

Theater of War

Act Two

"The Play's the Thing"

A
Hogan's Heroes
Story

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Theater of War

Act Two

by *EM Seifert*

is set in the universe of *Hogan's Heroes*.

This story is the second in a series of "Acts".

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"The play's the thing . . ."

-W. Shakespeare

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Act Two

Scene One

Scene One

– One –

January 1945 — three years of war for the Americans, over five years for beleaguered Europe. And the end was still nowhere in sight. In the Pacific, the U.S. Eighth Army had begun a hard, bitter campaign in the Philippines. In Europe, a long, drawn-out battle, the Battle of the Bulge, was still being fought. There were already thousands of casualties, American, British, German, yet the battle and the lines seesawed back and forth, and the victor was still to be determined.

For the Allies, there were more signs that the once unbeatable German armies were cracking. Fuel shortages were beginning to cripple the mighty Panzer divisions. The Luftwaffe had in the beginning of the year undertaken what would prove to be its last major operation, sending hundreds of planes against France and the Low Countries. But it had been a costly, disastrous operation for the once invincible Luftwaffe. The Allies continually proved their own supremacy in the air, sending thousands of bombers against German and Axis cities. And on the Eastern Front, the Russians had launched their greatest offensive, sending hundreds of thousands of soldiers against a much smaller German army.

Those were the grand battles of the war, the ones the historians write about. But there were smaller battles as well, battles involving no divisions, no armies, battles fought by a myriad of resistance groups in France, Germany and the other war-torn countries, battles which are only now coming to light. They were battles involving a few courageous men and women who defied the odds in the unlikeliest of places, places like a prisoner of war camp near the town of Hammelburg not too far from the city of Dusseldorf in western Germany. There, under the command of American Colonel Robert Hogan, the senior POW officer in Stalag Luft 13, a small group of men, with the benign cooperation of the rest of the camp and help from resistance members in Hammelburg, ran an effective rescue and sabotage operation under the noses of their German guards.

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But at the moment, it was quiet in Hammelburg and the camp, and Robert Hogan could just sit and enjoy a cup of coffee. For a change, he wasn't planning his next operation. That in itself was unusual. In the three years he'd been at Stalag 13, peace and quiet were far from the norm for Hogan. From his first moment in the camp, his thoughts and energies were directed toward fighting the Nazis and toward getting the camp and the surrounding community involved. Starting the tunnels that crisscrossed the ground underneath the camp kept the men busy and occupied. That was good for morale and kept order. The hard part had been convincing them to agree to his rescue and sabotage operation. But he had done it. And done it right under the noses of not only the Luftwaffe personnel who ran the camp, but also the SS and Gestapo.

The people of Hammelburg also cooperated in their operation. Before the war, before Hitler, Hammelburg had been a small centuries old town, quiet and sedate. Since the war, it had become important. During the years Hogan had been at the camp, the town had had a variety of war industries, from cannon factories to ball bearing plants to fuel depots. But thanks to Hogan's activities, those industries had all but disappeared as had most of the local upper crust. And now that the Allies weren't that far away, no new industries had started up. As for the camp's primary mission, helping escaped prisoners from other camps, even that activity had died down. The general feeling among the Allied prisoners was that there were only a few months to go in the war. There seemed to be little point in escaping from a fairly safe POW camp to a less than safe countryside where German soldiers and Allied bombs were an equal risk. They still had a few men coming through, but they were primarily downed bomber crews who were still evading capture.

But there were less pleasant changes in the camp as well. Since the Allied invasion at Normandy, more and more prisoners were coming into the camp. The current population was about eighteen hundred men, far more than the camp had been built to house. The new prisoners were a rougher, more confident breed than the men who'd been here for some time; that made it a bit harder for Hogan to keep them in line, but he was managing.

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Well, Hogan was glad for the rest right now. It had been an eventful past few weeks for him. It had begun unexpectedly in November¹ when he learned of the death of Colonel Wilhelm Klink's five-year-old nephew. That tragedy and Klink's evident grief had caused Hogan to reexamine his relationship with the camp kommandant. And it was a reexamination he didn't welcome.

The first violent death in the camp's history a few weeks later had led to an even greater crisis for Hogan and the camp. An American sergeant named Martinelli, who had escaped from other camps and had been sent to Stalag 13 as a last resort, had taken Klink prisoner and actually beaten him in an effort to escape from the camp. That incident ended when the SS killed Martinelli. The death of the American had shocked the camp, especially Hogan. Unwilling to face his feelings toward Klink, Hogan had lashed out at the Kommandant, lashed out to the extent that he had wished Klink dead in front of the camp and then betrayed him to the Gestapo as a traitor. It was a betrayal that Klink had not expected, and one he could not forgive. Relations between Hogan and Klink deteriorated into the worst they'd ever been, and the tension in the camp increased even more. For Hogan, it resulted in nightmares centered around Klink, nightmares where the horror of what had happened and what could have happened were intertwined.

It had all come to a head when Hogan and Klink found themselves trapped by a cave-in in an old mine. A cave-in where Hogan was finally forced to acknowledge how badly he had treated Klink in the past. And forced to acknowledge how he really felt about the German Kommandant. He made Klink a promise in that cave, a promise that they would face whatever happened in the camp together. And it was a promise that Hogan intended to keep.

The newly acknowledged bond between Klink and Hogan had a welcome side effect. It enabled them to work together for the good of the camp. The increasing number of prisoners came at a time of extreme hardships for Germany. Reduced rations, cut

¹ *Act One*

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budgets, inexperienced guards, all contributed to the problems of the overcrowded camp. But Hogan and Klink's new relationship helped everyone cope with the problems. Now they cooperated with each other to solve the camp's problems instead of competing for control as they had done before.

Hogan's relaxed reverie was broken by a knock on his door.

"Colonel?" It was Hammond, one of the men in the barracks. "The staff car's back."

"Klink and Gruber?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Hammond admitted. "I saw Gruber get out, but I didn't hang around."

"Okay, thanks."

Hogan got up and pulled on his jacket and cap. He left his room and the barracks, walking over to the office. This morning, Klink and his second-in-command, Captain Fritz Gruber², had been called to Gestapo headquarters for some kind of meeting regarding the increasing number of prisoners. And Hogan was curious to know what had happened.

Hogan walked into Klink's office and stopped, surprised to see Gruber behind Klink's desk. "Where's the Kommandant?"

"Major Hochstetter and Colonel Klink drove away this morning," Gruber said. "The major had a prisoner he wanted the Kommandant to see."

"Why?"

"That is none of your business, Colonel Hogan," Gruber said in an annoyed voice. "It concerns only the Kommandant and Major Hochstetter. The Kommandant will be back in a few days. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do."

Hogan left the office, frustrated by Gruber's attitude and Klink's disappearance. And a bit uneasy as well.

² "Don't Forget to Write"

Scene One

– Two –

“Boy, the Colonel sure is edgy,” Sergeant Andrew Carter said softly as he sat outside the barracks, polishing a tool with a stained cloth.

“Yeah, ever since yesterday,” Sergeant Richard Baker agreed.

“You know why, don’t you?” Sergeant James Kinchloe asked quietly.

“Yeah,” Corporal Peter Newkirk said in an almost bitter voice. “Klink again. I don’t understand what’s happened to the Colonel.”

“Aw, he’s just worried about the setup here,” Corporal Louis LeBeau said. “All the new prisoners.”

“You don’t believe that any more than I do,” Kinch said. “It’s Klink.”

“Klink!” This time Newkirk did sound bitter. “The bloody idiot who can’t do anything right.”

“Much as I hate to say it,” Baker said, “he’s doing some things right.”

“Thanks to the Colonel,” LeBeau retorted. He turned to Newkirk. “Don’t let it get to you, Peter. The Colonel’s just stringing him along. That’s all.”

“Maybe in the past,” Kinch said. “Not any more.”

“Ever since that bloody cave-in,” Newkirk said angrily. “The Colonel’s treating Klink like, like . . .”

“Like a human being?” Kinch finished. “No matter how much we’d like to pretend otherwise, and we have for years, Klink is a human being. Maybe a not too bright one, maybe a real dummy. But he is still a human being.”

“He’s a stinking kraut!” from Newkirk.

Kinch shook his head. “You’d get an argument from the Colonel nowadays. He sees Klink as a foolish man stuck in a job he’s not very good at, trying to do the best he can. And the Colonel’s helping him along. And he’s going to keep on helping Klink no matter how much we dislike the idea.”

“Aw, we’ve always helped Klink. To help ourselves,” Carter

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said.

“Yeah,” LeBeau agreed. “That’s all.”

“Not any more,” Kinch argued. “He’s helping Klink because he doesn’t want Klink to get into trouble. Not because it’ll help us. But because he cares about Klink.”

“Cares about Klink?! Hah!” Newkirk said.

“Yeah, cares about Klink,” Kinch said. “And he probably has for some time but was afraid to admit it. Like it or not, Klink’s the closest thing the Colonel’s got to a friend in this camp.”

“Now you are nuts,” LeBeau said.

“Think about it. Yeah, we like the Colonel and respect him. And get along great with him. But he still is the Colonel. The only man of equal rank in this camp is Klink. Not too bright, foolish, Klink.”

“That doesn’t mean he thinks Klink’s his friend!” Newkirk retorted.

“Maybe,” Kinch said in a noncommittal voice. “But he no longer thinks of Klink as the enemy either.”

“Still a far cry from a friend,” Newkirk said sullenly.

The argument ended abruptly as Hogan opened the barracks’ door.

“Klink still not back?” Hogan asked.

“Nope, still gone,” Kinch replied. “But Schultz is back.”

Hans Schultz, the sergeant of the guard, had been on leave for a couple of days; a family emergency had taken him home to Heidelberg.

Nodding, Hogan went back inside the barracks and walked over to the potbelly stove. He poured himself a cup of coffee. He was still inexplicably worried about Klink’s absence. Worse, he’d had one of his dreams last night. A dream where the Stage³, a near mythic resistance leader who had recently saved Hogan’s life, Klink, Hochstetter and last month’s cave-in were dizzyingly combined. He had awakened in a cold sweat this morning, filled with vague misgivings.

“What’s wrong, mon Colonel?” LeBeau asked as they trailed in behind him.

³ *Act One*

Scene One

"I don't really know," Hogan admitted as he carried the coffee mug into his room. "For days, I've had this nagging feeling that I'm missing something, something important."

"About Klink?" from Baker.

"Klink, the Gestapo, something." Hogan sat down as the others gathered around him.

"But, Colonel, Klink is . . . Klink," Carter said.

"Yeah, the same lovable Colonel we've always known," Newkirk remarked sarcastically.

"Right," LeBeau said hurriedly as Hogan looked at Newkirk. "Lovable, grumpy."

"Grumpy?" from a distracted Hogan. "He hasn't been lately. When was he grumpy?"

"Well, he was the day he got back from his party."

Hogan looked surprised. "What party?"

"The party he went to the night you went to meet the Stage⁴, mon Colonel."

"You mean Klink left, too?"

"Oui, about fifteen minutes after you did," LeBeau said.

"Why wasn't I told?" Hogan demanded.

"Well, sir, you came back kind of beat," Carter explained. "Klink came back while you were still asleep, and, I, uh, guess, we forgot," he finished sheepishly. "It didn't seem very important."

"Klink came back the next day?"

"Yeah," Newkirk said, "about noon." A grin. "Looked kind of peaked, he did."

"Yeah, and was he grumpy!" LeBeau said. "Must have struck out with the barmaid again."

Hogan wasn't listening; he was remembering that night and his conversation with the wounded Stage. Again that familiar feeling was back. Why did the Stage's voice sound so familiar? Why?!

". . . Though I swear he did look funny for a minute," LeBeau was saying.

"What?" Hogan asked, suddenly hearing him.

"Klink," LeBeau explained. "I accidentally hit him with a door

⁴ *Act One*

Scene One

later. I apologized — ”

“You hit him? Hit him where?” Hogan asked.

“In the shoulder. As I said, mon Colonel, a silly accident. But,” LeBeau remembered thoughtfully, “for a minute, I swear, he looked, I mean, his eyes . . . ” A laugh. “If it were anyone else but Klink, I’d swear he was in pain, really in pain.” LeBeau shifted uneasily under Hogan’s stare. “He didn’t even listen to the apology; just waved me away without a word,” he finished defensively.

“When was this?” Hogan asked.

“The day after you came back. Right before Hochstetter showed up.”

Hogan stared into his coffee. The Stage’s voice became louder in his mind and even more familiar. And those blue pain-filled eyes . . .

And there was something else he couldn’t quite make out.

“Colonel,” Kinch said. “Colonel, are you all right?”

“I don’t know,” Hogan said, frustrated. “It’s there. Something I can’t put my finger on. Something right in front . . . ” He broke off, staring at something in Carter’s hand. “What’s that?”

“This?” Carter held up the cloth he was using. “Just something I found. Can’t get the stain out, but it’s clean.”

“Let me see that.” Hogan took the fabric from Carter. A sudden chill swept over him as he examined it. “It’s a handkerchief.”

“Yeah,” Carter said. “I guess so.”

Hogan’s voice was hard. “Where did you find it?”

“In the trash,” Carter admitted. “I knocked over one of the cans by accident; it was part of the stuff that fell out. It wasn’t ripped so I took it. It’s good for cleaning messy things.”

“Colonel, what’s wrong?” Baker asked.

“It’s an American handkerchief,” Hogan said flatly.

“Let me see that.” Kinch took the cloth from Hogan. “Guess so. Weird. I’d swear this was blood.”

“It is blood.” Hogan’s voice almost shook. “And it’s my handkerchief!”

Blood crisscrossing the chest of a beaten man, blood staining the chest of a wounded man. Tight, tense muscles of a man in a cave, then a man in a car.

Scene One

"Yours, sir?" from a puzzled Newkirk.

"Yes." Hogan's voice was shaking now.

That voice. That quiet, pain-filled voice. Now he knew why it sounded so familiar. He'd heard it before. In a cave. A hot, cramped, filthy cave.

And those blue eyes, filled with pain. Now he could put a face to it. A face drenched with sweat, lined with pain.

"It's the one I used on the Stage's wound that night. The one I left in his car!"

"But how did it get here?" asked Baker.

"Carter," Hogan asked slowly, "where did you find it?"

"Like I said, sir, the trash."

"But where? Which can was it?"

Hogan still couldn't believe. He was hoping, no, praying he was wrong.

If he wasn't . . .

"The one from Klink's quarters. I . . ." Carter stopped as Hogan went white.

Horror, total horror, swept over Hogan. All the pieces finally fell into place. All the tiny, unimportant, insignificant snips of information he had ignored for years now made awful sense.

"Colonel . . . Colonel," Kinch repeated. "You don't look too well. Maybe you'd better lie down."

"All this time," Hogan murmured shakily. "And we thought, *I* thought, I was so smart!"

"Colonel, begging your pardon, sir," Baker asked. "But what are you talking about?"

"Don't you see?" Hogan said bitterly. "Put it together."

They stayed quiet, looking at him with concern.

"I go out to meet the Stage. Fifteen minutes later, Klink leaves. I come back after nearly getting the Stage killed and leaving him with a hole in his shoulder. Klink comes back much later, looking ill. LeBeau accidentally hits him, sees the pain but ignores it because it's only Klink. And then Carter finds *my* bloodstained handkerchief in Klink's trash."

After a moment . . .

"No," Kinch said firmly. "Colonel, that's impossible."

Baker nodded his agreement.

"Crazy," LeBeau added.

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“Colonel, if you’re saying what I think you’re saying . . . ” Newkirk said slowly. He stared at Hogan. “Sir, with all due respect, that’s *nuts!*”

“Uh, am I missing something?” Carter looked puzzled.

“We all have,” Hogan muttered angrily.

“The Colonel thinks that Klink is the Stage,” Kinch explained, looking at Hogan worriedly.

“Klink!” Carter exclaimed. “Colonel, that is nuts!”

“Yeah? Then you explain it!” Hogan shot back angrily.

“Just a coincidence. A freaky coincidence,” Newkirk said.

“I — ”

A knock on the door interrupted him and Sergeant Hans Schultz entered, carrying a mail pouch.

“Hey, Schultz,” LeBeau said brightly. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you,” Schultz said solemnly and looked at Hogan. “Excuse me, Colonel Hogan. But do you know where Kommandant Klink is? Captain Gruber is not here and no one else seems to know.”

Hogan looked at Schultz closely, for the first time noticing something deep in the dull eyes.

“Schultz,” Hogan took a deep breath, “yesterday, Colonel Klink paid a visit to Major Hochstetter. He never came back.” Hogan blinked at the sudden flash in those dull eyes. “He’s supposed to be on some sort of mission for the Gestapo.”

The large sergeant stared at him. “Colonel Hogan, I am not in the mood for unfunny jokes.” Schultz sounded almost angry. “Where is the Kommandant?”

“We told you,” LeBeau began.

“Shut up!” Schultz snapped.

LeBeau looked hurt as he fell silent.

“You are not joking?” Schultz asked Hogan.

Their eyes met.

“Sergeant Schultz, I wish I were,” Hogan said fervently.

“Colonel Hogan, I have one question for you. And I would like the truth, please.” Schultz’s voice was heavy. “Did you have anything to do with this?”

Hogan shook his head. “No, Schultz, I’m sorry. But this time, I didn’t.”

Schultz stared at him for a long moment, the men around him

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becoming uneasy.

“Uh, Schultz . . . ” began Carter.

A cutting wave of Schultz’s hand. Carter shut up.

Schultz slowly dropped the pouch on the table, pawing through it for something. A magazine.

The men around him grinned. It was a girlie magazine, one Klink got. Then their smiles faded. The way Schultz leafed through it wasn’t very funny; he was like a man possessed.

Schultz found the spot he wanted and read for a moment. Then he looked at the very somber Hogan.

“Colonel Hogan,” Schultz said slowly, “seventy-two hours ago, a resistance leader by the name of Pflueger was captured by the Gestapo.”

Hogan’s men, exchanging startled glances, slowly straightened as Hogan watched Schultz intently.

“Pflueger is one of the few men in Germany who can — ”

“Who can identify Kommandant Wilhelm Klink as the Stage,” Hogan finished soberly.

Schultz’s eyes met his. “Yes, Colonel Hogan.” A deathly quiet voice. “He can.”

The awful silence was deafening.

Scene One

– Three –

The dark, unmarked car sped swiftly through the snowy countryside as Colonel Wilhelm Klink sat quietly in the back of it. Finally, the car stopped in front of a sturdy stone building.

Klink got out of the car and gazed at the two-story building. It looked like a farmhouse with no outside trappings to identify it as an SS or Gestapo installation. The vague misgivings he had felt since they left Gestapo headquarters a few hours ago were starting to take shape.

Major Wolfgang Hochstetter waited for Klink at the door. It opened, and Hochstetter gestured for Klink to enter. The inside was sparsely furnished with only a few pieces of furniture. It was also remarkably unpopulated with staff, unlike Gestapo headquarters in Hammelburg. None of the usual office staff was present, nor as many guards. Hochstetter removed his overcoat and indicated that Klink should do the same.

Somewhat reluctantly, Klink complied. Suddenly, all his senses seemed to be on overload. He was noticing everything, from the number of guards in the room — six — to the cobwebs high on the ceiling. The noise of the men's boots as they walked seemed clamorous, the sound of his own heartbeat deafening in his ears.

"Colonel Klink," Hochstetter was saying, "I think you will be interested in this. Follow me."

Klink forced his voice to sound normal. "Of course, Major Hochstetter." Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

"Before we go up, Colonel, I must insist that you leave your riding crop and monocle with the guard down here," Hochstetter said pleasantly enough.

Klink frowned. "An odd request, Major."

Hochstetter smiled chillingly. "Security, Colonel. Nothing is allowed upstairs which might be used as a weapon."

"Of course," Klink agreed ironically as he complied with the request.

They walked up the stairs, two guards with machine guns

Scene One

following behind them.

Flee! Every instinct he possessed told Klink to run. But a swift glance at the armed men, it would be suicide. Perhaps he should risk it anyway.

Too late.

They halted in a long, dark hallway with several doors leading off it.

“The building is several hundred years old,” Hochstetter was saying. “The stone walls are two feet thick, even between the rooms. Quite soundproof. Quite escape proof.” He opened a door. “This might interest you, Kommandant.”

Hochstetter stepped aside and let Klink enter.

The stone room, harshly lit with a naked bulb, had nothing in it but dank hay and a bucket. It also stank. Nothing . . .

Klink’s eyes fell on the hay. There was something there. Or someone.

One of the guards went to the prone figure and yanked it to its feet. The man whimpered as he was thrust into the light. Klink’s stomach twisted as the man fell, staring up at Klink as he did so. The man’s face, barely recognizable, was battered and bloody, his hands twisted claws emerging from mangled, broken arms. Puffy, bleeding eyes teared as they stared up at Klink.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered almost incoherently. “I tried . . . But I couldn’t . . .” He broke into loud, painful sobs.

“He couldn’t name you, Klink,” Hochstetter gloated. “But he could describe you. Very well. Or should I say, ‘Stage’?”

Klink, ignoring Hochstetter and the fear that twisted inside his chest, knelt beside the tortured man, helping him sit up.

“I wouldn’t bother with him,” Hochstetter said with a contemptuous sneer. “He’s of no further use to anyone now.” He gestured and Klink was pulled roughly to his feet.

Klink faced Hochstetter, seemingly unafraid.

“No words, ‘Stage’?” Hochstetter pressed.

A thin smile. “What is there to say?”

A cruel smile in return. “Oh, there is plenty to say, Klink. And before we are through with you, you will beg to say it all.” A curt motion of his hand. “Take him away.”

Klink started toward the door and then paused. A shot had sounded behind him. After a moment, he began walking again.

Scene One

The cell next door, with two waiting guards, was just as harshly lit, just as dank but bigger. There was a rack-like contraption against the right side of the cell. A console of some sort was just to the right of the entrance with wires leading from it to the rack. Chains hung at various heights on the wall to the left of the rack over piles of straw.

Klink looked around dispassionately and turned to face Hochstetter as two men moved up behind him.

“There is one more way to identify the Stage, Klink,” Hochstetter said. “Not too long ago, he was shot while evading a trap.”

Klink’s arms were pulled tightly behind his back. Hochstetter pushed the uniform jacket off Klink’s shoulders and roughly pulled Klink’s tie off. He then yanked at the material of Klink’s shirt, scattering buttons, ripping the fabric across Klink’s chest. Hochstetter threw the ripped piece aside.

“An interesting scar for a man who’s never been in combat, Kommandant Klink. Would you care to explain it?”

Klink stayed silent.

“No, I didn’t think so.” Hochstetter turned away. “Soften him up first,” he told the guard who had come in quietly. “But no physical damage, if you please. I do not want to do anything that will help him die.” Smiling, Hochstetter turned back to Klink. “We will talk later, Klink.” He left the room.

Klink tried to relax in the unrelenting grip of his captors as he faced the newcomer.

The man slowly slipped on a pair of gloves.

A tight knot of fear in his stomach, Kommandant Wilhelm Klink waited for the blows to begin.

* * * * *

The cell door rattled; Klink looked up as Hochstetter entered.

Hochstetter grinned as he saw the seated man chained to the wall by his right wrist. Klink looked battered, his clothes already grimy from the dirt of the cell. His ripped shirt had been removed, though he had been allowed to keep his uniform jacket.

Scene One

After the beating, one of the guards had removed Klink's suspenders. It would not do to have such an important guest commit suicide.

A guard went to Klink and undid the manacle around his wrist, pulling him to his feet.

"Let me tell you what is going to happen, Klink," Hochstetter said as Klink rubbing his sore wrist faced him. "That device over there causes the most exquisite pain, but it does no permanent damage.

