

THE WAGNERIAN ASSIGNMENT

Second Edition

By

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Dedicated to my wife Dawn,
and my sons Stuart and Daniel for all their help and support.

MONDAY, MARCH 12TH 1945

The passing of each tortured second ticks slowly toward the inevitable destruction of the self-proclaimed German Führer, Adolf Hitler's, National Socialist Third Reich. Twelve years into what the Nazi's had proclaimed would last a thousand, and a mere twenty-six since the founding of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, the Red Armies of Marshal Georgy Zhukov's 1st Belarussian front and Marshal Ivan Konev's 1st Ukrainian front, bear down on Berlin in the fight for the tributes of being the first to conquer the once imposing German capital.

Thunderous explosions can be heard from far off artillery, breaking the cold wet spring morning that just hours earlier had calmed after a devastating night bombing raid by the Royal Air Force.

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Flying the flags of General and state, a battered, dirty, Mercedes Benz G4 sedan staff car, drives through the destroyed city, passing destitute and starving civilians who are scratching through the rubble for any resemblance of the life that had been torn from them. Terrified the occupants of the Mercedes have the power of life or death over them, the civilians and military personnel stop and come to rigid attention with arms outstretched giving the Nazi salute.

Fearful for the future, the terrified German people are well aware of the crimes their countrymen had committed in their name against the Russian nation and that revenge and rape will be foremost on the mind of the common Red Army soldier, who at that moment in time is preparing to conquer their country.

Through a cloud of dust, the Mercedes turns onto Wilhelm Strasse, past the Reich Chancellery and into the heart of the Berlin government sector that Adolf Hitler had pretentiously renamed Germania and whose plans were laid out by Albert Speer, his chief architect. Only a small portion of the grand project had been built prior to the onset of war, which now lies in ruins.

Due to the carpet bombing carried out at night by the Royal Air Force, and by day by the United States Army Air Force, Adolf Hitler had been driven below the Reich Chancellery gardens into a bunker complex that at the onset of war had not been thought of as an option that may be required for the future, the building work only being started in 1943 and completed in late 1944.

The Allies undertaking to destroy the industrial potential of an enemy through terror bombing had seen two million tons of high explosives dropped onto Germany during the ill-conceived strategic bombing offensive designed to bring the German nation to its knees, killing six hundred thousand Germans in the process.

In September 1939 after Great Britain and France had declared war on Germany, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring had bombastically boasted to the National Socialist elite that, "No enemy bomber can reach the Ruhr. If one reaches the Ruhr, my name is not Göring. You may call me, Meyer." After such an arrogant self-aggrandising statement, many ordinary Germans took to calling the Reichsmarschall, Meyer.

In the rear of the Mercedes, SS Standartenführer Otto Skorzeny hardly ventures to look out at the devastation that informs him his war was ending in inevitable defeat. He closes

his eyes as his mind returns to better times, bringing a small smirk to his battle-hardened face, but this is quickly broken when his second in command, SS Sturmbannführer Karl Radl, turns to face him, showing his exasperation at all that beholds them.

“Are you alright Otto?” Radl questions, making Skorzeny’s eyes flicker then open to see they had arrived at their destination. “You seem a little distracted.”

Not feeling the need to explain, Skorzeny ignores his friend and comrade as he looks around at the devastation outside.

Hauptfeldwebel Hans Bergdorf, an impressively dressed Wehrmacht Non-Commissioned Officer, showing medals and battle honours gained during the war on his tunic, climbs out of the driver’s seat, opens the rear door to the Mercedes then stands aside as he comes rigidly to attention.

Showing the effects of a long drawn out war, which of late had been one of dismal retreat, and a long tedious journey fraught with the dangers from prowling Allied fighters, Skorzeny alights, followed by Radl, both stretching out their aching bodies. Looking at the wasted desolation he’d attempted to avoid during the journey, Skorzeny shows no emotion as his eyes shift to the once grand Reich Chancellery, which shows the marks the heavy bombing had left, the stonework is heavily scarred and the grounds and gardens pitted with varying sizes of bomb craters. Soldiers and civilians clear the debris in a ridiculous show of Germanic efficiency as they attempt to keep some sort of normality.

Waffen SS officers and soldiers, from countries conquered by the Germans and who had elected to betray their own and serve the Fatherland in the fight against communism, find themselves constructing defensive structures as they anxiously await the Red Army onslaught. The last of the millions of highly trained soldiers of the once massive German army that had conquered large swaths of Europe, Russia and North Africa, stand ready to protect a Führer who is alien to them as they fight against the odds as if protecting their homeland capitals from invaders well aware that in their own countries they are traitors to their own people.

Born on the 12th June 1908 in Vienna Austria, SS Standartenführer Otto Skorzeny stands six foot four inches in height with broad shoulders and a handsome Germanic demeanour. A large duelling schmiss, received during his Burschenschaft University days in Vienna runs across the left side of his face, from his chin, tipping the left corner of his mouth, across his cheek, almost reaching his ear lobe, only missing it by a mere ten millimetres. His uniform bears a single oak leaf on both collars indicating the rank of Colonel, along with the Iron Cross first and second class and the Knights Cross of the iron cross on his chest. His swift rise to notoriety and the attention of the Allies had come when on the 26th July 1943 Adolf Hitler had given him the task of rescuing his friend and the Italian dictator, Il Duce, the Leader, Benito Mussolini. Codenamed, Unternehmen Eiche, Operation Oak, Mussolini had been overthrown and imprisoned on the orders of the Italian King, Victor Emmanuel III, who had seen the wind of change and had approached the Allies to save himself. This mission was carried out with great finesse on the 12th September 1943 by Skorzeny, the men of Jagdverbande 502, and General Karl Student’s Fallschirmjäger, who assaulted the Gran Sasso in Italy, rescuing the Italian dictator with minimal casualties, catapulting the once unknown soldier into worldwide infamy with the help of Josef Goebbels’ propaganda machine, which at that time in the war needed a hero

