



Chapter 4

Tötenkopf

There was no appropriate opening at a University at this time, as Ernst had expected; he had returned to Germany too late for a normal admission, and there were many applicants. He might have been eligible for a transfer from the American college, but his abrupt departure had rendered his credits there incomplete, and in any event they would have been regarded as inferior. So he would join military service, and he was satisfied to do this.

He did Krista the courtesy of discussing it with her. It was not that she had any better information than he did, or that there was any reason for her to have any control over his life. But he was seeing her now, and he wanted to work it out in his own mind, and she was happy to discuss anything with him. Her opinions were readily formed and fairly predictable; any exceptional thinking would have to be done elsewhere. But her actions were not at all predictable, and could be quite intriguing.

They walked through a park, having ridden their bicycles there and parked them at the edge. This was midsummer, and it was hot. They did not hold hands or otherwise touch. In America couples were frequently observed in physical contact, even kissing in public, but this was not that decadent land and the two of them were not creatures of the lower class. Both his family and hers were properly conservative. Public displays were not expected, and intimate contacts were properly reserved for marriage and privacy. Ernst had been taking a risk when he put his hand on her in the foyer, and she had been taking more of a risk by allowing it. Now their game of daring was over, and no contact since had been that extreme.

Krista was lovely in her light blouse and print skirt. He remained amazed at the transformation in her. It was not just that she had filled out spectacularly; she was hardly the only girl to do that. It was not that her face had cleared and become alluring in a way hardly hinted at before, though that certainly helped. Perhaps it was because of her change in hair style. Her fair hair now framed her face on its way to her shoulders, flattering it, almost molding it, and hiding its weaker aspects. But mostly it seemed to be her attitude. She had been eager and open; now she was more assertive and suggestive. That did wonders for her personality.

"So it must be the *Wehrmacht* or the SS," he said. "Which is better?"

"The *Schutzstaffel*," she said immediately "The SS, as it is called, the Order of the Death's Head. Its classy black uniform is wonderful, and it carries a tantalizing aura of mystery, power and terror. It is the organization that most specifically safeguards the welfare of our brave new Reich, and the very best people are members. But not the SS VT, the *Verfügungstruppe*, the troops. That's the lowest form of it. I don't think that's any better than the regular army. I don't want you marching through mud and getting your ears shot off."

He was impressed by her knowledge of the subject. He had not heard of that VT branch of the SS; it must have come into existence relatively recently. "I must admit that the notion of physical combat and random extinction on the battlefield does not appeal to me either," he said wryly. "I know that war will not be the civilized situation of a college wrestling match, wherein combatants shake hands at the finish. I prefer to serve in some capacity that utilizes my mind more than my muscles. Yet my choices are limited. If I join the elite SS, the lowly SS VT may be what they put me in. In that case, I might be better off in the *Wehrmacht*, the regular army, where I should qualify for officer's training."



"You could be an officer in the SS," she pointed out.

"With my incomplete education? Without NPEA or national service? I fear they would laugh me right out of the SS if I applied."

"But you have qualifications," she insisted. "Your father is a Party member with good connections. He could get you a commission."

That was possible, Ernst realized. But he wasn't satisfied. "I prefer to earn my own place, if I can."

"That's not the way it works," she argued. "You have to have connections. No one gets anywhere by merit alone. Do you think you were given command of your Youth group because of your ability or enthusiasm? Your father pulled a string, as mine did for me."

He sighed. It was true. Merit alone was not enough, because there were many meritorious young men and women. "Still, this is not an aspect of the system I like."

They entered a shelter. For the moment they were out of sight of anyone else, and unlikely to be disturbed by surprise. "You have to use what you have," she said, drawing him inside and into a corner. She pressed herself against him. "I did not like having to wheedle my father into making your father invite me to your house, but I did. I did not like letting you paw me, in order to get your attention, but I did. Because it was the only way. You don't have to like what you have to do to get your commission, but it's the only way. So do it."

