



Chapter 12

Götterdämmerung

It had been a fool's paradise, he realized: the hope that he could simply cut off his connection with Heydrich and give his loyalty to Admiral Canaris. The Abwehr, with all its faults, remained a far better working environment for him, ideologically, than the RHSA. Even those aspects that were distasteful, such as the apparent attempt to use their section, Abwehr II, as a vehicle for the assassination of a French general, could be set aside when he was home with Quality. They had also uncovered the "Red Chapel" (Russian Orchestra) network of Russian agents operating in Germany. The Admiral had been absolutely furious that German soldiers could be involved in any such treason, and livid when one of them turned out to be an officer in Abwehr II itself. That had almost involved Quality, when Major Stumel suspected that she represented a contact subverting Ernst. But he was innocent, and further investigation had clarified that. It had nevertheless been a close call; had they thought to check Ernst's possible connection to Heydrich, they might have found another kind of traitor.

But trouble had come from the other side: Kaltenbrunner had done his homework and traced down the far-flung agents Heydrich had sent out. Now Ernst had to report to the man personally, before being shipped to the front.

Kaltenbrunner turned out to be a large man, with a body like that of a lumberjack. His face was angular, his neck thick, his chin square and his eyes small. His fingers were discolored, for he was a chain smoker. He spoke with a thick Austrian accent, and was missing several teeth, which hardly helped his appearance. He also drank excessively, Ernst learned. Yet it was evident that he had a fine analytical mind, and was fully as ruthless as Heydrich, without Heydrich's cultured side. Heydrich could be subtle and even, according to Quality, charming; Kaltenbrunner would never be either.

The interview was perfunctory. It seemed that Kaltenbrunner had wanted to meet Ernst merely so as to be able to recognize him thereafter. If he knew about Quality he clearly didn't care; perhaps he intended simply to ship Ernst far away and let those left behind fend for themselves. It was an effective punishment for those who had had the temerity to support Heydrich. But he couldn't stop Ernst from taking accrued leave time, when whatever unit he was in was not in a state of emergency. Ernst would return to help Quality in due course. He had to.

He was sent to the General Kommissariat "White Russia," well back from the front line. But it turned out to be a long train ride to Minsk, through endless snowy forests. Even when he managed to get leave time, it would require days to return to Berlin, assuming he could get transport. Ernst's hope of returning within a month faded, and he was depressed.

There were other officers traveling to this and other destinations. Time was on their hands, so they played cards and talked. Some of them had been on duty at the front, and from them Ernst received evil news. It seemed that the war was not going nearly as well as the Berlin newspapers had suggested. The initial victories of 1941 had been followed by a temporary setback in December, as the Russians counterattacked near Moscow and took advantage of the savage winter to force a retreat. When the weather eased in 1942 the German advance had resumed, but by the Führer's directive not toward Moscow but to the south. Progress had been made, of course, but this was nevertheless troublesome, because the Russian capital, so near to capture, remained functioning. Now the Russians were organizing, and real trouble was developing. The great German Sixth Army was surrounded and under siege in Stalingrad, and the winter was taking its toll, as it had the prior year. "If only we had knocked out Moscow, the hub!" one officer exclaimed. "Headless, the Russians would have given up the fight. Now there is mischief we never should have had to face."



"Mischief?" Ernst inquired.

Several others laughed. "You do not know of the partisans? Ragtag bands, but vicious. They roam the countryside, striking from hiding. Never do they stand up to fight like men, but they take many lives in their sneaky way. A man can never be sure he won't get a bullet in his back."

Which accounted for why Kaltenbrunner had sent him here, instead of to the front line. He would be more likely to die dishonorably. What a contrast to his work in the Abwehr, and his nights with Quality! He was proceeding from relative Heaven to relative Hell. But he intended to survive, because he had to, to protect Quality. The thought of her alone in Berlin saddened him, but she could manage as long as he provided her money.

At last the train reached Minsk, where Ernst was met by a driver who took him to Major General Curt von Gottberg's unit. "Exactly what is occurring here?" Ernst inquired as the car moved along the snowy road.

"Antipartisan action, sir," the driver replied. "We have to clean them out, or they will clean us out."

"But surely there is not be serious partisan activity this far behind the front line," Ernst said, knowing better. "In Berlin, we were told that this area was secure."

"Sir, the truth is that we control the cities and towns, and they control the countryside. They are getting stronger every day. Of course that doesn't get put into the Berlin newspapers."

So it was worse than he had feared. "But we came as liberators. We lifted the Communist yoke. They welcomed us."

"That they did, sir. At first. Then the Einsatzgruppen started in killing all the Jews and Gypsies any anyone else they chose not to like, and burning homes and fields and taking the food away, and that made for great recruitment for the partisans. Now we have a real problem."

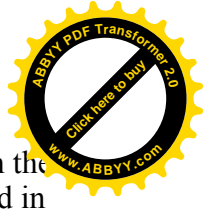
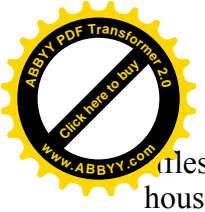
"You don't approve of the Führer's policies?"

"I didn't say that, sir!" the man said quickly. "I just think that maybe if they had been a bit more subtle, the people wouldn't be rebelling, and our life would be easier."