desperately. His military career was then catapulted to greater heights when, Unternehmen Panzerfaust, Operation Armoured Fist, was devised and he successfully kidnapped the wayward son of the Hungarian President, Admiral Miklos Horthy, on the 15th October 1944, after he was found to be negotiating the surrender of all Hungarian forces in the east to the Russians. The surrender of the Hungarians would have caused a catastrophic collapse on several of the Russian fronts and would have left the German army vulnerable to encirclement and annihilation. Due to his actions, Hungary carried on fighting to the end of the war, saving the lives of tens of thousands of German soldiers and Airmen. The Russian Premier, Joseph Stalin personally had a bounty placed on his head for his death. In late 1944, Unternehmen Griffin, Operation Grief, was devised as the ultimate task to disrupt the American lines of communications and their ability to fight during the Ardennes offensive. Known to the Germans as, Unternehmen wacht am Rhein, Operation watch on the Rhine, and to the Allies as, the Ardennes counter offensive, or the battle of the bulge, his English-speaking men were hastily trained to infiltrate American lines and cause as much disruption as possible, allowing the German army to push the Americans back, causing panic between the 16th December and 25th January 1945, but after a small set back it was thwarted by overwhelming American forces. Known as Germanys last gamble in the west, their plan although nonsensical, was to separate the British and American armies in order to recapture the Dutch port of Antwerp and disrupt the Allies military expansion into the western European theatre.

Discerning German Generals knew this wouldn't win the war but had hoped it would bring the Allies to the negotiating table where they could negotiate the cessation of action in the west in order to defeat the Red Army in the east. Skorzeny's men caused minimal disruption and most were executed after their capture in American uniforms, which is in contravention of the 1907 Hague convention. The biggest disruption caused to the Allies was when word was put about that Skorzeny's mission was to assassinate high ranking Allied officers, including General Eisenhower, which kept them under maximum security and thus away from their command. The use of German soldiers in American uniforms and the accusation of assassinating the Supreme Allied Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force, would come back to haunt him when the Allies added him to their most wanted list of war criminals.

Small, stocky but powerful, SS Sturmbannführer Karl Radl was born on the 12th November 1911 in Gloggnitz, Austria. A comrade of Skorzeny's since their days together at the University of Vienna, so that when Skorzeny had received orders to set up a school to mimic that of the British Royal Marine Commandos, Radl was the first to be approached. He hadn't been a soldier by profession but had proved himself in the field for Skorzeny to make him his second in command. Being Skorzeny's adjutant, he was involved in all actions taken by his commander and stood with pride by his side throughout.

Air raid sirens sound their impending danger, informing the terrified Berliners their short-lived period of calm was ultimately coming to an end, scattering them in all directions in the hunt for shelters that litter the surrounding area.

Skorzeny and Radl look into the bright sunlight that blinds them momentarily as they scan for enemy planes. Anti-air craft guns open up, blasting their ordnance blindly upwards

in an attempt to shoot their enemy down as the first bombs begin to land, adding to the panic and devastation. Not needing a reason but taking the air raid as one, they hasten their entrance through large grey steel doors into the bunker complex and descend into the semi lit darkness below. Their boots echoing with an uneasy sense of safety and security, which gets louder the deeper they get into the bunker. As the doors close behind, Radl feels an instant sense of foreboding as the cold and darkness falls over him. Claustrophobia had never been a problem he had suffered from but this day was different, was it the guilt of being in the safety of the bunker as the people left on the surface were being obliterated, or were his nerves coming to an untimely end, having taken more than his fair share of the fighting over the years.

“How much more punishment can the people take,” Radl mutters solemnly, forcing Skorzeny to grab his arm and pull him off balance down several stairs to bring him round from his moment of melancholy.

“We don’t have time for sentiment, Karl, remember where we are.”

Lights flicker and dust falls as the land above takes a direct hit, shaking their sensibilities.

“Come Karl, let’s get this over with.”

They make their way through the dimly lit concrete corridors, as soldiers and civilians scurry about, frantically sensing the doom that beholds them. Ahead, two immaculately dressed black uniformed SS Bodyguards of the Führerbegleitkommando stand alert, guarding the large mahogany doors to the conference room where their beloved Führer is in session with his general staff.

“Looks like there is a meeting in progress, Otto,” Radl says coyly.

Not wanting to be caught up in the politics of war, and how things are going for the Reich, Skorzeny draws an anxious breath as he and Radl move to pass, but the doors crash open, knocking the SS Bodyguards aside as the newly promoted Field Marshal Robert Ritter von Greim exits, limping off, aided by two of his Lieutenants, who help the recently injured officer. Without a word of excuse or apology, they barge past Skorzeny and Radl, forcing them against the wall, annoying the SS Colonel with the overbearing arrogance of the Luftwaffe officers. Stooped and shaking uncontrollably, Adolf Hitler exits behind, his face red and twisted with rage and looking decidedly older than his fifty-five years.

Turning to see their beloved Führer, Skorzeny and Radl come rapidly to attention, forcing their bodies rigidly erect as they click their heels and give the Nazi salute with a united shout of. “Heil Führer.”

Hitler’s face mellows, brightening his eyes momentarily as the sight of his favourite soldier comes into focus. His left hand uselessly hidden behind his back, trembles uncontrollably as he reaches out with his right to take Skorzeny’s. “Colonel Skorzeny,” he mumbles with delight. “I have not yet thanked you for your stand on the Oder. Day after day it was the one bright spot in my reports. For your National Socialist heroism, I have awarded you the oak leaves to your Knights Cross and I mean to hand it to you myself. Then you can give me a full account. For the future I have other work for you.”

An overriding sense of pride overcomes Skorzeny as he digests what he had been informed and forces his body even more erect. “Yes, my Führer.”

Born on the 20th April 1889 in Braunau am Inn on the Austrian German border, Adolf Hitler left school at 16 and moved to Vienna then Linz, where his radical racial and political views intensified by what he believed he had witnessed in his short life. Living in hostels and on the streets, the rich and powerful, all of whom he believed were of Jewish origin, were not prepared to help the vulnerable and weak as he was at the time and passed uncaring of his misfortune. At the onset of World War One, to avoid being conscripted into the Austrian army, he crossed into Germany to enlist in the 1st company of the List regiment of the Bavarian reserve infantry, which he felt more akin to. Decorated for bravery in the field, he was awarded the Iron Cross first class and served throughout the four years of war, in and around the trenches of the western front, mainly acting as a despatch rider conveying orders given by others. After being injured and temporarily blinded in 1918, he was hospitalised prior to the armistice being signed and was furious in the belief the military had been stabbed in the back by the politicians and bankers, once again mistakenly believing it to be a Jewish conspiracy.