"I am intrigued by your logic, but not convinced."

She took his hand and pressed it against her blouse, and the firm breast beneath. "What must I do to convince you?"

She had succeeded in startling him again, but he did not try to draw his hand away. That was a very fine and intriguing surface he felt. Her device might be crude, but it was effective. "You already have my attention, Krista; you don't have to let me paw you any more." Was she conscious of his irony? This time she was in effect pawing herself. Her objection was verbal, not literal.

"This time I want you to do what is right. I'm sure you don't want me to sully myself in the effort." She pressed his hand in more securely. The delight of that soft, intimate, suggestive contact leaped from his hand to his heart, making it beat as hard as if he were running. It was hard to maintain his equilibrium.

Was she making a promise, if he agreed to her way? It was persuasive, since he had already concluded that her course was the one he would have to follow. "Then I shall have to agree with you," he said. "But if this is your manner of persuasion, I hope to find many more differences to reconcile."

She smiled. "Perhaps, in good time." Then she gently drew his hand away and kissed him.

She had of course been trying to make a further impression on him, so that he would not be interested in other feminine company. She was succeeding. He knew better than to let himself fall in love with her, but she did excite and fascinate him, as she intended.



So it was that Ernst assembled the papers and made application for an officer's commission in the SS. Herr Best put in a quiet word where it counted, and in due course the word came: Ernst had been granted a provisional status of *Untersturmführer*, second lieutenant, in the SS, if he completed training successfully.

Of course it wasn't as simple as that. He still had two years of military service to do before receiving any such promotion. He would have to start in the SS VT, though he hoped not to remain there. But did mean that his course was marked, and that it was a good one.

In July he reported to the local SS station for training. Krista gave him a most passionate embrace and kiss, straining the limits of propriety, for it was in the sight of their families as they saw him to the building. But no one was in a position to protest, for Ernst was a good Nazi young man doing his duty, and Krista was a good Nazi young woman encouraging him in that, and their families were pleased that the two of them were keeping company. Anyway, their opportunities for further physical contact would be quite limited for the next few months.

He was issued a fine black SS uniform without patches; he was thus without rank or association. His belt buckle had an eagle, a swastika, and the SS motto "My honor is loyalty."

He was given a bunk in the dormitory, and instructed in the protocol of the facility. He had no problem with it; it was similar to his experience in the Hitler Youth.

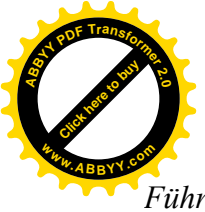
Indeed, though he entered training well along in the annual cycle, he received a provisional SS pass, and was able to comport himself well. This was because not only had he had excellent prior experience, the instructors knew that an exception had been made for him because of a Party connection. They suspected that he was marked for some special service, and they wanted him to remember them with favor if his path crossed theirs at some later time. They knew that Reinhard Heydrich, the "blond beast" who commanded the SS, had once been cashiered as a naval officer, and now was possibly the most feared man in Germany. Surely the rotten bones of certain naval officers were trembling now! So, just in case Ernst Best was going any similar direction, they took care.

There was camping and marching and discipline, and Ernst enjoyed it. He was not a squad leader, having come in too late, but he was competent and dependable, and the squad he was in did well. He had to scramble to complete the qualifications for his sports badge, being short of time. It wasn't possible simply to take the examinations; he had to be personally trained by the certified instructors. Still, he managed to do well enough, because of his prior experience.

Grenade throwing was new to him, however, because these were live. That made all the difference! One of the others armed his grenade and dropped it; the instructor immediately picked it up and hurled it into the field. That was why those in training were not allowed to proceed alone. Ernst himself performed without error, but still felt uneasy. These things were dangerous! They were called "egg" grenades, because of their shape; there was a cap to be unscrewed, which gave access to a string; when the string was pulled, detonation occurred after five seconds. The ones they used had blue caps; they were warned that if they ever saw one with a red cap, to leave it alone, because it would have a one second fuse. That was the kind left behind for the enemy to find.

