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CHAPTER 1

11 January 1945

It was just before dawn when General Müller, head of the Gestapo, arrived at the Adlerhorst.

The Führer had based himself at this medieval German castle to direct his daring offensive against the Americans and British in the forests of the Ardennes. But news from the front was bleak: the German army had ground to a halt, and the enemy was counter-attacking with overwhelming force.

After six years, the unthinkable was happening: the Third Reich was losing the war.

General Müller stared out at the darkness beyond the

car window, his mind racing. At least they still had Operation Black Sun, he thought. It was both their last hope and the best hope of victory. And he was here to report on its progress to Hitler himself. Everything was ready, he told himself: the secret airbase near Amsterdam; the friends in South America; the sea trial; the weapon itself . . .

After a series of checkpoints, his Mercedes pulled to a halt in the castle's large courtyard. A series of blast-proof concrete bunkers had been built beyond it, cleverly disguised to look like small cottages. Müller climbed out and stretched.

A sense of defeat seemed to hang in the foggy air. There was a muted silence to the staff officers who passed him, saluting perfunctorily. The atmosphere wasn't helped by the still-smouldering remains of the village church and several cottages which had been hit by Allied bombs a few days earlier. The Führer had been assured it was coincidental – his whereabouts was a closely guarded secret since the assassination attempt last July – but nevertheless, it added to the sense of a tightening net.

Müller reached Haus 2. A uniformed valet opened the door and took his winter coat and hat, then escorted him to an antechamber outside Hitler's situation room. The place had been decorated to resemble an Alpine lodge; it was very cosy, Müller thought, *sehr gemütlich*.

Reichsleiter Bormann was standing in front of a fire warming his legs. He didn't move his squat, paunchy body to greet Müller, just fixed him with his black eyes.

'So, Müller, what is your report on Operation Black Sun?' he said. 'The Führer is anxious to hear it.'

'Everything is proceeding to plan and on schedule.' Müller pulled off his gloves slowly, finger by finger.

'And the bomb?'

'It will be shipped to the Amsterdam airbase in time.'

Bormann merely nodded.

The two men waited in silence for the Führer to conclude the morning briefing of the Ardennes offensive. When the last of the tense-faced generals had departed, Müller and Bormann stepped inside and the doors slammed shut behind them.

They snapped salutes to the Führer, who waved them away.

'I'd like some good news for a change, Müller,' he said. 'My generals continue to thwart all my best endeavours.' Though he looked thin and his hair was lank, there was still, Müller thought, a sense of burning energy.

'Of course—' he began before Bormann the sycophant interrupted him.

'General Müller reports that all aspects of Operation Black Sun are in place.'

Müller watched as Hitler nodded, mulling it over.

'This bomb . . .'

'Here, *mein Führer* . . .' Bormann quickly laid out a map in front of Hitler, who studied it carefully with a large magnifying glass.

'New York?'

'*Ja, mein Führer*. Observe . . .' Bormann jabbed his middle finger at a series of concentric rings. 'Central Park. The first two rings spell total annihilation. Everything reduced to dust.'

The Führer stared at the two rings, the second one extending well beyond the island of Manhattan. 'So this atom-splitting weapon will work,' he said eventually. 'Incredible.'

'Indeed, *mein Führer*,' said Bormann. 'With this weapon you can win the war in one stroke. The genius of German technology will be the Fatherland's salvation.'

The Führer threw down the magnifying glass and stabbed an accusing finger at the two men. 'Didn't I tell you,' he said, 'didn't I tell the German nation to keep the faith, that we would triumph over whatever the Americans and Bolsheviks threw at us?'

His voice grew louder and stronger as he spoke. Müller noticed a fleck of spit form in the corner of his mouth. There was silence for a moment. Hitler closed his eyes briefly then opened them.

'If the sea trial of the weapon is successful then we move immediately – in three days. Müller, you will fetch my baggage.'

Müller frowned, not understanding. 'Your baggage, *mein Führer?*'

'Frau Braun, she is staying at the Berghof. Bring the sister too – she will want some company in Argentina no doubt.'

'*Ja, mein Führer.*'

'And my special gift that I promised our Argentinian friend? The stone?'

'The stone . . .' Bormann began but this time Müller interrupted him.

'Everything will be in order by the time we leave,

mein Führer.'

Hitler frowned. 'See that it is. I gave my word to the señorita.'

Müller saluted and the Führer planted his hands on his hips, his eyes bright.

'Take heart, gentlemen, the real war is just about to start! This weapon – this wonder weapon – will rain death on any city we choose: first New York, then Moscow, and finally Churchill's London. We will bomb them all back into the Stone Age!'