After the war, Germany was in turmoil and he was sent by the army to spy on the NSDAP, Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, which translates into English as the National Socialist German Workers Party. He was so taken by their politics, he began to speak at their meetings, joined in 1919, and by 1921 was their leader. In 1923, the National Socialists attempted a putsch to overthrow the Bavarian government, which was unsuccessful and resulted in the deaths of several party members who were killed by the army, whom Hitler had mistakenly thought would stand aside but instead chose to obey the orders of the Bavarian government and oppose the putsch. After running from the scene, he was captured and put on trial, which proved to be his first propaganda victory in the cause of National Socialism and he was sentenced to five years imprisonment in Landsburg, where with the help of his deputy Rudolf Hess, he wrote the book *Mein Kampf*, my struggle, which became a best seller and showed the world his intentions on war and his hatred of the Jewish people, which in 1939 took him and the German people on the road to war and mass genocide. The royalties from *Mein Kampf* made him a millionaire in his own right and he bought with the proceeds a chalet named Haus Wachenfeld, situated just outside Berchtesgaden, Bavaria, which was later renamed the Berghof, along with a large residence in Munich, which was used as the National Socialists headquarters and became known as the Brown house.

Hitler gives Skorzeny a wretched smile and nod as his body stoops and he shuffles off, giving Radl a stupefied glance of recognition in passing but he doesn't speak to the SS Major. Waiting until the two SS Bodyguards have passed; Skorzeny and Radl watch their Führer with sadness of the noticeable demise in his stature.

Having witnessed his Führer for the first time in person, Radl speaks with sorrow. "Not the man who took us to war all those years ago."

Without replying, Skorzeny turns to walk off, only to be confronted by the menacing figure of Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler, as he exits the conference room behind.

A leading National Socialist, Reichsführer SS Heinrich Luitpold Himmler was born on the 7th October 1900 in Munich. His anti-Semitic ideals and fastidious attention to detail helped get him noticed and he rose rapidly through the ranks from a lowly clerk and standard

bearer at the unsuccessful beer hall putsch of 1923 to the pinnacle of his career, commander of all armies on the eastern front. After Hitler's imprisonment, he went into hiding and had a short stint as a chicken farmer. On Hitler's release, he re-entered the National Socialist hierarchy where his rise up the chain of command was enhanced through deceit and deception. Obsessed with racial purity and hatred of all things Jewish, he oversaw the final solution to the Jewish question in order to eradicate all the Jews and Nazi dictated racially impure people through forced labour and extermination. A task he almost succeeded in with the mass murder of millions of innocents as he committed psychopathically heinous crimes against humanity in the name of his Führer from a remote safe clean environment where his involvement was his hand that signed the death orders and cowardly used others to commit the offences on his behalf.

Skorzeny gives a Nazi salute, followed seconds later by Radl, who turns into the staring eyes of the narcissistic psychopath.

“Good morning Reichsführer.”

Intrigued by the presence of the chief of special troops, Himmler glares through his pince-nez glasses before taking them off and cleaning them with a crisp clean cotton handkerchief.

“Colonel Skorzeny,” he said in his dark demonic tone that has most who hear frightened for their lives. “What brings you here this day?”

Skorzeny and Radl look into the crazed eyes of the methodical madman as he stares back searching for the intelligence he constantly craves to use against his many increasing enemies and give him the self-gratifying laudation he can't live without from his beloved Führer.

“We've been ordered here by General von Stiffel, Reichsführer.”

Himmler's mistrusting glance shifts several times between the two protagonists. “And you can tell me for what reason, Colonel?”

Unaware of the answer, Skorzeny attempts to duck the question, but Himmler's evil eyes insist on a reply.

“He hasn't informed us, Reichsführer.”

“Is that so, Colonel?” Himmler said with a grin of mistrust. “Is that so?”

Although Himmler is Skorzeny's superior as head of the SS, he could so easily put a bullet in his head without a moment's compunction rather than spend one more second in the obnoxious man's company.

“He will no doubt enlighten me at a later hour,” Himmler says then adds to the uneasy quiet with haste in his voice. “Well, carry on gentlemen; we still have a war to win.”

Unnerved by the stupidity of Himmler's words, Skorzeny and Radl give the Nazi salute then move off at speed as Himmler reluctantly salutes back.

Puzzled by their meeting, Radl looks back to find the Reichsführer had quickly lost interest and had moved off in the opposite direction. “A war to win,” he said with a laugh. “That man is severely demented and gives me the creeps.”

Shocked, Skorzeny grabs Radl's arm firmly as he looks around to make sure they hadn't been overheard. “Voices resonate in these hollow corridors, Karl,” he whispers. “That man is still dangerous.” He looks to confirm the despotic man had gone before carrying on. “Probably even more now his back is firmly against the wall.”

“Surely he’s no threat to you, Otto,” Radl mutters with a cynical smile, which Skorzeny sees as another idiotic comment.

“Need I remind you of the many Generals who have died by the wire on the orders of that man. I’ve seen the film and it’s not something you want as a memory.”

Fearful of why he would have been a part of such an action, Radl questions his commanders reasoning. “Why have you seen the film, Otto?”

“No doubt shown to me as a warning not to go against the Führer.”

Understanding Skorzeny’s unwavering loyalty to Führer and Fatherland is beyond reproach, Radl shakes his head and laughs. “As if you would, Otto... I hope General von Stiffel has ordered us here to discharge us,” he adds with a haughty laugh, making Skorzeny grin amused.

Skorzeny turns his look solemnly into the distance to see Hanna, a strikingly beautiful intelligent woman, making her way along the corridor and his stare fixes on her in amazement, making him smile and wave with delight as he focuses on her beauty and grace.

