The Amber Knight

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Hitler's Wolfschanze, Rastenburg, East Prussia, the dark hours before dawn,
24th January 1945

The standartenfuhrer had never experienced a winter like it. An intense bitterness was carried on winds that bleached and shrivelled flesh and permeated bones and, as if the cold wasn't enough, despair had set in. He detected it in every communication from Berlin; recognised it in the faces of his fellow officers and unkempt uniforms of his command; saw it in the sluggish steps of the men hauling crates out of the bunker into the waiting line of trucks. Wrapping his fur-lined greatcoat closer to his numbed body, he waved his arms and stamped his feet to circulate blood to his insensate and frozen extremities.

'Can't they move any faster, Hauptsturmfuhrer?' he barked.

His aide clicked his heels, cracking the frosting of ice on his boots. 'Are you soldiers or snails? Move it! At the double.'

'The boxes are breeding in there,' a private muttered loud enough for a sergeant to hear. The unterscharfuhrer snapped a reprimand, which was drowned out by a boom from a Russian gun. Night hadn't slowed the Soviet advance. Even the birds were

fleeing westwards. Possessing neither the men nor heart to fight, all the standartenfuhrer hoped for was survival and an uneventful retreat to the Western front where he could surrender his command to the British or Americans. After a few years in a POW camp, he and his men could go home – if they still had homes to go to.

A private stumbled, dropping a long, narrow box. The wooden casing shattered on a concrete step revealing a panel that glowed gold against the silver snow.

'You stupid oaf, Schutze! Do you know what that is? How valuable…'

The private snapped to attention, shivering as the unterscharfuhrer gave vent to his anger.

'That was a piece of the amber room Tsar Peter stole from Frederick the Great.' The standartenfuhrer picked up the panel emblazoned with a darker inlay depicting an eagle which Third Reich historians had unanimously pronounced Prussian.

'You're not fit to wipe a pig's arse, Schutze! Retrieve the pieces.'

As the private scrambled for the broken corner pieces an officer stumbled through the darkness towards them, sliding up the icy path that led from the SS barracks.

'The mines are in place, Obersturmfuhrer?' the standartenfuhrer asked, irritated by the breakage that was going to take some explaining if they ever reached Berlin.

'The sturmbannfuhrer respectfully requests another two hours, sir. The cold…'

'The cold is freezing all our balls, Obersturmfuhrer.' The standartenfuhrer's eyes

narrowed. ‘Tell the sturmbannfuhrer he has half an hour, after that he’ll be on his own.’

The obersturmfuhrer snapped to attention before backtracking down the path.

‘The snow chains…’

‘Have been put on the wheels of all the trucks, Standartenfuhrer,’ his aide reassured him.

The standartenfuhrer lost sight of the lieutenant in the darkness that shrouded the trees, but he could still hear his boots crunching over the drifts. The man was passing the ruin of the conference room where von Stauffenberg had planted the bomb he’d hoped would put an end to Hitler and the war. The colonel shuddered from more than cold. How many people, civilian as well as military, would have lived if von Stauffenberg had succeeded? He was grateful Hitler’s scientists hadn’t perfected a machine that could read men’s thoughts otherwise he and most of the surviving officers on the Eastern Front would find themselves facing piano wire nooses suspended from meat hooks.

‘Twenty-five trucks packed, Standartenfuhrer.’

‘I’ll inspect the bunker.’ Pushing past the line of burdened privates negotiating the narrow staircase that led into the bunker, he strode inside and stood on the threshold of what had been Hitler’s living room. Blinking against the blaze of artificial light, he saw a clerk hovering, clipboard in hand over hillocks of packing cases. ‘What’s left?’

‘Only the modern furniture, Persian rugs and what you see, Standartenfuhrer.’

The standartenfuhrer scrutinised the chalk inscriptions on the chests. ‘Take the van Goghs and Rembrandts next and –’ he looked at the largest case.

Over two metres long and one and a half wide, it could have coffined a giant. ‘Helmut von Mau?’

