Men of honor

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/15474966.

Rating: Explicit
Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category: M/M
Fandom: Hogan's Heroes
Relationship: Robert Hogan/Wilhelm Klink
Additional Tags: Angst and Hurt/Comfort, Romance, Action/Adventure, Slash, Torture
Stats: Published: 2018-07-29 Updated: 2019-11-10 Chapters: 61/? Words: 478467

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by Starflight1701

Summary

When Hochstetter arrests Hogan, Klink is forced to outgrow himself. With the war reaching its peak at the beginning of 1945, and Hogan facing torture and death, Klink knows he has to become the 'Iron Eagle' again if he wants to save himself and the man he secretly has fallen for since the day they met. In the darkest times of the war, the only light of hope is the two men's sense of honor - and the developing love both had never thought to find in each other' arms. Slightly AU.
Hi, dear readers,

thank you for clicking on this story. Those of you, who are readers of my Star-Trek-story “A second chance” and have a peek on the story because I informed you of this project, please do not fear that I abandoned the other writing. As I already let you know I’ve run out of spare time in the moment and will re-start writing hopefully during the following autumn. Yet, to shorten the wait, I decided to publish this story I’ve on my PC for years now, but never had the nerve to put it online.

Like before, my dear beta-reader Kat will have a closer look on my writing. For my new readers: English isn’t my ‘mother-tongue’ and thank the Lord that Kat smooths out my errors.

As said, I wrote this story a few years ago after “Hogan’s Heroes” ran once again on TV, and it caught me more than the first time I saw it in the beginning of the 90s as it ran for the first time in Germany – with big success, and today the show has a lot of fans here in my country. So, logical conclusion, yes, I’m German and I really love how the show displays everything as big comedy, but also broaches sincere subjects and that there is still a dark danger beneath everything, which keeps the tension up. After all, there are so many episodes in which Hogan and the others are about to be caught, revealed or undergo mortal danger during their operations, you cannot help but have to share the thrill the ‘Heroes’ face. Also, I always loved the brotherhood between the ‘Heroes’, the dry humor of the way many German officers were exaggeratedly shown, and the way the ‘Heroes’ always outsmarted their opponents.

Yet I loved the bantering between Hogan and Klink the most, and I often thought they just sounded like an old married couple – both trying to trump each other out, yet with an odd kind of sympathy that grows over the years. I also loved that Hogan not always won the arguments, or (the other way around) that Klink realized that he couldn’t outmatch Hogan in a special case and tried to gain victory with a certain way of cleverness (yet mostly failed – *snicker*). I also liked it a lot that always, before a situation became too hairy, Hogan was there to save Klink. And a few times Klink even grew a backbone and defied Hochstetter, Burkhalter and other men to keep safe those who were his responsibility. From time to time Klink showed why he was called the ‘Iron Eagle’ during WW I, and this – added with the obvious sympathy between him and Hogan – one day gave me the idea for this story. What, if Klink’s feelings for his American counterpart were far more serious than shown on the outside, and it made him outgrow himself when Hogan really needed rescue?

Like you certainly already assume, this is a slash-story, with slow development, a lot of action, hurt, angst (violenc), but also yearning, realization of feelings, tenderness, love (and more). I know, it’s
slightly AU, yet I tried to stay true to the characters. One guy, who gave Hogan and his men problems on regular base was Major Hochstetter of the Gestapo. The actor Howard Caine portraited this character in a way you really could believe that Hochstetter deeply and truly hated Hogan – last but not least because Hogan was one of the few men who didn’t bent to his malic behavior and evil threats. This will be the reason for Hogan being in need for help for once, and for Klink of outgrowing himself.

A little information concerning the time-frame, locations and the way the characters address each other and speak.

I know that in the TV-show Hammelburg was originally placed somewhere near Düsseldorf and not too far away from Berlin. Well, the two cities are approx. 450 km apart. So, where ever the fictional Stalag 13 was located, it could never be in closer range of both towns. The real Hammelburg lies, like most of you certainly know by now, in North-Bavaria. The original Stalag XIII C was placed there, as well as other military facilities. This, the fact that in ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ the winters are shown cold, snowy and long, and that there are higher hills around Hammelburg which even allow an avalanche, makes it clear that the TV-Stalag 13 can’t be placed in the Rhine-area or near Berlin. I’m from Düsseldorf – and believe me, the winters we’ve snow (and had snow in the past) high enough to be counted on the fingers of two hands.

Therefore, I placed the whole location in my story at the real area around Hammelburg (by the way, I know the little town from several visits and can therefore describe the outlay for real).

The next thing is the way the people address each other. In German it’s usual and simply polite, not to address another one as only ‘Leutnant’ or ‘Major’ but as ‘Herr Leutnant’ or ‘Herr Major’ – which translated means, you call someone ‘Mr. Lieutenant’ and so on. The ‘Herr /Mr.’ is dropped the moment you’re adding the family name to the title, means ‘Herr Major’ or ‘Major Hochstetter’. I integrated this in the story to give it a more ‘real’ touch. I also use the German officer titles when referring to the guys or when other Germans address each other, only Hogan and his men are continuing to address f. e. Klink as ‘Colonel Klink’. I also added a few Bavarian typical curses or dictums concerning Sergeant / Feldwebel Schultz, but do not fear, I translated it (as good as possible; mind you. Bavarian is sometimes difficult to translate even in German standard *smile*).

The time-frame was another challenge. I wanted to place it near the end of the war because that’s important for the story. Knowing that the episodes were produced in non-chronological sequence, I did some research. A big help was the site hh.wikia.com that shows a list of the episodes ordered not by production-date but by hints at which year and months during WW II they were staged. Therefore, my story begins a few days after ‘Look at the pretty snowflakes’ that was placed at the 04th January 1945. The next missions were placed at the beginning of February and continued for a few weeks until the liberating of Stalag 13 at the end of April 1945. And in the weeks between ‘Pretty snowflakes’ and the last missions, a lot of changes happens in the POW-camp – and especially with Klink and also Hogan.
One thing about Kinchloe: Because of the not chronical order of the episode’s production, Kinch seems to appear ‘til the end of WW II, while in truth Ivan Dixon never did the 6th season. I decided to go with the chronical list, therefore Kinch is still a part of Hogan’s mission, but Baker has also his appearances.

I do hope you’re going to like it.

So, enough of the prologue.

As always needed, here the disclaimer that goes for the whole story: I do not owe ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ and the mentioned originally characters, and I’ve written this story out of fun and not to earn money with it. The new characters are mine and shall not be used by third parties. Because of the partly sinister topics – physically and mentally violence – and the scenes of love-making this story is not qualified for readers under 18 years!

And now, have fun – and I would love to get some feedback.

Love

Yours Starflight
“Hochstetter just arrived!” Andrew Carter looked with alert back at his superior officer and the other three men, interrupting their work. Sharing glances, the core members of Colonel Robert E. Hogan’s team closed the distance to the youngest of the gang and stopped beside him; throwing a careful look around the high fence that separated the motor-pool of the POW camp Stalag 13 from the rest of the guarded area.

Frowning and clasping his arms around him in his typical stance, Hogan watched how his personal nemesis, Wolfgang Hochstetter, major of the Gestapo, wasn’t coming alone, but with four motor-bikes and three further cars following his own. The moment Hochstetter left his car and didn’t walk towards Klink’s office but scanned the area, Hogan knew something was wrong.

Very wrong!

Usually the major marched into the office of the Kommandant like he owned it. And often you could think it was true. Colonel (Oberst) Wilhelm Klink, commanding officer of the POW-camp Stalag 13, wasn’t known to be the bravest or brightest officer within German’s Luftwaffe (German Air Force). He rather bowed than stood up to something or someone, yet the man had his moments. Moments that Hogan knew how much they cost his German counterpart, yet Klink had his principles. Two of them were to protect his own men, and to protect the prisoners. Hogan was aware of the fact that the SS and the Gestapo would have loved to eliminate any enemy soldier and officer, despite the Geneva Convention, and that between them and their possible victims stood only the members of the Wehrmacht and within this army the unit Luftwaffe – including people like Klink.

Hochstetter had learned this the hard way, as anyone of Hogan’s team knew by now, yet the Gestapo major was always good for surprises. Nasty surprises, mind you.

“Is it only me, but do you think ‘ochstetter looks grimmer than ever?’” LeBeau murmured as he stopped beside Hogan; his French accent heavier than usual because of his rising concern. Rubbing his hands, which were black with grease, he shivered in the cold air of the 11th of January’s evening. Every one of them would love to return to their barrack to warm up, but first Klink’s car had to undergo some repairs – for once for real reasons.

“He looks not only gimmer, but also… almost happy?” Sergeant Baker, second senior POW officer, had followed LeBeau and watched the Gestapo major.
“Yeah,” Hogan nodded; feeling tension rising in his stomach. “And if something makes him happy, this something certainly is bad for us.”

“What’s the matter now, boys? Why do you stop working at Klink’s car?” The voice with the strong Bavarian accent belonged to no-one else than Hans Schultz, Sergeant of the Guards and almost considered as a friend to Hogan and his men. The large German with the round and indulgent face stopped behind LeBeau and Hogan, while looking over their shoulders. Like usual he watched the prisoners when they were working within the camp, pretending not to know that he was more of a help for Hogan and his men than a guard, because of his principle to ‘see and to hear nothing’. Just right now he did see a lot – and he didn’t like it.

“What does he want here?” he grumbled; his dislike for the Gestapo and especially for Hochstetter clear in his tone.

“I don’t know, but I have a bad feeling,” Hogan murmured. Then he tensed, as Hochstetter’s eyes met his. Both men had deep brown eyes, but where Hogan’s usually sparked with mischief, love of life, quip and boyish humor, the major’s were hard, piercing and flickering with constant contempt.

Especially when it came to Hogan.

So, it was no wonder that Hogan got a tiny shock, as the Gestapo officer began to smile the moment he saw him. And then the smile changed into something that looked scarily similar to a crocodile baring its teeth.

“Hogan!” Hochstetter all but bellowed; striding with large steps towards the American; eight of his companions followed him.

“Colonel, I don’t like this,” Kinchloe murmured; concern in his voice. He had a certain assumption that the Major’s visit had to do with Hogan, and he instantly worried for his superior officer and best friend.

Hogan took a deep breath; the nasty feeling in his belly turning slowly into coldness. Yes, Hochstetter was up to something bad and it had to do with Hogan given the stare that was fixed on the American officer.

“Whatever happens: Stay down, fellas,” he ordered quietly before he walked towards his nemesis. His own worry peaked even more as he watched the SS guards following Hochstetter; every one of
them held a hand on the pistol grip.

“Good evening, Major,” Hogan greeted. His voice sounded as casual as ever. “This late away from your headquarters?”

Hochstetter still smiled at him; his dark eyes hard as flintstone. “Yes, someone just chased me out of my comfortable office.”

“Your assistant? You should fire him. Or was the dinner that bad that you want to try the food they serve here?” Hogan’s smirk wasn’t that impish like he grinned whenever he bantered with Klink. The latter was fun, with Hochstetter it was a constant dare. Yet he usually loved to drive the man right up the wall, but sometimes it had been better to retreat without making it look like flight, because Hogan always knew when an escape was the only way out. Especially when it came to the major.

Both men had developed a strange dislike to each other the moment they met. Hochstetter was a choleric person; short in build and in temper. Someone who not only suffered permanently of a too high blood pressure, but also of an ego big as the Mount Everest and a huge paranoia. Of the latter Hogan was convinced and he sometimes used it to gain advantages or to make the major act in a way the American colonel needed him to. And very often it was simply fun to bring the man to the boil, yet Hogan wasn’t careless enough to underestimate the major. In his own way Hochstetter was dangerous – not only because of the power he had as a high-ranking officer of the Gestapo, but also of his quick-thinking mind and his intelligence.

The latter was shown again, as the major replied, “Food is a very good cue, Hogan. I got fed with information – information which finally proved something I already knew for a long time.”

Something flared in the major’s eyes, and the moment Hogan recognized it as triumph, Hochstetter already yelled towards his men, “ Arrest him!”

Before Hogan could react, two of the black clothed guards were at his side. Strong hands twisted his arms backwards and out of instinct he reared up; trying to fight back. The grip on his arms became brutal and he stopped himself from crying out at the pain in his shoulders, while he felt cold metal encircling his wrists, followed by the click of the handcuffs being closed. Behind him he heard his men roaring in fury, and fear rose in him as several of the SS-guards turned around and drew their weapons; pointing them at his crew – his team, his friends.

“Men, stay down!” he shouted over his shoulder; fearing for his comrades more than for himself. “That’s an order,” he added for good measure. He heard the angry protests, mixed with a shocked
sounding Schultz who tried to calm them. LeBeau was cursing in colorful French while Newkirk seemed to be at the edge of a raging fit, but at least they obeyed Hogan’s command. Turning his attention back towards Hochstetter, the colonel felt a chill running down his back. His nemesis watched him with sinister glee that told Hogan more than he wanted: Hochstetter had finally found a legal reason to arrest him. And Robert Hogan didn’t want to think of what would come within the next hours or days.

The major closed the small distance to him and straightened his short form. “I knew I would catch you one day, Hogan! I simply knew it! I’ll mark this date red in my calendar for finally having enough proof to do what I should have done months ago: Arresting and questioning you before I send you to the firing squad.” He lowered his voice to an ugly hiss. “Or even better to the gallows. Your death will be slower and more painful that way.” The words were spit out with such venom and joy that there was no doubt left of his deep hate for the American officer.

Hogan stared at him; ignoring his hurting arms which were still gripped by the two guards and were edged back to a painful angle. “I don’t know of what you accuse me now, but…” He wasn’t able to finish his sentence, as his head was knocked aside, and a sharp pain stung in his right cheek. Hochstetter had just backhanded him – hard. The silver SS-ring Hochstetter wore, left a red stripe on the colonel’s cheek. Hogan was more outraged then everything else, as he slowly turned his head back; eyes blazing. Behind him his men and other prisoners, which had left the barracks by now, were shouting insults and threats at the SS-men, but they remained where they were. Last but not least, because of the weapons which were aimed at them.

“Major Hochstetter, this goes too far!” Schultz shouted indignantly. It was clear that the soft-hearted man was torn between duty and his friendly feelings for the American colonel.

“You manhandle an official prisoner of war and of the Luftwaffe!” Hogan snarled at Hochstetter; not ready to give up. “That is against the Geneva Convention and…”

“Shut up, Hogan! A spy and saboteur had no rights he could…”

“You got the wrong man here, Major. Care to explain how I could do what you accuse me of when I’m nothing more than a prisoner of war and…”

“I don’t buy your innocent act anymore!” Hochstetter raged and raised his hand for a second slap that never came, as a long slender hand closed around his wrist and stopped him.

“Have you finally gone completely mad?” The voice echoed with unmasked wrath and as Hogan looked over Hochstetter’s shoulder his gaze found the furious face of the camp’s Kommandant.
That Wilhelm Klink had left his office in haste was obvious, because despite the icy coldness and the rest of a cold he was sporting, he had refrained from slipping on his coat or to warm his balding head with a cap. Even the always present riding crop wasn’t jammed under his arm.

“Klink, stay out of this!” Hochstetter ordered but was ignored. Klink’s dark blue eyes flashed with unhidden anger, which even the monocle over his left eye wasn’t able to make it look silly.

“How dare you to come to my camp and manhandle one of my prisoners, Hochstetter! I’ll report you to Berlin for this!”

“Be careful that you won’t be accused of supporting him which would make you face your own firing squad,” the major answered arrogantly while wrestling his hand out of Klink’s grip; nodding towards Hogan.

Usually, Klink would have winced and tried to make fun of a situation that could be risky for him. But to everyone’s bafflement this wasn’t the case this time. The Kommandant straightened his tall figure, while his gaze wandered over Hogan’s face. Klink’s already burning anger doubled as he saw the red bruise Hochstetter’s backhand had left on the younger man’s face he witnessed only seconds ago.

He always treated his prisoners with respect and protected them as well as he could, but when it came to Robert Hogan, Klink had developed a soft spot. A kind of soft spot he would be court materialled and certainly executed for if it ever would become officially known, yet he was powerless when this certain clever American with the attitude of an overgrown boy was involved. And contrary to the many situations in which Hogan had somehow managed to help him, just right now it was Hogan who was in need of rescue for once.

“And with what should I have supported Colonel Hogan, Major Hochstetter?” He looked straight in the shorter man’s eyes with pure mockery. “In showing him what kind of resentful gnome you are? Believe me, this is well-known to whole Hammelburg and my camp.”

It earned him some laughs and even applause from several prisoners, and he didn’t need to look at his guards to know that they hid some smirks behind the impassive mask they were forced to put on when on duty.

Hochstetter stared with barely hidden contempt at Klink, while Hogan rose to speak,
“I swear, Kommandant, I have no idea of what the major is blaming me for this time,” Inwardly he crossed his fingers that Klink would believe his innocent behavior. Actually, the American officer had a very good idea to what Hochstetter was referring to and it would mean his, Hogan’s, certain death.

The major turned back towards him. “I blame you for all the sabotages and other unusual things which happened in this area in the last three years, Hogan, but this is nothing new. What really is new is the fact that I’ve now proof for it – and for this you will hang!” He glared at his men. “Take him to my car.”

“Not so quick, Herr Major!” Klink interrupted him; blocking the way and straightening his body even more so that he towered a lot over Hochstetter. “This isn’t the first time you state that you have some proof of Hogan being a spy or saboteur, and every time said proof went up in smoke.”

“This time…” Hochstetter began but was interrupted firmly by Klink again.

“I really don’t have to remind you that this is the toughest POW-camp in the whole Germany and that under my command there never has been a successful escape.”

Hochstetter only chuckled ugly. “You forget that one prisoner escaped only a few weeks ago. Hauptmann Martin…”

“Was one of your spies and certainly got out because one of your guards let him,” Klink cut in. “None of the real prisoner made it successfully out of Stalag 13 until now. So, tell me, how shall Hogan commit all the crimes you’re accusing him of when he is here in my camp?”

Hochstetter lifted his chin arrogantly and a dangerous smirk played around his lips again. “That is exactly the point, Klink – and the reason why I warn you to stay out of this. There are only two possibilities: Hogan operated from here right under your nose with you being too blind and deaf to see and hear anything, or you’re his accessory, what would make you a traitor who will be shot.” He lowered his voice again. “It’s your choice.”

Hogan couldn’t help himself, but wallowing the bad taste in his mouth. Everyone knew that ‘courage’ wasn’t part of Klink’s personal description. Rather the opposite. As human and fair the Oberst was – or tried to be – he was also a coward, who backed down immediately as soon as a situation could become the tiniest bit risky for him. Klink wouldn’t throw his career – his life – away to protect Hogan. Hochstetter had the upper hand, and Hogan knew what this meant for him. He
could only hope that he wouldn’t have to suffer too long.

“Why don’t you show me the proofs you have that Hogan is an Underground-agent?” Klink asked with false kindness; surprising everyone with his refusal to give in.

“Because,” Hochstetter snarled, “every time I had proof they vanished. But not now! I’ll take Hogan to the Gestapo Headquarters in Hammelburg, and I will question him until he doesn’t know the difference between up and down anymore. And you will not stop me.”

Klink only smiled for a second at him without saying anything, before he answered, “And there you are mistaken, my dear Hochstetter. Colonel Hogan is a POW of the Luftwaffe and as such he is my responsibility. You will not…”

“The Gestapo takes this responsibility from you, Klink,” the major snarled. “Hogan will be brought to Hammelburg now. End of story.” He nodded towards his guards which began to drag the American officer towards the staff car.

“You will not leave my camp with him!” Klink’s voice rarely had sounded that strong and sharp – and Hogan wasn’t the only one who looked with big eyes at him. Sweet Lord, what had gotten into the Kommandant?

Hochstetter blinked. What on Earth had happened to the usually backbone-less man? His eyes found Klink’s, and he was even more surprised to see the steel in the Oberst’s eyes. Klink wouldn’t back down this time; this much the major realized. He had a few discussions with him before, and he had learned that Klink wouldn’t give in when he had set his mind onto something.

“Your worry for Colonel Hogan is more than fishy, Klink. If I learn that you indeed supported his crimes, I’ll shoot you instantly.”

“And then you will have to answer to General Burkhalter and explain to him why you shot one of his officers without any trial,” Klink answered icily. “The general hasn’t forgotten that it was you who set off the caught Underground-agents in his own car because you thought the war was over.”

Hochstetter’s face turned red as he was reminded of his biggest failure that had almost cost him his position and freedom. Only because of his ‘friends’ in Berlin he had been allowed to keep his rank and to remain the commanding officer of the Gestapo and SS in Hammelburg. “As far as I remember you believed it, too!” he growled.
Klink smiled his sneaky grin at him. “Yes, but we had only a little party here in the camp. And shouldn’t it be the Gestapo which knows everything? You believed it, too, and the decision to let the arrested agents drive away in your car was your idea!”

“No, it was Hogan’s idea!” Hochstetter raged. The finger he pointed at the American colonel shook with wrath.

“Since when do you listen to what I suggest?” Hogan asked innocently.

“Bah!” the major screamed. “Shut. Your. Trap!”

Klink pursed his lips. Yes, it had indeed been Hogan’s idea to let the arrested men and women go, but it was his duty as soldier and officer to aid his own people and allies. Just like he certainly had done several times, even in his position as a POW. Taking a deep breath, the Oberst’s gaze found Hogan’s. “Have you anything to tell me before this whole situation with the little henpeck here escalates?”

Hogan moistened his lips. He was grateful that Klink stood up against Hochstetter to defend him, but there was no way that he could admit anything to him. The lives of his men were at stake, and even if he couldn’t save himself, at least he could try to protect his friends.

“As I said, Kommandant, I have no clue why the major all of sudden thinks he has some proof of me being a saboteur or spy.” And this wasn’t a complete lie. For once the American colonel and his crew weren’t responsible for any sabotage that might have happened in the area. For a few days now, London had given them no new task despite of a transfer of a little information from the Hammelburg Underground Newkirk had retrieved for them. The last stunt of the Unsung Heroes – or ‘Hogan’s Heroes’, as they were called now by London and the other Allies now – had woken too much suspicion and London didn’t want to risk the whole mission. Well, risk was the biggest part in Hogan’s job description, but there was a fine line between risk and recklessness.

Yet it was always dangerous to run a ring of espionage – especially when you have your base placed in a POW-camp, invisible to the ears and eyes of the guards and the presented officers. And to accomplish missions for which you have to leave and return to said camp was an additional risk that demanded even more from his men and himself. That one of them would be caught one day hadn’t been a question of ‘if’, but ‘when’.

And obviously this day had now arrived – and Hogan hadn’t the smallest idea what or who had set
Hochstetter on the correct tract.

Klink only nodded at Hogan’s words. “As I thought. There is no way that you’re an active part of the Underground.” He looked at Hochstetter. “I will come with you.”

“What?” The major stared at him like he suddenly had grown two pairs of wings and three heads.

“You heard me: I am coming with you. I will make certain that Hogan will be treated correctly while you show me your so-called proof. Only then I will decide what to do.”

Hochstetter stemmed his fists in his waist. “Be careful, Klink. I could ‘decide’ to arrest you, too.”

“Yes, you can decide this,” the Oberst affirmed. “And then you’ll have to answer to General Burkhalter, like I already told you.” He raised his voice. “Schuuuuultz!”

“Yes, Herr Kommandant?” Schultz answered instantly; walking quickly towards the group. Hogan’s men followed him, despite the fact that several of the SS-guards aimed their weapons especially at them.

“You are in charge until I’m back – hopefully with Colonel Hogan.”

“Don’t be too sure of it,” Hochstetter growled, but was ignored.

“If I’m not back by eight o’clock tomorrow morning, call General Burkhalter and tell him what happened.” Klink’s gaze found Hochstetter’s again. “I’m certain the general would love to bring some order to the mess you’re calling your headquarters.”

That the Luftwaffe and the Gestapo despised each other was an open secret, and Klink made no bones about his great dislike for men like Hochstetter, the Gestapo in general and the SS. In his eyes they were a shame to Germany, and nothing else.

“Sergeant Kinchloe, you’re the officer in charge of the POWs until Colonel Hogan is back,” Klink addressed the oldest man with the second highest rank among the prisoners. “Please make certain that your men stay calm.”
“But Kommandant…” Carter began to protest.

“You heard Colonel Klink. Stay down until we’re back,” Hogan interrupted him while giving him and Kinchloe a pointed glance. Both men and the others all knew the real order beneath those words. If he didn’t come back, they would have to clear any evidence that could give them away — meaning they would have to destroy all the equipment they had installed over the last three years — and then to escape. It would mean leaving him behind but they had all known the risk when they had agreed to start their Underground missions.

“We’ve lost enough time,” Hochstetter cut in. Gripping the colonel’s arm, he scoffed, “Maybe you should say good bye to your men. You will never see them again.”

To the major’s anger, Hogan only smirked his infuriating grin at him, before he called, “Fellas, keep the coffee warm for me. I just have to make a short trip to Hochstetter’s office and I’m back for the midnight dinner.”

A low growl escaped the major’s throat. “Take Hogan to my car!” he ordered; ready to stomp his foot as Hogan simply continued to grin.

Even if every one of the colonel’s core team — and the many prisoners which had built a circle around them in the meantime — had to laugh about the dry joke Hogan just made, not one of them took the situation lightly. Those who knew him best — his four friends — were aware that this was Hogan’s very own way to deal with stress.

And there was a further man who had come to know the colonel better than thought. “Hogan, this is not helping,” Klink told him quietly. Both men looked at each other and the Oberst felt the familiar bolt in his heart whenever he met those usually sparkling, chocolate eyes. But it was quickly replaced with a cold twinge of anxiety as he had to watch how Hogan was roughly forced towards the waiting cars.

‘God help us all if Hochstetter should be right about you, Hogan. It would be not only your death, but mine, too,’ he thought, before he followed the group; his walk for once not stooped like usual.

‘He’s really accompanying us on his own free will,’ Hochstetter wondered. ‘There is more at stake for him than losing his senior POW officer to the Gestapo. And I ask myself what’s so important for him.’
He watched how the taller man shivered in the cold wind and sneered, “Have you misplaced your coat, Klink, or…”

“I do think the rust bucket you call a car as a heating system. Or could it be that Himmler gave you Gestapo-boys a simpler car equipment than Göring gave the Luftwaffe?” Klink taunted back.

“I only fear that your cold will get worse again,” Hochstetter said with false kindness. “I heard that your sneeze can trigger an avalanche, and I don’t want to spend the night on the road.”

Klink turned red – half with embarrassment, half with anger. It was seven days ago that the main-road to Hammelburg had been blocked effectively by an avalanche after many days of heavy snowfall. General Strommberg had wanted to send the Third Panzer Division this way and had demanded from Klink that his prisoners shovel the street free. That night they had stayed at the closed ‘Hofbräu’ because the snow had been too much. Klink still knew that Hogan had tried to trigger the feared avalanche by playing music with his men in the taproom, hoping that the noise would be enough to do the trick. And the Kommandant was still convinced that this – and only this! – had provoked the white flood coming down the hill, and not his sneezing!

This incident had been another thing that should have woken his anger concerning Hogan and his never-ending plans to help the Allies even in his position as a POW, but it didn’t. Not really. It was Hogan’s duty as an officer to fight whenever possible. And, by the way, Klink had despised Strommberg who forced him to join the whole thing despite the fact that he, Klink, had come down with a nasty cold.

Until today he wasn’t really fit, like the itching in his nose proved. A moment later he sneezed – and Hochstetter promptly used it for further mocking.

“Don’t, Klink! The roofs are full of snow and seeing the way you spoil your prisoners you don’t want them to shovel the doors to their barracks free this late at day.”

The Oberst shot him a furious glare, but it was Hogan who interrupted the upcoming quarrel. “Don’t tell me the whole escort is only for me, Major,” he scoffed; nodding his head at the rider of the motorcycles and the three other cars. “I thought only the tiny man with the small moustache gets such attention.”

“Shut up, Hogan, or I’ll make you!” Hochstetter yelled; his face reddening again.
‘For God’s sake, Hogan, don’t annoy him even more!’ Klink said exasperated; shooting the younger man a begging glare, before he climbed onto the car’s back seat. Hogan was shoved inside beside him. One of the guards opened the shackle around his left wrist and used the free handcuff to chain his right hand to the inner handle of the door. The second guard held the colonel at gun point the whole time.

No, this wasn’t only ‘not good’, this was worse. The situation was more than grave, and Hogan’s mouth went dry again. Hochstetter was serious which could only mean one thing: He really had something against Hogan in his hands. And this gave the colonel the chills for once.

“Is this really necessary?” Klink demanded, pointing to Hogan’s handcuffs as Hochstetter took the front passenger seat.

“He’s the most dangerous man in all Germany. So – YES! – it is necessary,” the major snapped back; relishing in the anxious faces of Hogan’s men, while the car began to move.

For a moment Hogan ignored his nemesis and looked out the window. His gaze found his team – the men he had gone with through thick and thin, and which were far more to him by now than subordinates. They had become close friends – family even. And it was really possible that he wouldn’t see them ever again. Sorrow spread through him at the mere thought – sorrow and fear that he quickly suppressed.

His glance found the pale face of the youngest member of his team, Carter; the outraged ones of LeBeau and Newkirk, and the deeply worried one of Kinchloe, and the shocked one of Baker, who stepped in for Kinchloe at the radio-station if necessary. Sweet Lord, he even hadn’t been able to bid them good-bye for real. He could only hope that they would be able to escape before hell broke loose, because if Hochstetter really had proof that Hogan was an Underground-agent – even the most wanted one going by the code-name ‘Papa Bear’ – the Gestapo would tear Stalag 13 apart.

As Hochstetter’s car was turned around, the colonel’s look found the big figure of Schultz, and new sadness rose in him. ‘Take him with you,fellas,’ he thought to himself. ‘Our large teddy-bear will be shot otherwise, and this damn war already took too many good men.’

Then the driver stepped on the gas and the car headed towards the gates – accompanied by the other vehicles. Hogan once had joked that he would leave the camp through the main-gates one day, yet he hadn’t imagined it would be because of being arrested by the Gestapo and facing torture and certain death. He didn’t lie to himself. If the Gestapo had someone in their clutches they wouldn’t stop at anything to get the truth out of their victim. And Hochstetter would love to break Hogan, even if the colonel would put up resistance to his very last breathe.
Moistening his lips, Robert Hogan leaned back in the seat and prevented himself from throwing one last glance back at the camp he had called ‘home’ for almost three years now. He didn’t want to think of the possibility that he would not return to this place. Fear was a bad adviser and just right now he needed a clear and steady head more than ever before if he wanted to get out of this. Yes, he was grateful that Klink stood up for him and went with them now to defend him, but when the going would get rough, the man would be no help for Hogan. The Gestapo – Hochstetter – didn’t know any mercy, and Klink would indeed be risking his neck if he tried to get into Hochstetter’s way.

No, Hogan knew that he was on his own in this case – and this time he hadn’t the tiniest idea how get his head out of the loop that had been already placed around his neck. But somehow, he had to try to avert the disaster that was spreading its dark wings above him and his friends.

Somehow.

The only question was: How?

*** *** ***

With fear and fury, the four men Hogan called ‘his core-team’ watched how Hochstetter’s staff car began to move and took their beloved superior with it. They all knew what this could mean for Hogan – what certainly lay ahead for him.

“We… we can’t allow this,” Carter pressed out; feeling helpless.

“We’ve to help him!” Newkirk agreed.

Especially in a situation like his.

“Schultzie, you have to do something,” LeBeau addressed the big guard; looking almost pleadingly at the Bavarian.

“And what should or could I do?” Schultz answered quietly; his worry plain to hear in his voice. “There is nothing we can do at the moment.” He glanced at the four POWs he secretly considered friends, saw the despair in their eyes and gulped. He hated it when those four – no those five, Hogan
included – were unhappy. Long ago he had realized what fine men they were, and he didn’t care that war had put him and them on different sides. Here, inside of the camp, was their own little world that didn’t stick too close to the madness that was going on outside, and Schultz always had tried to treat the POWs fair – and mostly gentler than it was allowed.

And just right now he felt very sorry for them – worrying about their leader like this. Straightening his frame, he said quietly to comfort them, “Oberst Klink will not allow that any harm befalls Colonel Hogan. He’ll protect him, be sure of it.”

“Dear God, Klink can’t even protect himself,” Newkirk raged. “A few loud words from Hochstetter and he bows like a willow in the wind. How could he defend Ho…”

Schultz turned around to him; frowning. “This is not a nice way to speak of our Kommandant, Newkirk. Klink may seem to you cowardly, but he is braver than you all think. He wants to survive this damn war, but still stays true to his own notions. And for this he dances between the raindrops, but only to a certain degree. He has some limits after all.” He watched the convoy leaving the camp. “And one of those limits is Colonel Hogan. If the colonel is really threatened, Klink doesn’t take any joke.”

“They do respect each other in a certain way,” Kinchloe admitted, “but I don’t think Klink would take any bigger risk only to save the colonel’s neck.”

“And here is where you are wrong, Kinchloe,” Schultz said softly. “Very wrong.” Concern made him look older than he was. “Klink would take any risk to keep Hogan safe – but this is something you won’t understand.”

LeBeau blinked in confusion. “What do you mean, Schultzie?”

“Yeah, why should Klink grow a backbone all of sudden only for the colonel?” Carter nodded.

The sergeant opened his mouth to answer, but then he quickly shook his head. “I know nothing. Nooottthhhiiinnng!”

The truth was that Schultz knew a lot in this special case. More than anybody else for the last year since he became aware of it, but like always he knew when to stay silent. Especially when it came to Klink and his secret – a secret Schultz couldn’t really understand but he accepted it. He was aware of the fact that it would disgrace and put Klink into a deadly position if anybody would ever learn of his
Schultz sometimes imagined how it had to be to live with the constant fear of being revealed. And to suppress your own yearnings was certainly horrible, too. This knowledge was enough to make the sergeant stay silent. Yes, Hans sometimes complained about his superior officer, but he would never endanger the man on purpose. For this he liked Klink too much – a man who had been a hero during World War I, was now called a coward behind his back and was in truth still braver than many other men Schultz had met.

He only hoped everything would turn out well for his Kommandant and the American colonel, otherwise there would be a lot of hurt on all sides – not to speak of death that was looming a little bit closer than it usually did in these dark times…

TBC…

I hope you liked the chapter so far. In the next one, Hochstetter shows his deviousness, Klink overgrows himself for the first time and Hogan proves once again that he is a man of honor who helps a friend who is technically an enemy. You also learn more about Klink's real feelings concerning his senior POW officer. There will also be a lot of action - because of something you maybe don't anticipate.

I would love to get some Feedback and I promise that I'll answer any Review.

Have a nice start into the new week

Love,

Yours Starflight
Courage has many faces

Hi, my dear readers!

Given the shown stats I’m really happy that already a lot of you already had a peek into the story and thank you so much for the first feedback.

Because my dear beta-reader Kat was already done with the second chapter as I published the story, I post the new installment now. I hope you’re going to like it.

As already mentioned it tells about the secret feelings Klink had for a long time now for his troublesome senior POW officer, but there will be also a lot of action. I hope you’re going to like it.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 2 – Courage has many faces

‘Brave’ wasn’t the word that would come to your mind when you saw Klink sitting beside Hogan in Hochstetter’s staff car just right now. Outside the approaching night was about to swallow the landscape – like a dark omen. The journey was silent, because for once Hogan didn’t make quips. And Klink was grateful for it. The situation was dire enough without enraged Hochstetter even more.

He turned his head and watched Hogan’s profile in the last glimmer of daylight and sighed inwardly.

The moment the man had come through the door of his office, Klink had known the American officer meant trouble. A lot of trouble, not only because of his personality, but also because of his devilish good looks and his irresistible boyish charm.
Klink liked to flirt with women and during his stay in Munich, when he was still quite young, he even fell in love with a sweet lady called Marlene. He had come as close to a marriage as much as he could, but the affair ended before it became too serious.

Because of him – because of something he missed in the relationship he only began to comprehend within the following years.

Between the end of that relationship and his realization of what was ‘wrong’ with him, he really hadn’t minded taking women to his bed. Hell, he had even increased his dubious reputation of being constantly after every skirt that came his way, but a part of him was never satisfied with it. Step by step it became an act, because he couldn’t deny any longer that he wasn’t immune to male beauty – a streak that was regarded as pervert and sick in the Third Reich.

Klink had heard what happened to men who were caught living out their ‘weakness’. He even had lost a comrade because he had been seen kissing another man. Paul had been brought to jail and a few days later news had reached Klink that Paul had been executed. There were also the horrible murmurs of men being castrated fully conscious before they were shot – all of this only because they had tender feelings for the same gender.

Just like Klink had. And for almost three years now these feelings were directed towards the man who was living, breathing trouble on two long legs.

As Hogan had been brought to his office the first time and looked with tempting deep brown eyes at him, Klink had known that fate had walked through the shabby wooden door into his life. Proud, lazily and more handsome than it should be allowed the new prisoner had made Klink hold his breath. But this had been nothing compared to the second the American officer had offered him the first impish grin. Eyes twinkling with boyish amusement, white teeth shimmering, long lashes shadowing those catching eyes a moment later, Robert E. Hogan’s appearance had hit home more seriously than any bullet could do.

Klink had felt his belly clenching – a well-known, constantly feared clenching that set him on high alert. To be attracted to another male meant excitement, but also mortal risk. Only a few days later Wilhelm Klink realized that Hogan possessed a danger to him that had nothing to do with him being a highly intelligent man who was the senior officer of the POWs from now on. There was so much more to the colonel that it made Klink’s head spin and he realized that this man could be his down fall.

He had tried to brush the temptation aside – to regard Hogan as only another prisoner of war, but for naught. Then he tried to get rid of him; using any chance that would show Hogan in a bad light to
get him transferred to another camp or to reveal him as a danger to the Third Reich. Again, for naught – especially because he couldn’t go through with his plan with a full heart; skipping too harsh accusations because he knew it could mean Hogan’s death.

His attempts to keep the younger man at a distance went out of the window, too. Hogan came to his office without being called; walking into it as if he would just show up at a friend’s house. Worse, he rarely even knocked. There was no day that the colonel wasn’t near him several times and spun his web around him – sometimes teasing, sometimes irritated, often manipulating.

Oh yes, Klink knew that Hogan manipulated him to his liking; wheedling benefits out of him. One time it was more bread for his men for a week, another time it was half an hour longer light for a few days or an additional shower. It never was something big, never something insolent, yet the small victories that Hogan gained nine times of ten he came to Klink were an alarming rate.

Yet the Oberst was helpless to resist the man he should regard as an enemy and had defied him over and over again. He loved to bargain with Hogan and to watch his American counterpart accepting the challenges in his typical way. The tricks Hogan had put up his sleeves seemed to be endless, his arguments sometimes well thought through, other times they simply were improvisations, but still clever. And Klink had been shocked to the core as he realized one day that he was eager for those moments when he found himself the full focus of those brown eyes; Hogan’s wits a never-ending pool of ideas which held Klink on the tips of his toes.

Yes, there were times Klink had the urge to wring Hogan’s neck. The man gave him more trouble than all the prisoners together, but one cheery glance, one lopsided smile and one friendly clap on the Oberst’s shoulder, and Wilhelm Klink found himself melting inwardly like butter in the sun. Hell, he even was half as irritated as he pretended to be when Hogan stole his cigars, called him ‘Willie’ or even served himself with Klink’s wine or Schnaps. It was the part of his carelessness that had caught Klink first, then he had come to almost adore the sharp mind behind the boyish, innocent looking behavior.

Of course, Klink wasn’t stupid enough to buy Hogan’s act of being a simple prisoner who was only more daring than the others. And he also didn’t buy the half of Hogan’s stories he presented him with whenever something odd went on. He knew that he hadn’t been sent to the Russian Front until now because of Hogan. Every time Burkhalter was about to make this move, something strange happened that made the general think twice of sending Klink away. Hell, Klink was even sure that Hogan was behind the plan that made Hochstetter and Burkhalter exchange him, Klink, for a caught Underground-head because all of sudden they were convinced, the Kommandant of Stalag 13 was the long-searched super-agent Nimrod. This kind of prank bored Hogan’s stamp, and Klink would have bet his last shirt that the American colonel had been the person who was responsible for his release of being held hostage.

And there were the two times, Klink had found himself in custody – placed there one time by
Burkhalter and another time by a Gestapo-officer. Both times he was about to face a firing squad, and both times he had escaped his fate only because Hogan (and Schultz) intervened. All right, the first time Hogan had put him into the situation, but he also had saved him. And the second time it had been Schultz who tried to help him, but Hogan had been part of the game. There was no doubt about it.

It should alarm him that his senior POW officer was able to pull stunts like this from his position within the camp, but it didn’t really bother him. Hogan’s willingness to help Klink when a situation became too hot, showed the Oberst that his American counterpart cared for him.

When the war came dangerously close to Stalag 13, the ground shaking with explosions and things were hurled through the air, Hogan always pushed him out of harm’s way or yelled a warning. If something happened, Hogan always found a chance to hold him, Klink, within the camp’s relative safety. And if ill-willed persons showed up, Hogan was there to distract them. In his own way the colonel had turned into a kind of protector whenever it was necessary, and Klink had skipped asking how Hogan was always able to come out of every situation as the winner. Sometimes it was better to use Schultz as an example, who constantly stated he would ‘see and hear nnnooothing’.

But it wasn’t those events in which Hogan showed he didn’t really regard Klink as an enemy which made the Oberst’s feelings bubble. It was the hours when they played chess, the minutes they gambled for victory in their endless banter and the seconds Hogan really smiled at him – eyes warm, expression soft, stance relaxed. It gave him ideas of what could be.

Klink was not blind to the fact that Hogan flirted a lot with the camp’s secretary Fräulein (Miss) Hilda and switched on his charm whenever a female was near, yet he couldn’t stop hoping that maybe the younger man wasn’t reluctant to regard another male as more than a friend. The hope was tiny at best, yet Klink had saved some optimism for himself.

And, by the way, there was no chance to escape the temptation Hogan presented. The American was a constant factor in his life by now, and somehow on the way Klink had fallen for him.

Hard!

The hidden longing and the fire in his veins which flared up whenever Hogan was in his personal space still burnt in Klink’s gut, but during the last months it had mingled with more deeper feelings. Softer, more gentle and tender ones – and it scared Klink.

He had fallen in love for real this time – and the danger to lose this love just right now was huge. It wasn’t the first time that someone of the Gestapo accused Hogan of being an Underground-agent.
Only a few weeks ago Major Pruhst of the Gestapo had been absolutely certain that he had revealed Hogan’s double-life and had come to lay out a trap for the colonel. Klink had been forced to support him, yet he had prayed that Pruhst was wrong – and as Hogan’s doppelganger Erik Schafstein had shown up, he had been glad that the major’s accusations went out the window. Yet, deep down, Klink had a bad feeling when he thought back on those two days. Something had been off, but he couldn’t put a finger on it.

And the bad feeling worsened from minute to minute now.

If Hochstetter really had proof that Hogan was an active member of the Underground, the colonel would be sent to the firing squad or the gallows. There would be no escape. And the mere thought of watching Hogan die made Klink nauseous.

Forcing the direction of his thoughts away, he quickly returned his attention back to the road. The night was falling rapidly now, and he could see in the headlights how nature was freezing over. The winter was hard this year, harder than before, and the temperature was below the freezing point for weeks now. But it was nothing compared to the chill that went through Klink’s inner core. Soon they would be in Hammelburg and then he would learn the truth – a truth he really didn’t want to know.

Beside him Hogan remained silent; his thoughts moving in circles. What was it that Hochstetter held over his head? The last mission had been to make certain that the Third Panzer Division would be delayed. The success was still to be seen because of the closed main road to Hammelburg. Since then London hadn’t given him and his men any new special tasks. Hogan had transferred a little information from the Underground to London, which had been retrieved by Newkirk four days ago, but that had been all.

If someone, by pure misfortune, had seen Newkirk in Hammelburg meeting someone from the Underground and was able to identify him as one of the POWs – howsoever – Hochstetter would have come earlier to Stalag 13. Usually the Gestapo worked quicker; especially now, after the Allies had landed in Normandy several months ago and had forced the Germans to retreat to their own original borders by now. And, by the way, Hochstetter would have arrested Newkirk and not him, Hogan.

So, if it hadn’t been Newkirk’s visit to Hammelburg, then what had maybe given the colonel away? A defector of the Underground or of Allies’ united military? If so, he was absolutely lost. On the other hand, his men were also well-known to the most members of the Underground in the area and to the high-ranking officers in London. Why hadn’t they been in Hochstetter’s focus, too? Of course, Hogan was more than grateful that his comrades – his friends – weren’t in the same position as he was now. He would give his life to protect them without any hesitation, yet the question remained: Why was only he arrested?
Was this whole situation here a pretense of Hochstetter to finally have his hands on him? Had Hochstetter faced a dead end in his searches and wasn’t ready to quit; staging a deception to finally kill the man he had hated for so long? And even if the latter was the case, then why now? Was the major’s position at stake again? Did he realize that the Germans were about to lose the war and he didn’t want to forfeit the chance to get revenge on his personal nemesis before everything was over? Or had it something to do with Major Pruhst’s investigation a few weeks ago? Had they both teamed up to bring him, Hogan, down? Had Pruhst found out that there was something off with ‘Erik Schafstein’ who was ought to be a ‘Doppelganger’ of Hogan but in reality had been Hogan himself?

So many questions without an answer, not before they would reach Hammelburg. And Hogan really didn’t look forward to it. He knew what lay ahead for him, despite Klink’s unexpected presence. It was well known that the Gestapo was not above of torturing people in the most brutal way if information and answers were demanded, and Hogan would have been a fool not to realize and – yes – to fear it. The prospect of what would happen to him within the next hours and maybe days sent dread through his whole being.

Swallowing again the bad taste in his mouth and ignoring the sick feeling in his belly, he looked to his left, where Klink sat. He was still baffled that the man had stood up against Hochstetter like this and even accompanied them by his own free will. Usually a sharp tone was enough to let the Oberst step back with nervous laughter and foolish jokes to cover his deeply rooted uncertainty, but not this time.

Why?

Wilhelm Klink never stopped boasting about his record of no escapes from his camp, unaware of the permanent coming and going of Hogan’s men, and called himself an uncompromising officer who commanded the toughest POW-camp in the whole of Germany, but in truth he was an anxious man who tried to stay alive during the madness that had befallen the whole world. Yes, Klink was there for his men and his prisoners when necessary and there had been several times he defied Hochstetter and even General Burkhalter, when he had to defend or to protect those within his responsibility, but in truth he was weak.

‘Not weak’, Hogan had only thought a few days ago as he had listened to Klink’s endless rambling about the paperwork he had to do. ‘He simply doesn’t want to be involved in the war and in the horror the madman in Berlin and his companions are spreading through Europe. Willi is everything but a Nazi but he has to hide it without giving himself away. He fights his own fight – in his very own unique way. It’s a kind of bravery that isn’t easy to realize, yet it is there.’

His thoughts about the man he inwardly had laughed about over and over again, but also had come to respect in some way, seemed to be true. The Oberst did battle if he hadn’t any other choice left, yet Hogan asked himself what made Klink choose to accompany them; skipping his chance of any escape if Hochstetter would be convinced that the Kommandant was a part in Hogan’s
Underground-mission – even an unwilling part. If he would have remained in Stalag 13 he always could have tried to run away the moment Hogan’s organization was revealed. There was no way that Berlin wouldn’t blame Klink for it. Yet the Prussian officer with Saxon roots and upbringing in Düsseldorf, had decided to walk another way – together with Hogan to aid him. The colonel had no clue what to make of this sudden show of recklessness, and he almost felt bad that maybe Klink’s one-time courage could lead to his own arrest and death.

Hogan pressed his lips into a thin line as those thoughts led to the only possible decision. If there was the tiniest chance to protect his men AND Klink he would take it. For months now, he was convinced that Klink didn’t belong in this insane war – like so many other good men and women. Even with his streak of agreeing with everything his superiors did, Klink was not a bad man. Rather the opposite. Hogan had met too many evil persons to not see the differences, and if there was a chance to save the man’s neck he would do it. They had lived through too many things together, had faced too many crazy situations and had enjoyed too many banters with each other to let the man down.

What was the saying? Ten minutes together in danger forges more than ten years of companionship? Well, they both had faced mortal situations more than once, and along the way Klink had become an odd kind of friend for him – one he certainly couldn’t trust utterly, yet the Oberst had his fine moments. Just like now as all of sudden he’d become the ‘Iron Eagle’ he called himself and spread his wings in the attempt to protect Hogan. This was something the colonel would never forget – how long this ‘never’ would last in the end.

Taking a slow deep breath Hogan looked out of the window again. They were forced to detour, because of the still closed main road to Hammelburg. For days it had snowed in the beginning of January and winter was now, almost two weeks later, still strong – preventing the Germans from making much progress in getting the road free.

But not only the weather delayed the repairs. The truth was: Germany was bleeding out – not only with nourishment but also with simple nutrients and other goods which would be necessary. Therefore, the usual short way of three or four kilometers was shut off and forced everyone who wanted to travel from the POW-camp to Hammelburg to use other roads which made a detour of more than 15 kilometers. Hogan saw it as a kind of short delay that would still end far too soon for him.

Suppressing a sigh, his attention drove to the skies. The darkness of the winter evening was catching up with them – especially here in the woods they were crossing – and despite his usually cocky way of thinking he felt coldness gripping his mind and soul. This was maybe his last travel before his life ended, and the thought sent another shiver down his spine.

The driver’s voice distracted him.
“Herr Major, look!” He pointed to the left above them and Hochstetter bent forwards to have a better view. The two men on the backseat followed his example.

Klink frowned because he saw nothing in the dark skies which shimmered behind the thinning out branches above them, then he became aware of Hogan’s proximity, as the younger man pressed alongside him to see for himself what had caught the driver’s attention. Klink’s heartbeat increased. He could smell the cheap soap the prisoners were forced to use, but also Hogan’s very own scent – a pleasurable mixture of sandalwood and herbs. He felt the other man’s warm breath washing over his cheek and his pulse drummed harder. Klink swallowed a lump in his throat. This was not the moment to have such feelings!

“I see nothing,” he declared; glad that his voice sounded firm.

“You sound like that fool Schultz,” Hochstetter sneered.

“Schultz sees and hears nothing,” Klink corrected him, “but I do hear something.”

Beside Hogan him nodded. “Yeah – a deep sound.”

The road headed out of the forest and into clearings, interrupted by several clusters of trees. The rising moon shone on the motorcycles and the one car ahead of them, then, suddenly, the silver light was shadowed for a moment and Hogan quickly looked up, while the sounds became louder.

“Fighter planes!” Klink yelled in alert.

“Ours or theirs?” Hochstetter demanded.

“How should I know?” the Oberst snapped back. “Do I have a night vision?”

Hogan ignored the quip and listened closer to the noise. “It sounds like Black Widows and…”

He didn’t get any further, as the planes came nearer and one of the smaller ones in the front opened
As the first bullets rattled down towards the road and the convey, the cars and motorcycles stopped with squeaking breaks. Two of the bikers dropped to the ground, the front window of another car was shattered as it was hit with a salvo of bullets, screams and curses filled the air. Then the plane flew past them and the next ones were there. The headlights of the cars, the rest of the vanishing daylight and the bright moon that already hung in the skies, gave the attackers a good view of their targets.

“Out!” Hochstetter shouted while the next salvo hit the car behind his own. “Out, out!” He opened the door and let himself fall to the frozen ground beside the road; the others did the same. The vehicle in front of the staff car caught fire, while the next fighters attacked them with their artillery pieces.

Carefully Hochstetter peeked over the roof of his car. Four fighters were turning back towards them, while the bombers and the other air fighters continued their way towards the south. Looking around the major’s gaze fell to the trees which led into the forest and realizing that his men and he stood no chance out in the open, he shouted, “Retreat to the woods! Quick, quick! Before they’re back!”

He didn’t need to say it twice; his men followed this order more than keenly.

“The first sane words I heard from him today,” Klink commented and sprinted in a ducked posture around the car to follow the SS-guards and Hochstetter. Hogan’s shout, “What about me?” made the Oberst stop dead in his tracks.

Glancing back, he was about to yell at Hogan that this really wasn’t the right time to joke, but the words died in his throat. Hogan had left the car, too, but being chained to the door handle he wasn’t able to make a run to safety. Cowering behind the car he tore at the handcuff, but the shackle didn’t give in; trapping him.

Klink gasped and whirled around again. “Hochstetter! The keys to Hogan’s handcuffs! Schnell (quick)!“ he barked.

Indeed, the Gestapo officer stopped and turned around. His confused gaze found first the Oberst, then the colonel, who tried to get free from the chain but without any success. There was no doubt that Hogan wouldn’t survive the next attacks, and for a moment the major’s sense of duty awoke. Then the noises of the returning air fighters drew nearer again, and he recognized the perfect chance to get his revenge on his nemesis – to get rid of him once and for all.
A maniac grin spread over Hochstetter’s face that was clear to see in the light of the burning car. “I told you that I would be your downfall one day, Hogan. Now go to hell!” he shouted, turned away and began to run towards the trees.

“HOCHSTETTER!” Hogan roared as the cruel truth crashed down on him – that the major had left him here to die. “HOCHSTTER, YOU CAN’T DO THIS!”

But the major’s black clad figure melted with the dark shadows of the forest and with him the key to the handcuffs. Hogan struggled with the realization of what this meant for him: Certain death.

“Hochstetter, come back you damn coward!” Klink screamed as he comprehended what the major meant, and jogged after him, but the Gestapo officer was already out of ear-shot beneath the trees.

The sounds of the fighters were dangerously near now and Klink looked back at the lonely figure of Hogan, tied to the staff car. In the flickering flames of the burning car nearby the Oberst watched Hogan’s furious expression turning into horror. And the severity of the situation hit Klink with the force of a truck: Hogan would really die – within the next one or two minutes.

Something reared up in the Kommandant; dread and denial fought their own battle at the prospect that the man he desired – loved! – would find his demise here and now. Then the droning noise of the aircrafts ringed in his ears, and instinct took over…

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Hogan gulped as he saw Hochstetter disappearing into the woods. He was left here to die – helplessly chained to the staff car like a lamb to an altar stone.

He thought he heard Klink shouting something before he saw the Oberst racing after Hochstetter. He was surprised at the hurt of betrayal that rose deep in his soul. He had known that Klink was a coward, yet a tiny part of him had hoped that the older man would care enough for him to make a real attempt at rescue. But – as always – Klink ran away when a situation turned hairy.

Then the booming sound forced his attention back to the deadly situation he was in. There was no chance that the pilots of the aircrafts would recognize him as one of their own. The speed with which the fighters flew was too high to let a pilot get a closer look at small details like a uniform. He, Hogan, was only a person near a car of the hostile army and none of the US-pilots could know that one of the men they wanted to bring down was an American.
For a moment nausea was about to overcome Hogan, then defiance flared up in him.

No, he wouldn’t give in. Never! Not until his very last breath.

He looked hastily around if there was something he maybe could use to force the shackle open, but there was nothing besides the abandoned vehicles, two dead SS-guards and three wounded ones, which tried to hobble or to crawl towards the trees – left behind by their own comrades.

The roaring of the planes betrayed the aircraft’s position, and the next salvos of shots ripped through the air. Hogan’s blood ran cold. That was it – the end. One of salvos hit the staff car and Hogan ducked. His mind turned blank and panic gripped him as he recognized that only a few inches were between him and the bullets – that the Grim Reaper was above him, lifting his deadly scythe. The salvo of the next aircraft was only seconds away and this time he would be done for. He would die – here and now!

Bile rose in his throat and a scream was torn from his lips, as the rearmost car of the convey exploded after its gas tank was hit. The blast wave washed over him with heat; bearing the ugly smell of melting metal. Instinctively he threw his free arm over his head; a part of his mind sane enough to know that it wouldn’t protect him at all. He closed his eyes while a cold fist seemed to reach into him and twisted his belly; mortal fear paralyzed him. Everything would be over within a few moments, and the sorrow of never seeing his friends again – and his parents and brother – mingled with despair. He only prayed that his death would be quick.

“Hogan, move aside!”

That voice…

Shocked he looked to his left and his eyes got wide as saucers as he recognized the familiar face. “Klink?” he gasped; thinking he was imaging things.

“Dammit, Hogan, move!” the Oberst yelled, before he impatiently pushed the younger man aside, set the muzzle of his pistol at the chain that tied Hogan to the car and pulled the trigger. He turned his head away, hoping that he wouldn’t be hit by the ricochet as the bullet went through the chain and into the car, where it was stuck in one of the backseats. Pointing the pistol at the other half of the chain’s link, Klink shot a second time and the chain gave in.
Hogan was free and both men jumped to their feet, the aircrafts were almost over the clearing again.

“Run!” Klink screamed with shrill voice and gave the younger man a rough shove. “Run, run. Run! RUN!”

Hogan didn’t hesitate for a second. The moment his mind started working again, he began to race towards the trees – survival instincts kicking in with all their might. He heard Klink running close behind him, heard the shouts for help from the three wounded SS-guards and the ear-deafening reports of another salvo. A second explosion pushed the two fleeing men forward and made them stumble. Instinctively both men pulled their arms over their heads, which also saved Hogan’s crush cap from being blown away. Thousands of sparks flew through the air like fireflies; bullets raged with high whistles around the two men and punched up the frozen ground; the roaring of the aircrafts drowned out everything.

Almost!

Klink’s painful cry pierced the air and Hogan stopped without a second thought. Whirling around he saw the older man tumbling to the ground – and an icy fear he would have to think about later froze Hogan’s limbs.

No!

Not Wilhelm Klink!

Not the naïve, gullible, foolish and gauche Kommandant, who just had shown a courage Hogan had never thought he possessed. Not the man who just saved his life by risking his own. It couldn’t be true! The war couldn’t have taken away another one from Hogan that he had come to respect and – God help him – to like!

Frozen in shock he looked at the lanky, tall figure clad in German Luftwaffe blue, thrown to the ground like a broken doll, and who…

…who began to move.

Without giving a damn about the danger around him, Hogan dashed back and knelt down beside the fallen Oberst; putting both hands on his back and shoulder. He could feel the heat of the burning cars
nearby, heard the roaring flames singing a sick duet with the din of the air fighters, and caught the acrid stench of burning oil, grease and bolsters that penetrated the air, but his whole attention was focused on the man who had proven to be, indeed, his friend.

“Klink!” he called; fearing the moving he had seen was only some left-over reflexes of a dying body, then he heard the Oberst’s painful moan, while he saw two long, slender hands balling into fists. Hogan’s hectic gaze wandered over Klink. He took in the tiny holes which were burnt through Klink’s uniform, before he saw the blood on the left pants leg and the left upper arm. Hogan didn’t know if it was relief or frustration that soared up in him. As it seemed, Klink had only been grazed by two bullets – a miracle given the salvos.

“Klink, get up!” he shouted; well aware of the fact that they had only seconds left until the next attack would begin. “There is no time to play The Dying Swan!”

Wilhelm Klink was dizzy with fear, dread and pain. His left calf and upper arm hurt like hell, his ears were ringing and the freezing ground beneath him did nothing to make him regain some senses. But those two hands on his back, combined with the rich tenor that haunted his most secret dreams worked a miracle. Trying to move he braced himself on his right arm, looked up – and the blinding light of the rearing fires nearby brought him back to his senses.

He – and Hogan! – were out in the open; attacked by aircrafts of the Allies whose pilots couldn’t know that they were about to kill one of their own men. And he, Klink, was wounded and was about to die.

As much as the latter prospect had always scared the hell out of him, he was now – as the time had arrived – shockingly calm. He had always known that he wouldn’t survive the madness that would be called World War II in the history books. He wasn’t made for this kind of brutality, cruelty and warfare. He was a child of the last century, forged in the Great War and tired of facing the new war’s even uglier visage day by day.

He knew he would meet his maker today.

But this fate should not befall Hogan. Not this bright, cheery, crazy, daring boy-man who had slipped beneath his careful raised walls and had wriggled into his heart. Hogan had to live! If there was one hope that Klink really clung to, then it was the faith that men like Hogan would raise a better world from the ashes the war would leave when the madness finally had burnt out.

“Go!” he rasped; his throat dry from dread and the heat of the near fire. “Go, Robert, save yourself!”
“No!” Hogan snarled; only realizing at the sidelines that Klink had used his given name for the first time ever. “I don’t let my friends down!”

Holstering the pistol that had slipped from Klink’s hand into his belt, Hogan leaped up, bent down and hauled the Oberst to his feet. Klink’s cry betrayed the pain he was in, but Hogan couldn’t take any consideration of it now. They had to reach the trees, or they both would be killed. Throwing a glance over his shoulder towards the skies, he saw how the fighters made another circle to return – and to end Klink’s and his life. Ignoring the Oberst’s protests and curses, Hogan wrapped one arm around the older man’s slim waist, slung Klink’s right arm around his neck and began to run – more or less dragging the Kommandant with him.

Again, the planes opened fire and the detonations which shredded the last cars into pieces pushed both men to their limits; mortal fear and desperation gave them the strength to run even faster.

Hogan began to pelt in a zig-zag pattern, shouting the direction he was heading for every time to let Klink know when to run to the right or to the left.

Soil flew up behind and beside them, as one of the air fighter’s pilots chose them as his target. That they weren’t hit again was pure luck – as if Fortuna herself held her hands over one of her favorite children and his protesting companion.

How they made it was beyond Hogan, but all of sudden they reached the trees and plunged into the holey roof of the leafless branches the woods presented in the moment. Still Hogan didn’t dare stop but continued to run; pulling the sputtering and whimpering Oberst with him – deeper and deeper into the forest. The colonel knew of the increased radar capabilities that allowed the Allied air forces to detect even small targets, and he didn’t want to risk being spotted by them.

He heard how the fighters raced over the woods; searching for the real and perceived enemies to eliminate them. One of them roared dangerously close over them and a new kick of adrenalin made Hogan act.

“Down!” he wheezed and pushed Klink to the ground before he threw himself above his German counterpart – giving into his protective instincts. He listened to the engines blaring above and then away from him and Klink, but he didn’t dare to rise again as new gunfire rattled through the dark evening a few hundred meters to their left. Obviously, the pilots went for Hochstetter and his men now.
Carefully lifting his head, Hogan looked around. He was out of breath, the stale taste of fire and ashes was in his mouth, adrenalin burnt in his veins and his heart hammered like a wild drum, but at least he was alive – as was Klink. The older man hadn’t moved until now, and Hogan could feel the Oberst gasping for air. Klink had never been keen about sports. The days Hogan and his team had tried to give the Kommandant a sport training by letting him pump irons which ended in a disaster, were still clear in Hogan’s memories.

“You okay?” he panted; lifting his weight from Klink’s body.

In secrecy the Oberst usually would have loved to have Hogan pressed all over him, but just right now he was glad the younger man removed himself. Despite his slender build, Hogan was heavy. No wonder given his broad shoulders and the muscles Klink had never seen clearly but had recognized in the way Hogan moved and how he was able to lift weights he – Klink – wouldn’t even be able to lift one centimeter.

Feeling Hogan’s hand on his back again, he tried to roll around – and cried out anew as a burning pain shot up his leg and arm. Looking up he could barely make out Hogan’s concerned face hovering above him.

“Colonel Klink, are you okay?” the American officer repeated; slapping himself mentally a second later. Of course, the man was not all right given the pain he was obviously in. “Are you hit somewhere else besides your calf and arm?”

“Isn’t it enough?” Klink moaned; closing his eyes for a moment. “I’m done for.”

Hogan made a face. “Oh, come on, don’t be such a drama-queen,” he sighed; sitting down on his butt. “You just showed so much courage, don’t take that image away so quickly.”

Klink glanced back at him and lifted his head from the ground; smiling proudly for a moment. “I did, didn’t I?” His smiled widened. “I’m a hero.”

Hogan rolled his eyes and inwardly shook his head. Sometimes Klink really acted like a child, yet he had to admit that indeed it had been a very brave thing the Oberst did a minute or two ago. It had been heroic, no doubt.

“You came back for me and saved my life – despite the hundreds of bullets which blew up in our faces,” he said quietly; his mind only now began to understand fully what Klink had done for him.
“Thank you, Wilhelm,” he added softly; eyes gentle.

“You did the same for me moments later,” Klink answered; feeling warmth bubbling deep in him for a few seconds. Hogan had challenged the Grim Reaper he was about to escape, only to help him – Klink. It made him feel fuzzy all over. “*Danke* (thank you), Robert.”

Hogan moistened his lips. To hear Klink calling him by his given name did odd things to his heart. Never before the *Oberst* had addressed him this personally and Hogan was uncertain what to make of his reaction to it. It was strange. Usually this kind of flip-flop inside of him followed after a pretty woman batted her eyelashes at him and she was his type, but certainly not because a guy addressed him by his first name.

In the dim light of the moon that hung in the bare branches, and the light of the fires a hundred meters away, both men looked at each other for a long moment. Klink had lost his monocle and dirt was smeared all over his face. Hogan knew that he himself didn’t look any better, but he didn’t care. To get clean was the least of their problems, as the air was again pierced with new gunfire and the roaring engines of the returning air fighters.

“You Americans really don’t give up easily,” Klink groused, and Hogan pressed his lips into a thin line for a moment.

“We’re not safe here.”

“You don’t say,” Klink commented with a rare shown sense of wry humor.

“Come on then,” Hogan urged, rose and pulled the older man to his feet. The *Oberst* muffled a further outcry and gritted his teeth; accepting the colonel’s help as they stumbled deeper into the woods – leaving the place that had almost brought them death.

Behind them the attack continued, and Hogan knew that they weren’t out of danger yet, but with every meter they were able to distance themselves from the clearing, his hope of escaping mortal danger grew…

TBC…
Yeah, Klink outgrew himself for the first time since WW I – but not for the last time. There is a dark, stony way both are going to face within the near future, and how much it will demand of them, remains to be seen.

Concerning Hochstetter: I always regarded him as a very dangerous man. One, who do not stop at everything to reach his goal, but also has an own kind of cowardice that isn’t easy to realize on the first sight but is really there. The Gestapo and the SS were the most cruel and twisted unions in the history of my country, and I think Hochstetter was perfectly portrayed in ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ – so don’t be surprised if ‘my’ Hochstetter acts in a way you would call criminal today.

I also admired the few times Klink showed some backbone and acted bravely. Yes, those scenes were rare, but they exist. And I always imagined: What is needed to give the ‘Iron Eagle’ back his wings. Believe me, this chapter and the following one are only the beginning of a fallen eagle becoming a phoenix – out of sense of honor, decency and above all love.

Latter will be shown in the next chapter, but also how Hogan ticks. Both men are needing each other to survive not only the war, but also the many stones which are thrown into their way – and Hogan is no one who let someone fall or leaves behind, who not only saved his life, but he also regards as a friend (as much as he wants to deny it).

There begins a slowly change in the relationship of the two men…

I hope you liked the second chapter and I’m really curious what you think of it, so any feedback is more than welcomed.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
It's going to be a long night

Hi, my dear readers,

I hope you liked the first two chapters so far and thank you for the first feedback I received.

In the new chapter is about feelings and a little bit action, but also the typical bantering and bickering between the two colonels. Klink knows that Hochstetter will not let drop the accusations against Hogan and makes a decision that turns even our witty Hogan speechless – at least for a moment. In the meantime the Heroes and also Schultz and Langenscheidt start to realize that the shooting noises they heard could maybe mean an attack on the convoy, and begin to worry.

I hope you're going to like it.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 3 – It’s going to be a long night

It seemed to last an eternity until Hogan finally announced that they were out of the danger-zone. Easing Klink carefully down on the snow-covered ground, he rubbed his lower back and tried to catch his breath.

The sounds of the gunfire were still heard, but they were far away enough to grant the two men something close to safety.
Klink groaned; not knowing if he should be sweating or feeling cold. It was somehow both. He grimaced as the pain in his calf and arm reached his mind with full force. His leg and arm seemed to be in flames and he knew what that meant.

Deadly serious he glanced up at Hogan; anxiety echoed in his voice. “You have to continue without me.”

“I beg your pardon?” the colonel asked; disbeliefing.

“I’m injured, Hogan. I can’t walk anymore like this. You should…”

“No way, Colonel,” the American interrupted him, knelt down beside him and fingered for the German’s tie, which earned him a sharp slap on his hand.

“What are you doing?” Klink demanded.

“Trying to stop your leg from bleeding for which I need your tie. So, give it to me.” Not waiting for Klink to react, Hogan simply freed the longer end of the tie-knot and pulled the cloth from the other man’s neck; Klink’s protests went unheard. Unknotting the tie, Hogan bent over the Oberst’s calf, ripped the trouser-leg apart and used the tie as a makeshift bandage; cursing quietly as the loose end of the chain got in his way several times.

Klink clenched his teeth; swearing under his breath. It really hurt! Then Hogan was done, and the older man sighed in relief. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Hogan answered seriously.

From afar they heard new shouts and screams, followed by the sharp shots of pistols – obviously Hochstetter’s group had a lot of trouble and tried to keep the aircrafts away by shooting at them with their hand-weapons. Klink looked furiously in the direction the noises came from. “If he survives this, I’ll report that damn coward to Berlin. Leaving you to die is attempted murder, nothing more.”

“I’m the enemy,” Hogan reminded him.
“Nonsense! You are not an enemy – at least not for me. Besides, you’re protected by the Geneva Convention until further notice. And if I have any say in this, this cursed wimp can meet his maker without trying to prove that you’re an Underground-agent.” He glanced back at Hogan. “You aren’t one, are you?”

“You already asked Hochstetter how I could do everything he accuses me of, when I’m safe and sound in your camp. And, by the way, we already had this discussion a few weeks ago and you even apologized for thinking of me as a saboteur,” Hogan answered; eyes fixed in the direction in which the unequal fight was happening. He didn’t feel good for lying this openly to the man who just saved his life, but he had no other choice. Even if he was convinced that Klink was anything but a true Nazi, he had to be careful. He didn’t belief that Klink would deliver him to the Gestapo, but knowing the Oberst’s big mouth and nervous babbling, the chance that he would give Hogan away by pure accident was too big.

Sighing, Hogan rose and offered the other man his hand. “Come, we have to hurry.”

“Haven’t you listened, Hogan? I’m injured, and I can’t…”

Rolling his eyes again, the colonel bent down and helped Klink on his feet; ignoring the Oberst’s complaining and order to let him be. “We both make it out of here, or neither of us does!” Hogan hissed. “And if I have to carry you, I’ll do it!” he all but threatened.

“I give you the order to leave me behind,” Klink snarled. “Do you disobey me?”

And like switching on a lamp, Hogan’s impish smirk was back in place. “You always can send me to the cooler for it, sir. But to do so, we both have to return to the camp.”

“Stubborn mule!” Klink snapped; his feeling getting the better of him as he continued without a second thought, “Can’t you see a chance when it pokes you in the face? This is your opportunity to flee – not only from here, but in general. Hochstetter is not going to let his accusations drop and will try to get you again as soon as he learns you’re still alive. And if the Gestapo wants to prove someone being guilty, they just do it – true or not.” He took a deep breath, as he realized what he had just said. What he suggested was real treason for once – high treason even – but his heart had overpowered his mind and usual anxiety.

He saw how Hogan’s jaw hung open in shock, and added, “I will report that you were killed, accuse Hochstetter of murder in Berlin and you can go back to London. Knowing your talents, you will greet Saint Paul’s Cathedral in a few days.”
Hogan stared at him; not trusting his ears. “You want me to flee – breaking your flawless record?” he stammered; thunderstruck beyond imagination.

Klink rolled his eyes. “Hogan, please, give me some credit here! There were several escape attempts which were successful, and that I’m still holding the record of no escape is only because your men and even you decided to return. Whenever I let you out of the camp to fulfill some unusual tasks to my advantage, I had to live with the uncertainty of your return until you really showed up again. Sure, you gave me your word to do so, yet you also have the duty to flee – which you never did. I know you’re a man of honor, but you also built up a kind of loyalty towards me, and only this still holds my record of no escapes.”

Again, the planes raced above their heads through the air, accompanied by shots from automatic cannons, and both men ducked.

Klink straightened his frame as the air fighters were no longer above them and looked back at Hogan. “Go, Robert! I meant it when I said you shall save yourself.” He knew that his decision would put him on court-martial if anyone learned of it, but deep down in his heart he knew he made the right choice.

“Try to reach Nürnberg or München,” he continued. “I’m sure you know a few guys who can help you back to England.” He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat as he realized that this last order would take the man he had fallen for out of his life. Fighting back the sudden pain deep inside him, he hobbled a few steps away and waved an impatient hand at Hogan. “Go and don’t look back.” He felt something in him about to break – to shatter. He would never see Hogan again, the man who had captured his so-well secured heart, but he would live. Whatever Hochstetter had found as a proof for Hogan to be far more than a ‘simple POW’, it surely would cost the American his life, and as much as it hurt his whole being, Klink rather would know Hogan far away and safe, then near and as good as dead.

Yes, his choice was high treason, but as long as he could stick true to the story that Hogan had died in the attack, there was no way to prove otherwise.

Klink was surprised about himself that he was making this step; that he was ready to take such a risk, but for too long he had played it safe. It had turned him into a coward. He knew this much. But here and now everything had changed. There always had been things which had made him outgrow himself, and to keep Robert Hogan safe belonged to these ‘things’. Somewhere during the last three years the younger man had become this important to him that he, Klink, chose Hogan over his loyalty to his Fatherland. Well, the Fatherland he grew up and had loved didn’t exist anymore – thanks to guys like Hochstetter or even the Fuehrer himself.
Hogan shook his head as if he wanted to wake up from a dream, then he frowned. “Three of Hochstetter’s men saw us running away. If they have survived the last attacks, there is no chance that Hochstetter will buy your story.”

Klink shrugged. “Then we’re sticking closer to the truth. We made it into the woods, where your willingness to help me ended. You overpowered me, left me and fled – just like any captured officer should do given the opportunity.”

Hogan stroke some dirty hair strains out of his forehead; still utterly flabbergasted. “You really want me to run away?” he asked and was even more shocked to see the deep sadness and even pain in his German counterpart’s eyes.

“At least it would heighten your chance of survival. You’re cleverer than any other man I ever met. You’ll make it away from Germany and then you’re safe.”

Again, Hogan shook his head. Sweet Lord, what had happened to the gutless, bumbling man who was barely respected even by his own men? First, he stood up against Hochstetter, then he risked his life to save Hogan, now he prompted him to take flight and was sad about Hogan’s eventually leaving? What, for God’s sake, was going on here?

Again, the engines of the aircrafts became louder, but a moment later the fighters pelted off and headed towards south, following the other planes. As it seemed the pilots were satisfied with the damage they had done.

Klink turned his attention back to Hogan. “It’s your only chance, and we both know it. So, take it!”

Hogan laughed out humorlessly. He couldn’t flee, even if he wanted to – which he didn’t. He couldn’t abandon his mission and his men. He wasn’t done in Germany. As long as the war raged his presence was essentially important to weaken the enemy, to help the Allies in his own way and to aid escapees and people who needed to get away from Germany. His men were good – geniuses in their own way – but he was the one who pulled the strings, who came up with the plans and coordinated everything. They would be lost without him, and if there was the tiniest chance that he could fool Hochstetter again and walk away as the ‘simple’ POW he pretended to be, then he had to take the risk.

And, by the way: Klink was indeed injured. Not fatally, mind you. The wounds were minor. A few stiches maybe, a couple of days rest, and the man would be as good as new. But the way to Stalag 13 was longer than Klink could possible keep up. Not only because of the pain, but mainly because of another factor: The cold.
Hogan had put on warm underclothes beneath his shirt as he joined his men to repair Klink’s car, and therefore he could longer withstand the weather that would turn icier and icier within the next hours. The winter was harsh this year and the temperature was beneath zero for weeks now. Klink was only clad in his usual stiff white shirt and his uniform-jacket – both good enough to sit in the office, but not to run through the winter evening for hours. Yes, he could warm up by starting a fire, but given the fact that the Oberst’s fingers were all thumbs, Hogan doubted that the man would be able to get a flame to linger longer than a few seconds. Klink certainly had never been a Boy-Scout, but Hogan had been.

To leave Klink behind would most certainly lead to the German’s death – and Hogan didn’t want Klink to die. Not only because Klink was the incompetent Kommandant Hogan needed to run his missions without being caught, but also because against all odds he liked him.

And, besides, Wilhelm Klink had just saved his neck. He owed the man, even if he had certainly rescued him in return seconds later as the aircrafts were upon them. It wasn’t his style to set a life off against another life, and then be done with it.

“I can’t go,” he said quietly.

Klink’s eyes began to flash. “God dammit, Hogan, we’re speaking of your life here! Go!”

Hogan shook his head. Decision made, he took a step closer to the Kommandant. “No. You wouldn’t make it alone back to the camp. If I’m not mistaken, we drove half the way to Hammelburg using the actual official detour, and it doesn’t matter if you want to reach Stalag 13 or the town. You’re wounded and clothed too thin for this damn winter. You…”

Klink waved the arguments away. “I’ll try to find Hochstetter and then…”

“What, if he decides to use the opportunity to get rid of you this time? You know he despises you and…”

“Hochstetter despises everyone – even himself. But he’ll be not foolish enough to harm an officer of the Luftwaffe.”

“If he learns that you want to accuse him of attempted murder in Berlin, he certainly will try to stop you,” Hogan urged. “Therefore, you only can tramp back to the camp – injured, square through the
woods because to take the road is not safe enough. You wouldn’t get far, so…”

“I know that you and most other people regard me as a weakling, but I’m stronger than you think,” Klink interrupted him; sounding arrogant. He turned around. “I can…” He gasped as a sharp pain shot up his leg, and the next moment he landed hard on the icy forest ground and his injured arm which elicited a yelp from him.

Looking shortly towards the skies – ‘Why me?’ – Hogan was beside him with three long steps and crouched down. “See what I mean?” he asked softly. “You will die out here.”

“What do you care?” Klink murmured miserably; knowing that Hogan was far too clever and intelligent not to take the chance to make an escape and save his own life and that his hesitation in the moment was a result of his honor. The American officer would leave, of course, and he, Klink, would remain behind. And regrettably Hogan was right about another detail: Even if Klink boasted how strong he was, he knew that in truth he was not.

“I do care, you fool,” Hogan whispered; making his German counterpart look up at him with widening eyes. “God help me, but I do care about you. I came back for you, just like you did for me. And I think we both did it out of the same reason. They demand us to be enemies, but the truth is: We are not!” Without giving Klink an opportunity to protest, he hauled him up for the third time, bent down again, gripped the older man’s waist with strong hands and threw him over his shoulder; rising in one swift movement and started to walk.

“Hogan, put me down!” Kink gasped, shocked. Hogan was throwing away his maybe only chance to escape Hochstetter once and for all.

“No,” the colonel unsubordinated.

“Dammit, I’m still your commanding offer, so put. Me. Down!” For good measurement he even tried to kick around but quit struggling as the American’s grip tightened.

“I hear nnnooootthhhinng,” Hogan parodied Schultz; beginning to smirk as the Oberst sputtered enraged. “And, by the way, how do you want report Hochstetter to Berlin when you can’t even make it back to your office?”

“Damn, thick-headed, nerve-killing, arrogant, reckless Ami! Always has to have the last word!” Klink groused.
“How shall I know that you don’t want to say anything more?” Hogan sounded very innocent and chuckled as a barrage of German curses was the result. God, he loved this bantering with Klink – and it had a beautiful side-effect in this case: Some of the horror in his body and mind was leaving him. With every step he made he felt more like his old, perky self again.

Walking as quickly as possible he headed into the direction where he knew Stalag 13 was settled; deeply amused by Klink’s continued nagging.

*** *** ***

“Roger, Goldilocks, Papa Bear over and out!” James Kinchloe removed the headset and closed the connection to London. LeBeau, Carter and Newkirk looked at him expectantly. They all had quit working on Klink’s car the moment the convoy had left the camp and returned to their barrack. The uproar among the POWs because of Hogan’s arrest and being manhandled by Hochstetter, had costed Kinch valuable minutes to calm them down. He was the highest-ranking officer for now, and as such it was up to him to keep the others in check.

It was fortunate that Schultz was acting Kommandant in the moment, and no-one else, because the Bavarian showed a lot of understanding for the outraged worry the POWs displayed for ‘their’ colonel.

Finally, Kinchloe had been able to return to Barrack 2 and had instantly contacted London to report the bad news to them. And, of course, the others of ‘the team’ had joined him.

Sighing, James glanced at them; the mixture of sadness and anger in his eyes already told them a lot even before he murmured, “London says we should be ready to evacuate ourselves. If Colonel Hogan isn’t back tomorrow by eight o’clock AM together with Klink, we’re ordered to contact London one last time, then destroy the equipment and flee. They’ll send a submarine and…”

“What about the colonel?” Newkirk demanded.

“Oui, what’s about mon colonel?” Louis snapped. “We can’t leave ‘im be’ind. ‘e wouldn’t let down anyone of us, nes pas?!” The worry and the irritation made LeBeau talk in an even heavier accent than usual.

“They say, when the Gestapo really has proof that Hogan belongs to the Underground, the chances
to get him out are practically zero.” He hated the whole situation with all his heart. Hogan was his closest friend – the first officer ever who didn’t care about his dark skin. He and Hogan knew each other for many years now, and the prospect of leaving Robert behind was unbearable. He wouldn’t do it – come what may.

“One moment!” Newkirk raged. “How many agents have we rescued within the last years? How often has the colonel risked his neck to save others? I’ve lost count. He always managed to do what London wants and more, saving hundreds of people. And now we let him down? No way!”

“We can’t just dress up as someone of Berlin’s brass and show up at Hochstetter’s door step,” Carter said unhappily. “He knows everyone of us too well and is certainly very suspicious – especially now, when he finally got the colonel in his fingers.”

Newkirk’s eyes narrowed. “You’re right, but I think I have an idea. We should try to contact Hans Wagner. He owes the colonel big. Maybe his boys can fool Hochstetter in…”

“Guys?” One of their fellow prisoners of Barrack 2 peeked down into the underground cavern they had dug almost three years ago and that held the radio station now.

The four men turned around. “Yes?” Kinch asked.

“Well, there should be artillery shots heard from afar and a few US aircrafts just flew by. Gordon Evans means they are attacking something near Hammelburg.”

LeBeau gave the radio station a very nasty glare. “They should inform us about things like this, instead of giving up on Colonel ’Ogan!”

Kinchloe headed to the ladder that was in truth the slatted frame of one the stock-beds above. “Let us have a look on it. Maybe the attack will keep Hochstetter busy enough to distract him from the colonel until we come up with a plan to get him out of the deep water he is in.”

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Yes, Hochstetter had been distracted – more than Hogan’s men could assume. And after the hostile aircrafts finally left, he first looked after his subordinates, of which a few were injured, others were missing. Surprisingly he couldn’t find Klink. The Luftwaffe officer had been only ten meters or so
behind him as they ran for the woods to find some cover, but now the clumsy man was nowhere to be seen.

“Does someone know what happened to Klink?” he asked.

One of his men, who pressed one hand over the shot on his left arm, grumbled, “He returned to the prisoner. I saw him racing back – shortly before the rest of the convoy was blown up.”

Hochstetter stared at him. “Klink… went back for Hogan? In the middle of artillery fire?” He looked into the direction where the light of the flames flickered in the dark dusk. “What have they put into his coffee this morning? First, he defies me and now he even runs into showers of shots? He’s more stupid than I ever thought possible.”

“Or has more courage than given credit for,” another one of his men commented, but was ignored by his superior officer.

So, Klink had wanted to play the hero for once by trying to free Hogan. Why the American was that important for the fool was beyond Hochstetter, but it didn’t matter anymore. He had heard the noises of the aircraft artillery, seconds before several detonations roared through the air. If Klink had been anywhere near the cars as they exploded, he certainly was dead – just like Hogan.

Yet Hochstetter knew he couldn’t just walk away.

“Stay here,” the major ordered. “Unfortunately, it’s my damn duty to check on this idiot and to see if he has made it. Otherwise I’ll have General Burkhalter at my throat – even if he’s going to be glad to be rid of Klink in the end.”

Carefully, ready to take cover again, he returned to the clearing and looked silently into the still raging flames which fed off the convoy’s remains. He saw three bodies of his men lying motionless not far away from the fire – killed by the blasts as it seemed. The area around the burning convoy was in flames – a result of the splashed petrol after the explosions. As much as Hochstetter tried to make out some more details, he couldn’t see anything – or anybody.

Even if Klink somehow had been able to free Hogan, the explosions had been too quick afterwards. There was no chance that the two men had escaped the detonations or the hostile aircrafts’ gunmen.
Hogan and Klink were dead, their bodies burning along with the convoy, and if there was one good outcome of the air fighters’ attack in Hochstetter’s opinion, then it was that his personal nemesis and this parody of a German officer had found their demise.

‘When I’m back at my office I’ll give a toast to the fates that I’m finally rid of this damn Ami and this stupid idiot. And then it will be my pleasure to call Stalag 13 and to let this big oaf of Schultz and Hogan’s men knew that their commanding officers are no more.’

Giving the convoy a mocking salute, he turned away and headed back to where his men waited for him. It would be a long walk to Hammelburg, but Hochstetter’s mood was too high-spirited now to be doused by the prospect of a little trekking tour.

*** *** ***

Hogan had carried Klink approximately one kilometer, until he decided that enough was enough. Yes, Klink’s injury certainly hurt but the man would be able to walk on his own legs for a while. The Oberst’s was slender, but tall, and therefore weighed a lot. And Hogan groaned in relief as he finally found a good place – full of frozen grass – to kneel down and give Klink the chance to regain his feet.

The Kommandant had been surprisingly silent after he had finally realized that Hogan wouldn’t obey his command to leave him behind, and even now he didn’t say anything as he carefully put his weight on his feet and grimaced at the pain that became instantly stronger again. Hogan helped him to regain his balance by steadying him at the waist, and despite the fact that Kink was highly irritated by Hogan’s insubordination, a part of him was overjoyed that the colonel hadn’t taken the given chance to flee but had stayed to help him. And as he looked down at the younger man, who happened to just kneel in front of him while steadying him, he couldn’t help but had to comment,

“It’s a nice try to make up for your disobedience, Hogan, but to kneel in front of me is really not necessary.”

Hogan took the words for what they were: A joke. Grinning he rose and looked at Klink with mirth in his eyes; invading the Oberst’s personal space like he did so often. “I’m not off the hook in your books then?” he asked innocently, and Klink rolled his eyes; ignoring how his heartbeat increased.

“The ‘hook’ has the size of a skyscraper after all you did within the last two years and eleven months since you came to my camp, Hogan, but I do appreciate your unwillingness to leave me behind.” His voice was soft. “Yet you are a big fool to do so. Hochstetter will be after you again soon enough.”
The colonel shrugged. “Let him. Until now he never had any proof of his accusations, and I do think his newest ones will be turn into smoke, too.”

“Your words in God’s ears,” Klink mumbled.

Hogan smirked and was about to give another comment, as he saw a shiver shaking the other man. “We should hurry, before you relapse with a cold,” he said quietly.

Klink shrugged. “Never mind. I took worse in the past.”

Hogan shook his head. “No, no! When you get a cold you’re grumpy – grumpier than usual – and…”

“I’m NOT grumpy,” Klink defended himself. As the American only grinned wider, he made his typical waving gesture with his balled fist when he was frustrated. “I am not!” he huffed, what earned him a chuckle.

“Grumpy!” Hogan teased back.

“No, I’m…” A new shiver made the Oberst tremble, and the colonel turned instantly serious again.

“We should get you to somewhere warm,” he said, before he cocked his head. “Or I’ll have to warm you up properly.”

What followed then took Hogan by surprise. Klink blushed a fierce red that was even visible in the dim moonlight, while he sputtered something in German the colonel was unable to understand. Then it hit Hogan that his counterpart had taken the suggestion in a more intimate way and began to smirk again. Just have a look, gold old Klink had a dirty mind. Who had ever thought that?

Never leaving out a chance of teasing – taunting – Klink, Hogan wrapped an arm around the older man, careful not to touch the injury, and pulled him close. “Come on, Colonel, to share body-heat is an old survival trick.”
Hogan couldn’t know what his words did to Klink – how much it affected the German. He was unaware of the rising pulse, the heat in Klink’s veins, the up-flaring of longing and the embarrassment because of it. Simply taking the other man’s reaction as the typical nervousness that was hidden behind Klink’s usual pompously behavior, he pulled the Oberst with him – heading into the same direction they had already taken before.

“We’ve to find a nice, cozy place and then I can show you what I mean,” he added; amusement plain to hear in his voice. And then he had to laugh quietly, as he heard the expected,

“Hooogaaaan!”

*** *** ***

“No, Major Hochstetter and Oberst Klink left the camp more than two hours ago,” Schultz answered and listened to the voice in the other end of the line. He looked up at Sergeant Karl Langenscheidt, who stood in front of Klink’s desk and was worried like Schultz. “I’m sorry, I can’t give you any other information. I don’t know why they haven’t arrived until now, but please call me as soon as they show up. Auf Wiedersehen (good bye).”

With those words he hung up and rubbed his neck. “The convoy hasn’t returned to the Gestapo-Headquarters by now. They are concerned that the aircraft attack we heard earlier could be aimed at Hochstetter and the others.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Hans, but I do not care for Hochstetter,” Langenscheidt murmured. “If the Allies got him, I certainly won’t share a tear for him.”

“Rrrright, but I do worry about Klink – and Colonel Hogan. If the Allies destroyed the cars, it could be that the two were killed.” He rose from the desk chair and stepped towards the sideboard where Klink had placed the carafe with the cognac. Without feeling guilty, he filled two glasses and offered one to Karl, who accepted the offer gratefully.

“What do we do now?” he asked.

Schultz shrugged. “I have Klink’s orders. No action before tomorrow morning eight o’clock. Maybe the Kommandant and the others will show up within the next hours in Hammelburg. If not…” He took a deep breath. “If not, then we have an exceptional situation that demands action.”
“What actions?” Langenscheidt asked after emptying his own glass.

The big sergeant sighed. “Then we’ll send a patrol that looks for them. If the convoy was really attacked by the aircrafts, then there will be enough tracks we would have to accept as proof.”

*** *** ***

Newkirk looked up from the telephone exchange station beneath Barrack 2 that made it not only possible to piggyback into every call that was made from or to the POW camp, but also gave the men the perfect chance to eavesdrop every word that was spoken on the line.

Greedy for every news which maybe would give to Schultz concerning Klink’s and Hogan’s unwilling stay at the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg, Kinchloe had ordered Peter to listen closely to every contact.

But what Newkirk heard worried Hogan’s team more than it calmed them.

“Vanished?” Kinch didn’t believe his ears. “They didn’t arrive in Hammelburg?”

“What is taking them so long?” LeBeau asked puzzled.


“And how, you genius? The gov’nor was chained to the bloody car-door and Hochstetter had his pistol aimed at him as they left. The colonel may be one of the most clever, scheming and smartest men I ever met, but he is no magician. And if he has talked himself out of the deep water, then he and Klink would have been already returned.”

“I’ll contact London and ask them if there was a planned bomber-attack in this area. We heard the artillery almost two hours ago, and I have this bad feeling that the colonel’s and the others’ disappearance has something to do with it,” Kinch murmured and headed to the radio station that was placed directly under the hidden entrance to the tunnels.

“What if those aircrafts attacked the convoy?” Carter asked the question everyone was thinking of
but didn’t dare to voice.

“Then we can only pray that mon colonel was able to safe ‘imself,” Louis said grimly.

TBC…

*I loved the idea that Klink orders Hogan to flee so that he is safe. Klink doesn’t care for his flawless record for once if it means that Hogan will escape Hochstetter and maybe a firing squad. I imagined Hogan’s reaction to such a suggestion coming from the man who always boast about the ‘no escape-rate’ of his camp, and it was really fun to write the scene. Hopefully you enjoyed it, too.*

*Well, the Heroes – and Schultz – have the right idea about the attack, but there is no way for them to help their superior officers for now. And regarding our two colonels: They are still in danger.*

*In the next chapter they are not threatened from Hochstetter or hostile aircrafts, but from the icy weather and a long way through the woods. Klink wears only his uniform jacket without any coat and Hogan’s leather jacket isn’t a big protection against snow and coldness, too. In other words: The whole situation worsens for the two men, while Schultz takes some action and the Heroes learn the truth about the ambush.*

*I hope you liked the new installment and I would be very happy to get some reviews / comments.*

*Have a nice Sunday,*

*Love*

*Your Starflight*
Finding shelter

Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so much for the first comments / reviews – and for the kudos. I’m really happy that the story begins to attract attention and that it has found some people, who like it.

Off to the next chapter: As you can imagine, the trip through the woods will be for Hogan and Klink no walk in the park. Far from it, because when the night falls and it begins to snow, both men are in real danger. The Heroes learn of the ambush and Schultz is getting very worried. But there will be also some funny and sweet scenes.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 4 – Finding shelter

The dark evening was blending into the night. Hogan and Klink were still walking through the woods, only interrupted by two breaks they had to make because of the Oberst’s injuries. But the wounds the grazed bullets had left weren’t the only reason why Klink felt miserable, to put it mildly. The temperature had dropped even more, and his jacket was anything but warm enough. Far from it. Additionally, not wearing his cap left his balding head exposed to the iciness and he had a big headache by now. He had never been so cold in his whole life, and within the last hour he had wrapped his arms around himself and only concentrated on two things:

One, to grit his teeth strong enough to prevent them from chattering.

And two, not to lose Hogan from his sight.
Three times he had fallen back without even realizing it, and every time the colonel had waited for him until he caught up. Of course, the damn rascal had to tease him about it, which stoked Klink’s pride and will, yet it became more and more difficult to keep up pace with the somehow very well trained American. A POW shouldn’t be so fit, despite the sports the prisoners were allowed to do. Then, on the other hand, he knew firsthand that Hogan was a lot stronger than he was; having certainly trained his body his whole life along, while he – Klink – hated to do sports.

And now this lack of active training came back to him.

If they only could use a real path – or a road for that matter – it would have been so much easier. But Hogan had made it very clear to him that this would add another danger to their situation.

The colonel didn’t need to persuade Klink very much to convince him of the danger that lurked outside of the camp at nightfall – last but not least because of the allies which usually were on Hogan’s side. The war was reaching its peak and certainly its end in a few months, and the people who had put up resistance against the Hitler-regime fought even stronger since the Allies had landed in the Normandie seven months ago. And they had become more restless and often brutal.

Even Hogan often had problems now to reason with them when it came to his missions, because where he tried to keep the number of victims as low as possible and spared members of hostile soldiers and even the Gestapo and SS as much as he could, the resistance within Germany had no such scruple. They all – their families, friends and themselves – had suffered a lot under the cruel regime, and revenge was often the motivation behind their actions. Matters were complicated further after a big part of the Underground-cell in Hammelburg had almost been revealed to the Gestapo and the agents blamed Hogan for it, because his many missions and activities had brought Hochstetter to the right track concerning the Underground. Of course, he had helped them to flee and to leave Germany by smuggling them out through the tunnels, yet the Underground in Hammelburg was weakened – and didn’t really listened to him like they had earlier.

Hell, within the last months there had been a few occasions in which Hogan had been forced to protect Klink, Schultz and one time even Burkhalter to prevent them from being killed by the people he worked together with, even if the three German officers never took notice of it. They would never learn about the things their senior POW officer did to keep them alive, and how much Hogan had to play tricks to keep the Underground, London and the German officers in line.

And so, given the whole tense situation, caution was priority now.

He knew, if had and Klink met with a group of Underground-activists by pure accident during their trip back to the camp, the Oberst would be in great danger. Yes, Hogan had the pistol, but he really
didn’t want to fight those men and women who supported his missions. He would be caught in the middle and this had to be avoided at all costs. Even he could run out of arguments and tricks, and he so didn’t want to face such a situation.

So, he thought it a good idea to lead Klink square through the woods – very much to the older man’s dismay. To trudge through the undergrowth wouldn’t have been easy at day and wearing proper clothes. Now, at night, with a temperature far beneath the freezing point and as only illumination was the moon, the trip was awful.

Klink had never felt so wretched before in his whole life. Every step was hell and he didn’t know what was worse: The pain in his calf and arm or this unholy iciness. The only pleasant part of this nightmare-trip was Hogan’s presence.

Klink was still baffled that the younger man had refused to flee. Hogan was gambling with his life, this much was certain, yet the colonel stubbornly declined to get himself to safety and remained with Klink. The Oberst didn’t know if this was the bravest or the most foolish thing Hogan ever did.

His thoughts were interrupted as the gusts of wind rustled stronger through the leafless branches than before and temperature seemed to drop a few degrees. Klink fought against the tremors which already shook him over and over again, and as the next gusts became heavier, he shivered violently.

“Colonel Klink?”

In the dim moonlight Klink met Hogan’s concerned gaze, and even if the younger man’s obvious worry warmed him, it was not enough to chase the chills out of his bones. “I-I’m a-a-a-I r-r-r-right,” he mumbled; gritting his teeth as a new wave of stinging and burning pain made itself recognizable from his calf and upper arm.

“No, you are not,” Hogan answered quietly, closed the small distance to him and watched him carefully. He took in the pale skin, the blue lips, the sick color of his half-bald and the shaking form of the Kommandant, and alarmed he realized that Klink was not far away from falling prey to exposure.

Not giving a damn about the fact that it was war, they were on different sides and that it really could be interpreted the wrong way, he closed the distance, rubbed Klink’s arms a few times with strong movements; careful not to come near the wound. Finally, he wrapped one arm around his shoulder. He met the older man’s baffled gaze and gave him a lopsided smile.
Inwardly Klink *relished* in the physical contact, but of course he had to keep his disguise and so he said indignantly,

“I’m not *Fraulein* Hilda, Hogan, nor I’m a damsel in distress.”

The colonel chuckled quietly. “Well, not a damsel, but obviously in distress.” He pulled off his crush cap and placed it on Klink’s head. “I should have done this an hour ago, then you would feel better,” he said quietly. “Sorry for not thinking so far.”

“You know that I’m i-i-i-n trouble when s-s-s-someone else sees m-m-m-me wearing uniform parts of the e-e-e-enemy?”

“It’s a necessity of pure survival, sir. I would make an oath on it.”

Klink only huffed but quit his protests; even mumbling a quiet “Thank you”. The rubbing didn’t make much difference to the icy freeze he felt until now and it was not much warmth that reached the left side of his body where Hogan was in close proximity and, but the latter made his heart soar what helped him a little bit. And to have something covering his balding head was a salvation.

Together they searched their way through the woods – one limping, the other one supporting. Then the first clouds began to shadow the moon and Hogan looked up. “This is not good,” he murmured.

“Very observant,” Klink griped. “I’m shot, lost in some God damn woods and slowly turning into an icicle. And there says this man that the situation ‘isn’t good’.”

Grimacing, Hogan corrected, “I don’t speak of you or us in this matter, but of the weather. I think I smell snow in the air.”

“Snow will worsen our situation, so you *do* speak of us,” Klink announced triumphantly, which made the American groan. The *Oberst* only smirked at him for a moment, then the next blow of wind hit them, and this time both men began to tremble.

‘*Dammit!’* Hogan thought. ‘*Every time I think it doesn’t can get worse, it gets worse!*’
“It’s past ten o’clock p.m. and no news from Hammelburg!” Schultz murmured; looking at the clock. “Dammit, here is something very wrong.”

He left Klink’s office and began to search for Langenscheidt, who did patrols at the other end of the camp. Schultz was very tired by now, but his worry kept him up. Crossing the yard and cursing the snow that blew in gusts down from the skies, he finally spotted the other man and walked towards him.

Usually both would be off duty at this hour, but in mute understanding they had agreed to stay awake and remain in attendance should their fear come true.

“Karl,” he said quietly as he reached the corporal. “Nothing from Hammelburg. Take Hoffmann and Maier and check the roads to Hammelburg. If the streets are clean than I don’t know why they’ve vanished. If those aircrafts really attacked them, then… we’ll find the proof.”

Langenscheidt nodded. “To say the truth, I have a bad feeling.”

“Me too,” Schultz nodded. “I fear that they are indeed dead.” He took a deep, sad breath. “I only don’t know what to tell Hogan’s boys if our American prankster should be no more.” He shook his head. “I like Hogan – a lot. He is a fine man. It would be such a shame if he would be another victim of this damn war.” He glanced at Langenscheidt again. “And even if you call me crazy, but I would mourn Klink, too. In his own way he is a good man.”

“Yes, he is,” Karl agreed. “I’ll take one of the trucks and inform you as soon as possible.”

“Thanks,” Schultz murmured and watched the other man heading towards one of the guardhouses. Then he returned to Klink’s office; knowing that he wouldn’t find any sleep until he knew about the fate of his superior officer and the cheerful American he had come to like so much despite the fact that Hogan had landed him in deep water many times and was making him crazy with all the ‘monkey-businesses’ and hidden activities Schultz knew of exactly, but ignored.

“They did WHAT?” LeBeau almost screamed in outrage.
Kinchloe flinched while he placed the headset down beside the radio-device. He was grey beneath his brown skin. “One of the pilots affirmed that they found a military convoy driving towards Hammelburg while they were on their flight towards Nürnberg – aiming for some companies there which produce ballistics and spare parts for military trucks. They thought it was maybe a traveling staff-officer and wanted to eliminate him. So, the pilot and three further aircrafts parted from the main-squadron and attacked. The pilot told London that all vehicles were destroyed and that the most hostile soldiers were killed.”

“Blimey!” Newkirk whispered. “What’s about the gov’nor?”

“The pilot said it was too dark to make out details like different uniforms. One of the other pilots recognized black SS-clothes and so they shot at everything that moved,” Kinch answered quietly. “A few escaped, but the pilot couldn’t say how much and who.”

“So what?” Louis snarled. “We just sit here and wait if mon colonel shows up again or not?”

“What can we do in the moment?” Kinch murmured; feeling miserable. “We can’t leave the camp and begin a search on our own. There is too much unrest in the camp tonight – last but not least because Schultz is too disturbed by Klink and Hogan vanishing. There are more guards out on patrol than usual and…”

“Guys?” Olsen peeked down from the slatted frame that served as ladder.

“Yes?” Kinch called upwards.

“Schultz searched out Langenscheidt a minute ago and latter just drove with two guards in a truck away. I think, our strudel-king finally had enough and sent a searching party.”

Carter looked unhappily at LeBeau and Newkirk. “Then we can’t do anything except wait.”

“Oui,” the little Frenchman murmured. “Waiting and praying.” He glared at the radio. “And if those idiots really have killed mon colonel I personally travel to Old England and kick those pilots in the asses – hard, until they can’t sit anymore!”
They wouldn’t make it. If they didn’t find shelter soon, the cold would get the better of them. Like Hogan had already anticipated, it had begun to snow – heavily. Within half an hour even the grounds of the woods were white, and the wind had strengthened to a level it could be called a storm.

Klink was barely able to remain on his feet, and usually the colonel wouldn’t have hesitated to carry the older man, but the risk that the Oberst would fall unconscious and would slip into eternal sleep was too high. To force him to move was the only thing that guaranteed conscious – to a certain point. Hogan was not one who gave into pessimism, but their chance of survival had dramatically dropped. Maybe the risk to use the road had been the smaller one after all, but it was too late to wager ‘ifs’ or ‘whens’.

Klink stumbled beside him – for the fourth time within a few minutes – and Hogan caught the Oberst again.

Not caring for any formalities by now, he shook the other man. “Wilhelm, stay focused! We can’t be far away anymore and…” He gulped as he met the dazed gaze beneath the half-closed lids. Klink was barely conscious while he swayed dangerously. Opening his leather-jacket, Hogan pulled him close and wrapped both arms around him – trying to share some body-heat despite the fact that he was freezing, too, by now. “Hold on, Willie,” he whispered and felt an unexpected wave of despair, as the older man sank against him and buried his face at his throat. “Don’t give up,” the colonel murmured; tightening the embrace. “We have to be almost there. Stay with me, Willie!”

He looked around. He was absolutely certain that they had covered the distance between the place where the attack happened and Stalag 13, but there was nothing that gave a hint of the camp. And with dread Hogan realized that – maybe – he had lost the way.

It was often heard that people got lost in darkness, snowstorms or fog, because humans had the tendency to move in circle when no fixed point was there to follow. And obviously exactly that had happened now. Hogan frowned. He knew how to find his way in the woods, using hints like moss-growth on tree trunks to localize the cardinal direction, but given the fact that the only illumination was the snow by now, he could have made mistakes.

Mortal mistakes, how he was well aware of. He maybe would hang on for an hour more, but Klink hadn’t that time anymore.

All right, time to take some other actions. The next bush that was big enough to offer them some shelter had to do it. Then he would collect some wood and would try to start a fire – a difficult thing
given the fact that everything was wet. Yet he had to try it.

With a “Come on, Willie, you’re stronger than that’,” he pulled the Oberst with him; covering him with his open jacket as good as he could.

They only made four more steps, then Hogan stopped abruptly. There was a small street and dragging Klink with him, he stepped out on it. He looked to the left, then to the right, hoping to see something and…

There, not far away to the right he made out the silhouette of a house, barely recognizable in the scurry of snow.

Inhabited or not, the building was their rescue. Grinning like mad he cheered, “Willie, we made it!”

The words seemed to stir some spirits in Klink, who lifted his head. “S-S-S-Stalag?” he whispered hopefully.

“No, but a house. Shelter, Willie!” Hogan began to walk with new strengths towards the house; pulling the older man with him. “Come on, I’ll get us inside, start a fire and you’ll warm up in no time. And tomorrow we find a way back home. You’ll see.”

Hogan’s joyful speech was only barely registered by Klink, but the words ‘shelter’, ‘fire’ and ‘warm up’ did magical things to his exhausted mind. Somehow, he managed to drag his feet over the snow-covered ground, even if it was only because of the colonel’s grip around him that prevented him from losing his balance.

Suddenly a dog began to bark and Hogan realized that the house was inhabited. By now he didn’t care whom they were going to meet. The biggest priority was now to get out of the cold and to take care of Klink.

The dog was barking furiously now and a moment later the front door was thrown open and a man appeared in the dim light of a lightened candle; aiming a rifle at them.

“Wer ist da? (Who is there)?” he demanded. “Stop, oder ich schieße (Stop or I’ll shoot).”
Even if Hogan understood the man’s wariness in those dark times, he had no time to spare. Klink was about to lose conscious, and tightening his hold on the older man, he raised his voice, “Hilfe! Bitte helfen Sie uns (Help. Please help us)” His voice sounded in his own ears strange – more like a croak than anything else.

The man called something into the house and the next moment another man appeared beside him and lifted something that looked like a petroleum lamp.

On shaking legs Hogan dragged Klink with him towards the house, then he heard a shout of surprise.

“Sweet Lord, that’s Hogan!”

The colonel groaned inwardly. No, please not someone known from the Underground. How should he…

“And Oberst Klink. Don’t shoot, Andreas. I know those two.”

The voice sounded slightly familiar and then he saw someone rushing towards him and Klink. Strong hands caught him by the shoulders and he as he looked up he saw a well-known aging face.

“Schnitzer,” Hogan whispered as he recognized the veterinarian who was responsible for the guard dogs in Stalag 13 and belonged to the Underground; supporting Hogan and his men whenever his help was needed. The man, who was in his sixties, wore a thick jacket and a cap, his eyes shone with worry as he watched first the colonel, then the Oberst.

“Andreas, come on, help me getting them into the house,” Schnitzer called, then went to Klink’s other side to support him.

“Careful with his arm. He’s injured” Hogan murmured, then another pair of strong hands gripped him. He didn’t protest. He really was glad to receive some help.

“What happened, Colonel Hogan?” Schnitzer asked alerted. “You two look like hell.”
“Later, Oscar,” the other man said. “Let us get them into the house and warmed up. Then we can ask them how it comes that a German Luftwaffe officer and an obvious American POW show up at my doorstep to this unholy hour in the middle of a snowstorm.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hogan croaked and looked at the man at his side, who was in his fifties. “Colonel Robert Hogan, US Air Force,” he introduced himself as politeness kicked in.

“Andreas Obermayer, farmer,” the introduction was returned.

The last meters to the house seemed to last forever. Schnitzer gave the still barking dog a sharp command and the animal that was in one of the stables went quiet. As they reached the door, a woman appeared – wearing thick clothes and carrying another petroleum lamp.

“Anneliese, go lit the oven upstairs in Frank’s room,” Obermayer said to her. “Fetch some blankets and the medical kit. The Oberst is injured and I think the American can need some care, too.”

In the same moment, as the relative warmth of the house closed around them, Klink’s knees gave in and it was only Hogan’s reflexes and Schnitzer’s streak to be always prepared for everything that prevented the Oberst of making hard contact with the floor.

“Kommandant!” Hogan gasped and swore under his breath while he held the older man in a firm embrace; the crush cap landed on the ground.

“Take his legs, I take his shoulders,” Schnitzer grunted towards Obermayer, before he addressed Hogan. “Can you make it upstairs alone?”

“Yeah,” was all the colonel murmured and picked up his cap before he followed the two Germans who carried Klink between them. Two children, maybe four and six, peeked out from a door – eyes wide and scared. Despite feeling like he could fall asleep on his feet, Hogan smiled at them, which made the girl, the younger one of the two, squeak and dive for cover behind the older one.

“Don’t be afraid, I will never harm you, sweeties,” he said softly in German.

Andreas looked at them and murmured, “My grandchildren. They were evacuated from München. Don’t fear him, Marie, Peter. The colonel will cause no trouble.” He glanced firmly at the American, who nodded.
“You have my word of honor, sir. I’ll give you and your family no trouble. I’m far too grateful for your willingness to help Colonel Klink and me.”

“You can trust Hogan, Andreas. Despite his nationality he is a fine man,” Schnitzer grumbled. That he kept his cover as a loyal man of the regime showed Hogan that Obermayer wasn’t part of the Underground, otherwise Schnitzer would have spoken in different way. Oscar glared down at the barely conscious Klink. “The same goes for this guy here. His bedside manners leave room for wishes sometimes, but he’s not bad.”

They managed to carry Klink upstairs to a chamber that hadn’t been used for a while. The curtains were drawn close as usual in the whole of Germany since the ordered brownout during the war. Covers were placed over the furniture and it was cold inside. *Frau* (Mrs.) Obermayer knelt in front of the oven and was lightening it. “Take the *Oberst* over here, Andreas,” she said and pointed to the covered bed. “Peter?” she called and as the boy appeared shyly at the door, she said, “Go to our chamber and fetch two blankets. Hurry!”

Hogan knelt stiffly beside her and gripped for the chopped wood. “I’ll take it from here on, Ma’am. If it isn’t too much to ask, the *Kommandant* and I would be very grateful to get something hot to drink.”

“We have not much to offer,” the woman answered carefully, “but I can make some sage-tea. We have saved dry sage for the winter and it helps with approaching colds and flues.”

Hogan smiled. “I know. Where I come from, sage is one of the most used healing herbs. A tea made of it would be wonderful. Thank you.”

Anneliese Obermayer pursed her lips and watched the enemy officer for a moment. He looked utterly exhausted, was dirty and wet with the melting snow on his bomber jacket and black hair, but there was something in the way he spoke and looked that made her want to trust him.

She rose and exchanged an asking glance with Schnitzer, who simply nodded slowly. Oscar was their friend for more than twenty years now and she always had appreciated his deep insight of animals *and* humans. If he, who knew most of the prisoners of the near POW-camp, trusted the American then she had no reason to be wary.

Schnitzer and Obermayer had put Klink on the bed by now, who only groaned some unintelligent words, as Andreas began to remove his jacket. “Anneliese, get the medical kit first. This doesn’t look
good!” he called over his shoulder.

“I’ll treat the Oberst. Right, usually I treat dogs and cats, but there isn’t such a big difference to humans – at least in this matter,” Schnitzer grumbled.

Hogan had finally started the fire and the first warmth began to spread through the room. It made him shake with overreaction, and with trembling fingers he removed his own jacket and kicked of his wet shoes. Laying Klink’s pistol on the table, he began to strip. It was better to get rid of the wet clothes than continue to wear them.

Obermayer got the idea to what the American was up, went to a heap of furniture which were covered with blankets, took a sheet of cotton and offered it to Hogan. “Here, you can use it to be spared moving in Adam’s costume. Place your clothes near the oven. I’m sure they’ll be dry by the morning.

“Th-th-th-thanks,” Hogan murmured; his teeth chattered by now.

Obermayer frowned as he saw the handcuff and the short chain that dangled from it. “You were transferred?”

“No. We were on the way to Hammelburg as the convoy was attacked by American air forces. The Kommandant and I escaped and tried to reach our camp but got lost.”

Stripping off except for his underpants, he quickly pulled the bleached cover around himself. He shivered violently as the warmth increased and he relished in it for a few seconds, before he closed the distance to the bed, where Schnitzer had managed to unclothe Klink for the most part.

The Oberst had come around again but was more asleep than awake. Yet he wasn’t too far gone to realize what was going on and tried to stop the other man, but Hogan reached out and caught Klink’s wrist in a gentle yet firm grip.

“W-W-Wilhelm, stop it,” he said between tremors. “It will get better as soon you’re stripped o-o-o-off the wet c-c-clothes.”

The unfocused gaze of the older man met his and for a moment recognition was in the dark blue

“Yeah, it’s m-m-m-me. Calm down. We’re s-s-s-safe now,” the colonel replied gently.

“O-o-o-o-okay,” was the only answer he got, before Klink sighed deeply – and was out cold a moment later.

Obermayer had watched the scene thunderstruck. “Do all POW’s care for their jailor like you do, Colonel?”

Hogan looked over his shoulder. “Colonel Klink always treats us f-f-f-fair and with respect, and… we both know each other for a-a-a-almost three years now.” A new shudder ran through his body but at least his teeth didn’t chatter that badly anymore. “I’m the senior officer of the POWs a-a-a-and therefore the colonel and I have often to interact with each other. I respect him f-f-f-for what he is: A loyal man with honor and decency.”

Anneliese returned, carrying the medical kit. “The water will boil in a few minutes, then I’ll make us all tea.” She looked at Klink. “How is he?”

“Asleep – for now,” Hogan murmured. Then he stiffened for a moment; realizing that a lady was present while he was in a more or less unclothed state. “Ma’am, I a-a-a-apologize for my appearance, but…”

Anneliese shortly took in his half-bare state. She saw the dog tag he wore on a thin chain around his neck and realized that it contained a duplicate made of metal foursquare. She knew from her son that the German ones were round and dark. She asked herself how the so-called ‘dog tags’ of the Germans and Americans differed further.

She caught Hogan’s still embarrassed gaze and smiled, “Colonel, I’m not one of the town-ladies who has to fan herself when she only sees a man’s naked chest. A man without clothes isn’t a big deal for me. By the way, the blanket covers the most – just like a Roman tunic.” She winked at him, and Hogan to his surprise felt himself flushing.

“Thank you, Ma’am. You’re very k-k-k-kind.” His voice became more firmly second by second now. Then he glanced at Oscar. “Let’s clean his wounds and treat them. I’ll help you.”
“Are you now a doctor, too, Hogan?” Schnitzer teased him while taking the medic kit, and the American smiled shortly.

“You have no idea what knowledge y-y-y-you gain when being trapped in a POW-camp.”

At this statement – especially the part of being ‘trapped’ in the camp – Schnitzer had to laugh. Then he turned serious again. “How did you get this bruise?” he asked; pointing nonchalant at Hogan’s cheek. “Don’t tell me, Klink lost patience with you.”

It was a joke, but it didn’t go well with the still tensed American. “Colonel Klink would n-n-n-never raise a hand against a prisoner, as you certainly know! He sends us to the cooler if we break rules, and even then, he only goes through the p-p-p-punishment half way, releasing us days earlier than originally ordered.” He met Oscar’s surprise gaze, and added softly, “I had a run-in with Hochstetter, that’s all.”

“Hochstetter?” Obermayer cut in, alarmed. “The leading Gestapo-officer in the area?”

Hogan looked shortly at him; the violent shivers were leaving him finally. “As it seems, Hochstetter isn’t famous, but infamous – not only among us prisoners.” He sighed. “Yeah, I mean exactly this black-clad gnome with a permanent foul mood and a streak of yelling a lot.” He saw how the other man tensed up even more and realized that Obermayer was afraid that he could get in trouble with the Gestapo for hosting someone they were after. So, he stuck to half-truth and a few exaggerations, as he added, “He’s possessed with the idea that I run an Underground-organization and has wanted to prove it for months now.” He shook his head and chuckled. “Me – a POW, running a ring of spies from a camp that is known as the toughest POW-camp in whole of Germany. There has never been an escape. A few of my men and even I tried to flee, but without success. As incredible as it sounds, but Klink is too clever for us.”

Obermayer frowned. “As far as I understand, you had your chance this evening after the attack.”

The colonel made an affirming gesture. “Yes, but that would have meant leaving the Kommandant behind who got injured because he saved me during the attack. We are on different sides in this damn war, but this doesn’t mean that I have to lose my humanity by letting down a man who just risked his neck to get mine out of danger. And, as I already said, Klink has earned my respect for being the man of honor he is. I wouldn’t leave him behind, even if he didn’t saved my life minutes earlier.”

Astonished Andreas looked at the American, who just politely bowed his head towards him, before he turned around and began to help Schnitzer to treat Klink’s injuries. If it wouldn’t sound so
completely crazy, Obermayer could have sworn those two officers were close friends. Shaking his head, he leant back against the wall and watched the two men aiding the injured Oberst.

Ten minutes later all that could be done, had been done. Klink’s left calf and upper arm were cleaned and bandaged, he was wrapped into one of the covers that had been earlier spread over a desk and a desk-chair under the window, and a woolen blanket added the much needed warmth.

Hogan sat beside him on the bed’s edge and sipped at the heavenly smelling and tasting tea. He was still chilled to the bones, but he felt better by now. Yet he knew that maybe he had caught a cold at least, and he really didn’t look forward to sneezing and coughing his head off within the next days. And he was certain that Klink would suffer the same, if not more. The older man wasn’t in such a good physical condition as Hogan was. The colonel simply knew that they all would witness a whining and ‘dying’ Klink within the next days. Maybe LeBeau’s cooking could lift Klink’s mood then and…

Hogan stiffened and almost had slapped himself. LeBeau… his men! None of them knew what happened. And there was also the matter of Hochstetter. Knowing the Gestapo, they certainly would send a search party when Hochstetter didn’t show up within time. Or Hochstetter was already back in Hammelburg, thinking him and Klink dead or was organizing search parties to seek for him (and Klink). Maybe the major would contact Schultz to learn if he, Hogan, and Klink had returned and would presume them dead. Kinchloe, Newkirk, Carter, LeBeau, Baker, Olsen and the other men would be devasted and he really didn’t want to give them more reason to suffer than they certainly already did by worrying their heads off for him.

Making a decision, Hogan addressed Andreas Obermayer, “Sir, do you have a telephone here?”

“Yes, but electricity is rationed and switched off after nine o’clock for the whole night.”

“What?” Hogan glanced surprised at him. “Since when is this the case?”

“For more than two weeks now,” Schnitzer answered; looking up from his task. “You only didn’t learn about it, because certain facilities have emergency generators, like Stalag 13, the hospital, the police station, Gestapo-Headquarter, the central telephone exchange to guarantee said facilities to be able to phone should it be necessary, and so on. But all other buildings are switched off power during night. Why do you ask?”

“I wanted to call our camp to let the active Kommandant know of our whereabouts and that we survived the attack.”
“Who is in command for now?” Oscar wanted to know; already anticipating the answer. “Schultz?”

Hogan grinned shortly and nodded.

“Oh dear,” Schnitzer sighed. “Well, it’s night. Maybe the camp will survive until morning when electricity is back online, and you can call him to let him know that you and Klink are still alive.”

Biting shortly his lips, the colonel addressed Obermayer. “At what time electricity will be switched on?”

“That depends. Mostly at six o’clock, but three days ago it was already seven o’clock as the power was back,” the farmer answered and emptied his cup before he rose. “I suggest that you and the Oberst will sleep here. I’m sorry that we can’t offer you a separate bed, but this room is the only one that is unoccupied in the moment. It once belonged to my eldest son. Peter and Marie are sleeping in my daughter’s room at the other side of the floor, beside the master bedroom, and Oscar got the chamber of my middle child.”

“It’s no problem, sir,” Hogan answered. “A bed is a bed, and I’m more than grateful for your hospitality.” He looked at Klink. “I only hope he doesn’t snore.”

Schnitzer chuckled. “Pinch his nose and he certainly will stop it.”

“As long as it isn’t regarded as an attack on another officer…” Hogan sighed; eyes sparkling for a moment with mischief, then he turned serious again. “Can you drive Colonel Klink and me to the camp tomorrow?” he addressed Schnitzer, who shrugged.

“If this damn snowstorm has calmed down until then I see no reason why I shouldn’t give you two a ride. Be ready to shovel some snow from the road, Hogan. The thick snow cover is the reason why I’ve to take Andreas’ offer to sleep here. My truck had never let me down, but its old and has its limits.”

“No problem at all,” the colonel answered.

In this moment the first snore was heard and rolling his eyes Hogan looked down at Klink, who still
trembled slightly even in his sleep. “I knew it,” he sighed. “I simply knew it!”

Obermayer and Schnitzer bid him good-night a few minutes later and vanished; closing the door behind themselves.

Hogan was alone – alone with a snoring, still shivering Wilhelm Klink who lay in the bed like a baby and was dead to the world.

Wrapping the blanket more firmly around himself, the colonel pursed his lips. There were two possibilities now: He could sleep on the floor which didn’t sound appealing the tiniest bit, or he simply could share the bed with his German counterpart.

Looking at Klink he realized that he had to use the side of the bed that was next to the wall – meant he had to climb over the Oberst. Groaning in defeat – the coziness and warmth of the bed was too tempting – he opened the blanket he had wrapped round himself a little bit and tried to get to the other side of the bed without disturbing Klink.

Half climbing, half crawling he finally reached his destiny, earned some unwilling grunts from his unusual bed-companion, and slipped under the second woolen blanket he had taken with him.

Promptly he shivered, while his tired gaze roamed one last time through the room. Obermayer had left his petroleum lamp that send a dim, golden shimmer through the chamber. The wood in the oven crackled, outside the storm raged and it creaked in the roof beams above, yet the whole atmosphere was somehow inviting and comforting.

Beside him Klink still trembled from time to time, and as Hogan carefully reached out and placed a hand on the older man’s shoulder he felt that the skin was far too cool. The Oberst’s core temperature was still dangerous low and not giving a damn about modesty – and surrendering to rationality – Hogan pushed away the thin covers he and Klink wore instead of clothes. “I hope you appreciate what I’m doing here, Willie. I really don’t want to hear any complaining from you tomorrow,” he grumbled while closing the distance to his sleeping-companion. “God, you’re cold,” he groaned quietly, as his bare chest and limps came in contact with the older man and he had to suppress another shiver.

As a Boy-Scout he had gone through a lot of survival training and one of the base-knowledges included emergency measurement when someone was about to die from cold. Sharing body-heat was the simplest but also most effective step that could be done; increased by skin-to-skin contact.
Careful not to touch the two bandages, Hogan slowly slipped his arms and legs around the lanky form in front of him – even lifting softly Klink’s head to put his right arm beneath it. Latter had two simple reasons: One, he still had the handcuff snapped around his wrist with the short rest of the chain and it would be very uncomfortable if he came to lie on it during the night. And two, being this close to his bed-companion there was no room left to put his arm elsewhere.

New tremors run through the Oberst’s body and Hogan’s eyes widened, as Klink snuggled deeper into him; driven by instinctively search for warmth. Well, it felt strange to lie like this with a guy, on the other hand the situation didn’t leave him with any choices. And, by the way, after a few moments it wasn’t so awkward as it had been before. It almost felt… nice to be not alone in bed for once, even if this was strict platonic. Yet Hogan knew what picture he and Klink gave.

