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Opening extract from

The Wolfstone Curse

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For Alison, Julian, & Chris –
may the wolves never find you

A TEMPLAR BOOK

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Operation Velvet Claw

It's what you don't know that kills you.

But I do know this: the next 24 hours could change the course of the war.

Am I exaggerating? I certainly feel like I have the whole future of the world in my hands. Not just me of course - Acer is in charge. And Boffin's the man who first discovered the terrible secrets of Castle Wolfenburg.

I keep this journal to take my mind off little things like that.

Boffin has briefed us on the background - the why. He told us about the Nazi experiments - as much as he knows, as much as his colleagues in the Special Operations Executive have managed to discover. It sounds incredible - incredible but grotesque. Inhuman. Devilish.

Acer then told us the plan. We all have codenames taken from trees for some reason. I'm Copper - as in Copper Beech. At least I'm not Elm or Gum. Not that real trees could survive in this stifling, claustrophobic underwater world. I'm not cut out for life in a submarine; I don't know how the normal crew copes.

It's a relief to me we're only on-board for a few days.

But that's a small enough sacrifice compared with what the people have been through where we're going. I guess if you don't have a child of your own you can't really imagine it. The loss. Not knowing. The terror of what might have been, what could have happened in the night – when your teenage son just vanished. Hoping that if you do ever see him again it will be as a pale, emaciated corpse ripped to shreds by the wild animals in the forest. By something.

Knowing that fate must be better than what else might have happened.

I can't imagine cradling the broken remains of my child in the shade of the medieval fortress that looms over this whole landscape. I can't imagine living in that shadow. Afraid of the darkest nights and what they might bring. Dreading the moonlight even more...

It's time.

Acer is ready.

Time to venture into the dark forest.

Time to face our fears.

Mercifully, there was no moon.

It took Copper, Acer, and three other commandos the best part of half an hour to reach the high stone wall surrounding the castle grounds. It was a difficult journey, in the dark and trying to stay silent, clambering over the rocky escarpment on which the castle was built. All the time, it loomed above them – forbidding and implacable.

Grass gave way to stone as they approached the main castle. Copper felt the cold biting through the thick rubber soles of his boots. Looking up, he saw dark shadows moving slowly round the battlements. The stone head of a wolf jutted out from the wall at the apex of an arched window. A reminder of where they were: Schloss Wolfenburg.

A dark shape detached itself from the wall in front of them – a figure.

"Who's there?" it called out, in German. "Hans?"

He never knew if he was right. A young commando rose up from the ground silently beside the approaching soldier. His hand moved so fast the knife was barely a glint in the pale glow of a distant searchlight. The guard didn't even have time to cry out before the soldier was lowering his body gently and quietly to the ground.

The young man's hand was shaking as he wiped the knife clean.

"First time you've slit a throat?" Copper wondered.

"I wish." His voice was trembling too. "You remember them all, don't you? Every single one."

Acer was checking his watch. He nodded with satisfaction, and gestured for them to stay close to the wall and wait for the diversion.

They didn't have to wait long.

The castle was silhouetted against the sudden flashes of orange and red. The percussive thump of the explosions followed a second later, but the fading noise was quickly drowned out by the alarm klaxon. The first thought of the German commanders must have been of an air raid, Copper decided. But it wouldn't take them long to realise they were actually under attack from other commandos on the ground.

Machine-gun fire split the night. The *crump* of grenades. It was a gamble, but Acer's plan was that a small force could penetrate the castle when it was left relatively undefended as the guards hurried to help their besieged comrades.

Acer led the way to the end of the wall. Peering round, Copper saw a line of storm troopers running out of the gates, machine guns glinting metallically in the light of the fires and explosions. Their distinctive coal-scuttle helmets masked their features.

Timing was everything. Too soon, and they'd run into more troops. Too late, and the castle gates would

be slammed shut. But Acer judged it almost perfectly.

Almost.

The five commandos charged towards the gatehouse. Two sentries were pulling the heavy wooden doors closed. Bullets from Acer's machine pistol stitched a line across the gates, ending at one sentry's chest. He was slammed back into the castle. The sound of Copper's own gun was loud even against the noise of the battle. He opted for single shots, the first going wide and chiselling into the stone wall. His next shot found its mark and the second sentry collapsed in a lifeless heap.

As he leaped over the body, Copper spared the man a glance. If you could call him a man.

The young commando who'd killed the sentry jammed a grenade between one of the gates and its main hinge. He flicked out the pin. It took him scant seconds.

But that was too long. Three SS troopers were sprinting towards them across the courtyard. Late to the main battle, but horribly punctual for this one. They fired as they ran.

The first burst of gunfire lifted the young soldier and threw him backwards. Copper saw enough blood to know the man was already dead.

