark thought it was going to be an unpleasant assignment. However, he soon realized it was not too bad. When he arrived at the Ministry of Defense, a morose captain removed the cuffs and told Mark to report to the ministry three days hence, and then take some documents to Szeged. The chance of spending a few days in Budapest was ample compensation for the discomfort.

He stayed at their family home in Buda. On the first trip, he had the apartment to himself because his mother was skiing in Austria somewhere. It was peaceful, since the war still did not reach the city of Budapest. The night-life was vibrant and everybody went about his or her business as in peacetime. The war was far away in Russia.

As he had nothing to do for a few days, he phoned Judy, but she was getting ready for her exams, and did not have the time to meet him. On the spur of the moment, Mark decided to start learning Russian while getting to know Tania a little better. He phoned her; she was eager to start the lessons.

The same evening, Mark decided to invite Tania to one of the better restaurants, and after the meal, go to one of the many nightclubs in downtown Budapest. Tania

suggested the Hangli in the ornate Vigado Building facing the Danube, as she knew some of the entertainers there.

Arriving at the nightclub, they ordered hors d'oeuvres and a bottle of light white wine. The music was good for dancing, spiked with odd sentimental songs like *Lily Marlene* or those especially written for the soldiers fighting far away from home, including the Hungarian hit of the century, *Somewhere in Russia*.

When the show started, the opening act was a stand-up comic who also danced very well. Next, two young ladies joined him. The girls wore very little clothes; their acrobatic routine was breathtaking, an interesting combination of gymnastics and ballet. In the end, the girls got a standing ovation. After the break, one of the dancers performed a risqué song wearing a revealing, short black dress with a plunging neckline. She brought the house down. A magician followed, taking the audience's breath away with his flashy tricks. The grand finale on the tiny stage was impressive; the girls looked very sexy in their colorful outfits.

"The two dancers are Russians," Tania said.

"They are very good."

"The brunette is a countess and the blond is the youngest daughter of an admiral. I occasionally have them over for lunch. If you advance enough in your studies, you may need someone to practice Russian. Any one of them would be an excellent candidate. Their Hungarian is atrocious, but both speak French and English well."

Mark had the sneaking suspicion of Tania trying to find a husband for one of those girls. After the performance, she invited them for a drink. Both were cute kids, but not really his type.

When the girls departed, Mark escorted Tania to her apartment. He was not surprised when she invited

him in. What followed was again a mutually satisfying encounter. The quality of their intercourse was markedly better than the first time in Szeged.

Next day, he had his first lesson in Russian. The language seemed impossible to learn, but under Tania's patient tutelage, he managed to memorize a couple of sentences and learned to use about fifteen words. She gave him a book to study.

"We must arrange to meet again," Mark said. "Unfortunately, I don't know my schedule."

"It doesn't matter. Whenever you come to Budapest, just phone me as soon as you get to your home, and we'll set the time for the next lesson."

"It will be just perfect."

"Alright, darling, I'll see you next time the army sends you to Budapest," Tania said. At the door, she kissed Mark passionately.

The return trip to Szeged was just as uncomfortable as the one to Budapest because he was carrying the heavy attaché case again. In the Army Corps Headquarters, Colonel Nemeth relieved him of the burden.

"You have three days off, son. Just come to the office in the morning and Sergeant Boros will tell you if we need you for something," the colonel said.

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His wealth did not influence Mark's lifestyle. He lived the Spartan life of a line officer and his salary was enough to cover all expenses. Occasionally, when he needed something special, he did not hesitate to dip into his treasure trove, but carefully avoided flaunting his riches in the company of other officers. Before the official declaration of war, Mark wrote to his banker in Geneva telling him to stop sending the annuity, but invest it into shares of major American corporations. Although he had many friends in the army, Mark was sure of eventually

returning to the Golden Saddle and the American way of life.

In the office, he had absolutely nothing to do. Therefore, in his tiny office, he either studied Russian or worked on the reports of other officers regarding the tactics of the partisans.

Mark organized his private life very well. In Budapest, Tania eagerly spent a night with him before or after the lesson in the Russian language. In Szeged, once every two weeks, he phoned a young lady named Sarah and spent a few exhausting but enjoyable hours with her. She was a professional, the same caliber as Catherine in Manila, but a lot more expensive.

For male companionship, he went to the fencing club almost every night; after that, he played bridge regularly at the officers' club. Occasionally, he managed to borrow a horse from the cavalry and rode on the picturesque banks of the River Tisza.

After returning from a regular trip to Budapest in late March 1942, the weather was changing for the better. To exercise in the fresh air, Mark often went for long walks on the riverbanks. Upon returning from one of his evening excursions, a messenger was waiting for him with instructions to prepare for a combat assignment and report to headquarters immediately.

There was no shooting anywhere in the vicinity; one had to travel at least a hundred miles south to reach an area where partisans might be active. Nevertheless, Mark took his Schmeisser, all the spare clips, put on a field uniform, clipped his .45 and a bayonet on his belt, and reported to headquarters.

The office was quiet; no one appeared to anticipate any action. The sleepy duty officer told him to go downstairs, take the Mercedes staff car, and report to the residence of General Vaskuti-Seidl. He would give Mark the

orders in person. The general's regular chauffeur knew the way; he took Mark to a house in the suburbs. As soon as they stopped, Vaskuti-Seidl appeared with his orderly carrying a large suitcase. Obviously, they were expecting them.

Returning Mark's salute, the general took the back-seat in the Mercedes and handed a small piece of paper to the driver.

"Come, Lieutenant, sit with me for a while," said the general in German.

"Yes, sir," Mark replied. He took his place next to him.

They started out on their journey.

"Lieutenant, I must go to Belgrade to the Regional Command Center of the SS. My mission is strictly confidential; thus, I could not take an armed escort with me. Colonel Nemeth suggested that you're the toughest, most battle-hardened officer in the Corps. I want you to protect me from the partisans on this important journey."

"May I speak freely, sir?"

"Of course," the general said.

"If someone knew about your trip and set a trap for you, I could not do much for you. The partisans could be lying in wait for our vehicle and hit us with a burst of fire from a heavy machinegun."

"Nemeth was right, you're a thinking soldier," the general said, interrupting. "It is a rarity these days. Not far from here, I have another car, a small Aero, a two-seater sports car. We are going to use that. Either I take the Aero, while you stick with the Mercedes, or you take the Aero and I stay with this vehicle. What do you think?"

"Does anybody know about your trip to Belgrade, sir?"

"I tried keeping it a secret. Only my driver and now you know about it. Why?"

“In that case, sir, I would suggest you and I take the Aero. Just tell your driver to follow in the Mercedes.”

“Bravo, my friend,” said the general with apparent satisfaction in his voice. “Great minds think alike. If anyone wanted to kill me, he would certainly ambush the Mercedes.”

Within a few minutes, they reached a quiet side street, where the Aero parked. The general told the driver to follow them and got out of the Mercedes. Taking the keys from his pocket, he got into the driver seat of the Aero and signaled Mark to get in. The motor started with a throaty roar and the little sports car shot forward. The Mercedes was hard pressed to keep up with the agile vehicle. In a half hour, they passed Subotica and turned to the south.

The general was a good driver, but in the dark, it was dangerous keeping the accelerator floored most of the time. Mark did not say anything, but kept his eyes on the road, occasionally glancing at the Mercedes behind them. Apparently, the general was also watching the staff car, since when they got too far ahead, he eased up on the throttle.

By nine o'clock, they reached the city where Mark had served earlier and had had such bad experiences. He gripped his Schmeisser swearing to die in a firefight rather than ending up like Paul Berkes. The general seemed to know where he wanted to go, driving the Aero at high speed through the city.

Passing the city boundaries, they came up on the first roadblock manned jointly by Hungarian and German soldiers. A German sergeant, wearing the uniform of the Wehrmacht, stepped to the driver's side demanding papers. The general handed him a small black book, which surprised the guard's commander. The soldier

snapped to attention, saluted, and signaled the general to proceed.

“My staff car is following us,” said Vaskuti-Seidl.

“Yes, general,” replied the sergeant. “We shall let him through.”

“Thank you, Sergeant.” The general trod on the accelerator. As they left the checkpoint, he remarked, “Now we are in partisan country. Keep your eyes peeled.”

Mark nodded and raised the Schmeisser, resting the barrel on the rubberized rim of the door. There was nobody in sight, as the sports car roared down the narrow blacktopped road. In another hour, they reached the city limits of Belgrade. Here, Waffen SS soldiers manned the checkpoint. The little black book of General Vaskuti-Seidl impressed the guards again. They waved the sports car through and the guard’s commander promised to let the staff car pass.

The SS Regional Command Center was on the banks of the Save River in an old palatial residence. At the main gate, the general stopped the car, reached into his breast pocket, and took out an envelope, handing it to Mark.

“Thank you for riding shotgun for me, Lieutenant. I’m going to stay here for a while. Tomorrow, you should take my staff car back to Szeged. In this envelope, I have your travel orders, the authorization to requisition food, lodging, and fuel. There is another letter in it with orders to Colonel Nemeth. It is strictly confidential; guard it with your life.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied. Although he did not fully understand what was going on, he did not ask for clarification.

“My driver knows where the SS barracks are. Just go there and they will look after you.”

Next morning, they left late. Mark and the driver had the German ersatz breakfast, which was not suitable for Hungarian stomachs. Mark did not mind the lousy food; he planned to stop at the Hotel Park for a decent lunch.

They drove by the Vojvodina Building, which the new city administration renamed and passed the former Detention Center Number Two. This time, instead of the terrorized detainees huddling in the middle, children were playing soccer on the green grass.

The hotel was a pleasant change of scenery. The army disappeared and it opened for business again. Mark gave the driver enough money for a princely lunch, and entered the hotel. He noticed the chicken wire had disappeared from the windows. Instead of the armed guards, a doorman wearing a uniform befitting an admiral welcomed him. The headwaiter recognized Mark and they chatted a while, just as much as a waiter may chat with a steady customer. The food was excellent; after enjoying a good lunch, they continued to Szeged.

Late in the afternoon, Mark arrived at Army Corps Headquarters, finding the office a beehive of activity. He could not see Colonel Nemeth because he was in the office of the Corps Commander. After waiting for an hour, he asked the adjutant to tell the colonel about Lieutenant Kende waiting for him and having orders from General Vaskuti-Seidl. At first, the captain hesitated, but eventually entered the inner sanctuary. Almost immediately, he came back and ordered Mark into the office.

A couple of three-star generals were in the room conferring with a colonel from the Judge Advocate General's Department. The presence of all the brass unnerved Mark for a moment, but he collected his wits and reported to the general with the most decorations, assuming he was the senior officer present. He guessed

right. General Kesmarky was the ranking officer and the new commander of the corps. The other big shot was General Hatvani, the Deputy Chief of Military Intelligence.

Mark handed the letter to Nemeth and asked permission to leave.

With a benevolent smile, Kesmarky remarked, "Just bear with us, Lieutenant, we may have a few questions to ask you."

Nemeth read the letter. When he finished, he slapped it on the table, and quietly said, "The son of a bitch got out of having to face a court martial."

Mark immediately realized Nemeth was talking about General Vaskuti-Seidl.

"What do you mean?" General Hatvani demanded.

"He made a deal with the Krauts," Nemeth said with undisguised hatred in his voice. "The bastard knew he would be court-martialed for the massacres. Thus, he resigned his commission, accepting the rank of a two-star general in the SS, citing his Austrian origins."

"In that case we cannot touch him," the military lawyer remarked.

"Actually, his resignation was dated five days ago and apparently the SS commissioned him the same day," Nemeth explained. "The Krauts must have issued him German ID."

"If the colonel permits," Mark said timidly, "General Vaskuti-Seidl had a little black folder, which impressed all the German soldiers at the checkpoints."

"That's it," Kesmarky said. "You're very observant, Lieutenant."

"If I may," Nemeth said, "Lieutenant Kende served as an interpreter and intelligence officer under Hesser. He should know a great deal about the massacres, the

importation of German troops, and the illegal executions.”

“Alright,” Kesmarky snapped. “Transfer Kende to the Ministry of Defense as an intelligence officer until this investigation is finished, and then return him to his unit.”

“I’d be glad to have him permanently,” General Hatvani said. He turned to Mark. “You know, Lieutenant, most young officers would sell their immortal soul for a transfer to my department.”

“Begging the general’s pardon,” Mark said, “I’m a line officer. If possible, I would like to return to my regiment. I might not be very efficient in the cloak and dagger work of military intelligence.”

Nemeth looked at Mark with admiration, but did not say a word.

“We shall see,” Hatvani said. “After a while, you may change your mind about intelligence work. I would not hold you there if you were not happy. Just keep an open mind.”

As far as his mother was concerned, Mark’s transfer to Budapest was a happy occasion. This time, she thought it would be easy to get Mark into the Staff College and eventually into the Corps of Generals. However, she figured Mark had to get married first, producing some grandchildren for her. When Mark explained he was not interested in getting married, Mrs. Kende was disappointed. Mark explained that he was not planning to spend the rest of his life in the army. This was oil for the fire. It made his mother angry; perhaps she did not even comprehend Mark saying that after the war he planned to return to the U.S. and enroll in university.

“What is wrong with being a general?” she demanded angrily.

“Mother, I have seen horrible things perpetrated by soldiers citing orders. If I became a general, I would have to issue those orders. As I’d refuse to do that, they’d throw me out of the army. By then, it would be too late to start a new career.”

“What would you want to do?”

“I don’t really know,” Mark said. “Perhaps I’d be a teacher making sure my students would not become infatuated with a good-looking uniform and the idea of revenge. This way I could prevent the subsequent massacres. I would like to teach them to live in peace.”

“Noble ideas, Marcus, but as you cannot teach the male lions to negotiate for the females, you could not teach people to live in peace. You’re aiming too high.”

“I do. I’m convinced I would not succeed alone, but I’m sure there are many people with ideas like mine.”

“I’m terrified to see you becoming involved in politics like your father. Are you going to become a traitor to your uniform like he did?” Mrs. Kende asked anxiously.

“I would not do that,” Mark said with determination in his voice. “As long as I wear this uniform, I’ll stay away from politics. However, after the war is over, I’ll take off the uniform, will not touch a firearm ever and yes, perhaps I will become a teacher, a writer, or a politician.”

It took several weeks to finish the investigations of the massacres in the Southern Territories.

As General Vaskuti-Seidl was not available to testify or take the blame for the horrific events, the Supreme Commander ordered Colonel Hesser to retire and transferred a few senior officers involved. Captain Vari and all those who took part in the military tribunals were decorated and with due respect for their ability to smoke out chetniks, then the High Command sent them to the Russian front to hunt partisans.

After sweeping the Southern Territorial massacres under the rug, they sent Mark back to the Oedenburger Regiment. At first, he did not get his platoon back. The Regimental Commander assigned him to his staff, developing training programs in counter-insurgency measures. In other words, he had to teach the infantry how to hunt and defeat the partisans.

There was nothing wrong with the tactical procedures, but the final note of no mercy to resistance fighters bothered Mark. He had no argument against having to execute a person wearing civilian clothes for attacking and killing soldiers, but he drew the line at hanging children. Even if a child proved to be a partisan beyond reasonable doubt, the kid would not know what he was doing, particularly when he joined a group of illicit fighters. As Mark made his views known often, he hoped the army would never send him to deal with irregulars. Eventually, the Regimental Commander gave him his beloved platoon back. He was happy being with his old friends and the soldiers he trained. The counter insurgency measures' exercises started immediately, and as always, Mark's platoon scored the highest.

In mid-May, the Oedenburger Regiment became part of the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Almost immediately, the order came to mobilize the regiment's first battalion. As they had already trained in the techniques of guerilla warfare, the High Command decided to move them to the Russian front. As an independent battalion operation, their assignment was the guarding of airfields. The plan to send an infantry battalion to Russia for about three months to see if a well-trained infantry unit could work with other disciplines was a test.

The Air Force already sent advanced technical and construction units to prepare sites for air operations. This coincided with the moving of the whole Second Ar-

my to Russia. Between early April and late July, more than 800 trains of 55 cars each left the country. Although the Russian Air Force was largely inactive, the partisans took their toll. The death rate was not very high, no more than thirty Hungarian soldiers died during the largest troop movement in the history of the country, but the delays were costly and interminable. In the end, the Germans stood members of the Ukrainian Militia at every hundred feet to keep an eye on the railway. If the resistance managed to blow up the rails, the High Command vowed to execute one of every tenth man in the militia unit. Perhaps the threat was enough to slow down the partisans.

The battalion heading for Russia squeezed into a single train. The officers traveled in a passenger car, but the enlisted men had to take boxcars, which turned out to be tight and uncomfortable.

The young officers were excited about their front line assignment; the Battalion Commander, Major Kiss, gave them plenty to think about.

“The fact that you would not be going to the trenches but guarding an airfield suggests boredom and lack of activity, the principal enemy of the morale of trained infantry which bothers me,” the major said.

“Nevertheless, it is better than having to fight the Red Army regulars,” Captain Toth, Mark’s company commander added.

“It is not going to be a picnic,” the major said. “The Air Force has a Services and Guards’ Company at each airfield, but they may be ineffective against assaults.”

“I wonder if the Air Force will accept our protection,” Toth queried.

“I hope they will. Keeping their antiquated aircraft flying is going to be a difficult, sometimes impossible job. As most airmen’s civilian occupation relates to mechani-

cal technology, the engineering officers often draw manpower from the guard's platoon, weakening it considerably. The Air Force brass thought it would be a miracle if the partisans did not blow up their precious aircraft on the ground. Therefore, they asked for infantry support."

"They were wise," Mark said.

"Well, I have my own ideas," the major stated. "Having a guy standing with a rifle on his shoulder in the shadow of the aircraft is an open invitation to the partisans. They would observe the stationary or the patrolling guards, establish their pattern, timing their quick in and out raids accordingly. As the worst-case scenario, they would ambush the single sentry and cut his throat. No matter how one looked at it, the partisans could get in among the aircraft. I'm determined to prevent that."

"How?"

"As far as the partisans are concerned, blowing up the aircraft would be an easy task. Although this may be spectacular, it would be the least effective way of sabotaging air operations. The minor, invisible damage to the aircraft has more promise. To have a few men sneak in, cut or remove some of the exposed safety devices is more effective. If a plane lost a prop, or threw a cylinder head during take-off, in the likely crash not only would the aircraft crack up, but the crew would perish as well. A few lumps of sugar in the fuel tank may also cause irreparable damage, wrecking a plane and killing the flyers. We must think about these possibilities as well," Kiss concluded.

"How are we going to do that?"

"You have four days to figure it out," Major Kiss ordered. "We must develop new techniques. Guards would always work in teams, changing the pattern of their movements frequently. The idea is to prevent an observer

from figuring out where the guards would be in any given moment. Let's get on with it, fellows.”

The job was a challenge; each company commander had the officers practice the deployment of guards on paper within the framework developed by Major Kiss.

## Chapter Ten

The train moved rapidly through Hungary, the Carpathian Mountains, and entered the Ukraine. The first major marshalling station was at the city of Gorodok. During the Great War, Mark's father had won a big medal there.

As they expected to wait at least a day at the station because the partisans blew up the tracks ahead, in exchange for a bottle of Slivovitz Mark managed to borrow a motorcycle from the German station commander, and with Steve Pataky he visited the site of the famous cavalry charge. At the hillside, they found the remnants of the old trenches. Mark looked at the place and remarked, "My father's hussars charged the Russian trenches here."

"A sane commander would not have ordered the cavalry charge," concluded Pataky, after viewing the layout.

"Who said those generals were sane?"

"I did not," Pataky asserted. "How did it happen?"

"Since the infantry couldn't break into the Russian trenches, some idiot sent in the cavalry."

"How did those poor bastards fare?"

"Although the attack was just as stupid and bloody as the famous charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava, this one was successful," Mark said. "The hussars suffering heavy losses, in excess of fifty percent, routed the Russians. Unfortunately, there was nobody like Tennyson writing about the charge of the Fifth Cavalry at Gorodok."

"I always said the hussars were crazy," Pataky said. He shook his head.

"After the war, the regiment erected a large bronze plaque in the Franz Joseph Cavalry Barracks commemorating the attack. While growing up there, I knew quite a

few survivors. In my opinion, those guys had the right to strut proudly saying: I was in the charge at Gorodok!”

“I would be proud too, but not of my courage. I would go to Monte Carlo and brag about my good luck,” Pataky concluded.

As they headed for the railway station, Mark said quietly, “As Count Zrinyi, the poet-general said: in war you need good fortune, nothing else.”

The troop train continued to Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, a beautiful city straddling the Dnepr. Although a few buildings suffered damage during the fighting, some sense of sanity appeared to overtake the apathy of the civilians in the city. A few shops opened, but the choice of merchandize was rather limited. According to the officers of the Hungarian garrison, the theatres performing ballet, operas, and classical music were open, offering high quality performances.

The stopover was an enjoyable interruption of the monotony of the journey. Mark had a chance to practice his Russian, but the Ukrainians spoke a different dialect, rendering his knowledge of the language almost useless.

Leaving this pleasant city behind, Able Company unloaded at a picturesque little town near airfield KP 318, while the others carried on to protect the two airfields in Harkov to the south.

When they arrived, Captain Toth called his officer together for an impromptu meeting at the mess. “I want to remind you guys about the order of non-fraternization. You must issue it to all your troops.”

“I won’t be able to practice my Russian,” Mark said sadly.

“You could hire a tutor,” Kulich suggested.

“It is out of the question,” the captain said. “Anyway, KP 318 is the home base of the First Bomber Wing of the Royal Hungarian Air Force. I must remind you

again: our primary task is to make sure the partisans could not harm their aircraft.”

“We already worked out the guarding principles,” Kulich said.

“I hope you remember them. Anyway, the airfield’s commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Beldy, is not very happy about infantrymen coming to guard them, but he has grudgingly extended all military courtesy to our group. Therefore, you may use their messing facilities.”

“Very nice of them,” Kulich remarked sarcastically.

“Mark, your platoon has the first night’s guard duty. Although there are not many aircraft at the field, take your job seriously.”

“Yes, sir.”

Before dismissing the officers, Captain Toth said, “Treat it as a dress rehearsal, gentlemen.”

Mark’s platoon followed the “Kiss Principle” or “the random guard movement” precisely, and the night passed without incident.

In a few days, the warplanes started arriving to the KP 318 airport. At first, the field seemed to be a transfer station. Four Heinkel 111 aircraft of the long-range reconnaissance wing arrived, but in a few days, they moved to another field south of Kursk.

During this period, the partisans did not try interfering with the operation of the airbase, but Mark figured this was the calm before the storm.

In a couple of weeks, the bomber aircraft of the Hungarian Air Force arrived. The ancient Capronis they flew were most inappropriate for their primary task, the support of ground forces. Flying low level attacks with them verged on suicide. Nevertheless, due to the superb training, guts, and determination of their crews, the 1<sup>st</sup> Bomber Wing did an admirable job.

The daily routine emerged; the planes took off two or three times a day, delivering their lethal load to hit Russian troop concentrations at Voronej, Uriv, and other targets, selected by the army.

In addition, on this day several transport aircraft touched down at KP 318, delivering armor piercing ammunition to the troops at the forward landing strips. Two of the transports suffered extensive damage when they lost their way and force-landed near the front lines.

As the Kulich platoon supplied the guards for the night, Mark was relaxing in the officers' mess. The air force officers tolerated the odd infantryman in their midst, and as Mark was an exceptional bridge player, and did not argue with his partners, the pilots treated him as one of their own. The fact that Mark was not a drinker was a character flaw according to the aircrews, but the flyboys overlooked such a minor item. Although Mark did not participate in the discussions related to the day's events, he overheard the aircrew cursing the High Command.

"There we were," a first lieutenant said, "flying through heavy flak and finally managing to identify the goddamned target. We lined up, starting the bomb run, when we got an order on the radio to change targets. Fine, I said, and veered off. You know how hard it is to abandon a bomb run."

"I thought you were mad when you turned," another young lieutenant said, "but you were the leader. I followed. That was the time Ivan hit my port engine. I made a hundred and eighty degree turn and headed for home. As I had to go over the target again, although I was flying on one engine, I adjusted the course slightly and clobbered them. I barely made it home with a smoking engine."

“The High Command is trying to kill us,” the first lieutenant continued. “Just before we reached the new target, some idiot ordered us back to hit the original spot. We lined it up again and started the bomb run, when the radio started crackling again. I told Pete to turn off the goddamned thing. We hit the target and returned. After we landed, a rear echelon warrior was waiting. The bastard started exhorting us for not hitting the primary target. I shut up because I do not argue with idiots, especially if they have all kinds of brass on their epaulets. I apologized and blamed the misunderstanding on radio malfunction. He calmed down. We loaded up with five two hundred fifty-kilo bombs, three quarters full tanks, and off we went again. The bastards did not give the mechanics any time to check the flak damage.

These idiots keep changing targets in the middle of the bomb run, and that is the best way to kill off the crews.”

Mark never thought officers could denounce the High Command in such crude terms as these pilots did. However, when the Wing Commander, Major Nadas joined the group, he voiced scathing critique of the higher echelons using much stronger language. Perhaps this was one of the many reasons why his pilots would follow Nadas even into hell. He led most missions personally and often said no without flinching when the High Command wanted him to do something utterly stupid. It was understandable why Nadas was the most respected and popular Wing Commander of the Royal Hungarian Air Force.

The exposure to the freewheeling flight crews was a new experience for Mark.

“I don’t envy you guys,” Mark said to his bridge partner after the game in the mess.

“Why not? We can fly.”

“I think the life of bomber pilots is much more dangerous and stressful than that of an infantry officer. Adding up everything, I’ve spent no more than a few hours in mortal danger during actual combat in my whole career. You, on the other hand, risk your life from the moment you take off,” Mark explained.

“That may be, but I can fly four or five hours a day, which is ample compensation,” the pilot replied.

“With Russian anti-aircraft batteries shooting at you, and enemy fighters challenging the group all the way to the target: that is more than what I could take.”

“You were not bitten by the bug of flying. I put up with piloting outdated crates in miserable condition. Regardless, I’m happy for the chance of getting off the ground,” the pilot said.

“You must be mad,” Mark said.

“Most likely,” the other guy agreed.

A few days later, nine fighter aircraft arrived to escort the bombers to their target. For a while, the bomber crews were happy, but when they realized the fighters could not fly slow enough to provide meaningful escort to their old, lumbering Capronis, they lost their enthusiasm about the escorts.

A day after the arrival of the fighters, four new Caproni bombers arrived from Hungary. The squadron commander reported five of them leaving Debrecen, but one returned because of engine failure. Later, they learned the tragedy of the returning aircraft. As the remaining engine gave up, the brand new plane crashed in the Carpathians, and the crew perished in the flames.

Despite the deplorable conditions, the Bomber Wing’s losses were very light, a tribute to the quality of the pilots and the dedication of their mechanics.

On July 6<sup>th</sup>, the bombers executed a couple of heavy raids on Voronej.

“I don’t know what got into Ivan,” Major Nadas said in the officers’ mess in the evening. “They were defending the damned city with unusual determination. The flak was unusually heavy, and the Germans lost two aircraft. In addition, the bastards damaged five of our Capronis.”

“The damage is serious,” the engineering officer said. “For the next few days, these kites cannot fly.”

“Shit,” Nadas grunted. “The remaining aircraft have to work double shift.”

Although very few partisans operated immediately behind the front lines, farther back they were numerous and active. As KP 318 was nearly a hundred miles behind the lines, the incidents with the Russian irregulars were a daily occurrence. During the night shift, Sergeant Vitek caught two young men trying to sneak in between the stalls of the bombers.

“As they carried pistols and explosives, there was no question about it: they were saboteurs,” Mark reported to Captain Toth.

“We shall discuss the method of execution with the Air Force and the Area Commander,” the captain decided. “Most likely you’ll command the firing squad.”

Mark was not happy about having to organize the executions.

The commanders all agreed to put the partisans to death one way or another. The Air Force said the infantry caught them, and they should dispose of the prisoners. Captain Toth wanted to shoot them, but the Area Commander, a major in the Military Police insisted on public hanging. As the major was senior to Toth, his will prevailed.

“I must remind you, sir,” the captain firmly asserted, “my men would have nothing to do with the execution. Lieutenant Kende caught them, and if you wanted a firing squad, I’d reluctantly permit him to command it.”

“The execution is a Military Police affair,” the major declared. “My men will look after the hanging. Your men should be there as observers.”

“I’m not going to attend,” Captain Toth replied, “but I’m ordering Lieutenant Kende and his platoon to witness the executions.”

Mark was relieved because he did not cherish the idea of commanding a firing squad, even though he did not wish to observe the hanging personally.

Before marching the platoon to the main square of the town, he told Pataky, “Orders are orders, and we must attend the hanging.”

“I’m not looking forward to it,” the sergeant said.

The Area Commander first wanted a volunteer hangman, but since nobody took the job, he had one of his sergeants liquored up sufficiently to hang the two unfortunate youngsters.

The execution was a shocking spectacle. The two young partisans did not die well; both were begging for mercy to the very last minute. Later, the executioner left the bodies hanging on a large tree for a couple of days to intimidate the people of the town.

Following the execution, Mark took his sergeants aside; they agreed to not take any more prisoners.

“If we catch anybody near the aircraft, we shoot to kill and keep firing until the culprit is dead or gets away,” Mark declared.

“Damn right!” Pataky added. “I’m sure none of us wants to witness another public hanging ever.”

“You’re right, Steve,” Vitek said. “It was a horrific sight.”

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As always, Captain Toth had dinner at the officers' mess with his platoon commanders. Although the events of the day spoiled Mark's appetite, he went to the mess, but could not eat his dinner.

"I don't know what motivates the partisans," Ensign Kulich asked.

"Actually, the development of the partisan movement was the Germans' own making. Hitler insisted on his troops impressing their supremacy upon the people of the occupied territories. In fact, the Krauts became more oppressive and cruel than the Russian communists were. The Ukrainians choose the lesser evil: the Russians, and presto, the partisan movement was born," Toth replied.

"What else could the Germans say? We are superior!" Kulich said.

"Like hell we are!" the captain retorted.

"I assume if Hitler's minions had treated the people of the occupied territories properly, like liberators, nobody would become a partisan. Instead, the Ukrainians may have flocked to the recruitment centers of the SS to fight Stalin's Red Army," Mark said.

"You're right," Toth agreed.

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The guards' company encountered partisans almost every day. There were attempts to blow up or sabotage the aircraft. The guards usually shot the infiltrators dead, but Kulich's platoon regularly caught them alive, saving them for the gallows. Fortunately, only the platoon catching the partisans had to witness the execution.

The new guarding techniques had their impact. Although the Capronis kept losing their props and cylinder heads less frequently, the tell tale signs of sabotage did not disappear entirely, a tribute to the courage and determination of the partisans. The Russian irregulars fre-

quently attacked the airport stores and the guards' company often had to fight pitched battles with them.

After a month of nerve-racking guarding of the aircraft, the news came about the bombers transferring to Staryi-Oskol, and the High Command converting KP 318 to a refueling stop only. Although a small contingent of airmen remained, no warplanes were stationed at the field for the time being. Consequently, the partisans had no targets. Therefore, they did not bother with the airfield, concentrating on blowing up the railway lines instead, causing interminable delays in the shipment of troops and ammunition.

Major Kiss, now stationed in Staryi-Oskol, ordered Captain Toth to send a platoon into the woods and eliminate the partisans. Toth chose Mark's platoon, naturally. "You're the expert of unconventional warfare," he told Mark, "take your merry men into the forest, and hunt down the partisans."

"It is going to be very difficult, sir. We have no maps, no local knowledge either."

"I'm sure you'll cope somehow," Captain Toth said, interrupting.

"Yes, sir," Mark grunted.

The mission was nearly impossible. The platoon tramped in the woods, following a variety of trails for days, but they found only a couple of abandoned campsites.

Mark asked the Air Force to fly over the place and pinpoint any suspicious locations. At first, the flyboys did not react, but when an armored train carrying a German general and his staff was marooned for a couple of days because the partisans blew up the rails, things began to happen.

The first reconnaissance flight pinpointed a small whisk of smoke, suggesting a camp of the partisans.

Mark's platoon fixed the map reference and carefully approached the location. They caught up with a small group of seven people. The surprise attack combined with the firepower of the infantry overwhelmed the partisans. In a brief firefight, the soldiers killed all of them, losing only two men, one killed, and another wounded.

Apparently, the partisans learned from the surprise attack. Quite often, the platoon ran into roadblocks on the trails, and by the time the Hungarians flanked them, the slippery enemy disappeared into the forest. These engagements were very hard on the soldiers. They usually lost one or two men in an ambush.

"The men's morale is low," Pataky reported to Mark. "Even the successful flanking of a group of partisans causes them more pain than the feeling of success. Do you remember what happened last week?"

How could I forget? Mark thought.

When his soldiers broke into one of the camps, they shot every partisan dead except a little girl about ten years of age. She had several wounds on her legs. The medic, Corporal Vecsey, approached her, wanting to bandage the wounds. Suddenly, the girl pulled the pin on a hand grenade concealed under her skirt, blowing herself and the corporal to kingdom come.