He also learned the SS catechism:

Why do we believe in Germany and the Führer?



Because we believe in God, we believe in Germany which He created in His world, and in the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler, whom He has sent us.

Whom must we primarily serve?

Our people and the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler.

Why do you obey?

From inner conviction, from belief in Germany, in the *Führer*, in the Movement and in the SS, and from loyalty.

It was easy for Ernst, because he needed no catechism to bolster his belief and loyalty. The ritual was beautiful and true.

The only thing that bothered him was religion. Ernst belonged to the Church, and his family had always belonged. He was not a devoted member, and there were things about religion he questioned, but he preferred that membership be a matter of personal decision rather than dictated by the state. Yet the candidates were pressured to renounce the Christian messages of tolerance and reconciliation as an effeminate, un-German, and even "Jewish" doctrine.

Each day on the drill field the command was given: "Anyone who has not yet left the Church take one step forward." The first day half the candidates stepped forward, Ernst among them. They were harangued for their backwardness and given disciplinary duties.

The next day when the call was made, only a quarter of the candidates took that step. Ernst remained among them.

So it continued from day to day, until only a handful remained. Ernst knew it would be easier not to take the step, because he really did not care that much about the Church. But he still did not like being forced to renounce it.

Then one day the other five candidates were put on adverse duty, but Ernst was excused. He went to the commander and inquired. "You are marked for better things," the officer told him. "The others are hopeless."

Ernst realized that the string his father had pulled was having further effect. If the authorities bore down on him too hard, or tried to drive him out, there could be unpleasant consequences for them. So they were excepting him.

But he refused to accept this. "If the others have done wrong, I have done the same," Ernst said firmly. "I must be punished in the same manner they are."

The man gazed at him for a long moment. "It is not your prerogative to establish company policy," he said. "Dismissed."

Ernst had to go, because he could not disobey a direct order. But instead of reporting back to his unit for regular activities, he went to the punishment detail. No one questioned this; it did not occur to the sergeant in charge that anyone would seek punishment he had not been assigned.



The word must have spread, however, because next morning there was no call-out. The remaining church members were allowed to proceed with the regular program.

Later, the sergeant who had been in charge of the punishment detail came to the barracks and paused at Ernst's bunk. "You have courage," he remarked, and moved on. But Ernst caught the momentary, tiny twitch of his lips. The man was pleased.

No one else said anything to him. But the subtle respect with which Ernst was treated increased. He had won the day, in a certain fashion.

On November 7 Ernst and the other candidates from all across Germany went south to Munich for the swearing in ceremony. But something strange and significant happened while they were traveling.

"Did you hear?" another candidate on the train demanded breathlessly. "Ernst von Rath has been shot by a Jew!"

Ernst thought at first that he was being teased, because of the first name. He had no idea who the victim was. But in the course of the following day, as they reached Munich and found their barracks, it came clear: he was the third secretary of the German Embassy in Paris. He was not a nationally known figure, but Goebbels, the minister of Propaganda, was spreading the word throughout Germany. A prominent leader had been treacherously murdered by the foul Jews!

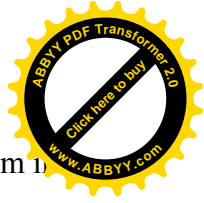
Ernst was neutral concerning the Jews. He knew that Hitler did not like them, and Hitler's logic in *Mein Kampf* was persuasive. But Ernst had seen in America that Jews could be much like any other people. So it seemed best to move them out of Germany and have no further quarrel. But if they were now murdering government officials, that made the matter more serious. So he paid attention, and learned the background of this episode.

It seemed that one Herschel Grynszpan was a Jew whose parents had been forcibly relocated to the Polish border, in accordance with the program to move Jews elsewhere. Rather than accept the situation, it was suggested, he had assassinated the official who had made the decision. Of course Grynszpan would be dealt with. Ernst knew that these things happened. But von Rath was in critical condition, and it was doubtful whether he would live. That was unfortunate for him.