"Back – back!" Acer shouted.

"Then we'll never get in," one of the other commandos yelled.

Acer didn't reply. He grabbed the man's shoulder and shoved him roughly aside. The ground at the man's feet erupted in a flurry of gunfire.

The SS men paused in the gateway. The searchlight from the top of one of the castle towers picked out Copper and his three colleagues as they stood helplessly exposed outside the main gatehouse.

Then the grenade wedged between the huge wooden door and the castle wall went off. The blast engulfed the nearest soldier. His uniform caught fire and he cartwheeled away, a screaming mass of flames and flailing limbs.

His fellows turned in shock and surprise. The blast hadn't caught them. But the massive wooden door did – tearing free of its fractured hinge and crashing down.

They raced across the courtyard, bullets whipping past them. The searchlight struggled to keep up. The commando next to Copper hit the ground, his body jumping and convulsing as more bullets ripped into it.

Three of them reached the tower and dived through the doorway. Copper barely had time to note the stone wolves staring down at him from the ornate doorframe. They were echoed in the carved stone lamp holders on the walls inside the tower.

Acer was firing up the spiral staircase. They heard the sounds of bodies tumbling and falling above them, blocking

the stairway. Copper, Acer and Elm ran down the other way. The only light was flickering torches held in the mouths of the stone wolves.

"We'll split up," Acer decided at the bottom of the stairway. He handed them each explosive charges. They were small but powerful. Enough to rupture the castle's foundations and bring the whole structure crashing down. "Find the laboratories and let's end this madness."

Elm stuffed several charges inside his tunic, and hurried off down the corridor.

"With me," Acer ordered.

"Where to?" Copper demanded. "Shouldn't we–"

Acer cut him off. "This way."

From above and behind them came the clatter of heavy boots down the stairs. With an almost casual gesture, Acer set the timer on one of the small charges, and lobbed it back towards the stairway. He and Copper both broke into an immediate run.

Behind them, the whole corridor erupted with sound and flame. Stonework crashed down, blocking the bottom of the stairs with a heap of rubble.

"We won't be getting out that way," Copper said, coughing away the dust and smoke.

Acer didn't answer.

He strode purposefully through the smoke-filled stone

corridor. A man appeared through the grey air – not in uniform, but wearing a suit. Acer knocked him down with the butt of his gun – a sudden, swift, brutal movement. Copper stepped over the prone body and followed.

The corridor ended in large double doors. Acer flung them open, spraying machine-gun fire into the room. Two more men in suits were caught in the hail of bullets. A woman in a white coat was slammed backwards across one of the beds. The syringe she was holding fell to the floor and shattered.

It looked like a hospital ward. Metal-framed beds with patients stretched out unmoving. Fluid tubes fed into their forearms. Artificial lungs wheezed and groaned. Chests rose and fell in a steady, almost lazy rhythm. Eyelids blinked open to reveal rheumy eyes. A hand clawed at the sheets, ripping through them.

Similar double doors led from the ward – the laboratory – into another room.

It was like walking into a cathedral. The high-vaulted roof extended into the upper floors of the castle. Leaded glass windows shone with the flashes and bursts of the fire-fight in the woods outside. A stone altar stood on a dais in the centre of the chamber. From each corner of the altar a carved wolf's head stared out. Where the stone arches met the upright pillars, more wolves watched impassively as Acer

strode towards the altar to place his explosives.

"It's like a shrine," Copper said. His voice echoed eerily.

There was an atmosphere, a sense of foreboding. Copper did his best to ignore it, setting his own explosive charge at the base of each of the main supporting pillars. He was bending to place the third one when a bullet hammered into the pillar above his head. Splinters of stone stung his face as he whipped round, bringing up his own machine gun.

He was in time to see a black-clad figure step back behind a pillar on the opposite side of the chamber.

Acer had ducked down behind the stone altar. He gestured for Copper to edge his way round – to get a line of sight on the soldier.

The figure reappeared. Another shot – worryingly close. Copper saw enough to know he was facing an SS officer. A colonel.

"*Standartenführer*." Acer called out the man's rank, trying to distract him. "You're outnumbered. Surrender now and we might all get out of here alive."

Copper eased further round the edge of the room. But still he didn't have a shot. The end of a handgun – a Luger – appeared round the pillar. It spat flame, and a bullet chipped the altar close to where Acer was sheltering.

Copper leaped sideways, firing a long continuous burst. The area behind the pillar misted with dust and fragments

of stone. The noise was deafening as it echoed round the chamber.

But the SS man was already gone – sprinting for another door at the back of the chamber. Acer fired after him. A light shone out from the doorway. Then the door slammed shut, the wood immediately ripped open by the shots from both men.