"Since the death of Vecsey, there is no way of holding back the troops," Pataky said.

"It is better that way," Mark said. "If we hit a camp, keep firing until every partisan is dead, regardless of age or sex."

"There is no mercy."

"They don't take prisoners either," Mark said sadly.

The successful hits on the campsites were rare, and the enemy became bolder by the day. Sometimes, the partisans engaged Mark's soldiers in intense firefights. Although the better-armed, trained infantry platoon usu-

ally came out on top, the losses were heavy. The irregulars knew they would hang if the enemy caught them. Likewise, the soldiers knew they could not expect mercy if captured. It was a fight to the death.

Soldiers wandering off the base alone, in search of women or booze, occasionally fell into the trap of the partisans and were killed painfully. The enemy dumped the mutilated body of the errant Hungarians in a ditch at the end of the runway.

After the fifth soldier was murdered, the Area Commander retaliated, massacring the residents of a small village nearby. Apparently, such brutality did not have the desired effects. The resistance fighters kept attacking, blowing up railway lines and trains. Fortunately, Mark's platoon was not involved in the massacre of civilians. They were in the bush hunting partisans.

Fighting the elusive enemy took its toll. By mid-August, the platoon was down to eighteen battle-fatigued men. The High Command suggested filling up their number from the military prisons, but first Captain Toth, then Major Kiss vetoed the idea, claiming their mission was over. They wanted to repatriate Mark's depleted platoon along with the rest of the battalion.

The second platoon under Ensign Frank Kulich took over the hunting of the partisans in the forest. They were unlucky, running into a well-planned ambush on their first outing and losing half of their number.

By this time, the guard's company was considerably under strength. Therefore, Captain Toth reorganized the remainder of his force. He gave up the hunt for irregulars in the forest, concentrating on security at the airport. Shortly thereafter, a company of partisan hunters arrived. The company commander was Captain Vari, Mark's old acquaintance from the Southern Territories. The troops came from the military prisons where the in-

mates received full pardon and an honorable discharge after a six months stint serving in such special units. The chance of survival in these penal battalions was about fifty-fifty.

Late in August, Captain Toth ordered Mark to take the repatriation plans of the company to Battalion Headquarters for discussion. The Air Force offered to take him on their regular courier aircraft to Staryi-Oskol on the so-called milk run. For the combat pilots, it was rest and recreation to fly the little German made plane commonly known as the Storch. The milk run started at Kursk, and after picking up Mark, they would drop dispatches at three different places before heading back to Staryi-Oskol. Mark put on a borrowed German flight suit and waited for the aircraft, which arrived on time. Because the Russian fighters badly shot up his Caproni on the raid to Voronej, Captain Varjas, the Bomber Wing's executive officer – and Mark's favorite bridge-partner – flew the plane.

In the back seat of the Storch was a light machine-gun with a few drums of ammunition. As Mark took the gunner's place, with his back to the pilot, he instinctively checked out the gun.

"You won't need it," Varjas said, "Ivan is too fast to harm this plane. I can always turn out of their way and they don't come around again because another pass would burn up too much fuel. Don't worry, Marcus, they won't bother us."

"Nevertheless, I'm going to familiarize myself with this gun."

"Have fun."

Their first stop was a small landing strip full of Hungarian fighters and reconnaissance aircraft. There was always somebody taking off or landing.

Varjas took the dispatches to the commanding officer and had a cup of real coffee in the mess before taking off. The next airfield they visited was empty. Actually, German dive-bombers resided there, but they were away somewhere softening up the Russians. Mark noticed huge piles of bombs by the strip. The Storch took off before the Stukas returned.

Their third stop, Goubkin, was near Staryi-Oskol; the main purpose of their visit was to check out a site for possible development as an auxiliary field.

They circled over the place and Varjas kept checking the potential approaches when suddenly the plane dove, reaching dangerously low altitude. "Fighters," the pilot said.

Mark searched the air and indeed spotted five aircraft coming towards them from the west. "Can they be ours?" he asked.

"They are Ratas, the oldest Russian fighters. They must have lost their way. Let's hope they are low on fuel and not going to bother us."

Without an order from Varjas, Mark checked the machinegun again. He looked at it and remarked, "I had no practice with this gun. I could fire it, but my aim may be off."

"Clear the gun now. Remember, we are very slow in comparison to the fighters. If you had to fire, it would be like shooting at low flying aircraft from the ground; shout if you see one of them coming."

A Russian fighter appeared from the thin air, guns blazing and disappeared immediately. Mark had no time to alert Varjas.

"Another one is coming," he cried, firing the gun. The tracers did not come close, the captain throwing the little plane into a tight right turn barely a few feet above the ground. When the next fighter came, the Russian

forced Varjas to turn right again, and their tracers missed by a wide margin.

The third Russian came, but another tight turn shook him off. Apparently, the fighters had plenty of fuel and they were playing cat and mouse with the Storch, herding it in the direction they wanted to. As they were flying at treetop level, it was hard to say where they were going. Suddenly, rifle and machinegun fire from the ground hit the fabric on the wings.

“Shit,” Varjas growled, “the bastards chased us over to their side of the line. We must get back.”

By this time, the Russians boxed in the Storch. They lowered their landing gear and let their flaps down, actually sandwiching the Hungarian plane.

“Marcus, I’m going to throttle back, drop the flaps and duck under the guy on the left. When I start the turn, fire at the Rata nearest us. We are too damn close and you cannot miss. If we manage without a collision, we’ll be heading in the right direction. It is not too far to our lines.”

“Alright.”

“Hang on, I’m turning now,” the pilot shouted.

Suddenly, the world turned upside down. Mark saw the wheels and the gray belly of a Russian fighter. Varjas was right. He could not miss. He emptied the magazine into the Rata. The pandemonium slowly settled. They were flying no more than a few feet off the ground. Varjas could not gain any altitude because one of the Russians was behind them, slowly catching up. If the Storch climbed, Ivan would have had a good target to shoot at.

In the distance, the other fighter, obviously damaged, headed to the east trailing smoke, but his buddies were hanging on to their prey. Three Ratas with wheels and flaps down were catching up to them.

Varjas had no room to maneuver. He knew he had to slug it out with the more powerful, better-armed Russians when they caught up to them. Mark fired the second magazine at the first fighter, but did not seem to hurt him. Apparently, the Russian succeeded in hitting the engine. It coughed and quit. Varjas pulled the plane up, trying to gain a little height and glide over the gauntlet of fire of the enemy ground forces. The third fighter veered off, thinking he should not waste the ammo. The Storch was smoking heavily, gliding at about fifty feet above the grassy surface over no man's land. Slowly, the aircraft sank to the ground, the wheels hit, and the plane rolled to a halt.

"We must run for it," Varjas said. He blew the canopy.

Mark tried to get out, but he could not move his legs. He looked down and saw his boots had blood on them. Pain shot up to his spine.

"Run, Johnny! I'm hit, but I'll hold them." He turned to the machinegun.

By this time, the foot race had already started. From the west came the Hungarians and at least ten Russians trotted toward the plane from the east. Mark let them close in to about three hundred feet and opened up on them with the machinegun. He fired only short bursts to conserve the ammunition. The Russians hit the dirt, returned fire, but the plane was out of the range for their submachine guns. Some of them got up and started toward Mark, but the short bursts of the machinegun stopped Ivan again.

"Good shooting, flyboy," a Hungarian voice came from the direction of the door, "you handle the machinegun as well as an infantryman."

"I am a fucking infantryman," Mark replied, angrily.

Apparently, the Hungarian soldiers had won the footrace. Two privates grabbed Mark and carried him towards their lines. The Russians, as an expression of their disapproval, started firing their mortars. Just before reaching the relative safety of the trenches, the Soviet hit the plane, which exploded with a loud bang. By this time, Mark felt very weak. Varjas looked at him and said, "Congratulations, Marcus, this is the thousand-pengo wound. You just earned a ticket home."

"Remind me not to fly with you again," Mark replied weakly. He passed out. He remembered a few words spoken around him, but he could not follow the conversation. Although he kept slipping in and out of consciousness, he recognized Johnny Varjas standing by, telling him how lucky he was.

Mark eventually recovered in a German field hospital. The first thing he did was to pull off the blanket to see if he had his legs. Both were there, but he found the left stabilized in a harness having a wad of dressing on it. As he kept admiring his legs, the fellow in the next bed started shouting in German, calling the orderly, and telling him about Mark being awake.

Soon the orderly and the doctor arrived. "How do you feel, Lieutenant?" The doctor asked in German.

"Very well, thank you," Mark said, automatically replying as if someone asked him the same question in America. "Of course, I would be much better if I hadn't been shot," he added quickly. "What are my prospects?"

"You're going to recover. Lost a lot of blood, but you're strong and young; you'll live. Your left leg is broken in two places, but they are clean breaks and should heal completely. I'm sure you'll dance at the New Year's Eve Party."

"That will be interesting," Mark mused, "I can't dance."

In the tented field hospital, about five miles behind the German lines, the surgeon shot Mark full of tranquilizers before the orderlies put him in an ambulance, which he thought would take him to the nearest railhead. Despite the tranquilizers, the trip was harrowing. The guy on the next stretcher was a German Luftwaffe officer. The Kraut was also suffering from the bumps on the road, but he was a tough cookie and never uttered a word. Mark being just as strong as the German, grit his teeth and did not complain about pain or discomfort. However, when they hit a particularly heavy bump and the pain shot into his leg all the way up his spine, he could not resist any longer.

“Goddamned Russian roads,” he growled. Looking at his neighbor, he expected a comment, but the German did not say a single word. He was stone cold dead.

The ambulance did not take the wounded to a railhead, but to a nearby landing strip. As the orderlies put his stretcher on the ground, Mark noticed a row of about twenty others waiting and some more arriving.

Soon a Junkers 52 landed to pick up the casualties. Mark got on the first plane and within a couple of hours, they touched down in Kiev.

Mark spent a few days in the hospital, in the same room with a German Stuka-pilot, who lost a leg and whom the doctors kept constantly drugged. A young bespectacled surgeon wearing the insignia of captain came and checked Mark’s leg. The doctor shook his head and left without comment.

Later that same day, the orderlies put Mark on a gurney and rolled him to the operating theatre. The surgeon with the spectacles placed an I.V. tube in Mark’s vein to put him under. The last words Mark remembered saying were in German, “Let me die if you must, but don’t take my leg off.”

The doctors did not amputate Mark's leg; instead, they put a huge plaster cast on it with a couple of windows over the bullet wounds.

"Congratulations," the doctor said when Mark woke up. "We shall put you on the next train home."

Surprisingly, he did not have to wait long for the repatriation. In fact, trains with the wounded departed daily. The trip home turned out to be much longer than Mark expected. The first layover was in Warsaw, and then the train rattled on to Breslau. There, the hospital staff unloaded the wounded, and let the train return to Kiev for another load.

The ambulance took Mark to a very pleasant hospital, but he did not understand why they brought him to Germany. He asked the doctors and the nurses when they were going to send him to Hungary, but did not receive a reply. The Germans just gave him strange looks. His persistence eventually paid off. In a few days, a major came into his room.

"How did I get into this fine hospital, sir? When are you going to send me to Hungary?" Mark demanded.

"Why do you want to go there?" the high-powered visitor asked.

"Because I'm a goddamned Hungarian."

Obviously, the major realized someone somewhere had made a mistake and attempted to explain the error, "We thought you were a German air force officer, Lieutenant Konrad Boelke. When they brought you into the field hospital, they said your plane was shot down."

Mark vaguely remembered Varjas telling him about the same Russian fighters that were chasing them, had shot down a German spotter plane while they were taking him to the field hospital.

"Yes, my plane was shot down indeed. I was a passenger and acting gunner in a Hungarian courier aircraft.

My name is Mark Kende, Lieutenant in the Oedenburger Infantry Regiment.”

“My God, this is a snafu of the first order. Boelke’s fiancée is on her way from Hamburg to see him.”

“What are you going to tell her?”

“I don’t know.”

“How did this snafu happen?”

“Most likely the orderlies screwed up somewhere. When you arrived in Kiev, you had a note on you saying you were Lieutenant Boelke, a pilot. Your flight suit was German with the insignia of a lieutenant. It completed the picture as far as we were concerned. Therefore, they put you in the Air Force wing of the hospital.”

“How about my uniform?”

“As I was saying, you had a German flight suit on.”

“Did anybody ever suspect me being a Hungarian?”

“No, because when we spoke to you, you always answered in flawless German, but with an Austrian accent. Even under anesthetics, you spoke German, telling the doctor not to take off your leg. Everybody thought you were German.”

“What is going to happen now?”

“Leave it with me,” the major said. “I’ll check the story and inform your officials about you being alive. I also have the awful responsibility of explaining Boelke’s fiancée what happened. Don’t worry. I’ll straighten out this mess somehow. I only hope your relatives were not told that you were dead or missing.”

## Chapter Eleven

Apparently, the hospital commander had some pull with the Luftwaffe because within a couple of days, Mark was on his way home, on board a Hungarian Junkers 52. The plane was taking optical instruments to Budapest, but the loadmaster squeezed Mark's stretcher in. The plane landed at Budapest; the waiting ambulance took Mark straight to the officers' hospital.

His room was full of flowers, candy, and a get-well card from his mother. It was embarrassing.

*Shit*, Mark thought, *Mother is treating me as if I just delivered twins for her.*

Fortunately, the Ministry of Defense was inefficient; the notification about Mark's death reached his mother two days after his arrival to Budapest. It took some time and two visits from military lawyers to resurrect Mark.

In a few days, the nurses told him about a friend of his, Johnny Varjas, recovering in the next room. It was a mystery how the captain got there. The last time he saw the pilot, he was healthy as a horse.

The nurses and the orderlies taught Mark to use the crutches, and as soon as he was reasonably sure about keeping his balance, visited the pilot.

The captain was lying on his back, his face pale and his eyes closed.

"My God, what happened to you?" Mark asked.

Varjas slowly opened his eyes. "Ah, it is you, my favorite rear gunner! How are you doing?"

"You ought to know, you were there, when I got it. How about you?"

"It is ridiculous. I have a nasty concussion, perhaps a skull-fracture, and assorted bruises."

"When did it happen?"

“The day I got back to Staryi-Oskol, I took the next raid on Voronej. First, the flak cut us to pieces, and then a whole squadron of Ratas jumped us on our side of the lines. We knocked off four of them, but they damaged my plane seriously. With my rear gunner and the radio operator badly wounded, I could not bail out; had to attempt a dead stick landing. We cart-wheeled, and I hit my head on something.”

“What are the doctors saying?”

“They say I’ll recover and get back on flying status soon.”

“You should. According to most anatomy books, the heads of air force captains are solid bone from ear to ear.”

“That is exactly what the doc told me,” Varjas replied.

They chatted for an hour; finally, the nurse came, ordering Mark back to his room. From there on, his daily routine was to visit Varjas in the morning, have lunch, head for the garden to take in some fresh air, and chat with the other lightly wounded or recovering officers. He was surprised to see the engineering officer of KP 318, Lieutenant Kovacs, among the guys sitting on the benches.

“Hi, Marcus, I’m surprised to see you. We heard you were dead. How did you get here?” Kovacs asked.

“I could ask you the same question. You were healthy as a horse the last time I saw you.”

“After you took off with Johnny on your infamous joy ride, a gaggle of transport planes came to KP 318 to spend the night there. Near midnight, the partisans attacked the airfield in force.”

“How about my guys?”

“They are mostly alright. Anyway, there was a major firefight, two planes burned and several damaged. I took

a bullet in the middle of the engagement, while firing my forty-five at the partisans. Actually, I think I got one of them.”

“Did my gang lose anybody?”

“I don’t really know. I was on the same plane with Ensign Kulich and Sergeant Vitek, as they were also among the wounded. Kulich said the guards fought the partisans off and saved the rest of the precious aircraft. They killed many irregulars and captured five of them.”

“I’m sure Captain Toth did not mess around; he probably had them executed by firing squad the same day. He hated the idea of public hanging.” Mark tried not to let his feelings about the killing show in his voice.

“Get well, Marcus,” Kovacs said.

After another week, Mark found Varjas sitting in a wheelchair and rolling it up and down in his room.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“I’m learning to fly this damn thing. It turns quite well, but it does not climb.”

As he returned to his room, an envelope was waiting for him with a very good-looking Luftwaffe decoration. A letter attached from an unknown German colonel said, “On the course of aerial combat Lieutenant Kende, although wounded severely, destroyed one enemy aircraft. For his courage and perseverance, we awarded him the Order of the Eagle Third Class.”

When he told Varjas about the decoration, the captain just smiled. “I know about it because I put you up for the gong. Perhaps you’re the only infantryman ever to receive a Luftwaffe decoration.”

“Why didn’t you recommend me for a Hungarian Medal?”

“The Krauts were closer,” Varjas replied.

“Thank you very much, but I did not deserve the gong. It was self-defense.”

“Nevertheless, it will look good on your dress uniform.”

In another week, Johnny Varjas left the hospital. He did not have a skull fracture after all, just a concussion. He came to say farewell. “I’m glad to go back to the front,” Varjas told him when he came in.

“Are you some kind of a nut?”

“No, I’m a pilot.”

“The two should be synonymous,” Mark said, interrupting. “You go there and let Ivan shoot at you, the Ratas chase you all over the sky, and you’re happy about it. Why?”

“You don’t understand it, Marcus. Flying is the worst kind of addiction. In Russia, I can fly six hours every day. It is worth the inconvenience of being shot at!”

Mark shook his head. “Break a leg, Johnny,” he said.

Mark stayed in the hospital for a few more days. In the end, the doctors wanted to send him to a convalescent home, but he tried to convince them to let him stay in the family residence in Budapest. After much haggling, the surgeons relented, but told him to come back to the hospital once a week for a checkup.

After Mark left the hospital, his mother looked after him and protected him just as a tigress protects her cubs. Mark was a miserable patient. He wanted to have the plaster cast off his leg because his skin was itching. The doctors nixed the idea, but a nurse privately suggested getting long knitting needles and scratching the affected location.

In early November, the cast came off and for a few days, Mark moved into another hospital in Budapest, which had a spa. He was very much looking forward to meeting lively nurses in bathing suits instead of the straight-laced girls serving in the officers’ hospital. He

had bad luck; it was a Catholic hospital and all the nurses were nuns. While they were very proficient in their work, as women they were off limits. Fortunately, they let him out and after a week, his leg improved a great deal. Using a cane for safety, Mark was well enough to walk.

His first independent trip was to see Tania. He wanted to take her out for lunch, but she had other ideas. It was well after five o'clock in the afternoon when they left her bedroom.

In the next few days, they resumed the Russian lessons, but somehow Mark lost interest because he thought the war was going to be over before he recovered completely, and he might not have to go back to Russia. He was not too keen on learning a language he might never use.

In those days, the war was going well for the Germans. Almost everybody was sure about the Russians suing for peace in the near future. The invincible German Army stood at the gates of Stalingrad. If they took possession of this important beachhead, the road to the Caucasian oil fields would open, and the war in the east would end.

As his leg was getting better, Mark called the commander of the 307<sup>th</sup> suggesting he would return for light duty. However, the adjutant told him to stay on sick leave until he completely recovered. In January of 1943, the doctors pronounced Mark fit for duty.

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The Hungarian Military hierarchy was stunned following the obliteration of their Second Army at the River Don. The heroic defense of the Ilovskoye airbase, with the "C" company of Mark's battalion taking active part, had immense propaganda value, but it took a heavy toll. In addition, the German allies lost the respect of the Hungarian air force officers because the goddamned

Krauts left them rearguarding the German rearguard at Ilovskoye. It took the Luftwaffe a long time to restore good relations with the rank and file of the Royal Hungarian Air Force.

The bloodletting at the Don resulted in tremendous shortages of properly trained professional officers and noncoms.

In 1943, elements of the 307<sup>th</sup> Division garrisoned the city of Sopron. Apart from the Oedenburger Regiment's First Battalion, the staff company, and a few officers the division existed in name only. The First Battalion, returned from Russia after suffering heavy losses, was their only experienced combat unit. Being located near the Austrian border in picturesque, hilly country, the High Command decided to turn the 307<sup>th</sup> into a training unit. The veteran enlisted men of the First Battalion, promoted to corporals, lance corporals, and buck sergeants, assisted in the training. Later, a few of these noncoms transferred into other units heading for Russia to plug the gaping holes left by the loss of the Second Army. Many of the veterans went to the training center for non-commissioned officers in Jutas.

The army could manufacture experienced field officers for the infantry by promoting older noncommissioned officers, but in the technical disciplines like the artillery, armor, and the air force, the shortages were serious.

When von Paulus surrendered at Stalingrad, a batch of recently called-up reservists reported to Sopron for training. In the race to catch the best noncoms, Mark was lucky, as he managed to hang on two of his friends, Steve Pataky and the sentimental Vitek. Both were veterans of the Russian campaign and understood Mark's training principles.

On the surface, they were merciless; the troops hated them. However, many survivors of the Russians' summer offensive admitted that the training at the 307<sup>th</sup> saved them from death or capture.

After six weeks of grueling training, a batch of officers arrived. They were fresh-faced kids straight out of the reserve officers training course. In addition, a bunch of tough noncoms arrived from Jutas, some of them veterans of the partisan hunting mission of Mark's platoon in Russia.

"You have to hand over your enlisted men," Captain Toth instructed his platoon leaders. "The new guys are going to command the reservists you trained."

"I don't mind," Mark said.

"The battalion under a new name and their new officers and noncoms are going to parade in the city tomorrow."

"What about us?" Kulich asked.

"You can escort them to the railway station and kiss them goodbye," the captain said. "They are heading for the front lines."

"I'll miss them," Kulich said. "They were beginning to understand what soldiering was all about."

While they watched the battalion marching toward the railway station before shipping out to Russia, Mark said, "My noncoms and I are happy about the arrangement. We gladly train reservists, as long as we do not have to endure the Russian front."

As the next batch of recruits was arriving only in March, they had plenty of time on their hands.

The discussion of the war and the future was the favorite topic of the officers. Mark was skeptical, unsure of the outcome. He hoped the Germans had enough sense to negotiate a peace agreement while they had the upper hand and their troops held enemy territory. Ensign Fe-

kete was distraught and felt the war would be lost no matter what, while Ensign Frank Kulich was gung ho, convinced of the final victory. He considered volunteering for the front, but according to Captain Toth, it was most likely his new commander would assign Kulich to lead partisan hunts. This thought cooled the ensign's enthusiasm immediately.

Mark lived off base in a pleasant little apartment on Deak Square in the heart of the city. He had no lady friend, but often spent the weekends in Budapest with Tania for renewed lessons in Russian.

Meanwhile, they were training reservists, an operation, which was not very difficult, but occasionally both the trainers and the trainees were in extreme danger.

"I was almost killed yesterday," Pataky said.

"What happened?" Mark asked.

"I was teaching the soldiers to throw hand grenades. After managing the duds well, I decided to let them throw the live ones."

"Did you dig a large foxhole?"

"Yes, the damn thing was big enough for me and the student."

"What went wrong?"

"I handed the live grenade to a guy who did very well with the duds. The soldier pulled the pin and as he was taught, shouted, "Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three..." and promptly dropped the grenade."

"Wow--"

"I grabbed the damn thing and heaved it over the lip of the foxhole. It exploded immediately showering us with dirt."

"What did you do to the guy?"

"Nothing, I just told him: if he does that again, I'll cut him out of my will, then I let him throw the second goddamned grenade."

“It shows you how dumb some of our recruits can be,” Mark concluded.

Later, Pataky admitted that his girlfriend found the first gray hair on the sergeant’s head that day.

Training the reservists was not always a pleasant experience. They were men, not kids, and they usually left a family behind. No wonder, they were always looking for excuses to go home or somehow get out of serving in the army. The worst case was a recruit arriving at the initial medical examination. As having no teeth was a reason to declare a man unfit for military service, the young fellow had all his teeth pulled. He stood there stark naked and the doctor looking at him announced, “You’ve got flat feet; go home, sonny!”

He never asked the young man to open his mouth.

“We have a problem,” Pataky reported to Mark one day. “The fathers and mothers of our soldiers are dying off at an alarming rate.”

“How come?”

“Vitek figured out the reason for the increased mortality.”

“What is it?”

“It is a new divisional order. According to our fearless leader, if someone dies in the family of a soldier, he should get a few days leave to attend the funeral.”

“It is reasonable,” Mark replied. “What can we do if a relative dies? We must give the fellow leave.”

“These guys are smart,” Pataky noted dryly. “Vitek noticed a particular soldier reporting his father dying with amazing regularity.”

“Alright, from now on, I’ll issue the compassionate leave passes. Vitek shall prepare a list recording the living relatives of each man in the platoon. If a relative died, we’ll strike him/her off the list. From here on, nobody

can report his father dying more than once,” Mark ordered.

The new system worked; the mortality rate of the parents and relatives immediately improved.

On Mark’s frequent visits to Budapest, his mother kept nagging him to marry and produce some offspring. The matter led to intense arguments, and in the end, Mark moved out of the family home and stayed in a hotel. Finally, Peter straightened out the situation. As her older brother, he simply ordered Angela Kende to shut up and respect Mark’s desire to retain his freedom.

“After all,” Peter said, “I did not remarry after my wife died. Leave the boy alone!”

In Hungarian tradition, if the parents were dead, the oldest son ruled. Angela accepted Peter’s quasi orders and did not mention marriage again. On his visits, Mark stopped using the hotels and stayed in the family home again. However, his mother did not give up easily. She always happened to have a young woman visiting her when Mark came home.

In May, the Divisional Commander ordered Mark to Budapest to serve as escort and interpreter to members of the International Red Cross. He was pleasantly surprised, finding himself in a little group of highly educated officers under the command of his uncle, Colonel Peter Knezits.

“The people you’re going to escort recently arrived from Russia,” Peter addressed his officers. “They investigated mass graves at Katyn and Vinnitsa. The one in the Katyn forest held the bodies of 4250 Polish officers and more than twenty thousand people captured in 1939 when the Red Army occupied Galicia. Allegedly, they killed another 8000 Poles at other sites, which we never found.”

“Do we have any proof of the Russians committing the murders?” asked a major from the group.

“There is very little doubt about the perpetrators. The victims had their arms tied behind their backs and killed with a single shot to the back of the head. This is the execution style of the NKVD.”

The small group was quiet.

“The German forensic scientists and experts retained by the International Red Cross, working side-by-side, examined the uniforms and the papers found on the remains of the victims. They established the date of burial with reasonable accuracy. Their studies support the initial theory of the executions in Katyn taking place in late 1939 or in January 1940,” Peter continued.

“What did you find in Vinnitsa?” Another officer asked.

“These mass graves date farther back to 1937 and 1938. Allegedly, the victims were dissenters, people talking of an independent Ukraine. To cover up the crime, the Soviets built a public park over the graves, which according to the locals, held nearly 20,000 bodies.

German and international scientists started working at the Vinnitsa site as well, but the task is enormous.”

“What are we going to do for the visitors?” Mark asked.

“Every one of you will be assigned to a neutral visitor. You will be on duty twenty-four hours each day. If the fellow wants to see something in Hungary, you take him or her there. In general, make sure of your charges getting whatever they want. I’m going to give your individual assignments now.”

Mark drew a Swedish judge named Jens Johansson, a talkative although distraught individual.

Mark showed him the city and took him to the best restaurants. It seemed whatever the Swede saw in Katyn

and Vinnitsa made a lasting impression on him. He could not stop talking about the horrors he witnessed, thoroughly ruining Mark's mood and appetite.

"These were the typical war crimes. I wonder if it is possible to prosecute those involved in the mass murders," Johansson said.

"It would be very difficult. How could you get the leader of a nation to stand trial for mass murder committed on his orders?" Mark asked.

"We have the appropriate legal vehicle to do precisely that. The 1928 Paris Treaty clearly defined war crimes."

"Who can lay the charges?"

"Usually the winners of the war, but I would like to see it extended to cover all participants," Johansson said.

"What are considered war crimes?"

"There are three types of offences. The first one is a crime against peace: the instigation of war. It is not relevant in the case of Katyn and Vinnitsa. However, the second and the third definition may apply. The second includes the violation of the customs of war: namely murder, ill-treatment or deportation of civilian population, maltreatment of prisoners of war, killing hostages, plunder, wanton destruction of cities and any unjustified military devastation."

"That covers an awful lot."

"Wait, it is getting better. There are such things as crimes against humanity. It includes murder, enslavement or deportation, and persecution of civilians on racial, political, or religious grounds before, after, or during a war."

"Can you charge the winners with crimes against humanity?"

"I don't know, but my sense of justice demands prosecuting those animals who committed the Katyn

massacre. They should be punished, be they winners or losers.”

“Whom would you punish? Would you charge the man who pulled the trigger or the one who gave the order?”

“Both,” the judge snapped.

“Congratulations,” Mark said bitterly. “Would you prosecute every soldier who killed someone in combat?”

“To take a life in battle is inevitable; it is self-defense. I would punish those who instigated the clash.”

“The generals?”

“Perhaps, but first and foremost, I would charge with war crimes anybody ordering the troops to attack.”

“Look, Mr. Johansson, a general is an officer like me. If my commander orders me to kill irregular fighters, I do the job. If I do not, I have to face a firing squad for refusing an order, or let the partisans kill me. The generals are in the same boat.”

“Why don’t you refuse the illegal orders?”

“I don’t have a law degree,” Mark said sarcastically, “I don’t know which order is illegal. As most of our enlisted men can barely read and write, very few soldiers know. Since this is valid for most armies. How could you expect the men to distinguish between proper and illegal orders?”

“The ignorance of the law is not an extenuating circumstance,” Johansson retorted. “The fact of being ordered to do something is not an acceptable defense either...” his voice trailed.

There was no way of convincing the judge of a soldier not being liable when he takes the life. In addition, Johansson claimed all soldiers participating in executions were guilty of murder.

“They should be sentenced accordingly,” he finished his lecture on the topic.

Following the judge's tirade, Mark immediately understood the rationale of the strict rules pertaining to the military executions. He decided to challenge Johansson.

"Well," Mark said, "I would gladly defend the members of a firing squad in your court. The Royal Hungarian Army has strict rules."

"Rules or no rules," the judge said, interrupting, "as there is no appeal, military executions are illegal in my book. However, just as a matter of interest, I'm curious about your legal theory of a defense."

"Please note, sir, I'm not going to defend the military judge passing the verdict. His hands are tied by the law."

"That's all right."

"My concern is for the poor bastard pulling the trigger."

"They should refuse to fire," the judge declared.

"Nevertheless, sir, the rules are very strict. Before the execution, a noncommissioned officer loads five rifles for the firing squad, puts the weapons on a stand in the armory, and leaves the room. The members of the firing squad enter, pick up their weapons randomly from the stand, and proceed with the execution. After the job is done, the soldiers must return their weapons to the rifle stand without opening the breech. The same noncommissioned officer, who is forbidden to witness the execution, has to clean the rifles afterwards. Of the five guns, one held blanks. Therefore, it is impossible to prosecute any member of a firing squad, as it is impossible to establish, which soldier fired the fatal bullets and who had the rifle loaded with the blanks."

The judge thought for a while and declared, "You'd make a good lawyer."

The explanation of the Hungarian Army regulations shut Johansson up for a while. Anyway, he gave Mark his

address and telephone number, inviting him to visit Sweden whenever it became possible.

“I promise I won’t let anybody charge you with war crimes,” the grinning Johansson said.

After the judge boarded the Red Cross aircraft for Sweden, Mark thought about what Johansson said. The Swede had a point, but if soldiers would question every order, there would be no army. *Perhaps in a thousand years.*

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After the battle of El Alamein and the strategic withdrawal of Rommel from North Africa, Mark suddenly realized Uncle Peter had predicted the changing of military fortunes in 1940 accurately. The war would be lost, as the industrial might of the Allies started manifesting itself. However, it was not clear what would happen to Hungary after the war.

Would it be as it was in 1919? Mark asked himself, but had no answers. With a heavy heart, he returned to Sopron and his training job.

In July, Mark took his annual leave and spent it in Siofok. However, he did not live in the elegant MAC, but in the smaller, intimate hotel ran by the mother of Steve Pataky. The sergeant also showed up; the two young men wearing civilian clothes had a ball in the lakeside resort town. They knew they might have to return to Russia, back to the horrors of having to hunt partisans.

The ouster of Mussolini and the Allied landing in Sicily did come as a surprise to the young soldiers.

“We may have to fight in Italy, like my father had to,” Pataky said. “The old man was a sergeant in the infantry during the second battle at the Isonzo. I’d rather fight the Brits than the Russkies.”

“Why?” Mark queried.

“They have principles. According to Dad, both sides observed all the rules and maintained a resemblance of chivalry.”

“That was a long time ago, Steve. Perhaps they changed, and might fight dirty like Ivan. Anyway, it doesn’t matter, war is hell; people are killed and maimed. I just want to survive and I’d like to see my country remain free.”

“I meant to ask you many times: at heart are you a Hungarian or an American?” Pataky asked.