"I have no desire to kill you, Klink, or inflict bodily injury. When I deliver you to your trial, there will be few marks on you to elicit sympathy. You will be given water, fed; you will not wallow in your own filth. When the Stage appears, it will be as if he betrayed his cause of his own free will. It will be utterly demoralizing to his followers and those who think of him as some kind of hero.

"Now, Klink, I am not an unreasonable man so I will ask you this just once. I want names, addresses, codes — all the information about your organization that you possess. Give them to me now and your death will be swift and painless."

Klink stayed silent.

Hochstetter grinned. "I had hoped you would be stubborn." He stepped closer to Klink. "I hope you do not break too easily, Klink. I want to enjoy every one of your screams."

At a signal, Klink was dragged over to the rack and shackled on it. Hochstetter went over to the console and turned a switch. A low hum sounded.

"This supplies current to the manacles around your wrists, Klink," Hochstetter explained. He turned a knob; the man on the rack started.

Hochstetter grinned. "I see you understand the concept. It can be low, or higher." He turned it again; Klink shifted uncomfortably.

"Or higher still."

A gasp from the man on the rack.

"Or even . . ." Hochstetter twisted the knob savagely.

Klink screamed.

Scene One

– Four –

A pale Robert Hogan sat with his clenched fists against his forehead. Carter aimlessly polished the tool in his hand while LeBeau had his eyes on the ashen-faced Schultz. Newkirk, shaking his head in disbelief, was staring out the window. Kinch and Baker watched Hogan closely, understanding his agony. All of them had seen the growing bond between Hogan and Klink since the cave-in. Seen and not understood. And to some extent resented it.

Finally, Schultz stirred. “Excuse me, please.” His voice was lifeless. “There is a very important telephone call I must make.”

Hogan stood slowly, determination replacing the shock in his eyes. “You can make it here, Schultz. From the tunnel.”

Schultz nodded tiredly, not surprised at the mention of the tunnel.

Hogan went out first, followed by Schultz and the still stunned men. The barracks was empty as Hogan activated the entrance.

Good. No one else needed to know about what was going on, Hogan thought as he started down the ladder. Right now, the fewer people who knew the better. All too quickly, everyone else might find out. But not now. Not yet.

Kinchloe put the call through.

Schultz spoke slowly, deliberately. “I am calling regarding the play you inquired about. I regret to say that twenty-four hours ago, the play was canceled. The stage is broken. I repeat, the stage is broken.” He ended the connection. “So ends my part, Colonel Hogan,” Schultz said heavily. “The message will be passed to units all over Germany. Each unit has its own escape plans.” He looked at Hogan. “You also must leave.”

“What about you?” Hogan asked quietly.

“My orders are the same. But,” a sudden shininess in his eyes, “I cannot leave. I cannot leave him, knowing what they are doing to him. I cannot . . .” His voice broke and he turned away.

Hogan watched as the massive shoulders shook and looked at

Scene One

his men.

“We’re not part of the Stage’s organization,” Hogan said soberly. “His orders don’t apply to us. But he knows who we are. When they break him,” a sudden pain inside his chest, “they’ll come after us too.”

Kinch asked the question. “What are you going to do, Colonel?”

They half expected the answer. “I’m going to try and get Klink away from them.”

His men exchanged bleak glances.

“I’m not going to ask for volunteers.” Hogan said evenly. “This time, the odds are whoever goes won’t get back alive. The rest of you, use the escape route and get back to London.”

“You’re going after him alone,” Baker said flatly.

“I owe him that much.”

“No, Colonel Hogan,” Schultz said in a thick voice, turning around. “You owe him nothing. You reacted exactly the way you were supposed to react.”

A tiny smile. “Yes, I did. But I owe him my life. And,” he added cryptically, “I made him a promise. One I intend to keep.”

“Sir,” Carter asked, “do we have to decide anything yet?”

Hogan smiled faintly. “No, you don’t have to decide yet. There’s still time. But first,” he said to Kinch, “put a call through to our friendly major in Abwehr.”

Kinch grinned and made the call.

In Berlin, Major Hans Teppel⁵ of the Abwehr, the German military intelligence agency, answered the telephone.

“Major, this is Colonel Hogansmeyer,” a voice said.

Teppel, in reality Robert J. Morrison, a U.S. agent, grinned as he recognized the voice. “Yes, Colonel. What can I do for you?”

“First, is your aunt Viktoria still as deaf as ever?”

“Yes, Colonel, very deaf.”

“Good.” Hogan resumed his normal voice. “Listen carefully. The Gestapo has taken one of the biggest resistance leaders. But he’s not being held in Hammelburg. We need to know if there’s a

⁵ “Bad Day at Berlin”

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special interrogation center nearby or if he's been taken to Berlin."

"Who caught him?"

"Hochstetter."

"That so-and-so. He wouldn't bring a big shot here; he's too greedy. Who did he get?"

"The Stage."

The major's grip tightened on the telephone. "Hochstetter has always made particularly nasty threats about him," Teppel said soberly. "I would bet he's not here, but you never know. I'll inquire discreetly. There is always a chance that he's here under his real name. I wouldn't ask, but . . ."

"Colonel Wilhelm Klink."

Teppel sucked in his breath sharply. "Are you sure?"

"Very."

"I . . . I hope I get a chance to meet him again."

A fervent, "So do I!"

"It will take time."

"I know. I also want you to arrange to get five of us — Carter, Newkirk, LeBeau, Kinch and I — out of camp legally. And we'll need Schultz too."

"I can get that done in an hour or so. But the rest . . . Look, it may be twenty-four hours or more before I can get an answer. You know what Hochstetter's doing to him."

A spasm inside Hogan's chest. "Yes. We'll call back every six hours. Be in."

"I will be. Good luck."

"To both of us."

Hogan put the phone down and turned to Schultz. "He'll get us out of camp in an hour or so. But he may not find anything until tomorrow. Things could get very hot around here."

Schultz wet dry lips. "I . . . understand." Then he added, "He has always promised to give his people at least forty-eight hours."

"How can anyone promise anything like that?!" LeBeau exclaimed.

"The Stage can!" Schultz said proudly. "You have not seen him like I have."

"I saw," Hogan said quietly. "In the cave, when he was

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trapped. Only I was too blind to realize it. Then later, when I removed that bullet from his shoulder. Not a sound. Then or later.”

“I, too, have removed bullets, Colonel Hogan,” Schultz said soberly. “More than one. We have never had any painkillers. Sometimes, I would have to cauterize the wound. LeBeau accidentally reopened the last one; it needed to be cauterized.”

LeBeau paled.

“Afterwards, I have watched him walk across the compound. Greet you and visitors alike without a word, a groan, a hint of his pain. He will give forty-eight hours, LeBeau. He will give more.” Then his voice became a whisper. “But what I have always feared the most is hearing him scream. As long as he did not, somehow, the pain did not seem real.” Schultz stared blankly at Hogan. “Hochstetter will make him scream.”

Hogan shivered. For once, he had nothing to say. There was nothing to say.

They had no trouble getting out of the camp just over an hour later. Their departure was watched with mild surprise by some and worry by others.

Captain Gruber was surprised at the call from Major Teppel but, as Hogan had expected, went along with the orders from Abwehr. In a way, Gruber was glad that Hogan was leaving for a few days; Hogan had always made him uncomfortable. Klink seemed to be able to handle the American far better than Gruber could, especially lately. With Hogan gone, at least the camp would be quiet for a few days.

With far too somber eyes, Captain Edward Martin, Captain John Mitchell and Captain Jerry Warren watched the departure from Hogan’s room. The three men were the highest-ranking officers in the camp after Hogan. Martin⁶, the senior captain, had been in the camp the longest. Warren⁷ had been an escapee from another camp and had been on his way to England when his escape went wrong. Instead of transferring Warren to

⁶ “The Gold Rush”

⁷ “The Flame Grows Higher”

Scene One

another camp, Klink decided to keep him at Stalag 13, preventing another escape attempt. Mitchell⁸ had had the misfortune to have his plane crash just outside the camp; he too became a permanent guest in the camp.

The three men had had little to do with Hogan's operations. Hogan preferred having few of the men in camp involved with his outside activities. But now the three found themselves in charge of a camp that might have some radical changes made to it. Hogan hadn't told them much, only that he and his men were going away for a special interrogation. The three captains hadn't been too concerned at first; Hogan and his men had been questioned before. But then Hogan admitted that there was a good chance that he and his men might not be returning to the camp. Out of choice or, as Hogan admitted soberly, because they were dead or in prison. If Hogan chose not to return, then they would remain in charge of Stalag 13 until the end of the war. But if Hogan didn't return for other reasons, then they were to follow Baker's instructions. At any rate, in ninety-six hours, they would know one way or another.

Sergeant Richard Baker watched their departure from outside Barracks 2. He hadn't been surprised when Hogan chose not to take him. He'd figured that one of them would have to stay behind — only they really knew what needed to be done if the worst happened. And Baker was the logical choice. He'd been the odd man out, the latecomer to the team. He'd joined Hogan's inner circle when Kinchloe broke his leg last year. It had been a particularly bad break with complications, necessitating a long-term stay for Kinch in the camp infirmary. Baker had helped on a few missions before when Kinch had come down with the flu, and had been asked by Hogan to fill in for Kinch after he broke his leg. Since Kinch's return, Baker continued to help out, alternating radio and phone duties with Kinch; there was more than enough work to keep them busy.

Now, with the group facing the worst danger they had ever been in, Baker was left behind. He would wait ninety-six hours for word from Hogan or any of them. If they decided not to

⁸ "The Big Gamble"

Scene One

return to the camp or if he hadn't heard from them within the designated time, Baker's orders were to make his own escape. Twelve hours later, if the three captains agreed, the biggest mass escape in Germany would take place. But if he saw the Gestapo arriving, Baker was to leave camp immediately. Explosives had already been planted throughout the camp, ready, if need be, to blow up the tunnels beneath the camp. Baker could only hope it wouldn't be necessary to go that far. And he prayed that all would go well for his friends. But he had to admit to himself as he turned back to the barracks, the odds were that he'd never see them again. And he prayed that if that were the case, the end would come swiftly for his friends. He found himself shivering from that thought as he walked back into the barracks.

The car finally stopped at a small cabin about an hour's drive from the camp. It was hidden in heavy woods and in very rugged terrain. A couple of times during the drive, Hogan had wondered if Schultz knew where he was going. But the difficulty of the trip was an added security advantage. This hideout was safe from all prying eyes.

They got out of the car and walked over to the door. Schultz took a key from his pocket. To their surprise, he walked over to an old tree. From a hole used by nesting squirrels, he took another key. Then he walked back to the door and inserted the keys in tandem into the lock.

"If I did not," Schultz explained, "this building would blow up. Along with me."

Carter was impressed. "Nice."

The door opened and they followed Schultz inside.

The cabin was small. There was a living area with a potbelly stove to supply the heat and cooking space; a compact icebox stood in the far corner. Dishes and kitchen utensils were stacked on a counter next to an old sink. In the middle of the room stood a small table with a couple of chairs around it. Kerosene lamps were scattered around to provide light. A portable generator along with a sophisticated radio transmitter stood in a corner. Before one of the two shuttered windows was a comfortable old chair beside a well-stocked bookcase.

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Hogan wandered over to the bookcase curiously. A few of the books were in English; others were in French, German, Italian, Latin and Greek. They were the great works of the literary world, many of them long banned by the Nazis.

Greek? Latin? Klink?

Hogan shook his head in disbelief and picked up one of the books. Virgil. He thumbed through it. The book, like the others, showed signs of frequent use.

Schultz gestured. "His retreat. He would come here to do most of his planning. Sometimes, he would come just to get away from the life he was leading."

Hogan returned the book to the shelf and walked over to the door in the left wall. He opened the door unto a small, spare bedroom furnished only with a bed, a chair, a nightstand, a chest and another bookcase. This bookcase held a portable record player on top and records in the shelves. There was another door in the right wall. Hogan opened it; it led to a primitive shower and toilet. Hogan walked back into the living room.

"Colonel, we'll need a phone, if we're going to call Berlin," Kinch reminded him.

"The cupboard, under the sink," Schultz said.

Kinch went over to it and pulled out a portable telephone. He examined it closely and whistled his appreciation.

"He used it to direct his operations," Schultz explained.

LeBeau had opened up the cupboards over the counter. "Very nice. All kinds of goodies."

"Think he'd mind if we made some coffee?" Hogan asked Schultz.

The large Sergeant shook his head. "No." Then "It is useless!" he said tiredly. "Why are we even here? We will not be able to find him!"

"Do you want to leave?" Hogan asked quietly.

"No." A heavy sigh. "Forgive me, Colonel. It is just that —"

"I know," Hogan said soothingly. "But it will take time."

"Time." Schultz turned away from him and stared out the window.

Time.

Hogan stared at the bookcase. It had been nearly thirty hours since Klink had disappeared. Thirty hours of what for Klink.

Scene One

Perhaps Hochstetter was content to let Klink stay in a cell. Perhaps . . .

Who was he trying to kid? Hochstetter hated Klink. And he hated the Stage. To discover that the two were in fact the same man must have overjoyed the sadistic Gestapo major. Only last week Hochstetter had made that threat against Klink, spelling out exactly what he would do to Klink if he were able. But until now, much as he would have liked to hurt Klink, he couldn't. Though there had been a few times in the past when it looked like Hochstetter would get his wish. Last year, Hochstetter had thought Klink guilty of a sabotage job that Hogan and his men had pulled⁹. Even then, Hogan, playing his own role with a relish, couldn't help but notice how pleased Hochstetter seemed to be to have Klink in his hands, especially when Klink refused to admit his guilt. Then last month when Hogan had turned Klink into the Gestapo. Fortunately, Hochstetter had been gone at the time. If he had been there, Hochstetter, unlike his subordinate, wouldn't have been content with questioning Klink and locking him in a cell for the night. Schultz and the Stage had been right. Klink, even the Klink he'd thought he'd despised, didn't deserve what Hochstetter would have done.

And now Hochstetter had not only Klink, but also the Stage. A man who had operated inside Germany for years. A man that every Gestapo agent in Germany had been hunting. What a prize for Hochstetter!

Hogan was hoping he'd read Hochstetter's personality right. Hoping that Hochstetter wouldn't be content to share his prize. Hoping that Hochstetter would want to deliver the Stage personally to Berlin along with every piece of information he could wring from the Stage. That's what Hogan was counting on. That Hochstetter would have Klink safely hidden somewhere, away from prying SS or Gestapo eyes. If that were the case, there should be few guards around. If Hogan and his men could locate that place, then maybe, just maybe, there was a chance to get Klink and themselves out alive.

But how long would it take to get a location from Teppel?

⁹ "Will the Real Colonel Klink Please Stand Up Against the Wall?"

Scene One

Assuming there was a location to be had? Hogan had no idea. He had put out cautious feelers among the local resistance groups before leaving Stalag 13, hoping one of them might know something. For now, that was all he could do.

Except wait.

Wait.

And Klink? Hogan shivered. Schultz was right. Hochstetter would make him scream. And enjoy every minute of it.

Scene One

– Five –

Nightfall.

Hogan closed the shutters in the small bedroom and went back into the main room. Klink had been gone thirty-five hours and they still had no clues to his whereabouts. They had spent the day making plans, getting their gear together, and were ready to take off at a moment's notice. Now all they could do was wait. Wait. It was hard on all of them, the hardest on Schultz.

Odd. Hogan hadn't noticed the real relationship between Klink and Schultz. He hadn't noticed a lot of things, he thought bleakly. Come to think of it, he still wasn't sure what their relationship was.

Ask Schultz. Keep him talking so he doesn't do any thinking. So none of them do. The night was going to be very long.

Schultz toyed with his food.

LeBeau raised a brow; Schultz not eating?

Hogan broke the silence. "How long have you known?"

Schultz barely looked at him. "Shortly after the Kommandant arrived at the camp, he told me."

"Must have been a shock," LeBeau commented.

"It was. And an honor. That he should trust me so." Schultz shook his head in wonder.

"It looks like he picked the right man for the job," Kinch said quietly.

"Danke." Schultz sighed. "It has not been easy. For him even less so."

"So," Carter asked curiously, "who is the Stage? Really?"

Schultz shrugged. "Believe it or not, Carter, just an ordinary man."

"Ordinary?! The Stage? Are you kidding?" Newkirk exclaimed.

"Well, maybe not," Schultz reconsidered. "At least, not now. But when it all started, he was. A very ordinary man."

"When did it start?" Hogan asked.

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“Back in 1933.”

“1933!” Kinch said with surprise.

Schultz nodded. “Germany was a very unhappy place back then. The Depression was very hard here, more so than in many other countries. Many people were desperate. And desperate people do not think very clearly.

“Except one ordinary man.

“I know very little about his life back then,” Schultz admitted. “He does not talk much about himself. I know he has never been happy in the military. He went into it because his father wanted his eldest son to follow in the family tradition. Any other dreams he may have had were abandoned at his father’s insistence.”

“Doesn’t sound very fair,” commented Carter.

“No,” agreed Schultz. “But it is the wish of many men to have their sons follow their dreams. And Wilhelm Klink honored his father and did as he wished.

“Of course, he did not do too well in his unchosen career. He has always been a loner, a very private man whom few knew. As a result, he was often thought not to be too smart by those who did not really know him.

“Nor is he a very social man. Good books, music, art, those are his loves. Not parties or nights out. When he was younger, he had a reputation as an unathletic klutz. And the reputation remained even after it was no longer true.”

“Sounds like the Klink we know,” Kinch said.

“The Kommandant is the extreme of him,” Schultz said. “Perhaps back then, he was not much to speak of. But are most people? Perhaps if things had not been so terrible here, he would have stayed the same. Had a less than average career, finding contentment in other ways. Perhaps he might even have married and had children.

“But even ordinary people have certain gifts. And this ordinary man did have one talent. An ability to understand people and know them for what they truly are. It enabled him to avoid people he did not care to know and to avoid problems he did not wish to deal with. If others thought him standoffish, he really did not care.” There was a thoughtful look on Schultz’s face. “Sometimes I think the only person whose opinion he cared for was his sister. Other people, it did not matter what they

Scene One

thought of him. And what they thought of him was often not flattering.”

“But what about the Stage?” Newkirk asked impatiently. “What started the Stage?”

“Hitler started it, Newkirk,” Schultz said quietly. “Back then, we Germans were inundated with all kinds of propaganda put out by the Nazis. And many, too many, believed. The Nazis promised food, shelter, prosperity.”

LeBeau snorted derisively.

Schultz looked at him reprovably. “Hungry people, homeless people, will believe anyone who promises them something. And Hitler promised and made it sound so simple. Even those who did not become Nazis saw many things to admire in their philosophy. At first, even I did. There was enough truth in their lies to deceive many.

“But not Wilhelm Klink. He read their books and articles, attended their meetings. And he was able to see past the propaganda, the promises and, yes, even the small truths. He saw the horror, the hatred and the madness to come. He saw that long before many others did, including the so-called experts and intellectuals in your countries.

“Surprised, Colonel Hogan?”

Hogan glanced at the bookshelf behind him. “Not any more,” he admitted softly.

Schultz smiled faintly. “He knew he could not fight the Nazis openly. Even back then, people were killed or disappeared. He also knew he could not fight them as the man he was. So secretly he began to study, to learn. This man who could barely hit a target on a shooting range, began to practice long hours until he became an expert shot. He learned about self-defense, explosives, everything and anything that might be of some use to him. To his surprise, I think, he discovered talents and abilities he didn’t know he had.”

“He just needed a catalyst,” Hogan said thoughtfully.

“Yes. And a disguise. He knew himself as well as he knew others. He knew what his faults and weaknesses were. So he used them. The undistinguished man became even less distinguished. He needed to be competent enough to become a colonel and stay a colonel. But he needed to be incompetent

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enough to keep from being sent out of Germany where his usefulness would be restricted.

“So Kommandant Klink was born. He exaggerated all the deficiencies in his character. He became inept, stupid, egotistical, a general bore. A man few liked or cared to like. And it was a role he played twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year for many years. A role he could and did play in his sleep.”

“And the Stage?” Hogan asked quietly.

“The Stage is the complete opposite. Intelligent, fearless, an expert in everything, oblivious to all hardships. He attracted fierce loyalty from everyone who came in contact with him.

“He did not start out that way of course. He grew slowly into the mythic hero. No one knew who he was, where he came from. He was always secretive, always successful.

“Few people ever saw the Stage. Even I rarely saw him. I know almost nothing about his organization. Rarely did I know about his missions. He wanted it that way to protect me. And himself. But I was to be available for the few times he needed my help. In the eyes of the world, the Stage was always successful. Only I saw his failures. He needed me for that.”

“Bitter, Schultz?” Hogan asked.

“Nein. I am no soldier. It was an honor to be involved. I wanted to help where I could.

“But it has been difficult. The Kommandant Klink you saw was the Kommandant Klink I saw. He would go for days, night and day, without breaking character. Then unexpectedly he would be the Stage again for an hour, a day.”

“But why the charade all the time?” Newkirk wanted to know.

“Safety,” Schultz said simply. “He never knew who might be listening in.”

Hogan and his men grinned ruefully.

“Occasionally, he must travel, share quarters with others. He had to react instinctively as Kommandant Klink, without thought. In his sleep, if he had to.”

“And he did,” Hogan said. “That explains why he sounded so familiar when he was unconscious.”

“Yes. But that time it nearly backfired. Though if it were anyone else, Colonel Hogan, I doubt if they would have noticed.”

“Yeah,” Hogan said with a faint smile. “How many people

Scene One

know what Kommandant Klink sounds like in his sleep?”

Schultz returned the smile almost reluctantly. “I would say that most are in this room.”

“Colonel,” Kinch interrupted, “time for the call again.”

Hogan sighed and nodded.

Hogan hung up the phone slowly.

“No news?” Schultz said in a dead voice.

Hogan shook his head.

Schultz turned away and hurriedly left the cabin.

“Colonel,” Carter asked hesitantly, “do you really think we’ll hear anything?”

“The truth? I don’t know,” Hogan admitted.

“Colonel, it’s been nearly forty hours,” Kinch said softly.

“I know!” Hogan sounded angrier than he really was. “Sorry.”

“Kinch has a point, mon Colonel. Despite what Schultz said, how long can anyone, including the Stage, hold out against those monsters?”

“Do you want to leave?” Hogan asked them quietly.

A general shaking of heads.

“No, sir,” Newkirk said. “We’re with you. All the way. You see, sir, you’re not the only one who owes him an apology.”

“I just pray we can say it,” Kinch echoed.

“So do I,” Hogan said quietly. “Look, it’s getting late. You get some sleep; I’ll take the first watch.”

The others nodded and prepared to settle down for the night.

It was odd, Hogan noticed, but no one wanted to use the bedroom. They felt like intruders in the little cabin and wanted to remain as unobtrusive as possible.

Hogan went out into the freezing cold. Schultz stood near the car, staring at the stars. Hogan went over to him.

“I am sorry, Colonel Hogan.” Schultz’s voice held tears. “I am afraid I am not much help.”

“You’re doing fine,” Hogan said soothingly. “Unfortunately, right now, all we can do is wait.”

A heavy sigh. “I know.”

“Schultz,” Hogan asked after a long silence, “why didn’t he say anything to me?”

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Schultz shrugged. "I do not know, Colonel Hogan. From the time you arrived in camp, I had hoped he would tell you. A few times, I think he almost did. But nothing ever came of it. At least in the past," he amended. "I think he was finally going to tell you. I know he was planning something special for your group."

"Why did you want me to know, Schultz?" was the soft question.

"Because . . ."

Silence.

"Because of the way I treated him?" Hogan finished.

"Partly, Colonel Hogan. I do not know if you meant to, but you hurt him very badly more than once. The man, not the Stage. I imagine the Stage would probably have approved."

"He didn't on one occasion," Hogan remembered with a guilty pang.

