

Here Comes Santa Claus

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When Julie Mackay initially proposed it, the First Annual Grantville Christmas party seemed a bit of unnecessary fuss to Mike Stearns. Not to mention that it was a misnomer: it would actually be the *second* Christmas since the Ring of Fire. In December of 1632, Mike had vastly more important things to think about, not the least of which was the future of their infant United States in war-torn Europe.

Besides, all the children in Grantville who had been orphaned, either the American ones by the Ring of Fire or the ensuing battles, or German ones by the chaos of the Thirty Years War, were being well looked after anyway. But Julie, heading toward motherhood herself in the coming new year, was adamant. These were all American children now, she said, and American children should have a proper Christmas, one with Santa and all the appropriate trappings. She meant to show this strange new world of theirs just how it was done.

For just a second as Mike stood there on the street, looking down at her, homesickness glimmered in the former cheerleader's blue eyes. Mike saw all that had been left behind, the many comforts and people this displaced populace would never possess again.

"We should start out as we mean to go on," she said stoutly. "Tradition is important. The fact that we didn't do it the first Christmas we were here doesn't count. We were too busy then just staying alive."

Mike's will crumbled. Perhaps a small celebration of the season would not be amiss. If they were circumspect, it wouldn't deplete their limited resources too badly, and, after all they had been through since the Ring of Fire, spirits could use some lifting. "All right," he said, "if you don't get carried away. It's going to be a long winter, you know. We can't waste food and supplies."

Julie beamed, her enthusiasm contagious. "I'll take care of everything," she said, "the presents, the decorations, the food. We'll have it one week from today, on Christmas Eve. There's just one hitch—we need someone to play Santa." Her eyes measured his six-foot frame. "How about you?"

Mike turned and quite wisely fled.

* * *

Accompanied by two of his handpicked men, General Gottfried von Pappenheim, the trusted top subordinate of the duke of Friedland, Imperial General Albrecht von Wallenstein himself, approached the outrageous new settlement known as "Grantville" on foot. He was a tall man, barrel-chested with a strong profile and prematurely white hair, though he was but four and thirty. On his face, he bore a distinctive birthmark, which looked for all the world like crossed swords. More than one had sworn that birthmark glowed red when he was angry.

Two of his men, handpicked for this mission, Otik Zeleny and Meinhard Durst, strode along at his back, clad in shabby farmers' smocks. Pappenheim knew all three of them looked entirely too well fed to be what they claimed to be, but there was no time to starve themselves and they settled for clothing too large for their frames to achieve the look.

The day here in Thuringia was cold, but fine, the sky arching overhead like a vault of shimmering blue glass in a cathedral. Armed guards with curiously sleek muskets patrolled the borders of the town, but allowed the three to pass without even paying a toll after they were found to be unarmed and asked for sanctuary in low German.

They were posing as poor refugee farmers, as per Wallenstein's specific orders. The general himself had been transported back to his estates in Bohemia in order to receive the best medical care. He had nearly died not long before, at the battle of the Alte Veste, when his jaw had been broken by a bullet from a gun fired from so far away, no one could even detect the shooter.

As they walked slowly down that strange gray road, Pappenheim couldn't keep from bending down to examine it. The unfamiliar substance was hard as rock, yet seemed to have been laid down in malleable form somehow, then smoothed like butter before it solidified. His right-hand man, Durst, the

sober veteran of innumerable years of fighting, also bent and ran calloused fingers over its unyielding surface.

Pappenheim shook his head. "The Croats told me, but I didn't really believe them. If it were indeed made of crushed rock, as it appears to be, how did they get it to bond in this fashion? Amazing," he murmured. "I have seen nothing like it anywhere."

Another of those devilish carriages roared past and Pappenheim did not suppress his shudder. The ignorant peasant he was imitating would have shuddered too. The upstarts who populated this town reportedly had countless such vehicles that moved without benefit of horse, not to mention lights not generated by fire and stoves that cooked without flame. The list went on and on.

His orders were to find the one called "Jew Lee Mackay," who was, by all reports, the marksman whose aim had been so devastating to General Wallenstein at the Alte Veste. One of his subordinates had beaten the name out of several refugees who had lingered for a time in this bizarre town, but then, frightened by its outlandish ways, returned to their farms. He still wasn't sure he believed the witless peasants.

"Jew Lee Mackay" was a strange name, made all the more puzzling by the peasants' insistence that "Jew" meant the same as the German word "Jude" in the newcomers' garbled version of English. That the shooter might be a *Jude* surprised Pappenheim. Most realms who allowed *Juden* to live within their borders forbade them to possess firearms. Pappenheim had never known a *Jude* who was proficient with weapons, much less a miraculous marksman.

But, beyond that, it was said this *Jude* was female, and though the females of this outlandish bunch seemed to put their hands to much that was traditionally male, he had trouble believing any woman could be so skilled in arms or steady of nerve—or that any self-respecting man would yield his place in combat to her.

At any rate, Wallenstein had been adamant: Find this mysterious Jew, Lee Mackay, and complete their mission.

A knot of young boys stood on a corner just ahead, arguing cheerfully in German about something. Pappenheim glanced over his shoulder, but none of the local inhabitants was paying them any undue attention. He headed toward the boys. The folk of this place spoke a bastard form of English so these children must be refugees. Perhaps they could point them toward this particular Jew.

He stopped behind the tallest, who looked thirteen or fourteen, a big yellow-haired lad just beginning to put on flesh after obvious long starvation.

"We are looking for the *Juden* of this town," Pappenheim said, giving the boy a stern look. "Where is their quarter?"

A shorter redhead with his arm in a sling looked from face to face. "There are no such quarters here," he said. "The townspeople do not consider such things when assigning living space."

"Besides," said the yellow-haired one, "why should you care? You do not look *Judisch*."

Durst stepped forward and backhanded him so that he fell onto the hard road. "Insolent pup! No one cares what you think!"

"Klaus!" The red-haired boy dropped to his knees.

A trickle of blood ran from the fallen one's lip, but his blue eyes were like stone as he took his friend's proffered hand and lurched back onto his feet. "This is Grantville," he said, and there was a flash of pride in his face. "No one has the right to do that here! No one is better than anyone else. Here, we are all equal." He glanced at his companions and they moved in to stand at his side. "Stearns has said!"

Durst snorted. "You—a common field brat, whelped under some bush by the look of you, equal to me, or anyone else for that matter?"

The boy flushed and he clenched his fists as a metal vehicle pulled up and stopped. A man with closely cropped hair stepped out. He was dressed in some sort of uniform that Pappenheim had never seen before and carried one of those small but deadly looking American pistols in a holster on his hip. "What is going on, Klaus?" the man asked, in badly accented German. "These men making trouble?"