Copper's gun clicked on empty. He pulled out the magazine and reached for another.

He didn't have one.

"I'm out too," Acer said grimly.

"Leave him?" Copper suggested.

"Charges are set. Stairs are blocked – but he might know another way out."

Copper nodded. "Worth a try."

Acer heaved the door open. They both ducked back as three more shots rang out. Then, together, they hurled themselves through the doorway.

Copper rolled to one side, leaping back to his feet. He held his gun like a club. More shots, then the staccato click as the Luger fired on empty.

But Copper couldn't see. He was dazzled by the light. He blinked, desperately trying to get his eyes to adjust. He shielded his face, but the light wasn't coming from a single source. It was all around them.

He heard Acer gasp in surprise, maybe in pain. And as his vision finally, gradually returned, he could see why.

The room was made of glass.

The walls, ceiling, even the floor were polished glass or crystal. It had a strange milky quality, like quartz. The light of the candles positioned in glass-shelved alcoves was magnified and echoed all round the room, and the whole place seemed to shimmer. Only one of the many alcoves didn't contain a candle. Instead, a sword handle projected from the glowing wall, the blade visible as a shadow thrusting deep into the crystal.

In the centre of the room stood the SS officer – the only dark shadow in a world of shining crystal. The light threw his gaunt features into stark relief. His jutting chin, thin nose, the arrogant set of his jaw. His eyes were dark, set deep within hollow sockets. His hair was cut short and swept sideways.

The man's voice was a deep rasp – full of hate and anger. It was a voice used to giving orders.

"Welcome to my lair."

It took Copper a moment to realise he had said it in English.

The man's next utterance wasn't in any language. He threw his head back and roared – a tremendous, guttural burst of sound. Saliva dripped from his mouth. His whole face seemed to shimmer and crawl in the glowing light.

Like something was trapped under his skin, and trying to rip its way out. The man's eyes had taken on a red tinge. The gun clattered to the floor and the man spread his arms, his hands clenched like claws. His teeth glinting and yellow. The death's-head emblem on his lapel glowing angrily.

Claws.

Teeth.

Death.

Another roar. The creature in the SS uniform hurled itself at Copper, snarling with rage and anticipation. Claws raked down towards him. Elongated jaws snapped hungrily at his throat. The pervasive glow of the crystal was blotted out by darkness – by black uniform, dark fur and death.

SEVENTY YEARS LATER...

She lost count of the days she spent in her room.

She lacked for nothing. She could have whatever she wanted – with just one exception. The view from her window made it worse – seeing what she could never have. Freedom.

She could see the woods. If she opened the heavy casement, and squeezed her head and one shoulder through, she could lean out far enough to see along the side of the house and catch the smallest glimpse of the edge of the circle.

She had thought about jumping. But the window was too narrow and the drop was too far. Mr Edward could do it. Her friend from earliest childhood would fit easily through the window, and the drop would be as nothing.

Mr Edward watched her across the room through glassy, unfeeling eyes. He sat on the bed, close to her pillow – impassive and silent. But she loved him, even after all these years. She loved his warmth, loved how soft and yielding he felt when she hugged him tight. She didn't mind the roughness of his snout, or the way his hairy face scratched at her own pale cheeks. And he didn't mind that

her tears soaked into his fur. All the better to comfort you with, he might have said – if he could speak.

Mr Edward was not part of her plan, but when she heard the man at the door, she was clutching him in a tight embrace. She lacked for nothing, but Mr Edward was all she had.

She didn't know the man's name. He had a broken ear, and he spoke almost as little as Mr Edward. Sometimes he had questions for her – questions that were not his own. Usually he just brought her food, and took away the empty plates. The first few times, she'd thrown it back at him. He didn't seem to care, and she had gone hungry.

He came less often now, so she was always hungry. He'd watch, amused, as she wolfed down the food. But not this time. She stood behind the door, holding tight to Mr Edward, whispering to him that they would be all right. Just like when she was a child. If they had put him here to stop her growing up, then it had worked.

The man's eyes narrowed when she pulled the door further open. He suspected something, watching her closely. Ignoring Mr Edward, which annoyed her. But it pleased her too because Mr Edward had now become a part of her plan. She smiled at the man's frown, and stepped back from the door.

"That's better," the man growled. He put down the

tray on the floor just inside the door like he always did. He never came far into the room.

"When's he coming?" she demanded as he let go of the tray.

"Who?"

"You know who. My father – when is he coming to see me?"

"Soon." The man began to straighten up.

"How soon?"

The man sighed. He was slightly off balance as he stood up – that was when she did it.

She hurled Mr Edward at the tray of food, as if in anger. The glass was knocked sideways – milk spattering over the man's shoes.