Soon enough Ernst verified the extent of the problem. No Germans went into the countryside alone; they were always in military units. Even in the city there were daily incidents, as terrorists set bombs and snipers fired at military vehicles. No one ever seemed to know anything about the activities, but it was obvious that the natives were harboring the partisans. This might as well have been enemy territory.

The first significant antipartisan sweep in which Ernst participated was Operation Hornung. He went only as an observer, learning how it was done. "Things may not be quite as they are described in Berlin," he was tersely advised.

Indeed they were not. Ernst watched as the troops went out east of Minsk, surrounding the suspected area. There was the sound of firing, but very little obvious result. If there were partisans in the countryside, most of them must have managed to slip away before the cordon tightened. Only a few



men were captured, and there were only five German casualties reported. But the men went through the houses, routing out their occupants, shooting any who tried to resist. These were called partisans, and in the course of the operation more than two thousand were "killed in action."

Many more were brought to a rendezvous for interrogation. They were lined up along the road, the men on one side, the women on the other. Then the translators went down the lines, addressing the women. "Point out all the men who do not belong in your village. If you do not, your own men will be killed."

The women tried to balk, to pretend that they did not know which men were which. "Then they all must be partisans," the officer said. "We shall execute them all."

At that point the women, distraught, reconsidered, and began to point out the strangers. Ernst realized that similar scenes were being enacted in all the villages of this region. The assumption was that any strangers must be partisans. But what of men with legitimate business in the village? What of partisans who happened to live here? There was the risk of executing the wrong men.

"Do you want to know the greatest irony?" another officer remarked to Ernst. "Most of those translators are Jews. Jews! We are using Jews to eliminate folk fighting for their homeland."

In due course a number of selected partisans were marched into a detention camp, and the other men, together with the women, were allowed to return to their homes. It was evident to Ernst that if those other men had not been partisans yesterday, they surely would be partisans tomorrow. Because almost any man would rather die fighting than be ignominiously executed just for being there.

The next day they went through a similar process at another village, continuing the sweep. The collection of prisoners grew. And the effective recruitment of future partisans.

After several days there were more than seven thousand prisoners. These were marched to a remote field and given spades and picks. They were required to dig large graves. Any who balked were beaten until they returned to work. The ground was hard, because of the winter cold, so the job took time, but no rest was allowed.

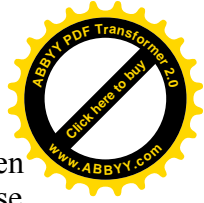
Ernst was appalled at the callousness of it, but he could not protest. He was only here to observe. If *he* balked, he might be required to give the cruel orders.

He looked at a group of soldiers who were seeming to have a party. They were drinking bottles of schnapps and vodka, and not even trying to conceal it. There were other officers in sight, but they seemed to be paying no attention. Apparently the soldiers were allowed this astonishing privilege of getting drunk on duty. Yet they did not look happy. What was going on?

When the graves were done, the partisans were forced to strip completely. There was snow on the ground, and they stood shivering violently, but were shown no mercy. They were required to stand facing the graves. Then the drunken soldiers came, carrying Schmeisser machine pistols. There were twelve of them.

"Fire!"

The pistols fired, in a crossfire pattern, and the bullets sprayed across the backs of the standing naked partisans. The partisans fell forward into their graves.



Now Ernst understood. No one liked the task of executing prisoners. It helped to be drunk when doing it. The soldiers were encouraged to drink so that they *could* do it. Only a few were sober. Those would be the fanatical Nazis who were satisfied to slaughter the helpless. That was no improvement.

Other soldiers took the spades and started filling in the dirt. There was a groan, and motion in the grave. One of the sober executioners walked across and used a carbine rifle to put a bullet through the head of the one who was incompletely dead.

"This is barbaric!" Ernst muttered.

"Not so," the officer beside him replied. "Barbarism is when they do not put the bullets in the heads of the survivors before covering them over."

"Or when they shoot a pregnant woman in the womb and push her into the grave alive," another added.

Ernst assumed that they were trying to shock him, in a kind of initiation. Later he learned that such things did occur. He was sickened and disgusted. This was, of course, why he had been sent here. His body might or might not survive--but would his soul?

The anti-partisan effort continued. General Warlimont, the head of the National Defense Office, issued an order stating that populations rounded up by the firing of villages which harbored partisans were to be sent to concentration camps in Poland and Russia. This was in response to the liquidation of entire villages during the anti-partisan operations. It was supposed to have a moderating effect. Ernst had already achieved enough cynicism to doubt that this would be the case. Actually, this order made it possible for almost anyone in occupied territory to be sent to a camp.

On March 18 there came a directive from the security office: "Generally speaking, no more children are to be shot." This, too, was likely to have no more than a cosmetic effect on policy. Ernst no longer had any doubt why so many local folk became partisans; he would have become one too, had he been a Russian resident.

Finally he was allowed leave time. He took the train for Germany, hoping that Quality remained in the Tiergarten room. It had been almost two months, far longer than he liked.