“I wish I knew. I’m a sworn officer of the Royal Hungarian Army. I intend to keep the faith, and if I have to, die for my country. However, after the war, I’m going back to the Golden Saddle and won’t come near Europe again. This place with its so-called culture, traditions, discrimination, and violence gives me the shivers. America is for simple, law-abiding people like me. There I always know what is right and what is wrong.”

“We must concentrate on surviving first.”

“Yeah, and train those poor bastards as well as we can, to give them a better chance of survival.”

“Perhaps they would look after us better if we do,” Pataky said.

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The Hungarian High Command felt the Allied landing in Sicily was only a feint. They expected the real McCoy coming to the Balkans; therefore, the generals wanted to keep the crème of the army in the home country to defend the southern borders.

In the officers’ mess, everybody was concerned about the future developments, and the conversation centered on the status of the war.

“If they landed in the Balkans, the Allies could make full use of the Yugoslavian irregular forces and overcome

the German resistance much easier,” Captain Toth said in the officers’ mess.

“The German troop strength in Yugoslavia is still considerable,” Ensign Kulich said.

“That may be, but they have mainly infantry with very little artillery and armor in the Balkans,” Toth replied. “Reinforcements should travel a long way, through Hungary and hostile Yugoslavia.”

“It would not be too bad, we could guard our railways,” the ensign argued.

“Security is not the main problem. In addition, to reinforce their troops in the Balkans, the Germans would have to open the door to the beaches on the Channel,” Toth concluded.

“I never thought of it that way...” Kulich’s voice trailed.

The possibility of a southern front developing weighed heavily on everybody’s mind.

Since the setbacks at Kursk, the brass was developing secret plans to have the Hungarian Army withdraw and make a stand at the summit of the Carpathians. As the Hungarians expected having to fight on two fronts, the High Command created The Fifth Army Corps, allocating two infantry divisions, the 307<sup>th</sup> and 303<sup>rd</sup>, in addition to the 103<sup>rd</sup> Armored Division. They rearmed this Army Corps with the newest Hungarian-made weapons and trained them to a fine edge of efficiency. However, the Army Corps was scattered all over the country; their armored units were training in the south, the 307<sup>th</sup> in the west, and the 303<sup>rd</sup> in the east. This was supposed to be a mobile reserve, which they could deploy in the South or at the Carpathian wall.

The Germans, sensing that Hungary wanted to get off the bandwagon, occupied the country in March 1944, installing a new government. This committed the nation

to the war one hundred percent. As the new army training units in the eastern end of the country produced enough cannon fodder for the Russian front to satisfy the initial German demands, the High Command still managed to withhold elements of the elite Fifth Corps.

Following the German occupation, the American bombers began their devastating attacks on Hungary. Budapest took several hits, and the industrial areas suffered a great deal.

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As troops from various garrisons of the country headed for Russia, there were gaps in military coverage at home. The High Command ordered the 307<sup>th</sup> to garrison the City of Gyor temporarily and assure the security of the Raba industrial complex, which produced trucks, tanks, and artillery pieces.

The workhorse of the Division, the First Battalion transferred to Gyor, a pleasant city on the banks of the Danube built in the same style as most cities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. If one drops into Amstetten in Austria, Zagreb in Croatia, or Gyor in Western Hungary, the similarities in the style of architecture and behavior of the citizens are striking.

At the same time, the High Command detached two regiments of the 307<sup>th</sup>, sending them to the Russian front.

The experienced officers of the Oedenburger Regiment, now the only unit of the 307<sup>th</sup>, were not happy. To bring the division up to full strength again, they had to train many older reservists and young volunteers arriving from every corner of the country.

The First Battalion, the veterans of the regiment arrived at Gyor on the first week in April and moved into the now empty barracks a few blocks from the railway station. The first couple of days Mark's platoon supplied

the guards for the factory, but since intelligence suggested Slovak partisans were on the move, Able Company started patrolling the dams of the Danube. After all, they were the experts in fighting irregulars.

Major Kiss handed the guard duties over to Bravo Company. They were on duty on April 13<sup>th</sup>, when the 25<sup>th</sup> USAF Bomber Group attacked the Raba Factory and the airport. More than half of the company perished along with several Germans in a troop train, coming home from Russia and waiting on a railway siding near the factory. The civilian losses were also heavy.

Mark's platoon moved in immediately after the raid, to search for survivors. Soon their mission deteriorated into recovery of mangled corpses. They worked into the night, but found only a few survivors under the ruins of the factory. In this raid, the Americans lost seven or eight planes over Gyor or farther south.

In a few weeks, the battalion was withdrawn from Gyor because new garrison troops arrived. They were the demoralized remnants of a regiment suffering heavy losses in Russia.

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The haggling with the Germans was the daily routine in the Ministry of Defense, but in view of the rapid advance of the Russians and the expected Allied invasion, the High Command caved in and ordered the 307<sup>th</sup> to Russia.

This could not have happened at a worse time. The training of the troops was far from complete, and the ranks filled up with the rejects of other divisions. Compounding the chaos, the Division Commander ordered the veteran companies to give up the best of their enlisted men to serve as noncoms in the new companies. The morale of the men torn from their normal environment sank to an all time low.

## Chapter Twelve

Company was devastated after the major bloodletting in Gyor, its depleted ranks partially replenished by reservists and a few veterans from Able and Charlie Company. Fortunately, Mark managed to hang on to three of his sergeants and fifteen of his regulars. This was much better than most other platoons, and happened only because the Battalion Commander decided to organize a so-called reconnaissance platoon with expertise in dealing with the partisans, within Able Company.

Normally, it would take sixty or seventy trains to move the whole division. This was a job of Herculean proportions. Regardless, the trip started out well. The Divisional Commander allocated three brand new Oerlikon heavy machineguns for air defense on each train. Major Kiss assigned Mark's platoon to a flatcar, ordering the reconnaissance platoon to double as the air defense unit.

Unfortunately, no one in the battalion's staff was familiar with the Oerlikons. The precise instructions in English and in German were part of the factory package, which came with the weapons.

*Evidently, the wily Swiss are playing both sides of the conflict, selling the same machineguns to the Allies as well as the Germans,* Mark thought.

It was not an easy job, but by noon, the gunners could fire the Oerlikons and clear a jam, although they did not have any target practice.

"Every fourth shell is a tracer. Therefore, you do not have to use the sights, just watch the damned tracers," Mark explained to the gunners.

The first major stop was Gyor again; everybody was apprehensive.

They waited for hours at the station for the arrival of another train carrying elements of the divisional artillery. "The guys are nervous," Pataky reported.

"They will just hook us to the artillerists train and we'll be on our way. You'll see," Mark said. "Try calming the guys down a little."

"Do you think they are not going to keep us with the rest of the regiment?" asked Pataky.

"No, the cannons are more difficult to replace than people," Mark replied.

When the artillerists arrived, the chief of staff ordered Mark's so-called air defense platoon to join the train carrying the cannons. Obviously, he wanted to protect the precious guns against marauding American fighters. The civilian employees of the Railway Company manipulated the wagons at the station, and an hour later the train of the artillerists, pulled by two monstrous locomotives, started out toward Russia.

They reached Budapest by midnight; the railway management had the train moved to the outskirts of the city. Everybody was relieved to hear the stationmaster's announcement that they would not spend the night in Budapest. However, their relief was short-lived; when the soldiers learned about the place where their train stood, they became very nervous, as the railway workers told them that this station was the target most often bombed.

While they were waiting, Mark managed a brief telephone conversation with his mother. She told him about Major Pesthy, who was missing in action. After cutting the conversation short, he called Judy, but there was no answer. His call to Tania was also a bust. Her phone did not answer. With a heavy heart, Mark went back to his platoon.

The train left just before sunrise, moving steadily toward the Carpathian Mountains until noon. They

stopped at Kisvarda because the locomotives had to take a number of empty wagons back to Budapest. Shortly thereafter, a couple of American Lightnings decided to take on the troop-train standing on the siding. The artilerists were outside the station servicing their horses when the Lightnings struck. The only people aboard were Mark's platoon, manning their Oerlikons.

The air defense unit attempted to fight the planes off, but it was only a pinprick. Miraculously, there were no casualties, except a railway employee getting on the wrong side of a horse, which kicked him in the buttock.

"How did the guys react to the air raid?" Mark asked Pataky, attempting to check on the morale of the troops.

"Even though they did not shoot down a plane, the gunners were happy about their marksmanship. They were sure it was their gunnery, throwing off the aim of the fighters."

"That sounds good."

"By the way, Sergeant Vitek is determined to get one of the attacking fighters," Pataky said.

"Perhaps he wants the tail of the plane on the wall of his dining room to keep his hunting trophies company."

However, despite Vitek's expert marksmanship, the sergeant could not bring down an American fighter.

Crossing the Hungarian border, the train arrived at a place in Galicia called Lavochna. This was the first place they felt they were nearing the front lines. After dark, the Russian Air Force became active, dropping star shells, the so-called Stalin-candles, and although their small bombs did not cause much damage, they kept everybody awake.

"Where are we getting off?" Mark asked the train commander.

“I don’t know,” was the answer. “Stay put. There is a good chance of partisans attacking the train, and your Oerlikons might come in handy,” the major answered brusquely.

The guy was right. A few miles out at a watering stop, the partisans attacked. It was not much of an attack, but created a lot of confusion. The artillerists were watering and servicing their horses when the shooting started. A few men with rifles and an ancient machinegun opened fire from the edge of the forest. They were at the extreme range of their weapons. Therefore, apart from wounding a couple of horses and shooting the heels off the most expensive riding boots of an artillery officer, they did not cause any damage. A couple of long bursts from the Oerlikons discouraged them. As he knew their tactics well, Mark had no wish to chase the partisans into the bush.

Finally, the train unloaded in Stanislau. According to the station commander, the rest of the division would arrive by June 21<sup>st</sup> and everything would fall into place. The acting Division Commander ordered Mark’s unit to hand over their Oerlikons to the air defense company of the railway station, move to a small village named Zaber-cze, and provide protection to the headquarters of the artillery battalion.

Mark’s platoon had no transportation for their baggage; he was not happy about having his men march with an extremely heavy load on their backs in partisan infested country. However, Pataky came to him with good news. “Vitek managed to buy a small Stalinetz tractor from the locals. They had no fuel to run it.”

“How come the Krauts did not grab the tractor?”

“It was broken, and they could not make it work.”

“How are we going to operate it?”

“It is going to be easy. It should run like a charm if we could get some fuel.”

“How come you can make it go and the Krauts couldn’t?”

“It took some diplomacy, Marcus. Vitek paid the villagers a couple of bottles of Slivovitz, which the council consumed on the spot, and then someone handed him the distributor cap.”

“I’ll look after the fuel,” Mark said.

After much haggling, he requisitioned fuel from a German supply sergeant, bribing him with two hundred Hungarian cigarettes, while Vitek found a large rubber-tire wagon. The platoon therefore became a mechanized unit. Although the Stalinetz was not very fast, they beat the horse artillery to the village of Zabercze and succeeded in hogging the best accommodation.

The locals were not very friendly at first, but giving the last of their Slivovitz to the village headman, the starosta, the people accepted the infantry unit as friends. When the artillery arrived, they had more Slivovitz, which helped to cement their friendship further.

In addition, the artillery battalion’s surgeon attended to the needs of the villagers, and so the Hungarian troops developed a good relationship with the Ukrainian civilians.

As Mark learned from his disheartening experience in Transylvania and at the KP 318 landing field in Russia, he gave a long speech to his men vividly explaining the dangers lurking in their cavorting with the local women.

“You’re wasting your time telling them to stay away from the girls,” Pataky reported.

“Why?” Mark asked.

“Look at it this way. All of the young men of the village are off fighting in the Red Army. They left years ago.”

“So what?”

“Most of our men instantly acquired sex-starved girlfriends,” Pataky said. He winked. “The women are the aggressors.”

It was strange how the soldiers managed to get along with the people of Zaberze. Despite the language barrier, or perhaps because of it, there was no hostility between them. Mark realized they were essentially the same kind of people. The soldiers came from the same farming backgrounds as the locals, sharing the same interests, likes, and dislikes.

Anyway, why should a Ukrainian peasant hate a Hungarian? Mark asked himself. They do not compete in any way and represent no threat to each other.

However, the front lines were only about twelve miles away, where the cannons of two mighty armies were delivering death and destruction ordained by the leaders of their nations.

The idyllic times did not last long. First, the Artillery Battalion Commander put out the standard order forbidding fraternization with the locals. This was a rule, which the enlisted men never took seriously, the non-coms observed occasionally, and even the officers broke sometimes.

Mark knew very well that the soldiers often forgot the rules of no fraternization. Therefore, he created the impression of being ignorant of the numerous indiscretions. Pataky landed the good-looking lady postmaster. Although she was a few years older than the sergeant was, they did not care. In wartime, one should cherish every minute of stolen happiness.

Sergeant Szabo hooked up with a widow having two children. The woman’s surprisingly small waist accentuated her rather large derriere. The sergeant said he would come back to Zaberze after the cessation of the hostilities, and help Mashenka bring up the children. Szabo was

an orphan and had no real ties to anybody or any place. The beautiful Ukrainian woman meant the world to him.

Sergeant Vitek seemed to obey the order of no fraternization, but in fact, he was playing the field. The enlisted men developed their local love interests before the higher-ranking officers arrived and started reminding them of the rules.

Mark had a room all to himself in the small house of the town's librarian. The library burned completely when the Germans came through in 1941, but the lady librarian was an inventive hard working person, and managed to gather a few books through the good graces of the officers of the occupying army. Mark practiced Russian on her, and to his surprise, they understood each other very well.

As it was early summer, the heat was oppressive; on the second day, Mark decided to sleep with the window open. There were bars on the windows; it would have been impossible to get in through the small opening. In the middle of the night, he woke at the sound of the glass panes crashing. He was out of the bed in seconds, his Schmeisser in his hand, ready to confront the intruder.

"It is only me," the librarian's husky voice stated. "I did not realize your window was open."

Mark picked up his flashlight and shone it around the room. The librarian stood at the door naked. "May I come in?" she asked meekly.

Disregarding the rules, Mark let her seduce him in a mutually satisfactory manner. Although she was not the best looking woman Mark ever went to bed with, she was all right. As a token of his appreciation, in the morning, Mark gave her four packs of cigarettes saying, "I do not smoke anyway. Would you be good enough to take the stuff off my hands?" Reluctantly, the librarian accepted the gifts.

The other two platoons of Able Company arrived, ending up with the worst accommodations the town could offer. The company started refresher courses in tactical training. It was always about advancing, which annoyed Mark very much. One evening, in the makeshift officers' mess, he exploded at Captain Toth, "I'd rather train the troops in forced withdrawal techniques than advancing. We have been withdrawing for more than a year. Why do you think everything is going to change suddenly? Do you think we shall start advancing again?"

"I'm inclined to agree with you, but I was forbidden to teach my company to retreat."

"That is stupid."

"It is," the captain said, "but if I hear you making defeatist remarks, I'll have you court-martialed."

Mark shut up, but after telling the story to Pataky, he added, "The colonel's making such dumb rules could be all right, but they should be able to pass the compulsory stupidity test before the promotion to general."

Pataky gave a wry grimace. "You're right."

In the early days of July, large trucks arrived with brand new German weapons. The Army Corps Commander ordered the division to rearm with German weapons, giving up their Hungarian made guns and ammunition because they were needed elsewhere.

For a short while, the Divisional Commander resisted, saying it would take at least a month and plenty of ammunition to train the troops in the proper use of the new weapons. He also said it was dangerous to attempt rearmament only a few miles behind the front lines but to no avail; the wish of the iron-headed Army Corps Commander prevailed.

The line officers had nightmares about a Russian breakthrough and having to send their poorly trained soldiers into battle with unfamiliar weapons. Mark and

his noncoms were working the troops incessantly; in about ten days, they managed to have them point the barrel of their rifles in the proper direction while firing. Marksmanship, the bread and butter of the infantry, was lousy.

There was not enough ammunition. Despite Mark's noncoms being master scroungers, they could not steal enough. Regardless, the platoon was making far better progress than any other unit did in the division.

"I figured out why they forced rearmament on us," Captain Toth declared.

"I'm very curious," Mark said.

"Look, it doesn't take an outstanding strategist to figure out what is going on. We are taking over from the Germans defending the so-called Prinz Eugen Line."

"That is no reason for rearmament."

"The Krauts do not want Ivan to know about Hungarians taking over the German positions," Toth explained. "If we used our old weapons, the sound of the machineguns and the rifles would be a dead giveaway."

"So, what? Ivan already knows they are going to face Hungarians and not Germans. I'm sure they have many agents behind our lines. The Soviet generals know exactly where our units are stationed," Mark said.

Apparently, Toth was right. Hitler needed troops urgently on the Western Front. The German High Command figured: if the Hungarians can hold the Russians, it is alright, but if they could not, it was all right too. The Krauts owned plenty of real estate between the lines and the German border. If the Russians advanced, they would take a part of the Ukraine back, occupy a part of Poland, and perhaps push the Hungarians to the crest of Carpathians where they would surely make a stand. The deteriorating situation did not worry the German High Command.

On July 11<sup>th</sup> Able Company was put on alert and ordered to proceed to a map reference point east of the village of Lisna Slobidka, making contact with elements of an artillery battalion and providing them with infantry protection.

“Apparently, some idiot sent the guns ahead without infantry support,” Captain Toth said. He ordered the company to head for the east.

By the evening, they reached Otinja. There was plenty of hot food, peace, and quiet, no shooting anywhere, just the odd partisan taking potshots at them, but their aim was very poor.

“Apparently, they were also recently rearmed,” Sergeant Pataky said sarcastically.

Next morning, at sunrise, the troops had a hearty breakfast and hit the road again. Mark’s platoon, the third, took the lead. About lunchtime, they reached the village of Lisna Slobidka. There was no sign of the enemy or the artillerists.

The captain ordered a halt, putting the third platoon out to guard the resting troops, and consulted his map when due south of them heavy machinegun and rifle fire erupted. Toth was just about to order the second platoon to send out a patrol to investigate what was going on when a company of Russian infantry appeared at the road and attacked the resting Hungarians.

Mark’s platoon bore the brunt of the attack. As they were prepared, the line held easily and the attackers withdrew with heavy losses.

Meanwhile, the captain climbed the church steeple and had a look around. He did not stay up there very long. Coming down in a hurry, he called the platoon commanders.

“Gentlemen,” he started, “there is a large Russian infantry column coming this way. They are at least a full

regiment. We cannot stop them and should not outrun them. We have to carry out a staged, forced withdrawal.”

“This is what we were not permitted to practice,” Mark whispered to Ensign Kulich.

The captain gave him a dirty look and continued, “Let’s find a couple of bicycles in town, and send runners to the battalion for reinforcement. It seems Ivan is determined to march on Otinja with its railway station and take the town. There is nobody in the way, except us. We must slow them until help arrives.”

“What about the artillery?” Mark asked.

“They must have been overrun. Anyway, I take the first roadblock with Fekete’s gang. Ensign Kulich with the second platoon would set up another roadblock about a mile or so behind us. Kende with the third platoon will take the last one. The first platoon after disengagement would pass through Kulich and Kende, then set up the fourth roadblock farther back. We shall leapfrog like that toward Otinja until help arrives. Any questions?”

There were no questions, although Mark had misgivings about the scheme. The Russians would certainly work over the first roadblock, and there would be considerable losses. He did not think those soldiers after heavy fighting and a five-mile forced march would be much use. It was hopeless. Mark would have preferred to fight a running battle as the Serb chetniks did. He made his own plans.

“After the first two roadblocks fall, we can defend our position long enough to make sure no one can charge us with dereliction of duty. However, before the Russians overwhelm the platoon, we can withdraw into the woods, starting the hit and run raids against the enemy,” Mark explained to his sergeants.

“It is a very good idea,” Pataky agreed.

“We know how the partisans fight and could copy their tactics,” added Vitek.

The second and the third platoon left the first roadblock. Later, Ensign Kulich selected a spot to make his stand and said farewell to Mark’s gang. The third platoon was moving up the road. Approximately two miles from the second platoon, Mark started looking for a suitable site to dig in.

With Sergeant Szabo at the point, the platoon moved slowly in single file on both sides of the road. As they came over the crest of a hill, Mark noticed a little brook with trees and bushes on both banks. The little wooden bridge was intact.

“That may be a good spot for the roadblock,” Pataky suggested.

“No,” Mark said. “We could not dig in deep along the banks of the creek, because if the level in the brook rose, the foxholes would fill with water.”

“I see.”

“In addition, if I were the Russian commander, I’d assume another roadblock was waiting for me at the brook. Therefore, I’d lay down a devastating mortar barrage on the bush around the brook before moving forward.”

“To survive that, we should be well dug in. I think we should find another spot.”

Halfway up on the next rise, a mile before reaching the village of Swiety Stanislaw, a road came in from the southeast, crossing the Otinja road. At the intersection stood a little chapel, which seemed to suffer some damage from the battles around it. About halfway between the brook and the road, the forest gave way to a large clearing. Mark pointed at the road crossing. “That is the place,” he said.

“Looks alright,” Pataky agreed. “I’ll keep the guys moving.”

The forest around them was silent, but the men were apprehensive, keeping an eye on the solid wall of greenery on both sides. Mark sent two patrols ahead, moving along slowly at the edge of the forest.

“The intersection of the roads might be a good spot,” Pataky remarked. “Ivan would have to cross the road if he wanted to outflank us through the forest. We would see them coming easily!”

“Great minds think alike, Steve,” Mark replied. He was immersed in thought. “If the Russians prove too strong, it would be easy to disappear in the forest,” he said.

“Damn good idea,” Pataky remarked.

“The clearing would give us a few hundred feet of open space, which Ivan must cross if he wanted to get to grips with our guys,” Mark said.

“Let’s figure out where to put our machineguns for most impact,” Pataky started. However, he was interrupted suddenly by shouting, scattered firing in the bush no more than a couple of hundred feet ahead of them.

Mark grabbed his binoculars and scanned the edge of the forest. To his amazement, he saw a melee similar to a street brawl, rather than an organized military engagement. An artillery unit was in the process of hitching their horses to the big fifteen cm cannons when a strong enemy patrol stumbled onto them.

In the thick woods, the Russians could not use their submachine guns, for fear of hitting each other, and the artillerymen had nothing else except their whips and barrel clearing rods. They already hitched up some of the horses and a few soldiers mounted when the enemy appeared. The Russians desperately tried getting the artillerymen off the horses and gun carriages, but the Hungari-

ans resisted stoutly with whatever weapons they could find. The battery's executive officer had the most potent weapon, his .45 caliber automatic, and he was squeezing off aimed shots when he could catch one of the attackers in his sights.

"Fix bayonets! Follow me!" Roared Mark in one breath, and started running towards the melee. The charge of the infantry platoon settled the outcome. After a few minutes of intense hand-to-hand fighting, the Russians suffering heavy losses withdrew into the forest.

The reaction of his soldiers to the bayonet charge surprised Mark. He realized Uncle Peter knew what he was talking about when he described hand-to-hand combat.

*Obviously, the soldiers' mind stopped and trained reflexes took over,* Mark thought. He barely remembered personally shooting two Russians and witnessing Sergeant Szabo stabbing one with his bayonet, a guy who almost brought his submachine gun to bear. For a fleeting moment, the dead eyes of the Philippine smuggler he had bayoneted popped into Mark's mind.

He shook his head to bring himself back to reality, looked around, and barked out his orders, "Sergeant Szabo, take the first squad, set up a defensive perimeter in the woods to guard against Ivan coming back."

"Yes, sir."

"The third squad under Sergeant Vitek will set up at the edge of the woods, keeping an eye on the road. Steve, check losses and effect a body count, please."

Mark found the executive officer of the battery, and he recognized Lieutenant Gara instantly. They had both taken the reserve officers' training course at the same time.

"Thanks for the timely intervention, Marcus. You guys happened to come by at the best time," Gara said.

“I’m glad we could help. Where are you coming from?”

“We were set up half a mile north of here and just started our withdrawal. Where are you going?”

“I’m in the process of establishing a roadblock in this area somewhere. Have you any suggestions?”

“If it were up to me, I’d not waste my time setting up here. Ivan is all over the place. We got the order to withdraw when the bastards overran our forward observation station. They either killed or captured the Battery Commander, but he had managed to order us to withdraw to the Brown Line. I have no desire to hang around in this neighborhood.”

While the two officers chatted, the artillerymen were working. Suddenly, Sergeant Pataky appeared. “Lieutenant, sir,” he reported, “during the bayonet charge we suffered no casualties, only a black eye and a couple of scrapes. They are not worth mentioning, but the artillery unit was not so lucky. They had two men killed and eight wounded, two of them seriously. As their medic is one of the casualties, our guy is handling all the wounded.”

“Thanks, Steve,” Mark replied.

“Vitek with the second squad is mopping up, looking for wounded Russians among the cannons. There were none, but he counted nine corpses,” Pataky continued.

“I’ll give your fellows infantry protection until you’ve loaded the guns on the carriages and hitched up the horses,” Mark said to Gara.

“I appreciate it,” the artillerist said.

Gara’s crew moved the large fifteen cm cannons in two pieces, the barrel and the base separately. As each unit needed six horses, moving one of the guns required twelve sturdy animals. During the hand-to-hand fight

with the Russians, many horses were injured, some of them so severely that they had to be put down.

After taking stock, Gara came back to Mark. "I must abandon two of my guns because I do not have enough horses to move them. I personally removed the firing mechanisms and stored them on one of the carriages."

"You're the expert," Mark replied. "Best of luck, buddy."

The two officers shook hands and the cannons departed to the northwest, toward Otinja and the safety of the fortified Brown Line.

Mark gathered his platoon and started westward. They soon reached the intersection. Checking the road from the south, Mark found a macadamized road in good condition. As the embankment rose more than six feet above the surrounding land, the road was a natural fortress wall.

Mark turned to Pataky, "Steve, the guys must be a little tired. Let's not make them dig foxholes; we'll have them cut L-shaped firing steps into the embankment."

"Yes sir. It is a good idea. They would have to dig much less to get the same protection."

"Tell Vitek to place the machineguns covering the east-west road, and make sure of having a good field of fire down the clearing," Mark said. He pointed out the location where he wanted the machineguns set up.

"Will do."

"Your squad shall cover the road, while Vitek's gang should send two three-men patrols into the woods to guard against Ivan's flanking attempts."

"How about Szabo's men?" asked Pataky.

"Let's keep them at the chapel, as a mobile reserve."

"I'll get on with it," the sergeant replied, and went on his way.

## Chapter Thirteen

The roadblock took shape rapidly. For half an hour, nothing happened, although there was scattered firing in the distance, but that did not bother Mark. Suddenly, a convoy of vehicles appeared from the direction of Otinja. A motorcycle with a sidecar led the column, followed by a Mercedes staff car, an armored halftrack, and three motorcycle escorts. Mark easily identified them as Germans, and thus relaxed.

The staff car came to a screeching halt about a hundred feet from the intersection. A German general and a captain tumbled out. Mark immediately recognized Generaloberst Winters, the Commander of the Second Army Group, which the 307<sup>th</sup> was part of.

“What the hell is this guy doing in the front lines?” Pataky asked.

“Evidently, we did not know the command style of General Winters. Allegedly, he is from the old school, like Rommel, and believes in having to lead from the front,” Mark replied.

“I often heard of the Desert Fox exasperating his staff by constantly disappearing from headquarters and turning up at the hot spots,” the sergeant remarked.

Winters stopped at the chapel, put his hands on his waist, and roared, “Who is in charge here?”

Mark marched up to him, smartly snapped to attention, saluted and reported in German, “Lieutenant Mark Kende reporting, sir.”

“At ease, Lieutenant,” Winters said. He drew a golden cigarette case, offering it to Mark.

“I don’t smoke, sir.”

“Good for you, you’ll live forever,” the general said. While taking a cigarette and lighting it, he continued, “What is your unit and what are your orders?”

“This is a detachment of the Able Company, First Battalion of the Oedenburger Regiment, attached to the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the Royal Hungarian Army. I’m ordered to set up a roadblock, hold it until the first and the second platoons withdraw through my lines.”

“Do you know what is happening farther ahead?”

“Our unit penetrated about four miles east of here before running into the Russians. What happened beyond that point, I do not know, sir.”

“What is Ivan doing south and east of here?” the general demanded to know.

“I’m not up on the strategic situation, sir. I believe it is chaotic. The battalion sent us here to find our forward artillery units and protect them.”

“I wonder which idiot sent the artillerists forward without infantry,” the general mused. “Continue, son.”

“After running into a Russian infantry column, estimated as a regiment, we began our staged withdrawal. We also found half a battery of fifteen cm guns. The Russians overran their forward observer, killing or capturing the Battery Commander. The artillerists are on their way to the Brown Line. It seems, sir, we are in the state of forced, but organized withdrawal.”

“Very well. I have a new assignment for you.”

“Respectfully, sir, may I have the orders in writing?”

“You’ll go a long way, Lieutenant,” General Winters said. He smiled. “Captain Hoffer, take a notebook and write out the orders in triplicate.”

“Yes sir,” the captain replied.

“Until further notice, Lieutenant Kende will assume command of the First Composite Task Force. Initially, his platoon will be the core of the said unit. Lieutenant Kende shall incorporate all available personnel of the Second Army, irrespective of rank, discipline, and designation into the said Task Force under his command. His

unit must hold the intersection of route eleven and the east west Otinja highway until further orders. Understood?”

Fear knotted Mark's stomach. He felt the general just signed his death warrant. His fear of the high rank of Winters suddenly evaporated. “May I speak freely, sir?”

“You may.”

“Sir, I have thirty-two tired infantrymen with two miserable machineguns and a limited supply of ammunition. I doubt we could repel a conventional infantry attack of company strength. In addition, if they use armored vehicles, we couldn't possibly stop them.”

“I'm beginning to like you, Lieutenant. You're a realist. Actually, your situation is not nearly as desperate as you think. I allocated artillery support for you. They are coming over the hill soon, two fifteen cm cannons, the ones you just found. I know it is not much, but that is all I can give you for the time being. However, I'll immediately dispatch a couple of trucks from Nadvirna with light machineguns, miscellaneous infantry ammunition, supplies, radio-equipment, and ammo for the fifteen cm guns. They should be here in a couple of hours. I cannot give you troops, but ahead of you to the south and the east, there are all kinds of loose artillery and infantry units. Apparently, they are in the process of withdrawal. They must use these roads. Stop them, and incorporate all stragglers into your Task Force.”

“If the general doesn't mind, they would be a disorganized rabble, or defeated soldiers at best. Their fighting value would be limited. I fear they would be liable to bolt if the going gets rough,” Mark stated categorically. Then, knowing he risked the general's wrath with his continued protests, he added, “However, I shall do my best.”

As to emphasize Mark's statement, east of their position, a Hungarian horse artillery unit entered onto the Otinja road from the south.

"Look at those magnificent bastards," the general said, pointing at the sight.

The artillery unit moved in parade-ground precision. Their light 10.5 cm field guns were properly hitched, each drawn by six well-kept horses. The executive officer on horseback led the battery and another officer, mounted on a beautiful palomino, came up galloping from the end.

"Do you call these a defeated rabble?" the general asked.

"No, sir."

"Captain Hoffer, take note; send these guys some ten point five cm ammunition as well."

"Yes, sir," replied the captain. He returned to the halftrack. From the corner of his eye, Mark noticed Hoffer getting on the radio.

"Now, Lieutenant, you have more artillery support than you actually need. Regardless, I'm not in the habit of sending men into almost certain death without telling them why. I'm not going to preach to you about the Fatherland, the ultimate victory, and all that crap. You're an intelligent, fellow professional. Thus, I'm sure you'll understand. Southwest of us, in Tlumaczyn, on the banks of the River Prut is a huge tented field hospital with more than a thousand wounded soldiers. They are evacuating to the nearest railhead in Otinja. The road you're blocking is the key. If the Russians advance on this road, they would cut off their evacuation route. Your Task Force is the only thing holding up Ivan. You must hold this intersection until the hospital evacuates. After they reach safety, I don't give a shit if you start running and don't stop until Budapest." The general took a deep breath and con-

tinued, "In case you don't know, Lieutenant, the Russians never take prisoners who cannot walk. Ivan shoots or bayonets them. Therefore, if you let the hospital fall into Russian hands, I shall personally shoot you. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Mark replied. He began respecting Winters. "If the general doesn't mind, may I ask if there are any forces south of us?"

"Between you and the River Prut are the 37<sup>th</sup> Hungarian Infantry Regiment, with artillery and two companies of Tiger tanks of their own. They should be able to slow Ivan long enough to let the hospital stay ahead of them. While ammunition is plentiful at the Brown Line, I'm sorry, I cannot send you infantry."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Captain Hoffer is going to give you our spare radio; if you need anything, you can contact me. Let's make your call sign *lifeguard station*, and mine shall be *Mercedes*. The codeword for your withdrawal is *Zeppelin*. Captain Hoffer or my chief of staff, General Horst may call you on the radio and give you the code for withdrawal. If you get the message, check the name of the sender. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"In addition, one of my motorcycle riders, Sergeant Schultz, will stay with you. Use him as you wish. He could check occasionally on the progress of the evacuation behind you. If he gives you a sealed note from me or the commander of the hospital, Colonel Steiner, with the codeword, you may withdraw."