"Yes. I know," Schultz said. "That was the first time I ever saw him truly angry. As both Kommandant Klink and the Stage."

"You were angry, too," Hogan reminded him.

"Ja, I was. You overstepped the bounds, Colonel Hogan."

A sigh. "I know."

"He almost retaliated. I know he was thinking of getting rid of you," Schultz said to Hogan's surprise. "Fortunately for all of us, he changed his mind. Instead, I kept hoping he would say something to you."

"Again, why?"

"Because he is a very tired man, Colonel Hogan," Schultz said soberly. "The hints that led you to suspect him prove that. He would not have made those mistakes a few years ago, even a few months ago. He has been fighting his war before any of you knew Germany existed. Living two, three lives, often simultaneously. He would go from being Kommandant Klink during the day to the Stage at night and back to Kommandant Klink. Sometimes going days at a time without sleep. Or living with pain but having to pretend nothing was wrong. Even away from the camp, he was either Kommandant Klink or the Stage. Rarely, very rarely, would he allow himself to be the man he is inside.

"Can you imagine what it must be like, Colonel Hogan, to

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never be yourself? Sometimes, I think he has forgotten who he really is." A tired sigh. "That is why I wish he had told you, Colonel Hogan. If you knew, then perhaps Wilhelm Klink could live again. At least for a little time.

"Colonel Hogan," Schultz's voice grew almost desperate, "there is so much to admire about the real Wilhelm Klink. And I had hoped that if you knew, you could see beyond the myth of the Stage and learn to know the real man. And care for him as well. So few people really care about Wilhelm Klink."

"You care, Sergeant Schultz," Hogan said quietly.

"Yes, I do." His eyes met Hogan's. "But I am just a toy maker¹⁰ playing soldier."

Hogan turned away.

"I . . . I also hoped that something good had come of the cave-in. That maybe you did not hate him any more. That maybe you could . . ."

Hogan stayed quiet, reluctant even now to talk about how he felt about Klink.

A sigh from Schultz. "You do not have to stand guard, Colonel Hogan. This place is very well protected. I set all the security traps earlier." He started toward the cabin.

Hogan nodded. Then . . . "Schultz." Their eyes met. "I'd like to know the man you know. Really know him."

"Because he is the Stage?" Schultz challenged.

"No," Hogan said quietly. "Because he's taught me more about courage than anyone I've ever met. Not only as the Stage. But also as Kommandant Klink when he was buried in that rubble. And because he's taught me a lesson about people I needed to learn." A deep breath. "I will never again judge a man by what he appears to be. Nor will I ever treat a human being as anything less than a human being."

"An invaluable lesson, Colonel Hogan."

"Taught by an invaluable man. Get some sleep, Schultz. It may be a long night."

"Yes. You should sleep as well. Good night, Colonel." Schultz entered the cabin.

¹⁰ "War Takes a Holiday"

Scene One

Sleep. Hogan glanced at his watch. Midnight. Forty hours since Klink disappeared. Was he even alive?

Dumb question. Hochstetter wouldn't let him die. Not easily.

Hogan shivered, only partly from the cold. He walked around the car and leaned against it, his eyes on the sky. A clear night. Just like the night he was nearly killed when the Stage saved his life.

The Stage.

No. Wilhelm Klink saved his life. Risking his own. Something Klink didn't need to do. He could have left Hogan to fend for himself and not risk capture or death.

A faint smile. What had the Stage, or rather Klink, called it? A symbiotic relationship. He and Klink. They had worked well together, hadn't they? Even if only Klink knew about it at the time.

Three years. A long time.

Hogan moved restlessly. He was besieged by memories. Odd bits of things that had bothered him just a little when they happened. Things he had in the end shrugged off as meaningless. Now he saw them for what they were. Glimpses of a man, a courageous, intelligent, sensitive man, hiding behind a mask. The mask had slipped while they were trapped in that cave.

Why couldn't he see it then? Why?!

A sudden overwhelming sense of loss swept over him. And pain.

Was it too late? Was his . . . ?

Funny, he almost said, "friend".

He stood still. It wasn't funny at all. He had begun to think of Klink as a friend ever since the cave-in. No, even before the cave-in. Long before the cave-in.

Why hadn't he admitted it before? If he had . . .

The pain was sharper now, almost physical.

Maybe subconsciously he had realized what was really going on. Since the cave-in, he and Klink had developed an open respect for each other, an odd friendship.

Oh God, there was so much lost time to make up for. He prayed that it wasn't already too late.

Scene One

– Six –

Wilhelm Klink was half lying, half slumped against the bottom of the wall to which his right wrist was chained. His eyes barely flickered open as a guard placed a tin of water and a bowl of stew on the floor beside him. The guard then took the slop bucket, replacing it with an empty one before leaving the cell.

He would be alone now; they would even let him sleep. But not for long; in time, fatigue would be as much his nemesis as that infernal rack.

Klink stared at the tin of water for a moment before lifting it with his left hand. The chain on his right wrist didn't give him much slack. As a result, he had to use his left hand for eating and drinking. Annoying, but no real hardship. He had forced himself long ago to learn to use his left hand. He was not quite ambidextrous but he managed quite well when he had to. An unseen smile; some descriptions of the Stage even had him listed as left-handed.

He took a swallow of the surprisingly cool water. When they first gave him the food and water, he, very briefly, considered refusing it. But Hochstetter would not leave him the option of starving to death; he would be ignominiously force-fed. As for the water, well, water torture left no marks and in its way would probably be just as bad as the rack.

Another gulp of water. Then he picked up the stew and straightened up as much as the chain allowed, the bowl resting on his lap.

In the beginning, he had been suspicious of the food. He had expected it to be rancid and spoiled. Or drugged. But Hochstetter had decided against drugs; he was settling old scores by using the rack. And the food was as decent as anywhere else in Germany this late in the war. Hochstetter was making sure he kept reasonably healthy.

Klink took a bite of the stew, put the bowl down and leaned back against the wall, his eyes closed. The problem was that he had no appetite. Nor could he keep what solids he had eaten

Scene One

down.

Did Hochstetter realize that?

Probably. Hochstetter was no stranger to torture. He would probably be given some sort of liquid nutrients as time went on.

Time. Time was both his enemy and his friend now.

Klink glanced at the watch they had left him. Forty hours. He returned the watch to his pocket. Forty hours of his life gone.

Hochstetter had planned his arrest at an ideal time. Schultz, big, naive, bumbling Schultz, was on a rare leave from the camp. It had come about unexpectedly; his sister had fallen seriously ill suddenly. Schultz had requested the leave to arrange some help for her, and Kommandant Klink, in his officious way, generously allowed Schultz to take the leave. A leave that was supposed to have ended yesterday morning. A full twenty-four hours after Klink had been captured.

Twenty-four hours. That much time before word could be passed on to his organization. And that assuming Schultz would realize what had happened.

Schultz would know what had happened; if not immediately, then shortly after he returned to camp. The seemingly inept sergeant was not the fool he appeared to be. He was totally unsuited to be in the military, of course. But his size and innocent face were very deceptive.

Klink had cultivated then Corporal Hans Schultz shortly after Klink's assignment to the camp. He'd seen behind Schultz's rather large exterior and he knew that an inept fool could not run one of the most successful companies in pre-war Germany¹¹. Klink had compiled a rather detailed file on Corporal Schultz before he arrived at Stalag 13, a file that led him to enlist Schultz in his cause.

So, Schultz became his eyes and ears in the camp, warning him whenever Hogan and his men were up to something, which they usually were, and keeping Klink informed about what else was going on.

Schultz was also his backup. He was the one Klink turned to when he was hurt or needed something. Schultz knew very little

¹¹ "War Takes a Holiday"

Scene One

about the organization itself. He knew only who to call in case Klink was really in trouble.

Schultz had also proven himself adept at distinguishing between real trouble and the kind that Hogan managed to cause. When Klink was arrested last year, Schultz had wisely decided that since Hogan had gotten Klink into that mess, Hogan could get him out of it. Which he finally did.

Yes. Schultz would make the call once he realized that Hogan had nothing to do with Klink's disappearance.

Hogan. Colonel Robert Hogan.

A thorn in Kommandant Klink's side. Sometimes a pain in the Stage's as well. Intelligent, resourceful, charming when he wanted to be. A perfect man to run the type of operation he had started. He kept life interesting. Klink never knew when Hogan was planning one of his escapades. It had become a game to see if he could figure out what Hogan was up to. Most of the time, Klink was secretly amused at the lengths to which Hogan would go to pull off one of his cons.

But there were also times when Klink resented the extent to which Hogan thought of him as a fool. A sigh. Then Klink deeply regretted his charade. Then he'd almost told Hogan who he was. Under different circumstances, he would have been able to call Hogan a friend. Something that he knew had been possible since that night in the cave. Something that now would never be.

But then there were the times when Hogan had come close to having his operation terminated because he had by threatening Klink unwittingly threatened the Stage. Especially that day last December.

Klink found himself wondering how smart Hogan really was. The Stage had had some recent encounters with Hogan. Dangerous encounters. The last one especially. He'd talked too much then; what had he said while he was unconscious? Not even the Stage, despite his training, could always control his subconscious. In a way, it would make things easier if Hogan were suspicious.

A faint smile. What would Hogan's reaction be when he learned the truth? Would he even believe it?

Would he even care?

Klink chased the thought away. Even before the cave-in,

Scene One

Hogan knew all too well how important the Stage was. And since the cave-in . . .

You and me. To the end.

Hogan would care. Since that day, the American colonel and the German Kommandant had come to an understanding, had developed a special rapport. A rapport, perhaps even a friendship, which might make Hogan reckless.

Don't be a fool, Hogan. Once you know, leave. It will only be a matter of time before . . .

Time. His friend. The more time that passed, the safety of his people, all those hundreds of lives, would become more assured.

And his enemy as well.

Forty hours.

Klink shifted uncomfortably, leaning against the rough stone wall with his right shoulder. No position was comfortable; only some were less uncomfortable than others. The short chain on the manacle about his wrist restricted his mobility greatly.

And the manacle. It was tight. Already it had scraped the skin off his wrist. Soon the wrist would start to bleed. For now, it was just sore; then it would be painful. He doubted that they would treat it. It would not be a life threatening injury, at least not for a long while. But it would ensure that from that moment on he would never be without pain.

Pain.

Klink shivered, not just from the damp coolness of the cell. He had no idea how long he had been on that rack. Time stopped for him whenever they chained him to it. He was always in pain while he was on it. He had lived with continuous pain before, sometimes for days at a time. But not like this.

Hochstetter was toying with him. There were stretches of time when the pain was bearable. Then others when he could barely keep from crying out. Then . . .

He had screamed. And continued to scream.

Hochstetter alternated the moments he could tolerate the pain with those nightmare moments when he couldn't stop screaming. At times, the uncertainty, the waiting for those unexpected surges of current that tore the screams from his throat, was nearly as bad as the actual torture.

That was the game Hochstetter was playing, hoping that the

Scene One

fear of the current would become as terrible as the current itself.

The question was, which would break him first?

For now, he was able to control the fear that gripped him whenever the cell door opened. For now, he could live with the pain. And for now, Hochstetter was content to play with him.

But when would Hochstetter tire of his sport? How long would it be before the pain would stop being tolerable? How long before these respites would grow shorter? How long before his fatigue became almost as much a thing to be feared as the rack itself?

Stop!

His doubts were only helping Hochstetter, not himself. He had to take each second as it came. He couldn't live beyond the moment. He could take the pain, the fatigue, of the moment.

He had to.

But, dear God, he was scared. He was so very scared.

His head drooped and, for the first time since he entered this hellhole, tears stung his eyes.

Wilhelm Klink felt rather than heard the cell door opening. He looked at the approaching boots with half-lidded eyes dulled from the little sleep he had gotten.

Hochstetter grinned at the man slumped against the dirty wall of the cell. Klink was a far cry from the impeccably dressed officer who had been brought in a couple of days ago. His eyes were puffy and dark with fatigue; rough growth covered his chin. The ripped uniform was stained with the damp of the cell and dirt and sweat. The jacket gaped open showing Klink's dirt-and-sweat-stained chest; bruises from the earlier beating discolored part of his upper abdomen.

Odd. Hochstetter had always assumed that Klink was soft, out of shape. But that tall, lean body was in better condition than many men half his age.

Good. He had been afraid that Klink's physical condition might kill him. But there was no danger of that. Klink could tolerate quite a bit of abuse.

Hochstetter was enjoying himself. Klink was proving to be a worthy opponent. He was still fighting. Passively, of course. Harboring his strength. Not doing anything that would provoke any more ill treatment from his guards than he had to take.

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Very wise. Not that it saved Klink from ill treatment. But some of the guards were “kinder” to prisoners who gave them no trouble.

A guard went over to Klink to unlock the manacle on his wrist.

Hochstetter watched Klink closely. There were no outwardly visible signs of fear yet.

Yes. It would take time.

Well, Hochstetter was in no rush. Berlin was not yet pressuring him to produce his prize.

The guard pulled Klink to his feet.

Good. Though he still pulled himself erect whenever he faced Hochstetter, Klink was not as steady on his feet now.

Hochstetter caught sight of the now raw wrist. A grin. That would make Klink’s time off the rack less restful; with the manacle on his wrist, it would cause him continual pain.

Hochstetter grinned at him. “Well, Klink?”

Klink stayed quiet; he had not talked since his capture.

That Hochstetter found annoying; it showed in his face.

Klink was pushed off balance from behind. He fell to his knees on the stone floor, wincing slightly.

“On your feet, Klink!” Hochstetter roared, his foot shooting out in a kick that caught Klink in the side.

Klink gasped as he toppled backwards, rolling over onto his stomach.

“I said, on your feet!”

Klink was pulled up by two guards, one wrenching his arm up savagely in a painful hammer lock, forcing him to face Hochstetter.

“Still nothing to say, Klink? . . . Very well. As you wish.” Hochstetter gestured brusquely. “On the rack with him.”

This time, Hochstetter caught the flicker of fear deep in Klink’s eyes.

Hochstetter smiled. This time, Klink would scream more than usual.

Scene One

– Seven –

His eyes on the face of the man standing across from him, Hogan knew total fear for the first time in his life. Their eyes met. And clung.

What a fool he'd been! What a blind fool!

Hogan continued to stare at the man he had despised for so long. And the man he had admired for so long. Then Klink was pulled away.

Hogan couldn't see what was going on but he saw the shadows of a man held, fists swinging.

"No!" Hogan wanted to scream. But he couldn't.

Finally, he saw Klink, stripped to the waist, his body covered with ugly bruises. Unconscious, Klink was dragged to the end of the cell as Hochstetter's voice floated in the semi-darkness. "We will be back, Kommandant. We will be back!"

Then a laugh. An insane laugh.

Hogan groaned and turned over.

He saw Klink, blood staining his bare chest.

"You will scream, Klink." It was Hochstetter. "And scream and scream and . . ."

Klink's face contorted, his mouth opened. A scream ripped the cell.

"No," Hogan whimpered, his hands lifting to his ears. "No."

"Isn't this what you wanted, Hogan?" Hochstetter taunted.

"No, I didn't mean it! I didn't!"

Another scream tore the silence.

Hogan moaned softly in his sleep.

No! Don't hurt him. Please, don't . . . !

Gasping, Hogan jerked awake in the semi-darkness. Slowly, he sat up, wrapping the blanket tightly around his body. He was

Scene One

shaking, and not from the cold. His throbbing head leaned against the wall, and there was a tight sob in his throat. He forced the lump down as his trembling hands lifted to his face; his fingers came away wet. A shaky breath and Hogan wiped the tears away with his sleeve. He took several deep breaths to still his trembling body.

As he calmed down, he glanced at his watch. Forty-five hours had elapsed since Klink had disappeared.

Oh God. Unshed tears burned his eyes. This time, he was able to will them back.

Slowly, Hogan stood and stretched carefully. Taking care not to step on anyone, he walked to the door. He opened it silently and walked out into the cold darkness.

Kinch was standing by the fence keeping watch. "Colonel," he greeted tonelessly.

"You can go in, Kinch," Hogan said. "I'll keep watch."

Kinch grinned at him. "No, thanks, Colonel. Wouldn't get much sleep anyway."

Hogan found it difficult to return the smile.

"Nice night," Kinch said, making small talk.

Hogan's unseeing eyes lifted to the sky.

"It's not your fault, Colonel," Kinch said quietly. "Don't blame yourself."

"I should have seen — " Hogan began angrily.

"Seen what?" Kinch said. "You saw what you were supposed to see, Colonel. What the Stage wanted you to see. You can't blame yourself for that."

"I should have seen the rest of it," Hogan said. "The way I was treating him. The way I used him. Like a piece of dirt to be picked up and thrown away. I had no right to do that to him."

"You saw the uniform," Kinch said.

A derisive snort. "I should have seen more; I should have seen the man. We Americans, we like to think we're better than others. But when it comes down to it, are we? Really?"

"I hope so," Kinch said quietly. "At least I like to think we could be."

"Colonel, over the past few weeks, you did change the way you treated him. He stopped being a uniform to you. I think even before you were willing to admit it. We all saw it. He did too. Be

Scene One

glad of that. The past few weeks have been hard on everyone with the extra prisoners and the money problems. But the way you two got along with each other made things a whole lot easier for everyone.”

“Maybe,” Hogan murmured. He felt a need to talk. “What I can’t forget is how he must have felt when the Gestapo turned up and accused him of being a resistance leader. I thought it was a great joke.

“Some joke.” His voice was bitter now. “Can you imagine how he must have felt when he heard that? His worst nightmare and I made it happen. And then he was forced to spend the night in that cell, waiting for them to show up and start on him.

“My God! Why didn’t I think?! Why?! Even if he weren’t the Stage . . .” His voice grew fainter. “What if they had tortured him that night, Kinch? What if — ?”

“Don’t, Colonel!” Kinch interrupted. “It didn’t happen! It’s over! Colonel, the way he’s been toward you since that cave-in, I know he’s forgiven you for it.”

There were uncharacteristic tears in his voice. “But I can’t forgive myself, Kinch. And I can’t forget either. Not now, not ever. And if we don’t find him, if he dies or breaks, then what?”

“We go on,” Kinch said quietly. “We go on and continue his fight. It’s what he’d want, Colonel. It’s what he’d expect, especially from you. If you give up or wallow in self-pity, everything he’s done for you will have been wasted. Because he’s never given up, no matter what happened.”

Hogan stayed silent for a while. When he spoke again, he was more like himself. “You’re a smart man, Sergeant Kinchloe.”

Kinch grinned. “I’ve learned from the best, Colonel.”

Hogan’s eyes were on the rising sun. Another day.

Where was he? Where?! Hogan didn’t realize he spoke aloud. Where?

* * * * *

Unconscious, Wilhelm Klink was pulled off the rack and returned to his spot beside the wall. He was laid on the straw,

Scene One

the manacle once more placed on his bleeding wrist.

Hochstetter grinned. It was going well. During the past ten hours, Klink had had little respite from the rack. Nor did he have much on the rack itself. Klink had shown an amazing tolerance to pain that Hochstetter had not expected until he'd thought about it. The Stage had been wounded in the past; yet visits to Stalag 13 shortly afterwards showed nothing unusual in Klink's behavior. He had behaved normally despite the fact that he must have been in pain. Klink's tolerance was well above that of most men. But he was not superhuman. Even he had his limits.

In the beginning, Hochstetter had experimented with the current, finding a level that had wrenched screams out of Klink but didn't push him into unconsciousness. But soon, Klink's unusually high tolerance would work against him. Hochstetter would not allow him the luxury of relief from the pain for long periods now. The moments Klink spent chained to the wall would grow shorter. Now most of Klink's days and nights would be spent on the rack. When Hochstetter was around, Klink would scream. When Hochstetter wasn't watching, the level of pain would be just low enough so Klink did not cry out. At least not continually. But the pain would wear Klink down, forcing occasional cries from him. Perhaps even forcing tears from him.

Or answers.

Tomorrow it will be seventy-two hours since Klink arrived. Hochstetter was confident that in another day or two he would have the information he wanted from Klink. More importantly, he would have the Stage, or rather Klink, a man he had hated for so long, begging for mercy. A mercy Klink would not receive. Once Hochstetter had wrung all the information he needed out of Klink, he would then be free to kill Klink. Slowly. Very, very slowly. No longer would Hochstetter hold back. Klink would die a bleeding, broken wreck of a man, crying piteously. How long, Hochstetter wondered, how long would it take Klink to die?

Wilhelm Klink, recovering consciousness, heard the door to the cell close. But he continued to lie where he was laid. He couldn't move. The last session had sapped his strength far more than he cared to admit. He stayed prone, trying to regain some

Scene One

of it.

How much more of Hochstetter's torture could he take?

He had no idea. There was only one thing keeping him going now. His people should be safe; over fifty hours had passed since he was taken. If he broke now, the information he revealed would be of minimal use to anyone. But he knew Hochstetter of old. Once he talked, once he had been paraded around as a propaganda victory, then Hochstetter would begin on him again. There would be no quick death for him in front of a firing squad or a hanging. No sentence to a concentration camp. That would be too easy. His death would be as long and bloody as Hochstetter could make it.

By resisting now, Klink was putting off the inevitable for as long as possible. By resisting now, he was hoping that Hochstetter might make a mistake, a mistake that might end his life more quickly.

Was there anything he could do?

Klink forced his heavy eyelids open and focused his bleary vision on the manacle around his wrist. Blood was seeping from beneath the chain, down his wrist, and staining his uniform jacket.

Was it possible to somehow increase the blood flow, perhaps cut the artery?

Klink moved his wrist slowly and gasped as pain shot through his arm. Gritting his teeth, he tried again. This time, he nearly cried out.

He stopped. The manacle was tight and painful, but it was bulky, not sharp. He forced his body to relax and closed his eyes.

Besides, he admitted to himself, he doubted his ability to commit suicide. That meant the end of all hope. And whether it was ridiculous or not, he was not yet to the point of despair. His reputation had been built by achieving the impossible, more than once.

But this time, even the impossible seemed far away. Very far away . . .

Scene One

– Eight –

Mid afternoon. Klink had been gone well over fifty hours.

Hogan paced restlessly outside the cabin, back and forth in a straight line. He was counting his steps, counting so he didn't have to think.

But it wasn't working; he couldn't stop thinking. It seemed as if every moment he had spent with Klink in the past, every word he had said to him, insisted on dredging itself up. More than ever, his unfeeling, contemptuous behavior toward Klink was becoming clearer. No wonder Klink had never said a word to him. He wouldn't have said anything either if he'd been treated like that.

A sigh and Hogan stopped walking, leaning against the dilapidated fence.

Where was Klink? Where?!

Restless, he began walking again.

What was Klink doing? How was he feeling? Had he given up hope? Did he know there were people out there who cared about him? Who wanted to find him?

Schultz had told them that the Stage had said that if he were captured, his people were to leave Germany immediately. He was the only one who knew the entire operation. He alone knew who the Six were and how to contact them. His capture threatened everyone, not just parts of his vast organization.

The Stage's orders did not allow for a rescue, Schultz had said. They never had. The Stage was to be written off. He would give his people as much time as he could, but in the end, unless his captors did something to prematurely kill him, he knew he would break. Schultz had shuddered when Klink had so calmly, almost nonchalantly, talked about his capture. There was no fake bravado in his voice, no ridiculous vows of holding out, of not breaking. Klink had seen all too often what happened to those the Gestapo wanted to break. Every man had his limits; he knew his better than most men. It would only be a matter of time. And he accepted that and went on, continually risking that horrible

Scene One

fate.

Kinch walked over to Hogan. "Time to call again, Colonel."

Hogan nodded and followed Kinch inside. And waited until Kinch placed the call.

The voice on the other end was excited; for the first time, hope surged through Hogan.