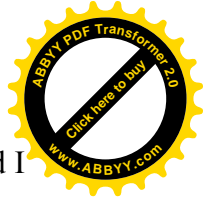
She was there! She was startlingly lovely, after the physical and mental horrors he had seen. Perhaps it was her nature, for he knew that Quality would never be associated with the atrocities of the eastern front. He swept her into his arms and kissed her.

"I have so much to tell thee," she said.

First they made love. Her body had filled out; she had not been going hungry. Yet her money should have run out. How had she managed?

"Ernst, I hope thee will not be upset," she said. "I am pregnant."

He lay beside her stunned. "Oh, Quality, in any other situation--"



"I agree. I did not want to be in this condition. Yet it is thy doing, and thy baby within me, and I can not help but feel joy in that."

And he had just had sex with her, not knowing! "I should not have--"

"I believe that love is healthy, at any time," she said. "I very much wanted thine at this time. I apologize for this small deceit: I did not tell thee before, so thee would not feel restricted."

He had to accept it. But there was another question. "How have you managed? I was so afraid you would not have money!"

"That is the other wonderful thing I must tell thee, Ernst, though I fear it will surprise thee and leave thee with mixed feelings."

"Nothing can surprise me or mix my feelings more than your pregnancy."

"I have a friend who has moved in with me, to share the expenses. When my money ran out, she used hers. She is the reason I am well, and not completely lonely in thine absence."

"A German friend?" he asked, amazed. "How can that be?"

"She is thy friend Krista."

The bottom fell out of his insecure equilibrium. "Krista! But she would hate you!"

"She tried to, but she did not succeed."

He looked at her. "I can appreciate how that is. But still--the resentment she must feel!"

"She is a practical woman. She says that since I have taken her man, she may take mine. She has questioned me closely about Lane."

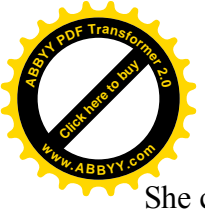
"Lane Dowling!" Ernst laughed. Then as he thought about it, it began to make insidious sense. Lane did have an eye for poise and beauty, and Krista had both in ample measure. If she had opportunity to be with him for any length of time, and privacy to show him parts of her body, he would certainly be interested. He would not be put off by her Gypsy ancestry; he would find it intriguing. Still, the thing was farfetched. "How would she meet him?"

"If Germany loses the war, I will try to introduce her to him. Surely he will seek me, and if Krista is with me, I can do that much."

If Germany lost the war. Ernst had not allowed himself to think that thought before, but it was a prospect. The eastern front could at best be described as stagnant, and the German resources were being wasted fighting partisans. After what he had seen, he could no longer hope for German victory. The Russians might be barbarous, but they did not deliberately kill women and children.

"Then perhaps it is a fair deal," he said. "Lane is certainly a good man, and Krista is a good woman. Better than I had taken her for, since she has helped you."

"A good woman," Quality agreed.



Still, it was awkward when Krista returned. She remained beautiful, her hair still glisteningly fair. She concealed her surprise at seeing Ernst. It was evident that she still had feeling for him, but she made no attempt to impress him. She had accepted the change.

Actually, it was good that Krista had come here, he realized. Quality needed more than money, now that she was pregnant. Krista would see that she was cared for.

Before he left, he gave them all of his money he could spare, repaying Krista and providing for Quality's future food and rent. He tried to thank Krista for the generous thing she was doing, but was ineffective. He promised to return as soon as he could.

As it happened, he was able to return to them in two months, just before things really got bad at the front. Knowing that he could not speak for his own future, let alone Quality's, he told her that she would have to go to a Lebensborn maternity home. There at least she would be safe until the baby came, and perhaps thereafter. He hated to do it, but the thought of her fate if he was unable to return convinced him. At least he would not have to worry about her.

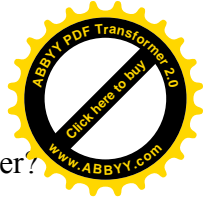
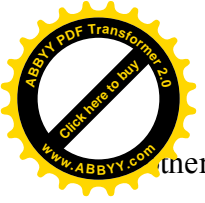
For the bad news at the front was the largest anti-partisan effort yet, Operation Cottbus. Two partisan groups had joined together and formed what they called "The Republic of Lake Palik," which extended on the southern end to within twenty miles of the Minsk-Moscow railway, and to another Moscow line in the north. There could be real trouble if the partisans started sabotaging the railways. That would interrupt the shipment of supplies and troops to the front. So this had to be dealt with, if German power in the region was to be maintained.

General Gottberg rounded up more than sixteen thousand men for the operation. Most of them were police from the Baltic states, or Russian volunteers. But it also included a civilian emergency force, part of which was comprised of ninety administrative workers from Minsk. Ernst suspected he knew how they felt: desk workers hauled out to the field, like himself. And of course there were the SS personnel.

The partisan forces were no mere ragtag bands. They now had tanks, field guns, an air strip and troop-carrying gliders under the command of a Russian Brigadier General. This had become an aspect of the front line, for that line had become dangerously porous. On the map this was pacified territory, but the map was a fiction. Ernst remembered Quality's remark: "If Germany loses the war." Out here it was unfortunately easy to recognize that possibility. The folly of not taking Moscow, thus leaving the head of the bear in place, was starkly clear. As was the folly of slaughtering the natives, for each one killed seemed to generate two more partisans.