"I understand, sir." Mark saluted, with his intestines still trembling. *What happens if the truck does not arrive in time?*

Captain Hoffer came back, reporting that he sent off the message.

“Your supply truck is going to leave Nadvirna within the hour,” the general said.

“Thank you, sir,” Mark replied.

“Carry on, Lieutenant,” the general said. He saluted, climbed into his car, turned to the west, and drove off.

Just as the general disappeared, Mark said to Sergeant Pataky, “Well, Steve, as a Composite Task Force, we have the same standing as a division. Perhaps I’m the only lieutenant ever commanding such a force. Did you ever think of suddenly becoming divisional infantry commander?”

The sergeant smiled, and remarked, “No, Marcus, never. However, I do not like our odds of survival.”

“I’m not very enthusiastic about the future either. Nevertheless, as we are expected to stay here for a while, take the reserve squads, dig a couple of shallow latrines behind the chapel, and set up my command post in the cellar.”

Before the sergeant could reply, the Battery Commander rode up on his palomino, dismounted, and stepped up to Mark. The artilleryman saluted and asked, “What is going on, Lieutenant? Who was the brass?”

Mark instantly recognized Lieutenant Les Bartos, a professional soldier and former instructor at the reserve officers’ training course. He was a good guy.

“It was Generaloberst Winters,” Mark replied.

“Wow. The Army Commander, hard-arsed Winters himself,” Bartos said. He offered Mark a cigarette from his silver case. “What did he want?”

“He promoted me to command a Task Force,” Mark said, waving his hand dismissively at the offered cigarette. He dug the general’s written order out of his pocket, and presented it to Bartos. “By the way, I regret to inform you that as of this moment, you’re drafted into the First Composite Task Force.”

“I’m at your service,” the artillerist said. “Actually, I could have done worse. Are you aware of task force commanders usually being generals or at least colonels? Let me be the first to congratulate you on your promotion.”

“Thanks, Les.”

“Alright, General, what do you expect me to do?”

“Take command of all artillery, set up your cannons and the two fifteen cm guns of Lieutenant Gara to cover both roads and the clearing in front of us. You’re the expert, not me. If any tanks or infantry appear anywhere heading for us, open fire at your own discretion and let me know what is coming.”

“Simplistic but clear. Are any of our guys east of here?”

“We should have two roadblocks manned by our second and first platoons,” Mark replied.

“I’ll locate them if I can, and give them artillery support. By the way, how long do we have to hold?”

“Until the German field hospital in Tlumaczyn manages to evacuate.”

“Understood,” Bartos said. “Where is your command post, Marcus?”

“We’ll set up in the cellar of the chapel. However, before you go, in case I die, take command of the Task Force. The codeword for our withdrawal is *Zeppelin*.”

“Alright, we shall discuss the details later. I’ll have the guys lay a wire from your command post to my observation point. In about an hour we should be in business.”

“By the way, where the hell did you come from?”

“Last night, I took up a firing position at a designated map reference. In the morning, Russian infantry appeared, attacking my forward observation station. The guys held them up with our machineguns long enough to

hitch up and leave in a gallop. We were lost for a while, but eventually found a good logging road and followed it to the main drag. I intended to go back all the way to our staging area.”

“Thank you, Les. Now you have some infantry around. I grant you we are not many, but better than nothing.”

They shook hands; Bartos rode back to the battery.

The cannons started going up the hill and soon disappeared from sight.

There was still no sound of a major engagement up front. Later, Mark permitted his men to eat their combat rations, but did not allow the building of any fires. The silence was deadly. Perhaps the most unnerving part of war in the infantry is the quiet anticipation. Mark’s heart was beating at double the normal rate. He knew that if the truck did not come, then the Russians would wipe out his blocking force easily, artillery included.

Shortly after twelve thirty, two large trucks appeared, disgorging six light machineguns, all types of ammunition, food, and medical supplies. The driver reported leaving the artillery ammo with the gunners and handed a note to Mark from Bartos, asking for more artillery ammunition, in case they had to fight an extended engagement. Mark signed the receipts with a sigh of relief, scribbled a note to Captain Hoffer requesting more ammo for the 10.5 and the 15 cm cannons.

At twelve forty five, a few minutes after the truck left, a tremendous mortar barrage hit the vicinity of the brook, approximately three fourths of a mile from the Task Force. That was past the second platoon’s roadblock, but it did not reach Mark’s position.

When the barrage began, Pataky remarked, “Obviously, Ivan thought we set up at the brook.”

“Maybe,” Mark replied, “but it is also possible we are out of range for the moment.”

Unexpectedly, the big guns of Gara fired five rounds rapidly.

The battle noise stopped as suddenly as it started.

Under normal circumstances, an infantry commander should have sent out a patrol, but with the limited manpower reserves, Mark could not risk it. By two o'clock, a few tired infantrymen appeared on the road. Some of them were walking wounded, but all had their rifles. They were the remnants of the first platoon. The newcomers reported at least a battalion of infantry attacking their roadblock supported by two light tanks. They held for twenty minutes; then those who could, ran all the way to the second platoon's trenches. They thought Ivan either killed or captured Captain Toth.

When the barrage on the brook began, they were in the process of moving to the position of Mark's platoon, but the Russian mortars caught them in the open. That is where they lost Ensign Fekete. What happened to the second platoon, they did not know.

“Sergeant Pataky, incorporate these guys into our platoon,” Mark ordered.

“Yes, sir,” Pataky roared. He took the men to the chapel.

Mark assumed Bartos had been just getting into the act before the Soviet tanks attacked the second platoon. On the phone, Bartos confirmed Gara's big guns indeed firing at Russian light tanks attacking Kulich's trenches. Because of the artillery fire, the Russians withdrew. At three o'clock, the mortar barrage resumed, but this time, it was farther up ahead, hitting the second platoon's position. Mark trotted up the hill to see Bartos.

The artillery observation post had a good view of the road, past the top of the rise to the southeast. Through

the powerful glasses of the artillerists, the position of the second platoon was clearly visible. When the Russians lifted the barrage, their infantry fell upon the defensive perimeter. The roadblock held with difficulty.

“Come on, Frank,” Mark said rather to himself than to the commander of the second platoon, “withdraw! Join me, here we could hold them!”

“Obviously, he has more guts than brains,” Bartos remarked. “He should withdraw while he can.”

At four o’clock, the barrage resumed and the Russian infantry started pouring down the hill in the direction of the second platoon.

“The tanks are trying to outflank them,” Bartos stated flatly, and began issuing his instructions.

The coordinated fire of the six guns hit the tanks on the flanking path. It was like a huge single blast, effectively halting their advance. Next, Bartos turned his attention to the Russian infantry attacking the Second Platoon. The artillerists hit Ivan with fragmentation shots. Regardless, the Russians appeared to break into the trenches of the second platoon, and Mark assumed they were involved in heavy hand-to-hand fighting. A few minutes after the artillery stopped firing, the Russian infantry retreated. The cannons started pursuing them with fragmentation shots.

The mortar barrage started on the roadblock of the Second Platoon at five thirty, but the Russian infantry did not move until six o’clock. By this time, the first survivors appeared. It was twenty of them. They were coming at a forced march towards Mark’s lines. The platoon commander, Ensign Frank Kulich, carrying a Russian submachine gun, was bringing up the rear.

They were tired, but after receiving some food, water, and half an hour rest, Kulich started his gang digging their own firing steps on the road.

At the Task Force Command Post in the cellar of the chapel, the officers discussed their plans. One squad from the second platoon relieved Pataky's unit. It moved up the hill to provide close cover for the artillery, in case the Russians managed to outflank them or break through.

Even though Mark now had some meager manpower reserves stationed near the command post, the tactical situation did not change much since the departure of the truck delivering the ammo. At about seven o'clock, Bartos reported on the phone, "I see Russian tanks with infantry southwest of our position. They are coming this way. I suggest attacking them when they enter in the most effective range of our guns."

"Affirmative," Mark replied. He turned to Pataky. "Steve, shift three machineguns to cover the road and alert the reserve squad."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant replied.

The Task Force settled down to wait.

Suddenly, heavy firing started around the Soviet T-34 tanks, and the field telephone came alive again.

"German Tiger tanks attacked the Russians from the west," Bartos reported. "It seems like a surprise assault, catching Ivan from the side. It is going to be a bloodbath; the T-34 is the most vulnerable from the sides."

"Thanks, Les," Mark replied.

He did not need the powerful glasses of the artillerymen. One could see with the naked eye what was going on. Several tanks caught fire, and thick black smoke rose against the blue summer skies.

"Obviously, Bartos cannot enter the fight with his cannons from that distance because the tanks are mixing it up, firing at each other from close range," Pataky concluded.

“You’re right, but it irks me that, from our position, it is impossible to figure out who was whom and which force had the upper hand. It is a chaotic situation,” Mark replied.

By eight o’clock, as the light started fading, the Germans pushed the Russians back across the road and the Tigers moved off into the woods.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” the voice of Bartos came through the phone. “Stand up and have a look!”

Mark walked onto the road and looked to the south. A number of soldiers appeared on the road. It was like a group of tourists walking, sometimes running toward the roadblock from the southwest. It was the strangest sight.

Most of them were unarmed, some were Russians, but most Hungarians marching or running without giving a thought to each other. All were concerned about one thing: reaching a spot where nobody was shooting at them. “I’ll be a monkey’s uncle,” Pataky remarked.

Suddenly, from the east, mortar fire started hitting Mark’s position. It was obviously a barrage preparatory to an infantry attack.

Bartos reported Russian infantry coming over the hill. Although he hit them with fragmentation shots, they did not slow much. The Russians reached the brook when they lifted the mortar barrage.

“It is about two companies,” Mark told Pataky. “I think we can hold them up easily. Just wait until they get to about three hundred feet from our position, and then open up with everything we’ve got.”

“Will do,” the sergeant replied. He went down the line to issue the orders.

When the machineguns began firing, the advancing infantry slowed, and some of the soldiers started to withdraw. At this moment, a hitherto unknown machine-gunner opened up on the faltering enemy infantry.

As he came back from the line, Pataky remarked, "Those are not German guns but Russians!"

Obviously, the fire came from behind enemy lines. Some of the Russian soldiers stopped running, picked up a weapon from one of their fallen comrades, and continued the attack. The machinegun behind them ceased firing.

"I pity the poor sods," Mark said. However, he still ordered his men to keep firing.

The Soviet infantry again charged into the interlocking field of fire of the Oedenburgers' machineguns. They did not have a chance. Within twenty minutes, the defenders wiped out two companies of Russian infantry with very few losses.

Sergeant Vitek came up to the command post and reported. "Only two Russians reached our position, and when they got over the ramparts, threw their rifles to the ground, raising their hands in surrender."

"Now we have a couple of prisoners," Mark mused.

"We are going to have a few more," Pataky said. He pointed to the southwest.

The first of the runners started entering the roadblock area. It took an extraordinary effort by Mark's non-coms to sort them out.

The sun was setting when Pataky came back to report. "Fifty Russians have surrendered. Besides, about sixty Hungarians were among the runners arriving from the 37<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment."

"Any of them armed?" Mark asked.

"Twenty soldiers still have their Hungarian made rifles and a few rounds of ammo," the sergeant said.

"These are not much use since the rearmament. We have all German equipment, and no ammunition for Hungarian made weapons."

"What are we going to do with them?" Pataky asked.

“I want to get rid of the prisoners and the wounded,” Mark declared. “Therefore, tell Sergeant Szabo to prepare stretchers and have the prisoners carry the more seriously wounded. Find a sane noncom from the 37<sup>th</sup> to take command of his men armed with Hungarian weapons and send them off to Otinja.”

He took a notepad and issued a written order to the commander of the group to head for the relative safety of Otinja.

Mark and his men watched the column slowly disappearing in the fading light. At the same time, the forty unarmed soldiers started digging, firing steps, and reinforcing the line.

Five veteran German noncoms also arrived with the withdrawing force from the 182<sup>nd</sup> German Infantry Division.

They reported to Mark. “Sir, our job was to hand over the trenches and fortifications to the Hungarian 37<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment,” the senior sergeant, a big grizzled fellow wearing the ribbon of a second class Iron Cross said.

“What happened?” Mark asked.

“We never completed the task because the Russians attacked smack in the middle of the handover and chased the Hungarians out of our trenches,” the German said.

“Where is the 37<sup>th</sup> now?” Mark asked.

“We thought they finally gathered themselves, somehow stopping the advancing Russians. I cannot pinpoint the Hungarian positions, for you, sir, but we have a general idea where they are.”

The man stepped toward Mark, and on his map, he showed the location where the Hungarians should be.

“I see. Thank you, Sergeant,” Mark said. Based on the German’s description, he thought the right flank of his Task Force might not be fully exposed.

The Germans had their Schmeissers and were in good spirits.

“How did this mixed run start?” Mark asked the German.

“I’ve never seen anything like it, sir. Apparently, some of these guys are recruits from the 37<sup>th</sup>,” he said. “These young soldiers had very little training, have never seen combat, and the mere sight of the T-34s unnerved them. They threw away their weapons and started running.”

“Where did the Russian runners come from?”

“The unexpected counterattack by our panzers frightened the Russian infantry accompanying the T-34s. At the sight of the Tigers, these kids started retreating. The green-capped NKVD guys opened fire on them, and the poor bastards lost it completely. They simply started running in any direction, away from the bullets.”

“Thank you, Sergeant,” Mark said. “Go to the chapel; Sergeant Szabo will give you food and water. Have a little rest and we will talk again.”

Two unarmed men wearing torn uniforms with yellow armbands were among the runners. Obviously, they were Jewish members of a labor battalion. Where they came from, nobody knew. Kulich quoting some obscure orders wanted to shoot the Jews immediately, but Mark nixed the idea.

“Nobody is going to be shot without a proper court martial while I’m in command,” he stated unequivocally. “Sergeant Vitek, take charge of these men.”

After double-checking the defenses, Mark handed over command of the Task Force to Les Bartos. Riding Sergeant Schultz’s motorbike, he set out to find the commander of the German tanks. It was risky and not an easy task. The Tigers stopped about half a mile south of the road and bivouacked for the night.

Mark eventually found their commander, a young captain, Werner von Cloten. He showed him the written order of General Winters. The captain did not argue, saluted, and accepted becoming part of the Task Force, although he insisted on having his orders in writing.

With a single flashlight providing the illumination, Mark wrote out the orders. The tanks were to withdraw onto the north side of the road about a thousand feet back. On the south side of the road, they established three fire zones. If Russian armor or infantry entered any of those zones, von Cloten was supposed to report on the radio, and the Task Force's artillery would hit the attackers. In the nearer zones, the lighter 10.5 caliber guns would provide support, but the farthest zone was in the optimal range of Gara's big guns only.

They worked out the radio signals, von Cloten acquiring the call sign of right-guard. To cover all eventualities, they established backup flare signals. Mark returned to the roadblock, promising to send some infantry support for the tanks, since the number of von Cloten's panzer grenadiers dwindled to about ten.

Upon his return, Mark found the forty Hungarian infantrymen of the 37<sup>th</sup> rearmed with Russian rifles and submachine guns, and had plenty of ammunition. "How did you do it?" he asked Steve Pataky.

"I sent out patrols to keep the Russians honest and had some of the unarmed men accompany them, with orders to liberate some weapons and ammunition pouches from the dead. Now we have some more rearmed infantry."

"Great job, Steve."

"Strangely, no more than one third of the dead Russians had weapons, although all of them had full ammunition pouches. Apparently, when the attack started, the guys with the rifles were leading it. The ones following

them were supposed to pick up the guns of their fallen comrades,” Pataky said. “The German master sergeant confirmed it. He told me that it was common tactics of the Soviet infantry.”

“Evidently, the Russians expect only a third of their men to reach the enemy lines.”

“According to the Germans, Ivan doesn’t mind losing a complete battalion. Green-capped NKVD men with submachine guns or machineguns are backing each unit. If the attack falters or the soldiers retreat, the green-caps open fire. The Russian infantry has no chance; the soldiers must go forward, win, die, or surrender. If they don’t reach their target, the High Command just crosses the unit off the roster.”

“It is a waste of good infantry,” Mark concluded.

As the German tanks drafted into the Task Force needed infantry screen, Mark detached Sergeant Szabo from his squad, giving him twenty of the freshly rearmed soldiers and two German noncoms, sending them to Captain von Cloten. The little group disappeared in the dark, as rain was beginning to fall.

Mark withdrew to his command post in the cellar of the little chapel feeling like a division commander. He had tanks and artillery; all he needed was a couple of light bomber aircraft. In other words, he had almost everything needed to hold the Russian advance. The armor commanded by von Cloten was in a safe position to repel any attacks and had full artillery support. There was nothing to worry about on the right flank as long as the 37<sup>th</sup> farther to the southwest held. The left was regrettably exposed. He sent two of the German noncoms to organize patrols into the bush to warn him if Ivan tried flanking. In that case, he could get a couple of Tigers from von Cloten to restore the status quo on the left wing.

Around nine o'clock, the rain started coming down heavily. The soldiers improvised roofs over their heads using their rain blankets, but it did not help much. The foxholes and the slit trenches were slowly filling with water. In most places, the soldiers stood in water up to their ankles. The infantrymen on the firing steps were a little better off because their positions drained into the ditch of the road. Regardless, it was impossible to keep dry.

About ten o'clock, on the orders of Ensign Kulich, Sergeant Vitek escorted the two Jewish prisoners into the command post. Obviously, the Ensign wanted to shoot them sooner than later. In the light of a single candle, Mark looked at the two middle-aged men standing at attention, awaiting the judgment of the Task Force commander. Evidently, they had both seen better days.

"Thank you, Sergeant, you may leave," Mark ordered.

Vitek saluted and left.

"I'm afraid I cannot offer you anything to drink," Mark said, "but you're free to sit down and smoke if you have the makings. I do not carry cigarettes."

The two men practically collapsed on the floor.

"My name is Mark Kende," he introduced himself. "Who are you?"

"I'm doctor Alfred Weiss, and he is Peter Koves."

"What kind of a doctor are you, Alfred?"

The informal American colloquialism shocked Weiss. "I'm an ear, nose, and throat specialist," he managed to reply.

"Great! I'm sure you know more about surgery than my medics do. Have something to eat and rest. From now on, you're the chief medical officer of the Task Force."

"But--"

"No ifs, ands, or buts, doc. I don't give a shit whether you're a Jew or a Cannibal. You're the guy who could

provide the best care to the wounded. Whether you like it or not, you're drafted, period." Mark called Vitek.

The sergeant materialized.

"Yes, sir."

"This is Doctor Weiss, and his assistant Mr. Koves. The doc is going to be our chief medical officer, and Koves is going to keep his records. Introduce them to the medics. Dismissed."

The presence of a fully qualified doctor was a relief, as Mark expected heavy casualties in the next couple of days with little chance of evacuation. Therefore, he ordered to convert a part of the cellar in the chapel into a field hospital, and directed Doctor Weiss to set up shop there.

As soon as Vitek left with the two men, Kulich came charging into the command post.

"Marcus, this is impossible. You should have shot those stinking Jewish deserters, not give them food and army jackets without the yellow armband. You're going to be in big trouble."

"Are you going to report me, Frank?"

"I'm sorry, but I have to."

"In that case, Ensign," Mark said in a hardening official tone, "I expect a copy of your report by the morning. You may submit it at your convenience. Dismissed."

Kulich was surprised at Mark's uncharacteristically militaristic, forceful manner.

"But, Marcus--"

"I said, you're dismissed, Ensign!"

Kulich saluted and left the command post.

## Chapter Fourteen

Although the Russians did not try anything in the dark, the night was miserable. The soldiers huddled under the rain blankets, occasionally stuck their head out, and fired a star shell, just to see what was going on. The morning brought no relief. It was dull and gray, as the rain kept pouring at the intersection of the Otinja road, reducing visibility to about a hundred yards.

Mark checked the defensive positions along the lines.

“The visibility is bad, ideal for a sneak infantry attack,” he told Pataky.

“You’re right. It is quiet all the way down to the brook. We could not detect any movement.”

“Whatever is happening beyond the brook is anybody’s guess because even Bartos’ powerful glasses cannot penetrate the rain and the haze,” Mark suggested.

“We shall see what Ivan does,” Pataky said.

Suddenly, there was shouting, hurrahs, and without the preparatory mortar barrage, the Russian infantry began to pour out of the bush around the brook. There was no time for the artillery to intervene. Through his glasses, Mark spotted the green-capped NKVD gunners.

“Let me have your rifle for a moment,” Mark said to a soldier standing on the firing step next to him. He adjusted the sight of the weapon, took aim, and fired. One of the green caps fell, hit in the head. The dead man’s ammo feeder looked surprised, but he got the next bullet from Mark’s rifle.

As soon as the enemy entered into the killing zone of the Oedenburgers’ machineguns, the attack faltered. When the second green-cap opened fire on the retreating Russian troops, Mark located the guy, shooting the gunner through the head.

“That should fix them,” he remarked.

After the elimination of the green-capped NKVD machine-gunners, the attack collapsed, and the Russians streamed back to the safety of the bush by the brook. However, there was another problem. They could not go back farther because the rain-swollen brook washed out the bridge, and the water level was rising. As the fog was lifting, they were at the mercy of the Hungarian artillery and the marksmen of the infantry.

A heavy mortar barrage shook the roadblock, suppressing the sense of victory. It did not last long. The hurrahs of the charging infantry replaced the cracks of the mortars.

Although there were no green-capped gunners visible at their backs, the Russian charge came dangerously close to breaking the thinly held lines. Actually, a few Russians got into the trenches, and they were not going to surrender.

Mark grabbed a long barreled Russian rifle with the bayonet and led the counterattack of the last of his reserves. For a microsecond, his whole life flashed through his mind: from the dead eyes of the Philippine smuggler behind the machinegun, through the battered face of Marie to the dead chetniks on the bottom of the irrigation channel. However, when he got to the ramparts, his training took over completely and his actions went on automatic. The charge of the reserve force threw the attackers back.

When his mind returned to normal, Mark was leaning on his rifle. The smell of the battle hung over the roadblock. It was cordite mixed with the smell of rain, sweat, and excreta. His bayonet was bloody, the stock of the rifle cracked, but he did not remember stabbing anybody. *Sweet God, I'm becoming a killing machine!*

For the time being, the roadblock held, although the victory was costly. The wounded were lying in the mud groaning or asking for help; the medics were hard pressed to carry them to the field hospital where the doctor tried to keep up with the flood of wounded. It was a job of Herculean proportions.

To see the tangled mass of dead bodies was a strange sensation. The Russian corpses did not bother Mark, but the lifeless bodies of his own men staring into nothing were unnerving. Ten minutes earlier they were alive, breathing, talking, and planning for their future. Death came suddenly to them.

Staring at the battlefield, Mark noticed a few Russians staggering, limping, and crawling toward the brook. Wiping his bayonet with a rag, Pataky asked, "Why don't they wait for the medics?"

"Because Ivan does not send medics to the field," remarked one of the German noncoms. "We used to treat more injured Russians than the Medical Corps of the Red Army."

"That is inhuman," Pataky remarked. "How can they expect to keep the morale of their troops up?"

"They don't need morale. The Army of the Ukraine operates on fear. It consists of poorly trained conscripts, always hungry, but equipped with plenty of ammo, and excellent

submachine guns. The NKVD is in control, and they execute a few people every day just to keep the rest sufficiently terrorized," the German explained.

"Genghis Khan treated his warriors much better than the Red Army looks after their soldiers," Mark said.

After the final count, Mark realized his defenders had lost almost a third of the force, dead or wounded. The enemy, on the other hand, had to scratch another battalion off their roster.

In the afternoon, Bartos arranged for a couple of wagons to take the most seriously wounded back to Otinja. Next morning, the radio came alive in the command post.

“This is right-guard calling lifeguard station, over,” von Cloten’s voice came.

“This is lifeguard station receiving you five by five, over,” Mark replied. He was the only one in the command post who spoke German.

“We have visitors in zone one, over.”

“Do you need assistance? Over.”

“Yes, there are quite a few of them. My grenadiers report infantry movement in zone one and two. Over.”

“Can you give us some map references? Over.”

“Affirmative,” von Cloten said. He rattled off the numbers.

Following the conversation, Mark cranked the field telephone to the artillery observation station giving Bartos the coordinates and the order to fire five rounds of fragmentation shots. In a few minutes, Gara’s big guns and the smaller 10.5 cm cannons opened fire.

After the third salvo, the radio came alive again. “This is right-guard to lifeguard station, over.”

“Yeah, this is lifeguard station. What can I do for you? Over.”

“Cease firing, Ivan is running for cover. May I counterattack? Over.”

“Negative, right-guard, negative; stay under cover. We are not going to take Moscow this time; we just want Ivan stopped. Over.”

“What a shame,” von Cloten remarked. “Over and out.”

The accuracy of the artillery fire was amazing. Although Bartos could not see the targets in the heavy rain, his guns somehow found their targets.

In the afternoon, there was an artillery attack on von Cloten's position, but it did not damage any of the panzers. Their motorcycle with the sidecar hauled in five wounded to keep Doctor Weiss busy, but he and his friend had disappeared.

"You should have shot them, Marcus," Kulich remarked.

"Some of the wounded would disagree with you. Besides, in their place, I'd prefer the POW camp to the labor battalion."

Just before dark, there was another mortar barrage on the roadblock, but the infantry attack did not materialize. The flooded brook held the Russian forces in check.

On the third day, in the short life of Mark's Composite Task Force, warm sunlight welcomed the tired troops. Ammunition was getting short, but there was no crisis yet. Mark attempted contacting General Winters on the radio, but without success. Around ten o'clock, Bartos' guns started firing when tanks appeared on the hill on the other side of the brook. The Russians replied with a murderous mortar barrage.

Von Cloten reported tanks in zone one, and Gara's big guns opened fire. Bartos was directing the artillery like a conductor managing the orchestra in the La Scala. Soon the Russian cannons got into the act and a regular artillery duel ensued.

Around noon, Gara reported being out of ammunition and requested permission to withdraw. Mark had no choice but to let him go. However, he ordered him to look up General Winters and tell him that the roadblock urgently needed further support, ammunition, tanks, artillery, and troops.

At the same time, from fire zone ten, T-34 tanks appeared and fell on von Cloten's Tigers. A fluid battle ensued. The Germans were faster and far better trained.

However, advantage in quality does not offset overwhelming quantitative odds. Von Cloten held for a while, but after losing two panzers, he disengaged and withdrew in the direction of the roadblock. Surprisingly, the Russians did not advance through the gap they inadvertently opened. Evidently, they smelled a trap. The enemy was content with holding its position at the road and settling down to wait for the German counterattack.

Parallel to the battle of the panzers, the Russian infantry attacked again, this time in battalion strength. The 10.5 cm cannons delivered their lethal fragmentation shots to about three hundred feet from the roadblock. By five o'clock, the Oedenburgers threw the attackers back again, but the casualties were mounting and the ammunition dwindling. One hour later, Mark's radio came alive in German. "*Mercedes* calling *lifeguard station*, do you read? Over."

"This is *lifeguard station*," Mark intoned. "Over."

"Hoffer reporting: *Zeppelin*, I repeat *Zeppelin. Mercedes* out."

The radio went dead.

Pataky also heard the message; his German was good enough to comprehend.

"It is about time," Mark said. He smiled with relief. "Although we could have held up another attack, it is better this way."

"How are we going to do it?"

"I'll send Sergeant Schultz to bring Captain von Cloten in for a quick conference. We shall see if we could scare Ivan into letting us go."

"That will be quite an achievement," Pataky said.

Mark's officers met at Bartos' observation post to work out plans to abandon their current position. The timing had to be right. The front was quiet, the Russians

were slowly reorganizing, and nobody expected them to attack.

“I hope they stay put,” Mark said. He issued his orders.

Most of the withdrawal took place during the night. Mark stayed behind with a squad making lots of noise a couple of hours before sunrise. Bartos started a barrage on the first and the second fire zones, while von Cloten’s tanks, first moving into the gap, withdrew to the Otinja road. Coming near the roadblock, the panzers drove about a mile to the west and took up defensive positions on both sides of the road. At sunrise, Bartos lifted the barrage, hitched up his guns, and headed for the Brown Line.

Mark’s rearguard marched to the first panzer and withdrew under von Cloten’s protection in the direction of Otinja. Everything went like clockwork because of the fierce artillery barrage. The Russians thought the Germans would counterattack through the gap, and so they withdrew all their infantry from the brook to back their tanks facing von Cloten. The noise, made by the panzers while concentrating at the intersection, completely confused the Russians. They thought the counterattack might come from the Otinja road, and they were feverishly relocating some of their forces. The Composite Task Force made it to Otinja.

Mark leaned against one of the gun carriages, chatting with Bartos when Pataky came to report. The sergeant was freshly shaven, his uniform clean, and almost pressed. He calmly reported, “We lost sixty men, twenty-two dead, and thirty-eight wounded. I do not have the losses from the artillery or the panzers, but the grenadiers we loaned them are included.”

“Not bad,” Bartos remarked.

“Our platoon lost only three soldiers, much less than the others,” Pataky continued.

“This further supports the theory once put forward by my mentor, Sergeant Ross of the US Marines. The best trained soldiers are most likely to survive.”

“This is why we rode them so hard,” Pataky said.

Mark was heartbroken to lose men in combat, but he did not have time to feel sorry for himself. Orders came for him to report at the battalion. He handed over command of the Task Force to Bartos. Mark got into the sidecar of Sergeant Schultz’s motorcycle, and they negotiated the muddy roads as they drove to the west.

Major Kiss immediately promoted Mark to Company Commander, even though the remnants of Able Company were not much more than perhaps a strong platoon.

“Believe it or not, we have some replacements coming,” the major said. “You’ll have first choice.”

“Thank you.”

While he was awaiting orders at the battalion’s command post, a messenger appeared with a letter from General Winters ordering Lieutenant Kende to report to his office immediately.

“Obviously, he wants to thank you,” Kiss remarked. “Go, but hurry back.”

The Army Group Headquarters were about forty miles to the rear of the Brown Line in Kalus; the ride in the sidecar of Schultz’s motorcycle was rather uncomfortable. As Mark entered the headquarters, he could not help counting the guards at the entrance and the messengers in the corridors.

“If I had all these guys at the roadblock,” he said to Schultz, “I’d be still holding; we could even advance.”

He entered the secretariat; several officers were shuffling papers and filing the reports. Stepping up to the

first officer, Mark saluted, and said, "Lieutenant Kende reporting as ordered, sir. Generaloberst Winters is expecting me."

"Ah, the lieutenant who commanded a division," the German said. "Let me shake your hand, sir. We were amazed to hear of your defense of the intersection. Please, sit down. The general will see you presently."

"Thank you, sir," Mark replied. He collapsed onto a wooden office chair. It was far more comfortable than the sidecar of Sergeant Schultz's motorcycle. In a few minutes, a captain came from the office of the general, stepped up to Mark and said, "This way, Lieutenant, the general will see you now."

Mark followed him into the large but otherwise Spartan office of the general. Winters was not alone; a couple of colonels and a brigadier were standing around him studying the large map on the wall. As Mark entered, the general stopped the briefing and turned around, "Gentlemen, this is Lieutenant Kende. This young man is my favorite soldier. I gave him an impossible order, and he came through with flying colors. Although he is only a lieutenant, he proved that he would make an excellent general."

Mark blushed.

"Anyway, I want him to tell you how he held the roadblock, and in the end, how he organized the withdrawal of his forces, making Ivan expect a counterattack. Due to his ruse, the Russians held back the T-34s, and retreated to a more defensible position still expecting our counterattack. The floor is yours, Lieutenant."

Although Mark was nervous, he recounted the events.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Winters said, smiling. "Of course, he wasn't completely honest with you. He did not tell you about leading a bayonet charge personally when

the Russian infantry broke into their trenches. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why didn't you mention it?"

"I was supposed to acquaint you with the major tactical events, sir. I thought the bayonet charge was a minor, irrelevant detail. If you were in my place, sir, I'm sure you would have led the charge personally to make sure of its success."

"You may be right. Nevertheless, I have a problem; I spoke to your commander, and he categorically told me about their policy. The Hungarian Army does not decorate officers for their part in rearguard action. That is stupid; you deserve a decoration."

He took off his own Knight's Cross and hung it on Mark's neck. "Wear it with honor, Lieutenant."

Mark was lost for words at first, but he quickly recovered. "Although I'm grateful for the honor, sir, I cannot accept the decoration unless my officers and men would receive the appropriate recognition of their courage and perseverance."

"Of course," the general said. Obviously, the chance of showing up the iron-headed Hungarian Army Corps Commander delighted him. "Give the list of your officers and men to Colonel Hohenwald. He will make sure your guys get their gongs. Bring all of them here tomorrow morning by 0900 hours and I'll personally pin the medals on them. Congratulations, Lieutenant, you may go."