Klaus dabbed at his lip with the back of his hand and Pappenheim could see how badly the boy wanted the speaker's respect. It was not in him to admit how easily he'd been struck down.

"They want directions, Mr. Jordan," he said finally, not meeting the fellow's eyes, "but we have been trying to tell him that here in Grantville we have no special quarter for *Juden*."

"Oh." The man nodded as though all that made sense. He turned to Pappenheim. "Okay, this is the way it is: no one here cares if you are a *Jude* or a Catholic or a Protestant. All are welcome. Go down this road until you come to the school. It's a big brown-and-white two-story building. They will you feed there and tell where you can sleep tonight."

Remembering his supposed identity as a poor peasant farmer, Pappenheim dropped his gaze. "Thank you, sir. It is very good of you to give us sanctuary."

The man waved them on, then the humming vehicle lurched back into motion and rumbled down the road.

"He thought we were *Juden*!" Durst stared after him, both angry and dumbfounded. "Does he not know what *Juden* look like?"

"Perhaps not," Pappenheim said. "By all reports, these people are very strange."

Klaus and his two friends had withdrawn across the road and now watched as the three men started toward the building that must be the promised school, just visible in the distance.

"What about them?" Zeleny jerked his chin toward the trio.

"Field brats," Pappenheim said. "It won't matter what they do or do not say. No one will care." He felt for the package tucked into his waistband beneath his filthy peasant smock. Soon enough, they would find this Lee Mackay, as ordered.

* * *

After Julie consulted Victor Saluzzo, the man who had replaced Len Trout as principal of the high school after Trout had been killed in the Croat raid a few months earlier, he gave her free access to the Christmas decorations. Armed with the key to the storage room, she dug through box after box, discovering wreaths and strings of lights, along with decorative candy canes as tall as her knee and smiling plastic Santa faces.

"The kids are going to love this!" she told herself, surrounded by boxes of ornaments and plastic tinsel.

She sat back on her heels, thinking. She was fuzzy on the details, but, as far as she knew, Christmas at this point in history had developed few of the traditions that so flavored the celebration in her own century. Maybe she could ask Gretchen Higgins, her closest friend among the locals, how people in this area liked to celebrate, but she was fairly certain the Christmas tree had first been used in Germany. Perhaps that was the one point where her culture and this one overlapped.

So, she told herself, shoving a box aside, the school's tired old artificial tree would not do for this party! She would send her husband Alex out for the tallest, greenest real tree they could find. Closing her eyes, she imagined the majestic evergreen out in the middle of the gym floor. It would smell divi—

"So here you are." A voice broke into her reverie. "An' just what is all this rubbish for?"

"Alex!" She came to her feet and threw her arms around her husband. "Just wait until you hear what I've got planned!"

"Dinna tell me." He smiled beneath his trim ginger mustache. "I have married myself a woman who is a better shot than I'll ever be and my puir heart canna take nae more shocks, at least not until after the bairn is born."

"Oh, that won't be for months," she said. "You'll have lots of shocks to get through before that."

"No doubt," he said, running his fingers through her hair fondly. "Of that, I think we can be sure."

"We're going to have a Christmas party," she said, "for the orphans, and anyone else who wants to come. I hope the whole town will be there." Her face sobered. "This Christmas is going to be hard for us, since it's our first holiday away from our old lives—well, our second, but last year we were too frantically busy to think much about it." She thought of her elderly grandmother, who lived in Virginia along with her

aunt and uncle and six noisy cousins, none of whom she'd ever see again, and swallowed hard. "Lots of folks will be missing their families this year. I think we need to celebrate together and be glad for what we still have."

"Well, I'm certainly that glad for what I have!" He pulled her into his arms and nuzzled her neck with great enthusiasm.

The resulting tingle ran all the way down to her toes. "Hey!" she said, but made no move to hold him off. "I can't think when you're doing that."

"I should hope not!" he said indignantly. "Anyway, thinking is highly overrated. Mike Stearns himself told me so, and you know how wise he is."

Julie grinned. "Now," she said, firmly extracting herself from her husband's embrace, "you have to help me plan this Christmas party."

"Well, I know about Christmas, of course," he said. "What Christian does not, but a party? Christmas is a time for sober reflection and worshipping in church back in Scotland, and not much else, unless you're a papist."

A furrow appeared between Julie's eyes. She'd forgotten. Her dear sweet Alex was a Calvinist, though mostly lapsed, by his own admission. Calvinists and probably most Protestants had likely frowned upon anything that smacked of pagan origin, like a tree or decorations. They tended to be adamant about anything that smacked of idol-worshipping.

"Okay," she said, "I'll plan it myself. You can do all the fetching and carrying and hanging, not to mention the cutting down of the tree. I'll handle the rest."

His brow furrowed. "Cutting doon of the tree?"

"You'll see." She held up a string of red and green lights and sighed. "I just hope we have peace for Christmas, whatever else we manage. There are still enough stragglers from Wallenstein's and Tilly's armies roaming the countryside out there to make trouble."

"That, wife," Alex said, "unlike fancy parties, I do know about." He enfolded her in his arms again. "Whatever else comes, I swear I will keep you and our wee bairn safe."

* * *

Otto Bruckner and Anton Berg, officers in Emperor Ferdinand's army, skulked around the perimeter of the strange town for hours, but in the end found no way to sneak in carrying their casks of gunpowder. People were entering Grantville, yes, quite frequently, and without a toll, but some of them were also being searched. It might be possible to spirit in something as small as a knife or even a pistol, if one were careful, but an ungainly object like a wooden cask was another matter.

"This settlement was not here two years ago," Bruckner told his subordinate, as they finally retreated to bury the two precious casks beneath a lightning-split oak out to the north of town, out of sight of the frequent patrols. "I spent a number of days in the area. This was mainly woodland, and the few surrounding farms were poor. The peasants had nothing worth stealing, other than the occasional daughter."

Berg, newly assigned to his command, snorted. "I doubt any of their filthy piglets would have tempted me."

Bruckner ignored the implied refinement of Berg's taste. Though Berg was his subordinate and younger than himself, he was of a noble family.

Relieved of the weight of the casks, the two made a last check of their clothing. Before setting off to see what they could learn of these devilish "American" upstarts, they had exchanged apparel with several like-sized members of their footguard. The boots were worn to holes in the soles, the nondescript trousers and shirts tattered, the linen unspeakable. Soldiers in the field for months at a time sometimes bettered their situation by robbing corpses, but this area had been at war for many years now and apparently no one better shod or dressed had made themselves useful by dying within recent memory.