Ernst had always regarded Adolf Hitler as a great man. Now even that belief was wearing thin. Perhaps if Hitler could come out here and see the reality, the policy would change. But Hitler, and Germany, seemed to be locked in to this course. In fact Hitler was giving ever greater support to the SS Einsatzgruppen, because its methods were more effective than those of the more fastidious Wehrmacht. It was like *Götterdämmerung*, the twilight of the gods, as the final battle loomed. The gods were destined to lose, and all things to be destroyed. Richard Wagner's music for this was beautiful, but the reality was grim.

Would Quality be allowed to take her books and Victrola to the maternity home, so she could continue listening to Wagner? He hoped so. She was a foreigner, but she wore his swastika, which



ners would misinterpret as her political statement. How could they refuse her Nietzsche and Wagner?

Operation Cottbus proceeded. The Luftwaffe supported it, bombing the suspect towns. It was full-scale war, and this time there were many partisans killed in true action. But for Ernst it was worse, because he was assigned to assist the notorious Dierlewanger Regiment, the one composed of Nazi party members who were convicted criminals. They were called "poachers," but there was no masking their nature. Ernst, as an intelligence officer, had to help interrogate prisoners and monitor the activities and attitudes of personnel assigned to "special details." In reality, the execution squads. He wished he could get drunk on vodka himself, but of course he couldn't.

As it happened, he was given no command responsibility, which was a relief. He had merely to be on hand as the work proceeded. He was in effect a spectator. But what he witnessed turned his stomach.

For the partisans had particular strongholds, and these were protected by minefields. It was folly for soldiers to march across those fields; if they managed to escape the mines, they would be picked off by the partisan sharpshooters. But the Dierlewanger men had a simple, ruthless solution: they routed out the women and children who were left behind in the towns, and forced them to march across the mine fields. The German troops followed, and the partisans could not fire on them without first gunning down their own families. As a result they held their fire, and watched their own people getting blown up by their own mines.

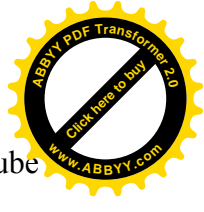
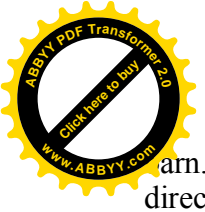
Ernst watched it happening, unable to turn away lest his horror be manifest. He could not help picturing Quality there, carrying his baby within her, stepping on a hidden mine and being blown apart. For each of those women were beloved by someone. He watched, and did not flinch, but his heart was turning leaden. This was the twilight of decency. What possible cause could be worth this?

He would have renounced it all, and fled the region, if he could. But he could not, because there was no honorable release from military service, and a dishonorable one would have cost him not only his life, but Quality's--and probably Krista's too. His own people remained hostage to his performance. So though he shot no partisans directly, and gave no orders to sacrifice women, he felt the blackening blood on his hands, that could never be washed off. He was part of the massive dishonor that was the SS Einsatzgruppen.

The operation began in mid May and continued through the month of June, 1943. Some fifteen thousand partisans were reported killed: six thousand in action, five thousand as suspects, and four thousand women and children used in the mine spotting. Five and a half thousand women and children were also conscripted for the labor force. Only a hundred and twenty seven Germans were killed. Thus Operation Cottbus was considered a great success. The fact that the countryside seemed to be no safer than before for Germans was ignored.

Yet there was additional irony. Ernst overheard the story of one person who had tried to follow a more civilized course. General Kube, Governor of White Russia, tried to win over the villagers in the region of Minsk so that the harvest would not be abandoned. Food was a real problem, and any fields that could be saved would help alleviate hunger. So General Kube's representative followed behind the troops in a loudspeaker van, attempting to drum up support. "The resistance is over. Return to your homes and work, and there will be no further reprisals. Cooperate, and we will work with you to restore your lives and bring food. You have everything to gain by peace."

But even as he was making his appeal, an SS colonel was giving orders to burn the village. The representative came across half-burned human bodies being eaten by pigs on the floor of a burned-out



am. Seeing the futility of his effort, he returned to Minsk and reported to the General. Outraged, Kube directed a complaint to his superiors. Nothing came of it.

Ernst knew exactly how the General felt.

In August Ernst finally got more leave time. He returned to Berlin, and to Tiergarten, but the room was empty. He inquired, and the hotel manager gave him the message Quality had left: "She is at the Lebensborn at this address." He held a slip of paper. But he did not give it to Ernst immediately. "Her account was overdue, but we did not press her for it, knowing you would make it good."

"I will make it good," Ernst agreed. He settled the account, and was given the address. He probably could have run down the address himself, but he did want to settle any debts, and preferred to keep the matter quiet.

He went there, and found the home crowded with children. In December 1942 thousands of racial German children had been forcibly removed from Poland. The maternity houses were required to be used until the children were adopted by suitable parents. Thus the nursery facilities were overflowing, for adoptions were slow. Good German families had other concerns now, such as feeding themselves.

Quality was there without Krista. She was now in her eighth month, her belly well swollen. She remained lovely to his eyes, and seemed to be in good health. The swastika shone at her bosom. He knew she did not accept its symbolism, but wore it only because it was his gift to her. Still, it had surely helped her gain entry and good treatment here, for the authorities would have taken it as evidence of her conversion to Nazism.