"I've scraped together a list of places Hochstetter was spotted at," Teppel said. "But I have to warn you, they're all long shots. Unfortunately, only one is in your area. The others are a long way away."

"I want them all," Hogan said tonelessly.

"I thought you would. Here goes . . ."

Hogan scribbled down seven locations, scattered all over Germany. The major was right; they were all long shots. And most were in impossible locations.

Hogan hung up the phone quietly, staring at the list. Then he looked up at his men.

"I'm not going to raise your hopes," he said. "There's only one place we can possibly get to tonight. The others . . ." He shrugged.

The others, Hogan vowed, he would find himself, after his men and Schultz were safely gone. Regardless of the Stage's orders, he had to know what happened to Klink.

Hogan's face was impassive, his voice low. "Okay, here's what we do . . ."

His men and Schultz listened attentively, hope flickering inside them. Maybe, just maybe, this was it.

* * * * *

The night was dark, moonless, as Hogan looked over the bleak stone building. It was well hidden, with nothing to identify it as the chamber of horrors he knew it to be. Hochstetter had done an excellent job keeping this place a secret from all the normal sources. Officially, no one knew where it was.

Hogan was praying that the secrecy was a point in their favor. It was so well hidden that it didn't even have a guard in

Scene One

the front.

The question was, was Klink in there? And if he was . . .

Klink had been gone sixty hours; Hogan didn't want to think about what he'd find.

If Klink wasn't here, at least they could shut this place down, put some of those monsters out of business. But if Klink wasn't there . . .

You and me. To the end.

If Klink wasn't here, they had no clues as to where he could be, and it would take at least another day to reach any of the other locations. If Klink weren't here, assuming they survived, his men would have to leave Germany. There was no choice; Hogan had to think about them.

And Klink . . . ?

Hogan shivered. He had no intention of leaving Germany without knowing what had happened to Klink. But if Klink wasn't in here, what would he find when he did finally locate Klink?

Another shiver. Klink had to be in here, he just had to be.

Wilhelm Klink stifled the strangled cry in his throat. Somehow, he managed to force down the sob as well.

He had lost track of the time he had been on the rack. All he knew was that it had to be night. There was no one here to watch his lonely fight. A guard came in every so often to see if he had broken yet. But that was all. He was deserted, entirely alone.

Stop it!

Klink had to catch himself mentally all too often now. He could feel the weight of despair preying on his mind. The unceasing pain and fatigue were finally taking their toll on him. How long could he continue to hold out against himself?

Klink shivered in the coolness. His jacket had been removed. A new phase of the torture? Discard the clothing, begin to strip him of his humanity? A prelude to some other, more horrifying torture?

He didn't know. And he didn't want to think about it. He couldn't. All he could think about was the here and now.

Another shiver from the cool air on his sweat-drenched body. He moved awkwardly, trying to ease the pressure on his

Scene One

shoulder joints. This time, a cry was forced from him as the current merged with the pain from his abraded wrist. He was breathing in harsh gasps, trying to settle into a normal rhythm when the current ripped through him again.

Dear God, the pain . . .

It was unending now, with no respite.

Stop! Don't think. You can take . . .

His body convulsed again.

This time the sob came out and a tear trickled down his cheek. He could taste the salty tear on his lip, reminding him of his thirst. The tear surprised him and gave him strength at the same time.

Not yet, Hochstetter. Not yet. Every second I hold out weakens me further. Every second is a second closer to death, but not the way you're planning it.

But, dear God, I hurt . . .

His body arched once more.

They were in the dark hallway now — Hogan, Newkirk, LeBeau and Carter. Schultz and Kinchloe were checking the outside grounds.

They had spotted a couple of guards, guards they had taken deadly care of, quickly and quietly. Security was unexpectedly lax, Hochstetter expecting no trouble in this supposedly secret location.

Newkirk opened the first door and, bracing himself, looked inside. His face contorted as he saw the putrid, broken body with the unseeing eyes on the floor. He shook his head quickly and shut the door.

Hogan moved to the next door and opened it. The smell hit him first, the smell of human waste and vomit. And he stared, horrified, at the man he'd once thought he despised, the man he'd finally admitted meant so much to him.

Wilhelm Klink was chained to a rack-like contraption by the far right wall, his appearance worse than any nightmare Hogan had ever had. Klink had been stripped to the waist. His wrists were in manacles far above his head, the stretch visibly straining his arm and shoulder muscles. Blood was seeping from beneath the manacle on his right wrist down the length of his

Scene One

arm to his shoulder and further down, staining the short dark hairs on his dirty chest. His soiled body was shiny from the sweat that soaked him. Bruises discolored his upper abdomen and parts of his chest. Odd welts were also visible. His legs were anchored in another set of chains at the bottom of the rack. The rest of his clothing was stained with dirt, straw, water and even blood, vomit and urine. Klink's head had fallen down to his chest. His face, with its rough growth, was etched with pain and fatigue, streaked with dirt and sweat. His eyes were closed; Hogan could hear his harsh breathing. Hogan prayed Klink was unconscious.

But he wasn't. Klink stirred, then convulsed, his head lifting, a hoarse cry escaping his cracked lips.

Hogan moved, slinging his weapon onto his shoulder, toward the rack. He had to get Klink off that thing.

Carter and Newkirk followed. LeBeau stayed by the door.

Hogan reached the rack as Klink's eyes flickered open. The bloodshot eyes tried to focus on Hogan's face. Surprise through the pain in those eyes.

A barely audible whisper from the man on the rack. "What . . . what are you doing here?"

"Symbiosis, remember," Hogan said in a voice made harsh by horror. "I'll bet you thought I didn't know what it meant."

Amazingly, Hogan caught a flash of humor beneath the pain in the blue eyes. "Besides, I made you a promise," Hogan added in a gentler voice as the pained eyes stayed on his face. "You and me. To the end. Remember?"

"Ow!" from Carter as he touched the manacles on Klink's wrists. "Colonel," he complained, "these shackles are charged. I don't know how to get them off."

"Let me see," Newkirk said, after releasing the bonds around Klink's feet.

Klink forced himself to speak. "They're controlled from the console," he said through cracked lips. Then his face twisted as the current slashed through him once more.

Newkirk hurried to the console. Unfamiliar switches and dials looked up at him. Part of it evidently controlled the current passing to the rack. Off to the side was a lone switch. Praying it was the right one, Newkirk flipped the switch.

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Klink gasped as his freed hands slipped unexpectedly from the shackles. He sucked his breath in sharply. His fingers had gone numb and life was returning to them with agonizing prickles.

With Carter's help, Hogan pulled Klink from the rack. Klink was unable to stand and he slumped between them to his knees.

Hogan knelt beside Klink, holding the tortured man in his arms, oblivious to the filth, the smell of Klink's unwashed body, the bloody wrist staining his trousers.

"Water . . . please," Klink whispered, his head resting against Hogan, his dirty fingers clutching Hogan's sweater.

Newkirk, leaving the console, spotted the water tin on the floor and took it over to them.

Hogan took the tin from Newkirk and raised it to Klink's lips. A gulp. But Klink choked on the swallow, water spewing down his chest, splashing on Hogan as well. Hogan held him as the spasm passed and tried again. This time, Klink was able to swallow some of the tepid liquid.

"Colonel," Hogan said urgently, putting the tin on the floor, "we've got to get out of here. Can you stand?"

"I'll . . . try," a ghost of a voice.

A sudden cry from the door. LeBeau, a gash on the back of his head, was pushed into the room. Newkirk caught him as he fell.

"Well, well, well." Hochstetter, with two machine gun armed guards on either side of him, grinned evilly at them. "How nice of you to join us, Colonel Hogan. Very nice, indeed."

Hogan and his men exchanged grim glances.

And Hogan, to his shock and dismay, felt the man he was holding tremble.

Scene One

– Nine –

Hogan and his men were herded over to the side of the cell, covered by machine guns. Klink was left kneeling in the middle of the floor as Hochstetter grinned at them.

“Well, Klink,” Hochstetter was saying, “we now have fresh meat for our entertainment. You have managed to tolerate the rack very well; let us see how they handle it.” He turned to the waiting men.

Hogan and his men braced themselves at the look in Hochstetter’s eyes.

“No.”

Hochstetter and the others looked at Klink in surprise.

Klink’s voice, though barely audible, was unexpectedly clear. Still kneeling, his hands on his knees, Klink looked up at Hochstetter.

Hochstetter stepped backwards in surprise at the look in Klink’s eyes.

“I said, no,” Klink repeated softly.

“No?” Hochstetter echoed. “You’re giving me orders, Klink?”

He laughed and then stopped as Klink continued. “Put any of them on that thing,” Klink was saying in a faint voice, his eyes meeting Hochstetter’s. “And you will never get any information from me, Hochstetter. Your great propaganda coup will never happen. That I promise you.”

Hochstetter laughed again. “You, Klink? You, a filthy, stinking thing, you promise me?”

“No, Major.” There was a ghost of a smile on the torn lips. “The Stage promises. And the Stage,” Klink finished grimly, “always keeps his promises.”

Realizing he was out maneuvered, Hochstetter roared his hate and anger. His hand lashed out, catching Klink in the face with a backhanded blow.

Hogan winced as Klink, blood on his lip, fell into the wall behind him and then slid down it to his knees.

Hochstetter kicked out savagely, catching Klink in the small

Scene One

of his back.

With a nauseated groan, Klink fell forward onto his face.

Hogan moved convulsively as Hochstetter lashed out again, catching Klink in the side with his boot. The soldier nearest Hogan butted the machine gun he held into Hogan's middle. With a groan of his own, Hogan doubled up. Only Carter kept him on his feet.

Hochstetter, ignoring Hogan, knelt beside Klink and pulled him off the floor, leaning Klink against the wall.

"You haven't begun to suffer yet, Klink," Hochstetter vowed as Hogan and his men listened in dismay. "This time your screams will stop only when I tire of them. And I promise you, it will be a long time before I tire of them! A very long time!" Hochstetter smiled as he saw the fear in Klink's eyes. "Good. You are afraid of me now. I promise you, Klink, there is a great deal more for you to be afraid of. A very great deal more!"

Hochstetter rose, pulling Klink up with him. Then he propelled Klink into the rack; Klink sagged to his knees, grasping the rack to keep from falling to the ground. Hochstetter pushed him onto the rack, a soldier helping to secure Klink on it.

Hogan watched in despair as Hochstetter went over to the console. His men looked at Hogan desperately, wanting him to signal a move.

Hogan tensed, ready to jump the armed guard, despite the risks to himself and his men.

"Hogan!"

Hogan froze at the sound of Klink's voice.

"You do nothing, see nothing, feel nothing!" Klink ordered in an agonized voice. "That is an —"

A terrifying scream cut off the last word. It was followed by another. And another as Hogan and his men watched in growing horror.

An eternity passed.

Hogan's men closed their eyes, unable to watch the torture any longer. But Klink's screams continued to sound in their ears.

Hogan watched the living nightmare with seeming impassivity; only his slowly clenching and unclenching fists

Scene One

betrayed him. Hochstetter hadn't lied; Klink hadn't stopped screaming since he was put on that thing. Worse, tears were finally being forced from him and a fresh stain wet his already soiled pants.

They would pay for every second of Klink's agony, his degradation, Hogan vowed. Somehow, they would all pay.

The scream was interrupted by a shot, then two others.

Hochstetter, incredulous astonishment on his face, turned around to face Sergeant Hans Schultz and the gun he held.

"You!" Hochstetter breathed in disbelief.

The gun in Schultz's hand fired again. Blood spurting from his chest, Hochstetter fell to the ground, dead.

Hogan moved quickly to the console, finding the switch to release Klink's bonds as another scream ripped through the cell. Newkirk and Carter were already at the rack, catching Klink's body as he slid down, freed from the shackles.

Kinchloe checked the two guards he had shot and joined Hogan at the console. "They were the last, Colonel," Kinch said. "The place is deserted."

"Good."

Hogan joined the others at the rack as they undid the chains on Klink's legs. Klink was mercifully unconscious.

"We need to get out of here in a hurry," Hogan said. "Before someone else shows up."

"Sir, the Colonel's out of it," Newkirk said in a shaking voice.

"I will carry him," Schultz said firmly, already at Klink's side.

"Okay. Carter, torch this cell as soon as we leave. Newkirk, get Klink's jacket and hat. The rest of you, place the bombs as we go. I want this place destroyed," Hogan ordered grimly.

"With pleasure, mon Colonel," LeBeau said fervently.

They watched as Schultz almost tenderly picked up Klink. Hogan and Kinch followed Schultz as he walked out of the cell with his burden.

"Kinch," Hogan asked, "anything in the office?"

"Nothing," Kinch answered. "Klink wasn't identified by name. Only as an anonymous VIP. No record of any calls in or out. Which doesn't mean there weren't any."

"No, it doesn't," Hogan agreed. "Find Klink's belongings?"

"Yeah, in the office," Kinch said. "We can pick them up on the

Scene One

way out.”

“Then, as far as we know, no one knew Colonel Wilhelm Klink was ever here.”

“Yeah, guess so, Colonel,” Kinch said. “Why?”

“Because he’s got a decision to make,” Hogan said evasively.

They reached the outside of building, Schultz carrying the still unconscious body of his Kommandant.

Hogan had picked up Klink’s effects and put them into the trunk of the car as Schultz placed Klink inside the car, draping his coat over the still Kommandant.

Behind them, the building was already burning from the incendiaries Carter had placed. In a few minutes, the flames would reach the explosives as well. In a few minutes, the place would be reduced to burning rubble.

The others piled inside the car.

Hogan stared at the building for a moment before getting into the car. Who had died in there? They would never know. But no else would die there, ever again.

“Let’s get out of here,” Hogan ordered quietly.

The dark car sped off into the silent night.

Act Two

Scene Two

Scene Two

– Ten –

The black car stopped near the road to Hammelburg; Newkirk and LeBeau got out.

Hogan leaned out of the window. “Get to the underground and bring a doctor back with you. Be as quick as you can.”

“Oui, mon Colonel,” LeBeau answered.

The two men stepped back as the car drove off into the darkness.

LeBeau knocked quietly on the hotel door as Newkirk kept watch in the hallway. Finally, a man in a dressing gown answered the knock. Surprise was reflected on both of their faces.

The man recovered first. “What are you doing here?” he whispered urgently.

“Please, may we come in?” LeBeau answered softly.

“Of course.” The man stepped aside and let the two in.

It was still dark when the car stopped at a small, nondescript cabin deep in the woods. Newkirk, LeBeau and the man with them got out of the car and went to the door. Carter opened the door for them.

“Colonel Hogan,” greeted Hauptmann Dieter Müller¹². “Gentlemen.” Then he spotted, “Sergeant Schultz!” Sudden realization on his face. “Oh mein Gott! Wilhelm!”

“You didn’t tell him,” Hogan said to Newkirk.

Newkirk shook his head no.

“This way,” Hogan said.

Hogan crossed to a door in the opposite wall and opened it. He turned up the lamp to light the shuttered room. Müller, beside Hogan, gasped as he saw the man on the bed.

“The Gestapo had him for over sixty hours,” Hogan said

¹² *Act One*

Scene Two

quietly.

Müller nodded grimly as he walked over to the bed. He placed his medical bag on the nightstand and removed his topcoat and hat.

“Do you need anything?” Hogan asked. “Or any help?”

Müller shook his head, bending over the unmoving man. “Not yet. How long has he been unconscious?”

“Nearly four hours,” Hogan answered shakily. “They were torturing him and he was screaming . . .” Hogan shook his head, trying to rid himself of the memory.

“I will call if I need help,” Müller said.

Hogan nodded and turned away. Then . . . “Doctor,” he began hesitantly.

Müller straightened up and looked at him soberly. “I do not know, Colonel. Not yet.”

Hogan nodded and closed the door softly behind him.

Dieter Müller turned back to the man on the bed. Klink’s filthy clothing had been removed; he was covered with a blanket, a sheet wrapped around his loins. Schultz had cleaned away most of the dirt. But nothing would remove the ugly yellowish-purple bruises that covered his body.

Choking down a sob, Müller went to work as dispassionately as he could.

The still man’s eyes slowly opened.

Müller bent over him. “Wilhelm,” he said quietly.

Surprise flickered in the glazed eyes of the man staring up at him.

“Do not try to speak. But I have some questions for you,” Müller said. “I need to know if there is any internal damage. Please, tell me if it hurts when I press so.”

Müller’s hands gently but firmly moved over Klink’s body. The man on the bed nodded “yes” or “no” as the hands moved.

Müller finally straightened up. “I do not believe there is any internal damage. There are places where the muscles are quite bruised; they will be very sore for some time. In time, the discoloration will fade.” He picked up a syringe. “This is a sedative; it will help you sleep. Right now, sleep is what you need the most.” Müller injected his brother-in-law with a gentle hand.

Scene Two

"I will be back later on."

Klink nodded and his eyes closed. As Müller watched, he fell asleep.

No longer the dispassionate doctor, tears began to slide down Dieter Müller's face.

Dieter Müller, his eyes suspiciously red, came out of the small bedroom to join the others.

Hogan watched him closely, half afraid of what he would say. Müller managed a small smile that relaxed them all.

"There is no permanent physical damage; nothing is broken and there is no internal damage. In time, the bruises will fade. Only the right wrist might prove difficult; the flesh is mangled and infected. I have bandaged it, but the bandages will need to be changed every two or three hours."

"I can do that, Herr Doktor," Schultz said.

Müller nodded. "I have given him a sedative to help him sleep; sleep is what he needs the most. If he awakens, give him liquids but no stimulants. A light broth would be best."

"I will make him the best chicken soup he ever had," LeBeau swore.

Even Müller smiled. "My grandmother would approve." He slipped on his coat. "I wish I could stay but I have other duties that I must perform," Müller said. "I will be back later tonight. Again, let him rest, but keep an eye on him as well. Do not be surprised if he slips in and out of sleep. Try not to talk to him, let him heal." He reached into his bag and gave a tube of ointment to Schultz. "Use this when you change the bandages."

Schultz took the tube. "Jawohl, mein Herr."

"Thanks for coming, Doctor," Hogan said.

Müller stared at him in surprise. "It is I who should thank you, Colonel Hogan," Müller's voice shook. "You have returned to me a man I care for very deeply. It is a debt I cannot hope to ever repay."

"Don't!" Hogan said harshly. "You owe me nothing; neither does he." A deep breath. "He's taught me a lesson I needed to learn." He looked at Müller. "Do you understand?"

Müller nodded soberly. "Yes, I do. It is the same lesson he taught me many years ago. I nearly forgot it when I was last

Scene Two

here. I will never forget it again.” He picked up his bag. “I will see you later.”

“Carter, go with him to the gate,” Hogan ordered.

“Yes, sir.”

Carter slipped on his coat and went out with Müller.

Scene Two

– Eleven –

The day went slowly. Outside, the temperature was bitterly cold, the sky overcast. Inside, the mood was scarcely more comfortable. None of them could forget the horrors they had witnessed. LeBeau's cooking did warm things up a bit. Following the Doctor's orders, LeBeau set about making a delicious soup. Soon, pleasant smells invaded the small cabin. Smells which helped them forget the stench of the cell as all the men took turns watching the sleeping man.

Every few hours, Sergeant Hans Schultz went into the quiet room and changed the bandages around Klink's wrist. Klink rarely stirred when he did so. After he finished changing the bandage, Schultz sat for a few moments, watching his sleeping Kommandant. His eyes strayed to the bruises on Klink's body, the fatigue lining the sleeping face. And he shuddered, remembering the scream he had interrupted. And he remembered the rage and the hate he'd felt when he walked into that cell and saw what was being done to Klink. And saw Hochstetter with that smile on his face as he tortured Klink.

Up until that moment, Schultz had never killed anyone. He would have said he was incapable of killing anyone. Now he knew better.

And he was both ashamed of his deed and equally certain that he had no choice. If he had not shot Hochstetter, they might all have been caught. Worse, his friend would have continued to suffer. So Schultz had shot Hochstetter almost without thinking.

Perhaps that's what frightened him the most. That he had done it without thought. A life, no matter how despicable a life, had been taken.

Schultz sighed heavily. Now he knew how others killed so senselessly. But perhaps now that he knew, he could better guard against it.

His eyes strayed back to the sleeping man. *HE* would understand Schultz's dilemma. In the rare moments when

Scene Two

Schultz could get Klink to talk, Klink had revealed his abhorrence of killing. And it showed in the missions he undertook. Rarely would any of the Stage's missions end in a death. Much as he abhorred the conditions in his country, Klink knew that most people were pawns used by Hitler and the madmen surrounding him. And that most people were too afraid to do anything but obey those madmen. But Klink also knew all too well that men like Hochstetter existed. And even them, he was reluctant to kill. However, sometimes, as Schultz found out, people did die. And the man who was the Stage suffered.

As did Schultz.

Another sigh. At least, Klink was free and alive. Schultz prayed that they would leave. Quickly.

The question was, would they?

* * * * *

Corporal Peter Newkirk entered the darkened bedroom and went to the chair beside the bed. He glanced down at the sleeping man; Klink's forehead was wet. Newkirk picked up the towel on the nightstand and carefully wiped Klink's brow. As he did, Klink's eyes slowly opened.

For a moment, Newkirk moved uneasily under the questioning gaze. Then he asked, "Would you like some water, sir?"

Newkirk didn't wait for a reply. He poured water into a glass and offered it to the man on the bed. He had to raise Klink's head a bit so the Kommandant could take a sip. After a couple of swallows, Klink shook his head.

Newkirk carefully lowered Klink's head back down to the pillow and placed the glass back on the nightstand. Then he looked at Klink. Klink's eyes slowly closed and his breathing soon settled into an even pattern. And Newkirk sat down on the chair beside the bed, his eyes staying on Klink.

Klink. The Stage.

Newkirk still couldn't quite believe everything that had happened. When Hogan had come up with his incredible idea about Klink being the Stage, Newkirk had been sure that Hogan

Scene Two

had flipped. Even when Schultz had confirmed it, Newkirk was still tempted to say they were both nuts.

Then they had come to this cabin — the books, the radio, everything. And Newkirk had been forced to admit that this did belong to the Stage. But part of him still didn't believe that it was the Klink he knew. Until he walked into the cell and saw the man who was chained to that thing.

Newkirk shuddered as he remembered his horror at Klink's appearance, his horror at what had been done to Klink. And he remembered his own fear when Hochstetter looked at them, wanting to put them on that contraption. Newkirk had been certain that he would be first.

For years, they had all kidded about being interrogated by the Gestapo. And he had shrugged it off. He'd been caught a few times by the Gestapo during their unauthorized excursions outside the camp. But nothing had ever happened to him. And none of it had ever seemed completely real to him. Until the moment when Hochstetter's eyes had flitted over him in that cell.

Then he knew what real fear felt like, tasted like. He'd thought he had felt it before on their trips outside the camp. But it was nothing compared to what he'd felt at that moment.

Newkirk's eyes strayed back to Klink and he shuddered.

All those years when Klink had been the butt of their jokes or their insults, Newkirk had enjoyed it. Teaching the bloody fool a lesson. Klink and his master race. Hah! That's what Newkirk had felt whenever Klink was being shown up or treated like an idiot.

Then he walked into that cell. And saw what they had done to Klink. Saw the bruises, the blood, the dirt, the exhaustion, the pain. And when Hochstetter lost control and started on Klink as they watched . . .

The way Klink was slammed around and kicked. Then when Klink was put on that thing . . .

Newkirk shuddered as he remembered the screams. That's what Klink had saved them from. Maybe not just this time, but in the past as well.

He glanced at Klink's lined face. How many times had this man that he had insulted and ridiculed, this man that he had,

Scene Two

more than once, wished dead, saved them?

Peter Newkirk knew they would never find out.