CHAPTER 2

It was a little after seven in the morning, still dark with a bone-chilling wind blowing through the city of Amsterdam. It sent the snow that had settled on the frozen canals dancing back up into the sky. Through this blizzard a figure suddenly appeared, racing along the surface of the ice. His skates were singing, his torso bent forward against the wind.

Tygo Winter, fifteen years old last June, was this lone skater shooting past the canal boats and barges seized in the ice. He was bundled up against the elements, a ratty old woollen balaclava over his head with a felt hat on top for good measure, secured with twine. His brown eyes, so dark you could not distinguish the iris from the pupil,

squinted ahead through the driving snow.

He had reached the end of the first canal and turned a sharp right into the next, larger this time but still frozen solid. It was only the third time he had adopted this method of reaching his place of work, and he realized how weak and unfit he had become since the winter of hunger had begun in Amsterdam. His legs felt like jelly and his knees were on fire, but he pressed on as fast as he could, thankful to be off the streets and away from the Verzet – the Resistance.

For Tygo was in the unfortunate position of being both hunted and held captive. Hunted by the Resistance for collaboration with the Nazis; and held captive in service to Oberst Krüger, the chief of the 'Sicherstellung' department of the SS in Amsterdam.

The Germans had such a department in every city they occupied. *Sicherstellung* meant 'safekeeping', but the locals had another name for it. They called it the Plunder Squad, for that was what it was.

Since the Occupation the Nazis had taken it upon themselves to steal anything and everything of value. They had started with gold, jewellery, precious works of art – stripping the banks, museums, and then the fine houses until they were taking literally anything they wanted. And they had used Tygo's father, the best locksmith in all of Amsterdam, to help them do it. His father had complied rather than watch the Gestapo execute his family, until he was himself shot as a collaborator by the Resistance almost a year ago.

And so it had become Tygo's turn to be Krüger's lock-

smith, and dodge the ever-watching, ever-waiting Verzet.

Either way he knew he was damned.

He kept up his pace along the ice. The wind was easing a little, and he felt sweat running down his spine beneath the almost comical layers of clothing he was wearing: overcoat, jacket, sweater, shirt, vest. He was getting close to Euterpestraat, where the Gestapo had their headquarters and Krüger his comfortable warm office on the third floor. He would get as close as he could on the ice, then run the last few hundred metres to the building.

Tygo's stomach rumbled. He hadn't eaten anything yesterday except for some tulip-bulb soup from a soup kitchen, and that wasn't even food really. There was no food now, or light or gas or electricity, for anyone except the occupying Germans. At least the exercise was keeping him warm, he thought.

He wondered briefly what Krüger would make him do today. It had been quiet since the New Year and Tygo had been sent home most mornings after reporting in. Well, not home exactly. He no longer stayed there, not since the incident on Christmas Day.

He'd been asleep upstairs in the back bedroom above the shop. Unlike the previous Christmas, when they were still a family and there had been a little food, a few bits of coal for the fire and even a few paltry gifts to give to his parents and his sister, Tygo had been alone in the house, curled up under a heap of damp, fetid blankets trying to keep warm.

Luckily, he had taken the precaution of setting a metal bucket filled with rubble on top of the door at the top of the stairs.

A startled yell and the sound of someone falling had woken him. He had leapt from his bed and jumped out of the back window into the yard below, where he had left a rope secured to the high brick wall. He had sprained his ankle in the jump, but just managed to scale the wall and drag the rope over the other side before the Resistance fighters had burst out through the back door.

He had crept back the following day under cover of darkness and retrieved his tools, which he stored now at Gestapo HQ, but since then he had slept at a different location every night: empty basements, church crypts, always on the move.

'You can run, but you can't hide!' one of the Resistance men had yelled after him.

Well, he'd keep running and just hope they'd never catch him.

Tygo turned off the main canal and followed the narrower Nordcanal to the point closest to Euterpestraat. He skidded to a halt on the ice, the skates making a satisfying screech, then climbed the stone steps from the landing jetty and sat down at the top to unlace his skates. They were beautiful: practically unused, black leather uppers with strong white laces looped through brass eyelets and shiny silver blades with sharp serrated edges at the toes. Tygo was ashamed to admit he had found them in a house he had been searching with Krüger on New Year's Day and had asked Krüger if he could have them.

'If you like,' Krüger had shrugged. 'But remember – you are only looking after them till the owners return.'

Tygo knew he was just joking. The house had had a

large yellow star painted on the front door, and everyone suspected that the Jews of Amsterdam would never return.

Tygo knotted the tops of the laces together and swung them over his shoulder. He pulled on his own boots, shabby and worn, that had been slung round his neck. Then he stood up and cautiously looked around. The coast appeared to be clear and he set off at a slow jog, the pavements too treacherous to allow a faster pace.