But why was Goebbels making so much of this? It was as if the Jews had bombed Berlin and killed the Führer! Anger was building up throughout Germany. What was Goebbels up to?

However, Ernst had more important things to focus on. He had to be perfect for the ceremony on the ninth. It was the anniversary of the Munich "Beer Hall Putsch" of 1923, when Adolf Hitler and his Nazis invaded a political meeting in their attempt to seize the Bavarian government. But the people did not support the Nazis then, and the troops of the government opened fire as the Nazis marched into the heart of Munich, killing sixteen. Hitler and other leaders were tried and imprisoned. But though their effort was a failure, it attracted a great deal of attention to the movement, and thereafter it grew. So in the longer view, it really had not been a failure, but a necessary step.

Ernst was among those who watched the solemn ceremony as the remaining survivors of the Munich Putsch silently re-enacted their march through the city. Fifteen years had passed, but the solemn memory had grown rather than fading. Today the sixteen martyrs were interred in state in the colonnaded Temple of Honor beside the ill-famed beer hall. The survivors marched by it, followed by a phalanx of those who had received the "Blood Order" award. Ernst felt a tear at his eye as the procession silently



passed. This was a fitting recognition of those who had risked or given their lives on behalf of Nazism in the troubled early years.

Adolf Hitler himself was in Munich with the "Old Guard" leaders for the traditional dinner celebration in the town hall after the ceremonial re-enactment of the Munich Putsch. But in the afternoon the news came that Ernst von Rath was dead. It was reported that the Führer left the hall, visibly upset, without giving his address. Goebbels had to fill in. He gave a rousing speech urging the Old Guard fighters to start spontaneous demonstrations throughout Germany.

That evening was the official swearing in, at the Beer Hall itself. But as they marched there, they heard shouting and saw crowds roving through the streets. There was the smell of smoke. What was happening?

The commander halted the troop. "There are riots in the city," he announced. "Loyal citizens are destroying the property of the Jews." He scowled. "I have no sympathy for Jews, of course, but I dislike allowing mobs to rule. Our troops are forbidden to take any notice, either to participate or to resist the activity. Therefore we shall march on past without observing anything."

The march resumed. They went right past a store whose broad glass front had been smashed in, and whose contents had been strewn half across the street. "Looters!" the commander muttered with deep disgust, but the march did not pause.

By the time they reached the Beer Hall, the directive to restore order had gone out. The police were finally in the process of protecting Jewish property and businesses, and arresting looters. But of course it was too late; the damage of what was to become known as Crystal Night had been done.

The ceremony itself was deeply moving. It was by torchlight in front of the hall, and on each of the sixteen smoking obelisks was the name of one of the martyrs of National Socialism. A voice intoned each one of those names, and was answered by the chant of a thousand voices: "Here!"

Ernst felt the tears in his eyes again. Surely those heroes were indeed here in spirit, and had not died in vain!

□

L 8,R 62,T 6 31

I swear to thee Adolf Hitler

As Führer and Chancellor of the German Reich

Loyalty and Bravery

I vow to thee and to the superiors whom thou shalt appoint

Obedience unto death

So help me God

R 62,T 6 31



□

Ernst received his collar patches and permanent SS pass. Now he was ready to complete his term in the SS VT, before becoming a "full candidate" and taking the final oath to obey the law restricting marriage that the Reichführer SS had issued. He was granted leave, and went home to renew acquaintance with his family and Krista.

"You are so handsome in your dress uniform!" Krista exclaimed in the company of their families. "Let me take you out on the streets of Wiesbaden and show you off to all my friends."

But when she got him away from home, she took him instead to the park, which was deserted at this hour. In the shelter they had paused at before, she embraced him and kissed him passionately. "You really are stunning," she breathed. "We have so little time together."

He smiled. "Most of our association has been apart, anyway."

She drew her blouse from her waistband. "But much can be accomplished briefly."