‘I left it until last, sir, because of the weight. The stone sarcophagus alone is enough to test the strength of any axle and there’s the amber…’

The colonel reverently touched the box. As a twelve-year-old schoolboy, he and his classmates had been taken on a pilgrimage to Konigsberg castle to pay homage to the amber-encased body of the knight who had crossed the Vistula in the Teutonic crusade of 1231. They had sat around the glass case that held the coffin, listening as their teacher related stories they knew by heart. Helmut von Mau, the lieutenant of Hermann von Balk, conqueror, founder and saviour of Prussia. Helmut, the heroic and fearless soldier who helped free Prussia from the barbarians before making the ultimate sacrifice; a man so handsome that the beautiful pagan princess, Woberg, only had to look upon his face once to change her name to Maria, her religion to Christianity and forsake her people to become his camp follower. A man who wrought vengeance against the pagans even in death, when desperate in defeat, his men had strapped his body to his horse and sent his corpse galloping into the enemy camp. Legend had it that every heathen warrior who had looked upon him had been struck dead. Pity he didn’t have one or two von Mau’s in his command now.

‘This goes next, pack the paintings around it. Don’t leave any case graded A. High Command would be displeased if any of them were lost.’

‘Jawohl, Standartenfuhrer.’

The colonel damned the transport department. If he’d been given a train and half a dozen wagons he

could have delivered the more valuable contents of the Wolfschanze to Berlin a week ago. What could possibly be taking precedence over the Reich's art and history?

It had taken him days to assemble the decrepit convoy that lined the narrow road outside the Fuhrer bunker, thirty vehicles and none of them sound. One ambush by partisans and the entire consignment would be lost. If it happened it would be the fault of Hitler and the sycophants he surrounded himself with, but he and his men would pay the price. When he'd taken a commission in the SS, he hadn't envisaged Command assigning crack troops and a platoon of hand-picked engineers to nursemaid treasure while allied bombs fell on Berlin, killing civilians – perhaps even his beloved wife Hilde and little Wilhelm…

'It's not going to be easy to make progress through the forest in this snow, sir,' his aide ventured as he stepped outside the bunker.

'No, Hauptsturmfuhrer.' His voice rasped; he hoped the captain would put it down to the cold. 'Alert the escort, we'll move out in thirty minutes.'

'Before the last trucks are loaded, sir?'

'Delay and we risk losing the lot.' The booming of large-bore guns tore through the air, adding emphasis to his order.

The partisan leader known only as "Jan" even to his closest confederates, for fear of reprisals against his family and village, crouched behind a tree. He hadn't moved a muscle in four hours and was beginning to doubt he'd be able to do so again. The cold had seeped through his rags, freezing his blood; and still the road stretched white, naked and empty like a scar hacked

between the trees. Was there another route out of the Wolfschanze he knew nothing of? A road that led directly from the western perimeter?

When he heard the rumble of engines coughing reluctantly to life, he dismissed it as a product of his exhausted mind, then the click of a rifle reverberated behind him and he realised it was real. Tension filled the air; the same nauseating mixture of fear and fragile bravado that marked the prelude to every skirmish he had fought. Willing his frozen limbs to move, he jerked his gun arm forward.

The trucks lumbered slowly out of the chalky mist towards the inner ring of security gates like grey, mechanical elephants. He raised his hand. It didn't feel as though it was connected to his body. Guns blazed. Shadows dived out from behind the trees alongside him. The largest force he had been able to muster in five and a half years of bloody guerrilla warfare, but a turning tide carries a lot of flotsam on its crest. Men who'd kept a low profile were now anxious to strike a blow before victory bells sounded and their apathy – or collaboration – was noticed.

'Hold your fire!' A tall, fair-haired German colonel brandishing a white rag stepped in front of the leading truck, his hat tipped back on his head, his greatcoat open to show he carried no weapons.

'What now, Jan?' His second-in-command's question echoed above the engines.

'We talk to the bastard before we shoot him, and his men, like dogs.'

The silhouettes in the forest reminded the colonel of wolves – gaunt, ravening wolves with rapacious eyes. Without turning his head he shouted to his aide,

'Stand by.'

Mesmerised by the sight of the approaching partisans, the captain remained silent.

'They're at our gates because the Russians aren't far behind. As we're set to lose our cargo, I'll try to use it as barter for our lives. If they kill me, retreat to the Fuhrer bunker, order the sturmbannfuhrer to activate the explosives in the outer ring and contact Berlin.' Both he and his aide knew there would be no reinforcements from Berlin or anywhere else, but he kept up the pretence for the men's benefit. 'Alert the sturmbannfuhrer.'

The leading partisan raised his rifle and took aim at the captain as he ran back through the gates.

'If he doesn't deliver the order I've just given him, we'll all be blown to kingdom come in five minutes.' The colonel stepped forward.