Mark saluted and marched out of the office, with Colonel Hohenwald following.

It was hard to come up with the full list of the soldiers he wanted to decorate. In the end, Bartos, Kulich, Pataky, and von Cloten got first class, Gara, Szabo, Vitek and a couple of the German noncoms second class, and four enlisted men third class Iron Crosses.

Mark's winning a Knight's Cross created quite a stir at the 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. Every high-ranking officer thought they should have had a German decoration, but since von Winters took command of the Army Group, one had to earn the Iron Crosses in the front lines. Most officers envied Mark, calling him the young reservist who hit the jackpot.

As expected, Mark took command of the remnants of the Able Company, with Kulich as exec and Steve Pataky as Company Sergeant Major. However, all of them had to go to the Army Group Headquarters, to receive their decorations.

It was July 17<sup>th</sup>, nine o'clock in the morning, when General Winters personally decorated the men upon Mark's recommendation. After the ceremonies, they had a meal and a glass of French champagne with the general. Afterwards, riding an armored personnel carrier, they started back to their staging area. However, the engine of their vehicle blew the head gasket. Marooned, they had to spend the night in a stable and next day walk nearly fifteen miles to their base.

## Chapter Fifteen

During Mark's absence, the Hungarian Army Corps Commander ordered the 307<sup>th</sup> to relieve a German Infantry Division holding the Prinz Eugen Line since a few weeks. Apparently, he rushed the takeover, and by the time Mark reached the Regimental Headquarters, he found only a sleepy adjutant packing up the office.

"The First Battalion, including your company under a temporary commander, already left to the Jedlina forest along the Zukow-Tlumaldzik highway, to provide cover for the artillery," the man said. "You could hitch a ride with the artillerists. They are still here."

Checking the map, Mark found the place not too far from their roadblock on the Otinja road. As Bartos and his battery were going to the Jedlina forest as well, he looked them up, finding the lieutenant nursing a sore foot.

"I'm not used to walking that much," the artillerist complained. "What can I do for you?"

"As you're going to the Jedlina forest, can we hitch a ride with you?"

"Sure, you can come with us. We are leaving at sunrise tomorrow. Since you're not too many, we can find you a seat on the gun carriages or on the wagons. It beats walking anytime. If you can ride, I can even give you a horse."

In the end, Mark was riding a spare horse of the artillerists, and the rest of the infantry team traveled in relative comfort. They hardly left the village when Pataky noticed something large hanging on a tree. Checking the object, he realized it was a dark brown parachute used to drop supplies and equipment. The box, although empty, still hung on the chute.

“The brown silk would make elegant cravats,” Bartos remarked.

It took only a few minutes to cut the chute up, and issue one cravat to each officer and noncom of the former Composite Task Force. The cravat became an identifying mark of the team.

Mark was apprehensive about the new assignment and mentioned his misgivings to Bartos. “We just retreated from the same area under the shadow of heavy Russian troop concentration. General Winters told me about the Soviet withdrawal and regrouping, expecting a counterattack. I’m sure that Ivan will not wait long before launching the next major offensive.”

“Exactly my sentiments,” the artilleryman replied.

The recently decorated infantrymen arrived with the cannons at the place where Bartos had to set up. The German battery commander whom they were relieving handed over his maps, his established observation stations, and all relevant information.

“The Russians could occupy Otinja anytime they wanted to. There was a team holding the road for awhile, but according to the rumors, they withdrew,” the German said.

“I know,” Bartos replied. “We were part of the Task Force.”

“Shit,” the German cursed, “if there is nobody holding the road, Ivan can march in, take Otinja, and we would be cut off.”

“I saw a German light infantry battalion digging in outside the town’s boundaries,” Bartos replied.

“They are gone. Hungarians were supposed to replace the German infantry north and south of my battery, but they did not show up so far.”

“Do you mean we are exposed?”

“Yeah. The situation is desperate. You may have to withdraw at a moment’s notice,” the German first lieutenant said. He drew his flask. “Heil Hitler,” he said. He took a long swig and offered it to the Hungarians.

“To the Fuehrer,” Bartos said. He too took a long swig and handed the flask to Mark.

“By the way, be careful in the forest; it is full of landmines. However, you can see the damn things from a mile away because Ivan did not do a good job covering them.”

“We’ll be careful,” Mark promised.

“Auf Wiedersehen,” the German said and ordered his artillerists to hitch up the horses to his cannons. While the German artillery rumbled to the east, Bartos set up his guns and fortified the Krauts’ observation stations. The takeover was completed.

Mark decided to look for the Oedenburger First Battalion’s command post, supposedly to the north of the battery. Although it was pouring rain, Mark, Pataky, and two soldiers started out to the north, trekking in the rain-soaked, foul smelling forest. In a couple of hours, wet to the skin, they reached the command post of the First Battalion.

“I’m glad to see you guys,” Major Kiss said. “Marcus, your company was temporarily taken over by First Lieutenant Dobos, an adjutant at division. He wanted a front line assignment to earn some battle honors.”

“Idiot,” Mark growled.

“Anyway, he has no line experience at all. Therefore, I gave him a short stretch between the Tlumaldzik Road and the River Prut to the south of here. He should also cover two batteries, the 7/3 and 7/4. I assume he is in position now. As far as I know, there are not too many Russians in his sector.”

“The batteries commanded by Bartos and Gara, are already in place, but my company has not arrived so far.”

“As soon as you find them, tell Dobos to come here, as he is going to be my battalion exec. Tell him to hurry, will you?”

“Yes, sir. I’m going back to the 7/3 battery and let them know you’re here, then I shall immediately set out to find my gang. I’m not happy having them in the hands of rear echelon glory hunters.”

“Watch your language, Marcus. His father is a three star general,” the Battalion Commander said sharply.

“May I go, sir?”

“Good luck, Lieutenant. By the way, could you send up the battery commanders?”

“I will, sir.”

“You’re dismissed.”

They started out toward the artillery’s position, but did not get too far when they met Bartos and his corporal. The two artillerists got soaked to the waist when they walked into a dry riverbed, which suddenly flooded, trapping them. Neither of them was very happy.

By the time they reached the Battery’s command post, it was getting dark, but Mark decided to make a couple of patrol sweeps to the south to contact his company.

“We are going to form into two teams,” he started. “I’m taking Steve and two enlisted men, striking out south-southeast. Kulich, you take Sergeant Vitek with the rest to search south-southwest of the artillery position.”

“When are we supposed to come back?” Kulich asked.

“After you find Able Company.”

“We might end up spending the night in the forest,” the ensign said. He picked up his Russian submachine gun and signaled his men to follow him.

No more than thirty minutes out, Mark's team encountered an enemy patrol. As they were not strong enough to confront the Russians, they laid low while Ivan passed their position, and then followed them. The enemy patrol approached one of the advanced artillery posts manned by Bartos' men, but the observers saw the Russians and attacked with their light machineguns. When Mark's team fell upon the enemy from the rear, the Russians ran, leaving behind three dead and two wounded.

The medic at the observation station took care of the wounded Russians; thus, the prisoners became very talkative, especially after receiving some food and cigarettes.

"We are from a depleted, demoralized company of Ukrainian infantry stuck between you and the river," one of the prisoners said. He seemed to be an educated person.

"Where are your headquarters?" Mark asked, practicing his shaky Russian.

"It is on a farm near Tlumaldzik. We have one company, but there is very little food," the Russian replied. Obviously, the man could not supply any information to help Mark locate his lost company.

As it was pitch dark and raining heavily, the small infantry contingent remained at the artillerists' observation station for the night. In the morning, Mark returned to the command post and told Bartos what was happening.

"Although we managed to lay a telephone line to Kiss' command post, I'm not happy," Les Bartos said. "On the north all is as well as it could be. However, on the south your company is not there. Ivan could walk right up to the goddamned cannons."

“I don’t know where in hell is Dobos with my guys,” Mark replied. “They should be here. I’m going to send two teams out to look for them.”

“Find them, Marcus, because I have nightmares about having to fight my way out of a tight spot without infantry support,” Bartos said.

“Don’t worry. I’ll take one of the teams. We’ll find them.”

Mark and his men again set out in search of Able Company. They did not find them, but noticed the almost continuous mortar fire on Jedlina forest and the incessant bombardment by the Hungarian artillery. To the north, there was heavy fighting, obviously infantry units clashing. By nightfall, Able Company was still missing.

Mark telephoned the Battalion Commander and got Kiss on the line. “There is something drastically wrong, sir. We reached the River Prut, but found no sign of Dobos.”

“You should search another day. If you did not find them, let me know. I’ll send you a platoon to cover the right flank of the artillery. Meanwhile, run a few patrols for the artillerists.”

“Yes, sir.”

During the night, several Russian patrols penetrated the vicinity of the artillery’s observation posts. Obviously, Ivan noticed certain things changing, and wanted to get a few prisoners to find out what was going on.

The rain was incessant; in the morning, Kiss called. “Marcus, my troops cannot take much more of the weather. Our losses are heavy and I do not have a platoon to spare to cover the artillery. If I did, Ivan would break through here.”

“Shit,” Mark growled. “What are we going to do?”

“Until your company shows up, you and your team should stay with the Bartos Battery, helping to control the enemy patrols roaming the area.”

The next day was no different from the rest. The intermittent Russian mortar fire did not bother Mark’s troopers. The rain was the major enemy, but the veterans took it in stride.

In the afternoon, suddenly the orders to withdraw came through. Bartos and Kiss agreed to start the withdrawal simultaneously at four o’clock in the morning, but until then, both units would stay put.

During the day, Gara’s battery withdrew due to lack of ammo, while the 7/3 provided intermittent fire support to the tired, wet troops of Major Kiss. Shortly after sunset, Bartos wanted to check with Kiss about the continuation of their fire support, but the phone line was dead.

Mark sent Kulich and three infantrymen to check the line. In an hour, they came back.

“The battalion disappeared. There is no Hungarian or German infantry anywhere, but the forest is full of Russian patrols,” the ensign reported.

Mark cursed like a trooper. Bartos was so mad that he could not find the words to swear.

“Since the bastards left us high and dry, we are going to start the withdrawal immediately,” Bartos said. “If we left it to 0400 hours, it could be too late.”

The withdrawal started immediately. Changing positions with four guns and more than a hundred horses was not easy, but the artillerymen were experts at it. They shifted positions skillfully, but after sunrise, the situation got worse. Sometimes, they got close to the enemy infantry and attacked them with fragmentation grenades. Their machineguns, which an artillery battery carries to defend their observation points, kept the Russians away

from the priceless cannons. The skirmishes continued all morning. The smell of the battle was typical, a mix of cordite, dust and horse manure.

There was no German or Hungarian infantry anywhere, but the Russians seemed to stream out of every nook and cranny like an army of ants. The partisans also got into the act, shooting at the horses hitched to the cannons. Fortunately, they were way off target. It seemed impossible to break off the engagement, but in the afternoon, the battery had some good luck at last; a rain-swollen brook washed out the road just behind the last cannon. They rested briefly for the night, but before sunrise, they started out again.

Finally, at Serebnii Maidan Mark and the artillery caught up with the withdrawing infantry units. It was a mix of Germans and Hungarians. A German colonel tried to organize a roadblock, drafting one of Bartos' guns, setting it up at the last house of the village. While the rest of the artillerymen fed and watered their horses, Russian tanks fell upon the town.

Although the artillerists destroyed three T-34's, an armor-piercing shell smashed the cannon, and opened the road for the Russian tanks.

At the sight of the attacking armor, the jittery, defeated troops bolted and started a stampede. Like a stream of ants, the soldiers of the Army of Ukraine were coming at the village from every direction. The lines of defense disappeared. German and Hungarian soldiers were streaming back toward Nadvirna about ten miles distant, with the Russians hot on their heels.

The artillery hitched up again and joined the withdrawal. Bartos' battery left the town in a gallop, but unfortunately, one of the guns rolled into the ditch. There was no chance of recovering it. Therefore, the artillerists took the firing mechanism, and with the remaining two

guns, continued their withdrawal. Mark and his team stayed with the artillerists, doing what they could. Again, a wild, running battle developed without any organization. Small groups of infantry occasionally resisted the Russians, while others threw away their weapons and ran.

Nobody cared for the wounded. If they could not walk, they stayed where they fell. Some were crying, begging for help, while others accepted the inevitable and fought to their last bullet. They knew it was the end because the Russians did not take prisoners who could not walk.

A black uniformed German SS officer fell just a few yards from Mark. A bullet or a shell fragment hit him in the thigh, and blood spurted from his wound. His face contorted in pain, but he managed to sit up. Pulling his handgun, he was taking potshots at the Russians. A few minutes later, he straightened his tie, raised his right arm, and shouted, "Heil Hitler!" and with the last bullet blew his brains out.

*I understand him, Mark thought. He knew he had no chance of survival because the Russians normally executed the captured SS officers and men without mercy.*

When he looked back at the body of the German from about a hundred yards away, he noticed a Russian infantry officer stopping at the body, standing at attention, and saluting the dead enemy. Mark could have shot the officer, but did not think it was right to kill him while he was honoring the fallen, gallant foe.

The bloodletting continued. Mark abandoned his Schmeisser because he ran out of ammo. He took a Manlicher carbine with his bayonet fixed on it. The infantrymen helped the artillerists to push their guns stuck in the mud, and covered their withdrawal. Overall, Bartos

was in command and cool as a cucumber as he managed the operation. In the later stages of the battle, Mark was behind a machinegun mounted on a horse drawn wagon. He was the rearguard, and a wounded artilleryist was his ammo feeder.

Slowly, the artillery left the chaotic melee behind, and by sunset, the remaining two guns under the protection of their own machine-gunners reached Nadvirna. A few desperate officers attempted to create a line of defense. However, the artillery units were finished, out of ammo; the arriving infantry were jittery and tired. Thus, stopping the advancing Russians was a nearly impossible task.

The town was full of withdrawing German and Hungarian units; the military police took on the Herculean task of keeping some kind of order. Slowly, a line of resistance along the north-south railway line was taking shape. It seemed they might hold the Russians for a while, as the enemy appeared to be running out of steam as well. There was a brief respite in the withdrawal.

A relatively fresh Hungarian Infantry Regiment took over the defense of the railway line, promising a breather to the tired troops of other units.

Mark found the headquarters of the division, and from a tired major, he received his orders.

“The commander of the division ordered every unit, including the artilleryists to proceed into Bistricja Valley, and up to Legion Pass on the Carpathian Mountains.”

“Are there proper roads?” Bartos asked.

“There should be, although we do not have maps,” the major replied. “On the summit, establish a line of defense. Depart at sunrise. Dismissed.”

They left the headquarters in a somber mood and bivouacked at the old market place. There was hot food and a few tents made from the rain blankets, but there

was no rest for the tired men. The Russian Air Force made sure the night was noisy.

When they got up and headed for the Bistricja Valley, Mark asked Bartos, "Do you know the elevation of the pass?"

"It should be nearly six thousand feet above sea level. This means a climb of more than three thousand feet in an uncharted area," the artilleryman replied.

As they got to the valley, they realized that the soldiers of the 307<sup>th</sup> were not alone attempting to climb the Carpathians. The men of several other units, Germans and Hungarians, flooded the valley.

As they looked at the men streaming up the mountain, Pataky remarked, "It is going to be crowded up there."

"Damn right," Mark grunted.

Armed and unarmed soldiers, mixed with artillery and noncombatants, were trekking towards the dark, foreboding peaks. The picturesque valley, leading to Legion Pass, had a deep gorge in the middle, where the fast-flowing, crystal-clear brook ran toward the Galician forests.

In the early stages of the march, all equipment, and even a couple of cannons were dragged uphill, but when the going got increasingly difficult, the soldiers started dumping their equipment into the gorge.

A unit of bakers were driving six sturdy horses, dragging a mobile field-oven, a huge barrel shaped contraption at least twenty feet long. Apparently, the fire was still going, as the bakers expected to serve fresh bread to the troops. However, as the valley narrowed and the push from the rear increased, the oven rolled into the brook and exploded, killing the three bakers.

The Russian Air Force got into the act as well. Their fighter aircraft kept machine-gunning the column of re-

treating soldiers. Some artillery units set up their machineguns in the back of a horse-drawn wagon and fired at the Russian planes. The return fire made the pilots fly higher throwing off their aim. Regardless, there were quite a few casualties, but the medics managed to look after them. However, the transportation of the wounded was not resolved, and the fate of those who could not walk remained unknown.

The valley was getting narrower. The officers had to decide which pieces of equipment to save. Mark and his men salvaged a machinegun and several boxes of ammo, while Bartos and his artillerists concentrated on saving the expensive glasses and optical instruments. The going was rough; the smell of cordite permeated the thinning air.

A burst from the machinegun of an attacking fighter aircraft hit Sergeant Szabo in the head, killing him on the spot.

“He did not have a chance to say goodbye,” Pataký said. He had tears in his eyes. Szabo was a close friend of the tough master sergeant.

The valley eventually became a narrow footpath, where the marchers had to abandon some more of their equipment. Several horses could not make it on their own; thus, the soldiers shot them, pushing the carcasses down into the gorge.

As the horse artillerymen were very much attached to their animals, they did not abandon them. They fashioned a sling around each horse with six men pulling and one pushing.

“The worst thing about this retreat is the constant pressure from the rear to move on,” Pataký complained.

“Wait till we get higher up,” Mark replied. “You’ll see some more horses, equipment, and occasionally people ending up in the bottom of the gorge.”

He was right; the narrowing path took a dreadful toll. The ever-deepening Bistricja Canyon became the resting place of many people, horses, and equipment.

In a particularly desperate moment, Mark remarked to Bartos, “How in the hell did Hannibal get his elephants across the Alps?”

“He had a longer rope, and more men pulling,” the pragmatic artilleryman replied.

When they reached the summit at Legion Pass with bursting lungs, the tired warriors started digging in and established a defensive position. It was useless because the Russians could not get at them without having to trample the mass of humanity still trying to get through the valley. Although everybody was short of food and ammo, the disorganized, defeated troops took their second wind and prepared to make a stand.

Even though it was late in July, on the top of the Carpathians the night was very cold; only the morning brought pleasant surprises. Members of labor battalions, mostly Jews, brought food and ammunition from the Hungarian side of the mountain.

The troops of the 307<sup>th</sup> tasted defeat and fear; thus, quick recovery of the demoralized men was out of the question. The idea of no sane Russian commander attempting an attack through the valley buttressed the sagging morale a little. They knew the Russians would stay on the Galician side for a while, but the partisans got into the act, relentlessly harassing the defenders of Legion Pass.

In the next few days, the ranking officer, a German colonel organized the loose infantry into a cohesive unit to defend the pass. Mark became his exec despite many officers of higher rank being available. Perhaps his Knight's Cross and his fluent German had something to do with the selection.

In the first week of August, fresh mountain-trained troops took over the defense of the pass and the battered remnants of the 307<sup>th</sup>, the 37<sup>th</sup>, a German SS infantry regiment, and a Wehrmacht armored brigade descended on the mountain to the Hungarian side.

It was impossible to establish the division's losses based on the number of people descending the mountain. Some of their units could have withdrawn toward the west joining the German armored divisions checking the Russians' advance. According to rumors, the Hungarians were still holding at Nadvirna.

As Mark and Les Bartos arrived at the first village, they found the organization breaking down again. Everybody was looking for the command post of his own unit. Pataky found a tent with the sign of the 307<sup>th</sup> Division's name on it. He directed Mark and his artillery friend to the place. Upon entering, they found a few clerks and a desk with Major Kiss sitting behind it acting as acting Divisional Commander.

"You bastard," Bartos growled quietly. Obviously, the others in the tent did not hear him. "You left us in the lurch!"

*Shit, Mark thought, Les is liable to hit the major. There will be a court martial.*

He was wrong.

"I did," the major said calmly, "and I'm very sorry. The rain defeated my troops. Someone on the line whispered that Ivan is attacking through the rain and everybody started running. They just pulled up and ran while I was out checking the defensive positions. By the time I got back to the command post, all my staff and equipment were gone."

"I apologize, sir," Bartos stammered. "I lost too many good men."

“I understand, son. In your place, I would not have watched my language either,” Kiss stated. “The division had no moral fiber. Only Kende’s company had seasoned, well-trained soldiers. However, under First Lieutenant Dobos they did not perform well.”

“Why?” Mark asked.

“Have you ever heard the saying the army’s brain is the officers’ corps and its soul are the noncoms?”

“Yes, sir.”

“With you and Kulich away, the company had no brains. Since Pataky, Vitek, and Szabo were missing, they had no soul either. How could you expect them to fight well? The rest of the battalion consisted of unwilling reservists and raw conscripts with no more than four or six weeks of training. What did you expect of them?”

“It was madness,” Bartos mused.

“The insanity of the rearmament and the army corps’ denial of timely withdrawal requests compounded the effects. I just learned about General Winters issuing the order to prepare primary defensive positions at the Nadvirna-Kamienna railway line and the secondary on the west bank of the Bistricja River. Our Corps Commander, apparently angling for a Knight’s Cross, wanted to hang on to the Prince Eugen Line.”

“I’d have given him my Knight’s Cross for the timely order to withdraw,” Mark mused.

“What are our losses?” Bartos asked, changing the subject.

“I don’t know,” Kiss replied. “Even if we count up those who came through west of us and the ones still fighting, supporting the German armor, we may end up with untenable numbers.”

“What are our orders?” Bartos asked.

“Les, you take whatever equipment you salvaged on your wagons and head for the railhead at Techoe about

twenty miles from here. Marcus, you and your men shall join the temporary Edelweiss Infantry Regiment under Colonel Wittenberg and take a different route. We shall all meet in Komarom to reorganize the division.”

“Who is in command?” Mark asked.

“I don’t know,” Kiss replied. “Right now I’m the ranking officer. The old man flew to Budapest and left me in charge. After the disgraceful performance of the division, I assume he would be removed from command.”

## Chapter Sixteen

Colonel Wittenberg had very few officers in the hodgepodge infantry regiment he commanded. Mark ended up as his exec, but also ran an outfit, consisting of three hundred men from the 307<sup>th</sup>, the Waffen SS, the Wehrmacht, and the soldiers of another Hungarian regiment. The so-called Kende Battalion, lacking both weapons and supporting structure, was a battalion in name only. The High Command ordered the Wittenberg Regiment to the Khust Railhead. As there was no other transport available, the trek began.

After two days of marching, the tired and hungry regiment arrived at the railway station, which had no rolling stock. The stationmaster told them he was not expecting any trains. He confirmed an artillery regiment, without cannons, of course, just leaving on foot in the direction of Cop.

Nevertheless, there was plenty of canned food, but no ammunition at the station. After thorough examination of the maps, the colonel decided to trek southwest to the village of Korolevo, then follow the River Tisza for about ten miles change direction to the south, aiming at Satu-Mare. He estimated it would take his tired men seven days to reach their destination. The troops loaded up with plenty of food and the march began.

The route picked by the colonel was not the best, since the trails led through the wilderness, and there were no villages on the way. Partisans on the other hand were plentiful. They regularly attacked at sunset, shooting and shouting during the night.

On one particular occasion, the frustrated Pataky took a strong patrol; after trekking in the bush for a while, managed to corner a small group of partisans.

“It was like taking candy from a baby,” he reported to Mark.

“Did you have a hard time finding them?”

“Not at all, these guys were amateurs. Can you imagine them sitting around a huge fire singing.”

“They’re fools.” Mark shook his head in disgust.

“In a brief firefight, we killed five partisans and captured one wounded. However, before I could have intervened, one of the Krauts bayoneted the unfortunate man.”

“Did you lose anybody?”

“We had two soldiers lightly wounded. One cut his finger with a pocket knife when he tried to lop off a piece of ham from the enemy’s stores.”

“Were they well supplied?”

“Their weapons were old, rusty, and unreliable. Mainly prewar equipment, but they had plenty of food.”

“I assume you ate it all on the spot.”

“I thought of you and salvaged a piece of cheese and some black bread for you. You were right though, the platoon ate up their stores in a matter of minutes,” Pataky explained.

On the seventh day of the march, the exhausted regiment reached Satu-Mare. This was the first time Mark slept in a bed since leaving Zabercze. As there was communication with Budapest, a massive reorganization of the regiment followed. They acquired a few boxcars and hooked them up to the scheduled passenger train to the capital. As it consisted of mainly Hungarians, the Kende Battalion boarded the modified train.

Two days and several air raids later, they arrived at Budapest Eastern Railway Station. It was one o’clock in the morning and nobody expected them. Following an exasperating telephone conversation with the duty officer at the garrison headquarters, the tired battalion marched

to the King Charles Armory on the far end of the city. Arriving at their destination by sunrise, the medics deloused the troops, took care of the minor ailments, and issued the soldiers with fresh, clean uniforms. They had hot food for lunch. To revitalize the exhausted men, everybody received his back pay in addition to a two-week furlough. After the leave, they had to report in Komarom, where the units would reorganize. The chance of going home and sleeping in a proper bed suddenly recharged the batteries of the tired bunch.

Mark arrived at their Buda apartment, but his mother was not there. "Mrs. Kende is in the MAC at Lake Balaton," said the maid.

"I may as well follow her," Mark replied.

Despite being very tired, he took the next train to Siofok. The old lady seemed happy to receive him when he arrived at the Royal Hungarian Yacht Club, Mrs. Pataky's small hotel. "It is a pleasure to see you, Lieutenant Kende. Steve arrived this afternoon and went to bed. He said I should not wake him unless a Russian tank comes to the garden gate. Do you want to talk to him?"

"Don't wake him, Mrs. Pataky. In fact, I'm going to bed too. You should wake me only if Steve couldn't handle the Russian tank alone," Mark said, then followed his Master Sergeant in going to bed.

Mark slept for sixteen hours. When he woke up, he had a huge breakfast in the company of Steve Pataky. The sergeant went to bed again, but Mark walked to the MAC and surprised his mother. She was very happy to see him, but shocked by the way her son looked. The scale revealed Mark losing more than twenty pounds.

"Marcus, you need a wife," she declared, "someone who would feed you properly and look after you. I won't be able to do it much longer."

"Why? Are you getting married?"

“How did you know?”

“A little bird in the Carpathian Mountains told me. Actually, I noticed your new diamond ring. Who is the fortunate man?”

“I decided I had enough of soldiers. They go off to fight their battles, and like poor Francis Pesthy, they may never come back. As I do not want my husband to die on me again, I picked a guy younger than I am. He is an ophthalmic surgeon, a talented researcher and already a professor.”

“Congratulations, I hope you’ll be very happy,” Mark said sincerely.

“I hope so.”

“By the way, do you know what happened to Uncle Francis?” Mark asked abruptly.

“We have no idea, the army reported him missing in action.”

“How is Aunt Gabby taking it?”

“She is hit hard, but Judy is a tower of strength.” His mother sighed. “She spends every minute with her.”

“I must see them,” Mark said.

“Perhaps you should consider...”

“Stop it, Mother,” Mark insisted, “please. This would not be the best time to propose to Judy. What do you think Aunt Gabby would say if Judy wanted to marry a soldier? She would say one war-widow was enough for their family.”

“She wouldn’t say that.”

“No, Mother, this is not the right time; besides my first pre-condition had not been met so far.”

“Oh, stop that,” she said, swiping at Mark. “Do you have to take every woman to bed before you could become serious about them?”

“Yes, Mother, I do. You would be well advised to test your prospective husband.”

“Do you think I did not?”

“It is none of my business.”

“Well, Marcus, I’m glad you’re alive. This is all that matters. By the way, did you get any more medals?”

“I got a Knight’s Cross.”

“My God, you could have been killed. What did you do?”

“Just something I was trained to do. I killed a few Russians. Don’t ask me about it, Mother. I hate to talk about it.”

“Do you have a room here?”

“No, I’m staying at the Royal Hungarian Yacht Club.”

“It is supposed to have the best kitchen in Siofok. Mrs. Pataky is very nice. We had dinner at her place a couple of days ago.”

“Actually, her son is my best friend. He is in my company.”

“Another officer.”

“No, Mother, he is my Company Sergeant Major. The greatest guy I’ve ever met.”

“I’d like to meet him,” she said.

That evening Mark arranged an intimate dinner at the Royal Hungarian Yacht Club. His mother’s fiancé was a pleasant individual. Steve Pataky gave as good account of himself at the dinner table as he did on the battlefield. Although the party was a success, it broke up early, just in time for Mark and Steve to head for a little restaurant called the Whale.

The two weeks of their vacation flew by as if it were only a couple of days. In the middle of September, Mark and Steve Pataky reported for duty in Komarom. They had a new battalion commander, Major Kovats, an old reservist.

He was well decorated in the Great War and picked up a couple of gongs in the current conflict, serving as area commander near the Briansk Woods in the Ukraine. There was no doubt about the courage and organizational skills of the old guy.

As Mark reported for duty, Major Kovats said, “I decided to keep all the veterans in your company as much as possible. They have a better chance for survival if they stick together.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Your company is not up to full strength, but I expect some replacements coming soon.”

“Where are the replacements coming from?”

“I don’t know, but according to the rumors they are from the remnants of a couple of infantry regiments, which suffered severe losses near a place called Kolomeya.”

“I understand Ivan broke through their lines in that area,” Mark said.

“That’s right. Those poor bastards suffered more than fifty percent casualties.”

“I wonder how they would stand up to the pressure.”

“If they find themselves among fellow veterans, they’ll calm down. Anyway, I made up detailed training programs.”

“I hope, sir, you did not leave out the tactics applicable to forced withdrawals.”

“No, son, in this phase of the war, you’ve got to know how to run away to fight another day,” he said.

The training barely started in the first week of October, when unexpectedly the High Command ordered Mark to Budapest to testify at the office of the Judge Advocate General investigating the miserable performance of the 307<sup>th</sup> in the Ukraine.

Mark was glad to go because he was still tired and the additional rest came at the best time. He expected to spend a couple of days in the capital. Naïvely, Mark had thought of his testimony having some impact. However, in Budapest, Mark spent hours and hours waiting in different anterooms of high-ranking officers. Every afternoon, the big shot's adjutant came out of the inner sanctuary, telling Mark about his testimony being delayed and ordering him to come by the next morning at 0900 sharp.

On the first evening, Mark telephoned Tania, but apparently, she had disconnected her phone. He did not give up easily and went to her apartment. To his surprise one of the young Russian girls, whom he met at the Hangli nightclub with Tania, opened the door.

Sasha remembered Mark at once and invited him in. Although the furniture was the same, the state of the apartment suggested Tania did not live there anymore.

As soon as he sat down, after satisfying the requirements of civilized social contact, Mark asked, "Where is she?"

"Tanya left in the middle of May, but since she owns the apartment, she asked us to move in and look after it for her."

"Where is she now?"

"She did not tell us anything, but sent us a postcard from Monte Carlo."

"Why did she leave?"

"I don't know. We noticed her becoming increasingly troubled when we had the bad news from the front."

"What bad news are you talking about?"

"We listen to the BBC," Sasha said, blushing. "I know what they say is not true, but the news broadcast of Radio Budapest is not true either. If it were, our troops would still be at Moscow."

“You’re right.”

“Anyway, Tania thought the Russians would eventually occupy Budapest.”

“They will not,” Mark interrupted. “The government would sue for peace before letting that happen.”

“Nevertheless, Tania told us that she wouldn’t want to be here when the Russians arrive. She said she knew how the Reds behaved after occupying a city, and did not want any part of it.”

“How about you, aren’t you afraid?”

“No. We have nothing to do with the war. The fact we were born in Russia won’t matter, as we lived most of our lives here.”

“Regardless, if I were you, I would leave for the west as soon as possible. However, if you didn’t, and the Russians entered the city, you should not betray the fact that you can speak their language.”

“Why?”

“I know them,” Mark said. “They may shoot you or ship you off to Siberia.”

They talked about the possible developments for an hour. Mark hoped Sasha and her friend did not wait for the Russians.

Finally, after a few days of hanging around, Mark’s turn came. It was a gray morning on October 12<sup>th</sup>. The discomfort of having to wear a dress uniform with Wellingtons and all his medals was getting on Mark’s nerves. The uncomfortable headgear and the ceremonial sword he had to carry on formal occasions, made him feel naked. He missed his Schmeisser, the forty-five, and the bayonet.

A captain from the Judge Advocate’s Department interviewed Mark.

“I was just a line officer, sir, and I did not have insight into the decisions of the High Command,” Mark started.

“Never mind, I want to know how you saw the whole operation,” the captain said.

“Like most of my fellow line officers, I thought it was insane making the division hold the Prinz Eugen Line at all costs. We learned later about General Winters ordering the division to withdraw to the fortified defensive positions, the so-called Brown Line.”

“You should not criticize the decisions of the Divisional Commander.”

“I’m just answering your question, sir,” Mark replied smoothly.

“All right,” the captain growled. “Continue.”

“In addition, we all felt the rearming with German weapons in the operational area without sufficient practice ammunition and time for retraining was unforgivable.”

The lawyer, obviously attempting to belittle the effects of the rearmament, asked, “Apparently, your platoon performed well with the unfamiliar German weapons, earning you a Knight’s Cross. How do you explain that?”