What was she up to this time? "There is something to be accomplished?"

She took his hand and put it against her breast, under the loose blouse. The touch was electrifying. "There is something I want from you, Ernst."

"I fear it is something I will not want to give, or you would not be taking this approach."

She let his hand go and reached behind her back. Something loosened. Then she took his hand again and moved it to bare flesh. She had undone her halter! "I want to marry you," she said.

Yet again she had startled him. "Marriage! I'm not ready for that!"

"When you are allowed. I know you must complete your training. But when you do--"

"Krista, I love the feel of your flesh. But that is not reason to marry. The commitment--"

"I will give you the feel of all my flesh," she said evenly. "All that you want. Immediately. Here. If you will agree."

He was suspicious of this, despite the amazing effect of her breast in his hand. "Why?"

"Because I love you, as I always have."

He gave her a little squeeze, not so much for the pleasure of it but as a negation. "Your love is qualified. I ask again: why marriage?"

"As the wife of an officer, I will have status. I will not have to endure more training or to take some dull job to support myself. I will not have to remain in this dull town."

"You could marry some other officer."



"Oh come on, Ernst!" she snapped. "I gave you a practical reason because you asked for it. You're the only man I want. I'm afraid you will go away and meet someone else, who won't be as good for you." She took his hand again and moved it down to her waistband.

"So you will make a down payment on me now, to secure me for later marriage," he said. It did make a certain sense. It was not that he might meet another woman, but that she might not meet another man who suited her fancy.

"Anything you want, if you will commit," she agreed. She used her free hand to draw the waistband out, and started his hand down under it.

"But I might get shipped far away for years," he protested. "Perhaps killed. Where would you be then?"

"Then at least I will have had your love for this moment."

He stopped his hand. "No."

"I will do it," she argued. "You do not have to take my word. Everything is yours. Only promise."

"I will not promise. I am not ready to commit to marriage."

"Let me persuade you!" She tugged at his hand.

"How do you know I wouldn't lie to you, as men do, to obtain your body without marriage?"

She laughed. "The day you tell a lie, Ernst, the sky will crash about our heads."

He laughed too, but not much. "I hope never to test it. But too much is unknown. If I were ready and able to marry now, I would consider your proposal. But I am not, so I will not. Perhaps some later day I will. I do like you, Krista, and the thought of possessing your body threatens to drive me mad. But this is not the time."

She hesitated, then made a decision. "Then I will give it to you without your commitment. It is not right to tease you. Only keep me in mind, when--"

"No. That would be a tacit commitment."

"Then without any understanding at all," she said. "Please, Ernst--"

"You don't want to do this," he told her. "You want only my commitment, express or implied, and you know it will be there if I do this. If I marry you, then I will expect the delight of your body, and I do long for that delight. But I can not do this now. I will instead give you all the commitment possible for me now: I will keep you first in mind for marriage."

"I accept that." She caught his hand once again.

"No more hands," he said. "I give you this commitment without touching your body."

"Without?" Her eyes were big.



"Without. Now put yourself back together."

She proceeded to do that, seeming relieved. "I do love you, Ernst, more than ever now."

"I find you fascinating, but--"

She quickly put her finger against his lips. "That much is enough."

They resumed their walk. Ernst hoped never to be tempted this strongly again. Krista's offer had been almost enough to destroy his better judgment.

Why was she so determined to have this commitment? She had had a crush on him when she was fifteen, but that should have passed. She certainly had discovered what effect her new body had on men; she had demonstrated uncanny competence in soliciting his desire. She could have another man if she wanted. At this stage Ernst did not see himself as the best of prospects. Yet she had fastened on him instantly and persistently. Perhaps that was part of his reason for demurring; he distrusted what he did not understand, and he did not fathom her motive. Surely she did like him, and did want to marry him, and would deliver on any promise relating to it that she made. But that could not be the whole story.

He did not think she would lie to him if he asked her the right question. But she was capable of avoiding that question. He would have to figure out what it was. Then he could decide.