An aviator extraordinaire, Hanna Reitsch was born on the 29th March 1912 in Hirschberg, Silesia and is the only German woman to win the Iron Cross First class. A fervent National Socialist with unswerving loyalty to Führer and Fatherland, yet she never joined the Nazi party. Blessed with superlative flying skills, she set numerous aviation and endurance records, which made her a favourite of Adolf Hitler and a constant within his circle. She test piloted numerous Luftwaffe and captured Allied aeroplanes and due to her photogenic qualities became a star of the National Socialist propaganda machine.

Having believed she would never see Skorzeny again, Hanna beams with delight as he takes her hand with great relief to kiss affectionately. Selfishly wanting the moment alone, Skorzeny turns to Radl, who recognises the look and backs off, neither wanting nor concerned to know about their private business. Skorzeny grabs Hanna’s other hand, pulls her in for a quick loving embrace and kisses her neck tenderly before they separate anxiously not wanting to be seen as lovers.

Concerned that she is in Berlin as it is about to be swallowed up by the Red Army, Skorzeny’s voice quivers as he whispers. “What are you doing here?”

Feeling she is still of service to the Fatherland, which gives her the opportunity to carry on her love of flying, she answers with pride. “I flew Field Marshal von Greim here for a meeting with the Führer.”

“How the hell did you get a plane into Berlin?”

“I flew the Field Marshal in on a Fieseler Fi 156 Storch. It’s small enough to get over the roof tops and nimble enough to land on a short rudimentary runway.”

Skorzeny thinks back to von Greim’s exit from the conference room and grins. “I don’t think the meeting went well.”

“He was promoted Field Marshal and given command of the Luftwaffe,” Hanna said with pride. Skorzeny, smiles amusedly aware of the great honour even if there wasn’t an air force left flying for him to command.

“We were peppered with small arms fire all the way in. The Field Marshal got hit several times but still showed great-spirit in meeting the Führer.”

Skorzeny thinks over the dangers of flying this late in the war with apprehension. "Promise me this will be your last flight," he said, taking a tighter hold of her hands and staring ominously into her eyes.

Shocked at a statement she never thought to hear from the man she loves, Hanna turns away as she replies. "I can't do that, Otto."

Having underestimated Hanna's love and desire to keep flying, Skorzeny's smile turns to one of despair.

"You know I can't," she adds unnerved. "I have to go," she mutters as she attempts to break free, but he keeps a tight hold of her hands, preventing her moving.

"I'm not joking, Hanna," he says with the determination he is renowned for, but she jerks her arm away and moves off a few paces, showing her equally strong determination not to be intimidated.

"Neither am I, Otto."

Concerned she has no consideration for her own safety and knowing how upsetting his words have been, Skorzeny adds sincerely. "I can't implore you enough Hanna, stay away before all this madness comes down around us. This is not a safe place to be."

Not enjoying the unwarranted attention conferred on her sworn duty, Hanna turns away as tears well up in her eyes and roll down her cheeks, forcing her to quickly wipe them away. "I can't do that, Otto."

Skorzeny attempts to wipe her tears, but she moves further off.

"I can't believe you asked that of me," she adds, turning to glare back. "You of all people should understand that." Visibly shocked and shaken that what had been a wonderful chance meeting had not ended well, she gives Skorzeny a sorrowful smile then walks off as he looks around in guiltless innocence.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Radl moves back over. "I can't believe you asked that of Hanna, Otto."

Shocked his private conversation had been overheard; Skorzeny turns angrily to face his old friend.

"Voices resonate in these corridors," Radl adds with a grin of irony. "You of all people should know that."

Desperate to defend his actions, Skorzeny walks off in dejected silence, with Radl following amused.

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General von Stiffel sits in his dimly lit temporary office within the Vor bunker, which is located above the Führerbunker that is connected by a single stairway.

The Führerbunker complex consists of thirty small rooms distributed over two levels and sits twelve metres below the old Reich Chancellery gardens on Wilhelm Strasse, north of the new Reich Chancellery building at Vossstrasse 6. Four metres of reinforced concrete protect them from the bombs above, as secure and safe a place anywhere within the entire Reich.

Born in Königsberg, East Prussia in 1895, Generalleutnant Erich von Stiffel is the last of a long line of Prussian Generals that date his lineage back to well before the battle of

Waterloo and the Napoleonic war against France. Having served throughout the Great War with distinction, he rose to the rank of Captain but received a shrapnel wound in the second battle of the Somme on the 4th April 1918, leaving him with a constant ache in the left side of his pelvis and forcing him to be sent home for recuperation that kept him out of front line action for the rest of the war.

After the Versailles treaty of 1919 and the decimation of the German Imperial army, Captain von Stiffel was lucky enough to carry on his career within the newly formed Reichswehr, one of the hundred thousand strong military that the treaty permitted. Having retained his wartime rank, he stagnated in the ranking system of the post war German military, where promotion was almost non-existent, making him consider a career change that would have made him the first in six generations of his family not to reach the rank of General. The shame and sense of loyalty instilled in him as a child prevented him from requesting release from his sworn service and he carried on in his duty in the Reichswehr, then Wehrmacht before being transferred to the Abwehr, German military intelligence in 1932 and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

When the National Socialists gained power through the electorate in 1933, the military was increased substantially under Adolf Hitler's orders, him wanting the military high command on his side and he facilitated promotion within the ranking system, which resulted in him achieving a subservient loyalty within the officer class of the Reichswehr and its predecessor, the Wehrmacht.

Like many descent German officers, von Stiffel was never a Nazi but had ridden the National Socialist tide and ignored the signs that showed they were without honour and decency. Not all Wehrmacht officers were politically minded or Nazi party members but most were willing to turn a blind eye to the impending evil in order to gain the power and recognition they craved. At the onset of war, he carried the rank of Colonel within the Abwehr, and throughout the advances in Poland, France, Ukraine and Russia, he witnessed horrors, that reminded him of his time in the trenches of the Great War, and crimes his mind would never be able to erase.

Luckily for him and no doubt saving his life, he was transferred to a desk in Berlin in 1942 on the orders of the head of the Abwehr, Admiral Wilhelm Canaris and at last promoted Generalmajor, but sadly his son, Leutnant Wolfgang von Stiffel, was lost on the steppes of Russia never to be found or receive the Christian burial his mother so desperately wanted.