'Hitler would never destroy his Headquarters.'

'Annihilation is preferable to surrender in the Fuhrer's eyes.'

'Then why didn't he blow this place when he left in November?'

'Because he and High Command refused to recognise the end and that the Russians were near.' The colonel lowered his voice, 'and because they needed a secure place to store the Reich's treasure.' He offered a pack of cigarettes to the partisan leader; when the man refused he pushed one into his own mouth. The paper stuck to his frozen lips. He waved at the trucks. 'They're packed with gold, silver, amber, paintings – the riches of every building worth looting in every German-occupied Russian and Polish town. Yours, commander – and mine, if we can stop fighting long enough to divide it.' He surveyed the ragged

horde ranged behind the leader and saw that at least a third were women and children. ‘The war will soon be over. We all have lives to pick up, homes to build. The contents of those trucks could go a long way to easing the problems of peace.’

A shot rang out. The colonel dived beneath the nearest truck. When he opened his eyes the partisan leader was lying alongside him.

‘Your men don’t respect a white flag when their commander is beneath it?’ The colonel spat out the remains of his cigarette.

Jan slithered over the snow and peered out between the wheels. He frowned, creasing a scar that ran from his temple to the corner of his mouth. ‘My men don’t have American lease-lend boots, Standartenfuhrer. The Russians have arrived.’

‘I have enough treasure to satisfy three armies. Shall we call an officers’ conference?’

‘You expect Russians and Poles to sit at the same table as Germans!’

‘We talk, or I blow everything and everyone within a five mile radius of this place sky high.’

‘I could kill you.’

‘And then you’d be responsible for the blast. My men are watching. They know the signal,’ he lied. ‘Kill me and they won’t even need the signal. They’ll fire the explosives anyway.’

‘My men aren’t used to standing idly by while officers talk.’

‘A couple of hundred metres beyond the perimeter of that fence is Hitler’s personal quarters stashed with wine and packing cases. There are enough bottles and loot to keep your men happy while we discuss the

future of my cargo. Will you invite the Russians? I don't speak the language.'

'I warned them not to stray from the path.' The captain ran at the colonel's heels as they led the Russian and Polish commanders towards what had been the officers' casino.

'Good,' the colonel commented absently.

'They laughed at me, Standartenfuhrer. I told them the area's mined.'

'And we'll be out of it in an hour.' The colonel hoped there were enough trinkets and wine bottles left to occupy the Partisans and Russians until he could get his men into the forest and on to a westbound road. He'd passed down the order that the first German to take a drink would be the first man shot, but would his troops remain loyal when they saw the enemy looting a cargo they'd been ordered to guard by the Fuhrer himself?

He was so tired he couldn't even recall the last time he had undressed to sleep in a bed. Was his house still standing in Berlin? He closed his eyes, visualizing the rosewood furniture, the crisp white sheets, his wife naked, her long fair hair tumbling down her back. Wilhelm curled pink and perfect in his cot…

'You have gold, Fritz?' the Russian major enquired in heavily accented German as they entered the casino.

'Gold, diamonds, silver, jewels, amber, paintings – more treasure than you can imagine, Ivan.'

'I have a very good imagination, Fritz.' The Russian slammed a bottle of vodka on a table and pulled a chair towards him. Turning it around, he sat leaning on its back.

'Hauptsturmfuhrer, bring the clerk and his lists here, and,' the colonel glanced at the vodka, 'something to drink and a set of glasses.'

'We don't need glasses.' The Russian pulled the cork from his bottle with his teeth, spat it out and drank deeply before passing it to Jan. He was enormous, his dark eyes shining from behind a fuzz of matted, black hair and beard, his massive bulk swathed in layers that bore no resemblance to any uniform.

Jan handed the colonel the vodka bottle. He put it to his mouth, pursing his lips as a stream of burning liquid flowed down his throat.

'Used to French brandy?' the Russian mocked. An explosion boomed through the open doorway, pounding the air and breath from their bodies. The bottle slipped through the colonel's fingers, its contents splashing over the carpeted floor onto the Russian's boots.

The captain materialised through the smoke, the clerk behind him. 'I warned them about the mines but they…'

'Our men, Hauptsturmfuhrer?'

'Russians, sir. They left the path.'