He was just passing an alleyway when a four-wheeled wooden cart, the sort used for foraging by one and all, shot out and caught the backs of his knees, pitching him forwards on to the street. Before he could roll over, the owner of the cart had jumped on his back and jammed something cold and hard behind his right ear.

'Don't move a muscle!' It was a girl's voice. 'We've got you this time, Winter.'

Tygo tried to turn his head to see his assailant, but she prodded the muzzle of the pistol harder into the soft part of his neck at the base of his earlobe. It hurt.

'What do you want?' he asked, but he knew the answer. Was he about to meet the same fate as his father? He felt his stomach churn.

'Shut up and do exactly as I tell you!' He felt the weight of the girl's body lifting off him. 'Stand up.'

Tygo climbed to his feet, his heart pounding in his chest.

'Turn round.'

He slowly turned to face his assassin in the murky light. Like him, she was bundled up against the cold, a fur

hat with flaps crammed on her head, a scarf covering her face like a bandit's. She held an old-looking revolver in her woollen-gloved hand.

'Remember me?' she said.

Tygo stared at her, and after a moment she pulled the scarf from her face.

'Ursula? Ursula Kugler?'

They had been in the same class at the beginning of the war. She had been a pretty girl with lots of freckles, who always wore her hair in pigtails. He remembered her flicking ink bombs at him, made from pieces of blotting paper. She didn't look pretty any more, just cold and starving and mean.

'Look, just let me go.'

Ursula laughed, a short, hard sound. 'Are you joking? There's a price on your head, and you're mine.'

Tygo looked about. If he made a run for it, would she really shoot? He doubted it – but just then, as if reading his mind, Ursula cocked the revolver and raised it, outstretched, so that it was pointing at his heart.

'Step into the alleyway, stand against the wall and put your hands behind your back.' She kept her distance as Tygo did as he was ordered.

'Come on, Ursula, we used to like each other.' He remembered how he would catch her looking at him in Geography.

'Like *you*? A stinking collaborator? Let me see your hands!'

Tygo glanced back; she now had a length of rope in one hand and the revolver in the other.

'I don't have a choice, Ursula, you know that.'

'We all have a choice; you made yours and I made mine. I hope they string you up with this rope from the nearest lamp post.' That was now the most common form of execution for collaborators; bullets had become too precious to waste on them.

Tygo felt her edging closer to him. He tried to control his breathing, felt every muscle in his body tense.

'Put your hands together, on top of each other . . .'

Tygo pivoted fast, spinning to face her. So fast that the skates flew off his shoulders and the blade of one hit Ursula square across the bridge of the nose. She fell back on to the floor, blood pouring from the deep cut the skate had opened, and lay on the cobblestones groaning with pain.

She had dropped the gun in the fall. It was a couple of feet away. They both saw it at the same time but she was faster, managing to grab hold of it and bring it up to bear on Tygo. Tygo leapt forwards and landed on top of her, both his hands wrapping around her wrist. He slammed her hand down on to the cobbles – once, twice, three times – and the gun fell. She was crying, the blood blinding her now.

Tygo's heart was hammering, a terrible rage filling his head. He grabbed the skates and jammed one of the blades against the girl's neck. Her face was crimson, so much blood . . .

'I hate you, Tygo,' she spat.

Tygo pressed the blade down harder. 'I hate you too.'

Ursula suddenly jammed her knee up as hard as she could. Tygo felt an intense, agonizing pain flood his

groin; he cried out and rolled off her. Ursula was on her knees searching for the gun, desperately mopping the blood from her eyes with her scarf. Tygo gritted his teeth against the pain, on his knees now too. He swung at Ursula, but she blocked the blow with her forearm. He swung again, and for a moment he thought they must look like two dwarfs boxing in the alleyway. Finally one of his punches struck the girl's chin full force, and she went down and stayed down.

Tygo pulled himself to his feet, retrieved his skates and the revolver, and left his old classmate lying where she fell.

He jogged the rest of the way up Euterpestraat, the knuckles on his right hand red and swollen, stopping only to stash the gun and skates in a street culvert he used as a hiding place, close to the Gestapo headquarters.

He sat down for a minute or two on the snow-covered pavement and gazed up at the imposing red-brick building with its clock tower, at the windows draped with Nazi banners. The entrance was heavily sandbagged and bristling with armed guards. Tomorrow he would have to use another route to get here. He didn't want to run into Ursula again, that was for sure.

His heart slowed, and suddenly he felt close to tears. That stupid girl had made him do it, made him hurt her. Why couldn't she just have let him go? Why couldn't all of them just leave him alone?

He got up and brushed the snow from his coat. It was all so unfair. But as Krüger liked to remind him: in the world they now inhabited, nothing was fair.