Bruckner did not have orders to do anything but scout the area. But since it took days of riding on the fleetest horses available to take a message to Vienna, then return with its answer, he'd decided to act

on his own. Bruckner was confident the emperor would be generous to an officer who had taken the initiative to wound this new enemy at its very heart.

Two kegs of gunpowder could be very effective, when positioned properly and detonated. If they could just find a suitable target, they might well strike a quick blow for the empire and use the ensuing confusion to steal some of these remarkable munitions and perhaps even one of these bizarre iron carriages that moved faster than any horse, and, unlike living flesh, never tired.

Such a carriage stood in the middle of the main road into the town as they approached. "Halt!" A pair of men emerged from behind it, their shoulders broad, their muscles heavy with years of work. They were clad in curiously splotched garments and most obviously were not of peasant stock. No peasant ate well enough to put on that kind of muscle and fat.

"What business you have here?" said the foremost, a man with a heavy jaw but no beard or mustache at all so that he had the aspect of a youth, even though he was well advanced in years.

His German was so heavily accented as to be barely intelligible. These troops had been imported from very far away, Bruckner told himself, perhaps even as far as England. He snatched off his battered hat and then held out otherwise empty hands. "We only look for food," he said, keeping his voice faint, as though he were either ill or weak with hunger. "Soldiers burned our homes, killed our families, and took what little we had." He glanced out of the corner of his eye at Berg, who quite plainly had never put hand to plow in his life. "But we are hard workers. Will you take us to your lord so that we may put ourselves into his service?"

They would see through this ruse, he told himself, as cold sweat pooled between his shoulders. Anyone with half a brain would have the wit to see that he and Berg with their well-trimmed beards were of the aristocracy. They would be taken before the local lord all right—then put to death. This was utter foolishness. They never should have come—

"Hold out arms," the second man said. When Bruckner didn't obey at once, the guard seized his shoulders and spun him around. Bruckner had to resist the urge to whirl and strike him with a ready fist. No one laid hands on him in such a disrespectful fashion!

For the emperor, he told himself with gritted teeth. Focus on the rewards that would flood his way when Emperor Ferdinand learned of his initiative and cleverness. Hands patted the length of his body, straying into territory entirely too personal. He stiffened but kept his eyes focused downward on the bizarre gray ground.

"Good," the gruff voice said. "Around turn."

Over to the side, Berg looked as furious as he himself felt, evidently having been searched as well.

"Walk this road down," the man said, still mangling German, "until school in the center, brown and white, two stories. They take care of you there."

Berg straightened his grimy smock. His aristocratic blue eyes were glacial. "That is where we will swear allegiance?"

The shorter guard smiled grimly. "Something like that. We have room as long as you work. Everyone in Grantville works."

"That is all we want," Bruckner said. "Thank you." He took Berg's arm and dragged him in the indicated direction. He smiled and Berg smiled back with his strong crooked teeth as they stalked toward the school.

* * *

Word of the party had spread by the next day, so that offers of help as well as inquiries came flooding in. Julie was hard put to sort them all out. She finally set up a command center at the school, using the consumer science room on the ground floor—the class used to be called "Home Ec" and that was the way Julie still thought of it—to receive donations and organize the tasks.

Gretchen Higgins, married to Jeff Higgins, a local boy, was among the first to drop in. Julie looked up as her friend appeared in the doorway. Gretchen was pregnant too, and due at about the same time, though like Julie, she wasn't really showing yet. The statuesque blonde put down her son, young Wilhelm,

who was flourishing in his new home, and he toddled toward Julie on chubby, unsteady legs.

Gretchen smiled broadly. "We are having a party, *ja*?"

"You bet!" Julie gestured to her. "Come in and give me a hand!"

"I know little of parties," Gretchen said, striding across the room. She was tall and vibrant, her honey-blond hair clean and shining, her light-brown eyes dancing. "But I will do whatever you want."

"Well . . ." Julie nibbled on the end of her pen. "I'm trying to decide what local customs to include."

Gretchen pulled out an orange plastic chair and sat across the table from Julie, her brown eyes now puzzled. "Customs?"

"What people do for Christmas," Julie said. "Presents and decorations, trees, stuff like that."

Gretchen rubbed her forehead, concentrating. "It has been long since we thought about anything but trying to keep alive." She sighed and closed her eyes. "But when I was little, I remember putting out shoes for presents." She opened her eyes and met Julie's. "Is that what you mean?"

"Shoes?" Julie shook her head. That sounded Dutch. "Well, never mind. I'm probably trying too hard. We have plenty of decorations and we'll just make it up as we go along. If we leave out something local, we can put it in next year."

Gretchen nodded, then rose to capture Wilhelm before he toppled a pile of Home Ec books. "So what do I do?" she said over her shoulder.

"Well, we need presents," Julie said. "I had Melissa give me a count of orphans and we're already up to two hundred thirty-three. You could go door to door and see what folks could spare in the way of toys and clothes and anything else that kids would like. Most of the local children arrived with so little. They could use almost anything."

"Okay," Gretchen said and swooped Wilhelm up. "Whatever we find, bring back here?"

"Yes." Julie stood and then leaned down to tickle the boy under his chin. His dazzling blue eyes crinkled and he crowed with laughter. One of these days, she told herself, she would have a baby of her own and it still made her head swim to think about it. "Thanks for helping."

"No problem," Gretchen said, sounding uncannily like her young husband, Jeff. "I'll get a lot, you'll see. We will have a good time!"

Julie had no doubt about that. She'd already seen Gretchen in action often enough to have a good idea what her friend was capable of. "You go, girl!" she said softly as the door closed, then turned her attention to the next on her list of knotty problems:

Where to find turkeys?

And who could she get to play Santa?

* * *

After two days in Grantville, Gottfried Pappenheim had been able to ascertain several facts. First, there were indeed a number of Jews in this outlandish town, as reported, but they were scattered throughout, as the boys had maintained, not sequestered in their own ghetto. No one seemed to make any fuss here about who was Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist, or Jew. In fact, no one had even asked them to state their religion since they'd arrived. Several churches already existed within the city limits, although nothing as grand as the cathedrals in other cities, and a Jewish synagogue was currently being constructed.

Second, the marksman whom they sought actually was female, as reported. He found this harder to accept than the existence of these bizarre metal carriages constantly rattling about, but everyone who professed to know anything about the attack at the Alte Veste agreed: Jew Lee Mackay had done the shooting and she was a woman, a young one at that. Several even maintained she was presently with child and had been so even at the Alte Veste.