Ernst was afraid that he would be assigned to the SS Regiment "Liebstandarte Adolf Hitler" in Berlin. That unit had a bad reputation. It had been commanded by Sepp Dietrich, but had been so inefficiently run that it was completely lacking in military discipline. The inspector of the SS VT, Major General Hauser, was a former Wehrmacht General, a traditional Prussian soldier who supported proper training and competence. But he had found it hard to implement his policies in the face of Dietrich's resistance. It was common gossip among the troops that Berlin was fit only for misfits.

But to Ernst's great relief he was assigned to the "Deutschland" regiment in Munich. This was commanded by Major Felix Steiner, one of the more remarkable officers in the SS. He had been a member of a Storm battalion in the World War: one of the elite units pulled from the front lines to break the deadly cycle of trench warfare. He was convinced that the future belonged to special groups which could strike with lightning-like rapidity and force, fragmenting the opposition, and then destroy the dislocated fragments. He had resigned from the Wehrmacht in the face of opposition to his theories and come to the SS, which had been starved for good officers. He had instituted his theories of training and command there with what was beginning to look like remarkable success. Ernst knew just enough of the Major's policies to be excited.

Steiner had done away with barracks drill, concentrating instead on athletics. He was turning his soldiers into cross-country experts of the hunter-athlete type. He had reduced the distinctions between enlisted men and officers, fostering camaraderie between them in the face of hardship. Unit Spirit was highly emphasized. Men and officers competed together. Doors were left open in the barracks. All future officers had to serve two years in the ranks, as Ernst himself was doing. Certainly they would not forget the concerns of the ordinary soldiers!

Ernst threw himself into the training with a will. He soon found himself in effective charge of a battle group, which was the basic unit of Steiner's force. Such groups were supposed to be well versed in



military teamwork, but still capable of functioning as regiments. The theory seemed good to Ernst, but it was apparent that the unit--indeed, all of the SS VT--suffered from a lack of officers. In the past recruitment had been severely limited, because of the competitive influence of the Wehrmacht, and most of its recruits had come from rural areas. The same was true of its officers at every level. The units compensated for this with fanatical devotion and unity, but the lack was still felt. Thus anyone with good potential quickly rose to responsibility, and Ernst quickly became important.

Instead of the Wehrmacht's regulation rifles, they trained with more mobile and effective weapons, such as submachine guns, hand grenades and explosives. They dressed in camouflage instead of regulation field service uniforms. And they learned how to deploy rapidly. They were able to cover three kilometers in full gear in twenty minutes. That made the eyes of conventional units pop!

There were other things Ernst liked about Major Steiner, though he could not say so. The man gave Heinrich Himmler no respect, refused to marry, and refused to leave the Church. Ernst knew that Himmler was second only to Hitler in importance, but he was not a tenth the man Hitler was. Himmler was a pompous functionary, barely competent, and Ernst hoped never to encounter him directly. As for marriage--it was indeed expected of officers, but they had to choose approved brides, which greatly limited the romantic aspect. Ernst had been freshly reminded of this by Krista's proposal. Sometimes marriage just wasn't right for a man, and it was good to see a key officer asserting himself in this manner. Finally the matter of the Church: there were no harassing call-outs here. How could there be, when the Major openly espoused his Church membership?

So Ernst really liked this unit, and did all he could to make it a success.

Then Major Steiner summoned Ernst to his presence. "I have what I hope is not bad news for you, candidate," he said grimly. "You have been directed to appear before Reinhard Heydrich himself. The papers for your reassignment are now being processed."

"But I have done nothing!" Ernst protested, horrified.

"You have done everything to be the best SS soldier in my command," Steiner responded. "This I have told the Commander. I have begged him to allow you to complete your training with me. He will not relent. Perhaps he has a special assignment for you. I am not allowed to inquire."

"A special assignment," Ernst echoed. But what he felt was dread.

Steiner stood and proffered his hand. Silently, they shook hands.