‘If Hochstetter or Burkhalter would see us like this, we would face a firing squad quicker than we could explain any survival-tactics,’ the colonel thought, before the cockier part of him added inwardly, ‘So thank the Lord that the two morons aren’t here.’

Finding a position that was comfortable – even with the living icicle in his arms – Robert Hogan began to relax. The warmth and the knowledge to be safe for now did the rest to lull him into dreamland. It didn’t last long until he was deeply asleep.

TBC…

Poor Hogan. First he has to drag Klink through the woods, then he has to take care of him and now he even has to be his personal ‘comforter’. And, believe me, the waking up for both in the morning will be slightly chaotically (*snicker*).

In the next chapter Schultz learns of the attack against the convoy and – of course – he, Langenscheidt and the others are going to believe the worst. Hochstetter reaches Hammelbug and will be his typical mean self. Well, and – as already mentioned – our two colonels will have a messy morning; especially given the fact that Hogan uses the circumstances to tease Klink merciless, until ‘Willie’ turns the tables a little bit.

I hope you liked the new chapter and that you – despite the summer heat – got a sense for the icy coldness and the danger that really threatened the two counterparts.

Like always I’m hoping for comments, reviews and any other kind of feedback.
Have a nice Sunday

Love

Yours Starflight
A restless night

Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so much for the feedback I received. I’m happy that you like the story so far.

As mentioned in the last chapter, this one is going to be funny and sweet – even if Hogan’s men, Schultz and his comrades, and Hochstetter are assuming the worst concerning the two colonels.

Enjoy,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 5 – A restless night

Langenscheidt stared horrified at the still smoking remains of the vehicles and motorcycles which had once been the convoy. Two burnt corpses could be seen among the rest of the bikes and three dead SS-guards lying nearby – the snow was only beginning to cover them and the tracks the salvos had ripped into the ground.

There was nothing else that could be recognized – not among the heaps of melted metal that once had been the cars. Deep inside glowing metal was still shimmering and it was too hot to go near the sad remains. Despite the icy and therefore fresh wind it reeked of burnt grease, oil and rubber.

One of the guards stepped beside Langenscheidt. “What do you think? Did they make it?”

“A few of them certainly. But Klink and Hogan?” Karl kicked frustratedly into the snow and pressed his lips into a thin line for a moment. “I don’t know, Christoph. I have no clue.” He glanced back at the truck they came with. “Let us return to the camp. Hans certainly will call Hochstetter’s office again. Maybe the survivors have already shown up and we will learn what has become of our
Sighing he wrapped his arms around himself and headed for the truck; filled with dread because of the news he would have to tell Schultz – and Hogan’s men…

*** HH *** HH ***

The door closed behind Wolfgang Hochstetter, whose mood had reached the level of zero – despite the fact that he thought his nemesis dead. Even the prospect of never having to deal with Klink again didn’t cheer him up. He was too cold for more than one positive thought.

Shivering, with chattering teeth and rubbing his arms he went for his desk – barking at a sergeant to bring him hot tea with rum. The open fireplace in the well-furnished room was freshly lit and spread warmth through the room, but for Hochstetter it was still too cold.

Damn Americans! To attack his convoy! Who had they thought they were ambushing? Hitler? This was a casual prisoner transport and not the travel of a staff-officer.

Well, it hadn’t been a casual prisoner transport – after all the prisoner had been Colonel Hogan, top-spy, saboteur and assumed Underground-agent ‘Papa Bear’.

The thought of his nemesis being dead brought the smirk back to his face. The Allies had eliminated one of their own best men.

Unfortunately for them, fortunately for the Third Reich!

Finally, this permanent thorn in his side was no more.

And that Klink had perished, too, was additional luck.

For this he would suffer a long walk through snow and ice again.

“Major, your tea,” the sergeant said as he stepped into the office.
“Thank you,” Hochstetter nodded and gestured towards the left side of his desk, where the open fireplace was. He would try to get warm before he would use one of the makeshift beds just down the floor. It was too late to return to the little flat he had rented nearby, after all duty would start in a few hours again. And, by the way, he didn’t want to set a foot outside as long as the snowstorm raged. Fresh uniforms were in the headquarters anyway, so there was no need to go home to change.

“Sir, we had called Stalag 13 eventually when you didn’t show up to ask if you were still there,” his underling continued. “Sergeant Schultz asked us to inform him as soon as we gained some news about you and Oberst Klink.”

Hochstetter nipped at his tea. “Regrettable Oberst Klink belongs to the victims of the attack – along with Colonel Hogan.” He couldn’t hide the satisfaction in his voice and there was glee in his piercing eyes.

“Shall we call Stalag 13 and…”

“No, Sergeant, we don’t want to startle big old Schultz and take the sleep away from the poor man,” the major sneered. “I call him in the morning personally before I have to inform General Burkhalter that his POW-camp needs a new Kommandant. Preferably we’ll take the camp over – then we can finally put an end to the mess Stalag 13 is in.” He took a deep breath. “And then I call Major Pruhst. I’m certain the news will please him.”

*** HH *** HH ***

“You are sure?” Schultz asked quietly. His face was pale, and sorrow had dug wrinkles around his eyes which gave away his sadness. He felt cold, despite the warmth of Klink’s office that he occupied.

“If there were survivors, then only a few. Hogan was chained to the staff car as we all saw before the convoy left. Yes, if they had enough time to free him, he maybe got away, but…” He shrugged helplessly. “There was absolutely no proof if he and Klink made it or not.”

“What about the others?” No, it didn’t interest him what had become of Hochstetter and his men. He loathed the Gestapo and the SS worse than warm beer or over-salted soup, but maybe their fate gave some hints what happened to his superior officer and Hogan.
No tracks of them. We saw three dead SS-guards – obviously shot – and two burnt corpses between the rest of motor-bikes, but that was all. The snow covered every trace that maybe was left on the ground."

Schultz combed his hand through his white hair; tousling it more than it already was. “If some of them survived, then they would continue their way to Hammelburg. The sergeant, who called me three hours ago, promised me to inform me if Hochstetter or someone else shows up. And until now there was no call.” He looked at the telephone as if it was its fault staying silent.

“What shall we do now?” Langenscheidt asked quietly.

“We’ll wait until morning. It’s too dark and the weather is too bad to take any further action. I try to reach Schnitzer tomorrow. He shall come with a tracker dog. Maybe the barker can find a trace if we give him a personal cloth from Klink and Hogan he can sniff at.”

“Right,” Langenscheidt nodded. “Permission to go to bed?”

“Dismissed,” Schultz murmured. “Try to get some sleep, Karl. I’ll do the same – after I concoct what to tell Hogan’s boys tomorrow.”

*** HH ***

LeBeau pulled the link away from the coffee pot that served them as a little speaker and cursed in French.

“Now we know no more than before,” Newkirk snarled. “We have no clue if Hogan still lives or not – and Schultz goes to bed! Unbelievable!”

“To be fair: There is really nothing he could do right now,” Kinchloe murmured. “The weather is…” He stopped, as the light began to flicker. For a moment it went out completely, then it came back to life, but much dimmer than before.

“What the hell?” Kinch frowned.
Again, the light flickered and Andrew Carter grimaced. “Did Klink forgot to pay the power bill?”

The lights went out again and remained like that.

“Super!” LeBeau ranted. “Now we can fumble our way to bed.”

From outside Schultz’ loud voice was heard, swearing in Bavarian and shouting for a technician.

“I ask myself what triggered this power blackout,” Baker mused. “The camp has an emergency generator. Shouldn’t it cover any failure of the electricity supply?”

“’Made in Germany’ isn’t what it once was,” Newkirk deadpanned, then he turned serious again. “Mates, we’ve to do something. We can’t sit here and wait if the gov’nor shows up again or not. What if he’s injured and is lying somewhere outside in the woods? He could die by morning.”

“And how do you want to find him?” Kinch asked; staying reasonable. “We’ve a snowstorm raging, it’s dark like as a closed mine and we’ve no clue where the attack against the convoy happened exactly. As much as I hate it, but we’ve no other choice than to wait – and to hope that the colonel is still alive and somewhere safe.”

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan didn’t know what exactly woke him up, but suddenly the fog of sleep freed him and he was thrown back into reality. A reality he didn’t know what to make of.

First, he realized that he wasn’t alone in bed but was pressed against someone – someone tall and obviously not female. The next thing he recognized was the howling of a storm outside, the foreign smell of the bedding and… One moment, was he naked? And his companion, too?

Groggily he opened his eyes and blinked into the dim light of a single petroleum lamp that was placed on a desk nearby. This wasn’t his quarters. To tell the truth, it didn’t look the tiniest bit like any chamber in Stalag 13, yet the balding head directly beside him was unmistakable.

How did he end up with Klink in one and the same bed in a strange room?
Then the memories returned – and with a groan Hogan closed his eyes again. He felt an unpleasant stinging deep in his throat and a rough pressure in his nose. Superb! The question if he had caught a cold was answered: He had!

He pulled the blankets higher as he only now sensed that the air had cooled down again. Lifting his head, he peeked over Klink’s sleeping form towards the oven and instantly missed the soft golden glow that was previously had been beneath the furnace door. In other words: The fire had died. He looked at his watch and saw that it was in the middle of the night. By morning the temperature within the room would drop a lot if he didn’t restart the fire.

Sighing, he began to unwrap himself from his bed-companion and the blankets, climbed carefully over the Oberst and tip toed on bare feet to the oven to lit up a new fire. Taking some chopped wood from the basket Frau Obermayer had left, he quickly began his work.

Suddenly he heard movements behind him and looked back over his shoulder. Klink had shifted in his sleep and seemed to tense; his face showed a frown. ‘You have your own weights to carry, Willie, don’t you?’ Hogan thought not without sympathy. You could question Klink’s competence as a commanding officer, but he took his duty seriously – a duty that became more and more difficult to attend. It was no miracle that the man had nightmares; especially after a disaster like what happened during the last hours.

He returned to his task, and only when the flames were dancing again in the oven, Hogan rose and checked on his and Klink’s clothes. The thinner materials had dried by now, but the boots and pants were still damp, as were the jackets. Placing them nearer to the oven, Hogan hoped that they would be completely dry by morning. It would be more than uncomfortable to slip into half-damp clothes and footwear again.

Turning around he met the groggy, half-closed eyes of his German counterpart, who moistened his lips and looked sleepily up at him – frowning suddenly again. Hogan sighed and waited for the inevitable sputtering and lamenting about decency and modesty. As vain as Klink was, the American simply took him for a prudish man who certainly was ashamed to show others more than his bare underarms – except if he was forced to take a shower in a communal bathroom like the one in London a few months ago, as they had been there on an undercover-mission to steal a new P51-aricraft.

The colonel couldn’t know how wrong he was – at least in this special case.

Klink had been deeply asleep, yet it wasn’t a peaceful rest. His subconscious still processed everything he had been through within the last hours – he and the man who held his heart. He was
too exhausted to have real nightmares, but fragments of voices and pictures had begun to haunt him, as something pierced his sleep and brought him back to conscious.

He felt warm and comfortable while lying on something soft. He also thought he could feel strong arms around him but while his still sleep-fogged mind needed some time to work with the information, he felt those arms leaving him before someone climbed over him and the mattress he obviously laid on, moved.

Still he needed a minute or two more to gain full consciousness and to open his eyes. He found himself within a dimly lit chamber and in front of him…

… knelt a definitely male figure with his back turned towards him; naked as the day of his birth. Well, not fully. There was the white of underpants shown, yet no shirt or pullover covered the muscular back with broad shoulders and slim waist. The light of a little fire sent dark golden highlights over the short, black hair and as the man rose, Klink faced two long, strong legs – bare like the rest of the man.

Even tired beyond belief, he would have recognized those movements and this shock of dark hair anywhere, and a smile appeared on his face. This had to be a dream – one of those tender dreams which haunted him no less than the ‘wet’ ones. There was no other explanation why he, Wilhelm Klink, lay in a bed in a little chamber with an almost naked Robert Hogan in front of him.

He took in the lean, slender body, in the way the muscles moved as the colonel reached for something which seemed to be clothes, and his heartbeat increased. ‘He’s more beautiful than I ever dared to think,’ was the first half-sane thought that went through Klink’s mind. When they had been in London, Hogan had worn a robe while being in the communal bathroom at the air force base, and therefore it was the very first time ever he saw his counterpart almost naked.

Hoping this dream wouldn’t end too quickly, he watched as Hogan put the clothes nearer the oven, and then his mouth became dry as the American turned around and their eyes met. The glimmer of the petroleum lamp bathed Hogan in a soft shine, and Klink wanted nothing more than to reach out and let his hands roam over this golden body.

“Come back to bed, hon,” he mumbled; praying his dream-lover would act like he should with being, well, a dream.

Hogan had expected every possible reaction, but certainly not that one! ‘Hon’? ‘Come back to bed’? Uh-uh, there was someone still in dreamland. ‘Well, at least he doesn’t freak out instantly by seeing me more or less naked,’ He thought; deeply amused.
“You are sure about it, sir?” he asked quietly; not realizing what his slightly hoarse voice did to his German counterpart.

Without hesitation but with rising pulse Klink reached out and closed his hand around Hogan’s left wrist the moment the colonel closed the distance to the bed. “Come back; it’s cold,” he grumbled; tugging at the American’s arm.

“Well, from senior POW officer to a personal heater – what a career,” Hogan commented wryly and climbed over the older man back to the empty spot. “But don’t give me an ear full tomorrow when you’re really awake agaaaa…. Willie!”

The Oberst had caught his left wrist again and wrapped Hogan’s arm around himself; lacing their fingers together. With a contented purr Klink snuggled backwards into the warm, strong body behind him, mumbled something Hogan was unable to understand – and fell back to sleep moments later.

“I don’t believe it!” Hogan murmured; flabbergasted. He tried to free his hand without waking Klink, but for naught. The Oberst’s long fingers were firmly entwined with his own.

Resigning, Hogan pushed his right arm back where it had been before and began to relax again – giving into his fate to be Klink’s additional personal blanket for the rest of the night.

*** HH *** HH ***

The snowstorm finally calmed down in the early morning; leaving the whole area of Lower Bavaria under a thick white cover.

Hogan’s men in Stalag 13 were still asleep just like Hochstetter and his underlings which had survived the attack, but in Obermayer’s house the day was already about to begin.

Usually Hogan woke up early, too, but after everything that happened the evening prior, he was still in dreamland as the first muffled sounds below the floor woke him. A door clapped, steps were heard on the stairs a few moments later, and low voices spoke with each other – male and female; obviously the Obermayers.
Half an hour later Hogan came slowly around; feeling warm and comfortable. Something heavy was laying atop of him and he felt on his belly the soft beating of a heart, while warm breath danced over his bare skin at his left shoulder. An arm was wrapped around him and whoever was sharing his bed cuddled him like a personal pillow or teddy-bear.

Well, this was a nice way to wake up – to be not alone in bed and having someone snuggling close to him. Still half asleep and groggy from the exertion hours ago, he gently tightened his arms around his bed-companion and sighed in content – not realizing the big difference between his usual one-night-stands and the current person in his arms.

A soft squeaking and the shine of a lamp prevented him from drifting back to sleep. Someone had come into the room, yet – exhaust as Hogan was – he needed a moment before his mind caught up with everything that was going on. For one his throat felt raspy and his nose itched, which was less good. Second, he wanted to go back to sleep but there was something he urgently had to do, even if he couldn’t remember what this ‘something’ was. And then he heard an amused chuckle. Finally, his brain started to work, and he opened his eyes again.

He looked directly into the aged face of Oscar Schnitzer, who carried a petroleum lamp, watching him and his bed-companion – and began to smirk.

“Really, Hogan, I never took you for this kind of guy. On the other hand, the never-ending bantering between you two should have told me enough. Teasing is a sign of affection, isn’t it?”

What, the hell was Schnitzer talking about? And what was he doing here in Barrack 2 – with a petroleum lamp?

The flood of words that came over Hogan’s lips betrayed his confused state of mind, and the veterinarian laughed quietly. “No, I didn’t replace Schultz to get you for the morning roll call. But if you two are ready to separate at some point of time, you should make yourself presentable before you come down. What shall Frau Obermayer think if she sees you two like this?”

Schnitzer made less and less sense in Hogan’s opinion, and…

The person with whom he obviously spent the night, began to shift and murmured something that sounded a lot like ‘five minutes more’ – spoken in German and definitely in a male voice!

What the heck!?
Lifting his head, the colonel peeked down at his bed-companion who was sprawled all over him – and almost yelped as he recognized Wilhelm Klink.

The movement seemed to wake the Kommandant more, who grumbled something about ‘moving mattresses’ and ‘silly pillows which dare to speak to him’.

Schnitzer couldn’t help himself anymore – he began to laugh out aloud; revealing a tolerance the most people didn’t possess.

A moan escaped the Oberst, followed by a “Shut up, Schultz!”

Hogan’s memories were flooding back, and with a groan he laid his head down again – looking exasperated at the ceiling, before he glanced at Schnitzer, who still gave into his amusement.

“This isn’t funny,” the American all but pouted. “Help me at least.”

“You two are such a nice couple, I’ll be damn by interrupting you.”

“Schnitzer!” Hogan hissed. “For God’s sake, be quiet! If someone hears you and gets hold of the wrong end of the stick, Klink and I are done for.”

“Do you really think outside our boys are not snuggling up to keep each other warm in this damn winter, Hogan?” the veterinarian teased. “At least you two prove that close cooperation between our countries is possible even in war.” He placed the petroleum-lamp on the table and took the empty one with him. “Hurry up. I’m leaving in half an hour. Oh, and by the way, the power is still off.” Still smirking he stepped out into the floor and closed the door.

Hogan groaned again, lifted one hand and rubbed his face. To hell with the old guy – on the other hand, the whole situation did bear some humor. No doubt about it. A soft snore drove his attention back to the human blanket on top of him and taking a deep breath he decided to use this unique chance to tease his German counterpart merciless.

No reaction.

“Willie, we’re late for roll call and Schultz will get angry with us.”

An undefinable murmur was heard.

“Ah, come on, honey, or we’re too late.” He patted the *Oberst* on the bare back, which earned him a comfortable purr. Oops! Wrong way to get his goal.

“Wilhelm, wake up!”

For a moment the man above him tensed, then he sighed and snuggled closer to him – even rubbing his cheek, rough with the first beard-stubbles, on Hogan’s shoulder.

‘*What a cuddler,*’ the American thought amused, before he chose the ultimate weapon. “Colonel Klink, General Burkhalter is on his way.”

Another sigh, followed by a groggily, “‘Shall go to hell,” was all he got. Sweet Lord, this man really was a deep sleeper!

“Yeah, I agree with you, but we really have to hurry now. So, rise and shine.” He patted Klink again, this time stronger. And finally, he was able to break through the *Oberst’s* sleep-fogged mind.

Klink too a very deep breath, moved – and blinked into the semi-darkness.

His throat was scratchy, his nose itched and his whole body was as heavy as iron. And, besides, where was he? This wasn’t his sleeping-chamber, this much was for certain. And… there was a body beneath him? A warm, strong and obviously not female body, but…

Lifting his head, he looked down at the living ‘mattress’ he lay on – and his eyes became wide as saucers as he recognized no-one other than his senior POW officer who smirked his infuriating smile at him.
“Ho… Hogan?” he all but stammered.

The colonel’s grin broadened. “Good morning, tiger.”

“T-t-t-tiger?” Klink’s voice was unusual high.

“Yeah. You call yourself the ‘Iron Eagle’, but in truth you’re a tiger,” Hogan said ambivalently, growling suggestively while wriggling his brows.

“What?” It was a squeak – nothing more, nothing less. The color Klink’s face changed to, was alarming red while he gasped for air.

Topping everything, Hogan wrapped both arms around the older man’s slender hips and smiled at him, “Who had ever thought that behind this shy behavior such a fierce soul slumbers?”

With a yelp Klink leaped to his feet, felt a sharp pain shooting up his left leg, got tangled in the blankets and almost lost his balance if it wouldn’t have been for Hogan’s quick reflexes.

“Easy there, ‘hon’. This is the sixth time within the last hours that I have had to catch you.” Steadying the older man, the colonel sat up and let go off him the moment the Kommandant got control over his legs.

Klink’s breathe flew and his heart drummed in his chest like he had run a marathon; his left calf hurt, and it was cold here. He didn’t know if this was a dream or a nightmare, as he turned around and looked down on Hogan, who sat there in all his bare glory; only some blankets drawn over his lap, the shine of the small lamp reflected on the dog-tag that hung on a golden chain down his muscular chest.

Had they really…? Had he finally given into his deepest wishes – and Hogan had returned those desires? Had they indeed…?

Hogan’s guffaw caught his attention. There sat the colonel with tousled hair, holding his belly with laughter and simply looked like an oversized boy who pulled a big prank with success.
One moment!

Something was utterly wrong here.

Looking down at himself he realized that at least he still wore his underpants. So, they certainly hadn’t… broken the law in this special way.

“You… you…” Klink sputtered enraged, pointing an accusing finger at the still chuckling American.

“God – your gaze,” Hogan panted, and tears of laughter swelled up in his eyes.

The Oberst realized that Hogan had only pulled his leg, and he didn’t know if he should be disappointed or relieved. “You damn rascal!” he growled. “You made me believe…”

“Told you I would warm you up when we were lost in the woods,” the colonel grinned. “I always keep my promises.”

“By crawling into my bed?”

“That’s our bed and…” The American stopped as his German counterpart promptly blushed again.

“D-d-d-don’t say you meant it this way!” The next second Klink slapped a hand over his mouth. He and his quick tongue without using his brain. It would be his downfall one day.

Hogan looked with big eyes at him, before he began to chuckle. “Sweet Lord, Willie, do you want that something had happened between us?” he teased.

“HOGAN!”

“Sorry, but after all you asked me to come back to bed tonight and even called me ‘hon’.”
“That… that wasn’t a dream?” Klink’s voice climbed up an octave again.

“You thought you dreamed as you named me ‘hon’ and pulled me back into bed beside you?” the colonel chaffed him again.

“Yes… NO!” Klink paled, only to blush again.

“You really dream about me?” Hogan tried to look innocent, but this time his acting skills left him. His eyes shone with mirth and new laughter pulled at his lips. Heavens, he really loved to bicker with the older man.

“Yes – in nightmares,” the Oberst snapped; wishing for a hole to swallow him.

This was too good to let the topic drop. “Uh, and there I thought you liked me – after all the snuggling and cuddling you did last night,” Hogan pretended to pout.

Klink had enough. He wasn’t going to lose this quarrel. Not this time. Turning the tables, he said, “Hogan, two possibilities. If you don’t shut up I strangle or kiss you. The choice is yours!” He felt a smirk tugging at his mouth, as the colonel promptly gaped at him. “Muzzled – finally!” Klink triumphed.

“You threaten to kill me after all the trouble I went through last night to save your butt?” the American complained in his best little-boy-voice.

“This bothers you more than the prospect of me shutting you up the other way?” Klink asked; not knowing what to make of this reaction.

Pretending to sulk, Hogan lifted his hand and counted on his fingers the long list of favors,

“I carried you through the woods, warmed you…”

“Hogan!”
“… gave you my cap, brought you here, treated your injuries, stripped you to prevent you from dying by exposure, filled the oven with wood during the night to keep you warm and even allowed you to use me as your blanket – and in gratitude, you are threatening me? Wilhelm, you really hurt me here.” Pouting, pressing a dramatic hand against his chest and looking at the older man like a punished little puppy, Hogan knew that he had won the moment Klink groaned and lowered his head.

“All right, all right, you saved me and took care of me. I’m very grateful for your help.”

“Yes, out of friendship. And then you accuse me of being nasty to you. You really should apologize.”

Klink glared up as he finally realized that Hogan was manipulating him again. With two stumbling steps he was in front of the younger man and bent down; invading the colonel’s private space for once. “I’m grateful that you did all those things for me – and that you didn’t leave me to die in the woods. But. Stop. Manipulating. Me!” With satisfaction he saw Hogan’s eyes widening in real surprise and added, “Don’t think for a minute that I don’t see through you, you churl! And if I didn’t like you so damn much I…”

“So, you really like me?”

There it was again – this boyish behavior that masked the American’s cleverness.

“How long have you two been married?” The voice came from the door and belonged to Schnitzer, who leaned against the door frame, crossing his arms in front of his chest and pursing his lips in sheer amusement.

Klink turned around, hissed as his calf began to burn again, and starred at the veterinarian. “Schnitzer?” he gasped; thunderstruck. “What are you doing here?”

“Visiting old friends before you and your senior POW officer showed up – more dead than alive. And now I wanted to offer you two a ride back to Stalag 13 – if the gentlemen will be able to get dressed within the next ten years.”

Klink blinked at him – then life returned into his body. With a “Give us two minutes!” he grasped for his clothes. “How late is it? Where are we exactly? Does Schultz know that we’re still alive?”
“Sorry, Herr Oberst, but because of the rationed power we’re still out of electricity. Therefore, no telephone is working. And concerning your other questions: We’re approximately three kilometers away from Stalag 13 and it’s half past six.”

“Are the Obermayers already awake?” Hogan asked and rose from the bed. “I want to say good-bye to them at least.”

“They are down in the kitchen and I’m sure they want to give you and Oberst Klink their best wishes before you leave.” He turned away. “Hurry, gentlemen, I don’t have all day.”

“Slave driver,” Klink grumbled barely after Schnitzer had left.

“We owe him,” Hogan replied while slipping into his pants; turning serious finally. “Especially you. It was him who attended your injuries. I only gave him a hand.”

“Thought so. My arm and leg feel like a heard of cows has tramped over them,” the Kommandant sighed. “Who are those Obermayers?”

While they dressed, Hogan filled him in on what happened during the late evening and the night, and five minutes later both men came down the steps; Klink having re-holstered his pistol. He was glad that Hogan had taken care of it instead of leaving it at the clearing. Weapons were rationed too, by now, and he really didn’t wish to explain to Burkharter why he needed a new pistol. Yet Klink asked himself why the colonel hadn’t hidden the weapon from him to make use of it at some later time. Besides the matter with Hochstetter, a POW – especially in Hogan’s position – certainly could make use of a pistol. Sometimes, the Kommandant thought, Hogan was too honorable for his own good – or he was too clever to give his opponents any kind of reason to put him on the back burner.

Klink met the Obermayers now for the first real time, thanked them for their help and hospitality and was about to leave the house after Hogan had already left with Schnitzer, as Andreas said quietly, “Herr Oberst, I don’t know why your senior POW officer really was involved with the Gestapo and I don’t want to have details, but one thing is for sure: He is a fine man who ignored his own duty to flee when he decided to aid you. He also defended you fiercely when I asked him why a prisoner worries so much about his jailor. Whatever the Gestapo accuses him of – look after him. I do believe he’s a true friend to you.”

The Kommandant stared at him and then outside, where Hogan was helping Schnitzer to get his truck free of snow. Hogan had defended him – and had really worried for him? Memories rose in
him. Memories of the last evening when he was barely conscious while wandering through the hell of ice and snow. He saw the colonel’s face near his, dark eyes sharp with concern. Words of encouragement and even pleading not to give up echoed in his mind, while strong arms held him – and his heart thrummed harder as he realized that this damn rascal seemed to really care for him. Joy filled him that he quickly masked with a cough.

“Well, he’s not so bad – and I’m used to having him around. The Gestapo will have a hard time getting him away from my protection.”

Uh, that was certainly more than he should have said, but one look at the other man’s smiling face showed him that his words were well understood.

“I’m glad,” Obermayer murmured. “If all men were as honorable as you two are, we would not be at war.”

Klink cleared his throat – God, it scratched. He certainly had relapsed with the damn cold he had barely overcome. “Thanks,” he murmured. “I wish you and your wife a good day. And if you have trouble one day, you know where to find me.” He saluted and left the house – cursing as the coldness hit him mercilessly.

“Herr Oberst!” Anneliese Obermayer followed him and offered him two blankets. “Here, for you and Colonel Hogan. It’s cold in Oscar’s truck and given the large amount of fresh snow, your way back to the camp will be long.”

Klink couldn’t help himself: He gave the lady a real smile. “Thank you so much, Frau Obermayer. I will ask Schnitzer to give them back to you when we’ve reached the camp. Good day.”

Wrapping the blanket around himself and carrying the second one towards the truck, he called, “Hurry, Hogan. We’ve already missed morning roll call – and warm coffee waits for us when we’re back.”

The American looked up from his task to free the truck from the snow. “Is this an offer, Kommandant? Thank you for the invitation.”

“That you always have to put words in my mouth,” Klink groused.
“But you just said that at home coffee waits for us, so this is a casual invitation,” Hogan protested with a huff.

Andreas looked at his wife; deeply amused. “It sounds crazy, but they are indeed friends.”

Anneliese giggled softly. “Yeah, but they don’t realize it.”

TBC…

This is the first time the two counterparts were really bickering, and I hope you liked it. I also imagine Schnitzer as a more tolerate man, therefore his shock-less behavior as he found the two colonels in a position that would usually have compromised them (even if really nothing happened).

The next one will first be a sad one, because Hogan’s men really think their friend and superior officer his dead. And then comes the big surprise – and it wear several faces.

I would be happy to get some reviews / comments again, and sorry that the next publishing will last approx. two weeks, because from Thursday on I’m off for holidays.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Just back from my holidays, I was happy to find my dear beta-reader’s mail in my inbox with the next edited chapter. Therefore you don’t have to wait too long to get the new installment.

Like already told, in our Heroes have no reason to doubt that their beloved superior and friend is dead (keep some handkerchiefs near), but then the surprises start.

Thank you so much for the feedback I got on the last chapter; I’m glad that you enjoy the story so far.

Have fun with the next chapter,

Love,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 6 – Returns

“It’s half past seven o’clock and Schultz hasn’t summoned us for roll call?” Carter glanced baffled from one of his fellow prisoners and friends to the next. They had all barely slept and even those minutes when tiredness had overwhelmed them, had been restless. The fear for their leader – their dear friend – was too deep.

“It’s pitch dark outside,” Newkirk reported; looking out of the open the window that was covered with frost. “Even the searchlights at the towers are still not working.”

“So, the power hasn’t returned,” Kinchloe grumbled, who tried to switch on the light for the fifth
time. They had lit a few candles on the table to at least see something. “Whatever is the reason for the power blackout, it’s serious.”

All of sudden the light flickered on and cheers broke out. After a few more flickers it remained stable but dimmed.

“Finally,” LeBeau sighed.

“Mates, Schultz is hurrying to Klink’s office. He’ll certainly call Hammelburg now with the power back on,” Newkirk said and closed the window. Quickly they set up the ‘coffee-pot’ to eavesdrop the talk from Schultz’s side within the Kommandantur. They would miss too much if they went down into the tunnels to listen to the whole conversation at the telephone exchange.

“Hochstetter returned during the night?” Schultz’s voice sounded from the tiny speaker, caught by the hidden microphone in Klink’s office. “Why didn’t you call…” “Yes, we had a power blackout...” “No, we were cut off from the general power supply and our own emergency generator broke down after a few hours.” – “Why? I don’t care at the moment. I only want to know if Oberst Klink and Colonel Hogan...” Silence began to stretch. Then Schultz’s said quietly. “I understand, Sergeant. No, there is no need that Hochstetter calls in person. I... I’ll make the next necessary steps.”, “What? Yes, Heil...” The soft click showed that the receiver was placed back on the phone before the demanded current usual greeting could be finished, then a desk-chair squeaked, followed by a deep sigh full of sorrow.

The four friends looked at each other with blank expressions; blood running cold.

What they had heard could only mean one thing: Hogan and Klink hadn’t made it.

No!

No way!

That couldn’t have happened!

Not after all the dangerous and suicidal missions they went through together with Hogan, coming out of the riskiest situations as the winner. Their friend – brother – couldn’t have died in a damn ambush by their own allies.
“This… this is not true,” LeBeau whispered; his dark eyes filled with tears. “Mon colonel can’t be
dead.”

“Hochstetter is mistaken,” Carter murmured. “He certainly only assumes the colonel and Klink dead
and misinformed his underlings. Hogan is on his way back to the camp and will come through those
gates over there within the next few minutes!” He pointed outside in the direction of the main
entrance; his voice shook.

No-one answered – painful silence had befallen Barrack 2.

Newkirk rubbed his temples; a murderous headache was starting as he tried to suppress the rising
tears; his heart hurt like it rarely had done before.

Kinchloe lowered his head and balled his hands into fists. He couldn’t believe it. No, not Hogan. Not
this bright, warm-hearted, kind-spirited man. He never had met a superior officer like him. Hogan
didn’t see the color of skin, the heritage or the rank, only the person. He had treated him as an equal,
contrary to many other officers he had served under.

And London… Kinch had to inform General Butler that his friend Robert Hogan had…

God, Kinchloe couldn’t even finish the sentence in his mind. His throat constricted and only his
strong self-control prevented him from giving into the sob that rose from the depths of his soul.

The door to the barrack opened and somehow LeBeau had enough presence of the mind to close the
‘coffee-pot’ before the newcomer could see the wires inside. He looked up and straight into Schultz’s
sorrowful face.

The Sergeant of the Guards glanced at Hogan’s team, saw their pained expressions and even
moisture in their eyes, and sighed heavily. “You already know,” he said quietly.

Mute nodding was the answer. “Boys, I’m… I’m so sorry,” he murmured crestfallen; not giving a
damn about how they already knew of something he had gotten affirmation of only minutes ago.
“Colonel Hogan was… he was a fine man – a real gentleman and…” Hans was lost for words. He
heard a whine and as he glanced down he saw LeBeau tightly crossing his arms as if he wanted to
protect himself against the pain and lowering his head; his tiny frame began to shake. With a “Come
here, little cockroach,” he simply pulled the small Frenchman against his massive form like he would
take a son into his arms; trying to comfort him, even as his own heart was dwelling with sorrow.

For a few moments there was nothing else to hear other than the soft sobbing of Louis, while Andrew buried his face into his hands – shoulders shaking.

“We’ve to get the bastards who did this to the gov’nor,” Newkirk whispered; eyes brimming with moisture. “They’ve to pay for this.”

Kinch nodded; already planning to speak with General Burton in person on the radio and to demand punishment for the fateful overzeal that cost their friend his life. Then he glanced at Schultz, whose eyes were reddened, and remembered what he also heard over the ‘coffee-pot’, too.

“Schultz,” he whispered. “I’m also sorry that we lost Klink. I know that you and he weren’t always on the best terms, but I also know that you respected and certainly even liked him. My condolences.”

“Thanks,” the Bavarian sergeant was able to reply despite the tears which threatened to spill over. “He… he was a good man – with a heart far too soft for this job.” He gulped, gulped again – and finally began to weep. “Damnit, I can’t go outside like this – seen by the guards,” he cried.

For minutes they all sat or stood together – prisoners and the Sergeant of Guards; united in mourning for two men that had been more than superior officers to them. One had been a beloved leader, the other one had turned into something close to a friend – at least for Hogan’s core team and the big Bavarian.

Then something pierced their suffering minds. Turmoil was heard from outside, which only reached the men in Barrack 2 just now.

Schultz cursed and wiped one large hand over his round face. He pushed LeBeau with a gentle “Let go of me, son,” from himself and went with heavy steps to the door. Rubbing his nose on the sleeve of his coat he opened the door, looked outside – and went rigid.

There, in the light of the now working searchlights he saw Schnitzer’s truck parking outside of the areal and three people making their way to the gates. One was Schnitzer, who followed two people wrapped in blankets. One of them supported the other one who limped, and both had covered their heads with the plaids, but in the pale light of the spotlights their faces were unmistakable.
A loud bark of laughter, born of pure delight and relief, was torn from Schultz’s throat. “HA-HA, there they are! ‘They didn’t make it – my ass!’ Hochstetter, you mendacious rat! I could tramp you in for making us believe they were dead!”

Hogan’s friends had run to the door the moment they heard the sergeant’s joyful outburst – hope rising in them like the sun after a long dark night. Could it be…

“It’s mon colonel!” LeBeau screamed, as soon as he had recognized Hogan.

The four men more or less tumbled out of the barrack; almost running Schultz over. And they weren’t the only one. The moment the other POWs realized that the rumors of their superior officer’s eventual death were wrong, they left the barracks – cheering and rejoicing. Even the guards at the gate that was opened at that moment, grinned.

Hogan supported a sniffling and slightly feverish Klink; whose calf gave him hell by now. They had needed almost an hour to reach the camp and Schnitzer had been forced to shovel the road free with Hogan’s help a few times. Klink had remained in the truck, yet the Oberst was frozen to the bones again, shivering and coughing – a certain sign that he really suffered a relapse. Hogan felt like shit, too, but the prospect of coming back to his men drove him forwards.

And now, after they climbed out of the truck as two guards outside of the gates had stopped them, the colonel wanted nothing more than to have a warm shower, a nice broth made by LeBeau and a long nap. And one look at Klink’s pale face told him that the Kommandant sported the same wishes.

Klink looked at the sight in front of him. The familiar layout of the buildings and fences, the inviting light in his office and the lamps outside of the barracks spoke of homecoming. The spotlights were trained on him and Hogan, and the guards even smiled at him a little bit (and that after they volunteered to have a part in the firing squad that threatened him only a few months ago). The POWs were running towards them now – everyone beaming like crazy.

“Home, sweet home,” he sighed, as they entered the camp through the gates; greeted formally but with pleased faces by the guards.

“Yeah!” was all Hogan said but it came from the heart.

Then his men had closed the distance to him, and for a moment Hogan was overwhelmed as he was pulled away from Klink and found himself caught in a group-hug; ranks forgotten. He looked at his
friends, saw the remains of shed tears on their pale, tired-out faces, the way they looked in wonder and overjoyed relief at him – and couldn’t help himself but began to laugh quietly. Sweet Lord, so these were the tough Heroes who thumbed the Germans’ noses over and over again, and who had gained a legendary reputation in Allied High Command and in the Underground? At the moment they reminded him of little boys under the Christmas tree, and he felt warmth at the display of brotherly love they held for him.

“Mon dieu, mon colonel…” LeBeau began, and continued to chatter in French with such speed that Hogan, who spoke a passable French, was not able to translate it properly.

“Thank the Lord, Gov’nor,” Newkirk sighed and pulled his friend into a bear hug, before Kinchloe did the same – clapping Hogan on the shoulder.

“You really had us worried here, Colonel,” he said.

“I knew you would make it – you and Klink,” Andrew piped up; beaming like mad. “I told the others that you were on your way back to the camp – coming through those gates at any minute.”

“Carter!” Newkirk groaned.

“I told you!” Andrew insisted; sniffling with shining eyes.

“And who told you this?” Klink asked; driving the others attention towards him.

“It’s easy: Colonel Hogan always finds a way out,” Carter explained in innocence eagerness. “But I’m glad that you made it too, Kommandant. Boys, we all were worried… I mean, sirs.”

“Thank God you’re well, Herr Kommandant,” Schultz said, who finally reached the group, too. His round face showed his real joy, while his big, still reddened eyes beamed. “The same goes for you, Colonel Hogan. Your men were devasted when they thought you dead.”

Klink pulled the blanket tighter around himself. “So, Hochstetter really believed us dead?” He glanced at Hogan. “I’ll bet my last shirt that this damn coward didn’t even search for us.”
“A sergeant from the Gestapo headquarters in Hammelburg and I phoned during the night several times until I had enough and sent Langenscheidt with a search party for you,” Schultz began to report informally. “We already assumed that the attack we heard was directed on the convoy, and as Karl found all vehicles destroyed and we got no news from the Gestapo, we believed that really something bad had happened to you and Colonel Hogan. And in the morning, after the power blackout was remedied, I called Hochstetter’s office again and one of his underlings told me that Hochstetter had told him that you and Colonel Hogan hadn’t made it. It was like this,” he nodded; clearly still troubled by everything despite the current happy ending.

“Ha, that wish was the father to his thought,” Klink sneered. “But he will learn soon enough that we’re still alive when Burkhalter will have his head for what he did to Hogan. That was attempted murder, nothing else – and he’ll pay for this!” Anger mirrored in his eyes and voice, while he shook one balled fist.

“He tried to murder the colonel?” Newkirk gasped; shock written all over his face.

“What exactly happened, Colonel?” Kinch asked Hogan, who recognized that Olson and the camp’s medic Sergeant Joe Wilson had joined the group. The other POWs remained at respectful distance but were still grinning like mad. “We only learned that the convoy was attacked by Allied aircrafts and that you and Colonel Klink were killed during the ambush,” James continued.

“That is what Hochstetter wanted,” the Kommandant growled – and promptly coughed. “But what is the old saying? Dead men live longer or so?” he added after his coughing calmed down.

“Yeah, thanks to you,” Hogan answered; looking with open gratefulness at his German counterpart. As he caught the confused gaze of his men and Schultz, he explained, “That I’m still alive is only because of Colonel Klink. When the aircrafts attacked, Hochstetter and his men fled and left me behind while I was still chained to the staff car – hoping that I wouldn’t survive the following attack.”

“WHAT?” LeBeau outraged.

“This gutless swine!” Andrew snarled.

“Carter, language!” Hogan rebuked him softly.

“He left you to die?” Newkirk growled. “I’ll beat the hell out of him the next time he shows his ugly
visage here in our camp!"

“How did you escape?” Kinch asked more factual, yet his blazing eyes betrayed his wrath.

“Only because of our Kommandant,” Hogan said with an unusually gentle voice; glancing shortly at an almost blushing Klink. “I know now why he got the nickname ‘Iron Eagle’ – because of his courage. He came back for me despite the salvos which pelted down on us, shot the chains apart and pulled me away seconds before the staff car exploded during the next attack.” He laid one hand on Klink’s shoulder and returned the almost sheepish look the older man gave him with a warm smile. “I take back any thoughts I sometimes had of you being someone who backs down too easily, Wilhelm. You’re one of the bravest men I ever met. Not many people are able to overcome their fright and above all even risk death only to help others.”

Klink gazed with big eyes at the American. Hogan was serious for once, this much he could tell. And as he saw the soft smile that curled the colonel’s lips ever so slightly, he felt flushed all over. Warmth spread through his heavy limbs, made his heart beat quicker and raised his pulse. He knew that he was smiling like an idiot, but he couldn’t help himself in the moment.

The four Heroes stared flabbergasted first at their superior officer, then at Klink and then back again. Was Hogan pulling their legs or had Klink really outgrown himself by saving the colonel despite mortal danger?

Schultz smiled knowingly to himself, before he addressed Klink with a gentle, “Always knew that you had it in you, Herr Kommandant.”

“Thanks, Schultz,” Klink murmured; hoping that the other took his burning cheeks for signs of his fever.

Newkirk shook his head in wonder. “I never thought that I would say this, but thank you, Kommandant. A big, fat thank-you from all of us.”

“Yeah, I agree,” Kinchloe smiled. “Colonel Hogan is more than our commanding officer. He’s our friend.” He glanced with brotherly warmth at the colonel, who shrugged with a hue of embarrassment.

“Stop it, fellas, or you’ll make me blush, too.”
“Herr Kommandant… I’m glad that the rumors of yours and Colonel Hogan’s death were highly overrated!” Langenscheidt stopped beside Schultz and smiled at Klink. He was a little out of breath and his uniform jacket wasn’t correctly buttoned up. It was more than obvious that he had just came out of bed; risen by the cheers and shouts outside.

Klink was about to rebuke him for such an appearance, then he took a closer look and saw the dark circles beneath the corporal’s eyes, the paleness and the dull eyes. He glanced at Schultz and saw the same, just like Hogan’s men. “Didn’t sleep well last night?” he asked no-one in particular, and it was Schultz who answered,

“We all could barely close our eyes – sick with worry for you and Colonel Hogan.”

Klink only nodded; almost embarrassed by the sudden display of comradeship. He wasn’t used to something like this. He knew that Schultz cared – and Langenscheidt a little bit, too – but this clear concern was a surprise for him.

At the same moment the lights began to flicker anew before they stabilized again. The incident brought a relieving distraction for Klink. “Schultz, what’s the matter with our power supply?” he demanded in his well-known sharp tone.

“Well, it is like this, Herr Kommandant. During the night – shortly after Langenscheidt returned from the search party – the emergency generator failed to cover for the official power blackout. We examined it, but only found the error in the morning.” He sighed; his tiredness was now clearly seen on his face. “The thing is tinkered together from old spare-parts after all, and I don’t think it will be functional for much longer.”

Klink rolled his eyes. “Well, I hope it will work during the next nights, otherwise we’ve a real problem. But first I must call Burkhalter. He has to learn what Hochstetter did.” He shrugged off the blanket and handed it Schnitzer. “Here, please return it to the Obermayers, once again with my thanks.”

“I will,” the veterinarian answered and took the plaid.

“The same from me,” Hogan said and gave his own blanket to Schnitzer.

Klink had already begun to head towards his office but stopped after two steps and turned around. “Hogan, you’re off roll call until the day after tomorrow. Get some rest and stay in bed. Maybe your
cold can be cured before it breaks through fully.”

Wilson frowned as he saw the Oberst’s movements. “Kommandant, you don’t look so well yourself – and you’re limping. Are you hurt? After all you ran through a shower of bullets.”

Klink blinked for a moment in surprise. Was this real concern the American medic showed for him? Why all of sudden? Because he saved Hogan? Had this one movement of neck-breaking risk smoothened the POW’s understandable grudge against him and his position? He didn’t dare to believe it.

“Nothing so dramatic, Sergeant, two graze-shots, that’s all,” he shrugged, before he pointed a finger at his senior POW officer who looked ready to hit the pillow. “Hogan, do as I say. Go to bed and cure yourself.” His voice became softer. “And thank you for not leaving me behind but taking care of me.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” the colonel answered with a tiny smile; feeling and seeing the asking glances his men directed at him. Well, they would have to wait until he could tell them of all that had happened since he had been arrested by Hochstetter.

Klink nodded, put his right hand on his back and stormed with his typical stooping posture towards his office – only to stumble to the ground after a few meters with a yelp.

Hogan and the others hastily closed the distance to him, and the colonel heard the Kommandant cursing in colorful German, as he knelt down beside him. “Is it your leg, sir?” he asked; feeling new worry rising in him. God, something really had something changed between them. Hogan had always felt concern when Klink’s position as the Kommandant of Stalag 13 had been at stake, but he always had brushed it off with the excuse that he needed Klink’s stupidity to continue his missions. Now he knew that he had started to care for his German counterpart many months, maybe even years, ago. Because just like during their trek through the icy woods last evening, he really loathed seeing the older man in pain or suffering.

“Dammit! It can’t be that such a little rip can hurt so much,” Klink groused; balling his right hand into a fist.

Hogan stood up. “Come on, fellas, help me get the Kommandant on his feet. Wilson, get your kit. Colonel Klink was grazed with bullets on his left calf and upper arm.” Together with Newkirk he pulled the Oberst to his feet. “And given his grumpiness, he also relapsed with a cold,” he added with the old habit of teasing the German officer, who promptly protested,
“I already told you Hogan, I am not grumpy! Keep that in mind, will you!”

“Just right now you are grumpy,” Hogan said innocently, which brought grins to his friends’ faces and made Schultz sigh in fond exasperation.

“Do you want to spend a night in the cooler?” Klink threatened, but even he heard that his hoarse voice was anything but serious.

“We already solved this topic yesterday evening, Willie.”

“Hogan! How often do I have to tell you not to skip formalities?”

“And you gave me a whole day free,” the colonel continued as if he hadn’t heard the interjection at all, “including lingering in bed, sir. Oh, and you invited me to coffee. You can’t have already forgotten it,” Hogan ended his little protest with a poorly hidden smirk.

“Hogan!” Klink growled – and had to cough again. He huffed as he saw the lopsided grin his American counterpart gave him, before Hogan turned towards the Sergeant of the Guards.

“Schultz, take Colonel Klink to his office so that he can call General Burkhalter. And he really needs something warm to drink and maybe a hot foot soak,” he all but ordered.

“Is’ scho’ recht (Bavarian: All right),” Schultz sighed, slung Klink’s right arm around his neck and wrapped his own arm around his superior officer’s waist. “Anything else, Colonel Hogan?”

“Yeah, I hope the warm showers are functional. I’m freezing my ass off.”

“You could use the shower of our guards, Colonel and…”

“SCHUUUUULTZ! Colonel Hogan is still a POW and NOT a guest. And he certainly isn’t the one who gives orders here,” Klink griped; even if he deep down really wished he could grant the younger man such a favor like a warm shower in the guards’ quarters. Sweet Lord, he wouldn’t
mind warming Hogan the way the colonel did with him last night (or to do more), but there was no possible way for it. As much as he yearned to snuggle into the next bed with the object of his most secret desire, holding each other and trying to find content and peace in each other’s arms, the risk of being revealed was too great, especially during the day. And, regrettable, he didn’t think Hogan would even agree to such an act.

Besides those points he also had duties which couldn’t be delayed anymore. Like calling Burkhalter to tell him of Hochstetter. No, the warm bed had to wait – just like finding some comfort by dreaming of the man who had captured his heart.

Schultz sighed as he heard the typical dressing-down. “Sorry, Herr Kommandant, I almost forgot.” Together they made their way to Klink’s office, and Hogan wasn’t the only one who smiled at the unequal pair.

Wilson watched them walk and addressed the colonel with professional concern. “How bad are his injuries, sir?”

“I can’t say for certain,” Schnitzer answered the question. “I attended to him as good as I could, but I’m usually treating animals, not humans, so you should have a closer look at it.” He smiled shortly at Hogan. “I’ll return the blankets to the Obermayers and then drive home. I have to take care of my dogs. They haven’t seen me since yesterday. Have a good day, Hogan – gentlemen!”

“Thank you, Oskar, the same for you. And thank you for your help.”

The older man nodded. “You are welcome, Hogan.” He glanced at the others. “Keep an eye on him, boys. He has this terrible streak of getting into trouble.”

While Hogan rolled his eyes, the others began to snicker and bid the veterinarian good-bye, who left the camp, nodded at the guards and climbed back into this truck, while the colonel and his team walked towards Barrack 2. Smiles, claps on his shoulders and words of relief and joy accompanied Hogan, before he finally reached the wooden building that served him and his friends, as well as ten further men, as ‘home’.

Sighing in relief, Hogan pulled a chair beside the oven and sat down; feeling like a big burden had been taken from his shoulder. Rubbing his face, he realized the stubble of a one-day-beard and grimaced. He hated it when he wasn’t clean-shaved.
“I’ll go down and radio London that you’re back,” Baker said, before he looked at Kinchloe. “Stay here, Kinch. I’ll take over the radio station for you.”

“Thanks,” Kinchloe smiled and watched how Baker stepped to the bed that hid the secret entrance to the tunnels, hit the mechanism and climbed down the makeshift ladder as soon as it appeared.

“What did they say as you informed them about me being arrested?” Hogan asked.

“They said that they see no chance to get you out if the Gestapo really has proof of you being an Underground agent and that we should be ready to evacuate ourselves,” LeBeau groused. “As if we would let you down. They should know us better!” He shook his head and began to prepare a late breakfast.

Hogan frowned. He had given almost the same orders to his men like London did. But, of course, they wouldn’t have obeyed them without at least trying to rescue him. He knew that they would risk court martial for insubordination to help him and that he should give them a stern speech concerning the matter, but he knew it would be for naught. And, besides, hadn’t he disobeyed London himself when he went straight against orders and saved Tiger from the Gestapo, sending her to England?

‘Don’t throw stones in a glass-house, Robert!’ he reminded himself, before he sighed, “Have you learned who attacked the convoy?”

Gratefully he accepted the cup of coffee Newkirk offered him, while the English corporal told him about the squadron that had been on a mission to bombard some factories in Nürnberg. “Baker made it clear to London that those overzealous pilots have maybe killed you and demanded that the guys will face consequences for it.”

“Did you inform London of my presumed death after the phone call between Schultz and Hochstetter’s office?”

Newkirk shook his head. “No, there was no time for it after the power came back. First, we were too shocked after we eavesdropped Schultz via the ‘coffee-pot’, and then you and Klink appeared at the main gate.”

LeBeau placed a bowl with broth in front of Hogan. “Did Klink really risk his neck to save you, mon colonel?” he asked, and as the colonel only nodded, he began to beam. “I’ll make a dinner for him he will give his eye teeth for.”
“Everything is all right,” Baker reported while climbing back into the barrack; closing the hidden entrance. “London knows that you’re still with us, Colonel, yet they say that we’re to hold still for the next days until Burkhalter as called Hochstetter off your neck – hopefully.”

“Klink was furious enough to sock Hochstetter if the latter would have been in range,” Hogan sighed; rubbing his neck. “I’m sure he’ll nag Burkhalter’s ears of getting Hochstetter for what he did to me – or tried to do.”

Newkirk shook his head. “I never thought that old Klink would put the life of someone else above his own – at least the life of a prisoner. No offence here, Gov’nor.”

“No offence taken, Newkirk,” Hogan answered. “I remember the occasion when Klink turned into full protective mode as Hochstetter demanded that the half of our guards here should support some dangerous mission of his. Klink denied him any support. And Klink also steps in front of us whenever someone threatens us.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Yet this was more. He was… terrified of the hell around us two, but this didn’t stop him from coming to my rescue, getting injured in the process. Even after he was grazed with the shots my safety remained a priority for him – screaming at me to run for cover while he lay wounded in the open, a clear target for the pilots in the aircrafts.”

He frowned. “I always knew that he had some fierceness left in him – that he is like a ticking time-bomb with all the pressure he has to endure as the Kommandant of a POW-camp, howling with the wolves which sing a song he loathes. His life is like a dance on the high wire – just like yours and mine. But that this all would make him become a fighter not for his own safety but for others’ is something that never occurred to me before.”

“Schultz said that Klink would take any risk if it comes to your safety,” LeBeau mused. “But he didn’t want to tell us, why.”

Thoughtfully Hogan pursed his lips. “He took a big risk to get to me,” he murmured. “That was almost suicide as he returned to free me from the chain that tied me to the car, while the bullets flew around us. And…” He hesitated.

For a moment he wanted to tell the others that his German counterpart had practically ordered him to flee – to get away from Germany. But out of a reason he couldn’t put a finger on, he rejected it. Klink’s command that Hogan should escape was high treason – and something absolutely private between them; just like last night. Of course, the latter hadn’t been anything that could be called criminal. It was only logical to share body-heat under the given circumstances, but Klink’s reaction when he was still in half-sleep and afterwards in the morning, stirred something in the colonel that prevented him from speaking about it. First, he would have to think everything through, before he could utter a word about it.
“And what?” Carter asked curiously.

“Nothing,” Hogan shrugged it off. “He got injured and fell. I returned to him, pulled him up and together we made it to the woods before the pilots in the aircrafts could hit us. Hochstetter and his fellows had left in another direction, and because we both really didn’t want to be guests in the Gestapo headquarters, we tried to return to the camp.”

“Have you two tramped the whole night through the woods?” Kinch asked worried, while sitting down at the table.

“No, we found shelter in a farm house as the snowstorm got nasty. Schnitzer was visiting the residents, recognized Colonel Klink and me, aided us and his hosts let us stay overnight.”

“You could have made an escape,” Newkirk said quietly; pouring himself a cup of coffee. “Hochstetter will not let you off the hook, Colonel.”

“I couldn’t leave you behind, fellas,” Hogan said softly. “We’re a team – thick as thieves. I knew you would worry your head off about what had happened to me, and I didn’t want you to mourn when there is no reason for it.” He sighed. “And, by the way, Klink was indeed wounded. He wouldn’t have made it back to the camp alone. I owe him – and, besides, he earned my respect long ago as I realized that he is in his own way a man of honor. Officially an enemy or not – I… just couldn’t let him down.”

Newkirk and LeBeau exchanged a glance. Typical Hogan!

*** HH ***

“Yes, Herr Sergeant, this would be all. Thank you and Heil… whatsoever!” Klink ended the call and grimaced. “Burkhalter is on his way to the Führer headquarters for a meeting that will last the whole day. I ask myself if they can do anything in Berlin other than talking, talking, talking. The war is as good as lost, and instead of thinking of a way to lessen the losses and how to handle the Allied Forces when they take over, they are talking about how to continue the mess.” He shook his head. “I really don’t get it.”

Schultz, who had prepared a tea for his superior officer, sighed deeply. He knew that Klink would be in deep, hot water if anybody could hear him speaking like this, but he couldn’t blame the Oberst. He himself had the same thoughts.
“Maybe they simply do talk about everything that will happen afterwards,” he offered, and Klink waved his hand.

“The brass will not recognize the truth until it jumps into their faces with a blow worthy of a boxing-champion.” He gratefully accepted the cup of tea. “Is everything else in order here? Are all prisoners present?”

Schultz gulped. Roll call! He hadn’t made a roll call this morning. He could only hope that all prisoners were still in the camp. “Well… I think so,” he said lamely.

Klink stared at him. “What does that mean? Haven’t you made a roll call this morning?”

“Uh… well… you see… With the generator blacked out and…” Schultz pushed his helmet back and straightened his large form. “No, sir, there was no roll call this morning,” he admitted.

The Oberst went rigid. “I should give you extra-shifts for this laziness, Schultz,” he said sharply, before his face softened. “But I know that worry can lead to something like this.” He watched his substitute carefully. He took in the pale face, the small, red eyes and frowned. “Have you slept at all last night?”

“No, sir, not really. There was no time for it.”

Klink sighed. “Well, then it’s time for you to go to bed.” He rose. “Help me over to my quarters so that this Ami-quack can have a look on my injuries. And then you are dismiss….” A coughing fit interrupted his sentence, and as it finally calmed down, he found Schultz bending over him; face crinkled with concern.

“Come on, Herr Kommandant, you should find some rest, too.” He fetched Klink’s coat that still hung at the hook since yesterday afternoon, helped him into it and followed his superior out of the office. Together they walked through the snow-covered yard towards the single building that held Klink’s quarters and where Wilson was already waiting for them.

Two times Schultz had to support Klink, who finally accepted the help gratefully.
Thoughtfully the *Oberst* looked up at the man who had become his confidant during the last years.

He knew Schultz was slow-minded, but not stupid. And he had a good heart; trying to be all things to all men, which was impossible. He could be tough if really necessary, but most times he was far too indulgent – especially with the prisoners. He took his duties seriously, yet he too often got involved in private with the POWs – something Klink couldn’t hold against him. After all, he himself allowed a certain American POW to manipulate him over and over again – out of personal reasons, too.

And there were two things about Schultz, Klink held in high regard. First, the sergeant knew about Klink’s ‘weakness’ and neither revealed him to his superiors, nor did he judge him. The reason for it was also the second thing that made Klink thinking well of the large Bavarian sergeant: Loyalty.

Schultz was down-right loyal to him, even if he groused here and there about Klink’s orders or moods, but it didn’t change his fidelity. Klink would never forget how Schultz broke him out of the cooler and tried to bring him to safety after he had been accused of high treason and waited for his execution. Yes, it had been Hogan’s idea how to clear Klink’s name in the end, but Schultz had – indeed – risked his own life as he freed his superior officer and tried to help him to escape.

Klink would bet any money that Schultz and Hogan had worked hand in hand to get him out of the trouble he had maneuvered himself into, and Klink had finally realized that Schultz was a true friend. Maybe one of the few real friends he had.

Friends…

To tell the truth, he hadn’t many of them. If he was brave enough to admit it to himself, the only real friends he had were here in this camp – the Sergeant of the Guards and the senior POW officer. But, like he comforted himself, they were indeed *friends*, and not these lickspittles the high-ranking staff-officers and politicians were surrounded with. Klink preferred his situation, because he knew when something became hairy he could always count on these two men – and Hogan’s team. Yes, they were wary of him out of duty – after all he was ‘the enemy’ – but he knew that they didn’t loath or hate him, and this was more than all other Stalag-Kommandanten could tell of themselves.

TBC…

*So, I do hope you liked the homecoming after our Heroes mourned their friend at first so much. And, of course, they are thunderstruck that Klink, of all people, saved the day the way he did. But latter*
isn’t the only thing that has begun to change the ‘relationship’ between Hogan and his German counterpart – and in the following chapter Hogan will start to think more closely about the possible reasons which made Klink react the way he did.

Like always, I would be happy to get some reviews / comments.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hallo, my dear readers!

Thank you for all the comments, reviews and other feedback. I’m happy that the story has found some fans.

Maybe some of you, who have already read this chapter, will realize a difference, because my dear beta-reader Kat is back and has corrected that one. The others, which are without a beta-reading, will be corrected and re-published, too.

And now I wish you fun with the next chapter.

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 7 – Darkness Closes Up

As it turned out Klink’s two injuries were slightly infected, and he suffered a real relapse of his almost cured cold. As Wilson stepped into Barrack 2, he reported to Hogan – who ate his second bowl of broth with a slice of bread – that there was even a rustle heard in the Oberst’s lungs and that he had advised Klink that he should go to a hospital to receive proper treatment for everything.

“I can give him some Aspirin and can treat his injuries with iodine, but there is a big chance that he got a light case of pneumonia, and if so, it can be fatal if not correctly attended to. I don’t have not the medicine here to help him properly.”

Hogan had stopped eating and was surprised by the sting he felt deep inside. Worry! It was indeed real worry that rose in him and the mere thought that Klink could die because of this damn incident yesterday evening, made him sick. Pneumonia wasn’t an easy thing. Heavens, people died because of it over and over again, and given the poor nourishment in the camp, the drafty buildings, the icy winter weather and Klink’s already ailing condition, the Oberst could be real in danger. In addition to that infected injuries weakened a body, too, so…
Swearing under his breath, Hogan glanced at his men. “Have you finished the repairs to Klink’s car?”

LeBeau shook his head and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “After Hochstetter arrested you yesterday evening, we weren’t in the mood anymore to move so much as a finger for the damn bosches!”

Hogan frowned. “Klink risked the Russian Front when he stood up against Hochstetter to defend me – and he almost gave his life saving mine. At least you could have…”

He was interrupted by Newkirk. “Sorry, Gov’nor, but one, we didn’t think that Klink would have enough guts to help you for real as soon as you two were in Hochstetter’s office, and two, how could we know what happened to you and him? We all assumed that the attack we heard was directed at the convoy and we had something else on our mind the whole night than a stupid car.”

Hogan sighed. “I know that you worried for me. Sorry, fellas. But Klink can’t be driven in a sidecar to Hammelburg. If he hasn’t caught pneumonia until now, he certainly has after the trip. I owe him and…”

“Let’s go, guys,” Kinch decided. “Let us see if we can get the car working again.”

Hogan smiled at him. “Thanks.” He grabbed for his leather-jacket. “I’ll help you and…”

“NO!”

This was spoken in a chorus and he stopped dead in his track. “I beg your pardon?” he asked baffled.

“You’re ill yourself, so please stay here, Colonel,” Kinchloe said.

“We’ll get the damn thing repaired in no time, sir, so please remain here where it’s warm,” Newkirk nodded, grabbing for his cap and jacket.
“Men, I really can…” Hogan began to protest, but Wilson cut in.

“I’ll have to check you thoroughly, Colonel, because you’ve really caught a cold as much as I can tell.”

“But…”

“Just let us do our job, and you go to bed just like the Kommandant ordered,” Carter said almost firmly, and added hastily a “Sir!”.

With an, “Until later,” the five men left the Barrack.

Hogan stared at the closed door and looked thunderstruck over his shoulder at Wilson. “I’m speechless.”

“Ah, certainly not for long, Colonel, knowing your wits,” the medic grinned and began to unpack his med-kit.

With a low growl Hogan sat back at the table, gripping his cup filled with hot coffee. His men – sometimes he thought he let them get away with too much lazy behavior. Some of his own superior officers would be shocked if they learned of the easy way Hogan led his command. But besides the fact that they all were in the same boat here while living as POWs and rank really didn’t count, if you could admit the truth to yourself, there was also Hogan’s personality. While he knew that hierarchy was an essential necessary for an army to be functional, he had never been someone who used his rank at any given chance to subdue others or to boast about it. He had always preferred a comradely working relationship with his underlings; only pulling rank when there was no other way.

But with Kinchloe, Newkirk, LeBeau, Carter and also Baker it was a completely different matter. Yes, he was their commanding officer, but he was also their friend. He always took the responsibility for those in his command seriously and he would never let anyone of his men down, but with those five he wouldn’t hesitate to give his life for them. They were more brothers of soul than brothers of arms, and quite often he thought he was handling younger siblings instead of underlings.

Therefore, he once again refrained from rebuking them from giving him orders, because he knew that they only had his wellbeing at heart.
Sighing he finished his meal, went to his office that was also his bedroom, and began to strip off his shirt to let Wilson check him. Maybe he only caught a slight cold and nothing as serious as Klink’s. Afterwards he would see that Klink really left the camp to go to the hospital, before he would shower, shave and then take a long nice nap.

But fate had other things in store for him…

*** HH ***

Hogan’s men needed just under an hour until Klink’s car was functional again – well, more or less. There were still things to do, and because of the almost empty container of gasoline the car’s tank could only be filled with ten liters, but for the short trip to Hammelburg it should be enough. In the years prior there had been no problems getting spare parts and the container filled on a regular bases, but now most industries within Germany had broken down and things became rare even on the black market. Newkirk and LeBeau were specialists when it came to tinkering things together and improvising matters, but both crossed their fingers that the car would hold.

In earlier months they wouldn’t have cared if Klink made it to Hammelburg by car or not. Hell, they would have laughed their heads off imagining their stiff, vain Kommandant stomping through the snow to get to the small town; grousing and whining the whole way along. But not this time. None of the five men who built Hogan’s core team would forget that Klink saved their commanding officer and that the German colonel was only suffering now because he put Hogan’s welfare above his own. Klink had risen in their esteem and they didn’t want the man getting more ill because of a damn car breakdown.

They were barely done as Schultz entered the motor pool demanding a short report. The Sergeant of the Guards looked utterly tired out and he yawned several times while Kinchloe gave him a quick update of the situation.

“So, the Kommandant can be driven to the hospital in that car?” Schultz asked in assurance, and as the men nodded, he climbed into the vehicle with a gentle, “You did well, boys. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” LeBeau grumbled. “But you should visit the next fuel-stop. There isn’t much gasoline left in the container and we only could draw a few liters.”

Schultz nodded. “Thanks for the advice.”
“When will you two be back?” Kinch asked – not out of concern, but out of the necessity to know how long they could go on with any missions London maybe have for them without the camp’s Kommandant present.

“I don’t know,” Schultz shrugged. “Your Sergeant Wilson made it very clear that the Kommandant has to be treated in hospital – and knowing Klink who cries for a priest when he only sneezed, I don’t think that he will be back within the next days.”

The five POWs chuckled; remembering very well the sniffing and whining every time Klink suffered a cold. Yet the Oberst had proven to be able to take a far more if needed. They all were still baffled of Klink’s obvious show of courage as he rescued Hogan.

“Behave, boys, until we’ve returned,” Schultz said, before he carefully steered the staff car out of the motor pool and towards the Kommandantur (commandant’s office), where Klink stood on the porch. Wrapped in his thick winter coat, with a scarf wrapped around his neck and under half of his face, cap pulled deep over his eyes and arms crossed in front of him, he really looked like he felt: Cold and miserable. A small suitcase was placed beside him on the ground, and Corporal Langenscheidt stood at the other side and got the last instructions.

“I gave Burkhalter’s secretary all details. If the general calls back, tell him my written report is on its way and ask him to call Hochstetter off Hogan’s back. I’m willing to listen and to look at every so-called proof Hochstetter allegedly has against our troublemaker, but he will have to bring those proofs to Stalag 13. Burkhalter has to make it very clear to Hochstetter that Hogan will remain in the camp until I’m back. I will not allow that this mad gnome gets his hands on my senior POW officer.”

Langenscheidt nodded. “I speak with the general in your name, sir.”

“Good,” Klink nodded and watched Schultz driving the staff car out of the motor pool. “Otherwise there is only one order I have to give you: Keep the camp together, watch out that there will be no escapes and if there are new problems with the power supply during the next night do anything in your might to get it going again. Without power we’re done for here.”

Well, that was three orders, but Langenscheidt wasn’t in the mood to joke. He was still far too tired and the prospect of being acting Kommandant until at least Schultz was back, wasn’t something he looked forward to. Especially given the whole situation with Hochstetter. And there was also the fact that Captain Gruber, who had been Klink’s official substitute until a few weeks ago, had been sent to active combat. Therefore nor real officer was left except for Klink. Yet there wasn’t any other answer possible than, “Jawohl, Herr Oberst.”
As Schultz stopped the car in front of the building, Langenscheidt saluted, wished Klink well and watched him limping down the steps, while Schultz took the suitcase.

“Colonel Klink!”

At the sound of the voice the Kommandant turned around and groaned. “Hogan! I ordered you to stay a day in bed and to cure yourself. So, what are you doing here outside of your barrack?”

The American colonel closed the distance to him; hands buried in the pockets of his leather jacket; collar popped up against the wind. “Wilson told me about his assumption that you caught pneumonia and that your injuries were infected. I…” He took a deep breath; surprised at the concern he still felt for the older man and his true wish to see Klink healthy. “I wanted to give you my best wishes. Get well soon.”

Klink watched him. He knew exactly when Hogan was mocking him or not, and just right now the younger man was downright serious. He indeed cared for Klink. There was no doubt left. Warmth spread through the Oberst’s body and heart, and he couldn’t hide the joy as he looked into those dark eyes. “Thanks, Hogan, I’ll try my best.” He gripped for the handle of the car-door, but hesitated. “And Hogan, do me a favor. Stay out of trouble.”

“Me?” Innocent indignation appeared on the colonel’s handsome features. “I always stay out of trouble.”

Klink couldn’t help himself: He had to laugh. “Yes, and pigs can fly – or how you Americans say.” Then his chuckle turned into heavy coughing and he felt Hogan’s hand on his shoulders, as the colonel helped him into the car.

“Schultz, put some coal into the fire, or our Kommandant turns into an icicle – or coughs his head off,” Hogan ordered, and the large sergeant looked confused at him.

“Coal? Colonel Hogan, you know that cars drive with gasoline.”

Groaning Hogan pushed Klink deeper on the back seat and threw the door closed. Sometimes he really wondered, if Schultz was simply pulling all their legs, or if he really didn’t understand usual jokes.
Clapping one hand in a farewell-greeting on the car’s roof he stepped back and watched the vehicle driving to the main gate. And deep inside him he felt uneasiness rising.

Something was about to go very wrong. He felt it deep in his bones.

Sighing, he turned and saw his men at the entrance to Barrack 2; waiting for him. And they weren’t alone. Wilson stood there, too, and all of them were obviously not amused of his little trip out into the cold.

‘Worse than mother-hens,’ Hogan thought, rolled his eyes and returned to the barrack.

He shivered as an icy wind breathed around him like the shadow of a dark omen.

And behind him Klink’s secretary, Fräulein (Miss) Hilda Schneider, was granted entry to the camp like every morning. If Hogan would have looked back, he would have seen her confused face as she watched her boss be driven away by the Sergeant of the Guards, but eager to return to the relative warmth of the barrack, the arrival of Klink’s secretary slipped the colonel’s usual sharp awareness.

“Where does Oberst Klink drive to this early in the morning?” the young woman asked, as she reached the porch of the Kommandantur and glanced questioningly at Langenscheidt.

Karl sighed and told her with a few words most of what happened since the evening prior; not going much into details. It was enough to shock and concern Hilda, yet she was relieved to hear that Hogan was uninjured, even if he suffered a cold now. She had a big crush on the American colonel from the beginning, and his flirting with her (especially his kisses) were the highlights of her days. Yet she worried also about Oberst Klink. He may be not the easiest of chiefs she had in her young career, but he was always polite and a through gentleman towards her. She had come to like him and to hear that he got wounded while he saved Hogan’s life, made her regard the middle-aged man in another light. She only hoped that he didn’t get it too bad.

Even without Klink in the office, Hilda had a lot to do, and as the telephone rang a quarter hour later, she answered the call while sorting documents.

“Stalag 13, office of Kommandant Klink.”

She instantly was on alert as she heard the sharp voice at the other end of the line.
“Gestapo Headquarters, Major Hochstetter’s speaking. Please put me through to Sergeant Schultz, Fräulein Hilda.”

Even if the short-tempered major was always polite towards her, too, his mere presence unnerved her as did his voice. She couldn’t stand the man but was very careful not to show it. Yet his order confused her. What did Hochstetter wanted from Schultz?

“I regret, Herr Major, but Sergeant Schultz isn’t available. He drove Kommandant Klink to the hospital and…”

“WHOM?” Hochstetter almost screamed.

Hilda had quickly pulled the receiver away from her ear which began to ring because of the major’s outburst. Frowning she stared at the telephone. Was Hochstetter drunk or why did he pretend all of sudden that he didn’t know who Klink was?

“Oberst Klink, Kommandant of this camp, Herr Major,” she answered finally; her tone betraying her thoughts that she assumed the Gestapo-officer had finally gone mad.

“I know who Klink is, but… He was driven to the hospital???”

Hilda frowned. “Of course, he had to visit the hospital after he was injured yesterday evening while saving Colonel Hogan, Herr Major. He and the colonel barely made it back to the camp – while you left them and walked to Hammelburg. Don’t get me wrong, Herr Major, but to leave them wasn’t correct. What, if they hadn’t made it?”

“HOGAN’s alive, too?” Hochstetter’s voice had risen an octave.

Hilda felt irritation rising in her. “Herr Major, if this is your way of pulling my leg, it isn’t funny. You certainly know exactly what happened yesterday evening. Oberst Klink is in hospital and…”

“And Hogan?”
“Where should he be? Of course, he’s here in the camp – in his barrack, trying to cure the cold he got after he aided Oberst Klink and returned with him to Stalag 13.”

“*He didn’t flee*?” There was an odd tone in Hochstetter’s voice now. Something that made Hilda suspicious.

“No, he didn’t flee. And it doesn’t surprise me. I don’t take Colonel Hogan for the type of person who leaves someone behind who is injured!” It was a potshot – something the young woman wouldn’t have dared to do if the situation were different. But just right now she was outraged that the rivalry between Hochstetter and Klink had made the Gestapo-officer abandon the *Oberst*. It was malicious and cowardly in her eyes, and nothing else.

At the other end of the line, Hochstetter had to stomach that the two thorns of his existence still lived. Yet it gave him another chance – a chance that sounded better and better with every passing second.

“When will Klink be back, *Fräulein* Hilda?” he asked; forcing himself to sound polite. It hadn’t slipped his attention that the young woman was obviously angry with him for leaving her boss alone in the woods. Usually he couldn’t care less if someone was irritated with him. He stirred other people’s anger on a regular base. Yet he had to admit that he almost admired the young woman’s loyalty concerning Klink – the stupid fool didn’t have so many people who stood true to him. But what was far more important was to keep the secretary calm. Regrettable there was too much talk and gossip within the POW-camp and he didn’t need her to alert Hogan before he, Hochstetter, made his move.

“I don’t know, Herr Major,” he heard Hilda answering his question. “*It depends on what the doctors will diagnose.*”

“I see. Who is in charge of the camp for now?”

“*Corporal Langenscheidt. Shall I get him for your?*” The secretary sounded calmer now.

“No, *Fräulein* Hilda, I only wanted to know if everything is in order with Stalag 13 until Klink is back.”

“If this is all, Herr Major, please excuse me, I have a lot of work to do.”
“Of course, my dear. I don’t want to keep you from your job.”

“Thanks, Herr Major, have a nice day.”

“The same for you, Fräulein Hilda.” He ended the call and placed the receiver back on the phone. His glance found Leutnant Heinrich von Neuhaus who sat in one of the visitor-chairs; a promising man full of the right ideals to be trusted with an important task – at least in Hochstetter’s eyes.

“Klink and Hogan are alive.”

Von Neuhaus nodded slowly. “I figured as much given your answers during the call. So, what do we do now?”

Hochstetter only smiled and sneered, “That poor excuse of a German officer got wounded while saving the damn Ami and is now in hospital. God alone knows why Hogan is this important to Klink.” He rose from his chair. “Fräulein Hilda wished me a ‘good day’, and I do think this day will be one of the best in my life.” He left his desk. “The whole situation gives us a formidable advantage. With Klink out of the way there is no-one who can protect Hogan.” He cocked his head. “Have you ever thought of commanding a POW-camp, Leutnant?”

“Not until today, Herr Major,” von Neuhaus answered; stroking back one light blond strain from his forehead while his icy blue eyes hung at his superior officer.

“Well, now you have the chance for it,” Hochstetter smirked.

The same moment the town’s horns blared as alert; informing everyone that hostile aircrafts were nearby.

“Oh… For God’s sake!” Hochstetter shouted and waved at von Neuhaus to follow him. “Down to the cellars!” he ordered. Outside of his office the whole staff abandoned any task that was being performed at the moment, and hastened quickly but with discipline towards the cellars to seek out cover.

From afar the sounds of aircrafts was heard, and Hochstetter stopped as the noises didn’t get any closer. Lifting a hand that signaled the others to wait, he listened intensively, before he breathed in relief. “They only passed by,” he stated. “No danger.” He raised his voice. “Everybody back to
duty!” he called, before he looked at the Leutnant. “Come on, we’ve a job to do.”

*** *** ***

Klink and Schultz had it made to the town, despite the cover of snow that made it difficult to drive. They made it into the hospital the moment the town horns signaled alert and were also on their way into the cellars, as the alarm ended. Grousing about all those disturbances even at day, Klink enrolled himself at the admission and sat a quarter hour later on the examination table of one of the doctors’ rooms.

Dr. Thomas Birkhorn, one of the leading surgeons in the hospital – and part of the Underground – had taken a critically closer look at the two injuries and listened to the Oberst’s chest. Yes, the officer was in need for a proper medical treatment. But this wasn’t the only problem at hand. All of sudden the lights within the hospital became dark and only shone again after the hospital’s own emergency generator was activated.

“What’s the matter with the power?” Klink demanded, while watching the doctor stitching his left upper arm. He was only glad that the hospital had still some sedatives to spare, otherwise the whole procedure would have been very painful.

“I have no clue, Herr Oberst,” Birkhorn answered. He knew Klink from several phone calls and he also examined him after the ‘accident’ with the sidecar. This had been the first time he had also met Hogan, and became aware of the American’s secret missions a few days later after a talk with Danzig. Outside a loyal German surgeon, he supported the Underground and its allies whenever needed. His gaze found Klink’s. “We’ve an emergency generator that prevents us from being without power. It would be a catastrophe during operations or for the intensive care unit.”

A few minutes later a nurse knocked and stepped into the room. “Doctor, we got word from a police officer who just dropped by. The aircrafts which flew by earlier attacked the powerhouse near Würzburg. Obviously, they did a lot of damage and the whole area is without power now.” Again, the lights flickered. “The police said it will last until problems are solved.”

While the doctor cursed, Klink sighed quietly. That was exactly what they needed: A general power blackout in the whole area – and the camp’s emergency generator was old and was on its last legs.

“Is whole Hammelburg affected?” he asked and grunted as Birkhorn began to wrap his arm in bandages.
“Yes – except for the town hall, the hospital and the Gestapo headquarters. We all have emergency generators, but the rest certainly will be without power for hours, if not days,” the nurse said unhappily.

“I understand,” the Oberst murmured; not knowing if these circumstances were fortunate or not. With the whole power crapped out, Hochstetter wouldn’t be able to make a call to the camp; after all the telephone lines were supplied by the town’s power station. This was in Klink’s opinion a good thing – after all he didn’t want Hochstetter to learn that he cheered too soon about Hogan’s and his, Klink’s, death. On the other hand, with the phones out of work, Burkhalter couldn’t reach Stalag 13 or could call off Hochstetter from Hogan’s neck.

Klink felt at unease that he was forced to leave the camp before he had the chance to speak with Burkhalter in person, but there had been no other real choice. The good doctor had already affirmed that he got bronchitis that could always worsen into pneumonia and needed to be treated with strong medication. And his two injuries were also needed to be attended properly to – even if Klink hated to get stitches.

In other words: He would have to remain for two or three days here – away from the camp, without having been able to settle all the things for the time he would be absent. With Hochstetter breathing down his and especially Hogan’s neck, he could only hope that everything would turn out well in the end.

After being treated with everything he needed, Klink was led out of the examination area towards his sick-room. Schultz sat beside the door on a chair – snoring like a bear in winter. Well, Klink couldn’t blame him. The man had been up for more than 24 hours by now, stressed with worry. He really had every right in the world to sleep. Gesturing to the nurse who accompanied him to stay silent, Klink entered the room and made himself ready to slip into bed.

He had to admit that it felt like heaven as his tired limps came to lie on the soft mattress and the warmth of the thick duvet covered him. The nurse closed the curtains, made certain that he took the pills the doctor had prescribed for him and then left the room.

Sighing in content, Klink closed his eyes. But real peace wouldn’t come to him. Too much happened within the last hours. First the arrest of Hogan, then the ambush of the aircrafts, Hogan and he running for dear life, Hogan’s refusal to make an attempt to escape and risking getting caught by Hochstetter again. Then their odyssey through the icy woods, him finding himself in bed with Hogan, seeing Hogan practically naked, Hogan teasing him about his sleep-drunken comments without realizing how close he hit home with his cheeky suggestions…

Klink groaned. Everything circled around this damn American oversized boy in form of a well-built man! There was no escape from him. Even here, in the dimmed patient’s room of the hospital the
colonel’s ghost seemed to be present. His shining eyes and his smirking face with the even, handsome features popped up in Klink’s mind whenever he tried to relax, and he thought to hear Hogan’s voice, declaring fiercely that he ‘wouldn’t let a friend down’.

A friend…

Klink wished for so much more, but he knew he would never have it. Those stolen hours last night were all he would ever get. And they hadn’t even been hours of passion and love-making, but hours of shared body-heat and comfort. It was more than Wilhelm Klink had ever dared to hope for, still it was not enough.

Far from it.

Klink had gotten a bitter-sweet taste of the forbidden fruit his American counterpart presented. He had experienced one time how it felt to wake up in the strong arms of the other man, hearing his gentle heart-beat under his own ear and basking in the softness of the silken skin that covered Hogan’s muscular body.

He wanted more. He wanted to really taste this human silk, comb his fingers through these thick, dark strands, wanted to conquer this witty mouth until they both were out of breath. He wanted…

With another groan Klink turned on his right side and hit the mattress with his left fist in frustration; cursing quietly as he felt the first pain in his upper arm from the sedative was wearing off.

God dammit! They had been in mortal danger – not only from the pursuing aircrafts but also from the bitter cold that had been about to get the better of them. Hogan had taken care of him – out of honor and gratefulness, an odd sense of duty and because of the friendship he obviously had developed for him. He had taken him into his arms to warm him up in attempt to prevent Klink from relapsing. This was all – end of story! Everything else was wishful thinking Klink had tried to control for almost three years now. He had somehow succeeded in suppressing his feelings for most of the time, he wouldn’t start to give into them now.

Yet there was the tempting whispering in his heart and soul – promises of getting a taste of Eden if he only would dare to make the next step.

But again, it was his deeply rooted fear that would prevent him from making this step; this much he knew. His mother had realized his ‘weakness’ years before he became even aware of it, and
afterwards she had warned him what would happen to him if this secret ever came to the light of day. And then, as the Third Reich became more and more empowered, men like him were treated worse than animals and most were killed in a very painful way. His fear to be revealed had increased over the years and was anchored in his very being by now.

Yet he could dream – dreaming of a future together with a man the war had put on the enemy’s side but who had become a friend and the person he desired beyond imagination.

Dreams were all he ever got, dreams were all that was left for him. And letting his mind and soul soar together with those dreams full of light and love, Klink slowly drifted into sleep – blissfully unaware of the dark demons which rose to lunge for any kind of future he maybe could have with the man he had fallen in love with…

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Hogan had gone to bed – but not the way the medic had in mind. He had washed himself properly, had shaved and had pondered slipping into his pajama to take a real nap, but an odd hunch had hindered him. Something wasn’t right. Something was going to happen, this much was for sure, so it was safer to be prepared.

So, he simply lay on his bed fully clothes sans shoes, jacket and crush cap, pulled the blanket over him and tried to find some rest. For naught.

Too many things were on his mind. There was the ambush he still had to think of. Yes, of course the pilots of the Allied Air Forces were instructed to weaken the enemy at any given chance, but to attack a small convoy without any further information was indeed foolish. The Allies had many supporters among the German Luftwaffe, Abwehr and even Gestapo. The risk that one of their spies could be killed by their own people was high – just like it almost had happened to him. He would have to speak with General Butler about it. Duty was good and right, but overdone it could have nasty results. Hogan didn’t want to think about the fact that he would be indeed dead now if wouldn’t have been for Klink’s sudden development of courage.

Klink…

That was the second thing that busied the colonel. There was something off with his German counterpart. Klink could put on a mask of bravery if necessary, and several times he really had stood up against Burkhalter and Hochstetter, but he usually backed down quickly afterwards; fearing consequences if he drew too much attention to his person.
This detail especially made Hogan more and more suspicious. Klink was a Prussian officer through and through, highly decorated during the Great War. The Iron Cross and the other decorations with medals weren’t given for naught. Either Klink had been the famous blind hen that found some grains of corn – meaning, he simply had had a few fortunate situations from which he turned out as the hero – or he really achieved some amazing things during the first World War. Otherwise he wouldn’t have gotten all the awards, but what had changed the Oberst so much afterwards?

Hogan didn’t know which one of the two possibilities was true. Maybe a mixture of both. Klink did have his moments after all and could outgrow himself if needed. He had proven that only yesterday evening. Maybe such things happened before which led to the awards he received, but a certain anxiety seemed to be his constant companion. Yet the question remained: What triggered Klink in getting a backbone and risking health and life to become someone others called a ‘hero’?

Well, there had also been less famous things the Kommandant did during the Great War, which indeed sounded like him. For example, there was the episode with the Blue Baron who accused Klink of panicking at the end of WW I so that the plane both flew crashed; leaving the baron with a knee-injury that made him limp even today. Yet Hogan couldn’t blame Klink for such a reaction. The colonel was too experienced as a pilot himself not to know that there were indeed situations in which even the best trained man lost it. Maybe this had been the beginning of Klink’s fall from a brave warrior to someone whose backbone was practically non-existing.

There was also a third possibility: The whole episode with the Blue Baron and afterwards, had given Klink the idea to play the idiot to survive this war of madness.

Klink wasn’t a Nazi, this much was clear. Hogan knew that the Oberst had been a member of the social democratic party SPD before it was forbidden within the Third Reich. Therefore, Klink had to be very carefully not to fall from grace within this insanity Hitler still called ‘beloved Fatherland’. To show and to declare another opinion than the Nazis had, would mean certain death. So, Klink put on an act of stupidity to stay true to his own opinion without risking execution. This was something Hogan had assumed for more than two years now. Klink was quite intelligent and clever. It would be a big mistake to underestimate him, even if he pretended to be the stupid fool. In his own way the Kommandant had adopted Schultz’ tactic of ‘seeing and hearing nothing’ to fight his own battle by not fighting at all.

But all this didn’t answer the question concerning Klink’s sudden suicidal bravery yesterday evening. Yes, Hogan knew that Klink liked him, even regarded him sometimes as a kind of friend, but given the Oberst’s usual behavior the American colonel had never thought that the older man would go this far for him – he who was technically the enemy. Something had triggered the Kommandant to overgrow himself – risking not only the Russian Front but death as he stood up against Hochstetter and returned to the car Hogan was chained to in the middle of a deadly ambush.
And afterwards Klink had not only ordered, but even begged him to make an attempt of escape. ‘It’s your only chance, and we both know it. So, take it!’ Klink had said. ‘You’ll make it away from Germany and then you’re safe.’ – ‘Go, Robert! I meant it when I said you shall save yourself.’

Safety.

Klink had been almost desperate to get Hogan to safety. Why? Yes, the colonel was Klink’s responsibility and above all was the senior POW officer in Stalag 13, but this couldn’t be the reason why the older man put Hogan’s welfare above his own.

What also was odd was the fact that Klink had addressed him several times by his given name – something that had never happened before. It had awoken an unsettling feeling within the American; a strange little sting within his belly followed by a foreign shiver beneath his skin. And he didn’t even know why, but he didn’t dare to think about this reaction closer – or his icy fear as he thought Klink had been shot. Something was whispering at the edge of his mind that set him on alert, and it was unnerving.

Heck, why had Klink called him ‘Robert’ at all? Yes, they had been in mortal danger, but they had faced the Grim Reaper before, and Klink never had become this private. Well, this was not entirely true. Hogan remembered the moments in which Klink thought, he and his senior POW officer were on a suicidal mission, and he had offered him to call him ‘Wilhelm’ should they die this day. And there were times Klink didn’t protest when he called him ‘Willie’ or rebuked him that these intimacies were improper in their positions.

Thinking of it, Klink almost never groused about the intimate way of being addressed when they were alone, only when others were present or when Hogan had really irriated him earlier. He also permitted Hogan more liberties when there weren’t guards or further POWs present, and the talks they had during chess or when they simply sat together after official business in the Oberst’s office, were often profound.

Hogan pursed his lips. Klink had begun to let his guard down when Hogan was involved; hell, half of his plans were based on manipulating Klink into doing or believing something Hogan needed to have as a background for his missions, and it often surprised him that Klink trusted him enough by now to even seek him out for advice.

Putting this all together led to one conclusion. Klink had…

“Mon colonel!” LeBeau burst into his room without even knocking; panic in his voice and on his face as Hogan sat up in alert. “Hochstetter arrived – with a truck loaded full of SS-guards! And a few
of them are heading straight towards our barrack!”

TBC…

Well, it came like it had to come: Hochstetter learned of the two colonels’ survival and of course he acts on it. You’ll see, the next chapters will be a little bit darker, while Hogan is in Hochstetter’s power, the Heroes are desperate to help him and Klink knows of nothing…

I hope you also liked the thoughts both men had – especially Hogan, who has begun to realize that there is more behind Klink’s bravery the evening prior than thought.

Concerning Dr. Birkhorn: He is a character of my own and I simply put him into the background of the episode ‘Up in Klink’s room’, in which Dr. Klaus treats Klink. Birkhorn is going to have some important moments within the story, so I hope you’re going to like him.

In the next chapter Hogan will be questioned by Hochstetter, and he has to realize that the major has figured out so much that the colonel’s chance of getting out of the situation alive is practically non-existing. Hogan is going to face a lot, be sure of it.

Thank you for reading the chapter – and, like always, I want to know how you liked the new update.

Have a nice rest of Sunday and a good start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

The large amount of feedback shows me that my error-full writing without beta-reading hasn’t scared you off, and I’m very happy about it. Thank you!

As I gave hints within the last chapter, a more darker time will begin now because Hochstetter learned of his nemesis being still alive and he will make use of the knowledge that this time Klink can’t interference.

Hochstetter has figured Hogan out, and finally he is able to do what he desired in his own way to do for two years: To get hold of his nemesis and make him suffer. All the times, our dear colonel taunted and humiliated Hochstetter, are not forgotten, and the ‘poison-gnome’ is going to relish in the opportunity of brutal pay-back...

Again I have to tell you that my beta-reader is still too busy to have a closer look on my writing, so you have to put up with my errors once again. Thank you for your patience and that despite the mistakes you don’t give up on the story.

And now – off to Stalag 13 and it’s known and also still unknown heroes.

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 8 – Into the devil’s den

Hogan’s blood chilled.
Hochstetter! With many SS-guards! And Klink wasn’t here!

As laughable as it would usually sound, but Hogan knew that he was for once really in need for the Oberst’s support and protection. With Langenscheidt as a corporal in charge of the camp, there was no real Luftwaffe-office here who could stop Hochstetter. The major would take him, Hogan, with him, and the colonel didn’t want to imagine what would happen then to him.

Quickly he rose and put his boots on. “Dammit, how did he learn so soon about Klink’s and my survival?” he growled.

“We have no clue,” LeBeau answered; kneading his hand nervously. “Mon Colonel, you’ve to hide in the tunnels. If Hochstetter gets you, then…”

Hogan shook his head. As tempting as it sounded to have a way out of the torment that lay ahead, he knew that he couldn’t endanger his men by fleeing. “No. If he knows that Klink and I made it back to the camp, what obviously is the case, he will turn every stone in this area if he doesn’t find me here. Everything could be revealed – the tunnels, our missions, you all. This is a risk I cannot take.”

“Colonel!” Newkirk hasted into the room. “Hochstetter walked into the Kommandatur, while a few of his fellows are on their way to our barrack!”

“I know. Blasted it all, here we go again!” Hogan cursed. Then his gaze found Kinchloe, Baker and Carter, who stopped at the doorstep. “My orders from yesterday evening are still standing. Be ready to evacuate yourself. Don’t risk yourself or the mission to rescue me! Take Langenscheidt with you when you escape. And Klink and Schultz, too, should they return before you have to flee. I don’t know how long I will be able to withstand what Hochstetter has planned for me, and Berlin will never believe that our three German unwilling allies had no knowledge about our job. To bring them to safety is the least we can do for them.”

“But Gov’nor…” Peter protested.

“That’s an order!” Hogan snapped and slipped into this leather jacket. “I’ll do my best to hold on as long as possible. Maybe Klink returns soon enough to learn of what happened before I’m done for. Or Burkhalter intervenes – given that Hochstetter has indeed no real proof of me being Papa Bear. Otherwise neither Klink nor Burkhalter will be able to safe me.”

The five other men exchanged a glance. The sangfroid Hogan displayed in face of certainly
upcoming brutal torture was unnerving them. Especially because they knew that deep down he was afraid as they were.

Baker balled his fists. “We contact Hans Wagner or…”

The door to the barrack flew open and four SS-guards stepped in; making room for a Leutnant in SS-uniform, but with the pin of the Gestapo on the knot of his tie. The guards had their weapons drawn and pointed it at several POWs – one of them aimed at Hogan’s core team.

“Colonel Robert Hogan?” the Leutnant demanded, and with churning belly, the American stepped forwards.

“That would be me.”

The Gestapo-officer waved a hand and two of the guards stepped behind Hogan; twisting his arms on the back and tied them with handcuffs.

“You guys really have a knack for this game, don’t you?” he mocked.

“You are still under arrest from the Gestapo,” the Leutenant aid. “Your attempt of escape worsens your…”

“There was no attempt of escape, because your boss left me chained to his car during an aircraft ambush while he ran away like a rabbit. I was freed by Kommandant Klink and he brought me back to the camp after he left sight of Major Hochstetter.”

A sneer appeared on the Leutnant’s face. “An interesting interpretation, yet…”

“We can also say it without remain polite: Your boss was a damn coward and almost murdered Colonel Hogan by leaving him behind! At least Oberst Klink kept a clear head and did his duty as he freed the colonel while your boss was too afraid of doing anything else than taking to his own heels,” Newkirk snarled. A pistol was aimed at him and the Englishman crossed the arms in front of his chest. “Truth hurts, uh?” he taunted.
“Newkirk, stop it!” Hogan ordered. “We…”

“Enough!” the Leutnant interrupted him. “Schuster, Hartmann, you two stay here and watch the prisoners of this barrack. You’ll be rotated with Krüger and Herrmann in three hours.” He glanced around. “I’ve nothing against POWs. We all are doing our duty to the own country, and I can respect you as enemy soldiers. Therefore, I give you this one warning. If you try some silly attempts to disturb the order of this camp or to come to his aid” – he pointed at Hogan – “everyone who doesn’t behave like strictly ordered will be executed.”

“That’s against the Geneva Convention!” Hogan cut in sharply. “The barracks are official havens for the private needs of POWs. To watch them within the barracks is forbidden. Also threatening them with execution is…”

Von Neuhaus glared at him. „This shouldn’t concern you anymore, Colonel. You’re out of the game.” He glanced back at the prisoners. “Take my warning serious, Gentlemen. I respect warriors – and I don’t want to give the order to shoot one or more of you.” He waved at the two guards who held Hogan in an iron grip. “Take him outside.”

“One moment!” Carter called; coming from Hogan’s room holding the crush cap in his hand. “The colonel needs…”

“Keep it, Prisoner – as a remembrance,” von Neuhaus cut in. “He won’t return.” He nodded at the two guards, who pushed Hogan outside of the barrack.

The American threw one last glance back over his shoulder, saw the rising desperation on his friends’ face and gave them something he thought it was a reassuring smile, but failed miserably. Every one of his men could see the fear in his eyes.

Hogan gulped and tried to remain calm, yet the coldness deep in his veins outmatched the winter temperature. He knew that the short period of grace was finally over – that this time there would be no surprising way out. Klink was in hospital, unable even to try to help him. And his men’s hands were bound. As long as the SS-guards remained within Barrack 2 no-one of his friends could try to contact the Underground or could call for help otherwise.

He was utterly alone in this – and the prospect of seeing the dead end of his life-road closing up on him, elicited bile in his throat.
He watched how approx. two dozen of SS-guards occupied the towers and gates; arguing with the guards of the Luftwaffe. Then his glance found the porch of the Kommandantur where he saw the slender figure of Hilda. The young woman had pressed a fist against her mouth and was pale as the tablecloth. Her gaze found him, and her eyes widened, before they filled with tears. She lowered her fist and he thought to read ‘I’m so sorry’ on her lips. Forcing his dread back, he offered her a short smile. More he didn’t dare to do to comfort her. It was enough that Hochstetter already assumed that Langenscheidt – and certainly Schultz and Klink, too – were sympathizer with the Allies. He didn’t want to put Hilda into the same position.

Hochstetter and Langenscheidt were arguing as they neared the major’s staff car, then the Gestapo-officer pushed the corporal back with one hand. “This is my last warning! I outrank you, and if I hear one more word of protest I’ll arrest for insubordination – or, even better, get your court materialled for conspiracy with the enemy!”

Karl didn’t back down easily, even if his heart was on a permanent up and down between heart and gut. “Oberst Klink left me in charge – and this camp belongs to the Luftwaffe, Herr Major. General Burkhalter will learn of this and…”

“General Burkhalter will be glad that finally strict discipline will find entrance in this mess you’re calling a POW-camp.” Hochstetter snarled. “Our ‘tough’ Kommandant Klink is unavailable and to leave a Stalag in the hands of a simple corporal is irresponsible. The safety of the area is endangered when no-one is here to lead the camp with a stern hand. This leaves me no other choice than to overtake Stalag 13 officially. I leave Leutnant von Neuhaus in charge. If I should learn that some irregularities are taking place here within the next days, you and all corporals will be questioned and court materialled.” He turned around and saw that Hogan was brought towards his car.

“My dear Colonel Hogan,” he called. “You really have nine lives like a cat. But what’s the old saying? A clever dog catches the cat?”

“That you made up,” Hogan growled. “I know a real saying that fits you perfectly: The coward sticks his face up the own ass until he’s too blind to see the dog before it bites him!”

He yelped as a hard fist landed on his back – making him stumble forwards straight against the staff car. The next moment he was turned around and the fist hit him in the belly.

“Enough, Mayer!” Hochstetter said; sounding almost kindly. “You should know that Hogan is too arrogant and stupid to know when it is better to keep his mouth shut.” He closed the distance to the gasping American, who had doubled over. Gripping Hogan’s collar, Hochstetter hauled him up, opened the car’s door of the backseat and shoved his nemesis inside; not caring that the other man banged his head in the process.
Bending down, Hochstetter murmured, “This was your biggest mistake, Hogan – not to flee when you had the chance. We both know that Klink wouldn’t have been able to hold you back yesterday evening, yet you decided to play the hero – again.” He smirked. “I have an old saying for you, too, Hogan: ‘The proof of heroism doesn’t lay within brave acts, but in enduring of defeat’. And believe me, Hogan, your defeat and upcoming agony will demand your hardest grip on heroism – and this will be my biggest pleasure.”

Hogan glared up at him, while still catching his breath. “You’re a fool, Hochstetter. You always try to surpass others, even your own people, but you’ll learn that this is the beginning of the end. You…”

“No, Hogan, it’s you who doesn’t understand what’s going on. I’ve enough evidences and proofs of your deeds within Germany that it would be enough of executing you a dozen times. And for the case that you’re too much in denial to realize your position: This time there is no Klink or someone else from the Luftwaffe who will interference. This time there will be no escape for you.” He bent down into the car, gripped Hogan’s hair, pulled his head roughly into the neck and whispered into his ear with glee, “Now you are mine!”

He let go off the colonel, straightened his form, pulled out his pistol, closed the door and rounded the car to take the seat beside Hogan. “Von Neuhaus, you have your orders. Keep an eye on Hogan’s men – and by the tiniest suspect that they’re up to something, arrest them.”

“Jawohl, Herr Major!”

Hochstetter climbed into the car; his weapon was aimed straight at Hogan’s chest. The driver took his place behind the wheel and started the motor.

Langenscheidt and Hilda got a last glance at the American colonel, who looked with hidden, yet still to see anxiety at them, then the car drove off.

‘God, we’ve to help him,’ Hilda thought, near a panic attack. But how? What if Hochstetter had indeed found out what Hogan’s real mission was in Germany?

Okay, he had never admitted that he was a spy, but deep down she simply knew that Hochstetter was right – that Robert Hogan was indeed part of the Underground and was fulfilling missions in secret, using Stalag 13 as base and alibi. Too often he had asked for delicate information, had tricked her – and Klink – of revealing details and had closer looks into documents which were top secret.
She had made calls for him, had flirted with German officers to distract them from what he was doing, and far too often odd things happened which prevented changes within the camp’s routine. Her helping him finishing his missions over and over again made her a member of the Underground, too – and it filled her with pride.

What had become of Germany since it had changed into the Third Reich was hell on Earth, in which people – family, friends, neighbors, co-worker – couldn’t trust each other anymore, but had to fear to be sold or revealed to the SD (the intelligence-department of the SS) or to the Gestapo. Destroyed cities and villages, hunger, fear and despair were all that was left after all those years of war, and the sooner the war would be over the better.

Therefore, she hadn’t mind supporting Hogan and his men; knowing that Robert held the death toll among the German army and Gestapo as low as possible. To kill wasn’t his style and he only did it when there was no other way anymore. He was an enemy officer to her homeland, a spy and saboteur, yet he had more honor as most of the whole brass in Berlin.

And now this man she had developed deeper feelings for than simple adoration, was in mortal danger. Even more, he was facing torture – because of her! As Hochstetter arrived, announcing that he learned that the camp was without leading officer and would therefore overtake command, she had known that she had conjured the catastrophe during the telephone talk with him an hour ago.

Hilda was devasted.

Looking at Langenscheidt, who had pressed his lips into a thin line, she knew that he felt bad for Hogan like she did. And maybe he felt sorry enough for the colonel to help her to get this madness stopped.

She watched Leutnant von Neuhaus stepping to the corporal and listened to his demand of the actual report. Expressionless Langenscheidt told him of the problems with the emergency generator, but that everything else was in order. In return they learned of the general power blackout in the whole area and that only the emergency generator within the camp supplied their needs by now. Wrapping her arms around herself she followed the short exchange between the two men, then the Leutnant’s focus drove towards her. His ice-blue eyes watched her from head to toe and back, and she felt a chill running down her spine she was unable to suppress.

“You are ‘Fräulein Hilda’, Oberst Klink’s secretary?” he asked.

“Yes, Herr Leutnant, Hilda Schneider is my name,“ she answered; sounding surprisingly firm given the circumstances.
He closed the distance to her and offered her his hand. “A pleasure to meet you,” he said with unexpected charm, while lifting her hand shortly to his lips. “I hope we’ll work well together.”

‘And I hope you go to hell,’ she thought, but smiled back at him. Maybe it would be an advantage to woo the man – an advantage Kinchloe and the others could use to rescue Hogan. There was no doubt that the men were already making plans to safe their commanding officer and friend, and maybe she could be of help for them. After all, she had to make up a lot, even if it had been never her intention to risk Robert’s life like she obviously did.

So, she answered with an almost shy batter of her eye-lashes. “I hope for the same, Herr Leutnant.”

He nodded towards the Kommandantur. “Is it possible to get a cup of hot coffee?”

“Of course, Herr Leutnant, please come with me.” She entered the building; von Neuhaus followed her. And while she closed the door she asked herself, what else could go wrong at this day.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan was roughly shoved in the visitor chair on the other side of Hochstetter’s desk. It wasn’t the first time the colonel was in this room. The last time he had been invited to be an official witness of the German’s next top-weapon and its pinpoint accuracy he should report to the Allies, maybe giving them second thoughts not to surrender to Germany. The whole thing backfired after Hogan and the developer of the weapon sabotaged the missile. Hochstetter had been enraged – like so often – had ranted at Hogan and the others without having any proof that the colonel had something to do with the failure. Hogan had been deeply amused as Hochstetter had acted like Rumpelstiltskin during a raging fit worth the gnome that wore this name in the fairy-tale.

But not now.

Amusement was as far from Hogan’s mind as the home of his parents in the United States. He hid his dread behind a mask of bravery and cockiness, as Hochstetter took his own seat, but inside he was chilled to the bones what had nothing to do with the cold he caught. He knew that the next minutes of skirmishing were the last moments of his life which would be easy. Afterwards there would be nothing else for him anymore than pain ’til his last breath.
Hochstetter glanced at the guards. “Wait outside!” he instructed. “This is only between the prisoner and me.”

Hogan felt his fear increasing. He doubted that the major sent the guards away to have a private talk with him that maybe would lead into an attempt of blackmailing him. The malic shimmer in Hochstetter’s eyes spoke of the thrill of anticipation that had nothing to do with forcing Hogan into any kind of bargain. Hochstetter was convinced to have evidences for the American’s role within the Underground, and he would love to press secrets out of his nemesis with brute force.

As the door closed with a click, there was for a moment nothing else to hear than the ticking of the mantle clock, then Hochstetter bent forwards and folded his hands on the desk top. Both men didn’t look away from each other, as the major began.

“You ask yourself what I found out to arrest you – risking trouble with General Burkhalter and the Luftwaffe. To say the truth, it wasn’t easy to glean all the information and details I needed to act at last. It costed me months of searching and following all hints I got, but finally everything fitted together like the pieces of a puzzle. And the picture of the puzzle is clear as fresh water – and confirms what I always assumed concerning you.”

Hogan knew that he and his men had left tracks during their missions and that certainly a few evidences pointed towards them. Yet he was not ready to confess anything. Leaning back, his hands still shackled behind his back, he gave the major a half-smile.

“I already told you that you should get yourself a hobby, Major Hochstetter. You’ve obviously too much spare time to hunt prisoners which are locked up in the toughest POW-camp in all Germany.”

Hochstetter chuckled – and it didn’t sound nice. “I took your advice to heart, Hogan, and got myself a hobby: To bring you down.”

“That is not a hobby, but obsession,” the colonel deadpanned.

“To give your best, you have to be obsessed with something,” the major answered with a crocodile smile. “And I gave my best.”

He rose and began to walk the office. “Do you want to know what I found out? Of course, you do, and I can understand it. Everyone should learn what leads to the own death.” He looked at Hogan who hadn’t moved an inch but looked straight towards the wall.
Returning to the desk Hochstetter leant against it beside the colonel; bracing his arms backwards in a gesture of pure superiority.

“First I got suspicious because since you had been taken to Stalag 13, sabotages and odd things around the area increased dramatically. Then I heard rumors – of men wearing black and running through the night, leaving destruction behind and people went missing. People which were suspected of being members of the Underground, escapees from other POW-camps, jails, and so on. Then I got reports concerning German officers and soldiers of giving orders which ended in successful sabotages – men in uniform whose name had never been heard of before and never appeared again. Sometimes they were followed but they vanished like smoke in the air – and more than often near Stalag 13. Yet there was no proof that those men were POWs, because none got ever caught.”

“So, your point is…?” Hogan asked; not liking to where the explanation was heading to.

“My point is, Hogan, that all evidence is telling me that you and your men are those saboteurs – in civil, in black, in uniform. And besides all the hints and indications there is one thing more – and this ‘thing’ is you!” He cocked his head; feeling satisfaction as he recognized the first sign of unease on the colonel’s face. “Since I met you for the first time I knew something was off with you, and after seeing and speaking with you dozens of times, everything clicked into place.”

He bent forwards. “I’m a predator, Hogan, and as a predator you must have a certain feeling, a six sense so to say, to smell your prey even against the wind. And you, Colonel, smelled exactly like this – only that I realized that you’re a hunter like me. You’re a wolf in the sheep’s clothing and no-one can lock up a wolf without getting him restless. But even after almost three years in captivity you are calm, content and almost happy; protesting about minor matters and childish things to keep up the pretend. You are a predator who is successfully on the hunt, living out his nature in secret.”

He leant back again and nodded slowly as he met Hogan’s piercing eyes. “You are far too perky for a prisoner, always barking into the scene like you were in command – and we both know that, indeed, you are! At least you think so and maybe you really hold the reins within Stalag 13, but how much power you really have remains to be seen.”

“The commanding officer of Stalag 13 is Colonel Klink – he was it and will remain it. To believe anything else…”

“…Will lead to make you fall into action to keep Klink in place. Don’t think I haven’t realized how often Burkhalter or other staff officers tried to transfer Klink to the Russian Front, but always Klink gets all of sudden important enough to let him remain in his position.”
“Maybe because he is important. He’s a high decorated officer who gained his reputation in the Great War – when you were still too much a child than doing anything else than to go to school.”

“Just like you at those times, Hogan,” Hochstetter taunted, before he looked thoughtfully at the other man. “The point is, that you are the one who make the others realize just what a ‘fine’ officer Klink is.”

Hogan shrugged nonchalant. “Why not? Klink is tough but fair – a man of honor. I’ve seen too many officers in this country which are nothing more than cruel cowards, gaining their stripes by harassing and tormenting others, even the own people.” He saw Hochstetter grinning his teeth and knew that he had hit home. “Of course, every one of us POWs prefers a reputable man like Colonel Klink in charge of our camp instead of someone who lives his frustration out by abusing his rank. And me as the senior POW officer is the only one who can speak directly with him and his visitors, therefore it is naturally me who points out to those narcissistic gongs-wearers what a good officer Klink is.”

“Your obvious friendship with Klink is touching, Hogan,” the major sneered. “But it also makes me think that there is maybe more going on between you two. Maybe the ever so ‘honorable’ Oberst Klink is nothing more than a traitor and works with you hand in hand!”

Hogan stared at him – and began to laugh. “Sweet Lord, are all Gestapo-officers suffering paranoia or is it only you and your obsession to gain victory over the Luftwaffe by renouncing loyal officers?”

“Don’t reverse paranoia with logical thinking, Hogan! It’s you who always come up with some excuse for Klink’ foolish acting or mention some urgent matters Klink has to take care of when he gets into deep water. You sit in his office like you two are best friends, disrespect but also defend him whenever possible. And only yesterday you put his safety above your own, and…”

“It was Colonel Klink who saved me, not the other way around,” Hogan interrupted Hochstetter; highly on alert of all the evident the major mentioned and which could only lead to one conclusion: The Gestapo-officer had psyched him out.

“Yes, this much I understand,” the major nodded. “Oberst Klink, the biggest coward in uniform, ran back into a rain of bullets to save you. And you, knowing that I have revealed your secret, didn’t try to flee to save yourself, but decided to take Klink back to Stalag 13. You two need each other – and want to know, why.”
Hogan forced an expression of surprise on his face. “We ‘need’ each other? What do you mean with those words, Major? Really, I never took you for this kind of guy who…” He gasped as he was backhanded anew – straight on the same spot that was still red and slightly swollen from yesterday’s manhandling.

“Shut up!” Hochstetter snarled, before he regained some self-control. “Your bad mouth is an insult for every honorable German officer. “

Hogan shot him a glance of pure disgust and hate. “Then it’s good that no ‘honorable German officer’ is present in the moment, because…”

The next hit was delivered to the other side of his face, and his ears began to ring. Dammit, Hochstetter really had some hidden strength beneath his uniform. Slowly Hogan glared up at his nemesis – eyes narrowed, yaw lifted proudly. “You can beat me all you want, but it doesn’t will change the truth.”

“The truth?” the major snorted. “I’ll press the truth out of you like juice from a lemon. Be sure of it, Hogan. And if you are as half as clever as you think you are, you better hold your tongue before you’re in more trouble than you already are.”

“They called me ‘troublemaker’ since I was little, and I didn’t bow to anyone who thought he could put me down,” Hogan said; displaying impertinence again by giving Hochstetter a lopsided grin. “Just ask my teachers. I even can give you the telephone number of my main teacher. He certainly will…” He stopped and pretended to be contrite. “Sorry, Major, I forgot that there are no telephone calls permitted between Germany and the US.”

Hochstetter only glared at him and sneered, “Very funny, Hogan, but I guarantee you that you’ll soon be laughing out of the other side of your face.”

The colonel cocked his head. “‘From the other side of my face’? Of course, after all you damaged enough of the right side of my face with your backhand. Have you played tennis during your youth? I could almost believe it given the strength you put into your blows.”

Hochstetter glared with hate at him, pushed himself away from the desk and started to walk around again.

“Do you want to hear the rest of my investigation, or shall we move directly to the part that will be
very unpleasant for you?"

Hogan didn’t even know why he stalled time. There was no chance that his men could put any plan into action they maybe had come up with during the next hours – or even days. Yet every minute the ‘questioning’ wouldn’t begin was a minute of grace more.

“I’m all ears, Major.”

“I thought so,” the Gestapo-officer snorted, before he took a deep breath. “The next parts of my investigations will certainly wipe any smirk off your face. Do you remember Major Pruhst?”

The alert-bells in Hogan’s mind were almost deafening. “Small, older than you but definitely with the same foul mood you always have. I think he showed up during the time you were questioned in Berlin for letting Underground agents drive away in your car.”

Yes, Hogan knew that it was anything but smart to provoke Hochstetter even more, but if he was about to be tortured and killed, then he would put as much thorns into his nemesis’ sides as possible.

Hochstetter hooked the thumbs in his belt and watched him like a hawk. “There is a certain method in your insolence, Hogan. You try to enrage me enough to kill you on the spot to avoid a more ‘stern’ questioning, but believe me, Colonel, you will not succeed in this.”

He returned to his desk and sat down again. “Major Pruhst came to the same conclusion than I did: That you are a spy and saboteur. Regrettable our superior officers don’t see it this way, but contraire to Pruhst I knew for what to search to convict you. Ever heard the name Erik Schafstein?”

Hogan frowned and pretended to think of the question. “No, never heard,” he said. “Who is it?”

“We both know that you’re lying through your teeth just right now. On the other hand, I can understand your question who this man is – after all, he doesn’t really exist.”

The colonel felt his mouth going dry but decided to keep up the charade. “You insist that I know someone’s name who doesn’t even exist? Are you feeling well, Major?”
“Erik Schafstein was the pseudonym you used to set Pruhst and your ‘honorable’ Klink on the wrong track,” Hochstetter continued; ignoring Hogan’s jibe for once. “Pruhst had you identified by a German citizen who saw you destroying a bridge a few months ago, and you came up with the crazy idea the man saw a Doppelganger of you. So, you showed up on the party of Feld Marschall von Leitner – a high decorated staff-officer who returned to his residence in Hammelburg. Grey hair, a moustache and glasses were enough to give you a slightly different appearance, but still showed the similarities between you and the supposed Doppelganger. To top everything, you pretended to be an old friend of the family, especially towards von Leitner’s son – and even made up a story about a tattoo you and the young von Leitner received on the right arms. You showed it Pruhst and Klink, and…”

“This was the reason why I had to roll up my sleeve in the middle of a chess game at the late evening?” Hogan pretended to be baffled. “Pruhst and Klink both rambled about a tattoo, but I hadn’t the tiniest clue, why…” He stopped, and his eyes widened. “They thought the guy at the party was me?”

“Clever, Hogan,” Hochstetter nodded and even applauded three times. “Really clever. And almost a perfect plan to steer any suspicions away from your person. I do not know how you manage to attend this party, coming and going like you want while the gates of the camp are firmly closed, but don’t worry. I’ll find the answer to this question when I turn every barrack upside down – especially yours.”

“This again,” the colonel sighed and shook his head. “As I said: Paranoia.”

Again, the major ignored him. “I checked the odd guest’s identity: There is no Erik Schafstein in the whole German army – not anymore. A man with this name died seven years ago at a heart attack. He lived near Bielefeld and was fifty-six years old! He also got injured during the Great War and had lost his left leg. So, there is no chance that the real Erik Schafstein was on that party – unless it was his ghost, but why should a ghost have your face and body, Hogan?”

The American felt the disaster closing up on him. He had to agree with Hochstetter: All evidence pointed towards him. Still he had to try to talk his way out – even if a tiny voice in his head whispered that there was no chance of success this time.

“Didn’t the field marshal affirmed that this Schafstein was an old friend of the family?” he asked innocently.

“Yes, but von Leitner suffers dementia – the reason why he was pensioned. You could feed him with any story you like, and he believes it. Sad for a man of his caliber, but dementia is something everyone could get. The point is, Hogan, I spoke with his son. He doesn’t know an Erik Schafstein – he hasn’t even a tattoo. The man who showed up on the party was an imposter…”
“An imposter using a wrong name?” Hogan mocked. “We really live in evil times, Major. Spies and imposters are introducing themselves with the false names. The nerve of them!”

Hochstetter’s palm landed with a sharp sound on the desktop. “Hogan, you really have no reason to make fun of this. The imposter wore your face, sounded like you and even charmed his way into the other’s mind just like you would do – because it was you! You maybe can fool Klink – that isn’t too difficult – but you can’t fool me! Pruhst was in hot pursuit of you, and you wriggled yourself out of the situation by misleading him and your ‘honorable’ Kommandant Klink.”

Hogan couldn’t deny it: His stomach had turned into a churning stone, while ice seemed to flow through his veins. Hochstetter really got him – and cold fear was crawling up his spine. He was facing a dead end – literally. Yet he wouldn’t give up. Never!

“Do you have any real proof for your accusations, Major?” he asked; forcing his voice to sound firm.

“Besides all those indicators which would be enough for any judge to find you guilty? Yes, a witness who identified you a few days ago while you were in Hammelburg, wearing civil clothes and meeting with someone from the Underground.”

Hogan blinked. “I beg your pardon?” he asked; truly confused now. The last time he had been in Hammelburg had been when he and his men were forced to clean the road from the snow, and they were locked up in the closed Hofbräu, playing music to trigger the avalanche that finally came down after Klink’s thundering sneezing. Since then he hadn’t been in the little town again.

“Oh, come on, Hogan, this is getting old!” Hochstetter taunted. “The witness came to the Gestapo and reported that a man of your size with dark hair met with another man in a dark alley, took some papers from him and then both vanished while acting very suspiciously – looking around the next corner before they entered different streets. The incident was reported to me and I sought the man out, showing him a photo of you. He affirmed that one of the two men was you!”

Hogan’s heart pounded loud enough to be certainly heard. He hadn’t been in town, but Newkirk. Peter had retrieved valuable information the Heroes had transferred to London the same night. Usually Hogan would have gone but…

“When should this all have taken place?” he asked; fighting to appear composed.
“Last Monday at eleven p.m. or so,” Hochstetter answered.

Behind his back, Hogan balled his hands into fists. Yes, last Monday Newkirk had gone to Hammelburg in Hogan’s place, because…

“Last Monday Colonel Klink invited me to play chess with him in his quarters. We played longer than intended and…”

“Of course,” the major sneered. “Of course, you were elsewhere occupied – at best with one of the Germans as your alibi.” He shook his head and smiled malicious. “The excuses and tricks you’ve up your sleeve seem to be endless, Hogan, and I have to admit that I almost admire you for this. You’re worth of being a member of the Gestapo.”

“Thanks, no need for belonging to a club of insane paranoids,” Hogan shot back.

Hochstetter rose, braced both hand on the desktop and bent slightly forwards until he was almost on eye level with the American. “Admit that it was you who was in Hammelburg last Monday and…”

“I wasn’t! Why don’t you ask Colonel Klink? I know that he will get in trouble for playing chess with a POW until two o’clock in the morning, but we got carried away after each of us won a game and we agreed on one final one to see who the winner of the evening is.”

“You know that Klink is in hospital, and…”

“Because of a nasty cold and two graze wounds. He isn’t too ill to answer a few questions,” Hogan protested. “Before you accuse me further of being a spy and saboteur, you really should get some true proofs, and…”

“I got them, Hogan, even if you deny it.”

“The last one has already turned into smoke and concerning this imposter Schafstein you also have no proofs that I was him. I was the whole evening in my barrack and…”

“Nothing has ‘turned into smoke’, Hogan. The witness a few months ago, and the witness here in
Hammelburg – both men clearly identified you. I see no reason to disturb Klink on his sick-bed only…”

“Only because you fear that your ‘proof’ turns out to be none if you ask him! You rather accuse an innocent POW of…”

Both fists banged on the desktop. “You are anything than ‘innocent’, Hogan!” Hochstetter yelled; his face turning red. “And I don’t care with which arguments you come up to get your neck out of the noose. The noose is already too tight around your throat.” He bent even more forwards. “You really should start to talk, or it will get very ugly for you.”

Hogan, still clinging to his mask of cockiness, curled the left edge of his mouth. “Do you want to put me in a small room again – too low to stand in it and also too small to lay down properly?” he taunted; using Hochstetter’s own threat from two year ago as the major had shown up for the first time in Stalag 13 and had tried to pave the way for his superior at this time, Gruppenführer Freitag. It had been the first time the two men had met and instantly clashed – and since then it had worsened into a peak.

The major gritted his teeth. “You simply do not know when to quit your jokes, Hogan.” He took another deep breath. “We can do this the easy, or the hard way. Tell me what I want to know, and I promise you a quick and painless death. I even will put in a good word for your men, after all they only followed your orders. I’ve connections in Berlin. I give you my word that I will try to get them not executed but transferred to a labor camp. But remain stubborn, and you going to regret the day you were born.”

Hogan swallowed the rising bile in his mouth; knowing that stalling time was no option anymore. And yet it was the only thing he could do to buy himself some more minutes. “I don’t accept to be blackmailed into admitting something I’ve not…”

“Who is your contact in Hammelburg and in the Underground?” Hochstetter interrupted his protest sharply. “How do you get in and out of Stalag 13? Who supports you in the camp? I want names and details! How do you get your orders and from whom? What are the Allies next steps? What are your next missions? I want answers, Papa Bear, and I want them now!”

The colonel’s belly clenched with anxiety, yet he clung to the reckless façade. “Papa Bear? You do have a knack for fairy tales, don’t you?”

Hochstetter rounded his desk again, bent over Hogan and put his hands on the armrests to the colonel’s both sides. His face was near enough the American’s that Hogan could feel the major’s
breath on his cheek. “Stop your denying, Hogan. The game is over! Your life is forfeit, but you still can save that of your men. And you can spare yourself a lot of pain if you play along now. The decision is up to you.”

Both men stared at each other with fierce loath in the eyes. Hogan knew that nothing he would say would convince Hochstetter that he caught the wrong man here – after all, the major was mostly right with his accuses. Fright crept through his inner being, spread through his heart and soul, and burnt icily beneath his skin. He knew what laid ahead of him if he didn’t give into Hochstetter’s demands, but there was only one answer he could give,

“Robert E. Hogan, colonel of the US Air Force, serial-number…”

He didn’t get any further, as Hochstetter’s right hand closed around his throat with a brutal grip; cutting off his breath.

“I hoped that you would chose the hard way, Hogan,” he whispered; eyes shining with glee. “I hoped that you would remain stubborn what gives me the best excuse to put you to where you belong: To my feet.”

Hogan reared up; tried to escape the cruel fingers which dipped into the tender skin and was about to crush the vulnerable inside of his throat, but to no avail. He felt his face reddening and even if his mind told him that Hochstetter wouldn’t kill him – not so soon – a hue of panic rose in him.

The major smiled as he saw the fear shimmering in his nemesis’ eyes, and added with malic joy, “I will break you, Hogan. I will break you until nothing is left of you despite a whimpering heap of misery, begging to be killed.” He lowered his voice to an evil whisper, “You’re going to be my masterpiece!”