* * * * *

Corporal Louis LeBeau walked into the bedroom, carrying a bowl of hot soup. He sat beside the bed, holding the bowl in his lap and waited.

After a while, Klink's eyes opened; his head turned toward LeBeau.

LeBeau gave him a shaky smile. "I brought you some soup, mon Colonel," LeBeau whispered, for the first time using the affectionate term. "Would you like to try it?"

He didn't wait for a response from Klink. Moving closer to the bed, he dipped a spoon into the soup and held it to Klink's lips. The man on the bed slowly sipped the soup. LeBeau tried it again. After some five or six spoonfuls of soup, Klink's pained blue eyes closed once again.

LeBeau, still holding a spoonful of soup in his hand, watched as Klink slipped back into sleep. With a sigh, LeBeau put the spoon back into the warm soup. The Kommandant still very tired, and, LeBeau knew, still in pain.

He glanced down the length of Klink's body and shuddered. The bruises were terrible, even worse than what Martinelli had done to Klink. LeBeau had never seen anyone beaten like this before.

LeBeau had been beaten once. Back in France, shortly after the Nazis paraded into his beloved Paris. He'd made some disparaging remarks to some German scum who'd come into a cafe. It hadn't been a particularly bad beating; in fact a German officer stopped it. But the beating only served to make him even angrier with the stinking Boche. Shortly afterwards, LeBeau joined the Free French. Unfortunately, it wasn't too long afterwards that he was captured and sent to Stalag 13. A Stalag commanded by a Luftwaffe officer, Colonel Wilhelm Klink — the man everyone regarded as a fool.

LeBeau sighed. He along with the others had made life

Scene Two

difficult for this man. More difficult than they needed to. Almost always treating him with contempt, deriding him, insulting him, every chance they got. To find out that the ridiculous, incompetent Kommandant Klink was maybe the most courageous and most brilliant resistance leader in Germany had been quite a shock. To realize that he was also in the hands of the Gestapo was an even greater shock.

LeBeau shuddered again. When they discovered Klink in that cell, saw him on that rack, saw the blood running down his arm, LeBeau had thought he'd faint; he never could stand the sight of blood. And when Hochstetter caught them, a terrible fear shook LeBeau as he realized what Hochstetter wanted to do to them. And would have done to them, except for this man.

Louis would have liked to say that he wouldn't break. In the past, he had said it with boasting bravado. But deep inside, he knew better. He knew he could not withstand the kind of torture this man had endured for so long. Few men could.

He should have seen Klink's courage, his strength, earlier. At the very least, he should have recognized the pain he saw when he had accidentally hit Klink with that door. But he'd ignored it. Ignored it because it was only Klink. A sad sigh. LeBeau hated the Nazis. One reason was that they treated people as nothing more than objects. People were useful only when they served a purpose for the Nazis. Otherwise, they had no rights, no feelings.

Another sigh. He didn't like to admit it, but that was the way he and the others had treated Klink. Rarely would they give him the respect due his rank. Rarely would they accord him any human respect. For as long as Louis LeBeau had been at Stalag 13, he had ignored Klink as a person. He saw only the hated uniform and nothing else.

Was his behavior really any less callous than that of the Nazis he hated so much? Sometimes, not really. And it made him feel ashamed.

He glanced at the sleeping man. If Doctor Müller were right, Monsieur Klink would be all right. He hoped so. Louis LeBeau had much to apologize for.

Scene Two

* * * * *

Sergeant James Kinchloe walked into the room. Klink was still sleeping. He almost looked peaceful. Peaceful. Was that a word one could use to describe a man who had been beaten and tortured for over sixty hours? Hardly. Especially when you looked at the bruises.

Kinch sat down at the side of the bed. The sleeping man stirred and opened his eyes. Kinch picked up the glass of water and held it to Klink's lips. After a slow swallow, Klink shook his head and Kinch gently laid Klink's head back on the pillow.

"Would you like anything, sir?" Kinch asked.

Klink shook his head again and his eyes closed. As Kinch watched, Klink fell asleep. And Kinch shook his head.

Who would have believed it? Klink, the Stage.

Should they have guessed? Maybe. Thinking back, Kinch could remember times when Klink seemed to know exactly what they were doing. But Hogan always managed to twist it around so that Klink appeared to be more confused than ever.

Maybe they should have guessed after seeing what Martinelli had done to Klink and how he behaved. After all, he had withstood a beating that would have had many men cowering in fear. Yet, oddly, Klink hadn't. For someone who was supposed to be a coward, it was remarkable behavior.

At the very least, after the cave-in they should have noticed something. The way Klink had calmed Hogan down while the two men were trapped should have alerted them to the fact that Klink may have been more than he seemed. Then the way he behaved while he was trapped should have been another clue. His courage, the way he refused to give in to the pain, had been in retrospect decidedly out of character.

But no, they hadn't seen it. All of them had been blind, blinded because of a uniform and a brilliant facade. And that made Kinch rather uneasy. All his life, he'd encountered people who saw only the facade of his black skin and treated him accordingly. It was odd, but here in a prison camp he wasn't judged by his skin color. Hogan, Newkirk, LeBeau and Carter never cared that he and Baker were Negroes. And the really

Scene Two

funny thing was that, despite what they'd heard about Germans and the so-called master race, neither did Klink or Schultz. Now that he knew the truth about Klink and Schultz, he could understand it. But thanks to Klink — it had to be Klink's doing — none of the guards were outwardly racist either. But could he honestly say that he had never treated Klink as anything other than the stereotypical Nazi?

Not really. Kinch was forced to admit that there was a little bit of the bigot in everyone. Including himself. Of course, Klink did too well a job playing the inept Kommandant. And he'd paid for it.

If they had guessed earlier, could they have prevented what had happened? Kinch wasn't sure. And he knew that's what was eating Hogan. That they should have seen what was going on. In the end, Hogan did. But by then, it was too late.

Another glance at Klink's unshaven face; fatigue and pain still lined it. But Klink looked a lot better than he did when Kinch and Schultz walked into that cell and saw Klink on that rack.

Schultz had astonished Kinch then. Before he realized what the rotund sergeant was doing, Schultz had shot Hochstetter. Kinch had just barely managed to shoot the other two guards before Schultz fired again, killing Hochstetter. Kinch hadn't thought that Schultz was capable of killing anyone, but considering how Schultz felt about Klink, how Schultz had always really felt about Klink, he guessed it wasn't that surprising. What had surprised him was the bond growing between Hogan and Klink over the last few weeks.

But it shouldn't have. Whether they liked it or not, Klink was Hogan's counterpart. In a way, they were both isolated from their commands. Even the seemingly inept kommandant knew what a burden command could be. And since the cave-in, the two men had clearly come to an understanding about where they stood. An understanding that solidified with each passing day. No wonder Hogan had been so shook when he realized who Klink was, and where he was. Kinch had to admit to being shaken also.

Another glance at Klink. He was glad he'd missed the beating the others had seen and missed most of the torture. Over the past few years, he'd lain awake a few times in his bunk, thinking about what would happen to them if they had gotten caught.

Scene Two

He'd hoped that the worst the Germans would do would be to shoot them. He hadn't wanted to think about the alternatives.

But Klink had faced those alternatives, had faced them ever since he started his dangerous charade. Kinch had never dreamed that Klink had had those kind of guts.

He wondered bleakly if James Kinchloe did.

* * * * *

Sergeant Andrew Carter walked into the bedroom and tentatively approached the bed.

Klink was sleeping, but the blanket had slipped down, baring Klink's chest. Carter leaned over and carefully moved the blanket up to Klink's shoulders. Absently, he noted the still fresh scar left from the wound the Stage had received when he rescued Colonel Hogan a few weeks ago.

In a way, Carter was embarrassed seeing Klink this way. Then he smiled faintly. Weird, he hadn't been embarrassed to play Klink's doctor last year¹³. It had been a scheme of Hogan's to get Klink to go into town. Make Klink think he was in perfect shape so the underground could use Klink's car to get a message back to them.

Perfect shape. Now, Carter was startled. While pretending to be a doctor, he'd examined Klink. Not completely, not like a real doctor. But . . .

He just realized something. That entire week, Klink had intimated that he was in bad shape. Hogan had even called him a physical wreck. And all of them had agreed.

But Klink hadn't been. In bad shape, that is. Now that he thought about it, Klink had been in pretty good shape. When he listened to Klink's heartbeat with a stethoscope, the heartbeat he'd heard had been strong, steady. And the muscles under his fingers were firm, not flabby.

Why didn't he notice it then? He could have told the Colonel.

¹³ "Get Fit or Go Fight"

Scene Two

Hogan would have been suspicious or at least curious. Maybe Hogan could have guessed what was going on earlier. And if he had, then maybe what had happened to Klink need never have happened.

Carter shuddered, then glanced at Klink as Klink stirred for a moment. Klink had ordered them not to react to his torture after he'd intervened in Hochstetter's plan to torture them. An intervention that had cost him dearly.

A deep sadness swept over Andrew Carter. Sadness at how he had treated Klink in the past. Once while acting the part of a general, Carter had even struck Klink¹⁴.

They didn't need to go that far. They could have carried out their plans and still have treated Klink with more respect.

In hindsight, Klink really hadn't been as bad as they all made him out to be. Schultz had said it best — Klink had tried to do his best by the prisoners. He had never harmed any of them. None of the Kommandant's discipline was ever physical or inhumane. Unlike some of the camps they'd heard about. Some of the stories Carter had heard from the prisoners of other camps had turned his stomach. Klink had only done what he needed to do. And they gave him only contempt in return.

They should have seen it. They should have seen how they were treating him. At the very least, they should have accorded him some modicum of respect. It wouldn't have cost them anything. And it might have made the man who had been fighting for so very long a little less lonely.

Carter hoped that Klink would forgive them. But right now, Andrew Carter was having trouble forgiving himself.

* * * * *

Colonel Robert Hogan entered the darkened room as Schultz finished bandaging Klink's infected wrist.

"How's he doing, Schultz?" Hogan asked quietly.

¹⁴ "Lady Chatterley's Lover"

Scene Two

Schultz shrugged. "LeBeau left some soup, Colonel Hogan."

"I'll give it to him."

Schultz nodded and left the room as Hogan went over to the bed and sat beside it. He glanced at Klink's lightly bearded face. The pain and the exhaustion that had lined it finally seemed to be lifting. For a time, Hogan had wondered if it ever would.

Pain.

Hogan shuddered. He remembered how Klink's pain in that cave-in had frightened him. How he didn't know what to do about it. Especially when Klink screamed. But the pain Klink had endured then was nothing compared to what he'd suffered since his disappearance. The few minutes they'd witnessed proved that. And Klink had withstood that pain for nearly sixty-five hours.

Sixty-five hours.

Another shudder shook Hogan. How many times had he and his men talked about what might have happened to them if the Gestapo interrogated them?

Talked? Joked was more like it. Joked as he had joked with the Gestapo men who would sometimes question him. Especially Hochstetter. Once in a while, Hogan had encountered underground agents who were in danger of being caught. He'd heard their fake bravado, those pleasant little lies that people tell themselves when they're frightened and don't want to admit it. Laughing at what the Gestapo would do to them. Denying what the Gestapo would do to them. Denying they could be broken.

So unlike Klink. He had known what would happen to him if he were caught. And had planned for it so that no one else would be hurt by his weakness.

No. Not weakness. Klink knew he was a man of flesh and blood and not the myth that had grown up around him. His courage was immense and born of knowing exactly what he was facing. His tolerance of pain was also immense; Hogan knew he could never have tolerated the kind of torture Klink had endured for so long. But Klink did tolerate it. And he'd saved them from that fate as well.

Memories crowded each other inside Hogan's mind. Memories of other times when Klink had intervened on their behalf.

Scene Two

Protecting them from Hochstetter and others. They had thought he was playing the fool when he did so. Now they were able to recognize what had happened. Hogan had never noticed the risk Klink took whenever he stepped in and protected them. Now Hogan knew. He had seen what happens to those who get caught taking that risk.

No, Hogan, like the rest of his men, had never really thought through what could happen to them. Perhaps that's why he didn't really think about what could have happened to Klink when he'd betrayed Klink to the Gestapo last month. It had always been a game to them. With risks to be sure. And danger. But that had made the game more exciting. And to a large extent, their status as Allied soldiers protected them. But what would protect Klink?

Nothing. The Stage's reputation ensured that if the man were caught, the Gestapo would use every sadistic torture they could devise against him. Not just to get information, but also to punish him for what he had done. There would be no easy death for him.

Why hadn't Klink told him who he was? Why?!

Why should he? What had Hogan done to earn his trust?

Nothing. From the first, Hogan had used Klink, used him as a tool, as something less than human. Why should Klink have trusted him?

It wasn't until Martinelli beat Klink that Hogan even bothered to consider Klink as something other than a tool. And even then, Hogan ran from the way he felt about Klink. He didn't want to be bothered considering Klink's humanity. He had acted more like a fool than the supposedly incompetent Kommandant Klink ever had. Not noticing how important Klink had become to him. Not caring what Klink had become to him. And when he finally did realize it, he tried to deny it. Deny it to the extent that he wished Klink harm.

And Hogan paid for it. The dreams, nightmares, he'd had after he wished Klink dead. Dreams where Klink would be hurt, bleeding. Dreams where Klink would fall into his arms. Dreams where Hogan would walk away from Klink's pleading eyes, leaving him alone. Dreams where those pained eyes would close, never to open again.

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The dreams had scared Hogan. They still did. There were tears on his cheeks now. And the dreams had grown worse after Hogan had turned Klink over to the Gestapo. Hochstetter's voice had floated in and out of those dreams, taunting Klink as his pained eyes looked at Hogan.

Hogan's hands lifted to his face. And he'd nearly ignored Klink again in that cave. It had taken all of Klink's pain for Hogan to finally admit how he felt about Klink. Something he should have admitted a long time ago. If he had, then maybe, maybe . . .

Klink stirred Hogan looked at him. Klink's eyes were still closed but his breathing quickened and he was moving restlessly. Klink was dreaming, reliving his torture. His hands were clenching and unclenching, his body arching as if still on the rack.

Hogan knelt beside the bed. "Kommandant?" he whispered. He wasn't heard.

There was no hesitation as Klink's bandaged hand lifted. Hogan grasped it firmly in his own. Klink's fingers crushed his in a death grip. And Hogan held on.

Eventually, Klink's body relaxed. The fingers were no longer so biting; his breathing settled down. Slowly, Klink's eyes opened, filled with tears and pain. He tried to focus on Hogan's anxious face.

"It's all right," Hogan said reassuringly, wiping Klink's sweaty face with a damp towel, his voice soothing, low. "It's over. You're safe now. No one can hurt you here." He started to relax his hold on Klink's hand.

A frightened, broken whisper, "No, don't . . ."

A voice from Hogan's nightmares. A voice he'd ignored in his dreams. But not now. And never again.

"No," Hogan vowed. "I won't leave you." His grasp tightened on Klink's hand. "To the end, Wilhelm Klink, you and me. Remember?" His eyes stayed on Klink's tearing ones. "You and me. To the end."

Klink's hand tightened on Hogan's as he echoed, "To the . . . end."

As Hogan watched, Klink's breathing settled and his eyes closed. And he continued to hold Klink's hand in his.

Scene Two

– Twelve –

Doctor Dieter Müller returned after dark. He took off his overcoat and gloves and held his hands over the stove. It was freezing outside.

“How has he been?” he asked Hogan.

“Sleeping mostly. He managed to eat some soup.”

Müller nodded. “I was able to visit the camp today.”

“How is it?” Hogan asked.

“Quiet. Captain Gruber was glad to see me, and there were no unusual reports either there or in town.”

“Good.”

“I managed to talk with your man Baker. I told him you were all fine and that the rescue had been carried out successfully. He looked relieved.”

Hogan managed a smile. “I bet.”

“He said that he was still ready to carry out your original orders.”

Hogan nodded. “Good. Right now, I’m not sure what we’re going to do.”

“Would you like my opinion?” Müller asked dryly.

A faint smile. “I think I can probably guess.”

“I think you can. Well, it is time I examined my patient.” Müller picked up his bag and walked into the bedroom.

Schultz was in there.

“He just woke up, Herr Doktor,” Schultz greeted him. “I will leave you alone.”

Müller put his bag on the chair as Schultz left the room. “Hello, Wilhelm,” he said quietly.

Klink cleared his throat. “You should not be here,” he said in a hoarse, low voice.

A thin smile. “I did not get the message,” Müller explained. “I have been traveling.”

“There?”

Müller sat down on the bed and picked up Klink’s wrist,

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checking the pulse.

"She received the message," Müller said quietly. "And crossed the border to Switzerland immediately. I located her with friends." Müller glanced at Klink. "She was frightened but holding up well. I told her you are safe."

A sharp glance from Klink.

Müller smiled. "You are not the only one who can play with codes and secrets, Wilhelm. No one else would have understood the message."

Klink smiled wanly.

"Now you. How are you feeling? The truth, please."

"Tired." Klink's hand lifted to his face and he rubbed his eyes. "Very tired."

"Any pain?" was the soft question.

Klink's eyes were on the ceiling. "Some. The muscles, of course."

"Anywhere else?"

"I will admit to a splitting headache," Klink said. "And it feels as if every nerve in my body is alive."

"I see."

Müller stood and removed the blanket. His gentle hands moved surely over Klink's body. He seemed satisfied when he replaced the blanket.

"There is no unusual tenderness or anything else that might indicate internal damage," he told Klink. "They used electrical current?"

His brother-in-law nodded.

Müller had a little trouble controlling his voice. "Colonel Hogan said they had you for over sixty hours."

"I will take his word for it."

"And most of that time they used the current?"

Another nod.

"The pain would appear to be residual effects of the shocks given to your nervous system. It should fade over time." Müller took some tablets out of his bag. "I would prefer giving you only aspirin," he said. "Unless the pain . . . ?"

Klink shook his head.

Müller smiled briefly and poured a glass of water. He handed it to Klink, along with the two tablets. He watched Klink swallow

Scene Two

the tablets. "Do you think you can sleep without a sedative?"

Klink nodded. "Yes. But a little later."

"Of course. Now, I imagine it has been a while. Let me help you out."

He helped Klink get out of bed and helped him to the outside toilet. After a few minutes, Müller helped Klink back into bed.

Klink protested a little. "I am unused to all of this attention."

"Perhaps you should not be," Müller retorted. "I should be very angry with you, Wilhelm. You warned me about the dangers of . . ." He broke off at Klink's gaze. After a moment, Müller cleared his throat. "The subject is still verboten."

Klink nodded soberly.

A sigh. "All right, Wilhelm. I will keep silent. For now," he amended with a small smile which Klink managed to return. "Do you know what you are going to do next?"

Klink shook his head.

Müller nodded and stood. He repacked his bag. "I will be spending the night. If you later wish a sedative or some conversation, I will be in the next room."

"Danke schön, Dieter."

"Gute Nacht, Wilhelm."

"Gute Nacht."

Müller came out of the bedroom. A faint smile at Hogan. "He is doing better than I'd hoped. If you do not mind, I would like to spend the night."

Hogan shook his head. "No problem. Make yourself at home."

Müller glanced around the small cabin. His eyes landed on the bookcase. He walked over and put his medical bag on top of it. Then he reached out and picked up a book. A faint smile as he leafed through it. "I have not seen this in a while."

"What is it?" Hogan asked curiously as he walked over.

"Plato's *Republic*, a very old edition of it," Müller said. "I gave it to Wilhelm for his fortieth birthday. Have you ever read it, Colonel?"

"Not in a long time," Hogan admitted.

"Nor had I. But at our second meeting, Wilhelm and I began to discuss it."

"An odd topic."

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Müller smiled. “He happened to be reading it while I was waiting for Therese to get dressed for our, I believe the word is, date?”

Hogan grinned. “Yeah, date’s right.”

“Until then I had not thought much of him. I knew he was in the Luftwaffe.” A small smile. “By then, I also knew how much Therese adored him. Frankly, I could not see why; he did not impress me at all. Until we started talking about this book.

“Suddenly, he was a different man. I sometimes wonder if he would have opened up that way if he did not already know I loved Therese. By the time I gave him the book, I was nearly a member of the family. Therese and I were married a few months later.”

“And you named your son after him,” Hogan said quietly.

A sad nod. “I named him after a man I had grown to love and admire tremendously. And to think,” Müller’s voice cracked, “that I could accuse him of all those things a few months ago.”

“I’ve called him worse.”

“But I knew him,” Müller said with anguish. “I knew what was behind that mask that others saw. I should have realized what I was saying before I hurt him like that.”

Müller replaced the book and scooping up his coat, hurried out the door.

With a sigh, Hogan watched the door close.

Dieter Müller walked down the lane and leaned on a dilapidated fence. He blinked back the tears in his eyes.

He was remembering, none too happily, his last visit to the camp. His anger, even shame, at what he’d thought Klink had become. Then his fear when he realized the truth.¹⁵

It was a somber Dieter Müller who climbed the steps leading to Kommandant Klink’s office. He walked into the office and knocked on the inner door.

Colonel Wilhelm Klink opened the door.

After an awkward silence, Müller said, “May I come in?”

Klink stepped back and gestured a welcome. He closed the

¹⁵ “Act One”

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door and followed Müller inside.

Müller looked uneasy.

Klink broke the silence. "Are you finished with the prisoners' examinations?"

"Ja. Here is the report. I found no serious health problems. Considering the conditions, the prisoners are in excellent shape."

"Good. You are leaving now?"

Müller nodded.

"Then there is nothing more to do. Or say."

Müller faced him. "Yes, there is . . . I wish to apologize."

Klink turned away. "For what?"

"For . . ." Müller cleared his throat. "I think I understand a little of what motivates you, Wilhelm, and others like you. You survive. And," a deep breath, "last night, I realized how important that is."

Klink turned back to him. "In what way?"

"I made contact with a resistance group last night, Wilhelm. More than one. Only the SS knew about the meeting as well. But for the courage of one man, I might have been caught or killed. I realized then what I had risked. And how foolish I was. I am not a soldier, Wilhelm. I am only a doctor in a uniform that has no meaning for me. As such, I am a liability to others." He looked soberly at Klink. "I had a gun in my hand and realized that I could not shoot."

"A doctor should save lives, Dieter," Klink said. "Not take them. And you are an excellent doctor."

A small smile. "Danke, Wilhelm." He stepped closer to Klink. "I haven't changed my mind about the resistance or the way to end this war."

A small smile in return. "I didn't think you had." There was an odd humor in his voice.

"But I realize that I must leave it to others better suited than I. A brave man was injured because of me. I won't risk that again."

"I'm sure that is the wisest thing."

Müller laughed. "I was right, Wilhelm. You are a realist and a survivor . . ." A friendly clap on Klink's right forearm.

And Dieter Müller froze. His doctor's eye could not miss the

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pain that flashed across the controlled face of the man before him. Or the pain still lingering deep in his eyes. And he realized the awful truth.

His mouth opened, but the quick hand on his lips and the warning shake of Klink's head stopped him.

Müller stayed silent, staring in shock at the man before him. He watched his brother-in-law step away, Klink's left hand straying to his forearm, then dropping away. The shoulders then straightened, as if nothing had happened.

"I . . ." Müller took a deep breath to still the sudden pounding of his heart and to quiet the fear he now felt for this man. Slowly, he came to a decision, one he had to make to protect his wife. One that might protect this man. "I have decided to take Therese to my grandparents. As you know, they live near Switzerland. It is much safer there."

"An excellent idea."

There was no tremor in Klink's voice to betray him. As if nothing had happened. Nothing!? Müller's life had been irreversibly changed in that second.

"There is a hospital where she can work. Perhaps in time there will be another child to show us how beautiful life can be."

"I hope and pray so, Dieter."

"And I pray Uncle Wilhelm will visit often." His eyes clung to the man before him.