As the bombs explode on the city above, he sits terrified as the reinforced concrete shakes and the lights flicker, making him grimace and shiver at every blast. Nervous and broken after five years of war, he shakes uncontrollably as he takes frequent sips of whisky from a flask that he had carried throughout both world wars and takes great comfort from. Of late the strong alcohol content of the whisky had been the only thing to help dull the pain of his loss and the orders his position within the Abwehr had to give on a daily basis, sending operatives on missions he knew they had little chance of coming back from. Leaning back in his chair, he looks up at the ceiling, lifts the flask in salute then brings it slowly to his lips ready to drink, when there's a soft tap on the door, giving him a start that makes him spill some of the irreplaceable liquid down his front. Angered at the whisky's loss and aware supplies of such a delicacy were at such an extreme low that even a General would find it impossible to come across, he wipes his

uniform then takes a large lingering drink before putting the flask onto his desk. Feeling the excessive amount of alcohol consumed, he stands unsteadily then moves precariously to the door, pausing for several anxious seconds unsure to who is on the other side until several more taps hastens his anxiety and he tentatively opens it to reveal Skorzeny and Radl standing patiently, bringing a relieved smile to his forlorn face in recognition of his old friends and comrades.

Skorzeny and Radl give military salutes, which von Stiffel returns with glee, never having liked the arm outstretched salute of the Nazi's.

"A welcome sight on a day full of trials," von Stiffel said as he stands aside. "Come in please." Skorzeny and Radl enter as von Stiffel shakes their hands in turn.

"I hope there's some hospitality left," Skorzeny says with joviality to the Generals intoxicated demeanour.

Von Stiffel glances back at his flask, and aware of the limited contents decides to spitefully ignore his subordinate's words as he closes the door and stands to face it for several more tense seconds before speaking with increased volume. "I've awaited your arrival in anticipation gentlemen. I have a very important mission for you to take the fight against the Russians." Apprehensive of any mission at this late date in the war he knows can only be one of suicide, Skorzeny's glance shifts ominously between Radl and von Stiffel as the General rounds his desk. "I believe it will give them a bloody nose they won't forget for a long time."

Lifting a pen and a note pad, von Stiffel pauses deep in thought.

Concerned by the Generals unusual behaviour, Skorzeny enquires. "Is everything alright, sir?"

Von Stiffel, smiles and nods apprehensively as he scribbles several shaky lines onto the note pad which he lowers onto his desk and taps on several times before walking off. "Yes, Colonel a great deal will depend on you," he carries on.

Curiously, Skorzeny moves over and picks up the note pad to look over the almost illegible lines.

Paper reads: -

Ignore my chatter which is for the ears of the Reichsführer and his agents. I have a plan to save the Führer but we need to speak in private.

Skorzeny looks around the room for listening devices as von Stiffel lifts up a box of cigars, which he opens to reveal three left inside. He turns to Radl and offers one, but the Major declines, before he offers one to Skorzeny, who knowing their rarity, takes in its fine aroma before placing it in his inside jacket pocket.

"If you don't mind I'll keep this for later, General."

Von Stiffel takes a cigar for himself, lights it and takes a long lingering draw before exhaling a large cloud of smoke that lingers in the already stale air. "The Russian front is as we speak not far off," he adds in a loud bounding voice for the benefit of the Sicherheitsdienst officer sitting in a room several doors down taking the minutes of every word being said.

Skorzeny hands the paper to Radl, which he reads intently before looking back bemused.

"What I have devised is a way to halt them in their tracks," von Stiffel carries on as he moves to Radl, and takes the paper off him to set alight before dropping it to the floor to singe into the

well-worn carpet. “Or at least give them a bloody nose they won’t forget while we recoup our forces and push them all the way back to their god forsaken Motherland.”

An unnerving calm comes over the room as the bombing ceases, and von Stiffel looks anxiously up to the ceiling as he awaits the next explosion before realising it had come to an end. “At last we have calm. Now I believe we can go,” he adds as he lifts his brief case and exits at haste, leaving Skorzeny and Radl watching in bewilderment.

“What’s going on, Otto?” Radl mutters, showing his concern.

“That I don’t know, Karl, but if we follow the General we may get to find out.”

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The steel doors to the Führerbunker creak open allowing a desperately needed rush of light and air inside. Von Stiffel exits into the Reich Chancellery garden for the bright sunshine to blind him momentarily, but this is quickly overshadowed by black acrid smoke billowing from the burning buildings around, darkening the area with its doom. The air raid sirens sound the all clear as a calm descends momentarily only to be quickly interrupted by the moronic boom of the Red Army artillery firing in the distance.

Elated to be out of what he considers to be his own personal hell, von Stiffel takes in a long lingering deep breath of fresh air. “I never thought I’d breathe again.”

Like claustrophobic men taking their first anxious breaths, Skorzeny and Radl exit behind, but neither gives the devastation of the air raid a second thought as they enjoy the freedom the outside beholds.

Von Stiffel takes another long lingering draw on his cigar, showing his preference to the smoke over the fresh air he so vigorously craved moments earlier. “I’d rather be out here facing the Red Army than in the so-called safety of the bunker,” he mutters to Skorzeny’s nodding agreement. “Even with the acrid smoke I can’t get enough of the fresh air.”

Skorzeny and Radl look at each other in bewilderment of the General puffing on his large cigar.

A Mercedes Benz W31 staff car drives up and stops in front for Sergeant Bergdorf, von Stiffel’s long term driver, to leap out and open the rear door with a salute as he comes to attention.

“Where are we going, General?” Skorzeny enquires as von Stiffel looks around mistrusting of the officers and soldiers, who exit the bunker behind, also on the hunt to clear their lungs of the stale stagnant air.

“I thought we should eat, gentlemen.”

Von Stiffel gets into the rear as Skorzeny and Radl stare at each other concerned at the manner the General is conducting himself in, which is alien to their experiences of him over the years.

“What’s going on, Otto?” Radl reiterates.

Well aware von Stiffel is suffering the effects of excessive alcohol, Skorzeny shakes his head, considering the pressure he is under his friend has a good reason to be intoxicated. Skorzeny and Radl get into the rear of the Mercedes, and Bergdorf closes the door, gets into the driver’s seat and looks through the rear-view mirror at his General, awaiting his instruction.