Reinhard Heydrich was an impressive figure, tall and fit. His nose was long, his forehead high, his mouth was wide, his lips full, and his eyes were small and restless, yet possessed of uncanny power when they fell on a person. His voice was high and his speech staccato, almost nervous. He seemed hardly ever to complete a sentence, yet his meaning was quite clear. Ernst was awed by him.

"You were in America," Heydrich said, gesturing in a vaguely westward direction. His hands were long and slender, almost spiderlike in their thinness, but his eyes were predatory. Ernst's feeling of dread intensified. "You have friends there?"

So that was it! His year overseas had made him suspect. "Yes." Ernst would not have tried to lie,



even if he had thought he could get away with it. This man would not be asking questions to which he did not already know the answers.

"Who?"

"Only one, sir, actually. An American who was open minded about foreigners. His name was Lane Dowling."

"No women?"

Ernst allowed himself a limited smile. "None there, sir. The American had a girlfriend whom I got to know, but my own girl is German."

"Name them."

"The American's girl was named Quality Smith. Mine is Krista--"

"What kind of name is that? Quality?"

"She is a Quaker. A small religious sect, of pacifist inclination. I believe that some of their names reflect such concerns."

Heydrich seemed to ponder a moment, as if finding this information significant. "How do you feel about the Jews?" he inquired abruptly.

So this related to the Jews! Ernst's American contact with them must have returned to haunt him. "Sir, I am a loyal German and Nazi."

Heydrich smiled. "You are evasive. Answer in detail."

He was stuck for it. "I have no special feeling about the Jews. I knew some in America, and they appeared to be like ordinary people. I did not inquire more closely."

"You do not hate Jews?" Heydrich asked sharply.

"I neither love nor hate them, sir."

"Then how can you be a good Nazi?" Heydrich barked.

Shaken, Ernst fell back on his most private faith. "My believe in Nazism is independent of the existence of Jews. I believe in the Nazi principles of racial purity, anti-Communism, subservience of the individual to the needs of the state, and personal devotion to the Führer. As a troop leader in the Hitler Youth I met the great man himself, and he spoke to me and shook my hand. I watched *Triumph of the Will*, the greatest motion picture of all time, the perfect expression of the Nazi way. Since then, in times of private stress or doubt, I have used the swastika as my object of meditation, and it has given me spiritual renewal. It is to my mind an icon of God and a symbol of the *Volk*, the true spirit of the German people. It helped me cope with the strange customs of the Americans." He drew out the silver swastika he always wore.

"You refused to renounce the Church. You still believe in a Christian God." It was an accusation.



"I believe that God expresses His will through Hitler and the Nazi party. I see no need to renounce the Church, which also supports God and therefore the things of God, including the Nazi party."

"So you are saying you would not renounce the Church because that would have implied a partial renunciation of Hitler?"

"To a degree, sir. But I also felt that a true Nazi will not allow himself to be browbeaten by inconsequentials. I and the other Candidates were serving loyally; our Church membership or lack of it had no bearing on that."

"You would have capitulated, if it had not been for the others," Heydrich said. "You were trying to spare them."

The man had uncanny insight. "It is true."

"Your woman. Why is she so eager?"

Was there nothing this man did not know? "I am in doubt."

"Could she have Jewish ancestry?"

Ernst was startled. That had never occurred to him, but it could indeed explain Krista's attitude. If there were a suspicion of Jewishness, to be hidden behind the status of being an officer's wife--but no. It did not make sense. Because any woman an officer married would be subject to the most intense scrutiny, her family tree explored for six generations back. The prospect of marriage would increase the risk of discovery, not decrease it. "I doubt it, sir."

"But you are not sure. So you declined to marry her, until it is known."

"I declined to commit to marry her because I am not at the stage at which marriage is an option for me."

"But if she were a Jew--"

Ernst caught on. "She is not."

"How so suddenly sure?"