He let go off him and stormed to the door, while behind him the colonel gasped for breath and coughed strongly. Pulling the door open, the major barked, “Guards, take Colonel Hogan to interrogation room 3.”

“Directly to interrogation room 3, Herr Major?” one of the SS-guards asked with mild surprise.

“You heard me,” Hochstetter snapped, before he looked back at the still coughing figure on the visitor chair. “Colonel Hogan belongs to those people, who never do easy. It will spare us all a lot of time and trouble, if he is thoroughly questioned from the beginning.”
The two guards stepped to the American, hauled him on his feet and dragged him with them. As they passed Hochstetter, the major put a hand on Hogan’s upper arm and squeezed it hard; driving the colonel’s attention towards himself.

“What comes now, Hogan, is your own fault. I warned you, but you didn’t want to listen. If you’re religious, start praying, because soon you won’t be able to think of anything else than of someone who will put an end to your misery!”

As the guards pulled him roughly down the hallway towards the staircase that led to the cellars, Hogan still was trying to regain his breath. There was no doubt what this interrogation room 3 was, and he felt his knees weakening. Only his pride and dignity prevented him from panicking. But as he was forced down the steps, there was only one thought that echoed through his mind with rising despair,

‘Sweet Lord, please help me!’

TBC…

Yes, I already gave you hints that Hogan will face a dark time – and his friends’ hands are more or less tied.

I always regarded Hochstetter as a highly intelligent but also very evil man, who won’t stop at nothing to climb up the ladder of carrier and to bring those to fall who gave him trouble. He and Hogan clashed the very first time they met – and they goaded each other during the months and even years. Both are hunters, both are determined to help their countries to gain victory within the war’s madness, yet there was always the small but still large difference between them: Hochstetter was a maniac in my eyes, Hogan – even as a spy and saboteur – still had his limits; especially when it came to other ones’ lives.

The ultimate showdown between those two was something I always hoped to see in the TV-show (even if the show was stopped filming half a year after my birth, so the outcome was clear from the beginning as I became a fan). So I let it peaked into the almost biggest disaster that could take place: Hochstetter figured out the truth by simply deducing all evidences.

I really hope you liked it.
Within the next chapter, the Heroes are trying to find a way to rescue their superior and friend, while Hogan faces a cruel face of the war he had been spared of until now. And to make matters worse, the Heroes can’t act like they would usually do because of the SS-member’s overtaking of Stalag 13. Yet they won’t give up – but the question remains, what they can do.

Like always I’ll love to get comments and other kinds of feedbacks.

Thank you so much for putting up with my writing despite the lack of some beta-reading in the moment.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Once again I can only say ‘thank-you’ for the feedback and that you are still reading the story despite the errors within the last chapters. As it seems the storyline keeps you despite the mistakes, and I’m glad about it.

As you certainly anticipated (and like I already pointed out), the next chapters will be darker, because Hogan will face a very hard time and will be pushed to his limits. Of course his friends want to help him, but this time their hands will be bound. They will have no chance to come up with one of their typical schemes to save the say, and you’ll read in the new chapter the reason for it. Yet they don’t give up – and desperate times demand desperate acting.

I hope you’re going to like it.

Enjoy,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 9 – Desperate planes, part 1

Even with Leutnant von Neuhaus in charge, the routine within Stalag 13 had to go on. Therefore, the POWs weren’t surprised as two dozen of them were ordered to free the yard from snow, while others began to clean the barracks. To the dismay of the most POWs, several SS-guards remained close by as they worked, even shooed them to hurry up whenever one of them let down the shovel because to remove the heavy snow was tiring. The murmurs and mutterings were ignored – the protest even amused the black-cladded men, while their ‘colleagues’ of the Luftwaffe watched them with anger and disgust.
“Somehow we’ve to help mon colonel,” LeBeau whispered; glad that to be outside of the barrack while fighting against the snow. It gave him and the others the chance to speak of what happened and what they could do to save their commanding officer and friend.

“Yes, I’m already wracking my brain what to do to get the gov’nor out,” Newkirk nodded – and began to shovel the snow stronger as one of the SS-guards came towards them.

“Unterhalten ist verboten (Talking is forbidden)!” he snapped.

“Speak English, bosche, or French,” LeBeau countered. “You can’t expect that every soul on this planet speaks your babbling tongue!”

“Was? (What?)”

“I said, speak English, because…” LeBeau stopped and flipped a thumb at the German, while he addressed Newkirk. “Did you know that they only accept apes in the SS? He can’t even speak a foreign langue. What do they teach in school in this land?”

The SS-guard had no clue what the little Frenchman was telling the other POW, but that he was mocked was as clear as water. Taking a deep breathe he was about to shout at the prisoner, as a hand landed on his shoulder. Whirling around and rising his riffle, he stopped as he saw the Corporal Langenscheidt standing behind him.

“Stop, don’t shoot!” Karl called in German, startled. Then he narrowed his eyes. “Was ist hier los (what’s the matter here)?” He demanded. He glanced at Newkirk and LeBeau, then at the enraged SS-guard, sighed inwardly and pushed the man’s weapon down.

“It’s forbidden to talk during…” The guard began, but was interrupted by Langenscheidt, who said with unusual sternness,

“You should read the Geneva Conventions when you work here. These men are POWs and not forced laborers on which you and so many of your ‘collegues’ are living out their bad mood. What you’re trying to do is against written law and if you’re doing it again, I have to report you. Our prisoners will be treated with respect and politeness, they are human beings after all. And if you have a problem with it, you should get yourself another job!” He turned his back to him briskly and looked at LeBau and Newkirk. “What was the matter?”
“He doesn’t speak English and so we couldn’t understand what he said. Then he became angry,” Newkirk answered.

Langenscheidt grimaced. The most guards within this camp spoke a few English words at least, and the corporals, sergeants and the Kommandant even spoke fluent English, but obviously the most of the SS-guards had never learned another language. This was the fourth incident like this within an hour.

“Just try to be patient. The current situation will change as soon as Klink is back.”

“Then it’s too late – at least for Hogan,” LeBau growled.

Langenscheidt felt an unease sting in his belly as he thought at the American colonel he had come to respect greatly. Hell, he liked the man, who had always kind words for him and his men, joked around and pulled every one’s leg without getting mean or cruel. He was good for the moral, which as down to zero at the moment. The whole POW’s were furious, and Langenscheidt knew that a spark was enough to trigger a wildfire within Stalag 13.

Turning around he waved the SS-guard to continue his patrol, but the man only stared at him. “I’m not bound by instruction coming from you and…”

“Guard, you and your colleagues are only here to support us, if I understood Major Hochstetter and Leutnant von Neuhaus correctly. And I’m outranking you, so do as I say – or I really have to report you to the Leutnant.” Both men stared at each other – a battle of wills – then the SS-guard gave in; knowing that the Luftwaffe-corporal was right. Swearing under his breath the man walked away.

Langenscheidt turned his attention back to the English- and Frenchman, who watched the SS-man with loath. “Guys, I know that you’re upset,” he began quietly, “but…”

“No ‘but’, Langenscheidt. Colonel Hogan is certainly tortured now in this moment, while we’re standing here and shoveling snow. Can you imagine what we feel?” Newkirk interrupted him.

“Yes, I can,” Karl said softly. “Believe me, if there would be a way to help him, I’d do it.”

Newkirk nodded. “Thank you for your sympathy.” Then, all of sudden, a plan was forming in his mind. A desperate plan, but a plan it was. “Can you arrange for a trash-transporter?” he asked;
catching the German corporal by surprise.

“A trash-transporter?”

“Yes. The boys are cleaning the barracks, we’ve already a mountain of trash stored behind the motor pool and it will grow during the day. I don’t think that even the SS or the Gestapo want to risk diseases and rats within a POW-camp.”

Karl cocked suspiciously his head. “To what you’re up to?”

“Nothing. What can we do as POW’s?” LeBeau shrugged; realizing that ‘Pierre’ had obviously an idea how to come to Hogan’s rescue.

“If this damn town power will be restored within the next hours so that we can use the phones again, I call the trash-company,” Langenscheidt sighed, before his gaze wandered over the two other men. They looked far too innocent and he simply knew that they were up to some ‘monkey-business’, like Schultz called it. They had something in mind to help their superior officer. And if there was a way to aid them without breaking too many rules or to get caught in the act red-handed, Langenscheidt would support them – maybe by simply looking into another direction.

The short incident between LeBeau, Newkirk, the SS-guard and Langenscheidt had given Baker and Carter a chance to exchange a few words.

“We’ve to alert the Underground,” Carter murmured, while helping Baker to ‘repair’ his shovel.

“No way. The power is still down and without power no radio or telephone. And we can’t leave through the tunnels. The tracks we would leave in the snow around the camp would give us and the hidden entrances away instantly.”

“Yet we’ve to do something. Maybe a little detonation at the Kommandantur later in the evening, when Fräulein Hilda went home, will distract the Leutnant enough so that one of us can flee and go to Hammelburg.”

Baker held the shovel blade with both hands and knocked the handle a few times on the ground, as if he wanted to stick it more firmly into the blade’s holder; making so an alibi for stopping his work and talking with Carter. “Are you mad?” he whispered. “They would know instantly that we’re up to
something and we would give us away. The colonel endures everything to give us a chance to flee and stay alive, and you’re about to affirm Hochstetter’s accuses that Hogan and we belong to the Underground.”

“Yet we have something to do,” Carter insisted. “If we could reach Burkhalter, he maybe would stop Hochstetter.”

“Andrew, no power, no phone!” Baker grumbled impatiently. “And I wouldn’t count on Burkhalter as a supporter.”

“Then maybe Klink. He risked his life yesterday to keep the colonel safe. If he learns what happened to the colonel, he’ll act.”

“Yeah, by poking his head into the sand – like always.”

The young American made a face. “Come on, Klink proved yesterday to be not such a coward we all took him for. Maybe…”

“Attention, one of the black guys comes,” Baker whispered quickly and rose his voice. “Step aside and let me try it again. Maybe get this damn thing stuck now.” Gripping the handle now, he thrust its end one more time onto the ground – and the shovel blade began to wobble.

The SS-guard was close now and snapped something at them in German, what made both men looking with big eyes at him and shrugging finally. Again, Baker knocked the handle on the ground – and the shovel blade flew away. The swing was strong enough to let it fly a few meters, where it hit another SS-guard in the back, who stumbled forwards and promptly fell into a heap of snow diligent hands had shoveled up.

The reaction came promptly, as the present POW’s burst out in gleeful laughter. Even a few guards of the *Luftwaffe* began to chuckle.

Baker looked surprised at the mess. “Oops, sorry!”

*** *** ***
The shout ended in a nasty coughing-fit, yet it had been loud enough to wake Schultz up. Startled he jumped off the chair he had slept on and groaned as his back began to protest. Sweet Lord, he wasn’t twenty anymore and to sleep in such an odd position was poison for his back, shoulders and neck. Throwing a short glance at the clock at the wall he realized that it was already afternoon. No wonder that his back gave him hell. He had slept a few hours in this unhealthy position.

“Coming,” he called back, yawned and entered the patient’s room. Klink lay in bed, covers drawn up to his nose, eyes small and reddened, cheeks flushed with fever.

“Are you feeling better, Herr Kommandant?” he asked kindly.

“What’s that for a question. Don’t you see that I’m technically lying on my death-bed?” Klink snapped; falling back into the old pattern.

Schultz almost rolled his eyes. ‘Yesterday a hero, today a wimp again,’ he thought.

“Schultz, have you informed the camp that I’ll have to remain in hospital for a few days?”

The Sergeant of the Guards frowned. “No, Herr Kommandant.”

“Why not?”

“Because…” He looked out of the window and saw that no lights were switched on in the houses around the hospital. So, the power was still blacked out and… “The power is still knocked out, Herr Oberst. There is no way to call the camp.”

Klink pursed his lips. Schultz was right. Yet there was this nagging feeling deep in him that something was wrong. “Schultz, drive back to the camp. I’ve a certain assumption that something is way off.”

Hans sighed. He already had anticipated that. “As you wish. Shall I come back and report to you if everything is all right or not?”
“This would be really thoughtful of you,” the Oberst said indignantly. “How else should I learn if everything is in order?” – ‘Including Hogan’ he added in thoughts

Looking everything than enthusiastic, Schultz saluted and left the room; closing the door behind him. Two minutes later he stepped outside into the cold. It had stopped snowing, yet the skies were covered with thick clouds and an unpleasant wind blew through the streets. Walking to the staff-car, he climbed into the relative warmth and started the motor.

He made it only until the next crossroad, then the car began to stutter. He glanced at the fuel-gage and began to curse. Only now he remembered what LeBeau had told him – that the gasoline container in the camp was almost empty and that he hadn’t been able to fuel the tank properly – especially in the short time they had to end the repair of the staff-car.

Voicing some very strong Bavarian curses, he was able to steer the car at the roadside, left it, walked to the trunk and got the gas can. Looking around he realized that the next pit-stop was several streets away and then it hit him. Without power there was no way that the gas pump would work. So, no power, no gasoline, no returning to the camp.

“The Kommandant will anything but pleased if learns of this,” he sighed, and decided to take the gas can with him for the case the power would be restored soon and he could walk from the hospital straight to the next gasoline station. He locked the car and began to tramp the way back to the hospital. “And I’m sure his main worry doesn’t lay with the camp, but with our American troublemaker.”

*** HH ***

If the situation would be not so gravely, you could say that the troublemaker didn’t give but was in trouble this time. But in the moment, there was nothing Hogan could have laugh about. Rather the opposite. Curled up in fetal position he lay on the icy floor of one of the cells in the cellars. He still had his pants, socks, boots and shirt, but the clothes were far too thin for the icy temperature in this dungeon.

At least the coldness soothed the bleeding stripes on his back and upper arm, on contraire the low temperature was bad for his whole condition – but the cold he caught was the less of his concerns, even if it add more pain.

He had never thought that a few hours in the Gestapo’s hands could be such hell. Interrogation room
3 had been exactly what he thought to be: A modern torture chamber, nothing else. They had taken his leather jacket, his wallet and his wristwatch from him, sneering that he wouldn’t have any use of them for the last hours of his life.

Then the ‘questioning’ had begun – and Hogan had to cling to his stubbornness and pride to hold on. He had lost count how many blows he had received – the one with fists and those with a whip. He had tried to fight back, not giving Hochstetter the satisfaction of showing fear or the first hints that he would give in. In the end a blow to his head had left him in merciful unconsciousness, but as he regained senses now in the cell, he wished he would have stayed in blissful unawareness. There seemed to be no spot that didn’t hurt, his left side burnt where certainly a few ribs were broken and he felt nausea as he tried to lift his head. Maybe he had suffered a concussion because of the last hit.

They hadn’t stopped, even not as he had to vomit after the third or fourth blow to his belly. And then always the same questions – like a mantra. Those guys knew what they did, and as a new shiver rocked the colonel he curled himself into an even tighter ball; realizing that this all here was far more horrifying then thought. They hadn’t done much damage to his body – yet – but he’d seen enough victims of the Gestapo to know that this here was only the beginning.

He could only hope that Hochstetter would lose patience and would kill him before he broke. Yet, knowing his nemesis, the major was far too delighted to have him in his mercy to give into furious impulses.

Maybe his men came up with a plan to safe him, but he hoped even more that they would take the clue and escape. He didn’t want them to risk their lives by coming to his rescue, yet a tiny part of him hoped desperately that they would play a trick on Hochstetter too get him, Hogan, out.

And there was still a third option: That Klink learned of what happened and would show up to stop Hochstetter.

Until yesterday afternoon, Hogan never would have put any faith in the Oberst’s courage, but that had changed drastically. He had seen the fierce man beneath the layers of cowardice, nervousness and vanity. He knew that Klink would try to get him out of this hell-hole, but for this the Kommandant would have to know about him. During the ‘questioning’ Hogan had heard that the whole power within town had broken down, so there was no way that someone in the camp could contact the hospital to inform Klink of the new situation.

And the same went for Burkhalter. Hogan was well aware of the rivalry between Luftwaffe and SS, and he knew for two years now that Burkhalter couldn’t stand Hochstetter. The general would intervene if he learned of anything that happened, but again there was no way one of the Heroes’ or maybe Hilda could contact the general.
Closing his eyes, Hogan took a deep breath and tried to suppress the dread that plagued him for hours now. He knew he was alone in this, yet a man could hope. After all, there was nothing else left than hope…

*** HH ***

Newkirk’s plan to use a trash-transporter to smuggle himself or another one of their team out of Stalag 13 proved to be unsuccessful – because the power breakdown lasted on. As the afternoon went by without that any energy could be used, the men knew they had to come up with another idea. The basic principle would remain – someone had to go to Hammelburg and inform the Underground – but how to get the chosen one out of the camp?

Additional to the whole stress was the fact that the most times one of the SS-guards was around – even in the barracks – and so the Heroes couldn’t discuss the topic openly.

The moment some turmoil was to hear in the yard and the SS-guard in Barrack 2 left the building to support his comrades, the four men began instantly scheming again.

“Right, change of plan. We need help and this yesterday,” Kinchloe said hastily. “Someone of the Krauts has to support one of us to leave the camp – willingly or unwillingly.”

“Why should one of them help us?” LeBeau grumbled.

“Because they hate the current situation with the black guys like we do,” Kinch answered. “We need someone who…”

“Fräulein Hilda,” Newkirk threw in, and explained as he caught the asking glances of his friends, “She’s supported the gov’nor whenever he was in need for information, phony calls, etc. And I have seen them flirting and kissing often enough to know that the Miss has a crush on him. She certainly is deeply worried about him and willing to help to get him away from Hochstetter.”

“And how shall she smuggle one of us out of the camp?” Carter asked tensed. “She walks to her parent’s farm house and…”
“Maybe she can convince the Leutnant to drive her home,” LeBeau mused. “I saw the way he glanced at her, and as I shoveled the snow at the Kommandantur, I heard him purring to her like a cat.”

“That’s an idea,” Kinch nodded slowly, then he pursed shortly his lips. “Louis, do you have any plans for the evening?”

“Going out with ma petite Marie into a restaurant, watching a movie and then having a nice long night with her, why?” LeBeau joked, before he turned serious again. “You want that I go.”

“Don’t get me wrong here, Louis, but you’re the smallest one of us. Whatever vehicle the Leutnant will choose, you’re small enough to hide inside. So…”

Sighing he crossed his arms in front of his chest. “What about the evening roll call? Someone has to cover for me, so…”

“A risk we’ve to take. And you heard him in the morning – if he could help he would do it. Now it would be his chance to stay true to his word,” Kinchloe calmed him. “And if not then we’re in trouble, but at least you’re out there to help Hogan.”

Grimacing, LeBeau nodded. “D’accord, I’ll try it. But first we’ve to inform Mademoiselle Hilda that she got herself a job.”

Kinch nodded. “Cater, watch the door and warn us if the SS-swine returns. LeBeau, with me.” Quickly they ran to the hidden entrance. “Go through the tunnels to Barrack 5 to get Alex. The SS-guy who watches our comrades there is outside in the yard, too. Alex shall come here immediately. Newkirk and I try to delay the SS-guy’s return by telling him about the firewood we’ve to bring to Klink’s office.”

“The guy doesn’t speak English.”
“The better. It will buy you enough time to get Alex and to exchange clothes with him. Then go to
motor pool. There is only a truck and the motor-bike with the sidecar left. I don’t think the Leutnant
will use the truck to get Fräulein Hilda home – should it come to that we’ll make certain that he takes
the motor-bike. Newkirk…”

sidecar?”

“Now you know why I chose you for the task. You’re small enough for it.”

Louis gasped, then Newkirk cut in, “See it from the bright side, mate. Hogan may kiss Fräulein
Hilda, but you are the one who’ll be able to snuggle close to her beautiful legs.”

LeBeau grimaced at him and was even tempted to stick his tongue out but suppressed the urge. This
wasn’t a task London had given them, this was more important. They had to save their dear friend.
Hogan always gave his best and risked his life for them, now it was up to them to repay his care.

Grumbling an agreement, he listened to Kinchloe’s further plan,

“Newkirk and I will inform Hilda of our plan. Knowing her she’ll be able to wrap the Leutnant
around her little finger. As soon as you can, leave the sidecar and try to reach Hammelburg. Inform
the Underground via Little Red Hood or Snow White. Somehow we’ve to get the colonel out – one
way or the other one. Hopefully the power will be back by tomorrow so that we can arrange more.”

LeBeau quickly climbed down the ladder. “Wish me luck.”

“God luck, Louis!”

He watched his friend climbing down into the radio room and the tunnels, and hit the hidden
mechanism that closed the door. He could only pray that everything would go smooth.

His glance found Newkirk. “Ready for a little theatre?”
“Any time you want, mate.”

*** HH ***

To make their ‘personal’ SS-guard understand that it was their routine duty to collect some firewood from the stock and to bring it to the Kommandantur, was an act that would be an object of topics for quite a time. It lasted more than ten minutes, with many misunderstandings, failure of translation attempts and wild gestures with the hands which should describe the task, until finally Langenscheidt was called, and he could serve once again as a translator. The corporal looked ready to fall asleep on his feet, after only a few hours of rest. He shot the camp’s own guards a nasty look. Anyone of them could have translated between the two POWs and the few SS-men which had surrounded Kinchloe and Newkirk, but the Luftwaffe-soldiers only smirked in amusement; loving it how the two prisoners were driving the loathed SS up the next wall.

Finally, as Alex Ramses had already taken LeBeau’s place in Barrack 2, Kinch and Newkirk walked towards the Kommandantur; arms full of firewood.

Usually one of the camp’s guards stood in front of it, now it was a further SS-man who had witnessed the whole mess and knew why the two men were coming. Giving them a sneer he gestured sharply towards the entrance, where Fräulein Hilda just appeared.

“Sergeant Kinchloe, Corporal Newkirk?” She smiled at the two men. “Finally, the firewood. It’s getting cold inside.” She looked at the SS-guard who was about to accompany the two prisoners, and told him in German that there was no need for him to join them. This here was daily routine and she added with a smile that the prisoners would never dare to do something against the rules – not when Oberst Klink was in command or now with Leutnant von Neuhaus in charge.

The SS-guard looked at the camp’s secretary, who was the best example for a fair German lady, and waved his hand to let the two POW’s pass.

They were barely inside, as Hilda already whispered, “What’s your plan? How can we help Robert?”

The two men exchanged a look. ‘Robert’, eh?

“Shall I put a few sticks into the oven, Miss?” Newkirk asked with normal voice, before he whispered towards her, “Can you convince the Leutnant to drive you home with the camp’s motor-
“LeBeau will hide in the sidecar and tries to get help as soon as he is out of the camp,” Kinch murmured and put his load of firewood beside the furnache. “Can you distract the Leutnant enough that LeBeau will have a chance to leave the sidecar without being caught?”

The young woman battered her eyelashes. “I can think of a way or two.” He turned serious again. “And then?”

“Stay at home. We’ll try to reach some people which can help to rescue Hogan.”

She bit her lips. “I’ll do everything I can. It is my fault that Robert suffers now. If I hadn’t told Hochstetter that the Kommandant isn’t dead but on his way to the hospital, the mean gnome would never have come to the camp.”

Kinch smiled full of sympathy at her. “He would have come anyway. Maybe an hour or two later, but he wouldn’t have missed the chance to take over Stalag 13. So or so he would have learned that the colonel and Klink are still alive.”

Steps drew nearer, and Kinchloe quickly closed the distance to Newkirk who still was piling the firewood. “Done finally?” he asked a little bit louder.


The door to the office that was usually Klink’s opened and Leutnant von Neuhaus stepped out. “What’s going on here?” he asked sternly in fluid English.

“The prisoners brought new firewood, Herr Leutnant,” Hilda smiled at him. “Shall they refill the furnace in your office, too?”

He nodded and pointed at Kinch with an arrogant gesture. “You, refill the furnace!” He looked at Newkirk. “And you wait just here!”
Hilda felt anger rising in here at the harsh tone von Neuhaus used at Kinchloe; showing clearly that he didn’t regard the sergeant as a normal man because of his skin color. ‘You could learn from Kinchloe’s and also Baker’s politeness and kindness a lot, you moron!’ she thought, but kept her smile as the Leutnant glanced at her. Lowering her head, she pressed her belly until her cheeks flushed and she looked up again, she saw the pleasant expression on von Neuhaus’ face. Very good, he had risen to the bait.

Two minutes later, Kinch and Newkirk left the Kommandantur, feeling some relief. The first part of their plan had worked.

*** HH *** HH ***

“You want to announce a curfew for the whole town, Herr Major?” Leutnant Horst Schmidt stood at ease on the other side of Hochstetter’s desk; watching his superior office warily. He had been transferred from Bremen to Hammelburg only a few days ago, and he didn’t feel well in this Gestapo-Headquarter. Sweet Lord, the one in Bremen had been sinister, but this here seemed to be a part of hell’s precipice.

He didn’t belong to those men here – or harbored the same frantic loyalty to the insane regime like they did. In the beginning he had been a devotee of Hitler, just like so many others, but within the last two years his eyes had been opened. Germany was descending in chaos and violence, people were hunted at the tiniest suspicion and any laughter seemed to have turned mute and was replaced with fear and tears.

Not only the drastic change of the war’s course and the increasing attacks of the Allies were responsible for all the sorrow, but a main part lay also with the regime.

Schmidt had served in the Abwehr, the German intelligence, but after this unit had been involved in the attempted assassination against Hitler at the 20th July a year prior, the unit had been dissolved into the SD, the intelligence arm of the SS Hitler always had preferred over the Abwehr. Members of the Abwehr, who were found innocent, were granted to keep their job but serving it in a different unit: The SD. Others were forced to serve in the Gestapo – like Schmidt. He knew that he was under observation like all of his other colleagues, but with his father being a rich industrialist who admired Hitler openly, Horst had gotten a chance. And he didn’t know if he should be grateful or not.

Being also a full trained soldier, he had gotten the ‘recommendation’ to enter also the SS, serving as an active member of it – just like Hochstetter did years ago.
And concerning his new superior officer, Schmidt had quickly realized that the man was a maniac. This much was for certain. He had gotten the last proofs within the last hours. He had heard the screams from the cellars and learned that an American POW was accused of being a spy and saboteur, and he asked himself how a prisoner could work actively for the Underground. Obviously Hochstetter was convinced of it, and Schmidt couldn’t deny that he felt some compassion for the American who was the target of the Major’s cruelty.

And now Hochstetter ordered a curfew for whole Hammelburg – what meant that everyone who was caught on the streets after the curfew’s start would be shot or arrested. Good God, didn’t those people here suffering enough without the Gestapo’s doing?

“Yes, a curfew, Leutnant. It’s for their own protection. With the power blacked out, too many ill-willed people have a chance to harass honorable citizen, what has to be prevented. Make certain that word is spread that after eight o’clock this evening no-one shall leave house or flat. Take as many men as you need.”

“Jawohl, Herr Major. Only one question. What about the workers which are still attending to their job and have to go home after eight o’clock?”

Hochstetter sneered. “With the power blacked out there is not much a worker can do at the companies. Let them know first that they have to go home before the curfew starts. If some of the bosses protest, they shall contact me tomorrow. Only emergencies for the hospital, police and firemen are allowed on the streets after eight o’clock. The curfew will last until the power is back online, or until six o’clock tomorrow in the morning. Any further questions, Leutnant Schmidt?”

The younger man shook his head. “No, sir.”

“Very good. Dismissed!”

He watched Schmidt leaving his office, emptied his cup of coffee that had been brewed on one of the ovens and went to the cellars. A minute later he stepped into interrogation room 3 and smiled as he saw the colonel’s figure hanging from chains at the ceiling; his bare upper body bloody and bruised. “My dear Hogan, sorry for letting you wait. Some business kept me away, but now you’ve my full attention back.”

“Go to hell!” was all Hogan spat; the one eye that wasn’t closed by the angry swelling his face suffered by now, blazed with hate.
With an evil laugh, Hochstetter closed the door and stepped deeper into the room.

*** HH *** HH ***

“**Herr Leutnant**, I’m done with today’s work and go home. I wish you a nice evening,” Hilda said, while peeking through the door into the office. The picture was so wrong – with the *Leutnant* in SS-uniform sitting at Klink’s desk. It occurred to her how much she was used to the **Kommandant’s** far brighter presence.

“You’re already done?” von Neuhaus asked and looked at the mantle-clock. It was almost six o’clock. He smiled a little bit. “You are very quick. Very good. I appreciate efficiency.”

Hilda gave him one of her perfect smiles – half shy, half flirtingly. “Thank you, **Herr Leutnant**. Please excuse me now. I’ve to walk to my parent’s home and new snow is coming. I…”

“You have to *walk*? Alone? In the dark?”

Hilda lifted delicately one shoulder. “I owe no car, **Herr Leutnant**, and the ways and streets are too much covered with snow to use a bike. It’s an old one and not so safe anymore, therefore I walk.”

“And Klink allows this? Doesn’t one of his men drive you?”

Again, the young woman gave him a coy smile. “No, every guard is needed here, and the **Kommandant** is too busy to play ‘driver’ for me. And Schultz… Well, he drives likes he eats, and it’s safer for me to walk.”

“Alone through the woods,” he stated again; shocked.

She giggled. “Until now nothing bad happened.”

“And should remain this way,” he said; rising. “I don’t understand that Klink shows so little responsibility towards you. It’s unbelievable!” Stepping around the desk he took his coat. “Come on, my dear, I’ll drive you home. I would never forgive myself if something happens to you. These are dark times, after all.”
Hilda triumphed inwardly, outside she gave the Leutnant a bright smile. “You are such a gentleman. Men like you are rare.”

He offered her his arm after he had slipped on his coat and guided her outside on the porch. “Heinzer!” he yelled and one of the SS-guards came running.

Saluting he waited for his superior’s order. “Get a car from the motor-pool. I drive Fräulein Schneider home.”

With a “Jawohl, Herr Leutnant,” he raced away

“Corporal Langenscheidt!” von Neuhaus called and Karl came, less enthusiastic than Heinzer before.

“Herr Leutnant?”

“Be ready for the evening roll call when I’m back. I want that all prisoners are outside of the barracks then and stay to attention.”

Langenscheidt lifted both brows. “This is the usual procedure, Herr Leutnant.” It was obvious that he thought von Neuhaus’ order utterly redundant and that it was clear to him that the Leutnant hadn’t a clue how to run a POW-camp.

Understanding the undertone in Langenscheidt’s voice, von Neuhaus gritted his teeth, as he answered, “Proceed like usual!”

“Jawohl, Herr Leutnant.”

The same moment Heinzer returned. “Herr Leutnant, there is only a truck and a motor-bike with sidecar in the pool, but no car. The staff-car was taken by Oberst Klink and the other one belonged to Major Hochstetter, so…”

“The motor-bike!” Hilda exclaimed with joy. “I love it when a man drives the motor-bike. It’s so…”
manly.” She giggled like a school-girl but made certain to give the Leutnant a very female suggestive glance.

“If it isn’t too cold for you and you like a travel in a sidecar so much, then this is what you get,” he said; padding her hand that still rested in the crook of his arm. He nodded at Heinzer and a minute later the motor-bike with the sidecar stopped in front of the porch.

Hilda’s gaze landed on the heap of blankets in the footwell and she knew that LeBeau already hid there – at her feet. She groaned inwardly. Frenchmen! They never missed a chance to be near ‘une belle’. Laughing in pretended delight, she quickly lifted one of the blankets and stepped into the sidecar before von Neuhaus could even offer a hand to help. Pulling the woolen material over her legs and around her waist, she smiled up at him; feeling LeBeau shifting a little bit to give her feet more room.

“A woman who takes the matters in her own hand,” von Neuhaus commented wryly, but winked at her. “I like strong women.”

“Yet you insist of taking me home,” she flirted back.

“Of course, I’ll accompany you home. Even a strong woman is no match for a gang of footpads, and I don’t take any risk in this case.” Climbing on the motor-bike the Leutnant started the motor. “Take a hold, Fräulein Schneider and enjoy the ride.”

They drove off into the night – and a lot of prayers accompanied LeBeau, hoping that he would be able to start a rescue mission for Colonel Hogan…

TBC…

Well, at least help is on the way, but it’s a stony and dangerous way with the current curfew in Hammelburg, the SS patrolling the streets and the Hammelburg Underground-cell weakened and decreased like it is. And given Hochstetter’s hate and glee to finally can do what he always wanted, Hogan is running out of time. So, it isn’t certain that the ‘calvary’ will arrive before it is too late. But more if of it in the next chapter.

I hope you liked the new update, despite the more darker atmosphere in it. Like always I would be very happy to get some reviews/comments – and thank you for putting up with the errors. I hope my
beta-reader will be back in two weeks so that she can correct he not beta-read chapters I will replace them with the flawless ones.

Have a nice Sunday and a good start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

A big, big THANK-YOU for the feedback. Like I said often before, I’m total happy that the story has gotten fans, and it really is a joy to go through the chapters, edit here and there something and publish it afterwards. And – lucky us all – for the time my beta-reader is still too busy to follow her / mine hobby, another dear reader was so kind and offered me her help.

Lils, thank you!!!!

Therefore the following chapter is edited and certainly with less errors than before.

Enjoy,

Happy Halloween for everyone

Yours Starflight

Chapter 10 – Desperate plans, part 2

The drive from Stalag 13 to the farm-house of the Schneider family didn’t last longer than ten minutes, but as the motor-bike finally stopped, LeBeau thought that not one bone in his body was still there where it belonged. To ride a side-car was never that pleasant, but being stuffed in its foot-well while it rolled over iced streets which shouldn't even be named ‘street’ was hell. He was certain that he had gotten dozens of bruises, yet he didn’t complain about it. He simply knew that Hogan got it much worse in the moment than him.

Hilda could see that her parents had lit some candles within the house and she saw movement behind the curtains as she stepped out of the side-car and threw the blanket back, while von Neuhaus dismounted the motor-bike and rounded the vehicle.
“Did you enjoy the ride?” he asked, while offering her his arm again.

Hilda laughed softly and beamed at him. “Oh yes, I did. Thank you so very much, Herr Leutnant.” She was still smiling as he walked her to the door, then she yelped and tripped to the side. Von Neuhaus had good reflexes and caught her before she could hit the snowy ground. “Fräulein Schneider!” he gasped, supporting her.

“I turned my ankle,” she said with pain in her voice, hopping on one leg. “Damn snow!”

Worried, he bent down. “May I see?” Of course, there wasn’t much to see given the fact that she wore boots, but it gave him the chance to have a closer look at her legs and even clad in black SS with the Gestapo-pin on his tie, he was also only a man. Carefully he gripped her ankle and moved the foot a little bit, and Hilda promptly whimpered with pitiful ‘ouch’ and ‘oh’.

Looking over the Leutnant’s bent figure she saw LeBeau slipping out of the side-car and placing the blankets back into a heap – the same moment von Neuhaus straightened his shape. Without hesitation Hilda put one arm around his neck as if searching for support and asked pitifully, “Could you help me into the house, please?”

“Of course,” he answered. “And I shall do even more. With your permission…” He lifted her on his arms and closed the distance to the door that opened in just this minute, and a man in the beginning of his fifties stood there; supporting himself with crutches.

“Hilda?” he asked concerned; eyeing the Leutnant warily.

“Papa,” she said with a teary smile. “Leutnant von Neuhaus was so nice to bring me home. I turned my ankle and…”

Herr Schneider moved back from the door to allow the officer to step in; face expressionless. “Thank you, Herr Leutnant, this was very kind of you.”

LeBeau had already hastened around the house corner the moment von Neuhaus had picked up the young woman. The Frenchman couldn’t help himself. Inwardly he applauded Hilda for her flawless acting abilities. ‘It’s a good thing that she is on our side,’ he thought with wry humor, then he looked around. He knew that the Schneiders lived in the east of Hammelburg, which meant he would have to walk into the north-west direction to reach the little town. Pulling out the compass he had taken
from the stored equipment Hogan and the others had stored beneath the barracks, he checked the direction in which he had to go.

Yet he would have to wait until von Neuhaus was gone to avoid any chance to be seen by him. Five minutes later the *Leutnant* stepped out of the house, and called over his shoulder, “Get better, *Fräulein* Schneider. And if your foot isn’t better by morning, take a day off. If you’re not at the camp at 9 o’clock I will know that your ankle is still bad and advice one of my men to do the office’s routine, so don’t fret.”

“Thank you so much, *Herr Leutnant*. I’m so sorry for the mess, but…”

“Hilda – you allow me to call you this?”

LeBeau rolled his eyes as he heard the young woman giggling and answering, “A pleasure, *Herr Leutnant*.”

“As I said, don’t worry for a sick-day – and you didn’t put me out by driving you home or by carrying you to your parents’ home. It was a pleasure. Good night.”

“Good night, *Herr Leutnant*, and thank you once again for taking care of my daughter,” a man’s voice said.

“You are welcome, *Herr Schneider*. Good night.”

Then the motor-bike was started and drove away into the dark evening. LeBeau heard how the door was closed and breathed in relief. Part 2 of the plan had worked, too.

*** HH ***

The POWs were summoned to evening roll call like every day – except for the day prior, but that was the past. Langenscheidt called them out onto the yard and like usual they took their positions in front of the barracks they lived in. Karl counted the men, ignored their still furious mood and sighed inwardly. He feared that nothing would be the same any more.
Stepping to the prisoners of Barracks 2, he also counted them, calling them by their names quietly.

“Newkirk?”

“Here.”

“Carter?”

“Here.”

“LeBeau?”

“Oui.”

“Ols…” He stopped dead in his tracks. Yes, these were LeBeau’s clothes and the man had spoken French, but… this wasn’t the corporal’s voice! It sounded similar, but it wasn’t the same.

Turning around, he looked back at the small figure of the Frenchman. He stood there like he did so often – with his arms crossed and with his head slightly lowered in silent protest, cap drawn down, but… there was something off. He was petit in body, but not as tiny as LeBeau.

Returning to the prisoner, he gasped as the man lifted his face – and turned out to be Alex Rames. “What…” Langenscheidt began, shocked.

“Charly,” Kinchloe addressed him quietly without turning his head; using the English familiar form of the corporal’s given name on full purpose. “You said you wanted to help if we’ve a chance to rescue the colonel. Now is your chance to do so.”

Langenscheidt almost choked. “You… you…” he sputtered, lost for words.

“No Beau will be back as soon as he can. I promise.”
Karl felt dizzy for a moment, before he quickly closed the distance to Kinch and pierced him with a sharp gaze. “Where is LeBeau?” he asked with his voice lowered.

Kinchloe took a deep breath. “He’s off to Hammelburg – to inform Colonel Klink of what is going on here.” All right, this wasn’t the whole truth. LeBeau would try to contact the Underground, and only if this would fail he maybe would run to the hospital to get Klink. They hadn’t even spoken about this possibility openly. Only Carter had brought up this subject while talking with Baker and him during the late morning, but this – the sergeant had to admit – could be indeed an option, yet he would prefer if the Underground could lend them a hand.

“How… how did he get out?” Langenscheidt whispered hectically.

“What shall I say? It isn't you guys in charge here, but the SS. Under Klink’s command none of us were able to successfully escape,” Kinch answered casually; almost sounding like Hogan in that moment.

Karl groaned. He knew that it was his damn duty to report the missing prisoner instantly as soon as von Neuhaus was back. Hell, he even should tell the new ‘colleagues’ about the incident, but…

His gaze wandered over the other men, who were Hogan’s closest friends. He saw the tension in their posture that had nothing to do with being in deep water. No, they only feared for their commanding officer, who was also their friend and who certainly was going through hell for hours now…

Rubbing his face with one hand, Langenscheidt knew that it was up to him now. He could report LeBeau’s escape which would lead to an area-wide search – and that would certainly mean that no help would reach Hogan in time before Hochstetter had tortured him to insanity or death. Or he could handle the whole thing like Schultz would do it: Hearing and seeing nothing.

The same moment von Neuhaus returned on the motor-bike, parked it in front of the Kommandantur, dismounted the vehicle and strolled with large steps towards the lined-up prisoners.

“Corporal Langenscheidt, report!” he demanded.

For tormenting long seconds, Kinchloe, Carter, Newkirk, Baker and the others looked with almost unbearable tension at Langenscheidt beggingly; almost willing him not to give them away.
Then Karl turned around. “All prisoners are present, Herr Leutnant.”

Kinch and the others had learned to hide reactions – to control their features. But just right now the relief they felt was almost too strong. Langenscheidt stood true to his word – he just had aided them in their desperate attempt to save Hogan.

*** HH *** HH ***

General Albert Burkhalter stepped into his office with the mother of all headaches. The meeting was over. Finally. He had thought that there would be no end to the endless discussion that happened between the most available generals and admirals, Himmler and Göring themselves. Even the Führer had attended the meeting for a few hours before he left for his own office. The discussions had gone back and forth, some generals had realized that Germany couldn’t win the war anymore with the Allied United Forces gaining more and more ground; coming closer to the original German border day by day.

Other generals denied this fact and waited that the newest generation of air-fighter Messerschmidt ME-262 could finally be produced en-masse, yet the underground factory in Thüringen had started its work only a few days ago. Burkhalter was realistic and knew that the production of the new-constructed plane that was about 180 km/h quicker than that of the Allies had begun too late. And, what was nonsense in Burkhalter’s and may other Luftwaffe general’s opinion: The ME-262 V5 was constructed as an interceptor and fighter in airspace, and as a ‘quick-bomber’ for the attack of ground-targets. The argument between Hitler and the staff-officers of the Luftwaffe had almost escalated a few weeks ago, and Burkhalter knew the man well enough to recognize that the Führer was about to withdraw his confidence. What this could mean for them all was something even an idiot could count on two fingers.

Burkhalter, and even Göring, were frustrated by now. It seemed that Hitler had lost all senses for the reality. An interceptor with newest drive-technics that should be used as a bomber; new attacks against the East Front that costed thousands of lives without the tiniest chance of victory; defense line against the approaching Allied ground forces which were simply overrun. Every man with a little sense for strategies and an intact sane mind could see that it was only a question of time when the war would be lost for Germany, The Führer, of course, didn’t see it this way and demanded that the fight would go on ‘til ‘the last man’.

Burkhalter almost saw no reason of sacrificing more good men in a war that was as good as lost. Yet he was clever enough to keep his thoughts for himself. Firing squads were quickly built these days and a lot of good officers had been executed because their insight had woken Hitler’s rage. Even the flyer-ass Adolf Galland, who had tested the newest Messerschmidt and insisted of using it for the defense and not for an attack, had been close to fall from grace. At least, given the current situation, Hitler had been finally ready to allow Galland and many other officers of the Luftwaffe to use the ME-262 V5 sometimes as ‘simple’ hunters – that meant, when there would be finally enough planes
to use them on a grand scale.

Burkhalter knew that the latter was nothing more than wishing by now. The hidden factory in Thüringen still wasn’t fully functional and the other projects connected to the ME-262 near Munich and other towns were only in construction. The new plane that could change everything would come too late, but – of course – the *Führer*, in his obsession, turned a blind eye on this fact.

‘The man is a maniac,’ he thought not for the first time within the last weeks. ‘He’d lost his mind – but there is no going back now. We can only hope that we can delay the invasion of Germany long enough to give the people a chance to adjust to everything.’

His secretary Heike Hohlbrecht, a woman of middle age with a bun, wearing a high-necked blouse beneath her lady’s suit, looked up and peeked over her glasses. “*Herr* General, a good evening,” she greeted him with her typical cool politeness.

“*Frau* Hohlbrecht, still at work I see,” he said; looking to the mantle clock that showed that it was already past nine o’clock.

“I waited for your return,” she answered, rose and took his coat from him. “How was the meeting?”

He snorted. “Long – and without a true result. The talks were turning in circles. I don’t even think we really agreed on a strategy in the end.” He suppressed a yawn. “Has anything important happened during my absence?”

“Not much, *Herr* General, but I got an urgent call from Stalag 13 this morning and…”

“No,” Burkhalter groaned and made a face as if he was in great pain. “What has Klink done now? Did he break a finger-nail, or did he complain of Hogan drinking his cognac?”

*Frau* Hohlbrecht hesitated for a moment, before she answered, “*Oberst* Klink was very furious, *Herr* General. He reported that Major Hochstetter of the Gestapo arrested his senior POW officer and then tried to murder him. He also…”

“What?” Burkhalter went rigid. “What kind of nonsense is this that Hochstetter tried to murder Hogan? I know the two can’t stand each other – to tell the truth I also like to see the major’s back rather than his front – but this would go too far.”
The secretary sighed. “I made a detailed telephone-note of what the *Oberst* told me. If you please would have a look at it? I do believe that this important – at least for the commanding officer of all *Luftwaffe*-Stalags.”

Accepting the hint and taking the sheet from the woman’s hand, he read the first lines – and his face got a very dangerous shade of deep red. “What on Earth…” he whispered while he continued to read, before he exploded, “Has Hochstetter finally lost his mind completely? How dare he… Hogan is a prisoner of the *Luftwaffe* and not… And he left him and Klink to die in the middle of a hostile ambush?”

He whirled around, and this was a speed you never would have thought him capable of given his fat figure. “This is enough! I finally have had enough from this crazy gnome!” He almost ran towards his office.

“Call Stalag 13, *Frau* Hohlbrecht. I do hope that Hochstetter didn’t make any further steps after Klink and Hogan made it back alive. I’ve to know more details. And then get me the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg and link me to Major Hochstetter. If he moves only one more finger to endanger personnel and prisoners of one of OUR Stalags, he faces court martial.” The door to his office slammed shut and the secretary tried to do as ordered.

Inside of the general’s office, Burkhalter went to the commode and poured himself a cognac; mad as hell. Of course, he knew about the rivalry between SS / Gestapo and *Luftwaffe*. And that Hochstetter was obsessed with the idea that Hogan was an Underground-agent was nothing new, but this had gone too far. There were laws and rules placed within this land, and POWs were strictly protected by the Geneva Convention, watched by the neutral Red Cross. Any violation could lead to unpleasant consequences and even the *Third Reich* didn’t want to annoy Swiss institutions. Switzerland was neutral – and its famous banks held a lot of German money. Money the *Fuhrer* needed, therefore he went along with the Swiss’s demands concerning human rights. To mess with the Swiss – and especially with the Red Cross – would be anything but smart.

And all this aside: Burkhalter hated it when someone was invading his territory. And the Stalags and Oflags were his responsibility – an important part of the damn job he had to do. He really had no time to grabble with Gestapo-majors whose ego was the size of the Mount Everest. And Hochstetter especially was a kind of man he loathed. Yet…

“*Herr General*, I’m sorry, but obviously Hammelburg belongs to the area that is cut off from any power because of the Allies’ attack of the power central near Würzburg. Hammelburg, Bad Kissingen, Bad Brückenau… all towns suffer the power blackout.” *Frau* Hohlbrecht, who stood on the threshold, glanced unhappily at her superior; already knowing what his reaction would be.
It turned out that she knew Burkhalter very well, because at the first harsh curses she quickly left his office and firmly closed the door behind her before she had to listen to the not so fine rambling and swearing.

Burkhalter calmed down after a minute and sat down behind his desk. Every time he thought the whole situation couldn’t get worse, it simply got worse.

First, the aircraft attacks within the last days which had decommissioned dozens of weapon-producing companies, rail stations and even airports. The airfield of Tempelhof in Berlin resembled a Swizz cheese and even hundreds of eager hands couldn’t jam the many holes! A part of North-Bavaria was out of power for hours now and a part of the Rhine area suffered a power breakdown too, because the Allies bombed power stations now. The Allied troops were gaining more and more ground and were about to reach Bavaria, Saxony and the Saarland within the next one or two months at the latest, while the German fleet suffered a lot of losses and therefore the war at sea was as good as decided, too. Burkhalter really didn’t know what the Führer expected from the generals and admirals, but fighting a war under all those circumstances would never lead to a success.

And now this trouble with the Gestapo – only because a crazy major thought a POW was a spy and active saboteur. Well, one thing Burkhalter had to admit: If someone could pull such a stunt, it would be Hogan. The general wasn’t blind to the fact that the American colonel was a highly intelligent, brilliant man. The boyish behavior Hogan often displayed was certainly a part of his personality, no doubt, but Burkhalter assumed that this was also a mask to trick others into believing Hogan was an innocent lamb. In truth the colonel was anything but an angel, even if he seemed to emphasize that no-one within Stalag 13 would come to grief. And this didn’t only go for his own men, but also for the camp’s personnel – including Klink.

Especially Klink. Burkhalter’s gaze found the paper with the protocol of Klink’s call.

It almost sounded unbelievable that Hogan had forfeited a true chance to escape, only to save Klink, yet this was somehow a typical reaction for the colonel. Hogan always seemed to be at the right time at the right place to come to Klink’s aid – whether it was to protect the Oberst against his superiors’ wrath or to protect him against real danger. And as much as Klink sometimes groused about the disrespectful way Hogan often behaved, the Kommandant stood protectively in front of his senior POW officer whenever it was necessary. Yet what happened yesterday was far more than the usual support they gave each other.

Yes, Burkhalter anticipated for quite a time now that the two men had developed an uneasy kind of friendship, but that Hogan risked another attempt at being arrested by Hochstetter only to protect Klink was strange – to say it carefully. Hogan was far too intelligent not to know what would happen to him if Hochstetter got his hands on him, yet he put Klink’s safety above his own. This led to one question: How well had this odd friendship between those two already bloomed? Klink went all hero all of sudden and Hogan failed his duty to flee. This was… crazy at best.
A log cracked in the open fireplace and brought him back to present.

The whole trouble in Hammelburg wasn’t something Burkhalter took lightly. He knew Hochstetter. The man wouldn’t give it a rest before he had accomplished his goal – maybe even threatening Klink and the whole camp. The general was well aware of the fact that Klink bowed far too quickly and rarely tried to stand up for his opinion or his regards. The whole situation could run out of control with Hochstetter being a possessed madman and Klink being a cowing idiot. All right, obviously yesterday the Oberst had developed some courage by saving Hogan in the middle of an ambush, yet Burkhalter was convinced that this was only a short blaze of bravery Klink quickly would lose again.

And there was another thought that troubled Burkhalter. He knew how beloved Hogan was among his men. If something would happen to him – and Hochstetter already manhandled him like Klink reported – an uproar could start in Stalag 13. The whole status in Germany was bad enough without a large POW-camp spinning out of control.

Cursing again, the general rose. There was only one thing he could do to halt the carousel that would turn into a doom loop if it wasn’t stopped in time.

Opening the door, he looked at his secretary. “Frau Hohlbrecht, tell my driver to ready my car. I’m driving to Hammelburg to stop those two idiots from initiating a loop of violence sooner or later. Then try to reach Stalag 13 or the Gestapo-Headquarter in Hammelburg, and link them to the radio in my car as soon as the power is back and one of the two facilities is reachable. Tell my adjutant that he shall replace you within that hour. I can’t demand you work through the whole night.”

“Jawohl, Herr General. And thank-you for your concern.”

Burkhalter closed the door again and went back to his desk. He would have to inform a few other generals of his departure and that he couldn’t attend the meeting that was planned for tomorrow. ‘At least one good thing comes out of the chaos. I don’t have to listen to the endless discussions so soon again.’

*** HH *** HH ***

LeBeau swore quietly beneath his breath while he forced his way through the woods – the using the compass. It had begun to snow again, but at least the wind had died down and that made the cold temperature more bearable. Yet it also prevented him from crossing the distance to the little town in the usual short time of an hour. He was already walking for three hours and he hadn’t reached
Hammelburg until now.

Then, all of sudden, the first houses were to see and groaning in frustration he realized that the power was either not back online or was switched off because of the rationing and the general brownout in Germany. Stepping nearer, he became aware of another oddity: There were no people out on the street. Not one single person – not even a lady with a dog. Right, it was in the middle of the evening and it was unpleasant weather, but usually workers were on their way home, but now…

Then he saw a movement on the other end of the street and he instinctively slipped into the next front garden – hiding beneath the fence. He had to wait a few minutes until he saw two men patrolling the street; wearing black SS.

‘Curfew!’ the truth hit LeBeau. ‘They imposed a curfew. And I bet my last shirt that this bosche Hochstetter ordered it – fearing that some of us are going to get Hogan out of his grip!’

This would make the whole mission even more difficult. He would have to walk the way to the next home of an Underground-agent with more caution than usual if he didn’t want to be arrested.

‘That would top anything: Me being brought to Hochstetter and with Hogan already in jail. This would be the last proof of our secret operations and the damn swine would rub his hands in glee.’

Sighing he waited until the two guards were out of sight and slipped back onto the street. Hopefully he would make it. He had to – or Hogan would pay the price.

Half an hour later he finally reached the single-family house in which one of their contact-men lives – or lady in this case. Louis didn’t even know her true name; for all his comrades she was ‘Red Riding Hood’ and was one of the last remaining original Underground-agents, who hadn’t been caught by a razzia of the Gestapo a few months ago. She was the right hand of the leading agent Oskar Danzig, who was also still operating and never got caught – last but not least because he was a man of ‘a thousand faces’ and changed disguises and masks like the transvestite star he had been before the war broke loose. Louis hoped that Danzig was in the area. With him the chance to free Hogan would rise drastically.

Ringing the bell – looking over and over around to make sure no SS-men were snooping up – he had to wait until finally a little window in the door opened and he faced the young woman in her middle thirties; blond hair pushed up in an unruly bun.
“LeBeau?” she asked perplex.

“Oui, ma chérie,” he nodded; giving her his best charming smile.

“Guter Gott (Sweet Lord), are you mad?” She opened the door hastily and pulled him inside before he could comprehend what was going on. Closing the door, she turned to face him. “The Gestapo ordered a curfew. Anyone who’s caught outside until tomorrow will be arrested or shot.”

“That fits,” the Frenchman replied darkly. “Hochstetter doesn’t run a risk after he finally got mon colonel in his dirty fingers.”

The woman raised both brows and glanced startled at him. “Hogan… was arrested?”

“Oui, the bosche Hochstetter says he has some proofs that the colonel belongs to the Underground and arrested him. Klink is in hospital, the Gestapo took over Stalag 13, placed SS-men as additional guards in our camp and everything is about to go down, if we don’t act quickly.”

‘Red Riding Hood’ crossed her arms in front of her chest. “Is this the reason for you coming here – to ask us to get Hogan out of custody?”

“Oui. We’ve no chance to do it alone, because Hochstetter knows us too well by now. He would reveal anyone of us, if we wear German uniform or not. Therefore, we can’t go to his headquarters and pretend to be some high ranking member of the brass to whom he has to deliver the colonel. But you guys…”

“LeBeau, Hammelburg is without power and I can’t call or radio anyone from the organization. Danzig is near Mannheim, preparing a meeting with the American supreme commander who has his legions already in North-France and Belgium. Most of us went with Danzig. And you know that there aren’t many of us left by now – thanks to you guys mixing up the area for three years now.”

LeBeau groaned. Not this again. “Ma petite, Colonel Hogan risked his neck over and over again to save you and your friends, smuggled many of you out of Germany, and helped the Underground whenever it was necessary. You can’t let him down now – and you know it!” His temper was beginning to rise, and obviously the woman realized it, because she said gently,

“I’ll try to contact a few of us, but before the power is back, there is no chance for it.”
LeBeau frowned. “This could last some time – time Colonel Hogan doesn’t have.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I’ll go to the hospital and…”

“The curfew! Don’t forget about it. If you’re caught they’ll shoot you – or the Gestapo learns because of your presence in Hammelburg that you and therefore Hogan are indeed Underground-agents, because you couldn’t be here otherwise.” The woman sighed and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Come on upstairs, I’ll make you a coffee.”

Coffee… As good as this sounded, LeBeau would have preferred a quick rescue-chance a thousand times over. How could he enjoy a coffee, knowing that Hogan was still facing torture – maybe even in this very moment? Yet there was the curfew. Everything would be indeed lost if he got caught.

Rubbing his forehead with despair, he followed the woman upstairs…

*** HH ***

He was dreaming. He knew that he dreamed, because the last time he saw his mother she hadn’t looked so young. And Jason, his older brother, glanced at him with mirth – a mirth the twelve year old teenager and his younger brother Robert shared. Yet it was young Robert who always came up with the pranks, who planned everything and who got himself and his brother out of hairy situations when they were about to be caught by their ‘prey’.

“Really, Rob, you shouldn’t have done this,” his mother sighed. “The Smiths are very nice people and you played this nasty prank on them.” Then she looked at Jason. “And you should be too old for something like this by now. Instead of supporting Robert you should stop him.”

The two boys looked at each other and giggled. The sight of Mrs. Smith clamoring and scolding while she tried to avoid the mice the two brothers had placed into her kitchen, had been one to behold.

“You should have seen her, Mom. She jumped onto the table and screeched like a Banshee because of three little mice,” Rob chuckled, while his older brother laughed out aloud.

Mrs. Hogan shook her head and it was clear that she imagined everything for a moment, before she turned stern again. “Yet you gave the poor lady a lot of trouble. At least you can apologize to her.”
The scene faded, and Robert was in the garden behind his parent's house. Jason sat beside him, reading a book and was utterly relaxed. Robert looked around. It was early summer, the trees wore their sated green, the air was warm, and a soft breeze played with his dark strains. Birds were singing and he heard the soft splashing of water while his father was watering the garden.

Robert smiled. In the evening they would make a barbecue with the new neighbors, and in a few days school would be over. They planned to travel to the sea for holidays and…

And a sharp pain made him gasp. Clinging to his left side, he tried to stop the burning sensation, but it grew even worse.

“You’ve to be careful, Rob. He’s getting to you,” Jason said, and young Robert stared with startled eyes at him, because all of sudden his brother was already forty and wore the uniform of the US Air Force – looking exactly like the last time he had seen him on the airfield before Robert was about to start his secret mission in Nazi-Germany.

“Be careful, little brother. Don’t let them catch you,” Jason almost begged him. “Return safe and sound, okay?”

The garden melted into darkness, the warm air turned into icy coldness and it was eerily silent. The last he saw was Jason's pleading face and heard his brother begging him to stay alive, then everything vanished and…

…And he found himself in a dark, cold room on the hard floor.

For a long moment Hogan was utterly disoriented, then the memories flooded back. He was in Germany, following orders for a special operation that had landed him in a POW-camp where he organized an espionage ring, aided the Underground and smuggled escapees out of the land. And just right now he was…

In the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg – and at the mercy of his personal nemesis who had sworn to break him.

And Hochstetter was doing a good job, this much Hogan had to give him.
There wasn’t a spot on his body left that didn’t hurt. He was bleeding from several injuries, he was nauseous from losing consciousness, his back burnt from all the lashes he got, and his head ached. He was thirsty like never before because any water had been denied to him. His arms gave him hell, too, because they were still bound on his back, while a rope was connected with his neck in a hangman's noose– strangling him every time he tried to move his arms more than a few centimeters.

“Like this you can get used to your last moments,” Hochstetter had sneered, and Hogan had realized that the major had to be mentally sick. There was no other explanation for someone doing such things and even relishing in it.

Shivering, Hogan closed his eyes and tried to blend out the bitter cold in the dungeon. You couldn’t call the cellars something else. He had to cough, and the burning pain returned into his left side, as his broken ribs were put to even more distress. At least the ‘questioning’ had stopped for now, because even Hochstetter seemed to need some rest. But this pause wouldn’t last for long; this much was certain.

Fighting a sudden burning in his eyes as desperation tried to overwhelm him, Hogan sent a prayer to all higher beings which maybe would hear him. He yearned for the whole procedure being over soon – one way or the other. He hoped to provoke his nemesis enough that the major would kill him in one of the raging-fits he already went through because despite name, rank and serial-number Hogan hadn’t spoken another word to his tormentors. Yet he knew that – despite his choleric temper – Hochstetter was too intelligent to lose his chance to gain more information about the Underground by killing Hogan too soon. And until now Hogan wasn’t desperate enough to use the cruel way he was tied to end his own life. This was a sin he hadn’t considered until now.

Rolling himself into a ball as far as his agonizing muscles and the rope allowed it, he tried to relax and to get some new strengths, before the ‘questioning’ would start again.

*** HH *** HH ***

The power came back late at night – others would also call it early morning. To test everything the responsible electricity distribution staff decided to skip the rationing for once and to make certain that there weren’t any serious damages to the power supply.

Hilda woke up because the lamp in her chamber was suddenly on. Obviously, she had forgotten to switch it off as she went to work last morning and therefore the lamp shone the moment the power was back. Confused she looked at her wrist watch – it was a quarter before five o’clock – and for a moment she simply wanted to snuggle deeper into the blanket, then the memory hit her with all might: Hogan was arrested and delivered to a man who didn’t know any mercy, and Klink obviously was clueless about what was going on in his camp.
Slipping out of bed, she tiptoed down into the hallway where the telephone was placed. She had to inform the Oberst of the whole mess – and she had to help Hogan by letting the Oberst know of the newest incidents. She was well aware that there was a kind of comradeship between the two men, and the fact that Klink risked his neck to save Hogan two evenings prior told her a lot about how the Kommandant regarded his senior POW officer.

Lifting the receiver, she demanded to speak with the hospital in Hammelburg immediately, and – thinking it was an emergency – the man of the telephone exchange linked her in no time. But if Hilda thought that she could alert Oberst Klink that easily, she faced a big disappointment.

“What do you think you are doing?” the night nurse snapped at her. “The Herr Oberst suffers a strong bronchitis, got injured and is deeply asleep by now after he was given sleeping pills. I will not wake him because…”

“You don’t understand, Nurse. I’m the secretary of Stalag 13 and we’ve a serious issue here. I have to speak with Oberst Klink and…”

“If you have problems in the camp, call the SS. I’m sure they can handle a few POWs. Good night!” The link was cut off – and Hilda swore under her breath.

What now? Oberst Klink was out of question as long as the night nurse was on duty – and every minute Hogan was in Hochstetter’s mercy counted. If only she could speak with Burkhalter. He had the power to call Hochstetter off, but she couldn’t simply phone him in the middle of the night and…

She hesitated. Why the heck not? This was an emergency, and Klink had ordered that the general had to be informed in detail of what happened as quick as possible. And the worst was that Klink had only been able to give a report of the events until yesterday morning. Burkhalter certainly didn’t know that the Gestapo had taken over Stalag 13 and that Hogan was arrested.

And she was the secretary of Stalag 13 and had a damn duty towards her superior – and the man she had a big crush on.

Determined she took the receiver again. “This is Stalag 13 in Hammelburg. Link me to Berlin, Luftwaffe Headquarters, General Burkhalter, priority one, code red!” she demanded in her best stern voice.
The lonely staff-car headed down the road – lamps blended out so that the vehicle didn’t drive any attention. Several times this night the driver and the General had heard the hum of aircrafts, and one time they even watched the detonations of bombs from far away – hitting Kassel – but at least the car wasn’t spied by the allies. And even if so: They weren’t interested in a lonely car. Who should know that one of the Luftwaffe’s Generals was driving through this snowy night?

General Burkhalter sat on the back seat, had leant back and snored softly. He had finally fallen asleep, and his driver was anything but angry about it. The first hour of their journey he had had to listen to the general’s endless rambling about ‘possessed Gestapo-Majors’, ‘idiotic Stalag-Kommandanten’, ‘reckless American POWs’, and so on. Then the general’s mood had even worsened as they had to tank up and the driver had to pump the gasoline himself, because the station had already closed, the power was switched off because of the rationing and the whole process needed more than an hour until they could continue their journey.

Burkhalter had fallen asleep as they had already left Kassel behind, and they were now near the north of Fulda, as the radio in the car sprang alive. It creaked and there was a lot of acoustic noise until finally he heard the voice of Sergeant Diekmann of the Luftwaffe-Headquarters – coming in on a new frequency non-interceptable by the Allies’ aircrafts (hopefully).

Burkhalter woke up with a gasp; clearly startled. “What’s the matter? Are we under attack?” he asked; still groggy and therefore disoriented.

“No, Herr General, Headquarters is calling us,” the driver replied and turned up the volume.

“General Burkhalter, Sergeant Diekmann is speaking here,” a male voice sounded from the speaker; interferences were making it difficult to understand him properly. “Sir, I’ve the secretary of Stalag 13 for you in the line.”

“What?” Burkhalter’s eyes widened. It was deep night – early morning. What was Fräulein Hilda doing in the camp at this God-forsaken time? “Put her through!” he demanded while he bent forwards between the driver- and the front passenger seat. A moment later he heard the pleasant, but obviously very flustered voice of Klink’s secretary.

“General Burkhalter?”
“Yes, it’s me, child. Sweet Lord, what are you doing at this time in the camp, my dear? Where is Klink? Why doesn’t he…”

“Herr General, I’m sorry for interrupting you, sir, but I’ve no clue how long the power will last – and I’m calling from home, not from Stalag 13. Sir, you’ve to come to Hammelburg – please! Oberst Klink is in hospital, the Gestapo took over Stalag 13, Colonel Hogan was arrested and Major Hochstetter made it very clear to everyone that the colonel would not return alive. And then…”

“One moment, my dear,” Burkhalter cut into the flood of hectic words. “One thing after the next. Klink is in hospital?”

“Yes, sir. He got injured while saving Colonel Hogan the evening prior, and he also relapsed with his cold – maybe he even got pneumonia. Then Major Hochstetter came to the camp after the Oberst went to hospital, put one of his own underlings in charge, threatened Corporal Langenscheidt that he had to obey or would be court-martialed, and then he took Colonel Hogan with him. They beat the colonel, sir – violently – and I watched how Hochstetter tore at Hogan’s hair and whispered things to him; sneering like mad. It… it was like he was possessed by a demon.”

Burkhalter took a deep breath. He had feared that Hochstetter wouldn’t give up his goal, but that the evil gnome took over one of the Luftwaffe’s Stalags without consulting him about it, was the peak of insolence – and transgressed the major’s competences.

“Stay calm, my dear, I’m already on my way to Hammelburg…”

“Thank the Lord!”

“… and will reach it in…?” He looked questioningly at his drive via the driving mirror.

“In approx. two hours, sir,” the man answered.

“You heard that, Fräulein Hilda?”

“Yes, Herr General. I’m glad. What shall I do in the meantime?”
“Nothing, child. Stay at home and let me handle everything. I will try to get Hochstetter in the line – and if it comes to the worst I’ll pay him a personal visit before I drive to Stalag 13. Don’t fear, everything will turn out to be okay.”

“Please hurry, Herr General. Hochstetter... he said he has proof that Colonel Hogan is an active Underground-agent, but I think he simply made up something to get his personal revenge. You should have seen him, sir. He was overjoyed to get the colonel and even smiled as his men punched and manhandled Hogan. It was... sickening.”

Burkhalter sighed inwardly at this display of worry. Of course, it hadn’t slipped his attention that the young lady had a little soft spot for the American officer, and he couldn’t blame her. Hogan was an attractive man with a lot of charm when it came to the ladies. There was no doubt about it. And as long as Fräulein Hilda didn’t forget that Hogan was technically an enemy and stood true to her duty and remained loyal, he had no problem with the girl flirting with the colonel.

Yet besides these thoughts, it irritated him that Hochstetter maybe used his position to his own strictly personal advantage. This was unacceptable! And Burkhalter had to admit that – even if Hogan sometimes got on his nerves – he respected the American in a certain way. If Hogan fell prey to Hochstetter’s personal wrath, he would have the major’s head for it.

“As I said, Fräulein Hilda, don’t be afraid. I am going to take matters in my own hands – and Hochstetter will learn what it means to interfere with my territory. Go back to bed, my dear, it’s still far too early to be up – and take the day off. I’m sure that the next hours will be ugly and I don’t want you to be caught in the middle of it.”

He could almost hear her relieved smile, as she answered, “Thank you so much, Herr General. I knew everything would turn towards the better as soon as you learned of everything.”

“Your trust in my abilities is great, my dear, and I’ll try not to disappoint you. I’ll get word to you as soon as everything is over. Now, go back to sleep. Good night.” He waved at the driver, who cut off the link.

“What now, sir?”

“Speed up, Sergeant. We’re needed in Hammelburg. And then radio my office. Sergeant Diekmann will have the nice job of getting into contact with Hochstetter.” He leant back in his seat. “The gnome is going to answer a few unpleasant questions!”
Yes, like I already pointed it out this part of the story will be a little bit darker and sinister, yet I hope it wasn’t too harsh. The next and the following one will be even harder.

Despite the more or less hopeless situation, Hogan’s friends don’t give up (even Langenscheidt supports them), and help is even on its way in shape of General Burkhalter, only the question remains: Will they able to intervene in time? Hochstetter is no fool and knows that he will be in big trouble if Hogan can tell his tale…

In the next chapter LeBeau will be forced to take unusual measurements; Hochstetter freaks out and fate is closing up on our colonel. A tiny light of hope seems to come from an unknown side, yet will it be enough?

I hope you liked the new chapter, and – like always – I’m really curious about your reactions.

Have a ‘Happy Halloween’,

Love

Yours Starflight
Chapter 11 – A tiny light of hope

“'You can’t be serious!’” It was rare that Louis LeBeau raised his voice while speaking to a woman. He regarded himself as the perfect French gentleman, who always treated a lady correctly while trying his best to flirt with her, but just right now he was about to explode.

“I am sorry, LeBeau, but Hans Wagner went with Danzig, his brother has a mission in Frankfurt and Müller is alone here. Three others are busy with an operation in Nürnberg and…”
“You can’t tell me that there is not one guy of the Underground left in Hammelburg!” LeBeau raged.

“No, I’m here – Oskar Schnitzer is here, but he is very well known to all the officials within the town, so he can’t take any action. Okay, we’ve a few boys and girls left, but they are still green behind the ears. Hans said he can be back by tomorrow and he will try to organize something during this day so that we can try to get Hogan out tomorrow, but not sooner.”

She glanced down at her guest who had stayed the night on her sofa. That he hadn’t slept well hadn’t slipped her attention, because she could often hear him walking back and forth within the last hours. She could understand him. She knew how close the men Hogan had gathered around himself were and that they loved their superior officer like a brother. Knowing he was being tortured and facing execution had to make them mad with worry and fury.

LeBeau let off a stream of French curses, while he looked down on his wristwatch. “It’s half past six. Hogan has been in Hochstetter’s mercy for more than twenty hours now. The Gestapo is never gentle, but this bosche is insane and hates mon colonel like nothing else. One day more in the clutches of this bastard could be too much, even for a man like Hogan.” He shook his head. “Non, we’ve to act today – and I know what to do.”

He began to walk down the stairs, and ‘Red Riding Hood’ looked at him, concerned. “What do you want to do?”

Down on the ground level, LeBeau glanced back upstairs, and snapped, “Something I never thought I would want to do, but I’ve no other chance left: Getting help from someone who turned out to be more of a hero just two days ago, than some people I knew for more than two years!”

The door was closed softly as to not elicit any attention, after all he didn’t know if the curfew had officially ended, even after the power had been restored. Slipping out on the street, LeBeau looked carefully around himself, then he began to jog. He had the unpleasant feeling that every minute counted now.

*** HH *** HH ***

“Sergeant Schultz?” The young nurse shook the large figure who slept on the spare bed beside Klink’s room. She needed three attempts until he finally woke up – still groggy and clearly not fully wake.
“Wha-ish’n?” he mumbled, and the nurse chuckled quietly. The man reminded her of her grandfather and she had taken a liking to the Bavarian.

“Herr Sergeant, you asked my colleague to inform you when the power is back. I only wanted to tell you that the power supply in town has been working again for half an hour now and…”

Schultz woke up properly at this news. “Thank the Lord,” he sighed. “Oberst Klink was more than angry as I returned from my failed attempt to reach Stalag 13 because our car is without gasoline.” He rose and suppressed a yawn. “If the Oberst wakes up, please tell him that I’m on my way to the camp now and will give word as soon as I’m there.”

The young woman nodded. “Of course, Herr Sergeant.” She smiled at him. “Be careful, the streets are icy.”

He smiled at her, without any attempt of flirting. “I will,” he nodded, picked up the empty gas can, saluted and left the room quietly. It was still pitch dark outside as he stepped into the icy morning, and he realized that he hadn’t even drunk any coffee or tea – not to speak of breakfast. Sighing, he shook his head, pulled the helmet deeper into his face and stepped onto the street. He would have to walk to the next gasoline station, then back to the car to fill its tank a little bit and then he would drive again to the station to fill up the fuel tank completely. Grumbling he began to stomp through the snow; wishing for a decent breakfast and a nice warm bed afterwards.

*** HH *** HH ***

Leutnant Horst Schmidt closed the door of the little chamber that served as his quarters in the Gestapo-Headquarters since his arrival in Hammelburg, and walked down the corridor. He hadn’t slept well this night, even though he was tired. To implement a curfew wasn’t an easy task, because the people had to be informed about it in time to avoid misunderstandings, unnecessary arrests and maybe even unfortunate accidents. As he returned late at night he had heard the prisoner’s screams again and he had felt sick to his stomach as minutes later a bang of a harshly closed cell door had echoed upstairs and Hochstetter had arrived from the cellars, grousing that the ‘damn Ami had lost consciousness again’.

Schmidt had learned from some of the guards that Hochstetter seemed to hold a personal grudge against the American colonel and had been trying to convict him for more than two years. Why the major thought that a POW was an active Underground-member was beyond Schmidt’s comprehension. He was trained in revealing secret activities and reading between the lines – he had worked for the Abwehr for three years, after all – but Hochstetter’s idea of the American’s ‘crimes’ were too bizarre to be true. And Schmidt couldn’t help himself – he felt real compassion for the
prisoner. The 'glorious war' Hitler had pronounced had spiraled out of control and had left more and more insanity in its path. Schmidt was sick of it and not for the first time he wished that Count von Stauffenberg would have been successful last year with his planned *Attentat* (assassination attempt) against Hitler.

Schmidt looked at his wristwatch. It was half past six and his shift would begin in two hours, yet he was unable to find any rest. What was going on within this building, which still bore the tracks of the aircraft attack of two years ago, was madness. He couldn’t call it anything else. Of course he knew that many things were getting out of hand within Germany and that the Gestapo and SS got more nervous the nearer the Allied Forces were coming toward the German border, but in Schmidt’s opinion this shouldn’t lead to tyrannizing their own people – or to torturing POWs because of spurious reasons or, even worse, because of personal grudges.

As he walked down the corridor, he heard the voice of Sergeant Huber from Hochstetter’s anteroom; sounding impatient and irritated.

“How often shall I repeat it, Sergeant Diekmann? Major Hochstetter isn’t available at the moment.” – “Yes, I know that General Burkhalter has an urgent message for him. You already told me as much during the last three calls, but I can’t give you any other information.”

Schmidt frowned. He could have sworn that he had heard the major’s voice from the cellars, so why wasn’t he available?

And then the truth began to dawn on him. The prisoner was a POW of the *Luftwaffe* and he knew that General Burkhalter was responsible for the Stalag-camps. Somehow the general had learned of Hochstetter’s doings and wanted to speak with him – certainly about the American who had been suffering like a victim of the Spanish Inquisition for many hours now.

No, this wasn’t the way he had been brought up. This wasn’t the Germany he had once loved. This wasn’t RIGHT!

Making a decision that could be very dangerous for him, Schmidt stepped into the anteroom. “Sergeant, whom do you have on the line?”

The younger man looked up at him, startled. “*Herr Leutnant,* this is the Luftwaffe-Headquarters in Berlin. They are trying to reach Major Hochstetter, but the *Herr Major* isn’t available and so…”
Schmidt reached for the receiver. “Give it to me!” he ordered and pulled the receiver away from a surprised Huber. If he played it clever maybe he could set a stop to the evil cruelty that was happening beneath his feet.

*** HH ***

Hogan had to cough again, and the pressure in his left side turned anew into searing pain as if someone was pushing knives between his broken ribs. And the posture he was forced in – more or less dangling from the ceiling by the shackles around his sore wrists, his feet barely touching the ground – didn’t do anything to lessen the agony.

Out of his left eye he watched Hochstetter, who stood at the small open fire-heater – a metal basket with burning wood – and was more frustrated than he had ever seen the smaller man before. It gave him some satisfaction that his nemesis wasn’t triumphing. He hadn’t been able to break him until now, and Hogan would try to hold on a little bit longer, even if he had never been in so much pain in his whole life.

And he had had his share of unpleasant experiences – last but not least as an older teen while he even lived out his wild side by vandalism, which had brought him some nasty run-ins with the police. He knew what would have become of him, if he hadn’t met a friend of his dad who persuaded him into joining the military. Today the colonel from those days twenty years ago was one of the leading supreme commanders of the Allied High Command – General Butler. Yet even all those incidents in his youth, including brawls with local rockers, hadn’t been comparable to what was happening to Hogan now.

Every breath hurt, the skin of his neck and wrists was sore, his whole upper body and even his upper legs had countless bruises, and he knew that his back was a mess. Sweat burnt in the gashes he had gotten from the lashing, the back of his head ached where the blow had left a laceration and his strained muscles and sinews trembled. The concussion he’d suffered made his mind and his eye sight foggy, and he had vomited until nothing was left in his stomach. Thirst and hunger racked him, and that he still gave Hochstetter trouble was only because he was too stubborn to give in.

“I really lose patience with you, Hogan,” Hochstetter growled. He had stripped off his jacket and the sleeves of his shirt were rolled up. Fury lay in his eyes as he glared at the torn figure that hung from the ceiling, shirtless, bleeding, sweating, beaten – yet Hogan kept his secrets to himself. He hadn’t given him any answers to his questions. The only words he had uttered were insults or rank, name and serial-number. Hogan was stronger than the major had anticipated, and it angered him a lot. Too much time was needed to break him.

Hochstetter knew that Burkhalter’s office had been trying to reach him since the main power had been restored, and he had a good idea what the general wanted to tell him. He would order him to
leave Hogan alone and return him to Stalag 13. Burkhalter, who usually wasn’t squeamish himself, grew a conscience when it came to the POWs and especially to Hogan. That was the problem when you knew someone personally for quite some time. Even a prisoner became a person then and scruple followed quickly. Hochstetter hadn’t such qualms. He did his job and people who were a threat to the Fatherland were lower beings than animals for him. Mercy didn’t belong in his personal dictionary.

And, besides, he couldn’t give up now. Not so shortly before he reached his goal. Hogan was on the verge of breaking, and then he would tell him everything he wanted to know. Hochstetter couldn’t allow to be pipped at the post now.

So, he had given orders that he wasn’t ‘available’ at the moment. It fell to Burkhalter to prove otherwise, which he couldn’t. Even if the general, whom he knew to be in Berlin for a few days, would decide to check on everything personally like he did ever-so-often, Hogan would be already dead and buried by then.

Glancing at his nemesis, Hochstetter said slowly, “What happened until now is only one of several steps, Hogan, and we both know that you can’t hold on for very much longer. Why suffer when you can put an end to everything and face the inevitable?”

“There is nothing I have to tell you,” Hogan rasped; his voice barely recognizable anymore.

“A shame,” Hochstetter shrugged, took the poker and raked the fire. “I hoped that it wouldn’t come to the utmost, but you have left me with no other possibility.” He pulled the poker out of the flames and stepped towards the colonel, whose one, still fully functioning eye fell on the tool and widened in alarm. Lifting the metal, Hochstetter held it in front of Hogan’s face; showing him that the poker didn’t end in a hook, but in the double-s-rune – the symbol of the SS. And it was glowing almost white with heat.

“No!” Hogan whispered; horrified. “No, you can’t do this!”

“Regrettably, I have to,” the major answered coldly.

Hogan had faced several different methods to make him suffer and he had thought he had gotten the worst, but this was something that made him tremble. The prospect of being branded woke something close to panic in him. Trying to step back as wide as the chains allowed, he panted, “Is this your gratitude that I saved your life last year?”
“When did you save my life?” Hochstetter sneered.

“The fire in the cooler… I got you out before you could suffocate,” the colonel croaked; his belly churned with icy fear.

“Yes, I remember, but unfortunately the situation doesn’t allow any personal feelings to get in the way,” the Gestapo-officer taunted.

“What else is this?” Hogan shouted back. “This is nothing else than you getting your revenge on me because I didn’t shiver whenever you raise your voice.”

Hochstetter laughed quietly. “But just right now you are trembling, my dear Colonel, aren’t you?” He aimed with the poker at Hogan’s belly. “Tell me with whom you met last Monday and…”

“It wasn’t me!” Hogan tore at the chains as he felt the hellish heat nearing his unprotected right side – a spot that was most sensitive. ‘No! Please, God, NO!’

“Tell me!” Hochstetter snarled.

“It wasn’t me,” the colonel screamed; panicking now. “I swear! I was in the camp. Ask Klink! We played chess for the whole evening. For God’s sake, Hochstetter, ask Klink! Please!” He couldn’t prevent his voice from becoming shrill, while his chest heaved with unshed tears of terror. He turned his head away and closed his good eye as the heat became unbearable; expecting the burning agony any second. ‘Please, God, NO! Don’t allow this. Please – PLEASE!’

“Major Hochstetter!”

Hochstetter angrily turned around. “Yes?” he snapped and glared at the intruder. It was Leutnant Schmidt, who stood in the doorway – face pale and eyes wide, while he looked at Hogan with shock. “Is there something important or do you want to learn how to get a stubborn mule to obey?” the major growled impatiently.

Schmidt’s gaze wandered over the bleeding, sweating and trembling figure that tried desperately to avoid the glowing poker Hochstetter held in his hand. The Leutnant had listened to the short conversation long enough to know that all this here was mostly something very personal between the major and the prisoner – some sick kind of revenge, and it made Horst nauseous. If the prisoner
really was an Underground-agent or not didn’t change the fact that he was still a human being. And no man should be going through such hell. They weren’t in the Middle Ages anymore, for God’s sake!

Taking a deep breath (and regretting it instantly because of the ugly smell within this room), he answered, “Sir, I’ve General Burkhalter’s assistant on the line.”

“I’m not available,” Hochstetter interrupted him. “I already gave Huber the instruction to…”

“Sir, I know that you don’t want to be disturbed, but you see, I spoke with the general’s assistant on the phone, and he warned me that the general will call his personal friend Reichsführer Himmler and is going to demand your arrest if you don’t answer the phone within the next minutes.” He cleared his throat. “I thought that this is important enough to ignore your order and get you.”

Hochstetter stared at him – quivering with fury. No! He couldn’t be called off just before he would have broken his nemesis. He knew that being branded would be Hogan’s breaking point. Turning around towards the colonel, he raised the poker, heard the colonel’s shallow breaths quickening, saw the sheer fright in the one eye visible and…

“Herr Major, the Luftwaffe-Headquarter is still on the line. I don’t think it would be wise if you let them wait any longer.” Schmidt sounded calm – and far too reasonable for Hochstetter’s liking at the moment.

With a furious “Bah!” he threw the poker back into the fire and stormed towards the door. “Don’t cheer too soon, Hogan, we’re not done here! I will get the truth out of you – even if I have to brand every inch of your body!” He left and raced towards the stairs; grousing the whole time.

Schmidt looked back at the prisoner. He seemed to be somewhere in his thirties, but Horst couldn’t be certain because of the bruises the man had in his face. The right eye was too swollen to be usable, blood and sweat mingled on his abused upper body and his breath was alarmingly hollow. ‘Sweet Lord, this went too far,’ he thought, before he slowly closed the distance to the prisoner.

“Colonel Hogan, right?” he asked softly.

The other man only eyed him, body and breath trembling violently.
“I am Horst Schmidt,” the Leutnant continued quietly. “I heard what the major said – and what you said. Klink is the commanding officer of Stalag 13, isn’t he?”

Hogan didn’t know what to make of all this. His brain had problems comprehending everything that was going on after the panic began to ebb away a little bit. But the name ‘Klink’ reached something within him. He nodded slowly as far as it was possible in the way he was restrained.

“You have a watertight alibi for what the major accuses you of, because you played chess with the Oberst. Did I understand this correctly?”

Again, he had to wait a few seconds, before he got a reaction. “Yes,” the American rasped out. “Hochstetter… refuses to ask him. Klink… is in hospital but… not dangerously wounded.”

Schmidt nodded slowly. “Hochstetter skips asking the Oberst, because afterwards he would have no further reason to keep you here. This all here is personal, isn’t it?” The hoarse ‘yes’ was barely audible.

The Leutnant took another deep breath. “I can’t promise you anything, but I’ll try to help you. You may be an enemy to my Fatherland, but you are also a human being. And this here isn’t the German way I was taught. Can you hold on for a little while longer?”

“I’ll try,” Hogan whispered; not daring to hope that one of Hochstetter’s own men wanted to help him.

“Good,” Schmidt nodded, before he turned around and raised his voice. “Guards!”

The two SS-men, who had waited outside, appeared on the threshold. Straightening his frame, Schmidt ordered sternly, “Get the colonel down, loosen his ties and give him something to drink!”

“But sir, Major Hochstetter ordered…” one of the men began, but was interrupted sharply.

“And now I order you to obey my commands! Do I have to pull rank, Corporal? Do as I say. The prisoner is of no use if he dies of dehydration and circulatory failure.”
Obviously nervous, the two guards began to do as ordered. Schmidt stepped to the fire-basked and took out the poker. “I’ll take this with me,” he said to Hogan, then he vanished. Determined he quickly climbed the steps and went to his chamber. Closing the door behind him he held the poker for another long moment in his hand – becoming sick again as he imagined how the two iron runes would burn into human skin.

Cursing he opened the window and threw the poker out into the garden at the backside of the building, where it landed with a hissing in the snow and melted through it. ‘At least there it can’t do any harm,’ he thought, closed the window, took his coat and walked towards the main entrance. He knew what he had to do.

*** HH *** HH ***

Schultz was in bad mood, after he had first walked to the gasoline station, had to wake the owner to get some very much needed gas, then wandered back to the staff-car, filled in the few liters into the tank before he drove to the station and finally back to the hospital. He would report to Klink that the car’s tank was filled now (if the Oberst was already awake, that was) and would wait for maybe some more orders, before he would drive to Stalag 13. Parking the car in front of the main-entrance, he climbed out, stepped into the building and went up the staircase as he heard a very familiar voice with an unmistakable French accent clamoring.

“But I have to speak with Colonel Klink! It’s a matter of life and death!”

Speeding up, Schultz turned around the next corner and saw no-one else than Louis LeBeau standing in front of the night nurse – arms crossed, swearing like a trooper and at the verge of throwing a raging fit.

“LeBeau?” he gasped; not trusting his eyes. “How… What are you doing here? How did you…”

“SCHULTZIE! Mon Dieu, merci!” LeBeau cried out in relief, while he dashed towards the Sergeant of the Guards. Finally, he would make process. “Schultzie, I have to speak with Colonel Klink. Hochstetter arrested Hogan yesterday and the camp was taken over by the Gestapo. Klink has to help mon colonel! Hochstetter said that Hogan wouldn’t come back, and he has had him now for many hours. Quick, Schultz, we’ve to do something!” His voice cracked with urgency, while he gripped the larger man’s upper arms and tried to shake him.

“I don’t permit so much noise during…” The night nurse was interrupted, as LeBeau whirled around and pointed a finger at her.
“Our friend is being tortured and faces death, and you damn hag dare to…”

“What did you call me?” the woman screeched.

“Was ist hier los? (What’s going on here?)” Klink stood in the door frame to his sick-room, wearing only his nightgown and a pair of slippers. At least the always present monocle was placed over his left eye, while his hair stood out into any direction – giving him a resemblance to a typical crazy professor. He looked tired with bags beneath his eyes, cheeks red with fever and his voice sounded hoarse, yet he stood surprisingly tall there.

“Colonel Klink!” the little Frenchman gasped, feeling for once indeed some joy at seeing the other man, and raced towards him.

Klink – torn out of sleep because of the loud voices near his room, groggy from the fever and the medicaments, with limbs like lead and suffering with the whole load of symptoms a nasty bronchitis gives everybody – stared wide-eyed at one of his POWs, who… who shouldn’t be here at all!

“LeBeau?” he asked, flabbergasted.

Louis was at full speed as he reached Klink and almost ran him over, while he gripped the Oberst’s under arms and spoke in one quick rush,

“Colonel Klink, you have to help! Hochstetter took Colonel Hogan yesterday. One of his men said that the colonel wouldn’t return anymore, and a few bosches punched mon colonel, manhandled him and Hochstetter took over Stalag 13. You have to do something, or mon colonel will die. I’m sure they’re torturing him and… and we have to help him!” He looked from one German officer to the next – eyes wide and pleading with desperation. He had staked everything on one card as he saw no other alternative than to go to Klink for help. If he was mistaken and the Oberst wouldn’t risk new trouble with Hochstetter, Hogan’s life was forfeit.

Klink was wide awake by now, bronchitis and graze-wounds forgotten. Hogan – arrested by Hochstetter. The man who had somehow become the center of his universe was at the mercy of a madman who had searched for two years for a reason to kill the American. What Klink had feared most had come true. While he was in hospital the Gestapo-major had reacted and had taken Hogan with him. Klink had no doubt what Hogan had been going through since then, and it made him shiver inwardly with dread.
Maybe Robert was still alive. He had to be! Klink couldn’t imagine anything else without feeling the shadow of insanity gripping for him. He couldn’t lose the only person in the whole world who gave him a reason to live. Not after three years – not after having a taste of the caring man beneath the boyish troublemaker he had yearned for so long.

The shock of maybe having lost the love of his life woke something in him that seemed to have died almost twenty years ago. He had felt its shadow touching him the evening before yesterday, as he had raced back into the shower of bullets to save Hogan, but now he sensed its full presence. Deep in him something he thought he had lost moved again, and began to rise with stiff but large wings.

Looking towards the sergeant, he bellowed, “Schultz, tell me the car’s tank is filled!”

“Jawohl, Herr Oberst, the car is…”

Klink didn’t let him finish but already whirled around towards his room. “Nurse, help me with my clothes. LeBeau, come with me!”

“Herr Oberst, I can’t allow you…”

The night nurse was cut off, as Klink turned around and stared with suddenly blazing eyes at her. “Either you help me get dressed in no time and prepare some medicaments I can take with me, or I see to it that you’re fired!”

“What’s going on here?” Dr. Thomas Birkhorn came down the hallway; his doctor coat full of crinkles that proved he been on call last night and had slept fully clothed on a makeshift bed. His gaze found the enraged nurse, the nervous large sergeant, the Oberst and… Sweet Lord, this was LeBeau! Birkhorn managed in the very last second to control his features, otherwise he would have given away his surprise of seeing the Frenchman here which would have shown that he knew a man he officially hadn’t met until now.

“I have to leave this welcoming hospital. It’s an emergency,” Klink called over his shoulder; already stripping off his nightgown. “LeBeau, come in and pack my belongings. Every minute counts!”

Usually Louis would have given some impudent comments, definitely mentioning it was against the Geneva Convention to force a POW into doing private work for his jailers, but in this case LeBeau didn’t mind lending a helping hand to Klink. Racing into the room, he caught the nightgown Klink
threw at him and put it into the small suitcase that was placed beside the door. Like this he not only saw the two bandages around the German’s left upper arm and calf, but also the thin, long, well-healed scar that sported the Oberst’s right side. He assumed that it came from a fencing-duel like it was often still done between students of universities or academies.

Birkhorn had stepped into the room, too, accompanied by the still indignant nurse. “Herr Oberst, I don’t know what emergency happened in your camp, but I urgently advise you to…”

“Major Hochstetter, this cursed bosche, arrested mon colonel and made it clear that he wouldn’t return him in one piece. And this is meant literally,” LeBeau explained while packing the slippers. His gaze found the doctor’s, and Birkhorn took a sharp breath. Hogan was arrested by the Gestapo? Oh no, that wasn’t good. That was one of the worst things that could happen to the Underground!

Klink, in the meantime, got dressed with the nurse’s help, while Birkhorn came to a decision. “Herr Oberst, when you’re done with getting the POW officer out of the Gestapo’s hands, please return to bed. I shall get some medicine you certainly are going to need, for you and your POW. If you or he needs more, let me know.” He turned to leave. “We’ll meet at the entrance. Please don’t drive off without the medicaments!” He hastened away.

Slipping into his coat, Klink reached for his scarf and his cap. His gaze found LeBeau for a moment, and it just dawned at him fully that the little Frenchman shouldn’t be out of the camp. “How did you, pray tell, escape Stalag 13?” he asked.

“What shall I say, Colonel? The SS-guys are nothing like your men,” LeBeau commented wryly; taking Klink’s suitcase to hurry things up.

“No, usually it’s impossible to escape the SS,” Klink dead-panned; leaving the room with large steps. His left calf hurt, he already felt exhausted from the bronchitis and his head ached, but he ignored it. The only thing – the only man – who counted now was Robert Hogan. Klink didn’t dare imagine what had already been done to his American counterpart since he was arrested. Fear crept through the Oberst’s heart and soul at the thought of Hogan being tortured for many hours now. He only hoped – prayed even! – that Robert hadn’t been pushed too far and could not be rescued anymore; not only physically, but also mentally.

Then it hit him, what LeBeau had also told him. Stopping dead in his tracks he stumbled as LeBeau ran into him; mumbling an apology, “Pardon, Colonel.”

“Did you say the Gestapo took over Stalag 13 and that SS-men are now controlling MY camp?” he demanded; enraged.
The little Frenchman looked up at him. “Oui, Colonel. A Leutnant von Neuhaus took over command, threatened Langenscheidt and treated us like slaves!” Fury shimmered in his dark eyes that matched Klink’s feelings.

“I'll get Hochstetter for this,” the Oberst snarled and continued his way; ignoring the still grousing night nurse who followed them. “This is the third time the Gestapo wants to use my camp for their tasks and the second time they really took control over it! Hochstetter should know better than messing with my territory! I’ll take care that Burkhalter makes one time use of his friendship with Himmler and transfers this malicious gnome to the Russian Front – or even better, sends him directly to Siberia! I’m sure even the Russian generals can still learn from this beast!”

He hurried down the steps; half mad with worry. ‘Hold on, Robert. I'm coming. Just hold on, I'll get you out of this hell. Don’t give up, Rob, please don’t give up!’

At the entrance stood Dr. Birkhorn and gave him a bag. “Penicillin-injections for you and your POW-officer, take them two times a day. I also packed sedatives, pain-killers and two cans with antiseptic ointment. I don’t know about the condition the man is in, but if it is too worrying, call me.”

Klink looked shortly at the surgeon; surprised by the man’s willingness to help an enemy-officer like this. To his knowledge Birkhorn had never met Hogan, yet he offered aid in a way that was more than kind. “Thank you, Doctor,” he said sincerely, then he rushed out of the door; LeBeau on his heels.

“SCHUUUULTZ!” Klink shouted; coughing instantly afterwards.

The sergeant had already started the motor and opened the door to the back-seat. “Everything is ready, Herr Kommandant.”

“To the Gestapo-Headquarters, Schultz, as quick as you can drive!” He slipped on the back-seat; LeBeau followed him after he threw the suitcase in the trunk. Schultz climbed on the driver’s seat and took off with squealing tires.

Somehow they knew that they were running out of time.

*** HH *** HH ***
Hogan had never thought that a few sips of water could taste so good – that they could mean a part of heaven. He leant against the wall and one of the guards had put on his shirt again, while the other one held a glass of water against his split lip. The man was young – certainly younger than Carter – and there was an unsteady flickering in his blue eyes. If Hogan were in a better mental state, he would have used the boy’s shakiness to manipulate him, but his foggy mind didn’t work properly.

All of sudden the door was pushed open and banged against the wall.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Hochstetter stormed into the room; more furious than ever before after the telephone talk.

He couldn’t believe it! First, he had spoken to Burkhalter’s assistant who had wanted to link him to the general, who was already on his way to Hammelburg, but to Hochstetter’s luck the connection hadn’t been successful. Yet the assistant – a Sergeant Diekmann – had made it very clear that Burkhalter demanded a halt of Hogan’s interrogation until he was there in person and that Hochstetter should withdraw the SS-men from Stalag 13.

Hochstetter couldn’t accept that he was stopped just before he could cross the finishing line. Hogan had reached his limits and one little push would be enough to get him to finally talk. And then Burkhalter intervened and Hochstetter would be left with empty hands again.

No! This wouldn’t happen! He had to force the secrets out of Hogan to show Burkhalter that he – Hochstetter – had been right all the time about the American’s secret activities. Otherwise the major would face hard consequences.

And one thing Hochstetter also knew: He was running out of time. He didn’t know how Burkhalter had learned about everything this quickly. The main power had been restored for only two hours now, but if he had understood Sergeant Diekmann correctly, Burkhalter was already near Bavaria. Therefore, the general must have learned about Hogan’s arrest and the over-taking of Stalag 13 many hours before.

How so?

Klink? Yes, the fool could have already given a report to Burkhalter’s office before he went to hospital, but this was before Hochstetter had been able to get his hands on Hogan and take over Stalag 13. And afterwards the power in the whole area had broken down – yet Burkhalter already knew everything! He had to have an informant within Stalag 13 – one who had been able to reach.
him despite the failed power supply. And he hadn’t the tiniest clue who this mysterious person could be.

But this was a problem he would solve later. Just right now there was only one important thing to do: To get Hogan to talk – or to shut him up forever, before Burkhalter learned that he, Hochstetter, hadn’t checked Hogan’s alibi concerning his alleged chess matches with Klink while there was also the statement that the colonel had been seen in Hammelburg during the same time.

Hochstetter was well aware of the fact that he had overstepped his boundaries as he refused to check the alibi. He would be in deep water if he couldn’t clear himself by presenting any successes – like Hogan’s admission of being an Underground-agent.

Determined to use the short time that was left before hell broke loose in form of an enraged General Burkhalter, Hochstetter had stormed down into the cellars again – ready to overstep any limits to break his nemesis. To see Hogan freed from the chains and sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall and getting water poured down his throat, made him burst with anger – screaming at this underling for intervening in his plans like this.

The young man, who crouched in front of Hogan, jumped to his feet hectically. “S-s-s-sir, Leutnant Schmidt ordered to…”

“Since when is Leutnant Schmidt in charge of this headquarters?” the major shouted; face reddening. He couldn’t allow Hogan to get some recovery time, even one of a few seconds.

“Sir, the Leutnant said that the prisoner wouldn’t be of any use anymore when he dies of dehydration and…” The second SS-guard was cut off by Hochstetter, too.

“Dehydration? If he is that thirsty, he can drink as much as he wants.” With those words he closed the distance to the colonel and pulled him up by the collar of his shirt. “Bind his hands on the back!” he ordered; fixing the colonel was a glare full of contempt. “I’ll give you water, Hogan, enough to still your thirst – and more.”

The guards were barely done, as Hochstetter already dragged him towards the door. “Corporal, unlock the next room and switch on the light. The prisoner isn’t to get at with fire, but maybe water does the trick!”

Hogan was barely able to remain on his feet as he was roughly pulled a short way through the
corridor and forced into another room. He didn’t know what Hochstetter was referring to, but he assumed that it was another devilment. Trying to clear his mind and fighting down the pain, exhaustion due to the fever and to suppress another coughing fit, he looked up as a light bulb that dangled on a simple cable from the ceiling was switched on. In front of him was a basin, maybe one meter in cross section, the walls were about the same height and it was filled with water. The realization of what this meant hit him with brutal force: Waterboarding.

Somehow the fear that exploded in him gave him new strength. Rearing up he tried to escape the cruel grip around his collar, but the major was strong given his stature, and Hogan was weakened after hours of torture, coldness and no nourishment. Despite his desperate attempt to get free, he was pulled towards the basin and he had only a few seconds time to draw in a deep breath before his head and shoulders were forced beneath the water surface.

Odd as it sounded but the icy water felt good. It soothed his feverish flesh, cooled the bruises and even made his head ache less, while he instinctively drew in two sips of the water to soothe his still burning thirst. And then he had to release the breath far sooner than intended as he had to cough. And with that the torment began as his lungs – his whole body – demanded new oxygen that was denied. Instinctively Hogan tried to get up, to wriggle free of the hard grip around his neck and to push Hochstetter’s upper body, with which the major held the American down, away. It gave Hogan even more pain because the Gestapo-officer leant with almost his full weight on the gashes. But all his fighting back was for naught.

Finally, as he thought he couldn’t take it any longer and had to breathe, Hogan was released. The major pulled him up and for a few seconds the colonel was granted some hectic intakes of air, before Hochstetter snarled,

“This is your very last chance, Hogan. Talk! Give me the answers I need! Now! I will not let you up again!”

The colonel was still coughing and gasping for breath. He felt dizzy, his lungs burnt and his belly, which had been pressed on the basin’s edge, convulsed with pain. He screamed out in agony as Hochstetter pushed him hard against the basin’s wall again and bruised his broken ribs even more.

“TALK!” the Gestapo-officer shouted and shook the American like a dog would do with a puppy.

For long seconds there was only silence except for Hogan’s gasps.

The colonel had closed his eyes; knowing that this was the end. He couldn’t talk – wouldn’t talk! He would never give away his friends and the mission that had weakened Hitler’s attempts of gaining
victory so much that the Allies were about to win the war. Thousands of lives depended on a quick end of the madness that racked Europe. He couldn’t let these people down. His death was a price he was willing to pay.

He took a deep breath. Whatever it was that Leutnant Schmidt had planned to help him would come too late. Within the next two or three minutes he would be dead, and for a moment he thought of his parents, of Jason and of his men which were his dearest friends. For a few seconds he even thought of Klink – the man who should be his enemy but had become somehow a friend, too. A friend, who had outgrown himself and his deep fears to keep him, Hogan, safe. Odd that Hogan felt sorrow for the German officer, as he knew that Klink would mourn his death.

Then the colonel summoned his strength; his whole inner being tightened with mortal fear. The next words would be the last he would ever say, yet they came out strong and unwavering despite his hoarse voice,

“Robert E. Hogan, colonel of the US Air For…”

The furious scream that was torn from Hochstetter’s throat was barely human anymore, while he forced his nemesis back under water.

Hogan had taken a deep breath before his face hit the surface and the water closed over his head. He knew that he was only prolonging the inevitable, but his fighting spirit wouldn’t allow anything else. He held the breath as long as he could, his body shook with the effort before it had to give in. His body cried out for air as the emptiness in his lungs became too much to bear – and he breathed in water. He coughed, only to get more water into his chest – the devilish circle that would lead to death had begun.

Panic woke in him, as his instincts took over. He tried to rear up again, to escape the brutal grip in his neck, to get free – somehow! But his body was too weak, his muscles lacked oxygen and didn’t obey him anymore. The pain in his lungs spread through his body, into his head and paralyzed him. The sheer mortal fear told him the bitter truth: He was dying.

Somehow a part of him seemed to have truly doubted that it would come to this – that Hochstetter really would kill him. But it was happening – here and now. There was no escape anymore – fate had caught up with him.

His mind shut off as any sane thoughts fled from his brain, while the first shadows of the dark eternity were closing on him…
Yeah, cliiiiiiiiiiiffffaaaaanger... I know, this is certainly the meanest moment to end the chapter, and I can imagine that you all this at the edge of your chairs now. But I love cliffhangers, and this one should be a strong one. I hope I succeeded.

I don’t tell you anything about the next chapter, because it would reveal too much, therefore: Sorry, guys, you’ve to wait until the new chapter comes during the next week.

Like always I’m utterly curious what you think of the chapter. It had a lot of twists in it and even if the whole situation in the story is very gravely in the moment, I loved to write the scene in which LeBeau comes to the hospital. I also know that the scene in the cellars was very hard and I hope I didn’t scare anybody off, but the whole thing with Hogan almost being branded and Schmidt deciding to help, will become very important for the story-line.

I wish you all know a nice weekend, for those who are celebrating St. Martin: Have fun and enjoy the St. Martins-goose,

Love

Yours Starflight

TBC...
Hi, my dear readers!

Sorry that the next update was delayed, but my poor beta-reader caught a nasty cold (just like Klink, *smile*) and had to stay in bed for a few days. But now the next chapter is ready to be published and I think it will elicted some ‘whoops’ and other stronger reactions.

Given the whole cliff-hanger at the end of the last chapter, I don’t want to tell you anything what you can expect now.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 12 – The 'Iron Eagle' returns

Schultz was someone who didn’t mistake a street for a race track. He always drove reasonably and presciently. But just right now he didn’t care for speed limits or that there was still a lot of snow on the street. With a speed that was anything but advisable given the weather, he headed for the Gestapo-Headquarters; listening with one ear to what LeBeau told Klink during the short trip. Obviously a lot of unpleasant incidents had taken place within Stalag 13 since the Gestapo had taken over the camp and the SS-guards even tried to order the Luftwaffe-guards around. And, by the way, Schultz learned of the way Hogan had been treated during his arrest. It was outraging, to put it mildly.

Klink only halfheartedly listened, because his mind and soul were already at the Headquarters; fearing for Hogan’s life. He could only assume of what all had been done to his American counterpart, and every imagining was worse than the one before. He knew that Hogan had been caught in a living hell, while he – Klink – had slept soundly and peacefully in a warm, comfortable bed. All right, he hadn’t known of everything that had happened, but hadn’t he feared that Hochstetter would act the moment he learned that Hogan was still alive? Hadn’t he had this nasty
feeling since the hour he had left the camp? He should have listened to his inner voice and returned to Stalag 13 as soon as the examination and the treating of his graze-wounds were finished. But no, he had chosen to stay in hospital, when he also could have cured himself in his quarters at the camp. He would have learned of Hogan’s arrest so much sooner, could have stopped the torment hours ago!

The guilty conscience seemed to fester endlessly, while deep in him this nagging feeling became stronger and stronger.

Robert needed him. For once, it was Hogan who needed his help, not the other way around. Robert’s life was in danger – Klink could feel it in his bones.

His gaze found LeBeau, who had finished his report and looked tense and with fear in his eyes at nothing. Klink still hadn’t the tiniest idea how the little Frenchman had managed to get out of the camp – after all, it was well-known that no-one escaped SS-members easily. The black-clad men were…

Another thought hit Klink. Mostly the same men accompanied Hochstetter, and a lot of SS-members stationed here in Hammelburg had already been to Stalag 13. The chance that one of them could identify LeBeau because of his unique small size – and he was an escaped POW – could lead to trouble for the corporal. After all, there was the newest order that any caught POW on flight could be shot without a trial.

LeBeau was one of the biggest mockingbirds in the camp, his mood could turn sour from one moment to the next when he had to cook something for Klink’s guests and he rarely showed respect. On the other hand, he had befriended Schultz (of course, given LeBeau’s culinary abilities and the sergeant’s weakest spot – namely food), could be funny, was an extraordinary cook and, what was most important for Klink at the moment, was one of Hogan’s closest friends and loyal to the death. Klink could imagine what Hogan would feel should something bad happen to the Frenchman.

“Schultz, stop the car before we turn into the next street.”

Confused, Hans looked into the back-mirror. “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant.” He parked the car at the street’s side and Klink looked at Louis.

“Corporal LeBeau, I don’t want to risk that the Gestapo gets wind of your little trip from the camp to the hospital. You could face real trouble. Therefore, you shall wait here until we’re back to pick you up. I demand your word as a gentleman and an officer that you don’t try to escape for real while Schultz and I get Hogan out of Hochstetter’s clutches. Understood?”
LeBeau, surprised, blinked at him. “But Colonel, I could help you…”

“No,” Klink impatiently shook his head. “Your presence would worsen everything and leave questions concerning how one of my POWs could flee with such obvious ease. Hochstetter would also think that I’m really involved with Hogan’s little gang when he learns that you didn’t take the chance to escape for real but ran to me for help. We all do not need any more suspicion than we already have gained. So, no discussion, out of the car and wait here. Hurry, we’ve no time to lose!”

Realizing that Klink was right for once, LeBeau quickly stepped out of the car. As he closed the door he heard the Kommandant ordering, “Schultz, full speed! Stop at nothing!” The Sergeant of the Guards kicked the pedal and the vehicle drove off with rising tempo.

“Hurry, Schultzie,” LeBeau whispered. “I agree with Klink that Hogan is in desperate need of rescue.”

*** HH ***

Leutnant Schmidt walked down the street and headed towards the hospital. He knew that he would face a lot of trouble later with his superior officer for this solo action that would – hopefully – stop the major’s sick deeds, but he didn’t care. He had joined the Abwehr in earlier times because he had known that the biggest risk didn’t lie in open combat, but within danger that came hidden, secretly and from the inner country. He had also known that the enemy would send spies and saboteurs to undermine the Third Reich and that those men and women had to be stopped, but what had happened within the last year, politically and socially, was the beginning of hell.

He had lost faith in this regime that had turned into madness – and he had begun to almost admire the warriors of the different Underground organizations, who lived a double-life and fought against the down-fall of Germany in a different way by fighting against Hitler and his fellows. And if the American colonel – Hogan – was indeed an Underground-agent, Schmidt had another reason to admire the man’s bravery. There couldn’t be a lot of people around the world which would stay silent while being tortured like this.

He reached the next crossroads and stopped dead in his tracks, as a gray staff-car came around the corner, barely lowering speed which made the passengers almost tumble over in their seat. He saw a large man on the driver’s seat, wearing Luftwaffe-blue, and behind him sat another man, wearing the Luftwaffe-coat of an officer – an Oberst. And even if he had never met Oberst Klink in person until now, he simply knew who the man on the backseat was.
Not giving a damn of what others may think of him, he turned around and ran back the way he’d just come – sliding along the pavement because of the hard-packed snow. He reached the Gestapo-Headquarters the moment the staff-car had parked, the two men left the vehicle, and the slender, tall officer with the cap and in the coat practically raced towards the entrance.

Schmidt sped up. He knew that the SS wouldn’t allow the officer entry without an official task or being called. “Oberst Klink?” he called from afar, what made the two members of the Luftwaffe turn around. Running even quicker, he reached them several seconds later. “Leutnant Schmidt,” he introduced himself; panting. “Sir, are you here for Colonel Hogan?”

“Yes, and don’t think you can stop me!” the Oberst almost snarled. Wrath shimmered in his eyes and… Dear God, was that a monocle? If the whole situation weren’t so dire, Schmidt would have laughed. Who, for heaven’s sake, still wore a monocle like they used to do in the last century? The man was an eccentric, no doubt. But just right now they had other problems.

“Herr Oberst, it isn’t my intention to stop you. Rather the opposite. I was on my way to the hospital to get you.” He headed towards the entrance. “Hurry up, Gentlemen. I think your POW is in great need of your presence.”

Feeling the cold dread crawling even stronger through him at those words, Klink followed the Leutnant into the building that had undergone a few repairs since the attack two years ago but was in bad shape. Inside it was cool and somehow dark, even if the lamps were switched on. Klink had been here several times and he always got an eerie feeling whenever he was inside this house that had been a courthouse before the war started. But just right now he didn’t care for the almost sinister atmosphere that clung to the walls and floors which had witnessed too much fear, dread, blood and death. His whole senses were fixed on getting to Hogan.

The Leutnant hastened in front of them, snapped at two guards who tried to step into their way, opened a metal door and quickly walked down the staircase behind it.

Schultz, who had taken his rifle with him, hesitated. “Herr Kommandant, if this is a trap…”

“Nonsense, Schultz, Hochstetter wouldn’t be that stupid!” Klink answered without faltering in his almost running steps and dashed down the stairs – following Schmidt. Schultz sighed. ‘A man is a fool – and a man in love is three times a fool,’ he thought, before he hurried down into the cellar, too.

They reached the bottom of the building and Schmidt turned into a hallway that was only illuminated by a few bare light-bulbs. Several metal doors were visible, of which one was open and framed with
two guards, who looked up in alert as the three men came nearer.

“Herr Leutnant, we have orders…” one of them began, but Schmidt cut him off sharply,

“Out of our way, Corporal!”

“But…”

Schmidt stopped in front of the two and opened his mouth to give them a fitting answer, but Klink had no time for this. He heard splashing and struggling – and knew instinctively what was happening and to whom.

Without giving a damn about the two guards, he pushed them roughly out of his way, stormed into the room and stopped for a second in shock as he took in two things: One, Hochstetter had someone by the neck who wore US Air-Force sandy-brown and was forcing him under water, and two, said someone’s movements were stilling.

Shock turned into blinding rage – Hochstetter was killing Hogan – and with a roar, Klink was with three steps beside the major who looked up, startled. Klink would never be able to tell what came over him, as he pulled Hochstetter around with unusual strength and punched the Gestapo-officer’s jaw hard enough to send the major stumbling backwards. Without giving him a chance to recover, Klink closed the small distance to the other man, gripped his collar with his left hand and with a low growl in his throat delivered another blow to Hochstetter’s chin with all the strength he could muster; losing his cap in the process.

With a mixture of a grunt and yelp, Hochstetter tumbled to the ground – sprawled out for once like a fallen doll, unable to move.

“Hogan!” Klink whirled around and caught the bleeding, partly wet figure that was sinking down along the basin’s wall. Catching the colonel, he carefully lowered him onto the floor; his hands moved frantically over the younger man’s body in search for signs of life.

He could feel some shivers, convulsions, trembles… Then something like a sob and desperate attempt to breathe wracked the American’s body. So, Hogan wasn’t…

“Someone cut his ties!” Klink shouted, already pressing his hands against the colonel’s back to make
him spit out the water he had inhaled. With dread he recognized the blood that seeped in stripes through Hogan’s shirt; knowing from what it resulted. Yet his priority was to proceed with any life-support as quickly as possible.

There was movement to his right, then Leutnant Schmidt knelt down beside them and cut Hogan’s ties with the dagger that often belonged to the SS-uniforms of officers. Not hesitating a moment, Klink turned the American around on his back. He gasped in shock as he barely recognized Hogan’s features because of all the bruises, then rationality kicked in like it had rarely done before. Opening Hogan’s mouth, Klink pinched the other man’s nose with one hand, pressed his mouth over the American’s and forced oxygen into his lungs, before he sat up and began the life-giving pressure. Eight-nine-ten times he pressed both hands down on the also bleeding chest beneath him, then he repeated the mouth-to-mouth respiration.

“Come on, Hogan, don’t give up!” he panted. “Don’t you dare die on me!”

The same moment he heard Schultz shouting, “I would stay where you are if I were you!” He saw movement at the edge of his vision, just before Hogan’s body reared up and the first water was spilled out of the colonel’s mouth.

“That’s it! Spit it out, Hogan. Come on, Robert, do it for me!” he urged; trusting Schultz to control the situation.

Again, he forced air into the younger man’s lungs, and finally Hogan got coughing fits and began to disgorge. Not giving a damn about anything else, Klink pulled the colonel’s upper body up a little bit and turned the younger man on his side; pressing one hand against his beloved’s back. A hoarse whimper escaped the American while he kept spilling out more and more water, interrupted by hectic breathing attempts and convulsing heaves.

Hogan didn’t know what was happening. His mind had retreated the moment he realized that he was really dying. There had been nothing more than the cold pressure in his lungs and the darkness that had begun engulfing him. Then there had been shouts, more pain and someone was sobbing. He didn’t even realize that the latter was him. Every clear thought had left him, yet his body reacted at the chance to get rid of the water. It felt like his inner being was turned to the outside while burning agony spread through his chest. He wanted to scream, beg anybody to stop the pain, but he couldn’t speak. There was no other urge than to breathe but his body didn’t allow it because of the water he had to spit. Despite the fact that his mind didn’t work, new panic woke in him and…

“Calm down, Robert, just try to breathe!”
That voice – it reached something in him. Somehow on the edge of his conscious mind he knew that he could trust this voice. Then he felt gentle hands moving over his burning back, while the voice above him continued urgently, yet softly,


Klink continued to instruct the younger man to breathe with him in unison. It seemed to last forever, in truth it wasn’t more than a minute in which Hogan’s lungs forced out the water while trying to catch some oxygen, and Klink did his best to help him. Then, at last, the gurgling and spitting stopped, while the gasps and pants increased. Hogan began to tremble like a leaf in the wind, while his wheezing turned into heart-wrenching sobs…

Not hesitating a moment, Klink stripped out of his coat and wrapped it around the colonel, before he turned him gently around. For a moment he met the utterly confused, yet desperate, fearful and pleading look of the one eye that was still visible and Klink felt his heart going out to the man he loved, before he gathered him into his arms – trying to give him some comfort. Cradling Hogan like a little boy in his left arm (ignoring the pain as some of his stitches were torn) he cupped the blood-smeared and wet head in his right hand and pulled the colonel’s face into the crook of his neck; alarmed at how cold Hogan was. He knew that the younger man was about to go into shock and warmth was the most important thing now.

“Sh-sh, Robert, I’ve got you,” he whispered; holding the other man close to him to offer him some of his own body-heat – just like Hogan had done with him two nights prior. He didn’t care that his own uniform jacket and shirt were soaked through or that his two wounds had begun stinging madly. There was nothing else important in the moment but Robert, who was sprawled over his lap and into his arms. “Don’t fear, it’s over now. I have you. Calm down, Hogan, calm down. No one will hurt you again.” He wanted to cuddle, to kiss the most important person in his life, but he knew that he couldn’t. Not without signing both their death-sentences.

“Stay where you are – everyone, or I’ll shoot him first! Don’t think I’ll miss on such short distance!”

Schultz’ furious voice woke Klink’s attention and, alerted, he looked up; ready to draw his pistol and fight everyone who would dare come near him and Hogan. But there was no need for any defense. The Sergeant of the Guards had his rifle pointed at Hochstetter, who had sat up and obviously had gripped for his pistol but didn’t dare do anything more because of the weapon that was aimed at him. Schultz stood almost between his Kommandant, the American and the major like a tower of strength, and Klink didn’t doubt that the large Bavarian would indeed pull the trigger if it came to the worst. As kind-hearted and soft-spirited as Schultz was, he also could develop real wrath at certain circumstances – especially when his protective instincts got the better of him. And the latter had just happened now.
Half aside stood Schmidt; his face betrayed the disgust he felt. His right hand rested on the handle of his own pistole while he alternatively fixed the two guards and Hochstetter with his gaze.

The major still rubbed his hurting jaw; stunned that Klink not only had wits enough to attack him, but also had proved a physical strength he had never thought the Oberst possessed. With narrowed eyes he stared at Klink who held Hogan in a protective half-embrace while obviously comforting him. Hochstetter had felt how the colonel’s struggles died away together with his life – and then…

“I knew it,” he growled; eyes bright with hate. “I knew that you and Hogan are in cahoots with each other, Klink! You’ll be shot for this betrayal.”

Klink’s gaze wandered slowly towards him – and Hochstetter tensed in surprise as he saw the fierce burning in the other man’s eyes.

“You’ll pay for this,” Klink whispered harshly; tightening his grip around Hogan gently as he felt the younger man’s trembling worsening. “You’ll pay for what you did to him. Hogan may be a prisoner of war, but he is a thousand times a better man than you will ever be! What you did was uncalled for. A brutal crime beyond any imagination – something bare of any humanity.”

“We can’t afford to show humanity,” the major snapped.

“’We’?” Klink echoed with a sneer.

“The Third Reich, the Führer, our…”

“A country – a leader – without humanity is hell’s precipice! Men like you have changed our Fatherland into this dark mess that costs thousands of lives day by day! To torture and try to kill a man has become nothing to you. But not in this special case, right? What you did to Hogan has nothing to do with our land or the regime – or with your mere surmises concerning him – but only and purely with your personal desire for revenge!” the Oberst shouted.

Klink took a deep breath as he heard a muffled sound from the shaking bundle in his arms and lowered his head until his lips were beside Hogan’s ear. “Sh-sh, Robert, it’s okay. It’s only me. Don’t fret, you’re safe now.”
“Hogan is an Underground-agent – a man who has killed dozens of our soldiers. And you defend him and call him a good man? You’re a traitor, Klink, but I knew this for a long time now,” Hochstetter snarled and began to rise, but the rifle that was shoved almost beneath his chin, made him stop. “Sergeant Schultz, lower your weapon – now!” he ordered sharply.

“No!” Schultz snapped back. He was shocked about Hogan’s condition, and his deep-rooted protective instincts were fully awake. “Due all respect towards your rank, Herr Major, but you’ve done enough. I will not allow you to harm Colonel Hogan even more – or Oberst Klink.”

“I’ll send you to court-martial – or directly to the firing squad!” Hochstetter shouted furiously.

“Only General Burkhalter can do this,” the sergeant answered strongly. “And I doubt that he will take such a step, after all I am only protecting my superior officer against someone who has obviously turned insane and is therefore dangerous.”

The same moment voices became louder from outside the room and steps drew nearer hectically.

“Out of my way! How dare you try to stop me!”

Klink looked towards the door; relief and satisfaction washed over him. He knew this voice well enough.

A moment later, General Burkhalter appeared in the doorway; his driver on his heels. The general stopped dead in his tracks – taking in the scene in front of him. Hochstetter crouched on the floor and his jaw was beginning to sport a red bruise. Schultz – Schultz! – stood in front of him and kept him in check with a rifle, a Leutnant and two guards of the SS didn’t seem to know what to do, while Klink knelt on the ground and gathered someone close to him who was wrapped into a Luftwaffe-coat.

“What is going on here?” he demanded, while entering the room.

“General Burkhalter, your timing couldn’t be better,” Klink greeted him; face and voice hard.

“Klink, I thought you were in hospital,” Burkhalter frowned.
“I’m needed here,” the Oberst answered brusquely.

Their eyes met, and the general lifted both brows as he saw the rage flashing in the Kommandant’s glance. There was no trace of the foolish uncertainty the Oberst displayed most of the times his superior was around. Just right now he seemed to be made of steel. Burkhalter frowned. He couldn’t remember that he had ever seen the gauche man like this.

His gaze found the basin – he knew what it was used for – then his gaze followed the wet track that led to the man Klink shielded in his arms, saw the dark hair of the person whose face was pressed into the crook of Klink’s neck and…

Assuming the worst, Burkhalter quickly walked towards the Oberst. “Don’t tell me…,” he began while lowering himself ponderously on one knee and reaching out to the collar of the heavy coat that covered the man. Pulling the material away carefully, he gasped as he saw his thoughts confirmed.

Shocked, he took in the bruised face he saw only a part of, and the blood that partly soaked the wet, sandy uniform shirt. He heard the hollow breaths, felt the colonel’s trembling and as he awkwardly brushed two fingers against the American’s exposed neck that was also bruised, he became aware of the other man’s cold skin. What could be seen of Robert Hogan was enough to show him what the man had been through within the last day, and something close to sympathy woke in him. This and hot anger, because one thing was also very clear: Someone had attempted to drown the colonel only minutes ago – against his orders not to pester the adversarial officer more than had already been done. And Burkhalter knew exactly who this ‘someone’ was!

“Hogan, can you hear me?” he asked quietly, but the only reaction he received was that the colonel shivered even more. Covering the American carefully with the cloak again, he met Klink’s eyes, ready to demand some answers. But what he saw made him draw back an inch; thunderstruck.

Tensed like a bow ready to let an arrow fly, pale, with fury on his face and fierce defiance in his eyes there seemed to be nothing left of the backbone-less man he had come to know over the last years. This here wasn’t the vain, cowardly, babbling Stalag-Kommandant he always had regarded as a shame for the whole German officer-staff. It seemed as if something had taken years off the Oberst and had changed him into someone Burkhalter had never met before. This here was the man Klink had maybe been during the Great War. A man with strength, courage and determination.

And Albert Burkhalter realized that the ‘Iron Eagle’ had arisen anew – taking flight like a phoenix from the ashes WW II had almost burnt him to…

His gaze found Klink’s right hand and he saw the bruised knuckles. He knew now who had socked
Hochstetter, and for the first time ever, Burkhalter felt respect towards the lower-ranking officer. As it seemed, Klink had outgrown himself a lot – not only two days ago, but also a few minutes ago. He gave the Oberst one short nod. It was a promise – a promise to do what had to be done and ask questions later.

Rising with a wheeze – God, he really should lose some weight! – he turned around. “Sergeant Schultz, lower your weapon. I don’t think Major Hochstetter will be foolish enough to get himself into even deeper trouble than he already is.”

“Jawohl, Herr General,” Schultz nodded and stepped back; making room for his highest ranking superior.