“Actually, I got my Knight’s Cross for my command decisions and leading a bayonet charge, carrying a captured Russian rifle. The rearmament had nothing to do with it.”

He meant to rub it in, since he saw the captain had no combat decorations. They argued for a while about the compound effect of the bad decisions by the High Command. In the end, Mark left with an empty feeling. He was sure his testimony would not have the desired impact.

*The High Command would sweep the generals' stupidity under the carpet, leading to the loss of a division, just as they did with the massacres in the Southern Territories, he thought, as he headed to home, not very far from the Ministry of Defense.*

As he had three days left of the short leave of absence, Mark spent the afternoon with the Pesthy family. Since the major was missing in action, they moved out of the Franz Joseph Cavalry Barracks and took an apartment in the heart of the city. Aunt Gabby could not stand the sight of hussars any more.

As supplies were short, they had tea with saccharin, some miserable lemon juice substitute, and hardtacks for cakes. However, Judy was sparkling as always, entertaining Mark with her adventures at the university.

"I heard the faculty recommending the relocation of all students to Germany, since they figured Budapest might come under attack," Judy declared.

"If it happens, you'd be better off in the west."

"I'm not leaving the city. I don't want to evacuate in the same wagon with a hundred stinking men. I have my drafting table and my bed here. This is the place where I'm going to stay," Judy said firmly.

Mrs. Pesthy withdrew and left them alone. Mark figured it was time to get Judy into bed, but she had different ideas.

After a rather long kiss, she quietly remarked, "Even though I want you, Marcus, I'm not going to bed with you. In fact, I'm not going to bed with anybody. Just in case. If I became pregnant, I would not wish to bring a child into this world in the middle of a war. Besides, the father of my child might disappear or get himself killed in action, like Dad. Just promise me, when this madness is over, you'll come back to me."

Mark had no arguments. He thought of Judy as an intelligent, young woman who would perhaps make an excellent wife after the war.

“I’ll be back,” he said.

He left the Pesthy’s apartment. While walking across the bridge over the Danube, gruff military policemen stopped him twice demanding identification and his travel orders. His papers being in order, they let him return to his home amid thoughts of Judy as a wife.

Next day, after having combat rations for breakfast, his mother started packing a couple of suitcases, as she intended to move into the Saint John Hospital.

“In case the Russians entered the city, I’ll be safer there. My fiancé is the medical director of the Ophthalmic Surgery Department. He also plans to move into the hospital from his elegant house,” she explained.

Angela Kende and Doctor Somogyi were planning to get married around Christmas, hoping that Peter could swing a few days leave for Mark to attend the nuptials.

There was an air raid during the night. It was well after midnight when the all clear sounded. The morning was gray and miserable, with slow, misty rain falling steadily. Mark did not really feel like getting out of bed, but around eleven o’clock, his mother came rushing into his room, and in an excited tone declared, “Marcus, the war is over. Hungary just asked for armistice. It is on the radio! Come and listen to it...” her voice trailed.

Wearing his pajamas, Mark ran to the living room and heard the news. It was true.

“Apparently, the war is over for Hungary,” Mark said. “Nevertheless, I expect trouble.”

“Why?” His mother asked. “The Germans must respect international law and leave.”

“Mother, the international law was killed in action in Katyn Forest a long time ago.”

“There are people who would argue with you.”

“It doesn’t matter what they say, but we all know the vast majority of the forces fighting in Hungary are Germans. I figure they would not take kindly to the desertion of the last ally. Remember my prediction, it is not over,” Mark said. Suddenly, he wished to be back with his unit and have a clear understanding of what to do next.

In the afternoon, the noise of heavy fire came from the direction of the Royal Palace. There was no doubt; a coup d’etat was in progress, just as Mark expected. In accordance with his oath as an officer, Mark had to enforce the cease-fire ordered by his Commander-in-Chief, but he had enough sense not to try.

*One man with a Schmeisser and two hand grenades would not turn the fortunes of the outnumbered, outgunned Hungarian garrison in the palace area, he mused.*

By the evening, it was over. The Commander-in-Chief, Admiral Horthy resigned, handing over the reins of power to Mr. Szalasi and his Arrow Cross Party, who immediately declared undying loyalty to the German allies and vowed to fight on to the ultimate victory.

When the new prime minister made his first radio address, Angela Kende became agitated. “This bastard made your father join his goddamned party, screwed up my life, and now he is fucking up the whole country!”

The right wing takeover did not surprised Mark, but his mother’s profanity stunned him. She charged into her room to continue packing, while Mark sat by the fireplace quietly contemplating his future.

If he put down his weapons, the new rulers of the country would draft him into the army. If he resisted, they would arrest, imprison, and most likely execute him. On the other hand, if Mark continued fighting, perhaps the Russians would kill him. Surrendering to the Soviets

and becoming a POW was not an option because he had vowed never to give up his freedom.

In the end, he thought it was much safer in the front lines with his company of veterans looking after him, rather than in the rear echelons where the politicians and their constant infighting would most certainly get him into trouble. Thus, he finally chose to stay in the war. Nevertheless, he did not think the war would last much longer because the Germans should come to their senses soon, sue for peace, and stop the wholesale slaughter.

As it happened, Mark could not return to his unit in time, and there was no need for Peter arranging additional leave for him. Suddenly, his fever shot up and he suffered from tremendous headaches. It was late at night when his mother managed to get him into the officers' wing of the military hospital. For a while, the doctors were lost; they could not figure out what was wrong with him. Mrs. Kende was beside herself, since Mark's symptoms were identical to the disease that killed her husband.

After the second day, one of the doctors thought Mark might have had an attack of malaria. A quick blood test confirmed the doctor's suspicion and with proper medication, the fever broke, and in a couple of days, Mark's life signs returned to normal. Malaria being a tropical disease, the physicians could not figure out where he picked up the bug. Although he was very weak, the doctors let him go, but ordered him not return to active duty before the first week of November.

During the last few days of his sick leave, the Kende residence was like a beehive. Angela felt that Mark would not get away again in December; therefore, she decided to hold the wedding in the last days of October.

The change in plans made the groom the happiest man in Budapest. Mark liked him very much, since the

doctor was a pleasant individual, keeping his mother entertained and in good spirits. Doctor Somogyi treated the war as a major inconvenience disrupting everything. He hoped it would be over soon and he could return to his research. Meanwhile, he was putting in long hours trying to save the eyesight of many wounded soldiers regardless of their nationality.

The wedding was a quiet affair, arranged in a small chapel. Only a few guests attended; the bride's two cousins, both officers in the cavalry, and of course, her brother Peter were present. Mark asked his mother to invite Mrs. Pesthy and her daughter, but Judy arrived alone, claiming her mother was feeling sick and could not make the trip across the river. The groom's guests were his brother and an elderly aunt.

The ceremonies were over quickly. The dinner at the Kende residence was not very successful, since in the middle of the reception, the air raid sirens tore up the silence of the night. Holding a plate of food in his hand, Mark followed the rest of the people to the cellar. In the air raid shelter, the complaints of the people living in the building described the conditions in Budapest of late 1944.

"We are freezing," the superintendent's wife said. "I couldn't get any coal or firewood. I have a few logs, but they won't last long, even if I heat the baby's room only."

"There's absolutely no meat anywhere in the stores," complained the widow of a bank manager living on the ground floor. "The only things I could find on the market were miserable dried-up apples and cornflower."

"My friend and I discovered a butcher shop on the Pest side, selling horsemeat," said the wife of a retired colonel from the top floor. "I bought wieners and frankfurters without having to wait in line. They tasted very nice, and my husband did not notice the difference."

Fortunately, the raid was over by midnight, and the guests departed. As it was dark, Mark escorted Judy on the long trek to their home. When they parted, she kissed him fully on the lips, "If you survive this mess, Marcus, come back. I'll be waiting," she said. Judy turned quickly and ran into the house.

Although she was strange, Mark thought she might be the ideal partner for him. After the war, I'll look into it.

Next day, Mark visited his mother at the Somogyi residence and found her packing again, preparing to move into the hospital.

"According to the BBC, the Russians have crossed the River Tisza and they could reach Budapest in a matter of days," the doctor said.

"As the nearest point of the Tisza is more than sixty miles from Budapest," Mark replied, "they are not at the gates yet, but it won't be long before the Russians start firing their cannons at targets inside the city."

"I'm afraid of that happening."

"You'd be better off in the hospital. Nobody intentionally bombs such a place. Not even the Russians," Mark said.

"I thought so," the doctor replied. "This is why we are moving."

They piled into the doctor's car with their suitcases for the short trip to the hospital. When they arrived, Mark kissed his mother goodbye and headed back to the apartment, to pick up his gear and return to his unit in Komarom.

He could not take the shortest route to their apartment because German SS units were blocking his way, and even his Knight's Cross was not enough to let him through. He had to walk around Castle Hill. When he got out onto the main drag, he saw black uniformed soldiers

and military policemen wearing the Arrow Cross armbands herding Jews with the yellow Star of David on their chests toward the Southern Railway Station. Men, women, and children made up the sorry procession.

People stopped on the sidewalk and watched the Jews marching off to almost certain death. An elderly woman remarked, "I'm sorry to see them treated this way. After all, they are human beings too," her voice trailed off uncertainly.

The military policeman standing next to the elderly matron grabbed her by the throat. "If you're sorry for this scum, your place is with them," he growled. He pushed the woman into the column.

Mark's hand slowly crept toward his forty-five, but checked the urge to put a bullet into the brutish policeman. He realized the Arrow Cross goons would kill him on the spot, and he would not have accomplished anything.

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Mark sensed the uncertainty hanging over the city. The people had no idea what the new government would do to bring about peace. Was it a good idea to remain in the war on the German side? Would this move effectively split the nation? Everybody had questions, but nobody had answers. The uncertainty was apparently catchy, as the Americans did not know if it was worthwhile carrying out massive bombing raids against Budapest.

Mark's train was leaving from the Southern Railway Station, which suffered heavy damage from the incessant bombing, but remained operational. He noticed the small army of workers clearing the rubble. The laborers wore yellow armbands identifying them as Jews, and stern military policemen were guarding them with the bayonets fixed on their rifles. Rooster feathers fluttered on their hats in the evening breeze.

On the other side, near a bombed-out part of the building, Mark saw two civilian bricklayers putting up a wall. It was pathetic. The two men among the sea of rubble tried to build something, which would be bombed as soon as it was ready.

*We Hungarians are foolish, always trying to build something in the face of insurmountable odds. Just like those bricklayers,* Mark said to himself.

He followed the signs directing all military personnel to the station's command center set up in a number of passenger cars standing on the track nearest to the bombed-out terminal. Apparently, the commandant was not taking any chances with his own safety. A locomotive hitched up to the cars kept the steam up, ready to move the train into a deep, bombproof tunnel in case the Americans B 17s attacked Budapest again.

As officers had to report at the commandant's office, Mark climbed the designated railway car and entered. The station commander was an elderly major, wearing the black uniform of the private army of the Party and had the Arrow Cross armband.

As he saw the major, Mark thought he was a bad caricature of the SS officers. He snapped to attention and said, "Lieutenant Kende reporting, sir."

"At ease. May I see your travel orders, Brother," the station commander said.

Mark handed over his travel orders and the medical certificate, which the major examined thoroughly. "Brother Lieutenant, I find your early return to your unit strange. Why don't you stay another day here?"

"My company needs me in these trying days, sir."

The major looked at Mark suspiciously, attempting to find something objectionable. "By the way, Brother Lieutenant, your attire leaves a lot to be desired. An officer is not supposed to wear a bayonet."

“If the major permit,” Mark replied, in an obviously annoyed tone, opening his greatcoat. “I used this very bayonet to get my Knight’s Cross. I swore never to part with it.”

Apparently, the major was surprised, but he noticed Mark’s dark brown cravat. Evidently, he found something objectionable again. “How about the scarf? It is contrary to regulations.”

“Respectfully, sir, when we got our distinguished unit citation in the Ukraine, General von Winters gave the survivors permission to wear a non-regulation cravat. Just like the officers and men of the Africa Corps are allowed to wear a yellow cravat.”

“I’m sorry, Brother Lieutenant, I didn’t know,” the major said. He kept scrutinizing Mark’s papers further. “By the way, are you related to the late Colonel Zoltan Kende?”

“Yes sir, I’m his son.”

“I knew your father well, son. It is a shame that the international Jewish conspiracy had him murdered. I wish he could be here with us fighting for the ultimate victory.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied uncertainly.

“Have a good war, Brother Lieutenant,” the major said. He stood up, raised his right arm and announced, “Perseverance, hail Szalasi.”

The black uniform, the Nazi salute, the hail to the chief was a poor mimicry of the German Nazi habits. Mark could not imagine Generaloberst Winters saluting that way, and uttering the words, “Heil Hitler.” However, Mark knew that the general would have given his life for his country anytime.

Mark saluted and marched out knowing he managed to hand a lot of bullshit to the major. The man obviously has never seen an infantry unit in action. Regard-

less, the brown cravat was strictly against regulations, but in the front lines, nobody gave a damn about infringements of the dress code. In peacetime, professional soldiers would have frowned upon his choice of the bayonet instead of the sword, but in wartime, his explanation was plausible.

*The major may have been a disgraced officer as his father was, and took the first opportunity to get back into uniform. If my father lived, he may have turned out as the major. It would be shameful seeing Dad in the black uniform with the stupid armband, herding Jews on the streets of Budapest. As for the Jews murdering my father, there was nothing farther from the truth, but it may have been counterproductive to argue it with the station's commandant,* Mark thought.

He got on the train to Komarom with many civilians, all moving westwards carrying their meager possessions, running from the horrors of war or the Russian occupation. The ride was peaceful; there were no aerial attacks on the crowded passenger train.

During the trip, Mark sat immersed in thoughts. He wondered if history might lump all soldiers fighting the Russians after the October Declaration of Armistice with those black uniformed jokers. Nevertheless, he was not giving up the fight; he'd rather die than fall into Russian hands.

It was not easy to find the headquarters of the 307<sup>th</sup>. Major Kiss was not a battalion commander anymore; he was lieutenant colonel and Divisional Chief of Staff. As soon as Kiss heard of Mark's arrival, he immediately ordered him into his office.

"Come in, Marcus, come in," he said. Kiss made him sit down. "You became quite a celebrity around here."

Mark sat down, looking surprised. "What did I do?"

“Nothing really. It is like this, we were stripped of our divisional artillery. General Winters transferred the whole of the Seventeenth Artillery Battalion to the SS, the Viking Armored Division,” Kiss continued.

“I’m sorry to see them go. Those guys were great.”

“As you know, the Viking lost their artillery because of insufficient infantry coverage. However, taking the artillery was not enough to hard-arsed Winters. He ordered us to transfer your company to go with the artillerists, and insisted on you personally commanding.”

“Surprising,” Mark said. He was happy about Kiss not keeping him at the headquarters.

“Anyway, Kulich already took the company to Kisber. It is a small village with a railway station. Your company was rearmed with the newest German weapons, the same as the Viking’s panzer-grenadiers.”

“I hope they gave us time and ammunition to retrain.”

“Yes, you have plenty of ammo and time. The Viking is reorganizing in the vicinity of Gyor, as their tanks need extensive repairs. Allegedly, they got many replacements from Germany and these guys are in training now. The High Command allocated our guys new 18/40 type 10.5 cm guns, which you’re going to guard until the artillerist personnel and their horses arrive.”

“Where are they now?”

“They are on a train somewhere, but should be here any day. They’ll pick up some more ponies and move to Kisber.”

“We are going to have a few easy days,” Mark mused.

“Yes, you would, but I want you here for a few days. Frank Kulich and Pataky can take care of the retraining on the new equipment.”

“Why do I have to stay here?”

“We have three American pilots taken prisoner. We need to question them and there is nobody around who speaks English well enough.”

“I’m not sure I could do it. I know the Geneva Convention, and I couldn’t in clear conscience coax any information out of those guys.”

“That is not what we want. Our Air Force has a special plan for them.”

“May I know what it is?”

“Not at this time. The corps ordered me to find a one hundred percent reliable, trustworthy interpreter. I thought of you.”

“Thank you for your confidence in me, sir. What do you want to do with those Americans?”

“We must be very careful with them. Don’t hand them over to the Germans and don’t let them escape.”

“Where are they now?”

“In the city jail; we separated them from other detainees. We shall give you authorization to visit them tomorrow. Tell them if they don’t want to be handed over to the Germans, they must cooperate with you and stay put.”

“If they ask why, what can I tell them?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“Thanks,” Mark replied sarcastically.

“You’re billeted on the south side of the river, the house of a retired schoolteacher. This is the address. Go there, settle in, and report here tomorrow morning at eight hundred hours. See you later, Marcus.”

## Chapter Seventeen

On the way out, Mark cornered a supply sergeant and hit him up for some food. There was no problem finding the goods because a large warehouse had just come under the control of the division. A German armored division left it behind when their High Command hastily shifted them to the western front. Mark loaded up with a few bottles of snaps, German sausages, crates of hard marmalade, chocolate, cigarettes, and a large box of hard-tacks. The sergeant found a buggy with two forlorn horses to take him to his new home with all the loot.

The landlord was a pleasant elderly man; he made friends with Mark very easily. A stick of Bockwurst and a five-kilo case of marmalade further cemented their friendship.

In the morning, Colonel Kiss was more communicative. "Listen, Marcus," he started, "I had a discussion with the higher ups about those pilots. They ordered us to deliver the Americans secretly to the fighter field in Veszprem."

"Why don't I borrow the paddy wagon from the city police and drive the prisoners to the airfield?" Mark suggested.

"No way; they have to go disguised as Hungarian Air Force officers. Explain to them that they will not be harmed, and we are giving them a chance to return to their bases."

Mark chose his next words with care. "Do you realize, sir, this may constitute treason?"

"No. The Commander-in-Chief ordered us to cease hostilities. Neither I, or for that matter, any of us ever took the oath of allegiance to Szalasi. If you want to opt out of this operation, you may do so."

Kiss was Mark's battalion commander for a long time. If he was ready to risk court-martial for these Americans, he must have had a good reason.

"I have never questioned your judgment, sir. This is not the time to start," Mark said shrugging.

"Thank you. In the evening, you will take the Americans out of the slammer and have them change into Hungarian uniforms. I'll have Air Force caps and great-coats delivered to your quarters this afternoon. Sergeant Meszaros has all the papers and the travel orders. You will travel in grand style, using a Mercedes staff car."

"You told me to take them to the Veszprem fighter field. Who is going to take them off my hands?"

"When you get to the field, find Lieutenant Colonel Bauer. He is expecting you. After the handover, the Mercedes will take you to Kisber, and then we will forget about the whole incident."

"Colonel," Mark said seriously, "I don't mind being involved in a little bit of treason with you, but I want to be sure of not selling out my men. If you can assure me of this, I'll do everything in my power. However--"

"Hold it, Marcus. These Americans are going to take three light bombers, and fly them to their own bases. They'll carry our emissaries to meet the Americans."

"What do we want?" Mark asked.

"We intend to concentrate all our resources at one place, hold a small corner of the country until their forces arrive. This way, Budapest should come under tripartite control, and we would not be fully under the yoke of the Russians. We want the Americans telling us which part of the country we should hold: the south, the north or the center."

"How do we get their answer?"

"They should send our emissaries back somehow."

"Can I tell this to the Americans?"

“Yes, but don’t give them any names or places because if they were caught, their testimony would get some of us into trouble.”

“Including me,” Mark added sarcastically.

“If you take off your Knight’s Cross when you meet them and introduce yourself with an American name, claiming to be one of their spies--”

“I don’t like it.”

“Nobody does, but can you find anybody who could successfully pull off this operation apart from you?” Kiss asked.

“I don’t think so. However, I want to cover my arse. Please transfer Sergeant Meszaros to my company. I want to keep an eye on him. After the delivery we shall blow the Mercedes up outside Kisber, set up two wooden crosses, and claim that the car’s occupants were killed.”

“General Kresky will not be happy about losing his car,” Kiss said, “but it was his idea and you’re certainly entitled to protection. It is wise to take the sergeant with you. He is not only an excellent supply sergeant, but also a master scrounger and a good driver.”

The police had stuck the three Americans in a cell originally designed to hold two people. Mark got to the door with the sergeant and the jailer. They opened the peephole, and Mark loudly announced in English, “Which one of you is the ranking officer?”

“I am,” one of the Americans said. He sounded tired and miserable.

“Your name, rank, and serial number.”

“Weston, Geoffrey M., Colonel 1239-44567.”

“I’m going to let you out, Colonel Weston. We need to talk.”

“I don’t need to talk to you,” the American replied with hostility in his voice.

“Regardless, sir, I must insist.”

The American stood up, shrugged, and stepped to the door. The jailer opened it, and the colonel stepped out. Sergeant Meszaros pointed his forty-five at the American.

“Let’s go,” Mark said.

He led the way out of the jail onto the street and into the Mercedes. As they got into the back, Mark drew his gun and pointed at the colonel’s stomach.

“Drive, Sergeant!”

They started out towards Mark’s residence.

“Sergeant, take us to the banks of the Danube,” Mark ordered. Switching to English, he said to the colonel. “You have nothing to worry about, sir. I’m Sergeant Roger Stormont USMC serial number 3456-2271. My orders are to get you back to your base.”

“How in hell are you going to arrange that, Sergeant?”

“I’m going to get you three Hungarian aircrafts full of gas. You’re going to fly them to your base, with a Hungarian staff officer on board each plane. Your passengers are going to deliver a message to the High Command. When they get their answer, you fly them back to Veszprem. Land or just drop them by parachute.”

“That is not going to be easy. Only two of us are pilots. The third guy is a gunner.”

“Then we’ll give you only two planes. I’ll take you back to your cell. Tell your men what we are about to do. Be careful, as it is possible the cops bugged your cell. I’ll come back later this evening, take you to a safe house, get you the proper uniforms, and off we go.”

“Hold it! I’m not getting out of my uniform for your harebrained scheme, Sergeant. The Krauts could shoot me as a spy. It would be a shame to die so late in the war.”

“You can keep your uniform, sir, but for the benefit of the guards, you have to put on at least a Hungarian Air Force cap and greatcoat. That does not contravene the Geneva Convention.”

“I don’t know.”

“Colonel, I don’t have time to argue with you. I must know if I can count on you or not.”

“Let us say I’m in,” the American mused. “What happens after we put on the Hungarian outfits?”

“I drive you to the airport,” Mark replied.

“Then what would you do?”

“Hand you over to an Air Force officer and he would look after the rest. I’m just a messenger.”

“I’m willing to try only because Hungarian jails are not very comfortable.”

“Thank you, sir. However, in case I fail to show up in the evening, one of two things might have happened. One: the bad guys caught and shot me. Two: they caught my boss and shot him. In that case, I’m calling the mission off and heading for the hills.”

“I understand.”

“Now, I’m going to take you back to the jail,” Mark announced. He said to Meszaros, “Let’s go back to the prison, Sergeant.”

As soon as Mark returned to headquarters, he went to see Colonel Kiss.

“Well, what did our friends say?” Kiss inquired.

“They are game. The mission is set for the evening.”

“How did it go?”

“It was smooth. To start with, only two of them are pilots and the third guy is a gunner. “

“We’ll send only two aircraft. Had they any concerns?”

“The colonel did not want to put on a Hungarian uniform, but I persuaded him to wear the greatcoat and the cap.”

“I’m glad,” Kiss replied. He seemed to be in an ebullient mood. “It is time for something good to happen.”

“We are not out of the woods yet, sir.”

“I know, but the project seems promising. You go home and rest up. I’ll send Meszaros with the great coats and the caps to pick you up by 1800 hours.”

“We shall be on our way by 1900 hours at the latest, arriving at the fighter field within an hour if all goes well.”

“Fine, Marcus, I’ll let them know,” Kiss said.

Mark stood up. “Thank you, sir. See you after the war.”

“May the Gods be with you,” Kiss said. He stood up and shook Mark’s hand warmly.

In his home, Mark had a luxurious bath. He was lying on his bed contemplating the ceiling, when suddenly someone knocked on the door. He checked his watch and saw it was two o’clock only.

“Come in!”

Sergeant Meszaros entered. He looked pale and disturbed.

“What is the problem, Sergeant?”

He stepped closer and whispered, “The Arrow Cross goons caught on to us. They just arrested Colonel Kiss and General Kresky. Fortunately, I have our papers and the Mercedes. We should hit the road to Kisber immediately.”

“Just as well,” Mark replied. He jumped off the bed and dressed swiftly. Apart from his small suitcase with the silk underwear, he scooped up some of the food, the bottles, and the cigarettes. These were always good to have, sometimes better than gold.

They left Komarom slowly because the covered wagons streaming to the west clogged all roads. The refugees were Hungarians from the Great Plains, Transylvanians, Romanians, and the odd Polish or Ukrainian families; all were trying to put some distance between them and the oncoming Russian steamroller.

Kisber lies due south of Komarom. The road was full of refugees. They intended to go south and make the turn to the west at Kisber. The Mercedes made reasonably good time on the left side of the road because nobody was traveling north.

They passed the village of Csem late in the afternoon, when Mark saw the refugees jumping off their wagons and hitting the dirt in the ditches. Before Meszaros could bring the car to a halt, they heard the roar of engines and the chatter of machineguns.

They stopped and jumped out. Two Lightnings were machine-gunning the road. Although there was not a single military vehicle apart from the Mercedes in sight, the fighters kept attacking the defenseless, covered wagons. The pilots, not having any opposition, were bold and flew only a few feet above the ground. Mark fired two magazines of his Schmeisser at the Lightnings, but apart from the satisfaction of fighting back, the shooting did not do any good. Eventually, the planes pulled up and disappeared to the south, heading home or searching for targets that were more promising.

There was mayhem on the road. The attackers had killed several people, all of them women, children, and elderly men. There were no young or middle-aged males among the refugees because they were in one of the armies, likely fighting each other. After stripping the dead of all valuables, leaving the naked bodies by the roadside, cutting the wounded horses out of their harness, and leaving them standing where they were, they pushed the

wagons without horses off the road. In less than half an hour after the attack, the column of refugees started moving again. Only the wounded horses stood or laid motionless waiting for the coup de grace, which never came.

“Why did the Lightnings machinegun the refugees? Why did some of these people have to die?” Mark asked. He immediately answered his own question, “In a war, bloodlust suppress the last remaining shreds of humanity. I’m sure none of the fighter pilots would intentionally torture a single animal, or massacre defenseless civilians.”

Meszaros just stared at him. His eyes were blank, devoid of emotions, but shook his head. “The Lightnings machinegun everything without batting an eye,” the sergeant said. “I wonder if the airmen mistook the refugees for a column of soldiers.”

He started the car, and they hit the road again.

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. Perhaps the pilots had orders to keep on killing because the Allied High Command believed everybody on the other side of the line is a dangerous enemy,” Mark said thoughtfully. “I’d rather be back in the front lines where the picture is clear: the guys wearing Russian uniforms are the enemy.”

“I agree with you, Lieutenant. The front lines are the safest place for soldiers in these days.”

At Kisber, Mark found the cannons well disguised as haystacks, and the soldiers billeted in private houses. Kulich reported the company still somewhat under strength, despite receiving a few replacements.

With a deep sigh, Mark took command of his specialist company. He immediately assigned Sergeant Meszaros to command the first platoon.

During the night, a train pulled into the station, disgorging several horses, artillerymen, and their para-

phernalia. They took over the school and several out-buildings of private residences.

Next morning, two Lightnings came, but this time there were plenty of machineguns to discourage them from attacking the road and the much beloved horses of the artillerists. It was moving how gently these veterans treated their animals.

Mark was glad to meet old friends again. Les Bartos and Gara were both there, looking a little bit worn, but in high spirits. Mark invited Kulich and the two artillerists to his billet for hot wine and Thuringian sausage, which Sergeant Meszaros had liberated from the German warehouse. It was nice to reminisce about the good old days of the Composite Task Force at the Otinja road.

“That was a good clean fight,” Gara remarked. “Such war is almost tolerable.”

“Yeah,” Kulich added. “If you have to take the other guy one-on-one, it’s alright the better-trained soldier will survive. However, I hate the heavy bombers and low-flying fighters. During an air raid, your survival becomes strictly a matter of blind luck. I’m sure you remember Sergeant Szabo. There wasn’t a better-trained soldier anywhere. He survived everything, but in the end caught a burst of machinegun fire from one of the Ratas on the way to Legion Pass. That was bad luck. Szabo did not have a chance.”

“An aerial attack is not the worst thing. It is something like roulette, and mercifully lasts a few minutes only. If I survived, I would be in control again. The worst thing is capture. If I was a prisoner of war, in my captor’s power for years to come, I would not survive, I’d rather die,” Bartos said.

“You guys are wrong,” Mark cut in. “The worst enemy in this war is the lice.”

The other three burst out laughing.

“That is not too bad coming from a reservist,” Bartos remarked. “I wear silk undergarments and share the blanket with my horse. The bugs never came near me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Gara exploded. “I battled the little bastards all the way from Nadvirna to Miskolc.”

“My father told me. He ought to know. The old man spent two years in the trenches during the Great War in Russia,” Bartos said. “Tell us, Marcus, how did you combat the fiercest enemy?”

“I must confess I also have the silk underwear.”

“As we had the worst enemy licked,” Gara said, “what are we going to do about the Russians?”

Bartos shrugged and remarked quietly, “I don’t know. I’m going to train my guys on the new equipment the best I can, then carry out my orders.”

“Spoken like a true professional. What do you think? Are we going to push Ivan back to the Danube?” asked Kulich.

“With what?” Mark asked.

“Well, the Viking is getting ready. Allegedly, the Gross Deutschland Panzer Division is on its way to Hungary. Our army provides the best artillery and excellent infantry. With the German armor, we should chase Ivan back to the Carpathians,” Kulich concluded.

“Two divisions might not be enough,” Gara said. “The Russians have at least eight armored divisions in Hungary.”

“Well, how about the German miracle weapon?” Kulich challenged.

“They’d better start using it soon,” Mark said, “before we run out of real estate.”

“I’m not so sure about the miracle weapon. I think we could push Ivan back to the Danube and have the

Krauts counterattack in the west, then sue for an honorable peace,” Gara said.

“What if the Allies would not negotiate?” Mark asked.

“Then we have to use the miracle weapon,” Kulich firmly stated.

“How did we get into this mess?” Mark asked quietly. “The Germans were at the gates of Moscow...” his voice trailed.

“I tell you,” Kulich said sharply, “if our government had not fucked around, but put the whole army on the eastern front, we would still be holding at the River Don. They should have done what Szalasi is doing now: commit to the total war.”

Mark did not say anything, as he knew Kulich was much in favor of the Arrow Cross Party taking over. There was no use arguing with a biased individual. Apparently, the two artillery officers thought so too. They drained their glasses, excused themselves, and left. Mark also decided to turn in, leaving Kulich alone with his firm belief in the ultimate victory.

Bartos and Gara had orders to proceed to Halmasker, the Valhalla of Hungarian artillerymen to practice their craft, but they barely hitched up their horses when a German lieutenant colonel arrived with new orders.

“The Soviets have crossed the Danube at Dunafoldvar and are driving toward the west, intent on encircling Budapest,” he said. “Your orders are to stop them by Lake Balaton.”

“I see,” Bartos replied. “Do you have any idea, Colonel, about the enemy we are going to face?”

“Most likely a composite group, infantry with a few light tanks.”

“How about our armor?”

“You’re asking too many questions, Lieutenant,” the colonel snapped. “You will support the Viking counterattack and cooperate with 22<sup>nd</sup> SS Cavalry Regiment.”

“What type of ammo should we take?”

“The standard complement,” the German said. “Get moving. Here are the map references you must occupy.”

“Are we going to counterattack and drive Ivan back to the Danube?” Mark asked.

“I’m not privy to the plans of the High Command,” the German said shrugging. “My job is to get the artillery in position as soon as possible.”

“Understood,” Bartos said. He saluted and left the lieutenant Colonel on the road by his staff car.

Mark also saluted and hurriedly departed to look after his men. He understood the responsibility of his company well. He had to make sure the Russian infantry would not get near the precious cannons. He assigned the first platoon to cover Gara’s battery, the second with Vitek commanding as reserve, and the third platoon to keep Ivan away from the Bartos Battery.

A couple of days later, they arrived at their destination. The artillerists set up their guns near the northeastern tip of Lake Balaton, expecting the Russians from south-southeast. However, the front was quiet.

While they were sitting in the company command post, Mark said to Pataky, “We know the Soviets crossed the Danube, and they are trying to consolidate their position.”

“The moral of the troops is at an all time low,” Pataky said. “The poor bastards were watching the hordes of refugees from the occupied territories.”

“It is sad. I feel sorry for them. Most of these homeless civilians have all their belongings on a covered wagon while the women, the children, and elderly men are following on foot.”

“The bunch we passed, were tired, hungry, thirsty, and with eyes glazed staggered on westward, not knowing where they would end up,” Pataky said. “My guys gave them all the food they had. It was a shocking spectacle.”

“Someone should stop this madness,” Mark mused.

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In the first few days of December, nothing happened. There was no sign of enemy activity. Therefore, the artillerists trained on the new equipment, but Bartos and Gara realized that there was not much need for rigorous training. The officers and noncoms knew what to do, and quickly familiarized themselves with their new weapons.