On the morning of the third day, Pappenheim motioned his two men outside after they had broken their fast in the huge dining hall of the refugee center attached to the school. The sky was gray, ominous with snow, and it was so cold, their exhaled breath hung like low clouds in the air.

He could still taste the breakfast served this morning. The food was extraordinarily good here, if sometimes strange. He rubbed his hands together in the cold, then stared ruefully at his blistered palms. In payment for food and bed, they had labored the last two days with other refugees to build a fortress guarding the northern approaches to the town. The Americans, clearly enough, were taking no chances of being surprised by another Croat cavalry raid.

Their hands were raw, their backs sore, but no one else seemed to mind the hard work so Pappenheim and his two companions had been careful not to utter any complaints themselves.

"I know now where she is," Durst said, blowing on his hands to keep warm.

Pappenheim narrowed his eyes. "The Jew?"

Durst nodded. "One of the cooks told me when I took my plate back to the scullery."

Pappenheim's hand went to the package concealed beneath his grimy farmer's smock. "Where is she then?"

"She is married to the headman of the village, a man named Michael Stearns, and serves herself as 'National Security Advisor.' She also, apparently, has the title of 'Senator,' whatever that means."

Unlike Durst, who was not well educated, Pappenheim recognized the term "Senator." It was a title the ancient Romans had used, although whether it meant the same thing here was impossible to determine. But the other . . . *National Security Adviser*?

"What exactly does that mean?" Pappenheim stared at Durst. The man looked ridiculous as a peasant, something like substituting a slaving war dog for his mother's pampered spaniel and imagining no one would notice.

The shorter man waved his hands. "I do not know, but the cook said she was the most important Jew in all of Grantville. So that must be the one we're looking for."

"Did she say where we could find this Jew?" Zeleny asked, his hands tucked beneath his armpits for warmth.

"They have a house near the center of the town, the cook told me." His face was rosy with cold. "A very nice house, apparently, since she described it to me rather enthusiastically. But I didn't dare ask her for directions. That would have made her suspicious. But I know what it looks like well enough, I think, to be able to find it if we can go to the town."

"We'll have to slip away," Pappenheim said. He raked fingers back through his white hair, now clean thanks to the marvelous "showers" provided in the refugee center. "The work crew will be going out soon."

"They never count," Zeleny said, "and it's a large work crew. I do not think we will be missed."

With Pappenheim leading the way, they edged around the massive building so that they were out of sight of the peasants gathering to work. In less than an hour, they were threading their way through the wood and brick domiciles that characterized this town.

"Fine work," Zeleny murmured, running his fingers over the magnificently regular red bricks. "I wonder who heads their guild?"

Pappenheim scowled. "Keep your mind on our mission. Who cares about bricks?"

Zeleny, whose father had been a guildsmen in Rothenberg, ducked his head and closed his mouth, but Pappenheim could see the wheels turning in his obstinate head. It was almost as though this place were haunted, or possessed, like the old tales of faeries. According to them, if a man once tasted faery food, he was ruined for the real world. That was what Grantville was like.

It took them some time, but eventually they found the right residence. It fit the description, at least. And it was still early in the morning. Early enough that the residents would probably still be at home.

Pappenheim made sure Wallenstein's package was readily to hand, then marched up the steps, his head held high, and knocked on the door.

After a moment, it opened and a beautiful black-haired woman gazed at him with dark-brown eyes. "Yes?" she asked, in flawless German.

Pappenheim cleared his throat. Could this beauty possibly be the infamous marksman of Alte Veste? "We seek the Jew Lee Mackay, and we were told she lived here."

The woman blinked in surprise. "Julie Mackay?"

"Yes," Pappenheim said stiffly. His nose felt numb with cold.

"Oh, Julie does not live here," the woman said, shivering. "This is the home of Michael Stearns." Somewhere in the house, the thin wail of a baby began. She glanced over her shoulder, then looked at her wrist. "Julie should be at the school before too long, in the room called 'consumer science' on the first floor. Did you want to help with the party?"

Pappenheim blinked. "You are not the Jew Lee Mackay?" She certainly looked like a *Jude*, he thought.

The baby's crying grew louder. "No," she said with a trace of impatience. "Julie is at the school. You will have to excuse me." And she shut the door in his face.

"The school," Durst said, disgusted, after Pappenheim came down the steps and reported the conversation. "But we were just there!"

"We must go back then," Pappenheim said. He shook his head. "What does 'consumer science' mean? Sometimes I think these Americans are not sane at all."

* * *

Hard labor most certainly did not agree with Bruckner and, after two days, Berg was beside himself at the very thought of spending even one more hour sorting rock and fitting appropriately sized chunks into the walls of the growing fortress.

He glowered as they were herded along with the rest of the peasants out to the perimeter of the town. "I will not demean myself in this way anymore!" he said under his breath to Bruckner.

"They do not watch us so carefully now," Bruckner said quietly. "Have you noticed?"

Berg's lip curled as a small girl with blond plaits waved at them from the steps of a nearby house. "I have noticed that my back hurts!"

"I think we could sneak into the woods and retrieve our casks of gunpowder, if we picked the right moment. Then we could hide them near the wall and come back for them when it is dark tonight."

"Oh." Berg nodded. "I suppose so."

Bruckner scratched his neck. "I hear there is to be a party on Christmas Eve, in the great hall at the school. Everyone is invited, even peasants like ourselves."

"That is ridiculous," Berg said. "They should go to mass on Christmas Eve."

"A number of orphans will be at this party," Bruckner said. "People are being encouraged to bring presents for the poor children who have lost their family."

"Presents!" Berg glanced at him, cheeks ruddy from the cold. "You expect me to bring a present for some sniveling houseless brat?"

"We have very little, you and I. We are poor peasants, remember? Little more than the clothes on our backs and those two casks, but I think we should try to do what we can."

"The casks." Berg's eyebrows rose and understanding dawned in his face. "If we brought them disguised as presents, no one would ask questions."

"I imagine not." Bruckner smiled thinly. "Imagine how surprised the orphans will be."

* * *

Three days before the party, Julie shut herself up in the Home Ec room in despair. Although Jeff Higgins had agreed to oversee the hanging of the decorations and his wife Gretchen was efficiently collecting presents, no one in the entire town of Grantville would agree to play Santa! All the available men were either too shy, too short, too busy, too skinny, too young, too—something! The excuses were endless. She'd play Santa herself, if she thought she could pull it off, but this was important. As nearly as she could tell, local children knew nothing of her time's archetypal jolly old gent. If she settled for some poor excuse, the legend she was trying to establish would be warped forever.