A smile. "I will probably out stay my welcome."

A sober smile in return.

"A drink before you leave?"

Müller nodded, and watched as Klink poured brandy into two glasses. Left handed, Müller noted. Klink gave a glass to Müller and lifted his own drink as the two men looked at one another. There was a twinkle deep in the eyes of the Kommandant as if he understood Müller's dilemma.

Müller had questions he could not ask, fears he could not voice. It had taken him a while to learn to like this very private man. In time, he had learned to love him, first for Therese's sake, then for his own, for Müller had seen behind the public face. But all those stories he had heard . . .

He had not wanted to believe them; they were so at odds with the man he had come to know. But what he had seen and heard

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over the past few days had forced him to believe those stories.

And now he was filled with a greater respect for the man before him.

And terrified for him as well.

"To Therese," Klink said quietly, lifting his glass in the toast.

Müller slowly lifted his own glass. "And to the men who love her."

Klink acknowledged the salute silently and drank.

Müller gulped the fiery liquid and placed the glass on the table. Carefully avoiding Klink's right arm, he embraced Klink tightly.

"Take care of yourself, Wilhelm," Müller whispered softly.

There was a smile from Klink and another hug before they broke apart.

"Write, if you can," Müller was saying as they left the office together.

Klink escorted Müller to his car. Müller got in and closed the door. Klink leaned on the open window and glanced around quickly. Müller felt a chill as he watched Klink's face.

"Dieter, I will say this only once," Klink said slowly, quietly.

"You and Therese may receive a message. If the message is, 'The play is canceled; the stage is broken', you are to leave Germany that moment with no questions asked." His eyes met Müller's.

"Is that understood?"

Müller's fear was reflected in his face. Fear for Klink. He wet dry lips. "Yes, I understand." Then "Wilhelm — "

"No," Klink said softly, firmly. "No more words." Then raising his voice. "Give my love to Therese," he said loudly, grasping Müller's hand affectionately.

Müller nodded behind Klink, he could see Hogan approaching. He started the car. "Auf wiederseh'n, Wilhelm."

Klink stepped away. Müller, raising a hand goodbye, drove slowly away.

Müller had gone home, filled with trepidation.

Therese had run out to greet him. As always, his heart beat faster when he saw her. Nine years of marriage and a child had not changed the girlish figure or the way she moved.

Nor did the pain of losing their son diminish the love they

Scene Two

shared. They had reached out to each other when little Wilhelm died. And they knew that while the pain wouldn't disappear, in time it would soften.

They didn't go into the house immediately. Arm in arm, they walked down the lane to the back garden and up the small hill overlooking their house. Müller brushed the snow away from a bench. Their bench. And they sat.

"Did you see him?" Therese asked eagerly.

Müller nodded. "Ja."

"Is he well? And happy?"

Müller wasn't sure how to answer either question.

"Well?" she demanded.

Müller hesitated. He didn't know where to begin. But he had to give her the warning. He must, for all their sakes.

"Therese." He took her cold hands in his and looked at her.

She grew alarmed. "Wilhelm is well, isn't he? The war . . . He hasn't been hurt?"

"Therese," Müller said soberly, "there is something I must tell you. A story."

"I don't want to hear any stories." Therese grew impatient. "I want to know about Wilhelm. Tell me he is well." There were tears in her voice.

Müller took his wife in his arms and held her close. "The story is about a very brave man, Therese," he said softly. "A man we both love deeply."

He felt her tremble as he told the story and she buried her face in his coat. When he finished, he was surprised to hear a faint laugh tinged with tears.

"I knew it was all false," Therese whispered into his coat. "I knew it!"

Müller was astonished. "You heard the stories!"

"Of course I heard. I wasn't supposed to, but I did. And I didn't believe any of it," she said proudly. "I knew better."

"I should have known better as well," Müller said with a sigh.

Therese held him close. "I am certain that he forgave you, as do I."

Müller kissed her. "You are a wonder, my darling." Then soberly, "You understand we must leave here."

The blonde curls nodded. "Ja. It will be hard on mother."

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"She can come as well. And your brothers as well," Muller said.

"That may be more difficult to arrange. As for mother, we will see."

As it turned out, the elderly woman didn't go with them to the Bodensee. She would not leave her home of so many years, nor her sons and their families. As for Therese's brothers, neither they nor their families could leave. Their jobs didn't give them the same leeway Müller had in these troubled times. Though the Müllers didn't give up easily, in the end it was only Therese and Müller who traveled south. There, both Müller and Therese, a nurse, began working in one of the hospitals, tending the wounded who returned in droves from the battlefronts.

Shortly after their arrival, a man approached them. It happened to be on a rare day when both of them were home. At first, Therese thought it was a peddler, selling odds and ends. There were many in Germany who were selling off their goods in order to survive. Therese, whose kind heart always tried to help those less fortunate, welcomed the man into the garden where she had been working. Then the man expressed a desire to see Doctor Müller as well. Therese, thinking the poor man needed medical help, fetched her husband. To their surprise, the man said he needed to talk to both of them. They sat in the gazebo overlooking the lake, surrounded by newly fallen snow.

The man took out an envelope and handed it to Müller. "I do not know what is in there or who it is from. Nor do I need to know. But I was told you would recognize the handwriting."

With trepidation, Müller opened the envelope and read the note. Soberly, he passed it to Therese. Therese gasped as she recognized her brother's writing. It was a simple message, unsigned, instructing them to follow the bearer's instructions.

Müller asked quietly, "What is it that you must say to us?"

"I must pass along some instructions for you," the man replied. "You may receive certain messages on the telephone. They are similar but mean different things. Please listen very carefully."

The couple sitting before him nodded soberly.

"One message may be, 'The play is over'. It requires no

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further action from you. It simply means that a certain individual, who will remain nameless, has ceased operating. God willing, it also means that the war is ended.

"The second may be, 'The play is terminated'. This message means that a certain individual is dead . . . "

Therese paled; Müller took her cold hand in his.

The man continued, "If a time is mentioned, that time would be the approximate time of his death. Your orders would then come from whatever unit you are assigned to.

"The third message, and the most important, is, 'The play is canceled; the stage is broken'. There should be a time mentioned." The man hesitated as Therese grew even paler. "If that message ever comes, you must disappear immediately."

Müller asked the question, though he had already guessed the answer, "What does it really mean?"

"It means," the man said soberly, "that the individual has been taken by the authorities."

"And you expect him to . . . break?" Müller asked in a tight voice.

"Ja. Which is why you must leave." The man couldn't look at the ashen-faced woman across from him. "Now, Herr Doktor, I must have every telephone number at which you and Frau Müller may be found, day or night. A person will be assigned to notify you as soon as a message is received."

Müller cleared his voice. "If we were to disappear, what consequences would there be to our families?"

A thin smile. "There would be units assigned who have no direct link to the individual to keep watch over those who may possibly be taken as well. But it is believed that the risk to those persons would not be too great. It is also suggested that the reasons you prepare for leaving be as realistic as possible. There is always the possibility that the message was sent prematurely or in error."

"And how likely is that?" Müller asked bitterly.

"Very remote," the man admitted.

Müller, after a glance at his wife's stricken face, wrote down the telephone numbers on a scrap of paper.

The man took the paper from him and looked at it for a moment or two. Then he handed the paper back to a surprised

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Müller. The man tapped his forehead and smiled briefly. "Like a camera." And he stood.

Müller stood as well. "Can you pass a message to your superiors?" he asked hesitantly.

"Perhaps."

"I am no soldier as I discovered recently, so I would be of no use in that capacity. But if ever a doctor is needed . . ." Müller's voice faded.

The man smiled. "That, Herr Doktor, was already known. Guten Tag, mein Herr. Frau Müller."

Therese barely noticed his departure.

Müller sat down next to his wife. "Therese?" he said softly, putting his arm around her shoulder, drawing her close.

"I didn't think before . . . Dieter . . . Wilhelm, if they catch him . . . If they catch him, they will torture him," she whispered desperately. "They will torture . . ." She broke down, sobbing loudly.

He had no words of comfort; he could only hold her close.

That night, in the stillness of their room, they talked, their arms tightly wound around each other as they lay in bed. Müller had never felt so proud of Therese as he did in that moment. Once the shock had worn off and the tears dried, Therese put her mind to the problem of leaving. Müller wasn't surprised that her suggestions made excellent sense. They decided on a number of courses of action, depending on where they were if the message arrived. Unless they were together, each would slip away quietly and without suspicion; their occupations made unexpected telephone summonses reasonable.

Once the course of action had been decided, Müller was not surprised to find Therese in tears again. Müller felt like crying as well. From the moment he realized who his brother-in-law was, the realization of what would happen to Klink if he were captured terrified Müller as well.

Müller tried reassuring Therese that her brother had been playing his dangerous game for over ten years. But the question still haunted them, how much longer could Klink continue to defy the odds? When would the Gestapo or the SS finally catch up with him? All they could do was pray they would never

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receive the message. That was all. Just pray.

The message had been sent. And it had been sent while Müller was away on an inspection trip. Therese was working at the hospital as usual. They usually took very little time off when Müller was home. And when he was gone, Therese would spend all of her days and a good part of her nights at the hospital. She needed the work when she was alone; her imagination carried her off into terrifying worlds.

"Therese!" Helga called. "Telephone!"

Therese had no reason to fear the telephone. She was frequently called, by friends, patients, Müller's grandparents.

"Hello."

"Frau Müller?"

Still no fear. "Ja."

"I have a message regarding the play you inquired about," the voice said tonelessly.

Therese stood still, the color draining from her face, her heart pounding in her breast. "Ja," she mumbled.

"I regret to inform you — "

Dear God, please, no. Then . . . Let him be dead. Bitte, if it is, let him be dead.

"That the play was canceled approximately twenty-five hours ago. The stage is broken — " Her eyes closed to hide the pain.

"Do you understand? The stage is broken."

Her voice was lifeless. "Ja. Ich verstehe. Danke schön." Slowly, numbly, she replaced the receiver.

"Therese?"

She turned to the worried looking woman beside her.

"Are you all right, Therese?"

The rehearsed words came out quite calmly and naturally. "A very dear friend has taken ill; she is not expected to live. I must see her now."

"Of course, you must," Helga said consolingly. "You put in so many hours here, I can spare you for a little time."

"Danke schön."

Therese walked down the stairs to the room she shared with the other nurses. Quite calmly, she took off her uniform and dressed quickly in her warm street clothes. Then, smiling

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mechanically at those she knew, Therese walked out of the hospital to her car.

She drove quickly, but without undue hurry.

The border. Müller and she had friends, close friends, across the border. And those friends had arranged a special pass for them. The words slipped mechanically off her lips at the border crossing. The gate lifted; it was not her first trip across and the guards knew her.

Then she was in Switzerland, safe. Therese continued to drive without really seeing the snowy countryside.

The estate was just ahead. The gatekeeper welcomed her, but seeing her pale face, he telephoned ahead.

A picturesque castle loomed in the woods. The car stopped. Therese got out and walked to the front door. An elderly and very correct butler opened the door. A much older woman, leaning on an elaborate cane, came over to greet her.

“Therese, my dear.” The woman’s voice was sympathetic, guessing at the cause of her visit.

“They have him,” she said in a slurred voice. Then Therese did something she had never done before in her life. She fainted.

When Therese recovered, she found herself in a large bed in a beautifully furnished room, Baroness Mathilde Dietrich sitting by her side. The story was told dispassionately; then Therese fell sobbing into the older woman’s arms. In time, Therese cried herself to sleep.

Hours later, Therese, the Baroness at her side, waited in the drawing room, praying for word from Müller. Therese had contacted Müller’s grandparents, telling her story about the sick friend. The old couple had promised to pass on her message to Müller if he called home. As the hours slowly passed, Therese’s fear for her husband grew. She had heard nothing from him. For all she knew, he may not have gotten the message. As for her brother, Therese tried not to think about him at all. Every time she did, tears would form in her eyes.

Another day passed without any word. Therese bore up well, though the Baroness watched her worriedly. Therese seemed too calm.

It was mid afternoon of the second day that the telephone rang. The old butler answered it. Then he held out the telephone

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to Therese. Shaking, she timidly took the instrument from his hand.

"Therese."

Relief swept over her. "Dieter, my love. I was so frightened. Are you — ?"

"My darling, I have little time. I just wanted to tell you about that old patient of mine, the one we were both worried about. He is past the danger point and is expected to live."

Therese paled and then flushed as she listened.

"I should be home within a few days. In the meantime, stay with the Baroness. I am certain that she will require your care for a few more days."

"Jawohl, Dieter," she whispered. "Hurry back. Ich liebe dich."

"Ich liebe dich, Therese."

Therese slowly hung up the telephone. Now that it all seemed to be over, she couldn't seem to stop shaking. Therese turned to the Baroness.

"I . . ." Her voice sounded like someone else's. "Dieter is safe. And Wilhelm," her voice broke. "He is free. He is free!"

The Baroness walked over to her and held her shaking body close. Therese burst into tears.

"It is all right, Therese. Cry it out, my child. Cry it out."

Dieter Müller sighed, pushed himself away from the fence, and looked around. The cabin was barely visible. He glanced at the sky; it had started to snow again. It was so quiet, so peaceful. Such a difference from the war-torn world. Here, it was as if the war didn't even exist.

The war.

Müller was lucky. His profession and his family's prestige had kept him away from combat. He did his duty in the operating room and the wards of the hospital. Doctors were spread thin throughout Germany and his services were badly needed. He had even been able to help some of the resistance groups battling the madmen who kept on running this insane war.

Would it never end? How many more had to die? How much more of his country had to be destroyed?

Another glance at the cabin. Wilhelm. He had been extremely fortunate to escape from those monsters. And escape with such

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little damage. Hochstetter had wanted to keep him alive as long as possible. It was ironic that Hochstetter's sadism was what had saved Klink from injuries from which he might never have recovered. The question now was, what would Klink do?

Klink had to leave. Except for a very few who may have not received the message or who may have chosen to stay anyway, his organization was gone.

But there were other resistance groups still fighting. Groups that would welcome his skills. Groups like Colonel Hogan's.

Would Klink leave? Müller found himself praying he would.

* * * * *

Robert Hogan went into the darkened bedroom and stopped as he saw the empty bed. A glance at the window. Wilhelm Klink, in a dark robe, sat by the unshuttered window, looking out at the falling snow. Klink glanced at Hogan for a moment before turning his gaze back to the view.

Hogan walked over to Klink and stood awkwardly, not really certain what to say to him.

"Please, sit down, Colonel Hogan," Klink invited after a moment, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Hogan pulled over a chair and sat. Klink continued to look outside; Hogan waited patiently.

"I had forgotten how beautiful snow is," Klink said quietly after a long silence. "I never expected to see it again." A pause. "Thank you for allowing me to see it again."

Hogan stared at his hands, and then cupping them together, looked up at Klink. "Colonel, there are some things we need to talk about."

Klink nodded. "You have questions."

"Yes," Hogan admitted. "But they can wait."

Klink looked at him with faint puzzlement.

"Sir," Hogan's voice was filled with a respect it had never before held, "you have a decision to make."

Klink waited.

"Sir, Kinch and Schultz examined the records in that place.

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You were not identified by name. No record exists of anyone being told that you were there. And as far as we know, Hochstetter," he nearly spat the name, "told no one in Hammelburg or Berlin that you had been arrested." He paused.

"Go on," said the quiet voice.

"As far as we can tell, your secret is still safe." His unusually somber eyes met Klink's. "Sir, the decision you need to make is, do we go back to Stalag 13, or do we continue on to Switzerland or London?"

Klink's gaze stayed on him for a moment and then returned to the outside. "Colonel Hogan, my organization is gone."

"Yes, sir, it is," Hogan admitted. "But — "

"But Papa Bear would like to continue."

"Sir, I'm not going to say one way or another," Hogan said. "I'm only presenting alternatives. There is still work to be done here, work you could do. But the decision must be yours. We have no idea if Hochstetter told anyone. If he did — "

"Then they will arrest me the minute we return to camp," Klink finished quietly.

How can he be so calm about it? "Yes, sir. And what Hochstetter started," Hogan had to restrain a shudder, "they will finish."

"You might be arrested as well," Klink pointed out in that quiet voice.

"Yes, sir. But they'll just shoot us."

"Not necessarily. You could be facing the same risk as I," Klink continued calmly. "They could be very unpleasant to all of you as well."

"More so to you."

"Yes." A pause. "Are you all willing to take the risk?"

A deep breath. "Yes, sir. We are."

"Perhaps because you don't fully understand it," Klink said. "I had always thought the greatest fear was facing the unknown. Perhaps it is harder to face the fear that is known."

Hogan didn't know what to say.

"I will think about it, Colonel Hogan," Klink said in that same quiet voice.

Hogan stood. He had been dismissed.

Scene Two

– Thirteen –

Morning. The smell of LeBeau's cooking — hot coffee, powdered eggs and sausages — filled the small cabin. He'd even managed to bake some rolls on the stove.

Müller took a cup of coffee from Newkirk and turned. The cup nearly fell to the floor. "Wilhelm!"

They all turned to stare at the door to the bedroom. Klink, still unshaven but dressed in a dark blue sweater and dark pants, stood there, watching them.

"You shouldn't be — " began Müller.

"Dieter, please, go." The voice was quiet, but the eyes were intense as they looked at Müller. "Now, bitte."

Shaking, Müller put the cup on the table and walked closer to Klink. "Wilhelm." Müller's voice was tight with emotion.

"This does not concern you, Dieter," Klink continued, his tone implacable. "Please go." A pause and his expression softened. "We will say goodbye later. Now go."

Müller gazed at Klink for a long moment and then nodded. He picked up his coat; Carter helped him put it on. Another glance at Klink, then a deep breath, and he nodded goodbye to the others. Cold air swept into the room as Müller left the cabin.

Klink's gaze took them all in — LeBeau at the stove, a spatula in his hand; Carter still at the door he had closed; Newkirk holding the pot of coffee; Kinchloe nursing a cup at the far window; Schultz sitting at the table, a fork with sausage on it in his hand; and Hogan watching him closely from the table. All of them seemed unsure how to react to his presence. It was rather embarrassing; he had to break the mood.

"Sergeant Schultz!" A nearly normal Klink voice.

Startled, Schultz dropped his fork; it clattered noisily to the table. "Jawohl, Herr Kommandant!"

"You disobeyed orders," Klink said conversationally. "You should be in Switzerland."

Schultz's face fell. "Jawohl, Herr Kommandant."

"I made a grave mistake with you, Sergeant Schultz."

Scene Two

Schultz visibly flinched in the face of his superior's apparent displeasure.

Klink moved closer to him, his voice dropping. "I underestimated you, my friend." Schultz's face lit up. "It is a mistake I do not intend to repeat."

Klink's hand rested briefly on Schultz's shoulder as the mood in the cabin visibly lightened. But Klink's expression as he looked at Hogan was somber. "Colonel Hogan."

Hogan stood, facing him.

"Are you and your men still willing to return to camp?"

Hogan glanced at his men, reading their expressions. "Yes, sir," he finally answered as they nodded acceptance.

"Please," Klink said, "don't underestimate the danger. My fate may be yours as well."

A deep breath. "Yes, sir, we know." His eyes met Klink's. "We still want to try."

A ghost of a smile. "By their own follies they perished, the fools,'"¹⁶ Klink quoted.

"What?"

"Homer," Klink said. "All right, Colonel Hogan. How do you propose to explain our absence from camp?"

"Well," Hogan began, "we were released to undergo a special interrogation."

"By whom?"

"Major Teppel of Abwehr," Hogan explained. "He's really —"

A trace of a smile on Klink's face. "I know about Major Teppel. And does he now know about me?"

"Yes, sir," Hogan said soberly. "He was the one who found the place where Hochstetter was holding you."

Klink nodded. "A problem, but a minor one. What about my absence?"

"Hochstetter provided you with an excuse," Hogan said.

"Hochstetter is dead," Klink said bluntly. "How do I explain my being alive?"

Hogan couldn't meet his eyes. "I haven't gotten that far."

The voice became steely cold. "I cannot afford to improvise,

¹⁶ Homer: *The Odyssey*

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Colonel. Not now. We need an airtight story to explain the past few days. Unless you can provide one, we leave.”

Hogan stayed silent, unable to respond.

Klink’s eyes swept the group of Allied soldiers. They each bravely, if nervously, met his glance.

Klink turned to Schultz. “Schultz, how long since you made the call? Exactly.”

Schultz looked at his watch. “Seventy hours, almost seventy-one hours.”

Klink glanced once again at Hogan and the others. They were watching him silently, waiting for his decision.

Klink went over to the portable telephone on the highboy and picked up the receiver. He dialed a number, waited thirty seconds and hung up. He repeated the entire process as Hogan and the others watched curiously. And one more time, he dialed. This time, he began speaking in a language none of them understood.

Hogan glanced at Schultz.

Schultz shrugged. “It is combination of old Latin and Greek. I do not know it.”

“Latin!” from LeBeau.

“And Greek?” from Carter.

The conversation went on for about ten minutes as the others watched and listened in puzzlement, puzzlement colored by a growing admiration.

Klink finally hung up and looked at Hogan. “Except for Schultz, he is the last of my group who should be in Germany. He had orders to wait for seventy-two hours.”

“In case you got free and needed help?”

Klink nodded. “He will try to arrange a plausible story, complete with documentation. But you must all still convince me you can pull it off. Understood?”

Hogan nodded. “It’s your show, Colonel. All the way.”

Klink managed a faint smile. “As long as we all understand that, Colonel Hogan.”

Klink’s hand strayed to the bandage around his right wrist. He rubbed it absently and then stopped, appearing to notice the bandage for the first time.

“Would you like me to change the bandage, Herr

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Kommandant?" Schultz asked.

Klink shook his head. "No, not yet. But this," he held up his wrist, "will be a little difficult to explain."

Klink went over to the counter, picked up a cup and walked over to where Newkirk stood. Newkirk poured him a cup of coffee. "Thank you, Corporal." Then . . . "Sergeant Schultz!" The voice they all knew so well. "You are a great big clumsy idiot!"

Schultz stood. "Jawohl, Herr Kommandant!" The Schultz they had always known. Then he looked confused. "Uh, what did I do?"

Klink held up his bandaged wrist. "Slammed a door on my wrist, you idiot! You could have broken it!" His voice dropped to the quiet tone they were beginning to know. "We will work out the details later." He took a sip of the coffee. "Finish your breakfast, Schultz."

"Would you like something to eat, mon Colonel?" LeBeau asked.

"No, thank you, Corporal LeBeau. I am afraid that I am still not hungry."

Klink walked over to the window and gazed out at the snow-covered woods. Hogan walked over to him.

"And where is Sergeant Baker?" Klink asked.

Not surprised that Klink knew about Baker, Hogan answered, "He's supposed to wrap things up if we don't return by tomorrow night."

Klink nodded and then said quietly, "I suppose you would like some questions answered now, Colonel Hogan."

"Yes, sir. If you don't mind."

A tiny smile. "Please, Colonel Hogan. I am not used to all this solicitude."

A smile in return. "You're going to take some getting used to."

"Not really," Klink said, rubbing his tired eyes. "If we go back to camp, things will be pretty much as they were before. I will once again be Kommandant Klink."

"Down to every detail?"

Klink's hand dropped to his side. "Yes. Kommandant Klink needs an alibi, Colonel Hogan. We can try to give him one. We cannot give him a new personality at the same time." He looked at Hogan. "Ask your questions, Colonel Hogan."

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Hogan looked at the man he had once despised and ridiculed, and the hero he had always admired. "Why didn't you tell me?!" His voice was more plaintive than he realized. But he knew that he was asking the question on two levels.

Klink smiled faintly and answered the public question. The more private one he would face later. "You did not need to know."