Finally, Hochstetter was able to rise and, throwing an evil glare at Schultz, he straightened his uniform and frame. “General Burkhalter, I…”

“Shut up!” Burkhalter snapped. He took a deep breath before he snarled, “Have you gone completely mad? Hogan is a prisoner of the Luftwaffe and if you have some accusations against him, you first have to contact me before you make any steps – and especially before you brutalize someone like this!”

“Herr General, I…”

“I don’t know which part of the order Sergeant Diekmann delivered in my name was mistakable, but I really thought the command ‘stop any interrogation of Colonel Hogan until I’m in Hammelburg’ didn’t need any detailed explanations! And to my knowledge this order finally reached you a quarter hour ago – but this man was just waterboarded almost to death only two or three minutes ago. What defense do you have for this kind of insubordination before I take you into custody?” The last two sentences were shouted, while the general’s face flushed in sheer irritation.

Hochstetter moistened his lips, before he replied, “I have gained so much proof of Hogan being an active Underground-agent that every lawyer in the world would find him guilty.” He placed his left hand on the belt in his typical gesture, while pointing at Hogan with his right hand that shook in wrath. “He is responsible for dozens of sabotages within the area. The destruction of a whole bombers-squadron, the destruction of plants in the area which were important for the war, the sabotages of railways so that any ordnances and needed supplies for our men at the fronts were cut off. The explosions of three bridges which served us for the same need – everything was planned and mostly done by this man!”

“Proof?” Burkhalter demanded. “Besides your general assumptions you have had for two years now
because you can’t stand him?"

“It begins with the fact that Hogan can leave and return to the camp whenever he wants.”

“Bullshit!” Klink hissed; cupping Hogan’s head with his right hand in an unconscious gesture of further protection. “No-one escapes Stalag 13 – except when my men are not in charge of the camp, just like now!”

“They are fooling you, Klink!” Hochstetter yelled. “Hogan and his men are acting up with you. You are only too blind to see it – or you’re conspiring with them.”

“Major Hochstetter,” Burkhalter warned. “Oberst Klink may have a leading style that confuses even me from time to time, but you just accused a loyal German officer of being a traitor. I strongly advise you to have some proof for it – or for your statement that a POW is an active spy and saboteur.”

The Gestapo-officer gritted his teeth for a moment, before he growled, “Hogan has been seen by at least two witnesses during criminal deeds outside of Stalag 13 – the last time only a few days ago in Hammelburg!”

Burkhalter pursed his lips and turned slowly around towards Klink and Hogan – the latter didn’t react at all. The general assumed that the American was going into shock and knew that the colonel had to be taken care of as soon as possible. Yet the accusation...

“Hogan was in Hammelburg? When?” Klink asked; pulling Robert even closer to him by pure instinct. He would not allow Hochstetter’s crazy ideas to become a threat for Hogan again. He heard a small muffled sound escaping the younger man in his arms and needed every ounce of his self-control to ignore it. Every part of his being wanted to soothe and comfort Hogan, but he couldn’t give into his urges – not in Burkhalter’s, Hochstetter’s and the others’ presence.

Hochstetter was too much in rage to realize that he gave away his unwillingness to check the colonel’s alibi, as he snapped. “Five days ago in the late evening, he was seen taking documents from another man who is a known Underground-member and then vanished into a southern direction where Stalag 13 is located. A citizen saw him clearly,” the major said triumphantly. “Well, Klink, what do you say now?”

“We are speaking of last Monday, right?” Klink wanted to clarify.
“Yes,” Hochstetter nodded. Then he saw the Oberst’s face flushing in fury and he realized his mistake. But it was too late.

“You cocky, royal stupid fool,” Klink whispered, then wrath overwhelmed him. “You rotten bastard!” he shouted. “Hogan and I played chess last Monday the whole evening ‘till late at night! I personally accompanied him to his barracks at two o’clock in the morning.”

“Two o’clock in the morning?” Burkhalter asked, thunderstruck. Had Klink ever heard of something called a curfew within a POW-camp after eight o’clock in the evening? Yet he didn’t say anything more, because the Oberst continued to rage,

“Whoever this man your ‘witness’ saw was, IT COULND’T HAVE BEEN HOGAN! A dozen of my guards can confirm that I accompanied him this late at night from my quarters to Barracks 2. And because of this ‘witness’s’ false statement you tortured Hogan like a Spanish Inquisitor an assumed witch in the Middle Ages? You should rot in hell, you sick son of a bastard!”

“Have you confronted Colonel Hogan with your accusations in detail?” Burkhalter asked the major sternly; baffled about Klink’s outburst. Sweet Lord, what was going on with the usual weakling?

“I told him bluntly what I found out and demanded an admission, but he denied any cooperation,” Hochstetter replied arrogantly.

“Are you really trying to tell me that Hogan didn’t even speak about the chess-matches with Klink, and rather let himself be tortured instead of presenting you with an alibi?” Burkhalter sneered; eyes small. Yes, to be out of barracks at this late time was against the rules, but certainly not worth enduring torture to keep it a secret.

“Colonel Hogan asked – pleaded – the major to speak with Oberst Klink about it a short time ago,” Leutnant Schmidt cut in. “I heard it with my own ears.”

“Shut up, Schmidt!” Hochstetter snapped. “You are not allowed…”

“Let the man speak!” Burkhalter ordered coldly, before he looked at the young man. “Please continue, Herr Leutnant.”

“I received the last call of your assistant, Herr General, and went to the cellars to get Major
Hochstetter. I came into the neighboring room of this one here the moment the major demanded from the colonel to tell him with whom he met in Hammelburg. I heard the colonel telling him, obviously for the uncounted time, that he had played chess with the Oberst the whole evening the incident took place and practically begged the major to contact the Oberst – but Major Hochstetter refused to do so.” His gaze found the major, who was trembling with wrath by now. “The colonel also mentioned that he saved the major’s life last year and whether this torment was the major’s display of gratitude, but Major Hochstetter replied that personal feelings couldn’t get in the way – but, as far as I’m able to comprehend the whole affair, it is utterly personal. At least the major let himself be ruled by his feelings of hatred during the whole ‘questioning’.”

Burkhalter watched him for a few seconds more, concluded that the young man spoke nothing else than the sheer truth – which needed a lot of bravery in the given situation – took a deep breath and turned his attention back to Hochstetter. “We two will have a serious talk in your office.” He made a sharp gesture with his right hand as the Gestapo-officer opened his mouth to protest. “I don’t want to hear anything else until then.”

He turned around and looked down on the still heavily breathing and quivering figure in Klink’s arms. He could only imagine what all had been done to Hogan, but it was enough to make him sick. In one regard Hochstetter had been right: If you know someone personally for a long time, this someone – even an enemy officer – became a person and from there it was only a little step to develop empathy.

“Klink, take Hogan back to the camp and make sure that he is attended to. I want a detailed report of his condition when I arrive.”

“Yes,” was all the Oberst said, before he turned towards his Sergeant of the Guards. “Schultz, help me get him to the car.”

“With your permission, Herr General, I’ll lend the sergeant a hand,” Schmidt offered.

“This you do, young man,” Burkhalter nodded. “And please continue to be available afterwards. I have a few further questions for you.”

“Jawohl, Herr General.” Schmidt saluted and then went to Klink. He bent down and carefully helped to raise Hogan to his feet. The colonel’s legs gave out instantly, and Schmidt quickly caught him. The next moment Klink had risen, too, gently curled one of Hogan’s arms around his neck and his own arm around the younger man’s waist, while Schmidt did the same on the other side. A low moan escaped the American, before he coughed violently and breathed harshly and hollowly.
“Hogan, hold on,” Klink said softly. “Just try to move your legs, we’ll take you out of here.”

They more carried the colonel than he was able to walk; his knees gave in again half the way up the staircase. Klink caught him again and gritted his teeth as he felt moisture running down his left calf as the stitches were torn because of the effort, but he controlled the pain. He could take care of himself later – Robert was in far more urgent need now. He heard Schultz following them and called over his shoulder,

“Schultz, hurry to the car, start the motor and switch on the heating system. Hogan is in shock and needs warmth more than anything else at the moment. And as soon as we’re in the car head straight for the camp. I want to have Hogan there yesterday.”

“I’m on my way,” the large sergeant said. While he used the room to Klink’s left side to overtake the three men, he offered Klink the lost cap, who simply took it and put it on Hogan’s head to cover his wet hair from the icy air that would greet them the moment they left the building. Then Schultz ran towards the entrance with surprising speed given his oversized figure.

“Corporal Nolte?” Schmidt shouted as they reached the ground-level and a young SS-guard left an office just that moment. “Get a woolen blanket from one of the spare beds and bring it out to the Oberst Klink’s staff-car. Hurry!”

“Jawohl, Herr Leutnant!” If the young man was baffled or not remained a secret, because he had his features completely under control while he raced down the hallway deeper into the building.

While another guard opened the entrance, Klink removed his scarf with one hand and wrapped it with Schmidt’s help around Hogan’s neck to offer him even more protection against the wintry weather. Behind Klink’s car Burkhalter’s car was parked but the Oberst didn’t waste more than a short glance at it.

To take Hogan to the car over the icy ground was anything but easy, but Schmidt proved that he was a strong man and carried most of the colonel’s weight. Carefully, they lowered the American on the backseat, while the corporal appeared with the demanded blanket.

“As far as I could see he has some broken ribs on the left side,” Schmidt told Klink, who pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded wordlessly. He hoped that he hadn’t caused Hogan further problems while pressing the water out of his lungs. Broken ribs presented their own dangers – like puncturing the lungs.
With the corporal’s help they steered Hogan on the middle part of the backseats, before Klink slipped into the car, too – taking care that he was seated on the colonel’s right side to avoid coming in contact with the younger man’s broken ribs. Schmidt spread the blanket out over the two men – having realized by now that the Oberst sported at least a nasty cold and was in need of warmth just like the American officer.

As he was about to pull out of the car he had bent into, Klink put a hand on his arm and looked up at him. Seeing that the SS-corporal headed back to the building and was out of earshot, he said quietly,

“Thank you, Leutnant Schmidt. I didn’t think that there were still some honorable men left within the SS.”

“I belonged to the Abwehr – but you know what happened to the unit last year,” Schmidt answered quietly.

Klink nodded slowly. The Leutnant’s statement told him a lot. “Yet it was very brave what you did – and human. If you ever need any help, let me know.”

“Thank you, Herr Oberst.”

Schmidt closed the door and stepped back. He watched as the staff-car left the parking space and steered out into the street, where it sped up. ‘God luck, Colonel Hogan,’ he thought, then he turned around and was about to head back to the entrance, as he saw a movement at the edge of the next cross-road. He saw a man with a surprisingly tiny shape, who had wrapped his arms around himself and stared with big eyes at the leaving staff-car. Then he became aware of the Leutnant, greeted with a short nod, and continued his way by crossing the street – heading towards the opposite direction.

Shrugging his shoulders – obviously a first worker on his way to one of the two remaining factories in town – Schmidt returned to the headquarters; hoping that the Luftwaffe-general would take the mad major with him.

*** HH ***

Louis LeBeau wasn’t a very patient man. He knew this, and he knew that it was a weakness. Additionally he possessed a lot of temper – a combination that had often brought him trouble. But within the last quarter hour he thought he would lose his mind. How long could it take until Klink had gotten Hogan out? How much time did this German fool need until he would show up again –
with Hogan, of course?

Stamping on the spot to keep himself warm, LeBeau waited and waited – but no gray staff-car came along the street.

Finally, sick with worry that everything had gone wrong, he began to walk down the street Klink’s car had taken, arrived at a crossroads and looked to his right. He knew the Gestapo-Headquarters and was relieved to see the building only fifty meters away. But not only the HQ, but also two cars and three persons, which went to one of the vehicles. Better to say – two persons walked and a third one was more or less carried between them. The man was wrapped in a Luftwaffe-coat and wore a Luftwaffe-officer’s cap, but LeBeau couldn’t be fooled. He knew it was Hogan. Beside him was Klink – supporting him, while a SS-officer helped to get the colonel in the car.

The little Frenchman gulped as he realized that Hogan was unable to move on his own but had to be placed on the car’s backseat. Another SS-man came and brought a blanket. The massive shape of Schultz vanished behind the wheel and half a minute later the staff-car drove away with a speed that was almost dangerous given the street’s condition. LeBeau thought it would turn around to pick him up like it was agreed, but it turned at the next corner in the opposite direction – clearly heading back to Stalag 13.

“And what about me?” LeBeau groused quietly. Then he saw that the SS-officer had become aware of him. Well, the curfew was certainly finished, yet Louis didn’t want to take any risk. Crossing his arms in front of him and giving the German a polite greeting, he began to walk down the street like he had a purpose, but wasn’t in a hurry. As he reached the next corner he carefully peeked back over his shoulder. The SS-officer was nowhere to be seen and the street was empty.

Sighing, he grimaced. “Superb. Now I can walk back to the camp,” he grumbled, then he almost kicked himself. He only had to face a longer walk but Hogan had been through hell. He hadn’t seen much of his superior officer and friend, but that he had to be supported and had been unable to use his own legs spoke volumes. LeBeau didn’t dare think closer of what had been done to the colonel, and fury woke in him – a rage that gave him strength.

With determined steps he began to walk down the street. He knew a shorter way out of town before he would tramp down the road to Stalag 13. And he didn’t care who would see him on his way.

TBC…

So, Hogan has been finally rescued, but he’s going to face a long, hard way of healing. Of course his friends and Klink are there for him – and especially ‘Willie’ is determined to nurse him back to
health – but given Hogan’s physical and mental condition the suffering isn’t over. Yet I can already promise you several sweet scenes.

And there is still the danger of everything Hochstetter learned until now or has concluded. And he will try everything to convince Burkhalter that he has been right about Papa Bear the whole time.

This and a first sweet scene will be in the next chapter that comes at the weekend.

I hope that Hogan’s rescue was to your liking, and that your hopes and wishes were fulfilled. Like I already informed in the plot-description, Klink would overgrow himself for Hogan and I imagined how the gauche Kommandant becomes the ‘Iron Eagle’ again – someone who finally gets his backbone back and makes a kind of rebirth like a phoenix who does for once what is right – and will continue to do so.

I also loved to write the moment Hochstetter finally is punched and pushed to the place where he belongs. It also was fun to write about Burkhalter’s shock as he realized that ‘Coward Klink’ has become ‘Warrior Klink’. Well, never underestimate a man who is pushed too far and has to protect those he loves…

I’m always curious what you think of the chapters, but this one is game-changing for the rest of the story (and the war), and I really would love to know how you liked it.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

I knew that the last chapter would elicit an emotional rollercoaster and given the feedback I was right. I loved to write those scenes and I’m glad that you liked it so much.

I think the new chapter will fulfill the one’s or other’s dream/wish – just look at the title (*snicker*). This is certainly something the most of us wanted to happen during the TV-show, after all Hochstetter is really the biggest pain in the a… (you know the word). A little disclaimer: In this chapter a real historical person is mentioned and has an inactive role at the phone.

But there is also a very sweet scene in the beginning, and I hope you’re going to love it.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 13 – Hochstetter’s fall

Klink sat in the right backseat of the staff-car and didn’t pay any attention to Schultz speeding the car down the street. Hogan leant heavily against him – head against the Oberst’s shoulder, eyes closed, breath still raspy. The moment the car had begun to move, Klink had forgone all caution and had given into his urges to comfort the younger man in any way possible. Carefully as to not inflict even more pain on Hogan, he had wrapped both arms around the colonel and softly held him close – taking care that the blanket covered the American. Leaning his own head gently against Hogan’s, which made the cap slide away, he whispered words of solace.

Hogan still trembled – with coldness, pain and shock – yet he seemed to have calmed down somewhat. Maybe the icy yet fresh air had helped him, or his mind had somehow realized that the danger was over. In any case he wasn’t panicking anymore, yet Klink assumed that only a little thing would be enough to send the younger man over the edge again.
And he was right about his assumption.

Hogan didn’t really know where he was or what was happening to him. His mind was still numb as even the hard training he had undergone before he started his mission in Germany didn’t kick in this time. Everything around him was foggy and surreal. Everything hurt, everything was cold, everything was dark and…

And then long arms enveloped him carefully and tenderly. He thought he could feel another body half beneath his own – solid, warm and inviting. A heartbeat thumbed gently near his ear, while a hand began to cup his left cheek and stroke lovingly over the bruised skin. He forced his eyes open but could see nothing else than something that seemed to be a window with movements behind it and there was blue at the edge of his sight. He thought he heard a whimper – and just like before in the cellars he didn’t realize that the sounds were made by him.

“Sh-sh, hon, you’re going to be okay. You’re safe now. I know everything hurts, but it will be better soon. I promise.”

He knew this voice. He had heard it before – after the coldness and darkness enveloped and devoured him. He had heard it afterwards, as there was some light and warmth again, yet he hadn’t been able to breathe and…

Breathe…

He could still breathe, couldn’t he? Fearing that air would be cut off again, he tried to gulp as much oxygen into his body as quickly as possible. He became dizzy and nauseous, then the voice was back.

“Hush, Robert, there is no need to panic. You are safe now – enough air to breathe, no more pain, no threats.” Something warm, gentle and utterly soft touched his left temple – a pair of lips.

A kiss.

A kiss was a good thing – it meant safety, belonging, love… Things which had been denied him, but were now given back. He felt the dread begin to retreat as the gentle lips remained – speaking of affection, security and protection. His tensed muscles gave in and he wasn’t aware that he all but melted into those long arms and the warm body beneath him. Something whispered at the edge of his
mind; that he had to be strong and that he had to fight, but his soul outgrew his deeply rooted sense of responsibility for once and relished in the tender comfort that was offered to him. The almost three years of being permanently in danger, risking the lives of his men and his own day by day, and the fact that so many people depended on him, were finally taking their toll. And now, for once, he gave into his wish of letting go.

Klink could sense how much Hogan was yearning for physical and psychical warmth – the knowledge of being safe. And, to say the truth, he needed to feel Hogan being alive just like the colonel needed a safe harbor in return.

The Oberst knew that he had come in at the very last moment. A minute more and Hogan would have been too far gone to be brought back. Hogan would be dead now – drowned like an animal by a man who had always been a madman in the Kommandant’s eyes, but now Klink regarded the Gestapo-officer as a monster. No sane human with an intact soul left could do what the major had done to Hogan – to another human being.

Klink felt sick to his stomach when he thought of the many injuries which had been inflicted on the colonel – and he knew he had only seen a part of them. Given the state Hogan was in, Klink realized that his American counterpart had been brought to his limits and he prayed that Robert hadn’t been pushed over his breaking point. He wouldn’t bear it to see the cheerful, clever, witty and boyish man broken.

Then he heard Hogan’s breathing quicken up again, and he sensed the returning panic even before the colonel began to heave for air. Having been interested in medicine since he was a boy, Klink had read some articles about people who had almost drowned and knew that they often got anxiety attacks shortly after the almost deadly experience. It was a trauma the Oberst hoped Hogan would overcome within the next hours – or days – otherwise the colonel’s mind would need to heal very much longer.

Cocking his head to have a look at the American’s half visible face and the good eye, he saw horror shimmering in the dark orb and pulled the younger man closer to himself. Whispering further words of caring, he gave into the most natural impulse and pressed his mouth against Hogan’s icy and still damp temple; moving his lips gently and slowly to transfer peace and love towards the one who held his heart. He didn’t care that maybe he was giving himself away should Hogan be more aware of his surroundings than assumed. All that mattered was soothing the man he loved.

And then he felt the tense muscles relax and something close to relief rushed through him as Hogan’s full weight was pressed against him. Robert was calming down – finally. Combing the fingers of his right hand gently through the wet dark strands and ignoring the unpleasant burning of his bruised knuckles, he brushed a second kiss against the younger man’s cheek this time, murmuring further words of comfort. He heard Hogan sigh, cradled his head in his hand and rocked the other man very softly. He knew from his own experiences in his teens that this helped a lot.
Schultz grumbled something like ‘damn snowy road’ and, remembering that he wasn’t alone, Klink looked up. His and Schultz’ gaze met in the rear-view mirror.

The sergeant’s eyes shone with understanding and compassion before they returned straight towards the street. Klink knew that Schultz would stay silent about this little slip of caution, and he was grateful for the other man’s good heart. There weren’t many people who would tolerate the Kommandant’s feelings towards someone of the same gender – and above all towards a POW who was even under suspicion of being a spy and saboteur.

Klink pursed his lips as he thought about the reason for this whole mess.

Hochstetter had mainly pointed out Hogan’s alleged visit in Hammelburg last Monday, but this was only one incident of a lot the major referred to earlier. Contrary to what his superior and other officers thought, Klink wasn’t stupid. He was well aware that many very odd things happened in the area – or that Hogan was somehow involved in the strangest things which were going on in the camp.

Klink remembered the mass-escape when he was on holiday and he was barely back, all escapees returned as if nothing happened – and he, Klink, could keep his position that had been at stake because of his temporary substitute Oberst Krüger who led the camp with a real iron fist and wanted to oust Klink. The latter turned into thin smoke after 30 POWs escaped. Well, giving it all a second thought and recalling Burkhalter’s grousing afterwards, there certainly had been a further reason for this ‘mass-escape’ and sudden return. It had bound the whole 6th SS-Division for days, which delayed their next mission – an operation that was later lost because the Allies had rebuilt adequate reinforcements when the confrontation finally took place. Maybe stalling the 6th Division’s leave had been the real intention, yet it also had saved his – Klink’s – position.

And there were more incidents in which Klink had escaped a transfer to the Russian Front by a hair’s breadth. Whenever the Oberst was in need of gaining the better regard of Burkhalter or other staff officers, something weird happened that made the Kommandant shine in a better light – and Hogan almost always pulled the strings.

Then there were the moments when Hogan warned him or told him of something that would happen within the next minutes and said thing became promptly real. Or people, who were a danger to Klink, simply vanished on their way back to Berlin.

And there had been the few times Hogan had acted outside of the camp – directly in front of Klink’s eyes. All right, most of the times the Oberst had even given his permission for it, but there had also
been incidents in which the American had taken an active part in things outside of Stalag 13 of which Klink learned by simple accident.

One of those events were still very fresh in his mind, and it had given him sleepless nights afterwards.

Almost a year prior he had been more or less blackmailed by two SS-officers who demanded 5000 Marks as a donation for a project Hitler planned for Berchtesgaden, otherwise they would put him on the ‘black list’ – a list that would hold the names of those officers who didn’t ‘support’ the Führer. What this meant could be counted on two fingers. Of course, Klink did not have 5000 Marks left and he had already expected himself being arrested soon because of made-up reasons. And then Hogan, wearing an uniform of the *Luftwaffe*, had shown up at the *Hofbräu* where Klink was ordered to meet the two officers for the handover, and the American had given them the 5000 Marks. Like this the *Oberst* had learned that Hogan – Major Hoople, as he was introduced – had not only left the camp without Klink’s knowledge, but Carter, Newkirk and LeBeau had been there, too. Of course, Klink had been glad that Hogan had saved him by paying the two SS-officers – even if he still hadn’t the foggiest idea how the colonel got all this money – yet he had gotten some serious thoughts about Hogan’s abilities.

At this evening Klink had been forced to admit that his senior POW officer really was able to do everything to his liking. Schultz’ and Hogan’s explanation that they wanted to help Klink by letting the POWs work at the *Hofbräu* for money was so transparent, Klink didn’t know if he should be offended or amused. After all, the two SS-men had only shown up at Stalag 13 the day prior, and three or four men couldn’t earn so much money within one or two evenings by serving in a restaurant – and it also didn’t explain why Hogan wore a German uniform. Klink had decided to let the subject drop and had dismissed the two – not handing over Hogan to the Gestapo for espionage and for wearing the *Luftwaffe*-uniform the American had borrowed.

Borrowed for one evening…

Ha, how laughable. As if you could ‘borrow’ an uniform. And, by the way, how could Hogan have borrowed the uniform for one evening, when the two SS-rats seemed to have known him for longer – at least from the evening prior? That made two evenings at least Hogan had run around in a German uniform and…

Klink groaned.

This was another odd story that belonged to the long list the *Oberst* had made for himself concerning Hogan and his ‘activities’.
No POW – no matter the rank – should be able to do what Hogan did.

And all this allowed only one conclusion: Hogan was no ‘simple’ POW.

Too many things spoke for Hochstetter’s theory to be true.

Yet Klink didn’t care!

Even if Hogan was indeed a spy and saboteur, Klink had not and would not reveal him.

He would protect Hogan, no matter what. Not only because the colonel had supported him or saved his neck a dozen times and more, or because Hogan had captured his heart. No. Whatever Hogan was for real, one thing outmatched everything: He was a good man. Someone who didn’t judge people by their heritage – or uniform – but by their personality. Hogan was his friend – maybe the only friend he had next to Schultz. Yes, he longed for more concerning the younger man, but he didn’t believe that this wish would ever come true, and therefore he valued the American’s friendship far more than he should, given both their positions.

It certainly would be Klink’s duty to report all the odd events and things which had happened within the last three years – especially under the regard of the newest accusations – but in this case his mouth was sealed. He would keep Hogan out of danger – and if Hochstetter would come to his camp ever again, he would show him what he thought of human monsters.

Tightening his gentle hold around Hogan and leaning his head again against the still wet dark strands, he closed his eyes – allowing himself and the man he loved some moments of rest.

*** HH *** HH ***

“You see, Herr General, all these pieces of evidence lead to only one conclusion: Hogan is an active Underground-agent. And I bet my last shirt that he is also Papa Bear!” Hochstetter stood in front of his own desk like a visitor, while Burkhalter sat on the major’s desk-chair – hands folded on the desktop, fat face flushed with anger, eyes small.

Hochstetter had told him everything he had gathered of information concerning Hogan’s supposed missions – of which most was true. Yet the major had no real proof that it was indeed the American colonel who was behind all these incidents. And without ironclad proof his doings within the last one
and a half day weren’t legitimate. Hell, they were crimes, no matter that he acted with the Third Reich’s interest at heart. To go against the Geneva Convention was regarded as an impossibility – at least by those officers who still had some honor and decency left.

There were certainly many people who would accuse Albert Burkhalter of many deeds – among them things which would be called war-crimes afterwards – but one thing didn’t belong to the general’s more than dubious activities: Dishonor. Like Klink, he was a child of the last century and, even if he hadn’t this much scruple – and empathy – like Stalag 13’s Kommandant had, Burkhalter had his limits. And what Hochstetter had done, had crossed the invisible line the general had drawn for himself.

“Let me get this straight, Herr Major,” he said. “You summed all acts of sabotage and espionage within the whole area, asked for descriptions of the saboteurs and every time one of them had dark hair and eyes, and was about 1,80 m tall, it automatically had to be Hogan.”

“Sir, Major Pruhst already reached this conclusion parallel with me, while I…”

“Major Pruhst, Hochstetter, had been ordered off Hogan’s neck even before he acted on his own a few weeks ago, disobeying direct orders,” Burkhalter snapped. “Like you, Pruhst had no proof that…”

“Sir, as I just told you, I spoke with the Feldmarschall’s son and this ominous Schafstein doesn’t even exist. The man who showed up on the party looked, spoke and acted like Hogan, because it was him! And this isn’t the only time Hogan was a part of operations outside of the camp. He was seen…”

“Like I already said, Herr Major, not every man who looks almost a little bit like Hogan IS Hogan. But that you instantly hop on this train, so to say, speaks volumes.” The general leant back in the chair; watching the smaller man carefully. “You are obsessed with him,” he stated.

“Because it is my damn duty to eliminate enemies of the Third Reich – no matter if they come from our own lines or from hostile countries,” Hochstetter gritted out; eyes glistening with wrath. “There have been so many odd things happening whenever Hogan was even officially involved, there is no doubt that he has also had his hands in events unofficially. You can’t deny that the man pulls every trick to reach his goal.”

“Proof is needed, Herr Major. I don’t know how often I have to repeat this,” Burkhalter sneered.
“Proof?” Hochstetter snorted. “Just remember the wedding of your own niece, Herr General. Count von Hertzel, a man who had defected and was already in the Gestapo’s custody in the Hausener Hof, vanished during a phony aircraft alert while the wedding party was happening – and Hogan was in the house! Hogan even stumbled into the count’s room and was caught by my men who had set up a trap to get the Count’s contact-man. Hogan said it was a misunderstanding – that he had mistaken the floor and searched for the room of your niece, because he had fetched a note-book that was needed by the tailor who would sew the gown for your niece. And who was the tailor? The damn Frenchman from Stalag 13, who is also known as a very good cook and – as Hogan once declared – also as a famous dance-teacher.”

“I’m sure you remember his latter ‘job’ very well, Hochstetter,” Burkhalter mocked, after all he had arrested the major for dancing with a POW – LeBeau, who taught Hochstetter how to dance. The general hadn’t forgotten the view the two showed down in the cooler. He had gotten nightmares afterwards.

Hochstetter made a face. “If you allow me the comment, Herr General, you over-reacted. I wanted to outdo Klink with his dancing-abilities to impress a certain lady, and Hogan told me that LeBeau was a famous dance-teacher back in France.” He huffed. “Of course it was Hogan who gave me the information – who else! And it got me a day in custody. This was certainly another trick of his to get rid of me so that he could continue one of his secret operations – no doubt!”

Burkhalter groaned. “And it didn’t occur to you that Hogan played this prank on you to get back at you for the many insults and accusations you hurl at him permanently?” He shook his head. “Really, Hochstetter, concerning you and Hogan I think sometimes I’m in kindergarten!”

“And what of Count von Hertzel, Herr General?” the major insisted on his suspicion. “He escaped during the wedding – a wedding with two brides if you would kindly remember. And both wore the same gown which had been tailored by the damn Frenchman, who belongs to Hogan’s gang. This has to ring a bell!”

Burkhalter pursed his lips. If you looked at the whole mess from this point of view, it really pointed at Hogan and his men getting the Count out of custody and away from the Gestapo. Yet…

“Have you ever caught Hogan red-handed on one his so-called ‘secret missions’?”

“Not in person – otherwise this damn Ami wouldn’t live anymore. But so many witnesses…”

“And this is exactly my point, Hochstetter! How many men with dark hair and eyes, taller than you, are living in Germany? How many members of the Wehrmacht, the SS and even the Gestapo have
defected to the enemy and therefore wear their uniform as a cover? How many spies has the enemy placed behind our lines who are approximately at the end of their thirties? You don’t know? No wonder, because no-one knows this! We are infiltrated, there is no doubt about it. However what I doubt is that a POW – even a clever one like Hogan – has an active part in all the espionage, sabotages and defections which are going on in our land. I have no high regard of Klink, but his record is flawless and therefore Hogan can’t…”

“Of course it is flawless – and there are two explanations for it: One, Hogan and his men return after every single mission because there is no better hideout and alibi possible than being an official POW in a camp. Or, two, Klink belongs to the conspirators and covers for Hogan. The more I think about it, I’m convinced that Klink indeed is in one boat with Hogan. Everything makes sense, so…”

The general’s face reddened. “Herr Major, I already warned you not to accuse a loyal officer of…”

Burkhalter’s highly irritated protest was interrupted by Hochstetter,

“Sir, we both suspected Klink to be an ally to the enemy a few times. Hell, one time we even thought that he was Nimrod, the master-spy. Even if those suspicions couldn’t be proven, there were also two times Klink was arrested and accused of high treason – three times even, if I count correctly by adding the time he was taken into custody in Paris. In Paris a mysterious agent spoke on his behalf – who also resembled Hogan a lot – and Klink was released from jail. And the two other times the charges were dropped, because Klink saved his accusers’ necks and even took part in a gunfight in his own camp. Klink – the biggest coward in the whole of Germany, who…”

“Who ran back into a shower of bullets only two days ago to save Colonel Hogan whom you had left to die!” Burkhalter snapped. “You ran away to hide in the woods, while Klink risked his life to prevent an indirect murder from taking place. I really ask myself, who the coward here is.”

“Bah!” Hochstetter threw his arms up. “Isn’t it more than curious that Klink wants to keep Hogan safe this desperately that he even risks his neck for him? He mutates to a bad parody of a ‘knight in shining armor’ when it comes to the damn Ami, and even has the nerve to stand up against the Gestapo.” He pointed at his jaw that was turning blue by now. “Just look what he did to me. Usually he quivers when I only glare at him, and now he punched me. Two times, even. He…”

“That Klink punched you was overdue after all the trouble you gave him until now, not to speak of the many hollow threats and insults you hurl at every possibility. I’m glad that Klink burst with anger, otherwise it would have been up to me to bring you down onto the next carpet,” Burkhalter growled. “What you did to Hogan crossed every line. I agree that there is very strong evidence that points towards the colonel, but as long as you have no real proof, you have no right to arrest him – not to speak of torturing him! I do know that the Gestapo and the SS are using methods which are utterly off the charts, but to abuse their own position to get personal revenge on somebody, even
“Herr General, I do know how this all looks and I’m aware of the fact that you and Klink have developed a great tolerance when it comes to Hogan…”

“Are you alleging me of disregarding my duty because of personal feelings, Herr Major?” Burkhalter sounded a little bit louder now, and Hochstetter knew that he had to be very careful.

“No, Herr General, I do know that the Fatherland has absolute priority for you. But it becomes difficult to think of somebody as being capable of doing hostile things when you know said someone for three years and mostly in a positive way. Hogan has a way of charming himself into most people’s heart, or at least lulling people into a false sense of security. He’s the nice American man-boy, who jokes and amuses others with his witty comments, while he in truth weaves his net around everyone and manipulates them.”

“Just like he did with you as you all thought the war was over and he suggested that you should let the three Underground-agents drive away in your car?” the general taunted, before he all of sudden sat up straight and fixed the major with a hard gaze. “Hochstetter, all the things you mentioned could have been done by Hogan, if he really would have the chance to leave Stalag 13 like he wants, if he had a lot of support around the area and if he were capable of being in two places at the same time – just like last Monday, when one of your so-called witnesses saw him in Hammelburg, while in truth he was in Klink’s quarters, playing chess ’til deep into the night. Do you know what I think of this all here?”

Hochstetter hooked his thumbs into his belt. “I have an idea, but please continue.”

“You are too kind,” Burkhalter mocked, before he continued, “You are obsessed with Hogan being a spy, because he outsmarted you a few times – he, a POW. It hurt your ego and nothing is more important to you than satisfying your ego. Then there are all the mysterious events in the area, which are still not solved. You need a scapegoat for all the sabotages, secret information which got into the enemy’s hands and the vanished Underground-people, because you are incapable of revealing the real spies and saboteurs! You are so convinced that Hogan is responsible for everything that you close your eyes concerning any different solution. You weren’t even above letting him die in an ambush, kidnapping him while Klink was in hospital and then even torturing him brutally.”

“I would have gotten the truth out of him if…”

“Truth? What truth? The truth you want to hear from him or the only truth he was able to give you, but you didn’t accept – like him playing chess with Klink and you not even checking his alibi!”
Burkhalter rose; enraged. “Torture can make someone admit to things which don't even exist. Women were forced to admit to flying on brooms through the air and to dancing with the devil on the Blocksberg (mystical name for the Brocken, highest mountain in North-Middle-Germany, region Harz, part of Goethe’s ‘Dr. Faust’). Torture made people admit crimes they didn’t even know how to do.” His fist landed on the desktop. “Forced admissions are nothing, Hochstetter. Despite what the Gestapo says, those admissions have no meaning! Hell, many officers even have problems accepting statements made when they are given under the influence of truth drugs.”

“Fortunately there are other generals who regard these methods of questionings in a different light than you,” Hochstetter hissed. “And truth drugs have been proven to be not trustwor…”

“Other generals are not responsible for the POWs within Germany – or make certain that the Geneva Conventions are stuck to! Or that even our own laws are followed. You had absolutely no right to question Hogan without a Luftwaffe-officer being present! You know this regulation, yet you ignored it.” Burkhalter was really furious by now. “Whatever you maybe would have gotten out of Hogan, would have meant nothing because you can break any human being and then use his or her words to doom him or her. And as you realized that Hogan was stronger than you thought, you tried to kill him with your own bare hands – for you feared that he would accuse you of what I’m accusing you now: Attempted murder.”

“It wasn’t my intention to kill him. A dead spy can’t give answers. I only wanted…” Hochstetter’s lie was interrupted again by the enraged general, who looked through the major like the man was made of glass.

“If you have the guts to disobey my direct orders, than at least have the backbone to stay true to your deeds!” He narrowed his eyes. “Hogan had to die to keep you out of trouble, because you knew that you would be in deep water as soon as I arrived and realized what you did to him. Therefore you insubordinated and tried to get rid of him once and for all before I could intervene. If it wouldn’t have been for Klink, Hogan would be dead now – murdered by a man who put his own hate over his duty.”

“This has nothing to do with my dislike for him, but…”

“I got Klink’s short report of what happened two days ago. What did you say to Hogan as he was tied to the door of your car? ‘I told you that I would be your downfall one day. Now go to hell!’ – or something like that. Then you left. Klink heard you very well as you doomed Hogan to death as you left him helplessly chained in the middle of an aircraft ambush. This is attempted murder, nothing else! Then you return to Stalag 13 as Klink had to go to hospital because of injuries he received by doing your job! With Klink out of the way your first act was to get Hogan – and taking over Stalag 13 without any reason! Then…”
“Without any reason? Herr General, the camp was in uproar as I arrested Hogan, and only with Corporal Langenscheidt in charge the danger that…”

“Corporal Langenscheidt may be no high ranking officer who underwent a Military Academy, but he is a capable man. And if Klink left him in charge of his camp then this is something you have to accept. It would be only up to me to interfere, because Stalag 13 belongs to the Luftwaffe – and not to the Gestapo or SS! I really ask myself when you guys are going to learn this rule. And, by the way, how did you know that the camp would be in uproar? As far as I heard the evening prior there was no uproar as you arrested Hogan for the first time, and I’m sure Hogan held his men calm even as you arrested him the second time and manhandled him as I learned from an eye-witness.” He snorted. “No! All you did had nothing to do with duty. Far from it. You abused your position to get personal revenge, overstepped your authority by taking over one of the Luftwaffe-camps without even consulting me, then you gave instructions to your office to tell my assistant you weren’t ‘available’ and ignored my orders. This time you went too far!”

“Herr General, I…”

Burkhalter took a deep breath. He had always loathed this particular Gestapo-officer and he was almost happy that he finally could say the next words, “Major Wolfgang Hochstetter, herewith you’re arrested and I will press charges against you for insubordination, abuse of rank, illegal overtaking of another unit’s facility, breaking of the Geneva Conventions, attempted murder and torture of a protected POW-officer out of personal reasons. We are at war, yes, but certain rules should be kept – no matter what.”

“General Burkhalter…”

“GUARDS!” The general’s voice boomed and a moment later two SS-members stepped into the office and saluted. They knew better than to let the enraged staff-officer, who was also a personal friend of their highest ranking commander, wait. It really wouldn’t be wise to irritate him even more.

“Yes, Herr General!”

“Take Major Hochstetter to one of the cells and make certain that he doesn’t get any visitors. He’s in custody and disposed of all duties and his rank.”

“General Burkhalter, you can’t strip me of my rank,” Hochstetter protested. “The Wehrmacht has no authority over the Gestapo and the SS, so…”
“If you insist, we can do this the hard way,” the general snarled and lifted the phone receiver. There was a short answer in the line and he snapped, “Link me to Reichsführer Himmler, priority call one!”

Hochstetter paled dramatically. “Herr General, there is no need to discommode the Reichsführer. I’m certain everything can be solved by…”

“Heinrich? Albert Burkhalter speaking. Sorry for disturbing you this early in the morning, but I’ve a lot of trouble with the commanding officer of your headquarters in Hammelburg. And I’m really not in the mood to deal with his directly superior General Müller, so I called you. Said major took over one of my camps – again, as I have to point out – then went against the Geneva Conventions and arrested the highest ranking POW-officer in said Stalag out of personal desire for revenge. He tortured the man and tried to kill him two times, going against my orders and the rule that a Luftwaffe-officer has to be present while interrogating one of our POWs.”

There was a short silence, then Burkhalter answered, “Yes, I arrested Hochstetter and stripped him of his duty and rank, but he thinks I crossed a line with it, so… Yes, of course. He’s still here.” He offered Hochstetter the receiver. “For you,” he said; a big, satisfied smile tugged at his obese lips.

Gulping and with slightly trembling hands, Hochstetter accepted the receiver and straightened his figure. “Herr Reichsführer, Major Wolfgang Hochstetter here. You…”

The two guards at the door looked at each other. They didn’t understand one word their highest ranking commander was saying, but his shouts were easily audible – even over the distance of a few meters. They asked themselves what Himmler even needed a telephone for.

Hochstetter was white as a table-cloth, as he stuttered, “I-I-I understand, Herr Reichsführer. Of course I’ll answer to everyone of your liking and to you.” He gulped again. “Yes, sir, I’ll give General Burkhalter no trouble. No trouble at all, sir.”

Burkhalter smirked at him. For once Hochstetter sounded like Klink whenever the Kommandant feared something or someone, and the general couldn’t suppress a feeling of deep satisfaction. How quick tables could be turned!

“Yes, Herr Reichsführer, of course, sir. Have a good day.” He gave the receiver back to Burkhalter, who cleared up some more details, before he bid his ‘friend’ a good day and hung up the phone. His small eyes wandered back to Hochstetter, who had sweat dropping from his forehead.
“I’ll take you with me to Berlin when I’m done here. Until then you remain in one of the cells, stripped of all favors. An interim commander for this headquarters will be announced by me. Himmler gave me free hand in this case. Have you anything else to say?”

Hochstetter shook his head.

“Good. As I see we begin to understand each other – finally.” He waved at the two SS-members, before he addressed the major one last time. “Concerning Stalag 13: Did you pull off your men from the camp?”

“N-n-n-no, sir. There was no time to…”

“Of course there was no time to obey at least this part of my order. After all you were in a hurry to break and kill Hogan after you finally accepted the call from my office.” He looked him up and down. “I always regarded you as a rat, but that you’re a crablouse hadn’t even occurred to me.” He glanced at the two guards. “Take him away! And then call Leutnant Schmidt. I have to speak with him.”

He sat down at the desk again and rubbed his forehead. An intense headache was forming. God, he really had a lot of work to do – but what was he to deal with first? With this mad Gestapo-major, Coward Klink turning into a ‘knight’ and Hogan, whose witty mouth had brought him more trouble this time than he was able to survive without help?

Sweet Lord, what had he done to deserve these slobs?

A few minutes later a knock was heard.

“Leutnant Horst Schmidt reporting, sir,” the young man said, as he entered the office and saluted.

“As you were, Herr Leutnant,” Burkhalter said and watched the officer curiously. “As far as I understood, you witnessed Hochstetter's deeds against Colonel Hogan. Please tell me exactly what your heard and saw.”

The man took a deep breath and reported, as detailed as possible, what happened down in the cellars. Burkhalter went rigid as Schmidt came to a certain point.
“Branding? Hochstetter wanted to *brand* Hogan?” he asked, shocked.

Horst nodded. “Yes, sir – with an iron in the form of the double S-rune.” He moistened his lips. “I… distracted the major and urged him to accept the call from your office.”

“So, you prevented Hochstetter from going through with his intentions,” Burkhalter realized. “An SS-member who feels compassion for an accused spy. Unusual, don’t you agree?”

“I do not have much experience with being in the SS, sir. I originally belonged to the *Abwehr*."

Burkhalter lifted both brows. “This explains a lot. Let me guess, the way the SS and Gestapo work doesn’t meet with your agreement.”

“I’m not allowed to agree or disagree with something like this, sir, yet…” He straightened his shape. “Permission to speak openly, sir?” As Burkhalter made an inviting gesture with one hand, Schmidt continued, “I know that we’ve a war going on – one that doesn’t look as successful as it once was. And I’m also aware of the many enemies behind our lines, but I was raised with certain fundamental values, which are easily forgotten within the SS and Gestapo. To torture a man, who obviously has an alibi for the accused deeds that could prove him being innocent, crosses lines I’m unable to tolerate. And I can accept even less that a high ranking officer abuses his position for personal reasons. We’re Germans, not animals. What the major did…” He shook his head. “I know that I’m certainly in trouble now, but I would again try to stop anybody who oversteps his boundaries like this.”

Burkhalter pursed his lips shortly. “You think you are in trouble, because you followed our own rules and laws? They are made for cases like this, young man – and I appreciate men who have guts enough to enforce rules even if it means they have to face unpleasant situations.” He leant back on the chair. “You acted honorably and reasonably, without insubordination. I need men like you. Have you ever thought of changing to the *Luftwaffe*?”

Schmidt smiled ruefully for a moment. “Since I was a child I wanted to fly. But an accident as a boy robbed me of my left hearing-ability and therefore I’m unfit for the *Luftwaffe*.”

The general cocked his head. “Hm, yet you’re fit for the ground personnel. I could use you in Berlin. Or, if you like it in North-Bavaria more than Berlin, I can also leave you in charge of this headquarters here.” He chuckled as he saw the flabbergasted expression on the young man’s face.
“Herr General, Leutnant von Neuhaus is older than me and therefore he should be in charge after he returns from Stalag 13.”

Burkhalter frowned. “So, this Leutnant von Neuhaus commands one of my camps?” As Schmidt made an affirming gesture, he sneered, “I would rather leave my dog in charge of this headquarters than a man who thinks he can step into other’s territories. Reichsführer Himmler, who is a personal friend of mine, left it to me to announce a new interim commander for this Gestapo-seat here.” He rose. “From now on you are in charge, Oberleutnant (Chief Lieutenant) Schmidt. The official promotion follows together with the new stripes for your uniform.” He offered Schmidt his hand, who looked with wonder at him while his cheeks flushed.

The general had to chuckle again. God, had he been this young, too? Yes, a long time ago – when the world still wasn’t one big madhouse.

“Good luck, young man. And if there are a few older gentlemen who have problems with you being in command, show them that members of the Wehrmacht are cut from different cloth. If it becomes too hairy, call me. One little talk with Himmler, and they will be mild as a dove.”

Schmidt saluted. “Thank you, Herr General.”

“I thank you, Oberleutnant Schmidt. It’s a pleasure that there are still some decent men left, who understand that duty means responsibility.” He left the desk. “Have a nice day – and, a little advice from me, check Hochstetter’s correspondence and settlements first. I’m sure the good major has quite the records. And, this way, you get to learn how business runs in this damn house and can make a clean sweep. I leave Hochstetter in custody in the cellars until I’m done here in Hammelburg. Good day!”

“The same to you, Herr General – and thank you.”

The door closed behind Burkhalter and Schmidt stared at the desk that was now his. Sweet Lord, how much had happened within the last hours – all because of his superior officer turning crazy and because of an American colonel who seemed to have befriended not only his own ‘jailer’, but had also won over a general of the Luftwaffe in a small way.

‘The whole world has gone utterly mad, but not everything is lost as long as there are still people who follow the way of honor and truth,’ his mother had said before he left for Hammelburg. How right she had been. Today he had experienced a lesson that would shape him for the rest of his life.
Well, that Schmidt is now in charge will change several things in the area of Hammelburg – including Stalag 13. And that von Neuhaus hasn’t gotten the job will cause trouble, so you all can be curious of what will come concerning this detail.

To write how Burkhalter pulls Hochstetter down from the heights and brings him down on the carpet, has been pure fun. That both men don’t like each other is very clear and that Burkhalter is more than angry that Hochstetter even tries to spy on him (like it comes out in several episodes), is something that has to hurt the general’s big ego. So to rubbish Hochstetter was certainly a pleasure for Burkhalter (*snicker*).

The next chapter will be completely about our dear, beaten colonel and a very protective, helpful and even tender Oberst, who turns into the mixture of a mother-hen and nurse, while he is barely able to hide his true feelings. It will be mostly sweet and tender. It’s more or less a continuation of this actual chapter’s beginning.

I hope you liked the new update, and – like you all know by now – I’m always curious what you think of it.

Hopefully ‘til the weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

After the first gentle scene at the beginning of the last chapter, you’re certainly all hungry for more. And, like I promised, this new chapter will be full of it – Klink becomes a ‘nurse’, so to say, and shows how much he really cares for ‘his’ troublemaker. I’m sure the most of you will love this update (*smile*).

Thank you so much for the feedback concerning the last chapter; I know that you all are happy that Hochstetter has to face harsh consequences.

And now have fun with the newest installment of the story,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 14 – Tender care

The moment Klink’s staff-car drove with unusual speed into the camp and headed directly to the outbuilding where the Kommandant’s quarters were placed, everybody knew something was terribly wrong.

Newkirk had been watching the grounds from one of the windows after roll call while Carter, Kinchloe and the others silently sat around the table and nipped some coffee. Not one of them was hungry and Carter had even been conceiving new explosive formulas to distract himself from the deep worry concerning Hogan and LeBeau. They had all been expecting the Frenchman’s return for two hours now, relieved that Langenscheidt ‘oversaw’ LeBeau’s absence again, but Louis hadn’t come.

Instead of him all of sudden Newkirk called, “Klink returns – with high speed! And he has someone
with him on the backseat!”

Assuming the worst the three Heroes were out of the barracks before the others could even react. They watched how the car headed to Klink’s quarters and began to run towards the smaller house. Their dashing elicited several shouts from the SS-guards, then the men of the Luftwaffe cut in and within a minute a hard discussion had started concerning how to treat the POWs.

The turmoil was utterly ignored by Hogan’s men, but not by the other prisoners. Doors of the other barracks were torn open and Carter heard Baker calling for them, but he didn’t interrupt his run towards Klink’s quarters where the staff-car had just stopped with squeaking brakes.

“Oh. My. God!” Was all Kinchloe gasped as he watched how Schultz left the driver seat, opened the back door and pulled someone, clad in Klink’s coat, with utter care from the backseat and held the person on unsteady feet. Klink followed immediately and, shocked, the three men recognized the barely conscious person as their superior officer and friend.

“This damn swine Hochstetter!” Newkirk spat; concern mingled with hot fury.

Klink heard the nearing, hurrying steps and the outcries of several POWs, among them the familiar voices of Kinchloe and Newkirk, but he had no time to spare.

“Laaaaaangenscheeiiidt!” he shouted; suppressing another coughing fit and ignoring the burning pain of the torn stitches. “Get over here and give Schultz a hand!”

The corporal came running from the side gate and helped Schultz more or less carry Hogan towards the Kommandant’s quarters – his face grim and full of disdain as he realized the American’s condition.

With a “Be careful with him, Schultz!” Klink all but raced to his quarters, despite his limping movements, and opened the door. A moan escaped Hogan and his head rolled against Schultz’s shoulder, as the big Bavarian – wheezing like an old steam locomotive – helped him up the stairs.

“We’re almost there, Hogan, hang on,” Klink called quietly; worry and fear made his voice even more hoarse than it already was. Going ahead, he stepped into his quarters, switched the lights on, hurried to his sleeping chamber and from there into the bathroom. “Careful now,” he ordered Schultz and Langenscheidt, who placed Hogan gently down on the toilet cover. Shrugging out of his partly still damp uniform jacket, Klink bent over the American and helped him lean back against the wall;
cupping Hogan’s head to prevent it from banging against the wall behind.

“Easy, Robert,” he whispered as a low groan escaped the younger man.

“Colonel!” Kinch appeared in the door; Carter, Newkirk and Baker behind him. Horrified they looked at their friend; took in the swollen face, the split lips, the many bruises, the dirt mingled with sweat; the blood; the way Hogan held – or at least tried to hold – himself, while he swayed dangerously. His breathing was uneven and hollow and tremors shook his body like a leaf in the wind. His uniform beneath Klink’s coat was wet and bloody, and his hair, crusted with blood, stuck out in every direction and was damp.

Hochstetter and his gooneys had beaten him into a bleeding pulp, and the four friends simply knew that they were only seeing a small part of what had been done to their superior officer.

Klink glanced back at them. “Baker, get Wilson! Hurry!” he ordered; taking matters into his own hands. “Carter, I need firewood for the furnace in my sleeping chambers. Hogan will stay there for a while. Newkirk, get Hogan’s pajamas, fresh underclothes, a pair of socks and his hygiene utensils. Kinchloe, try to calm the other prisoners. Tell them that I will personally take care of Hogan and that he is getting the best treatment possible. I don’t want to give the damn SS-guys outside a reason to act against my POWs.” He had to stop shortly as he had to cough again, before he continued, “LeBeau, go to the kitchen and prepare some tea.”

Schultz flinched heavily. “LeBeau!” he gasped; whirling around despite his large build. “Joa-mai, I think we forgot him back in Hammelburg.”

Klink threw a glance over his shoulder, while his hand held Hogan’s underarms in a gentle grip to give him some hold. “You forgot…? He glanced at the four other men, noticed the Frenchman’s absence, remembered him ordering LeBeau to stay a block away from the Gestapo-Headquarters and wait there to be picked up after the rescue, and finally his memories replayed his barely controlled panic as he ordered Schultz to drive back to the camp ASAP. He had been worried out of his mind for Hogan, therefore Klink had really forgotten about LeBeau.

He cursed in German, before he regained some composure. “Right then, Schultz, you prepare the tea, the others do as ordered.” He looked at the four prisoners and waved an impatient hand at them. “Do the gentlemen need an engraved invitation? I gave orders, so off you go!”

Newkirk and Carter hesitated; they didn’t want to leave their superior officer and friend, but on the other hand they knew that Klink would take care of him and that Hogan needed the demanded things. Especially the aid of Wilson.
“Hurry, guys!” Kinchloe said, turned around and jogged out of the quarters; Peter, Richard and Andrew on his heels.

“Herr Kommandant,” Schultz began but was interrupted.

“Not now, Schultz! Prepare some tea – chamomile would be the best. It will help Hogan’s certainly sore throat. I have some dried chamomile saved in the cupboard above the sink.”

With a “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” the sergeant nodded and left.

“Langenscheidt, make certain not one of the damn black-clad bastards shows up in my quarters. The last thing Hogan needs now is a reminder of his tormentors.”

“I’m certain Leutnant von Neuhaus wants to speak with you, sir. He took over command after Hochstetter left with Colonel Hogan,” Langenscheidt reported.

“I know. LeBeau told me everything as he sought me out in the hospital – a circumstance I will have a talk with you about, but later. Go outside and prevent anyone of that frigging scumbags from coming inside – despite their rank. That’s an order.”

“Jawohl, Herr Oberst,” Karl confirmed. He knew that he was in trouble if Klink learned that he, Langenscheidt, had stayed silent about LeBeau’s absence during the roll calls last evening and this morning, but he knew that he had done the right thing. He threw a last pitying glance at the beaten figure that cowered on the toilet seat and walked away.

Finally alone, Klink crouched down in front of Hogan; ignoring the stinging pain in his calf and the pain in his throat and chest after he had breathed in so much cold air. Most symptoms of the bronchitis he suffered went by unnoticed for now.

“Hogan, can you hear me?” he asked softly and met the painful gaze of the dull eye that was still to see. Lifting a hand, he gently stroked an unruly lock out of Hogan’s bruised forehead; again, offering some comfort. The younger man’s trembling worsened, and giving into instinctive urges, Klink cupped the less hurt cheek. “Calm down, Rob, I got you,” he whispered. “You’re safe now. We’re back at the camp and no-one will hurt you anymore. I’d rather die than let Hochstetter near you ever again.” Slowly he let go of the colonel and began to peel his coat off Hogan’s shoulders, whose open eye widened in alert. “I know, it’s cold and you’re hurting, but we’ll get you warmed up and
attended to in no time. We just have to wash you. This dirt doesn’t help with healing you at all.”

The helpless way Hogan looked at him pained Klink deeply. He was used to the younger man’s cocky behavior no matter how grave the situation. To see him like this, vulnerable, injured, mute and apathetic, shook the Kommandant to the core. He had seen victims of the Gestapo’s questioning before, but even people weeks after being captured weren’t in such a condition. Hochstetter must have lived out his hate to the limits, and Klink didn’t dare imagine what more the major would have done to Hogan if he’d gotten a chance. Klink was convinced that Hochstetter had only tried to drown the colonel because he knew that Hogan would be under protection the moment Burkhalter arrived, and even his fear of the general’s wrath hadn’t been enough to stop the Gestapo-officer from finishing what he had started. The Oberst shivered inwardly again at the thought that Hogan would be dead now if he, Klink, hadn’t come in the very last minute.

His gaze found Hogan’s hands, as they clung to the coat’s material weakly. The American’s wrists were bruised and sore, and Klink could only guess how violently Robert must have torn at his chains so that those wounds were the result. His heart went out again towards the man he loved. What would he give to spare him all this suffering!

“Sh-sh,” he soothed. “I’ll be careful, I promise.” Slowly, to give Hogan the chance to comprehend what he was doing, he pushed the heavy coat from the other man’s shoulders, unwrapped the scarf from the colonel’s neck and began to unbutton the bloody shirt, before he stroked it down his arms. Seeing that the golden chain with the dog-tags worsened the bruises around Hogan’s neck, he carefully removed it and placed it on the edge of the sink, before he relieved the colonel of his boots and socks. The whole time he murmured words of comfort while he continued his task of stripping the younger man off all clothes except for the pants. For the latter he would need help.

Klink’s hands trembled slightly. He had fantasized about this: To strip the one he loved bare. Never had he really dared to hope that his dream would come true one day – but the reason was wrong. So utterly and terribly wrong – worse than he could have imagined. He never thought that he would be undressing the younger man because the colonel was badly hurt.

His glance wandered over the slender, yet muscular body – strewed with broken skin and bruises which were coloring more and more; some of them had already turned blue. His eyes found Hogan’s left side and his breath was caught in his throat as he took in the black spots beneath the pale skin. Schmidt had been right: Hogan had two or three broken ribs – certainly the result of merciless kicks. And he prayed that the bones were still correctly in place and didn’t threaten to pierce Robert’s lungs.

Rising, he carefully pulled Hogan more towards him and peeked down on the younger man’s back. The bleeding stripes on the colonel’s shirt had spoken a certain language, and Klink felt new nausea washing over him as he saw the bleeding tracks of the brutal whipping Hogan must have received.
“I'll kill him!” the Oberst whispered furiously. “God help me, but I'll kill this sodding bastard!”

If Hogan would have been himself he'd certainly have rebuked his German counterpart for using such a vulgar term and maybe Klink had tried to provoke some reaction from Hogan like this, but the American didn’t show any hint that he had even heard what the Kommandant had said.

Before he leant Hogan back against the wall, Klink gave into his urge to soothe the younger man again and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. “You will be better soon, Robert. I'll take care of you, I promise.”

“Colonel Hogan? Colonel Klink?” Wilson’s concerned voice sounded from the living area.

“Over here – in the bathroom. Straight through the sleeping chamber, Sergeant,” Klink shouted over his shoulder and felt Hogan flinch. Like before, in the cellars, the colonel reacted to loud voices – another sign of the trauma he suffered. “Hush, Rob,” the Oberst murmured and brushed over Hogan’s left cheek with utter care again, before he took the American’s right hand into his. “It’s only me, don’t fret.”

Wilson stopped dead at the threshold; his dark eyes widened in horror. “Oh my god,” he mumbled. As a medic he had seen a lot during the war and most injuries were ugly, but to see his superior officer, whom he greatly respected, beaten like this made his stomach turn upside-down. Catching himself – Hogan needed him clear-headed now – Wilson closed the distance to the two men and bent over the colonel. Attentively he observed the wounds and bruises, inwardly making a list of what to do and in which order he would treat the injuries, then he helped Klink remove the rest of Hogan’s clothes.

“We should put him into the shower first,” the Oberst said softly. “All this dirt has to be removed before you can attend to him.”

“I agree,” Wilson nodded. “But I don’t think he can remain on his own feet, so…” He stopped, as Klink rose and began to strip. “Sir, you’re ill. You shouldn’t expose yourself like this or your cold is going to worsen.”

There it was again: The simple worry he had never gotten from the American medic before. And, surprisingly, it didn’t boost his ego, but touched him. Yet the fact that he had somehow gained the medic’s respect didn’t count. It was Hogan who was in need of aid, not he.
“I’m pumped full of penicillin, so a shower will not hurt. And, by the way, Hogan’s got it nastier than I.” He nodded at Wilson. “I’m going to need your help. One of us holds Hogan, the other one washes him.” He frowned as the medic only looked surprised at him. “You should strip too, Sergeant. Otherwise you would be forced to run with wet clothes through the camp in the end, and, last time I checked medical basic knowledge, this isn’t very healthy given this damn weather,” the German officer deadpanned, while kicking off his boots.

Thunderstruck at the Oberst’s willingness to go through all that trouble only to help Hogan, Wilson rose, too, and followed Klink’s example.

“Where is Sergeant Baker?” Klink asked. “I told him to get you and…”

“After he informed me, he ran to the barracks to help the other boys with getting a few things for the colonel,” Wilson told him.

“What about the other prisoners?”

“They are furious as they learned of Hogan’s condition, but Kinch calms them. Obviously your word that you will take good care of the colonel, and that he'll get all the help he needs, holds their wrath within limits.”

His gaze found the bandages around Klink’s left upper arm and left calf and saw that the latter was bleeding through. Obviously the stitches had been torn open again. “Sir, you should avoid getting your injuries wet,” he said; pointing at the white mull. “I’m certain the doctors at the hospital had to treat your wounds with stitches and to get them wet with normal water could lead to further infection.”

“A risk I’m willing to take,” Klink answered and placed his monocle on the washbowl. Only wearing his half long underpants, he waited for Wilson to be done with stripping, then both men pulled a groaning Hogan carefully up. The colonel swayed dangerously and Klink quickly steadied him, while Wilson stripped him off the pants; revealing more bruises along Hogan’s legs. His eyes found his superior officer’s back and he swore under his breath as he saw the bleeding stripes which could only have resulted from the American colonel having been brutally lashed.

“These damn swine!” he growled.
Klink pressed his lips into a thin line before he hissed, “Hochstetter will pay for this. Mark my words.” He stepped into the shower-chamber and helped Wilson steer Hogan into it, too. Ever so gently he gathered the younger man into his arms and swallowed a lump in his throat, as Hogan simply leant against him and placed his forehead on the German’s shoulder – unable to utter any protest he usually would have made.

“I'll hold him, and you wash him,” the Oberst said quietly to the medic, who had taken the shower-head and switched on the water; trying to mix a pleasing, warm temperature.

Wilson’s gaze found the Kommandant’s right hand and nodded at it. “What happened to your knuckles?” he asked.

“Nothing serious, Sergeant. It will heal.” He felt Hogan tensing as the younger man heard the splashing of water and let his thumbs move comfortably over the colonel’s cold skin. “It’s all right, Robert,” he soothed. “We will only wash you and this is the quickest and best way to get you clean. Don’t fret. You’re safe.”

Yet Hogan flinched violently as Wilson began to shower his back.

“I know it hurts, Colonel, and I will be as quick as possible, but this dirt has to go, or you’ll really be in trouble if that gets infected.”

Everything that was happening around him still reached Hogan’s mind only slowly – like everything was surrounded by thick fog. He heard Klink’s and Wilson’s familiar voices and even understood some words, and he was also somehow aware that he was being taken care of, but his usually so quick and clever mind was numb with pain and shock, and therefore his instincts had taken over.

The moment Wilson lifted the shower-head to rinse Hogan’s blood-encrusted hair, the colonel panicked. He felt water running down his face – and he was back in the cellars of the Gestapo-Headquarters; being pressed under the surface by the merciless, cruel hand in his neck, while breathing water and dying. The trauma of being almost drowned broke through with all its might, and with a scream of sheer terror he reared up – tried, desperately, to escape.

“Robert, calm down!” Klink called; strengthening his hold on the American who began to trash around.

Wilson had instantly realized that Hogan was having a panic attack and that it was obviously
connected with the shower, so he quickly lowered the shower-head and switched off the water. “Colonel, no-one will hurt you. We…”

Hogan broke free – Klink’s strength was no match for the well-trained colonel who was in pure survival-mode. Almost losing his balance, Hogan fell against the wall and would have landed on the wet floor if it hadn’t been for the other two males who reacted with lightning speed. Wilson gripped his hips to steady him, while Klink did something that made the medic gape at him: He pulled the younger man into a tender embrace, pulled his face into the crook of his neck, made soothing sounds and combed his left hand gently through the messy, wet and still very dirty hair. His right arm was wrapped firmly around Hogan’s waist to steady him, while his hand moved tenderly over the skin it could reach. For a moment Hogan tried to fight back, then the American’s resistance ebbed away – like someone had flipped a switch.

“It’s okay, Rob,” Klink murmured. “It’s okay, you are safe.” Softly he began to rock Hogan like he had done in the car during their ride back to the camp. He rather felt than heard the sob that escaped Hogan, and he thought a knife had been plunged into his heart. His throat tightened as the younger man began to tremble violently and not giving a damn about Wilson’s presence, he lent his head against Hogan’s and whispered gentle words of comfort in his ear.

Joe Wilson could only stare at the Kommandant. What, in God’s name, was going on here? First the sudden heroism during the aircrafts’ attack two days prior, then Klink obviously breaking Hogan out from the Gestapo-jail and now the German officer was treating his American counterpart like he was the most important person in his whole life.

His gaze roamed over Klink’s face, took in the closed eyes and the emotional pain on the man’s features, then his glance found the Oberst’s left hand – still massaging Hogan’s scalp almost tenderly, while he held the younger man in a way he – Wilson – would have held his wife.

Those gestures, the way Klink outgrew himself and acted to get Hogan to safety (two times now), the gentle words… If it wouldn’t sound so crazy, he would think Klink had feelings for Hogan, but given the fact that the Oberst was after every skirt that came along his way, the medic was ready to skip this idea.

In the same moment Klink opened his eyes again, his gaze directed on the figure in his arms, and Wilson suppressed his shock. He knew love when he saw it, and what lay in the Oberst’s eyes was this strongest of all good feelings in its purest form.

“Come on, Robert, calm down,” Klink said quietly, but more firmly now; knowing that he somehow had to stabilize Hogan’s mind by giving him a strong anchor to latch on. “We are only here to aid you, but you have to help us a little bit. We can’t do this all alone, so be the stubborn mule we all admire so much and keep on a few minutes longer. Afterwards you can sleep all you want.” He
gulped as he felt Hogan’s arm slowly slipping around him in a weak attempt to find some hold—emotionally and physically. “Yes, that’s right, Rob. Just hold onto me. It’s okay. I will not let you go, no matter what.”

He glanced at Wilson, saw the sergeant’s thunderstruck expression and took a deep breath. He knew what kind of image he’d just presented and the American medic was anything but stupid. He had to steer Wilson’s attention into another direction, before the medic maybe made the correct conclusion regarding Klink’s feelings for Hogan.

“He was being waterboarded when I arrived,” the Oberst explained softly, and saw Wilson paling in shock. “Hochstetter had him by the neck and ducked him under. And if I interpreted the whole scene correctly, this damn bastard had decided to skip an official execution by drowning Hogan.”

Joe closed his eyes for a moment as the information settled it. “Sweet Lord…” he whispered, then his training kicked in. “We have to get him clean instantly and then I have to check his lungs. He certainly breathed water and…”

“I pressed his chest until he had spit out all water he got into him, yet it would calm me if you could listen to his lungs – after all he caught a cold, too. And the last night in the cellars was certainly poison for his bronchia and lungs. And, by the way, I fear that I added damage as I pressed the water out of his lungs. I hope the broken ribs haven’t moved and are threatening his lungs now.”

With utter care Wilson palpated over Hogan’s left side; eliciting a yelp from the younger man, yet Hogan held still as Klink murmured more words of security and comfort.

“Two are definitely broken, but they are all in place,” Wilson said quietly. “No danger for his lungs.”

The Oberst sighed in relief, before he carefully straightened his frame and returned his attention back to the man in his arms. “Hogan, we are going to wash you now.” He snaked his left arm around the colonel’s hip before he placed two fingers of his right hand under his chin and lifted his head gently. One eye, wide in alertness, looked at him. Forcing a reassuring smile on his face, Klink added, “Don’t fret. No-one will hurt you, but you have to remain calm so that Sergeant Wilson and I can proceed. Do you understand me?”

He waited a few seconds, but as Hogan remained stiff without any kind of response, he repeated strongly, “Robert, do you understand what I say? Just nod if you cannot speak at the moment, but – please – give me a reaction.”
He felt the tiniest movement of Hogan’s head and breathed in relief. He almost had feared that the younger man had been pushed too far to be reachable anymore.

“You are absolutely safe here with us. We’ll take care of you. I cannot promise you that Wilson’s treatment will be painless, because we both know that bandaging wounds is a nasty thing, but afterwards you can rest in a nice, warm, comfortable bed and sleep as long as you want. No roll calls, no silly questions, no duty – until you’re fit again. And I’m certain our little cockroach will spoil you with delicious meals, made from my stock. How does it sound?”

He knew that he was babbling – like so often when he was nervous or when a situation was not within his control. But for once it did some good.

There!

For a second Hogan’s lips moved, and Klink was certain to understand a croaked “thanks”. Smiling, he wrapped his right arm back around the younger man’s waist and addressed Wilson, “Carry on, Sergeant. Try to avoid his face – we’ll clean it afterwards with a washcloth.”

Joe blinked. Aaaaalllll right, who was this guy wearing Klink’s face, and where was Klink?

Shaking his head in pure disbelief of what had happened with the usually backboneless man, he resumed his task by taking the shampoo-bottle, opening it and beginning to wash Hogan’s hair.

The colonel stood stiff, but weak there; his good eye moved hectically and his breathing quickened, as Wilson rinsed out his hair. Klink felt Hogan’s grip become almost painfully tight as he clung to him, but at least he didn’t freak out again.

“You’re doing good, Rob,” Klink soothed him. “That’s it, just try to relax and let us do our job.”

The American opened his mouth, and Klink was certain to hear his name – whispered in a hoarse, barely recognizable voice.

“Yes, it’s me,” he said; happy that Hogan seemed to be regaining some senses. “I have you, Rob. Everything is all right now.”
Wilson had to shampoo him three times, afterwards he cleaned Hogan’s back again, before he took care of his upper arms. “All right, Kommandant, we’ve to turn him around now,” he said after he was done.

The calm, professional, yet warm tone Wilson used seemed to help Hogan in his attempt to fight his instincts. Yet he couldn’t fool the medic – or Klink in this case. The colonel reminded the Oberst of a caught deer, ready to flee at any moment.

With utter care he tried to loosen Hogan’s iron grip around his waist. “Come on, Robert, let go of me. What shall Sergeant Wilson think of you, hm?” He met the alerted gaze of the one brown eye and added softly. “I'm holding you, I promise. I won’t let you fall. Never! Just turn around and lean back against me.”

“Come on, Colonel, you have to turn around so that I can clean your front,” Joe said gently, while trying to move his patient.

“Just do as Wilson says, Rob,” Klink encouraged him and finally – finally! – Hogan let go of him and let himself be turned around. It needed time, but at last it was done. Klink placed himself firmly behind his American counterpart and re-wrapped both arms around his hips; avoiding his bruised belly.

Carefully Joe proceeded and realized after a minute that Hogan had begun to relax enough to lean back against Klink. The Kommandant peeked over the colonel’s right shoulder, murmuring new words of comfort. Taking the washcloth that hung on a hook beside the holder of the shower-head, Wilson soaped it up and lifted it in front of Hogan’s good eye.

“I’m going to wash your face, Robert, so close your eyes. Don’t be afraid, nothing bad will happen to you.” Wilson had used the colonel’s given name on full purpose; knowing that the familiar addressing woke more trust than using the rank.

And again Hogan fought back his instincts and allowed Wilson to proceed; his mind was slowly coming out of shock. The warmth and gentle treatment had begun to reach his brain.

“All done,” Joe said finally and switched off the water. “That was the ration of two days or more,” he said, apologizing to Klink, who simply shrugged.

“I'll survive.”
Wilson stepped out of the shower chamber and returned a moment later with a large towel. With Klink’s help he wrapped Hogan in it and then both men steered the utterly exhausted colonel into the next room; leaving wet tracks. Kinchloe, Carter and Newkirk were already waiting for them – their faces and eyes betrayed their deep worry for their superior officer and dear friend. Baker had remained at Barracks 2, radioing London to give them an update – now, after the power was restored and most of the ‘Krauts’ were utterly distracted by the gathering of almost all POWs, who waited for news concerning Hogan, in the yard.

The three Heroes were tensed, yet they had kept a clear head to prepare everything for their friend. The oven spread warmth through the small chamber, the curtains were closed and the lamp on the nightstand was switched on.

“How is he?”

“How is he doing?”

Kinchloe and Newkirk asked at the same time, while Carter whispered, “Boy, that looks bad!”

“I can only examine him completely now,” Wilson informed them.

Carefully he and Klink helped Hogan sit down on the bed’s edge, where the covers were drawn back. While Wilson instantly began to finally do the proper examination, Klink returned to the bathroom, stripped completely, towed himself dry, put on his monocle and slipped into his bathrobe. With a further towel he stepped into the sleeping chamber a minute later, handing the cloth to Wilson who gratefully accepted it.

While Joe towed himself, Newkirk crouched down in front of Hogan and tentatively placed one hand on the colonel’s knee. “Hey, Gov’nor,” he whispered and looked up in the barely recognizable face. It hurt him to see the man he admired and more or less regarded as a brother like this.

The one eye looked down on him, then something sparked in the dull depths. “Ne’kirk?” It was a hoarse croak, barely loud enough to be heard, but it made Peter’s heart leap. He was terribly afraid that Hogan had been pushed over his breaking point, and he prayed to all higher beings that Hochstetter had least failed in reaching this sick goal.

“Yes, it’s me,” he murmured; squeezing the knee ever so gently. “Kinchloe and Carter are here, too.”
“Hello, Colonel,” Carter peeped up, trying to sound cheerful, but his trembling voice gave him away. Yet it was enough to make Hogan turn his head very slowly.

At least the shower had stirred his spirits a little bit, and even if his brain still wanted to shut down and forget everything, his mind and heart fought against this natural reaction as he became aware of his men’s presence. He looked at Kinchloe, who smiled with damp, soft eyes at him, then at Carter, who waved shyly like a little boy in his direction, and finally at Newkirk who knelt before him and was deathly pale.

“Y’guys… ’kay?” he mumbled.

Kinch rolled his eyes. Typical Colonel Hogan. Wearing his head under the arm but his first question was about the welfare of his men. Was it really a question why they cared for him so much?

“We’re okay, Colonel.”

“Don’t you worry about us, Gov’nor,” Peter rebuked him softly. “It’s the other way around.”

“M’fine,” came the whispered answer.

“Of course!” Wilson grumbled while slipping in his pants and shirt, before putting on his socks and boots. “There is barely one healthy spot on his whole body left, but he’s ‘fine’.”

Schultz entered at the same moment and brought the tea; looking with unmasked compassion at the American colonel who sat there, only clad in a towel that revealed more than it covered. “Himmel-Sakra (Bavarian curse, translated: Holy heavens!),” he groused outraged, “Hochstetter should go to hell!”

“If you compare Berlin with hell, then you’re right, Schultz. I’m sure that Burkhalter will court-martial him for this,” Klink mumbled, took the tea cup from his sergeant and placed it on the nightstand.

Wilson gestured Newkirk to rise and give him room to work, and the corporal obeyed immediately. Opening the medical kit, Joe put out a stethoscope and listened to Hogan’s lungs. “I’m no doctor, but
I think the water is completely spilled out. I’m not sure how much this all will affect his lungs, especially after he’d already caught a cold prior to this. If the noises haven’t stopped until tomorrow, I advise you to call a real doctor.”

“Consider it done,” Klink answered.

Nodding, Wilson took out some iodine and said quietly to Hogan,

“I’m sorry, Colonel, the treatment will hurt, but I have to clean these injuries properly or you could die of infection.”

Somehow the American understood those words and nodded his aching head one time, before he closed his eye; waiting with fear for the new pain he would have to endure. He couldn’t suppress a moan as the medic began his work.

“At least he needs only a few stitches,” Wilson said softly to no-one in particular. “Some of the wounds on his back are deeper and have to be stitched up.”

“What about his legs and jaw – and his neck?” Klink demanded; concern plainly written in his eyes and on his face.

“His jaw is fortunately only dislocated, but it has to be straightened which will be very painful. Thank the Lord that the blows he received in the face haven’t broken his nose, but I’m not sure about his cheek bone. The swelling has to reduce before I can be certain, which will certainly last a few days. By the way, then he can use his right eye again.”

“Further injuries?”

“Countless bruises, some of them bleeding, some of them not. And I’m sure that he also got some strained muscles – mostly in his legs, arms and shoulders as he tried to escape his ties, but also on his abdomen. He seems to have received some hard blows to his belly. Concerning the bruises around his neck I think they came from a rope.”

“You… you mean, Hochstetter hung him – sort of?” Kinchloe gasped.
“That – or he connected the rope with the colonel’s arms which made Hogan strangle himself whenever he tried to break free. Usually no-one in his right mind would take the risk of suffocating himself by struggling too strongly, but torture can blend out the brightest mind.”

“Blimey!” Newkirk hissed; his eyes flashed with burning hate before he addressed Klink. “Burkhalter is taking care of Hochstetter?”

The Kommandant nodded; his own gaze betrayed his wrath. “Yes, he is. And he was as furious as I was – and still are.”

“Will… will the colonel heal?” Carter asked quietly; his eyes wet.

“Given time, much rest, good food and gentle treatment he certainly will be fine again – at least physically. Torture doesn’t only leave scars on the body, but mainly in the soul, too. Nightmares, panic attacks or unusual outbursts are typical results for a while. It’s called post-traumatic stress, because what the colonel suffered was very traumatic. Hogan will need all your help to overcome what has been done to him.”

Klink took a deep breath – sick to the stomach after the most grave of his concerns got affirmed. “He gets everything and as long as he needs. I swear. And if I… we have to nurse, tend and spoil him ‘til the end of the war then this will be exactly what we’ll do.” He looked at the other three POWs. “You agree?”

Affirming gestures were the answers, and he nodded at the other men, satisfied. Then his glance wandered back to the miserable heap of a person sitting half asleep on his bed. “Have you enough medicine to treat him, Sergeant?”

“I still have some morphine and sedatives, but I’m not sure how long my stock will last.”

“I got some penicillin injections, sedatives, antibiotic ointment and pain-killers from Dr. Birkhorn. If they are not enough then please make a list of what you need, and I’ll send Schultz to the hospital to get the items,” Klink said.

“Maybe we should transport Colonel Hogan to the hospital and…,” Schultz began, but the Kommandant shook his head.
“No. Hogan is more comfortable here – and he is also out of reach from the Gestapo. The people he trusted most are here and this will help him as much as the medicine. And, by the way, they are running out of medicaments in town and when I let the doctor know that he doesn’t have to take care of a POW if he gives us the items to treat him, I’m sure the good man will play along for a little while longer. If not, there are other possibilities to get painkillers and sedatives.” He looked firmly at his second in command, who understood what Klink was suggesting: Black market. And knowing his superior officer’s depth of affection for the American colonel, Klink wouldn’t hesitate to pay the sum from his own wallet.

“Right,” Wilson said softly. “Now I'll ask the gentlemen to leave me and my patient alone. Attending to him will take a while.” He looked kindly at Carter, who still fought back tears. He knew that the youngest of the POWs regarded Hogan as a mixture of older brother and father, and the colonel’s condition had shaken the young man deeply. It certainly would do him good to have a part in Hogan’s healing process. “Andrew, can you assist me?”

“O-o-o-of course,” Carter stammered.

“We will wait outside in the living-room,” Kinchloe murmured miserably and glanced at Klink. “With your permission, sir.”

Klink waved at them. “I’ve no objections.” Then he hesitated for a moment, before he added. “I know that Hogan is more a friend to you four than a superior officer and that you’re worrying your heads off for him. There is cognac in the carafe on the sideboard. Serve yourself, but leave something for Wilson, Carter and I when we’re done here. And before you drink, one of you should go to my car, fetch the bag on the backseat and bring it here. It’s filled with medicaments from the good doctor. Dismissed!”

He saw Kinchloe and Newkirk exchanging a look of utter surprise, before the second highest senior POW officer smiled at him. “Thank you, sir.” Then they left.

“Schultz, go outside and check how Langenscheidt is doing. I have the feeling that Leutnant von Neuhaus won’t be too happy that I haven’t shown up until now in the office and that he may be giving the corporal trouble.”

“Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” Schultz grumbled. He had already speculated of getting some cognac, too, but obviously he wasn’t that lucky.

Klink turned his attention back to Wilson. “What can I do?”
Joe frowned and deadpanned, “You can undo your bandages and Carter will replace them with new ones. Then you should get dressed before your cold worsens – and afterwards I suggest you join the others outside to get the drink you spoke of. As it seems, sir, you really could use one.”

“Thanks for the concern but I have to decline. I will not leave this room until Hogan has been treated,” Klink stated, and as Wilson was about to disagree, he added firmly, “There is no room for any discussion, Sergeant. Hogan can barely sit on his own and you will have to move him to get access to any parts of his body that have to be taken care of. Six hands are better than four. And when you’re done with him, only then you can attend to me. Not one minute sooner.”

Carter blinked in shock at the German officer. Klink caught the look and asked, “Anything wrong, Carter?”

“N-n-n-no, sir, I only thought that… Boy, I almost don’t recognize you… I mean, Kommandant.”

Klink rose both brows. “Is this so? Because I consider Hogan’s injuries to be a higher priority than mine? I’ve already been treated, Hogan has not. And, by the way, why do you think they called me the ‘Iron Eagle’?” He pointed at the Iron Cross First Class that lay on the dresser. “Do you think I got that for naught?” He turned his attention away from the youngest of the POWs. “I only forgot for far too long that a man needs a backbone to gather courage before he can do what he has to do. But not anymore! I can’t do anything against the insanity that rages through the world at the moment, but I will be dammed if I permit it to infect my camp. The men here, independent of their heritage, are my responsibility, and if bastards like Hochstetter think they can play their sick games with them like a cat does with a mouse, they are mistaken. I have had enough of this all. I’ll keep the people in my camp safe and if I have to bite the dust because of it, so be it.”

He took a deep breath as he caught the flabbergasted glances of Wilson and Carter. “Gentlemen, we’ve a job to do with our troublemaker here,” he reminded them. He rolled up the sleeves of his bathrobe, while Wilson began to take out bandages, the medical sewing kit, as well as two syringes.

“Colonel, I’ll give you some morphine and a light sedative. It will not prevent you from feeling the one or other pain during the treatment of your wounds, but it will relieve you from the worst.”

“‘kay,” was the mumbled reply, and the three other men felt a short wave of relief. As it seemed, Hogan became more and more aware of his surroundings, which was a good signal. The warmth and the presence of the men he trusted was certainly another part of giving Hogan’s mind a reason to work again.
Injecting the colonel with the medicaments, they had to wait a few minutes until the effect would take place. In the meantime, Carter helped Hogan sip at the tea; holding the cup to his lips and encouraging him to drink something. Klink watched them; wishing it could be him who took care of Hogan like this, but he didn’t dare go this far with his unusual behavior towards his senior POW officer. He knew Wilson had already become aware of it and he didn’t want to give the medic an even bigger idea of what was going on. So, he only spread a woolen blanket over Hogan’s lap and legs to keep him warm, before he began to assist the medic by readying the bandages.

Kinchloe entered the sleeping chamber and brought the bag; reporting that the POWs remained calm for now, but waited for news. And, as it seemed, the SS-guards were very nervous by now while von Neuhaus was pacing in front of the Kommandantur; snapping at everyone who came near him. Obviously Klink ignoring the Leutnant’s presence irritated the man a lot.

“I couldn’t care less,” Klink sneered. “I haven’t called him, so he can wait until he’s black like his uniform.” With a nod, he dismissed Kinch; satisfied that at least a little peace was still lasting in his camp.

Then, after five minutes as the medicaments had taken effect, the three men began to work.

TBC…

Yes, just like I said, this chapter was full of ‘tender care’, and the next chapters will be gentle, lovely ones, too, even if our poor Hogan is going to suffer from all the aftereffects. But not only his friends will be there for him. Klink reveals more and more of his soft side, while he also spreads the protective wings of the ‘Iron Eagle’ whenever necessary.

In the next chapter Klink confronts von Neuhaus, LeBeau will hire a very special ‘yellow-cap’ that brings him back to Stalag 13, and our Heroes are even ready to play ‘bodyguards’ for the Kommandant – after all he saved their beloved friend. And to top everything Burkhalter gets a new proof how much the ‘idiot’ has changed. In other words: The whole camp will be in chaos.

I hope you liked the new chapter and the way ‘Willie’ is more or less unable to hide his love for his American counterpart. Like always, I’m damn curious of your opinion.

I wish you a nice rest of the week,
Love

Yours Starlight
Hi, my dear readers!

I’m happy that I can keep my promise and publish the next chapter this weekend. After the emotional rollercoaster and also sweet, but also sad scenes within the last chapter, I can promise you in this one more of the ‘Iron Eagle’, but also some funny things. Well, if our Heroes are in action, not only serious, but also chaotically stuff can happen – especially now. And they know exactly who has earned some support for once, and who whom they want to give trouble...

Thank you so very much for the reviews, kudos and other feedback. I’m glad that you liked the last chapter so much, and I can tell you that more sweet scenes between our stricken colonel and love-sick Kommandant are going to happen soon.

Have fun with the new chapter,

I wish you a nice rest of the 2. Advent-Sunday and a good start into the next week,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 15 – Chaos in Stalag 13

Louis LeBeau stomped along the road towards Stalag 13. Daylight had begun half an hour ago and he could follow the street easily, yet it was still tiring to walk through the thick snow that had only been run flat by a few cars which had driven this way earlier. It hadn’t begun to snow again, but the wind was rough and icy. LeBeau yearned for the relative warmth of the barracks and a decent breakfast.

But even more he longed to know how Hogan was doing. That the colonel had more been carried than he’d been able to walk had been clear to see despite the distance between the little Frenchman and the entrance of the Gestapo-Headquarters. And that Klink had wrapped his own coat around Hogan had spoken volumes – after all the Oberst really suffered a nasty bronchitis. That the German officer was willing to give the protective cloth to his American counterpart and that he even forgot
about LeBeau, showed Louis that the colonel was in an even worse shape than Klink.

‘Hochstetter, this bosche, certainly tortured him. I could kill this damn pig! Hogan is one of the finest men I ever met, and then…’ He kicked into the snow, swearing in French and English.

Imagining the most horrible things which could have been done to his friend and superior officer, he almost missed the noise of an approaching car. Realizing that he was out in the open, on a road that led to a POW camp and that his French accent was unmistakable, he quickly tried to hide beside the street in the bushes, but the high snow hindered him a lot.

Too much, even.

Turning around, he glanced at the vehicle coming nearer. It was a grey staff-car with twin axes and…

He knew this car. He knew it very well. He had seen it a hundred times inside of the camp. For a moment he gulped, then an idea built in his mind. Why walk when a yellow-cap drove by? Well, not really yellow, mind you, yet a hack was a hack, even if it was already occupied by a general.

Okay, show-time!

Putting on his best cheerful smile, he waved with both arms at the car – as if he would be happy to see the passenger. Well, given the whole situation, he was indeed glad that Burkhalter had arrived. If someone could bring order to the whole mess, then it was the fat general who still had some dignity left.

*** HH ***

Burkhalter sat in the backseat and pondered about everything that had happened within the last hour. He was glad to be rid of Hochstetter. He had never liked the man, and even if the major was only doing his duty, his choleric nature and his shouting if given the tiniest reason had disgusted Burkhalter a lot. And, by the way, he simply knew that Hochstetter had even had him observed! At least…

“Herr General, I think this man over there wants something from us. Shall I ignore him or shall I stop?”
His driver’s voice tore him out of his thoughts and looking out of the window, Burkhalter gasped, “LEBEAU?”

Sweet Lord, what was Klink’s little French cooking-POW doing out here on the road? And… he was beaming at him?

“Stop the car!” he ordered; one hand fingered for his pistole. No, he didn’t think that the Frenchman was up to something nasty, but these were dark times and a staff-officer, especially, couldn’t be careful enough.

Lowering the window, he bent outside, as he already heard the POW’s cheerful voice calling,

“Monsieur le Général! What a pleasure to meet you here.”

Burkhalter controlled his jaw at the very last moment. No, he would not gape at this kind of greeting, coming from a POW. He had some decency left, after all. “Corporal LeBeau, what are you doing here?” he demanded with his most stern voice. “Klink barely left the camp and the POWs are already running free?”

The little Frenchman closed the distance to the car; arms firmly wrapped around himself now and shivering, yet he was grinning like a boy.

“No, mon Général, all are still in the camp – and I’m on my way back to it. Would it be too much to ask if you could give me a ride?”

In the front seat the driver almost choked. He had been driving Burkhalter for years now, but the most funny and unbelievable things he ever witnessed always happened when Stalag 13 was involved. And that an escaped POW asked the general, joyfully, if he could give him a ride back to the camp could only be a joke – yet the Frenchman was serious, this much he could tell. Heavens, if he survived the war he would write a book about all these odd and funny things that happened concerning Stalag 13, and he already knew that it would turn into a bestseller!

Burkhalter could only stare at LeBeau for a moment, before he asked slowly, “You want to return?”
“Oui, of course. I only left the camp to get Colonel Klink for help for mon colonel and…”

“Just a moment!” Burkhalter interrupted him. “You informed Klink about Hogan having been arrested? I thought Fräulein Hilda did it after she talked with me.”

“Mademoiselle Hilda called you?” LeBeau’s eyes widened. “Mon dieu, the mademoiselle has guts, no doubt.”

Burkhalter watched him closely. “So, you told Klink about everything?”

“Oui, mon Général. The whole power was cut off, no-one could use the telephone, the SS took over the camp, treated us like animals, threatened Corporal Langenscheidt and Hogan’s life was at stake. Something had to be done. So I fled, went to the hospital and got Klink.”

In the front seat the driver could only look straight down the street to control his features. What was it with this Stalag 13 that the POWs were concerned about their guards and that they turned to the camp’s Kommandant for help as if he were a friend? Was Stalag 13 a vacation camp, or what?

Burkhalter took a deep breath. “You can tell me the whole story on the way back to the camp. Climb into the car.”

LeBeau, who was hopping from one foot to the other and rubbing his hands by now, smiled at him. “Merci beaucoup, mon Général,” he said cheerily, walked to the other side of the car and slipped in.

*** HH *** HH ***

Kinchloe and Newkirk had sat down on the baroque sofa in Klink’s living-room and nipped at the cognac. They were still nauseous from what had been done to Hogan, fearing that their friend had been through too much this time to heal properly again.

Their anxiety increased as, here and then, they heard a yelp from the sleeping chamber, mostly accompanied by low, muffled voices which were obviously trying to comfort the deeply troubled man.
Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity but wasn’t more than twenty minutes, the door opened and Carter emerged – pale like a tablecloth.

Rising parallel, the two other males glanced expectantly at him.

“It’s done,” Andrew said; his voice sounded pressed. “Wilson will give him some more pain-killers and then… we’ve to wait.” He wiped his forehead. “Boy, a medical career would never be something I would choose.”

Suddenly loud voices came from outside the little house, and the three Heroes recognized Langenscheidt’s angry voice.

Inside the sleeping chamber, Wilson was placing a second pillow behind Hogan’s upper body to make everything softer for his sore back, while Klink was helping him by holding the colonel in a sitting position. Bandages were placed around Hogan’s chest and back, another one protected the wound on his head and patches covered the open bruises. An IV supplied the American with a sugar solution to help him with the dehydration and to raise his blood sugar. They had put on his pants, but skipped from using the top, because Hogan had more freedom to move like that and the access to his injuries was easier. He was cleaned and attended to, yet he did not look better than before. There was nothing Klink wanted to do more than to lie down beside him, take him into his arms and guard his sleep, but he knew that he couldn’t give into his desires now. There was still too much he had to do and…

Voices grew loud in his living-room – a voice Klink didn’t know and that of an obviously highly irritated Kinchloe, as he demanded that someone should stay away from the sleeping-chamber.

“What the hell is going on?” the Oberst groused, but before he could turn around, he saw Hogan stiffening, while his one eye widened in fear – looking at something behind Klink’s back. “No,” was all he whispered, but somehow this one, hoarsely croaked word thundered in Klink’s ears.

Whirling around, the Oberst came face to face with a man wearing the black SS-uniform of a Leutnant, with the Gestapo-pin on his necktie that showed that he belonged to both units. And Klink knew instantly whom he faced.

“How dare you come into my quarters without permission!” he snarled.

Behind him he heard hasty movements, while Wilson murmured urgently, “Colonel, please calm
down, the Kommandant will not allow…”

“How come this man is out of custody?” von Neuhaus demanded and pointed at Hogan who had come out of his apathy enough to be ready to jump up.

Klink placed himself firmly between the American and the Leutnant. The same moment Schultz appeared on the doorstep; holding his rifle.

“How Herr Kommandant, I’m sorry, but the Leutnant’s men distracted me and then he slipped in behind me, so…”

“Not now, Schultz!” Klink growled while making a threatening step towards von Neuhaus. “I gave clear orders that you and your underlings stay away from my quarters, and said order still stands. Out! Leave instantly or I shall forget myself.”

The Leutnant’s eyes narrowed. “I asked how this man got here and…”

“You have no authority here, so I don’t have to answer to you,” Klink snapped and pointed one hand firmly at the door. “Out! NOW!” Closing the distance and stepping into the Leutnant’s personal space, the Oberst forced von Neuhaus to retreat.

“Oberst Klink, I was put in charge of this camp by Major Hochstetter and…”

“And I’m the legal Kommandant of this camp that belongs to the Luftwaffe and, besides, I outrank you.” He pushed the other man out of the sleeping chamber into the living room, where Kinch, Newkirk and Carter stood – ready to intervene should it be necessary. Yet there was no need for risking punishment by putting up resistance against a German officer. With awe they – and Schultz, who had instantly followed the Oberst – looked at Klink who firmly closed the door behind him and seemed to grow an inch. He stood there, proud like the Prussian Officer of the Emperor Wilhelm III. he had maybe been once, when he was still very young. Even with bare feet, bloody bandage around his left calf, only wearing a bath robe and the everlasting monocle placed before his left eye, he somehow demanded respect.

“You and your men have fifteen minutes to pack your belongings and leave my camp.”

“You can’t…” von Neuhaus began, indignant.
“I can, and herewith I give you this order. Leave! Anyone of the SS who will be caught in a quarter hour within the area of Stalag 13 will be arrested and have to answer to Berlin.”

Newkirk and Carter had a hard time from preventing their jaws from dropping. Sweet Lord, what had gotten into the Kommandant? Whenever the SS or Gestapo were involved, he usually bent to every wish those bastards mentioned, but just right now he was kicking them out? What, for God’s sake, had triggered Klink into developing such courage?

“You overstep your competence, Klink!” von Neuhaus raged. “Only Major Hochstetter can…”

“Major Hochstetter certainly has completely different things to worry about just right now – like answering to General Burkhalter for overstepping his limits, for abusing his rank, for attempted murder and more. And if I were you, I would take my men and leave quickly, before the general decides to question you about what you’re doing in one of his camps.” There was no wavering in the Oberst’s behavior or voice. His eyes blazed while he glared at the younger man, who dared to disobey his orders – and who had scared Robert, who had been about to come around a little bit!

Von Neuhaus took a deep breath. “I will call the headquarters in Hammelburg and demand some answers. I will not abandon my post only because a simple Oberst in a bathrobe says so.”

“This ‘simple Oberst in a bathrobe’ will definitely arrest you if you don’t leave within the given time and stop insulting a higher ranking officer!” Klink hissed, before he taunted, “By the way, if you would have obeyed my order, you wouldn’t have to see me in a bathrobe.”

The Leutnant growled quietly in his throat. “Major Hochstetter already told me that you are a very special individual. And as far as I know you already have had a lot of trouble with the Gestapo. I will take care that this trouble will finally have a result – like removing you from your post and…”

“Time is running out, Herr Leutnant,” Klink interrupted him sternly; for the first time not impressed with the harassing behavior of a Gestapo- or SS-officer. “You already wasted a minute of the fifteen I granted you for safe-conduct. I wouldn’t fritter away more time, but it’s up to you. If you want to stay here until the period has expired, be my guest – but outside of my quarters!” He pointed at the door. “For the last time: Out! Or I will have to order Sergeant Schultz to take you to the cooler, where you can wait for General Burkhalter to pick you up and send you to Berlin – side by side with your beloved Hochstetter.”

Von Neuhaus’s face flushed. “This will have consequences for you, Klink. I promise you will pay
“Your threats are childish – and I’m only paying for things I want to owe,” the Oberst replied icily. “Out!”

“You’ll hear from me again,” the Leutnant snarled, turned around – and flinched as behind him Kinchloe and Newkirk stood; arms crossed, straddle-legged and with a grim expression on their faces.

“You allow your prisoners to intimidate other German officers?” he hissed; looking back over his shoulder.

“Sergeant Kinchloe and Corporal Newkirk are here with my permission, and if I need their service I will let them know. Otherwise they do what every loyal soldier should do: Protect their superior officer, meaning Hogan, and wait for orders from their Kommandant, meaning me. It’s their duty – and part of their loyalty. But the latter is something you will never be able to grasp. And now – there is the door!” He pointed again at the entrance, and with a curse, von Neuhaus left.

“Schultz, make certain that Leutnant von Neuhaus and his men are really leaving. If they put up resistance, our guards shall arrest them.”

“Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” Schultz nodded; almost happily. He couldn’t stand the SS and he didn’t like that Leutnant at first sight. The way the Oberst had kicked the black-clad officer out was worth to be written down in some annals. Almost smiling, he left.

Klink took a deep breath. Usually he wouldn’t have stood up against someone of the SS who also belonged to the Gestapo like this. Until two days ago he wouldn’t have dared to do so – he would have trembled at the mere thought of what could happen if he defied one of those guys like he did now. But just right now his nerves lay blank – and he was still furious with everything that had happened. This, combined with the new inner strength he had developed as he knew the man who held his heart was being mortally threatened, made him act as if he was a different man.

Maybe he was. Love could change everything – and everyone. Well, if he was truthful, he had denied that his feelings for Robert Hogan went that deep. He even had trouble admitting that he desired him at all, yet the affection he held for the younger man outreached simple lust. The last two days had opened his eyes. He loved his American counterpart, and with finally admitting this to himself, something close to peace weaved through his soul, but also gave him an infusion of strength he thought he had lost years ago.
“This I’m calling an iron hand, sir,” Kinchloe said; indeed a little bit impressed by Klink for the first time ever.

“Well, it’s the only way to handle these guys. They are worse than blowflies. If you allow one of them near, a whole swarm will follow.” Klink turned around and wanted to return to his sleeping chamber, as new tumult was to hear from outside.

“Himmel, Kreuz-Donnerwetter, noch mal!” Klink groused in German (Heavens, cross and golly, once again). “Can’t a guy get some peace for once?” He stomped towards the door, followed by Kinchloe and Newkirk. ‘Since when have those two become my bodyguards?’ the Oberst thought, but at the same moment he knew that they were only accompanying him to make certain that Hogan wouldn’t be disturbed again. Well, Klink was okay with it.

He stepped out onto the porch – and quickly jumped back as his bare feet hit the icy planks and the cold wind drove beneath his bathrobe without any problem. He had forgotten that he wasn’t dressed. If this wasn’t typical for him whenever he was distracted!

Newkirk and Kinchloe exchanged a short glance of amusement; suppressing a chuckle. As it seemed, the schlemiel in Klink still existed after all. Then their attention was driven to the chaos in the yard.

They saw Burkhalter’s staff-car parking between the Kommandantur and Klink’s quarters; the general himself stood there with von Neuhaus and was discussing something; gesturing wildly and face flushed red with anger. The SS-guards were almost running forth and back between their truck and the guards’ quarters like a startled flock of chickens, while the Luftwaffe-members grinned broadly and with obvious glee.

“A shame that we don’t have a cine-camera here,” Kinch smirked. “This is pure slapstick.”

“Yeah, we could start a career in Hollywood after the war,” Peter nodded; eyes sparkling.

“Gentlemen, this is no fun but the sad truth,” Klink protested; standing shivering at the door step. “We Germans are so busy with each other and turf-battling that we forget that the real enemy is closing up.”

“Well, like Colonel Hogan already suggested; you can always surrender. No problem,” Kinchloe
deadpanned; burying his hands in the pockets of his parka.

“I’ll laugh later,” Klink grumbled – and had to cough again. He trembled and took notice of his headache for the first time since he had left the hospital. God, he really needed to lay down and cure himself further.

“Look who comes there!” Newkirk grinned; pointing towards Burkhalter’s staff-car.

“Wow, LeBeau must have climbed up the career-ladder a lot if Burkhalter is his driver now,” Kinch joked.

The little Frenchman looked around, shook his head as he saw the two German officers arguing with each other, and headed quickly towards Klink’s quarters.

“So, the lost son returns,” the Oberst stated wryly as LeBeau reached the porch.

“I thought it would be a good idea to bring Burkhalter with me,” Louis smiled mischievously. “I already assumed that he could give you a hand in kicking von Neuhaus out of the camp, Commandant.”

“Thank you for your consideration, LeBeau, but I already chucked him and his men out before Burkhalter showed up.” The Oberst cocked his head. “So you decided to return.”

“He’s used to the food here,” Newkirk commented dryly.

“Yeah – food that I cook, in case you have forgotten. Yours couldn’t be eaten even if the men were starving,” LeBeau bickered, then he turned serious again. “How is Colonel Hogan doing? Le général already told me a little bit of what he could see while he aided Colonel Klink in the Gestapo-Headquarters, but he didn’t say too much.”

“Just go inside and look after him,” Klink offered, before he added darkly, “And afterwards you, Corporal Langenscheidt and I will have a little talk!”

LeBeau shrugged and vanished inside. Klink and the two POWs followed him, Kinch closing the
door. Burkhalter was more than capable of handling von Neuhaus and his men.

“Hey, good that you’re back, LeBeau,” Carter greeted LeBeau, relieved. “We thought you took advantage of the circumstances since Colonel Klink and our strudel-king forgot about you and would have a nice day in Hammelburg.”

“Too cold, too expensive and too many SS-bosches around at the moment,” Louis shrugged. “Besides, I promised not to run away – and a Frenchman always keeps his promise!” he added proudly.

Klink listened to the short bantering; pursing his lips. It was just like he had told Hogan as they hid in the woods after the ambush two days ago. That his record of ‘no escapes’ was still flawless was only because Hogan and his men always returned whenever they were outside of the camp. He hadn’t doubted that LeBeau would wait for him and Schultz to be picked up again – he knew that he could trust the Frenchman’s honor – yet Klink was grateful that the tiny cook returned after he had been forgotten. He would have had a hard time explaining to Burkhalter why one of the POWs had successfully escaped – and Langenscheidt would have been in really deep trouble, after all, the corporal was responsible for the correct running of the roll call if Schultz wasn’t present.

“So, *mon colonel* is badly hurt?” LeBeau’s shocked and sad voice woke his attention again.

“He’s in bad shape,” Carter nodded unhappily.

“Where is he?” Louis demanded.

“In my sleeping chamber. And he will remain there until he’s well again,” Klink said.

LeBeau looked at him – the *Oberst* was serious with this offer – took a deep breath and headed with a few harsh curses towards the other room.

The three other Heroes watched him – until all of sudden Newkirk’s and Kinchloe’s eyes widened in alert and both raced after their French friend, who had just opened the door. “Louis, wait!” Newkirk called, but it was too late.

LeBeau had stopped dead on the threshold to the sleeping room, choked – and promptly fainted. Newkirk was able to catch him before he hit the floor.
“Oh… dammit!” Kinch groaned and rubbed his face with one hand.

“Not again!” Carter sighed.

“God, this is humiliating!” Newkirk shook his head and rolled his eyes.

Klink limped towards the fallen Frenchman; peering, thunderstruck, down on LeBeau. “What’s the matter with him?” he asked, baffled, and met Newkirk’s exasperated glance.

“He can’t stand the sight of blood,” Peter grumbled.

“What?” Klink was certain that he didn’t hear that correctly.

“He can’t see blood,” Kinch repeated; grimacing.

Flabbergasted, the German officer looked at LeBeau. “But… he is a cook. Whenever he handles raw meat, he faces blood.”

“He has problems with human blood,” Newkirk murmured and looked at Kinch. “Help me get him to the sofa over there.” Both men lifted their friend between them. “Don’t worry, Kommandant, usually he comes around within a few minutes,” Peter added.

“Actually, I wanted to lay down there…” Klink began.

“Burkhalter certainly wants to talk with you first, and until you two are done, LeBeau is going to be awake again,” Kinch said casually, while he and Newkirk laid Louis down.

“Yes, certainly ‘Burkhalter’ wants to talk to Oberst Klink,” the general’s voice sounded from the entrance; bringing a wave of coldness with him before he closed the door. “What happened to the Frenchman?” he asked, surprised, as he saw LeBeau lying on the sofa. “A few minutes ago he was fit as a fiddle.”
“The little cockroach can’t stand to see blood,” Klink told him. “Can you imagine this? He’s a cook, serves in the military and faints when he sees blood. Typical of those crazy Frenchmen.”

“Not really,” Burkhalter sneered, while stripping off his gloves and removing his cap. “My nephew has the same weakness.” He threw both on the table and looked around. “How is Hogan doing?”

“Not good, sir,” Kinchloe answered quietly; utterly serious now. “Wilson is still treating him.”

“Given the fact that you all are here I assume Hogan isn’t in the infirmary but in Klink’s sleeping chamber,” Burkhalter grumbled.

“Yes, Herr General,” Klink nodded quickly. “I’ll take the guest room. Colonel Hogan has more comfort and warmth here, and the bed is better. It will increase his healing.”

“Hm, usually I would say you spoil your senior POW officer, but in this special case I agree with you. What had been done to Hogan was not right.”

“’Not right’?” Newkirk asked with a dangerously soft voice; eyes flashing. “This was barbaric. You should see the poor bloke. There is barely a healthy spot left on him and…”

“I can understand your wrath, Corporal Newkirk. And be assured that Hochstetter will pay for it. I arrested him and stripped him of his rank – with Himmler’s permission. The major will have to answer at trial for attempted murder, abuse of rank, disobeying orders, breaking rules and usage of illegal interrogation methods. The Gestapo and SS are never prim when it comes to questioning people, but that was too much.” He looked at the three POWs and Klink. “I hope this calms the gentlemen a little bit.”

“Only if this damn crab-louse gets what he deserves in the end,” Klink answered; ignoring Burkhalter’s grimace. “Otherwise I am going to make certain that he pays for what he did!”

“Be careful, Klink, Hochstetter has many fellows. One of them is von Neuhaus. Be wary so they don’t get you for bringing the fall of one of their own,” the general warned.

“Hochstetter dis-empowered himself as he crossed too many lines,” the Oberst growled.
“And you never do the same, of course – like sending Hogan out of the camp to do little jobs for you or playing chess with him ‘til two o’clock in the night,” Burkhalter taunted.

“We got carried away during the chess matches,” Klink shrugged. “It’s not that it did any harm.”

“No, in this case it even saved the colonel’s neck, yet I’m surprised that the ‘toughest’ POW-camp in the whole of Germany is lead this lazily.”

“I lead this camp with an iron fist, but there's a difference in having to control hundreds of POWs or playing chess with an officer of my own rank who has proved himself to be honorable and decent over and over again,” Klink defended himself – without the usual silly chuckling, as Burkhalter realized.

Pursing his lips shortly, he surveyed the other German officer. “Hm, Hochstetter thinks the straight opposite of Hogan, and he has some points which give me a lot to think about, yet in one thing I agree with you: He overdid it. Hogan can thank the Lord that he and you had a chess-marathon going on last Monday. Otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to arrest Hochstetter at all.”

“Do you really think they will judge one of their own men, General?” Kinch asked, tensed yet polite.

“This is still a state of law, Sergeant.”

“Really? It didn’t occur to me,” Newkirk murmured beneath his breath.

“And of course the court-martial will be a correct one,” Burkhalter continued; ignoring the Englishman. Then his gaze found the open door that led to Klink’s bed chamber, and, pressing his lips shortly into a thin line, he crossed the living area. Stopping on the threshold and feeling a little shocked, he looked at the usually so witty and cocky American who lay on the bed; supported by a few pillows. Burkhalter took in the bandages, the patches, the bruises and the paleness where no hematomas were coloring Hogan’s skin. He heard the hollow breath and sighed. Even attended to, the colonel looked like a buffalo herd had stomped over him.

“Status, Sergeant,” the general quietly ordered Wilson, who gave him a short but detailed report of Hogan’s injuries. “Sweet Lord,” was all Burkhalter said afterwards, before he turned towards Klink. “I understand your wrath better now. This here is indeed a crime. Spy or not, this went too far.”
He saw now that the three other POWs had stopped behind the Oberst and peeked over his shoulder. He couldn’t remember anyone of his own men having shown so much worry about him like those three did for their superior officer. Somehow he had to have done some things wrong.

“Hey, Colonel,” Kinch suddenly greeted gently, and as Burkhalter turned around, he saw that Hogan had carefully turned his head towards them and looked with one eye tiredly at them.

Closing the distance to the bed, Burkhalter bent down a little bit. “Colonel Hogan, do you hear me?” he asked, unusually soft.

A tiny nod was the reply.

“I know that it doesn’t change what happened, but… I’m sorry about what Hochstetter did to you. He’s arrested now and will face harsh consequences for his deeds.”

The American looked at him without any reaction, and giving into a human impulse, the general carefully put one hand on Hogan’s left arm. “Get better soon, Colonel. I am certainly going to miss your permanent meddling whenever I have business matters to discuss with Klink – or your general presence in his office.” It was an attempt to joke, and for a moment he thought he saw Hogan’s left corner of his mouth moving. Softly squeezing the colonel’s arm, he straightened his shape again and looked first at Wilson and then at Klink. “Make certain that he gets what he needs and that he is correctly attended to. I will not allow that my reputation is damaged because of a mad gnome and failing medical care in one of my camps.”

‘That’s all you worry about, damn Kraut!’ Newkirk thought enraged.

Klink’s reaction was different but no less critical. “I had been telling you for months that Hochstetter is about to lose it, Herr General. Maybe you should have put him in his place sooner,” he commented with a stern voice.

Burkhalter’s eyes widened for a moment, before he replied, “And at which occasion should I have done this? The man has a choleric temper. If I would have given everyone who is choleric an earful, I wouldn’t know where to start and where to stop – including the Führer,” he added quietly in the end.

“Maybe we wouldn’t be where we are now, if someone would have stopped him earlier,” Klink whispered under his breath; leaving it open to whom of the two mentioned men he was referring and
careful not to be heard by Burkhalter. But Kinch, Carter and Newkirk had heard him, and he was certain that the chuckle came from Kinchloe.

Burkhalter took a deep breath. “So, take care of Hogan and keep me updated, Klink.” He observed the Oberst from head to toe, frowned as he saw the bloody bandage around the other man’s left calf, and grimaced. Turning towards Wilson, he ordered, “Change Klink’s bandages. It should have been done already and…”

“I offered to do so, but the Kommandant declined until I were finished with Colonel Hogan,” the sergeant replied while crossing his arms in front of his chest. His glance was almost challenging.

Eyes almost bulking out of his head, Burkhalter looked at Klink. “What has gotten into you all of sudden? First…”

“Qu’est-ce qui s’est passé?” (What happened?)

Carter, Newkirk and Kinchloe turned around and glowered at LeBeau who had just regained consciousness and had lifted himself on his elbow; looking around, disoriented and confused.

Klink rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me he even forgot how to speak English.”

Newkirk moved to make room for the Kommandant – which was a big mistake. Like this the Oberst’s left under leg with the bloody bandage was clearly visible from the sofa. LeBeau’s eyes widened comically, he sighed – and promptly fainted again.

“Really, I’m running out of words,” Klink deadpanned.

“A condition I prefer,” Burkhalter sneered. To his utter surprise he received wry and almost sharp looks from the three POWs around Klink, while the Oberst glared back over his shoulder, but said nothing. The general made a face. Now Hogan’s men even defended Klink – more or less. This was all getting really odd.

“All right, gentlemen, I don’t have all day. Klink, I need to speak with you after Sergeant Wilson has attended to you. Get dressed and meet me in your office afterwards. I will make sure that von Neuhaus and his men are leaving in the meantime.” He pushed through the men.
“Very good,” Klink nodded. “The sooner they get lost, the better. And…” He began to cough violently and almost doubled over, while he shivered.

Burkhalter grimaced again. This really didn’t sound good. Taking a closer look at the inferior officer, he pursed his lips shortly before he said, “As it seems, it’s really got you bad. Maybe Corporal LeBeau can make this mysterious sauce again, the one that helped you heal last time – that means, if he can see you without fainting again.”

“I don’t look this ugly,” Klink protested.

“No, you only look like someone who should be in bed yesterday,” the staff-officer nodded.

“Well, if there weren’t a certain general who chases me square over the yard through the bitter cold, I would go to bed instantly,” Klink groused; sounding like his old self again.

“Please, Klink, I just saw a new side of you back in the Gestapo-cellars as you socked Hochstetter powerfully enough to send him to the ground.” He ignored the gasps of the POWs. “And the way you defended Hogan showed me that somewhere in you a warrior does indeed exist. Don’t destroy this new image I have of you.”

The Oberst gave him one of his gauche smiles. “If this is so, Herr General, then please note that I decline from coming over to the Kommandantur while I’m suffering a strong bronchitis and running a high fever. It can’t be in your interest if it worsens to pneumonia. Therefore I will stay here and wait for your return.”

Burkhalter, who had already collected his cap and gloves, turned into a pillar of salt before he turned around again. “Klink, that you grew a backbone for once doesn’t mean that you can disobey me to your liking.”

“Two times,” Klink corrected and explained at the general’s confused glance, “It was two times I ‘grew a backbone’. One time when I saved Hogan from his own people’s flyers, and the second time at the Gestapo-Headquarters. And I am not disobeying you, Herr General, I simply intended to drive your attention to my poor health that could prevent me from commanding this camp. And seeing as most officers of the Luftwaffe, who are competent enough for such a job, are fighting a lost battle at the Russian Front, I’m sure you’re glad that you don’t need to search for a substitute for me, because to remain warm and in bed means I’ll be well again in a few days.”
Burkhalter fixed him with a firm glare. He received the foolish grin he knew so well, but otherwise Klink didn’t bow. “I really want to know what they put into your coffee within the last days. Maybe it would help our boys at the battle fronts, too.” He sighed. “By all means, stay here. I’ll return in half an hour.” He was almost at the little anteroom that was separated by a dark velvet curtain from the living area, as he turned around one last time. “By the way, I gave Fräulein Hilda a day off. The child was beside herself as she called me in the early morning and told me what was going on here.”

Klink almost lost his monocle as his eyes became wide as saucers, while Kinch, Carter and Newkirk exchanged glances of pure surprise.

“Fräulein Hilda called you?” the Oberst asked thunderstruck.

“Yes – after the main power was restored in the area and wasn’t switched off despite the given general order of rationalization. Like this I learned that you were in hospital and that Hogan was arrested – the reason why I could show up in time in the Gestapo-Headquarters. You have a brilliant secretary there, Klink. Very loyal and intelligent. I also thought that she called you in the hospital to inform you, too, but as it seems you have your own messengers.” He nodded at the still unconscious LeBeau on the sofa. “He told me that he slipped out of the camp while Leutnant von Neuhaus took Fräulein Hilda home. How he was able to escape under the SS’s nose is beyond me, but he somehow managed.”

Promptly the well-known proud, vain smile was back on Klink’s face, while he rubbed his hands in glee. “See? With my men in charge and with me as the Kommandant there had never been a successful escape. And then, the black rats have barely started with having the say here, the POWs are coming and going to their liking.”

Burkhalter couldn’t suppress a loud groan. “I know, I know, zero-escape rate.” Muttering under his breath he vanished through the front door that fell closed with a bang a moment later.

“And don’t forget it,” Klink called after him, before a new coughing-fit hit him.

The three Heroes looked at each other. If Klink only knew…

TBC…
Well, LeBeau is back, Burkhalter got the second shock this morning, Hogan is well-cared for and
Klink showed once again this new side of him…

In the next chapter, LeBeau and Langenscheidt have ‘the’ talk with Klink who has to decide what to
do with them, Schultz tells the Heroes of what happened in the cellars and then there is the next
sweet scene between the two colonels.

I hope you liked the new chapter so far and I would be very happy to get new reviews (*smile*).

Have a nice evening,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the feedback I got. Like so often I’m very happy that you like this story so much.

Like I already mentioned in the epilogue of the last chapter, this new one will be one of emotions, a little bit fun and some clear-outs. I hope, you’re going to like it.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 16 – To clear anything out

“So, did I get this right? You, LeBeau, simply walked through the main-gate while the SS-rat took Fräulein Hilda home on my motorcycle, went to Hammelburg, had to hide there because of the curfew, then searched for the hospital, found me, alerted me, waited for Schultz and me to pick you up again, and after we didn’t within a few minutes you went near the Gestapo-Headquarters, saw Schultz and me steering Hogan in my car, and, after we didn’t stop, you began to wander the way back to Stalag 13, only to be picked-up by General Burkhalter.”

Klink, with freshly-done stitches, clad in casual pants, a shirt, socks, slippers and wearing his thick red house-coat, sat on one of the armchairs and watched LeBeau with hawk-eyes – glassy, reddened hawk-eyes! In front of the table stood Corporal Langenscheidt, while Kinchloe, Carter and Newkirk leant against the wall beside the door to the sleeping-chamber, where Wilson watched over Hogan who slipped into and out of sleep.

“Oui, Colonel, exactly like this,” LeBeau nodded. “But I didn’t ‘walk’ out of the camp, but slipped
out of it, using the shadows and that the SS-bosches were distracted by the pompous behavior of their superior – making a big show of driving the motorcycle and having the mademoiselle with him.” He smiled mischievously.

He had regained consciousness shortly after Burkhalter left and had to endure the merciless taunting of his friends while Klink was being treated in the bathroom by Wilson. Yet none of the Heroes dared to ask LeBeau what had happened that led him coming back in Burkhalter’s car and Klink obviously being the one who had rescued Hogan from Hochstetter. They would question him later when they were back in their barracks.

As the Oberst returned, he had ordered Langenscheidt to join them and had questioned Louis first – and, like so often, he could barely believe what he heard. That a POW could sneak out of camp by using the main-gate was… crazy. Yes, Klink was proud of his guards, but he also knew that the SS-members were usually better schooled than the best of the Luftwaffe-guards. So to imagine that LeBeau had slipped away right under their noses was almost impossible.

He surveyed the Frenchman and recognized for the first time that he wore strange clothes, yet the garments looked familiar. “From whom did you borrow those clothes, LeBeau?” he asked firmly.

Louis bit his lips and prevented himself from looking at Kinchloe. “From another prisoner,” was all he said.

Klink pursed his lips and nodded. “Of course. Name!”

LeBeau gulped and shook his head.

The Oberst sighed. “I can order a roll call just right now and check who wears your clothes. This would mean a few days in the cooler – otherwise…”

“Otherwise LeBeau and the man in question remain unpunished,” Kinch suggested.

“I bargain with Hogan enough, Sergeant Kinchloe. I don’t need another POW who thinks he can strike deals with me,” the Kommandant snapped.

“I’m the colonel’s substitute at the moment, sir, and therefore it’s up to me to negotiate with you.”
Klink glanced sharply up at him. “Negotiate? This isn’t a market place but a prison camp, Sergeant, and I’m its Kommandant and not a merchant.”

Kinch sighed. It always looked so easy when Hogan was making deals with Klink, but maybe that was because both men knew each other so well by now. “Sir, the camp was without power, was taken over by the SS who harassed us, Colonel Hogan was about to face death and you didn’t know about it all because you were in hospital. We had to inform you, but how could we, without power to use a phone?”

“So, POWs are using a phone. Do we have official call-boxes in the camp now?” Klink asked wryly.

“No sir, but Sergeant Kinchloe speaks of my idea to call you in secret from your own phone here in your quarters,” Langenscheidt cut in; jumping in for Kinch. He and Hogan’s men were on the same boat now – and he was in even more trouble than them. He knew that he needed Kinch’s help to get off this all cheaply. “But before I was able to do so, the power was cut off as the emergency generator broke down again and the main power failed.”

“So, you thought it a good idea to send LeBeau to me,” Klink asked disbelieving.

“This was my idea, sir,” Kinchloe said. “I came up with the plan. Louis and the other POW switched clothes and like this LeBeau’s absence wasn’t recognized during roll call.”

“Still, one POW wasn’t there when Corporal Langenscheidt counted them,” the Oberst said angrily and pointed an accusing finger at Karl.

“Leutnant von Neuhaus returned during the counting, and like before he made a big fuss of everything he is involved in. Langenscheidt had no chance to make a proper counting,” Kinch more or less lied. He wanted to keep the corporal out of serious trouble, after all Langenscheidt had covered for them, which led to Hogan’s rescue in the end.

Both men exchanged a short glance. They both needed each other in the moment to get away from everything with the famous ‘stink eye’.

“Regard it from another side, sir,” Newkirk raised to speak. “If not one of us would have alerted you, your camp would still be in the clutches of the Gestapo and the SS, and Colonel Hogan would
certainly be dead now. And we all know that you and he have become sort of friends and that you value his opinions. So we did you a favor.”

“And nothing bad happened,” Louis added. “I’ve returned like promised, we are all still here, your record of no escapes is still flawless and even Général Burkhalter hasn’t any reason to grouse this time, after all my trip to Hammelburg happened while this nasty von Neuhaus was in charge, and not you.” He smiled winningly at Klink.

The Oberst made a face and gave them a mocking nod. “So everything is fine, you say.”

“Of course,” Carter piped up. “As long as you are in charge, we’ve no chance at all to leave the camp, but – boy – these SS-guys really don’t uphold their reputation. Your men are far more efficient.”

“This I could clearly see one year ago, as three of you played servicemen in the Hofbräu and Hogan ran around in a German uniform, pretending to be one of my officers,” Klink snapped. Feeling his headache increase, he lent back on the sofa, massaged his temples and closed his eyes shortly. What to do. Usually LeBeau should be put into the cooler for at least 30 days, Kinchloe and the other POW he still didn’t know the identity of should join the Frenchman for 20 days, and Langenscheidt had to get a serious rebuke in his personal chart at least. Yet those overgrown boys were right: They did him a favor by alerting him – a favor they didn’t know the half of. And it also touched him that they trusted him enough to lay their beloved colonel’s life in his hands.

Opening his eyes he looked at expectant faces, grimaced and groaned, “Corporal Langenscheidt, I urgently advise you to check the identity of the POWs you’re counting at those roll calls which are done by you. Switching clothes is an old trick you should have expected, but given the whole stressful situation the camp was in within the last two days, I’ll… oversee your mistake for once.”

Langenscheidt stood promptly to attention. “Yes, Herr Kommandant – and thank you.”

The Oberst waved one hand before he saluted properly. “Diiiiiiismissed!”

“Yes, sir!” Karl returned the salute happily and quickly left the building; relieved that he hadn’t gotten into trouble – thanks to Kinchloe and the other men of Hogan’s gang.

Klink looked at LeBeau after Langenscheidt had vanished. “Usually you would have many days for yourself in a single room downstairs, if you get what I mean, but seeing that you did not use the
chances to escape permanently from here and stood true to your duty as a soldier and to the promise you gave me, I'll let the whole matter go this time. By the way, your cooking abilities are needed by Hogan. Wilson said that good food is another key to his healing, and knowing that Hogan is your friend you'll certainly have no objections preparing meals for him. And I wouldn't rebuke you if I could get a part of those meals, too."

For once LeBeau wasn’t angry to have to cook for a ‘Kraut’. Klink had proven to be an odd kind of ally – at least to a certain degree – and he just had showed a big fairness. And he had saved Hogan. No, Louis had no problems making meals for the two highest ranking officers within those wires, one of whom he didn’t like only two days ago, but who had risen in his esteem now.