On December 5<sup>th</sup>, the day of Saint Barbara, the patron saint of artillerists, Bartos and Gara threw a party. It was not much of a bash, although in a warm wine cellar they served thick slices of smoked ham with crusty bread and hot wine. It lifted Mark’s spirit. Kulich was still shooting off his bombastic phrases about Hitler’s miracle weapon and the ultimate victory, but the artillery officers did not take him seriously.

Mark was quietly sitting in the corner when a messenger came with a slip from Sergeant Major Pataky, asking Mark to join him forthwith in an extremely important, urgent matter. As a company commander, Mark could not get out of meeting his top kick, therefore with a heavy sigh he took a last bite of the ham, drained his glass, and set out.

The messenger was not heading for any of the command post but straight to Steve Pataky’s billet. The sergeant was not alone. A young woman wearing jackboots, riding breeches and a Hungarian Army issue shirt was sitting at the table munching on a piece of sausage

and black bread. As Mark entered, she put down the food and snapped to attention.

To the querying look of his company commander, Pataky simply said, "Marcus, meet Sergeant Nina of the Red Army."

Mark was dumbfounded. "Where the hell did you two meet?"

"It is hard to explain. I found her in the shed behind the stable. She was all wet, in a state of shock, and I had no heart to lock her up as a POW."

"Can you communicate with her?"

"Not really. My Russian is basic, and she knows only a few words of German, but claims she can speak English."

"How did you get here, Sergeant?" Mark asked the woman in English.

She smiled and in accented but fluent English replied, "I ran away because the NKVD wanted to shoot me after I witnessed them murdering an American pilot, sir."

"Wow, that is a mouthful. What American pilot are you talking about?"

"The one the NKVD found in the residential building of Andrea Farms. They shot him and wanted to kill me as well."

Mark could see panic overtaking the woman. "Slow down, Sergeant. Sit down and start from the beginning."

She sat down, took a deep breath, and continued, "My name is Nina Stanskaia. I'm a sergeant in the interpreters' corps of the second Ukrainian Guards Division. I was ordered to Andrea Farms about ten miles southeast of here to assist in the interrogation of an American officer."

"Go on," Mark encouraged her.

"When I met him, he stated that he was an American, Lieutenant Henry James Crawford of the USAF, a

fighter pilot. He did not give me the name or the number of his unit, and I cannot remember his serial number. The lieutenant said he witnessed horrible atrocities committed by green-capped NKVD soldiers against the people who hid him from the Germans in the wine cellar of Andrea Farms. The NKVD soldiers raped Andrea and knifed her husband when he tried to protect his wife. In the end, they shot the woman too. Subsequently, the American demanded the court-martialing of the offenders.”

“Did they want to shoot him for that?”

“Yes, sir. After the NKVD finished the interrogation, their colonel told the American that he did not believe Lieutenant Crawford to be an ally. He declared the pilot a German spy. They locked him in the cellar for the night. I objected since I knew he was an American. I saw his dog tags, the little metal plates American flyers wear on a chain in their neck.”

“What happened next?”

“They locked me in with him, claiming I was also a spy. The lieutenant gave me his parents’ address, asking me to look them up after the war, and tell them how he died. I hid the address in my boots. Here it is,” the woman said and handed Mark a piece of paper.

“Thank you. How did you get away?”

“Two NKVD men took us out into the woods near the railway over there,” she pointed to the northeast. “They carried German submachine guns. Henry tripped one of the guys, and I ran away in the shuffle. After they shot him, they chased me and kept shooting, but they missed.”

“Why did they have to kill the American?”

“He witnessed their atrocities.”

“Why did they want to shoot you?”

“You don’t know the NKVD, sir,” she replied. Terror filled her eyes. “They knew I was aware of their murder and rape, which is contrary to standing orders. Actually, what they did is punishable by death. They decided it was better to put me down too. I figured if I surrendered to the Germans, I might live a few months longer.”

Mark thought for a while. Handing her to the Arrow Cross guys would be signing her death warrant. To leave her with a family here would be just as dangerous because the Russians would eventually occupy the village and find her. They would not hesitate to shoot her on the spot. To put her into a regular POW camp would also result in her premature death. She might survive the war, but after the cessation of hostilities, when the prisoners repatriated, the NKVD would find her and make sure of the woman dying in the most painful way they could imagine.

“Someone should tell the American authorities and the parents of Lieutenant Crawford about their son dying a hero’s death, standing up for a Hungarian family who risked their lives to hide him from the Germans,” Mark said.

“They should also know about their gallant Russian allies killing the pilot because he witnessed some of their atrocities,” Pataky added.

“You’re right, Steve,” Mark said. “Clip her hair and get her a Hungarian uniform jacket, cap, and a greatcoat. Assign someone trustworthy to watch over the poor creature.”

“I’ll take care of her myself,” Pataky replied.

Switching to English, Mark turned to her. “Alright, Sergeant, we are taking you with us. However, I’m ordering Sergeant Pataky to shoot you the moment it becomes obvious the Russians will capture us. If they learn about you telling us how the NKVD guys killed Crawford, they

are likely to shoot all of us. If this is not acceptable, you're on your own."

"Thank you, sir, I'll take my chances," she replied in a firm voice.

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After about a week of peace and quiet, noise of battle came from the southeast. No one knew what was happening. A German infantry battalion appeared and dug in a few miles ahead of the artillery. Mark's teams supplied the local knowledge and his men occasionally patrolled with the Germans, but after the Russian infantry showed up, the two forces did not clash.

"Ivan is digging in," Pataky reported.

"I hope they are going to stay put," Mark said.

The Russians did not commit large forces in this sector. They just carried out lively patrol activities, intent on taking prisoners. The Germans were very happy about having artillery support and liked Mark's having reconnaissance teams helping them. Jointly, they managed to keep the artillery observers as safe as anybody could expect to be in a war.

In early January 1945, suddenly new orders came from division headquarters. The artillery and their infantry support had to proceed north to a community called Mor and take up a firing position almost due east. In the extreme cold, and the deep snow, the men and the horses tired soon. The progress became very slow. The infantrymen occasionally helped pushing the cannons, but their strength was ebbing fast. Finally, they arrived to their position. Among the friendly villagers, the half frozen soldiers warmed up a little. They mustered enough strength to set up guards for the night, and next morning, they were all at their posts.

"This is an awful position we had to take," Bartos complained to Mark when they got together to discuss

their protection of the artillery. "Even though we have the elements of a German Cavalry Regiment helping you, the location of our observers is terrible."

"I'm aware of that," Mark replied. "We are facing the wooded slopes, giving Ivan an excellent view of our position."

"My guys report continuous movement in the forest; occasionally columns of smoke rise suggesting large troop concentrations. I begged for permission to open fire, but it was denied," complained Bartos.

"My men cannot move during the day at all," Mark said. "Even a single man in the open draws instant fire from Ivan's mortars."

"You'll have to do what my guys are doing; stay put during the daylight hours."

"I was afraid of that," Mark said. "The twelve-hour shift in the extreme cold will be hard on the men."

"Let us hope the weather will ease up a little," Bartos said.

Reconnaissance in force was the program each night. The German cavalrymen, without their horses of course, ran joint patrols with Mark's soldiers, and often got into fierce firefights with the Russians. The enemy patrols were also active after dark; they often cut the telephone lines connecting the observers to the command posts.

Whenever it was possible, Mark visited the artillerymen to maintain close contact. He had many interesting conversations with Bartos.

"I get frightening reports from my observers," the artilleryman said one evening when they sat in the main observation station having smoked ham and hot wine.

"Are they exposed?"

"No, they are not, and your boys are nearby all the time. Nevertheless, the Russian patrols come too damn

close. Sometimes, during the night, the guys sense the Russians are around and keep very quiet. In the morning, they see the footprints in the snow confirming their suspicions,” Bartos explained.

“I don’t know how they manage to sneak through our screen,” Mark said, shaking his head.

“You’re doing whatever you can,” Bartos said. “Don’t worry about it, but I’d appreciate if you’d assign a few more men to the forward observation point.”

“Will do,” Mark said and made a note.

In addition to the patrol activities, the occasional company strength probing attacks by both sides quickly ran out of steam without reaching their apparent objectives. Obviously, something was brewing. A major attack was coming, but nobody knew by whom, when, or where.

The order to relocate came unexpectedly during the night. This was not a withdrawal, but a lateral move, the support for an attack to recapture a major city from the Russians. Suddenly, the Divisional Commander ordered Mark’s unit into battle with the German panzer grenadiers.

When he heard about losing his infantry cover, Bartos remarked calmly. “This is the Viking’s curse, the reason why they always lose their artillery.”

Mark agreed with the artilleryist, and regretted not training his troops to support tanks in an armored conflict.

“What are we going to do with the panzers?” Pataky asked when he heard of the orders.

“Logic suggests that while the Tigers and the Panthers are locking horns with the enemy T-34s, we must make sure of the Russian foot soldiers not getting near our tanks.”

“We’ll see what we can do.”

This was exactly what the Oedenburgers had attempted to do with reasonable success until they were relieved and began walking back to Mor to their artillerymen. On their way, Mark counted many burned-out tanks, mostly Russians, but he encountered a few Tigers as well. The German and the Hungarian infantry apparently proved superior to Ivan, as there were many more dead Russians left on the field than Germans or Hungarians.

In the evening, Mark checked the roster, and realized that while Pataky's platoon had lost only three men and Vitek had lost five, Sergeant Meszaros and his entire platoon had disappeared.

"The bastard must have slipped over to Ivan," Kulich concluded.

Mark suddenly realized the sergeant might have planned changing sides from the moment they left Komarom. Meszaros knew about the Arrow Cross operatives arresting Major Kiss and General Kresky. Thus, he figured being next on the goons' list.

"Perhaps I should go over as well," Mark said when he was alone with Pataky and Vitek.

"Are you nuts?" Pataky asked. "They'd stick you into a prisoners of war camp in Siberia somewhere. Very few people survive that."

"Do you fellows remember Major Kiss?"

"Sure," Pataky replied. "He's one of the good guys. Why?"

"Well, the Arrow Cross goons arrested him."

"What for?" Vitek asked.

"He tried to consort with the Americans, trying to help them occupy a part of Hungary and make sure of Budapest coming under tripartite control. We would not be completely under the yoke of Ivan."

"Damned good idea. Why didn't the Arrow Cross guys like it?" Vitek asked.

“The idiots still believe in the ultimate victory,” Mark replied. “Meszaros and I were involved in Kiss’ scheme. There is a chance of them arresting me too.”

“Ridiculous,” Pataky said. “If any Arrow Cross guy’s came looking for you, we’d direct them into the waiting arms of the nearest Russian patrol.”

“Or I’d just shoot them with my Russian submachine gun, and blame it on Ivan,” Vitek mused. “While I’m at it, I may even shoot that idiot Kulich.”

“Don’t worry, Marcus, we’ll look after you. I’m sure you would look after us if the situation were reversed,” Pataky said, trying to calm Mark’s frayed nerves.

## Chapter Eighteen

The Russians gathered themselves and counterattacked north of the position held by the Viking Panzer Division, Bartos' artillery, and Mark's company. The SS cavalry managed to hold for a while, but under the tremendous pressure, started to withdraw. Therefore, the advance from the north threatened to cut off the battery.

Since the Viking's Commander again drafted Mark's unit to carry out reconnaissance in force with the Germans, there was no infantry ahead of the artillery.

As Ivan proved too strong, Mark's unit and their German partners in the operation withdrew toward the village of Sarpentele under heavy pressure. When Ivan ran out of steam and halted the advance, Mark's battle-weary company started digging in. They suddenly had not found the artillerists behind them. They apparently had not managed to survive without infantry protection.

"I wonder what happened to our artillerists," Kulich asked Mark while they were checking the lines.

"Ivan could have run them over," Mark replied. "I'm going to miss Bartos and Gara. They were a couple of good guys."

Two hours after they settled in and put out their guards, the tired artillerists arrived. Apparently, they managed to get away from the advancing Russians. "Where were you?" Mark asked when Bartos staggered into his billet, dead tired.

"After our erstwhile leader sent you off with the Krauts to chase Ivan, we learned about the advance to the north of us. The brains in HQ delayed our order to withdraw by a few hours."

"How typical," Mark mused.

"Anyway, after receiving the order to withdraw, we started toward this goddamned place. We thought your

team was somewhere between the Russians and us. However, when Ivan appeared in large numbers, we figured they overran you. The last time I talked to Gara, he said he'd miss you," Bartos said.

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get away?"

"The same way as we did at the Jedlina Forest. We were lucky though, we managed to knock out a couple of tanks, fought off the enemy infantry, and lost only two horses. Now shut up, Marcus, and let's have something to eat."

After dark, Gara's cannons arrived and orders came from division to move the artillery again. This time they did not have to go too far, just to the other side of the village, taking up a firing position by a highway. A regiment of German tanks counterattacked, and in need of panzer grenadiers, the commander again expropriated the remainder of Mark's reconnaissance company. The artilleryists were without infantry cover again.

The counterattack proved successful. The German and Hungarian Armies took a firm stand. Behind them, the engineers began building fortifications, the so-called Margit Line.

Both sides undertook painstaking reorganization. The Russians were getting ready for the next big push, and the defenders were bracing for the inevitable attack.

Mark's unit now appeared inextricably fused with an armored regiment. Stationed east of the artillery, Mark did not worry about his friends. The company's assignment was clear-cut: keep the Russian infantry away from the tanks. All was well until the enemy attacked. At the first sign of the Russians, the tank regiment broke and outran their infantry, reaching the Margit Line before Mark's company.

Fortunately, the Russian attack also ran out of steam. Mark again caught up with the artillerists. They again fought their way back from the vicinity of Lake Balaton completely without infantry support.

The Bartos battery had a well-organized system of observation stations and a command post in a wine cellar. When Mark entered, he found Les munching on a large stick of sausage.

“Well, well, well,” Bartos said, “the lost little lamb. Where in hell were you? We needed your guys. Do you know how hard it is to hold a position without infantry?”

“I wish I could have been with you, but Colonel Prick-head drafted us to act as his panzergrenadiers.”

“Did he let you come back?”

“He didn’t say, but he left us rearguarding their rearguard.”

“In other words, the worthy Colonel ran faster than you,” Bartos concluded.

“That’s about the size of it. Les, I really don’t know what to do. I’m down to forty-five men. This is not a company, not enough to provide infantry protection to anybody. For all intents and purposes we do not exist anymore.”

“We could absorb your unit. However, you must clear that with your battalion.”

“I’ll try,” Mark said. “Now, how about a piece of that sausage?”

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The Battalion Commander flatly turned down Mark’s request to attach his unit permanently to the artillery.

“Your ranks will be filled up soon,” the German major said. “We are getting some excellent fresh trained units and some volunteers from your military schools. I expect them any minute. Then you would be full strength

and could provide meaningful protection to the artillery. Dismissed, Lieutenant.”

Mark left the headquarters with mixed feelings.

“How did it go?” Bartos asked as Mark entered his command post.

“It was a total bust. I know I do not have enough men to protect you guys, but battalion suggested filling my ranks with half-trained, raw, unreliable troops. It gives me the shivers.”

“What are you going to do?”

“When the replacements arrive, I’ll keep all the veterans in one platoon under Vitek, and shove all the newcomers into the new platoons.”

“That is contrary to proper military procedure,” Bartos said.

“I know, but time is short and the war will be over soon. Since they can’t rely on their new, untried comrades, it would be unfair asking my veterans to teach those guys while exposing themselves to danger. I just want to maximize the chance of survival of the troops who fought so well in Galicia.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” the artillerist remarked. “The war should be over in a matter of weeks since the Germans should sue for peace unless they want their country devastated.”

During the night came the order to relocate again.

“I wish the bastards in HQ would move us during the day for a change,” Bartos complained.

“The move to the vicinity of Mezoszentes means an offensive,” Mark replied.

“I bet you the idiots are trying to relieve Budapest.”

“It would be a clever political move.”

“No, it is stupid. They should knock out that god-damned bridge over the Danube and counterattack. We could drive Ivan into the river, and the Russians encir-

cling Budapest from the west would have to swim for it,” the artillerist said angrily.

While the stupidity of the High Command always annoyed Bartos, he roused the sleepy artillerists and completed the move by the morning.

Plenty of new equipment was available following their arrival at Mezoszentes. The Hungarian troops could requisition fresh clothing and replacement weapons. In addition, the Germans had a few panzer grenadiers transferred from the West. Evidently, a major attack was brewing.

The front was quiet. Mark took out a strong patrol to see what was going on ahead of them. They reached the main square of the next village in no man’s land. Ivan was nowhere to be seen. The population greeting Mark’s patrol was not very enthusiastic. Apparently, the Russians occupied the village only for a short time and withdrew. They had not had time to commit any atrocities there, or the villagers got along with the occupying troops well.

Mark’s patrol did not intend to reoccupy the village. Their job was to estimate the strength of the enemy forces holding the community. A boy came running from the northern edge of the village, reporting a couple of T-34s coming.

That was bad news, thus Mark decided to withdraw. There was no sense in running because from the moment the tanks passed the last house, they would be in the open, and the artillery would cut them to pieces. At the last house, Mark noticed a German sentry standing on the outside smoking a cigarette. The man stood at attention and reported to Mark; he was guarding the entrance to an artillery observation station.

As the Russian tanks had not yet reached the northern boundary of the village, the patrol was in no particu-

lar hurry to withdraw. Mark went inside the house and found three Germans eating, sitting among their radio equipment.

A middle-aged lieutenant wearing a second class Iron Cross, apparently a veteran of many battles, worked on the radio. There was another man in the attic with field glasses, watching the village and the surrounding countryside. The two officers greeted each other cordially.

“I don’t want to alarm you, sir, but a couple of T-34s are coming this way,” Mark said.

“We saw them. They never come this far, Lieutenant. We have been watching them for days. They occupied the village, but always stop at the crossroads, by the bakery.”

“It seems they mean business this time; they have infantry with them.”

The noise of the tanks became louder and louder. “Hans,” the lieutenant said, “take care of the goddamned tank.”

“Jawohl,” the other guy said. In his shirtsleeves, the German stepped out of the room, picking up a Panzerfaust behind the open door.

Mark followed the man and saw him casually walking to the corner by the bakery. He waited until the first T-34 tank arrived, and then threw away the cigarette, and from a distance of no more than twenty yards, fired, hitting the tank on the side, and setting it afire. Then he leisurely walked back to the building.

“I told you,” the man said to his lieutenant as soon as he entered the room, “it was a bad idea trying to hold on to this observation station so close to Ivan. We’d better return. They are not going to mess around this time.”

Meanwhile, shooting erupted outside the house as Mark’s patrol engaged the enemy infantry. Not too many

Russians accompanied the tanks. They had not had a chance against Mark's veterans. The Russians retreated in haste.

Being sure the Russians would not attack until they got some reinforcement, Mark went inside the house and offered to stay behind for the Germans and cover their withdrawal. He was not surprised to see the soldier who knocked out the tank wearing the jacket of a sergeant with many decorations. He was a veteran too. The informal style and cool efficiency of the German team was surprising. Perhaps Mark's men were just as good, but they were the elite of the Hungarian Army, while the Krauts were just a run of the mill Wehrmacht unit.

*It was perplexing. How could anybody lose a war with such high quality fighting men?* Mark thought.

He concluded the Germans were losing only because of the stupidity of their High Command. From the back of his mind, a conversation with Mr. Wessel at the Golden Saddle popped up. It was now clear to him: Hitler was like a riverboat gambler, wanting to break the bank against all odds, but instead, he went bust and broke Germany as well.

That night, the Russians withdrew at least ten miles from the Margit Line, and the Viking occupied two of the neighboring villages.

Mezoszentes was a pleasant little town. The division's commander set up his headquarters there. The fall of Budapest reached the troops while they were setting up a defensive perimeter around the forward observation station of the Bartos battery. Some of the soldiers wept like children.

Kulich attempted to keep up the morale of the company, saying that the Germans would help take back Budapest, as soon as the miracle weapon came on line. However, nobody believed him.

A few days later, orders came for Mark and Bartos to attend an important briefing by the Commander of the Viking Armored Division in Mezoszentes. The site of the meeting was the movie theatre of the town.

Only two Hungarians were present: Lieutenant Bartos and Mark. They were part of the Viking on direct orders of General Winters.

The average age of the tank commanders present at the briefing may have been less than twenty. The faces of many of these young officers never saw a razor from close quarters, but some of these youngsters had considerable combat experience. In every respect, they were veterans.

Brigadier Dietrich gave a short pep talk, assuring everybody of quick, decisive victory, "The codename of our offensive is the Rising of Spring. We are going to break through the Siberian Guards near Lake Balaton, advance to the south-southeast in the direction of the only bridge standing over the Danube. By taking the bridge, we shall cut Ivan's supply lines from the East. The Gross Deutschland SS Division to the north of us is going to protect our left flank and the Hungarian Army, the right."

The general stopped for a moment. Mark thought it was a sound plan if the participating units were resupplied and at full strength. However, it was common knowledge that the Gross Deutschland was about a third of its normal strength and the defeated, disorganized Hungarian Army was dysfunctional by this time, although a few officers were trying to whip the demoralized troops into shape. Even though there was a resemblance of order on the southern front, at best, the Hungarian Army Group could have held its present position with difficulty -- but to attack -- that was too much to ask for in the spring of 1945.

Apparently, it was impossible to convince the German High Command about the true state of their forces.

The Army Group operating in Hungary was in no position to mount an offensive.

The brigadier started issuing the orders to each unit under his command. In the end, he was looking at a group of black leather-jacketed tank commanders standing in the back.

“Colonel von Walden,” he said, “your regiment is going to take the point. You must capture the fuel dump northeast of Lepseny intact. There we fill up the division, strike out eastward, cross the Danube at Foldvar and sweep Ivan out of our way. By mid-March, the Gross Deutschland shall retake Budapest. By April, we’ll reach the River Tisza, and in June, we’ll enter Romania, and fill up the panzers in Ploesti. Colonel von Walden, you have the honor of leading the charge to change the course of the war.”

There was quiet in the room. In the back, a tired looking officer stood with his left hand in his pocket. He wore the black leather jacket over the uniform of the Vikings. A Knight’s Cross hung on his neck, and he wore the yellow cravat, the identifying mark of the elite Africa Corps.

“Begging the general’s pardon,” von Walden stated, “my regiment is less than half strength. We are short of ammo and fuel. The moral of the men is low, and I have doubts we could attain the objectives you’ve just outlined. We need refurbishment, rest, and many more replacements urgently to have a fighting chance of taking the fuel dump before Ivan blows it.”

“Such defeatist remarks, Colonel, are uncalled for. We all have difficulties, but we are soldiers; carry out our orders, and cope with the problems. Perhaps, von Walden, you lost your heart and your faith in victory.”

Mark thought it was bad policy to dress down a colonel in the presence of captains and lieutenants.

Doubtless, Brigadier Dietrich made a mistake. Suddenly, all eyes were on von Walden. The colonel slowly stepped forward, looked at the brigadier and quietly remarked, "No General, I have not lost my heart; I have lost my left arm," he replied and slowly pulled the empty sleeve of his jacket out of his pocket. "I'll get your fuel dump, sir, or die in the attempt."

Brigadier General Dietrich turned red as a turnip, stood up, and declared, "You all have your orders, gentlemen. Dismissed."

The young officers stood up. In the back, one of them broke into a song. "Auf der Heide blüt ein kleines Blümelein, und das heist Erika..."

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On the dark street cold wind was blowing, Mark turned up the collar of his greatcoat. Suddenly, Lieutenant Bartos, walking next to him, stopped and turned to face Mark, "Marcus, we lost the war."

"Hello, good morning, Les," Mark said quietly. "It is time you realized it. I knew it long before your battery came galloping into my sight on the road to Otinja."

"Then what are you fighting for? Your uncle could swing a safe desk job for you somewhere behind the lines."

"Listen, Les," Mark replied seriously. "I'm fighting to hold the Russians back until the Krauts come to their senses and ask for an armistice. If we manage to hang on to a part of our country, a small piece of Hungary would remain free. This is what I'm fighting for!"

For the next couple of weeks, Mark's company was continuously in action. Sometimes they advanced, at other times retreated, but they had not fought a major engagement since the Rising of Spring offensive ran out of steam. Apparently, von Walden did not take the fuel

dump, and the Russians buried him with full military honors in the cemetery of Lepseny.

The sole entertainment of the troops, apart from the rare personal interaction with members of the opposite sex was the radio. On the old sets, they could only listen to the Hungarian Station.

Mark spent most of his spare time with the artilleryists because he considered them civilized human beings. The music on Gara's radio was all right, but the news got everybody upset. "These idiots still call their station Radio Budapest, when we all know the city is in the hands of the Russians," Bartos complained.

"It doesn't bother me," Gara added. "I wouldn't care if they called it Radio Timbuktu, as long as they'd give us a clear picture."

"The newsmen always lie," Mark said. "Do you remember what they said about Mezoszentes? When Ivan chased us out there, they declared a minor readjustment of the lines in the vicinity of Mezoszentes."

"Yeah," Bartos said. "When Ivan got fed up with the place and withdrew, we just marched in, and the radio announced the Hungarian armored columns racing in the direction of Budapest, breaking through the Russian lines at Mezoszentes."

"If everything we heard on the radio were true, we'd be standing at the gates of Moscow," Gara remarked.

"How long is this tussle going to go on?" Bartos asked.

"Until either of you guys runs out of ammo, or Ivan runs out of T-34s," Mark said.

"They have an awful lot of tanks and we are very low on ammo," Bartos mused.

By the middle of March, both sides were getting ready for something decisive, perhaps a big push.

The Bartos battery, stationed southeast of the village of Enying, was in action all day. They were always shooting at something. The smell of cordite permeated the vicinity of the artillery command post.

Mark inspected his troops regularly. The soldiers knew their company commander had a handle on the situation. The sun was setting and the enemy activity abated. This was normal since Ivan did not like attacking with the sun in their eyes. After dark, about nine o'clock at night, the Russian tactics usually changed. They cut the size of their patrols and sent them out to locate targets for their air force and cannons. Mark's patrols tried intercepting the Russians or steer them in the wrong direction because Bartos always moved his guns under the cover of darkness, to keep the enemy guessing about the location of the Hungarian artillery.

It was completely dark when Mark returned to his command post. There was no activity; a corporal and two of his cronies had the post manned. Mark took off his greatcoat and stood next to the pot-bellied stove his men had liberated from a bombed-out house. A soldier entered and reported that a lady wanted to see the lieutenant. *I wonder what she wants*, Mark thought, and with a sigh he said, "Show her in!"

The soldier saluted and escorted a striking young woman into the dugout. She was tall. Her reddish blond hair peaked from under the heavy headscarf used to protect her head.

"Madam," the surprised Mark said. He bowed. "What can I do for you?"

"Can I speak to you in private?" she asked.

"Corporal, take your guys out and have a cigarette."

"Yes, sir," the man replied, and with his messengers left the bunker.

The woman removed the headscarf. She was young, no more than twenty-five, and despite the heavy sheepskin coat, Mark surmised she had a fabulous figure. Mark studied the young woman. She was not a peasant girl. Her fingernails were manicured, and her manners cultured.

“Thank you for seeing me, Lieutenant. My name is Anita. The family name is of no consequence. I came to ask you a favor.”

“Madame, rest assured I’ll do whatever I can. However, my resources are rather limited.”

“It is very hard for me to ask you such a favor,” she said, looking at the floor. “I want you to make me pregnant as soon as possible.”

Mark thought his hearing was defective.

“I beg your pardon.”

“You heard me right, Lieutenant. I want you to impregnate me.”

“Why?”

“Well, the moment you withdraw, the Russians would occupy the town. There is very little doubt several soldiers are likely to rape me, as they’ve done in the other villages. I’ll get pregnant and in nine months, I’ll have a child by one of those barbarians. To preempt that I want a Hungarian, preferably an officer fathering my baby.”

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t say no, Lieutenant, I beg you,” she pleaded.

Her sky-blue eyes were filling with tears.

“Why don’t you leave with us? You’re young and strong. Perhaps you could march as well as an infantryman.”

“No,” she said, interrupting. “I cannot leave. Someone must take care of my parents. They are old and sick. They need me. For the last time, Lieutenant, please help me.”

Mark smelled a trap. *Could she be a Russian agent?*

“Please, Lieutenant, don’t reject me. I beg you.”

Mark looked at her again, seeing the fear in her eyes. *It is impossible to fake tears so well. She is genuine,* he thought. *My God, how could this world sink so low?*

The world started closing in on Mark Kende. Certainly, she was a nice girl and to take her to bed would be a rare treat, but the circumstances were frightening. To imagine this beautiful, gentle girl in the grasp of the dirty, drunken Russian soldiers boiled his blood. However, he knew there was no power on Earth that could stop the Russians occupying this town. He could die fighting, but that would not help her. Perhaps the Russians would rape her on top of his dead body.

“Where do you want to go?” Mark asked, putting on his greatcoat and grabbing his Schmeisser.

“Come up to the house,” she said, smiling. “It is the first one down the road.”

They stepped outside into the biting wind.

“Corporal,” Mark said, “I’ll be back in an hour or so.”

“He’ll be with me in that house,” the young woman said. She pointed at the nearest residence.

“As long as I’m away, Sergeant Major Pataky is in charge. If I don’t come back in an hour, get a patrol and pick me up.”

“Yes, sir,” the corporal said. He saluted.

They walked in the dark, muddy path up to the first house, about two hundred feet from the command post at the edge of the town. It was a well-built, neat house with the traditional patio of a family with means.

“This is it,” the woman said and held Mark by the arm. “I shall go in and prepare everything. I’ll come and get you.”

“Alright,” he replied, compliantly. He stood in the shadow, while she entered the house.

*She is going to set up the room in a romantic fashion,* Mark thought leaning against the wall.

From the end of the house, suddenly subdued voices came. Mark could not make out what they were saying, but he was sure it was neither Hungarian nor German. He un-slung the Schmeisser and quietly flipped the safety off. He did not know if it was the young woman setting up the operation, or the Russians just happened to come by. Suddenly, two Russians stepped out from behind the house. They carefully looked around and put their sub-machine guns on their shoulders.

One of the Russian said something.

From behind the house, three more soldiers emerged. The tallest Russian, obviously the leader, was quietly issuing orders to his men, when the young woman suddenly opened the door, illuminating the patio where the Russians stood.

Mark did not hesitate. Despite the fact she was standing behind the Russians, he fired. From such a close range, it was impossible to miss, and the five soldiers went down. Mark did not wish to take any chances, and emptied the magazine into the tangled mass of bodies. He clicked the spare clip in place and waited. None of the Russians moved.

The young woman stood there completely immobilized, frozen like an iceberg. “Are you alright?” Mark asked quietly.

She nodded. “I could have gotten you killed,” she whispered softly.

“Go inside, close the door, I’ll be back,” Mark said. He trotted back to the command post. When he got there, the guards were on edge because of the shooting, but otherwise all was well.

He took three men with him and returned to the house.

Although Mark was concerned about his own callousness, for some reason the killing of five human beings did not upset him at all. For a fleeting moment, the primeval justification of subduing the challengers for the favors of Anita gave him satisfaction.

The infantrymen pulled the bodies off the patio into the garden while Mark entered the building. In the neat kitchen, he found her sitting behind the table wearing a flannel housecoat with her face buried in her hands. She jumped up and rushed to Mark.

“Forgive me. I didn’t know they were here. Is our deal still on?”

“If you insist, yes, but now you have no alternative, you must flee. The Russians may decide to look for partisans in this house. They would find you, rape you, and kill you in the most painful fashion.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Look, your parents are not in any danger. I believe the Russians would not hurt them. However, you must get away from this house. When the battles are over, you could return.”

“Even if I go to Uncle Paul’s house, just down the street, I’ll be raped,” she said in resigned tone. “Lieutenant, please...”

That was the first time a beautiful woman was begging Mark to climb into her bed. “As you wish; let’s go.”

“Gladly,” she said and led Mark into the bedroom. As they entered, she dropped the housecoat. She was completely naked underneath.

The girl’s tender touch and her warm lips rekindled the most cherished moments of the not too distant past, seemingly a few lifetimes ago when the veil of glory, chivalry and patriotism had covered the ugly face of war. The

fleeting moments of happiness with Anita made Mark forget the war and the circumstances of how he got into the bed of such a spectacular woman. Within an hour, he was back at the command post, just in time for the beginning of the night's activities.

Next morning, there was peace and quiet in every sector. Even the cannons of Lieutenant Bartos were quiet. There were a few brief firefights with Russian combat teams during the night, but there was no major action. In the afternoon, the Russians launched a probing attack by some T-34 tanks, but the well-directed, accurate fire of the Bartos battery put an end to the venture.

Contrary to expectations, at four o'clock in the afternoon, the Russian artillery fired a few shells at the last known position of the guns. As there was nothing there, the infantrymen did not worry.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening, when Mark finished his inspections and returned to the command post. In the twilight, he spied at a strange motor vehicle standing under a large tree. Just to be on the safe side, he checked his Schmeisser and approached the vehicle carefully. The driver's side door opened, and Sergeant Schultz climbed out. He looked ten years older since their last meeting on the other side of the Carpathians. Schultz saluted and stood at attention.