"Because you would not be teasing me, cat and mouse, if you did not know. You have traced her lineage and exonerated her. But I will answer: I would not condemn her were she a Jew, but I would not marry her."

"If the machine gun were in your hands, and Jews before you, would you fire?"

"I would if so ordered. But that would be a task not at all to my liking."

"There does seem to be a softness in you concerning Jews. What would you have us do with them?"

"I would have us facilitate their departure from Germany. I see no reason to harm them."



"What of the Gypsies?"

"They are harmless, but they too should leave."

Heydrich's eyes bore piercingly at him. "The fourth generation, on her mother's side. The suspicion of Gypsism, unconfirmed."

Again Ernst was startled. "Krista?"

"Would you marry a Gypsy?"

So that was what made Krista so anxious! She feared that she might have some Gypsy ancestry, and that it would make her unsuitable for a good marriage. So she wanted to seal the marriage first. "The suspicion might be unfounded."

"It might. There seems to be no way to tell, given the quality of the old records. It could be a false alarm. In any event, there is no need for anyone to know. You can marry her if you choose."

Ernst realized that the man's ploy was not finished. "What do you want of me?"

Heydrich smiled, and this time it seemed genuine. "Merely your loyalty."

"I am loyal to the Führer and to the--"

"Of course. And to me. For the sake of that lovely girl."

Now Ernst remembered something else that had been whispered about Heydrich. He liked to get evil information on his subordinates--perhaps on his superiors too--with which to blackmail them, so that they could not do any evil to Heydrich. That way the man could trust his people to serve his interest. He had gone to the trouble to find Ernst's vulnerability--which Ernst himself had not known about, before this interview.

"You have an assignment for me," Ernst said, realizing that this was why he had been summoned here. He felt relief rather than dread, now.

"You are quick to comprehend. That is one reason I selected you."

Ernst nodded. It was amazing that it was not his ability or dedication that had qualified him for Heydrich's attention, but his hidden vulnerability. Yet this was a far better outcome than he had feared.

"You speak Spanish."

"German, English, Spanish," Ernst agreed. "I am not truly expert in--"

"It will do. What do you know of Admiral Canaris?"

Yet another surprise. What could any mission of his have to do with that eminent person? "He is head of the *Abwehr*, the military intelligence service. I am sure he is qualified and competent."

"Certainly. But is he completely loyal to the cause?"



"I would not presume to question the loyalty of an admiral!"

"Nor would I," Heydrich responded easily. "But it seems that it does fall on me to verify it. For that I need a skilled, trustworthy, and unknown agent. One who speaks Spanish. One who is ultimately loyal to me."

"But the Admiral--" Ernst protested, aghast.

Heydrich leaned forward, and his eyes were mesmeric in their intensity. "I know the Admiral, and respect him personally. I was once under his command, on a training vessel in the Navy."

Ernst was suffering dawning horror. "And you were expelled from the Navy--"

Heydrich laughed. "I left the navy, but through no doing of Admiral Canaris's. He was a good and fair commander, and he taught me much. Perhaps I am now in Intelligence because of him. We are friends. But there is a question which must be resolved. Were there any betrayal by any person in a position as critical as his, the security of the Reich itself could be seriously compromised. We can not allow any chance of that. We must be certain."

"But I have no notion--I could not--"

"Canaris is a nice man," Heydrich continued relentlessly. "He tends to be easygoing and gentle, and he has too great an affinity for peace to be entirely trustworthy in the eyes of some." His eyes flicked upward, and Ernst felt a chill, realizing that the man was obliquely referring to his own superiors, Himmler or Hitler himself. This was truly critical! "But he is too important to be challenged without ironclad evidence against him. So we must seek that evidence, to convict him or to clear him beyond doubt."

Now those hawklike eyes bore on Ernst again. "You will be my agent in this matter. I hope you are able to exonerate my friend." But those eyes were as cold as those of the death's head itself. The man wanted the truth, whatever it was, and he would act on it.

And Ernst would have to get that truth.

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