Day had broken, the thin, watery light heightened by the lustrous sheen of snow blanketing the ground, frosting the trees, and roofing the bunkers, illuminating anarchy. Bottles were being upended into mouths and smashed against trees; crates wrenched apart and plundered. Straw packing littered the ground as gem-studded, gold and silver altar crosses were attacked with knives and bayonets. One man was dancing crazily, his arms and neck festooned with ropes of

pearls and amber. Others lay in wait for the cases that were still being dragged from the bunker.

'Over there, sir.'

All that was left of two Russians were shreds of flesh and bloodstained clothing that decorated the lower branches of a conifer and the ground beneath it with gobs of glistening gore. The legless body of a third still moved, his screams muffled by the rumpus around the bunker. The Russian commander pulled his gun from his holster, aimed and fired. The mutilated body jerked once before slumping motionless. The men didn't even glance up from the looting. To his dismay the colonel saw as many Germans as Russians and Partisans in the melee.

'I couldn't stop them, sir,' his aide apologised. 'Not after they saw the others.'

'Looks like there's no one left to shoot them, Hauptsturmfuhrer, except you and me.'

'The sturmbannfuhrer managed to keep his men out of it, sir.' The captain felt the major's success with the engineers who'd been ordered to destroy the bunker complex reflected badly on his ability to control his own men.

'How many engineers are there?'

'Two officers, including the sturmbannfuhrer, three non-commissioned officers, and twelve men, sir.'

The colonel eyed the line of trucks that stretched between the Fuhrer bunker and the gates. 'Order them to drive the transport to the Naval High Command bunker.'

'There's gold in the trucks?'

'Valuables,' the colonel answered the Russian. 'The men are looting what we would have abandoned.'

‘All the trucks are loaded?’ A smile cracked the frozen dirt on the Russian’s face.

‘All,’ the colonel concurred.

‘Then we divide…’

‘Not here.’

‘I say we do it here and now.’ The Russian conjured another bottle of vodka from his shirt.

‘How would you rate our chances of keeping what’s in them from our men, or hanging on to it once we leave? The German army will make a last stand, if not in East Prussia, then Berlin. And his,’ he jerked his head towards Jan, ‘is not the only partisan unit in the forest.’

‘What are you proposing?’ Jan asked.

‘That we take only what we can carry in our packs. The larger more valuable items we hide here. At the end of the war we return, unearth them and sell to the highest bidder.’

‘What’s to stop someone from coming in and taking them after we’ve gone?’

‘They have to find them and there are cellars in this complex that could lie undiscovered until the sun turns to ice. If you won’t take my word for it, see for yourselves.’

‘We will, Standartenfuhrer.’ The Russian attacked the cork on the fresh bottle. ‘But first we drink to the philosophy of “survivors take all”.’

‘Starting with –’ the colonel pulled out his cigarettes and looked to the last truck in the line. ‘The Amber Knight and Frederick the Great’s Amber Room.’

‘Peter the Great’s Amber Room,’ the Russian commander corrected.

‘You’re both wrong,’ Jan smiled. ‘It’s our Amber Room now.’

Avoiding the drunken mob around the Fuhrer bunker, the engineers drove the trucks past the Teleprinter exchange to the Naval High Command bunker. At the colonel's suggestion, three men from each group were entrusted with the location of the hideaway. The colonel chose his immediate ranking subordinates; the major in charge of the engineers and his aide. Jan picked his lieutenant and his mistress, the Russian his second-in-command and his brother.

Dismissing the drivers, the colonel led them into a bunker opposite the one occupied by the Naval High Command. In the three years he had been stationed in the Wolfschanze, his aide had never seen the building open or occupied. It housed a single large, empty room.

The colonel produced a set of keys, prised a concrete block from the inner wall at floor level and uncovered a lever. He heaved it downwards. The Russian leapt in the air as a stone trap door opened inches from where he was standing.

'That, gentlemen, leads to a passage buried three metres below the cemetery at the rear of the Naval Command bunker. At the end of the passage is a room, airtight and bomb proof, fifteen metres square and two metres high. Suitably commodious for our purpose, it has only one entrance.'

'Air supply in the tunnel?' the Russian asked suspiciously.

'There are vents connected to the air supply that feeds the main bunkers. I suggest two men from each party transfer the artefacts.'

'While the others remain on guard.' The Russian primed his rifle and aimed it at the colonel's chest. 'Shall we begin?'

It took eight hours to fill the chamber. The last chest to be carried in held the amber encased corpse of Helmut von Mau. It required the combined efforts of all nine of them to slide it down the improvised wooden ramp the major had set up on the steps, through the passage and into the secret room.