“Litzen café, Hans,” von Stiffel says with a large grin.

“Yes sir.”

“My favourite place to eat while in Berlin,” von Stiffel carries on with great enthusiasm as he slaps his leg several times in anticipation of the treat to come. “It has been since I was first posted to Berlin in twenty-nine.”

Sitting in silence, no one wants to discuss the futility of carrying on the war as they witness the devastation they are passing on the short drive to the Litzen café.

“We are being followed, sir,” Bergdorf said, but von Stiffel doesn’t hazard a look and remains unnervingly calm.

Radl turns to look out of the rear window to see an Opel Kadett K38 saloon a short distance off, showing all the signs of being in pursuit.

“Don’t worry Karl,” von Stiffel said with calmness as he takes a heavy draw on his cigar.

Radl frowns as his stare moves slowly between von Stiffel and Skorzeny, wondering why he shouldn’t worry about something he knows nothing about.

“What’s going on, General?” Skorzeny enquires.

Von Stiffel pulls his brief case protectively into his chest but doesn’t answer.

“Sir,” Skorzeny said his voice insistent on an answer.

“Don’t worry, Otto, it’s just the inevitable Gestapo tail.”

Shocked by von Stiffel’s nonchalant statement, Radl turns his stare back out of the window toward the Opel Kadett and the shadowy figures of two occupants inside.

“They are no threat to us,” von Stiffel said with a fearful laugh. “We’re not meant to know they are there. Don’t give the game away, Karl.”

“Why would anyone want to follow us, General?” Radl enquires naively.

“Since the July plot to kill the Führer all top ranking military officers have been under suspicion of treason against the state.”

“With good reason, General.”

“You think so, Otto? Not all are traitors but now all are suspected of such.”

“What about, Otto, General?” Radl jokes, to Skorzeny’s ire.

The July 20th bomb plot was an attempt by German officers, politicians and religious leaders to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Codenamed, Unternehmen Walkure, Operation Valkyrie, Lieutenant Colonel Claus Shenk Graf von Stauffenberg, a seriously injured Wehrmacht officer, planted a bomb in a conference room within Hitler’s front line headquarters, the Wolfsschanze, Wolf’s lair, near Rastenburg in East Prussia, but the bomb failed to do its job and Hitler survived to take revenge on the conspirators. Hitler’s propaganda machine had always proclaimed he was at the front with his men but during the early stages of operation Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, the wolf’s lair was well behind the fighting in the relative comfort and safety of the East Prussian countryside.

The meeting was scheduled to be held in a concrete bunker, but due to the heat and humidity at the last moment it was changed to a wooden building that had windows, which were opened to allow ventilation. The bomb was planted with only half the explosives, due to Stauffenberg’s inability to set them, and then being placed not far from Hitler’s side before they were moved behind a heavy table leg and the explosion was deflected away from him with the energy dispelled through the open windows and he survived with only minor injuries, making his right arm useless with a severe shaking paralysis.

Four men were killed, including two Generals and a Colonel, and twenty were injured in the failed attempt on Hitler's life. This was the sixth attempt to kill him and only added to his belief he was protected and that he had been chosen to lead Germany by divine providence. Hitler immediately ordered Himmler's Gestapo to round up all believed to be involved, but the Reichsführer used his Führer's orders as an excuse to not just get rid of the conspirators but to seek retribution against his many enemies. Tortured to breaking point, the resistance members were put on a show trial in front of maniac judge, Roland Freisler and the Volksgerichtshof, the people's court, where they were humiliated into giving a confession and naming other conspirators, mostly through the threat of violence against their families. Over five thousand suspects were executed with a large number of their families being sent to concentration camps.

Hitler ordered the executions by hanging with piano wire and wanted them filmed for future entertainment, which he watched with glee.

Several conspirators, including Stauffenberg, were lucky enough to escape the wire having been executed by firing squad as other complicit officers attempted to conceal their involvement. Others chose suicide in the naïve hope it would save their families.

Operation Valkyries main designations were to assassinate Hitler then arrest all SS officers and National Socialist officials in order for the conspirators to be free to negotiate the immediate cessation of hostilities with the Allies. All to save the lives of Axis soldiers who they knew would die with the continuation of the war.

Skorzeny's belief is all who had sworn loyalty to Adolf Hitler should retain that loyalty no matter how bad things had turned out. It was a matter of honour to him and even as a necessity of war, Germans killing Germans he finds abhorrent, and the thought of what had happened to several of the conspirators, who he personally knew, sends a cold shiver down his spine.

Radl looks curiously to Skorzeny, wondering if he'd also been suspected or accused of involvement in the July 20th plot. "Some are obviously above suspicion," he says with amusement, making von Stiffel wheeze with mirth.

"Otto's a favourite of the Führer's, isn't that right?"

"The Führer knows I am loyal and above reproach," Skorzeny replied with pride.

"Not all are above suspicion, many innocents were also sent to the gallows and guillotine," von Stiffel explains, conscious of what he had said to be treasonous, making him lower his tone.

"And the biggest traitor of them all is the Reichsführer."

Skorzeny and Radl stare at each other in stunned disbelief of a statement that could only be said in private.

"That can't be right, sir," Radl interjects.

"Reports from my agents is that the Reichsführer has or is about to betray the Führer by negotiating a surrender with the Western Allies. Of course he is only after saving himself," von Stiffel blusters. "I don't know what world he lives in but in mine mass murderers would die a terrible death," he adds, then realising he had spoken in a second unguarded moment, he grins weakly and shuffles uncomfortably with no intention of backing down from his words.

“Have you reported this, sir?” Radl adds naively, making Skorzeny and von Stiffel laugh and look at him with scorn.

“Who in their right mind would try and darken the so called good name of the Reichsführer,” von Stiffel explains uneasily.

“But you’ve just said.”

“Never mind, Karl,” von Stiffel interrupts, annoyed with himself for speaking without thought.

“Please forget I said anything.”

“If the Reichsführer is a traitor the Führer needs to know,” Radl mutters with urgency.

“The Führer thankfully needs to be informed of the Reichsführer’s treason by someone other than myself,” von Stiffel said with a sigh of inevitability. “Someone with their own agenda, I have more pressing issues at hand.”