“Non problem, Colonel. I’ll make you and Hogan lunches and dinners you will yearn for even years later.”

“Maybe – if I survive you all and this damn war,” Klink grumbled. He had to sneeze violently.

“Gesundheit, (German equivalent to ‘God bless you’)” it echoed in German from all four POWs, and Klink glared at them. Of course he remembered how Hogan and his ‘gang’ irritated him during the incident with the avalanche several days ago, as first Schultz sneezed and Hogan wished him well like this, and then, as Klink sneezed, all remained silent. It had been a kind of teasing afterwards – especially as Klink’s noisy demonstration of having a cold allegedly elicited the avalanche and the whole gang called ‘Gesundheit’ in union. General Strommberger had almost gotten a raging fit. And later, back in the camp, snow came down from the roof after Klink sneezed anew, and promptly Hogan had called ‘Gesundheit’ again. Looking back it had been humorous, yet the Oberst couldn’t admit this officially.

“All right,” he began, before he coughed. Gasping for breath he added finally, “I hope I survive this damn bronchitis.” He rose. “All right, Gentlemen, General Burkhalter will be here in a few minutes and for once I have to attend to business. And you certainly have your own duties to do. Dismissed. I shall keep you updated concerning Colonel Hogan’s condition, and if you want to visit him, I have no objections, but please give him and me a few days of rest before my quarters turn into a place like a dovecot.”

“A… dovecot, sir?” Newkirk asked baffled. “What do you mean?”

Klink waved both hands. “That people are coming and going like doves in a cot, of course.”

Peter chuckled for a moment. “You mean, ‘it’s like Piccadilly Circus here’.”
“Or ‘like Grand Central Station’,” Cater helpfully added.

The Oberst, realizing that another German idiom differed a lot from its English equivalent, simply shrugged. “Whatever.”

Kinchloe couldn’t help himself: He grinned at the German officer. “Otherwise your English is very good.” He nodded at his comrades. “Come on, fellas, let us leave the two colonels to their healing.” He glanced back at Klink. “And thank you for your compliance.”

Klink made a face and gave them all one dark glance, before he glanced aside and murmured, “I’m far too soft.”

“Oh no, sir, don’t worry. We all know that you command the camp with an iron fist, but you are also very fair. Just like now,” Carter told him eagerly.

“Andrew – shut up!” Newkirk groaned.

“Why? It’s true, isn’t it?” the youngest Hero defended himself.

“You can continue your discussion wherever you want, but please outside,” Klink cut in. “Dismissed – all of you.” He watched the four POWs leaving reluctantly; throwing last gazes over their shoulders towards the door of the sleeping chamber, but at least they obeyed.

Finally almost alone, Klink went to the bedroom and stopped at the threshold. Hogan seemed to be asleep, but after a few seconds – as if his brain needed some time to react to noises – he turned his head and looked at him with one eye. Wilson sat on the bed-edge and surveyed him carefully.

“How is he?” Klink asked quietly.

“He is calmer now and I think the sedatives will kick in when his adrenalin finally comes down,” Wilson answered quietly.
“Good, good,” the Oberst nodded. “Do you need to watch over him further?”

The sergeant shook his head. “No, sir, I only thought that it would be better for him if he isn’t alone.”

Klink glanced once again at Hogan and caught the American’s tired gaze. “He won’t be alone, Sergeant. I’ll keep an eye on him. But just for now I have business with General Burkhalter in a few minutes. Please leave. You can check on Hogan later again – or, if something happens, I will call for you.”

Wilson sighed and rose. “Aye, sir,” he said, before he bent over Hogan and placed a hand on the colonel’s left arm. “Get better, sir. I’ll look after you in an hour when the IV-bag is empty.” He directed his attention to Klink. “Please make certain that he drinks a lot. He’s still dehydrated. I am going to tell LeBeau to make very light meals for him, because his stomach will certainly have problems after the brutal hits on his abdomen.”

“I’ll give him plenty to drink,” the German officer affirmed; recognizing that the medic had used the typical US-military reply when being given an order. That had never happened before. Sweet Lord, something had really changed between the POWs and him within the last two days. “Dismissed, Sergeant, and thank you for your help.”

“You are welcome, sir,” Wilson said. “May I give you some advice? When you’re done with the general, go to bed. This bronchitis you have is no walk in the park, and bed warmth helps a lot.” He nodded at him and left.

Klink watched him leave and pursed his lips. So, it was like this when comrades cared for each other. In earlier times, when he had been quite young, he had had friends among his squadron, but as the Great War neared its end, only a few had been left. And even fewer still lived since the madness had seized Europe. He had almost forgotten how it was when not the rank but the person was important. Wilson was the camp’s medic – not of his own free will, as he was a prisoner, but he took this responsibility very seriously. Not only towards the other POWs, but also towards the guards and lower ranking German officers. And now he also cared about him – Wilhelm Klink; the man they all regarded as an enemy. At least most of them. Hogan’s men had come to tolerate him, but this kind of real respect was utterly new. And somehow it warmed him – to be accepted a little bit into this special circle.

Sweet Lord, how desperate could a man get if he welcomed the first hue of comradeship from imprisoned enemies?

Only – Hogan and his men weren’t his enemies. Robert had never been one, and his fellows… Well,
Klink couldn’t deny that he admired their loyalty and their casual way of handling everything. What a difference to the stiff *Wehrmacht*…

“Kli’k?”

The croak behind him made him turn around and, glancing softly down on the injured man, the *Oberst* murmured, “Yes, it’s me.”

Lowering himself on the spot Wilson had left unoccupied, Klink surveyed the colonel with unmasked concern but also barely hidden tenderness. For a long moment there was nothing else to hear than the soft ticking of the grandfather clock in the living room and the crackling of the fire in the furnace.

Placing a hand on the American’s arm, Klink said quietly, “You had me scared here, Hogan. When I learned that you had been in Hochstetter’s clutches for almost a day, I…” He shook his head; trying to forget the dread that had gripped him only two or three hours ago. “I was afraid that I would come too late.” His glance wandered over the bruised face that was barely recognizable at the moment. “I came too late to spare you all the torment you went through, but at least I could get you out alive.” He took a deep breath, carefully as to not trigger another coughing fit. “The next time I order you to flee, you just do it, okay? This all wouldn’t have happened if you would have obeyed me the day before yesterday.”

“Co’dn’t,” came the hoarse reply. Hogan’s mind was still numb and his whole body seemed to belong to another person, yet his brain had started to work again. Everything was still foggy and where the cold darkness had gripped for him there seemed to be emptiness now, but his senses regained some abilities. He knew that he was in Stalag 13 again – home, as odd as it may sound. He had been attended to, his men – his friends – had been here, and now Klink sat at his bed. He even understood what the older man said, but he still had problems grasping reality.

The latter was not only because of the shock his brain still suffered from, but also because of the sedatives Wilson gave him. The pain-killers and the penicillin had their own soothing effects and increased his exhaustion. It was no miracle that he was in a condition similar to half-sleep.

Klink groaned as he heard the answer. “I know. You always put others above yourself. Your men – even me.” He bent down a little bit. “But this time your selflessness almost cost you your life. You would be dead now if LeBeau hadn’t come to the hospital to get me, and…”

“L’B’u?” Hogan needed all his strength to lift his head. “How’s’he?”
For a few seconds Klink could only look at him with fond exasperation; not realizing the warmth that shone in his eyes. “For once, stop worrying for the others, Robert. It’s you we’re worried about.” Gently he pushed Hogan back into the cushions. “LeBeau is well and I didn’t put him in the cooler for leaving the camp. Neither him, nor the others who had a part in the little complot to fool the Gestapo and SS and get me for help.”

Hogan moistened his lips and winced at the stinging pain the gesture elicited. “The G’st’po?” The word alone woke unusual fear in him.

Giving into his instincts again, Klink softly stroked an unruly lock out of Hogan’s forehead; touching the bandage. The gentle gesture seemed to calm the colonel, because the tension left him.

“I kicked the black rats and Leutnant von Neuhaus out of Stalag 13, and General Burkhalter is making certain at the moment that they are really leaving. All your men and you are safe again.” He squeezed softly Hogan’s hand. “I’m sorry that you had to endure this at all. If I would have known of what happened earlier, I would have come instantly, but… LeBeau reached me only early this morning and I came as quickly as I could.”

The one brown eye looked up at him with an expression Klink had never seen before: Gratefulness, wonder… Even something close to affection.

“Tha’ks,” Hogan whispered. “Tha’ks f’r gettin’ m’ out.”

Klink smiled. “You’re welcome, Hogan.” Then another thought struck him. “Are you hungry? Do you want to have a light breakfast?”

Very slowly the colonel shook his head. “No, th’k-yo’.”

“Okay.” The Kommandant rose. “Try to sleep a little bit. I’ll look after you when I’m done talking with Burkhalter. I think I’ve somewhere a little table-bell. I will bring it to you so that you can use it if you need something. It will certainly take a few days until your voice is strong enough again to call.”

Squeezing Hogan’s fingers a last time, he left – tired beyond belief, but still too agitated to even recognize it.
“So, what the hell happened?” Newkirk asked while pouring LeBeau a cup of coffee. Baker and Kinch sat beside him at the table. “How come you arrived with Burkhalter here and that it's obviously been Klink who got the gov’nor out?”

“And what took you so long?” Kinch added questions.

“Maybe you should try to sneak through a town that is full of SS-men while a curfew is set,” Louis bitched; offended. “First I got every bone shoved at another place inside my body while hiding in this impossible side-car – and I swear, this damn Kraut hit every pothole in the street…”

“The streets are covered with snow, and therefore have no potholes,” Peter cut in.

“Have you bruises everywhere, or I?” Louis snapped.

“Colonel Hogan has bruises everywhere – and more,” Kinchloe threw in, while he sat down in front of LeBeau. “Louis, don’t get us wrong here, but we were worried half out of our minds. So, what happened?”

The little Frenchman sighed and in the following minutes told his friends everything that had gone on since he sneaked out of Stalag 13.

“The Underground… did nothing?” Newkirk gasped.

“You heard LeBeau. Hans Wagner is with his leading men and women near Mannheim to speak with the Allies which are somewhere in Belgium and North-France. That’s why he and the others couldn’t do anything for the colonel,” Kinch tried to calm the Englishman, before he mused, “Hm, our people seem to be as good as liberated from those damn bosches.”

“And so you simply ran to the hospital and tore Klink out of bed?” Carter asked LeBeau. “Boy, you really have nerves.”
“I didn’t tear him out of bed, he came as I quarreled with this hag of a night nurse – and then Schultzie made noises enough to drown out a whole herd of elephants. Klink came, I told him what happened and then he went all…” Louis raised both hands, widened his eyes and made panicking sounds, while looking around furiously.

The others began to snicker, then Newkirk turned serious again. “So, Klink didn’t hesitate to come to the gov’nor’s rescue?”

The little Frenchman snorted. “You should have seen him. He got all commanding, snapping at the nurse to help him get dressed and threatening to take care that she would be fired if she tried to stop him. Then Dr. Birkhorn appeared, I told him what happened, he hurried away to get medicine for Hogan and Klink, and then our balding eagle was already on his way. A street away from the Gestapo-Headquarters he made me leave the car and stay behind so that I didn’t get caught by one of the black rats should one of them recognize me…”

“This was unusually thoughtful of him,” Newkirk murmured.

LeBeau nodded shortly. “Oui, I think he really cares a little bit for us – but especially for the colonel. The moment I left the car he already gave Schultzie the order to speed up the car. I swear, I never saw him like this before.”

“I know what you mean, LeBeau, and I can only agree. I never saw the Kommandant acting like he did this morning,” a voice with a Bavarian accent rose to speak, and the others turned around, startled. None of them had heard Schultz coming in. He leant his rifle against the next stock-bed and set down his helm; not caring that he broke a dozen rules like this or gave the POWs a change to get hold of a weapon. He had no worry that they would attack him. “The SS and von Neuhaus are gone,” he updated them, before he simply pulled one of the chairs to the table and sat down between them – like he had done so often within the last years. Not for the first time Hogan’s men thought the large man belonged more to them than to the German guards.

“At least one good message,” Newkirk grumbled.

“Yes, I couldn’t stand this von Neuhaus the moment I met him. I thought Klink would tear him apart as he stepped into the sleeping-chamber and recognized Hogan.” He smiled proudly. “Mei, the Bavarian Lion couldn’t have become fiercer than our Kommandant in this moment.”

“Yeah, Klink was really impressive for once as he kicked him and the SS out of the camp,” Kinchloe agreed. “I never thought he had it in him like this.”
“You should have seen him back in Hammelburg,” Hans said; gratefully accepting a cup of coffee LeBeau offered him. “Danke,” he nodded, before he took a sip, placed the cup on the table and returned to his tale, “He stopped at nothing, really. He raced into the building, went to the cellars and while this nice Leutnant Schmidt began to argue with the guards, Klink stormed into the room were Colonel Hogan and Hochstetter were.”

“Did he really sock Hochstetter?” Carter asked eagerly.

“That would explain the bruises at his right hand,” Kinchloe nodded.

Schultz chuckled for a moment and nodded, “Yes, I saw it with my own two eyes. He dragged Hochstetter away from Hogan and then – zack!” He punched his right fist in the palm of his left hand. “Straight against the jaw. With all his strength. I never thought that Klink could throw a punch like this, but he did – two times, even.”

Applause and whistles were to hear as the POWs began to cheer.

“Hochstetter tumbled to the ground like a marionette cut off its strings,” Schultz had to raise his voice to be heard at all; grinning broadly now. “I think he was even knocked out for a few moments.”

“Bravo,” Kinch grinned. “I’ll buy Klink an ale the next time we’re in town.”

Again everyone began to laugh, and Hans shook his head; smirking. “’Next time we’re in town’ – jolly jokers.”

Then the Heroes and the other POWs in Barrack 2 turned serious again. “So, Klink knocked Hochstetter out and then he took Hogan and fled?” Carter wanted to know.

“If it would have been that easy, m’boy,” Schultz sighed. “Hogan was barely moving anymore and Klink had to reanimate him.”

“He had to reanimate him?” LeBeau repeated, alerted.
“He was partly wet as he arrived,” Newkirk said quietly; his good mood was lessening again by the mere thought of what his friend had been through. “Waterboarding?”

Schultz made an affirming gesture; looking very unhappy now. “Yes – and it seems that Hochstetter was going to kill him this way.” He slowly shook his head again. “No wonder Klink lost it.” He took a deep breath. “Hochstetter came around while Klink was aiding Hogan, and gripped for his pistol, but he hadn’t considered me.” Seeing that he had everyone’s attention now, he straightened his shape a little bit and said proudly, “Yes, I, Sergeant Hans Georg Schultz, kept Hochstetter in check with my rifle.” He flicked a thumb backwards towards his weapon. “And believe me, I would have shot if he had moved more than a finger, while Klink helped Hogan get some air in his lungs.” He grimaced. “Sacra (Bavarian for ‘holy’), had the man breathed water. I think he spitted for a minute or so. Klink was beyond himself with worry and even wrapped the colonel in his coat before he pulled him on his lap to warm him.”

“Klink… cuddled Hogan?” LeBeau asked thunderstruck.

“The colonel was going into shock and to keep somebody warm then is essentially important,” Schultz told him. “Hochstetter was furious and accused Klink of treason, but – Heavens – did our Kommandant turn eerie in that moment. I think, if he would have had a hand free he would have killed Hochstetter. I never heard him hissing and snarling like this. And his eyes… they were almost bright with fire.”

Newkirk and Kinch exchanged a glance. First Klink ran back into a rain of bullets to save Hogan, and now he even socked Hochstetter and defended Hogan like a lioness her cub? What was going on here, for God’s sake? That wasn’t normal anymore. Even if Klink regarded Hogan as a friend, that didn’t explain this sudden change in the man. What had triggered this kind of explosive protectiveness?

“Then Burkhalter appeared and took over,” Schultz continued. “Jesus Christ, I’ve seen the general angry before, but this time he really broke his own record. I don’t know what made him more furious: Hochstetter disobeying his orders, Hogan almost being killed or that the Gestapo took over Stalag 13.”

“Do you know of what Hochstetter accused the colonel in detail?” Kinch asked, and Schultz shrugged.

“The usual. Hogan being a spy and one of the leaders of the Underground, operating in secret here from the camp.” He suddenly looked sharply at the five Heroes. “And we all know that this is downright nonsense, isn’t it?”
“Of course.”

“What an idea. We – members of the Underground.”

“Silly.”

Schultz grumbled something beneath his breath and made a face, before he told them further, “Hochstetter also said, Hogan had been seen last Monday late in the evening in Hammelburg – meeting someone who is a wanted member of the Underground. What a Schmarrn (Bavarian for ‘nonsense’). Klink and Hogan played chess this evening – ‘til two o’clock in the morning. The colonel couldn’t have been this person, and as Burkhalter learned of it, he gave Hochstetter an earful like I have never heard before.”

Newkirk had grown stiff as he heard about this accusation. It had been him who had been in Hammelburg and… Hochstetter had arrested the gov’nor because someone saw him, Newkirk, and had mistaken him for Hogan? He remembered the short mission in the little town. He had to wait for the contact-man longer than intended and the handover of the information had costed extra time, so that he had to hurry to return to the camp. Someone must have watched them, informed the Gestapo and, of course, Hochstetter instantly assumed Hogan to be the one who headed back into the direction of Stalag 13. That the major was possessed with the idea of Hogan being the leader of an espionage-ring was nothing new.

Closing his eyes he lowered his head. He should have been more careful. If he had watched his surroundings more cautiously, he would have maybe seen the person who betrayed them to Hochstetter and he could have stopped said man or woman before it came to the worst.

He gulped. That Hogan had been through this hell was partly his – Newkirk’s – fault.

He heard how the others talked more with Schultz, but he blended it out. He could only think of his friend and superior officer, who had…

“But why didn’t Hogan tell Hochstetter that he played chess with Klink that evening?” Baker asked baffled; tearing Peter out of his thoughts. “Okay, to be out of the barracks after curfew means a lot of trouble, but not enough to endure torture instead of telling the truth.”

“As far as I learned, Hogan did tell Hochstetter, but this poison-gnome refused to ask Klink,” Schultz explained. “Leutnant Schmidt, the nice young man who helped us get into the Gestapo-Headquarters
and had even been on his way to get Klink, told Burkhalter that Hogan pleaded with Hochstetter to call Klink so that the Kommandant could affirm this alibi, but this bastard didn’t do it. Burkhalter accused Hochstetter that he didn’t want to know the real truth, but wanted to force Hogan to admit wrong statements. And as Hogan didn’t give in, Hochstetter decided to kill him so that Hogan couldn’t tell Burkhalter the truth after he arrived. If Klink wouldn’t have come at the last moment, our troublemaker would be certainly dead now.”

Shocked, the Heroes looked at each other. They had been a hair-width away from really losing Hogan today. After the colonel had barely escaped the ambush, now he had come very close to being killed again. They could only imagine what must have gone through Hogan’s mind and soul during the moments he thought they would be his last.

Schultz took a sip from his coffee and sighed again. “The poor colonel. He wasn’t even responsive as Klink held him. I thought, the Kommandant would strangle Hochstetter if given the chance. Even Burkhalter was perplexed.”

“I know what you mean,” Carter nodded. “He even refused to get his graze-wounds stitched again until the colonel was attended to, and gave me a little speech.” The others looked at him, and he explained, “I told him that I was surprised by his reactions and he only asked ‘Why do you think I was called the ‘Iron Eagle?’ Then he pointed at the Iron Cross and said that he hadn’t gotten that for naught. And he also told me that a man needs a backbone to do what he has to do, but that he had forgotten about it for too long – and that this would stop now.”

In awe Kinch, Baker and even Newkirk looked at each other, while LeBeau crossed his arms in front of his chest and mused, “That fits. I thought he would freak out as I told him that mon colonel had been arrested and in Hochstetter’s clutches since yesterday. He went pale like a tablecloth and then he changed into someone who knows exactly what to do and how. There was no track of his usual uncertainty or silly eagerness he shows so often. His orders were plain and stern, and he even walked straight – not bowed like an old tree. It was as if he all of sudden was a completely different man.”

“Yes, someone who has no problem even stripping off and helping another one get clean beneath the shower despite the heavy bronchitis he sports,” Carter nodded. “If you ask me, Klink feared for our colonel so much because he really likes him a lot. He became all protective and didn’t think of himself for a moment as he freed him and supported Wilson during Hogan’s treatment. He put the colonel’s welfare over his own two days ago, and he did it again today. Just imagine: Socking Hochstetter. I bet that no other man within Germany would have the guts to stand up against a Gestapo-officer like this.”

“Usually it would mean court-martial,” Schultz affirmed, “but in this case it’s Hochstetter who will face a trial. General Burkhalter made certain of it and arrested him. I don’t want to be in Hochstetter’s skin at the moment. They maybe could overlook him torturing a POW – even if this is
against the law – but disobeying the direct order of a general, giving instructions to tell the general’s office that he wasn’t present, abusing his position to get private revenge, refusing to check an alibi and trying to murder said POW to cover his deeds, all this is enough to put him in jail or a working camp for the next ten years.”

“Your words in God’s ears,” Kinch sighed. “At least it would make up a little bit of what he did to Hogan.”

Schultz looked around, saw the heartache apparent on the men’s faces and tried to comfort them, “Heads up, boys, Colonel Hogan is a strong man. And he is well cared for. Klink will make certain that he gets everything he needs – including kind words and a shoulder to lean on. He’ll cosset him, believe me.”

“We do believe you, Schultz,” Baker said. “And the image of Klink nursing Hogan back to health alone is confusing enough to give us sleepless nights.”

Hans waved a hand, “Ah, Baker, don’t be so over-dramatic. Our Kommandant and the colonel have become friends, that’s all. Klink has come to appreciate Hogan and wants to keep him safe – just like he wants to protect us all, too. I know he usually keeps the ball low, but if circumstances demand it he can take matters in his own hands and overgrow himself.”

“And how often has this happened?” Kinchloe asked.

Schultz shortly pursed his lips. “Well, there was… Hm, I think I remember the case as… No, that had been Burkhalter who saved the day. But there was…” He stopped again, before he capitulated, “Okay, I can’t remember when he did something like this before.”

“See,” Kinch nodded.

“But I always knew he had it in him,” Hans continued; raising one finger.

“Yes, I think everyone can be pushed to their limits and even cross that line. The only question is, why was it Hogan’s life that changed our gauche Kommandant into a real ‘Iron Eagle’?”

*** HH ***
While Schultz was with the POWs of Barracks 2 and was talking with them more than his position allowed, Burkhalter returned to Klink’s quarters.

The talk didn’t last long. Klink gave the general a full report of the last two days, including some details the older man hadn’t known until now. In return the Oberst learned of all the arguments and accusations Hochstetter had made about Hogan, and having more background information than Burkhalter, Klink had to secretly admit that the major had some very good points. If summed all together it completely confirmed what he assumed and had figured out for himself for months, even two years now. Yet – like before – Klink didn’t reveal what he had witnessed, heard and seen in the past; even changing a few little details of the different incidents in which Hogan had a part in. Especially concerning the incident with Major Pruhs and ‘Schafstein’ Klink twisted some facts to convince Burkhalter of Hochstetter’s obsession and that the major obviously lost track of his own sane mind.

Fortunately, Hochstetter had been arrested now, and Klink was even more glad about it because of everything the major had found out. The Gestapo-officer had been too close to Hogan’s track for Klink’s liking, and he knew that it would have come to the worst if Hochstetter were able to continue his hunt.

The Oberst also learned of Leutnant Schmidt’s promotion and that he was now in charge of the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg until further notice. Klink was pleased. He had feared that von Neuhaus would be put in command now, but as it seemed the young man from North-Germany had not only impressed him, but also Burkhalter.

And as the Kommandant heard how selflessly Schmidt had intervened in the ‘questioning’ as he became suspicious about ‘the prisoner’, Klink sent a silent prayer of thanks to all higher beings that the young man had been courageous enough to take matters in his own hands. Without Schmidt, Hogan would have been in an even worse condition than he already was.

Yet Burkhalter stayed silent about Hochstetter’s intention to brand the colonel. He had seen how fiercely Klink had protected his American counterpart; standing up against the Gestapo like only a few people would dare. The general assumed that it had been Klink’s fever and the medicaments which had been given to him at the hospital that made the Kommandant this reckless. Yes, the Oberst had suddenly gotten guts, which had taken Burkhalter by surprise, but he also knew how much this all had demanded from Klink. He knew his underling well enough to realize that the other man had reached his limits, and he didn’t want to push him over the edge.

Besides, it hadn’t slipped the staff-officer's attention how sick Klink really was. Therefore he cut the talk as short as possible, wished him well and left.
His own house was only a few kilometers away and, since he hadn’t gotten any decent sleep last night, he planned on staying at home until tomorrow. Maybe, with a little bit of luck, the meeting would be over in Berlin then and he could remain in Hammelburg for a few days more. He wanted to make certain that everything ran smoothly – not only in Stalag 13, but also with young Schmidt. He didn’t trust von Neuhaus – not one little bit. The man was like Hochstetter – enjoying his power far too much and obviously too hungry for climbing the career ladder. Burkhalter would watch him, because he didn’t want a repeat of what happened within the last two days.

But for now he had other duties to attend to – and he was so damn tired. Climbing into his staff-car he signaled his driver, who had already been waiting for him, to leave the camp.

In the meantime Klink made certain that Hogan sipped at least one glass of water; gently steadying the younger man’s head while he held the glass against the split lips. Only then did the Oberst finally find time to take care of himself. Schultz brought him a light breakfast, and after putting Schultz in charge for the next days – ordering him to keep him updated and to give him reports on a regular basis – the Kommandant went to bed. An ordinance had put fresh linens on the bed in the little guest-room, Schultz had unpacked his luggage and had brought some of Klink’s clothes to the other room, and then finally – after one last time checking on Hogan who was deeply asleep – Wilhelm Klink slipped into bed.

It didn’t take longer than a few minutes before sleep claimed him, too…

TBC…

Yeah, finally both men find some time to rest and in Hogan’s case to heal. And, believe me, the latter will happen slowly – physically and mentally. Especially our dear colonel’s soul is going to need a strong anchor to latch on to find a way to regain new strengths – and, like you certainly assume, Klink will be more than willing to be said anchor. In other words, the next chapter will be an emotional rollercoaster, but also in a special way very sweet.

I hope you liked the update, including Schultz and the Heroes who are near to grasp what is going on with the Kommandant, but – in the Heroes’ case – remain clueless. I also took a deep pleasure in write Klink for once generous as he let LeBeau and Langenscheidt off the hook.

Like always, I’m very curious what you think of the new chapter and would be happy to get some reviews.
I wish you all a good start into the last week before Christmas,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Once again a big thank-you for the feedback and the thoughts you shared with me – even among mails. I’m still so very happy that you have come to love this story so much, and I hope that this will continue.

Like I promised, the next chapters will be full of emotions, sweetness, some angst and even deeper thoughts. Both colonels have reached the limits – every one of them in their own ways. And they really can only heal by staying together.

The first shaking aftermath will be within this chapter, and I’m looking forward to your reactions to it.

Have not only fun, but also maybe second thoughts about the one or other thing.

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 17 – Aftermaths

The morning and midday went by uneventfully. Schultz stayed in Barracks 2 for a little time longer, and afterwards Kinch informed London and asked them permission to decline any missions in the near future. Hogan would be in no condition to do anything besides healing within the next two or three weeks, and he was the mastermind behind every operation. Without him there were no successful missions. The Heroes remembered all too well the one time they wanted to do something
on their own to surprise Hogan, and in the end only his clever and quick thinking saved them all from being revealed and arrested. So, they all agreed that an operation without Hogan would be suicide, and they wouldn’t do anything before he was back in charge. London confirmed the request and Kinchloe had a short but intense time speaking with General Butler, informing him in detail of what had happened to his friend and protegee.

Schultz ‘fought’ with Klink’s paperwork and informed Hilda about the newest events; insisting that she still took the day off to ‘heal’ her ankle. Wilson and Carter took turns with cooling Hogan’s facial swellings and attempting to bring down his fever. LeBeau made lunch for the colonel and Klink, but both men ate little. Hogan, still numb towards everything around him, was barely able to eat anything, and Wilson all but fed him the broth LeBeau had made and assisted him in drinking another two glasses of water, while Klink wasn’t hungry, but ate a few of the meat and potatoes LeBeau had prepared for him. Afterwards both fell asleep again, and Wilson – who regularly checked on a restlessly sleeping Hogan – also peeked two or three times in Klink’s interim sleeping chamber; checking his fever and how his lungs sounded.

Both colonels slept through the whole afternoon. In the evening Wilson showed up one last time, helped Hogan to the bathroom to relieve himself, and gave both men another dose of penicillin and some pain-killers, before he left them for the night. Schultz reported to Klink that the evening roll call was done and that all prisoners were present – and wearing their own clothes – and then something close to peace settled over Stalag 13.

*** HH ***

“Who are your contact-men?”, “With whom did you meet in Hammelburg last Monday?”, “How do you leave and return to Stalag 13?”, “Who works together with you?”, “Does Klink know of your missions?”

The questions seemed to come from everywhere, but he couldn’t see anyone. There was only darkness and coldness.

Something whistled through the air and then pain exploded on his back – over and over again. He screamed, but there seemed to be no end.

A face appeared in front of him – the face of a man in his middle age, with a dark moustache, dark hair and piercing dark eyes, filled with hate. The man gripped for him and sneered, “I’ll break you, Hogan. I’ll bring you down on your knees and make you beg, so start talking. The sooner you do, the sooner everything will be over for you.”
Talking…

He couldn’t talk to this man. He was the enemy. The mortal enemy! He would hunt the others if he got the information he wanted.

A glowing iron was suddenly in front of his face and was lowered towards his belly. He felt the incredible heat, the voice demanded answers from him and he heard himself pleading to contact someone who could help – and then the metal touched his left side.

He screamed like he had never done before in his life. There seemed to be no end to the burning agony, before he all of sudden was in front of a basin. The next moment he was being pushed under water. He tried to rise but something held him down…

Down…

Without a chance to breathe…

“Hogan, wake up! It’s a dream, nothing more.”

Another voice. It seemed to come from afar, but it didn’t belong to the man who was torturing him. This voice belonged… If he could only remember, but he couldn’t. Not with the water that was invading his lungs, making him cough and…

“Robert, please wake up. You are safe now. He will never hurt you again. I promise. Just wake up!”

He felt himself being shaken and then the coldness was melting away as something warm was wrapped around him. Searching for any help he could get, he tried to grip for this warmth and felt something solid beneath his hands – something that seemed to pull him out of the merciless water.


That voice was familiar. It had been there as he had been under water before… It meant… safety?
He thought he saw another face in front of him – one with a balding head and a dark ring of shiny hair; peppered with the first hues of silver. A mouth pouted and also smiled, blue eyes looked gently at him – eyes of which one was covered with a glass. How odd. Glasses were usually on both sides, weren’t they? Yet this odd kind of vision aid was also very familiar.

A name whispered at the edge of his consciousness. A name that meant caution, but also fun – evenings spent playing chess, hours in a shabby office full of half serious, half humorous discussions, bargains and… sometimes even philosophy. He saw a desk with an odd old helmet that had something pointy on the top – a pickelhaube. He saw his own cap lading on it and an elegant hand pushing it away, accompanied by the voice that protested…

“Ah, come on Colonel Klink, it’s only an old helmet.”

“It is my grandfather’s, Hogan, so show some respect.”

“All right – sorry."

Klink…

Shots rang around him through the darkness that lit up fires nearby. He tried to run away, but his right hand was chained to something. Death was coming for him, he couldn’t flee and then…

Klink was there and shot the chain apart – they ran, ran for dear life…

A little room, a single bed, not much space but they cuddled against each other, warming each other…

Long arms were wrapped around him, a weight lay on him, soft breath danced along his shoulder… and his face.

His face seemed to burn but the breath was cool and soothing…
The darkness melted away…

The soft golden light of a lamp enlightened the room around him; wood cracked in a stove.

From somewhere the ticking of a clock was audible…

He found himself sitting on something soft and clinging to something – or, better said, someone. The long arms from his dream enveloped him carefully and his partial sight caught dim light and something like a bleached shirt in front of him. Something lent against his temple, a gentle voice whispered comforting words at his ear and… he was being rocked softly?

Only slowly his mind began to work, yet he needed a minute or more until he began to recognize his real surroundings. He was sitting on a bed, someone was holding and soothing him, it was warm in the room and…

And then he felt the pain in his whole body. Some places were dull, others burnt, others stung. He felt nauseous, his head ached, his visual field was small and everything was a little bit blurry. His throat was sore and he had trouble breathing properly. His limbs were heavy like lead, he was somehow freezing and his face, which felt twice the normal size, seemed to be gently pressed against something that could be a shoulder.

A low groan escaped him. He definitely wasn’t well, to put it mildly. To say it clearly, he felt like shit!

“Better now?” the quiet voice from his dreams asked by his ear, and he needed a further long moment to recognize it. The accent was unmistakable but the voice sounded odd. Hoarser than he had ever heard it before.

“Klink?” he whispered.

“Yes, it’s me,” came the soft reply.

Ah, good. Klink was here and he…
One moment, *Klink was holding* him?

Rising his head he looked at his German counterpart. In the dim light of the switched-on lamp on the nightstand, he took in the tousled coil of hair, the missing monocle and that the older man wore his ‘famous’ nightgown. He had even skipped from slipping into his dark blue bathrobe, as if he had been shooed out of bed without any chance to make himself presentable. His cheeks were feverish, flushed and his eyes, which were glassy and reddened, glanced with concern and compassion at him.

This all was very odd!

Why was he sitting in bed, feeling like he had had an unpleasant rendezvous with a truck and how did it come that a worried Klink, who had just held him in his arms, was beside him?

And then the memories crashed down on Hogan like a tidal wave. For a moment he could only sit there; pictures, voices, emotions and pain seemed to whirl around him; trying to overwhelm him, making him sway both mentally and physically. He remembered the agony, the iciness, the merciless beating, the fear, the despair, the horror of being drowned…

Then slender hands gripped his underarms with surprising strength.

“Hogan, calm down. You are no longer there, you are back in the camp. Hochstetter has been arrested and the accusations against you have been dropped. You are out of his reach and he will never harm you again.” Klink spoke forcefully now as he tried to get the colonel out of the newly arising panic attack he could clearly see approaching. He reached out and cupped the younger man’s feverish hot neck; his thumb circled soothingly through the dark short hair there, while he added more gently, “You are safe, Robert. You are safe, I promise.”

Softly he pulled his counterpart’s head towards him and lent his own forehead against Hogan’s bandaged one. Intensely he glanced into the one eye which looked at him with a fearful expression. “Don’t fret, Rob, it’s over,” he said; sensing with relief that Hogan was indeed calming down again.

For a very long moment neither of the two men moved. Klink returned Hogan’s gaze firmly, but also softly; willing him to realize that the danger had passed. He knew that his American counterpart, who was usually so witty and full of self-confidence, needed an anchor to secure himself – to find the way back to reality. It startled him how deeply troubled the younger man was, on the other hand he couldn’t expect something different. What had been done to Hogan was unimaginable, and Klink was aware of the fact that Robert would be haunted for quite a time. Even a strong man like Hogan needed time to overcome such a trauma.
Hogan took a deep, shuddering breath and turned his head away as he had to cough. He winced in pain as the coughing made his left side hurt even more, and he closed his good eye. He felt Klink’s hand on his neck and the gentle petting of the thumb in his hackles. He knew somehow that this was very strange – wrong, even – but it felt too good to avoid the comforting gesture.

Again he thought to hear Hochstetter’s voice demanding answers from him, and forcefully he pushed those memories away. He couldn’t deal with them right now. First he had to become himself again. Slowly his nemesis’ voice got quieter and made room for the soft ticking of the grandfather clock in the next room and the cracking of the fire. Yet the Gestapo-officer’s face appeared over and over again in his mind; eyes shimmering with glee and loathing. Hogan wasn’t even aware that the stress was overflowing in the form of words which tumbled out of his mouth.

“He didn’t stop. He said I had been seen in Hammelburg a few days ago, but that’s not true. I told him that it wasn’t me – that I’d played chess with you that evening ‘til late night. But he didn’t believe me – didn’t contact you to clarify anything. He asked over and over again – about contact people, about missions, about allies, about you… I said that I couldn’t tell him anything, that I have no answers for him, but he didn’t stop.” He lowered his head. “He didn’t stop.” His voice wasn't more than a choked whisper.

Klink could feel his heart starting to bleed with compassion again as he realized once more the horror Hogan had been through. Slipping his right hand from Hogan’s neck to his shoulder and letting it rest there in a soothing manner, he said softly, “We both know that Hochstetter seems to hate everyone – especially you. I feared that he would live out his loathing one day, but even I didn’t imagine that he would get carried away like this.”

Carefully the colonel turned his head and looked at him; for a few moments his mind remembered with brutal accuracy what he had been through. “He wasn’t interested in the truth. He said he was glad that I had given him a reason to break me – that I would be his masterpiece.” He swallowed heavily and lowered his head again; his hands trembled. “I tried to withstand. Whatever he did, I didn’t answer his questions, but then…” He went rigid, before he suddenly tried to unwrap the bandage around his rib-cage frenziedly.

Quickly Klink caught his hands to stop him. “Hogan, what are you doing?” he asked startled.

“I have to see it,” the colonel gasped and tried to wriggle his arms free. “Let go, I’ve to see it!” He sounded frantic now, and Klink knew that a new panic attack was closing up.

“Robert, what do you want to see? What do you mean with ‘it’?” he demanded gently, yet sternly. He had realized that this tone brought the best result when dealing with Hogan’s trauma.
“The brand,” Hogan almost shouted and had to cough again. He held his left side and moaned in pain. It hurt like hell and one single tear slipped down his bruised cheek. Only after the coughing stopped and the pain ebbed away until nothing more than a throbbing remained, he became aware that Klink had closed the small distance to him and had slipped one arm around his shoulder as far as he could reach. Somehow it gave him hold. The knowledge that there was someone who really cared, calmed him. And the pain had a positive side-effect in this case: It cleared his mind enough to stop the rising panic attack.

Yet the fear of being stigmatized with the symbol of his mortal nemesis for the rest of his life burnt in him, and almost pleadingly he looked at Klink. “The brand…” he whispered helplessly.

“The brand? Which brand?” Klink was confused now.

The colonel looked almost terrified at him. “The brand he gave me – SS-runes. With a gleaming poker. He…”

Klink bent forwards and took Hogan’s shoulders into a strong, yet soft grip; ignoring the stinging in his left upper arm that even the painkiller couldn’t fully suppress. “Robert, there is no brand.”

“But he did…”

“Rob, listen to me,” the older man interrupted him firmly. “There. Is. No. Brand. On. Your. Body! I swear. I stripped you and held you under the shower while Wilson was washing you, and you indeed have got a lot of injuries, but no brand!” He recognized the dread in Hogan’s gaze, and added gently, “Believe me. There are no marks from any iron, of whichever shape.” He saw how much the colonel fought with his obviously wrong memories and his wish to trust him. “What burns at your side are your broken ribs,” Klink explained. “Sergeant Wilson fixed them with the bandage and you have to be careful with your left side for at least four or five weeks. The same caution is necessary with your back, but hopefully not for so long.”

Hesitant hope began to shimmer in Hogan’s one eye, and so the Oberst lowered his voice to a more gentle tone, as he continued, “Hochstetter did a lot to you, but he didn’t stigmatize you – neither physically nor, I hope, mentally. You were in his power, but he had no power over you. Not over your heart, mind and soul. Your body will heal, and your men and I will do everything within our power to help your spirit take victory over your hurt soul, too.”

The strong, yet so soft words, mingled with faith and certainty reached Hogan and struck a chord
deep in him. Chasing away the dark clouds that were still surrounding him, he looked at the older man; took in Klink’s confidence and trust in his, Hogan’s, inner strength. It woke an odd sense of duty in him – the wish to not disappoint his German counterpart, who had fought his own fears and demons to rescue him. Klink had overgrown himself – again. The least Hogan could do was return this effort.

Gulping he carefully reached out and placed his right hand on the other man’s arm. “Thanks,” he whispered. “Thank-you for your faith in me – and for getting me out.” He took a deep, slow breath and groaned as the nausea returned. “God, I feel like shit.”

“You caught a cold, or worse, a bronchitis, sport a fever and you even got a concussion, Wilson said. And the best then is to lay down, avoid bright lights and eat only light things.” Klink pushed him gently down into the cushions, pulled the comforter higher and watched him for a long moment; concerned as he realized the other man went paler and paler by each passing second. “Hogan?” he asked; really worried now.

“I… I’m going to be sick,” the American pressed out; good eye widening.

Hastily Klink rose, pulled the comforter and blanket away and helped Hogan get up. Swaying dangerously on unsteady feet and heaving by now, the younger man couldn’t do anything more than press a hand over his mouth, while he broke into a cold sweat.

Klink acted without another thought. Despite his throbbing calf he pulled the colonel with him, steered him quickly to the bathroom and to the toilette. He had barely opened the cover, as Hogan already sank to his knees and began vomiting violently. The *Oberst* grimaced; half because of the stench, half because of sympathy. He hated heaving, knowing how miserable he felt afterwards, and given Hogan’s whole physical condition, the younger man must have felt even worse. Flushing the toilette, he quickly took his tooth cup, filled it with water and offered it to his American counterpart to wash his mouth and get rid of the taste.

With a trembling hand Hogan accepted the offered glass, but he needed two attempts to get the cup to his lips. He shivered like a young puppy, his whole belly hurt as did his left side, and he felt an uncalled-for stinging in his eyes.

Cleaning his mouth and spitting the water into the toilette, he tried to control the cold that seemed to overwhelm him, while the burning in his eyes increased. No! He wouldn’t weep! Not because of a little vomiting. For God’s sake, he was 39, not 7 anymore! Again he rinsed his mouth, but it did him a bad favor, because he had barely spit anything into the toilette bowl again, when a new urge to cough rose in him. His already burning throat seemed to catch fire, while the ugly taste from the depths of his stomach returned.
Wheezing, coughing and spitting the rest of the dinner out, he only felt the cold cloth in his neck after his body calmed down one or two minutes later. An arm was wrapped around his hips and steadied him, while gentle words of comfort were murmured close to his left ear.

“Sorry,” he whispered; feeling humiliated. “Sorry for the mess.”

“Don’t apologize,” Klink replied softly. “It’s not your fault. To get sick is a typical side-effect of a concussion. I’m only sorry that you’ve to suffer even more.” He made certain that the wet, cold cloth wouldn’t slip down Hogan’s back before he reached out and pulled the string of the toilet flushing. “Better?” he asked.

The younger man only nodded with closed eyes; feeling like his inner being was turned to the outside.

“Okay, let us get you up.” Klink rose and helped the colonel to his feet, before he closed the toilet cover and made Hogan sit down on it. Taking the cloth, he wet it once again before he offered it to the younger man together with a towel. “Here, wash your face. You’ll feel better afterwards. I will go next door and open the windows for a few minutes. The air may be icy, but it’s fresh. It will help soothe your stomach and your nerves. Will you be all right on your own for a minute?”

Hogan, whose mind had cleared more after the last encounter, glanced up. Klink was absolutely serious in his worry. It warmed the colonel in a way that was completely new for him. Usually it was him who worried for the other’s well-being. To be on the receiving end of such care was something he hadn’t experienced for many years. And it felt alarmingly good.

“Yes, I’ll be okay,” he answered, raspy and braver than he felt.

Klink watched him attentively for a second, then he patted him on the less injured shoulder, nodded and left the bathroom.

Hogan took a deep breath and new nausea washed over him, but not strong enough to make him sick again. He was about to raise the washcloth to his face, but stopped as his gaze fell on his wrists. They were wrapped into bandages, yet some red and sore tracks were still visible above the material. The rest of his underarms were bruised, too. Lowering his head, his gaze wandered over the bandage around his torso, yet there – where the white mull ended – further bruises were revealed.
Closing his eyes, he thought to hear Hochstetter’s voice again. For a moment he was back in the cellars, darkness and coldness surrounding him, while brutal fists delivered blows upon blows to his body.

Getting a grip on himself, he opened his eyes – better to say, his one functional eye – and carefully rose. Instantly he became dizzy, yet with some returning determination, he managed the little distance to the sink, let the washcloth and towel fall into it and steadied himself there with both hands. He raised his head, looked in the mirror – and stiffened with shock.

He barely recognized his own face. The right side was so swollen it bore no resemblance to his usual appearance, and even forced his eye close. The left side was better, yet bad enough to make him gulp. Some of the bruises had already begun to turn blue and there was a cut on his right cheekbone. A further bandage was wound around his head like a bandanna, and made the dark strands of his hair fly, tousled, in all directions.

His throat and the area around it were also sore and bruised; at some places even little spots of scab were to see. He remembered how he got them – by tearing as his bound hands which were connected via a rope with his throat; almost suffocating himself in his desperate attempt to escape the kicks he received while lying on the cold ground of his cell.

Over his left shoulder he could see some dark red stripes and it was a miracle that the skin hadn’t split open as the leather-whip had rained down lashes on him. But regarding the bandage around his torso, he knew that other part of his back hadn’t been so lucky.

Closing his good eye again, he bit down the bitter taste and the lump in his throat. Hochstetter and some other SS-members had done quite a number on him. He would need weeks to heal – at least physically. He didn’t dare to think too much of everything in detail that had been done to him, or he would certainly suffer another breakdown. And alone this knowledge made it clear that the curing of his body was only one part of the healing process that lay before him.

Tightening his grip around the sink’s edges, he looked up again – and his gaze found Klink’s in the mirror.

The Oberst stood a few steps behind him. He had come inside the bathroom without any sound and it was obvious that he had already been here for quite some time, but had kept his distance – giving Hogan the chance to come to terms with the condition he was in.

The American moistened his split lip carefully and held his counterpart’s gaze in pure defiance; not ready to give into the humiliation of seeing pity…
Only, there was no pity in the older man’s eyes. Compassion – yes; gentleness – yes; but no pity. If anything Hogan thought he saw respect in Klink’s gaze.

“Hochstetter lived out his hate,” the Kommandant said quietly. “He really tried to break you with sheer violence and brutal force – but he didn’t succeed. You are stronger than him.” He closed the distance to Hogan and carefully began to steer him back into the sleeping chamber. The window was wide open and it was really cold now in the room, but the air was fresh and clean. The new falling snow outside dimmed any noise that could exist this late in the evening in the middle of a POW-camp. It was silent outside – but not an eerie silence. Somehow the approaching night was for once peaceful – a peace Hogan desperately longed for, but one that was just out of reach for him.

A quiet snort escaped him at Klink’s words. “You think I’m stronger than him? It didn’t feel this way, believe me.”

The Kommandant helped him lay down and spread the blanket and the comforter over him. “No. I don’t think so – I know you are stronger than this bastard. Because your heart and your spirit wouldn’t allow someone like Hochstetter to win, so you do what you always do: Go on.” He went to the window and closed it; shivering because his nightgown provided no real protection against the winter iciness that had entered the chamber. “Damn coldness!” he grumbled; changing the subject to give Hogan’s tumultuous mind some rest. He hastened to the bed and waved his right hand. “Scoot over, Hogan, I’m freezing my ass off here.”

Realizing to what the Oberst was up to, the American stared stunned at him. Then he saw the older man rubbing his upper arms while he was shivering again, recognized for the first time the reddened fever-spots on Klink’s cheeks, and, as fast as his condition permitted, Hogan made room for him.

Klink quickly slipped into bed and pulled the covers ‘til his chin; making sure that they covered Hogan the same way, too. The trembling worsened for a moment, before it calmed down. “Damn winter!” the Kommandant cursed. “And there are still two or three months left before spring returns.”

“Maybe figuratively, too,” the colonel whispered; yearning for peace.

“Believe me, you are not the only one who wants the end of this cursed war,” Klink replied softly, before he turned his head and looked at the other man, who lay close beside him. Remembering what Wilson said about Hogan being dehydrated, he asked, “Do you want something to drink? Some chamomile tea perhaps?”
Hogan slowly shook his head. “Thank you, but I… I don’t think my stomach would be able to hold it at the moment.”

With new worry, Klink frowned at him. He would call Dr. Birkhorn the next morning and would order him to come to the camp. He wanted the doctor to have a closer look at the American and check him through properly. Maybe the surgeon even had something that would ease Hogan’s suffering.

Seeing how tense the younger man still was, another thought struck him. One that filled him with dread, but Hogan was more important, so he cleared his throat and murmured, “Are you uncomfortable with me being here?” He hoped not, because…

“No,” Hogan said quietly and turned his head towards him. His one eye looked with something close to warmth at him. “I… I’m glad that I’m not alone in the moment. I don’t want to deal with everything that happened just now. And besides, you are nice company.”

To his horror, Klink felt himself flushing with joy and he coughed a little bit to mask it. “Well, we often spent some hours with each other in the evenings during the last years – talking, playing chess, and so on. I’m glad that my presence is welcomed, even now.” He pursed his lips shortly. “Yet you are very tense. Let me guess, your back is giving you hell.”

“To put it mildly,” the colonel nodded.

Klink sat up. “I can get you some more painkillers and…”

“No, I don’t think it would be wise given my nervous stomach,” Hogan whispered.

Again the older man looked thoughtfully at him, before he got another idea. “Turn on your right side,” he suggested. “It’s the less hurt one despite your cheek.”

Realizing that the Oberst was right, Hogan cautiously shifted his weight to the right side, turned – which made him grit his teeth – and laid down again. It really relieved pressure from his broken ribs and his injured back, which outweighed the throbbing in the right side of his face. “Sorry for showing you my back,” he apologized and heard Klink chuckling again.

“As long as you do it out of medical reasons and not in a figurative way, I can live with it.”
This statement woke some more curiosity in the American officer. It showed one more time how important he – Robert Hogan – seemed to be to the older man.

Klink rose. “Don’t run away. I shall fetch something and will return in a minute.”

“Take your time,” Hogan sighed. “It isn’t as if I could go anywhere at the moment.”

He closed his good eye and tried to relax, but for naught. Every time he stopped concentrating on pleasant memories, Hochstetter’s voice was back – or he heard the whistling of the whip. Hogan groaned. He never would find any rest like this and…

Something was gently placed behind him and as he tried to turn around, said ‘something’ stopped him without troubling his hurting back too much. “What…?” he began rather unintelligently.

“The pillows will hinder you from turning while you’re asleep, and they are soft enough to add no further pain to your back,” Klink said quietly.

Peeking over his shoulder, Hogan blinked with his good eye a few times; struck by the thoughtfulness the Kommandant had again displayed.

“Thank you,” the colonel whispered; really grateful. “But… what about you?”

“I’ll take a cushion from the sofa, so no problem,” Klink replied, while he pulled the comforter over the younger man and the pile of pillows. “Just try to find some sleep. Tomorrow everything will be bathed in a brighter light.”

Even if Hogan highly doubted the latter, he couldn’t help himself but giving his German counterpart a smile – at least as far as his swollen lips could move. Then he sighed, “I… I don’t think that sleeping will do me any good.” At Klink’s asking gaze, he added quietly, “The dreams, you know. I will be back there and… I really don’t want to see and hear everything again.”

The Kommandant knew how much this confession must have cost Hogan – to admit weakness at all, even if it was so understandable. He saw how the younger man’s face flushed a little bit, rounded the bed, sat down on the edge and said gently, “You don’t have to be ashamed of your nightmares,
Robert. I had them a lot – and they still come back to me from time to time. They show that we do
not belong to those people who are jaded and indifferent by now. We are not dull like so many
others who faced terrible events. Our hearts and souls are too strong to give in to the easy way of
becoming callous. We’d rather face our demons than bow to them, no matter if they haunt us in
dreams or lurk in our subconscious and make themselves recognizable in certain situations. First we
fear them, but we also know that we can’t escape them, and therefore we do what lays in our nature:
We fight them – and become stronger in the end.”

Thunderstruck Hogan looked at the Oberst. He had known that there was more to his German
counterpart than the first and second sight showed, and he had listened to serious stuff coming from
Klink before, but he had never acknowledged such profundity from the older man. And one thing
became clear to him, too. “You speak of your own experiences,” he said softly.

Klink nodded slowly and had to cough shortly, before he continued, “You are enduring this insane
war – I’ve lived through two insanities by now. And believe me, the first war wasn’t less cruel,
monstrous and inhuman than this one. This time it’s ‘only’ darker.” He looked away. “I lost
comrades – friends. They died in my arms and I was unable to save them. I buried them, and the
following day the next men I served with died. I saw destruction everywhere, smelled fire, ashes,
blood and rotting corpses. I watched colleagues dropping from the skies, their planes exploding on
the ground and taking them with them to eternity, while I knew that I could be the next.”

He glanced back at Hogan; his eyes betrayed the many things which would never be forgotten.
“Believe me, Robert, I already witnessed horror when you were still young and a ‘wild boy’. The
dreams will haunt you – but they will decrease. And some day they will only find you sporadically.
Yes, they will still be troubling, but you are stronger. You’ll beat their aftermath. If I managed it, you
will do it, too – because I do know that your spirit is more vivid than mine. Vividness is the source of
being alive – and life is death’s only enemy.”

He had to smile again, as he saw the awestruck expression on the younger man’s colorful face and in
his good eye. ‘Got you finally, love,’ he thought half amused, half fondly. He knew that most people
thought him to be a hollow shell; his deeply rooted uncertainty often made him act like a fool which
he tried to cover with big speeches, vanity and even arrogance. He hid his true self behind a carefully
built disguise, because he knew other people would abuse his sensitivity to their advantage and
would hurt him – and he really had been hurt enough in his life.

But with Robert Hogan it was different. He sensed that they both had more in common than
originally assumed, yet he had been careful with how much he could reveal to the younger man
without giving too much away or exposing himself to a dangerous degree. But after all that had
happened within the last two days, he knew that they had reached a new level of their carefully
developing relationship. That Hogan admitted his fear of the nightmares, which certainly would
haunt him for longer, had shown Klink how much his American counterpart trusted him by now, and
he had returned it by taking off his mask and letting Hogan see a little bit of his true self.
And as he saw how the wonder in Hogan’s gaze changed to deep warmth and new softness, he knew that he had made the right step.

“You are incredible, Wilhelm Klink,” the colonel murmured. “I thought I knew you, but now I realize that I’ve only scratched at the surface.”

Klink chuckled and pointed one finger at him teasingly. “And don’t you forget it,” he smirked.

Hogan smiled back and felt himself relaxing. Suddenly, he felt oddly at peace; the way they sat together in this little chamber, while outside the winter bloomed, and spoke of things which weren’t for any others’ ears, because they were too private. It gave him a new sense of comradeship with his German counterpart – a comfortableness he hadn’t had since he left the States to start the mission ‘Unsung Heroes’, how the whole operation he was the head of was called. It should alarm him, but it didn’t.

Klink suppressed a yawn. “Shall I leave the lamp switched on?”

His question was almost awkward for Hogan.

“I think I’m a little bit too old for a nightlight,” he murmured.

“Yet it offers comfort,” the Oberst replied calmly.

“Yes, for children who have bad dreams,” the colonel sighed; remembering the times when his mother had left a nightlight in his nursery.

“The boogeyman under the bed may change his face and voice with the passing years, but he still haunts our dreams,” Klink mused. “It doesn’t matter if you are a child or an adult.”

Hogan looked up again at the Kommandant. “What has happened that you changed this much within a few days?” he whispered.

‘Hochstetter happened – he almost killed you,’ Klink thought, but aloud he said, “This is the real me. The man you’d dealt with until now is the German officer I’m forced to be, and who has become a
stranger in his own skin, because he barely knows anymore how to wriggle himself through the mess the world has turned into.” He bent down and pulled the comforter even higher over Hogan. “Try to sleep, Robert. I'll let the doors open so that I can hear you should something happen.”

“You mean, if I get another fit because of a stupid nightmare,” the younger man grumbled, embarrassed. “Just ignore me then. I think I’ll have bad dreams for quite a while now, and I don’t want you to skip any beauty-sleep because of me being childish.”

Klink groaned this time. “Bad dreams don’t only belong to children, Hogan, I thought I had made this clear to you. To find no rest only shows that your soul is injured, and nightmares are the first step of coming to terms with everything. So, don’t be ashamed of them.” He smiled again. “I know, it’s hard to accept something we regard as weakness, but just like I already told you, it will make us stronger in the end.” He rose. “And, by the way, I do not need any ‘beauty’-sleep.”

He got the wished-for result: Hogan chuckled.

Shuddering at the still cold air and the fever he sported, the Oberst switched off the lamp on the nightstand. “I’ll leave the reading lamp turned on in the living area. Like this a little brightness will be there. Good night.”

Hogan listened to the soft steps moving away, and said quietly, “Good night, Willie – and thank you for everything.”

He didn’t know it, but Klink had heard the soft words – and it made his world once again brighter and easier to endure…

TBC…

Just like I promised, this was the first chapter of deeper emotions. And several will follow, in which our two colonels will learn about each other more than ever before, what will lead to more.

I’ll hope to publish a further chapter during Christmas, but this depends on different reasons.

Before the next year begins, I’ll publish the next chapter, and would LOVE to get some reviews until
then.

Nonetheless I want to thank you for your loyalty,

I wish you all a Merry Christmas and may Santa Claus fulfill the one or other wish.

Love and to everyone peace and love,

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

I hope you had a beautiful, peaceful and merry Christmas, enjoyed the songs, the family/friends and gifts. Now, with the old year nearing its end, I didn’t want to let you wait any longer for the next chapter. Like the last one it contains a lot of emotions, and our two colonels are growing closer, before the ‘fat Sacher cake’ arrives and Hogan is forced to re-live what happened to him. But ‘Willie’ will be there for him, so be ready for some more sweet scenes.

Thank you for the feedback, and I’m sorry that in the case of fanfiction.net I’m partly not able to answer the reviews, because the ‘answer’-button is blocked. My dear readers on ff.net: Thank-you for the comments; I love them. And also thank-you to my readers on ‘archiveonourown’; of course you will get my answers to your reviews like usual.

And now have fun with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 18 – Troubled soul

Both men didn’t completely sleep through the whole night. Shortly after midnight a coughing fit tore Klink out of his own nightmares, and even if his chest hurt and he felt more miserable than before, he was glad for the distraction. He had told Hogan that someone could grow due to nightmares; becoming stronger because of them and that their horror would lessen given time. This was something he had experienced after the first war, but many things had changed – not only within the last almost three years as he was confronted with his forbidden feelings for the same gender, but especially within the last days.

He had always feared that Hogan would be in terrible trouble one day – given his activities which had been first only assumptions, but were now utterly revealed to be true for the Kommandant. But to see the Grim Reaper reaching for the younger man two times within fifty hours, had scared the hell out of Klink. He hadn’t thought twice as Hogan had been cuffed to the staff-car’s door with
death approaching in the form of hostile air-fighters shooting at everything that moved. Klink had simply acted – driven by his affection and fear for the man who held his heart.

Yet the second time had been even worse. Shooting Hogan’s chains and running to safety had been a matter of seconds – had given him no time to think straight. To see him tortured and almost dead in the cellars of the Gestapo headquarters had been far more terrible. The moment he stepped through the door, saw Hogan forced under water by a malicious Hochstetter, movements already stilling, had woken fuming rage in him – but by now the wrath had turned into an odd mixture of horror and helplessness.

There was absolutely nothing he could do to spare the younger man the pain he was suffering and would have to endure within the next one or two weeks, maybe even longer. He could offer him comfort and the knowledge of safety, but this was all. He was damned to watch the person that meant the world to him struggle with everything he had been put through – and it gave Klink nightmares in a way he hadn’t faced in almost two decades.

The first had hit him as he went to bed after dinner. He had dreamed that he came too late and Hogan was dead, and the icy despair that had flown through his veins in dreamland was still very real – especially as Klink woke up because of Hogan’s screams and pleads to stop the torment. He had jumped out of bed and dashed towards the voice before he was even able to grasp a sane thought, had found the younger man wriggling and squirming among the sheets and had taken him in his arms while trying to wake him up, which he was finally able to do.

Despite the new panic attack and Hogan being sick afterwards, Klink was glad that he could help him at least a little bit, and he knew that his talk about dreams had somehow soothed Robert, too.

But Klink had barely found some more sleep afterwards, as the nightmares returned; this time he was forced to watch helplessly as Hochstetter branded the American – had smelled the sting of burning flesh, had heard the hoarse shouts and pleads for mercy until he finally woke up again; bathed in cold sweat, and mind and limbs heavy with dread.

Switching on the night-lamp on the nightstand, he sat up in bed and rubbed over his damp face with trembling hands; the echo of the horror of his dream as he had watched his beloved being tortured was still ringing through him. Driven by an unreasonable desire to make certain that Robert was still there and safe, Klink once again left the bed and tapped on bare feet through the cool quarters towards his usual sleeping chamber. In the dim light of the reading lamp he had left switched on, he saw the figure laying under the blanket and comforter – twitching in his sleep while from time to time a soft whimper drifted through the air.

For the first time he asked himself, if Hochstetter maybe had really tried to break Hogan by attempting to brand him. The colonel’s panic a few hours ago, shouting hoarsely about a stigma in
form of a double-s-rune, was still clear in Klink’s mind, and he decided to ask Hogan about it as soon as the younger man was more himself again.

As quietly as possible, the Oberst found his way around the bed and looked down on the beaten up man. Hogan was obviously asleep – but even now deeply troubled. His bruised face grimaced here and there, and from time to time incoherent words in English and German escaped his split lips.

Klink reached out and carefully touched Robert’s cheek. Hogan’s fever was still high, despite the penicillin – the typical overreaction because of everything his body suffered. The German’s breath hitched, as the younger man moved towards the touch – as if he was seeking comfort in proximity even in slumber. Klink took his hand away and received another soft whimper for it. Now, with his ever-witty and clever mind switched off, Robert Hogan resembled an overgrown boy more than ever before – a very troubled boy.

There was a quiet crack in the furnace and Klink became aware that the warmth in the sleeping chamber was dying down. He shivered and wrapped his arms around himself while he turned towards the wood-basked to add some branches into the fire box of the stove. While he poked the fire back to life, he listened closely to the soft noises his American counterpart made: They spoke of unrest, bad dreams and many tracks more of a hurt soul and mind.

Klink placed the poker back on its stand and made up his mind.

Enough was enough!

Neither would he let Robert suffer any longer, nor himself. To hell with dignity and inhuman rules forbidding something as natural as feelings only because they were directed into an uncommon direction. In war and love anything was allowed, and especially after all the insanity he – and Hogan – had witnessed since the madness had gripped the world, he was starved to find and give love.

Throwing all good manners, shyness and home-driven caution out of the window, Wilhelm Klink lifted the comforter and blanket, slipped into bed beside the younger man, closed the distance to the pillows which still hindered Hogan from turning on his mess of a back, reached out and wrapped one arm around the colonel’s waist. Bringing his face closer to the American’s head, he whispered words of comfort towards him and recognized after a minute that Hogan had relaxed.

Klink’s heart beat increased, while a wave of tenderness washed over him. He hadn’t the tiniest clue if Hogan’s subconscious realized it was him who held him, or if Robert simply reacted instinctively to the proximity of another human being, but no matter what was true, Klink was grateful that his presence had anchored his beloved once more.
A soft sigh of content escaped him, while his eyes drifted shut. For the first time since the whole mess started over two days ago, Klink felt at peace – in his quarters, in his bed, with the man he loved in his arms, while outside the falling snow settled like a plaid of white and quietness over the land. For once there was no droning of by-passing air-crafts to hear, no rumbles spoke of bombs or other fights. There was only the silence of the night, and Klink could pretend that they were far away from war and danger – maybe somewhere in the mountains, enjoying the winter and each other.

With those thoughts and hopes, Klink’s mind drifted away.

This night none of the two men had any further nightmares and slept, for once, peacefully.

** HH **

Morning roll call came far too early – for Schultz, but also for most of the POWs. But especially for Newkirk.

He hadn’t slept well; still feeling partly guilty for Hogan’s condition. If he would have been more careful a few days ago in Hammelburg, he wouldn’t have been mistaken for his superior officer which gave Hochstetter reason to arrest the colonel. After all, it wasn’t the first time that the Gestapo caught him on a mission. There had been this incident with ‘Gretchen’ – a young woman he befriended who turned out to be a Gestapo-agent. It had been a close-call that they all would have been revealed to Hochstetter.

And then there was the mission he went to in place of Hogan and the Gestapo promptly mistook him for the colonel.

It was more than a half year ago that he, Newkirk, was sent to a meeting with an Underground cell that turned out to be infiltrated by a female Gestapo agent. They finally believed that he wasn’t the man they wanted and he ‘gave into’ their demands of learning the frequency Papa Bear used. Keeping silent about the emergency-code he and Hogan had agreed on before the mission started, the colonel had been warned as the ‘Underground’ contacted him that something was not right. Hogan was able to catch the agent, free Newkirk and even blow up a munition company by the way.

It had shown Newkirk how quickly tables could be turned and he was still grateful that his superior and friend had risked everything to get him away from the Gestapo. Hogan had also tricked Schultz and Klink into believing Newkirk was very ill and was resting in the colonel’s own room to prevent other POWs from getting sick, too.
To their fortune Hochstetter hadn’t been involved, otherwise he would have finally gotten his proof that Hogan was behind most of the sabotages, vanishing people and other ‘strange’ things that happened in the area.

All in all it had been successful, but Newkirk had blamed himself afterwards that he hadn’t been more cautious as he met the Underground-‘members’. There had been hints that something was off, but he hadn’t listen to his inner voice – just like a few days ago while he had been in Hammelburg.

Yes, Newkirk knew of the risk they all took whenever they were away from the camp for a mission and that something would go wrong someday hadn’t been a matter of ‘if’ but ‘when’, but this time it had peaked in a close-call that made his belly churn.

And even in the area of Stalag 13 they were in danger of being caught and revealed everyday. The latter almost happened far too often for Newkirk’s taste, but until now they all had been very, very lucky. And, maybe, their luck was based on more than Hogan’s quick way of thinking for excuses and ways out – or Klink’s blindness and foolishness. But given the German officer’s behavior within the last two days and how fiercely he had protected – even saved – Hogan, Newkirk began to assume that Klink perhaps wasn’t so blind and foolish like they all thought. Maybe the Oberst turned a blind eye and deaf ear to anything just like Schultz, and if so, they all owed the man their life a dozen times over.

Still Newkirk felt miserable that his activity a few days prior had been the reason for Hogan going through hell in Hochstetter’s hands, and he knew he wouldn’t find any peace until he had spoken with his superior and friend about it.

Like this the night went by without much sleep for Peter. Tired, in a bad mood, freezing and loaded with guilt, he followed the others outside for roll call in the early morning; realizing with an eye-roll that the compound was covered with another thick layer of snow and that the white glory still fell down from the skies. One morning more they would spend shoveling snow – what a joy!

Schultz was tired himself and, accordingly to his exhaustion, his mood was down to zero. He really hadn’t any nerves for the POWs' usual jokes and taunts, and was glad when the roll call was over. Knowing that it was too early to report to Klink, he returned inside the Kommandantur to get warm before he made his way over to Klink’s quarters around half past eight.

As he stepped into the small wooden building, the light of the reading lamp in the living room greeted him, and as he looked over to the guest room he saw that the door was open and a small light fell into the living area. Assuming that his superior had to be awake, he closed the distance to the door, only to find both bed and room empty. Frowning he listened towards the sleeping chamber and
to the bathroom, thinking Klink was maybe refreshing himself, but it was far too quiet in the whole quarters for anyone to be awake and up at all.

Odd. Very odd! If Klink wasn’t in the guest room and also not up, then where was the man?

Getting suspicious, Schultz walked as silently as possible to the sleeping room and peeked inside. His eyes widened in mild shock and his jaw hung open, before he closed it and a large smile spread over his round face.

There, cuddled together like children, lay the two colonels – wrapped around each other, with a pile of pillows partly above them, partly at their feet (and one on the floor), soundly asleep. Deep peace radiated in gentle waves from them, and Schultz sighed – remembering the times he and his wife were still young and in love. For him it was an eternity ago, for Klink (and maybe for Hogan, too), this time had just begun. And for once he didn’t think it strange that two males were snuggling up like this. In these sinister times love was rare and he really hoped that there would be a happy ending for his superior and also for the American colonel.

Nodding with satisfaction to himself – at least those two had found some rest – he left the building; ordering a guard to watch the entrance and let no-one in except for himself. Then he went back to the Kommandantur; oddly happy for the two highest ranking officers in Stalag 13.

It was around nine o’clock, as the relatively peaceful morning abruptly ended, while Schultz made another round on the compound. He saw a gray staff-car with a double-ax arriving at the gates and knew instantly that Burkhalter had returned – certainly to speak with Klink and…

And maybe Klink still lay in bed with Hogan!

There was no misunderstanding possible, why the Oberst cuddled his senior POW and…

It was seldom the case that Hans Schultz ran, but this time he all but raced towards Klink’s quarters, waved the guard aside and burst into the building.

“Herr KOMMMANDAAAAANT!!!!” he shouted.

In the sleeping chamber Klink was torn out of blissful sleep and sat up hastily “Are we under attack?” he gasped the first thing that came to his mind; blinking into the semi-darkness like an owl.
The loud “Ouch!” and a gentle ‘thud’ beside him, followed by a low groan startled him. Still foggy with sleep he turned his head. The view instantly woke him fully: Hogan, bandaged up with a lot of bruises even on his face, lay there and looked with one eye reproachfully up at him.

“This wasn’t nice,” the American mumbled almost pouting, before he grimaced and pressed his eye shut. “Everything hurts,” he slurred.

“Hogan! What…” Klink stopped abruptly as his memories rose deep in him, and, startled, he bent over the younger man. “Rob, did I hurt you?” he asked, distressed.

The same moment Schultz burst into the room – out of breath and agitated.

“Herr Kommandant, Gener…”

“Schultz!” Klink snarled. “Why the heck do you trample like a mad elephant into my quarters, startle the hell out of me, tear Colonel Hogan out of…”

Schultz, usually shutting up whenever Klink groused at him, wouldn’t have anything of his superior’s typical ranting for now. Leaning his rifle beside the door against the wall, he closed the distance to the bed, pulled the comforter and blanket away, and gripped for Klink’s left upper arm; eliciting a pained yelp, which he ignored, from the Oberst.

“Quick, Herr Kommandant, go into the bathroom! General Burkhalter just arrived and if he sees you and Colonel Hogan cuddling together like ferrets, maybe he gets the right idea about your fierce protectiveness concerning the colonel.” Realizing what he had just revealed, he hastily corrected himself, “I mean, the general gets the wrong idea why you fought for Colonel Hogan so much.”

Klink, feeling steamrolled, rubbed his throbbing left upper arm and blinked in confusion at his Sergeant of the guards – and Schultz lost it. “Herrschaftezeiten noch omoal (Bavarian curse, symbolic an expression for losing patience), Herr Oberst, HURRY up. The general is coming – and you are lying in bed with Colonel Hogan – who is a MAN!”

That finally got Klink’s attention. With a hissed “Shit!” he swung his legs over the bed’s edge, all but threw the covers back over a little bit confused but also amused Hogan, cursed as his left calf began to protest angrily, and raced to the bathroom.
“Finally,” Schultz sighed, bent down and began to put the pillows in order.

“Trouble?” Hogan asked hoarsely, and as Hans caught the first sparkle of mirth dancing in the American’s good eye, he felt relief washing over him. Obviously the colonel felt a little bit better.

“Jolly joker,” Schultz said softly; smiling at the younger man, while he tried to put some tidiness into the bed. “Do you feel better?”

“I'll know when everything stops hurting,” the colonel mumbled. He only slowly came around, fought back his returning memories and pain, and tried to find some hold by concentrating on the fact that Schultz (!) had torn Klink out of bed (!). He carefully relaxed and watched the large man’s attempts to eliminate any tracks which could reveal that not one but two persons had slept here.

One moment.

Klink had slept beside him? The last thing he remembered was how Klink bid him good-night, left the room and let the reading lamp in the living area switched on to chase away Hogan’s nightmares. And now he woke up by more or less thrown away by the Oberst, who had… ‘cuddled like a ferret’ with him?

“Schultz,” Hogan began slowly. “Why was Klink sleeping beside me?”

“How shall I know? I found you two asleep like this more than an hour ago, left, and now, as Burkhalter arrived I…”

“Is anybody here?” the well-known voice demanded from somewhere at the entrance.

“When you speak of the devil,” Schultz grumbled and made a dark face, before he put on a far too bright smile, straightened his shape, went to the door and took his rifle with him. “Joa mai, if this isn’t General Burkhalter,” he said a little bit louder; sounding very surprised. “I wish you a good morning, sir,” he added while leaving the sleeping room.

“Schultz! What’s the meaning of this? Why aren’t you in Klink’s office, but ran like a cannon ball on two legs to Klink’s quarters?” Burkhalter’s mood was already down again – like most times. With
bready eyes he glared at the Sergeant of the Guards.

“Well… you see, Herr General… I… uh… The Kommandant ordered me to assist him here a quarter before nine o’clock, but me being in charge of the camp in the moment I somehow forgot it. And then… well… I made a short patrol, looked at my wristwatch, saw that it was already past nine o’clock, remembered what I promised Oberst Klink and ran to his quarters.” He breathed through as he had this excuse finally uttered. “It was like this, Herr General,” he beamed at him.

Inside of the sleeping chamber Hogan had closed his good eye, grimaced and groaned into the next pillow. Schultz and his explanations… Usually they were a reason to laugh, but just right now the colonel had hoped for the large Bavarian to be a brighter candle on the cake, for once. There was no way that Burkhalter would buy this story.

“As long as you don’t forget what it means to be in charge of a POW-camp I have some hope left,” Burkhalter sneered; proving that the general was – indeed – so convinced of Schultz being a fool that he didn’t even get suspicious in this case.

Whatever this ‘case’ was for real.

The American frowned. What had made Klink lay down beside him, Hogan, and sleep here for the rest of the night? If someone would have found them, they would both be in deep trouble now and…

And Schultz had seen them and come running to Klink’s quarters to warn them? And, something that gave Hogan second thoughts, the large Bavarian didn’t seem to be shocked about it?

Odd! Really odd!

“And where is Klink now?” Burkhalter’s voice drove Hogan’s attention back towards the scene in the living room.

“In the bathroom, Herr General,” Schultz answered truthfully.

The same moment the door to the bathroom opened and Klink stepped out – only wearing his nightgown; after all he had left his slippers, bathrobe and even his monocle in the guestroom. At least his hair was combed. Pressing one index finger against his lips as he looked shortly at Hogan, he tiptoed to the door and stepped outside.
“Schultz! There you are. I waited for you to… Oh, good morning, Herr General! How nice of you to stop by before you leave for Berlin. I trust you slept well?” He sounded almost cheerful and Hogan could imagine the false, too kind smile on the older man’s face that only poorly masked his uncertainty and discomfort.

The colonel shook his head inwardly. Schultz and Klink couldn’t become actors even if their lives depended on it!

“Yes, surprisingly – given the mess here in Hammelburg,” Burkhalter said sourly. “I came to ask Colonel Hogan some questions should he be responsive today. How is he?”

In the living-room Klink felt himself growing even more nervous than he already was. Rubbing his hands and chuckling, he answered, “Well, I don’t know. I all but crept into the bathroom for my morning toilette, and the poor bastard didn’t move at all. And as far as I could see he runs a high fever. I wanted to call for Wilson as soon as I’m a little bit more presentable and…” He had to cough again, and it really sounded awful.

“You should stay in bed, Klink, and get better as soon as possible,” Burkhalter grumbled.

“Thank you for your worry, Herr General,” the Oberst smiled after he regained some breath. “I never thought that you value me so much.”

“I don’t worry about you, I worry about the camp. Of you and Schultz, you are the smaller catastrophe, Klink!” the staff officer sneered, before he removed his gloves and put them on the table. “Schultz, make us some tea or coffee, and then leave us alone. I’ve to speak with Hogan before I indeed leave for Berlin – and take Hochstetter with me.”

Despite the offense he had had to endure once again only seconds ago, Klink couldn’t help himself but grinned broadly. “So, you’ll really take the black-clad poison-dwarf with you?”

“Yes, I keep my word.” He glared at his inferior. “While I talk with Hogan in private, please put something on, Klink. When I see your nightgown I’ve to think of my shrew at home and then my mood drops even more.”

“If this is even possible,” the Kommandant whispered beneath his breath, before he quickly walked with an “Excuse me please!” toward the guestroom.
In the sleeping-room Hogan had listened carefully, even if his headache worsened. He had to know what Burkhalter wanted, and it really didn’t surprise him much that the general came to speak with him. Of course the colonel had to give several statements concerning his captivity, and even if he didn’t look forward to mentally facing everything once again, he also knew that everything he said could be used against Hochstetter. To be confronted with the unpleasant memories once again was a small price to pay, if it would lead to Hochstetter being out of his hair forever!

He heard a soft noise at the door and forced his good eye open. His limited gaze found the fat figure clad in gray at the entrance. He didn’t like the thought of being questioned by Burkhalter without Klink present, on the other hand he had seen how much everything that happened to him had made the Oberst furious. Maybe it was better certain details weren’t revealed to Klink – especially given the Kommandant’s current health or, better to say, lack of it.

Moistening his lips, he whispered, “Good morning, General Burkhalter.”

The staff officer glanced at the American colonel; once again shocked at his condition. The bruises had darkened and colored since the day prior. Some of them were a nasty mixture of deep red and lilac; others reminded him of starless skies during night. Hogan looked even worse than yesterday.

“Hogan,” he said quietly while stepping in and closing the door. “I think it isn’t necessary to ask how you are doing.”

“Miserable doesn’t even come close, sir,” Hogan answered and, gritting his teeth, he tried to roll around and sit up. Pain shot through his shoulders, upper arms and back, while his belly stung like it had been stabbed. Unable to suppress a gasp he closed his eyes and continued his effort, as all of sudden two hands helped him. Looking up he realized, baffled, that it was Burkhalter who supported him; the small eyes showed a mixture of sympathy and anger.

“This is absolutely intolerable,” Burkhalter grumbled. “Hochstetter will be punished for it. You have my word.” Shoving a few pillows behind Hogan’s back, he helped the colonel lay back more or less in a sitting position, before he straightened his shape and watched the American closely. What was the English saying? Looking like shit? Well, in this case it fit perfectly. Yet he couldn’t spare the younger man the next minutes.

“I know that you need to rest and that you suffer not only a nasty cold and severe bruises, but also a concussion. Even through your pain, are you able to answer a few questions?”
Hogan took a deep breath. “Yes,” he murmured.

Burkhalter nodded, removed his cap, put it on the dressing table, opened his coat, pulled the chair from the room’s edge to him and sat down. “Can you give me a report of what Hochstetter did and said to you exactly – from your arresting three days prior ‘til yesterday as Klink stopped him?”

Hogan gulped. The mere thought of being confronted with everything once again, without having a chance to deal with it prior for himself, sent a shiver down his spine, but he knew that he had no other choice. Not if he wanted to get Hochstetter out of the way.

So he made an affirming gesture, tried to shut out any feelings and began to tell what happened from his point of view. It was cumbersome and tiring, and he was grateful as Schultz brought some tea a few minutes later that helped his sore throat a lot.

Outside in the living room Klink paced up and down, despite the stinging pain in his left calf. He was vivid with worry; knowing that the questioning must be tiring Hogan out – not only physically but also mentally. The urge to ignore Burkhalter’s orders and enter the sleeping room to give his American counterpart some mute support by simply being there was almost too strong. Two times he headed firmly towards the door, only to be stopped by Schultz, who knew exactly what was going on in his superior’s mind.

“Herr Kommandant, you'll only get in trouble if you go inside now,” he said quietly.

“I’m in charge of this camp – and Hogan is my senior POW. When he is being questioned an officer of the Luftwaffe has to be present and…”

“Herr Oberst, General Burkhalter may be a member of the Heer and not of the Luftwaffe, but he is responsible for all Stalags, so I do think that this special regulation is satisfied.”

Klink only stared at him, balled his right hand into a fist, huffed – and continued to pace. Schultz watched him with sympathy; being fully aware of the worry his superior had to endure now knowing that the one he cared so much for was forced to relive the malignant memories all over again.

After a quarter hour of reporting and answering questions, Hogan was exhausted. Burkhalter looked more sour than ever before after he got a lot of his own assumptions confirmed. To use truth drugs as well as psychical pressure methods during the questioning of suspicious people was common within the Gestapo, but open torture like Hochstetter had done was out of limits. This, together with the fact
that the major refused to check Hogan’s alibi, used real torture and ignored Burkhalter’s orders, were
enough deeds to send Hochstetter to prison for a lot of years.

Closing the notepad he had used to make notes of what Hogan told him, he glanced almost gently at
the tired American, and said softly, “Thank you for your report, Hogan – and for your effort to relive
everything anew. I will write it down and add it to the documents I’ll present at the trial. I’ll send a
copy in advance that you have to please read through and sign. It will be your official statement that
will be used during the court-martial. I hope it will be enough for the judge, otherwise you’re going
to have to appear in court and will be questioned.”

“Understood,” Hogan said quietly. “You really want to go through with this? I’m only a POW
and…”

“Law is law, Hogan – and Hochstetter broke it. More than this – he put his personal regards and
desire for revenge over the law and went against anything man-kind call ‘humanity’. We are at war,
yes, but there are still some rules left. I know that it has to be difficult for you to understand that we
would go against one of our own men to give justice to an enemy officer, but even in these dark
times justice has to be followed.” He rose and took his cap. “I’ll keep Klink, and therefore you,
updated. Get well soon, Hogan.” He made a short gesture of his head that was almost a hint of a bow
– a signal of respect from officer to officer.

And Hogan managed to rise his right hand to a short military salute.

“General, thank you for your help yesterday – and for listening. Should we win this war, I’ll put in a
good word for you to the Allies.”

Burkhalter stared at him – and began to chuckle for the first time ever since Hogan had met him.
“And if we should win the war, I’ll hire you as my personal adviser and bodyguard. I’ve never met
someone who is this strong and keeps his humor even in the most sinister moments like you do.”
Giving a proper salute in true respect he went to the door, but hesitated before he could reach for the
handle. One thing was nagging at him since the whole mess started – and especially after he stepped
into the cellars of the Gestapo-Headquarters to find Klink turned into a protective warrior.

“And Hogan, please allow me one personal question.” As the colonel only nodded, he took a deep breath.
“You are a highly intelligent man and therefore must have known that Hochstetter would be after
you as soon as he learned that you and Klink hadn’t died in the aircraft ambush. Why didn’t you use
your chance to flee? Klink was injured and wouldn’t have been able to follow you. Why did you
make no attempt to escape, but brought Klink back to the camp?”
Well, this was a question his men and also Klink had asked him. Hell, he had even asked himself the same a few times by now, but besides the fact that he couldn’t let down his men by making a run for freedom while they were still captured, there remained another answer that wasn’t less true than the other one.

“As you said, Klink was injured – and he was too thinly clothed to stay out in the open for hours. Not during this hard winter. He wouldn’t have made it back to the camp alive. If I would have left, he would have died. I couldn’t let him down like this. Not Klink!”

Burkhalter shortly pursed his plump lips. Hochstetter had pointed out the odd closeness the two men seemed to have developed and he, Burkhalter, had witnessed, too. “‘Not Klink’, you said. What makes him so special to you? Most times he’s a fool – and technically you two are enemies.”

“And practically we’re not,” Hogan answered quietly; knowing that he had to be careful now. To befriend an adversarial officer could be interpreted as treason, and he didn’t want to endanger Klink or give Burkhalter a reason to separate them by sending the Oberst to the Russian Front or him, Hogan, to another Stalag. “Colonel Klink always treated me with respect and politeness. It made me regard him in another light. In another time, if we weren’t at war, I certainly would see a friend in him.” He took a deep breath; inwardly crossing his fingers because those words came close to a lie. He wouldn’t see Klink as a friend, the older man had become his friend. But this was something the general shouldn’t learn of, so he added as explanation for his silly behavior, “And as he raced back into the shower of bullets to save me, or as he came into the Gestapo-Headquarters and got me out, he didn’t appear to me as a fool, but rather as a honorable, stern warrior who doesn’t let fear of the devil stop him from doing what he thinks is right. Without him I would be dead now. Of course I had to help him – and I would do it again.”

“Even with the knowledge of what may be laying ahead for you just like you did as Hochstetter returned and arrested you?” Burkhalter asked; assuming that Hogan told him only a part of the whole reason why he risked so much for his German counterpart.

The colonel lifted his chin. “Yes, even then. As I said, I’ve come to respect the Kommandant greatly, and this doesn’t depend on good times. The dark times show you who is really honorable and who is not. I knew that Hochstetter would get me as soon as he got the information that his little plan to get rid of me had failed, but this was no reason for me to let the man down who had just saved my life.”

Burkhalter didn’t know what to say for a moment. The strange loyalty the American colonel displayed towards a man who should be his enemy made him almost uncomfortable. There were men he called ‘friends’, but the general was convinced that not one of them would move a finger should he be in deep water or if there was a chance that they would face trouble by displaying loyalty towards him. And this young man here, an officer of a hostile army, put the health of his jailer above his own, only because he held him in high regard. Klink was maybe a fool and an idiot, but he had found in Hogan a true friend – something Burkhalter couldn’t state of himself – and it woke
jealousy in him, but also an odd sadness. There was the saying that you get lonelier with each step up the career ladder, but Hogan and Klink had high ranks, too, yet they had true friends.

Burkhalter sighed soundlessly. Sometimes he wished he would be nothing more than a man with a simple job, less responsibilities and a warm and welcoming home, where he could spend his evenings with real friends and a nice wife.

‘Perhaps it will happen in another life,’ he thought, before he straightened his shape, took his cap and looked one time back at Hogan.

“I think your superiors wouldn’t share your point of view, but I have to agree with you in one thing: Men with honor should treat each other with dignity and respect, no matter the nationality. And I’m glad that a few of those men are still left.” He went to the door. “Get better soon, Colonel.”

Closing his eye, the American tried to relax the moment the general left the room, but the talk with him still turned over and over again in Hogan’s mind. He hadn’t left anything out as he made his report; knowing that every detail was a nail more to Hochstetter’s ‘coffin’. With the major out of the way, he and his men would have it easier with the coming missions – that meant, as soon as he was able to walk properly again and show his face in public without scaring all people away.

Outside in the living area, Klink was more or less in Burkhalter’s face – not asking but demanding answers of what the general and Hogan had spoken.

“Klink, last time I checked, I’m your superior here and not the other way around. If you want to give orders, then address Schultz,” the general snapped. “And concerning Hogan: Ask him yourself. I’m certain that he will not keep anything from you since he regards you in such a bright light.” He placed on his cap. “Yet I do hope that none of you two forget that you’re on different sides in this damn war.” He pulled on his gloves. “Good day, gentlemen!”

He left – and Klink glared after him. “Such a bad mood! Well, if I would look like this and see myself every morning uncombed and unshaven in the mirror, my mood would be down for the rest of the day, too.”

Schultz laughed out loud, but calmed himself as he received a typical sharp glance from his superior. Sighing he murmured, “I’ll tell the ordinance to get you and Colonel Hogan some breakfast.”

“Thank you. He shall bring it in a quarter hour. First I’ve to speak with Hogan.”
Hurrying to the sleeping chamber, he quietly stepped in and stopped beside the bed. His American counterpart turned his head and looked up at him – tired and obviously shaken.

“How are you feeling?” Klink asked softly.

Hogan shook his head very carefully. “You don’t want to know,” he said quietly.

“Would I ask otherwise?” the older man replied gently. “Robert, I don’t ask out of politeness or as the Kommandant of this camp. I ask you because I care.”

The younger man looked at him again – the good eye widened slightly. Then something like a smile moved his split lips, while warmth appeared in his gaze. “Thanks, Willie. After everything I just had to relive in my mind, I almost forgot that not all German officers are bad.”

“You feel like shit, am I right?” Klink murmured and earned a short chuckle.

“I couldn’t have said it better,” Hogan deadpanned, then he turned serious again. “I feel even more beaten up than yesterday,” he admitted.

The Oberst nodded; he had already anticipated it. “That’s because your adrenalin is down and your body finally feels everything that has been done to it.” He took a deep breath. “I’ll call the hospital and ask Dr. Birkhorn to come over to the camp to check on you.”

“Th’s not necessary,” Hogan murmured. “I’ll heal.”

“Yes, the question is only how you will heal – the easy way or the difficult one. And, besides, I won’t take the risk that some of your wounds get infected – or that you get pneumonia.”

“Don’t give yourself trouble,” the colonel sighed and caught the suddenly stern gaze of his German counterpart.

“Hogan, usually you are living, breathing trouble on two legs, yet it is no trouble for me to make
certain that you get well and therefore become said living trouble again.” That earned him a snicker this time and his heart beat faster for a moment. Then he realized how the haunted expression returned in Hogan’s gaze, and sat down on the bed’s edge. “How went your talk with Burkhalter? He wasn’t too demanding and stern, I hope.”

“I told him everything that happened,” the colonel murmured and lowered the gaze of his good eye. “It was… unpleasant to think and speak about the details I tried to forget, but I do understand that Burkhalter needs to get as much knowledge as possible to put Hochstetter on hold.” He frowned as another urge made itself recognizable. “Kommandant, could you call Wilson? I’ve to use the restroom and…”

Klink rose, pulled the comforter and blanket away and offered Hogan his hand. “We don’t need the sergeant for it. Come on, I’ll help you.”

Again baffled about the older man’s unlimited willingness to support him, the American carefully sat up, looked at the Oberst’ hand – and stiffened. The colonel frowned as he saw the bruises Klink sported there. “What have you done to your hand?” he asked – partly to distract himself, partly with concern.

First Klink blinked at him, confused, before his gaze wandered down to his own hand. Letting his arm sink and flexing his fingers, he murmured, “It’s nothing serious.”

Hogan knew those tracks well enough. He had seen them dozens of times – on old school-mates, comrades and a lot on his own hands during his wild years. “You didn't have those bruises when you went to Hammelburg’s hospital.” He took a sharp breath as the truth dawned on him. “Burkhalter asked me to tell him everything between Hochstetter’s first attempt to arrest me and the moment you stopped him from killing me. Don’t tell me… you did the latter by punching Hochstetter,” he said slowly. He was almost shocked to see Klink’s face brightening up to a wide grin, while the blue eyes shone with satisfaction and even glee.

“Yes, I socked him – square on the chin. Two times. He lay there like a broken doll for at least a minute, and I really wish he would have stayed like this longer. He deserved it!”

If a parade of German, American, British and French soldiers in full dress-uniform on horses, accompanied by orchestras playing marches, would have waltzed through the room, Hogan couldn’t have looked more thunderstruck than in this moment.

Klink – KLINK! – of all people had knocked out an officer of the Gestapo and the SS with his own bare fist? Klink, the man who avoided confrontation at all costs, snaked himself out of any hairy
situation and bent himself backwards only to not get into trouble, clouted another officer who
belonged, above all, to the most dreaded para-military organization within Europe? Holy heavens,
what had gotten into the man?

The Oberst took in the flabbergasted face of the younger man and chuckled. “Surprised? Believe me,
I was a little bit surprised myself, but I didn’t regret it. I would have loved to give him even more
pieces of my mind after what he did to you.”

Hogan closed his eyes shortly, before he whispered. “You… you are crazy.” He glanced up at Klink
again; worry edged in his hoarse voice, “Sweet Lord, he will bring you to court-martial for this! To
attack another officer means…”

“Burkhalter arrested him for attempted murder, abuse of his rank and position, insubordination,
broken laws and torture,” Klink interrupted him softly. “Hochstetter went against several important
rules of the Wehrmacht, disregarded his duty as he fled during the ambush and let down not only a
POW but also a higher ranking officer of the Luftwaffe and disobeyed a general of the Heer. He
would be insane to press charges against me, because after all I only attacked him to prevent him
from murdering someone.” He shook his head. “No, Hochstetter gambled too high this time and lost.
Even Himmler demanded his arrest as Burkhalter spoke with him. So, don’t worry, Hogan. I will not
be brought to trial for punching this bastard.”

“I hope so,” the American whispered. “I don’t want you to be arrested and maybe sentenced to only
God knows what, only because you defended me.”

The glance Klink gave him was full of warmth, yet there was also some pride to see. “If you want to
do the right thing, most of the ways leading to it are full of stones. I stumbled a few times, but I
always regained my footing – and it hasn’t stopped me until now to walk this way. Now even more
than ever before. Of course Hochstetter will try to give me trouble – hell, he’d certainly want to press
charges against me for treason because I stood up for a POW who, he is convinced, belongs to the
Underground. Burkhalter told me a few things Hochstetter suspects you of. But regarding the fact
that many accusations are nothing more than smoke because you’ve tight alibis, everyone will regard
Hochstetter’s accusations as what they are: Attempts to cover for his failures – and for his criminal
deeds.”

He watched Hogan closely while speaking to him, and he had recognized how the younger man
suddenly avoided his gaze as the topic came down to Hochstetter’s suspicions. ‘Getting a guilty
conscience for lying through your teeth even to me, love? Certainly – and we’ll talk about it when
you’re feeling better.’

Putting on a smile, he bent down and offered the colonel his hand again. “Come on, Hogan, let us
get you up and into the bathroom. Schultz will be coming with breakfast soon, and afterwards I’ll call
for Wilson to have a look at you before Dr. Birkhorn comes.”

Slowly, carefully not to stir more pain by hasty movements, Hogan crept to the edge of the bed and allowed Klink to pull him to his feet. He felt dizzy and unsure on his legs, as he began to feel cold the moment the warm covers weren’t around him any longer. He knew that he sported a fever and yearned to lay down again, but certain matters were more urgent now, and so he limped towards the bathroom; grateful for Klink’s support.

“You really don’t have to phone the doctor. I…”

“We are both in need of his assistance, Hogan, end of discussion!”

Baffled, the American looked at his German counterpart. This streak of becoming really stern all of sudden was new – and somehow he liked it.

TBC…

Well, this was the first ‘little’ break-down Hogan had – and of course Klink (the man in love, NOT the Kommandant) was there to help him. It will be a harsh way of healing for our beloved colonel, but his friends and ‘Willie’ are doing their best to get him through it.

I also loved to write the scene in which ‘Willie’ skips every modesty and slips into bed beside Robert – a sleeping arrangement that will not stop so soon (*snicker*). And I also enjoyed to write the moment Hogan learns of Klink punching Hochstetter. I hope, you liked it among the other things, too.

Like always I LOVE to get some review/comments, so hopefully you have some time to leave them – despite the preparation for the ‘biggest party of the year’.

In this regard I wish you all a lot of fun during New Year’s Eve tomorrow,

A Happy New Year – and thank you for your loyalty.
Love

Yours Starlight
Hi, my dear readers!

To all of you: HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

I hope, you all had a joyful and funny turn of the year and that the hangovers weren’t that nasty.

Thank you so much for the many reviews I got. You’re the best.

In the new chapter, the healing of our beloved colonel begins. All right, there only tiny steps, yet it is clear to see that there is needed more to break Robert E. Hogan, even if he will going through a tough time. And Klink reveals for the first time that he has some clear ideas concerning the ‘Hogan-gang’s’ activities.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 19 – Healing, part 1

Doing his morning toilette was more than exhausting for Hogan. And as he finally laid back in bed, limbs heavy as lead, he still couldn’t believe that Klink put up with him and his condition like this – that the Oberst really supported him while he was getting washed and even offered to shave him because the American’s hands still trembled whenever he lifted them a little bit. Yet Hogan had to decline the offer. Not that he didn’t trust Klink enough to let him near his throat with a razor-sharp blade. There was no doubt that the older man really cared for him. But most parts of his face still hurt like hell and felt sore. The mere thought of scratching over the sensitive skin with something, anything, gave Hogan goosebumps. No, he’d rather have a loathed beard growing than endure more hurt. A beard wouldn’t kill him and he could shave it in a few days.
Sighing in relief as the warmth of the blanket and comforter enveloped him again, he was too tired to think about the talk with Burkhalter much more – and fell asleep within a few minutes. He woke up two hours later. A tray with breakfast was placed on the nightstand, together with an empty cup and the table bell Klink had given him. Not really feeling hungry but knowing that he had to eat something, Hogan made use of the little bell to get some tea and only a few seconds later LeBeau appeared in the doorway.

“Mon Colonel,” he said happily as he saw Hogan awake; beaming at him like a child beneath the Christmas tree. “I thought you would sleep through the whole day. Wilson was here an hour ago and gave you the next shot of penicillin, but you didn’t wake up. And Klink phoned the hospital. Dr. Birkhorn will come in the afternoon to have a closer look at you and our Balding Eagle.”

Still groggy, the American watched LeBeau, who didn’t faint for once – now, after there were no tracks of fresh blood visible on the bandages anymore. “Merci, mon ami,” he said quietly.

Louis smiled widely at him. “I’m so glad that you’re doing a little bit better.”

“Thanks to you I have the chance to get better, otherwise I would be two meters below now,” Hogan murmured; feeling a smile tugging at the left side of his mouth as he saw LeBeau wearing an apron and a cooking hat. Somehow it gave him a sense of normality to see the feisty tiny Frenchman in the outfit of a cook.

“I haven’t done much, Colonel.” Louis threw a short glance over his shoulder towards the guest room to make certain that Klink wasn’t listening, heard the Oberst snoring, and quickly entered the sleeping chamber. Sitting down on the chair, he continued his story, “I only got caught in the curfew in Hammelburg after I finally reached a member of the Underground, and had to wait ‘til morning. And then, after I realized they couldn’t do anything, I went to the hospital to get Klink.” He lowered his head. “To tell the truth, the one who rescued and took care of you was Klink.”

“You risked your life as you crept out of the camp,” Hogan whispered. “Without you, Klink would have learned too late of what was going on and I would be dead now. Thank you, Louis. I’ll never forget what you did for me.”

The little Frenchman shrugged. “You would do the same for every one of us. Merde, you already did the same for us – risked your life to save us, I mean.”

“I’m responsible for my men – and, above all, you are my friends. Of course I have…’”
Pointing one finger at his superior, LeBeau smirked, “See, this is exactly the point. We are all not only a completely crazy bunch of ‘Unsung Heroes’, we’re friends. And that’s why bosches like Hochstetter will never win. The Krauts can’t grasp what we share.”

“There are enough examples who speak of the opposite,” Hogan corrected him softly. “Think of several members of the Underground – or of Schultz and Klink. They are raised to mask private feelings, especially within the army, but of course they are able to make real friends. Klink risked his neck two times now to protect me – out of friendship. That says a lot.”

Louis rolled his eyes, then he snorted and grinned. “I never thought Old Klink had it in him, but I’ve to agree. He really outgrew himself to save the day.”

Both men smiled at each other, then the colonel turned serious again. “How did you really get out of Stalag 13 – with all the SS-guards in and outside of the area?”

LeBeau got his typical soulful gleam in his eyes he always got as soon as a beautiful woman was involved. “Mademoiselle Hilda helped,” he said, which caught Hogan’s full attention.

“Hilda helped you escape? I know she does a lot for us, but this…” He felt slightly alarmed by the thought that the young woman had risked so much for them. There wasn’t a POW in the whole camp who didn’t treat Klink’s secretary with respect and politeness. Not only because she was pretty and young, but also because she always behaved kindly to everyone despite nationality and skin color. To think that she took such a high risk to help them – to help him! – woke unease in him.

LeBeau chuckled quietly. “She smuggled me out of the camp – in the sidecar.” Within the next minutes he told Hogan what really led to his rescue. They spoke in hushed voices and listened closely to any noise that could come from the guestroom, but despite Klink’s snoring everything remained quiet.

Finally Louis got Hogan some tea, helped him eat something and promised to make him a fine chicken soup for lunch. Obviously Schultz – better to say Langenscheidt – had managed to get hold of a boiling hen LeBeau was preparing for the two colonels now. It was well known that chicken soup supported the healing process if someone had caught a cold.

Around midday Klink woke up. Even if his nose was blocked he somehow could smell the strong scent of chicken stew. Still feeling like he had been ‘run over by a truck’ as Hogan loved to say, he left bed, put on his bathrobe and slippers, and walked to the kitchen. He was thirsty and miserable, but the sight of a whistling LeBeau in apron and cooking hat, preparing something at the stove, lifted his mood a little bit.
“I can’t smell much, but what I smell is great,” he said quietly; knowing that the little Frenchman was a lot more sociable when being complimented about his cooking.

Louis looked over his shoulder and for a moment his deeply rooted grudge against most Germans awoke in him, then he remembered that a) Hogan was only still alive because of Klink and that b) the Oberst was in such a bad shape because of his protecting and saving Hogan. Feeling his emotions softening towards the older man, he answered politely,

“Schultz gave me this boiling hen to prepare some chicken soup for you and Colonel Hogan. I’m sorry that there was no asparagus available, then it would taste even better, but I got some rice. I’m sure it will taste good despite the missing vegetable.”

Klink felt himself smiling a little bit. “I’m convinced of it, LeBeau. Your cooking is always formidable.”

Surprised by the sincere compliment, Louis couldn’t help and replied, “Merci, Colonel. And, by the way, chicken soup helps a lot when someone has caught a cold.”

“What? No Sauce Béarnaise this time?” the Kommandant asked almost ironically. “No garlic to wear around the neck? I’m surprised, LeBeau. Last time I lay on a sickbed with a cold you said that there is no better medicine than the special sauce from your grandmother.” He walked deeper into the kitchen and got himself a cup of tea, while he continued, “And do you know what really befuddles me? As you guys smeared the sauce on my chest and made me wear this anti-vampire remedy made of garlic, I also got pierced by something in my butt. A spiral spring, like Newkirk said. The only odd thing is that Dr. Birkhorn’s and Sergeant Wilsons’ injections feel exactly just like this ‘spiral spring’ that mysteriously disappeared to never be felt again. It didn’t even leave a hole in the mattress – but I’m sure you, Newkirk or Hogan have an explanation for it, too.”

He looked back at LeBeau, whose jaw hung open and whose eyes were wide in alert. Chuckling to himself, Klink added, “I’m still grateful for what you all did for me that day, but some time you’ve to tell me how and where you got hold of penicillin.”

LeBeau still gaped at the Oberst as he realized that Klink knew the truth. Of course he remembered the incident one year ago as Klink had come down with a nasty case of the flu – or better to say a cold, otherwise the medicine wouldn’t have helped – that was about to prevent the Oberst from joining a meeting. Hogan had wanted to use the Kommandant’s car to smuggle a female Underground-agent out of the camp where she had been hiding in the tunnels, and therefore needed Klink healthy, which made him order for penicillin to be sent by London. This medicament wasn’t part of Stalag 13’s medical equipment, and to cover the sudden appearance of the medicine, LeBeau
had come up with the cover story of an old family recipe – a paste that had to be put on the chest and a garlic loop around the neck. While treating the Oberst, who had been completely distracted, Newkirk had given him an injection of penicillin into the butt – square through Klink’s nightgown. The short prick had been blamed on said spiral spring. The next day the Kommandant had been doing much better, and when the Luftwaffe-surgeon appeared later, he had been healthy again.

Until now they all had believed that Klink had bought their trick, but given the Kommandant’s little speech now, LeBeau started to realize that the Oberst had seen through them, but had decided to ignore it instead of demanding answers. Like he had done so often before – especially after the incident in the Hofbräu where he caught Hogan in a German uniform. Since then Klink had rarely pestered Hogan for explanations whenever something very strange happened, and even turned to him for advice.

LeBeau began to realize that Klink seemed to know a lot more than they had all thought, yet Louis was not ready to reveal the truth behind the cover story pertaining to the ‘flu-sauce-incident’.

“You need tarragon for the sauce, and contraire to last year we have none at the moment. And I haven’t seen garlic for weeks. So, good old chicken soup has to be enough,” he shrugged.

Klink fixed him with a short stare, daring him to say more, but the canny Frenchman only looked at him with the perfect mixture of innocence and kindness. And especially the latter spoke volumes, because usually LeBeau’s glances at him were anything but kind. Well, maybe he wasn’t that grouchy anymore after he, Klink, had saved Hogan’s butt two times (officially) now, yet the Oberst knew that LeBeau was against Germans in principle.

Klink had to admit that he was tempted to challenge LeBeau by throwing more of the hidden truth into his face, but he decided against it. He wanted to speak with Hogan first about everything he had witnessed or had found out concerning the not so innocent activities of the men in Barracks 2, so he changed the topic by employing a distraction.

“Has Hogan woken up in the meantime to eat something?”

LeBeau, glad of the change of topic, nodded quickly. “Oui, he ate more than half of what I made and drank some tea. But… I think he will need a lot of days until he’s fit again.”

“He’ll get all the rest and support he needs,” the German officer nodded, and emptied the cup he placed into the sink. “Thank you, Corporal, I’ll hit the mattress again. Please wake me when lunch is ready.”
LeBeau watched him leave the kitchen and drew a nervous breath. Klink knew about their little meddling concerning his cold and the secret penicillin! Louis would have to tell this to Hogan as quickly as possible – but when he managed to get out of the kitchen ten minutes later, the colonel was sleeping again. Sighing, LeBeau returned to the stove; determined to inform his superior and friend at the next possible opportunity.

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The possibility came around midday as the chicken soup was served. Klink ate at the dining table, but Hogan stayed in bed. His still too strained muscles didn’t allow his arms to be lifted much without his hands trembling, and therefore LeBeau had to feed him again. Usually the colonel would have felt humiliated, but the tiny Frenchman was a close friend and even if his face and eyes didn’t lack sympathy they showed no pity, and Hogan was grateful for it. Yet he would have had a hard time being fed in front of Klink. Not because the Oberst belonged to ‘the enemy’. ‘Willie’ had proven that, yes, he belonged to a hostile army, but he wasn’t Hogan’s opponent. Rather the opposite. The American wouldn’t forget how his German counterpart helped him out during the last day and night; even putting up with his morning toilette to give the younger man a supporting hand.

No, the reason why Hogan shied away from being fed in front of Klink was strange even in his own eyes, but he couldn’t help it. Hogan had seen that Klink seemed to take any evidence of the American’s injuries to heart, and the colonel had the odd wish to not give the Kommandant any additional mental stress.

Therefore he was glad as LeBeau offered him help by feeding him while remaining in bed. The soup wasn’t this hot anymore so that any contact between the broth and Hogan’s split lips wasn’t that painful, and he had even developed some appetite that was, of course, quickly satisfied. Digesting nourishment meant additional effort for his body that was still very busy with healing itself. Yes, the body needed food to regain strength, yet it was also tiring, and therefore Hogan had had enough after a dozen spoons. But Louis wouldn’t have anything of it. Determined he continued to feed his friend, until the colonel threatened him with court-martial if he would be forced to eat only one sip of soup more!

Grinning, LeBeau put away the almost empty bowl and began to fluff up the pillows – the perfect moment to tell Hogan the news,

“Klink knows that we gave him a shot of penicillin last year,” he whispered in his superior’s ear.

Startled and with his good eye widening, the colonel looked at him. “What?” he breathed in shock. “How so?”
With hushed voice LeBeau began to tell him of the short talk he had with Klink. Alarmed, Hogan pursed his lips; frowning.

“Dammit,” he murmured. “Our Balding Eagle is cleverer that I ever gave him credit for.”

The Frenchman nodded; tense. “What shall we do now?” he asked quietly.

“All nothing,” Hogan answered beneath his breath. “Klink had more than a dozen chances to give the incident away to the authorities – Burkhalter or Hochstetter. He didn’t do it until now, he won’t do it in the future. But one thing is for certain: We’ve to be more careful from now on. I think we underestimated the ‘big shot’.”

Louis cocked his head. “You mean, he won’t blow the whistle on us?”

Hogan sighed. “He didn’t deliver me to the Gestapo after he caught me running around in a German uniform last year and he didn’t give us away after the ‘flu-sauce-incident’, like you and I just learned. An inner voice tells me that he will stay silent about us as long as we don’t give him a reason to do otherwise.” He lent back against the pillows. “In his own way he's really protective of us – even against his own regime.”

Louis couldn’t help himself; he smiled shortly. “You mean, he's protective of you. Old Klink has a soft spot for you – a big one given his actions within the last days.”

“Nonsense,” Hogan grumbled. “The Kommandant simply cares for the people that are his responsibility. That’s all.”

LeBeau grinned. “If you say so, sir. But I do think you’re his favorite.” He took the tray. “Just try to sleep a little bit more, mon Colonel. Sleep is the best medicine.”

Deciding to let the topic drop, Hogan carefully pulled the comforter higher. “Besides your chicken-soup, there are only a few things which could do magic like this. Thank you, Louis.” He smiled tiredly at him and watched the tiny Frenchman leaving the room.

Closing his good eye, the American tried to relax, but rest wouldn’t come easily to him now.
Klink knew about the incident with the penicillin last year!

He also had to know that this medicament didn’t belong to the standard equipment of the camp’s infirmary – in other words, Hogan and his men must have gotten hold of it outside of Stalag 13. Therefore one of them must have left the camp or had someone outside of the wires who delivered goods to them. Both possibilities would have had any other camp-Kommandant on alert, despite the fact that the medicine had been for him. But Klink had stayed silent about it – until now, as he informed LeBeau in a roundabout way that he had seen through their little charade all those months ago.

What more did Klink know?

Why hadn’t he given Hogan and his men away?

Why risk his own neck by saving Hogan and openly defending him?

Hell, staying silent about suspicious incidents was one thing, but standing up against the Gestapo was in a completely different league. And Klink had done the latter a few times by now, not only within the last three days. How often had he placed himself between Hogan and Hochstetter – both literally and verbally? How often had Klink dropped some random piece of information during a conversation or Hogan’s weekly report concerning the POWs’ condition and health, warning the American of upcoming problems like this?

Hogan remembered one morning roll call during which Klink had stated that a secret lightning attack against London was planned. Hogan had been able to warn London and the attack was fended, which had certainly saved thousands of people. Klink had given him the information openly, masked as typical arrogant boasting about the power of the Luftwaffe, yet it could also be understood as a warning.

That led to the next question: Did Klink know or assume that he, Hogan, had a secret radio? Well, one time Klink had even warned him that a radio detector was on its way to Stalag 13, and Hogan had been able to stop any radio traffic just in time, or he and his men would have been revealed.

So, if Klink at least thought that Hogan was in contact with London, why didn’t he turn every stone upside down until he had found the secret radio or at least reveal the ‘Unsung Heroes’? Why did he only investigate some cases which had been brought officially to his attention by the Gestapo, and even then his attempts were half-hearted and superficial? Other odd cases were left at that. Even
more, he simply ignored many things. Yes, sometimes he groused and gave Hogan a speech. And if someone from the Gestapo, SS or Luftwaffe was present, he even threatened his senior POW officer, but those threats were empty ones. And the Kommandant often treated him to some cognac afterwards, as soon as the official representatives had left.

And to add to all those odd things, there was even something much stranger: Why did Klink allow him to manipulate him? Sweet Lord, only three mornings ago the Oberst had revealed that he knew about Hogan manipulating him, but he never really stopped him.

Why?

Why keep everything a secret and defend him, Hogan, inactive or active?

Yes, Klink was no Nazi, but he was also no traitor. He loved his fatherland dearly, this much Hogan was aware of, yet Klink protected Hogan and his men by staying silent about the destructive activities he had witnessed or maybe found out about.

This all made less and less sense.

Hogan had the urge to speak with his German counterpart about everything, yet he didn’t know if he would maybe cross a line then – if he would force Klink to act if he learned that Hogan knew of his knowledge, because he couldn’t allow that someone knew that he knew…

The colonel groaned. Hell, now his own thoughts made no more sense anymore. Maybe he really should try to find some more sleep – and while coming to this conclusion, Morpheus’ realm really caught him…

And outside, in the guest-room, Klink had returned to bed after he had finished the soup, and smirked to himself. He had heard LeBeau and Hogan whispering with each other, and he had a good idea concerning the topic. He had given the Frenchman the hints on purpose – to give Hogan something to really think about. He had lost count how many sleepless nights he had endured whenever another strange thing happened and he simply knew that Hogan had his finger in the pie. His troublemaker should be the one who mulled over hair-raising knowledge gained for once.

Pulling the comforter higher, Klink found sleep easily – and only woke up in the early afternoon, as Schultz shook him carefully to tell him that Dr. Birkhorn had arrived.
And the good doctor wasn’t alone.

As Klink left bed, clad once again in his bathrobe and with slippers on his feet, he was greeted by the sight of the surgeon and a very pale Hilda Schneider, who had shown the doctor the way to Klink’s quarters.

Critically, Birkhorn looked at him. “You don’t look any better than yesterday, Herr Oberst. Did you stay in bed?” he asked while shaking the officer’s fever-hot hand.

“As often as it was possible given the whole situation,” Klink affirmed. “Schultz, take the doctor’s coat and show him to my usual sleeping chamber. He shall examine Hogan first. And then get Wilson. I’m sure Dr. Birkhorn will have some instructions for our medic concerning the colonel.”

“Is scho’ recht (Bavarian: It’s all right / okay),” the large Bavarian nodded, helped the surgeon out of the coat, hung it up and then walked the man to the one of the two sick-rooms. Klink wanted to follow them, but then he remembered that his secretary was still there and turned towards her.

“I wanted to ask how you are doing, Herr Oberst,” she said softly.

“It could be better, but I’ve had it worse,” he said truthfully. “Thank you for your concern, my dear – and thank you for taking action during the crisis,” he added. “It was brave but also fortunate that you called General Burkhalter and told him about the mess here.” He nodded shortly at Schultz, who bypassed them and left to get Wilson.

Hilda watched the sergeant leave, before she lowered her head. “It was the least I could do – after all, it was my fault that Colonel Hogan was arrested and that the SS took over the camp.”

Klink frowned in confusion. “Your fault? How, on Earth, could this be?” he asked baffled.

The young woman looked up at him again with troubled eyes. “Because I didn’t fathom in time that Major Hochstetter had not deduced that you and Colonel Hogan escaped the ambush he tried to use to get rid of you and the colonel. I thought too slowly as he screamed your name in surprise through the phone as he heard from me that he couldn’t be linked to Sergeant Schultz, because Schultzie was driving you to the hospital.” She lowered her gaze. “An hour later he was here – together with the SS, he arrested and manhandled the colonel and put Leutnant von Neuhaus in charge. If I would have stayed silent about yours and Colonel Hogan’s successful survival, he wouldn’t have come so soon, but… I was so angry as I learned from Langenscheidt what happened – that this damn coward
ran away while you and the colonel were still in mortal danger – I had to give him a piece of my mind.” She looked from her long lashes up to her boss again. “It was my fault that he learned so quickly about it all and…”

“Hochstetter would have found out one way or the other – sooner or later,” Klink tried to comfort her. He really liked her and appreciated her loyalty. To see her so guilt-ridden and sad made him uncomfortable, and so he placed one hand on her small shoulder. “It wasn’t your fault, Fräulein Hilda, so please stop blaming yourself. And, by the way, you saved the day by informing Burkhalter. Yet… may I ask you a personal question?”

The young woman nodded, and so the Kommandant continued, “Why did you call the general and not me? I was in Hammelburg and you certainly know that a little fever wouldn’t prevent me from doing my duty – in this case saving our troublemaker’s reckless butt again. So…”

“I did try to call you,” Hilda interrupted him and anger began to brim in her eyes. “I called the hospital, but there was this damn witch, the night-nurse, who started snapping about how I could dare try to reach you ‘in the middle of the night’ – even if it was very early in the morning. I tried to make her understand that we had a serious situation, but she only raged that I should call the SS if we’ve trouble at the camp and then hung up. I knew that I had no chance to call you until later morning, when the shift of this hag had finally ended, but I also knew that Colonel Hogan was running out of time, so I called General Burkhalter and… Herr Oberst, is something wrong?”

Klink’s face had flushed an alarming intense red. “The nurse… refused to put you through to me despite the fact that there was an emergency?”

As Hilda only nodded, Klink cursed in a way that made the young woman blush, before he whirled around and stomped to his sleeping chamber; once again ignoring the pain in his calf. Pushing the half closed door open, he stormed into the room – startling Birkhorn and Hogan.

“Doctor, I demand that there will be consequences for your night-nurse!” he snarled.

“Nurse Mathilda?” Birkhorn asked while he turned around towards the enraged Oberst, baffled. “I know that you and she had a little dispute because…”

“She prevented my secretary from informing me concerning a grave issue within our camp and the arrest of Colonel Hogan. She hung up the phone despite the fact that Fräulein Hilda told her there was a dire situation I had to learn of instantly! I’m not only the Kommandant of this camp, but also the highest ranking officer in this area when General Burkhalter isn’t present. And we are at war! Yet your night-nurse thought that everyone, including units of the Wehrmacht, has to dance to her
“Herr Oberst…”

“If this shrew would have done her damn duty that not only lays within the hospital but also towards people outside of those walls, I would have been able to act hours sooner – and Colonel Hogan would have been spared a lot of pain and the terrible experience of being almost drowned.” He pointed the American who was utterly thunderstruck by the wrath Klink displayed on his behalf. “Just look at the man,” the Kommandant continued; voice hoarse and shaking with fury. “He’s barely able to sit properly, not to speak of walking unaided or only holding a God-damn cup of tea! It never would have gone this far if this blasted witch would have known her place. I always thought employees of a hospital are there to help and heal people – and not to support torment and death!”

Birkhorn had turned pale, then he glanced back at Hogan – who was gaping at the Oberst; obviously flabbergasted because of the older man’s raging fit. “If this is really the case, then I have to apologize, Colonel Hogan,” the doctor said quietly, before he looked back at Klink. “Of course it wasn’t Nurse Mathilda’s place to decide if you shall receive a call from your camp or not. And if the liberty she took for herself almost resulted in a man’s demise, then there will be consequences.”

His glance found the three other persons who had appeared behind the German officer: Fräulein Schneider, Sergeant Schultz and a man wearing an American uniform in his middle ages. The two men glanced at Klink, no less surprised than Hogan was, and the young woman… She watched the colonel with damp eyes. Aha, you didn’t need to be a genius to figure out that the young woman had feelings for the senior POW officer.

Hilda only had eyes for Hogan, who sat on the bed’s edge, only clad in his pajama bottoms and looking… terrible! Her glance wandered over his beaten body, the bruises and cuts, the swollen face and… She felt tears rising and stifled a sob.

“Hilda,” the colonel said quietly as he became aware of her; knowing that she saw in him more than a simple flirt. “Please, don’t fret. I’ll be okay again in a few days. I look worse than it is – and I’d gotten it nastier before.”

Birkhorn snorted. “Where did I just hear the same adage? Ah, yes, I remember: From Oberst Klink, concerning his own condition.” He looked back and forth between the two colonels, as he tried to loosen the tight atmosphere. “Is this an officer-thing or is it only you two that try to play down serious ill health?”

“Playing it down?” Schultz snorted. “Usually the Herr Kommandant calls for the priest when he
only sneezes, but for a few days now he all of a sudden…”

“Shut up, Schultz!” Klink snapped – and promptly began to cough.

Hogan used the little intermezzo to wink at Hilda; trying to soothe her without giving too much away. She gave him a teary smile and bit her lips. Then the American heard his German counterpart coughing and turned his attention back towards the scene in front of him that began to unfold in its typical manner.

“You shouldn’t rise your voice when you are sporting a cold or bronchitis, Herr Oberst,” Schultz said at this moment. “This is something my dear mother taught me when I was little.”

Still coughing, Klink glared at him. “She should have taught you to… to not anger… your superiors with… with idiotic comments,” he wheezed.

“I only pointed out the truth, Herr Kommandant,” Schultz defended himself; looking like an overlarge innocent child. “You know, usually I don’t see and hear nnmnoothing, but this time I had to remind you what is good for you.”

The Oberst was still gasping for breath. “What is good for me? To not be irritated is good for me!”

“How can well-meant advice irritate you, Herr Kommandant? I only wanted…”

“SCHUUUUULLLTZ, get out or…” Klink coughed again and shook his right fist in his typical manner.

“This is what you get when you’re worrying about your superior officer,” Schultz shrugged at Birkhorn, before he quickly rushed away after getting another fierce glance from Klink.

Hogan was chuckling now, feeling some normality finally return, and it filled him with relief. Trust the eternal banter between his German counterpart and the large Bavarian to lift the mood.

Birkhorn saw the American’s amusement, but also how Hogan began to relax. He realized that he obviously just had witnessed a normal display between Kommandant and sergeant, and that it gave
the colonel a strange kind of hold. He pursed his lips thoughtfully. Hogan’s condition had really woken his deepest sympathy, but as it seemed, he was well cared for enough to regain even some humor. Yet Hogan couldn’t fool him. The man was in a terrible state – not only physically, but also mentally. Birkhorn had seen enough haunted eyes within the last five years to know when someone battled inner demons.

Klink, unaware of the doctor’s worry, glared daggers at Schultz’ back, turned around, caught Wilson’s barely hidden grin, saw Fräulein Hilda smiling tentatively at him (still with a few tears in her eyes), recognized the first real impish spark in Hogan’s good eye – and sighed dramatically.

“I’m happy that your Kommandant was able to make you all laugh!” he complained sarcastically.

“Willie, without you the world would be so much more grave,” the colonel deadpanned with the hint of a snicker – and got the expected result.

“Hogan! No informalities! How often do I have to repeat this?”

“As often as is needed for you go straight through the ceiling because of it,” the younger man teased; looking very innocent as he received a murderous glance from the Oberst. Yet Hogan didn’t miss the warm amusement that lay deep beneath the masquerade in those remarkable blue eyes.

And from where, please, came this description? ‘Remarkable blue eyes’. Really, Rob, now you lost it, ’ Hogan groaned inwardly. The hit on the head he had received from Hochstetter really must have caused some sort of insanity. This was the only explanation why Hogan felt an uncalled flutter in his belly and chest, as he caught the poorly hidden smile on Klink’s face as the older man turned away to clear the stage by walking to the bathroom.

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Dr. Birkhorn examined both men thoroughly. Wilson had done a good job, but he was no doctor. The surgeon stitched two further gashes on Hogan’s back, the injury at his head and also bolstered the left side of his chest by using extra layers of mull which would have to stay in place for two or three days, before it would be changed again. Wilson had been right as he said that none of the three broken ribs had been shifted and therefore there was no danger that they could pierce Hogan’s lung. The surgeon also ascertained that no amount of water remained in the American’s lungs, yet his cold had worsened to a bronchitis. Therefore he ordered for Hogan – and Klink – strict bed-rest for at least five or six days. He also examined the colonel’s jaw, cheek and side of the nose, and to Hogan’s relief nothing was broken. Birkhorn gave advice on how to soothe the swelling so that Hogan would be able to use his right eye again within a shorter range of time and advised the usage
of a hot-water bag for the rest so that the bruised muscles could relax better.

Giving the senior POW officer another mixture of pain-killers and penicillin (and some sedatives), he was finally satisfied with the treatment, left instructions for Wilson to use the antiseptic ointment as soon as the open gashes had developed real scabs, provided the medic with further medicaments and then went to the little guest-room to examine Klink. Hilda had left shortly after the little chaos with Schultz; she was grateful that Klink – and also Hogan – did not hold her responsible for what happened, yet she still felt guilty. And this would last for a little bit longer.

Birkhorn listened to Klink’s lungs, checked his fever and instructed Wilson how to treat the Oberst, who needed a different mixture of pain-killers and penicillin than Hogan.

Wilson had barely left when Klink was no longer able to hide his concern for his senior POW. He pointedly asked the surgeon of the younger man’s condition – and the doctor became very serious.

“Do you want a true answer?” he asked quietly, and the Kommandant nodded while he re-buttoned his nightgown. “It will need time to heal him – weeks maybe,” Birkhorn reported. “The bruises will fade within two or three weeks, but the wounds which resulted from the lashes he got will need longer to mend. And then… there is still the question concerning his mental state. Were there any… abnormalities in his behavior since you got him out of the Gestapo-Headquarters?”