"I didn't . . . !" Hogan's voice rose. "You run one of the biggest operations in Germany under my nose and I didn't need to know?!"

Klink looked at him curiously. "No, you did not. If I thought it was necessary for you to know, I would have told you in the beginning. Besides, you have been managing very well by yourselves."

"Yes. But — "

"Colonel Hogan, how large do you think my operation was?"

"Uh, I don't know. A couple of hundred?"

"There were some two thousand men and women," Klink said to Hogan's surprise, "directly involved. With ties to another 30 or 40 smaller groups. I really did not need another group to worry about. Especially a group that knew who I was."

"But you knew about us!" Hogan objected.

"Of course, I knew about you," Klink said with amusement. "You would not even exist without my approval."

"Wait a minute," Hogan protested. "Our group was cleared through London."

"Who cleared it with me," Klink said. "Come now, Colonel Hogan. London could hardly approve a resistance group operating from my camp without asking my permission first." He took a sip of his coffee. "I will admit I was surprised when I discovered what you were up to; I was expecting a mass escape."

"Uh, when?"

"When Schultz found the tunnels."

"He *found* the tunnels?"

"Of course," Klink said. "When they were first started. We let them go on out of curiosity. Then London notified me of your plans." His eyes met Hogan's. "Your impudence surprised me, Colonel. I did not realize how little you thought of Kommandant Klink until then," he said bluntly. "I will admit to being a little

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insulted when I found out. But then I saw how I could turn it to my advantage. With you around, I did not have to worry about protecting Kommandant Klink. You would do that for me. To protect yourselves.”

“We were had,” Hogan stated.

“Yes, Colonel Hogan.” A tiny smile. “You were.” His smile grew at Hogan’s obvious chagrin. “Don’t worry, Colonel Hogan. You were not the first. Or the last.”

“Yeah, well . . . ” Hogan was at an uncharacteristic loss for words.

Klink smiled briefly.

Hogan changed the subject. “What went wrong this time?” He regretted the question as Klink’s expression changed. “Stupid question. You don’t have to answer that.”

“What happened was I let myself be talked into giving someone more authority than he could handle,” Klink said grimly.

“This guy, Pflueger.”

Klink nodded. “For years, he performed well. Then he was given increasingly greater responsibilities. First, small things went wrong. Then larger things. I secretly attended one of his meetings, unfortunately unmasked, to see for myself. And one of my deputies, thinking it would help him, stupidly pointed me out as the Stage. Pflueger’s mental condition was not good; he was too frightened and oddly too cocky. So I ordered him out of the country.”

“And he was caught.”

Klink nodded. “The people who remained with him were too inexperienced; they obviously tried to find him and waited too long before giving the warning.”

“By then, they had already picked you up,” Hogan said quietly.

A nod. “Yes. I underestimated Hochstetter; I didn’t think he could plan so well. So I didn’t suspect anything was wrong until it was too late.”

“And Pflueger?”

“I saw him. They wanted information and quickly.” Klink’s eyes were haunted by the memory. “They were brutal and ugly. He held out longer than I would have guessed.”

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“But he did break and betrayed you.”

“He paid, Colonel Hogan. With his life.” He looked at Hogan. “They can break anyone, given time. They would have broken me,” he admitted calmly.

“Not from what I saw,” Hogan said quietly.

“And what did you see, Colonel Hogan?”

“A man on his knees, defying his torturers,” Hogan said. “Thinking of others besides himself.”

“I wasn’t thinking of you, Colonel Hogan,” Klink said bluntly. “I was thinking of myself. At that point, I was trying to find a way to die.”

Hogan looked as shaken as the others as Klink’s eyes went back to the window.

“If they put any of you on that rack, I would be resting, regaining some of my strength. By then, I could not let that happen. I thought your attack had failed and, at that point, it was only a matter of time before Hochstetter won. But I hoped that the weaker I became, then, maybe, the closer death was. I was trying to find a way to make Hochstetter angry enough to lash out at me. I was praying that the angrier Hochstetter became, the more likely it was that he would make a mistake. Perhaps hit me hard enough to cause internal damage. Or accidentally increase the voltage to the point where it might trigger a heart attack. Anything.” He shook his head. “No, Colonel Hogan, I was being very selfish at that point.”

“And what are you now?” Hogan asked softly.

Klink sipped his coffee before answering. “I like to finish what I start, Colonel. I would like to see the war end here, where everything started. Not in Switzerland or London.”

“Even if it means torture again?”

“I am counting on you to protect me.” A tiny smile which Hogan had trouble returning.

After a short silence, Klink’s hand strayed to his eyes again. “I am sorry, Colonel. But I’m still very tired.” His hand dropped. “I am going to get some sleep. But,” his eyes met Hogan’s, “I must be awakened in exactly,” he pulled his watch from his pocket and checked it, “one hour. If I do not call back on time, my contact will leave.”

Hogan nodded and checked his own watch.

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Klink went back to the bedroom and closed the door.

After Klink left the room, the others let out sighs of relief.

"He's got a lot of guts," Kinch said quietly.

"Yeah, a lot more than I've got," from Newkirk. He looked at Hogan. "Colonel, are we doing the right thing?"

"It was his decision."

"But are we making him do it?" Newkirk persisted.

"You could not make him do anything he did not want to," Schultz said softly.

"What about you, Schultz?" LeBeau asked. "What do you think he should do?"

"Go to Switzerland," Schultz said firmly. "But he will not. I knew that from the moment he made the call. If there is any way that this will work, he will take it. It has always been that way. It is what made him so successful and why others were so willing to follow. It is also why the Nazis hate him so much."

"The question still remains," Hogan said quietly. "Are the rest of you certain you want to go through with this?"

"I thought we hashed this out last night, Colonel," Kinch said.

"I just want to make certain," Hogan said. "He's right. This time, we're all in it together. If we slip up anywhere along the line, they get us. If we're lucky, they'll shoot us. If not, what happened to him, will happen to us."

"We know, mon Colonel," LeBeau said soberly. "We, I, still want to try."

"So do I," affirmed Kinch.

"And me," from Carter.

"Why not?" Newkirk managed a small smile. "I'm just as crazy as the rest of you."

"Schultz?" Hogan asked him.

"I swore to follow him no matter what, Colonel Hogan," Schultz said solemnly. "If he goes back, I go back. Besides, what would the rest of you do without me?"

Hogan smiled. "I don't even want to think about it." He glanced around the cabin. "We'll probably be leaving soon. Let's get this place cleaned up."

Groans from his men as they complied with his order.

An hour later, Hogan walked into the bedroom. To his

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surprise, Klink was at the dresser, wiping his clean-shaven chin with a towel. Klink dropped the towel on the dresser and checked his face in the mirror. He seemed pleased.

“No bruises,” he said to Hogan. “That might have been awkward.”

“Somehow, I think you’d think of something.”

A faint smile and Klink walked away from the dresser.

Hogan stopped him before he opened the door. “Colonel, are you sure you want to go through with it?”

“Yes, I am,” Klink said calmly. “But if any of you have doubts, tell me now.”

“Sir, the only doubts we have — are we being fair to you?”

“Do not worry about me, Colonel Hogan. Remember the Stage is superhumanly fearless, confident and all those other disgustingly heroic things. He never fails.” Klink smiled as he opened the door.

True, Hogan thought bleakly. But what about Wilhelm Klink?

The second telephone call was even more perplexing than the first. Klink was writing a series of letters and numbers on a sheet of paper as he talked in that incomprehensible tongue.

Finally he spoke in German. “Danke, my friend. Have a safe journey. God willing we will meet later. Auf wiedersehen.”

Klink hung up the telephone, resting his hand on it for a moment. Then with a sigh, he straightened. “The Stage is now officially out of business,” he said with some sadness. “Eleven years, gone.” He shook his head. “I really didn’t think it would end like this. But then,” he considered briefly, “I really didn’t think it would last so long either.”

He went back to the table, taking the paper with him.

“Sergeant Carter, the books on the first shelf of the bookcase, bring them here, please.”

“These?” Carter picked up the books as Klink nodded.

Hogan glanced at them as Klink sat. They were all in languages he couldn’t read.

Klink opened the books, matching certain pages against his list, then writing more down, again in languages none of them could read. After he was finished, Carter replaced the books on the shelf. Klink sat back, reading silently for a few minutes

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while the others waited patiently.

Finally Klink looked at Hogan. "It may be possible. My friend has done an excellent job organizing this. It remains only for us to make it work."

Hogan glanced at the scrawls on the paper. "I'll take your word for it."

Klink smiled. "It is ancient Greek and Latin. There are few in Germany who could begin to read it. As far as I know, no one in the Gestapo has ever mastered the art."

Hogan was more than impressed. "Your brainstorm?"

Klink shook his head. "My friend's. It took years before I learned it to the point where I could use it. It is pretty much foolproof."

"It's got me fooled," mumbled Newkirk as the others grinned.

Klink stood. "We leave in half an hour."

Half an hour later, Klink came out of the bedroom, carrying a spare uniform. Schultz took it from him.

"You look better," Hogan said, appraising him.

A small smile. "I am certain I smell much better. Though it will take another shower or two before I really feel clean again. And I suspect that Schultz will have to search me thoroughly for unwanted guests."

Hogan nodded soberly, barely restraining a shudder as he remembered Klink's appearance in that cell. For a man who had always been careful about his personal hygiene, the stink and dirt of the cell, the lack of sanitary facilities, must have been another battle that Klink had to fight.

"Shall we go?" Klink asked.

Hogan nodded and opened the door. The others filed out silently.

Klink was the last one out. A glance around the cabin. Everything had been put away. Would he ever be back again?

A sigh and he closed the door behind him.

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– Fourteen –

Hogan sat in the front seat of the car between Klink and Schultz as Schultz drove them through snow covered country; he still had no idea what Klink was up to. Finally he couldn't stand the suspense. "Where are we going?"

"About two hundred kilometers into the country to an SS installation."

"What!"

A faint smile. "An SS installation manned by the resistance, Colonel."

"Do they know who we are?"

"Not directly. The password will identify us."

"Okay, why are we going there?"

"They will 'interrogate' you and your men; supposedly they will have been doing that ever since you left the camp. There will be transcripts of questions asked and answers given to prove where you have been."

"They're making it all up?"

"No, Colonel. You will."

"Huh?!"

"It will be a very full twenty-four hours, Colonel. Very full."

"It would have been easier going to Switzerland," murmured Hogan.

Klink just smiled.

Finally, the car pulled up in front of a barricade, a barricade guarded by an alert, and armed, SS trooper.

"Halt!!" ordered the guard.

Schultz stopped the car and waited as another guard came over to the car window.

"Password," said the emotionless guard.

"Mephistopheles," Klink said in an equally toneless voice.

The guard nodded once. "Take the left road until the end. Do not stop for any reason. If the car has a problem, remain inside until someone comes. If you leave the car or the road, you will

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die. Is that understood?”

Klink nodded.

The guard stepped away from the car, and the barricade opened. Schultz drove through the gate, taking the left fork.

As they drove, Klink turned to the others. “Once we arrive, do not speak to anyone until I give you leave to do so. I must warn you that these people can be very ruthless. They will try to frighten and intimidate you. If they succeed, we will not be returning to camp. Is that understood?”

“Yes, sirs” echoed in the car.

Hogan’s eyes met Klink’s for a moment. There was an unexpected hardness in Klink’s eyes that softened into a faint smile. Hogan looked away, but he found himself wondering just what they were getting into.

After a few minutes, the car stopped before a forbidding-looking building. They were immediately surrounded by SS troops. The car doors were yanked open, and Hogan and the others were pulled out of the car. None too gently, they were searched for weapons and then pushed toward the building. It was dim inside, and grim. Prodded by the guards, they were led down a dank corridor and into a windowless room. They found themselves pushed into chairs around a large table. Hogan looked at his men. They were all somber, almost too somber. Schultz looked visibly uncertain, nearly frightened. Only Klink seemed unconcerned.

An SS captain stepped into the room. Stepped? Swagged into the room. And he smiled at them.

“So, what do we have here?” he asked with a mocking smile on his face. His eyes swept their faces and clothes. “Such a strange collection of uniforms.” He walked around them, the baton in his hand hitting his palm sharply. “American, British, French, even German.” A smile. “How very strange.”

The stick in his hand swooped down and struck the table in front of LeBeau. The small Frenchman jumped reflexively and then felt an iron grip on his shoulder.

“Did that startle you, Monsieur? I’m afraid I do not know your name, Monsieur?”

LeBeau glanced at Klink who shook his head almost imperceptibly. Trying to ignore the increasingly harder grip on

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his shoulder, LeBeau stared straight ahead.

The captain smiled for a moment, his hand leaving LeBeau's shoulder. He turned to Carter. "What about you, soldier? You are an American, are you not?"

Carter swallowed hard but resolutely kept his eyes on the table.

"I see. You have no tongue either." He turned to Schultz. "Do you have a tongue, Sergeant?"

A small tick in Schultz's eye betrayed his anxiety.

"Your name, Sergeant!" roared the captain, the stick striking the table beside Schultz.

Schultz flinched and sweat broke out on his brow, but he stayed silent.

The captain moved up beside Hogan. "An American colonel." His hand reached inside the holster and pulled out his pistol.

Hogan found himself sweating as the gun was placed against his temple.

"Your name, Colonel."

Hogan stayed silent. To his astonishment, he could hear the weapon being cocked.

"Five seconds, Colonel."

Hogan's eyes found Klink's, asking none too politely what the hell was going on? Klink looked at him impassively. Hogan forced himself to relax, and forced himself to look up at the captain with unafraid eyes.

The captain stepped away from Hogan and holstered his gun. He turned away for a moment and then swung around to Klink. "Mephistopheles."

"Beatrice," Klink responded.

The captain nodded once and left the room.

Hogan could see his men bursting to ask what was going on. They looked at Klink who looked back with that same impassive gaze. Then they looked at Hogan, Hogan who shrugged and relaxed into his chair.

After a couple of minutes, an SS colonel came in, looking at them with interest. Then he turned to Klink. "'Here must all distrust be left behind; all cowardice ended.'"¹⁷

¹⁷ Dante Alighieri: *The Divine Comedy*

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“Necessity brings me here, not pleasure,” Klink paraphrased.

The colonel smiled briefly. “I apologize for the rough welcome, gentlemen, but we have our reasons. In this room, we can talk freely. Your real names, rank and current posting, please.”

Hogan glanced at Klink who nodded. “Colonel Robert Hogan, United States Army Air Corps. Currently a prisoner at Stalag Luft 13.”

The others also introduced themselves. Only Klink’s name seemed to surprise the colonel.

“Thank you. If you will wait a few more minutes, gentlemen.” With that he left the room.

He returned five minutes later and sat down at the table. A woman wearing a sergeant’s uniform and carrying a notepad also entered; she stayed unobtrusively near the door.

“I am Colonel Schiller. And you, Colonel Hogan, are also known as Papa Bear,” the colonel said to Hogan’s surprise. He turned to Klink. “You are the surprise, Kommandant Klink. While Papa Bear is known to me, your presence is unexpected. Your reputation, Kommandant — ”

“Remains my own,” Klink said quietly.

Schiller nodded. “Given that reputation, Kommandant, if you had given any other password save ‘Beatrice’, I might have killed you without a word.”

“I know,” Klink acknowledged.

“What do you need from us, Kommandant?” Schiller said.

“An alibi,” Klink said soberly. “These men were released from Stalag 13 for special interrogation by Major Hans Teppel of Abwehr four days ago.”

“I know of Teppel,” Schiller said. “But he does not know us. Can he be trusted?”

“Yes,” said Hogan. “He’ll do what I say.”

“Good. What about you, Kommandant?”

“My situation is more complicated,” Klink said. “I was taken by Major Wolfgang Hochstetter of the Gestapo, supposedly to interrogate a special prisoner. I can provide a story to account for a few hours. But I must have been brought here or ordered here by a still living Hochstetter, and I must have remained here until Hogan and the others arrived the next day.”

“I take it that Hochstetter is no longer alive.”

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“Nor any of his men.”

“The Gestapo will not like that,” Schiller said dryly. He thought a moment. “I would prefer that a guard who is now conveniently dead be the one who brought you here. Guards are anonymous; no one notices who they are or what they look like.”

“That won’t prove that he had nothing to do with Hochstetter’s death,” Hogan objected.

“No, it will not. But I will not agree to do more.” Schiller looked at Klink. “The rest will depend on you.”

Klink nodded. “Agreed.”

Schiller turned to Hogan. “As for you and your men, Colonel, I warn you that the interrogation you will be subjected to will be very real, very demanding, and very exhausting. It may be the most difficult thing that any of you have ever done in your lives. Are you certain you want to do this?”

Hogan nodded. “We’re sure.”

Schiller smiled without humor and turned to Klink. “Your role in this will be as an observer?”

Klink nodded. “Yes. I will also object strongly and uselessly against the interrogation, and be overruled.”

“The reason?”

“The numerous acts of sabotage around Stalag 13,” Klink said. “You are not convinced that Hogan and his men know nothing about them.”

“I see.” The colonel fell silent for a few minutes. “Yes, it would work. Fraulein Braun, you will need to get all the material together. I assume, Kommandant, that whether this play goes beyond these walls will be your decision.”

Klink nodded. “If I am not convinced that the interrogations and the rest of the alibis are faultless, we will leave. There is too much at stake for any mistakes.”

“I agree.” Schiller looked at them all. “I will have food and drink sent in for you.” His eyes sparkled with an odd humor. “I am afraid that for you Allied soldiers, it will be the last meal you will have until you are ready to leave. Colonel Hogan, once we start the interrogations of your men, we will not interrupt them for any reason. You will not be allowed to see them or speak to them until it is over.”

Hogan wasn’t too happy. “Is that necessary?”

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Schiller nodded. "Yes. We have discovered to our regret that unless the facade of a real interrogation is maintained completely, people do not take it seriously. Some have died because of that mistake. You are also asking us to alibi you for several days. You and your men must have the appearance of being interrogated for days on end. Time must become immaterial to you so you will not have to account for it. If you are separated and not allowed to speak to each other, you will not have to think up elaborate stories to account for those days. There are some details that we will need to work out with you, Colonel Hogan, so your interrogation will not be as extensive. And as an officer you will be shown a courtesy that does not extend to your men. I know you are not happy with this, but there is no choice. I promise you that your men will not be injured, but it will be an exhausting ordeal for them mentally and physically."

"You can still change your mind, Colonel," Klink said quietly. "Any of you can."

Hogan looked at his men. He could tell that they weren't looking forward to what was going to happen. He could see that it scared them. But there was determination in their eyes as well, and one by one they nodded their agreement. Hogan looked at Schiller. "We go on."

Schiller nodded and stood. "All right, Colonel. We begin in one hour."

All too soon for Hogan and his men, it began. When Schiller and the captain returned, it was in character, ready to begin the interrogations. Klink slipped into his familiar Kommandant role, objecting loudly and uselessly. Hogan found himself objecting as well, and was even more rudely ignored. Hogan's men, after exchanging uneasy glances with Hogan, left with the captain.

Schiller turned to the three remaining men. "Follow me, please."

Schiller led the way deeper into the fortress-like building to a communications room. There he turned to Hogan. "We are placing a call to Teppel. Go through your normal identification procedures. Then introduce me and I will take over."

Hogan nodded and took the telephone from Schiller.

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Teppel was relieved and more than surprised to hear Hogan's voice; guiltily, he realized that he'd expected Hogan to fail. Teppel's surprise turned to astonishment as Hogan handed the telephone to Schiller.

Hogan listened for a moment and turned to Klink. "Who are these guys?"

Klink smiled tiredly. "Professional soldiers, Colonel. In the First Division, the Second and so on."

"Huh?"

"They each hold several identity papers with real names and histories. If need be, there are people who will vouch for them."

"So when the stories are checked, they will be believed."

Klink nodded.

"Nice. Your idea?"

"Partly. But I had nothing to do with coordinating it."

"Your friend?"

"No. He was just one of the sponsors. I don't know who runs it."

"But what if you need them again?"

"Then it will be my misfortune. I have no idea how to contact them."

"You have burned all your bridges, haven't you?"

"Hochstetter did that for me, Colonel," Klink said quietly. "In a way, he accomplished what he set out to do. Even if he didn't know it, he did destroy the Stage, quite completely."

Schiller came over. "One of my men will see Teppel tomorrow to go over the final story. He will not be a problem, but I have suggested that he leave Berlin for a few days after he is asked to verify your story." A quick smile. "For security."

Klink nodded. "A reasonable precaution."

Schiller's smile was grimmer as he turned to Hogan. "Colonel Hogan, is there anyone else who should know of this?"

Hogan thought a moment and then shook his head. "If we return to camp by tomorrow night, no."

"Good. The less contact we have with outsiders, the safer it is. Now, Colonel," a humorless smile, "if you are ready . . ."

Schiller opened the door. A couple of formidable-looking guards were waiting in the corridor.

Hogan looked at them and glanced at Klink. There was a

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regretful look in Klink's eyes; he more than anyone knew how difficult the ordeal would be. "Ready," Hogan said evenly. And suddenly grinned with all of the cockiness that used to infuriate Kommandant Klink. The grin was still on his face as he left the room.

Schiller's surprise was evident as he turned to Klink, who smiled faintly. "Courage? Or foolhardiness?" Schiller demanded.

"Both," Klink said softly.

Schiller nodded curtly and gestured. "This way, gentlemen."

It went on for nearly twenty-four hours. Nearly twenty-four hours of ceaseless questioning for Hogan and his men. Klink studied the transcripts of the interrogations as he waited. Studied them for any weaknesses, any hint that they were less than they seemed. But there were no weaknesses. The questions were hard, unrelenting, as were the questioners. The answers were, after some initial bravado-like insolence on the part of Hogan and his men, a litany of name, rank and serial number. A very tiring litany of name, rank and serial number.

Klink nodded unseen; Fraulein Braun had taken the initial questions and answers and produced pages of transcripts. Pages simulating long, hard days of interrogation. Pages that would be believed.

Klink's own story had been worked out with Schiller. It wasn't as airtight as Hogan's, but it couldn't be. There were no witnesses to account for Klink's time with Hochstetter. At least none that they knew of. Schiller would give Klink an alibi for most of the time he'd been gone. But there were six hours unaccounted for. And unless Hochstetter had contacted anyone after that six-hour period, it left Klink as the last person alive to see or speak to Hochstetter.

Klink smiled grimly as he reviewed his story yet again. Hogan would be less than pleased when he heard that! But it cut down on the number of lies the others would have to tell. And cut down on the risk for Hogan and his men. Yes, Klink thought with some satisfaction, it was more fitting this way.

He stood and walked over to the window. Below the window in the inner courtyard, a contingent of real SS troops were exercising.

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It would all come down to whether they believed his stories yet again. Or had he finally come up with one tale too many? A tale that at best would get him killed.

But now the questioning was over, and it was time to return to camp. Klink walked over to the bed and began dressing.

There was a perfunctory knock on the door; Schiller entered. And stopped. Klink was putting his uniform on for the first time since his arrival. Schiller's eyes skimmed over the splotchy bruises still on Klink's abdomen and chest as he closed the door.

"Hochstetter?" Schiller asked quietly.

Klink nodded, slipping the shirt on over the bruises.

"You will not be able to explain those away," Schiller said.

"I know."

"Does Hogan?"

Klink nodded. "We have talked about it." His eyes met Schiller's. "What about you and your men?"

A thin smile. "We will be conveniently leaving for the Russian front an hour after you leave. Or rather our names will be leaving." Humor glinted in his eyes for a moment. "And I will personally vouch for the veracity of Colonel Schiller and his men, though, of course, I was not here during the time you claim to be our guests."

"Elaborate, and simple," Klink said.

Schiller nodded. "But it is also too dangerous for us to continue much longer. Before we received the call from your sponsor, we were discussing the dissolution of the installation."