She'd begged the doctor, James Nichols, last night, and he'd laughed in her face. "No," he'd said, his dark face apologetic. "I'd rather stitch up a hundred men than face a roomful of orphans and try to do the *ho-ho-ho* thing. Surely you can find someone else."

But there wasn't anyone. Michael Stearns had been but the first to turn her down. Her own husband Alex had been the second, pleading his Calvinist ties. "Dammit!" She folded her arms and put her head down on the shiny table. "How hard could playing Santa be?"

Someone knocked on the door.

"Go away!" she called, too close to tears to want to see anyone.

"Ve vant help vith partee," a deep voice called. "This right place, *ja*?"

Julie brushed the unshed tears out of her eyes. It was just the pregnancy hormones that were making her so emotional, she told herself, and besides, by the accent, these were obviously locals. She couldn't turn them away.

"*Ja*," she said, rising, then went to the door and unlocked it. "Come right in and—"

The door swung open to reveal three men waiting out in the hallway and the rest of her words died in her throat. Two of the men were unremarkable, just more refugee farmfolk, it seemed, one short and swarthy, the other pale, both clad in dingy peasant smocks.

But the third!

"Hallelujah!" she said, taking the center man's arm and pulling him into the light from the windows. It was as if Santa himself had come knocking on her door. He was tall, well over six feet. Best of all, even though he looked to be in his thirties, he had a head of white hair and a lovely beard. She resisted the urge to reach out and stroke it. "I'm Julie Mackay and you've just saved my life!"

True, that weird birthmark didn't really fit on Santa's face, but you couldn't have everything.

"*Ja*, Jew Lee," the man said. "Ve come find you."

She walked behind him, admiring the breadth of his shoulders. "You certainly did!"

The white eyebrows knotted together. "Ve haf orders—"

"Mike sent you, didn't he?" She beamed. "This is so wonderful! I must remember to thank him. You'll make a splendid Santa!"

The man fumbled at his smock.

"Yes," she said, "you're right. You really should try on the suit, but not in here." She hurried over to the cardboard box languishing in the corner and pulled out the traditional red flannel suit trimmed in white. "Take it down to the bathroom and see how it fits." She pushed the shirt and trousers into his arms. "We may have to alter it a bit, but I'm betting both pieces fit perfectly—after we add a few pillows."

"Pil-losss?" The man's brow knitted, then he turned to his companions, speaking in rapid German. By now, Julie's own German was rather good, but the language had so many dialects that she couldn't really follow what he was saying. Something about—a message?

"Don't worry," she said. "Mike didn't get around to telling me you were coming, but I know you'll be perfect." Taking his arm, she led him to the door and pointed. "The bathroom is down the hall, to the left. You can't miss it."

Her new Santa blinked down at her, perplexed, and seemed disinclined to leave. "Ve haf orders," he said again.

"Not now, you don't. Whatever Mike told you, I'm overriding him. President or not, Christmas comes first." She glimpsed Victor Saluzzo's worn blue suit jacket as he entered the hallway on the way to his office and waved. "Mr. Saluzzo!"

His head turned.

"I've found my Santa!" She pointed at her man.

Saluzzo's affable face broke into a smile. "Splendid!"

"But" she continued, "he doesn't speak much English and I can't understand his dialect. I need someone to help him try on the outfit."

Saluzzo nodded and headed toward her.

"*Nein*," her Santa said, trying to wave him back. "I haf for you somesing, Jew Lee Mackay. You must—"

"Later!" Julie said merrily, giving her candidate over into Saluzzo's capable hands. "For now, go down to the men's room and try that on."

The tall man's blue eyes darted to his companions. "But—"

"Go!" She fixed him with a steely glare. "I'm too busy to argue!"

Saluzzo grinned. "Come on," he said. "I don't know about you, but, where we come from, there's no arguing with a pregnant woman once she takes that tone of voice!"

Julie leaned limply against the wall and watched their halting retreat. Her Santa kept looking back at her, something plainly on his mind. There was no telling about what. Well, it was probably nothing.

At any rate, she had her Santa! Now all she had to do was to make sure Jeff Higgins hung the rest of the decorations in the gym and Gretchen located enough presents for the list of orphans.

She charged out the door, her energy renewed. After finally finding a Santa, that should be a cinch.

* * *

In the end, Bruckner was surprised how easy it was to bring his nebulous plan to fruition. Instead of having to ferret out where and when this celebration was, a woman actually came out to the fortress and asked the workers for donations to be given to the orphan children of the town.

"For fatherless urchins?" Berg muttered, his aristocratic face smudged with mud. "They cannot be serious!"

Bruckner put down the rock he had been fitting into the cursed wall and dusted his blistered hands off. "Shut up," he hissed.

"We will both bring something," he said over his shoulder to the lovely peasant with the statuesque frame and shining dark-gold hair. Indeed, by the cleanliness of her person and the way she carried herself, she might easily have been mistaken for a duchess, if not for the hideous garb of this region. "We have very little, but we will do what we can."

He had to sigh, looking at her. She looked quite magnificent. The woman wore tight dark-blue trousers, just like a man, and a long flannel shirt beneath a sleek jacket that looked very warm. Though Berg was openly staring, she seemed totally at home in the bizarre garb.

Berg managed to make an effort to maintain their disguise. "What kind of donation do you require of us?" he asked, a bit sourly.

"Whatever you think a child might like," she said. "Toys would be nice, if you could fashion any, but old clothing to be made over or blankets, anything you could spare." Her light-brown eyes were shrewd, as though she wasn't fooled at all by their impersonation of farmers. Bruckner had the sudden intuition this Valkyrie had experienced things that no young woman of good breeding would encounter.

Then she took him totally by surprise. "Can you find a way to wrap your donation?" she asked.

Bruckner blinked, then glanced aside at Berg. "Wrap?"

"It is the custom of Grantville," she said, "to give presents at this season covered in something, so that their nature is not readily apparent. Then, I am told, the child is allowed to 'unwrap' it. I gather it was usually done with paper, in their—" She hesitated, her gaze faraway. "In their old home."

She shrugged, which only served to emphasize the ampleness of her very healthy figure. "At any rate," she said, "you can use whatever is at hand. If you can't find paper, some sort of cloth, perhaps, or cast-off clothing, but Julie is very determined. She wants everything 'wrapped.'"

"Then we will wrap," Bruckner said. "What time does the festival start?"

"Sundown on Christmas Eve," she said, "in the great hall at the school. What they call a gymnasium, which means something different than it does to us. You are staying right next to it in the refugee center."