Klink sighed. “Nightmares,” he said softly. “Hogan suffers from strong nightmares and seems to mix fantasy and truth within them, but… he also tries to distract himself with black humor which is typical for him.”

“And typical for someone in denial,” the doctor nodded. “As far as I’m able to measure the colonel, he is a strong-willed man – not used to being weak. He’s a fighter, and those people often have trouble admitting that they were forced into helplessness. Men like him bury what happened deep inside their minds, and there it can lurk and grow until it can find a chance to slip out – mostly during the strangest situations. Raging fits, depression or withdrawal into themselves are typical outcomes of such traumata.”

Klink had listened carefully and lowered his head; dread spread through him. “I don’t want to see him like this,” he admitted softly. “I only know him as a cheerful, maybe a little bit too reckless but also strong man, who drives me up the next wall on a regular basis with his never-ending quips, teases, demands and attempts to bargain, yet I… admire him for it. He has never given in – not to pressure from my superiors and not to the darkness that has spread its blanket over the world and permanently tries to crawl into my camp.” He moistened his lips. “He’s the one who keeps this bunch of imprisoned soldiers together, lifts their spirits and has turned the oppressive mood within the camp in something close to pleasant since he arrived here nearly three years ago. And… he even brightens my days with his boyish behavior that so perfectly masks what a strong-willed, brave,
honorable man he is.” He looked up towards the closed door. “I want him back – this man,” he whispered. “I cannot allow Hochstetter to win like this – not on Hogan’s cost!”

Dr. Birkhorn had pursed his lips. After he had witnessed the Oberst’s determination and touching mixture of fury and worry in the hospital as he learned of Hogan’s arrest, the surgeon had assumed that there seemed to be more between the two opponent officers – that there was a kind of bond between them that defied the cruelty of war and their duty to regard each other as enemies. Klink had been half mad with concern, this much Birkhorn had realized yesterday morning, and the Oberst’s raging fit only half an hour ago as he learned that the night-nurse’ acting on her own authority had almost led to Hogan’s death, was very fresh in the surgeon’s mind. And listening to Klink now and hearing first-hand in what high regard the officer held his American counterpart gave the doctor a good idea that the two’s relationship wasn’t based only on enforced duty, but on deep rooted respect – and maybe more.

“I can be mistaken, but did I get it right that you two have… befriended each other?” Birkhorn knew that he had to be very careful. Friendship between two opponent officers could lead to their demise, and he didn’t want to see something happening to the camp’s Kommandant. Yes, Birkhorn was a member of the Underground and fought against everything that supported the regime, yet he had realized that Klink was a good man. Maybe this was one of the reasons why Hogan – the famous Papa Bear – had come to trust Klink. The way the colonel had relaxed as Klink had been with them in the sleeping room spoke volumes. There had been no tension from Hogan’s side – rather the opposite while teasing the Oberst. And Klink had been amused too, even though he had rebuked the colonel for addressing him improperly. Birkhorn was well trained in psychology and he recognized if someone tried to hide something – especially if said someone was hiding something that poorly.

Klink pulled the comforter around himself, while still sitting on the bed’s edge. “We’ve become friends, yes,” he affirmed the surgeon’s assumption. “I know that this can lead to trouble, but I know that this little secret is safe with you – after all, you’re a doctor and bound to confidentiality. And, by the way, I see no crime in making friends.” He rubbed his nose at the sleeve of his nightgown, before he asked, “Is there something I can do for Hogan?”

Birkhorn nodded. “Yes. Try to talk with him – or, even better, try to get him to talk. A hurt soul can only heal if it lets out the pain, and experience taught me that the best way to gain this goal is to talk. Listen to him, don’t try to interrupt or stop him if he starts talking. Give him a chance to live out what he had been through. And, the most important thing, what he tells you has to remain with you. He needs to trust someone. Yes, he has his men and as far as I remember the deep worry the POW who informed you in hospital about the colonel’s fate showed, I infer that his men are more his friends than his underlings, yet he needs you to win back or to hold onto his faith.”

Klink wrapped his arms around himself. He was freezing again, but he suppressed it. This discussion was far more important than feeling a little bit cold. “Of course he can trust me. I won’t betray his confidence in me. But may I ask why you think it’s me who is this important for him?”
“The answer is easy, but also not nice,” Birkhorn said while closing his med-bag. “He has been tortured by German members of a military department. You belong to the German army, too, but it was you who got him out and took care of him. The knowledge that there are some ‘enemies’ left who still show humanity – even comfort – will prove to him that he isn’t captured in a hell that knows nothing else than violence and cruelty. It gives him hope.”

Klink grimaced. “My camp isn’t hell, Doctor,” he said indignantly. “I try to treat the prisoners with respect and politeness. Yes, I have to be stern sometimes, but I also try to be fair. I allow them more than necessary, grant favors and look away to a certain degree when they are carried away in one or the other direction. I do understand the position they are in and try to show this to them. This is certainly more than the other Kommandants are doing.”

“Yes, I understand this – and I can only appreciate your way of handling your prisoners,” Birkhorn nodded. “But I don’t speak of your camp, but of the world outside the wires. There are so many powerful men who only wait for a chance to eliminate Hogan and many other POWs, and Hogan got the first full blow of the raging hate they hold for him and his kind. He is strong, but maybe he has begun doubting humanity. And this together with the dark memories can build demons which could destroy him – step by step.”

“The nightmares…,” Klink murmured, and the surgeon sighed.

“Yes, the nightmares. They are the beginning of this spiral. But there is you – another German officer, who doesn’t hate him or treats him like the dirt beneath his boot. I’ve seen the way he looks at you – with relief and something close to trust. There is someone left among his captors who looks behind the uniform and nationality. And that you treat his men in a likewise fair and polite manner, shows him that he isn’t the infamous example, but that you’re indeed a fair and good man. He needs this knowledge – this conviction – to go on until he’s healed. So be there for him. Show him what you still try to hide: That you are his friend. I know that this can become risky for you and him, too, but I’m sure you two can pretend otherwise when someone from the outside is present. And at the moment it isn’t important what others expect of you to be, but what you are for real: A man who cares.”

“I do care about him,” Klink said softly. ‘More than anybody, maybe except for Schultz, can assume,’ he added in his thoughts.

“I know,” Birkhorn smiled and closed his coat. “And you know what? This gives me hope that not everything is lost – that there is still humanity and kindness left in these dark times.” He wound his scarf around his neck, while changing the topic back to the original reason he had been called. “I’ll give your camp medic instructions concerning your treatment. Please listen to him. He is no doctor, but he is a good medical assistant. If you stay in bed for a few days and take the medicine, I’m sure you’ll be back on duty in the middle of the next week. But if the fever doesn’t let up within the following two days, please call me again.”
Klink rose and politely offered his hand. “Thank you, Dr. Birkhorn, for your support – and your open words. I’ll do whatever is in my power to help Hogan.”

The surgeon smiled. “Somehow I’m convinced of it.” He gaze found the Oberst’s hand as he took it, and because his attention wasn’t fixed on Klink’s face like during the welcome greeting, he saw the sore knuckles. “How did you get these bruises? They weren’t there when I treated you the day before yesterday or when I gave you the medicine to…” He stopped as he saw the half satisfied, half fierce look within the officer’s glassy eyes. “Don’t tell me you scuffed the Gestapo-guy who tortured the colonel!”

“I did,” Klink growled. “And even my superior applauded it – well, symbolically, mind you.”

The doctor stared at him – and began to laugh quietly. “This I’m calling courage. We all have the urge to punch a member of the Gestapo here or there, but that you really went through with it…” He shook his head in respect, but also amusement. “The colonel is lucky to have a friend like you.”

“I know,” was the answer in Klink’s typical vain way, then he shortly bowed his head in respect. “Doctor, have a good drive home.”

“Thank you, and get better soon, Herr Oberst.” He went to the door and the Kommandant wanted to accompany him, but the surgeon shook his head. “Thank you, but I’ll find the way alone. Please go to bed and cure yourself.”

“With pleasure. Good day,” Klink nodded, watched the man go and slipped back into bed. The talk with Birkhorn had given him a lot to think about…

TBC…

Well, there are the first real hints that the ‘Balding Eagle’ knows indeed more about our Heroes than assumed. There are a lot of episodes in the original show which point out that Klink has learned about Hogan the others more than thought – and that he doesn’t give them away the authorities. And exactly here I tackled a part of the story. But until it comes to the ultimate talk between the two colonels, Hogan first has to heal more – and Klink becomes more and more a ‘nurse’ for him (and more).
In the next chapter you not only read about Schmidt again. The two colonels are beginning to grow closer – and I can promise you sweet and gentle scenes.

I hope you liked the new chapter, and – like always – I’m looking forward to get your feedback.

For all whose holidays come to an end tomorrow: Have a nice start into the working part of the new year – for those, who are still at vacation, have fun.

Love

Yours Starflight
Healing, part 2

My dear readers,

Like promised here comes the next chapter. It will be an emotional and sweet one of which I hope you're going to like. Our both colonels begin to grow closer now, and while Klink can give into his wish to coddle 'his' favorite American a little bit, Hogan begins to realize that he didn't know Klink that well as he thought, because he develops streaks of his German counterpart he had never assumed.

Have fun – and thank you for the feedback.

Love,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 20 – Healing, part 2

Both colonels slept deeply after Dr. Birkhorn had left. It was in the late afternoon that the quiet routine in the camp was interrupted by the arrival of an SS-staff-car. Five minutes later Schultz entered Klink’s private quarters with the visitor and woke the Kommandant, who left his bed with some quiet curses on his lips, put on his slippers and his bathrobe and stepped into the living-room, only to stop his movements as he recognized the visitor’s identity.

"Oberleutnant Schmidt?" he asked, baffled. "This is a nice surprise." He closed the distance while the younger man gave him a proper military salute which he returned.

"I apologize that my arrival disturbs your well-needed rest, Herr Oberst, but I brought Colonel Hogan’s belongings which Major Hochstetter had taken away from him." He put a bag he'd carried over his left shoulder beside his feet. "I also wanted to know how you are doing – the colonel, too."

Klink, pleased by Schmidt’s politeness and thoughtfulness, smiled at him. "I got a little bronchitis, nothing too dramatic," he played down the issue. Realizing that Schultz was still present, he dismissed him, before he continued, "Colonel Hogan is in a worse shape than I. And he would be
even worse if it wouldn’t have been for your intervention. Thank you for your courage – not only before my arrival, as you obviously intervened to stop the major, but also for telling the plain truth when General Burkhalter questioned Hochstetter in the cellars. I don’t think that there are many men who would dare speak against their superiors, even if the latter are at fault.”

“I’ve been raised by my parents to stay truthful, and I try to live to a code of honor, even if it isn’t that easy at the moment.” Schmidt shortly lowered his head. “It was not much I could do for the colonel, and I regret that I didn’t take some action sooner.” He offered Klink the bag. “Here are his leather jacket, his wallet and his wristwatch. One of the guards told me that the colonel wore more than only his shirt, pants and boots when he arrived at the Gestapo-Headquarters and I ordered his belongings to be brought to me.”

Klink took the bag. “Thank you, this was very considerate of you.” He placed the bag on the sofa. “By the way, my congratulations on your promotion, Herr Oberleutnant. I was very pleased when the general told me that he had left you in charge of the Gestapo-Headquarters here in Hammelburg.”

“Thank you, Herr Oberst. This is another reason for my coming here. I wanted to make the first official visit to you – after all you’re the highest ranking officer in the area and we both are in command of our stations. I do know about the dislike between the Wehrmacht and the Gestapo and the SS, yet I hope that we can build a good working relationship.”

Schmidt’s eyes were clear and hopeful, and for the first time Klink became aware of how young the other man still was. Yet he was already entrusted with great responsibility, and the Kommandant felt some fatherly sympathy for the Oberleutnant. Only twenty years ago he had been entrusted with a task of his own he hadn’t thought he’d been ready for, and he simply knew that Schmidt would have to endure a lot of problems until he had gained the respect of the older men.

“Usually one of you guys means trouble, on the other hand you, personally, belonged to the Wehrmacht, too – and I haven’t had the pleasure of working with a decent, honorable ‘Black’ until now. Maybe this has changed for the better.” He offered his feverish hot hand to the Oberleutnant to shortly shake it in return. “To a successful cooperation,” Klink said. “I think, everyone within this area would be facing a harder time if Leutnant von Neuhaus would be in charge now.”

“He is… a difficult man,” Schmidt agreed. “And I know that he doesn’t accept me as his CO, yet his hands are bound by General Burkhalter’s order – and especially by Reichsführer Himmler’s agreement in this case.” He lowered his voice, “Herr Oberst, I’m also here to warn you. Von Neuhaus had been openly speaking with ill-will about you after you kicked him out of your camp – and I take the Leutnant for someone who holds grudges for a long time. I fear you’ve made yourself a real enemy – especially given the fact that he admires Major Hochstetter and blames you for the major’s arrest.” He took a deep breath. “And that’s not all. General Burkhalter took Hochstetter with him as he left three hours ago – and as the major was brought to the general’s staff-car, he called me a traitor, because I didn’t stay silent in the cellars, and he also called you a traitor. He said that you
and Colonel Hogan should enjoy your ‘victory’ as long as you could, because he would be back and then he would settle the score with you two.”

Klink watched him. Usually he would fear the Leutnant’s ill-willed opinion, because if the Gestapo wanted to prove someone guilty of anything, they simply did it. Truth didn’t matter. And the Kommandant knew that most officers of every army unit or intelligence department regarded him as an idiot or thought him to be a thorn in their sides, and would be happy to see him fall. Therefore he couldn’t count on any help from them – maybe from Burkhalter, but the general’s intervention yesterday was more because he was defending his territory, nothing else.

And he also didn’t take Hochstetter’s promise of revenge lightly. The man would go crazy whenever he faced a dead end in his research, or got raging fits if he didn’t succeed. That he now would concentrate all his hate on those two men who had always defied him, which had now led to his arrest, was logical.

Yet Klink remained calm. Somehow this new found self-confidence, rooted in his love for Robert which he had finally admitted to himself, prevented him from getting anxious. Rather the opposite seemed to be the case: He would rather fight than cower in the next corner and hope that the storm would pass. He couldn’t allow one of Hochstetter’s promises of vengeance to influence his duty concerning his job, his camp, his underlings and the POWs by getting scared and panicking. And, as odd as it sounded, Hogan needed his protection – maybe more than ever before. By the way, given the many charges Hochstetter was up against, Klink anticipated that he wouldn’t hear or see much of the man within the upcoming decades.

Therefore he simply nodded. “Thank you, Herr Oberleutnant. I’ll take your warning to the heart.”

Schmidt looked at him, relieved. “That’s good.” Then he hesitated again, giving away his uncertainty, before he asked, “Herr Oberst, is Colonel Hogan responsive? I want to pay him a visit.”

Klink sighed. “I don’t know. Dr. Birkhorn, the chief surgeon of the hospital, was here two hours ago and gave him a sedative. Let me check on him.” He turned and walked towards his usual sleeping-chambers.

Schmidt frowned. “He’s not in the camp’s infirmary?”

The older man looked back over his shoulder. “No. After all Hochstetter did to him I thought it better to offer him shelter in my quarters which are warmer and more comfortable. It will speed up his healing process – and I can keep a wary eye on him. His injuries are certainly not only on the surface.”
Surprised about the Kommandant's willingness to share his private quarters with a POW – senior officer or not – he followed the older man, who stepped into the next room.

“Hogan?” Klink whispered after a few seconds, but got no response. Schmidt, curious and a little bit concerned, closed the distance to the Oberst and stopped beside him. A gasp was torn from his lips as he saw the beaten figure laying beneath the comforter; supported by piles of pillows.

“Sweet Lord,” Horst whispered. To say it carefully, he was horrified with what he could see. The American was so covered in bruises, patches and bandages, his true self was barely recognizable. He assumed that the colonel had been given not only a sedative, but also some pain-killers, yet the healing would be long and painful. This much was for certain.

“I can’t believe that something like this is possible in the twentieth century – here, in Germany. Sweet Lord, this man looks terrible,” Schmidt murmured. “And I don’t dare to think of what I have heard concerning some work camps in Poland and South- and East-Germany.” He shook his head while he lowered it. “This is pure insanity,” he breathed before he caught himself.

Klink had turned his head and looked straight at him. “This is what happens if the Gestapo gets suspicious, be the accusations true or not. What Hogan has been through is beyond any humanity – and I know he isn’t the first victim, and certainly won’t be the last.”

Schmidt took a deep breath. “I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry that my attempt to help the colonel came almost too late. I’m aware that the unit I’m forced to serve in now doesn’t know compassion or mercy, and therefore I don’t want to speak in their name. But would you please give Colonel Hogan my sincere apology as a German citizen for what has been done to him within my country?”

Surprised, Klink nodded slowly. “This I will do.”

“Thank you,” the Oberleutnant said. “This here” – he pointed at Hogan – “isn’t our people’s way, but regrettably there are many men and women now who mistake responsibility with power, and power with scrupulousness. I’ll try to be a better and more understanding commander of the local Gestapo-station than Major Hochstetter was, and I promise that I will give my witness report to the trial that the major is going to face. He will be punished for what he did to the colonel – and certainly to many other people.”

“The promise you just made of being a better CO in the local Gestapo-Headquarters will not be easy
to keep. The Gestapo has its own ways, laws and rules – especially the unwritten ones. It will be difficult for you to do your duty in such a way as to satisfy the brass, while at the same time doing what your heart and your upbringing tell you. It’s a dance on the high wire, but I’ve faith that you’re strong enough to master it.”

Schmidt gave him a short smile. “Thank you, Herr Oberst. It’s hard for men like you and me to stay true to the way of honor in these dark times.” His gaze found the sleeping American again. “Please give the colonel my best wishes.”

“Of course,” Klink affirmed, gestured for the young man to leave first and closed the door.

They exchanged a few more words, then the two German officers bid each other farewell before Schmidt left.

The Oberst pursed his lips. It was the first time ever that he seemed to have an ally within the Gestapo-Headquarters – someone who didn’t work against him or tried to make his job even more difficult than it already was. Of course, this could all be a trick, but in this case his gut told him that he could trust the young man. Someone who showed compassion towards an enemy officer accused of being a spy, tried to help and even stood up against his superior because honor and truth were more important to him than staying safe, spoke his own language. Klink knew that he faced a man who still lived according to the old values, and he was glad for it.

Taking the bag containing Hogan’s belongings, Klink walked quietly back to his usual sleeping-chamber and stepped inside. One look at Hogan showed him that the younger man was still in dreamland, and with a tender smile Klink placed the bag on the chair in the corner and pulled the comforter higher over Hogan before he left. His own bed was calling him.

*** HH ***

The two men slept for the rest of the afternoon, and as evening came, LeBeau and Newkirk had problems getting some nourishment into Hogan, who remained half asleep while being fed. Wilson affirmed that Birkhorn had given Hogan another shot of sedative to give his body the chance to heal better during a peaceful sleep, and the American even smiled like a happy little boy as these ‘naggers’ finally left him alone so he could return to Morpheus’ realm.

Going against the doctor’s orders, Klink left bed a few times during the evening to check on Hogan, but to his relief the younger man was sleeping soundly like a child. At least until close to midnight. Klink had been asleep for close to two hours when he heard the shouts and whimpers coming from his usual sleeping chamber. Blinking wide awake within a few seconds, he found himself kneeling
down beside Hogan on the mattress only half a minute later; trying to rouse his senior POW officer who was once again caught in obviously hellish nightmares. Now, after the effect of the sedative had worn off, his subconscious had strengthened again and was tormenting him with memories and imaginations.

After a minute he finally was able to pull Hogan out of the sinister dreamworld that held the colonel in an icy grip. Disoriented, confused and haunted, the younger man blinked groggily in the semi-darkness, felt two gentle hands on his shoulders and didn’t need to take a closer look to know who was there.

“Klink?” he rasped.

“Yes, it’s me,” came the soft reply. “Sorry for waking you, but you were having another nightmare.”

Still filled with dread, feeling cold and somehow out of breath, Hogan needed a moment to gather his thoughts, before he murmured, “I apologize for dragging you out of your sleep again.”

“No problem,” Klink answered quietly. “We already talked about dreams and their might yesterday, didn’t we?”

Hogan sighed, lifted one hand with effort and wiped some sweat from his cheeks – a procedure that was unpleasant because of the bruises. “Yes, yet I’m sorry that my silly nightmares interrupt your sleep. You need rest.”

“Just like you,” Klink nodded; watching his senior POW officer in the dim light of the reading lamp he – again – had left switched on before he went to bed. Hogan looked exhausted and distraught – and the Oberst got an idea.

“I’ll get something for us. Something that will calm our nerves and help with the damn cold.” He left the sleeping chamber.

“Please, no Schnapps,” Hogan moaned. “Otherwise I can say good-bye to my throat.”

“Don’t fear. I don’t feel suicidal myself; after all we’re pumped full of penicillin,” Klink called back, coughed – God, his chest hurt – and vanished into the direction of the kitchen. Minute by minute he felt his limbs growing heavier and he froze like a little puppy, but he suppressed the urge to crawl
into the next bed and sleep for two or three days. Hogan needed him. They both needed each other, like several times before – but just right now not for survival, but for overcoming the distress they had been through.

The coal stove was still warm from the dinner LeBeau had made, and a few minutes later Klink returned – carrying two cups with spoons.

Curious, Hogan carefully sat up on the bed and suppressed the pain in his back and side. “What’s that?” His eyes widened as he looked at the white contents of the cup Klink offered to him. “Milk?” he asked perplexed.

“Not only milk,” the Kommandant smiled and sat down on the bed’s edge after he had switched on the little lamp on the nightstand. “Try it.” He sipped at his own cup and watched the younger man, who put the cup at his mouth – sniffing at the liquid first before he took a sip.

“Warm milk with honey?” Hogan recognized the taste in wonder.

Klink slowly bowed his head. “My mother always made me warm milk with honey when I was a little boy and upset – or had caught a cold. It not only soothes down the urge to cough and loosens the muscles in the abdomen, it also calms your nerves and makes you sleepy. And often sleep is the best medicine you can get.”

In awe the colonel glanced at his German counterpart. This was certainly the most private moment they had ever had together. Klink rarely spoke of his past or his family, and Hogan had only learned by eavesdropping via the ‘coffee-pot’ that the Oberst had an older brother and a younger sister. His father had died when he had been still young, his mother moved with her father-in-law and the children from Leipzig to Düsseldorf, and Klink grew up in the Rhine metropolis before he went to the military academy in Potsdam. That the older man had shared something this private – and rare – with him, touched Hogan.

“Milk is rationed, too – and I didn’t know that there was still honey available on the market,” he said quietly.

“Fräulein Hilda provides the casino and me with milk one time per week. Her parents have a small farm not far away. And the honey was a Christmas-gift from my mother. A neighbor of her is befriended with a beekeeper near Kappeshamm – that’s the nickname of a district in the south of Düsseldorf downtown, where mainly vegetables are sown.”
“Kappeshamm?” Hogan repeated. His German was really good, but this time he was at loss as to what this nickname could mean.

Klink chuckled. “‘Hamm’ comes from the Latin words ‘hamus’, which means ‘hook’. The borough was called so because it is located directly at the great oxbow of the Rhine-river. And Kappes is the local dialect word for cabbage, which is mostly cultivated in this part of the Düsseldorf-area. Therefore the Düsseldorf citizens call it ‘Kappeshamm’.”

“Cabbage?” The colonel cocked his head. “You mean ‘Kraut’.”

“That’s what it is called after being cooked. The plant itself is called ‘Kohl’ – ‘cabbage’ in English,” Klink nodded and smirked; glad he was able to again distract the younger man from his pain and haunting memories. “I know that you and the others call us Germans ‘Krauts’, and most of us really have a knack for it if it is well cooked. Yet I want to see your face if we would call the Amis ‘Steaks’.”

Hogan couldn’t help himself: He had to laugh – and groaned as his left side gave him hell, yet it felt good to have some fun after the strong nightmares he had endured. For a moment he saw something close to mirth but also satisfaction in Klink’s eyes. The older man seemed to be almost happy that he had made him, Hogan, laugh. God, this was simply sweet.

Taking another sip of the warm comfort-drink, Hogan softly asked afterwards, “And through this beekeeper your mother got a glass of honey she later gave you as a Christmas-gift?”

“Yes,” Klink nodded.

Hogan drank some more of the liquid, and felt how the soreness in his throat lessened. “As odd as it sounds, in these times it was an expensive gift your mother gave you.” His gaze was gentle. “And then you share it with me? Thank you, Wilhelm.”

The Oberst shrugged casually. “There is an old saying that suffering shared is suffering halved. I prefer the positive variant of it: Shared pleasure is double the pleasure. How can you get the most enjoyment out of something special? Together with a friend.”

For a long moment both men only looked at each other and Hogan became aware how the first dark shadows, which still gripped for his mind and soul, began to retreat at those words.
A friend...

Hogan had not dared to voice it as Burkhalter asked him why he hadn't fled but had taken care that Klink made it back to Stalag 13 alive. Yet he couldn’t deny it any longer: Klink had really become a friend to him – more than he ever thought possible. After his arrival at Stalag 13 almost three years ago, he had built a fake-friendship with the Kommandant to manipulate and to control him in the end. Heavens, in the beginning he had even winced whenever the Oberst told him that they could have been close friends if they had met under different circumstances. And by now the older man had really turned into someone Hogan indeed wanted to trust.

God, he did trust Klink – maybe more than was advisable.

The Kommandant still belonged to a hostile army and he had tried to reveal Hogan’s secrets on more than a few occasions, but without real determination. Rather the opposite now that Hogan remembered his train of thought from midday. Klink had never endangered him. He had even been relieved whenever an accusation against Hogan turned into thin smoke, and Klink had never gone along with the threats he sometimes muttered when the American annoyed him too much. The Oberst had to keep control over the camp and the POWs, and so voicing stern warnings was necessary, but he had always protected the men within the camp and heck to their nationality and uniform.

So, even without everything the German officer had done for him within the last three days, he had indeed been a friend for quite a time now. And the knowledge of being safe in the older man’s presence did miracles to the colonel’s wounded soul.

“You could have been a good doctor, Willie,” he said gently. “You’re good at treating sick or injured people. You not only show empathy, you also have a good way of soothing and calming them.”

A sad smile danced around the Kommandant’s lips for a moment. “When I was a boy I wanted to become a doctor.”

Hogan remembered what he had eavesdropped in Klink’s office as Major Pruhst had been there last autumn, and how the Gestapo-officer beat Klink with Klink’s own less successful career path over the head; sneering with mockery the whole time. The major had mentioned something about Klink wanting to be a doctor but being unable to proceed with this dream because of his school results. But the colonel had to pretend that he didn’t know this, and so he asked, “What hindered you?”

Klink surveyed him for several seconds. He saw curiosity but also real interest in Hogan’s good eye, and sighed, “Usually I don’t talk much about my past – especially my youth – but I know that I can
trust you with it.” He shortly pursed his lips. He was unused of speaking about his childhood, because at a certain point it hadn’t been a bright one anymore. He had been often taunted about it, but he knew that Hogan wouldn’t make fun of him – not this time.

Maybe telling him a little bit about his youth was a good way of taking the younger man’s mind off the hell he had been through and maybe, just maybe, it would get him talking, too. Dr. Birkhorn’s warnings and advice were still very fresh in Klink’s mind.

He took a deeper breath as he began to speak, “I was born in Leipzig and I first had a good childhood, but after I turned seven years old, my father died in an accident and everything changed. My mother hailed from Düsseldorf and after my father’s death she wanted to return home – together with my sister, my two brothers, me and my grandfather. It wasn’t easy for me. Different slang, different culture, different town. I was still mourning my father whom I loved dearly – and I missed my friends terribly. My mother had changed a lot, and my older brother acted up as if he was the new master of the house whenever my grandfather wasn’t at home. My younger brother Wolfgang and my sister Auguste had become very quiet and shy after Father’s death. My new schoolmates made fun of me because of my Saxonian dialect and the learning material differed a lot from what I had learned until then.”

‘So, these are the reasons for your lower education, Willie,’ Hogan thought with sympathy; recognizing some parallels between the Oberst’s and his own youth. Aloud he said, “And all this mirrored in your school-results.”

Klink grimaced. “Ja, a lot. The results were too bad to be accepted at an university and to study medicine. But I also loved bookkeeping, music and literature. I thought about a career in an library or in the office of a theater – or opera-house – but my grandfather didn’t agree. He had been in the army under Wilhelm I – just like my father – and since my older brother Friedrich already insisted on becoming a businessman and Wolfgang was too delicate to enter the service, it was up to me to keep the ‘family-tradition’. I had no real say in this matter.” He sighed. “And here I am.”

“So, being a soldier wasn’t your first choice,” Hogan stated and emptied the cup; grateful that Klink’s tale blew the cobwebs in his mind away.

“No, far from it. Yet… as the time went by, I began to like it. That means, until World War I started.” The Kommandant lowered his head. “Many comrades and other officers still call it the ‘great’ war, but there was nothing ‘great’ in it. The new technologies – aircrafts, tanks, submarines – generated a completely different warfare than before. More destruction, more cruelness, more deaths, more inhumanity. Yet, at least, some old rules still existed – contrary to the insanity now. I was forged in the first war – maybe that’s the reason why I rub everybody the wrong way today.” He took the empty cup from Hogan’s hand and placed it on the nightstand.
Laying back again, the colonel watched his German counterpart with real interest. It was the first time ever Klink had spoken of his past and it showed a completely different person than the one Hogan had come to know within the last three years. Yes, he had always known that Klink had more depth than was thought – the older man had proved it only last night as he spoke with him about the power of dreams – yet this side of the Oberst surprised him.

“Yet you chose the Luftwaffe – one of those new ‘technologies’.”

Klink snorted. “Yes, because this was the only free post left after I was ‘convinced’ to start a military career. Burkhalter was right, you know. I’m really a little bit afraid of flying.”

Hogan frowned. “But you are a good navigator – and you weren’t afraid as we took the P51 from London four weeks ago. We were a really good team aboard.”

“And yet I was screaming like a girl when we had to parachute away after we realized that the plane didn’t have enough fuel to reach our destination.” The Kommandant rubbed his neck. “I really was afraid then.”

Something like a bad conscience woke in the American officer. He had more or less taunted Klink in those minutes and had shoved him overboard; trusting in the other man’s training to parachute to the ground. He had thought that Klink had been having one of his drama-moments, but in truth…

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I pushed you over the edge as the aircraft went down. There wasn't much time left to make a safe landing with a parachute, yet I should have responded to your obvious fear.”

Klink shrugged “You made a decision for me – and it was the right one. Maybe I wouldn’t have found the courage to make this step in time.”

“You were shot down before, like Oberstgeneral von Richter, the Blue Baron, said. So it wasn’t new for you to face an emergency procedure, yet you… almost panicked. And I thought…” Hogan looked for once really a little bit guilty.

“You thought I was being over-dramatic,” the Oberst grumbled. “But I indeed had the jitters.”

Hogan watched the older man closely; suddenly realizing the real reason for Klink’s anxiety. “You
are not afraid of flying, but of heights.”

Klink nodded, then he blinked as he realized what the colonel had just said. “You mean, I’m not afraid of flying but of heights?”

“It would explain a lot. You were an excellent co-pilot during our flight – calm, businesslike, and in control. You only lost your nerve as you saw the abyss beneath us,” Hogan murmured and glanced up at him again. “I apologize, Wilhelm. Had I known of your true fears, I would have jumped together with you. Then you wouldn’t have had to face your fears alone.”

Again the Kommandant watched him for a few seconds, recognized the seriousness of the other colonel’s words and replied softly, “You really would have taken care of me during those moments, as silly as it sounds for a pilot to be afraid of heights and despite the fact that we fight on different sides? Thank you, Hogan.” He looked to the wall. “Afraid of heights,” he mused. “It would explain why I love it when I’m up there – in the skies. The clouds or stars above me, seeing the endless horizon…”

“Feeling free like a bird, stripped of any boundaries, and being a part of the air,” Hogan sighed; yearning to be in a pilot’s seat again. Okay, he had had his share of flights even during his captivity as a POW – during different secret missions – yet he really wanted to be back up there again. Especially now. It would soothe him, this much he knew.

Klink smiled absently, while he followed his own thoughts. “It always gave me peace to be in the skies – the world far beyond you and you riding on the wind’s back.”

Hogan looked baffled at him. “The last sentence comes from…”

“Peter Pan’, I know,” the Oberst nodded. “I played him in school and flew a little bit through the air with the help of a line.” He chuckled. “It was pure fun.”

“You really played Peter Pan?” The American lifted his head; thunderstruck. “I thought you made this up last year when I asked you about your acting abilities.”

“Ja,” Klink grinned. “I know, this is a role that rather fits you more than me, but when I was a young boy I had my own wild times.”
“Before you moved to Düsseldorf,” Hogan assumed and got an affirming gesture from the older man.

“Ja – only a few weeks before my father died.” The Kommandant sighed, shook his head and emptied his own cup that he also placed on the nightstand. “What about you? Major Pruhst mentioned your ‘wild youth’.”

Hogan chuckled. ‘So, it’s a giving and taking then. All right, Willie, you trusted me, I’ve to trust you – and quite oddly I really do.’

“I was born in Ohio, but soon after my birth my parents moved to Wisconsin and then to Indiana. I graduated school and… well, let us say that I had enough of being the ‘nice boy’ who always obeys and plays by the rules. It wasn’t my nature.”

“And still isn’t,” Klink threw in, teasingly.

Hogan smiled slightly. “You got me here.” He sighed. “Well, not everything I tried went well and, to admit the truth, I had a few run-ins with the authorities. Mostly because I paid back those guys who thought it funny to abuse their larger bank-account or greater power at work to diss others who weren’t so lucky to have rich families or hadn’t been able to graduate school. Today I know that I overdid it here and there, yet at those times I didn’t care that my doings broke laws.” He shook his head. “If it wouldn’t have been for an old friend of my father I don’t know what would have become of me.”

“He took you under his wing,” Klink assumed, and the younger man nodded.

“Yes. He witnessed me and a few ‘friends’… well… demolishing a shop, recognized me, heard the siren of a police car coming nearer, appeared on the scene and simply dragged me away. First I fought to get free. He was about twenty-five years older than me and I thought he’d be easy game, but – boy – was I mistaken. He overpowered me using grips I’d never experienced before, barked at me that I should quit and shut my trap instantly and pulled me with him. I was so baffled that I went along – around the next corner and straight towards a car.”

“I can imagine your face then,” Klink said softly; half fond, half amused.

“To say the truth, I got afraid,” Hogan snorted. “I thought I had fallen into the hands of some gangster boss, but then I recognized that the car was an army staff vehicle and in the light of the
street lamp I finally recognized the man from earlier times when he met with my father during my childhood. Colonel Butler all but ordered me to slip into the car, took the place beside me and his driver brought us to safety.” He looked at the ceiling. “I thought he would bring me to my parent’s house, but instead of this we stopped at a bar where he bought me a few drinks. We had a long and serious talk. Two days later I took his offer and showed up at the air force base where he was working. He helped me get enlisted in the local recruit center where I took classes for an army career; determined to be in the US Airforce one day, just like him.” He glanced back at Klink. “And here I am.”

The Oberst smiled. “He became your mentor,” he stated.


“Is he still in service?”

“Yes. I don’t think I reveal military top-secrets when I tell you that he belongs to the Allied High Command and is a general now.” He took a deep breath. “Everything I learned, everything I am today, is only because of him.”

Shortly pursing his lips, Klink cocked his head. “I know what you mean. I had a mentor, too. Colonel Schleswig. He was one of my instructors. He gave me a good piece of advice I try to always follow since then: ‘Authority is a dangerous thing in the hands of fools’.” He sighed. “He couldn’t know that his words were almost prophetic given the insanity that started after Hitler took over.” He stiffened and looked at Hogan. “I had never said the later before, it is grounds to be shot for high treason.”

The American reached out and placed a hand on the older man’s arm. “Nothing you told me will leave this room, Wilhelm,” he said softly, and meant it.

Another smile tugged at Klink’s mouth. “The same goes for you, Robert. Whatever you tell me will stay with me, okay?”

Both men glanced at each other; their eyes made a promise that was stronger than a voiced one. This here was private and concerned no-one else.

Pulling a part of the comforter around him, Klink continued his task to loosen the younger man up. If Hogan trusted him with private things from the past, he also would sooner or later trust him enough
to speak about his captivity in the Gestapo-Headquarters. And the latter was very important, as Dr. Birkhorn had driven the point home.

“So, you didn’t want to become a flyer from the beginning – just like me. Yet we both landed in the flying department of our armies. Where was your training?”

“In Florida,” Hogan answered. “I spent a few years there. Have you ever been to Florida – or the United States at all?” he asked. As Klink shook his head, an almost dreamy smile began to play around the colonel’s swollen lips. “In Florida it’s always spring or summer, the air is rich with the smell of flowers and woods, and the water of the Gulf is most times warmer than in a bath tub. Even the rainy period is warm and full of natural wonders. Tower-high clouds in all shades of black, blue and white with pink and lilac flashes. And the cities... Miami is expanding rather nicely – a town full of different people of different heritage. Shops, bars and restaurants are along the seaside, the beaches with their palm trees are inviting everyone to take a rest, and the streets are wide and open. Or the Keys... They are lined up between the Atlantic and the Gulf like pearls – one little island more beautiful than the next one. With little colorful houses, houseboats and residences. The most beautiful thing is the sunset. It’s white – not red or lilac, but white-golden. The skies are turning into a soft rose mixed with silver and gold, while the sun sinks into the shimmering waves.” He sighed. “Or the Great Plains... You should see them, Wilhelm. An area as large as half of Germany, covered with high grass that waves gently in the wind like a green sea – here and there interrupted by hills...”

Hogan continued to describe his homeland – the territories he had been within the US. He talked of the landscapes, of the people and their quirks, and the weather. He spoke of the tornado he once saw – “Like the skies are ripped open and a finger of clouds is sent down to Earth. The word ‘tornado’ has its roots in an Indian word meaning ‘Finger of God’. Well, it is like a finger – a dark one that brings destruction wherever it touches the ground.” Then he told of the Rocky Mountains – so like the Alps, yet so much more towering and wilder.

And Klink listened. Having always had a vivid imagination, he could envision everything. Hogan’s hoarse voice – warm with affection for his home – painted pictures in the Oberst’s mind, and he thought he could even smell the rich aroma of the Keys or the hot and dry air of the Llano Estacado.

And during his telling, Hogan became calmer and relaxed utterly. The memories of his home seemed to give him peace, and Klink was glad for it. Not daring to interrupt the younger man, he took in every word and sentence Robert said – until Hogan’s voice began getting quieter. Looking down at him, Klink realized that his American counterpart was about to fall asleep again, and he wasn’t aware of the tender smile on his face. Feeling a wave of pure love washing over him, he watched how Robert finally dropped off in the middle of a word – eyes closed, face and body without any tension, breath even.

Waiting a few minutes more to be certain that Hogan was really deeply asleep, Klink finally moved from the spot he had been sitting for almost an hour. Bending forwards he switched off the lamp on
the nightstand, snitched one of the pillows which still supported Hogan and crawled under the comforter and blanket. Last night his presence had prevented Robert from suffering new nightmares, maybe this night it would be the same.

Snuggling closer towards the man who held his heart, but making certain not to touch him to spare him any discomfort, Klink closed his eyes. Hogan’s voice and the images of his home accompanied him into his dreams…

TBC…

Well, to think and to speak of home always give some strength and comfort – and I think Hogan is no exception in this matter. It also was fun to write a little bit about Düsseldorf, after all I was born there. Concerning Klink’s past: There are a few hints within several episodes, which tell about the Oberst’s youth and childhood. I took those information and connected them in a (hopefully) logical way. I hope, you liked it just like the rest of the chapter.

The next chapter will begin with a funny scene of LeBeau catching the two colonels sleeping side by side (just guess Louis’ reaction to that). And then there will be a very emotional rollercoaster, because anything that happened is going to break out of Hogan. Klink will learn like this about everything Robert had to endure during his captivity in the Gestapo-HQ and also what almost had happened to him. It will elicited a reaction from the ‘Iron Eagle’ that is going to be only one but very important of the impetuses which later are going to make Hogan realize the feelings his German counterpart has to harbor for him.

So, be ready for a big up and down.

I hope you liked the last chapter, and I really would be happy to learn what you think of the first real private moment between our two colonels.

Have a nice Sunday and a good start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the big feedback. I knew that you would love the last chapter and I, just like I promised, a few more sweet and emotional scenes are about to come. The two colonels with grow closer more and more, and how much will be seen in the new chapter.

I can promise some fun, some ‘awwww’-scenes (with a big rollercoaster on both sides) and also the beginning of a ‘new chapter’ in both men’s life at the end. I hope, you’re going to like it.

Have fun and a nice weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 21 – A dam breaks...

Yes, Klink’s presence was registered by Hogan’s subconscious and it helped keep the nightmares at bay – at least to a certain degree. Yet the colonel wasn’t that badly haunted by them, like he had been before. In the following three evenings Klink always returned an hour after they had bid each other good-night and lay down beside the younger man – giving him some hold simply by just being there. The first morning after Burkhalter’s and the doctor’s visit, Hogan was baffled to find the Oberst beside him again, then he got used to it. The third night, he even woke up as Klink slipped under the covers and whispered a grateful “Good night, Willie”, before he quickly dozed off again.

During the days the men mainly remained in their own beds and tried to get better. Schultz made his reports, and some of the Heroes stopped by in the late morning or in the afternoon to spend some time with their superior and friend, who slowly began to come out of his exhaustion. At the third day the swelling in his face had lessened enough to allow him to use his right eye at least a little bit again. It was nothing more than a slit, but it was visible again. The bruises were still pitch dark, but the scabs were dry – a good sign. Wilson changed the colonel’s bandages every day now, and made certain that his superior took his medicine and that he got his injections whenever he should. He also took care that Klink got them, too, and after three days both men’s bronchitis began to lessen. The
fever sunk, in Klink’s case, down to an almost normal level, only Hogan’s temperature remained higher, but this was no miracle. The immune system had to heal more than ‘only’ a bronchitis and the still lasting, lightly high fever helped, but also tired the American.

Hogan slept a lot and even if his slumber wasn’t always peaceful, the large amount of time he rested was welcome by body and soul. He had pushed himself to his limits over and over again during the last almost three years since he had arrived in Stalag 13 to begin his mission as ‘Papa Bear’, and him having been more or less constantly in danger was taking its toll now. To know for once that his men – his dear friends! – and he needn’t fear getting caught, revealed or shot, did wonders for him. He was also glad when Klink told him of Oberleutnant Schmidt’s visit and that the younger man differed a lot from Hochstetter – he had even warned them of the former major’s wrath and oath of revenge. Maybe Schmidt could be a kind of ally, and even if not, at least the young man was honorable. Hogan was also thankful that his belongings had been given back to him. He hadn’t taken much with him as he started his mission in Germany and the only reason he’d had a gala-uniform and even nightclothes with him was because he had all his luggage stocked in the plane when he was shot down. Having his wristwatch – a gift from his brother – and his wallet – a gift from his father – back meant a lot to him. And the leather bomber jacket wasn’t such a big protection against the coldness of the winter, but it was enough to remain a little bit warm. He was indeed grateful that Schmidt had brought those things back to Stalag 13.

Klink visited Hogan whenever he had to leave bed to go to the bathroom, and used the chances given to ‘warm himself up’ afterwards by slipping beside the younger man under the blankets whenever the American was awake. And if Hogan slept, Klink did the same to ‘chase the demons away’, like he explained. The open care the Kommandant showed stabilized Hogan’s mind and soul even more, and without being aware of it, he not only relaxed utterly in the older man’s presence but even let his guard down more and more. And in his current state it was almost a blessing not to be forced to think over every word he spoke.

Both men talked a lot with each other – about their youth, their times at the academies or about their hobbies. Like this Hogan learned that Klink not only loved playing his violin – as bad as his playing was – but that he also liked reading, strolling through museums and going to theaters. The Oberst also told him about Germany – about the Lueneburg Heide in North-Germany near Hamburg that bloomed in lilac at the end of August; about the North-Sea and its famous tides; about the Mecklenburg Lake District northern of Berlin, the middle Rhine-river and its many mystical legends, the Saxonian Mountains and the Alps. Hogan, on the other hand, told him more about the states that made up the US, about his hobbies of going fishing, playing baseball and playing the drums. Klink was baffled that such a dynamic man like Hogan loved sitting still for hours to do some fishing, but somehow it suited the American. Hogan’s character was far more complex than the Kommandant had ever thought, and to hear that the younger man enjoyed quietness but also loved making a lot of noise by playing the drums made sense in a strange way. And during the incident with the avalanche over a week ago he had heard with his own ears how Hogan used the drums for a wild, yet rhythmically perfect beat – and he played damn well.
Here and there one of them fell asleep during those talks, and if it was Hogan, Klink mostly stayed until the colonel woke up again or the clock told him that someone from outside would come soon. He loved watching over the younger man’s sleep and being able to lay a soothing hand on his shoulder whenever his slumber became less peaceful. If it was the other way around, Hogan remained absolutely still when his German counterpart had dozed off, and quit any teasing afterwards. The colonel knew that Klink was exhausted, too, because in his own way he had worries similar to Hogan’s: The welfare of his men, what would become of them if Germany lost the war – and it was really looking like this was the most likely outcome by now – and how to take care of everyone within the camp with the rising prices on the market and the decreasing nourishment he could get for them. So Hogan deigned to allow the older man his rest when he could finally get it.

Yet both men were careful to not be caught in a situation that could be compromising – even if there was absolutely nothing ambiguous about it. One of them (Klink) hid his love and desire perfectly behind his well-trained mask, and the other one (Hogan) was unaware of Klink’s feelings.

Then, around midday of the fourth day, it happened. Both men had fallen asleep side by side and were deep in dreamland, when they were woken up by LeBeau – who stood at the door and stared wide-eyed, shocked and gasping for breath at the two sleepers.

A torrent of French left his lips while he was resting his clenched fists on his hips. His eyes shot daggers at the two colonels, who’d come around because of someone swearing like a trooper.

Groggily Klink looked up, saw an enraged LeBeau only a few meters away, closed his eyes again and groaned, “What an odd dream. I imagined the cockroach standing in my sleeping room, grousing like my Aunt Elisabeth.”

“Then we're both having the same dream,” Hogan mumbled without turning around or lifting his head. “Because I hear him, too.”

LeBeau glared at the two officers. There they lay, like it was the most natural thing in the world that two men share a bed – and above all two men who were currently on different sides during a war. Two men who were technically enemies!

Well, that they both didn’t take this whole ‘enemy-thing’ really seriously had become very clear during the last almost three years – and especially during the last days. Hogan and Klink had developed some strange kind of friendship, all right, but THAT here went too far!

“Mon colonel, I really appreciate that the Kommandant was so nice as to let you stay in his quarters to heal, but isn’t there any other room left for him other than sleeping at your side?” The little
Frenchman really sounded more than indignant.

“That’s my room,” Klink murmured while he pulled the blanket higher.

“You took the guest room,” Louis griped; forgetting rank and his position as a POW. “It’s against the law that you two are sleeping together!”

“We’re trying to sleep,” Hogan grumbled; careless in his drowsy state. “That means, if someone who beeps like mad could shut up for once.”

“But…” LeBeau was interrupted by his superior again, who added hoarsely yet almost wryly,

“And, by the way, we’re sleeping together – not with each other.”

Louis LeBeau was really a philanderer, and he had no problem with flirting around, making ambiguous comments and speaking of ‘beautiful nights’ whenever the topic came up. He also was anything but prudish, and always called himself a ‘Frenchman who knows about l’amour more than any other people’. But hearing Hogan’s dry reply while the colonel lay beside his German male counterpart, made LeBeau flush deep red.

Yes, there was still a little distance between the two men, and because Hogan had been able to wear the top of his pajamas now for two days, his upper body wasn’t exposed like it’d been before, yet the two made a picture far too intimate for LeBeau’s liking.

After a few seconds of being utterly speechless, he found his tongue again. Crossing both arms firmly in front of his chest, he glared fiercely at the two officers. “If you want me to lose all appetite and therefore my fine taste for making delicious meals, mon Colonel, then just continue! Mon Dieu, I really don’t know what image is worse – you two…”

“Why are you shouting like this, LeBeau?” Schultz, who had accompanied Louis in the hopes of snatching something from lunch before it was served, stepped beside him, looked into the room and then down at the little Frenchman freaking over something. “What’s the matter?” he asked guilelessly.

“What… what the matter is?” Louis didn’t trust his ears. Was Schultz blind? “Just look at those two!” he snapped; pointing a finger at the bed in outrage.
Schultz, who of course knew why LeBeau was beside himself like this, did what he could best: Play the innocent. And, after he had realized that his superior and Hogan spent most of their time together, he had already come up with an excuse should the two be caught. Just like now.

“Joa mei, the two are in quarantine and because the chamber is too small for two beds, they share one – which is, by the way, wide enough to offer them both room. So, no reason to upset the apple cart.”

LeBeau glanced up to the large Bavarian. “Quarantine? Who came up with that idea?”

“Well, that was me,” Schultz admitted proudly; smiling. Then he turned serious again. “Come on, let us prepare something for our two sick Hascherl (Bavarian slang for cute little children).”

LeBeau gave him an irritated glare. “I'm almost really having second thoughts about cooking them something at all.” He raised his voice. “You owe me, Colonel. I need brain bleach to forget this sight.”

“Don’t be so pathetic,” Klink murmured, already half asleep again.

“Pathetic?” LeBeau’s voice had risen by an octave. “You two are lying in bed like a long-married couple, give me the shock of my life, and then you call me ‘pathetic’?”

“The next time you and Newkirk stick together, I’m going to ask you if I can be your maid of honor,” Hogan’s voice came from the other side of the bed.

LeBeau promptly stuck his tongue out – after all, his superior couldn’t see him, groused something in French, turned around and left. “I’ll serve myself with your Schnapps, Colonel Klink! I need it or there will be no lunch,” he stated.

“Whatever you want,” the Kommandant grumbled, then his already foggy mind became clear again and he raised his head. “But leave something for me, or you’re in trouble!” he yelled – only to cough again.

“Please, be quieter,” Hogan moaned. “My head is still aching.”
“Stop thinking so much, then your headache will lessen,” Klink sighed and lay back again.

“Can’t. It’s my nature.”

“For once your ‘nature’ should shut down – after all, you’re still sick,” the Oberst deadpanned.

“Can an eagle stop flying?” the American grumbled.

“Just look at me and you’ll get your answer.”

“You’re just grounded but that you can still fly was clear to see during our trip to London,” Hogan murmured, assuring.

“Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

Schultz watched them, amused, before he left the room and closed the door. “Really, those two not only lie there like a long-married couple, they also bicker like one,” he chuckled.

LeBeau, who had poured himself a glass of Cognac, filled a second one for the large Bavarian, and ranted, “Please, Schultzie, no comparison like this – or I will get a headache.”

Hans only smiled. ‘If you only knew the truth, little friend, then you really would get a headache!’

*** HH ***

LeBeau made them lunch, woke them by drumming a wooden spoon against a pan like he would operate a gong, which made a hellish noise, and shot them dark glares while serving the meal. Because Hogan’s muscles and sinews in his shoulders and upper arms were doing better, he was finally able to shave and afterwards eat by himself. Therefore he joined Klink at the dining table.
And the little Frenchman almost threw another fit, as the Kommandant offered Hogan his thick, red housecoat and the colonel accepted it.

“I can’t sit at the dining table clad only in my pajamas, LeBeau,” he sighed while Louis served them lunch; frowning the whole time.

“You’ve your own housecoat, mon Colonel. One word and I will bring it.”

“Thanks, but this one here is warmer.”

Klink, who had just spread the napkin over his lap, commented wryly, “I think I know an American saying that fits our cook here perfectly at the moment: Don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

“That’s an English saying,” LeBeau said acerbically. “But please, get comfortable with each other. I’m sure Burkhalter totally agrees that you two are best buddies now.”

To his – and Hogan’s – surprise the Oberst didn’t get nervous because his superior was mentioned. Klink remained utterly relaxed. “The general knows that Hogan is staying here at the moment and he even ordered me to make certain that the colonel gets anything he needs to heal.”

“Even your housecoat?” LeBeau asked, almost scandalized.

“Why not?” Klink replied while helping himself to some water he poured into his glass from a carafe. “His own isn’t here and, by the way, that thing really is very thin.” He suddenly looked pointedly at LeBeau. “If you dislike it so much, maybe you should make use of your many talents, ‘Yvette’, and make him a new one. I’m sure you have some spare fabrics from which you can tailor a housecoat.”

LeBeau stared at him; knowing that Klink hinted at the chaotic wedding of Burkhalter’s niece last year that the Heroes had used to free and smuggle an Underground agent out of Germany. Hogan had stated that LeBeau was in truth the famous French tailor ‘Yvette’, using the female name as a pseudonym to stay anonymous in France. Of course Burkhalter, always ready to boast at every given chance, had ordered LeBeau to make a wedding dress for his niece – a possibility for the Heroes to get the Underground-agent out of captivity by sewing a second dress the man had worn during the escape.
Hochstetter had pointed out exactly that still unsolved riddle to Burkhalter while trying to convince the general that Hogan was Papa Bear, and the general had afterwards talked with Klink about it. The Oberst had understated everything to cover for Hogan – like before – yet the detailed information he learned about the incident during the talk had confirmed once again that his senior POW was anything but the innocent boyish man he acted as. Klink didn’t guess anymore, but simply knew by now who Hogan was for real.

Hogan stiffened. ‘You have some spare fabrics’??? Highly alarmed he cleared his throat and forced himself to chuckle. “How should we get cloth, Colonel Klink? We don’t even have…”

“Your theater productions, Hogan,” Klink said without looking up from his plate. “LeBeau and I think Newkirk, too, have tailored enough costumes for the little performances within the last years.” He glanced at Louis. “And the wedding gowns you made for Frieda, General Burkhalter’s niece, spoke their own language. You are good with needle and thread, and so is certainly Newkirk. So, if you don’t want to see your superior wearing one of my clothing items, you should maybe use the free time you have to help him out with a new housecoat.” He smiled, yet there was a certain gleam in his eyes that made LeBeau more than careful. “And, if you're already swinging the needle, you also can make him new pajamas. His are overdue for a washing, but in his current state he can’t sleep naked. We still have the torn parachute of the pilot who was shot down last year. You can use this silk, if you want. I'll order Schultz to bring it to you.”

LeBeau gaped at Klink, while Hogan, who was watching his German counterpart alarmed, tried to appear relaxed and careless. “Thank you, Kommandant. This is very thoughtful of you.”

Klink’s glance found his and for a long moment both men shared a firm look with each other, before the Oberst waved one hand nonchalantly. “You’re welcome.” Then he continued to eat.

Hogan slowly took a deep breath as he suddenly realized one thing more: Klink had referred to the gowns LeBeau had made. Therefore the older man knew that there had been two wedding dresses which could only mean…

Hogan felt his mouth going dry. The Oberst knew more than he admitted; this much was becoming more and more certain. And for once Hogan didn’t know what to do.

*** HH ***

He couldn’t sleep, either during the afternoon or in the evening. His mind was turning in circles while he tried to figure out how much Klink knew or not – if the Oberst simply made some guesses by mixing hints together or if he really was aware of some ‘activities’ his POWs did straight under
his nose. First Klink revealed to LeBeau that he knew about the penicillin-case a year prior and now he let on that he also had cognizance of the existence of a second wedding dress during the whole wedding-drama last summer. Then there was still the incident of Klink seeing Hogan in a German uniform last year, and…

Hogan groaned silently into the next pillow. These three things would have been more than enough to let Klink take some action, but he never did. Either the Oberst had no real proof (except for Hogan wearing a Luftwaffe-uniform in the middle of Hammelburg), or for reasons unknown, he had covered for Hogan and his men which led to the question of what Klink was really up to. The ignorance troubled the American a lot.

Yet, odd as it was, the colonel began to relax as Klink slipped into bed beside him in the late evening, just like he had done all five nights prior. Still it was somewhere after midnight as Hogan finally fell asleep.

This night wasn’t a peaceful one for him like the others before. Despite Klink’s warm presence, the uncertainty over how much the Kommandant had learned of the Heroes’ missions and the fear of what would happen if Klink really had found out the truth wriggled their way into Hogan’s subconscious – and the nightmares returned.

Again he was in the cellars, helplessly delivered to Hochstetter’s cruel relishing in getting vengeance. And, like before, the prospect of being branded seemed to dominate all images and memories.

Screaming, trashing around and trying to escape non-existent chains, he finally woke up – bathed in sweat, breathing heavily and trembling like a leaf in the wind. An arm was wrapped around him, a hand was comfortingly stroking over his left underarm and gentle words were being whispered in the darkness.

With a shaking hand Hogan wiped his face. “Sorry,” he whispered; ashamed of the weakness shown. “Sorry for disturbing you again.”

“I won’t repeat myself that you don’t have to say ‘sorry’ for suffering nightmares,” Klink answered quietly, before he turned half away and switched on the little lamp on the nightstand. Watching the younger man closely, he recognized the last flickers of horror in those dark eyes, while he thought he could still hear the desperate pleas Hogan had been shouting in his sleep. Instinctively, he lay one hand back on Hogan’s shoulder; recognizing the still slightly higher-than-normal body temperature that radiated through the thin material.

Groaning, the colonel closed his eyes and stroked through the strands of his messy hair with
trembling fingers. “God, I hate this!” he whispered. “I hate what this damn swine did to me – that he even invades everything without being here in person.”

The hand on his shoulder began to move in soothing circles. “Give it time, Robert. You’ve been through hell and such an experience always leaves tracks.”

A humorless laugh escaped Hogan. “Dear Lord, I don’t even just nag at what he did to me, but even at what he didn’t do – or didn’t get the chance to do.” He slowly shook his head. “God, Robert Edward Hogan, get a grip! He didn’t do it, so finally overcome it!” he hissed at himself.

‘He didn’t do it…’

Klink had a very good idea as to what Hogan was referring to – and it seemed to trouble the younger man more than anything else. And this made one thing very clear: Klink couldn’t wait anymore until Hogan could maybe come around to speak of it on his own. The American needed to let it out as soon as possible.

“Robert,” he said softly; tightening the gentle grip on the younger man’s shoulder. He moistened his lips because what he had to ask already made him sick – imagining that what he thought might indeed be true gave him the chills, but Hogan’s peace of soul was more important. So he took a deep breath and quietly asked, “Did… did Hochstetter really try to brand you?”

Hogan looked at him and balled his fists. Somehow he feared putting it into words, but as he saw the soft yet firm gaze Klink gave him – the silent promise to be an anchor once more – something in him gave in. He gulped and nodded carefully. “Yes,” he rasped. He saw Klink’s eyes widening in alert and continued hoarsely, “He threatened me with a poker in the form of the double S-rune and said he would brand every inch of my body if I didn’t give him the answers he desired.”

“What?” the Oberst whispered in shock. Yes, he had assumed that Hogan’s nightmares the days prior and his frantic behavior during the first night after his rescue were based on a real experience, but to get affirmation that Hochstetter had been ready to accomplish such a cruel thing made him ill.

The American moistened his lips. The horror that still lurked deep in him; the returned tension reasoning in his new worry about his men and himself; the terror that had overcome him while being in the hands of Hochstetter – everything finally burst out of him as the dam broke.

“I… I pleaded with him to contact you – said you could confirm that we two had been playing chess
the evening I was supposedly seen in Hammelburg. He didn’t listen – even enjoyed my despair. I…
could already feel the heat at my side and… and then… there was this young man… Schmidt. He…
he distracted Hochstetter, told him something about a telephone call and…” He turned his head away
as he felt his eyes beginning to sting. “He would have done it,” he whispered. “He really would have
done it! After the two years we know each other, after everything that happened, he really was about
to…” He swallowed the bitter taste in his mouth. “Last summer he thanked me for saving his life and
only a few days ago he would have branded me. And later he was… killing me.” He shook his head
and pressed his lips into a thin line; fighting against the rising lump in his throat. “He was really
killing me,” he whispered; his voice sounded forlorn in his own ears. “If it hadn’t been for you, I… I
would be dead now.”

Klink could only look at Hogan in horror. His gaze wandered over the bandaged rib-cage of the
younger man; imagined how the irons would have burnt themselves in the soft skin, thought of
smelling the burning flesh and hearing the agonized screams – and felt bile rising in his throat. He
needed all self-control to swallow the urge to vomit, while his belly began to churn.

Hogan took a deep shuddering breath. “And… that was not all,” he continued, even against his will.
He didn’t want to voice his memories, but the pain and fear he had lived through flooded out of him
like water that finally found a way to break through a barrier. The words left his lips without any
control as he told about the icy, inhumane display of contempt and glee the guards showed while
they beat and kicked him in the tiny cell he was held when not ‘questioned’. It hadn’t been less
frightening than the blazing hatred of Hochstetter, whose taunting, mocking, sneering and
threatening made it absolutely clear that there wouldn’t be any mercy. Rather the opposite. The major
had used the already inflicted injuries to heighten Hogan’s pain, even smiling while doing so –
relishing in his victim’s agony.

Hogan wasn’t aware that a few tears had escaped his burning eyes while he had been talking – but
Klink saw them. And every shiny little drop was like a knife plunged into his chest. He knew how
much it had to cost Robert to speak about it at all; he felt him trembling and heard the stutters which
interrupted his flow of speech. Acting on pure instinct and not giving a damn about decency, he
closed the distance to the younger man and wrapped his arms around him – trying to give him some
hold in the storm of emotions which were about to blow him apart.

As Hogan finally came to the end, he felt utterly exhausted and empty – as if something that had
congested him, like stones, had been removed. It was relieving but also wearisome. Unaware of it, he
had relaxed into the gentle embracing arms around him; his head rested on the older man’s shoulder,
one of Klink’s hands was in his hackles and moved in the attempt to comfort him. Only as he felt the
hot stinging in his eyes, his groggy mind began to focus anew.

He gulped again. He would NOT cry, for God’s sake! He was one of the youngest full colonels in
the US Airforce and had been entrusted with a mission not many men would be able to carry out. He
wouldn’t weep because he’d gotten some bruises. He had known the risks when he accepted the
mission. And, by the way, what should Klink think of him? The German officer who had proven to
be a real friend despite the war between their countries and had risked his life to protect and to save
him. Should he, Hogan, keep lying there and crying like a little girl? No, never! He wouldn’t grant Hochstetter this victory, he wouldn’t embarrass himself and he certainly wouldn’t make Klink uncomfortable. The Oberst deserved better after all he’d done for him.

Rising his head, he also lifted his right hand and wiped over his eyes, before he began to straighten his shape a little bit. He glanced at his German counterpart; his worry whether Klink knew something about the mission ‘Unsung Heroes’ forgotten for the moment. “Thank you, Wilhelm,” he whispered gratefully. There was no need to explain that he thanked the Kommandant for the silent support he had just given by simply holding him. “Danke, it helped a lot.”

Bemused, he saw that the older man had pressed his lips into a thin line. He was pale like a tablecloth and his breathing was uneven while there was a fire burning in his eyes Hogan had rarely witnessed. To say the truth, he couldn’t remember when he had ever before seen such a fierce expression in the Oberst’s gaze like this one. He couldn’t know that this was the very same glance Klink had when rescuing Hogan from Hochstetter – forcing even Burkhalter to develop some respect for him.

“Willie?” Hogan asked, concerned; once more skipping any formalities. They had no place here in this moment. Everything was too private.

Klink tried to get a grip on his raging feelings – on the sheer fury that whirled through his heart, mind and soul. He had known that Robert had gone through hell, but this…

Unable to sit any longer, Klink squeezed gently Hogan’s shoulder and neck, threw the blankets away, rose and paced for almost a minute; not caring that he was barefoot, only wearing his nightgown and that his ring of hair was tousled. Hogan, who was still numb after the emotional hurricane he had just been through, was distracted by the Oberst’s reaction. Confused, he watched him; realizing that the older man was brimming with rage.

All of sudden the Kommandant stopped, turned towards him and pointed one finger at him. The light of the little lamp enveloped him – almost gave him the look of an angel of vengeance. “I swear to you, if this sodding bastard comes near you ever again, I’ll send a bullet into his insane brain or wrench his neck! How dare he to use such methods on you. How sick can someone be to get such ideas! Imagine this, getting joy out of hurting other people and fouling them up beyond all recognition. Right, he hadn’t gotten the chance for the latter – thank the Lord – but he would have done it. I’ll have his head for it – literally. Burkhalter can demand whatever he wants from me, if only he makes use of his friendship with Himmler one time more and achieves Hochstetter’s execution. This sick bastard has forfeited any right to walk on Earth!”

Hogan had seen Klink furious before, but never this enraged. Well, a few days ago, in the woods, after Hochstetter had left him – Hogan – to die, the Oberst had been beside himself, too. But right now the older man was trembling with wrath, and the colonel didn’t want his German counterpart to
suffer even more after-effects than he already did. He knew very well how much such an emotional fit afterwards demanded from mind and body. He had just experienced it himself.

“Anything he wants? Be careful. Know that his price could be you marrying his sister,” he softly deadpanned to lighten the mood. He had to get Klink out of his fuming state. It would only worsen the older man’s condition.

At the mention of Gertrude Linkmeyer, Klink went stiff like a pillar of salt. With dread, the Oberst looked at the American. The mere thought of sharing his life with that shrew made him almost nauseous. The only person in the whole world he wanted to be bound to for the rest of his life sat before him in his bed, bandaged, bruised and traumatized. But he had sworn to protect the younger man, no matter what, so…

He gulped, winced and grimaced as if he were in great pain, before he murmured, “If this is the sacrifice I would have to make – so be it.”

The colonel stared, thunderstruck, at him; his foggy mind became clear. There were only two threats Klink had always reacted to with almost panic: Being sent to the Russian Front, and marrying Burkhalter’s sister. Yet he would accept one of those two fates only to make certain that Hochstetter would be liquidated? Why? Because only then the major would no longer be a threat to…

“Don’t tell me you would endure such a fate just for me,” Hogan whispered.

The glance Klink gave him baffled the American. For a moment there was such softness – even tenderness – in those blue eyes that it took Hogan’s breath away. Then the Oberst’s face became almost neutral while he turned his head away. “The world is sinister enough at the moment. We all would do a little bit better without this demon in the shape of a human being,” he only said, before he took a deep breath.

This whole last minute triggered something in Hogan’s mind – deep down and hidden. Something moved in the edges of his soul; a knowledge that had been hiding behind his calculating and analyzing thoughts for several days now; maybe even longer. Yet he couldn’t get a grip on it – again. But one thing was for certain: Klink was no less troubled than he was. And, like before, Hogan didn’t like to see the older man like this. Somehow, along the path they’d been forced to walk together for almost three years now, he had come to care for his German counterpart. And, he had to admit, he maybe cared a little bit too much for him by now.

“Calm down, Wilhelm. As you said: It’s over,” he murmured.
“Ja – for now. Otherwise…” Klink began to cough again, and like it was contagious Hogan had to cough, too.

Clearing his throat and wiping his nose at the sleeve of his nightgown, Klink forced himself to calm down. He knew that Robert didn’t need his wrath now, but his composure. So he decided to use the short interruption as a distraction, and sighed, “Just look at us. We’re really a pair; coughing in duet.” He smiled shortly at Hogan, who gladly took the opportunity to smirk half-heartedly back – only to groan in pain.

“Dammit, I can’t even grin without it hurting.” he complained and covered his bruised right cheek with one hand, before he had to cough again.

The scorching fury was decreasing in Klink as he looked down at the heap of misery Robert was at the moment, and his protectiveness kicked in again. “I’ll make us some tea. There is no more milk, regrettably, but tea with honey is healthy and calming, too.”

Hogan carefully laid back. “You’re spoiling me,” he said quietly.

Klink took a deep breath. ‘You have no clue how much I really want to spoil you – to worship any part of your beaten body and to kiss every bruise and injury better;’ he thought, before he chased the yearning away like so often before. Instead of giving into his need for cherishing the one he loved, he simply chuckled. “Don’t get too used to it. We can’t hide in this little room forever.”

“No, of course not – but I wouldn’t mind it if we stayed here in this bed until this damn war is over,” Hogan sighed while closing his eyes. If Klink and he would remain in this separate little world there would be no danger of revelations, uncomfortable questions and new threats.

To Hogan’s surprise he didn’t get any replies, and so he glanced back at Klink only to see, in the light of the lamp, that the older man had blushed crimson red.

“Willie?” he asked, confused.

His voice seem to shake the Oberst out of the rigidity he had fallen into. “N-n-n-nothing, I’ll be back in a few minutes,” he stammered and almost fled the room – leaving behind a very thunderstruck Robert Hogan.
What, for God’s sake, was the matter with the Kommandant?

*** HH ***

Klink kept his word and brought them some tea that, indeed, calmed the symptoms of the cold. And afterwards both men slept peacefully. The next morning Klink woke up to find himself one more time wrapped around the younger man, who was still deep in dreamland, and he enjoyed those stolen minutes until he knew that time was up. Soon Schultz would come and there was really no need to present the sergeant with another highly ambiguous scene.

Following a certain routine that had been developed by now, Klink went to the bathroom first, then woke Hogan who took care of his morning toilette before Wilson showed up to attend to them both. They ate breakfast and then the two officers returned to their beds. As it seemed, Klink would be able to resume his duty tomorrow or the day after, but Hogan would be forced to take it quite slowly for longer. And it began to bother the American. He was a man of action and being on bed-rest had started to make him restless. It gave him too much time to think, which was never good.

Then fate took the matters of a bored Hogan in its own hands.

In the late morning Schultz appeared and carried a larger-than-usual envelope with him, which he gave to his superior. "From General Burkhalter," he said. "It’s addressed for your eyes only, so I thought I should bring it immediately."

Klink sat up in bed and took the envelope. "Thank you, Schultz," he nodded. "Is everything all right in the camp?"

"Everything is perfectly alright, Herr Kommandant," the large Bavarian affirmed with one of his typical half negative, half positive waggings of his head, while smiling like an eager boy.

"Good, good," Klink murmured; his attention already fixed on the papers he had taken out of the envelope. It was a short letter, signed by Burkhalter, and a thin file comprised of a few sheets. Unfolding the letter, Klink quickly read it and grimaced afterwards. Glaring at the file, he grumbled, "Why couldn’t he have sent this a few days later? Robert just went through a roller-coaster last night, and after he’d finally let it all out and had maybe found some peace, he’ll be confronted again with all the shit he tries to forget!"
Schultz wasn’t the brightest candle on the cake, but he wasn’t stupid. You didn’t need to be a genius to know what the file contained. “It’s the official record of Colonel Hogan’s report concerning the whole mess with Hochstetter, isn’t it?”

Klink nodded slowly. “Yes. General Burkhalter wants him to read through it, correct it if there are any mistakes and afterwards give it to me to be sent back to Berlin.” He sighed. “And he wants me to write my own report which he’ll present at the trial together with everything he witnessed.”

Schultz rubbed his neck. “Isn’t this a good thing? The general will make certain that Hochstetter gets what he deserves.”

The Oberst made a face. “Of course it’s a good thing – yet I don’t know if Hogan is ready to read this shit at all.”

The large sergeant’s face softened, while understanding shimmered in his round eyes. “Just ask him. If he needs a day more to come around, I don’t see a problem with it.”

Klink glared at him. “Schultz, Burkhalter demands the signed documents as soon as possible and…”

“And you’re still restricted to bed, but he wants your official report together with Colonel Hogan’s signed statement. So you can only write the report when you’re no longer ill which will take a few days more – days the colonel can use to compose himself better.”

The Kommandant looked at him, baffled. “Schultz, sometimes you have very good ideas.”

Promptly the Bavarian stood to attention and proudly lifted his chin. “Danke!”

“But this doesn’t mean that you can walk around all stuck-up now,” Klink scoffed.

This time it was Schultz who made a face. “If this is all, Herr Kommandant…”

“Yes, dismissed,” the Oberst nodded and watched how Schultz was about to leave the room. Out of an impulse he said, “Thank you for coming – and for your consideration concerning the whole situation.”
He received a warm smile, accompanied by the words, “Get better soon, Herr Oberst,” then the sergeant vanished. Taking a deep breath he took the envelope and began putting the file and letter into it again, when he heard a soft noise at the door. Looking up, his gaze found Hogan who stood there – arms around himself, unsteady on his feet, but with his typical curiosity in his eyes.

“You eavesdropped!” Klink stated. There was no doubt that the American had listened to every word. “And given the fact that your German is really good and fluid, you understood everything.”

“I couldn’t avoid it. The doors were open – and you weren’t exactly whispering,” Hogan shrugged, while he watched the older man closely. “You’re worried about my mental state.”

“I’m worried about your whole condition, Hogan. After I learned all that happened to you, I’m utterly baffled that you can hold it together like you’re doing. But that’s what you always do, right? Go on, no matter what.” He looked towards the window that showed gray skies and the shadows of the nearby woods behind the wires. “I admire you for your strength – your stubbornness.” He glanced back. “I said it a few days ago and I’ll say it again: You’re the strongest man I’ve ever met.”

Hogan cocked his head; ignoring the uncomfortable stinging and throbbing of his injuries. At least the bronchitis had retreated a little bit so that the only unpleasant experience during breathing was the pressure of his broken ribs. “You say I’m strong, yet you don’t want to give me Burkhalter’s transcript of my report.”

“Robert,” Klink sighed; sounding frustrated. “Like it or not, you had a breakdown last night – one that was necessary for the healing process, yet…”

“Was that the reason for you asking me if Hochstetter had really tried to brand me?” the colonel interrupted him, flabbergasted; figuring the Kommandant out once again. “You wanted me to let everything out so I could get better afterwards?”

This time the Oberst shrugged. “Dr. Birkhorn made it very clear to me that you’re bottling up everything and that this could become dangerous for you. He advised me to get you to talk, yet I was uncertain as to when the best point of time would be. I knew that you needed some more distance to the whole shit you’ve been through before you could speak about it, but on the other hand time was your opponent. And after your nightmare I thought it best if you would finally get it all off your chest.” He looked straight into the widened brown orbs three meters away – and felt some amusement rise in him as Hogan blurted out,
“You *manipulated* me! You… played me off!”

Despite the serious situation, Klink couldn’t contain himself anymore: He had to laugh quietly. “How does your own medicine taste, my dear Robert?”

The colonel groaned and let his head sink into the neck. “I don’t believe it,” he complained, while shortly looking at the ceiling before he glared back at the older man. “You got me!”

The Oberst was still chuckling. “Yes, the tables were finally turned for once – but I had your best interest at heart as I used the chance to get you to talk.”

Hogan rubbed his temples; grumbling inwardly as his fingertips touched the still present mull. “Never thought you would outsmart me one day.”

“Oh, I had a very good teacher,” Klink nodded, self-pleased. “Okay, just right now he looks a little bit like a boy caught with his hand in the candy-box and patched up like after a boxing-fight, but he is still a constant challenge that brightens my days.”

His American counterpart glanced at him with big eyes – and to Hogan’s surprise he felt heat shooting to his face. Klink was teasing and complimenting him in one. Even more, the older man just said that he, Hogan the nuisance, brightened his days. Holy Heavens, he had never thought that Klink could be this sweet.

And, once again, where did this description come from? ‘*Sweet*’? Well, the Oberst was maybe right to worry about his senior POW’s mental state.

Clearing his throat, Hogan, with uneasy steps, closed the distance to the bed and sat down on its edge. “Wilhelm, I do appreciate your concern, but I’m not made of glass.” He reached out for the envelope. “Give me the file. The sooner I’ve read through it the sooner I can go on.”

Klink hesitated. “You just had…”

“… a ride on an emotional roller-coaster, I know. But this damn thing won’t use its breaks until the round is over – means, I’ve to finish everything to put it behind me,” Hogan interrupted him softly. “Give me the blasted file, Kommandant. I'll look if Burkhalter is really such a good secretary that he made the right notes of everything I told him, and if not I'll have the pleasure of correcting him. Then
I'll hand it back to you, you write your report and then, when the documents are on their way to Berlin, we can both finally close this damn chapter once and for all. Then we aren’t confronted with daily memories of it.” He saw how Klink’s gaze roamed over his face and throat, and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I know, every look in the mirror brings the memories back. I know that I’m not my usual handsome self, but the bruises will fade in a few days, so…”

“Handsome self, eh?” The Oberst didn’t miss the chance to bicker a little bit. “Never call me vain again!”

Hogan stared at him. “I… I never called you… How do you know?” he demanded, as Klink lifted one rebuking finger and tut-tutted at him.

“Easy, I know that Schultz calls me vain, Schultz talks a lot with you and the other men in Barracks 2 and like this you learned of it. And, by the way, you were here a few times whenever I made myself ready to go out. I saw your glances in the mirror, my dear Robert. You consider me vain.” He pointed at his balding head. “There isn’t that much left of my hair, I know, but I’m proud of the rest.”

Now it was Hogan who had to chuckle; his eyes betrayed a warmth he wasn’t aware of. “Only the top is balding. And, what is the old saying? Hair has to make room for a brilliant mind.” He got the wanted result: Klink began to laugh. “And, by the way, you’re not that bad looking,” the younger man added; winking at the Oberst.

“Don’t flatter me, you rascal,” Klink smiled. “I don’t buy it all the time, you know.” Then he became serious again, while looking down at the envelope. “Do you really want to read it so soon? I could stall for some time and…”

“The sooner the better,” Hogan nodded and took the envelope. Rising, he slowly headed to the door. “I’ll give it back to you after I've read it.”

Feeling uneasy again, Klink began to pull the comforter away to rise. “Shall I come with you?” he offered.

The American glanced back over his shoulder to give a dry comment, but as he saw the real concern in the older man’s eyes, he quit every thought of sarcasm. The open sympathy he could see on Klink’s face touched him. “I’ll be okay, Willie. And if not, I'll call for you.” With those words he left – and the Kommandant moaned quietly.
“We both know that you won’t call, no matter what, you stubborn mule!” He lay back again; ready to join Hogan if it should become necessary.

TBC…

Well, Klink knows ‘his’ troublemaker and is rightfully concerned that Hogan will ‘eat anything’ instead of seeking support and a safe harbor. Even after the night prior, which will lead soon to Hogan’s beginning realization what really drives his German counterpart. ‘Willie’ simply revealed too much within his reactions and his gazes, but first both men will reach a crossroad that will change everything for them – and for the Unsung Heroes.

I hope, you liked the last chapter, too and – like always – I’m curious about your opinions.

The next chapter will be published in the second half of the next week.

Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Originally I wanted to post the new chapter already yesterday, but a lot to do in my praxis and the damn ice-rain in the evening delayed everything (including cooking dinner) so that any kind of hobby had to wait. Now it’s only raining, every little spot of snow we had, has vanished and it’s stormy and simply… unghghghgh (you know what I mean, *smile*).

Thank you so much for the reviews, comments, kudos and any other kind of feedback. I knew that you would love the fluffy scene in the last chapter, and I promise that it won’t be the last. But just right now our two colonels are staying at another kind of threshold that will change everything for them, the Heroes and even others.

I don’t want to reveal more, so have fun with the new chapter.

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 22 – The secret is revealed

It didn’t become necessary for Klink to join Hogan to give him some more silent support – or so it seemed at first. There was nothing audible from the other sick-room, not even a half-hour later. And that gave Klink second thoughts. The file contained only ten or eleven pages. How long did someone need to read them? Yet, he didn’t want to impose himself on Hogan and so he remained in the guest room, while the minutes were slowly ticking away.

Forty minutes later and Klink was ready to crawl up the walls. Not being endowed with great patience by nature, he had finally had enough, threw the covers away, rose, slipped into his bathrobe and slippers, and walked quietly to his usual sleeping chamber.
The sight that greeted him made him stop dead in his tracks.

The bed was empty, the file lay on the tousled blankets and Hogan... stood at the window and looked outside into the camp through the net curtain. His hands gripped the windowsill tightly enough his knuckles had turned white.

Somehow he must have heard a noise, because all of sudden he began to speak, “I read through it three times. Burkhalter got everything accurate – and I signed it.” His voice was tight and hoarse. “Just take it and send it to him. And then I don’t want to be confronted with any of it again for the near future!”

Klink sighed soundlessly; understanding the hidden anger in Hogan’s voice and statement. “It was too early,” he murmured. “But may God make you listen to me one time only.”

Hogan whirled around – and almost lost balance. Regaining his feet by leaning himself back against the windowsill he snarled, “I have had enough of being treated like a china doll! I have had enough of…”

“Neither your men nor I treat you like a china doll, Hogan!” Klink interrupted him sternly. “You’re injured and we take care of you so you can heal, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah?” the colonel sneered. “You, Birkhorn, my men, Schultz – hell, even Burkhalter! You all tiptoe around me and fear I would shatter at any given thoughtless word! You speak behind my back about how to help the poor broken bloke, but…”

“You are not broken, Robert – not yet,” Klink snapped. “But bottling up everything until you can’t control it anymore isn’t a solution. I thought you understood this after last night – or that you’d accepted that you can’t push yourself, yet the latter is what you still do despite the fact that it harms you.”

“What me harms is this damn pity,” Hogan spat; fury lay in his eyes.

“We don’t pity you,” Klink corrected him firmly. “Pity is something you receive; sympathy, compassion and understanding is something you must earn – and you’ve three guesses as to what we hold for you!”
This time the colonel remained silent, yet his breathing was heavy and his glance was fierce.

Klink sighed quietly and moved slowly forwards as if he were approaching a wild animal. “I know that you loathe being in this condition – that you loathe having to depend on others instead of caring for them. I know that you hate what has been done to you and that this anger is beginning to latch out at everything and everyone. But neither your friends nor I are your enemy, Robert. Hochstetter was the enemy and he tried to triumph over you by wounding you so much that a part of his hate would remain in you. Hochstetter has lost all humanity in his constant desire to beat everyone and to be the best – in his constant fear of losing. Having such a sick, twisted soul walks hand in hand with a deep rooted loathing and anger towards everyone. To say it in a religious way: It’s like he tried to plant some of his evil streaks into you – streaks your mind and heart has to fight, or you’ll be lost. Just look at you. You glare at me as if you are ready to murder me. Is this really you?”

The words seemed to reach something in Hogan, because he blanched and his glance betrayed a soft shock. “I… I would never murder you, Wilhelm,” he whispered. “I would never harm you – not before you showed how much you care for me, and certainly not now. But…” He lowered his head and balled his hands into fists. “But I hate all this. I can accept that my injuries have to heal and that it may last a few weeks. I can accept that I have to take it slow, even if I’ll certainly go mad within the next days because I’m forced to do nothing. I’m grateful for your and my men’s worry. I’d never had such close friends like I have found within my team – and I have certainly never anticipated a German officer becoming a sort of guardian angel for me; someone who even risked his own life for me. I never thought you’d care so much for me that you’d put up with my stupid nightmares and even comfort me like… like we were family.”

“Then what is it was makes you so angry all of sudden?” Klink asked quietly. “Please, make me understand.”

Hogan looked up again and took a deep breath. His eyes brimmed with unshed tears. “I fear that… that Hochstetter won in his own way. When I described all that happened to Burkhalter, it was like I was speaking about someone else, not me. It helped make it possible for me to give the report at all. Last night I couldn’t hold it back anymore – the pain and the disbelief that something like this has really happened were too strong. I… I was so helpless, Wilhelm, so damn unable to defend myself or stop Hochstetter and his men, I still can’t get over it. Dr. Birkhorn may be right if he says that I have to let it out in order to accept it in the end, but I’m far away from it.”

“Of course,” Klink said softly. “Of course you’re far from healed. First you have to come to terms with everything.”

“‘Come to terms’,” Hogan snorted. “I was always the strong one – someone the others could rely on. It’s me who makes the decisions, who takes the responsibility and who fights ‘til the last breath to keep all those under my command or close to me safe. But this time I…” He gulped. “I was ready to sacrifice myself, Wilhelm. I knew that there was no other way to keep everyone safe, so I was ready
to let myself be killed. It’s what you do for those you love, or for those whose lives are in your hands. But as Hochstetter told me that he wouldn’t let me up again and that this was my very last chance to give into his demands, I…” He moistened his lips. “I knew it would be my end – that I was going to die, yet I couldn’t do anything else than sign my own death sentence. I was forced to let death take me, because despite Hochstetter’s attempt to blackmail me with my life, there was no real choice he gave me. I couldn’t tell him what he wanted to know despite the terrible fright that ruled me within those last minutes.”

He took another shuddering breath. “As Hochstetter arrested me the second time, he cited a saying: ‘The proof of heroism doesn’t lay within brave acts, but in enduring defeat’. And in one way or the other he did defeat me.”

Klink shook his head. “He didn’t defeat you, Rob. He tormented you, made you afraid – but he didn’t defeat you.”

Hogan lowered his head again. “It feels like defeat. I fought, Willie. I fought him as much as I could – and then I realized that I couldn’t gain victory this time. I realized that everything was over the moment I heard his inhuman scream of rage before he pushed me under water. And I continue to hear this shrill roar that seemed to come from an animal and not from a human.” He took another deep shuddering breath, and glanced up again. “I fear that… that he broke something in me I won’t regain.”

Klink slowly walked around the bed and stepped in front of the younger man. He knew that the next minutes were essential for Hogan’s healing.

“The fact that you admit this fear alone shows me that you aren’t broken, Robert Edward Hogan. You doubt yourself, which is understandable, but maybe you should consider that any real near-death experience makes us doubt ourselves. I think, we both went through it in similar situations: As we were shot down from the skies – I at the end of the first war, you before you came here. In those minutes we didn’t know if we would make it out alive – yet we did. The same went for you while Hochstetter was about to kill you. You thought you would not survive – yet you did. These moments and the doubts we have about ourselves afterwards, show that, despite our strength, we’re only humans. Death is always waiting for us, but we beat it. You beat it – and maybe you should consider that it has made you stronger in the end. You won – not Hochstetter. He has been arrested and will be seriously punished, but you are safe and cared for – and you will heal, both in body and soul. And do you know why?”

As Hogan carefully shook his head, Klink cradled the younger man’s face between his hands, careful not to inflict some pain, before he continued gently,

“Because giving-up is not in your nature. If things are bad you dare them to become worse. If there is
no way out, you search until you find one. If you can’t do anything, you hold on until you get a chance to turn the wheel and come out of the situation as the winner. Hochstetter also never gives up, but he is haunted by too many inner demons to be successful. He fears so many things that the pressure on him became too much – and it corrupted and twisted his mind. He doesn’t know it, but inwardly he is broken – contrary to you.”

His hands slipped down to Hogan’s shoulders where they remained; his gaze never left that of the younger man.

“We both know that you have faced danger within the last years more often than anybody can count. You outwitted your opponents and the Grim Reaper over and over again. You were pushed to your limits, maybe even despaired here and there, yet you were always able to go on – because you didn’t give up. You never let anybody down – including yourself. And this is the reason why Hochstetter hasn’t won and will not win, so don’t give him a small victory by letting self-doubt bloom in your heart. You, Robert, showed everyone that you triumphed over the poison-gnome even in the most dark minutes of your life, and will continue to do so as long as you do not doubt yourself. Your family at home needs you, your men need you, this damn war needs you – and every man and woman on this almost doomed continent need you.” – ‘And I need you, too’, he added in his mind.

The strong words had given Hogan something to latch on to, had breathed new hope in him – and then he realized what Klink had said between the lines.

“The people of this continent need me? I faced danger within the last years?” he asked; new alarm rose in him. “I outwitted… the Grim Reaper? What do you mean? I’m safe here in Stalag 13, am I not?”

Klink nodded slowly; his gaze fixed Hogan’s. He had hoped to have this talk some days later, when Robert was more himself again, but as it seemed the grace period was over. He had revealed a few details within the last days, which hadn’t slipped Hogan’s attention. The colonel was nervous because deep down he knew that he, Klink, was aware of many things the American tried to keep a secret. And this new fear was poison for Hogan’s healing. Right, Klink had inflicted it by being unable to hold his tongue a little bit longer, but what was done, was done. And just like the night before, Klink would try to get Hogan to talk. It would be better for both of them.

Taking a deep breath, he said softly, “Yes, as long as you are here you are safe, because I can protect you – citing the Geneva Conventions or pointing out my authority as the camp’s Kommandant if necessary.” He let go of the colonel and sat down on the bed’s edge; making himself smaller to appear not threatening to the deeply troubled and also alarmed man in front of him. “But we both know that there were a lot of times you were outside of my authority’s range – in the middle of ‘the enemy’s territory’, risking new arrest and even execution. You always knew exactly what was at stake for you, yet you mastered everything because you don’t give up. This is the reason why I said that you are stronger than Hochstetter, because you didn’t break under any pressure you endured.
within the last years since you arrived in my camp.”

Hogan stared at him – highly alert. Klink’s little speech could be nothing more than a simple comparison between a POW locked away in a POW-camp and a Gestapo-member who was under the pressure to succeed, but the colonel knew his German counterpart very well by now. There were times Klink was rambling, and there were times Klink expressed his sometimes surprisingly profound thoughts to make it clear to the others around him that he knew more than he admitted. And in the last days Klink had done the latter a lot.

The colonel knew that he had to be very careful now. Maybe Klink didn’t know for real about him and his men, and simply had made some guesses – last but not least Hochstetter had rambled about many details a lot, and Hogan would bet his last shirt that some of that information had been passed from Hochstetter to Burkhalter, and from the general to Klink during his talk with him six days ago. If Klink was only bluffing concerning his ‘knowledge’, then there was still the chance to keep the mission hidden.

“If you mean last year when we were at the Hofbräu to help you with those two morons who’d been blackmailing you, then…”

“Hogan,” Klink interrupted him softly, “we are both aware that this wasn’t the only time you were outside of the camp.”

“Yes, of course, after all you sent me out to re-capture a few escapees, you sent me on a test drive after we repaired your car and…” He stopped as he saw the sadness in the other man’s eyes.

“Do you still not trust me, Robert?” The question was uttered in a quiet and simple tone, but it seemed to echo in the room like a trumpet fanfare.

For once Hogan didn’t know how to react. Did he trust Klink? Yes, to a certain degree. And, to say the truth, he wanted to trust the older man completely. God, he longed to trust him, because it would be so much easier for him to share everything with somebody who held the same rank and knew how it was to hide behind lies and a mask. Klink and he had more in common than he had ever thought, and the last days had shown how much the Oberst cared for him, but… could he indeed entrust him with his men’s lives? He didn’t know. He simply didn’t know, and…

“I can understand that you are careful, Hogan. I know how difficult yet sometimes necessary it is to pretend to be another person. I also know how it is to carry the weight of responsibility for the men under your command on your shoulders – especially in your case. They are your friends; more than brothers in arm.” He sighed deeply and all of sudden he seemed to age by years. “Maybe one day
you will realize that I would never take any risk that could cost you your life, and will trust me the way I trust you.”

He rose and headed towards the door; his movements were heavy – as if something was weighing him down. And Hogan knew what this ‘something’ was: The feeling that he wasn’t worth someone’s trust; the feeling of always being left out; the pain of utter loneliness.

“Don’t,” Hogan whispered.

Klink stopped. “Don’t what’? Don’t expect too much?” A hue of bitterness was in his voice. He had really thought – hoped! – that Hogan would finally realize that he, Wilhelm Klink, was on his side; that he never would give him away.

“Don’t trust me like you obviously do, Wilhelm,” Hogan murmured, before he became aware of what he was saying. “I’m not worth it.”

“Why?” Klink turned around and faced the younger man; a mixture of understanding and hope lay in his eyes; hope that Hogan finally realized that his German counterpart could be made privy to his deception. “Because you have secrets? We all have them. But yours are bigger, aren’t they? They are big enough to make you restless whenever someone begins to suspect them. And this is more exhausting to you by now than anything else. But you need rest, Robert, just like any other bear in winter – especially when he is the papa of the family.”

The world seem to come to a halt.

The words ‘bear’ and ‘papa’ – even in the wrong line of order – hung in the room like a thick fog.

Hogan could only stare at Klink; knowing deep down that his bad suspicions were obviously true: The older man knew about him and his missions – or he assumed and had simply taken a shot in the dark. Maybe the latter was the case, after all Hochstetter had said a dozen times and more that he thought Hogan was ‘Papa Bear’. Maybe Klink had only hopped on the train of thoughts and suspects Hochstetter had certainly been able to wake in the Oberst. If this was the case, he, Hogan, still had a chance to turn the wheel, but an inner voice told him that he was fooling himself. Nonetheless he answered,

“Well, rest really is something I need – just like you. We are both living in hard times and face problems every day. We are both commanding officers of our men in the middle of a war, and this
makes our responsibility even more difficult than usual. Of course one day we would be tired out and need a break.” The words sounded lame even in his own ears.

The Oberst nodded. “Yes, you are right. We both need rest, but you will not find it again until you have found out how safe your secrets still are. I’m very aware of your restlessness yesterday and during the night. But to get an answer to this uncertainty you have to reveal your secrets – and they can be if deadly given away to the wrong persons.” Klink returned; his voice and face were soft, yet firm. “Rob, I’m not one of those ‘wrong persons’. If I had belonged to them, you and your men would have been arrested and certainly already executed a long time ago.” He watched how the younger man went absolutely rigid.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the colonel lied through his teeth; avoiding the Kommandant’s gaze. And this, especially, told Klink more than anything else. Hogan always glanced straight into his eyes. It was his nature to show dominance by never looking away from someone he talked to – except when he knew that his eyes would give him away. And this was exactly the case now.

Klink couldn’t help the little smirk that curled the left side of his mouth. “Still not ready to admit the truth, but playing the ignoramus? Okay, you block-head, then let me mention a few things which may tell you of what I’m speaking.”

He sat down on the bed’s edge again, pulled the comforter over his lap and waited until Hogan looked at him, before he began,

“I have assumed that you and your men are much more than ‘simple POWs’ for more than two years now. First I thought I was imagining things, because the truth would be too bizarre to be true. But over the months, piece by piece was added and it began to build a picture I didn’t dare believe to be true, but denial never changes a fact.” He took a deep breath. “I had a lot to think about within the last days, and no matter how I look at it, it always remains the same picture; compounded by too many incidents.”

Hogan felt his mouth go dry. “What incidents?” he asked; managing to sound casual.

Klink sighed. ‘Stubborn mule’, he thought fondly, not for the first time this day. Clearing his throat he said,

“Remember the days I rebuked you because your men were almost too tired to stand straight on their feet during morning roll call? Of course they were tired, as if they hadn’t slept all night, because they hadn’t. And why not? They had other, more important things to do.”
“What things should we be able to do except for sleeping at night?” Hogan still sounded nonchalant as if he wasn’t really interested in that talk, yet he needed all strength to keep up the masquerade. Hochstetter had figured him out and Hogan had been able to laugh straight to his face. But, for reasons unknown, he almost had trouble acting the same way around Klink.

The Oberst shortly pursed his lips. “Well, let us say that running around in the area for the whole night, or several nights even, can be very tiresome. Or another example of odd incidents: Remember all the times you dove for cover within the camp or even in my quarters, pulling me with you or warning me – seconds before something close by exploded, came flying through the window or likewise? You are not a foreseer, Hogan, therefore there is only one explanation: You knew of what was going to happen because you initiated it – or got word of it through secret channels.”

“We’ve a transistor radio here, as you know. You yourself offered to have it repaired for us,” Hogan said slowly; feeling his tension increasing.

“Please, Hogan, give me some credit here,” Klink grumbled. “If the authorities knew that something bad would happen, they would prevent it instead of broadcasting it before it took place. Therefore you can’t have gotten the knowledge by listening to the German radio – or that of the Allies. Like hell they would tell the enemy what they’re up to. And, by the way, you never came out of your barracks where you could have listened to your transistor radio before you acted as the king of guardian angels for all in the camp; warning your men, my men and me in advance before something bad could happen. No, you knew about the upcoming dangers because you were responsible for them or learned of them from your allies outside the wires. And these warnings of yours aren’t the only thing that gave me seconds thoughts for months – years even. Remember all the times someone who was involved in sabotage resembled you a lot, but you had an alibi?”

Hogan felt his knees going weak as he realized that Klink seemed to have finally puzzled everything out, and he lent back against the windowsill again; still trying to look casual. “My ‘alibi’ like you call it, is me being a prisoner here in…”

“A prisoner who comes and goes to his liking’, Hochstetter said. And the more I think of it the more I have to agree with him. You, Robert, walk out and into the camp whenever you need it – while others take your place to cover your back; maybe even switching clothes with you, just like LeBeau did as he came to the hospital to get me.” Klink braced his underarms on his thighs. “There are several occasions I remember very well in which you were officially here, but I’m ready to make a vow that in truth you were on the other sides of the wires. For example that one time you lay drunken on my bed while a few kilometers away air fighters were blown into pieces at their air base. I bet my last shirt that someone had replaced you and wore your clothes, so that Burkhalter believed it was you he saw face-down on my bed; snoring like a bear in winter.”
“Why do you think it was me who gave your planes an extra flight? As you said, I lay drunken on your bed. I think I remember that someone shook me, but…”

“The sabotage was done by someone whose description fits you very nicely. And as Burkhalter learned of it half an hour after the attack on the air base, he went into my sleeping chamber to check on you. Yes, you lay there in all your drunken glory and even snapped at Burkhalter to let you sleep.” Klink chuckled. “A dangerous scheme but you love to play with fire. You returned just in time, changed into your own clothes and lay down again before the general saw you for real. A plain alibi – and very clever.”

He watched the colonel closely, who had wrapped his arms around himself in a typical gesture; face paler than before.

‘My guess was right – it really happened this way,’ Klink thought, and continued quietly,

“Or another example for your tricky way of making anyone think you’re in the camp, but are in truth outside: Your identity as Erik Schafstein last October. Schultz watched you play chess with Carter the whole evening, but in truth someone had taken your place again, wearing your cap and jacket and turning his back to the window so that Schultz could only see said person from behind. I think it happened as Schultz said you pushed a play-stone down on the floor and put it back on the wrong field – cheating. In truth this was the moment you switched places with someone else who wore your leather jacket and your crush-cap. There must have been a reason why you played at the open window the whole evening despite the fact that it was damp and cold outside: You wanted Schultz to see ‘you’ the whole time.”

He cocked his head, as Hogan only stared at him – stiff and tense.

“Like this Pruhst and I met Schafstein on the party, getting ‘proof’ at first hand that you, Robert Hogan, have a doppelganger, who turned out to be non-existent later,” Klink developed his thoughts further. “Like this you killed two birds with one stone: You got Pruhst off your neck and there finally was an explanation as to why someone who looks like you was so often seen during strikes against the Third Reich. Yet the problem was that Hochstetter, after he got word of it, didn’t buy your act – just like me. I knew that it was you the whole time – at the party and later in your barracks.”

“Pruhst and you spoke of a tattoo and you even checked if I have one. But I haven’t, so…”

“Robert, the moment I saw the slightly reddish color on the inside of your underarm and how flushed your face was, I knew the truth. It was you on the party – tattoo or not. By the way, I already knew then that pictures you can glue to the skin exist – a gag for Karneval or parties. You got one, put it
on and came up with the story of how you got the same tattoo like the Feldmarschall’s son. You rubbed it away while you were returning to the camp, switched clothes and sat down in your barracks, ‘playing’ chess with Carter like you’d been doing when Pruhst and I left earlier in the evening. And you were flushed because you had to hurry a lot to be there when we arrived – especially after we left the party earlier than you were able to.” He took a deep breath. “And, besides, I know you too well by now. I would recognize you everywhere, no matter the costume and mask you wear. I know the way you move, how you cock your head, how you chuckle and how you charm your way into everyone’s mind. I know the way you hold a glass and sip at it – or how you try to distract others to change a topic that becomes uncomfortable for you. It was you at the party, no mysterious doppelganger, who – in my eyes – doesn’t even exist.”

He saw how the younger man had gone deathly white by now, as he asked hoarsely,

“If you were convinced that it was me all the time along that evening, why didn’t you reveal me?”

“To Pruhst?” Klink shook his head. “He would have torn you apart, believe me. He isn’t less fanatical than Hochstetter.” He sighed. “I even ‘lost’ my way while we were driving back to the camp, buying you a few minutes like this. You should have heard Pruhst grousing while I turned the car and ‘found’ the main road again.”

Hogan gulped; barely believing his ears. “If what you say is true, then I’m a spy and saboteur. It would have been your duty to stop me at any cost – to give me away to the authorities. But you even tried to help me by stalling for time? Why? It shouldn’t…”

“And it’s your duty to flee, yet you never did. You even returned after you were transferred but were freed by the Underground. Hell, you didn’t even try to escape after I ordered you to take your chance and run away eight days ago. You stayed – despite the fact that Hochstetter was after you,” the Kommandant interrupted him. “Because a) you’ve something very important to do here that doesn’t allow you to go away, and b) you couldn’t let me down. We both forget our duties when the other one is in real danger – and I think that’s the reason why we're both still alive.”

Taking a shuddering breath and still not ready to admit anything, Hogan murmured,

“Of course I warn you if danger closes up. You are our Kommandant here – and a fine man despite your unruly way of handling the camp’s books and exchequer. We have built a kind of friendship over the years and this is stronger than what our superiors are expecting us to do. I warn you, you help me – or you cut my men or me a break when we’ve broken a rule and you let us out of the cooler earlier than originally ordered. One good turn deserves another. But this doesn’t explain why you’re risking trial and execution by staying silent about my trips you’re so convinced of.”
Klink chuckled. “‘Your trips I’m so convinced of’… A nice way of formulation – and so typical for you. Trying to get others to talk by revealing things first in such a way that no-one believes you. Is this a natural streak of yours or have you been trained? I think Pruhst mentioned some kind of special training you underwent before you were sent over the Atlantic to Europe.”

Hogan only looked at him, and the Oberst grimaced. “My dear Robert, I’m absolutely convinced that you are still here because you’ve a special mission to fulfill. For this you are pulling strings in the background in an extent that would even make Himmler dizzy if he should ever learn about it. I remember the day you were chosen to witness the launch of a newly developed rocket to afterwards tell your people of the great success of the Third Reich, so that they would think twice about attacking us again. Several test-starts prior had been very successful, but the start you participated in promptly went to hell.”

“I was locked in my room. You yourself locked me in and opened the door the next morning.”

“As if a locked door could stop you,” Klink said sardonically. “And given the odd, phony attack during the night at the rocket station, I’ve a theory of my own. I don’t want to probe your little gang about this incident. However, I can’t shake off the feeling that they had a big part in it – despite the fact that they should have been here in the camp, many miles away from the test areal.”

Hogan said nothing to this detail. What could he say? After all, his men had really shown up at the rocket station and had helped him – and the Russian spy Mayra – to change the rocket’s programmed course. Schultz had caught them, had seen Hogan’s men in the black SS-uniforms and had decided that he saw ‘nothing’ (like always).

Clearing his throat, Hogan replied with pretended calm, “We were all questioned by Hochstetter afterwards. Except for insulting me he had to admit that none of us, me included, could be blamed. Hell, I even told him how he could formulate an excuse for Berlin.”

The Oberst smirked. “Yes, I’m impressed how you always manage to erase any tracks which could lead to you – mostly. Hell, you’re able to do you tricks right under everyone’s nose. One time a whole tank vanished within my camp, only to be back a day later – another time it was a shot-down plane that disappeared and returned hours afterwards. The latter happened while Feldmarschall von Heiken was ‘kidnapped’ by the Brits and was exchanged for the American Brigade General Barton who had been shot down and had been brought to Stalag 13. If I remember correctly he was also your direct commanding officer. I have a certain feeling that the vanished plane and the kidnapped Feldmarschall are connected. And do you know why? One, the general is your direct superior, as you admitted, and even if he treated you worse than Burkhalter behaves towards me, he’s still your direct CO and we both know how strong your loyalty runs. And two, the voice of the American negotiator during the broadcast, in which the swap of the two officers was demanded, was your voice…”
“I was sitting in your anteroom the whole time, if you would please remember,” Hogan interrupted with a croak; realizing with dread that the game was as good as over. Klink had indeed figured him and the others out. Denial was impossible anymore.

The Oberst rolled his eyes. “You sat there as I left my office to check on you after I recognized that the voice from ‘London’ sounded exactly like yours – and unfortunately I even blurted it out, thinking too late that my carelessness could and would put you in danger. But, of course, somehow you’d already learned that I had recognized you and acted on it; rushing to the Kommandantur and sitting down in the anteroom maybe seconds before we left my office. And I think I know how you learned of it. You’ve placed bugs in my office, haven’t you? Like this you can always show up in time if something goes down the hill and your interference is necessary. Because the latter happens on regular base.”

“I have a good gut-feeling, and simply ‘smell’ it when something bad is in the air,” Hogan pressed out.

“Very funny. Your nose must be better than that of our dogs,” Klink scoffed. “But concerning this particular case, there is a third thing that made it clear to me that there was more going on than it seemed to be. General Barton saluted you first instead of the other way around as he was brought away to be exchanged with our Feldmarschall. Why should a general, who even thought so low of you to accuse you of being a traitor, give you such a high symbol of respect by greeting you first? The answer is easy: It was you who got him out – and he learned of your intervention shortly before he left Stalag 13. I think, Newkirk stood at his side just before he left. Did he tell him of your mission that is such a top-secret that not even your direct CO knew about it?”

Hogan didn’t answer and looked aside; pressing his lips into a thin line. Sweet Lord, Klink knew him as well as maybe his own mother. And obviously there was not much that escaped the Oberst’s attention, even if he masked it so well. Hogan gulped. God help him!

Sighing, the Kommandant rose again, closed the distance to his American counterpart, reached out and placed a hand on his underarm. He felt that the colonel seemed to have turned into stone.

“Rob, stop pretending,” Klink said gently. “We both know that Hochstetter was mostly right with his accusations concerning you. You are running an espionage ring – here, right in my camp and under my nose. You are the man who is behind all the little and bigger stunts, using Stalag 13 as your very own base of operations, and only a few in the Allied High Command know about it to keep the risk of you being revealed as low as possible.” He lowered his voice softly. “You *are* Papa Bear, aren’t you?”
Hogan bit his lips. Klink had pointed out many things similar to Hochstetter – and even more, after all there were incidents of which the major hadn’t been aware of, in contrast to the camp’s Kommandant. And the older man had put together all puzzle-parts he’d collected until he finally got a picture – the right one. Wilhelm Klink was anything but the moron Hogan had always thought him to be. The colonel had to admit the bitter truth that he had been the idiot thinking that he really had Klink fooled for almost three years now.

The horse was out of the barn and closing the door after it was too late. And there was nothing he could do to stop whatever may come now.

He neither could try to replace Klink, nor could he kidnap him and send him to London, where he would be questioned and be treated as a POW. The Saxonian officer had become far more to him than only the ‘idiot’ he needed to go on with his missions. Klink had become his friend – and he was a good man. He owed this man his life, maybe more often than he’d believed until now. And, after all the Oberst had done for him, to repay him with betrayal was out of the question. Hogan wouldn’t do this to Klink – never! Usually he wouldn’t have any other choice if he didn’t want to endanger his men and himself. God alone knew what Klink would do if his assumptions were proven true. Yet… Hogan couldn’t simply eliminate the threat like he had often done before. Too many things stopped him.

And beside the emotional reasons there was one fact that echoed like a shout in his mind: Klink hadn’t given him away despite everything he had witnessed, recognized and assumed. If he understood the Oberst correctly, the older man had been aware of his activities for two years now. Why had Klink covered for them? Yet the more important question was: Would Klink still turn a blind eye on everything, if he would learn of all the things Hogan and his men had been up to? Maybe Klink had stayed silent until now, but eventually the whole truth would be too much for the Kommandant to handle, and he wouldn’t have any other choice than to call the SS. What then? Could he, Hogan, really take this risk?

Klink’s gaze roamed over the younger man’s face. He saw the inner battle Hogan was going through – how caution, training, distrust, fear and the knowledge that he had finally reached a dead end were fighting with each other. The colonel’s fingers, which clutched the material of his pajamas around his upper arms, were shaking, while something flickered in his eyes that made it clear that he was nearing his limits again. In his current condition, learning that his secrets were revealed, could be too much for him to bear. Realizing that Hogan stood at the cliff’s edge, Klink decided to help him a little bit.

Lifting his arms and cupping Hogan’s shoulders, he moved his thumbs in a soothing way, before he softly said, “Robert, there is much proof I got of you being anything but an ‘innocent’ POW within the last years – and I never gave and still won’t give you away, so calm down. There is no need for you to freak out.”
He met the colonel’s gaze and recognized the growing despair behind the uneasiness. Yet there was also an almost desperate hope that indeed everything was okay. Klink could understand him. After being deep inside of the enemy’s country and having faced many fanatical and brutal followers of the merciless regime, Hogan had internalized distrust with every fiber of his being. It was what had kept him and his men alive. If Klink wanted to prove to the younger man that he could trust him, he had to convince him that he wasn’t in danger here – not now and also not during the times earlier.

“I first ignored the many little hints and odd incidents, until I couldn’t look away anymore. Deep down I knew that you are the man half of the Gestapo, SS and Wehrmacht are after – yet I couldn’t stop protecting you as best as I could. The first time I really became aware of you being more than my senior POW was two years ago. There was an event that forced me to make a decision: Tell the authorities what I’d found out, or stay silent. I chose the latter. Remember the day you came to my office and told me that a Gestapo-major – Hegel – had offered to get you and your men out of the camp in exchange for diamonds worth a million dollars?”

Hogan nodded wordlessly; tensed like a bow ready to let an arrow fly. So much depended on the next minutes. He had to make his own decisions on how to proceed now; decisions he didn’t want to make and he caught himself praying to all higher beings that Klink could indeed prove that he was an ally. He didn’t want to go against the older man. The mere thought made him sick.

“I asked you how you were able to contact him – or how he got in contact with you, after all this bastard had never been in Stalag 13. I also wanted to know how you wanted to get so many diamonds,” Klink continued, while he let go of the American, but remained in front of him. “Every time you said ‘I can’t tell you’, yet I agreed to play your game of cat-and-mouse. Hell, I even kept my mouth shut as the other Gestapo-guys interviewed you after the whole misery in my office. It was you who told them how it came that Hegel was shot, and you served them one of the biggest fish-stories and lies I had heard in a very long time. Why, do you think, did I not intervene but covered for you by staying silent?”

“Because they would have partly blamed you for Hegel’s death – and for the attempt of our almost escape,” Hogan whispered. He knew that any denial was for naught, yet he couldn’t help but try to change the course the ship had taken.

“No, my dear Robert, I kept my mouth shut because otherwise they would have had your ass for it. The story you served up to me as you came to my office two days earlier had so many inconsistencies I’m still surprised that you came up with it at all. Usually your tales are more thought-through. The report you gave the Gestapo sounded far more convincing, so I let them buy it. You can also thank me that I removed the little box Hegel carried with him – a wooden box that was made of teak. We use oak wood, the Brits favor teak – a certain evidence of the box’ origin. And then its content: Diamonds – approximately worth one million dollars; the payment Hegel demanded. You got them to fake the payment – despite the fact that you’re a POW in a camp with only a small town nearby.” Klink sighed as he saw how Hogan looked away again. “May I tell you what I think was really going on during this crazy incident and how you got the gems?”
“Not really,” Hogan murmured; feeling dizzy as everything began to crash down on him.

“You and your men were blackmailed by Hegel,” Klink continued as if he hadn’t heard the colonel’s answer, “because he found out about you. He threatened to arrest and execute you all if he wouldn’t get paid – in the form of diamonds. Yet, clever as you are, you knew that Hegel couldn’t allow you and your men to remain alive afterwards, so you needed a way out. In your dilemma you turned to me, knowing that a) I would do everything to keep my flawless record, and that b) I couldn’t permit that this scumbag would put the blame on me for the pretended escape of you and the others. Therefore, I was your only chance to get you out of the mess alive.”

“If you would please remember that you heard Hegel blackmailing me further with your own two ears? He also gave instructions where the hand-over should be – and you heard it,” Hogan desperately tried to turn the wheel a last time.

Klink smiled sourly. “Yes, I do remember very well the two hours I pretended to be a simple soldier, and Schultz gave me a little payback for one or the other stern word by shouting at me the whole time. And I remember your and Hegel’s little talk while I cowered behind the major’s staff-car and heard how the guy, who’d never met me before, called me an idiot – an insult you agreed to.” He shot his grimacing American counterpart a dark glance.

“It’s difficult to disagree with someone when you’re facing a dead-end,” Hogan pressed out.

Klink rolled his eyes. “Come on, you did it before – only a few days ago.” He saw Hogan stiffening anew, and sighed. “Robert, the point is: I knew that Hegel wasn’t offering you an escape which you knew would lead to your and your men’s death in the end. Then you could simply have declined the offer. No, he was blackmailing you with something completely different. The moment you told me that it would be a mistake to call the Gestapo-Headquarters in Berlin to let them take care of Hegel, I knew something was amiss. You said that the black-cladded bastards stick together and wouldn’t arrest one of their own, even if said someone tried to get rich by helping POWs escape for payment. This was another hollow explanation as to why I should try to get Hegel and not the Gestapo. Yes, the dudes hold together but only on the surface. Internally, they’re fighting each other like the mangy dogs they are, and you know this like I do. Some guys who wanted to replace Hegel and get his position would have loved to arrest him.”

“How should I know that one of your elite units tear each other apart – for whatever reasons? I haven’t had that many experiences with the Gestapo and…”

“I think you’ve even more experiences with those bastards than I – and I’m the highest ranking Luftwaffe-officer in the area when Burkhalter is in Berlin.” Klink shook his head. “No, Hogan, you
know exactly how these black- or leather-clad maniacs tick – the reason why you were forced to turn to me for help. You were caught in a trap you couldn’t get out on your own anymore. Hegel held something over your head that made it impossible for you to allow an official arrest, and this something was the knowledge of your secrets. He would have blown your cover if he wouldn’t have been paid to stay silent – and he was certainly going to kill you as soon as he received the diamonds he had demanded. So you had to get rid of him – and because it is very dangerous to eliminate someone from the Gestapo, who may even have partners in crime who knew what he knew, everything had to look like an accident. And this was the moment you brought me into your game.”

Hogan, still clinging to denial, shook his head. “What should he have found out about m…”

“He found out the same thing Hochstetter did, like Pruhst did – like I did, even if I denied it for a long time,” Klink stated firmly. “You are the chief of the espionage-ring here in the area; an active member of the Underground. Hegel blackmailed you, and you had no chance to silence him without risking others revealing the real reason for his death. So you had no other choice than to play along and get support from another side – from me.”

Hogan stared at him; his breathing was uneven. “You are convinced of this,” he gritted out, and Klink snorted.

“Damn right I’m convinced of all this – because it’s the truth.” He sighed as he saw how Hogan pressed his lips into a thin line again while lowering his gaze for the third time. Hogan had certainly undergone hard training before he took over his mission. He was clever like a fox and stubborn like a whole herd of mules, yet the colonel could only lie to a certain degree – this much was clear to Klink. And it showed him one time more that his American counterpart was still a good man – a man who had been risking everything for almost three years now without knowing that someone he thought to be an enemy had begun to support him from the background for many months.

“Everything clicked into place the moment I found the little box with hundreds of diamonds Hegel carried with him,” the Kommandant added. “I personally searched his dead body after you and the others were secure on the truck; already anticipating that you had somehow gotten hold of the demanded gems to give Hegel the impression that you’d submitted to his demands. I let one of the stones get examined by a jeweler in Hammelburg. They are phony diamonds, of course. Very well made, but still fake. This faked payment stalled enough time for you and your men until I and my men arrived to save your butt.”

The colonel had the unpleasant feeling as if someone had pulled the rug away from under his feet and he was in free fall now. Klink had indeed figured everything out! God help them all – and God help him, Robert E. Hogan! If it would turn out that Klink wasn’t an ally, Hogan would be forced to take action against him – and he didn’t want to!
Klink still voiced his thoughts. “Am I wrong that the major wanted to kill you after he got what he
wanted?”

“No, you’re not wrong,” the American officer whispered. “He wanted to get rid of my men and me.
He… he was about to shoot us as you arrived.”

Klink growled in exasperation. “You and your damn schemes! One day you’ll really meet your
maker before your time because of your crazy plans.” He shook his head, before he glanced back at
the deathly pale American. “The phony diamonds… I’ve asked myself many times how you were
able to get hold of them to present them to Hegel. Maybe you can enlighten me? And please don’t
come up with such a silly lie like the one you told me when I asked you how Hegel and you had
come in contact with each other. ‘Reflections of mirrors’, really Hogan! As if not one of our guards
would have seen it if you and someone outside of the camp were signaling each other with little
illumination-plays.”

“This wasn’t a good explanation, right?” Hogan murmured; feeling nauseous while a piercing
headache approached him.

“No, it was one of your less brilliant ideas to trot me out.” Klink sighed and cocked his head. “I think
you got the diamonds the same way you got the penicillin for me last year: London sent them.” He
watched how the younger man swayed slightly, reached out and took his shoulders into a strong, yet
gentle grip again. “Robert, please don’t fear for yourself – or your men. Neither you nor they are in
danger. Not if I can prevent it. I have presumed the truth for over two years now. And after
everything that happened within the last days – and after the further details Burkhalter got from
Hochstetter, which I was able to refute in a small way – I simply know that my strong assumptions
are correct. I only want your admission because keeping this whole operation a secret is becoming
more and more impossible for you and the effort is eating you alive. And, by the way, it's giving me
the chills by now. Despite all your attempts you’ve left a lot of tracks during your operations here in
Germany and they are about to come back to you. I try to protect you, but to do so in the future, I
have to know the plain truth. So tell me, clear and simple: Are you Papa Bear?”

Hogan had trouble breathing.

Game over!

Any denial, excuse or further lie wouldn’t lead to anything.

This was it – the end of everything he had worked for and tried so hard to hide. They could do with
him whatever they wanted, but…
“My men,” he croaked. Fear rose in him like an icy storm.

Klink blinked in confusion, then he realized what was going through Hogan’s mind, and groaned, “For crying lout out, Robert, when will it get into your thick head that I won’t give you or your men away? I could have done it for a very long time now, but I didn’t. Rather the opposite. I tried to cover for you as much as I could after I realized that the poison-gnome had a few good points. I observed you, and noted many little details that spoke their own language when you put them together under certain aspects. I concluded that Hochstetter and the others were right – that you are indeed the Underground-agent half of Germany is after. Yet I covered for you, and will continue to do so.”

“Why?” was the only thing Hogan could reply; his brilliant mind was close to becoming blank due to the stress and added pressure it had to endure.

“I have my reasons, but believe me, they have nothing to do with any form of abusing your situation like Hegel tried to do and maybe others have already done.” Klink took another deep breath. “Robert, are you Papa Bear?”

“If you’re so convinced that you know the truth, why ask me to admit to it?” Hogan tried to stall for time, even if he didn’t know anymore for what.

“Because I want to hear it from you. After all I did for you – and your men – I think I’ve earned the truth and your trust. So, once again: Are you Papa Bear?"

Hogan took a shuddering breath. Maybe Klink was really an ally, but how much of his mission could he, Hogan, give away without pushing the Oberst to the limits of what he could bear? He knew that Klink was a patriot who only loathed the current regime – but how far did this loathing go?

‘At least far enough to keep covering your ass during the last years and to take the risk of being hanged with you, Rob,’ his inner voice told him. ‘And at least far enough to punch a Gestapo-major, to risk his life by getting you out of a crossfire – literally – and to even stand up against his own superior officer. Far enough to let you sleep in his quarters, in his bed even, and to nurse you back to health with tender care. So, how much more does he have to do until you get it into your thick skull that Klink is trustworthy?’

“Robert?” The older man’s voice was quiet – and sounded almost pleading. This here was a question
of trust, and after everything Klink had just told and done for him, Hogan knew that he couldn’t keep up the denial any longer. It would be useless anyway.

As if someone had cut the strings of a puppet, the colonel seemed to falter into himself. There was nothing he could do anymore except for pray that Klink would, indeed, not tell anyone what he got confirmed now. The consequences for them all would be deadly.

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, I’m Papa Bear.”

TBC…

NOW it’s in the open – the one thing Hogan desperately tried to keep to himself despite the trust he has developed for his German counterpart within the last days. But Klink is cleverer and far more intelligent than Hogan gave him credit for. And after all his missions, operations, pranks and other deeds, it was only a question of time until he was figured out. Well, okay, Hochstetter was the first but luckily this dude’s opinion doesn’t count in the moment – but Klink’s does. And our ‘Balding Eagle’ knew that he couldn’t delay ‘The Talk’ any longer.

I hope, you liked how ‘Willie’ put one and two together, and which TV-episodes were deciding to open his eyes.

In the next chapter, I’ll refer to more episodes which were crucial and how some events happened from Klink’s point of view. And, of course, both men have to come to terms with this big secret being out in the open between them. Everything depends now, if Klink continues to walk the way he had chosen as he began to support Hogan in secret, or if the fact that Robert is one of the most-wanted men in Germany will be too much for the usual cowardly Kommandant. It’s not a question of honor alone, but also of the heart.

I remember that I loved to write these scenes, and it was pure fun to read through them again and to add / change a few things. I hope, you enjoyed ‘The Talk’ so far. And, like always, I’m absolutely curious what you think of it, so I’m looking forward to your comments.

Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Love
Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so very much for the big feedback. I knew that Klink detecting everything out and Hogan confirming his Underground-identity would meet your liking – and your bafflement. Yeah, ‘ol’ Klink’ has his moments after all, and Hogan knows when he’s entered a dead end; literary or not.

I don’t want to reveal too much about the new chapter in advance, so I simply wish you fun,

Love,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 23 – A matter of trust

Hogan’s admission hung in the air. For a moment there was nothing more than silence – the heavy silence that usually comes before a storm breaks loose. The colonel watched his German counterpart; tensed like he’d rarely been before. The next seconds would show if Klink really was an ally or not. And, dammit, he didn’t have a weapon. But, even if he had one, he couldn’t imagine using it against the older man. Hell, he would rather send Klink to London than harm him, yet… ‘Please, Lord, let him be on our side!’

The Oberst let out a long and noisy exhale. “Finally,” he breathed. “That took some doing!”

The German officer felt himself a little bit thrown off after he’d finally gotten the affirmation of everything he had puzzled out. A small part of him was angry that Hogan had indeed played him all these years, on the other hand he had allowed it. He had permitted his American counterpart's manipulation of him – he let him play his games and draw a red herring across his back. Even if Hogan’s secretiveness was a sort of betrayal, Klink couldn’t blame him; after all, the younger man was fighting against the worst madman of the world and his brutal regime.
And, as Klink had to admit, he was relieved that everything was in the open now. As much as he had enjoyed the challenge of guessing or finding out what Hogan was up to or had done, the times had changed dramatically within the last week. Hochstetter would do everything to take Hogan and him, Klink, with him when falling from grace and facing punishment. Burkhalter was no fool. Klink knew that Hochstetter had been able to wake suspicion and doubt in the general, which would lead to Burkhalter watching Stalag 13 and the whole area nearby like a hawk; ready to clamp down at the tiniest evidence that the major had been right. And Hochstetter would present everything he had found out during the trial to save his neck. Whatever Hogan’s tasks and missions would be within the next weeks, Klink had to know about them to properly cover for them. They had to be more careful than ever before, or the next eager Gestapo-officer would stick his nose in Hogan’s secret business.

The Gestapo…

“So, Hochstetter was right all this time,” Klink sighed; shaking his head. “At least he doesn’t get to learn about it. I would really begrudge him this satisfaction.”

“What now?” Hogan asked; his eyes and his tone gave his anxiety and almost inhuman tension away.

Klink snorted and sat back down on the bed’s edge, sighed, combed through the ring of his hair, rubbed his forehead and sighed again, before he looked up the other man.