'Forgive me, old fellow.' The colonel stroked the box. 'But someday there'll be a different world.'

'It's here.' He turned to see the Russian grinning in the torchlight behind him. 'The only question is, standartenfuhrer, whose world will it be?'

At nightfall the Russians and Partisans who were sober enough carried their comrades into the forest. The colonel mustered his men. Half the trucks were abandoned. Nursing hangovers and bruises, the Germans stowed their booty in their pockets and rucksacks, boarded the trucks and, prepared themselves for a long, cold and uncomfortable journey west. An hour later only the major and his band of engineers were left in Hitler's bunker city.

The outlines of the towering, concrete walls softened into ghost shadows as he and his men flitted from grey mass to grey mass, checking cables, priming fuses, laying caches of high explosives, ten tons to each bunker. An hour before midnight they retreated, crawling back over the paths Hitler had trodden with his beloved dog, Blondi.

The last building the major checked was the bunker opposite the Naval High Command. He'd been more

careful with his calculations there than anywhere else in the complex, laying just enough explosive to blow out the windows and doors, and cover the floor with debris that would settle, attracting leaves and dirt, an ideal host for weeds, and even trees, given the ravages of time.

The colonel reached the town of Rastenburg as the Major depressed the plunger. It set off a chain reaction that sent everyone who hadn't already fled the Russian advance scurrying to the air-raid shelters. The peasants in the countryside fell to their knees and crossed themselves. Columns of smoke and fire erupted into the night sky, obliterating stars as explosion after explosion blasted trees and tossed great clumps of concrete askew. The Partisans and Russians who crept too close to watch had their eardrums shattered and their skin seared. Afterwards, they looked for, but failed to find, the German major. If he and his men had left the Wolfschanze it was not by the main gate.

A group of partisans found the colonel and his men waiting on the outskirts of Rastenburg for the major and his engineers. The colonel's wife never gave up hope. Men were still coming home from the Russian POW camps in the sixties. She never remarried.

Jan disappeared at the end of the war. The men who had been with him since the beginning wanted to believe that he'd returned to his village and his old life. But there were rumours; that he had been tried for collaboration by the Stalinists and sent to Siberia; that he had been caught by the retreating Germans and shot; and the unthinkable – that he was a Jew. If so, the

end of the war brought no peace for him or his kind. Some Poles were meticulous in carrying on the work of the death camps.

The Russians lingered in the forest until the fires in the Wolfschanze died down. They discovered the German engineers had done their job well. Twelve men were killed attempting to reach the bunker with the trap door in the floor. Eventually their commander abandoned the site to the army behind him, consoling himself with the thought that only nine people knew of the existence of the cellar. There would be time enough after the war. But then, he hadn't reckoned on the battle for Berlin.

Another Russian unit came to the Wolfschanze. Lured by tales of Hitler's gold, they walked through the outer fence and into the minefield. The last sight they saw was the eight-metre-thick, steel-reinforced roofs of the bunkers lying drunkenly on their sides. The invading army posted signs in Polish and Russian, warning people to stay away. There was no need to post signs in German. Those who hadn't fled west had been killed or transported to Siberia. East Prussia was no more, its lands swallowed by Communist Poland and the Soviet Union.

The Wolfschanze's fences were replaced and the skull and crossbones signs remained until seven years after the peace treaties had been signed. It took that long to defuse the 54,000 mines the German engineers had left in the complex. By then the birds had returned to the forest.

Tourists visited the bunker city constructed to protect one man's life and comfort, while the rest of

Europe was being destroyed by a war he initiated. They walked over the airfield, the power station and the railway station; examined the air purification installations, the tanks that had ensured a plentiful supply of clean water, and the drainage systems. They imagined the scenes played out in Goering's, Jodl's, Keitel's, Speer's, Todt's, Von Ribbentrop's and the Fuhrer's bunkers while Europe burned. Their footsteps echoed hollowly on the concrete floors of the casinos, the guest bunkers, the saunas, cinema, brothel, barber shops, doctor's and High Command offices. They stood on the uneven ground of the cemetery trying not to think of the bodies beneath them.

They posed for photographs, marvelling at the scale of the place. Some drew analogies between the demise of the empires of old and Hitler's Third Reich in the Wolfschanze's shattered ruins, but none imagined the riches that still lay buried beneath the forest floor.