"Yes, I know it," Bruckner said. He had wandered into the school several times, and peered into the huge room on the lower floor with its gleaming wooden floor and strange rope baskets dangling from

boards nailed to columns. Once, when he looked in, youths were bouncing large orange balls, shouting with great abandon and running about. The activity was clearly popular—a game of some sort, obviously—but he found it perplexing.

"Bring the presents before the party starts," the woman said, then worked her way down the incomplete construction, asking the rest of the workers for their help, just as she had asked them.

* * *

The day of the party had dawned frosty and bright. Outside, a foot of snow already covered the ground, so Julie knew they would have a white Christmas for sure. Alex had guard duty with his cavalymen that day, but had promised he would be off in time for the gift distribution this evening.

She picked up a cut-paper "snowflake," crafted by refugees. Unfortunately, it resembled an elephant more than an ice crystal.

Not that it really mattered, she told herself firmly, as she hung the "snowflake" on the magnificent tree set up in the center of the gym. She just wanted everyone to be together so they wouldn't focus on all they had lost. Though admittedly not everyone looked at it her way, she felt most had gained as much through the Ring of Fire as they'd been forced to leave behind. She had a sense of really being needed in this world, of coming into her own, despite her youth. Back in America, it would have been years before she could have had this much responsibility.

And then of course there was Alex, her wonderful husband, and the baby. Her hand crept to the new roundness of her abdomen. Next Christmas, they would share the wonders of the season with their child and she was surprised to find how eager she was for his or her arrival, when she'd never even thought she wanted children before this. For now, she would have to settle for making the best Christmas she could for Grantville's current population of children. Fortunately, Gretchen had gone over her quota on the gift gathering, so if a few unexpected guests turned up, it would just be the more, the merrier.

Hank Jones, one of the miners, called her over to admire the UMWA banner they were hanging on the wall. She was just having them move it over a few feet, when her dad stuck his head in the gym and waved. "Need any help, Jules?"

"You bet!" she said.

Her dentist father, Henry G. Sims, looked good, she thought, as though this century agreed with him. And maybe it did. Back in their own time, people took dentists for granted, made jokes about them, many avoiding them like the plague until they had no choice.

Here, the locals were literally lining up for Dr. Sims' services, despite the distressing lack of anesthetics. Next to their physicians, Doctors Nichols and Adams, he was the most sought after professional they had brought into the past. Even her Alex had gone to him and had his teeth worked over before he'd summoned the nerve to propose to her.

"Hang these up along the wall," she said to her father and pointed at an armful of sweet-scented pine boughs.

He picked one up and sniffed. "There's really something to be said for the real thing, isn't there? I can't remember when I smelled anything this wonderful."

She laughed. "You're just saying that so I'll forgive you for not playing Santa!"

"Maybe." He grinned and moved off toward the wall.

She put her hands on her hips. Now, just where was her German Santa Claus, Gottfried, anyway? She'd left instructions for him to arrive early.

Gretchen sailed through the door, holding her son Wilhelm in one arm and using the other to sweep her younger sister and a whole host of children before her. "We come early," she said to Julie, her cheeks red with the outside cold. "They all want to help."

The kitchen volunteers were already loading long cafeteria tables with food and drink and the children's eyes gravitated to the piles of iced Christmas cookies. "All right," Julie said, "but no snacking before the party begins."

Gretchen rattled off a string of insistent German. The wide-eyed children nodded, then headed for

the Christmas tree instead, chattering like sparrows. Immediately, a slender little girl pulled off a gleaming gold ornament and dropped it, then stared in tears at the shards on the floor.

Julie sighed and went to fetch a dustpan. While she was on her knees sweeping up, three men appeared in the doorway, one of them Gottfried. His red Santa suit was hung neatly over one arm.

"It's about time," she said, dustpan in hand. The shards slid together with a clink. "Why aren't you dressed? The children are already beginning to arrive."

Gottfried glanced at his companions. "We talk," he said, using German this time. "Now."

"Not now," Julie said as another group appeared in the double doorway, their arms full. "Go put your suit on!"

"No, we talk." His blue eyes were fiercely insistent. "They say you are the shooter—"

"Look," she said, "I don't have time! I have to organize the presents into appropriate age groups, as well as boy and girl things." She pushed him toward the door. "Dress now. Talk later!"

With a forced smile, she turned to newcomers who had evidently brought presents for the children—five live chickens, a handcart full of potatoes, and a kid goat. The benefactors, Franz, Anna, and Ernst, siblings from a local farm just outside the town, seemed quite elderly and all smiled gap-toothed smiles at her.

"How—lovely," she managed. "Just set them down by the tree." She watched them hobble away, wondering just how they were going to wrap any of that.

Over the next two hours, the pile of gifts increased to include handcarved spoons, two rusty keys, an ax handle, a bag of goose feathers, a broken eating knife, several dozen candles, and innumerable bundles of firewood. Julie retreated to the wall where she watched the ongoing parade of dead hares and foxes, dried fish, vegetable seeds, and farm implements with growing amazement. Those few items that were wrapped, as requested, came covered mostly in hay or straw. The goat kept escaping to nibble at the hem of her dress.

The problem was quality, not quantity. Before too long, Julie had to start telling people to store the presents in the Home Ec room.

She shook her head. Toys—she'd told Gretchen to ask for toys, dolls, carved soldiers, balls, that sort of thing, but she'd obviously failed to communicate the concept.

It's all my fault, she thought miserably. *I messed up and now the orphans' first real Christmas is going to be ruined!* She felt tears coming on in earnest and didn't know what to do. She had to stay and do the best that she could, but the children were going to be so disappointed!

And, on top of everything else, Santa Gottfried had never come back, after she'd dispatched him to get dressed. She was either going to have to look for him herself, or find someone else who would.

"Pliss," a gruff voice said at the door. "Where put?" Two scruffy looking wind-burned peasants stood in the doorway, each holding a cask wrapped in a shirt.

Sauerkraut, she guessed. Wonderful. "In the room down the hall!" she said, pointing and trying her best not to snarl. The two ambled away, as she turned to find Santa and wring his neck.

* * *

Bruckner worked to contain his glee. There was a room right across the corridor from the one being used to store presents—unlocked and unoccupied. The perfect place for the casks. Close enough to the gymnasium to do the needed damage, but far enough away that no one would smell the burning fuse until he and Berg made their escape and it was too late to stop them.

"Come on," he said in a whisper, elbowing the door open. "We must hide these in here out of sight and lay the fuse."

Berg nodded, but his attention was clearly back on the strange flameless lights that illuminated the gymnasium, as well as the steaming platters of food being carried in from the dining hall next door. Music was playing, as good as the finest musicians he'd ever heard, but none were in sight. "How do they do it?" he wondered. "Is it witchcraft?"