“What I’ve done before – keeping my mouth shut, pretending to be blind and deaf, and covering for you. As I already stated earlier: I wouldn’t do anything that could cost you your life. But given the fact that Hochstetter figured everything out, too, we’ve to be more cautious. The bastard will certainly try to get himself out of trouble by revealing everything he knows to the judges, even if he has no proof, and I’m sure Burkhalter and the Gestapo will be watching us vigilantly. Whatever your next tasks are, you have to be very, very careful, or we both face the hangman.”

Hogan stared at him; barely able to believe what Klink just said – that he would continue to keep the missions a secret and even begged the colonel to be more cautious. The Kommandant would rather risk execution than letting him, Hogan, and the others down? “Why?” he rasped; not daring to hope that the older man truly was on his side, something that would eliminate any actions he would be forced to take against Klink. “Why do you protect me? Why are you helping us against your own country?”

“I’m no traitor, if you think that’s the reason,” the Oberst murmured, while he realized the state Hogan was in. Gently, he patted the empty spot beside him. “Come on, Robert, have a seat. You
look ready to drop with exhaustion.”

The colonel swallowed. The last hour had cost him more than he was ready to admit. First, reading the transcript of his own report concerning his captivity had forced him to re-live the whole hell in his mind again. Then, the fact that Klink had figured everything about the ‘Unsung Heroes’ out, and now the reviving hope that he and his men were still safe – that the man they had all thought to be part of the enemy (even if he was a humane and polite opponent) had protected them and would continue to do so.

And there was a further, private thing that made Hogan’s knees go weak: A part of him had hoped, even longed, for all this. He had yearned to share his fears and superhuman responsibility with someone who could really understand how high the price was he had to pay day by day. He had hoped that the rising confidence he had developed for the older man within the last days wasn’t a mistake – that his gut had been right again as he was letting down his guard around Klink more and more. He had somehow sensed that he could trust him, and the relief now, as Klink proved to be a real friend, with all the consequences of such a thing, was almost too much for the beaten up American.

Sitting down beside Klink, his shoulders slumped, while he rubbed his temples; once again ignoring the material of the mull. Klink watched him with sympathy. With contentment he saw that some color was returning to the younger man’s deathly white cheeks, something that was visible despite the colorful bruises. “Relief can make someone dizzy, right?” the Oberst asked softly, placing a hand on Hogan’s shoulder once more.

“You have no idea,” the colonel murmured; feeling drained.

“Oh, believe me, Robert, I know exactly how fear and tension can almost drive you crazy – and the relief afterwards empties you like a plug pulled from a filled bathtub.”

Hogan turned his head and looked straight at Klink. “A nice comparison,” he deadpanned.

“But mirrors the feeling, doesn’t it?”

For a second the colonel’s mouth curled, then he whispered, “You said you’re no traitor, and I never took you for one. I know that you don’t agree with what is going on here in Germany, yet it never occurred to me that this would be enough for you to… rebel against your country.”
“I’m not rebelling against my country, Hogan. I love my fatherland dearly, but it doesn’t exist anymore. This madman and his fellows have perverted it into nothing more than a sick, twisted and dark parody of the Germany I know. This Germany here is filled with death, blood-shed, cruelty, fear and despair. And it more and more keeps turning into a demonic twilight zone day by day – not just because of the war, but mainly because of what the regime does.”

His face became stern. “You asked me why I support you. The answer is easy: I want my country back, Hogan. I want this beautiful land to heal. I want the people here to once again live in freedom and peace, not in fear that some guys in black clothes or leather-coats spying on them are going to throw them into jails and labor camps as soon as they don’t agree with the dictatorship the mighty people in Berlin call ‘politics’. I want the destruction of my country to stop and I want the children not to cry as soon as they hear some noises in the air. I want the little ones to play openly on the streets again without risking being too late to find shelter during the next aircraft attack – I want women not to have to keep weeping their eyes out because their fathers, brothers, husbands or sons will never come home again. I want an end to this insanity – and this can only happen when the war is finally over.”

He realized that he had talked himself into a mixture of rage and sorrow, and tried to calm himself down, before he continued. “After my graduation at the Academy I made an oath to protect my land, no matter what – even if it would cost me my life. I have to stop this ongoing insanity, but being a Kommandant of a POW-camp in the middle of nowhere, I don’t have a chance of accomplishing much of anything. Hell, I rarely get any information about what is really going on outside, but I can support those people who fight these madmen from beneath. That’s why I help you, Hogan, by covering for you or feeding wrong information to the Gestapo or SS. On the outside I may support them and bow to their demands to prevent them from becoming suspicious, but do you have any clue how often I led Hochstetter – or other guys who came to investigate odd incidents – on a wild goose chase? I’ve lost count, but at least I can do something.”

His gaze held Hogan’s firmly. “You and your men have fought the Nazis in your own way, and harmed and prevented so many of their schemes that it really influences the war. The acts of sabotage, the vanished scientists or staff-officers, the information you gathered and certainly sent to London – this all slowed down this crazy machinery of war that is squashing my country. Your activities have brought and are still bringing the United Allies advantages that will cost Hitler the victory in the end, and I pray that this day comes soon.”

“You are not the only one who prays for it. Believe me, a lot of people think like you and yearn for an end to all this,” Hogan said quietly; thunderstruck by all those admissions he’d just heard. He had known that Klink was no Nazi and that he feared but also hated the regime, but what the older man had just said surpassed the colonel’s assumptions in spades. “You do know that you would be facing a firing squad if regime-loyal people heard you now?”

Klink snorted and took a deep breath. “Burkhalter and the others would certainly call me a traitor if they knew what I’m thinking, but in truth they are the traitors. They have first ignored and then even helped change this country into hell, where people are kidnapped and forced to build the regime’s
lunatic great projects – gigantic recreation homes on the island Rügen, the congress-hall in Nürnberg that is planned to be the middle of a whole district of 11 km² only for Hitler’s party, the hidden factories and more. They took all our Jewish fellow citizens captive and transported them to camps – camps they’re calling ‘working camps’, but I’ve heard enough rumors within the last two years of what they’re for real: execution camps. I’m sick only imagining that this might be true – that they’re killing the people there. Innocent men, women, children…”

He shook his head and balled his hands into fists.

“The same in Poland,” he continued. “I don’t think that the Poles attacked first. I’d bet my last shirt that it was a fake to give Hitler a reason to finally raid our neighbors. France, the Netherlands, Belgium, the countries in the East, Greece… I could weep if I weren’t so furious. We were once the nation of poets and philosophers, now we’re the land of murderers and butchers.”

“Will,” Hogan softly said while laying a hand on the other man’s thigh in a soothing manner; using the English shortened version of the Oberst’s given name for the first time ever. “Not all are like this. I’ve met a lot German men and women who are decent people with high ethical standards and good hearts. I’m sure, if given a chance to rebuild their country, Germany can be a good land again.”

Klink gulped. The whole talk had made him take a ride on the same emotional rollercoaster Hogan had previously been on, yet the younger man’s comforting hand on his thigh was indeed calming him down. “I hope so,” he whispered. “I hope with all my heart that there are enough good people left who can build up our country again – a country that is worth living in. I know it will be a long, hard way paved with sharp stones, and I do realize that we won’t be able to do it alone. Germany is almost torn to pieces, and until the war ends, I think there isn’t much left that can be a solid root to let a new tree of life bloom.” He moistened his lips. “But the same goes for so many other countries we attacked and then bled white. I dare not think of all the little towns, villages and areas that the Wehrmacht and the SS raided, all their people killed. When this insanity has finally burnt out, what will remain won’t be only sorrow and tears, but also a lot of grudges and understandable hate. Overcoming this will be an even bigger challenge than building new houses and streets, and it will certainly last for decades.”

He turned his head and looked straight into Hogan’s eyes. “That’s another reason why I support you, Robert. Our world needs people like you to heal – to become strong and better.”

“People like me”? Will, I’m a spy and a saboteur. I lie, I cheat, I delude, I’ve even killed – and the latter not only during my time as a bomber-pilot.”

He gave Hogan a short smile. “I know, Robert, yet you are still a good man. I’m aware that you have to kill sometimes. It’s what soldiers are forced to do whenever there isn’t any other choice left. Yes, there are enough men in uniform who kill just because they can and even feel great about it. And
there are men like you – who only kill if there isn’t another option left. As far as I recognize you keep the number of victims low. You still have scruples, you are still human. You are a warrior in the best sense of the word. I can support such a man, but not those maniacs who are only ruled by their hunger for power and might, no matter the many lives they took, uncaring of how much pain and tears they’re bringing upon other people.”

The American officer carefully rubbed his neck. “To admit the truth, the killing-aspect is the only part of being a soldier I hate. You never only kill a person, you also bring sorrow over many other people with every life you take. Yes, I wouldn’t hesitate to eliminate the big bubble-beard in Berlin or his fanatical fellows, because I don’t think they can be stopped otherwise. But I usually try to spare my opponents – even the black-clad ones. I interrupted a mission once because a patrol of SS-guys came along. They would have been caught in… in what we were about to do. I ordered a stop to our preparations and returned later to finish what we had started.” He took another deep breath. “I know that the SS is the worst unit of the German army and that they bring a lot of pain, even over their own people, but the guys were still so young. Their whole life lay in front of them and… and I do know that a few of them are misguided or simply forced to serve. Just like Schmidt.” He slowly shook his head. “I couldn’t take responsibility for their death, enemy or not.”

Klink smiled and patted Hogan’s hand. “There you have your answer as to why I regard you as a good man.”

“Yeah – and sometimes showing mercy comes back to you and bites you in the ass,” Hogan grumbled.

Klink sighed for the uncounted time and lent himself sideways back on one of his underarms – square over the mattress and the blankets; not caring that he crumpled the envelope with the documents in the process.

“That’s the risk every good man takes when he puts mercy over justice. Sometimes it comes back and punches us straight in the face, yet we would do it again. And do you know why?”

Hogan looked down at him; surprised about the casual behavior the Kommandant displayed by lying there like this. “Because we’re better than them?” he guessed, and Klink smiled at him again.

“Exactly. If we would change, we wouldn’t be better than those guys we’re fighting.”

Hogan watched him closely – and felt some more tension melting away. Yes, this could all be one big charade of Klink’s to lull him into a false sense of security, but his inner voice, his gut, told him that the older man wasn’t following a scheme of his own – that he, Hogan, and the others didn’t need
to fear any betrayal from the Kommandant.

“And because we two are thinking the same way, you began to support me,” Hogan mused. “You took some big risks here, you know.”

Klink snorted and sat up again. “My dear Robert, do you have any idea how many risks I've taken – or how often I had to use crass methods to keep you alive? I tried to keep you safe since I became suspicious of your true role here within the camp – and of your deadly games. Why, do you think, did I send Schultz to you to warn you about the arrival of a radio detector? I knew that you must have a radio, otherwise you couldn’t gain the knowledge of most of the newest events you have. Why, do you think, did I stall for time with Hochstetter in Hammelburg last year while you and your men were inside the house to ‘save’ LeBeau? I knew that in truth you'd smuggled this woman from the Underground away before the Gestapo could get her. Let me guess, the old lady you so gentlemanly offered a ride in my staff-car was said woman, right? You costumed her perfectly in the time I stalled for you, so everyone saw an old granny in her, but in truth she was the Underground-agent Hochstetter was after. And there were so many more cases in which I played the dumb idiot, laid false trails or simply jumped on the train you presented to Burkhalter, Hochstetter and the others.” He chuckled, as he saw the awe on Hogan’s face. “And I did it without even being sure that you were, indeed, a spy and saboteur, yet I sensed that you faced danger whenever one of the brass became suspicious, so I covered for you. Just in case, you know.”

“You… did all this on purpose to cover for me?” Hogan wasn’t just thunderstruck, he felt overwhelmed. “You risked your neck dozens of times only because you thought I could be an Underground-agent? And later, as you became more and more certain in your assumption you supported me in secret?” He shook his head. “You… you are incredible.”

“What should I have done?” Klink shrugged. “I already told you that I loathe the regime, that I had no real chance of fighting them successfully, and I felt it deep in my bones that you are the man who throws so many sabots into the war-machinery that it could one day be enough to stop the insanity. So I helped you. And, by the way, you know I like you.” The latter was the underestimation of the century. Klink himself was taken aback by how strong his feelings for the younger man ran – especially now as he saw the utter gratefulness and wonder in Robert’s soft brown eyes. For a second he thought he could also see affection in them, and the Oberst’s heart began to beat quicker.

For a moment they held each other’s gaze, then Hogan sighed and his shape relaxed fully. Resting both underarms on his thighs, he murmured, “If I would have known that you are on our side, several things would have certainly gone differently – and would have been easier. Like you covered for me, I tried to keep you safe in return, too, but I had to mask it and keep it a secret. The two times you were arrested in the camp, I got you out. Right, the first time I had to play with open cards, and the second time I had Schultz’ support, who – by the way – came to me for help. Despite your grousing at him at every given chance, he likes you.”
“I know that our relationship is… chaotic. He drives me up the wall almost every day – but I also know that he is a loyal soul and a true friend.” Klink grimaced and sat up again. “I know that I’m not always fair to him, but… I’m sitting between two chairs my whole life, Robert, and sometimes it is difficult to react or to do what is right.” He glanced back at the colonel. “But I’m aware of his loyalty – and of yours. I know that both times it was you who got me out and even saved my reputation – as low as it is. And I don’t speak of the several times you prevented my transfer to the Russian Front or me getting into real mortal trouble. I remember very well how you helped me after Major Strauss from Stalag 5 found out about my… short private drawings from the camp’s exchequer. If you wouldn’t have intervened, I certainly would have faced serious punishment, maybe even an execution. Did I ever thank you for the many times you helped me?”

“Yes, while we sipped cognac,” Hogan smirked. Then he turned serious again. “But, really, Willie, if I would have known of your true intentions, many things would have been easier for me.”

“I know what you mean. Yet I wasn’t absolutely sure of you being… well… Papa Bear. I was only finally completely convinced of you being an Underground-agent after I got you away from Hochstetter’s clutches and Burkhalter told me all the details Hochstetter had gleaned. I wanted to speak with you about it, but first I wanted you to heal a little bit. And if you wouldn’t have thrown your angry fit earlier, I wouldn’t have brought up the topic so soon.”

“Sparing me again?” Hogan huffed, but felt himself softening, as he caught the older man’s gentle smile.

“I can’t help it – I care for you.” Klink shortly lowered his gaze before he asked, “Are you going to tell your men that I know who you are for real now?”

“Yes, yet I think I’ve to prepare them first – I’ve to take it slowly. They do accept you and, after you officially saved my butt two times within the last days, I think they've begun to develop some respect for you, but…”

Klink began to chuckle. “Newkirk and Kinchloe almost became my bodyguards while von Neuhaus was here in my quarters threatening me. They placed themselves behind him like solid heaps of rocks, and glared at him as if they wanted to strangle him. And when the whole chaos broke loose outside as the SS-rats had to leave my camp in haste, they accompanied me – making sure that I’m okay.” He smiled. “Do you think it means that I’ve found mercy in their eyes?”

Hogan snickered, satisfied. “Maybe. But still… give them some time. It will be difficult for them to realize that you’re not the enemy they thought you to be – especially for Newkirk, I think – but that you are on our side and have even kept us safe within the last two years. They will have a hard time understanding this.”
“Distrust and grudges, eh?” Klink made a face. “I can accept this, yet I would really feel better if your men would regard me as an ally. Not because it would stroke my ego, but because I could support you better if I know what you and they are up to. As I said, Hochstetter will try everything to take you and me with him during his fall, and we will have to be very, very careful within the next weeks. I don’t think that the war will last for very much longer, and I really have no urge to face a firing squad a few days or weeks before we reach the finish line.”

“Believe it or not, but I’m totally on the same page here,” Hogan joked, then a shudder ran through his body – something that wasn’t missed by the older man.

“You should lie down again, Rob,” he said softly; concern lay in his eyes. “The last hour was almost too much for you.”

“Like I said: I’m not made of glass,” the colonel grumbled.

“No, you are simply human,” Klink replied and rose. Waving his hand towards the mattress, he smiled, “Come on, lie down and try to find some sleep. There is nothing left anymore that could rob you of your rest now. Your secrets are still safe, your men and you are safe and maybe now I can relieve you of some burdens in the future.”

Hogan, who was about to crawl under the blanket, looked questioningly up at the Kommandant. Klink met the asking glance and gently explained, “I know that you are still a little bit wary, and this is okay. Only a fool would be too trusting in your position, and I understand that you will have a hard time, too, realizing that your idiot enemy is in truth your supporter and keeper. I will not hassle or pester you to share every scheme of yours with me. If you entrust me with something, I’m glad. If you decide you still want to keep several things away from my knowledge, I can live with that. But please always remember one thing: I’m here for you – and your men. I will continue to protect you as much as I can, no matter what. It would be easier for me if I learn in advance what your tasks will be, but I managed to cover for you and your men for two years now, I’m able to do so further without having detailed knowledge of what you are doing. Only share with me what is comfortable for you, not more, okay?”

For the uncounted time Hogan could only stare, baffled, at the German officer, then a true, warm smile spread over his bruised face. “God, how much I was mistaken about you.”

Klink began to laugh quietly and couldn’t help himself: He rubbed his hands in satisfaction. “That I
was able to fool you like this, is grist for my mill. You are the cleverest man I’ve ever met – a true fox. And that I could lead you on a merry dance for so long shows me that we two have something more in common.”

“And what’s that?” Hogan asked; mirth appeared in his eyes as he became aware of the humor of the whole situation.

“We two are masters of masquerades.”

The American colonel burst out laughing – and held his sides a second later; groaning but also chuckling.

Gripping for the envelope, Klink walked towards the door. “Try to rest, Robert, or we will both face a grousing medic.”

“Aye, sir,” Hogan answered, anything but serious.

Watching the younger man finally slipping beneath the covers, the Oberst was about to leave the room, but he really wanted to know one thing. “May I ask how many tunnels are beneath my camp?”

A still small and a normal eye looked with great innocence at him. “What do you mean?”

“Please, Hogan, not this story again,” Klink groaned. “There were three tunnels you allowed me to discover – or revealed them by leading others to them. I still remember very well how the inspector broke into one and was stuck there. Or how you tricked Hochstetter into believing that there was an attempted mass-escape, revealing the tunnel in Barracks 3. Or the tunnel in your barracks beneath the washing-sink. I convicted you and your men to 30 days in the cooler, but got you out only a few days later, because I couldn’t stand to see you and the others suffering.” He took a deep breath. “You and your men indeed come and go like you want, otherwise you couldn’t fulfill your missions. So there have to be a few tunnels more. How many are there?”

Robert watched him, saw the amusement deep beneath the curiosity in the older man’s eyes and smiled, “Well, we’ve a few tunnels. Don’t ask me how many.”

Klink paled and stared at him. “Are they secured? Or do I have to fear that the whole camp will
vanish in them?"

Hogan chuckled. “They held until now. I see no reason why they should collapse or should cause any other problems.”

“But they did cause problems, right? This sudden well with ‘healing abilities’ was one of them, wasn’t it?”

Sheepishly, the colonel looked at him. “Well, you and Burkhalter enjoyed the bath, didn’t you?”

“Yes, it was my absolute dream to lay side by side with Burkhalter in bathtubs,” Klink complained. Then he cocked his head. “But the warm water was pleasant. Yet, I don’t know how it was possible that a spring with many minerals appeared and vanished again.”

The colonel shortly pursed his lips and decided that there would be no harm in telling the story. “Well, one of the water-pipes broke and I feared that our tunnels would be found during any engineering work. So I came up with the idea of a well that holds a lot of minerals.”

Klink frowned. “I had the water checked in a lab. How did you…” He hesitated and then his eyes widened. “You mixed something into the water our scientists found!”

Hogan grinned at him like a boy relishing in a prank gone well. “Yep,” he said; nodding with a broad smirk.

“And I bought the trick,” the Kommandant gasped.

Again, the American made an affirming gesture while he smiled impishly.

Klink let his head sink into his neck; looking accusingly at the ceiling. “Why me!” He glared back at Hogan, saw the mirth in his eyes – and felt himself melting. Good God, what did this man do to him! “And why this whole theater?” he asked; already assuming the answers.

“We needed your and Burkhalter’s uniforms for our mission,” the colonel replied nonchalantly; chuckling as he saw the Oberst grimacing and heard him grumble something he couldn’t understand.
“Don’t fret. It wasn’t anything dramatic. We only had to smuggle a few people away and couldn’t do it the usual way because of the added guards in the area.”

“How many people have you smuggled away since you started this reckless game?” Klink wanted to know. The answer made him almost dizzy.

“A few hundreds.”

“Sweet Lord!” The German officer shook his head. “And all the time it didn’t occur to you that one of them could be caught and would maybe give you away?”

“Oh, I knew about the risk. But like you said earlier: We’ve to support those who fight the Nazis or otherwise help prevent Hitler from winning the war. And bringing those people to safety is one of the many things we’re doing here. Just remember last December as we persuaded Hochstetter to send arrested Underground-agents away in his own car. It was one of the many tricks we had to use to save other people’s lives.”

“Yes, risking your own in the process,” Klink growled.

“I had and still have a guardian angel,” Hogan answered; his smile softened. “A guardian angel in a German Luftwaffe-uniform.”

The Kommandant sighed. “Just remember to inform you ‘guardian angel’ about your next tasks, Rob, or even he may not be able to help you in time for once. I don’t want to see you beaten and bruised ever again – or about to get killed.” His voice was gentle; almost pleading. And his eyes told what his mouth still stayed silent about: ‘I couldn’t bear losing you.’

Hogan’s gaze roamed over the older man’s face. The worry he saw was real – so was the care. He meant something to the Oberst, this much was certain. And if it wouldn’t sound too odd, he would say he meant a lot to Klink.

“I will remember this, Wilhelm,” he replied quietly and downright serious. “You are right, I still have to learn to utterly trust you, but I will remember that you have been protecting me for many months now – and that you even stood up against the Gestapo to keep me safe. You are a real friend – an honorable man between wolves and harpies – and I’ll turn to you when I know that I’m going to need help.”
“Even if you don’t want to admit that you’re in need of support, just don’t forget that I’m with you –
no matter what.”


“You are welcome, Rob,” he replied gently; his eyes shone with a warmth that did odd things to the
colonel’s suddenly quicker beating heart. With a “Sleep well,” Klink left the room – happier than he
had been in a very long time. Robert had trusted him enough to lay his life and that of his men in his
hands. And the Oberst would never betray this trust. Yet his happiness resulted in several more
things: Finally he would be able to support Robert better; finally everything that had weighed him
down, too, was out in the open. They shared more now than only a forced working-relationship,
some bargains, jokes and chess-games. They were depending more on each other now than ever
before – and it felt so right. Because he knew together they were second to none: The experienced
fox and the aging eagle.

And then he had to grin as he recalled the typical behavior of those two wild animals. A fox strolled
through the undergrowth, got wind of something worthy enough of being tracked down, followed
his incredibly fine nose and didn’t give up until he had succeeded. His wits and cleverness redeemed
his small figure and gave him the chance to beat even larger opponents. All this made him one of the
most successful hunters within the woods.

An eagle had the best eyes of all creatures and was the ruler of the skies. With his unbeatable
eyesight he was able to see a mouse from a thousand meters afar and could act on it. His cries
warned other animals of upcoming danger. He didn’t fear anything and could even oust a whole
murder of crows or an unkindness of ravens, gaining victory over them.

It reminded Klink of Hogan and himself – the clever Underground-agent and the ‘flier’ who was
looking out for him and even put up with black-‘feathered’ enemies. The fox and the eagle. An
unruly friendship but all the more strong for it.

Yet Klink knew that he had to regain some more of his inner strength. The eagle’s wings hadn’t been
used for a long time; they were stiff and weak. But not any longer. He may have aged, Burkhalter
and the others may have almost doused his spirit, they may have forced him to bend his backbone to
its limits – but they hadn’t broken him.

The eagle was still alive – and now, as the love of his life had been threatened, he had remembered
his nature. Eagles were strong and free, and their biggest advantage was their eyesight. Well, Klink’s
left eye was anything but sharp, but he was thinking more in the figurative sense just then. If he
would keep his eyes (and ears) open like before, he could support his ‘fox’ – hiding him beneath his
wings whenever necessary and giving him ‘warning cries’ if needed.
The Kommandant became aware that he was standing in the middle of his living room, lost in thought and with a wrinkled envelope in his hand. He shook his head and chuckled to himself. ‘Just see what a serious talk and a show of trust from this crazy Ami is doing to you, Wilhelm,’ he rebuked himself, anything but serious. ‘You begin daydreaming and thinking in fables. Woe you if he should ever return your feelings. It really doesn’t befit an Oberst to be on cloud nine.’

Yet there was a far too cheery and happy smile on his face while he went to the guestroom to find some rest before lunch would be served. He felt ten years younger.

*** HH ***

In the sleeping-room Hogan lay beneath the blankets and comforter; lost in thought, too. But contrary to Klink, his weren’t that hilarious. Despite everything the Kommandant had said – and Hogan simply sensed that the older man hadn’t told any lies – he was unsure if revealing his secret had really been wise. He believed Klink when he’d said that he wouldn’t betray him, yet he knew first-hand how easily the Oberst prattled things away when being under stress. Then, on the other hand, Klink had guesstimated Hogan’s activities for two years and had covered for him without opening his sometimes big mouth. As strange as it sounded, the older man seemed to be someone completely different when it came to him, Hogan, and his missions.

The American officer was still baffled as to how Klink had figured everything out – how the older man had been able to draw a whole, correct picture from the many puzzle-parts he collected within the last two years. Hogan had always known that his German counterpart was intelligent, even if he was a fool most of the time. Or so Hogan had thought. There had been moments in which the colonel had begun to doubt the Kommandant’s idiotic behavior; hell, sometimes he had even sensed that Klink had looked straight through him, but had skipped from giving him away. From time to time there had been a certain gleam in the Oberst’s eyes – a knowledge Hogan had ignored, because it was easier like this. Well, given all the new things he’d just learned, it had been him, Robert E. Hogan, who had been the idiot to believe that he really had the older man fooled for this long. Klink had his moments – and how often had been revealed within the last half hour.

Groaning, the colonel carefully rubbed over his face. If Klink would have truly been an enemy, he – Hogan – and his men would have been dead for months now. There had been so many cases that even a blind and deaf man would have been able to see through, Hogan had been thunderstruck that Klink hadn’t gotten on his trail. Well, the Kommandant had been on his trail – and had stayed silent. Even more, he had covered for him.

Every detail Klink told him earlier made it clear that the older man had him figured out for a longer time now, therefore any further denial would have been for naught. Yet a part of Hogan – the hard trained, wary part of him – asked himself if it had been smart of him to admit the truth.
The other part of the American – the lonely, tired and longing-for-trust part – was glad that this endless game of hide and seek had finally come to an end. At least between him and Klink. The Oberst was right when he said that everything would be easier from now on. Hogan would only have to think about the next missions, and not also about the camp’s commanding officer and how to keep him away from his tail. It really was a relief, this much was for sure.

Well, there was another big part he would have to consider now: How to tell his men that the ‘old idiot’ was aware of their secrets, of Hogan’s Underground-identity and of many things that had happened in the past? Okay, the latter was proof that Klink was on their side – that he wouldn’t give them away because he could have done it for many months now. But knowing his men, Hogan didn’t look forward to giving them the news. The first who wouldn’t be too difficult to convince was Kinchloe. Kinch trusted him blindly and rarely doubted him, yet there had been times in which the sergeant had obviously thought his superior had lost his marbles. More or less the same went for Baker. Carter would maybe protest in the beginning, but would calm down quickly. It was his character, and Hogan didn’t think that he would have a lot of trouble making the youngest member of his team see that Klink was, indeed, an ally. Yet there were his two other friends, whose deep-rooted grudge against most Germans and whose temperament could become a problem.

Both, LeBeau and Newkirk, had all the reasons in the world to distrust a German officer and to loathe the members of the German army; ally or not. What had been done to so many people in France was a war crime, and the way Hitler attacked England – and especially London – had left deep wounds. Hogan could understand that his two friends were going to be very, very wary concerning Klink, yet he would have to try to make them understand.

And, maybe, Klink’s selfless deeds within the last days had softened the Heroes’ opinion of him. That Kinch and Newkirk had played ‘bodyguard’ for Klink spoke its own language – a language Hogan hoped would be the base that would lead to his men’s acceptance of the Oberst and his offered help.

Sighing – and tired of now having a new topic he would have to turn over and over in his mind – Hogan carefully shifted on his right side. His gaze found the window. He couldn’t see much more than gray skies and falling snow, but somehow the dancing white flakes calmed his still troubled and stressed mind. Hogan loved the summer, but he had also come to like the winter. At home, in the US, he had loved to use his skis together with his older brother; here in Germany he had first loathed the iciness, but somehow this time of the year didn’t bother him anymore.

Maybe he simply had come to terms with this country and this place he had first sarcastically called ‘home’, but which had really become something close to ‘home’ over the last almost three years. Maybe another reason for his beginning to like the winter lay in a further thing: During winter, nature found rest; the snow covered the ugly tracks of the war and clothed everything in a cloak of peaceful silence. Silence could be relief – and relief was the main emotion that went through Hogan now, after he didn’t have to hide anything in front of a man, who had become a strange mixture of friend
and confidante for him, anymore.

Taking a deep breath, Hogan tried to relax, but he was far from doing so.

All the reasons Klink had given him for why he fought his own regime and supported him were sound and logical, yet Hogan had a certain feeling that the Kommandant had kept something from him. A further thing that was maybe one of the main reasons for Klink’s help. And the colonel couldn’t shake off the thought that it had to do with his person.

‘I care for you…’

Yes, this was more than obvious. As it seemed, Klink had already developed real friendship and trust for him many months ago – at a time when he, Hogan, had regarded the older man more as a useful idiot than someone he could respect. Well, he had begun to like the naive and foolish Kommandant a little bit over the last three years, but he had never imagined to call him indeed a friend one day. He had known that Klink somehow liked him, too. Otherwise the Oberst wouldn’t have put up with him like he did. Yet the last days had shown him that the German officer would rather stand up even against the Gestapo and his superior instead of letting Hogan down. Klink had risked his life in many ways since the whole mess started – and he did it without a second thought, all to keep his senior POW officer safe.

‘I care for you…’

This was more than ‘caring’. Yes, Hogan did understand that he was the best candidate for Klink to fight against the regime in his own way. As much courage as the older man had shown within the last days, it was beyond any question that he wouldn’t have stood a chance of survival if he had decided to be an active member of the Underground. So he did what he could do best: Masking and covering everything. Hell, he had been this good at acting and pretending that he even had Hogan fooled for two years. The colonel had to admit that he was still baffled at how well the Oberst had played his role – being the idiot on the outside, and assuming/knowing exactly what was going on, but hiding it. He had helped Hogan like this more than if he would have fought alongside him.

Well, again in his own way Klink had done the latter – by covering for him. And even this was a big risk if Hogan’s secret would have been revealed. There was absolutely no chance that Berlin would have believed Klink didn’t know what was going on. And this brought Hogan to another conclusion: If Hochstetter or maybe another Gestapo-officer would have been able to break him, he would have sealed not only the fates of his men, but also Klink’s.

And the intensity of the shudder that ran through the American at this thought surprised him. His
men were most important to him. He would fight for them – protect them – ‘til his last breath. Yet merely imagining Klink being hurt and killed sent dread through Hogan – a twinge of something close to pain and panic. And it had nothing to do with the fact that he owed Klink.

The truth was, he didn’t want to see the older man suffer, yet exactly this was what had happened over and over again. If you put all the pompous, vain, silly behavior aside, what remained? A vulnerable man with a good heart that had been stomped on far too often. Every mockery, every sneer, every insult were taken by Klink with ignorance or foolish chuckling, yet – for the first time ever – Hogan realized how much it must have hurt Klink.

The man was intelligent, warmhearted and far too kind for this cruel, sinister time. How profound and deep his thoughts were had been proven within the last days. There was so very much more to Wilhelm Klink than first and second sight showed – and none of the people he encountered considered how much they had all hurt the man beneath the uniform.

Hogan took a deep breath. That was what had happened within the last days: He had seen the real man who was behind the uniform and gauche behavior. The man who was forced to hide if he didn’t want to get more hurt, maybe even killed. He had seen the caring, gentle side of Klink – the side that had no problems nursing him back to health no matter the scope. The side that allowed him to sleep in the older man’s quarters and even in his own bed. The side that brought him warm milk with honey, watched over his sleep, tried to keep his nightmares at bay and offered him comfort. The side that had put his, Hogan’s, safety and welfare above his own.

Hogan had always only partly regarded Klink as an enemy. He knew that the Kommandant could become dangerous for him and his operations, yet he had never seen a real opponent in him. In his eyes, Klink was too foolish to be taken this seriously – at least this had been his first explanation to himself as to why he didn’t develop real dislike for the older man. Then, over the months – years – he had somehow realized that the Oberst wasn’t that bad. Still foolish, still gauche, still incompetent, but Hogan had recognized that the German officer was no Nazi and that he had a good heart.

It had changed the colonel’s feelings for his counterpart. A part of him had learned to respect him – not as the camp’s Kommandant, but as a human being. This was certainly more than most other men within those wires did. Hell, Hogan still felt sorry for Klink as he learned that all guards had volunteered to be part of the firing squad that had been set up for the Oberst’s ordered execution a few months ago. This was something the Kommandant hadn’t deserved. Hogan had often enough witnessed - via the ‘coffee-pot’ - how Klink had even defied Hochstetter’s demands of getting Klink’s men for his purposes. Klink had risked a lot of trouble with the Gestapo to keep those within his responsibility safe. There was not much Klink could do, but he used his authority to the last extent to protect his men – and his POWs – and got only loathing and disdain in return.

Hogan had felt bad for him. Maybe this was another reason why he began to see more in the Kommandant than just the silly guy he could use to go on with his missions. Pity was never a good
adviser, but it hadn’t been real pity that had moved Hogan during those hours last year as Klink was about to be executed. It had been his sense of justice and growing sympathy – and it had woken Hogan’s protective instincts. Somehow on the way he had developed the urge to keep Klink away from deep trouble – the man beneath the uniform, not the Oberst. Thinking back, there had been a few occasions when he had been really worried for his German counterpart. And it had peaked in his rising horror as he saw Klink falling during the ambush last week.

Those seconds in which he thought the attack had cost the older man’s life had deeply disturbed him. He had thought of it before – the day after the mess – but only now he began to realize how deeply it would have hurt him if Klink had been killed that day. How much he had come to like this man was only shown now – now that he was ready to admit it. He would have mourned for Klink – greatly. Sweet Lord, the mere thought of losing him sent pain through his whole being, and for a moment he was confused about it. Then he remembered that he saw a friend in the Oberst, and friends cared for each other. Maybe this was indeed the further reason why Klink covered for him – because they were friends.

‘I care for you…’

There! Klink had even admitted it and…

And Hogan saw those blue eyes in his mind – the deep gentleness and even affection.

‘I care for you…’

The memory of those words, spoken in that soft tone, filled the younger man with warmth and security. Again he felt his heartbeat quicken – like it had done a few times within the last days. Good God, what was going on here? He didn’t know, but one thing he was absolutely certain of:

“I care for you too, Willie,” he whispered. “A lot.”

Closing his tired eyes he let his thoughts drift away. With the knowledge that he was really safe for once – as safe as you can be in a POW-camp in the middle of the enemy’s territory – he felt a heavy burden being lifted from his shoulders.

Klink was on his side; he distracted his enemies, covered for him and protected him. Him and his men. This was all that counted – yet he was absolutely sure that there was more to it.
Something Hogan couldn’t grasp. Something that was there but out of his reach and invisible, yet he felt its mighty presence. A presence that was powerful, yes, but not threatening. Rather the opposite. It whispered words he couldn’t understand – as if they belonged to a language that wasn’t made for human ears and mouths – but he got the message. It spoke of warmth, light, brightness, happiness…

Hogan tried to get nearer to this something to see what it was, but he couldn’t. Somehow it remained in the shadows – shadows which promised shelter, security, even bliss.

And as Hogan was slowly slipping into sleep, he thought he saw this something clearly. It wore Klink’s face while the older man’s voice echoed gently through Morpheus’ realm,

‘I care for you…’

TBC …

Yeah, Klink cares for his ‘fox’ and will look out for him like the ‘eagle’ he has been named after in earlier times – last but not least, love gives you wings. I do hope you liked the little mind game of the two ‘animal’-identities. I know that in several episodes people refer to Hogan as an ‘eagle in the cage’, but with him officially ‘grounded’ and Klink being called the ‘Iron Eagle’, I thought about another symbol for Robert. A fox hides in holes, knows the ‘underground’ where he hunts and his cleverness is legendary. I thought it would be a nice contrast, and also fitting symbols of the two men’s self-given duty in a certain way.

Some of you may also ask themselves what a ‘sabot’ has to do with stopping the war-machinery. The words ‘sabotage’ has its roots in it. At the end of the 19th century the workers in France threw their shoes, wooden footwear called sabots, into the agrarian machines they were forced to work with to stop them – protesting like this against the beginning industrialization which they feared. Klink refers to this tale / fact.

In the next chapter Hogan begins to realize the other reason why Klink covers for him and protects him. This ‘something’ that lurks for Robert still in darkness becomes clearer and clearer, because with a big burden less his mind starts to remember more of what happened between his almost-death and coming to his senses in Stalag 13. And this will lead to something neither he ever imagined, nor Klink ever dared to hope for.
And the Heroes will get the shock of their lives, because two of them become aware of the two colonels’ share of knowledges none of the officers usually could have.

I’m more than curious what you think of this new posted chapter. There are a lot of stories in the web which tell the tale of Klink learning about the ‘Unsung Heroes’ and how he takes it – or how Hogan has to arrange himself with the fact that his German counterpart is aware of things he thought he were able to keep a secret. That Klink isn’t a true Nazi comes out in the TV-show over and over again, yet his anxiety and his cowardice prevented him mostly from acting like he wanted. In my story he finds the strength to do what is necessary – because of his love for Hogan. I hope, you liked my vision.

Have a nice rest of the week and a beautiful weekend,

Love

Your Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so much for the big feedback. I knew that you would love the last chapter, and I’m absolutely certain that it will be the same with the new one, because f-i-n-a-l-l-y the scales fall from the eyes of our mastermind of the “Unsung Heroes”. Yeah, even a genius like Hogan can be daft and blind sometimes – along the lines of ‘I don’t see what can’t be’. And his realization will be a kind of shock for him.

And he isn’t the only one, who gets a big surprise. At least two or the Heroes learn that ‘Ol’ Klink’ is anything but the idiot they all took him for – and the way they learn of it is certainly a funny thing.

So, have fun with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 24 – Tiny shocks for everyone

Hogan overslept, not rousing in time for lunch, and only woke up during the afternoon. Schultz, who made another report to Klink, simply warmed up the food and even set up the table for him. Klink joined him for the very late lunch, sipping a cup of tea and carrying conversation about casual topics. Yet he was distracted – just like Hogan. Both men had learned more about each other that morning than they had done during the last, almost three, years, and even if both were almost relaxed it was obvious that Hogan remained a little bit wary. Klink couldn’t blame him. If their roles were reversed, he wouldn’t have reacted differently. Old habits die hard, and the distrust sat deep; at least in Hogan’s case. Yes, the colonel knew in his heart and soul that Klink wouldn’t betray him and his men, yet his mind was not so easy to convince. Experiences, training and natural wariness were difficult to switch off.

Yet the rest of the afternoon was spent side by side again; talking. Hogan remained in bed, Klink was sprawled in the big armchair that was usually placed in the corner with a reading lamp. It was obvious that the Kommandant felt better and that the bronchitis was wearing off.
Hogan was careful with how much he could reveal to Klink, on the other hand he learned a lot of what the Oberst had done for him and the others. They had a small dinner and went to bed early – like before, every man in his own, but in the late evening Hogan heard the soft steps of Klink coming nearer, shortly before he felt the mattress shift. And, like the evenings prior, the colonel whispered a soft “Good night, Willie,” before he closed his eyes and relaxed utterly.

“Good night, Robert,” came the gentle reply, then quietness spread through the room.

Hogan’s sleep wasn’t as peaceful as he may have assumed. Many missions he hadn’t thought of for a long time rose from the depth of his subconscious, where he had sent them. Sometimes they played like a movie within his mind, sometimes they changed – and every time Klink was in them. The older man smiled, huffed, rebuked, glared or was frustrated, but every one of his appearances ended with a look of worry or affection.

The American officer woke up in the morning with a mixture of puzzlement, unease and the feeling he was missing a very important detail.

But one thing he didn’t miss: The older man was wrapped around him like a blanket. The long arms held him with utter carefulness, his warm breath danced over Hogan’s neck, which wasn’t any longer bandaged, and he even had slipped one leg over those of the colonel. And, what shocked the younger man the most, it felt right.

Despite the fact that it was forbidden by law, and that he would usually have dismissed even the thought of enjoying a man’s company like this, he relished in the warm proximity. It felt so good to not be alone and to be held, and it didn’t matter that it was Klink who huddled up against him in his sleep. Sweet Lord, Hogan caught himself thinking that he even enjoyed this all because it was Klink who enveloped him in a way that would compromise them both without any chance of excuses. And this revelation really startled him. He would have to think about this as soon as he was given a chance, but for now he simply continued to savor this unusual cuddling.

The moment he felt Klink stirring, he pretended to still be asleep, and waited until his German counterpart had woken up fully, rose and went to the bathroom. But another thing hadn’t slipped the American’s attention. In those splendidous moments between sleep and waking up, Klink had tightened his arms around him and even snuggled closer to him; sighing in contentedness. Only after he’d left Morpheus’ realm completely had he distanced himself and risen a minute later. And it had left Robert E. Hogan in utter confusion.

This ‘something’ he had been pondering for days now – and especially yesterday after their special talk in the late morning – became almost visible behind the shadows for a short moment, before it
vanished again; teasing him with its presence that he couldn’t grasp.

Like the days before, Klink dealt with his morning toilette and then Hogan did his own – slowly and with much effort. The Kommandant was feeling better and had decided to return to his office for at least a few hours to ‘look what this Dummkopf had gotten the camp into’.

“Stay in bed, rest, cure yourself and do nothing reckless,” he told Hogan while slipping his coat on; grimacing as his still healing left upper arm stung him mercilessly.

The American rolled his eyes. “You sound worse than my father,” he complained, which made the Oberst chuckle. Their talk yesterday had raised the fledgling trust between them to a new level, and like this they were more comfortable around each other than ever before.

“Maybe your old man was right about keeping an eye on you,” Klink teased.

“I’ll get bored – more bored than before,” Hogan groaned.

“Do you really think the paper-work I’ve to do is thrilling?” the Kommandant scoffed gently, while putting on his cap.

“We both know that you are more comfortable with doing this desk-job than I could ever be if I was in your place. And you at least have something to do,” the colonel pouted. “I swear, the walls are closing up on me; I’ll suffocate soon.”

Klink groaned. “I’ve been spoiling you too much.”

“I enjoyed your company,” Hogan corrected him. “But remaining here now, with nothing to do, to learn, or to…”

“Learning!” The Oberst snapped his fingers. “Wait a minute.” He vanished, only to return a short time later; carrying a book. “Here, something to read.”

“I don’t like ‘Mein Kampf’,“ Hogan grumbled.
“Silly, this is a classic book, not trash.”

The colonel looked up; surprised at the open dislike concerning Germany’s ‘first man’ that Klink had uncharacteristically displayed. Usually, the Kommandant went rigid and pale as soon as the Führer was only mentioned. Maybe the fact that there weren’t so many secrets between him and his senior POW anymore had galvanized his spine even more.


“Yes, of course. Your German is very good, Robert, but sometimes a little bit rough. Maybe you can refine it this way.”

The colonel chuckled. “Remind me to lend you a book, too, but in English.”

“I would like this,” Klink nodded. “I know that I’ve still some trouble with English here and there – especially concerning the idioms.”

“Yet your enunciation and grammar are flawless.”

“Thanks.” He took his riding crop and cap. “I’m going to be back around midday. See you.” With those words he gave the younger man a warm, gentle gaze and left.

Hogan pursed his lips. There it had been again – this special look in Klink’s eyes. Something he seemed to have reserved only for him, and it had been shown more and more within the last days.

Putting the book aside, Hogan relaxed into the cushions and allowed his mind to completely wrap itself around the riddles he still had to solve: The riddle of Klink’s further reason for supporting him and the riddle concerning the deep care Klink held for him.

Looking at the ceiling, Hogan let his mind wander – and the first things that appeared for his inner eye were Klink’s soft smiles, the warmth and affection in his gaze and the gentle way he treated him. Hogan simply knew, deep in his gut, this behavior was a part of the further but still secret reason as to why the Oberst supported him. Klink was hiding something from him – something very important.
And Hogan was a hairsbreadth away from revealing this secret. He could sense it, taste it even, but it didn’t reveal itself to him, otherwise he would have recognized it by now.

Pursing his lips, he again pondered over everything his German counterpart had done for him within the last days. The key to the riddle lay somewhere in there; this much Hogan knew.

Klink had not only been protecting him for two years now, he had overgrown himself two times to save him. He had offered him shelter in his own quarters – in his own bed! – and watched his sleep to shelter or release him from the returning nightmares. He had held him in his arms while comforting him the first evening, when Hogan woke up to his first nightmares, and Klink had continued to do so within the last days. He remembered the night before the one prior, as he had his breakdown and the older man had secured him in his arms like…

Like he, Hogan, was the most important person in Klink’s life.

The colonel frowned. Nonsense!

The Oberst cared for him, yes, despite all the trouble he had gone through because of Hogan, but to think that the older man had…

Had what, exactly?

Feelings?

Hogan snorted. Klink was after every skirt that came his way – okay, except for Burkhalter’s sister, but this was understandable. Gertrude Linkmeyer was Mayra’s German counterpart – at least in the colonel’s opinion, despite the fact that Mayra was an attractive woman, contrary to Burkhalter’s sister. If Mayra were the last woman on Earth and he, Hogan, the last man, he would travel to the other side of the planet to escape this Russian man-eater – and the same went for Klink and Frau Linkmeyer. That the older man had the strong urge to run away when this hag was near was more than understandable. But, otherwise, the Oberst tried everything to win himself a woman.

Well, his attempts at flirting were clumsy at best, and his eagerness to woo a female was almost slapstick, but he was a passable dancer, as Hogan had heard on a few occasions. Hell, Klink had given him two bottles of champagne to show his gratefulness that he, Hogan, had told him about the new landlady of the Hofbräu, whom the Oberst promptly hit on.
And there was also the time Klink dated Sofia Lindemann – a pretty redhead. They had seen each other for a month or so, and there had even been a lot of wagers between the POWs whether the Kommandant had finally found a woman who would put up with him. In the end she had left – like the other ladies Klink had tried to win for himself.

So, the whole idea of having ‘feelings’ for his male senior POW was out of question, but…

‘Come back to bed, hon’…

Hogan frowned. These had been Klink’s words as he woke up in the middle of the night while they’d been staying at the farm after the ambush of the air-fighters. Okay, Klink had been deeply asleep before and was still dead exhausted. In such situations you can mistake someone for another person. But then, the next morning, as Hogan mercilessly teased the older man about it, Klink’s reactions had been… strange. First his outburst ‘That wasn’t a dream?’ as Hogan confronted him with his nightly slip of calling him ‘hon’. And then as he further teased the Kommandant over the earlier sleeping arrangement, Klink’s whole reactions had become even more odd.

‘That’s our bed and…’

‘D-d-don’t say you meant it this way!’

‘Sweet Lord, Willie, did you want something to have happened between us?’

The Oberst had flushed almost crimson red – and had done so a lot of times since then. Every time he, Hogan, had said something ambiguously, the Kommandant had blushed. And Klink wasn’t this prudish.

‘We can’t hide in this little room forever,’ Klink had said.

‘No, of course not – but I wouldn’t mind if we could stay here in this bed until this damn war is over.’ Hogan’s reply had made Klink blush until his face had had the color of a full-mellowed tomato.

‘I care for you.’
Yes, it was obvious that his German counterpart cared for him – a lot! He did not have many memories between him being pressed under water by Hochstetter and coming to his senses here, in this very room, but something was scratching at the edge of his consciousness.

For a moment some fragments – pictures and a voice – seemed to break through the barrier that kept his memories away from his mind. He was held by someone, a window with a moving landscape was at the edge of his sight and he was cold. He was afraid – afraid of being denied breathing again and…

‘Hush, Robert, there is no need to panic. You are safe now – enough air to breathe, no more pain, no threats.’ And then something soft and warm was pressed against his temple. Something that felt like…

Like lips!

A kiss.

Someone had kissed him, but the voice had belonged to…

Hogan sat up. Were his memories fooling around with him, or had Klink really given him a kiss while they drove back to Stalag 13?

Impossible! It would mean that the older man indeed had feelings for him. Well, Klink felt something for him – friendship, respect, maybe even affection, but the latter was certainly a thing between comrades and not…

His gaze found the closed door that led to the bathroom – and out of the depths of his memories another image rose: He was sitting in that little room – on the toilette cover. Everything was a blur, everything hurt, everything was cold. He was so afraid and confused and then…

Then there was this tall, slender figure in front of him. Gentle hands peeled his clothes away, a well-known voice murmured gentle words of comfort. Long, tender fingers combed one of his locks out of his icy forehead…

He remembered that he was partly stripped and then…
Soft lips brushed over his forehead. ‘You will be better soon, Robert. I’ll take care of you, promise.’

Hogan gasped. Were his memories really playing pranks on him, or had Klink indeed kissed him? And if his mind wasn’t making things up, then it had been the second time within a short range of time.

He thought he could remember a loud voice, followed by Klink’s quiet ‘Hush, Robert, it’s only me, don’t fret.’ A long hand gently stroked over his left cheek, offering warmth and the promise of security. ‘I rather die than let Hochstetter near you ever again.’

Suddenly another thing became clearer in Hogan’s mind: He had stood beneath a shower – and somehow he knew that he had freaked out. There had been new panic and… And Klink had pulled him into a careful yet firm embrace; holding him, rocking him like a child, giving him something to latch on while he had laid his own head against that of the younger man.

‘It’s okay, Rob. You are safe.’

Hogan stared into the corner and therefore at nothing. He wasn’t sure what were real memories and what was made-up by his still blocked mind, but one thing he knew for certain: Klink had definitely done far more for him than even a very good friend would do. And not only during their way back to Stalag 13, or while he, Hogan, had been medically treated.

He remembered how the Oberst had wrapped his arms around him while they slept – not only this morning, but also before. He had dreamed of those long arms around him and a few times within the last nights, when he woke up for a few seconds, he thought he remembered that he had been held in a tender embrace.

‘General Burkhalter just arrived and if he sees you and Colonel Hogan cuddling together like ferrets, he maybe gets the right idea about your fierce protectiveness concerning the colonel. – I mean, he gets the WRONG idea…’

That had been Schultz’s words as he tore Klink out of bed shortly before Burkhalter arrived the day after his, Hogan’s, rescue. Had Schultz made a slip of the tongue as he announced that the general would get the right idea, finding Klink lying in bed beside his senior POW; snuggling up with him? The large Bavarian had corrected himself afterwards, but it had sounded far too hasty – false. So Schultz’ first statement was the right one, which spoke for itself.
Then there was the way Klink coddled him. It was one thing to nurse someone back to health or to spoil him – and the Oberst had pampered him more or less; paying enormous sums from his own wallet so that Langenschneidt could buy boiling hens, fruits and substantial bread on the black market. Hogan wasn’t naive. He knew that by now you needed a lot of money to get something as luxurious as those things in Germany. Klink had also denied himself the comfort of his own bed and had left it to Hogan to offer him a nice, warm, pleasant place to stay. He had lent him his housecoat, had broken the rule of ‘lights out’ during the nights only to give him, Hogan, a nightlight in the hope it would keep his nightmares at bay. He had shared private details with him, literally soothed him with milk and honey – two things that were absolutely rare within Germany by now.

This all were things which spoke their own language – a language Hogan hadn’t thought of before. Hell, he had ignored the many little details and hints, because the truth behind them hadn’t occurred to him until now – or had been ignored on subconscious purpose: The gentle gestures, the smiles, the deep warmth in those blue orbs, which looked at him with so much affection.

Not only affection – this was more!

He remembered the moment he teased Klink that Burkhalter’s price to get Hochstetter out of the way forever could be the general’s demand that the Oberst should marry his sister Gertrude. Klink had paled dramatically, before he had stated that he would pay this price if only… If only Hogan was safe. The colonel had been speechless for a second, before he had blurted out, ‘Don’t tell me you would endure such a fate only for me.’ Klink had looked at him with this special gaze – and Hogan let his mind wrap itself around this one glance the older man had given him.

Those blue eyes had shone with fondness at him, with so much devotion and love that…

Hogan gasped.

*Love!*

That had lain in Klink’s eyes.

A deep, unwavering *love!*

The American sat there on the bed for more than a minute; his thoughts tumbled over.
No, this couldn’t be! This was laughable at best! Klink couldn’t be in love with him. It was impossible, crazy – insane! Yet…

Yet there was so much that spoke for this theory to be true. The gentle kisses Hogan began to more clearly remember now. The offered and given comfort that was far more intense than you can expect even from a close friend. Klink’s raging fury whenever it came to Hogan’s injuries or when he learned more details of what had been done to the colonel. Klink punching Hochstetter, demanding answers from Burkhalter…

And… hadn’t Klink touched him more often than usual? Hell, even during their serious talk yesterday, the Kommandant had slung an arm around his shoulder, steadied him with gentle grips and soft brushes; giving him, again, a kind of hold that was far beyond anything else.

‘I will never do anything that could cost you your life.’ – ‘Robert, please don’t fear for yourself – or your men. Neither you, nor they are in danger. Not if I can prevent it.’

What if the older man really had feelings for him? Strong feelings? What if it was really love?

“This… this can’t happen,” Hogan whispered, and felt, to his horror, his heart beginning to beat quicker – just like it had done a few times now whenever Klink smiled at him so softly. Like it had done as Klink told him in a roundabout way that he would accept the sacrifice of marrying Burkhalter’s sister for Hogan’s sake. Like it had done whenever the Oberst gave him this special gaze.

The colonel carefully rubbed his face. “Robert, you’re crazy,” he murmured. “Klink cares for you, all right, and he wants to protect you, but don’t assume, from his words and reactions, something that could only lead to a catastrophe. And, by the way, you are not gay – nor is he. End of story.”

He carefully turned on his right side, yet he knew that it was impossible to brush aside the suspicions of the last minutes and forget them. His curiosity had been awoken. A part of him would watch out for further reactions from his German counterpart. He would keep a close eye on the older man; trying to collect more hints which could prove that he had imagined things or… Or that he had been right!

Hogan sighed. He really had more important things to do, like thinking of a way to convince his men that Klink was their ally.
Yet his mind couldn’t focus on anything else than a pair of blue eyes and a gentle voice that whispered soundlessly through his memories.

Groaning, cursing and damning everything to hell, Hogan gave up only few minutes later. Desperate to distract himself and find some clear thoughts again, he took the book. Maybe some reading would restore his sane mind. He knew this book, but only in English. Maybe it would be interesting to read it in another language. And, by the way, it would save him from wracking his brain even more.

Determined, he opened and began to read – but neither his mind, nor his heart were in it.

*** HH ***

In the early midday, Hogan heard someone coming into the quarters. First he thought it was only LeBeau like during the last days, because the tiny Frenchman appeared to make lunch around this time of day. But this time Louis wasn’t alone. Relieved that his mind was finally forced to focus on something else, a large smile spread over Hogan’s still colorful face as he recognized his closest friend. “Kinch!” he exclaimed. “You’re sent by the heavens! I’m going crazy, alone here.”

Kinchloe removed his cap and chuckled softly. “It’s like solitary confinement – only you have it more comfortable here.”

“You can say that,” LeBeau nodded, while stripping off his jacket. “When I see these things they call stock-beds in the barracks…” He shook his head, but smirked at his superior officer.

“Nonetheless, I’m bored out of my mind,” Hogan more or less lied. “Even a book doesn’t entertain me anymore.” He lifted the book, and Kinch cocked his head as he saw the title.

“Hoffmann’s tales – in German. Let me guess: A favor from our dear Kommandant.”

‘Dear Kommandant’… Jesus, his pulse wasn’t rising at those words! Hogan took a deep breath. ‘Calm down, Robert, calm down, this is c-r-a-z-y!’

“He thinks I can smooth my German like this,” he replied and put the book beside him. “It was thoughtful of him and I do enjoy some good literature, but this permanent inaction is making me
antsy by now.” – ‘Maybe this is the reason for those insane ideas I've got,’ he added in his thoughts.

LeBeau opened a paper bag he carried with him and laid out pajamas and a new long housecoat. “Here, made of the parachute silk and from thicker material we got to sew civil clothes.”

Hogan beamed at him. “Thank you, Louis. This here is really overdue.” He pulled at his usual pajama; glad that he had something to change into.

“Yes, mon Colonel. And it’s better than wearing Klink’s clothes.”

“Yet it was kind of him to offer the colonel something from his own wardrobe. I don’t think that there are many POW-camp commanders who would be this thoughtful,” Kinch said. LeBeau only grimaced, before he took the items and brought them into the bathroom.

Kinch took the chair Hogan pointed to invitingly, while LeBeau braced himself at the side of the dressing table's top after he returned. “Concerning your boredom, Colonel, I may have something for you,” Kinchloe began. “London radioed us a quarter hour ago. As it seems, the Germans are transferring a lot of cargo to the middle east. The most trains and even truck convoys are starting from the Rhine-area near Düsseldorf, Cologne and Neuss, but also from Stuttgart and Heilbronn.”

Hogan frowned. “There are a lot of rumors that the Messerschmitt ME-262 is built in different facilities and its final assembly is done in different places, too. Maybe those transports are connected with it and they want to increase the production.”

“That would be bad. The ME-262 isn’t the best of bomber-types, but a very quick interceptor and fighter because of its new kind of drive. It performs best as a defender, but fortunately until now the Germans only use it as a kind of quick-bomber,” Louis commented. “And how bad this went was shown last summer in France. The Allies made quick work of those birds.” He grinned broadly.

Hogan nodded slowly. “Yeah, but with half of Germany laying in ruins, Hitler has maybe changed his tactics and wants to defend what remains. And then we’ve a problem. While I was in London, Colonel Forbes told me that the Germans eliminated the problems with the heavy jet-drive of the ME-262 and that the fighter is more or less perfect by now. If Hitler chooses to use the aircraft for what it is constructed, our boys will have serious trouble.”

“No, Hitler still wants to use it for attacks, especially now after they found a solution for the problem with the undercarriage that shortens the needed length of tarmac. Like this it can take off and land
almost everywhere. This new generation has entered the stage of serial-production – and the 
production will start somewhere during the next month,” a well-known voice with a Saxonian accent 
spoke from the doorstep.

Hogan looked up – and firmly ignored the short jump of his heart as he met those deep blue eyes. 
This. Was. Mad!

Kinch had risen hastily, while LeBeau whirled around. Both men paled as they saw Oberst Klink 
standing there – coat open, cap and riding crop clasped beneath his right arm for once.

“The gentlemen should know that the new Messerschmitt aircraft ME-262 V5 is more maneuverable 
than the prior version. Its range-ability has increased to more than 1000 km and the top-speed is 
approx. 870 km/h. Therefore it’s a lot quicker than any plane of the Allies.” He entered the room and 
threw his cap and the riding crop on the dress table. He looked tired and his eyes were reddened 
again. Obviously his resuming of duty had been a little bit too hasty. “And, like I said, it has entered 
the stage of serial-production.”

Kinchloe and LeBeau stared, shocked, at him. Klink had caught them speaking about military secrets 
they couldn’t have learned, being POWs for so long, and this was his reaction???

“So, London already knew about the newest version when we were there,” the Kommandant 
addressed Hogan, while two jaws were about to hit the floor. “Pray tell me why the P51 we stole 
together from England was equipped with the drive of an old Messerschmitt?”

The colonel looked with big eyes at him and Klink sighed, “Please, Hogan, don’t play the innocent. 
Of course Burkhalter told me about this detail after the crashed P51 was canvassed.”

“Do you really think the brass would let me fly away with a brand-new plane and deliver it to the 
Germans?” Hogan deadpanned wryly.

“No, of course not. I anticipated something like this. Let me guess, the London brass were already 
prepared for everything as we arrived – including a ‘special’ P51.”

Hogan grinned at him almost sheepishly. “Well… Yes.”

LeBeau squeaked as he heard his superior and friend admitting very much more with this ‘yes’ than
the fact that he knew about the ‘edited’ P51, but was ignored.

“And why all this?” Klink asked, really curious now, but before Hogan could answer, the Kommandant snapped the fingers of his right hand. “Of course – the espionage-ring in London. You said we needed support from them to fulfill our task and I brought you to Berlin’s contact – a chance for your people to reveal the agents.”

The grin broadened into a big smirk. “Now you gained an additional 50 score-points from the quizmaster.”

Kinchloe snapped for breath like a fish thrown on land.

Klink rolled his eyes. “Clever – and so typical of you. Like this you not only eliminated an espionage-ring, you also made certain that Goering didn’t get his hands on a real P51 but also continued to think that the Allies’ technical standard is far behind ours; using even captured motors to equip their air-fighters. Yet, regrettably, with the new jet-fighters we’re really better – if Hitler would take advantage of its full potential. But he still won’t do it – and this may be the Allies’ last chance of winning the war.”

Hogan smiled shortly. Well, if he had really been waiting for Klink to prove that he was a true ally, that proof had been delivered just right now. The Oberst did more now than simply cover for him and the others – he gave away information about Hitler’s newest plans. This was a completely new level of support Klink offered.

“Do you have any information about this planned serial-production?”

Klink nodded gravely while stripping off his coat and throwing it beside Hogan’s feet on the bed. “Yes.” He gave his American counterpart a questioning gaze and Hogan nodded the tiniest bit. Yes, he understood the older man’s wordless message. ‘Do you trust me now?’

‘Yes, I do!’

Then Hogan forced the wave of relief and soft joy aside, while his sense of duty mercifully kicked in. “So, the bird is going into serial-production. How so? As far as we know there are no new facilities for something like this.”
“This is exactly what London should think,” the Oberst said.

Kinch and LeBeau simultaneously turned their heads and glanced, gaping, from one officer to the other and back. Instead of freaking out that Klink caught them talking about secret German plans, the colonel was discussing a former mission with Klink, revealing Underground-activities and now even asking the Kommandant about more information about further output of the blasted jet-fighter? And how did the ‘Kraut’ know about them staying in contact with the Allied High Command?

“But unfortunately the truth looks different,” Klink added. “Very much so. Goering and the others were able to build a new project directly under the Allies’ nose.”

Kinch and LeBeau looked at him, flabbergasted – not because of those details, but because of the fact Klink spoke of them.

Hogan shortly pursed his lips. “Let me guess: An underground facility?”

James and Louis quickly glanced back. Did Hogan really expect a truthful answer to that question?

Klink nodded. “Yes. And it’s almost ready to start with production. At a rough estimate the output will be 1000 jet-fighters per month.”

“What?” Hogan looked, shocked, at him.

Another sigh escaped the Kommandant. “The whole production is about to be consolidated at one place. Like this it is more efficient and the output can be increased. Hitler plans new Luftwaffe squadrons with thousands of the ME-262.”

Kinch and LeBeau had stopped looking at the two colonels every time questions and answers were made. With eyes large as saucers they stared at each other. What. Was. Going. On. Here?

Hogan gulped. This was not only bad, this was a nightmare about to come true.

“How do you know about it?” he asked quietly.
“I spoke with Burkhalter this morning,” Klink replied. “He called me to ask if you’ve received his report, which I affirmed. He was in an incredibly good mood, and because the fat desk-jockey is only in a good mood when something ‘glorious’ has happened, I thought that something was off and asked him.” He snorted. “I’ve rarely heard him that satisfied and almost happy. As it seems, the brass is convinced the inevitability of losing the war can be averted because of the newest ME-262 going into serial-production. The project is called REIMAHG – which means Reichsmarschall Hermann Goering – and the responsible taskmaster informed the brass yesterday that the first fighters can be produced in the middle of February.”

Kinch and LeBeau glanced, thunderstruck, back at Klink. Was the Kommandant indeed giving them secret information about a large project that would endanger the Allies like nothing before??? Had someone hit him on the head, or what?

“And Burkhalter was happy about it,” Hogan assumed.

“Yes, of course,” Klink growled. “The whole project of mass production was ready to start almost two years ago, but because of the many air-attacks of the Allies there was no chance to produce the plane in a large factory. Yet space is what you need when you’re building 13-m-wide air-fighters en masse, and then Goering came up with the idea of an underground facility.”

“And the project is almost done,” Hogan whispered; highly alarmed. “London has to learn about it immediately!”

Kinch’s and LeBeau’s eyes were about to bulge out of their heads, while they glanced back at their superior. Were they misunderstanding something here, or were those two indeed exchanging secret information with each other???? Klink shouldn’t know about their contact to London at all – and he especially shouldn’t tell them about the whole project!

“I agree,” Klink murmured; frustrated.

Kinchloe gasped; unable to formulate even one single word. Klink wanted London to learn about all this????

“But please don’t ask me where this damn factory is,” the Kommandant continued; his gaze fixed on the American colonel. “I didn’t dare ask Burkhalter so as to not make him suspicious.”
Hogan nodded slowly. “Understandable. Yet we’ve to get this information as quick as possible.”

Klink snorted. “Good luck. This whole thing is more secret than the hidden entrances to London’s Tower.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “But something as large as such a factory must leave tracks – even if it is beneath the earth. There must be tarmacs which can only be placed on the ground and are therefore clearly visible. And, besides, this damn thing didn’t build itself alone. Someone must have done it – a lot of ‘someones’. And knowing Hitler he certainly used slave laborers and prisoners for this kind of work. So many people need a place to live – more or less – and they need nourishment. Maybe your contacts can find something out by searching for tracks of keeping so many people in one place.”

Hogan nodded slowly. “Yes, maybe they…”

“One. Damn. Moment!” Kinch had lifted both hands and had raised his voice; finally recovering his ability to speak. “Would one of the two gentlemen please tell us what the hell is going on here?”

Both officers looked at him as if they had forgotten all about his and LeBeau’s presence.

“What do you mean, Kinch?” Hogan asked; mind absent.

“You two are discussing knowledge our intelligence would kill for to gain information about,” LeBeau said; thunderstruck. His dark eyes looked up at the camp’s Kommandant. “Shouldn’t you keep something like this a secret? Or at least freak out that we learned about it – we, POWs?”

Klink and Hogan exchanged a look.

“You haven’t told them?” the Oberst wanted to know, and the colonel took a deep breath.

“No, I hadn’t a chance until now.” He turned his attention back to Kinch and LeBeau, who looked at him in alert. “Calm down, fellas,” he said softly. “And maybe you should sit down somewhere, because I’ve news for you that could pull the rug away from under your feet.”

“With your permission I’d rather stand, Colonel,” Kinch replied; crossing his arms in front of his chest. Somehow he knew that he wouldn’t like what he would hear now. Klink had spoken of Hogan’s ‘contacts’ and of ‘London’. And they had discussed a former mission of Hogan’s. This only could mean that the German officer knew about the whole operation and… No! Impossible! The
colonel couldn’t have given them all away to Klink. The mere thought was insane.

Hogan sighed, exchanged another look with Klink, and addressed his men, “Boys, I know it sounds crazy but… Klink has more or less known about us for almost two years now.”

Kinchloe felt dizzy. NO! This wasn’t happening!

“And he is on our side!” Hogan added.

Silence.

Utter and unmistakable silence.

Then Kinch, absolutely in denial, said slowly, “This is a joke, isn’t it? I mean, what should the Kommandant know about us, Colonel? That we love baseball? That we want to set up a kind of tournament here, but we haven’t decided until now if it should be about volleyball or baseball? Or do you…”

“Ki-inch,” Hogan interrupted him gently with the kind of sing-song he only used if he wanted to drive a point home. “I speak of our missions. Colonel Klink has known about them for a long time now – and he’s covered for us, laid false tracks, stalled for time for us or simply kept details secret which would have thrown us into such deep waters we would have drowned. Without him, we would have all been arrested, questioned, tortured and executed months ago.”

LeBeau gaped at the tall German officer, while Kinch cocked his head; tensed and ready to do anything to keep his friends – and his obviously mad superior – safe.

Klink saw the disbelief, distrust and even rising anger in the two POWs’ eyes, and rose to speak, “Sergeant, Corporal, I know that you may be thinking I abused Colonel Hogan’s condition to trick him into admitting his identity and your mission. I also know that you – and everyone within this camp – have good reasons to distrust, despise and even hate members of the Wehrmacht, the Gestapo or SS.”

“You can say that,” LeBeau murmured under his breath; loathing shimmered in his eyes but, to Hogan’s relief, it obviously wasn’t directed at Klink.
The Oberst sighed soundlessly, before he continued. “I also realize that you have little respect for me – the man who is your jailer and belongs to the enemy. There are so many grudges and suspicions towards my people that you certainly have a hard time acknowledging that I, personally, am not your enemy. I can only ask you to believe me – and Colonel Hogan. I’m really on your side – I was more or less from the beginning. I realized, a few months after Colonel Hogan’s arrival, that the odd incidents in the area were increasing in frequency. I knew that something very strange was going on. Then I got fragments of what he was doing.” He looked at Hogan. “I got more and more hints, puzzle parts, evidence… So I had to make a decision and I made one: To his and the Allies’ advantage.”

Again none of the two POWs said something, and Hogan took a deep breath. “Kinch, LeBeau, please have a seat. I think this talk will last longer than anticipated.”

Klink cleared his throat. “Maybe you should also call Newkirk, Carter and Baker over, Hogan. Then you won’t have to explain everything two times.”

“And how do you know you can trust him?” LeBeau burst out; his temper got the better of him like so often. Nonchalantly, he pointed at Klink while glaring at Hogan. “This can also be a big trap, you know!”

“Yes, I know,” Hogan nodded. “But Colonel Klink convinced me that he isn’t playing a foul game, and just right now he even proved it to you by giving us these details about Hitler’s latest project. He…”

“He is a damn Kraut!” Louis raged.

“Yes, he is a German – like so many of our allies and supporters,” Hogan answered softly. “He is the German who risked his life for me and you many times over. He is the German who was ready to sacrifice himself to protect me. He is the German who covered for us, sent the Gestapo and other doubting members of the German army on goose hunts over and over again, and shielded us against vengeance and abuse. He is the German who vowed to protect and defend his fatherland – a fatherland that has been almost destroyed by the madman in Berlin. He is one of those Germans who want their country back – the land before the insanity began to twist everything. You two and I quickly realized that Colonel Klink is no Nazi. He never was and never will be. And so he fights in his own way – by covering for us, turning a blind eye and deaf ear on anything and distracting those who were far too close on our tail.” He looked firmly first at Kinch, then at LeBeau. “Not one of us would still be alive if it wasn’t for Colonel Klink.”

LeBeau bit his lips; frowning deeply. “And you believe this?” he asked, thunderstruck.
“What he did and still does speaks for itself,” Hogan answered calmly, before he looked up at the older man. “Could you please order Newkirk, Carter and Baker over? You’re right. I think they all should learn it at once, at the same time.”

“Spare nerves, doesn’t it?” Klink deadpanned and left the room to give the order; knowing that the next hour would be rather unpleasant…

TBC…

Well, I hope the last part was something to laugh. As I wrote it, I imagined how LeBeau and Kinch looked for and backwards between the two colonels in the classical slapstick-modus – even if the top is rather serious.

The secret underground facility to produce the new Messerschmidt en-mass is a true occasion that began in 1943. The facility was built by thousands of slave-workers which were partly even simply kidnapped in conquered countries. The spread production of the air-fighter should be pooled on one place to increase the output, and to hide it from the allies, the facility was placed in a hill that already had some mining-tunnels which had been used centuries earlier. The serial-production began in February 1945 and more than 1000 fighters took the air in the following weeks, but – fortunately too late to turn the fate’s wheel for the Nazis. I reveal more about its location and what happens during the story, because to delay the serial-production and to sabotage it as much as possible will be a new task for the “Heroes”.

Given the above mentioned historical facts, Klink’s revelation is more than the simple support he gave Hogan and his men until now. Klink enters now a more active role in standing up against the regime, and his assistance will increase in a way that takes even Hogan by surprise (and you, maybe, too).

Concerning Hogan’s realization of his German counterpart’s feelings – I hope it was as you imagined it (or eventually even better). Of course our colonel is shocked about it, especially after he has to admit that a big part of him reacts to it anything but negative. For days now his body takes a kind of own life whenever Will smiles at him or gives him this special glance, and this is only the beginning of the road Hogan had stepped on without being aware of it.

I hope, you loved the new chapter, and I can already promise a turbulent next chapter – after all, then all members of the “Unsung Heroes” are ALL going to be flabbergasted about the changes.
Like always I’m absolutely curious what you think about the new update.

Have a nice rest of the week,

The next chapter comes eventually at Sunday,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Originally I wanted to publish the next chapter yesterday, but a surprise-visit of friends prevented it. Therefore the new installment comes only now, and I hope you’re not angry about it.

Thank you so much for the many reviews. I hoped that you would like the last chapter, and my expectations weren’t disappointed. You really seemed to love it. And I can promise you that the new chapter is extraordinary, too.

So, have fun with it,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 25 – To win the Heroes

Klink was barely out of his quarters, as Kinch and LeBeau began to speak rapidly.

“Do you really think he is on our side, mon Colonel? Oui, he helped you, but all this could be one big trick to deliver us to Berlin and to finally receive the damn red stripes for his trousers!”

“Louis is right, Colonel. This all here – letting you stay here, getting all hero-like all of a sudden, playing the elderly friend – can be nothing more than one big trick to…”

“He knows too many details about our missions that he could have only gotten by watching us closely and by figuring us out during or shortly after our operations in the past,” Hogan interrupted them softly. “He could have already delivered us to the Gestapo two years ago – at least after the
whole mess with Hegel. He knew what was going on, and eliminated the phony diamonds which could have given us away because they were packed in a box made of teak-wood which is typically English. And he stayed silent during my big fish-story I presented to the Gestapo afterwards; in effect playing along with it. He recognized my voice while we had the big show going on concerning the kidnapping of Feldmarschall von Heiken to get General Barton out – and again he played along. He…”

“He blurted out that it was your voice he heard, so…”

LeBeau couldn’t finish his sentence, because Hogan replied, “Yes, and he even apologized to me for putting me in danger by his reaction.” He sighed. “Klink knew about the vanished tiger-tank, the vanished air-fighter… Hell, he even assumed the right thing concerning the damn rocket-test last year. He didn’t deliver me to the Gestapo after he caught me in a German uniform at the Hofbräu and didn’t punish you all for also being outside of the camp. He warned us as this radio-detector arrived, and…”

“Colonel Hogan, you really should wait until the others are here. It spares energy to have such a discussion only one time.” Klink returned into the room; carrying a tray with glasses and a bottle of cognac. “I think the gentlemen are going to need it.” He looked at Hogan. “Do you think you could bear a Schnapps with your sore throat?”

“I rather worry for my stomach if I don’t get one,” the younger man sighed; knowing that the upcoming talk would be stressful and tiresome. He already felt a headache approaching.

Klink chuckled and poured seven glasses with cognac. He was barely done, as Schultz appeared; Baker, Newkirk and Carter in tow. The three Heroes looked rather puzzled at the two officers and saluted quickly, before they looked enquiringly at their other two friends.

“What’s the matter here, mate?” Newkirk whispered towards LeBeau, who glared at Klink and Hogan. What the heck…?

“Is this for us?” Carter piped up; pointing at the tray with the filled glasses.

“You’re going to need it, André,” Louis said darkly; crossing his arms in front of his chest. “You’re going to need a lot more of it, believe me.”

Schultz looked questioningly at Klink. “Herr Kommandant, I brought the three prisoners. Any
further orders?"

“No, Schultz, dismissed!”

“One moment,” Hogan cut in and lifted a hand. “I think Schultz should stay.”

“What?” Klink stared in disbelief at him. “You want him to stay? Don’t you think this would be a little bit…”

“You suggested that it would be better if all participants were informed at once to spare us all nerves,” the colonel answered; shrugging one shoulder.

“And what does this have to do with Schultz?” Klink demanded.

“Please, Colonel Hogan,” the sergeant began in his typical uncertain voice, “I’ve done nothing. Nnnnooothing at all. You know: I see nothing and I hear nothing…”

“Exactly,” Hogan nodded and looked up at Klink. “Just like you.”

The Oberst frowned, blinked slowly – and Hogan began to count the seconds in his mind. ‘One, two, three, four…’

“Don’t tell me that… that SCHULTZ… No, this can’t be!” Klink burst out; shock written all over his face.

“I don’t know what Herr Hogan is implying, Herr Kommandant,” the large Bavarian began to whine. “I really have done nothing that…”

“Shut up, Schultz!” Klink snapped and wagged one balled fist. “You… you covered for them, too????”

“I-I-I c-c-c-cover for them, Herr K-K-Kommandant?” Schultz stuttered; panic in his eyes.
“Why did he say, ‘too’?” Carter asked Newkirk, who stared disbelievingly at Hogan. Why had the gov’nor given Schultz away to Klink?

“Yes,” Klink groused; feeling betrayed. “You cover for them, let me run blind and deaf through the camp and…”

“Colonel Klink, you weren’t ‘deaf’ and ‘blind’ like you conclusively told me,” Hogan interrupted the beginning tirade. “You only pretended to be ignorant – just like Schultz. So please don’t rebuke him.”

“The Kommandant just said, ‘you covered for them, too’,” Carter directed his attention to Kinch, as he realized that he wouldn’t get any answer from a rigid Newkirk. “I heard it very well. What does he mean with this?”

Kinchloe sighed deeply. “He means…”

“What Colonel Klink means, is that Schultz isn’t the only one who was and still is on our side, guys,” Hogan cut in. His gaze wandered from one Hero to the next, before it stayed on Klink’s half indignant, half tensed face. “Colonel Klink knows that I’m Papa Bear and he also knows of our missions. And he has protected us within the last two years!”

You could have heard the famous needle hitting the ground. Newkirk, Baker and Carter gaped at their superior officer, Kinch crossed his arms in front of his chest again and grimaced, while LeBeau made a face, too. And Schultz?

The large Bavarian was opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water, while his eyes were about to bulge out of his head. Then he pointed a finger at Klink and gasped, “You… you knew about them – and covered for them? But… this was what I did the whole time!”

“This much I’ve understood, Schultz,” Klink snapped. “I suspected for quite some time that your nice handling of the POWs doesn’t only happen because of your kind nature or because they give you chocolate from their Red Cross-packages. Don’t look at me like this, I’ve seen you munching it often enough. But I never thought that you would double-cross me like this!”

Schultz gulped. “I’ve never double-crossed you, Herr Kommandant. I was always loyal to you and…”
“Colonel Klink, you really can’t reproach Schultz for doing the same thing you have been doing,” Hogan tried to calm the enraged Oberst. “And it would be highly unfair to accuse Schultz of disloyalty concerning your person. It was he who came to us for help to get you to safety before your planned execution could take place. He defended you a lot of times against suspicious superiors and was always there for you – even in private, if I may remind you. He helped us because he thought it was the right thing to do – and because he loathes what is going on in this country just like you do. But he didn’t know that you were covering and protecting us, too. The show you delivered was too good for him to see through, so he didn’t dare tell you that…”

“Don’t stroke my ego to drive a point or opinion home, Hogan. I’ve recognized this trick a long time ago.”

“Yet you allowed it to happen more than often,” the colonel replied gently.

“Yes, I know,” Klink growled; sending the younger man a dark look. “And you took advantage of it.”

“Of course – after all I didn’t know that you were on our side the whole time.”

“He. Is. What?” Newkirk finally began grasping what his superior had said, and stared with wide eyes at Klink and Hogan.

The colonel sighed; his attention still fixed on the Kommandant. “Come on, Willie, you are only irritated because you didn’t see this coming with Schultz – and the other way around. You two hid your true convictions and secret supports too well. Sweet Lord, you even fooled me, and so…”

“One. Bloody. Moment!” Newkirk cut in; being instantly in everyone's focus. “What are you trying to say here, Colonel? That KLINK is on our side?”

“Bright spark,” LeBeau taunted him. “Isn’t this what the two colonels have been talking about the whole time? Mon colonel is convinced that Klink is our ally – and now it’s your turn to say something about it.”

Peter stared at the American officer and managed to ask, “Permission to speak freely?”
“Go ahead,” Hogan nodded; already knowing what was coming.

“Have you lost your bloody mind – *sir*?” he exploded; pointing at the *Oberst*. “Klink tries for almost three years to reveal us, to…”

“This is *Colonel* Klink for you, Newkirk,” Hogan interrupted him. “That I allow you to speak your mind openly doesn’t include the permission to address him improperly.”

“You do it the most times,” Carter murmured, but was still heard.

“Colonel Klink and I have the same rank. This makes a difference, Carter,” Hogan said firmly.

“Rank or no rank, *sir*, but *C-o-l-o-n-e-l* Klink tries for three years now to reveal us, supports the damn Gestapo, does the SS’s biddings and…”

“And didn’t raise any suspicions like this,” Hogan cut in. “He played a role – just like Schultz, just like we did.”

“And how do you know that this isn’t one big trick?” Newkirk snarled. “Gut-feeling? You were wrong about persons before, *sir*!”

“Yes, and I was wrong about Colonel Klink, too – because I didn’t recognize until yesterday that he is not only on our side, but even covered for us and supported us. He still does!”

“This… this is insane!” Newkirk hissed; his eyes flashed. “I can understand that you are grateful for him saving your neck, but…”

“This has nothing to do with me, Newkirk!”

“Really?”

“Colonel Klink just gave us very important information about the increasing cargo transfers within Germany and revealed Goering’s and Hitler’s newest project,” Kinchloe rose to speak; voice and
face calm. “Does this sound like playing tricks to lull us into a false sense of safety? What for, Newkirk? If he already has the colonel’s admission of our missions, it would have been one of his easiest tasks to call the Gestapo and deliver us to them, but he didn’t.” His dark eyes wandered to the tensed German officer. “You had this chance since yesterday, as far as I understood – yet we are all still here.”

“This is a trick!” Newkirk hissed. “Doesn’t anybody see this?”

“Well,” LeBeau began; cocking his head. “I thought about this all – and I think Colonel Hogan is right.”

“I advised you to never think too closely about something,” Peter all but sneered.

“Someone who puts mint-sauce on meat shouldn’t speak about ‘too much thinking’,” LeBeau mocked back, before he took a very – very! – deep breath. “But concerning this whole mess… I don’t like to say this, but Kinch and Colonel Hogan have a point. Why would Colonel Klink wait until today and discuss everything with us, if in truth he intends to deliver us to the Gestapo? Why should he trick us into believing him if he could take care of our arrest every second if he wanted to?” He pushed his cap back. “That really would make no sense. And, by the way, he risked his own life to protect and rescue mon colonel. He even stood up against the Gestapo and punched Hochstetter. And this all tells me a lot.”

“Thank you, Corporal LeBeau,” Klink said.

“You’re welcome,” the tiny Frenchman replied.

Newkirk glared at his friend. “Has he wrapped you around his finger now, too?”

“Non, of course not, but try to think straight and cool your hot head down, Pierre. If Klink’s intentions were to trick us all, he would have called the Gestapo yesterday – after mon colonel admitted everything about us. Yet we’re standing here, discussing everything, no SS in sight and…” He looked at the tray, “… and with cognac waiting for us all. I think that speaks its own language.”

Newkirk only shook his head; shooting fierce glances at the two officers.

Hogan sighed. “Baker, what do you think?” he asked. “Until now you’re the only one who hasn’t
Baker grimaced, crossed his arms in front of his chest and murmured, “Give me a minute more to stomach the information that Colonel Klink was made privy by you.”

“It was the other way around, Baker. He revealed himself to me,” Hogan said softly.

“And what makes you so certain that he hadn’t made a shot in the dark and now got his assumptions proved?”

“I made a ‘shot in the dark’,,” Klink cut in; deeply baffled about the democratic way Hogan handled his men, but maybe this was the key to his success. “Like Hogan said, I only had a lot of assumptions concerning you all, but after everything that happened within the last week, I knew I had to act. Covering for you, laying false tracks or playing a role aren’t enough anymore. After first Pruhst and now Hochstetter found everything out but fortunately lacked the last iron-clad proof, you all, Gentlemen, are a hair-width away from being revealed. Berlin has become paranoid and that goes for all leading persons, independent if they belong to the Wehrmacht, SS or Gestapo. The war teeters on the brink – last but not least because of the ME-262 V5 going into serial production.”

“What?” Baker asked; alarmed.

Kinchloe, LeBeau and Hogan simply nodded, while Klink continued,

“Just like you all – and most Germans by now – I want an end to this insanity that wracks the whole continent; even the whole world if you add the Pacific-war. I, in person, never wanted this war. Contrary to you all – except for Schultz – I have lived through the first madness and I had hoped, prayed, that nothing likewise would happen again. In a very twisted way my prayers were heard: This war isn’t like the first one – it’s worse! And I fear it will leave this world – this planet, like the scientists call it now – in ruins. The sooner the war ends, the better – and hopefully with the Allies as the winners.”

“Maybe those who supported your beloved Führer should have thought about it sooner,” Newkirk growled. “It would have cost less millions of lives.”

“What a fortunate circumstance that the ‘British Empire’ is free of all crimes,” Schultz murmured; showing again loyalty towards Klink by giving examples against Newkirk’s voiced loath. “I had a friend back in Heidelberg. He came from India and had a little shop of spices. When he told me of
everything that had happened in his country from the beginning of the colonial era until now... I still get sick.”

Newkirk opened his mouth to protest, but Hogan was quicker. Lifting his right hand he said strongly, “If we want to bestow each other with accusations for everything that went wrong in history, we can start with Adam and Eve, so stop it! Just right here and now, there are only a few things that count: Colonel Klink and Sergeant Schultz are on our side – because they want to free their country of this madman, just like we want to stop him before he topples the whole world into darkness. Colonel Klink broke his silence yesterday and told me of the many things he saw, heard, witnessed and concluded concerning our missions, but contrary to Hochstetter he didn’t use this development to doom us, but to defend and protect us. And I think it best he tells you what he found out and how, before you all dart at him like a pack of hyenas.”

“Hyenas?” Newkirk snapped.

“Sorry, fellas, I know that this all must be hard for you to understand, but we already mastered other difficult occurrences, because we not only used our brain and mind, but also our heart. Maybe you all should do this here and now again. For my part, I trust Colonel Klink – because I have acknowledged one big truth: We all would have been dead many months now if it wouldn’t have been for him. And concerning your doubt of his intentions: If he really wanted to lull us into a false sense of security, why risk getting killed before he could reveal us? When he saved me during the Air Force ambush, he came a brink away from being shot. Yet it didn’t stop him from coming to my aid. And he did it again two days later as he got me away from Hochstetter. Don’t get me wrong, fellas, but when a guy saves my neck two times by risking his own, I cannot allege him of using dirty tricks. For something like this there had been too much at stake for his person. He chose the deadly risk; not caring if he survived or not. So I do think that getting the ‘red stripes for his trousers’ was the last thing on his mind during those moments. And why? Because the ‘red stripes’ are nothing to him. Ending this war and stopping Hitler are more important to him – and, by the way, the safety of every person in this camp. Not only that of his men, but ours, too.”

“The colonel has some points here,” Baker murmured.

Hogan knew that he was about to gain his men’s agreement and led another trump. His glance found the Sergeant of the Guards. “You have to come to trust our Schultzie, because he is a kind-hearted man and wants to do the right thing. You mentioned it several times that you don’t care about the uniform he wears, because he is a good man.” He watched how the large Bavarian grew a few centimeters in pride but also smiled with a lot of gratefulness at him. “If you trust him and do not care for his nationality, why don’t you want to do the same for Colonel Klink?” Hogan continued. “He did no less for us than Schultz.”

For a long moment there was again nothing else than silence, then LeBeau grumbled, “I remember his reaction as he learned that you were in Hochstetter’s clutches, mon Colonel. I thought he would
faint – and then he got all warriorlike.” He looked at Klink. “You didn’t worry for your health, but only for Colonel Hogan. To get to him as fast as possible and to save him from Hochstetter was all that mattered to you at those moments.”

It wasn’t a question, yet Klink felt the need to nod. “Ja,” he said quietly. “Hogan’s welfare is… very important to me, because despite everything the brass says and expects, he is my friend.”

LeBeau’s dark eyes seemed to penetrate him for a moment, and whatever the Frenchman saw seemed to satisfy him, because Louis’ face relaxed, while he sighed, “This much I’ve recognized.” He glanced shortly back at Hogan. “D’accord, I listen. And to make everything easier, we all drink this cognac *now*.”

“Oh yes, please,” Schultz groaned. “I can really use one now.”

“You should still shut up,” Klink snapped.

“How often do I have to repeat myself until you learn it?”

An idea struck the American – an idea concerning this crazy thought he had got regarding the assumed feelings of his German counterpart. Smiling softly at the older man and cocking his head in a way that always succeeded when females were involved, he replied gently, “Wilhelm, we’re one big gang now, so loosen up. And concerning Schultz: Haven’t we cleared it out that you and Schultz are the best team on the German side within Stalag 13? Without you two, not only my men and me, but also both of you would have been leaked out by now. So calm your hurt ego and say ‘thank-you’ to the man who was always loyal to your person despite the fact that he didn’t know that you belong to the same side he does.”

Klink stared at him, saw the velvet brown eyes looking at him with understanding, sympathy, pleading and even fondness – and his inner being melted away. Warmth spread through him and one time more he remembered the first time he ever had lain eyes on Hogan, knowing from this moment on that he was lost. And how lost he was had been proven within the last days.

“God dammit, you rascal!” he growled, before he glared at the Bavarian. “And damn your naive way, Schultz! I have lost count of how often I downgraded you only to take it back – or how often I wanted to send you away, but somehow never did. Hell, I was even deeply afraid as I thought you
deadly ill, because I knew that I’ve a friend within you, and then…” He sighed and lowered his head. “Why didn’t you trust me enough to tell me the truth?” He sounded hurt.

Hogan was about to answer this question instead of Schultz, but skipped it. This was something between those two men, and not his place to interference. And, by the way, he had just gotten another proof that his own assumptions concerning Klink’s feelings were spot-on. Good God, what should he do now?

Hans still looked at his superior. “Because I didn’t know how much I could entrust you with this delicate thing. I knew you are against the regime – I knew that you loathe it like I do, but…” He took a deep breath. “But I didn’t know how much they had intimidated you by now, or what you were willing to risk.” His big eyes shortly found Hogan’s, before he glanced back at Klink. “But I knew other things, which showed me that you are a good man. I only…” He gulped. “I was only unsure how you would react if you knew the truth so…” He shrugged helplessly.

Both Germans looked at each other – one searching for forgiveness, the other one debating if he could really continue to trust his subordinate. Then, tired out, Klink’s shoulders slumped. “You know that you can come to me every time, Schultz. And you'll hopefully remember this the next time you’re unsure about what you can tell me or not.”

The Sergeant of the Guards dared a tiny smile and his big eyes were a little bit damp, as all of sudden LeBeau stepped between them and offered them two glasses of cognac. “Here, I think it will make everything better.”

“There aren't enough glasses now,” Carter cut in; his voice as innocent as always.

“Take mine,” Hogan offered. “I don’t think I can bear some with my sore thro…”

“Oh no, sir, I'll get you another glass,” Andrew interrupted him eagerly. “And then,” he continued; looking around, “I think we should hear what Colonel Klink and Colonel Hogan have to tell us, and only then decide what we shall do.”

Klink, having calmed down and once again in control of himself, glanced at his American counterpart. “Is this the way your army handles problems – by discussing it with everyone?”

Hogan smiled. “No, it’s my way – and the reason why we were and still are so successful. Understanding is the key to everything.” His glance found a still glaring Newkirk. “Well, at least I
The whole talk lasted more than an hour. Klink told the other Heroes more or less the same he had admitted to Hogan the day prior. There were some occasions to which Schultz could add a few details, other incidents were completed by Kinchloe and Carter, who had both seemed to come to terms with the whole change easier than the others – just like Hogan had assumed.

Newkirk didn’t say much during the whole discussion – he only leant against the wall, held the empty cognac glass and stared with small eyes at the two officers. LeBeau was more talkative and even if his whole face practically screamed ‘distrust’, he was open enough to listen and think about everything thoroughly. Baker was silent most of the time, too, but you could see that he pondered all details to come up with his own opinion.

But the Heroes not only listened to Klink’s remarks and observations, they asked him their own questions – questions directed at his person. And despite the fact that Klink didn’t like to speak about his private thoughts, he answered as truthfully as possible. He knew that it would be a long and stony way to gain the men’s trust, but if they could accept the fact that he was indeed not their enemy, it would be a beginning. And so he revealed his point of view concerning the current regime and the war. He knew that he risked a lot by doing so, on the other hand if he wanted to convince Hogan’s men of his seriousness he had to show them his own trust into their sense of justice. And, by the way, he knew that Hogan wouldn’t allow them to use their knowledge against him. Just like Klink protected the younger man, he knew that it was likewise the other way around.

And, to his not so big surprise, Schultz cut in here and there, and told the Heroes about the one or other things Klink did or decided, obviously to keep them safe. There were details not even Hogan knew about, and the colonel’s respect for the way Klink handled everything grew.

In the end Kinch and Carter – and also Baker – admitted that one thing was sure: Klink, the gauche, weak and foolish Kommandant, was anything but lame and daft. In his own way he was clever and also genuine in his endeavor to shield Hogan and his men and to end this war by supporting the Allies.

LeBeau was still wary, but he had seen firsthand how much the Oberst had worried for Hogan. This hadn’t been an act, but true reactions. And the Frenchman remembered that, even though they were running out of time, Klink had made sure that the SS or Gestapo wouldn’t catch LeBeau outside of camp. The German officer had protected him – and since then Klink had handled him and the others in a far kinder manner than usual. Those hours in which they had all worried their heads off for Hogan seemed to have forged them together – the camp-Kommandant and the POW-gang. So LeBeau was ready to give the man a chance – after all, he had done the same for Schultz and had...
never been disappointed by the large Bavarian.

The only one who clung to his strong distrust and aversion was Newkirk. Yes, he was grateful that Klink had saved Hogan. And that the German officer had risked his own life while doing so was something he couldn’t deny. That Klink had also faced a lot of trouble that could have backfired on him as he stood up against Hochstetter, and even punched the bastard to avenge Hogan, was another thing that made Peter think a little bit higher of the Kommandant. But to believe that Klink had really seen through them for two years now was something he couldn’t believe. Yes, the others were right when they pointed out that Klink could have given them away since yesterday at the latest, but hadn’t done so, but to trust the man was crazy at best. Too often he had witnessed how the Saxonian had bent to the SS’s or Gestapo’s liking – or Burkhalter’s – to not get into trouble or to save his neck. Newkirk couldn’t imagine that Klink would keep silent if the pressure on him would grow – for whichever reason. Yet, as it seemed, his friends were more or less ready to take this risk. And it gave Newkirk a headache.

“So, any further questions?” Hogan’s voice tore him out of his thoughts, and he lifted his hand.

“Yes, one: Are we now going to inform Colonel Klink of everything we’re going to do?”

“I don’t think he’s interested if you have to use the restrooms or not,” LeBeau said ironically. “But if you refer to informing Colonel Klink when we’ve ‘businesses’ to attend to, then – oui – I think he should learn about it.”

“Well, then don’t begin to cry when we’re surprised by a load of SS-men the next time we’re out of the camp,” Peter growled.

“Newkirk,” Hogan warned, “this here is a matter of trust. Colonel Klink trusted me – us! – as he told not only me but also you all the truth. He…”

“He holds the whip in the hand, sir, because he knows about us and could use this to…”

“And we know about his views. If anybody loyal to the regime learns about it, it would mean certain death for Colonel Klink. So you can say that one hand washes the other – or, how I prefer it, when we trust each other, we all come out of the situation as winners.” He sighed as he saw the still harsh glances Newkirk gave Klink. “Peter, I know how hard it must be for you to let go of your grudges, but you do so any time we’re working together with Germans from the Underground. You do so concerning Schultz. Why don’t you give Colonel Klink at least a chance?”
“I didn’t say that,” Newkirk replied, “but I’ve been through too much in this damn war to suddenly put my trust into someone who threw stones in our way at every given possibility.”

“No stones, Peter, only pebbles as to not make his superiors and the Gestapo suspicious. If he really wanted to give us trouble, it would have looked a lot different. This much I know now.”

“And why was he so glad as you were about to be transferred to another camp – or was eager to let you return to the US, if he knew what important work you’ve to do here? Sweet Lord, as you were about to be transferred to Stalag 15, it almost cost you your life because the damn Berlin Express was doomed to get blown up, and…”

“Klink didn’t know about the latter,” Hogan added for consideration.

“You knew about the upcoming explosion?” Klink gasped. “This was the reason you asked for the actual time and commented something about my clock – my radio – being too slow?” He remembered the moment the explosion tore through the air from afar; learning only afterwards what had been torn to pieces. He then had realized that Hogan had almost been on this train and it had given him the chills for days how close the colonel’s demise had been. And that after he, Klink, had taken care that the travel for the man who had wormed his way beneath his skin should be comfortable – on said train, not on a cold truck. Even today he didn’t want to think of the fact that he had almost caused Robert’s death.

“Well, we initiated it – a day before everything got so out of hand,” Hogan told him. “And the latter was my fault. I got the request to go home and I gladly accepted it, only to think twice about it and wanted to take my agreement back. I couldn’t leave my men, I couldn’t walk away while they would still be here. But it was too late. London had already arranged a replacement for me and the mess took its course – in many different ways, because even in our worst nightmares we hadn’t imagined that they would send Crittendon. We all, including you, already had the displeasure of working with him before.” He sighed. “Thank the Lord everything worked out in the end.”

“Yes, but it was a near thing. You were almost killed,” Newkirk growled. Then he looked at Klink. “And you were eager to get rid of him. Why so, if you see a friend in him?”

Hogan frowned, but Newkirk had a point here. A point that had a completely different meaning for the colonel than his friends couldn’t imagine. Glancing at his tired German counterpart, he asked quietly, “Newkirk is right about this detail. Why did you want to get rid of me this much if you wanted to support my missions?” – ‘Why did you want to get rid of me if you’ve feelings for me? Because of them?’ he thought.
Klink still felt bad about the whole thing. And now even more after he just learned that this close-call had been Hogan’s own doing. Sweet Lord, he had almost lost Robert – because he, Klink, had thought he could kill two birds with one stone: Sending Hogan to relative safety to another Stalag and eliminating the seduction he was more and more helpless against. But he couldn’t speak of the latter – never!

“Out of the same reason I wanted you to flee after the ambush last week,” he replied quietly; only telling a part of the truth.

At his words, the Heroes gasped and stared again with large eyes at him – even Newkirk gaped at him in utter disbelief. Klink had wanted what?

“The ring of those who suspected you of being an active Underground-member – of being Papa Bear – was closing more and more up around you during autumn 1943,” the Oberst continued. “Especially Hochstetter was very close on your tail at the beginning of last year. So I thought it best to get you away to safety after the chance came last autumn. If you would have been transferred to another Stalag, Hochstetter, at least, would have been out of your hair. And if you would have made an escape and returned to the States, you would have been safe, too. But, of course, you crossed all my attempts to get you out of the rising danger, and even returned on your own after you were freed by the Underground. I can’t say that I was unhappy, because this Crittendon already cost me dozens of nerves after only one day. But on the other hand you caused me new old problems: How to protect you.” He sighed soundlessly. ‘I would endure never seeing you again if this means that you’re safe – and I can’t even say it aloud because then you would realize how much you really mean to me – how much I love you.’

Hogan pursed his lips and wanted to say something, but Newkirk was quicker.

“Give me a sec here. Did I understand this correctly? The Kommandant wanted you to flee last week?” he addressed his superior; flabbergasted.

Hogan nodded slowly and wasn’t aware of the soft smile that played around his healing lips. He hadn’t told his friends about this detail because it had been something private between Klink and him. But with the Oberst’s admission he could break the silence about it.

“Yes, he even ordered me to escape – knowing that Hochstetter would be after me as soon as the black-clad rat learned I survived the ambush. I refused to obey…”

“I still should send you to the cooler for this disobedience,” Klink grumbled, but even Newkirk realized that the German was only joking in his own unique way.
“Thanks, I had it cold and dark enough during Hochstetter’s hospitality,” Hogan commented wryly.

“Don’t remind me,” the Kommandant said; anger began to brim in his eyes. “I still want to kill him for what he did to you.”

LeBeau pursed his lips. There it was again: This fierce protectiveness Klink developed whenever Hogan was facing danger. And when he thought back two days ago as he found them both sleeping side by side, he began to wonder how close this friendship between the two went by now.

“The Kommandant wanted to give up his beloved perfect record of no escapes for you?” Carter asked; pushing both hands into the pockets of his jacket. “Boy, I think that speaks for itself.” He nodded firmly to himself.

Newkirk cocked his head and watched the two officers, who looked shortly at each other with odd soft eyes, before Hogan addressed the youngest member of his team, “So, you’re willing to give Colonel Klink a chance, Carter?”

“Well, he put your injuries above his own. He forbid Wilson from treating him until you were cared for, and he punched Hochstetter. And he wanted you to flee so that you were safe – he even tried to get you home last autumn. And he didn’t reveal us to the Gestapo. So, yes, I think it’s safe to see an ally in him.”

Hogan smirked, before he glanced at Kinchloe and Baker. “Kinch, Baker, what do you think?”

James took a deep breath. “What shall I say? Carter already pointed everything out – and if you trust Colonel Klink, then… well, I’m in. By the way, it would already be too late to do something else and…” His dark eyes found the tall German. “And you are not as bad as I believed in earlier times.”


Baker nodded shortly.

“It’s like the others already said: Colonel Klink knows about us and there is nothing that can be done about it anymore. I hope that you’re right and that he won’t double-cross us, but in one thing I trust him: That he keeps you safe. And if he wants to protect you, he has to stay silent about us, otherwise you would be lost, too. So – oui – I’ll give him one chance.” He suddenly looked fiercely at Klink and pointed a finger at him. “But woe you do something that will harm mon colonel, then you learn what it means to face French rage.”

To his surprise the German officer only smiled. “I know what it means to enrage a protective Frenchman, LeBeau. I had this experience a dozen times and more within the last almost three years.”

The tiny Hero crossed his arms in front of him. “And don’t you forget it,” he grumbled, before he suddenly smirked, “Otherwise you can say au revoir to any delicious meal.”

Hogan chuckled. This was so typical for the feisty cook. Grousing, grumbling and even bitching, but his heart was made of gold. He admired Louis for it. Then his gaze found Newkirk.

“Peter?” he asked.

Frustrated, the Englishman threw up both arms. “What shall I say? I’m obviously outvoted, so there is nothing I can do at the moment.” His eyes became small while he glared at Klink. “But I’ll watch you.” He waited a moment before he added, “sir!”

“By all means, there is nothing I could do to prevent that,” Klink shrugged. Then his attention was driven to Schultz. “Is there anything else you did within the last three years I should learn of?”

“Nnnnothing, Herr Kommandant. To say the truth, those boys over there cost me years of my life.” He lifted his right hand and began to count fingers. “I was forced to parachute out of a stolen aircraft, I had to close my eyes during the last rocket-test because there was no way I could see the guys over there in SS-uniforms for real, and…”

“WHAT? So, like this you were able to manipulate the rocket?” Klink stared wide-eyed at his American counterpart. “We’ll speak about this, too!” he glowered; pointing a finger at the younger man.

Hogan gave him a very innocent, gentle smile. “With pleasure.”
“And why do I have the feeling that he really means what he just said,” Klink huffed, looked back at Schultz and said sternly, “I don’t know if I want to learn about your ‘adventures’ at all, or I’ll get the grays. Yet I hope everything you’ve been through taught you one important thing.”

“And what should this be, bitteschön?”

“If you hang out with this rascal here for too long,” he flipped one thumb at Hogan, “you’re either ready for a one year vacation, or you request early retirement of your superior.”

“I’m not this bad,” the colonel promptly pouted.

“No, you’re worse,” Klink deadpanned, but there was a warm gleam beneath his exasperated gaze. He took a deep breath and not only the Sergeant of the Guards, but also the others saw the exhaustion the Oberst tried to hide. “Schultz, you’re in charge this afternoon again. I’m done for today. Please no disturbances except if the world comes to an end.”

“We should come up with a story as to why we’ve all been sitting here for more than an hour now,” Kinchloe cut in. “Not only will the other POWs be curious by now, your officers and men will be wary, too,” he addressed Klink.

The Kommandant nodded. “A good idea, Sergeant Kinchloe.” He looked at Hogan. “Regarding the fact that our senior POW will be in no condition to resume his duty within the next two weeks…”

“No, I’m going to be fit earlier!” Hogan instantly protested, but Klink lifted a hand.

“You will be ready to do your duty in two or three weeks, Hogan, like it or not. Therefore the allocation of responsibility has to change for the time being. Sergeant Kinchloe and Sergeant Baker are going to share your duty. Like this none of them has too much to do and can also resume their own tasks.” He looked at Baker. “As far as I know you’re the leading POW of Barracks 4, and Sergeant Kinchloe shares the same post in Barracks 2 in Hogan’s absence. If you two are also taking over the duties of a senior POW, you can fulfill both duties if they are shared.” His glance found the three other POWs. “Concerning your part in this meeting, we can officially say that your presence was required by Colonel Hogan, because he has given you further instructions how to run the camp from the POWs’ side. I know that this isn’t usual, but given the fact that you six are close friends and are functioning the best when building a group, I agreed to your participation – last but not least to ensure the camp’s safety and to lighten the mood that has been down for days now. I think there is no need to explain more.” He took a deep breath. “Who of you is responsible for the radio traffic?”
Kinchloe crossed his arms in front of him. “That would be me.”

“And me,” Baker added. He wouldn’t let Kinchloe face any consequences alone should Klink play a foul game.

“Right. I assume that you keep London updated about Colonel Hogan’s condition – and given the fact that he pulls the strings, there are no missions at the moment. Yet we have to think about a few things which should take place. Burkhalter is no idiot. If nothing happens in this area while Hogan is put out of commission, so to say, he will count one and one together and may realize that Hochstetter wasn’t that wrong with his accusations. So, if London has tasks for you which can be fulfilled without our troublemaker, do them. You can inform me or not. I already offered Hogan that it’s up to him what he tells me and what not. The same goes for you. If you’re comfortable with informing me about something, I’m honored. If you decide to keep things from me, I hold no grudges against you. I’m aware that you first have to learn to trust me and that this will take a while. I only ask for one thing: Be careful. Very, very careful! Hochstetter was certainly able to wake some suspicions in Burkhalter, who is already wary when it comes to Stalag 13 and you especially. If you have some missions for which you need an alibi, Schultz or I can provide you with one, but then we need to know about it in time, so please keep this in mind.”

Except for Hogan, the Heroes looked surprised at Klink, and it was Carter, who piped up, “This sounds fair, don’t you think so too, boys?”

“Yes, the question is how long this will last,” Newkirk murmured beneath his breath.

“Colonel Klink is right when he suggests that we shouldn’t hold still until I’m fit again,” Hogan said slowly. “It would alert Burkhalter and certainly a few other high-ranking guys. So ask London for a task – nothing too difficult, nothing too dramatic, but something that will show the German brass that the Underground in this area is still active.”

“And if the brass in London have nothing to do for us, I can always blow up a bridge or a street,” Carter said eagerly. “That certainly would wake them up in Berlin.”

Klink looked with big eyes at him, before he turned towards Hogan. “Don’t tell me that he is the one with the dynamite.”

Hogan had to chuckle. “Our dear Andrew has fire, Willie. And this is meant literally.”
The Oberst groaned and closed his eyes. “I don’t think I want to learn more.” And somehow it relaxed him as he heard a few of the other men chuckling…

TBC…

Yeah, now the cat is out of the back for everyone. Of course the revelation that Klink more or less knew about the Heroes for approx. two years had to be a shock for Hogan’s men. It always takes you by utterly surprise if you think you could keep something a secret only to learn that others knew about it for longer. And it will be partly a hard way for the Heroes to come to terms with it – and to learn to trust Klink. Especially Newkirk has his problems with it.

In the next chapter, Hogan learns more about Klink’s private life and family, but this isn’t the reason for the beginning of unrestful sleeps. With the realization that his ‘jailer’ and officially enemy has feelings for him, everything begins to go out of hand for our dear colonel, because never in a million years he had thought that his own emotions would turn into chaos. To suppress something like this is never a good idea, because feelings can haunt you even in your dreams…

I hope, you liked the new chapter and that the reaction of the Heroes were like you assumed. Like always I’m dying to learn about your thoughts and likings.

I’ll try to poste the next chapter at the coming weekend, but this depends on my beta-reader, because I sent her a whole bunch of edited chapters last Saturday and hope to get no. 26 back until the following weekend.

Have a nice week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so very much for the many reviews you left. I’m really happy that the story finds more and more readers and even some fans.

I don’t want to reveal too much about the new chapter, only that it is an emotional one with new background concerning Klink, Newkirk showing even more distrust and then… Well, let me put it like this. This chapter is the first one for which you maybe will need something cool to drink. It isn’t too hot (this will come later), but the first step into this direction is made.

So, have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 26 – Crazy dreams

The Heroes, except for LeBeau who remained in Klink’s quarters to prepare lunch, returned to Barracks 2. They were shivering because of the icy wind outside and were glad to reach the relative warmth of the hut. The door had barely had time to close behind them, as Newkirk began to vent his spleen. “This is madness at best! Klink an ally! Klink jumps on any bandwagon that could give him advantages or just keep his neck safe. And now, after he realizes that Hitler and his goonies are about to lose the war, he’s a big friend all of a sudden. That is…”

“Weren’t you listening?” Kinch interrupted him. “The colonel said that Klink has assumed and more or less known about us for two years now. Even if he’d have used snail mail to inform the Gestapo, they would have been here months ago.”

“He’d only guessed about our missions – and the gov’nor confirmed it,” Newkirk snapped. “I have
“Klink… knows about us?” Olsen, who lay on the upper stock bed, looked down on Hogan’s main team, shocked. The other POWs inside the barracks stopped dead in their tracks; eyes wide, jaws agape.

“Calm down, fellas,” Kinchloe tried to soothe them. “Yesterday, Klink admitted to Colonel Hogan that he had become suspicious of us two years or so ago, had by now figured everything out and was breaking his silence to openly offer us his help.”

“He told us about this new project the **Krauts** have built somewhere,” Carter began. “And he also…”

“That the ME-262 is going into serial-production and that there is a new complex facility somewhere in middle-eastern Germany is really nothing our boys wouldn’t have found out by themselves. Basically he hasn’t said anything that is really useful for the Allies,” Peter groused.

“Oh, and you think that the newest **Messerschmitt** will be released by 1000 per month and is built in an underground factory is something our Intelligence isn’t interested in?” Baker asked, perplexed. “This information gives London the chance to react before our boys face thousands of new enemies in the air. They’re warned now!”

“And they are certainly also interested in the fact that the aircraft now has a longer range or that it is less maneuverable in lower heights. Or that it is still used as a quick-bomber, which slows it down because it is built for defense,” Kinchloe added. “Peter, just forget your grudges for one moment and admit that Klink gave us a lot of valuable information.”

“By the way, I'd assumed that Klink had known more than he let on for quite some time now. Didn't you?” Carter piped up.

Newkirk threw his hands up. “Yes, I have thought that Klink isn’t as blind and deaf as he pretends to be. But now, after I got my worst suspicions confirmed, I… I can't really come to terms with it. At least not easily.” He sighed. “Until now this whole thing between him and Hogan, whatever it is, was a kind of silent agreement,” he growled. “Klink said nothing and we avoided his attention as much as possible. But that the gov’nor's now admitted everything to him is… is insane. Klink has us in his clutches now – I mean, really, **really** in his clutches. He can blackmail us, demand…”

“I don’t think that he will abuse this knowledge to his advantage,” Andrew interrupted him; shoving
his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “He won’t do anything that will endanger Colonel Hogan, and…”

“Why?” Peter demanded. “What advantages does he expect? That he won’t be put to court-martial when the Allies get him? Or do you really believe him when he says that he sees a friend in Hogan?”

“I know that he likes the colonel – a lot,” Carter replied. “Boy, was Klink beside himself when he saw the entirety of the colonel’s injuries when Wilson had to patch Hogan up. Or afterwards, as he kicked out this SS-Leutnant. I thought he would have strangled the guy if he took just one step closer to Hogan. And I don’t think that this was an act. He… was really afraid for the colonel.”

“And what shall we do now?” Olsen asked no one in particular. “Okay, if Klink has really been covering for us all those months, then we’re safe. But if not, what?”

“Then start praying,” Newkirk grumbled.

“The colonel knows what he's doing,” Kinchloe cut in. “He's never let us down, he's never endangered us as long as he could prevent it, he stood up for us and came for us whenever one or more of us landed in deep water. If he trusts Klink, then he has reasons for it – maybe more reasons than Klink chose to share with us.”

“Or he is too tired and too exhausted by now to think clearly,” Newkirk hissed and rifled through his few belongings for a cigarette.

“I don’t think so,” Andrew said. “Yes, he’s in a bad shape and I do believe that he will still need a while until he is healed, but his mind is clear, like always. And when he asked us to trust Klink, he also asked us to trust him, because if he trusts Klink but we don’t then we’ve no trust in him. Right?”

Newkirk and Baker looked at him. “Could you please repeat this, in understandable English this time?” Peter asked; half baffled, half amused.

“Please don’t – or I'll get a headache,” Kinchloe groaned, before he addressed another topic, “By the way, Klink was right about one thing, at least. If we hold still for too long – maybe until the colonel is fit again – the brass in Berlin will certainly put one and one together, and then they have us. So we need to remind Burkhalter and the others that there is still an active Underground-cell in Hammelburg – and that is has ‘nothing’ to do with Colonel Hogan or us here.”

“I'll call London and try to reach General Butler. I’ll give him the information we got from Klink concerning the new **Messerschmitt** and the upcoming serial production. And I'll also ask him for an easy, but spectacular task. He may have a job for us.” Kinch stepped to the hidden entrance, knocked at the upper stock-bed and was ready to climb down the ladder, as Newkirk held him back.

“Are you going to tell the general about Klink?”

Kinch shook his head. “No, this I'll leave up to the colonel. Shall he tell his friend that our ‘idiot’ main jailer might be another guardian angel within this camp.”

“And who is the other ‘angel’?” Carter asked.

“Who else than our ‘Strudel’-King.”

*** HH ***

After Schultz and the others left, Hogan tried to find some rest, while Klink stripped off his uniform and slipped into simple trousers, a shirt and his red housecoat. It was obvious that he would stay on the sofa with a blanket after lunch, and this was certainly for the better, because with some unease Hogan saw how the older man’s cheeks sported a red hue, hinting that his temperature had risen anew.

After serving the two officers lunch, LeBeau left, too, and both men ate quickly, before Klink prepared some tea for Hogan and himself.

“You know, when I learned earlier that it was you who had initiated the explosion of the Berlin Express you had almost been forced to board, I… felt sick,” Klink said quietly, while offering Hogan some sugar for the tea. “My intention was to make it as comfortable as possible for you when I insisted you travel with said train. And then it almost sealed your doom.” He shook his head. “Do I really want to know how often you danced with the Grim Reaper while under my responsibility?”

Hogan sighed. “Dozens of times, yet I knew what I bargained for when I accepted the mission before I came to Germany. But… I never imagined that there would be an enemy officer who'd care for me.” He looked straight at the older man. He saw the guilt in those blue eyes and continued
gently, “It wasn’t your fault, Will, it was mine. I was overjoyed when London ordered me back to the US, then I thought closer about it and wanted to take back my agreement, but it was too late.” He cocked his head. “Yet I have problems understanding why you were so full of glee as you presented Crittendon, of all people, to me – why you even locked me in the cooler while literally rubbing your hands.” His moistened his lips, before he softly added. “You said you've cared for me for a long time now, but a year ago you were glad to get rid of me.”

‘Why?’ he thought for the second time this day. ‘Why did you react this way?’

Klink looked down at his untouched cup. “Like I said, I wanted to get Hochstetter out of your hair so that you would be safer than before. And…” He took a deep breath. “You’d irritated me a lot the weeks prior and I wanted to get you down a peg or two. I knew that you and Crittendon don’t get along and I thought it would teach you a lesson. You said that everything went out of hand, and you’re right. It was the same for me. Crittendon told me of your planned escape – and I knew that Hochstetter was only waiting for the chance to finally get you. Fleeing would have been tantamount to suicide. Therefore I locked you up, then regretted my harshness and came to speak with you – maybe searching for a reason to give you back command of the POWs.” He grimaced. “And then you showed me that even the cooler can’t hold you. This, coupled with your intended escape, which would call the Gestapo on the scene quicker than anything else, made me decide to transfer you. And it almost killed you.” – ‘And that would have killed a part of me, too,’ he thought. He lowered his head. “As it seems I did everything wrong.”

Hogan had watched him closely and he saw the rue but also the sadness on the older man’s face. ‘This is your problem, Willie. Everything you try to do backfires on you, because you’ve an unlucky hand and, above all, too many people work against you. But not anymore. Not if I can help it.’

“To say the truth, the whole plan of my intended escape was nothing more than a cover-story. The Berlin Express was doomed and with it the Kesseling refinery, but if I’d escaped at the same time – to return to the States like ordered – no-one would have believed my escape was a coincidence. They would have left no stone in the camp unturned and then they would have found out about my men – and they would have held you responsible for everything. It would have meant certain death for you all. So Crittendon came up with the plan that I should be officially transferred so that even Hochstetter wouldn’t find a reason to suspect me. Later, after the explosion, it was planned that I would be freed by the Underground. Like this, I would have had a tight alibi, which would also work perfectly for you here in Stalag 13.” He chuckled shortly. “And then you wanted to give me a kind of good-bye-gift by arranging a ride on the comfortable Berlin Express for me. That was the reason for my shouting at my men about the way I would be travelling.”

“It was your way of crying for help,” Klink whispered. “So I wasn’t imagining things: You were afraid.” As he saw Hogan simply nodding, he rubbed over his ring of hair with both hands. “I’m sorry, Robert. I almost got you killed.”
“It wasn’t your fault,” the colonel repeated softly; seeing that the whole thing had shaken Klink to the core. Sweet Lord, how deeply did the older man’s feelings run for him?

Clearing his throat, he continued, “My men and Crittendon left the camp in secret and tried to stop the truck that would take me to the Hammelburg station, but Crittendon – who really has two left feet – screwed it up. Thank the Lord the truck got a flat tire, giving us additional time. Then my men caught up with us, freed me, fixed the tire and brought my escort to a meeting point with the Underground, who took care of the guards. And then we returned to the camp – the boys in secret and I officially. But Crittendon, always boasting, remained outside of the wires where you caught him, which gave you a reason to transfer him and not me to Stalag 15.” He made a face. “The whole mission was pure chaos – because for a moment I’d forgotten what is most important to me: My men and my mission.” He snorted. “Well, and second most important to me is this damn camp I really have come to regard as a sort of ‘home’ far away from home.”

Klink had listened carefully and cocked his head. “You told me a lot of sentimental trash about you feeling regret for leaving Stalag 13 and longing to be back here. I laughed it off, because – all jokes aside – I do know that this here is nothing more than a prison. And men like you, especially, love their freedom. Yet… I hoped that you really did feel something other than loathing and disgust for the camp.”

Hogan’s brown eyes roamed over the Oberst’s tired face. Commanding a POW-camp wasn’t a dream-career, yet the colonel knew that Klink did more than just his duty. He indeed took his responsibilities very seriously and had learned to be proud of the camp. And, like Hogan had to admit, he felt likewise. They had their own little world here. It wasn’t perfect – far from it – but it could be a lot worse.

“You maybe won’t believe me, but I do regard the camp as a kind of home by now. There are a lot of things that change a place into a home. My friends are here, we’re relatively safe, we’ve nourishment, a roof above our heads, daily routine and we even have fun sometimes. The world is becoming even more sinister and crazier week by week, but somehow all the evilness and darkness remain outside these wires. If everything outside is like a desert, we’ve an oasis here. We’re not free, but we’re also not in danger – at least as long as Burkhalter doesn’t abuse the camp as a storage for German weapons and so on. And even then you try to shield us and also your men. Home means safety – and somehow this oasis here has turned into a large boat we all occupy. Hell, it’s not for nothing that POWs and guards are talking with each other, sharing some harmless stories or cigarettes. And I’m certain that some of them would be friends, if it wasn’t for the damn war.”

Hogan’s statements and calm voice gave Klink more strength than twenty hours of sleep. He knew that most POWs loathed him, yet it hadn’t slipped his attention that there were dozens of them who talked to the guards – and the other way around. The tolerance that was sometimes displayed had given him a sense of peace – a peace they all longed for. Maybe, when the war would be finally over, a few of his own men and some of the POWs would remember the one or other situation in which they didn’t regard each other as enemies. On the other hand, he knew that his wish was the father of this thought.
“I’m glad that Stalag 13 gives you a feeling of security and that you’ve learned to regard it as a kind of home, but we both know that this here is only a substitute. I remember how fondly you spoke of your home in the States and I recognized your longing to go back. I’m certain that every one of those men outside of my quarters are yearning for their home, too, but I’m forced to keep them here. At least I can try to help end this war as soon as possible.”

Hogan cocked his head. “What you revealed this morning to my men and me about the imminent start of serial-production of the ME-262 was more than simply covering for us. You decided to take a more active part – and for this I want to thank you.”

A snort escaped Klink. “Betrayal is always welcomed, but never the traitor.”

“You aren’t a traitor, Will. You’re a fighter in your own way and you fight for a better world, free of insane dictators, oppression and daily murders. I see it like this – and my men certainly do, too.”

“I hope so. I know that they despise me, yet the talk this morning went better than I expected,” the Kommandant murmured, while he took the cup and began to twirl it in his hands. Hogan watched him and, not for the first time, he became aware of the other man’s long, slender fingers. Klink had elegant hands, that much was for sure, and…

Hogan groaned inwardly. Obviously he really was about to turn crazy.

Clearing his throat, he murmured, “Well, they were more difficult than I feared. Yes, I do understand that they are distrustful, but…” He sighed. “I’m sorry if they offended you during the discussion.”

Klink shook his head. “Everything is all right, Robert, don’t worry your head over it. To say the truth, I didn’t dare hope that they would give me a chance at all. They don’t know me that well like you do and, to say the truth, there is still much I don’t know about them. I’ve no clue what they had been through before they came to Stalag 13, what they had done before the war, whom they may have lost and who waits for them at home. We Germans started the war so it’s our fault that they were torn out of their lives and are now far away from those they love; locked into a camp and fearing for their future day by day. And I’ve not given them many reasons to like me, even if I have tried to be fair and understanding to them. I know that they’re only giving me a chance now because they respect and love you too much to reject your request.” He sighed again. “Maybe I should have revealed everything to you sooner.”

Hogan grimaced. “Well, it would have certainly spared me a lot of problems. I got the first grays
because of too much stress and trouble.” He pointed at his temples, where the first silver sparkles hid beneath the bandage.

A chuckle escaped the Oberst, who glanced up again; blue eyes soft. “Look who is talking. Why do you think I’m already balding, Troublemaker?”

Feeling the chance for a little bit of joking – something he needed just right now – Hogan asked innocently, “Heritage of your grandpa?” He caught Klink’s scandalized gaze and added, “You know that most things repeat themselves in the second generation? If your grandpa was balding in his younger years, too, you have your answer.”