"At ease, Sergeant," Mark said. "Is this an official visit or just a social call?"

"I'm afraid it is official, sir," the German replied. "I have special orders for you from General Winters. They were copied to General Dietrich and forwarded to your battalion commander," he said handing over a thick envelope.

Mark tore it open. It contained transfer papers in his name to the staff of the Second Army Group Headquarters, as a liaison officer and personal adjutant to

Generaloberst Carl von Winters. In addition, the envelope held two transfer orders without names and a white envelope addressed to him. He tore it open. It was a handwritten note from the general.

*Dear Lieutenant Kende,*

*I need you for a very special mission, thus I had you transferred to my staff. It is a very important and dangerous mission. Take two of your best NCOs with you. Their transfer papers are also enclosed. You have to enter their names. Sergeant Schultz has orders to drive you and your team to my headquarters immediately.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Carl von Winters*

*Generaloberst, Commander of the Second Army Group*

*Generals do not usually write such letters to lowly lieutenants justifying their transfer unless there was something very special about the move, Mark thought.*

Mark invited Schultz into the command post. He wrote notes to Sergeants Pataky and Vitek, ordering them to hand over their responsibilities to the most reliable person under their command and with all their gear report to the command post. He also ordered Pataky to bring the Russian woman as well. After the runners left to deliver the notes, he called Ensign Kulich.

As it was dinnertime, a large can of goulash was simmering over the little pot bellied stove. Schultz and Mark consumed the contents of the large can with ease. Obviously, the sergeant had not had anything to eat in quite a long time. He ate most of the juicy, greasy beef soup by himself.

“Now I could do with a gallon of beer, a bed, and a good woman,” Schultz said.

“I cannot help you. All I have is some miserable red wine, which would remove the paint off a cannon’s barrel, but you’re welcome to it.”

“It’s better than nothing,” Schultz said. He took a long swig from the bottle offered by Mark. “That was nice, Lieutenant, I’m beginning to feel human again.”

Kulich arrived first. He looked fresh and well rested. “Frank,” Mark said, “I’m sure you remember Sergeant Schultz from our battle on Otinja Road.”

“Sure do. I couldn’t forget him. He took me to the parade on his motorbike to collect my Iron Cross. It is nice to see you again, Sergeant.”

“Well, he brought special orders for Pataky, Vitek, and me. General Winters transferred us to his staff, effective immediately. No doubt, he has a suicide mission planned for us. Schultz took copies of the general’s orders to Battalion and now you’re officially the Company Commander. Congrats, Frank, and please, take good care of the poor bastards.”

They shook hands. “You took my company sergeant major and my best platoon leader,” Kulich said with apprehension in his voice.

“I already told them to hand over their responsibilities to the most appropriate person and report here on the double.”

“Let us hope there was somebody sane enough to take over. These are not the same soldiers who fought so well at the Otinja roadblock.”

*They are a defeated bunch,* Mark thought, but did not say anything.

“You’re lucky to be out of here. We are stuck and will most likely end up dead or in a Siberian prisoner of war camp,” Kulich continued.

“While I may be dead taking on General Winters’ special project.”

The sergeants arrived at that point. “Well,” Mark said, picking up his bag, “See you after the war Frank. Best of luck to you.”

“Take care of yourself, Marcus,” Kulich said, as they shook hands again.

When the Russian interpreter got into the truck, Schultz raised his eyebrow, but said nothing. The German obviously realized the fourth member of Mark’s team was a woman. Vitek whispered something to Schultz. “Ah so...” the German said and smiled.

In about an hour, they arrived at the town of Csorna. Schultz put the vehicle into a barn and walked his passengers across the street to the school. Only a single guard stood in the shadows. He challenged Schultz when they came within hailing distance.

The Army Group Headquarters were different from the one Mark visited in Galicia. Here, the HQ-company was much smaller. In the anteroom only one officer, an armed sergeant and a radio operator were on duty.

“My name is Captain Hausmann,” the duty officer introduced himself. “I understand you’re General Winters’ commandos.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied, with apprehension in his voice. He did not like the captain calling him a commando. The Brits called their elite troops commandoes. Those guys carried out dangerous missions in enemy territory. Mark most sincerely hoped the general would not send them behind Soviet lines.

“Go to the basement, Lieutenant,” the captain said, “have a little rest. The general will see you around eight thirty, after the morning briefing.”

Mark checked his watch; it was 0130. He had not had six hours of uninterrupted sleep for a long time.

The commandos went down to the basement, finding some straw on the floor. A few people were already sleeping under their blankets or greatcoats.

“By the way, what did you tell Schultz?” Mark asked Vitek.

“I told him Nina was your fiancée.”

“At least we avoided further unpleasant questions,” Mark mused.

They found a quiet corner and lay down. As soon as his head hit his kitbag, which he used as a pillow, Mark fell asleep.

## Chapter Nineteen

Steve Pataky woke Mark around seven o'clock. "I found a cup of hot water for you," the sergeant said. "You can use it to make ersatz coffee, or shave in it."

"I'll shave," Mark replied. He sat up and got to it. By the time Captain Hausmann appeared asking Mark to follow him, the Hungarians had made themselves presentable.

The office of General Winters was not as sumptuous as Mark expected. It was the principal's office in peacetime, and now the office cum residence of the Supreme Commander of all Axis forces south and west of the River Danube.

The general appeared tired and worn, with dark shadows around his eyes. His gaze was steady and had a little smile for Mark, when he came in with Captain Hausmann reporting for duty.

"Leave us, Eric," the general said to the captain. He turned to Mark. "Sit down, Marcus. By the way, is that what your friends call you?"

"Yes, sir."

"I presume you still do not smoke."

"No, sir," Mark replied.

"Well, make yourself comfortable. We spoke of you often with your uncle, Colonel Knezits. He's the liaison officer of the Hungarian High Command. They just left for Bavaria."

Mark sat facing the general, wondering what Peter might have said about him.

"All right, Marcus, I'm going to give you the most important mission of this goddamned war. It will not win it for us, but for me it is far more important than victory. You may turn it down and remain here as part of my staff, but if you accept it, please see it through."

“I understand, General,” Mark said. He sarcastically added, “Is there a special intersection you want me to hold, sir?”

“No,” the general said with a smile. “This is an entirely different proposition. Tell me, Marcus: do you believe in the final victory?”

“This is an unfair question, sir.”

“Why?”

“If I say no, you can have me shot as a defeatist.”

“Well said, my friend. It proves I can pick my men right. In case you’re interested, I do not believe in victory either.”

Mark was not surprised. He knew von Winters was a professional soldier, and as such, he had to see the looming defeat.

“I picked you, Marcus, because you’re not a German, and according to Peter, Hitler has not infected your mind with his Nazi nonsense, the miracle weapon, the Alpine redoubt, and all the other crap. I doubt you’d report my defeatist beliefs,” the general said.

Mark began to feel the utmost respect for the general. “Anyway,” Winters continued, “I expect the Russians starting a two pronged attack, a big push in the direction of Vienna in the north and Graz on the south. I cannot slow them down much, let alone hold them up. The only way for me to come out as a victor is if you can snatch my family from the outskirts of Vienna and take them to safety in Switzerland. Are you willing to try?”

“Yes, sir,” Mark replied without thinking. “It does not seem dangerous at all.”

“Wait till you meet those cantankerous females.”

“What should I do if they don’t want to come with me?”

“Hogtie those contrary women and throw them in your truck,” the general replied with a twinkle in his eyes.

“Seriously, if Marlene would not want to go, just tell her to remember the Titanic.”

“Rest assured, sir,” Mark declared, “I shall get them to Switzerland.”

“Thank you. Although I’ll give you the necessary travel orders and documents, there’s still the possibility of a half-witted SS officer or a Gestapo man wanting to arrest and execute you as a deserter, despite your legitimate written orders from me. Are you willing to take that chance?”

“I see no reason why I shouldn’t. There is hardly any danger involved.”

“As long as I’m in command here, you’re safe. However, if Mr. Hitler learns about sending my family abroad, he would say I’m a defeatist and cannot be trusted anymore. Most likely he would have me shot immediately.”

“Would they execute you for that?”

“Of course. He had a couple of generals shot already for smuggling their families out of Germany. If the Gestapo shot me, the papers in your pocket won’t be worth a pinch of shit. In fact, if they caught you with the family of a traitor, they’d shoot you on the spot too.”

“Credit me with some brains, sir. If I heard the Nazis executed you, I would not use the papers signed by you. I always have a couple of blank travel orders in my pocket issued by the Royal Hungarian Army, 307<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division.”

“Why do you keep those orders?”

“A long time ago, I swore never to become a POW of the Russians, sir. Most likely, when the end comes, the High Command would order me to surrender with my company. I’d disobey that order and make out a travel order for us to the west. My company was well armed.

They're a bunch of tough, disciplined veterans, and in a chaotic situation nobody could stop us."

"Remarkable."

"How should I take your family to Switzerland, sir?"

"I'm going to give you a truck and Sergeant Schultz. He has been with me since the Great War. He is an excellent driver; you can trust him with your life. I'll give you three envelopes with three sets of orders. The first one is for you, Schultz and three Hungarian NCOs to take important strategic documents to Vienna following the safest route from Csorna. Actually, you'll have a crate containing the Second Army Group's War Diaries. They are not important, but if anyone demands to see it, you'd have something to show him. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"When you arrive in Baden, put my wife and daughters on the truck, burn the first orders, and take the second set. It says you're taking confidential documents from Vienna to the SS Headquarters in Innsbruck. The order specifically states that you may use any route you choose. However, I do not want you to go near the SS. As soon as you have entered the city, burn the second set of documents and use the third one. This is from Seppl. He is the Commanding General of an SS Panzer Division. According to those orders, you're taking important state documents for safekeeping to Switzerland. I understand the SS made several shipments like this from Innsbruck. According to the grapevine, those cases contained gold bars. If you show this order to the border guards, they'll let you through. In fact, the Swiss would grant you asylum and confiscate your weapons."

"I understand, sir."

"As far as finances are concerned, don't worry. I have an account at Credit Suisse, and my wife has all the codes. Although my father had some business interest in

Switzerland, which I did not liquidate, we are not rich. Nevertheless, we can look after you and your guys for a while.”

“You won’t have to, sir. I have a Swiss account too, a trust set up by my grandfather.”

“That is good,” Winters said with obvious satisfaction. “As the Americans rule the skies and shoot at anything that moves, travel only at night. It is much slower, but safer. During the day, the roads are full of refugees anyway. I think you should leave tonight.”

“Yes, sir,” Mark said, but did not move.

“Is there anything you want to ask or say?”

“May I ask you a favor, sir?”

“Shoot!”

“I have a woman with me. Technically, she is a Russian prisoner of war. However, I do not want her falling into Ivan’s hands under any circumstances.”

“Why?”

“She was an interpreter of the Ukrainian Guards and witnessed the execution of an American pilot by the NKVD. The Russian goons wanted to shoot her too, but somehow she got away.”

“Why do you want to save her?”

“First, the parents of the American flyboy ought to know their son died a hero’s death standing up for the Hungarian family, which saved him from us. Second, she might be a star witness at the war crimes trial of the Russian Commander ordering the execution.”

“There will be no trial, son. In this war, the winners will be the heroes and the losers, the war criminals, regardless of their deeds,” the general said.

“I’d like to believe you’re wrong, sir.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not wrong, but since this issue is important to you, take the Russian woman with you to

Switzerland. My wife will outfit her with proper clothing.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mark said, with a great sigh of relief.

“One last thing, Marcus,” the general said seriously. “If the Russians catch up with you, shoot my wife and the girls before those barbarians lay their grimy hands on them. This is an order!”

Mark’s head was buzzing from the many things von Winters told him. The tone of the general’s voice shocked him. He evidently knew what the Russians were capable of doing to women. Mark suddenly began to understand Anita and started worrying about his mother and Judy, but realized he could do nothing for them.

After filling in Pataky and Vitek about the nature of their assignment, they left Csorna just before sunset. Mark figured the Americans would not fly sorties in the twilight. He was right. The Lightnings and the Mustangs did not disturb the peace on the roads. As soon as they crossed the border, they encountered the first checkpoint manned by soldiers of the Second Army Group. They respected the signature of General von Winters and let them pass.

As Schultz knew the way in Baden, they located the general’s villa. It was an elegant, yellow house built near the turn of the century with elaborate stucco façade and had a wrought iron fence. Schultz honked the horn; an elderly man came out onto the sidewalk.

“What do you want?” he asked brusquely.

“Hello, Hansl,” Schultz said, sticking his head out of the truck’s window.

“Ah, it is you, Andreas. Do you have any news about the general?” asked the morose, unfriendly man with a grim smile.

“The general is all right,” Schultz said.

“Who are your companions? They are Hungarians, aren’t they?”

“You’re right. This is Lieutenant Kende, the first adjutant of the general.”

“Come on in,” he said, opening the wrought iron gate.

The truck rolled into the courtyard, and Schultz and Mark got out. Hansl just stood there looking at them.

“Why did the general pick a Hungarian adjutant?” He asked Schultz.

“He wanted to be sure that he was not one of Adolph’s glory boys,” the sergeant replied.

“I see. Come into the house, Lieutenant.” Hansl opened the heavy oak door with the longheaded knocker. Mark and Schultz entered.

A priceless Venetian crystal chandelier illuminated the hall of the villa, but only every second bulb was working. “Follow me,” Hansl told Mark and took him inside the house.

They entered a large room furnished with elegant antique furniture. On the gun rack two old, silver-plated hunting rifles kept the various knives and pistols company. The paintings on the walls depicted soldiers in the uniform of the Austrian Imperial Dragoons, bearing the rank insignia of colonels and generals. Their facial features resembled General Winters. The smaller pictures were prints of hunting scenes.

“This is the general’s study,” the man said. “Sit down, I’ll get Frau Winters.”

A huge bookcase, holding many leather bound volumes covered the full length of the room. Mark thought he would enjoy browsing through the bookcase, but then the general’s wife entered.

She was short, well rounded with blonde hair and blue eyes, wearing an elegant silk housecoat, which fit the aristocratic surroundings.

“I’m Marlene Winters.” She stepped toward Mark, offering her hand.

“Lieutenant Mark Kende,” he replied, clicking his heels, and kissing her hand.

“What can I do for you, Lieutenant?”

“The general ordered me to take you and your daughters to Switzerland.”

“Is it really necessary?”

“Ma’am, if you do not want to go, according to the general’s orders, I must hogtie all the cantankerous females in his household, dump them in my truck, and head for Switzerland,” Mark said with a smile.

“That sounds like him. Did he tell you anything else?”

“Yes, Ma’am, he told me to remind you of what happened to the Titanic before I bring up the rope.”

“I understand. We’ll have our suitcases packed and ready to move in a matter of minutes. Is there anything else?”

“Yes, Ma’am, I have a woman with me, wearing men’s clothing. The general said that you could outfit her.”

“Does she speak German?”

“Not much, but she is fluent in English and Russian.”

“That is all right,” she said, “we all speak English.”

It was a couple of hours before sunrise when they set out. Mark wanted to go through Wienerneustadt because, on the way to Baden, he saw the large airport with several aircraft bearing Hungarian markings. If he could find an officer whom he had met in Russia, perhaps he could arrange someone to fly them to Switzerland.

Mark's attempt was not completely successful, although he found an officer he knew well, Captain Johnny Varjas, the most decorated Hungarian flyer.

"How is my favorite rear gunner?" the pilot asked when they shook hands. "I'm surprised you made it so far."

"It was rough. I'm not a flyer, and I had to take the low road."

"The high road wasn't much fun either," Varjas mused.

They had a drink from Mark's flask, and chatted about many inconsequential things. In the end, Mark openly asked the captain for an aircraft and a pilot to fly his cargo to Switzerland. Varjas smiled. "I have plenty of aircraft with the appropriate range; I have fuel too, but I do not have a pilot crazy enough to try it."

"Why?" Mark queried.

"To start with, during the day, the Americans rule the skies. They would shoot you down. We don't have fighters to protect you. Even if you managed to fly into Switzerland, the Swiss fighters or their anti-aircraft batteries would likely shoot you down. If we attempted the trip during the night, it would be impossible to find the appropriate airport. I could find Switzerland all right, but I would not like to make a forced landing after dark in the Alps somewhere. Besides, we cannot get the weather info, and don't know the airport codes. No, Marcus, forget it."

As the excuses were legit, Mark gave up the idea of flying to Switzerland. They chatted for a while about the good old days, and before the sun started peeking over the horizon, Mark decided to leave and travel for an hour or so.

"I guess I'm going to stick to the low road, Johnny," Mark said, as they parted company.

“Hals und beinbruch, Marcus,” said the flyer, using the standard goodbye of all air force officers, meaning break a leg. He waved farewell.

When they started out to the south, the refugee columns were not out in force yet. Thus, the truck covered a respectable distance. However, at sunrise, at a crossroad, they ran into a column of civilians herded by Hungarian Military Policemen. Apparently, they were Jews since most of them had the yellow Star of David on their chests.

Mark stuck his head out on the window, ordering one of the guards to give the column a rest, and let their truck go by.

“Just a minute, sir,” the fellow replied. “I must run up to the head of the column and ask the commander.”

“All right,” Mark said, “but be quick about it.”

As the man left a hole in the guard coverage, two young men broke from the ranks and started running. One was lucky, as he ran toward the buildings on the west side of the road, disappearing from sight, but the other guy headed to the east on the open field. The next guard kneeled down, wrapped the strap of his rifle around his arm, aimed, and fired. The running man stopped, and then collapsed. He was evidently wounded, but not dead.

The guard, shouldering his rifle, joined the march. When he drew level with the cab of Mark’s truck, he remarked, “Don’t worry about him, Lieutenant. He’ll bleed to death by the evening.”

In the back of the truck, Mrs. Winters covered the eyes of her youngest daughter, but the other two stared in wide-eyed horror.

Eventually, the column stopped, and they let the truck pass. While they pulled away from the group, they

heard a couple of rifle shots. Evidently, some more people had attempted to escape.

“Why are these guys still trying to exterminate those poor Jews?” asked Schultz. “For all intents and purposes the war is over. Adolph is finished. Why don’t they see it?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps they believe in the miracle weapon.”

“Miracle weapon, my arse.”

They traveled for almost another hour before stopping at a small village in the foothills. Schultz hid the truck in the orchard of a farmer, and they all went to sleep. Pataky took the first shift to stand watch.

Mark stretched out on the mattresses in the back of the truck, and woke up early in the afternoon. He was still half asleep when he heard Pataky and Vitek talking outside the truck.

“I’m going to sit out the rest of the war in the Swiss internment camp,” Pataky said. “It is going to be more comfortable than a POW camp anywhere. After tempers have cooled, I shall return to Hungary.”

“You’re crazy. You hunted partisans in the Ukraine, killed Russian civilians. Ivan is likely to hang you, like we hung those poor fellows at KP 318,” replied Vitek.

“I was ordered to do so.”

“The Russians don’t give a shit. They may not hang you, but send you to Siberia instead. You’ll die there just the same, and believe me, it will be much worse than the hanging. As long as the Russkies are in Hungary, I ain’t going home,” Vitek said.

“Perhaps you’re right. I may as well stay in Switzerland until they leave. I hope it won’t be very long.”

“They may hang around for a year or so. Then we can go home.”

“What are you going to do when you get home?” Pataky asked.

“The same thing I did before I was drafted. I’m going back to my hometown and work in the wildlife business of the squire. In five years, I’ll be a supervisor, like my father. Than I’ll marry Susanna, and have six kids.”

“Will she wait for you?”

“I hope so, but if she doesn’t, there are plenty of girls in our town. What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to stay in the army. I already have eight years of service. Of these four were war years, which count double, and one year in the front lines. That counts triple. All together, I have twelve years of service. If I stayed in for another eight years, I’d get a pension.”

Mark understood his friends had definite plans for after the war. He just wanted to sail across the Atlantic and stay at the Golden Saddle again.

Although the mountains hid the village well, the refugees from Eastern Austria and Hungary were crowding the little known side road. The covered wagons kept lumbering toward the southwest, hoping to find refuge from the fighting and the Russian occupation. When Mark got up, he shaved and washed. The weather was clear, not a single cloud in the sky. Mrs. Winters stepped up to Mark, asking why they did not leave.

“The weather is too good, Ma’am,” Mark replied. “If I were a pilot, I would fly now. If we took the road, the Americans would likely attack the truck. I cannot take chances with such valuable passengers. We shall wait until sunset and then start.”

“Are you planning to cross the Alps in the dark?”

“Yes, Ma’am, it may be slow, but we’ll be safe from air attacks.”

“Are the American airplanes so dangerous?”

As for answering Marlene Winters' question, the noise of aircraft engines broke up their conversation.

"Get down," ordered Mark, and pushed the woman on the ground.

Two fighters flew over the road. They were not flying as low as Mark previously saw them. Nevertheless, they were going to attack the column of refugees, even though there was not a single soldier or a military vehicle on the road.

The planes flew off to the north, making a large circle, and came back with their guns blazing. They took only one pass, and then flew off to the north.

The single pass of the two American fighters wreaked havoc among the refugees. There were many wounded people and horses on the road. Although Mrs. Winters wanted to help, Mark restrained her, "Ma'am, you're not a doctor and you do not have any medicine. If you go there, you'll expose yourself to the next attack. Stay put!"

When the sun started setting, Mark loaded the passengers on the truck and started toward Innsbruck. In total darkness, they arrived at a small town. Schultz wanted to fill up the truck from their own reserves. However, before reaching a place where they could have stopped, they ran into a checkpoint. A Wehrmacht officer, a major, stepped to the driver's side and ordered Schultz out of the truck.

"Belay that order, Sergeant," said Mark. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Schultz pulling a forty-five from his boots. Mark switched to Hungarian and quietly remarked, "Get ready to shoot it out, fellows!"

He heard the faint clicks of Vitek and Pataky getting their Schmeissers ready. Mark got out of the cab, his submachine gun ready to fire, and walked over to the German officer.

“Lieutenant Kende, mission commander reporting, sir,” he said and made sure his greatcoat was open and the Knight’s Cross visible.

“Lieutenant, I need your truck to take supplies to the Alpine Redoubt. Please order your driver and passengers out. My men will unload your cargo.”

“I regret I cannot comply with your request, sir. I have strict orders from Generaloberst Winters to make this delivery,” and he handed over the travel orders.

“Although your documents are in order, I must insist,” the major said, handing the papers back to Mark. “You could requisition a smaller vehicle later.”

Without further arguments, Mark slightly raised the barrel of his Schmeisser and quietly stated, “Major, I regret, I still cannot comply with your request. The general personally ordered me to make this delivery at the earliest, and in case anyone attempted to stop me, he authorized the use of force. I have special troops under the canvas with automatic weapons, ready for just such an eventuality. Please don’t force my hand.”

The major looked at the slowly rising barrel of the Schmeisser and thought not to push his luck further. The fact of Mark having a Knight’s Cross suggested the bearer was a lucky madman, not afraid to start shooting. In addition, the strict orders from Winters made the major change his mind. Obviously, he realized there was no sense being shot over a miserable truck in the last few days of the war.

“Alright, Lieutenant, you may pass.”

“Thank you, sir,” Mark replied, saluted, climbed back into the cab, and said quietly, “Let’s go, Schultz!”

The heavy truck lurched forward. From here on, they followed the picturesque Mur River Valley, but they did not see much of the beauty of mountains because they traveled at night. At sunrise, Mark decided to push

on using the twisting and turning mountain roads to the next village. There, they pulled into a farmer's orchard, and bedded down for the day.

Late in the afternoon, they hit the road again. The alpine tracks were treacherous and progress was very slow. When the sun rose, Mark decided to take the wheel over from Schultz and keep going because it was unlikely the American fighters visiting the little used track would attack a single vehicle. However, upon reaching the more densely populated area, they bedded down for the day.

After sunset, they ran into a checkpoint manned by regular German soldiers. They did not argue about the travel orders, but held them up for hours. A carton of cigarettes to the sergeant at the gate secured his cooperation, and the truck was on its way. They followed the main road for a while and stopped several times at different military checkpoints, but their luck held. The guards respected the orders issued by General Winters.

Next day, at the Innsbruck city limits, they ran into an SS roadblock. The commander of the guard was most obliging.

"If you wish, Lieutenant, I can personally escort you and your truck to the headquarters," the Sturmfuehrer commanding the checkpoint suggested.

"That would be nice, Sturmfuehrer, but I don't want you to abandon your post for my sake," Mark replied.

"Makes no difference, we do not get much traffic here," the SS man replied. "I just want to go to town and have a drink."

"Tell you what, Sturmfuehrer," Mark said, "tell me where I can have a drink, and I'll leave you a bottle of snaps."

That was a potent argument dissuading the German from going along with them to show the way. Neverthe-

less, he drew a map of the streets illustrating the shortest route to the headquarters and the pub on the way.

“When you get to the pub, ask for Liza and tell her Heinrich sent you. She’ll look after you as if you were kings,” the Sturmfuhrer said when they parted.

Schultz drove past both places, but did not stop. Just before leaving the city, Mark opened the last set of travel orders. He expected the last hundred miles to be the most dangerous part of their trip.

Through several Wehrmacht checkpoints, they reached Landeck, and spent the day there. At nine o’clock, Mark took a deep breath and told Schultz to start the last twenty-five mile dash for the border.

On the twisting and turning alpine road, there were no checkpoints. As they passed the side road to the village of Pfunds, a few miles from Switzerland a patrol of border guards stopped them, but respected Mark’s written orders.

A few minutes later, while coming out of a turn, they spied a village in the distance. To their great relief the streetlights were on. They knew it was Switzerland. Mark pounded on the roof. Pataky’s face appeared in the rear window.

“We are coming to the last obstacle, Steve,” Mark said. “Keep your weapons ready, but don’t shoot until I give the order.”

“We know.”

Suddenly, Schultz stood on the brake, and brought the truck to a halt. There was a gate in front of them; two black uniformed SS men stood in their way. The barrier had no lights, and it was difficult to see beyond it. One of the guards, a noncommissioned officer, and a master sergeant stepped to Mark’s side of the truck demanding the papers.

After studying them, he turned to Mark, "I must telephone Innsbruck, sir, and verify these orders."

"I'm rather pressed for time," Mark replied, calmly.

"I'm sorry, sir, we have many deserters passing through here every day. You wouldn't believe the stories they come up with."

*If the SS man called Innsbruck, they would arrest me and most likely shoot everybody in the truck.*

"I'm afraid there is no time for that, Sergeant," Mark said quietly. "Our Swiss counterpart is waiting for us at the border station, and they close at ten o' clock. If you try the call to Innsbruck, and you would not get through in time, we would be in trouble."

"I've heard this before, Lieutenant. I'm not buying."

Mark suddenly realized the sergeant was not Waffen SS, but one of those troops, which guarded camps and served as bullyboys for Hitler. Although several badges covered the sergeant's chest, he held no decorations, which front line soldiers acquire.

"I'm not going to argue with you, but if I get our shipment to Switzerland without our associates waiting, we stand a chance of having it confiscated. I'm not going to be responsible for that. Therefore, to cover my arse, Sergeant, I need your name, ID number, and be quick about it," Mark said.

The German was uncertain for a moment, then took a deep breath and announced, "Sergeant Wilhelm Rausch, serial number 2213-98 AB."

"Do I look like a complete idiot, Sergeant? I could tell you I'm the son of the pope. I'm sure you would not believe me without showing you my ID. So let me see some papers."

The sergeant was dumbfounded, and just stood there.

"In addition," Mark said, "how do I know you're not just a bunch of outlaws setting up a barrier here to hijack

the gold shipments of the Reich to Switzerland. Why you may even be a Russian paratrooper..." his voice trailed.

Mark cocked the Schmeisser, and held it on the sergeant continuing, "Now my friend, you signal your apes to raise the barrier, step up on the running board, and accompany me to the Swiss border station. If you step off, I'll shoot you. If I miss, one of my men in the back of the truck will not. Now raise that goddamned barrier."

The sergeant stood there like a statue.

"Listen, if you hold us up, and I cannot deliver my shipment, I will hold you personally responsible. In that case, you will wish I'd shot you," Mark continued.

The sergeant raised his arm and signaled to someone near the barrier.

For a painstaking moment nothing happened, but then the barrier rose.

"Hop aboard, Sergeant," Mark ordered.

The German followed the order, stepping on the running board. Schultz shifted gears and the truck slowly gained momentum.

They passed the barrier, and within a few minutes, they had arrived at the Swiss border.

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The Swiss authorities disarmed them, had everybody sign requests for political asylum, and let them go. The main concern of the Swiss was if they were Jewish or not. Apparently, they immediately returned every Jewish refugee. One of the border guards accompanied the truck to the refugee center a couple of miles down the road.

Strangely, the German SS Sergeant did not rush back to fight for his beloved Fatherland. He also quietly signed the request for political asylum, and traveled on the running board of Mark's truck for the last two miles to the camp.

In the refugee-processing center, the uniformed Swiss police officers examined their documents, took statements from them, and inquired about their connections in Switzerland. Mark told them about his bank account and gave them the name of the manager, which the official wrote down.

Then separating the men from the women, the Swiss herded everybody into small temporary buildings. The men's dorm had twenty wooden benches for beds and an adjoining ablution block with basins and toilets.

At first, they were the only occupants. Schultz bunked with the Hungarians, and stayed as far from the SS man as he could. After midnight, a few exhausted refugees arrived. Most wore civilian clothing; they were visibly tired but relieved.

Mark put his head on his kit bag and fell asleep.

Next morning, the block was almost full. At seven thirty, the Swiss guards let them out and directed everybody to a third building, obviously the mess hall, to have breakfast. During the meal, Mark had a chance to check with Mrs. Winters. They were all right. The Russian woman was with them, having practically become a member of their family.

They contemplated returning to the dorm when a loudspeaker called Mrs. Winters and Mark to the commandant's office.

The Camp Commander called in the general's wife first. Mrs. Winters stayed in the office for at least half an hour. When she came out, stepping to Mark, she hugged him and whispered, "Thank you very much."

It was Mark's turn to see the representative of the Swiss Government. After he entered, the commandant introduced himself, then courteously offered a seat and a cigarette.

“Mr. Kende, your referee, Mr. Pernini of the Julius Bauer Bank, asked me to confirm your identity. You have a codeword and a number for your bank. Kindly give me the second and fifth digit of your bank account number.”

Mark had to write down the number to make sure of not making a mistake.

“Three and nine.”

The official smiled, and said, “Thank you, sir. We are going to transfer you to the main holding camp in Chur. After you settled in the camp, the manager of the bank’s local branch would look after your needs. In the holding camp, we shall check you out and issue a Nansen passport to you. After that you may go to whichever country accepts you.”

“I cannot go anywhere outside Switzerland. There is a war going on all around us. I would like to stay in this country for the time being.”

“As you wish. Mr. Pernini told me you have adequate funds to support yourself in Switzerland. You could apply for residency status later.”

“Thank you, sir. As I’m responsible for the people I arrived with, I’d be grateful if you told me what I should do for them.”

“As far as Mrs. Winters and her entourage is concerned, you shouldn’t worry. Mrs. Winters already offered to sponsor Miss Stanskaia and Mr. Schultz as members of her household. As far as Mr. Pataky, Mr. Vitek, and Mr. Rausch are concerned, there are no arrangements. They would stay in the main holding camp until the cessation of hostilities and repatriated forthwith.”

“Can I take Pataky and Vitek with me as members of my household?”

“The camp commandant in Chur will decide that. However, if any of you is on the list of wanted war criminals, the Swiss court would have to review your case.”

Mark remembered his conversation with Judge Johansson. He was sure General Vaskuti-Seidl, Colonel Hesser, Captain Vari, and the Area Commander ordering the village massacre in the Ukraine would qualify as war criminals. He agreed with that, but the nagging thought of the NKVD guys organizing the massacre at Katyn getting away scot free bothered him. Were the chetniks who carved out the eyes of Paul Berkes war criminals? How about the American fighter pilots machine-gunning the columns of refugees? Were they in the clear? Would the general ordering the fire raid on Dresden on the list? How about those Russians raping and killing the owner of Andrea Farms, and later murdering the American pilot? Were they on the war criminals' list? Did the list contain names from both sides? No, as General Winters said, the winners are going to be the heroes, and the losers war criminals, regardless of their deeds. Hurrah for justice.

“Who prepared the war criminals' list?” Mark queried.

“I don't know,” the official replied. “I'm not an expert at war crimes. I assume it was the International Tribunal.”

Organized by the Allies, no doubt, he thought and turned back to the commandant. “I see. Thank you, sir,” Mark said and walked out of the office. He sighed with relief thinking, thank God, it is over, and I'm alive. Nobody is going to make me kill again. When I leave the camp, I move into a hotel and just rest. I will try forgetting the horrors of war, and as soon as the fight is over, I will head for home at the Golden Saddle.

**THE END**