Believing he is imperative to the future of Germany and out to save himself, Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler had contacted Count Folke Bernadotte, a Swedish diplomat and nobleman, at Lubeck on the Danish border. Being a delusional personality and assuming Hitler would soon be dead, he believed the Allies would see him as Germany’s legitimate successor and represented himself as just. He had asked Count Bernadotte to act as a go between with General Eisenhower and that he would surrender Germany to the Western Allies, but not the Russians, in the hope they would join together in the fight against communism.

Von Stiffel knows Himmler’s treachery would very soon come to the attention of Hitler and would be reported by one of the many sycophants in dire competition for his favour. “The Führer wouldn’t hear a bad word against his old friend and comrade. He still believes he is a great National Socialist.”

“I’d like to put a bullet between the bastard’s eyes,” Skorzeny snarls with venom, even though he doesn’t need another reason to kill the bespectacled madman.

“These are things beyond our control, Otto, and as I’ve said it is for others and for another day,” von Stiffel interrupts. “Now let’s get back to more important and patriotic things at hand and why I asked you here today.” He places his cigar into his mouth to allow him to open the briefcase, which he fumbles around inside before producing an envelope, which he grips tightly to crush in his palm. His glance shifts slowly between Skorzeny and Radl then out of the window at the lines of old soldiers and Volkssturm as they march apprehensive but determined in well-disciplined lines towards the advancing Red Army. “Madness,” he mutters to himself before his eyes fix on Bergdorf, who is looking back through the rear-view mirror at him. “I believe some of them fought against Napoleon Bonaparte.”

The Volkssturm was founded on the 8th October 1944 on the orders of Adolf Hitler to conscript men between the ages of sixteen and sixty who were initially thought too old or too young for military service. Many who volunteered were young boys, indoctrinated in Nazi ideology since 1933, soldiers from the Great War, and some who had been disabled out of military service due to injuries in the field. They all volunteered with the full backing and knowledge of the National Socialist party as the last bastion against the revengeful Mongol hordes coming from the east. On their arms they wear a band with Deutscher Volkssturm

Wehrmacht stitched on. Their uniforms are whatever they can muster or just their everyday clothes. Armed and trained on numerous diverse weapons, they are hastily sent to the front after taking an oath of allegiance to their Führer, in an attempt to halt the might of the Red army. Invariably they are annihilated in many ill thought out battles where they were lured to their slaughter under the command of regular army units. Their only choices were to die in battle or be shot or captured by a vengeance seeking Red Army and be sent to the Siberian Gulags. If they decided to desert, they then had the vengeance of the state behind the lines against them as SS and Gestapo men hunted them down and set an example by their executions.

Realising he isn't enjoying the cigar, von Stiffel leans forward and stubs it out in the ash tray to everyone's relief. "Far too many of them are boys, far too young to fight. If only they knew what awaits them," he adds after a moment's reflection.

Skorzeny and Radl stare out of the window, disillusioned at how bad things really are, and maddened at the senseless sending of old men, boys, and the infirm against the massive mechanised murdering machine of the Red Army.

Von Stiffel gazes at his reflection in the car window, equally dismayed to see how withdrawn he looks before turning away to hide his true feelings. "Well to business. As you know Germany has lost this war."

Skorzeny and Radl don't react to a statement that isn't news to them. Anyone with the slightest intelligence had known for years that Germany had taken on too big a burden but had only discussed such subjects in private circles. Countless Gestapo informers thirsted for such knowledge to inform on their neighbours and family, believing it would increase their standing within the National Socialist family.

With great tentativeness, von Stiffel hands the envelope to Skorzeny, who looks over the handwritten title on the cover.

"The Wagnerian Assignment," he said, taken by the Germanic title of the mission.

"We cannot allow the Führer to go down with the rest of Germany. I have devised a plan to get him out of Berlin to the Obersalzberg where we can protect him. I was overseeing the project myself until my premature recall back to Berlin a few weeks ago."

Skorzeny straightens out the envelope and goes to open it, but von Stiffel reaches out preventing him.

"Leave your reading for later, Otto," he said. "Why I called you here is I need a man to take temporary command while I remain here." He looks directly into Skorzeny's eyes. "Are you that man, Otto?" he enquires then adds without waiting for an answer. "I believe you are and as such my last order to you as a commanding General is for you to fortify and protect the Berghof until I arrive with the Führer."

Relieved the order is not the suicidal one expected, Skorzeny sighs heavily as he looks at the envelope, desperate to open and read the secret it conceals.

"If I don't make it, I order you and Karl to take off into the hills and save yourselves," von Stiffel adds thoughtfully in the hope this will give his friends the reason to evade capture.

Not knowing what the Wagnerian Assignment truly entails, Skorzeny questions with concern. "What do you mean, don't make it, sir?"

“Berlin will fall soon, probably within eight to ten weeks. I intend to remain with the Führer awaiting the right moment to approach him with my intentions.”

“Why not do that now, sir, while there is more time?” Radl enquired once again with a naïve question he should have kept to himself, making von Stiffel shuffle uncomfortably.

“You don’t understand the implications of diplomacy and government, Karl. If I don’t get the timing right the Führer will have me shot for defeatism. I’m afraid it needs to be timed to perfection. Not even his most trusted advisors, which I can assure you I am not, could approach him with such a delicate subject at this late hour. The Führer still believes we can win this war. He stands in the conference room surrounded by subservient sycophantic Field Marshals, Generals and lackeys, moving long defunct armies around as if they still existed. Ranting and raving all the time, as all in the room stand like sheep, too frightened or as equally delusional to understand the truth and bow to his every word instead of advising him of what is truly happening.”

“Why don’t the Generals inform him of the true situation?” Radl says, annoying Skorzeny with his ill thought out remarks.

“Weren’t you listening, Karl, the Führer trusts no one.”

“Maybe you should do it, Otto,” Radl snipes to Skorzeny’s increased annoyance. “You know, with you being one of his favourites.”

Oblivious to Skorzeny and Radl’s petty conversation, von Stiffel contemplates his plan and the future. “I hope to get the Führer to the Berghof before the end of April. That gives you six weeks, Otto.”

“What about orders, sir?”

