

Paperclip

by Dale Marlowe

Until recently, the fighting seemed far off. The most action *Rottenführer* Sigmund "Ziggy" Scouter had seen was from American bombers, which loosed clutches occasionally on Büren, the little town ringing Wewelsburg Castle. Those strikes felt perfunctory. Courteous, like calling-cards left by fellow professionals. That changed when Büren came under direct artillery barrage, and the *Schutzstaffel* enlisted quit the grounds to regroup with the regular army at Büren.

Their departure left just over twenty men to secure the Castle. On night's watch, as the first mortars sailed across the parapets, Zig decided to see his charge to the end. He would not, as lesser men had, slink into the hinterlands, burn his uniform, take a Burgher's dress, and fade into anonymity. There was something serene and right about finishing a thing, even in the certainty of failure.

Hauptsturmführer Taubert's secretary, a pasty, orbicular chap whose toothbrush mustache brought no end of glee to the enlisted, came late one morning to the foyer. Clacking down the colossal central staircase, he cut a right-angled corner at the foot, approached Zig's desk, stopped at the lip, and clapped his boot heels.

Zig stood and threw his arm up. "Heil Hitler!"

The secretary extended his hand, arm bent chest height. A superior's returned salute, but tired, insincere and lackadaisical.

"The *Hauptsturmführer* desires you. No delay."

The secretary turned, marched to the gate, and demanded Zig's Grenadier hoist the man-sized postern cut into the right-side. A racket: metal, creaking on wood. Harsh, midday light flooded in. Silhouetted, the secretary strode through the blazing rectangle. Zig exchanged mocking glances with the Grenadier, who lowered the postern. Zig never saw the secretary again.

Leaving his post to the Grenadier, Zig took the staircase, walked the length of the second floor's armor-flanked gallery, then turned

into the narrow corkscrew leading to the tower containing *Der Obergruppenführersaal*, The Round Hall.

Zig had never been invited beyond its massive oaken doors. Fifteen ranks remained between Zig and the Holy of Holies; his education was sparse, family common, and rising to corporal had itself been a shock. Fair expectations rested at Storm Trooper, but a year earlier, Taubert swapped Zig's epaulets for laurels sporting an extra stripe.

Zig wanted to grab Taubert by his cheeks and kiss him full on the lips. Anything beyond Corporal was windfall, cause for pride, joy, celebration. But Zig's modest ambitions met their doom at the crossing of time and fact. The best he could hope for now was postwar amnesty for Niederhagen. The worst? Certain death at the business end of a Russian bayonet.

He climbed. His footfalls in the helix reported thick as horseshoes striking cobblestone. Slit-wide archer's windows let scant light; what entered was useless but to emphasize shade on the floor, pooling, collecting, rising and crawling the walls behind him as he mounted each flight. Finally, The Round Hall panned into view. Upon its doors hung identical grinning skulls-and-crossbones door-knockers, big as cat's heads. The left door stood slightly ajar.

Zig caught murmurs from inside:

Salt the ossuary. Salt it and send us to safety.

"There is no safety, Lord. We're at an end."

We endure. Salt it, now.

"I don't understand."

I have refuge wherever men want of power.

"Forgive me, but I don't—"

Enough! Someone is at the door—cover us!

Zig arranged his uniform, tucked his cap under his arm, smoothed his part, then wrapped his fingers around the left knocker. He meant to knock, but the pressure of his grip pushed the door open. He saw *Hauptsturmführer* Taubert inside, alone, hands clasped behind his back.

"Ah! Scouter! Come!"

Taubert waited within a circular colonnade; its columns rose thick as old poplars, and a vaulted ceiling soared above. Tall, thin windows rimmed the room's perimeter. Through them, dust-salted sunbeams focused on a massive carved table. Dozens of scenes rose from the wood: floating mythical beasts, stylized forms, strong men, handsome women, ornate, medieval weapons. Below the table's stout legs, etched in marble and laced in inverted, looping swastikas, swirled a Black Sun. A smooth, polished limestone box sat on the table, near Taubert. It might have carried a man's shoes, but little more.

Zig offered a smart salute, which Taubert did not return.

Quizzically, Zig said, "Heil Hitler?"

"Heil Hitler, my ass. The Führer's crazy. If he's not already dead, he will be soon."

"I don't take your meaning."

"It's obvious, isn't it? The war is lost."

"Not until the last bullet flies."

"Bah! Scouter, I know your father. He is a good man. We are not friends. We are not close, your father and I, but I know him. I will not see his son given over to Russians. I owe a good man that much."

"Sir, is it not the United States 3rd Armored besieging Büren?"

Taubert laughed.

"The Americans don't want us. They want knowledge. They want to eat with us. They want technology and weapons. They want the results of research they themselves are too craven to perform, answers to questions they ask themselves in whispers, in the dark.

The Russians want us in a different and worse way. The Russians mean not to eat *with* us, they mean to *eat* us. That is the difference, yes?"

"Yes, *mien Hauptsturmführer.*"

Taubert rested his hand flat on the box's lid. His face drew down in an expression of deep longing as he rubbed the lid. A final, loving brush of forecast grieving.

"You will carry this box—it is valuable, priceless even—to a truck that waits at the lists on the castle's edge. This is not an army truck. It is a civilian truck. We have disguised it to appear as a truck a burgher drives. Wear civilian clothes. Drive the *Bodelschwinghstrasse*. The Americans will be waiting. You will surrender the box to the 3rd Armored commander only. You will not give the box to the commander until you are promised, in a signed writing, amnesty for any activities in this war's undertaking, and unless emigration to the United States, including an annuity, are provided you. That has been arranged. Do not let them renege. This much I owe your father. We're not friends, but I know him, and he is a good man. You are a good son."

"I am confused."

"I was very clear. Oh! And you are under no circumstances to open the box. Were the box to open—which it should not, understand, as it will have been well-secured, and specially prepared for the journey—you are forbidden to look inside. This is very important."

"Of course." Zig paused, then asked, "Sir?"

"What, *Rottenführer*?"

"How shall I respond when asked of the Castle?"

Taubert dismissed the question with a wave.

"Tell them to take what's left."

Zig understood then. Wewelsburg, a noble house older than Germany itself, would not see day's end.

"But—but what of you, *Hauptsturmführer*?"

Taubert peered out a far window, his eyes narrowing to a squint, straining at the limits of vision, trying to glimpse something in the far distance, beyond the ragged green tree-line and frosted peaks.

"Gone," he said, after a while. "I will be gone, Scouter. Long gone and far away."