He kissed her chastely. "I am sorry I took so long," he said. "I settled the account."

"Account?"

"The money you owed the hotel. I paid it."

"I owed the hotel no money. We left when we ran out, assuming no debt."

Ernst realized that he had been taken. There was nothing he could do about it. "You are safe; that is all that matters."

"Krista went home to Wiesbaden. Perhaps thee should visit her, too. She was very good to me."

He shook his head. "Even if I had the time and the money, I would not care to see her alone. There is only respect between us, now."

"Of course." That was it. There was no privacy for any serious dialogue, and his leave was short. He had to return to the front. The truth was that there was little he would have cared to tell her about his activity. He felt unworthy to be in her company, for she was a gentle, practicing pacifist, and his hands were stained. He understood the alienation she had suffered from Lane Dowling, because now it applied to himself. He loved her, but how could he be with her?

He set himself to go, though he longed to remain. But Quality held him. "Ernst, what troubles



He shook his head. "Nothing I can speak about."

She touched the swastika. "Does thee wish to recover thy--"

"No!" For that would signal the end of their private marriage. "Oh, Quality, never think that! I am unworthy of you, but I will love you till I die. It is just that I wish things were not as they are. That the war did not exist. That all men and all women were like you. That I could be all that you would have me be."

She nodded. "I know thee is enmeshed in horror, Ernst. I can see it in thy face and feel it in thy hand. But this is not of thy making."

"It stains me nevertheless."

"I, too, am stained."

"Not in my eyes."

"Nor thee in mine."

He could not agree with her. "I will come again when I can." He kissed her again, quickly, and departed.

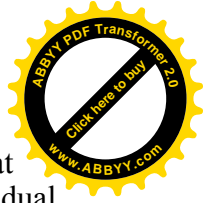
During the final months of 1943 the situation of the Germans grew desperate. It seemed impossible to eradicate the partisans, and the Russians were advancing. It was becoming obvious that the German tenure in Russia was ending.

This brought a new policy: scorched earth. It was necessary to destroy the ability of the land to support life, so that the partisans could not exist on it. Nevertheless, resources were diverted to exterminate the few Jews who remained unaccounted for in earlier actions. Not because they had done anything, but just because they were Jews. Hitler wanted a Jew-free Europe, even if Germany lost the war while implementing this policy.

Of course the partisans controlled much of the open countryside, so that it was hazardous to go out and actually scorch the earth. Troops would go out in the morning and return at night, claiming to have reduced a particular section, but Ernst knew that it was more likely that they had spent their time hiding from the partisans.

By the turn of the year, the Russians had advanced so far that Minsk was now not far from the front. Then the Russians broke through to the south, so that Minsk was threatened with encirclement. Retreat was mandatory, lest there be another Stalingrad disaster. The anti-partisan activity became pointless; the only concern was to extricate the German forces before they were cut off.

Ernst was transferred back to Berlin in April, 1944. By the look of it, few Germans would remain behind long.



But things were confused in Berlin, too, and he was not reassigned immediately. It seemed that the authorities were too busy trying to understand the disaster to bother with the paperwork of individual assignment. Ernst was for the moment left to his own devices.

Naturally he went to the Lebensborn maternity home to see Quality. She was there, working as a volunteer to care for the children which still crowded the premises. She was slender again, and in good health, and she still wore his swastika in plain sight. "But the baby--" Ernst asked.

"I bore a son in September," she said. "He was healthy, but they told me that I lacked the proper qualities to raise an Aryan child, so my baby would have to join the racial Germans in awaiting adoption. I was allowed to leave and fend for myself, or to remain to work for bed and board. Since I had no money, and this was the only way I could remain close to Ernst Junior, I agreed to remain. I am, it seems, good with children, and they are shorthanded, so it is a fair compromise. It allows me to remain close to Junior, who is now seven months old. I try not to favor him too much, so as not to attract attention, but he knows me. They all know me."

"But the child is mine," Ernst protested. "He must not be adopted!"

"I had hoped thee would feel that way," she confessed demurely. "Few folk care to assume the added burden of another couple's child in these troubled times, but I quail whenever a prospective couple comes to look. I am afraid that mine will be the one they choose."

Ernst talked to the proprietors, who referred him to the higher Lebensborn authority. His application was taken for consideration. "But you are not married," the clerk pointed out.

That stopped him. If he married Quality now, legally, she would be the wife of a Nazi officer--as Germany lost the war. That was no albatross to hang on her at this time!

"But I will marry thee," Quality said as he tried to explain. "We are already married in our hearts; the outer symbol is merely confirmation." She touched the swastika.

"It is no good for you!" he said. "You must be free to return unencumbered to America."

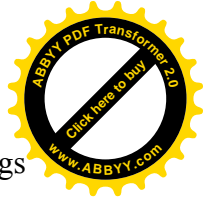
"Not without thee and our son," she said firmly.

So he applied for permission to marry. His application was taken, and lost in the shuffle. He could not marry Quality until his petition was granted, and he could not secure Ernst Junior until he married.