Believing his planning and foresight had covered every eventuality, von Stiffel answers with pleasure. “Everything you require is in the envelope.”

Enthusiastically, Skorzeny opens the envelope, to von Stiffel’s dismay, and pulls out maps and hand written statements that show what is expected of him, and glances over the paragraphs with surprise. “One thousand men, where do you hope to get these from, sir?”

“They’re already there, Otto,” von Stiffel says with pride in what he had accomplished before his recall to Berlin. “I had them posted several months ago.”

Believing taking soldiers from the front where they are desperately needed is madness saddens Skorzeny, and it shows on his forlorn face.

“I see by your expression you disapprove, Otto.”

Skorzeny doesn’t want to be seen as disrespectful to his friend, and forces out an indignant smile. “It’s not that, sir.”

Having a great knowledge of all the aspects of modern warfare, von Stiffel answers with what should really be Skorzeny’s words. “I can understand. What sort of a madman would transfer battle hardened men from the front to a quiet idyll untouched by war?”

“I wasn’t thinking that, sir,” Skorzeny pleads, not wanting to question the orders of a man he respects greatly.

“Of course you were, I would think the same if I didn’t know the reason why.”

“Obviously to protect the Führer, sir,” Radl interrupts in an attempt to make amends for his previous ill thought out remarks.

“To protect the Führer I would have transferred the entire army,” von Stiffel adds hesitantly. “But I had to do it covertly so as not to arouse suspicion. A company here and a company there, it all took time.”

Skorzeny innocently believes with the end of the third Reich the fourth will still require his beloved Führer. “I can understand that, sir.”

“When you get to the Berghof you’ll find an Obersturmbannführer Shint of the first SS Panzer Division there. He’s an extremely trustworthy officer; I handpicked him myself, so when I was recalled to Berlin I left him in command. I don’t trust many officers these days, most are out to save their own necks but Lieutenant Colonel Shint is a man of honour. Just as an afterthought, don’t allow his age or boyish good looks fool you. He’s a very capable officer and has proven himself many times in the field.”

“Does he know about the Wagnerian Assignment, sir?” Radl enquired.

“A good question,” von Stiffel answers, bringing a large smile to Radl’s redeemed face. “No, he doesn’t. The only people that know are in this car but he is an intelligent officer and I would be amazed if he didn’t suspect something.”

Skorzeny looks at Bergdorf, wondering why such an important secret would be known by a mere Sergeant.

“There are very few people I would trust with my life,” von Stiffel said on noticing Skorzeny’s curiosity. “Obviously, there’s you and Karl, but Bergdorf here is my dearest friend and well aware of what I know. Not all though,” he adds with a mocking laugh that receives a giggle from the Sergeant. “This car is probably the only place I feel I am not being listened to by the SD.”

“He could be a Gestapo agent,” Radl said gravely, angering Bergdorf by the obvious personal slur to his honour.

“You’re not, are you, Hans?” von Stiffel says in total seriousness before bursting into exaggerated fits of laughter. “Hans is my most loyal and trusted confidant. He’s witnessed more than his fair share of intelligence nastiness since being transferred to my command as my driver.”

“Thank you, General,” Bergdorf said with pride.

“No, Hans, I thank you,” von Stiffel said then carries on. “I need the help of an officer in the Begleitkommando, then the next to be informed will be the Führer himself but only when and if the time is right.” Apprehension of what that outcome may be makes him shuffle ill at ease.

“Until then nobody else must find out what we intend to do.”

Radl glances back out of the rear window at the Opel Kadett to see it still following some distance off. “What about the Gestapo, they are sure to follow.”

“That decision I believe I will leave to you,” von Stiffel says reservedly, to distance him from what is sure to be a distasteful action.

Skorzeny considers von Stiffel’s words for a while. “What should I do to stop them reporting back to the Reichsführer, sir?”

“What I’d like to do with all the bastards,” von Stiffel utters in a third unguarded moment, to Skorzeny’s shock, him having never heard the proud officer swear or lose his temper during their long years of friendship. “Kill them Otto, kill them all,” he adds showing his venomous hatred towards Reichsführer Himmler’s state sanctioned murderous machine. “They deserve no less than what they have done to others.”

Skorzeny replaces the paper and maps into the envelope then places them inside his jacket.

Boarded up and run down, the Litzen café shows the signs of disrepair and having gone out of business a long time past. The Mercedes pulls over and they all look out at the devastation as numerous Berliners, who are out looting, exit the building and run off in fright of the official looking car.

“When was the last time you were here, sir?” Radl enquires, slightly amused by the General’s bemused expression.

Showing visible sadness at the plight of his favourite eatery, von Stiffel shivers as his mind races over the inevitability of his life crumbling around him. “Obviously a lot longer than I thought... Well gentlemen, I don’t believe we had the time to eat anyway.”

Having believed he was in for the first decent meal in days, Skorzeny draws a deep breath of sadness.

“Alright Hans back to the Reich Chancellery.”

Bergdorf turns the car in the road and drives off, just as the Opal Kadett nears from the opposite direction and passes, with Skorzeny glaring at the two Gestapo men inside.

“The real face of the enemy,” von Stiffel adds without hazarding a look.

“I’ve seen it before, General, in many different guises,” Skorzeny said as he recollects the time he was in command on the Oder front when his patience had been lost and he ordered the execution of two Gestapo men for cowardice in the face of the enemy. This had angered Himmler who ordered his arrest and execution but underestimating his importance to Adolf Hitler and the regime no action was taken against him. Even though Himmler was in overall command of all armies in the east his power was in the early stages of waning.

The Geheime Staatspolizei, which abbreviated to Gestapo, is the secret state police of Nazi Germany. The National Socialist sanctioned killing machine was established on the 26th April 1933 on the orders of Adolf Hitler. Its first commander was Hermann Göring, who on the 20th April 1934 agreed to transfer its immense power to Heinrich Himmler because of their mutual hatred of the SA, the Sturm Abteilung, who they both believed was too formidable a power and needed to be kept under observation. Himmler then made his second in command, SS Obergruppenführer Reinhard Heydrich, commander on 22nd April 1934. From then on, the Gestapo became the most feared organisation within the Nazi state, increasing Himmler’s dominance and power over his many enemies, both social and domestic.