A dark-headed toddler of about three came running down the corridor and threw her arms around

Bruckner's legs, dimpling up at him. "Are you Santa Claus?" she asked in German.

"No!" He shifted his weight to break her hold. "Let—go!" he said in a fierce whisper.

The girl laughed and pressed her cheek against his leg. "I am a good girl, Santa," she said. "I get present!"

"How—nice." Bruckner's skin crawled as he handed his cask off to Berg and then pried the tiny fingers off his trousers. "Now, run along and play."

Her face contorted and then she dissolved into wailing tears. "Did you forget my present?"

"Shhh!" Bruckner glanced around, afraid of drawing too much attention. Fortunately, they were alone and Berg had already taken the second cask into the room, closing the door behind him. "I am sure you will get a lovely present, when this Santa fellow arrives, if you just do not cry!"

A tall young woman came into the corridor, saw the wailing child and angled toward them without hurrying to sweep her up into her arms. "Hush, Berta! Whatever can you be making such a fuss about?" Her light-brown eyes regarded Bruckner over the child's dark curls.

He realized with a start it was the same woman who had been soliciting gifts out by the fortress. "I am sorry," he said stiffly. "This child is mistaken. She thinks I am someone called 'Santa.' "

"Oh, Berta." The woman chuckled, taking the little girl by the hand and turning away. "This is not Santa. Julie told you—Santa wears a beautiful red suit and has a long white beard and merry eyes." She gave Bruckner a not entirely friendly glance over her shoulder. "And he is much nicer. Julie says he loves little girls."

A moment later, they were gone. Bruckner cracked open the door and slipped through. The room was dark, but there was enough light from the windows for him to spot Berg in a corner, already beginning to lay the powder fuse.

"I hate peasants," Berg muttered when Bruckner joined him in the shadows. "They are stupid and carry disease."

Bruckner began opening the second cask, mopping at his forehead with the back of his sleeve. He could hear people pouring through the school doors now, men, women, and children. The noise outside grew louder with every passing moment. Soon everyone would be too preoccupied to notice them at all.

"As soon as they start serving the banquet," he said, "we will strike a spark, and then slip away."

Berg nodded and settled on the floor in front of the casks to wait for the right moment.

* * *

Fortunately, Julie found Gottfried and his two friends in the cafeteria next door, sitting at one of the few tables that hadn't already been moved into the gym, and drinking hot tea. To her relief, he was wearing the red Santa suit, though not the hat. "What are you doing in here?" she burst out at the sight of them. "You're supposed to be next door playing Santa! Where's your hat?"

"I did not come to wear a silly hat," Gottfried said firmly. "I came to talk with you."

"Not now!" Julie hauled at his arm, but he was rock solid, impossible to move. "The children are all here. In a moment, they'll serve the food, and then after that, you're on!"

Gottfried's brows knotted. "On what?"

"Never mind," she said. "We're counting on you!"

"I want to talk about the Alte Veste," he said. "You were there, yes?"

The strange birthmark on his face, she suddenly noticed, seemed more prominent than she'd remembered. It looked almost like two crossed swords. "What?" she said, as his words came together inside her head. "The Alte Veste? What does that have to do with anything?"

"You were the shooter, yes?" His blue eyes were fierce now.

"Who are you?" She edged back out of reach.

"You shot Wallenstein." His tone was more sure now, his manner businesslike. He stood and towered over her, his body looking rock-hard. Her heart raced. How could she have seen Santa Claus in this man? He was more like a pit bull!

"I'll get Mike," she said, trying to keep her voice steady. "He can tell you about the Alte Veste, if that's why you're here." She turned and almost ran away.

Footsteps clattered after her across the floor as they followed.

* * *

In the gym, food was now being served on pink plastic cafeteria trays to the tune of "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer." Children were squealing with delight as adults led them to their place and sat them down with the biggest portions they'd ever been served in their short lives.

As Julie dashed through the double doors into the gymnasium, she saw three Grantville boys trying to rig up a harness for a gift suckling pig out of school jump ropes, while a pair of wondering little girls in red Christmas frocks were on their knees, staring in rapt fascination at three speckled hens scratching in vain at the polished wooden floor. Mike Stearns was standing with his wife Rebecca and their new baby daughter over on the far side of the room, looking contented.

"Mike!" She waved, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. Gottfried and his friends were only three men and she hadn't seen any obvious weapons. Maybe Mike and some of the other men could get them out of here before they caused trouble. "Mike, I have to talk to you!"

Her father was standing close to the Christmas tree with her Uncle Frank, admiring the lights, and she tried to get their attention too. "Dad! Uncle Frank! Over here!"

The trio entered the room, their eyes searching her out. No! she thought hard at heaven. Please! Not here, not now, just when everyone is so peaceful and happy!

"What is it, Julie?" Mike said, his eyes twinkling. "I already told you I won't play Santa."

"I already have a Santa," she said, the breath wheezing in her chest, "and he's asking me about the Alte Veste!"

"What?" Mike glanced up at the approaching men.

"They know I was the sharpshooter at the Alte Veste," she said as her father and uncle reached her side. "I think—they must be part of Wallenstein's army."

Mike reached under his jacket and she saw the sleek deadly shape of his pistol tucked into a shoulder holster. "It's all right," he said, stepping in front of her. "Nothing is going to happen."

Julie caught at his arm. "I know this is serious, but please don't let them spoil the party."

Gottfried stopped a few paces away, and drew a small box out from his Santa suit. "Jew Lee Mackay," he said, his tone very firm—like that of a man who has put up with as much nonsense as he can tolerate. The other two flanked him like an honor guard.

"Hello, Santa," Mike said evenly. "It's about time you showed up."

"*Santa!*" A trio of Grantville children, who recognized the suit, squealed and launched themselves across the gym floor. "Where's your bag?" they asked, their voices echoing. "Where're your reindeer?"

Scattered applause rang out and more children sprang up from their places at the long tables. "Santa! Santa!"

Gottfried stared down at them, evidently unnerved.

"What's your business here, Santa?" Mike had his hand on the .357 magnum under his suit, but hadn't drawn it out yet. "Only our friends are invited to this party."

Gottfried straightened and nodded at Mike, then turned to Julie. "I am General Gottfried von Pappenheim," he said. "I have been sent by Imperial General Wallenstein to find the one who shot him at the Alte Veste."

Mike's gun came out. Julie glanced at her uncle and father, who had also drawn guns. The image of Wallenstein's shattered body falling was vivid in her mind.