Months passed. Ernst was assigned to routine deskwork; it seemed that Kaltenbrunner had forgotten him. On June 6 the Allies invaded Normandy, and spread east toward Germany. Six weeks later Hitler was almost killed by a planted bomb. A month after that Paris surrendered to the Allies. The Russian advance continued. The days of the Third Reich were dwindling. Admiral Canaris, under suspicion, was investigated in connection with the bomb plot; Ernst was deeply sorry to learn of that. But the marriage permission did not emerge from the bureaucracy.

"I must do something!" Ernst said. "But if I steal you and the child from the home, we will all be illegitimate, and forcibly separated. It is time for a desperate measure."

"I am satisfied to remain here," Quality said. "The children need me."



"I do not want you here when the city comes under siege by the Allies," he said. "The bombings are bad enough; then it will be dangerous."

"It will be bad elsewhere too," she pointed out.

"Not so much in the country, away from the main bastions. If I can get you to Wiesbaden, with my family, you and the boy will be comparatively safe."

She caught the omission immediately. "And not thee, Ernst?"

"I remain in the SS. There will be no safe place for me, when the Allies come."

"But--"

"You know I will return to my family when I can. That is where you must be. I am going to try to arrange it."

She understood the rigors of the situation. "I will do what thee wishes, Ernst."

Ernst made his desperation ploy. He requested a conference with Dr. Ernst Kaltenbrunner, the head of RHSA.

It was granted. "I had thought you would prefer to remain beneath my notice," Kaltenbrunner said.

"I would have, sir. But I have a problem that perhaps you can help me with."

"The problem of too soft a life?"

"I love an American woman I rescued from a camp in Vichy France. She bore my child. I must get away from Berlin now. I will volunteer for whatever you wish, if you will enable me to take her and my son to my family in Wiesbaden."

"I hardly need to bargain with a man I already command. Why do you think I would do you any favor?"

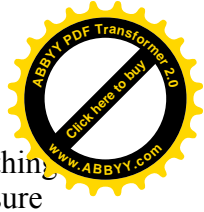
"Because I can be trusted to keep any bargain I make, even when there is no gun at my head."

Kaltenbrunner considered. "Very well. I will make that bargain. Give my secretary the necessary information, do your deed when you receive clearance, and return here to wait for special assignment. When I indicate it, you will volunteer."

"I will volunteer, sir," Ernst agreed. He knew he was making a pact with the devil, because only the most dangerous assignments were volunteer.

"Dismissed."

Late in September Ernst was granted leave to visit his family. He went to the maternity home--and Quality and Junior were waiting for him. She had been granted permission to take her son to his father's



family. There was no explanation for this odd, sudden release, but she knew it was because of something Ernst had done. He in turn knew that Kaltenbrunner was keeping his part of the bargain. But it was sure to be a hard bargain.

He drove her there. There was an air raid on the way, and they pulled onto a deserted road and parked under the foliage of a tree, hiding. Junior, now one year old, was sleeping. Quietly, efficiently, despite the cramped quarters, they made love. It was intensely sweet, after more than a year. Then they resumed the drive.

Herr Best was amazed to see them. "We feared you would never get out of Berlin!" he said.

"This is Quality Smith, whom I will marry. This is our son. I must leave them with you, until I am free of my commitments."

"Of course," his mother said. "Krista told us."

"Krista is here?" Quality asked. "I would very much like to see her again."

"She is away today, but will return tomorrow," Herr Best said. His glance at Ernst suggested that there was a good deal more he would like to say, but not in this circumstance. His family had of course thought Ernst would marry Krista, and the change to an anonymous American woman could hardly please them. But Krista had prepared them, and Quality would explain the rest, and they would be reconciled. Indeed, as they came to know Quality, they would be more than reconciled.

He kissed Quality, and then his son. "I will visit when I can," he promised.

"I know thee will," Quality murmured, managing to keep the tears from her eyes. He knew that she feared she would never see him again.

Then he was driving back, to face what Kaltenbrunner had in mind for him. The man had honored his part of the deal, and Ernst would honor his. But it did seem likely that his life would be in peril.

On October 22 Kaltenbrunner summoned Ernst. "My classmate and friend Otto Skorzeny is organizing a special mission. He needs loyal soldiers conversant in American language and custom. The mission is challenging and dangerous."

"I volunteer for that mission, sir," Ernst said.

"I commend you on your courage and patriotism." Those were the most complimentary words Ernst was ever to hear from Kaltenbrunner, though they were protocol for the situation. "You will be transferred immediately to Otto's unit." He actually shook Ernst's hand before returning the closing salute. Apparently he was pleased to be able to forward a genuinely competent man to his friend. Possibly his attitude toward Ernst had mellowed, since Ernst had performed well in his assignments and engaged in no subversive activity.

Colonel Skorzeny turned out to be a giant of a man, four inches over six feet tall. He was a self-assured Austrian whose face was badly scarred below the left cheek and across the mouth, but who nevertheless remained handsome. He was a legitimate hero, because he had made a spectacular rescue of



He deposed Italian leader Mussolini. He had also succeeded in abducting Admiral Horthy, the Hungarian leader who was attempting to make a treacherous separate peace with the Allies. He was forming Operation Grief, literally "Grab," for sabotage. He was assembling a hand picked group of about two thousand American-English speaking commandos to train for missions behind the Allied lines. This was to complement the German offensive in the Ardennes. It certainly seemed to be important, for Germany's situation was now desperate. The Allies were massing in Belgium and Luxembourg for an invasion of Germany itself, and if they were not stopped, the war would soon be over. The only way to stop them was to go on the offensive, but German strength was insufficient. It seemed that everyone knew this, except the Führer, who refused to receive any news of weakness or retreat.