"*When*?" she yelled – for the noise and surprise as much as because she wanted to know.

The man was staring at the mess – at the teddy bear lying in the spilled milk and ruined food. He was caught halfway between crouching and standing. She pulled the skirt of her long white dress up above her knees and kicked out as hard as she could.

She wasn't allowed shoes. But her anger and desperation gave her strength, and her bare foot connected with the man's chin. His head snapped up and he grunted in pain and surprise, falling backwards. There was no time to

get his keys, but she knew the door had a bolt as well as the lock. She leaped over his fallen body. Felt his sharp nails scratch down her leg as he grabbed for her. Heard his growl of anger.

Then she was past him, slamming the door shut in his snarling face and ramming the bolt across.

"Sorry, Mr Edward," she murmured. But she wouldn't come back for him. She was far too old for toys.

And she had to get away.

Night was drawing in and the house was in near darkness. There was no light except in her room. It took a moment to get used to the dark. To get used to the contrast between her well-lit room with the patterned wallpaper and soft carpet, and this twilight world of bare, dusty boards.

Something heavy thumped into the door, shaking it in its frame and shocking her into movement.

The dust was slippery under her feet. She cried out as a cobweb swept across her face. She brushed it away, shook her long, fair hair out of her eyes, and kept running.

The stairs creaked. Her ancestors watched her accusingly, staring down from their gloomy, age-darkened portraits. How long since any of them had lived here? How long since *anyone* had lived here apart from herself, and the man with the broken ear?

Across the hall. More cobwebs. Her foot scratched on a

splintered floorboard, but she scarcely noticed.

The night air was fresh and chill, and she gulped it in hungrily. She stood for a moment, looking round, getting her bearings. Which way was the village?

She kept to the shadows, close to the walls of the house. Past the broken and boarded windows, along the cracked and uneven paving.

A single light shone out from a high window, in a tower at the end of the house. Her room. She must have run all the way round to the back of the house. But that was good – she knew where she was. She could remember the view. She glanced up at the light.

There was a dark shape in the window, silhouetted against the light. Eyes stared glassily down, and for a moment she thought Mr Edward had somehow clambered up to watch.

The shape forced its way lithely through the window. Forelegs scrabbled at the edge of the sill. Fur bristled and ruffled in the breeze as the blood-red eyes sought her out. Then it leaped – out from the window, into space, legs still scrabbling in the air. The night split by its howl.

It landed on all fours, snarling and snapping. The animal's broken ear was a mass of matted fur and tissue that scarred one side of its head. The eyes caught the moonlight so they seemed to flash and glow. It took only a moment to

gather itself, then the creature was running – bounding towards her.

She turned, her long white dress billowing out as she moved. Her feet pawed urgently at the grass as she ran from the house. The blood was pounding in her ears, like the thump of the predator's feet behind her. Ragged gasps of breath, the wind in her hair, her dress pressed tight round her as she ran.

If she could reach the hedge, maybe she could lose him in the maze. How well did her pursuer know it? She'd played there as a child – laughing and hiding from her brother. Racing him to the centre to find the statue. If she could find it now, would she be safe?

She didn't dare look back. She could feel the animal's hot breath on her neck. Could smell the musky scent of its body – the same smell that accompanied the man into the room when he brought her food. When he brought her milk and raw steak.

A wall of green. The moonlight filtered through, casting shadows like the pattern on her wallpaper. She ran, turned a corner, pushed through a narrow gap between hedges.

Ahead of her, eyes glinted in the night. She doubled back.

Close beside her, jaws snapped shut. A snarl of anger sent her off down another green corridor.

The next opening – even overgrown, even after all these years, she recognised it. She forced herself through the brambles and bindweed. Barely noticed the tiny purple flowers opening as the moonlight touched them. Something whipped at her face, like the cobwebs in the house. She cried out, wiping the back of her hand across. It came away smudged with blood.

She stared at the crimson stain for a moment, before licking it away. Like an animal licking its wounds. She felt the blood welling up again, and running down her cheek like tears.

But she was here now, she'd made it. She'd escaped from the room, from the man with the ragged ear. She'd made it to the centre of the maze, just like in her childhood games. Safe.

She let out a long, sighing breath. The wind riffled through her hair. She could feel the night through her flimsy dress. Her breathing settled into a gentle rhythm.

And now could she hear its echo. The low, rasping breath of the animal that was hunting her. That had found her.

Only now did she realise there was no other way out of the centre of the maze. She was just as trapped here as she was in her room.

She turned, just as the creature leaped out of the

darkness – paws out and claws extended. Its snarling face filled the night as the wolf slammed into her, knocking her down. Its jaws opened impossibly wide, and its roar of triumph echoed round the green prison.