"The duke of Friedland instructed me—" Pappenheim broke off, his head suddenly swiveling toward the entrance to the gymnasium. His nostrils flared, as though scenting something.

* * *

Bruckner had the door open, ready for their escape. He could hear children in the gymnasium

shouting. "*Santa! Santa!*"

Berg cursed, as a third spark flared and died.

"Idiot!" Already the room stank with burning gunpowder from Berg's fumbling efforts to light the fuse. The smell—if not much smoke, yet—was drifting down the corridor

He took the flint away from Berg and knelt down. The casks were in the corner, now on their sides, with a powder train leading to them.

He gripped the steel and flint carefully and struck a spark. For a moment, the powder hissed but, again, the flame didn't catch. Unfortunately, the long days the casks had been buried had allowed some dampness to penetrate.

Berg grasped his shoulder and pulled him around, pointing out the door. "Look!"

The tall, powerfully built man in the red suit was striding down the corridor, sniffing with his nose. He spotted Bruckner and Berg almost immediately.

He smiled and kept striding toward them. About the coldest smile Bruckner had ever seen. And, behind him, other men were starting to come into the corridor.

Desperately, Bruckner looked down at the cursed fuse. No hope for it. They'd just have to escape.

He and Berg scrambled out of the room and began running down the corridor. With a muffled curse, the white-haired man dashed after them. Glancing over his shoulder, Bruckner could see other men coming after him—and they were holding firearms.

They almost made it out of the building before being tackled from behind and sent sprawling across the hard floor. Berg was cursing, but the blow had knocked the wind out of Bruckner and he was having trouble breathing.

Someone flipped him over on his back and stared down at him with cold blue eyes. The muzzle of a pistol was shoved into his neck. "Who in the hell are you?"

He could only shake his head and try to make his lungs work. Rough hands hauled him to his feet and then held him there when his legs buckled. The blue-eyed man lowered the pistol but kept it in his hand.

To his left, he could hear Berg complaining of the rough treatment and invoking the prestige of his ancient lineage.

Red invaded his field of vision and he tried to make his eyes focus. "There's gunpowder in that room!" someone was shouting in German. "They were going to blow up the school!"

The blue eyes were very hard. "Who sent you?"

He tried to take a deep breath and this time succeeded in drawing a moderate amount of air into his shocked lungs. "We are from Emperor Ferdinand," he said weakly. "We are of high rank and will surely be ransomed, if you preserve our lives."

The man in the red suit came up. "Nonsense. The emperor will disown you immediately. To save himself money, if nothing else. I sense two young officers haring off on their own, trying to curry favor and rise in rank."

He had a birthmark on his face and now it seemed to blaze red, like two crossed burning swords. Bruckner blinked. He had heard of such a famous mark once, somewhere . . .

"So, General Pappenheim," the blue-eyed man said. "It seems we are in your debt."

Pappenheim! Bruckner's knees went weak again. Though he had never had the honor of meeting the famous general, everyone who had fought in this war knew of him. He was something of a legend. What was he doing here with these damned Americans?

Berg had a cut over one eye where he'd struck the floor and his lip had already swollen to twice its size. "I demand to be ransomed!"

A squealing pig came racing down the corridor, followed by a bevy of laughing children.

* * *

The two would-be assassins were turned over to the custody of Fred Jordan and another deputy,

who handcuffed them and hauled them away—none too gently. One of them was still shrieking a demand for ransom. The other seemed in shock and said nothing.

Julie, on the other hand, was full of questions. She came over to Pappenheim, who was now back in the gymnasium handing out presents from under the tree after it had become apparent to him the children wouldn't take no for an answer. Over in the corner, toddlers were building a fortress out of potatoes.

"I don't understand," she told him. "Those two meant to kill us, but you stopped them, so that can't be why you're here."

He looked baffled. "I told you." He passed out a doll made out of straw to a beaming two-year-old led up by Gretchen. "Wallenstein sent me."

"I shot Wallenstein," she said numbly. "I hit him twice! I saw him fall!"

Gretchen brought another child forward, a five-year-old with eager eyes. Pappenheim picked up a dried fish wrapped in yarn and handed it over. The child rattled off a string of incomprehensible dialect. Gretchen smiled. "He says he'll name it Fritz. It looks just like his uncle!"

The general shook his head and moved on to piles of vegetable seeds in burlap bags. "Wallenstein was wounded, true, very badly. Now he wants to change sides. The emperor is no longer pleased with him, after the Alte Veste—and then the duke read one of the books we stole from you which says the emperor will have him assassinated."

Another happy child raced off. "So the duke decided to make a secret treaty with you Americans and King Gustav of Sweden."

"But he tried to kill our kids—and I did my best to kill him!" Julie protested. "Came that close, too! He can't just turn around now, say all is forgiven, and become our ally."

Mike Stearns had been standing nearby, listening. "Why not?" he asked. "I'll sup with the devil—if it means breaking Bohemia from Austria and tying that bastard Ferdinand into a knot. I won't think twice. Gustav Adolf won't even blink an eye."

She was trying to think of an answer to that when Pappenheim gently disentangled a little girl who was trying to climb into his lap, reached into his voluminous red Santa pocket and pulled out the same small wooden box she'd seen him carrying earlier.

"I brought this from Wallenstein, at his command," he said earnestly. "For the Jew Lee Mackay who shot him. Though it seems you are not actually a *Jude*, after all." He handed it to Julie. "There is a condition to the alliance."

"I knew it," her Uncle Frank said. "Leopards don't change their spots. What does the bastard want—half of Thuringia?"

Julie opened the lid. Inside the box, nestled on a bed of blue silk, was the deformed shape of a rifle bullet, the same caliber she had used at the Alte Veste. It was threaded onto a golden chain. Beside it rested the remains of four shattered teeth.

"Oh—my—God," she breathed.

Gretchen peered into the box. Her light-brown eyes crinkled at the corners and her face was suddenly merry. "Ha! He wants magic, General Pappenheim, doesn't he? The magic of new American teeth!"

Pappenheim nodded. "That is his condition for the alliance. Not negotiable. American dentist to come to his estate—or he will come here—so he can chew again."

Julie looked at her dentist father, who was as amazed as she was. "Well, Dad," she said. "I guess the alliance is up to you."

She could see the wheels turning inside his head as he tried to make sense of this upside-down world in which they found themselves, where the most sought after Christmas presents of the day were apparently a suckling pig and a pile of potatoes, dentists were held in higher accord than emperors, and a cavalry general was Santa Claus.

She snuck a second peek at the gruesome teeth. It would take some getting used to.