Skorzeny formed the 150th Panzer Brigade and began training at Friedenthal, near Berlin. The men were equipped with American uniforms, Jeeps, and a few Sherman tanks which had been rescued from various battlefields. They were trained in the use of American military equipment, American slang, American military rank and custom, and even the American way to open a pack of cigarettes.

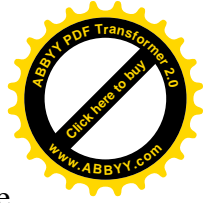
Ernst had no trouble with the language and slang; in fact he helped others to get it right. But he knew nothing of American tanks, and he did not smoke. Nevertheless, he learned to open a pack of cigarettes, and to take a puff without coughing. How anybody could *enjoy* such a procedure was hard to understand. It was really easier to learn to drive a Jeep, which was an efficient vehicle for the forest terrain where they would see action, the Ardennes.

The brigade had two main objectives. On the day of the offensive, small units would penetrate the lines under the pretense of retreating from the Germans, and commence sabotage activities. They would pose as military police and misdirect Allied units. They would remove Allied warning signs from minefields, so that the enemy would march into its own trap. They would mark and report targets for German artillery fire. They would blow up ammunition depots, cut communications lines, spread false reports, block roads, and act as scouts for advancing troops.

Meanwhile Skorzeny himself would take fifty American tanks and advance to the bridgeheads across the Meuse River. He would hold these crossings without challenge from the Americans--until the bulk of the German advance reached the river. Then the commandos would identify themselves to the German troops by using pro-arranged signals with colored flashlights or similar devices. In this manner the troops would cross the river without challenge, achieving a significant advantage.

Would it work? Ernst was doubtful. The plain fact was that the Russian front had sapped Germany's power, while the Allies were growing constantly stronger. It hardly mattered whether the river was readily crossed, or depots blown up; the enemy was simply too strong for such tricks to make a sufficient difference. Also, he doubted that many of the Operation Grab personnel would be able to carry it off; the intricacies of the American ways were too devious. So this was probably a death trap--as perhaps Kaltenbrunner had known.

Ernst kept his doubts to himself. He would do his best, though this type of thing disgusted him. He was becoming in effect a partisan, doing treacherous damage behind the enemy lines, and the Americans would hold him in the same contempt that he held for the Russian partisans. It was a truly terrible mission, and one which might have no escape. Obviously any of them who were caught would be executed immediately, in the field; that was what was done with partisans. So the best hope lay in doing what the partisans did: once the mission was lost, merging with the population and pretending innocence. What an irony! He had learned how to be a partisan from fighting the partisans.



They trained through November and early December. There were no breaks, and not entirely because of the urgency of their deadline for readiness; it was because of the necessary secrecy. There had to be no hint of what was planned. Ernst understood the necessity, but wished he could have visited Quait and his son. At least then there could have been one more contact, before□.□.□.

Of course they were not supposed to think of failure or death. But he knew he was not the only one. This mission was dangerous in the performance and in the aftermath. Only if it should be successful would they be heroes. Ernst simply did not believe that success was destined.

The German assault began at 5:30 in the morning on December 16, 1944 with heavy artillery shelling. German troops followed immediately behind, and a thousand paratroopers were to land behind the enemy lines. Meanwhile, the commandos would infiltrate undetected. Ernst was part of a three man group that made it through in a Jeep; in fact they didn't even see any enemy soldiers.

Once they were beyond the line, they parked the vehicle in the forest, scuffed the ground to hide its tracks, and split up, so as to achieve maximum effect. Ernst was in the uniform of an MP, the Military Police. He looked for a supply depot to destroy, but was in the wrong area; all he saw were empty trucks rushing along the road in both directions. He didn't even need to interfere with that; the Allies were already confused enough!

By day's end he had accomplished nothing. He returned to the Jeep and found his companions already there. One had managed to misdirect a truckload of troops, but he knew that they would soon enough correct their error, so it would count for little. The other had managed to drag fallen branches across a road so as to block it, but before he could complete the job an allied tank had arrived and bulldozed it clear.

In the morning they drove further on, hoping for better luck. This wonderful scheme seemed rather futile in practice, because they were almost as confused as the Allies. They heard the roar of the main German advance, and knew it would soon overtake them if they didn't get clear. That was of course pointless; they had to remain behind the enemy lines.

They came to a stalled American truck. The driver flagged them down. "Hey buddy--gimme a lift!" he called. "I'm outa gas, and I'm freezing my nuts off out here!"

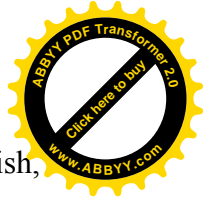
"Sure," Ernst said. He had warned the others about such oddities: the Americans called petrol gas. "Hey, corporal--get down and guard the truck for him, until he gets back."