"Will you dissolve it?"

"We think so. Especially if many questions are asked regarding your stay. Especially since I believe I know who you are."

A flat, "You do?"

Schiller smiled briefly. "Our contact with a certain resistance group has disappeared."

Klink turned away and picked up his jacket. "I see."

Schiller was at his side. "If I may?"

He took the jacket from Klink and held it out. Klink slipped his arms into the jacket. Schiller straightened it and watched as Klink buttoned the jacket.

"They know about Hochstetter," Schiller said quietly. "They

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may be waiting for you when you return to Stalag 13.”

“I know.”

“Forgive me, but is this wise? You have done enough, suffered enough, for Germany. Why not leave?”

“It is not yet over,” Klink murmured.

“It can be. If they choose not to believe you, if they strip that uniform off you, it will be over. And whatever Hochstetter did to you will be nothing compared to what they will do to you.”

Klink stayed silent.

Schiller gazed at him for a long moment before walking over to the window. “Your sponsor has left.”

“I know.”

“You will not be able to contact us again.”

“Even they would not believe the same lie twice.”

“No.” Schiller turned back to Klink. “You were one of the first to realize the truth and to fight them.” He held out his hand. “I have long wanted to meet you, to tell you . . . ” He grasped Klink’s hand firmly. “I am honored that you trust us to help you. I will not betray that trust.”

“Danke, Herr Oberst.”

Schiller tightly held Klink’s hand. “Auf wiedersehn. And good luck . . . Stage.”

“To both of us. Auf wiedersehn.”

Schiller nodded and stepped away from Klink. He strode to the door and opened it. “The Kommandant is ready,” he told the guard waiting outside the room. “Take him down to the others.” He turned back to Klink. “Kommandant.” He bowed as his heels clicked together.

“Colonel.” Klink picked up his overcoat and followed the guard out.

Dawn was just breaking when they left the building. Schultz drove Hogan and Klink in the car. The others followed in a truck along with some of the SS men.

Klink stayed silent throughout most of the long drive back to Stalag 13. Hogan had given up trying to make small talk and napped as best he could.

Finally they were nearly at Stalag 13.

An unusually tense Hogan turned to the silent man next to

Scene Two

him. "There's still time to pull out," he said quietly.

The impassive man shook his head soberly. "We go on."

"Aren't you nervous, scared, something?!" Hogan exploded irritably.

The same impassive voice. "What would you have me do, Colonel Hogan?"

"I don't know!" Hogan almost yelled. "Look at me!" He held out his hand. "I'm shaking."

Klink glanced at him and looked away. "You should be. You have just undergone four days of intensive interrogation. No one will think it strange that you are tired or tense or scared. But," his eyes went to Hogan, "what has Kommandant Klink been doing for those days? Overseeing the interrogation, resting and becoming rather bored by the whole thing. That is what he has been doing." Klink's eyes went back to the passing countryside.

Hogan stared at his profile. Hogan suddenly realized how utterly lonely Klink had to be. He had been admiring the Stage's coolness and audacity, his courage under torture and in action. What must it be like to always live a lie, to always live a life not your own, with never a respite. And now Klink was forced to continue living it. As if the torture had not happened.

But it had happened. Klink had gotten precious little sleep over the last five days. His bruises were still visible; he must still ache where he had been beaten or kicked. The bandaged right wrist was still infected, the torn flesh healing slowly. Could he still feel the current that had ripped through him so mercilessly? Klink's screams still echoed in Hogan's dreams. What were they doing in Klink's?

The camp came into view.

Klink took a deep breath and turned to Hogan. "Well, Colonel Hogan, as Shakespeare said, 'The play's the thing'¹⁸. May our play have a long run." He held out his hand.

Soberly, Hogan took it. "Amen to that."

Their hands parted.

As Hogan watched, the face of the man next to him changed ever so slightly.

¹⁸ W. Shakespeare: *Hamlet*

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The car stopped.

And Kommandant Wilhelm Klink stepped out of the car as Sergeant Schultz opened the door. Klink stormed up the stairs to his office, complaining loudly and bitterly as he did so.

Hogan stared after Klink for a long moment before sighing. "Well, here goes nothing."

Then he got out of the car.

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– Fifteen –

Hogan ambled around the camp aimlessly. It had been a week he would not soon forget. Gestapo, General Burkhalter, SS, everyone and anyone had descended on the camp not long after they returned to Stalag 13 in the late afternoon. Before their visitors, along with a contingent of SS troops, arrived, Hogan had managed to talk to Captains Martin, Mitchell and Warren. Mainly to warn them that they would be receiving some nasty visitors very shortly. Mainly to reassure them that everything would be fine. The three captains looked skeptical at that, but were still reassured that the camp itself would be safe. Then Hogan briefed Baker about what had happened, and warned him that there were still questions they would all have to answer. As he briefed his radioman, the rest of his men installed bugs in the cooler. Hogan wanted Baker listening to the questioning in case something went wrong. But nothing had.

Hogan glanced at his men as they played volleyball in the compound. Hochstetter's death had made the Gestapo very unhappy. More, it made them very persistent. There had been hours upon hours of questions, extending far into the night, broken only for snatches of rest and food. But despite that, no one had made any mistakes. That in itself was pretty remarkable. With the constant retelling of their stories, it was almost inevitable that someone would make a mistake. But no one did. They were all too aware of the consequences if they did. Hogan had never been prouder of his men, never been prouder that they were willing to risk their lives and more.

Or did they realize what they were risking?

Perhaps Klink was right. None of them had ever been beaten or tortured. Yes, they could imagine it. Now, they had even seen it. But could anyone who had not experienced it know what it truly meant? Rarely were any of them even slightly hurt on any of their missions.

Unlike the man who was briskly crossing the compound. He knew what it was like to be hurt, beaten and tortured all too

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well. And he had been willing to risk it yet again.

Hogan had watched, and listened, as Wilhelm Klink put on the performance of his life. Klink had played it with the right mix of fear, bravado, cunning, stupidity, insolence and obsequiousness.

Hogan had been extremely worried when their inquisitors focused their attention on Kommandant Klink — the last man, as far as anyone knew, to see Hochstetter alive. Hogan and his men had been cleared of any involvement in Hochstetter's death, thanks to the alibi arranged by Schiller and his people. But Klink had not yet been cleared.

Hogan had listened with mingled relief and dismay to the exchange between Burkhalter and the Gestapo. Burkhalter, unwilling to watch the Gestapo zero in on his subordinate, was leaving. Leaving after exacting a promise from the Gestapo. More anxious about disrupting the workings of the camp and undermining Klink's authority than about Hochstetter's death, Burkhalter had ensured that whatever happened between Klink and the Gestapo would, if Klink was cleared, stay between them. That at least saved Klink from outright physical abuse. But there were other methods that the Gestapo could use. And they did.

Hogan knew that Klink had gotten very little rest during their questioning; Burkhalter had seen to that. And the Gestapo knew it as well. Hogan had found himself wincing as he heard, again, Klink's voice drone the explanation of the time he supposedly spent with Hochstetter. Every time Klink finished, the Gestapo man, a Major Webber, would stay silent for a few minutes, his eyes on the stiffly-at-attention Klink. Then Webber would say, as he had a dozen times before, in a polite, bored voice, "Danke, Kommandant. But I am still unclear about what happened. So, if you don't mind, from the beginning . . ." And Klink would start again, his voice getting progressively weaker and hoarser.

As the interrogation continued, Hogan could almost physically feel Klink's exhaustion and pain — the agonized strain of his muscles, still weak and bruised from Hochstetter's ministrations, as Klink stood erect and stiff, his throat dry, parched, aching as he talked, denied water by his questioners, the humiliations in being forced to ask, to beg, his tormentors for water, rest, relief. No beatings, no electric current this time, but

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the torture was still very real. If the questioning had been difficult for Hogan and his men, it had been sheer agony for Klink.

As Klink's ordeal extended into another night, Hogan had begun berating himself for even daring to suggest that Klink return to the camp. More, he had to fight himself, to resist the urge to take his men and forcibly end Klink's ordeal. A move which, given the number of SS and Gestapo men in the camp, would surely have gotten them killed.

But, somehow, Klink kept going. He had to. If he collapsed, it would have been all over. He would have disappeared into a prison in Berlin, coming out only when he broke or died.

Then it was over. Over after thirty-six hours of hell for Klink. As Hogan listened with a painful relief, the calm Major Webber apologized to Klink for his treatment, and cleared Klink of all charges.

Dieter Müller had shown up the day after the Gestapo left. Hogan had no idea what they had discussed but Müller had left apparently satisfied with Klink's physical condition. But not happy that Klink was endangering his life again. From the few words Hogan managed to have with him, Hogan gathered that Klink had ordered his brother-in-law away from the camp; Hogan was certain that Müller would comply.

Now everyone had gone and the camp was at peace. But what next? Hogan hadn't been able to talk to Klink alone since they returned. In fact, Klink had pointedly ignored Hogan ever since the Gestapo left. Schultz pretty much ignored them as well, though occasionally they caught a twinkle in his eyes.

Why didn't Klink talk to him? Hogan didn't know. But he intended to find out.

"Kommandant!" Hogan called. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

The blue eyes, still filled with fatigue, glanced at Hogan dismissively. "Not now, Colonel Hogan. I have too much work to do. If you have any complaints, take them up with Captain Gruber."

And Klink walked away.

"But I . . ." Hogan said to Klink's retreating back. He gave up. What was the point?

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His men walked over to him.

"Same old Klink?" Newkirk asked.

Hogan nodded. "Yeah, same old Klink."

"But he's not," Carter said. "Not really. I mean, I can't think of him like that any more. Not after seeing what they did to him."

"Neither can I, Carter. Neither can I," Hogan said softly.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," agreed Newkirk. He looked at Hogan a bit guiltily. "If you want the truth, Colonel, I didn't really believe your story until we walked into that cell. It all seemed too fantastic."

"Yes, incroyable," murmured LeBeau. "But Monsieur Klink is an incroyable man."

"And he's got guts," said Kinch. "He was amazing."

Baker smiled faintly. "He had me believing where you guys were." Baker had been relieved when Hogan and the others arrived back in camp. Relieved and scared about what they were risking. And he was infinitely glad that he had not been subjected to the interrogation the others had to endure. It had been bad enough listening to it.

"The important thing is he had the Gestapo believing it," Hogan said.

"But why is he being so unfriendly?" Carter asked.

"He did warn us," Hogan reminded him. "We play by his rules."

At least for now, Hogan amended silently. But we will have that talk, Kommandant. Whether you like it or not.

Then a sinking feeling. The question was whether Hogan would like the results.

* * * * *

Hogan was in his room when Kinch knocked on the door and entered. "Colonel, some big shot from Berlin just arrived. An SS colonel."

Hogan looked disturbed. It had been over a week since their inquisitors had left. He'd thought it was all over. "Set up the

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coffeepot.”

The rest of his men trailed in. Carter, the last one in, shut the door. They sat down to listen.

Klink was surprised as his visitor entered.

“Colonel Weiss! What an honor,” Klink said as he stood. “Please, sir, have a seat.”

The door closed behind the pretty Hilda.

Then Hogan and his men were astonished to hear . . .

“Wilhelm! Thank God! I didn’t quite believe it until now,” the man breathed softly.

But Klink wasn’t too pleased. “You should not be here, Karl. You should have left a long time ago.”

“He must be one of the Stage’s men,” Newkirk said.

“I know, Wilhelm. After the message was delivered, I made myself scarce as the Americans say. But when I had finally decided to go, I heard that you were back,” Weiss explained. “Please, Wilhelm, don’t be angry. But I couldn’t stay away.”

A faint smile. “Well, now that you are here, sit down. Do you know how things went?”

“Better than any of us had anticipated, Wilhelm.” Weiss said with enthusiasm. “Within six hours of the message, fully fifty percent of the organization had gone. Within another six, ninety percent had left. The rest, like me, were on the move, ready to disappear in an instant.”

“I’m glad,” Klink said quietly. “Now, Karl, what are you doing here?”

“Do I need a reason to see an old friend?” Weiss said jovially.

Klink stayed quiet, his eyes on Weiss.

A heavy sigh. “All right, Wilhelm. I do not know why I ever try to fool you.”

A dry, “Neither do I.”

Weiss moved his chair closer to Klink. “Wilhelm, for days, our people have been coming back into Germany; most of them had arranged plausible excuses for their absences before they left. Our best guess is that nearly fifty percent of the organization is back, most of them intact units.” Klink frowned as Weiss

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continued. "They are not being foolhardy, Wilhelm. We all know that if the Stage were dead or broken, the Nazis would have broadcast the news all over Germany. Despite the way the war is going, it would still be a brilliant propaganda victory. And we all know that not even the Stage could withstand three weeks of the torture they would inflict. He would either break or die. I knew fairly quickly when you returned to Stalag 13. Then I waited to see what would happen. It should be safe now."

Klink shook his head. "There is no way of knowing that, Karl. I am assuming a great deal by being here."

"But you are here, Wilhelm," Weiss said quietly.

Klink stayed silent.

"Wilhelm," Weiss continued, "we, those of us who are back, we want to start up again."

Klink refused to understand. "Then go, start up again."

Weiss shook his head. "We want the Stage back, Wilhelm. We want you in charge."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Kinch, "They can't be serious!"

Klink's chair scrapped back as he stood. "No," he said quietly and went over to the window, gazing out at the camp.

"Wilhelm, we need you," Weiss pleaded. "You founded this group. You built it. Everyone's loyalty has always been to the Stage."

"I never wanted that!" Klink said.

"No. But that is what happened," Weiss said. "It is far easier to be loyal to a man than an idea. Especially if that man is the Stage."

Klink stayed silent.

"We can do it, Wilhelm. This war is still not over."

"No, it's not," Klink agreed. "Neither is the danger. As I said, Karl, I am assuming a great deal by being here. Someone else may know who I am, was. They could be biding their time."

"But why?" Weiss persisted. "What would be the point? Why not just arrest you?"

"They could be waiting for precisely what you're asking. Let the organization begin again, then move in."

"It seems like a lot of trouble. They have better things to do

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now. Wilhelm, I am surrounded by them in Berlin. They are scared. They can see the end, only they do not want to believe it. We can push them over the edge. Save lives, save what is left of Germany.”

“Then do so. But without the Stage.”

“We need the Stage, Wilhelm. He is still a rallying cry for most of us.”

The man at the window stayed quiet.

“Wilhelm,” Weiss’s voice was placating, “I know you’re tired. You’ve been doing this far longer than any of us ever dreamed it would be necessary.”

Klink stared straight ahead.

“And I know what they did to you. Not for the first time. Nor the second.”

“Huh?” from Carter.

“My God,” breathed Baker. “He’s been tortured before.”

“I know about the impossible missions,” Weiss continued, “the sleepless nights, the times you have been wounded and had to go on as if nothing had happened, the strain of running an organization this size. And I know all about the ridiculous Kommandant Klink.”

“And you are still asking me to start again,” Klink’s voice was damning.

“Yes, I am. Because we need you.”

“You need the Stage,” Klink said softly.

“The Stage, you.” Weiss sounded puzzled. “What is the difference?”

“He really doesn’t know,” Hogan said softly, “or he doesn’t really care.”

There was a long silence in the office.

Finally, “All right, Karl.” Klink turned back to the happy Colonel. His voice was hard. “But under my terms; I will be in complete charge.”

“Agreed,” Weiss said promptly and smiled.

A very grim smile. “You may regret it, Karl. This time, I will

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not divide the power. Do you still want the Stage back?"

Weiss swallowed hard at the look in Klink's eyes but said, "Yes."

"All right, Karl." Klink went back to his desk and sat down. They heard his chair move closer to the desk. "First, we will use the 'Inferno' code."

"But almost no one knows it," protested Weiss.

"Then they will have to learn it." Klink's voice was inexorable. "They have two weeks. Those who do not have it perfect will have to find some other group to join.

"Second, each of the Six must contact me here, in person, within five days. None of you is guaranteed acceptance. And the contacts had better be perfectly logical and acceptable to me, or you will not be acknowledged. I will also give each of you a list of people in your sections who will not be allowed back under any circumstances.

"Third," Klink moved on relentlessly, ignoring the dismay on Weiss's face. "Everyone of our people who is in the path of the Russian armies is to leave immediately."

Weiss finally managed to find his voice. "But the Russians are our Allies!"

Klink merely looked at him.

Weiss straightened under the immovable gaze. "All right, Wilhelm," Weiss said in a subdued voice. "Every time I try to second guess you, my efforts end in failure."

"Fourth, each of you is to submit a general plan of operation for your sections. I will have the final approval for each plan.

"And finally, except for next week, no one, I repeat, no one is to come near me again without prior approval. And I warn you, it will not most likely not be granted." His eyes met Weiss's. "Those are my conditions, Karl. You are each free to accept them or not. The choice is yours."

"I . . . I accept, Wilhelm, for my section," Weiss said quietly. "I understand the reasons for the conditions."

"I really hope you do, Karl," Klink said evenly.

Weiss stood. "I will pass on the conditions, Wilhelm." A faint smile. "In the 'Inferno' code. I will be back later with the information you ordered."

Klink unbent a little. "Thank you."

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Weiss walked to the door and hesitated. "Wilhelm, I am glad to see you. I would be glad even if you threw me out."

Klink stood and walked over to him. "I know, old friend." He held out his hand.

Weiss took it warmly and embraced Klink. Then he straightened and opened the door.

Klink said in his normal voice, "Thank you for coming, Colonel Weiss. Any time I can be of assistance to the SS, do not hesitate to call on me."

"Thank you, Colonel," Weiss said. "I may call on you again later this week."

"Of course, Colonel. A pleasure to see you."

The door closed behind Weiss.

They heard Klink walk back to his desk and sit down. Then as Kinch reached for the wire to turn off the listening device . . .

"Dear God, I hate this war."

Scene Two

– Sixteen –

It was late afternoon when Hogan came out of the barracks. Though it was still cold outside, the sun had finally decided to break through the clouds.

“How long has he been like that?” Hogan asked a lounging Newkirk.

“Ever since I’ve been out,” Newkirk answered.

Hogan turned up the collar of his jacket to keep out the cold. “I think I’ll go over and see how he’s doing.”

“He’s been less than friendly since we got back,” LeBeau reminded him.

“Yeah, I know.”

Hogan walked across the compound to the far end of the camp. Kommandant Klink was pacing alone near the wire. Hogan approached cautiously. Klink saw him and stopped, waiting for Hogan to get close. There was no one else near them.

Klink glanced at Hogan as the American reached him and then looked away, his eyes on the woods outside the camp. “I suppose you heard,” Klink said quietly.

“Every word.” Hogan forced a cheer he didn’t feel into his voice. “I’m glad I don’t work for you.”

Klink didn’t respond.

Hogan glanced at the stern profile. “Why did you agree to do it?”

A shrug. “The same reason I agreed to come back here. I want to finish what I started. Or perhaps it satisfies my ego to be needed.”

“Whose ego?” Hogan challenged. “The Stage’s? Kommandant Klink’s? Or Wilhelm Klink’s?”

Klink’s voice was disinterested. “What is the difference?”

“Plenty!” Hogan said angrily. “All this time, it’s been the Stage or Kommandant Klink. What about Wilhelm Klink? What does he want?”

A pause, then a sad, tired voice. “I don’t know if he exists any

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more.” Klink started to walk away.

“Wait a minute!” Hogan adroitly stepped in front of Klink, blocking him. “He exists all right. And he’s more important than either the Stage or Kommandant Klink.”

“To whom, Colonel Hogan?” Klink said listlessly.

“You don’t mean that.”

Klink stayed quiet.

“He’s very important to a sister who adores him, a brother-in-law who cares for him. And he was very important to a little boy who knew nothing about Stages or Kommandants.” Hogan ignored the flash of anger in Klink’s eyes. “And, whether you believe it or not, he’s important to me.”

“You went after the Stage, Colonel Hogan,” Klink said tonelessly. “That’s who you expected to find, didn’t you?”

“Yes and no,” Hogan said. “Yeah, I went partly to satisfy my own ego. To pay back the man who had saved my neck more than once. To show him that I was capable of doing everything he could do.

“Yeah, part of me wanted to save a myth,” Hogan said quietly. “But that’s not who I found. And in the long run, that’s not who I went after.” His eyes met Klink’s. “I didn’t find a myth, Kommandant. I found a man. A man with more courage than any myth could ever have. A man who had been chained, beaten, badly tortured for days, still defying his captors.”

“The stuff myths are made of,” Klink said ironically.

Hogan shook his head. “No. Myths are never unshaven, filthy, bleeding. They don’t choke on a swallow of water; they don’t tremble when confronted by their worst nightmares.”

Klink started to turn away.

Hogan stopped him with a hand on his arm and continued, ignoring the haunted expression in Klink’s eyes.

“And myths don’t scream in pain. That wasn’t the Stage being tortured in that cell. It was a man named Wilhelm Klink.

“The same Wilhelm Klink who was beaten by a man he had been trying to help. The same Wilhelm Klink whom I refused to treat like a human being, whom I used like an object, whom, when he really needed me, I turned my back on, and worse, wished him dead. The same Wilhelm Klink who even though he was practically buried alive still calmed me down when I was

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panicking and helped me despite the way I treated him.

“The same Wilhelm Klink who reached out to me when he was hurt and wouldn’t let me hide behind my indifference. The same Wilhelm Klink I made that promise to when I finally admitted just how much he meant to me.

“I don’t care about the Stage; he’s a myth. It wasn’t the Stage who saw the truth all those years ago. It was a man. A man who saw what was happening to his country. Who reached inside himself and instead of running away or hiding, forced himself to become something he wasn’t. An intelligent, resourceful man who cut himself off from everything he loved and cared about, and accepted the ridicule and hatred of others to fight for a cause he believed in. And who is still willing to fight, regardless of the consequences to himself.

“A man who’s taught me more about courage than anyone else. A man who’s taught me not to judge people by what seems to be the truth and to never, ever, treat people as less than human beings.

“He’s the man I care about, not the Stage and not Kommandant Klink. He’s the man I went after, the man I made that promise to, and the man I was so scared I’d never see again.

“And whether you admit it or not, he’s the man standing before me.”

Klink stayed silent; Hogan’s hand dropped from his arm.

“For what it’s worth,” Hogan said after a pause. “I think it’s time the world discovered the real Wilhelm Klink. I think it’s time he did as well.”

“I’m not sure he knows how, Colonel Hogan.” Klink rubbed his aching eyes. “He’s been buried for so long. He can’t compete with either the Stage or Kommandant Klink.”

“He’s far more like the Stage than he’s willing to admit,” Hogan said quietly. “As for Kommandant Klink, the war won’t last forever. The Allies are already knocking on Germany’s door. I think it’s time to bury Kommandant Klink. A nice, honorable burial. He did his duty well.”

A reluctant smile. “Yes, he did. In his own inimitable way.”

Hogan smiled.

Klink turned away from him, his eyes on the woods outside the camp.

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“Well?”

“Colonel Hogan, Wilhelm Klink is a very frightened man,” Klink said softly.

“I think he’s been frightened for eleven years,” Hogan said in the same tone. “That’s never stopped him from doing what he had to do.”

A deep breath. “I . . . I will think about it.”

“Yes, sir.”

A smart salute and Hogan started walking away.

“Robert.”

Surprised, Hogan stopped and turned back to Klink.

“Thank you.”

Their eyes met.

There was mutual respect and more in their glances, and they both knew that things would never again be the same between them. What had begun in a dark cave was finally complete.

“You’re welcome . . . Wilhelm.”

Hogan rejoined his waiting men.

“Well?” Carter asked.

A slow smile. “I think there are going to be some changes around here.”

“Huh?” from LeBeau.

A quick grin. “Never mind you’ll see. We’ll all see.” And Hogan went back inside the barracks.