Their third man nodded, and jumped down, making space on the cramped vehicle for the truck driver. Ernst knew he would take advantage of the time alone to clip wires so that the truck would be unable to run even when refilled.

They talked with the American, and were reassured: he had no inkling of their nature. He guided them to his depot, where they picked up two big cans of gasoline and headed back. "Domn stupidest thing," the man muttered. "I know exactly how far my tank goes, but I got distracted by this damned Heine attack and forgot. Lucky thing the Krauts didn't get me!"

"Lucky thing," Ernst agreed.

They delivered the driver to his truck. He poured in the gasoline, then started it up. The engine roared into life. "Thanks, pal!" the driver called as he pulled back onto the road. "You saved my hide!"



Ernst turned to their third man. "I thought you were going to fix the motor." He spoke in English, maintaining the pretense even when they were alone.

"Too obvious. He'd know right away that I'd done it, and then we'd have to kill him, and our presence would be known. But wait until he tries the brakes!"

"Did you fix the hand brakes too?" Ernst asked.

"Of course."

"But if he puts in it gear and turns off the motor, he can stop even on a hill," Ernst pointed out.

"Oops, I didn't think of that!"

So they had probably done about as much good as harm, unless the driver panicked and went out of control. They were not turning out to be much good as saboteurs.

They drove on. "But now we know where their depot is," the second man said. "I can blow that tonight."

"Good idea," Ernst agreed. They were learning on the job.

They parked the Jeep again and split up. Ernst found a temporary military base, but there were too many soldiers, and they were too alert; he could not get close enough to sabotage anything. The point was to take advantage of the enemy's innocence and neglect. He managed to pour handfuls of dirt into the gasoline tanks of several officer's cars, so that they would in due course stall out with clogged carburetors, but he knew that was a mere nuisance, not a significant act of destruction. Finally he gave it up and returned to the Jeep for the night. He was after all a desk man; he just wasn't good in the field.

One of his companions joined him there; the third did not. They realized that they had lost a man. They had all been aware that this was a high-risk mission, but this confirmation was nevertheless sobering.

On the third day, the 18th, as they drove farther ahead of the front, they were again flagged down. Ernst noticed that one man stood in the road, while two others remained at the side, rifles ready. This was no out-of-gas situation.

"Hey, buddy--who are Dem Bums?"

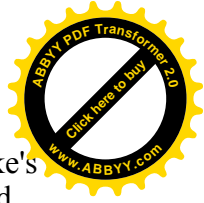
Ernst nudged his companion with his hidden foot, warning him into silence. "Listen, dogface--you got something against the Dodgers, let's have it!"

"Not a thing, pal. You there, sergeant--where's the Windy City?"

"Chicago," Ernst murmured without moving his mouth. "On Lake Michigan."

"Mister, I wish I was back there on Lake Michigan right now!" Ernst's companion replied. "Chicago may not be much, but it's a damn sight better than this hellhole."

"You got that right, trooper," the man said. "Pass, friends."



But Ernst retained caution. "Now do you mind telling us why the damned interrogation? A joke's a joke, but I don't like being covered like that by my own side. Would you have shot me if I'd trashed Brooklyn?"

"No. Only if you hadn't known about it. We caught some fake soldiers, Krauts in American uniforms, sabotaging our supplies. So now we're checking all strangers. Your uniform and rank don't mean nothing; you gotta prove you're American."

Ernst made a show of relaxing. "Oh. Gotcha. Sorry I got my back up."

"Get your ass on outa here."

"Right." Ernst drove the Jeep on through the checkpoint.

"How did you know they suspected us?" his companion asked.

"I spent a year in America. Now we must be alert: it's not enough just to answer questions; we have to do it as Americans do. Pugnacious, insulting. If you are challenged with something you don't recognize, make a counter-challenge; that may put them off."

They drove on, looking for something to sabotage but still had no luck. Ernst hated the feeling of ineffectiveness but knew it would be pointless to risk exposure unless he found a target worthy of the risk. Meanwhile it was becoming evident that the German attack was faltering; there were too few troops to sustain it, and the allied defenses were stronger than expected. The commandos' element of surprise had been nullified, and there was nothing further to be accomplished.

"We had better rejoin our troops," Ernst said. "But we can't do it in these uniforms!"

His companion agreed. They drove east, toward the sound of gunfire, as far as they could without hitting a checkpoint. Then they pulled into the forest and quickly changed clothing, becoming Germans again. Then they split up, knowing that it would be easier to sneak through separately.

Alone, Ernst trudged back toward the line. There no longer was an easy avenue through; the line was stabilizing as the German thrust lost momentum. But it should be possible to get through at night.

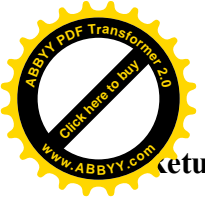
"Halt!"

Ernst stopped. He had been spied--and now he was in German uniform. There was an American soldier bringing a rifle to bear. Ernst could have shot him with his handgun, but didn't try. He had never directly killed a man, and the thought of it sickened him.

But if he surrendered, he might be spared. He might be taken as a stray from his unit.

Slowly he raised his hands. He felt like a coward. Thus ignominiously did his career end. Just as the career of the Third Reich was ending. Götterdämmerung--the day of doom, when the good gods were slaughtered. It had come at last.

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