“God prevent that I become like my grandfather,” the Oberst groaned, while placing the cup on the saucer. “I’d rather blow my own brains out with the next available bullet. It would be better for everyone around me.”

Hogan couldn’t help himself; he had to snicker. After the tension he had undergone in the later morning, having something to laugh about felt like heaven – especially together with the man who wasn’t any longer a pretend-friend but a true one. “Was he that bad?”

“He is still that bad,” Klink corrected him. “94 years old – and still someone who could even make Burkhalter run away. I swear, every time I visit my mother and am unfortunate enough to meet the old crock, I’m happy to still be alive when I return to Stalag 13.”

“Aw,” Hogan teased, “he’s still family.”

“Ja, yet there is the old saying: You can’t choose your family, but your friends.” He looked back at his American counterpart. “I’d rather spend a whole day together with Burkhalter than one hour with my grandfather or my brother Friedrich. I’m absolutely happy when I know them to be far away.”

“And your younger brother – Wolfgang?”

Klink chuckled for a moment. “Wolfgang is a completely different kind of person – a jinx. A good man, yes, but he has two left feet. And how is the saying? ‘Luck is on the side of the fools’? As the factory he worked in exploded, he was injured. Not fatally, but his right side still gives him trouble and prevented him from being sent to the Russian Front or any other battle zones. Today they even conscript half-grown boys, but Wolfgang is off the hook because he limps and he is deaf on the right ear. Friedrich offered him a job, but Wolfgang declined. He doesn’t want to have anything to do with
Friedrich – just like me.”

“Younger brother doesn’t belong to your favorites,” Hogan assumed, and Klink grimaced.

“You can say that.” He shook his head. “My sister Auguste is the very reverse of Friedrich. She is a nice lady. After she overcame the mourning of our father and grew up, she became self-confident, yet warmhearted and kind. Of what my mother told me, she takes after my grandmother.”

“See, second-generation,” Hogan threw in; smiling softly. It surprised him that Klink was willing to share more details of his private life so soon – of his family. Maybe the older man did it to show him how much he trusted him, or the Oberst simply needed a change of topic, too. The last two mornings had been hard for both of them.

“Yes, in this case you’re right,” the German officer nodded. “Wolfgang takes after my grandmother and mother, too. And if you see him, Auguste and Friedrich you would never guess that they are siblings.”

The colonel watched him closely and saw old irritation shimmering in his German counterpart’s eyes. There was no doubt for its reason, and Hogan wanted to help Klink the way the older man had done yesterday: By making him talk so some of his burden could be relieved. “You and your older brother are really not on good terms.”

“Far from it. Auguste married a businessman from Switzerland – Gabriel Adler. A nice man with a kind spirit. They really belong together. Wolfgang is a chemist and worked in said factory in Düsseldorf until it was blown up. LeBeau was right last summer, you know. You remember when he was hit by lighting and got all gypsy all of a sudden?” He lifted a hand as Hogan moved to speak. “I’m convinced that this was a trick to make me move the guards to a planned phony attack. Like this, you could destroy the new device in the tank that was stationed in the camp for a few days – and I played along.” He caught Robert’s sheepish smirk, rolled his eyes and took another deep breath. “But, nevertheless, LeBeau may have been correct when he said that it was Wolfgang’s fault that the factory had been destroyed. He entrusted Mother with everything. Obviously, he mixed something wrong in the cellars. It’s pure luck that the authorities blamed an Allied air craft ambush for the explosion. Otherwise…” He shuddered. “I destroyed the letter she wrote me. No need for it to maybe fall into the wrong hands one day. But what I wanted to point out is that Wolfgang doesn’t want to cause harm to anyone, but misfortune follows him like a second shadow.”

“So, you and he are the misadventurous ones,’ Hogan thought. ‘Seems to be a family streak.’

“But my brother Friedrich…” Klink snorted. “He is worse. No, he does not have two left feet, but
what has become of him is daunting, to put it mildly. He is an ardent worshiper of Hitler, treats his workers like dirt and boasts about his good connections with the ‘really important men within Germany’. And even now, after half of our country lies in ruins, he still blames the Allies and not the madman in Berlin, who doesn't give a damn how many lives it takes to achieve his desire to rule the world."

“That’s another reason why you support the Allies – you want to be a better man than your big brother, who, by the way, could live his life as a businessman while you were forced to enter the Army. And I’ve the feeling that you older brother even taunts you about it,” Hogan thought. ‘Sweet Lord, Will, why does everyone around you trample on you and your feelings? You deserve so much better!’

For a moment he had the strong impulse to round the table and take the older man into his arms; showing him that there were people who really cared for him. And the mere imagination did funny things to Hogan’s belly: It clenched in a very pleasant way.

The colonel called himself to order. This couldn’t be happening to him. This was only an overreaction because of everything he had been through within the last week or so. He liked women! And this… this thing that seemed to lurk somewhere in the most hidden corners of his being was simply a… a… Well, he didn’t know what it was, but it’d better remain where it was! He had no use for it.

‘Liar,’ a voice whispered in his mind and he firmly pushed it away. Concentrating on the talk and hoping for a distraction, Hogan asked quietly, “What kind of business does your older brother run?”

Klink took a deep breath and leant back. “In earlier times he opened a factory for high society fashion – menswear only. Coats, business suits, tailcoats, so on. He made a lot of money and his company even survived the stock market crash of 1929. Afterwards his business ran even better – especially during Hitler’s rise. The German economy bloomed in the first years after Hitler took over. Construction of highways, fabrication of small cars for everyone, new large buildings, expansion of already existing buildings… There were as good as no people unemployed. Men and women who hadn’t been able to indulge themselves in luxury suddenly had enough money they could spend for their own benefits. And everyone wanted to show how well he or she was living. New fashion styles and expensive details were in great demand – silk, velvet, furs. My brother made a lot of money, but he’s a clever mind. I’ve to give him this. As Hitler began his war, he knew that the times of high society would eventually come to an end, and that demand for another kind of clothing was growing rapidly. So he changed his assortment.”

“He produces uniforms now,” Hogan guessed, and Klink nodded.

“Ja. Today his company is one of the most important uniform producers in Germany. And, as far as I
understood from my mother, most of his workers are forced laborers by now. The cut out and sewing are done by women – either for a breadline wage or they are simply prisoners, the latter for whatever reason. But those jobs that demand more physical effort are done by males. Friedrich not only has the whole sewing production, but also the fabrication of the different buttons and insignia and badges of rank. Operating the machines is tiresome and for these tasks he has male workers – mainly forced laborers.” He grimaced. “If you regard it in a certain way, we both work with prisoners, but I try to handle mine politely and with respect. When I hear Friedrich talk about his ‘workers’, who can be ‘lucky to still be alive or don’t have to carve out their miserable existence in a prison or a camp’, I get sick!”

Hogan watched him closely again. ‘You are far too softhearted for your position, Willie, or for being a soldier at all. You really would have found a better place among a medical staff, but here you are – a colonel of the German Luftwaffe who despises the cruelty and inhumanity of your own government, and tries to make this whole insanity more bearable for everyone within his range of responsibility. And because your regards would mean your death, you’re playing the idiot, showing fake sternness and dancing between the rain-drops. I never imagined I would think this, but I’m really beginning to admire you.’

Without being fully conscious of his own doing, he reached out and patted the older man’s underarm that rested beside the emptied plate. “You are too good for this crazy world, do you know this?”

Klink waved his other hand; his usual vanity and pompous behavior had no place here, in that moment. “There are many other men and women who are even more ‘too good for this crazy world’, Robert. And I pray that a few of them will remain when the flames of war will be finally doused.”

“I’m convinced of this, Will,” Hogan answered slowly. “Yet, I think it will be a long way before the distrust and the wrath on all sides will decrease and maybe vanish one day.”

“Hope dies last,” the Kommandant nodded.

*** HH ***

The rest of the day both men rested – everyone in their own bed. There were many things they had to think about, but Hogan still sported the rest of the bronchitis and Klink was still weakened. So both slept most of the time, met for dinner and went early to bed again. And, like the last nights, Hogan woke up in the late evening as the mattress beside him moved. To his shock he felt a wave of joy and warmth, while his pulse quickened.

“Still awake?” came the whispered question from beside him.
“No,” he murmured back. “I’m still asleep.”

His heart-beat increased as a soft chuckle reached his ear, followed by a gentle, “Good night, Rob,”

“Good night, Will – sleep well,” Hogan heard himself answering. He listened to the even breath nearby and felt himself relaxing. It still baffled him that Klink’s presence soothed him like this, but it felt too good to think about it more. Sweet Lord, he was about to get used to having the older man sleeping beside him.

‘If you aren’t careful, you’re going to have a problem when you return to your own quarters, Robert,’ he chided himself and blinked in the darkness. Yet he couldn’t help it; the proximity of the other man calmed him in a way he hadn’t experienced before. And therefore it wasn’t a surprise that sleep claimed him easily.

*** HH ***

Using the flashlight, James Kinchloe climbed up the ‘ladder’ and slipped into the otherwise dark barracks. Switching on the light during the late evening was too dangerous, because even with the shutters closed the light could be seen outside. And there was the general order of ‘lights out’ after nine o’clock pm.

Newkirk peeked down from the top of the stock-bed he occupied, while LeBeau braced himself on one elbow. Carter and Olsen also watched the sergeant, who closed the hidden entrance and straightened his shape, curiously.

“Message from London. The brass seems to have gotten very nervous because of the upcoming serial production of the new Messerschmitt they learned of by the plans Nimrod gave us, and they want to have as many details as possible – especially concerning where this flying beast is assembled. If they can’t destroy the factory we’re gonna have another big problem.”

“Maybe our new friend Klink can find out something more,” Newkirk grumbled. “That means, if he doesn’t soil his own pants when he asks Burkhalter,” he taunted.

“Klink demonstrated very clearly that he’s got balls, as he saved the colonel two times; even risking his own life,” Carter mumbled. “You should really learn to accept this.”
“I’m not that dewy-eyed, unlike some other people,” he shot Andrew a glance.

“Yet you should trust the colonel. And if he trusts Klink, then I see no reason why I shouldn’t follow his example,” Carter defended himself.

“There is more,” Kinch cut in before another discussion could break loose. “We shall not only gather as much information as we can concerning the Messerschmitt – and London is delighted that we obviously have a new information source – but they agree with our idea to have a mission that isn’t too risky, but is enough to kill any suspicions Berlin could get concerning Papa Bear’s sudden absence that goes hand in hand with the colonel’s healing process.”

“Let me guess: They just can’t agree with each other as to what kind of mission we shall have,” LeBeau mused.

“Obviously. They’ll contact us soon again.”

“And mainly they hope that we’ve new information then,” Newkirk assumed.

“Exactly!”

“Great. Just let us hope that Klink’s abilities as a ‘spy’ are better than as a camp-commander.”

LeBeau threw both hands up. “Merde, you’re worse than me, and this is saying something.” He lay back and pulled the blanket over himself. “Bon nuit, everyone. Contrary to some other people, I’ve a job at the moment and that demands a well-rested cook!”

Carter lay back, too, while Kinch began to peel off his clothes. “I really wish we were ten days or so in the future,” Andrew mused.

“Why?” Kinchloe wanted to know.

“Because then even the last doubting Thomas would have learned not to doubt the colonel’s regards
Newkirk groaned. “I don’t distrust the gov’nor’s point of view, I only have trouble seeing Klink as a buddy all of a sudden.”

“No-one is demanding this of you,” Carter replied. “But you should know the colonel well enough by now to realize that he wouldn’t put us in danger because of a mood. Hell, he tries to keep us out of danger even during missions, and goes alone if he thinks the risks are too high for us. He does everything possible to keep us safe – and if he thinks that Klink ensures our safety, then I believe him!”

Newkirk didn’t say anything to it anymore, but he lay wide awake when the others were already asleep; hoping – praying – that his superior and friend hadn’t fallen into a trap that would close over them all.

*** HH ***

It was warm and cozy – and even through his closed eyes he was aware of the soft golden light that shone in the semi-darkness of the room. Gentle hands ghosted over his exposed skin; tender fingertips stroked over his rib-cage while silken lips wandered softly from his chest to his belly; leaving a trail of rising fire.

He couldn’t suppress the quiet moan that escaped his throat, while he instinctively grasped for his lover. His hands found lean, firm shoulders while muscles moved beneath his palms. Warm breath danced over his abdomen, soothed the tension of the still lasting bruises – and woke anticipation.

A shiver ran through him and he sensed a tightening in his loins, while he felt himself hardening. A soft chuckle echoed through the air. “Here is someone very eager,” a voice whispered. A finger ran softly along his heated member and a wave of pure lust washed over him.

His grip around his lover’s shoulders became stronger. “Please,” he murmured; wishing – no, needing! – to feel those lips on the most vulnerable part of his body.

“Out time, Rob,” came the soft reply, before the hot mouth was back on his belly; teasing and fondling him in one.
Rob…

This voice…

Robert forced his lids open; heavy with passion. Above him was a wooden ceiling and from somewhere the quiet cracking of a fire was audible; matching the rhythm with which those clever lips were leaving wet tracks on his body.

His fingers slipped into his lover’s hackles – they were soft and short. He felt blunt teeth nipping at his skin and, giving into the new wave of lust, he buried both hands in his lover’s hair – hair that blended over into human silk at the top.

Lifting his head, he couldn’t recognize much. His lover was nothing more than an almost invisible ghost, who suddenly looked up. The face remained unrecognizable – a bright hue in the golden half-darkness – but the eyes were clearly visible: Deep blue orbs looked with shining love and burning desire at him, while a strong, definitely male hand wandered over his hip…

Hogan woke up with a gasp. There was nothing more than darkness around him, but this wasn’t bad. He lay beneath thick covers on something soft, it was warm and…

And there was an almost familiar long arm wrapped around his waist. The soft breath from his dream danced over his throat and for a moment he felt nothing else than security and comfort – shelter! – then he became aware of his throbbing member. And of the heat that ran through his veins. Not the hotness of fever or overheating, but the well-known ardor of desire.

Moistening his lips, he forced himself to wake up completely – and as the last remains of sleep released him, reality crashed down on him. His mind instantly knew who the secret lover in his wet dream had been, and there was no denying that he was incredibly turned on. And the worst was that said ‘dream-lover’ lay beside him and held him. Against his will a pleasant shiver ran down his spine.

‘This… this goes too far!’ Hogan thought, horrified. It was one thing to recognize another man’s attractiveness – even if he hadn’t seen the attractiveness of said man ever before! – and quite another to get lustful dreams of the guy. Sweet Lord, over a week ago he hadn’t even called Klink handsome and…
Handsome! And from where, please, had this thought come now?

Klink was a balding man of middle age – almost fifty – with a bowed posture, lanky and sometimes clumsy movements, silly grins, intense blue eyes, gentle lips, elegant long hands, a tall, lean body and…

Hogan groaned as he realized the direction his thoughts were drifting to again.

This had to end! Here and now!

Willing his erection away with a lot of effort by thinking of unpleasant things, he tried to move away from Klink, who sighed in his sleep and tightened his hold around him – gentle and yet strong. Hogan growled in frustration; knowing that he couldn’t move too harshly if he wanted to prevent the Oberst from waking up and, last but not less important for it, spare himself new pain connected to his broken ribs and healing bruises.

And, by the way, a part of him didn’t even want to leave this cozy embrace. He stopped himself at the very last moment from thinking of it as ‘pleasant’.

‘Now it’s official, Robert!’ he rebuked himself. ‘You’ve lost it. Utterly and doubtlessly lost it! And you’ve to get a grip on yourself, otherwise you’ll have a bigger problem at hand than ever before, because there is no excuse for lusting after your own MALE jailer!’

He tried to relax again, but he was irritated with himself and irritated with Klink for being so damn alluring with his hidden yet so obvious feelings for him, those warm eyes and…

‘STOP IT, ROBERT!’ he inwardly screamed at himself. ‘Not gay, remember? You like your friends, yes, you even love them, but not in THAT way, damnit! And you certainly don’t have the hots for Klink, who… Whose touches are so alluring, whose tender care feels so good and…’

Hogan turned briskly on his right side; pressing his lips into a firm line to suppress an outcry as his ribs and his abdomen began to protest. He would never think further of this again! He wouldn’t, end of story!

*** HH ***
There is a saying that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. As Hogan woke up the next morning, Klink was already in the bathroom and it gave the colonel the chance to get a tight grip on his confusing emotions. Klink had become a friend and nothing more! So, no need to panic because of a silly dream. A dream that was understandable, when he ruminated closer on it. He had been a prisoner for far too long and all he needed was to get laid. He had heard about other men who had been captured and developed feelings for their comrades or, partly, their jailers, just because there was no-one else they could turn to. And after all the nice and thoughtful things Klink had done for him, this here – these crazy reactions of his body and subconscious – was nothing else than the other blokes had been through.

That was it!

Satisfied to have figured everything out, Hogan relaxed and closed his eyes. And his contentment lasted exactly three seconds longer than Klink’s arrival as the Oberst left the bathroom.

Hogan looked up, met the gentle smile of the older man – and his heart seemed to jump before it began to beat far too quickly.

No! Not again!

“Good morning,” Klink greeted, good-humored. “Slept well?”

Hogan stared at him for a moment. That was a joke, right? A bad joke, because the American had barely found any sleep after this crazy dream!

Then, on the other hand, Klink couldn’t know this.

Taking a deep breath and trying to calm his racing pulse, Hogan glanced at his German counterpart. The older man wore his blue bathrobe and was barefoot. And for the first time ever the colonel became aware of the other man’s slender waist to which the thick material clung in a very pleasant way.

No! Please, not those thoughts now!
“Yes, thank you, and you?” the American replied; shocked at how hoarse his voice sounded.

Worried, Klink turned around. “Is it your throat again?” he asked. “Shall I call Dr. Birkhorn?”

“No,” Hogan said forcefully, and only as he caught the Kommandant’s surprised gaze, he regained some control. “No, thank you. I’m just suffering from a dry mouth, that’s all.”

“I’ll get us some tea,” Klink said. “And then I’ve to make the morning roll call. I really don’t want to go out into the cold, but if my prisoners are torn out of bed this early then it’s only right that I do the same. And, by the way, it’s about time to get some routine back.”

“Ever thought about delaying the morning roll calls by an hour? Then everyone would be happier – you, your guards and certainly your POWs.”

Klink glanced at him, scandalized. “Hogan, something called rules does exist. And one of them says that morning roll call in a POW camp has to be done in the early morning to reveal escapes if they happened during the night.”

“Yes, understandable, but how early is early? And, by the way, there has never been an escape in your camp,” the colonel argued.

“Yes, I know,” Klink snorted. “Because my prisoners like it so much here that they always return.” There was some humor in his voice.

Hogan rolled his eyes; grateful for the distraction and the fact that the little discussion had brought some normality back for him.

“There, you gave yourself an answer. And there is another reason to delay the whole thing.”

“Enlighten me,” the Kommandant mocked; obviously pleased by arguing with Hogan again.

“The weather. It’s icy, windy and snowy – in the early morning even more than later. And you’re responsible for the POWs’ welfare. Do you have any idea how many of my men could catch a cold because they’re torn out into this hellish weather clad in nothing more than what they wore when
they were captured? And believe me, those blankets that belong to the standard equipment of a
POW-camp are a small defense against the bitter cold. They barely shield us at all, even when we
wrap them around us during morning roll call.”

“The latter is forbidden, yet I tolerate it because I know that the men are freezing their asses off – just
like I do,” Klink said softly.

Hogan sighed. “I know. You are cold, we are cold. So why suffer when there is no need for it?
Everyone stays in bed an hour longer and the risk of sickness decreases.” He cocked his head.
“Including the risk that you get another relapse, which would really be dangerous for you.”

The older man watched him shortly, before a teasing smile appeared on his face. “Are you implying
that I should lie down again and start my duty later?”

The colonel groaned. “Isn’t that what I just said? I…” He stopped as he heard the Kommandant
chuckling,

“I didn’t know you liked my presence beneath the blankets this much.”

Hogan gaped at him – and to his utter horror he felt blood rushing to his face; knowing that he was
blushing like a schoolboy just right now. And, to worsen everything for him, his pulse began to rise
again. No! Please, no!

“You’ve some points here, Robert,” Klink continued; satisfied that it was Hogan for once who was
speechless and, to the Oberst’s delight, even blushing fiercely. And Klink prayed for a second that
the reason for Robert’s reddened face was as ambivalent as his own thoughts. “I think I’ll speak with
Schultz about a temporary delay of the morning roll calls – at least as long as the weather is this bad.
But first, some tea for you and me – and maybe tomorrow we can both snuggle under the blankets
longer than today.”

He left the room and Hogan stared after him.

‘Snuggle under the blankets’…

No, Klink didn’t mean what Hogan had just thought he meant. The Kommandant was speaking of
staying longer in bed to rest and not that they both would be cuddling and…
‘Robert, stop it!’ he pleaded with himself. ‘This is utterly insane. Get a grip. You have never been drawn to another guy, and now – shortly before your fortieth birthday – you get a hard one because…’

He stopped his own thoughts. They would lead to nothing. He would need time to think everything through and…

He heard Klink working in the kitchen; realizing that he would be alone for the rest of the morning after breakfast – without Klink’s nice companionship, which meant that…

Hogan rubbed over his face, encountering beard-stubble, before he groaned into his own hands. What the hell was the matter with him!

TBC…

Well, did I promise too much? Yes, they aren’t together until now, but the first step from Hogan has been made – at least from his subconscious. And you can fight everyone, except for yourself. Yet our dear colonel will have a hard time to accept what has been woken in him. And there will be more dreams and reactions, so just wait…

Parallel our Heroes are going to have a new mission – with Hogan be forced to stay back, the Heroes still not trusting Klink fully, and Klink with giving more support than ever before. So, a little bit of chaos comes soon.

I also loved to write more about Klink’s private background. In the TV-show his mother and younger brother Wolfgang are mentioned, on the other hand the photos on his desk also show a little girl between the two boys, so I also gave Klink a sister. His grandfather is also mentioned, who seemed to be anything than a nice man, so I made an own kind of story for him. And his older brother Friedrich, who is a character I created, will have a part in the story later. Maybe you liked the whole thing.

I hope the last chapter fulfilled some of your wishes concerning our two colonels, and I’m looking forward to your feedback (after you cooled down, mind you, *snicker*).
Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

YEAH, I knew that you would love the first ‘hot’ scene – even if it was only the first dream that will be the start for a more haunting nightly imaginations of our dear colonel. The next one will be in this chapter – and, as you’re going to see – the results will be more drastically (*he-he*).

But that’s not all. Klink shows that he means it really serious with his more active support of the Unsung Heroes; he and Robert will talk about more secrets and – in the end – you all are going to need a little cold drink again, while you certainly will also laugh your heads of, because… ‘Boy’, the genius of the most reckless Underground-organization really can be daft sometimes.

So, have fun.

Thank you so much for the big feedback concerning the last chapter; I promise the next ones will be even better.

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 27 – Forbidden longing

“Prisoners, I heard through the grapevine that you are all freezing your butts off because of the damn cold this early in the morning. And I don’t think it will surprise you that the same goes for my men and me.”

The beginning of Klink’s morning speech elicited a lot of grimaces, silent groans and scowls, but what came then baffled everyone within the camp – POWs and guards.
“The weather is bad enough to prevent anyone from emerging outside for whatever reason, but we all have to stay here because some desk-jockeys in their warm, nice offices came up with the idea of an early roll call. Well, someone we all know asked me ‘how early is early’, and it gave me an idea. What do you think about postponing the subsequent morning roll calls so they take place an hour later until further notice – or until the sun decides to honor us with his presence and herald the warmth of spring again?”

Schultz and Langenscheidt, both wrapped in blankets, with ear-flaps beneath their steel helmets and scarfs around their throats, stared with big eyes at their superior officer; almost gaping. And the POWs didn’t look less thunderstruck, which obviously pleased Klink, because he chuckled quietly.

For a long moment everyone remained silent, then the first applause was to hear – and Klink’s chuckle turned into a smile; a true smile, not the gleeful smirk he had shown so often in the past.

“I take it that you agree to this suggestion. So, morning roll calls will start an hour later until the weather isn’t that ugly any more. Like this none of us will be exposed to the coldest time of the day. Take it as a late Christmas-gift. Dismissed!”

The applause that followed was genuine and spontaneous, while many faces beamed at him. Most of them knew to whom Klink had referred by saying ‘someone we all know’, and not for the first time the POWs were secretly glad that Hogan was on good terms with the Kommandant. It made many things easier for them.

And, unknown to them, the German guards thought the same.

*** HH ***

The morning went by peacefully, if you didn’t count Hogan’s increasing restlessness that had its roots not only in him being bored half out of his mind, but mainly on his mind being seemingly unable to fixate on something other than this crazy dream and his body’s reaction to it – something he had to force away over and over again.

Kinchloe and LeBeau stopped by in the early midday, and while Louis went to the kitchen, Kinch gave his superior a short report. Like this Hogan learned what Klink had announced during the last morning roll call. Hogan had heard the noises and had hoped that the applause was heartfelt, happening because of Klink having listened to his suggestion. It really pleased him that the older man had taken his proposal to heart and had given into it.
Kinch also told Hogan that London was happy to have a new information source – even if the brass didn’t know that the new source was none other than Stalag 13’s Kommandant – and that they were eager for more details about the upcoming serial production of the Messerschmitt.

Knowing this, Kinch had already contacted the Underground in the late morning and spoken with Hans Wagner, who was glad that Hogan had been able to be rescued and was doing a little bit better. He promised to spearhead some investigations concerning places where the secret underground facility could be, but he already had some information about these increasing transports heading to the middle west.

With some luck the one or other train with the assumed components for the ME-262 would bypass the area around Hammelburg. If so, they could kill two birds with one stone: Sabotaging the beginning of the German air-fighter's serial-production, and giving Berlin proof that Papa Bear was still active, which would prevent Burkhalter from pondering too much about Hochstetter’s certainly given statements concerning Hogan.

In the middle of the discussion they heard the front entrance opening and closing, and Hogan didn’t even need to look through the open door of the sleeping chamber to know that Klink had returned for an early midday break. It seemed his senses had increased a dozen times over when it came to the Kommandant’s presence.

Kinchloe rose and walked to the door. “Good day, Colonel Klink,” he greeted politely.

The older man wasn’t surprised to see the dark-skinned American in his private place. For days now Hogan’s men were coming and going to their liking to spend time with their slowly healing superior. And since ‘the talk’ yesterday, Klink anticipated seeing them here even more often. And, what took him indeed a little by surprise, he didn’t mind. “Good day, Sergeant. I hope I'm not disturbing anything,” he answered; removing his cap.

“No, you aren’t,” Kinchloe said. “I'm just paying the colonel a visit.”

“Before he turns mad with boredom,” LeBeau called from the kitchen.

“LeBeau!” Hogan groaned; asking himself when his men would stop being such big mother-hens.

The left edge of Klink’s mouth curled upwards. “And there I thought the gentlemen would maybe be discussing the next mission.” He stripped off his coat and scarf, hung both at the hall stand and
placed the cap and his riding-crop on the dresser. “LeBeau, whatever you’re cooking, it smells formidable,” he called into the direction of the kitchen, while he walked towards the sleeping chamber.

“Merci, Colonel Klink,” came the casual reply from the next room – and Hogan smiled to himself as he realized that Kinch and LeBeau seemed to have come to terms with the new situation and had begun to accept Klink, at least as a supporter.

Kinchloe made room for the Oberst as he entered the sleeping chamber. Klink’s glance found the sitting figure on the bed, and for a long moment both men only looked at each other. The Kommandant lifted both brows. Was he mistaken or had the younger man’s eyes lightened up as he saw him? He didn’t dare hope for it.

“I can’t take responsibility for your turning mad, so maybe some scheming would be good for you,” he tried a soft joke.

“You think so?” Hogan smirked. “I fear that I will get rusty if I don’t get anything to do soon.”

“So you’ve decided to do your job from bed,” the Oberst nodded. “Typical of you. Others take their breakfast in bed, and you scheme plots.”

“Every man has a hobby,” the colonel commented wryly, which earned him a chuckle from his German counterpart.

Kinch stuck his hands in the pockets of his parka. “You said that we shouldn’t remain idle for too long,” he addressed Klink, who sighed,

“Yes, a little turmoil would be perfect – preferably with an useful outcome as a side-effect.” He looked at Hogan. “Do your contacts have a task for you, or shall I get you one?”

Kinch stared at him. Was Klink really offering them close to active support?

“Do you have any information about routes the trains transporting the components for the ME-262 take?” Hogan asked bluntly.
Klink rolled his eyes. “Do you want to blow up another bridge or just the train?”

“A missing bridge delays all trains,” Hogan deadpanned.

“Yes, it would force the trains to take another route that may be a time-eating detour, but the components would arrive nevertheless.”

“So, it’s a cargo train and a bridge,” Kinchloe said carefully; watching the German officer closely.

Klink sighed. “Correct. I don’t have any detailed information on the routes, but I know one thing for sure: The wings for the ME-262 V5 are produced near Stuttgart – in the Engelbergtunnel. The tunnel was built for the new highway that connects the west with the east in South-Germany, but was extended and altered three years ago to serve as a secret and hidden factory that produces the wings. Those wings have to be brought to the new location where the Messerschmitt’s serial-production will start. And if this top-secret facility is somewhere in the East, like London assumes, because of the many transports heading into this direction, the train or trains with the wings must pass through North-Bavaria. Maybe this is something for your men, Hogan.”

The colonel nodded slowly. He himself had thought about something like this, and was glad that Klink saw it the same way. He looked up at Kinchloe, who had pursed his lips, caught his superior’s gaze and made one tiny movement with his head. This was a case for the Underground and its Germany-wide net. Wagner, Danzig and the others had friends everywhere, and when suddenly hundreds of aircraft wings were loaded on trains in Stuttgart or another town nearby, they would learn of it within a short range of time.

Klink hadn’t missed the short mute exchange between the two Americans and had correctly assumed that Hogan had given Kinchloe the order to get more details by contacting the Underground. He asked himself, not for the first time, how well organized Hogan’s little espionage ring was for real.

“If you find out something more detailed and plan some action, let me know if you need an alibi for that time or if I can support you with something else,” he said quietly.

Hogan glanced up at him. “You don’t have to do this,” he said softly. “If you look away it will help us enough.”

“Or maybe not, given the fact that already two Gestapo-officers more or less found out about you, and that the brass certainly will be even more suspicious as soon as Hochstetter makes his official
statements,” the Oberst replied. “Like I told you: We have to be very careful now. So, if there is a way to increase your safety during your missions, I’m with you.”

The colonel couldn’t help the smile that spread over his colorful face. “Thanks, Kommandant,” he said gently.

“And like I said: If one things is for sure then it's the fact that Colonel Klink will keep you safe, mon Colonel.” LeBeau leant against the door frame; arms crossed, with the cooking hat on his head and an apron bound around his waist.

“He keeps us safe, Louis,” Hogan replied strongly.

“By protecting you,” LeBeau nodded; beaming widely.

Klink felt heat rising to his cheeks – had the tiny Frenchman figured him out? He felt Hogan’s eyes resting upon him and didn’t dare glance at his direction; fearing he would reveal too much. Clearing his throat he looked down at LeBeau, who was smirking broadly. “Colonel Hogan is right, Corporal. Yesterday, I explained to you all my reasons and motivations for first suspecting and then supporting you for two years now. Yes, your commanding officer and I have become friends, and friends are there for each other, but the aid of your missions includes you all.”

LeBeau chuckled, “If you say so.” And then a certain strong smell wafted through the living room.

“My sauce!” Louis shouted and raced back towards the kitchen; holding his cooking hat not to lose it.

Klink sighed. Sometimes he really asked himself how it was possible that this gang of oversized boys was able to keep half of Germany’s war machinery at bay.

### HH ###

The afternoon came and went, and finally the evening dawned over the country – very much to Hogan’s delight. None of his friends had stopped by after midday, the book had been read was finished, and there was nothing for him to do despite lying there and desperately trying to concentrate on making plans for the upcoming new mission. And, to his dismay, last night’s dream kept popping up in his mind at the most unwelcome moments.
Klink was back for dinner just in time, and only after they had already been sitting there for a quarter hour, chattering and talking, did Hogan become aware that these meals together were something he could get used to. The atmosphere was relaxed and casual; the fire in the furnace spread comfortable warmth through the living room and the switched-on lights increased this odd feeling of being almost at home.

After the ordnance had cleared the table, both men sat at the seating area – Hogan clad in the new housecoat LeBeau had tailored for him, and Klink in uniform plus his red housecoat. He had even loosened his tie and opened the collar, which showed how comfortable the Kommandant was feeling. He held a glass of wine in his right hand – and Hogan couldn't help the thought that Klink did it in an almost elegant way. Even the way the Oberst sat there – long legs crossed, leaning comfortably back and cocking his head – was in a certain way graceful. Why had he never seen this before?

‘Easy,’ came the unwelcome voice from another part of Hogan’s mind, ‘you’d never realized before that he is, in his own way, attractive.’

No! Not this again!

He shifted a little bit, glanced at the cup of tea in his own hand and concentrated on the conversation with the older man – only Klink didn’t say anything but was lost in own thoughts; looking at the wine that shimmered in the glass. Then the Oberst’s expression changed and he tensed up. He seemed to get nervous all of a sudden.

“What is it?” Hogan asked. He really didn’t like seeing Will anxious.

Klink glanced at him in brief surprise. “You really know me, don’t you?”

The colonel gave him a short smile. “Yeah.”

The Kommandant snorted. “Of course you do. No-one can play another like you did if they don’t know the other inside out.” He took a deep breath. “I was thinking again about the incident with Major Hegel, and I couldn't help asking myself how he found out about your intelligence identity and missions, at all. If he learned all those details, maybe someone else can do it, too. And then you – we all – are in deep water.”
Hogan sighed. “You don’t have to fear something like this. That Hegel learned about us was a chain of unlucky events. Like I said two days ago: Sometimes mercy comes back to kick you in the butt.” He snorted. “You asked me how Hegel was able to contact me – and now how he found out about my men and me in the first place. Remember Jack Williams?”

Klink thought for a moment. “The guy who had been thrown out of every barracks in my camp, by his own people?” he asked, and shortly pursed his lips as Hogan nodded. “The same guy tried to escape but was caught by Schultz,” Klink voiced his memories, “only to boast about a ‘big secret of immense importance’ he wanted to share with us if he would be released from captivity. He even demanded a big flat, money and many more things. He was killed while trying to blow up an artillery piece before he could reveal something.”

“Did you know that he was about to give us – me – away?”

“I didn’t know for sure about your secrets missions then, Hogan, yet I suspected that the man would try to discredit you. You and him had had some terse discussions before and I knew that he didn’t obey you – that he loathed you.” The Oberst placed the glass on the table. “Realizing that he was a traitor who expected me to be overjoyed to get information for the Third Reich, I pretended to play along. The truth is, I feared that he would discredit you enough that the Gestapo would arrest and maybe execute you because of this guy’s statements, true or not. So I put him into the cooler. Officially, to protect him against his furious former comrades, in truth, because I wanted to silence him until I could find a way to shut him up for good without arousing Burkhalter’s suspicion.”

Hogan stared at him with wide eyes. “You… tried to shut him up to protect me? Even then? You said you only had some assumptions concerning my missions, yet you would have gone so far as to silence someone only because you thought he could be a danger to me?” Sweet Lord, did this mean that the older man had had feelings for him even then?

Klink shrugged. “He was a troublemaker of the most unpleasant sort – and he endangered the camp and you. So, yeah, I thought about ways to get rid of him. Preferably without sending him to his maker. I thought about how I could compromise him so that he was considered untrustworthy, but then he fled from the cooler and died in this explosion.”

Hogan, becoming aware of the fact that Klink’s affection for him had already existed for a longer time, cleared his throat. “He… he didn’t die in the explosion. It was a trick.” He saw the Oberst’s eyes widening, and added, “We broke him out of the cooler, took his uniform jacket and placed it near the site of the explosion so that it was full of tracks. Williams… was smuggled out of the camp and was sent back to London to stand trial – or so I thought.”

“You smuggled him to London?” There was real curiosity in the Kommandant’s gaze now. “Through one of your tunnels and then someone picked him up?”
Hogan only lifted one shoulder and smiled almost sheepishly at him. “Yeah, just like this.”

“Super,” Klink groaned. “The oldest escape route you can think of – and right under my nose.” He shook his head, before his glance softened again. “But concerning the tunnel’s usage: I just got another assumption confirmed. Most of the people who would endanger you weren’t killed, but smuggled away.” The Oberst began to chuckle. “A good man, just like I stated a few times before.”

Hogan made a face. “Yeah, but sometimes it isn’t the best solution – especially in this case.” He took a sip of tea and put the cup beside Klink’s glass. “Williams escaped during the travel like I learned months later – after the incident with Hegel, who mentioned him. As it seems, Williams returned or stayed in Germany, got in contact with Hegel and gave my men and me away in exchange for a new life here – just like he’d tried to when he had still been here in Stalag 13.”

“Sodding bastard!” the German officer hissed; fury shone in his eyes. “To betray his own comrades and his own country like this – for money and a good life! I am a traitor in my superiors’ eyes, too – if they ever learn of my deeds. But I do it for a higher purpose – to stop Hitler and his mad followers. Williams was ready to sell his comrades for filthy lucre! That he had no honor was obvious as he made his offer. And I despised him the moment he sprawled arrogantly in the visitors’ chair in my office and made his demands. I also learned later that he stole red-cross-packets and sold them to my men.”

“That’s not all. He cheated during card games, stole more from my men than only Red-Cross packages and was quick with his fists,” Hogan growled, before he calmed down again. “I thought it best to send him to London so that he would be court-martialed instead of eliminating him, but this time my showing mercy got my men and me almost killed.”

Klink sighed. “Yes, showing mercy can be deadly during a war, yet it also shows that we’ve still humanity left.” He hesitated. “Do you know what has become of Williams? Not that he can still give you away and…”

“Hegel told us in the barn that he sent his ‘assistant’ to the Russian Front where he was killed. Hegel also killed his own confidante – the young woman who had offered milk to us a few days earlier. She was his closest assistant and…”

“He killed the woman?” Shocked, Klink stared at him, before he growled with deep anger, “Then he really deserved every bullet he got. Killing a female – just imagine!”
Hogan watched him with curiosity. That Klink was all gentlemanly as soon as a woman showed up or was involved in something was nothing new to the colonel. It was one of the reasons why he had problems imagining Klink being interested in males. Then, on the other hand, the Oberst came from a noble family and had been raised in this manner. Right, as far as Hogan knew Klink’s family rooted in lower aristocracy – Junker, a title from the Middle Ages – but still, Wilhelm Klink had blue blood, so to say. Until the end of World War I, only members of the nobility had been allowed to visit a Military academy and Klink had studied in Potsdam (even with a third party interceding or not), which also spoke of his heritage. So it was no wonder that the Kommandant was the perfect gentleman when it came to women – and that he had a streak to protect weaker ones was a secret Hogan had revealed more than two years ago.

It didn’t surprise Hogan that Klink was shocked and furious that the woman had been killed by Hegel, member of the Gestapo or not. Yet this was the sad everyday world in Hitler-Germany.

“The Gestapo doesn’t differentiate between killing males or females,” the American said quietly. “They just do it – and they haven’t the tiniest scruple.”

“Yes, and that’s another thing that makes me sick to think about,” Klink murmured and leant back again; a deep frown on his forehead. “At least this Williams can’t whistle the blow anymore – one less danger that could cost you and your men your lives.”

“And yours,” Hogan added softly.

Klink winced a little bit, before he shrugged. “I didn’t believe I would survive this war. As it seems, I may have a chance to live longer, but if not I’ll die to keep my oath. This nuisance in Berlin has to be stopped, no matter what, or the Fatherland will be wiped out from the charts. I swore to protect my country.” He looked at Hogan and placed a hand on his arm just above the still healing bruises of his wrists. “And I stand by my comrades. If they wear a different uniform than I do, then mine is nothing more than a cover – a mask. Just like you do when you slip in Wehrmacht-gray or SS-black. My loyalty lies with my people, and if this means turning traitor in the regime’s eyes and it costs me my life, so be it.” He squeezed Hogan’s arm gently before he let go of it. “And, by the way, I drew back from old friends often enough to protect my own neck. Not any longer! If they catch you, I’ll die along with you. At least then I won’t be alone at my last walk.”

‘This is what you fear the most – being utterly alone. You ARE alone and this has certainly been the case for many, many years now. You’re starved for human closeness – just like I am. And I fear that this will wash us away in a sea of emotions we can’t control anymore,’ Hogan thought.

His mind told him that he had recognized a truth he didn’t want to accept until now. And so he ignored his inner voice as well as he could. But it wouldn’t be any use, like he would learn later.
Hogan went to bed earlier than Klink, who readied himself for the night but remained up a little bit longer; writing a private letter to his mother. He didn’t know if the secret changes of the whole situation concerning his senior POW officer and the core-team around Hogan would lead to a good end, or if sooner or later the Gestapo – or Burghalter – would figure out everything. It would mean certain execution, and therefore Klink wanted his mother to have at least one letter more.

It was almost eleven o’clock as he finally crept into his usual sleeping chamber and slipped into bed beside Hogan. The younger man was deeply asleep, and Klink was glad that the nightmares, which had tormented Robert this much, were obviously decreasing.

He had no clue that what was shaking Hogan were not the bad dreams, but those which rose from the depths of his soul – those, which were deliciously forbidden.

And those dreams went on. Within the next two days, in which the Heroes waited for the Underground to come up with some more information and Klink continued his daily duty, Hogan was almost plagued with erotic fantasies of someone he had regarded first as an enemy, then as a weak opponent, finally as a friend and now… Well, he didn’t know what Klink was to him by now, but one thing was sure: Whatever his unwanted but increasing feelings for the Kommandant were, they were slowly but certainly driving him nuts.

At least his healing proceeded unimpeded and Wilson had finally declared that his bronchitis had lessened to the level of a cold. His stretched muscles and sinews didn’t hurt this bad anymore when he moved with almost normal speed. His legs still gave him problems and his back was still an ugly sight to behold – he really was glad for the bandages in this case – but the less severe bruises began to fade, while the other ones colored more and more.

Yet, on the outside, Hogan managed to mask everything. He joked with his friends when they visited him, he schemed some plots in case one of the transport-routes would bypass the area of Hammelburg, and he talked and bantered with Klink.

And especially the latter freed the suppressed feelings over and over again. He caught himself watching the Oberst more than ever before – and this out of completely different reasons. And he became aware of things he had never acknowledged before: How tall Klink was when he didn’t
walk like a bowed tree; the graceful way the uniform clung to his lean, slender body, the elegant movements of his long hands, the sparkle in his eyes which hadn’t been there ever before, the soft laughs which were free of the silly chuckles he had made in earlier times…

Wilhelm Klink had changed for the better, in a subtle but unmissable way – and it increased the pull of the invisible strings drawing Hogan closer to the Oberst without a chance of escape.

Especially during the night.

The last two times Hogan had woken up from forbidden, wet dreams with heat in his veins and a demanding tightening in his loins – and that this had to peak sooner or later was inevitable…

*** HH ***

Those slender hands were back – whispering like a breeze over his sides, downwards, before they gently gripped his hips. Hot, soft lips fondled the side of his throat, while a familiar warm breath danced over the sensitive spot quite beneath his ear. A lean and slightly muscular body pressed down on his; keeping him almost immobile, but he didn’t mind. There was no danger, no risk in being caught like this. Rather the opposite: He was shielded; protected. It felt so good to let go for once – to simply receive and to give without anything to consider.

His own arms snaked around his lover’s waist; his fingers wandered over the warm human velvet that covered the slender back. The lips on his throat became more firm, more demanding and a groan escaped him as his body reacted with even more vigor than it already had. This clever mouth began travelling south – nipping, kissing, licking its way down his chest and leaving a hot trail.

He knew what his lover’s goal was and the thought alone was enough to send another thrill through him. Closing his eyes, he relished in these seconds full of lusty expectation – yearning for his lover’s touch on his stone-hard member, but also enjoying the rising anticipation.

“May I?” whispered his lover and he was about to scream a “Yes!” but the only thing that tumbled over his lips was a soft moan.

“I’ll take this as a yes,” came the murmured reply – and then these hot lips closed around him.

Nothing had prepared him for this scorching desire that spread through him like wild-fire. Every
nerve seemed to be aflame, while he couldn’t help but buck up into this sinful mouth.

Hunger awoke in him – a hunger he couldn’t control. His hands found the short, incredibly soft strands of his lover’s hair, while he arched up again.

This wet, warm mouth freed him for a moment and whispered a soft, “Easy, Rob.”

“Don’t stop!” he gasped. “Please, don’t stop!”

“I won’t, do not fear,” came the hoarse reply, and instinctively Robert lifted his head and looked down.

Blue, wicked eyes glanced up at him; full well-kissed lips smiled from a familiar face. “There is someone very eager, but don’t worry. I got you, Rob, I got you…”

And then his lover engulfed him again; this soft tongue teased his hard member mercilessly.

Heat raced through his limbs and gleamed beneath his skin and with a shout he threw back his head in nameless passion…

Hogan woke with a hoarse outcry. Sitting up, he blinked into the darkness that was only pierced by the light of the reading-lamp that fell through the open door into the bed chamber like every night since his rescue from the Gestapo-Headquarters. He was breathless, his whole body seemed to be on fire and he felt a very well-known burning demand in his loins.

“Robert?”

Klink had been torn out of his blissful sleep and looked up at the figure who sat beside him – gasping for breath and obviously shaken. Bracing himself on one arm, the Oberst reached out with his free hand. “What is it?” he asked softly. “Another nightmare?”

This voice that spoke in the same gentle, warm tone like it had done in the dream was about to
become Hogan’s undoing. He sensed how every nerve was tingling, how the most vulnerable part of his body throbbed with unfulfilled demands while shivers ran down his back. The night-lamp was switched on, but Hogan avoided looking at Klink – realizing with horror that otherwise he would lose control and would do something that would change everything.

The slender, strong hand that had fondled him only a minute ago in his dream, came to rest on his shoulder, and he didn’t need to turn his head to know that those blue eyes were full of concern and affection.

He felt his loins tightening – now the urge to find satisfaction in ecstasy was reaching for him and was about to send him over the edge.

With a shout he threw the covers away, swung his legs over the bed’s edge and half limped, half ran to the bathroom. The manly needs could only be suppressed to a certain degree, and after all that had happened within the last days and with the new-found forbidden longing increasing in him, he had reached his limits.

He threw the door to the bathroom closed and locked it; grateful that at least this door had a lock. His knees were about to give in as he heard Klink calling his name. Forcing himself to the toilet, he quickly opened the cover while pulling the pants of his pajamas down; gripping for himself. It was the only way…

Outside, Klink stood at the locked door; filled with worry. What had happened? What was the matter with Robert? Was he sick? Did he need help?

Raising his fist, he knocked at the wood and softly called the colonel’s given name, but received no answer. Worry began to change into anxiety.

“Robert? What’s the matter?” he said more firmly now. He heard a low growl coming from inside the tiny room, followed by a gasp and a stifled outcry – and now Klink was really concerned.

“Hogan, answer me! NOW! Was ist los? Shall I get Wilson?”

“Give… me a… moment!” a breathless reply finally came while the toilet flushing was activated.

Inside the bathroom, Hogan sat down heavily on the toilet seat – spent but frustrated and absolutely
horrified. What had he done! How could his body betray him like this because he had crazy wet dreams about Klink! And it wasn’t the fact that those dreams were about his German counterpart, but rather the fact that said ‘dream-lover’ was male! He wasn’t gay – hell, he didn’t even think that he was bi. All right, when he had been a teen he had been curious and there had been this one almost-time with a friend, but they had both stopped before it had gone too far. And since then, Hogan had never thought of a man like this ever again.

He enjoyed females; he liked their slender yet curvy bodies, their soft skin and their beauty. He liked being in control and being responsible for them enjoying their coupling like he did. He couldn’t imagine completely letting go, not holding something back to avoid hurting his partners and…

‘Wrong,’ a voice whispered in him. ‘You just got a taste how it is to let go – to be safe, held and driven to the outmost, without being forced to hold back. You felt how it is to let yourself drift away, knowing that your partner is as strong as you are…’

Hogan buried his face in his hands.

This. Was. Madness!

Nothing else!

This was only an overreaction because of the last week, and… And he remembered how it had felt when he woke up and found himself enveloped in those long arms; feeling Klink’s warm breath on his face or hearing the gentle heartbeat beneath his ear. In those moments between sleep and fully waking up, he belonged in this embrace and relished in it.

So, what did it mean?

Did he harbor feelings for Klink? Definitely, but until three nights prior they had been those towards a friend. Hell, two and a half years ago he hadn’t even imagined in his most crazy dreams that this fake-friendship he had built towards the Kommandant could change into a real one.

And now he sat here – on the toilet seat in the little bathroom in the Oberst’s private quarters, lusting after the older man who was outside and…

And was certainly worrying his head off. There was no doubt how much he, Hogan, meant to Klink.
That the German officer must be more than concerned after the colonel’s flight into the restroom was clear. And Klink wasn’t a patient person. He granted him privacy, all right, but within the next minute or so the Oberst would certainly…

“Hogan, are you all right?”

There! Klink’s patience had already worn down.

Sighing, Hogan rose. “Yes, I’m okay,” he said; lying through his teeth again. “I just had… the runs. Sorry for….” He looked down at himself and then at the wall behind the toilet; realizing the mess he had made, “… for the mess.” He grimaced. He would have to clean first himself and then the wall before he could leave the bathroom. “Give me a few minutes to wash. I’ll be back with you in a short.” To his relief, his voice sounded almost normal again.

“Are you sure?” There was some uncertainty in Klink’s tone that gave away his worry, and Hogan didn’t even try to suppress the warmth that flooded through his heart and soul at this new display of care. His mind already knew that he was fighting a losing battle, but for now he was too tired to think about it thoroughly.

“Yeah, I’m okay. Don’t worry, Will.”

“All right,” came the tentative reply.

Hogan needed some time to get washed and clean the toilet properly. At least his pajamas had been spared. He felt humiliated and angry with himself. How could he lose control like this – over a dream with a guy! Yet said guy was Klink – Will. Caring, gentle, loving Will who hid his true feelings behind the mask of a male nurse and good friend.

A soundless groan escaped the American officer. His German counterpart controlled himself far better than he, Hogan, did. Maybe Klink was used to hiding his feelings like this for a very long time now – after all, this kind of affection was forbidden by law and was certainly cruelly punished by this current inhuman regime. Hell, even in the States you were sent to jail for it.

And yet…

The mere thought of Klink taking him in his arms – if only just to comfort him – raised his pulse
‘You’ve really lost it, Robert!’ he rebuked himself. Maybe it would be best if he moved back to his own quarters in Barracks 2, but he could imagine how Klink would take it. He could already see the sadness in those eyes and the disappointment on the older man’s face – something that sent a short pang through his inner being. And, by the way, for the first time since he had come to Germany and started his mission, he felt like he belonged somewhere. Stalag 13 had indeed become a sort of home for him, and those last days here in Klink’s quarters had increased this feeling. Not because of the spartan luxury the quarters offered, but because of the company and the warm atmosphere. He knew that sooner or later he would have to leave, but just right now he couldn’t force himself to do so. Those meals with Klink, the talks, the jokes, the banter – he couldn’t give this up now. And, by the way, he was not the running away kind. He would have to learn to ignore those new feelings and stay in control.

Determined – and aching because of the short but tiring clean-up that had demanded more from him than he was ready to admit – he splashed some cold water on his face, carefully dried it, unlocked the door and stepped out.

Klink sat on the bed’s edge and his eyes were filled with deep concern. One look at him was enough to wake the urge in Hogan to calm down and comfort the older man. And this, more than anything else, told the colonel he was in really deep water, because his wish to soothe the Oberst was followed by a wave of affection.

“Better?” Klink quietly asked.

Hogan almost laughed out loud. No, he wasn’t better. Quite the contrary. This newly rising feeling of warmth and sudden yearning for proximity showed him, mercilessly, that he really was in trouble. But he couldn’t say this, so he answered,

“Yeah, thanks. I’m sorry for the chaos.”

Klink waved a hand and rose. “Maybe it was the penicillin. I also get the runs if I have to take strong medicine for longer. As long as I reach the restrooms in time, I do not mind, but otherwise…” He chuckled, and Hogan realized that his German counterpart was trying to cheer him up.

And for a short but strong moment he had the almost overwhelming urge to kiss those soft, kissable lips and to…
Moaning, he rubbed his temple – and flinched as he felt Klink’s hands gently gripping his shoulders. “Off you go,” the Oberst said and began to steer him around the bed.

‘You have no idea how much I just went off,’ Hogan thought ironically; shocked about the casual way his mind seemed to be handling all this.

A minute later he lay on the mattress; covered with the blanket and the comforter to his chin. He lay on his right side and, because he had become cold during the stay in the bathroom, he curled his legs closer to his upper body; wishing for some thick socks to warm his toes.

Klink slipped into bed beside him and closed the distance to him. Hogan lifted his head and looked, perplexed, over his shoulder as he felt how the Oberst took his feet between his lower legs.

“Verdammt (dammit)!“ Klink cursed. “You’ve feet like ice!“ He pulled Hogan closer to him. “You’re completely cold. Tomorrow I'll make certain that the bathroom is more warm. We can’t risk you relapsing with your bronchitis.”

The inner alarm bells within the colonel were ringing like mad, as he realized that he had instinctively snuggled closer to the warm body behind him – and how right it felt!

He wasn’t losing this battle, he had already lost it – but for now he was too stubborn to admit it. So he closed his eyes, and after a minute he abandoned his attempt at not enjoying the older man’s closeness. Within a short time he had drifted off to sleep – sheltered and at least a little bit at peace after his body had let off some steam…

TBC…

‘Yes, dear Colonel Hogan, you’re soooo lost already’ (*smirk*). Yet he will need some time to wrap his mind and heart around it, but – believe me, dear readers – time is on Klink’s side. And Hogan’s inner resolve will crumble and crumble, until… Well, I don’t want to reveal too much.

In the next chapter, our Hogan will not only have a serious discussion with himself (he really thinks too much too often sometimes), but foremost the Heroes begin to plot a real plan for the next mission – with Klink in the middle of it. You maybe can imagine the Heroes’ reaction to it (*snicker*). The mission will lead to a lot more, because it really will stir up the whole brass in Berlin what have a few effects for the whole camp.
I hope you liked the new chapter and the way the two colonels are coming more and more together – especially from Hogan’s side, who is going to pass through a lot of confusion concerning himself, before....

Like always, I’m ‘dying’ to learn what you think about the new update.

Have a nice start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight.
Hi, my dear readers,

Sorry that the new chapter wasn’t posted yesterday, but my mom was released from hospital yesterday and I stayed with her for longer, before I helped my dad with the household (right, he does the cooking and he also cleans everything, but he is on the warpath with the laundry and, of course, I had to help my parents now). But, finally, I find some time to publish the next chapter.

Thank you so much for the many comments and other feedback. I knew that you would love the last chapter, and the tension between the two colonels will grow even more.

But first there is the newest mission to plan – and, to the Heroes’ surprise, Klink supports them actively. The chapter will be fluffy, funny but also will have some gravely moments, because, even if the camp is far away from any battle-scenes, the war rages more and more, and the news about it do not stop at the wires.

Yet I hope you’re going to like it.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 28 – Scheming

“Understood, Little Red Riding Hood. Papa Bear, roger and out!” Kinch sat the headset up and switched off the radio. Newkirk stood beside him, both arms wrapped around himself. It was freezing cold down in the tunnels – the cold had crept into the ground and was radiating from the walls in uncomfortable waves.
“And?” Peter asked; shivering and wishing to be close to the stove over their heads.

“Danzig found out that the wings for the new ME-262 are indeed being transported from Stuttgart to somewhere in the middle east, and the train-route passes through not too far away from Hammelburg; using the speed-route from Schweinfurt. London has already given us the green light to give our best to lessen the amount of components reaching this secret facility. Carter will be happy. He hasn’t blown up anything within the last four weeks.”

He rose, while Newkirk began chuckling. “Blimey, I don’t want to take a closer look at his wish to study pharmacy. Every cough mixture he creates will be explosive.”

Kinchloe laughed quietly. “At least afterwards the patient won’t have a cold anymore.” He walked towards the ‘ladder’. “Let us go upstairs. I’m freezing my ass off – and it’s almost time for roll call.”

“Only your ass? I can’t feel my hands anymore,” Newkirk joked. “Therefore you have to carry me up the ladder.”

Kinch tipped at his forehead and grinned. “In your dreams.”

*** HH ***

It was incredibly comfortable, warm and cozy. Someone was wrapped around him and even if some of his injuries stung, he didn’t mind. Lying in someone else’s arms felt far too heavenly to complain about a few itches or an uncomfortable throbbing at his left side.

Then the peaceful silence was abruptly pierced by the shrill noise of an alarm-clock. His ‘human blanket’ began to groan and mumble something about ‘fünf Minuten’ (five minutes), but the silly alarm-clock didn’t react to those words and continued to rattle and clatter.

“Switch-it-off,” Hogan mumbled; too drowsy to even move a finger.

A low curse in German was heard, then the ‘human blanket’ moved away and a few moments later the hellish noise stopped.
“Ich hasse Wecker (I hate alarm-clocks)!“ Klink grumbled, braced himself backwards on both underarms and sulked a little bit.

Hogan sighed as he heard the unmistakable, Saxonian dialect; not caring that he lay in bed with Klink. He was used to waking up beside the older man by now – and at least in these moments when his mind wasn’t fully awake, he even enjoyed the improper proximity.

“You’ve delayed the morning roll calls,” he reminded the Oberst and snuggled even deeper into the pillows.

As he heard Hogan’s voice from the heap of comforter and blankets beside him, Klink couldn’t help the smile that tugged at his mouth. Robert sounded casual and utterly relaxed, and Klink felt peace washing over him. He could really get used to waking up beside the younger man every morning for the rest of his life.

Looking over at the alarm-clock, he saw that even this grace period he had granted his POWs, his men and himself was over, and moaned, “No chance, Hogan. It’s already half past seven.”

“Delay it again,” came the wry and uncharacteristic comment, and Klink began to chuckle.

“There is someone very lazy with his sense of duty, my dear colonel!”

‘There is someone very eager…’ The same voice echoed in Hogan’s memories and with this memory the pictures and sensations of last night’s dream returned.

Hogan groaned and buried his face in the comforter. He so wanted to forget this forbidden, delicious fantasy – or the mess afterwards. God, had he really come in the bathroom, only because…

He was distracted as Klink began to rise – and panic woke in the American. What if he hadn’t cleaned everything thoroughly enough and there were still some tracks left from his slip of control?

“WAIT!” he almost yelped, threw the covers away and rose hastily.

“Do you have the runs again?” Klink asked; stopping his own movements.
“Sort of!” Hogan panted and stumbled towards the bathroom; still limping. “Excuse me,” he managed to say before he quickly locked the door behind him.

Thunderstruck, Klink stared at the closed door. “Wilson should really check you through,” he sighed, then he realized how cool it was with the fire in the furnace smoldering out. Shrugging, he snuggled back under the blankets. He would have to hurry as soon as Hogan was back, but until then there was no reason to turn into an icicle.

Hogan came back five minutes later. He had used the toilette and had been more than relieved to see that all evidence of his impossible behavior last night had really been removed. Klink lay in bed, covers pulled ’til his nose, and looked at him, concerned.

“I’m all right,” the colonel told him before Klink could’ve asked, rounded the bed and slipped under the comforter.

The Oberst only nodded, but there was a determined gleam in his eyes – one Hogan knew by now. It was obvious that at least Wilson would be alerted, and he hoped that the medic would buy the story Hogan would present him.

*** HH ***

Well, there isn’t much to examine when someone has the runs, and therefore Wilson didn’t get suspicious. He only ordered that Hogan should drink some more tea, eat less greasy foods and keep his belly warm. Then he checked the colonel’s stitches and other wounds, and removed the stitches which had been done to close the less deep cuts. The other ones, so he declared, still had to heal two or three days more until they could be removed.

Yet the most important stitches for Hogan were those on his head and, as Wilson confirmed that they could be removed maybe within the next two or three days, the colonel really was happy.

“Am I allowed to wash my hair then?” Hogan asked, almost eagerly. “Don’t get me wrong here, Joe, but everything is itching by now.”

“I do understand you,” Wilson said while closing the med-kit. “But you still have to be careful. You don’t want to ruin what your body has healed until now. Two or three days, and you can take a shower.”
“Thank the Lord,” Hogan all but sighed. “I feel more than dirty by now.”

Wilson smiled at him, looked at the white pajamas that seemed to be made of parachute silk and chuckled. “At least you’ve spare nightclothes. Not that this is a big luxury, but it certainly makes a few things easier.”

“Yeah – thanks to LeBeau and his sewing talents,” Hogan nodded; pulling at one sleeve.

“And I also think ‘thanks to Klink’. This is parachute silk and you could only have gotten it from the camp’s stock, so the Kommandant must have given his permission to use it.”

The colonel wasn’t aware of the smile that tugged at his almost healed lips. “Well, LeBeau complained about me wearing Klink’s clothes from time to time – and Klink certainly wanted to spare his nose unpleasant smells which go hand in hand with wearing nightclothes for many days without changing them. He suggested the tailoring, sacrificed an unusable parachute and LeBeau swung his needle. And, voila, everyone is happy.”

Wilson began to laugh. After giving Hogan another shot of penicillin and redoing the bandages, he bid his superior good-bye and left; asking himself what the future would hold for the two opposing, yet obviously secretly befriended, officers.

He couldn’t know how many twists lay ahead for the two men.

*** HH ***

Hogan tried to find some rest, but his mind was still in turmoil. What had taken place last night had shown him the amount of trouble he was in. There was no way that something like this could happen again, but he knew that he had no real control over his subconscious – and this unsettled him a lot. This time he had been able to cover his slip, but he couldn’t present Klink with a made-up story of having the runs several more times. Contrary to his former beliefs, the Oberst was no idiot and would realize that something was up and very off the chart with his senior POW officer.

So, what to do?
‘Just give into your desire and enjoy it. The last time has been too long ago. And Klink certainly wouldn’t mind – rather the opposite. He will be very happy to help you out, old boy!’ this crazy voice from his reckless side suggested.

‘You’re insane!’ the more rational part answered. ‘It’s against the law, public morals, the Church, even if it is about love, and… Well, it’s forbidden. And it would change everything!’

‘Everything has already changed!’ came the not so useful reply.

‘No, not fully. Until now you’re still in control of yourself and of everything that happens.’

‘Yeah, this was very obvious last night.’

‘That’s different. You can’t decide what you dream, but you can control your body.’

‘And once again: Remember last night!’

‘A one-time-slip, nothing more. Giving into this crazy wish would turn everything upside-down. You’re not gay, this much is certain, and this crazy… lust for Klink is nothing more than an overreaction because of everything that happened. And, besides, it could endanger the mission if you allow yourself to be ruled by your feelings.’

‘So you admit to having feelings for him?’

‘I’m ignoring this question. And, by the way, you NEVER let any emotions mingle with your duty and…’

‘It will not interfere with duty – it will make it easier.’

‘Shut up.’

“Is this the best you can come up with?”
'I said: Shut up!'

‘Running out of arguments?’

Hogan sat up and stared wide-eyed at the wall as he realized what was going on. “Oh my GOD! Now I’m having a discussion with myself!” he groaned.

“Don’t we all, here and there?”

Startled, Hogan turned his head and looked straight at a broadly grinning Kinchloe who lent with crossed arms against the door-frame.

“I don’t want to get too personal, Colonel, but you look like a man who has to turn over really strong problems in his mind,” the Sergeant teased.

‘You have no idea,’ Hogan thought. Aloud he replied, “This is the result when I have too much time to think.”

Kinch chuckled and pushed himself away from the doorframe to come in. “Then I may have another thing you can think of. Danzig radioed us this morning. The Underground found out that the wings for the ME-262 are transported from Stuttgart towards the middle-east of Germany. It passes Würzburg and Schweinfurt before its route turns north, and this means…” He didn’t end the sentence but looked expectantly at Hogan.

“… it bypasses near Hammelburg,” the colonel finished the line; smirking. “And if they send the trains via Schweinfurt instead of directly via Hammelburg, which is the shorter way, it means that the railway we tinkered with last year to save Tiger hasn’t been completely repaired.”

Kinchloe laughed quietly. “I don’t think that the Krauts are calling our messing with their railways ‘tinkering’, but I know what you mean.” He continued to smirk.

Hogan shrugged. “One man’s joy is another man’s suffering.” He sighed. “I’d already assumed something like this when we freed Tiger back in December. We drove a few kilometers before we shed our masquerade, eliminated her guards and fled with her. The train was blown up behind Bad
Kissingen. So this is the second time the Germans have had to repair this rail section. And, because of the winter and their lack of materials by now, their attempts to close the gap we left in this route have been hindered.” He shortly pursed his lips. “If we want to ‘tinker’ with the other route, we’ve to be very careful. They will be guarding the area, no doubt. We need to know details of the other railway – bridges, curves, and so on. And we need to know when the trains arrive, how the cargo is disguised, the speed of the trains, etc."

“I’ll contact Danzig again and ask him to give us these details,” Kinchloe offered.

“Good. Tell Carter that he can start building some bases for bombs, but he ought to be damn careful with the stuff he puts in them. I really don’t want to have a new series of ‘earthquakes’ here in Stalag 13. Klink will keep his mouth shut, but he would certainly have a hard time explaining something like subterranean explosions to his men – and we don’t want a few of them becoming suspicious and too ‘dutiful’.”

Kinch sighed. “Consider it done, Colonel.” He turned to leave, but stopped one last time. “Sir, when we succeed, Berlin will certainly send a whole bunch of Gestapo-officers to sniffle around.”

“Oh, let them come. I’ll still be too weak to even walk properly and you'll all have your own alibis, given by our dear Klink.”

“You think so?”

A smile appeared on Hogan’s face – a warm kind of smile he wasn’t aware of. “Willie will spread his protective wings over us. Don’t forget, he finally has become the Iron Eagle again, and this for us.”

Kinchloe snorted softly. “From your mouth to the Lord’s ear, sir.” He saluted casually and left.

And Hogan, finally, had something else his mind could be busy with.

*** HH ***

Klink wasn’t surprised to find the entirety of Hogan’s gang in his sleeping chamber, as he returned from his office for lunch. The only exception was LeBeau, who nodded at him through the open kitchen door, from where – once again – a delicious smell wafted through the rooms.
Leaving coat, scarf and cap at the coat-rack and clamping his riding-crop beneath his right arm, he closed the distance to the other men, who had already become aware of him and, to his utter surprise, saluted seriously.

“Gentlemen,” he greeted them. “At ease.”

He stepped into the sleeping chamber, put his riding-crop on the dresser and looked at Hogan. The first thing he recognized was the eager sparkle in the colonel’s brown eyes and the smile that played around his lips. He knew the younger man well enough to know the reason for it.

“You’ve got your next mission,” he stated, and his American counterpart nodded with a sudden grin.

“Yep!”

“End of boredom,” Klink commented wryly, before he turned serious again. “Is there anything the Gentlemen need?”

“A detailed chart of the railways in the area, a truck, some alibis and…” Hogan stopped and chuckled as he saw the German officer's flabbergasted expression. “I was only joking,” he said.

“No, you weren’t!” Klink answered. “You got information about the components for the ME-262 which are transported by train. And you want to stop or delay those transports,” he thought aloud. “Please, no more detonations in Hammelburg or northern of Bad Kissingen. The last time you didn't only wreak a lot of destruction at the railway and a few houses, you also burnt two hillsides of vineyards – and the Bocksbeutel (special white wine of this area) is too good to get burnt.”

Hogan chuckled. “There aren’t any vineyards in the east of our camp, are there?”

“No, not to my knowledge,” the Oberst affirmed; frowning. “East of here runs the railway from Schweinfurt to Meiningen, passing Poppenhausen and a few small villages before it reaches Bad Kissingen. It’s the only railway left after your deeds last December. And the mentioned route is practically on the same level as Hammelburg, only twenty kilometers away.” He looked thoughtfully at his American counterpart. “You want to sabotage the railway there.”
“It’s within Papa Bear’s area, but also far enough away to not endanger the towns and our camp,” Hogan shrugged. “And, by the way, we don’t want to set up a large, shining signal pointing at Stalag 13. You’re right, Kommandant: The brass in Berlin is certainly paranoid by now, and even with me restricted to bed, the Gestapo and Burkhalter would get second thoughts if the sabotage happens too close to our camp.”

“Well, everything that happened within a certain radius of our camp gave Hochstetter second thoughts,” Carter murmured.

“Yes, and even with Hochstetter arrested we’ve to be careful. He wasn’t the only smart mind within the Gestapo. Other members of this devil-club are capable of putting one and one together, too. We can’t risk getting lazy now, just because Hochstetter is out of the way.”

“Hogan has a point here,” Klink cut in. “You should give the brass proof that Papa Bear is still active, which is its own kind of alibi for all of you, while Hogan is sick, but you shouldn’t overdo it.” He sighed. “But I agree that the transports of the components have to be delayed. We will not be able to stop them, but every stone we throw into Goering’s way gains more time for the Allies. So let us come up with some schemes.”

None of the Heroes missed Klink’s references to ‘we’ and ‘us’. And it slipped from his lips so easily that there was no doubt about his sincerity. Even Newkirk had to admit that Klink sounded honest.

Hogan nodded. “Okay, then it’s settled. The rail sections east of here is it. Any ideas?” he addressed his men.

“If we install the bomb at the middle of a bridge, the loco will be disturbed when it passes the spot, fall down and pull the wagons with it,” Carter suggested.

Hogan pressed his lips in a firm line for a moment. “I would prefer to let the locomotive pass and blow up the middle of the train. Like this the cargo and the railway are destroyed, but the train staff on the loco has a chance to jump off it if the engine has already reached solid ground. The men are only doing their job, and are not enemy soldiers but civilians. I don’t want to harm them. If they can jump out of the loco they’ll at least have a chance of survival.”

Unknown to the colonel, Klink smiled for a few seconds; blue eyes bright. There it was again – one of the reasons why he had decided that Hogan was an Underground-agent he could support: The American was a good man, who only killed in self-defense or if there was no other option. And even then he tried to keep the number of victims as low as possible – just like now.
“Then I’ll build two bombs with timers,” Carter shrugged. “No problem, sir. But they have to be firmly fixed and the timer has to be correctly activated, otherwise it goes ‘boom’ the moment the railway shivers because of the train.”

“We’ve done it before. The last times your ‘babies’ worked perfectly. Just make two new ones, and everything will be all right,” Hogan ordered.

“No problem, boy… Ungh, I mean Colonel.”

“Is there a bridge at all we could use?” Newkirk asked and looked questioningly at Kinch, who sighed,

“No real bridges, rather small overpasses. But the Underground told me that after Poppenhausen and the next three villages the railway runs parallel to a road. There is nothing there other than woods and said road. If the train tumbles over there, no citizens will be endangered.”

“Perfect,” Hogan smiled. “So the men on the loco have the chance to jump to safety, and no other civilians are at stake. And when we blast up the railway on a longer route, maybe with an explosion strong enough to damage the road, too, the Krauts will not be able to rebuild it this quickly.” He realized the nick-name he used and smiled sheepishly at Klink. “Sorry!”

“It’s all right – Steak.”

Hogan stared at him with large eyes – and burst out laughing. A full rich sound that made Klink’s heart beat faster. The three Heroes looked first at Klink and then at Hogan with bright question-marks on their faces. What the heck…

“Serves me right,” the colonel snickered. “We had already discussed this topic.”

“And don’t forget it,” the Oberst nodded, but there was an amused smile on his face and a certain gleam in his eyes. He had caught Hogan by surprise – again! – and it was sheer fun.

Newkirk, Kinch and Carter looked at each other. Obviously, this was a private joke between the two officers – and they would pester Hogan until he would tell them about it. But just right now they had
the next problem to discuss, and it was Carter who came up with the topic.

“Any idea concerning our alibis?”

Hogan took a deep breath; turning serious again. “I only know that we have to have a good one,” he murmured. “But I think I’ve an idea what kind of alibi could be presented to the Gestapo if they show up here.” He looked at Kinchloe. “How about some rehearsals for a new theater show? And a dozen guards or so to witness it?”

“Your men are very well known, Hogan,” Klink added for consideration. “My guards would recognize the absence of any man belonging to your team.”

“He has a point,” a voice with a French accent commented. LeBeau lent against the door-frame – arms crossed, wearing his apron and cooking-hat.

“But there may be another way,” Klink continued. “While I'm distracting the guards with a speech, you can slip past the wires – just like you do on a regular basis.” He gave them a pointed glance. “And concerning the sabotage itself: If the explosion takes place during a roll call, every one of us could make an oath that you all were here in the camp when the detonation happened.”

“We've done the latter before,” Hogan admitted.

“I'm aware of it,” Klink deadpanned; giving his American counterpart a short glare.

Hogan chuckled for a moment, before he said, “But there is a problem; one of the trains really has to bypass the set-up detonation while we're having an official roll call here – hence it has to do so in the morning or evening. And if the trains’ schedule doesn’t allow it, we’ve no alibi at all.”

Klink cocked his head. “I could order roll calls out of line – to supposedly restore discipline within the camp, since it has become lax. If you tell me when you have to leave the camp to prepare everything, I'll avoid these hours and make roll calls before and afterwards. Maybe it'd be even better if I order them within the next days before everything happens so that none of the brass gets suspicious about why I'm all of a sudden making unscheduled roll calls out of time while a sabotage is taking place. That would be a few coincidences too many.”

Newkirk stared wide-eyed at him. Was Klink really plotting schemes here and even offering them
support like this? He was baffled. Carter, LeBeau and Kinchloe smiled at each other – who had ever thought that their Kommandant would suggest help like this.

And Hogan?

His eyes shone with warmth as he looked at the older man. “That you’re a good strategist became clear to me during our games of chess. But I never took you for someone who can scheme like this.”

“We’ve both realized that there are a lot of things we still don’t know about each other,” Klink replied mildly.

Hogan chuckled and nodded, before he returned to the topic. “So, the frame of the plot stands. We only need the details like the train-schedules – and a chart of this area so that we can plan the set-off of the bombs.”

“The Underground's still working on it,” Kinch said. “After our short talk this morning I contacted them again, but they say they'll need some time to get this information.”

Hogan grimaced. “Yet every day that goes by without us taking action is a day more the Messerschmitts can be build – and Burkhalter may be getting more suspicious because Papa Bear isn’t sending his own greeting cards.” He glanced at Klink. “Can you find something out?”

The Kommandant slowly wagged his head. “I could provide you with a chart, but I’ve no chance of learning the trains’ timetables. They are chartered trains and travel outside any schedule. And if I ask Burkhalter about it, he’ll get the right idea about us all after the successful sabotage, at the latest – last but not least because the assault is done near Stalag 13.”

Hogan frowned. “You are right. Well, then our contacts have to find out how long the train needs from Würzburg to the place we want to use, so that we can use a set-up timer for the detonator.” He looked at Kinch. “Keep me updated.”

“Who do you take us for, Gov’nor?” Newkirk said. “Of course we'll keep you updated. Oh, apropos: Care to explain what is it about ‘Krauts’ and ‘steak’?”

Hogan saw the pure curiosity in his friends’ eyes, smirked devilishly and said with the most sugar-coated voice, “No.”
Four baffled faces stared at him, and with mirth sparkling in his gaze he glanced at Klink, who chuckled, before he answered, “You call us Germans ‘Krauts’, because we love this vegetable. And as a little pay-back I thought I could call the Americans ‘Steaks’ – because that is one of your favorite foods.” He looked at LeBeau. “What do you think, Fromage?”

LeBeau glared at him, then the joke of being called ‘cheese’ in French hit home and he began snickering. “What an idea! What about you, Mint-Sauce?” he grinned while clapping Newkirk strongly on the shoulder.

“Do you have a death-wish?” Peter growled, but the edges of his mouth trembled with suppressed laughter.

“Well, as long as no-one calls me ‘Burger’,” Carter threw in.

“You are already called ‘Chatterbox’, Andrew, so there's no need to give you another nick-name.”

“Chatterbox?” Andrew asked indignantly; pushing both hands in the pockets of his jacket. “Couldn’t you call me ‘Detonation-Andy’ or something like that?”

“I prefer ‘Chatterbox’, too,” Kinch said – and in the next moment an anything but serious discussion began.

Hogan watched how his men instantly began giving each other different nick-names which all referenced one food or another. Looking at Klink, he saw the amused but also satisfied expression on the older man’s face. As it seemed, the Heroes had begun accepting him.

*** HH ***

Klink ended today’s work later than usual, and showed up at his quarters with Kinchloe in tow. Hogan sat at the table, clad in the newly-sewed housecoat, and put away a book he had borrowed from the shelf in the guest-room. The Oberst couldn’t deny that he was pleased that Hogan had waited for him instead of dining alone, but for the moment dinner would have to wait.

Walking very slowly, the American sat down on the sofa, and even if some of his movements were
still uncertain and heavy, it was obvious that he was slowly beginning to do better.

“So, what’s up?” he asked, while Kinchloe took the offered seat on the arm-chair. Klink himself sat down beside Hogan; unusually tense.

For a few seconds the Kommandant didn’t answer, before he quietly replied, “I have something for you.” He rose, walked to the hall stand and pulled something out of his coat, which he had hung up there. Returning to the sofa, he wordlessly offered Hogan the folded sheet of paper he’d just fetched.

Curious, the colonel unfolded it and gasped. It was a travel chart of North Bavaria. “Is this…” he began and Klink sighed deeply, while sitting down again.

“Yes, this is a chart of our area here – including all streets, field paths and railways.” He pointed at a spot on the chart. “Here is the spot your contact suggested. There are only a few long curves so the train can travel with full speed.”

“Full speed…,” Hogan murmured. “It will increase the damage, but what about the men on the loco?”

“With some luck the loco will remain on the rails – otherwise the guys have to be very quick,” Kinch said. “And one more thing, Colonel. The Underground found out that there is only one train every three days – the next time will be the day after tomorrow. And, as it seems, afterwards they’ll send trains only when enough new wings have been produced near Heilbronn.”

Hogan shortly pursed his lips. “Then we have to act the day after tomorrow. And it doesn't give us much time to prepare everything, but we’ll manage.” He thought about everything for a minute, and even Klink didn’t say anything until Hogan opened his mouth again.

“We’ve to check the area by ourselves to apprise the situation there. Only then we can go into details.” He cocked his head. “You said the place is twenty kilometers from here?” he addressed Klink, who nodded slowly.

“Yes.”

“Okay. Kinch, contact the Underground again. Newkirk and Carter shall meet with them tonight and check the place.”
“Okay, Colonel,” Kinchloe nodded and rose. “I’ll inform you when the guys are back.”

“Thanks,” Hogan replied and looked up at his friend. “Please tell them to be careful. I hate that I can’t come with them, but I would hardly make it down into the tunnel, not to speak of climbing out of it or running around in the night.”

James chuckled quietly. “Colonel, please don’t worry your head off. Peter and Andrew are no beginners. They’ll make it.” He looked at Klink. “If it doesn’t disturb you, sir, I’ll call your quarters when the boys are back.”

Klink stared at him. “You’ll call my quarters!?” He snorted – half irritated, half amused. “And there I thought I was joking when I asked you since when the POWs of this camp have official call-boxes.”

“We have one – only very well-hidden,” Kinch smiled, while he folded the chart and put it in the inner pocket of his jacket. “Thank you for this little helper, Kommandant.”

“It comes from my office,” the Oberst answered in a pressed voice. “Give it back as soon as you don’t need it anymore. If anyone realizes that it is gone or finds it on you, we’re all done for.”

“Don’t worry, sir, it’s safe with me – and I’ll return it to you ASAP.” He nodded at the two officers. “Until later, Kommandant – Colonel.” He left the quarters. And despite everything he had learned within the last days, he was more than curious whether Klink had told the truth or if he had sold them a cock and bull story. If he had said the truth, it was the big proof that he was indeed their ally. If not… Well, he didn’t want to think about it.

For a long moment neither Klink nor Hogan moved. Then the American carefully crossed his arms in front of his chest, pursed his almost healed lips and looked at his German counterpart. “You do realize that you have now switched from someone who covers for us to an active supporter?”

Klink smiled tiredly and sadly. “Yes, from now on I can be called a high traitor. My father would certainly be turning in his grave if he knew about it. Then, on the other hand, I don’t think that he would have accepted what has become of our country and would have acted likewise.” He sighed. “I know that I’m doing the right thing, yet I feel… shitty.” He turned his head and looked at Hogan with large eyes. “Does this make any sense?”

The colonel reached out and laid a hand on the older man’s shoulder; squeezing it gently. “It makes
sense,” he answered softly. “And it shows that you’re indeed a good man, because only a man without honor and morals would make such a step without his conscience plaguing him.”

He watched how the older man lowered his head, and let his hand rest on the Oberst’s shoulder. He knew what was going on his Klink’s mind and felt a wave of deep sympathy. “You don’t have to do this, you know. If you continue to cover for us, it would be more than enough.”

Looking really miserable for a moment, the Kommandant only glanced with something close to helplessness at him – like a child that began to realize that they had done something very, very bad. Then he took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. “The time of grace is over. I’ve two options: To really support you and try to end this madness, or to look away like the coward I turned into during the last years. And knowing that every bit of help counts now with the war reaching its peak, just guess what I chose.”

He sighed again and looked away – lost in thought. Hogan cocked his head.

“What is it, Will?” he asked quietly; sensing that something had to be terribly off.

Klink took a deep breath. “Burkhalter called to tell me that Hochstetter has been seriously questioned. Of course the poison-gnome spoke mainly of his suspicions concerning you and me, but obviously the brass doesn’t believe him.”

Hogan smiled. “That’s good, isn’t it?”

“Ja,” the Oberst nodded, “but this was not all. Burkhalter was… nervous and shaken. And he obviously needed a valve to let off some steam and I was in the line to listen.” He shortly bit his lips, before he began,

“A few days ago the Red Army reached our frontier in the north-east, and they and our soldiers are battling for every meter – and there seems to be no end of Russian reinforcements. Hundreds of people want to flee to the west, which is absolutely understandable and maybe increases their chance of saving a few belongings, and, of course, their lives. But, what I simply can’t get into my mind is the fact that our own regime has made any kind of flight-attempt a punishable offense. ‘A German doesn’t just flee from a filthy scallywag, barking like a dog, with a red star on his sleeve.’ Goebbels’s words, not mine. Burkhalter was repulsed, even if he didn’t dare mention it, but I know his voice well enough to hear his incomprehension of this point of view.” Klink shook his head. “We stand no chance against the Russians there and we both know what this means for the civilians.”
“The Russians are not known for being mild,” Hogan nodded slowly, and the older man snorted in bitterness.

“You can say this. Burkhalter got the first reports from Poland. The Red Army has reached Warschau (Warsaw) and is about to overrun it; other parts of Poland have already been conquered. And the same is going to happen to East-Prussia. The young men and mere boys sent there to defend our borders are no match for the well-trained and experienced Russians. And instead of evacuating the civilians, Koch, this mad bastard, threatens them with the death penalty if they try to leave.” He moaned quietly. “And I think what is going on in the north-east is only the beginning. The civilians, all those women, children and any men left are paying the price for Hitler’s insanity.”

Hogan said nothing for a short time. This was the darkest side of a war that was about to reach its peak or end – or both. He knew that there was a lot of burning hate raging through the soldiers on all sides – on the winners’ and the losers’ both. He also knew that, despite orders, many soldiers didn’t hold back but lived out the fear, wrath and suffering they had endured during the battles. There was no doubt about what would happen to a great part of the civilians in Germany, especially along the country’s borders. But that their own regime forbid those people to flee was… inhuman. He was almost unable to grasp this insane decree and that there were indeed men who obeyed it.

“Who is this Koch?” he asked.

“Erich Koch, the Gauleiter of East-Prussia – something like a governor in the US-states. He comes from the Rhine-area and was ordered to annex the Polish areas around East-Prussia, which he did. As far as I know, more than the half of the people who lived in those areas have been deported.” Klink shuddered and looked away; deeply ashamed.

“It’s not your fault, Will,” Hogan said softly. “You didn’t give these orders or force those people to stay where they are. You’re not responsible for what happened in Germany.”

“No, but I – just like so many of us officers – strengthened Hitler by staying quiet. This is another reason why I’ll be actively supporting the Allies now. There is a lot I have to make up for – not for my deeds, but for the things I didn’t do.”

He rose, stepped to the dresser and poured Hogan and himself a glass of cognac. After putting the colonel’s glass on the table, he drank his own drink down without a second thought. Glancing at nothing again he murmured, “Just look at what has become of you, Wilhelm Klink: First a coward and now a traitor.”

Hogan, who hadn’t touched his drink, rose and closed the short distance to the older man with
limping movements. “Will,” he began, tentatively, “I know that you must be feeling like shit at the moment. But just like you said earlier: It’s the right thing to do. You mentioned all those enslaved people who are forced to work for the Nazis; dying in the process by the dozens. People who mostly haven’t done anything wrong - except for being born in another country or having a foreign heritage. You mentioned your Jewish fellow citizens, and that they were all kidnapped and brought to camps. Not only you, but I have also heard rumors about those camps – that they are nothing more than execution stations. And now the Nazis even forbid their own people from fleeing; not caring that these orders will cost hundreds – thousands – of lives. You said that this isn’t the Germany you were born in – that this here is a sinister, twisted parody of your country. Stopping this insanity isn’t betrayal, therefore you are no traitor. I even dare say that you’re exactly the opposite."

Klink, who had listened wordlessly and without any emotion on his face, took a shuddering breath. “How so?” he asked tonelessly, without looking at Hogan.

“You said that you swore to protect your country as you graduated the Academy – and you are still doing so. A country is more than the landscape, the government and even the people. Fatherland also means the values – the inner, ethical and moral ones. It means the beliefs and the spirit of the people, the freedom to build their own opinion and to stand for it without being in danger. It means solidarity, cohesion, the willingness to help each other and to go on no matter what. It means the roots of the past and the branches of the future. It means the culture, like traditions, music and art in general. This all builds the soul of a country that can only be called a real ‘Fatherland’ if the people are free to live their lives in peace and to their liking without any fear. And this is exactly what you’re fighting for in your own way. It isn’t you who broke his oath. It was them – those who swore to keep the best interest of your country as their highest priority, but abused their position for their own advantage and to quench their greed for power. You already said it a few days ago, and I have to agree wholeheartedly: They are the traitors, not you.”

Klink had turned his head and looked straight at his American counterpart. He was pale, his eyes were dull and he looked utterly unhappy, yet his posture was straight. “Yes, I know that I said all those things after I revealed my guesses and knowledge to you. And I still stand by them. But talking of something and actually doing it are two different shoes. Tell me, Robert, if the roles were reversed, and fate demanded from you to go against your country – against the United States. Would you do it?”

Hogan took a deep breath; knowing that his answer would be very important for the shaken man in front of him, who was obviously shocked that he had dared to make the jump from the cliff he had stood on for so long.

“I have to admit that I can’t imagine that something like what happened here in Germany would happen to the States,” the colonel replied. “And you can’t compare Germany with the US. We’ve had a democracy without royalty for two hundred years, while your emperor resigned only twenty years ago. Yes, in 1939 there was a kind of Nazi-party in the US – the German American Volksbund – that began to infiltrate the States. Hell, they even had a big party conference in Madison Square Garden, but the whole thing was stopped before it could go too far. Our whole society differs
a lot from the original traditional countries in Europe. But should there ever come a time in which an insane dictator rules the States and is about to doom the whole world, I would fight for what I was taught is right – for what we fought two hundred years ago despite terrifying sacrifices and losses.”

Klink cocked his head. “You speak of the War of Independence.”

“Yes,” Hogan nodded. “It was bloody, unspeakably cruel and horrifying, but we didn’t give up. They destroyed the villages, locked the citizen into churches and burnt them down, murdered countless farmers, including the children – but we didn’t give into the tyranny and the dread. Standing up for a better world, free of fear and despair, comes with a price but in the end we all win so much more. And if fate would decide that this dark time repeats itself, I would do what the first Americans did: Fight for the country we love, even against our own regime if it brings harm and hurt over our people.”

For a very long moment Klink glanced aside; collecting his thoughts. Then he lifted a hand and touched Hogan’s cheek for the length of a breath. “You’re an irredeemable optimist and starry-eyed idealist, Rob, and maybe this is the whole strength of you Americans – and the reason why you will win the war.” He let his hand sink and sighed. “And you know what? Your streak to see light even in the darkness and your willingness to fight for what you think is right inspires not only your men, but also everyone else around you – at least those who are willing to listen and see reason. And it gives comfort to those who think that everything is lost.” His eyes were still sad, but they were also gentle. “I admire you for this.”

The spot Klink had touched tingled like a thousand little flies and sent a warm shiver through Hogan’s inner being. And seeing his German counterpart so oddly lost, so shocked about his own courage, almost pained him. Without thinking straight, he pulled the other man into an embrace; hoping to comfort him.

For seconds the Oberst went stiff. This couldn’t be happening! This was a dream from which he would wake up any moment to be left once again cold and lonely! Then he gave in and all but melted into the arms of the man he loved. It felt so good; so incredibly good to be held by the only being in the whole world who gave his now even more miserable existence a spark of life. He knew that Hogan was right about everything he’d said, but going against his sense of duty, giving up loyalty – even towards those madmen in charge – and double-crossing everything he had been taught a good soldier should do or not, had pushed him to his limits.

It was really a big difference between speaking about something and believing in it, and actually acting on it. The whole extent of what he had done crashed down on him. He had given sensitive information to the United Allies. And maybe this was only the beginning. With the new Messerschmitt at the brink of going into serial production, a fact that could turn the wheel of war, he knew that it was perhaps up to him to help the Allies even more. There was a chance that his active support of the Allies would cost the lives of many comrades. He knew that there weren’t many well-
trained men left. Mere boys and old men were who was conscripted now; forced to fight a lost war. Many of them would certainly die – at the Front or in the Allies’ upcoming ambush. He felt dizzy because of it. And even the knowledge that their death would prevent even more people from being killed didn’t comfort him.

But there was no going back now – he had made his decision and had passed the point of no return. From now on he couldn’t hide behind lies, excuses and silly behavior. From now on he was someone who really fought against the regime. On the one hand it filled him with relief to have finally found the courage to go against the insanity that tore his country apart and costed thousands of lives day by day. On the other hand he knew that his deeds would mean the death of many other soldiers. He would be called a traitor now; someone who couldn’t be trusted and had forfeited his right to live; others might be grateful for what he’d do from now on, and would thank him. Yet the real outcome would be written later, in the history books.

Sighing, he forced his mind away from these troubling thoughts, and realized again that Robert was embracing him. He relished for a moment in the still weak, yet usually so strong arms holding him with gentleness unknown to him. He could feel the warmth of Hogan’s body, chasing away the cold demons haunting him. There was Robert’s breath on his neck just above the stiff collar and the other man’s heart that beat against his own in a calming, lulling rhythm. For a small eternity that ended far too soon he was one with the love of his life – closer to him than ever before; secure, safe and comforted.

Then he felt Hogan’s arms slipping away, and in a desperate attempt to extend the moment he wrapped his own arms around the other man’s waist, while he buried his face at the American’s throat, hence losing his pride – and his monocle.

Hogan's hesitation did not last longer than the time an eye needed to bat, then he closed his arms around the taller man again and pulled him gently against him; knowing that ‘Willie’ needed an anchor just right now, like he, Hogan, had too often needed within the last days. And he couldn’t deny that holding the other man like this felt so good.

They were both hungry for comfort, for peace – for each other's proximity. And even if Hogan still denied the latter, a part of his soul enjoyed the warm contact, while his mind excused everything citing his urge to help Klink with getting over his inner turmoil.

The dinner was forgotten for many minutes more.

TBC…
So, besides the fluff and some fun inside of the chapter, the dark side of these times can’t be forgotten – and it doesn’t stop at the gates of Stalag 13. Of course several gravely occurrences will reach the men within the camp, too – mostly by hearing about them, but in the later chapters some of those circumstances will catch up with the men, independent of uniform and nationality.

But first our Heroes are up to the next mission – with Hogan being forced to stay behind and to do nothing else than waiting. And this for a man of action. A hard thing that will cost him more nerves as if he could be an active part of it (poor colonel, *snicker*). And, besides, those haunting dreams and his woken yet still denied desire for his German counterpart rankles with him even more.

The geographic which are mentioned in this and the following chapters, is true. Hammelburg is near Bad Kissingen, a spa that is also famous for its special wine (like it is cultivated in the whole Rhön-area) and there are several smaller villages close by, as well as two railways, of which one is the old speed-line for the Berlin-Express. The connections between Stuttgart, Heilbronn (in the south-west of Germany) to Schweinfurt (near Nürnberg) and then heading to the north-east via Hammelburg or Poppenhausen, are still functional these days, and were only interrupted by the former border to the DDR, because Thüringen belonged to the separated east-part of our country until 30 years ago. So, if you want to do some google-research you really can find imagines of the area, Papa Bear is active (*smile*).

In the next chapter Klink takes a real active part in Hogan’s newest mission, and the whole deed will alert Berlin to an extend that will bring a lot of turmoil to Stalag 13. Some real historical figures have a short appearance (without being really in the story, mind you), and Klink realizes that he had stepped on a very dangerous path as he decided to support Hogan’s task more than ‘only’ looking away.

I hope you liked the new chapter, including Hogan’s discussion with himself, the joking and Robert comforting his German counterpart what heightened the temptation ‘Willie’ has become for him by now. And, like always, I’m curious what you think about it.

The next chapter will be posted at the end of the next week.

Have a nice rest of Sunday,

Love

Yours Starflight
The new mission

Hi, my dear readers!

A little bit later than usual, but at least I managed it to publish the new chapter. Thank you so much for all your good wishes concerning my mother. She’s back from hospital for a few days now, the pathological result was – thank the Lord – negative. Yet she is still very weak and I think I’ve to support my dad within the household for longer.

I also want to express my gratefulness for the big feedback concerning the last chapter. I knew you would love it, and I also know that you’re eager to read more about the increasing relationship of our two colonels. But just right now they’re busy with the next mission that will show the rest of the Heroes that Klink is really on their side.

So, have fun with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 29 – The new mission

The two colonels finally ate their dinner and talked about the upcoming mission – a good distraction after the emotional roller-coaster Klink had been through. The evening went by, and the later it got the more nervous Hogan became. And the reason was simple: Newkirk and Carter were certainly already out to prepare the task – and Hogan would pay a whole year’s salary to be with them right now.

Yes, it wasn’t the first time that some of his men were out of the camp without him to prepare or even to fulfill a mission, yet every time he didn’t find a peaceful minute until they were safely back.
And today was no different. Hell, it was worse. If something happened to Newkirk and Carter, he would be unable to do anything in his current condition. Yes, he knew that Klink would try to help, but Peter and Andrew were his men – his responsibility and his friends. It would be up to him to aid them if something went down the hill, but he didn’t even know if they were okay or not.

Two times Klink tried to persuade him to go to bed, and finally gave up. Hogan sat on the sofa, wrapped in a comforter and stared at nothing. The Kommandant had even suggested that they could kill time by playing one or two games of chess, and was more than surprised as the younger man confessed that he hadn’t the nerve in the moment to concentrate on chess. Hell, Klink was convinced that there had been likewise situations before – that a few of Hogan’s men were on a mission while the colonel played chess with the Oberst, distracting him and getting an alibi like this.

But not this time. And that Hogan even admitted to be too tense to pretend otherwise, showed Klink how much the younger man trusted him by now. In earlier times Hogan would have denied even the tiniest hints of nervousness, and now he even lived up to it. And it was also a sign of how exhausted and stricken Robert still was.

It was after midnight and Klink feared that Hogan was about to lose it, as the telephone rang. Despite his still healing limbs, the American was on his feet within the blink of an eye, but Klink was quicker. With a few long steps he was at the dresser and lifted the receiver.

“Ja, Oberst Klink here,” he said while looking at Hogan, who had closed the distance to him. “Ah, Corporal Newkirk! Good to hear from you. Your superior is, by now, about to be pushed over the edge. I trust that you and Sergeant Carter are well?” He listened shortly and nodded at Hogan, who allowed himself a loud sigh of relief. “I’m glad to hear this, Corporal. One moment, I’ll give the receiver to our lame duck. Good night.”

The colonel shot him a glare as he was called a ‘lame duck’, almost tore the receiver from Klink’s hand and lifted it to his ear. “Newkirk? You and Carter are all right?”

Down in the tunnels, Newkirk smiled at Hogan’s obvious concern. “Everything is all right, Gov’nor. Andy is happy because we need three bombs to incapacitate the railway for longer and to send the ME-wings to the skies without an engine.”

“Any problems on the way?” he heard his friend and superior asking, and replied,

“No, no patrols, no road blocks. Danzig sends his greetings. A few of his men already observed a train’s travel the day before yesterday. It needs 42 minutes from Schweinfurt to the place we chose. One of his men has taken a hotel room near the station in Würzburg and will inform him when the
train leaves for Schweinfurt. That gives us enough time to reach the chosen place. Two other members of his cell will travel to Schweinfurt tomorrow to inform us when the train will leave the station so that Carter can set up the timer and we’re all back for the roll call in time. And then his babies will hopefully go ‘boom’ at the correct moment.”

“My timers always work correctly!” Carter protested while coming around the corner; leaving the room in which all their costumes and black clothes were hidden.

“Yes, yes,” Newkirk sighed; rolling his eyes.

In Klink’s quarters Hogan listened to the short banter and smiled; feeling like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. The two were back in one piece – thank the Lord!

“Ask your men at which time I shall make surprise roll calls today and tomorrow,” Klink murmured, and Hogan nodded – passing the question to Newkirk.

“Today it doesn’t matter when he makes them. But it counts tomorrow. I’ll inform you when Carter and LeBeau leave to place the bombs and when the big bang will be set to take place. Both things will happen within two hours or so, so…”

“Then the Kommandant will have a roll call three or four hours before and afterwards during the ‘big bang’,” Hogan interrupted him. “All right, keep me updated.”

“No problem, sir. Afterwards we’ll see if Klink really is our ally.”

“NEWKIRK!” Hogan groaned.

“Good night, sir. Sleep well.”

“Thanks, the same for you and the others,” the colonel replied; still grimacing. Then he added quickly, “And Peter? Good work! Give my thanks to Carter, too.”

“This I’ll do. Good night, sir.”
The link went dead and Hogan hung up. He took a very deep breath and let the air out again; relief plainly written on his face. He caught Klink’s knowingly gaze and sighed, “I’m always tense when one or more of them are on the road. I am aware that they are experienced men who know what to do if a situation becomes hairy, yet…” He shrugged.

“They are your men – and your friends. Of course you worry for them,” the Oberst replied softly. “Especially when you’re damned to remain here and are unable to join them. It’s what makes you such a good leader and gains the men’s deepest loyalty – and even brotherly love.”

Hogan felt, for the second time this evening, heat rising in his cheeks. “Thanks for the compliment,” he murmured. “You’re a good leader, too.”

“Oh yes, that was plain to see as every one of my guards, except for Schultz and Langenscheidt, volunteered to have a part in my planned execution last summer,” Klink scoffed and turned away.

The colonel’s hand on his arm stopped him. “Will, many things have changed since then. You protected them against Hochstetter as he demanded from you to send half of your men into a suicide mission.”

Klink turned his head stared at him. “And how do you know about this detail?” He waved one hand. “Don’t answer that. I know: Bugs.”

Hogan smiled sheepishly at him, before he replied, “What I wanted to say is: Word of your refusal to give into the Gestapo’s demand, sheltering your men, spread through the camp afterwards – and I saw many guards who afterwards looked at you with something close to guilt. They realized what they have in you – especially after the messy attempts of your replacements leading the camp whenever you had to leave Stalag 13 for a few days. And remember when we came back from our nightly trip twelve days ago? The guards smiled at you and a few even applauded at your return. Believe me, they have learned by now what a fine man hides behind the stern and sometimes crazy behavior.” He winked at Klink, who had turned around again.

“You think so?” he asked; a real smile on his face while he seemed to grow an inch.

In earlier times Hogan would have thought that this was another display of vanity, but today he knew better. The older man was starved for simple human respect and appreciation – to get proof he wasn’t worthless. And Hogan also knew that Klink’s so often showed eagerness towards his superiors was rooted in the same longing: To receive some due credit from others. It showed the loneliness ‘Willie’
was suffering.

Placing both hands on the Oberst’s shoulders, Hogan nodded sincerely. “Yes, I think your men have finally realized that their commanding officer may be hard and might sometimes make silly decisions they can’t understand, but they know one thing for sure: He doesn’t let them down and protects them. And this is more than many other officers are doing, independent of nation and army. Your men respect you. I’m convinced of it.”

The typical wide smile spread over Klink’s face while he chuckled in delight; eyes sparkling. Then he turned serious again. “Nu (Saxonian for ‘well’), took them long enough.” He laughed quietly as Hogan groaned, before the American shook his head and looked at the other man with warm eyes – unaware of the affection that lay in his gaze.

*** HH ***

This night Hogan was spared any forbidden fantasy-dreams. His whole mind and subconscious was fixed on the upcoming mission – a complicated task he had no part in except for scheming. His men were taking a great risk to cover Papa Bear’s absence from the Underground-activities and to save them all they were putting their own lives at stake. He would have preferred to be together with them – on the front lines, so to say – but with his still healing body there was not much he could do.

At least not physically. But his mind ran at 1000 mi/h and his subconscious mingled memories with fantasy during the night. This time he was in the cellars and Hochstetter smiled in glee while Newkirk and Carter – torn and bleeding – were brought in and accused of blowing up half the area…

In the middle of the night Hogan woke up – shaking and sweating – and he needed a moment to realize that he lay half on top of Klink, who held him in a gentle embrace and whispered words of reassurance and comfort. And this time Robert didn’t find the strength or had the heart to roll away, like the rational part of him demanded he do. Instead he relaxed and almost melted into the solid warm body beneath him, and relished in feeling those long arms wrapped around him – shielding and protecting him. There was Klink’s heartbeat at his ear, and one hand combed with slender, sensitive fingers through the messy strands of hair peeking out from under the bandage.

Hogan felt safe – sheltered. And he didn’t give a damn about modesty and duty. Without realizing it he even snuggled closer into the proximity of the older man and drifted back into sleep.

Klink gently held Robert to himself. He had been torn out of sleep by the younger man’s trashing and groans, while partly understandable words spilled over his lips. It was more than obvious that
Hogan was suffering from nightmares that weren’t, this time, simply a result of the torture he had been through, but were also intensified and influenced by his deep worry for his men and the frustration of being forced to stay behind while his friends fulfilled the next mission.

There were certainly enough soldiers and officers who accused Klink of being insensitive, egocentric and ignorant – in truth he was nothing like it. He could understand the American’s concern and restlessness because he feared for his men. They were both officers to the heart, even if their leading style and behavior differed a lot. So Klink simply knew what Hogan was going through at the moment, and as the colonel rolled around in bed and instinctively sought out human warmth, the Oberst kicked wariness and modesty out of the window and carefully pulled Robert to him – enveloping him and murmuring calming words to him like he had done while they were driving back from the Gestapo-Headquarters to Stalag 13 ten days ago. It had helped the traumatized colonel then – it would help him again.

And, by the way, Robert had comforted him in a similar manner in the earlier evening, as Klink had become fully aware that his deeds were high treason. Hogan had held him and he, Wilhelm Klink, had found peace and something close to salvation in the younger man’s arms. They both needed each other more and more, and therefore it was the most natural thing for him to offer the one he loved a safe harbor by embracing him.

A few minutes later Hogan woke up. Klink had no idea if the younger man was fully awake or still in half-sleep, but one thing was very clear: The proximity did Hogan good. He relaxed and huddled even deeper into the embrace; suddenly sighing in content.

Warmth spread through Klink – a wave of deep love that seemed to bathe his heart and soul in golden light. And it even increased with a rush of utter tenderness, as he felt how Robert nestled against him like an oversized cat.

“I got you, Rob,” he whispered; stroking through the once again dirty hair, the state of Hogan's hair something he didn’t mind. “I got you, hon. We’ll make it – your men will make it. I'll do everything in my power to cover and protect them. Don’t fear for your friends.”

He was aware that Hogan was once again in dreamland, but he also knew that those words reached the younger man’s subconscious nonetheless. Giving into an impulse, he carefully raised his head and pressed a kiss to the bandaged head, before he relaxed as well – relishing in feeling the love of his life cuddled to him like this. If he could only show Robert how much he meant to him – if he could only cherish him the way he wanted to. But he hadn’t any hope that this would ever come true, so he enjoyed the stolen moments in which he could have the younger man in his arms like this.

And slowly he slipped into Morpheus’ realm again.
This time both men’s sleep was peaceful…

*** HH ***

As Hogan woke up a few hours later, Klink had already left for duty. The colonel pursed his lips and tried to remember if he really had snuggled up to the older man who had held him in a warm, comfortable embrace, or if this had only been a dream. He wasn’t certain, yet a part of him simply knew that this hadn’t been an image from Morpheus’ realm at all.

‘I’ll do everything in my power to cover and protect them. Don’t fear for your friends.’

Those words uttered by Klink’s quiet voice echoed through Hogan’s memories – foggy and a little bit out of grasp, yet he knew that they weren’t rooted in fantasy, but in something that had really been said during the night. The Oberst had tried to calm him with those words, and the sincerity in them sent a breath of warmth and increasing affection through the colonel.

Groaning, he closed his eyes again and pulled the comforter higher above himself; realizing that he was indeed fighting a lost battle. The responsible-minded part of him was grateful for Klink’s honest support, Hogan’s crazy, daring part enjoyed the half-memories of lying in the older man’s arms and yearned for more.

He was distracted two hours later, as Kinch, Newkirk and Carter visited him and the two latter told him about the details of their trip the night prior. Kinchloe told him that he had returned the borrowed chart to Klink while making the daily report as acting senior POW officer. Kinch also spoke of the first surprise roll call Klink had made only one and a half hour after the official morning roll call. Many of the POWs were still grousing about it. The Kommandant had given them all a speech about the laziness that had found its way into the camp and their having to be reminded of the discipline every soldier should have. He threatened to hold the morning roll calls at the original time again, if this laziness didn’t stop.

You didn’t need a vivid imagination to picture the POWs’ reaction to those words – and Hogan felt a little bit bad for Klink. He knew that his German counterpart was doing all this only to build the Heroes the alibis they were going to need tomorrow, but Klink was also risking the better regard the men had begun to have for him. The American colonel had learned how much the older man wanted to be respected by the men within Stalag 13, no matter the nationality, and losing the slightly better reputation he had gotten after rescuing Hogan two times would be hard for him. Yet Klink stood true to his suggestion and given word – and Robert admired him for it.
The whole day Hogan busied himself with reading some more German books he found in Klink’s quarters, chatted with LeBeau while the Frenchman prepared lunch and rested after he ate his meal together with Klink.

Klink made another roll call in the middle of newly falling snow, and, to keep up the charade, the Heroes did their best to ‘boo’ about it. Kinchloe even made an official protest, Klink simply ‘accepted’ and answered with a loud “Diiiissmiiiissed – everyone!”

“You know that you risk losing the acceptance the men have developed for you,” Hogan said during dinner with sympathy in his eyes.

Klink sighed and shrugged one shoulder. “Ja, I’m aware of it. But it is for a higher purpose, so I can’t sit back and sulk about it. Maybe one day they'll learn why I'm doing all this and forgive me.” He shuddered. “It really is awful outside.”

Because they had been up until very late the last night, both men went to bed early this evening – knowing that they had to be well rested for what would come tomorrow. Klink bid Hogan ‘good-night’ and was about to walk to the guest-room, as the reckless part of the younger man kicked in again.

“Why do you still go to bed over there, only to move to our bed an hour later?” he asked quietly; surprised by his own boldness.

Klink stopped his movements and slowly turned around. The words ‘our bed’ echoed through his mind and soul. He had heard them before – in the early morning after the ambush as they had woken up in the farm house. And, exactly like then, he felt himself flushing now.

“Well… I sleep beside you because of your nightmares… and… And, we’ve still some bed-manners to consider… and…”

“Will,” Hogan interrupted him gently. “There is no need for pretenses.” He saw the Oberst’s eyes widening and for a moment he was utterly tempted to tell him that he knew about the feelings Klink harbored for him. But even a brave, daring man like Robert Edward Hogan had times when courage failed him, and so he shrugged, “You've slept beside me since you saved me from Hochstetter, so why not from the beginning of the night? It must be unpleasant for you to leave bed after it has finally gotten warm and walk through the cool quarters only to come here. And we both know that you're not only doing it for my sake. You feel better, too, so come on.” He limped towards the
bedroom, while he heard his inner voice scolding him, ‘Coward!’

He ignored it, and heard how Klink slowly followed him.

“The ordnance will see that the bed in the guest-room is untouched,” the Kommandant murmured.

“Then throw back the covers and crumple the pillow and the sheets,” Hogan suggested wryly. “Your ordnance will see no difference. And, by the way, for days it’s been Schultz acting as your factotum. You know that he ‘hears and sees nothing’.”

Klink stopped and said softly, “He is my ordnance at the moment to prevent my getting in trouble because of… yours and mine current sleeping arrangements.”

Hogan turned around and looked gently at the older man. So, Schultz knew about his superior’s feeling for him – Robert Hogan. Of course! The colonel had already assumed it days ago, but now he knew for sure. And Schultz didn’t judge Klink, but stood loyal to him. The large Bavarian really was a good soul.

“See, no harm will be done if you skip the charade and sleep in your original bed from the beginning. Schultz wouldn’t give you away. Hell, I remember the first morning after my rescue he came shouting into your quarters and tore you out of bed because Burkhalter was advancing.”

Klink chuckled for a moment. “Yes, good old Schultz was very quick that morning.” He sighed and looked at the two doors. It was more than tempting to waste no time by slipping first into the guest-bed and only later into his own – in his and Hogan’s bed. And as he glanced back at the younger man, any thought of modesty vanished. One look from those chocolate brown eyes combined with the soft half-smirk, and the Oberst melted like butter in the sun.

Hogan stepped into the sleeping chamber and Klink called, “Make your evening-toilette first. I'll strip, get my nightgown and be back in a few.” He went to the guestroom to get the gown and as he stepped into the sleeping-chamber a minute later, he heard Hogan being busy in the bathroom.

At least getting rid of the boots, the uniform jacket and the tie, Klink waited patiently for Hogan to re-appear. As the colonel finally came out of the bathroom with still slow movements and some limping, the Oberst needed all his self-control not to close the distance between him and the younger man and simply take him into his arms. Hogan’s face was still sporting the most different colors, dominated by blue. The bruises on his throat were healing, but nonetheless clear to see. And Klink
simply knew that Robert’s back was still a mess and that his abdomen matched his face, arms and legs. Most of the time bruises that had started healing were uglier than shortly after they were inflicted, and the Kommandant didn’t need to ask if Hogan was still in pain. It was obvious that the American was only better because of some medicine, the distraction of making new plans for missions and his pride.

Hogan caught Klink’s thoughtful gaze that lingered a moment too long on his face and grimaced. “Yeah, I know. My statement five days ago that I’ll be my shining beauty in no time again was a little bit overhasty.”

The German officer chuckled softly; eyes warm and full of sympathy. “It’s the inner beauty that counts – the outer one will come again in time.” He winked at Hogan, who felt, to his horror, heat creeping into his cheeks.

“Flatterer,” he murmured.

“No,” Klink answered while shaking his head. “I’m flattering my superiors to cover my nervousness. To you I speak the plain truth.” He saw how Hogan’s eyes widened, took his nightgown and vanished into the bathroom. “Lay down, Robert, I’ll join you soon.”

The door closed with a soft click. Hogan looked over his shoulder and took a deep breath. That Klink had admitted his nervousness whenever one of the German staff officers was present showed how much the older man trusted him – and it increased the still new private atmosphere that had developed between them. And the compliment ‘Willie’ had just made… Usually Hogan would be amused, but not now. Not when those words came from Wilhelm Klink, who rarely spoke like this about other persons in a private manner – and even more rarely he gave compliments.

And there was further proof of the Oberst’s feelings for him: Klink used the word ‘beauty’ not in an humorous but a serious way. A man could call a female ‘beauty’ even if he wasn’t romantically interested in her, but usually a male never called another man beautiful – except if he harbored amorous emotions for said guy. And, the fact that he indeed felt flattered made Hogan really nervous one more time.

‘Sweet Lord, Robert, get a grip – or you’re going to do something that could put you and him in real danger.’ And, this much was clear, said danger couldn’t only come from the authorities, but also from what had taken roots deep within his heart: The blooming of increasing affection and woken desire.

*** HH ***
Finding rest from the first minute on was something that did both men good. And even if Hogan had some further troublesome dreams – last but not least because of his worry for the upcoming mission – he woke the next morning a little bit refreshed. Klink was already up and getting ready for the morning roll call he did half an hour later.

Then the waiting began – Klink in his office after breakfast, doing his desk-job, the Heroes preparing and Hogan in bed; tensed like an arrow ready to fly.

The Oberst made another demonstration of ‘restoring discipline’ by making another surprise roll call only two hours after the one in the morning; assuming that the expected cargo train wouldn’t arrive in Würzburg this early, and his assumption was right.

It was in the later midday that the telephone finally rang in Klink’s living room. Hogan limped as quickly as possible to it and picked up the call.

“Danzig called. The train left Würzburg five minutes ago, which means that it will pass our little surprise package within the next two hours or so. Newkirk and Carter are ready to leave,” Kinch reported.

“Very good. Call Klink so that he can distract the guards. Inform me when our boys are back,” Hogan said quietly; cursing his inability to accompany his men.

“Aye, Colonel,” Kinch said down in the tunnels, and looked shortly back at Newkirk and Carter, who both wore black SS-uniforms, and had three further black sets of clothes packed for the Underground-members who would pick them up. Like this they wouldn’t raise any suspicion if they had to pass any road blocks. Newkirk wore the uniform of an SS-Major and Carter that of a Leutnant. With such valuable cargo passing through this area, the arrival of SS-members could be expected and was a plain alibi for them being near the railway.

“Good luck, guys,” Kinch said, before he plugged in another connection and cleared his throat.

“Ja, Oberst Klink hier, wer stört?” (Yes, Oberst Klink here, who is disturbing?) the Kommandant’s voice sounded through the receiver.

“The event starts,” Kinch said. “All will end in approx. two hours.”
For a second there was silence, then the Oberst answered, "Tell the two to wait a minute. I’ll talk to the guards." The link went dead and Kinchloe turned around.

“Klink’s going to distract the guards, so go down to the emergency entrance and wait a moment there.”

Newkirk and Carter exchanged a glance. “Now we’ll see if the gov’nor was right about our Saxonian eagle or not,” Peter murmured. “Either we’ll have fulfilled another mission in the evening, or we’ll all be standing up against the next wall.”

For a moment Kinchloe felt some unease, then he sighed. “I bet ten dollars that Klink won’t betray us.”

“I’ll take the bet. Send the money to my sister should I win, will you?” Newkirk asked with black humor, which made the others laugh, but they turned serious soon enough.

“Be careful, mon amis,” LeBeau said, while crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“We will,” Carter nodded eagerly. “We'll go outside, place the bombs in one and in two hours it'll go ‘boom’ – three times.” He grinned. “And then we…”

“Andrew, no long speeches, we’ve to go!” Newkirk reminded him, waved at the others and went down the tunnel; Carter followed him with a cheerily, “Until later!”

A minute later Newkirk carefully pushed the hatch in the tree stub a little bit and peeked through the gap. Even over the distance he could hear Klink’s irritated voice,

“Es ist mir gleich, ob es kalt ist oder nicht. Auch wenn es kalt ist kann der Schal sauber sein! Und was ist mit Ihren Stiefeln, Gefreiter? Was, keine Schuhcreme mehr? Spucke und ein Lappen reichen! Was lernt man heutzutage eigentlich noch in der Grundausbildung? Sauber machen, sonst gibt’s Ärger. Unteroffizier Ladinger, da fehlen zwei Knöpfe! Gehen Sie zur Kleiderkammer und besorgen Sie sich Ersatz!” (“I don’t care if it is cold or not! The scarf could be clean even when it is cold! And what’s up with your boots, Private? What, is there no shoe-polish available? Spit and a rag do the job, too! What do they teach soldiers today in military basic training? Clean up or you face trouble! Corporal Ladinger, there are two buttons missing. Go to the uniform store and get yourself some replacements!”)
Newkirk and Carter exchanged a short glance. Klink was in grousing-top-form, as it seemed. And one glance at the guard tower showed Peter that all Germans were glancing at their superior, who stood there in his typical stance in the middle between the Kommandantur and Barracks 2: A little bit bowed, riding-crop clamped beneath his right arm, left arm on his back. Schultz stood beside him – confused like so often.

“Now!” Newkirk whispered and quickly left the hideout; Carter followed him.

** HH **

In the camp, Klink continued his tirade.

“Ich dulde diese Schlampereien nicht länger! Weder von den Kriegsgefangenen, noch von meinen Männern! Sie haben rund zwei Stunden Zeit Ihre Uniformen in einen präsentablen Zustand zu bringen. Lösen Sie sich gegenseitig mit dem Wacheschieben ab! Beim nächsten Appell will ich nicht nur das die Gefangenen wieder wie Menschen aussehen, sondern dass ein jeder erkennt das Sie, meine Herren, Soldaten des glorreichen Dritten Reichs sind! Weeeeeggetreten!“ (“I am not allowing this sloppiness anymore! Neither from the POWs, nor from my own men! You’ve two hours to make your uniforms presentable again. Replace each other for your sentry duty. At the next roll call all of you will not only be again recognizable as human beings, but everyone will see that you, Gentlemen, are soldiers of the glorious Third Reich. Diiiiisssmiiissed!”)

He turned towards the few POWs who were outside in the yard, “The same for you, Gentlemen! Take care of your uniforms, I'll check them in approx. two hours! Dismissed!” He looked at Schultz. “Spread this order through our men and the barracks,” he said strongly, before he whispered in German, “Sehen Sie nicht zu genau hin in Barracke 2!” (“Don’t look too closely into Barracks 2!”)

Schultz frowned, then he began to comprehend what all this was about and what was really going on. For a moment a smile played around his lips, then he saluted, “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant!”

Klink returned the military greeting before he looked towards the east. He thought he saw a quick movement in the woods, but it vanished so quickly he could have also been mistaken, yet he knew what it was – or, better to say, who. ‘Good luck,’ he thought, before he returned to the Kommandantur; satisfied with the show he had just delivered.

** HH **
Newkirk and Carter had reached the top of the low hill that was beside the camp and vanished between the thick underwood.

“Boy, Klink can really make anybody’s day a hard one,” Andrew chuckled.

Peter’s thoughts differed a lot from Carter’s. “He kept his word,” he whispered. “Either he's really on our side, or he's using this chance to get not just all of us, but members of the local Underground, too.”

Andrew groaned. “Peter, you’re really a worrywart!”

*** HH ***

Time seemed to flow doughy, like puree, and even the seconds ticking by at the Grandfather’s clock seemed to be slower. Hogan had nothing else to do than try to read a book, which he skipped because he couldn’t concentrate, or walk holes into the carpets – at least as long as his legs allowed it. He sat down on the sofa, only to rise a few minutes later and re-start his pacing. With anger he realized how exhausted he finally was and lay down in bed, where he was able to stay for a quarter hour before he rose again.

He had heard Klink’s loud voice through the open window – catching only a few words. And Schultz had later told him about the Oberst’s performance that had distracted the guards and had given another reason for the next roll call. The American was grateful for the Kommandant’s support, and he’d only now recognized that there had been a very tiny part in him that had remained careful concerning Klink. He rebuked himself, but wariness had been drilled into him during his training, and therefore small leftover doubts had obviously remained. And now, after he’d witnessed Klink’s active help during a mission, his conscience was tormenting him because of the silly apprehension he had still sported.

Yet he would only relax again when his men were back healthy and well.

Almost two hours after Kinch’s call the telephone rang again. Hogan was a bundle of nerves by now and he skipped any formalities or politeness as he answered the phone. “Yes?”

“They’re back. Everything is okay. The babies will cry in seventeen minutes,” Kinchloe reported – and a groan of pure relief escaped the colonel.
“You’re the best, guys,” he murmured. “Thanks, Kinch. Give Peter and Andrew my most sincere gratitude. We’ll speak later – when everything is over.” He hung up and for a moment covered his face with both hands; asking himself a second later why he had been that unsettled. His men were professionals; they had mastered hundreds of missions before, partly even without him. Okay, he was the man behind all schemes, but there wouldn’t have been any activities without his friends. Hell, on some occasions one or two of them had even been caught, but fortunately never identified – or those Gestapo-agents, who had recognized that they were POWs, were now ‘guests’ in London or had been compromised and were living their lives in prisons. Yet there was always some risk remaining, and with him out of commission for now, he’d had no chance to aid them if something went wrong.

Thank the Lord everything seemed to be fine.

Ten minutes later Hogan heard Schultz’ strong voice shouting, “Alles raus! Raus!” (“Everyone out! Out!”).

Four minutes later all POWs were lined up in the compound and the same went for almost all guards, and then Klink made his inspection.

And Hogan stood beside the open window, wrapped in the comforter and listening carefully in case some sign from the explosion was maybe audible.

** HH **

“Repoooooort!” Klink shouted, while halting in front of the prisoners, who were shooting dark glares at him and were grumbling more than usual. Inwardly the German officer asked forgiveness for shoeing them all out into the icy wind that had begun blowing around midday from the east and was about to bloom into a full storm soon.

“All prisoners are present, Herr Kommandant,” Schultz said. “And, I have to add, they didn’t waste any time coming out of the barracks, and their uniforms are perfect. Well, as perfect as they can be, given the fact that many of the men have already been here for three or four years.”

“I’m not complaining about weathered appearance or wrinkles. I know that the clothes can’t be perfect anymore after all this time, but they can at least be clean and without open seams.” He began his inspection with the POWs, starting with the men of Barracks 2, like so often. To his relief, he instantly saw Newkirk and Carter and gave them one firm glance, before he nodded, “Clean and
proper, well done!"

The two men didn’t react, but they understood the Oberst’s words for what they were: A short acknowledgement of their return in time. Then Klink observed the others before he finally stopped in front of Kinchloe. “Your men are presentable, Sergeant, and…”

From afar, something like the rumble of thunder, that seemed to go on for a lot of seconds, was heard, before its echoes started fading away. “That sounds like an oncoming blizzard,” Klink said with his normal tone, gave Kinchloe another short glance and turned towards the POWs of Barracks 3. “I think we should hurry up, Gentlemen. No-one wants to be caught in a winter thunderstorm. Schuuuultz, inspect our men and give me your report afterwards. There is no need to force the men to endure this awful weather longer than necessary.”

Kinchloe hid a smile, while beside him Newkirk and Carter exchanged a glance. Mission accomplished!

Ten minutes later the Heroes returned to their barracks; shivering due to the icy wind but happy.

“I’ll go downstairs and wait for Danzig’s call,” Kinch said and knocked against the hidden mechanism that opened the entrance to the tunnels. He looked back one time. “And Peter? I will profitably invest the ten dollars you lost.”

Newkirk rolled his eyes, but he grinned. “I hope so.” He took a deep breath. “And to say the truth: It’s the first time I’m very happy to lose a bet.”

*** HH ***

Half an hour later it became clear: The timing had been perfect. There wasn’t much left from the wagons and their cargo, only the coal car and the loco were still intact. And, what was even more important, the railway was destroyed on a length of a few hundred meters, because as the bombs detonated the speed and the weight of the wagons had catapulted them forwards where they had crashed down on the rails and the close-by road – building several heaps along the way. Given the hard winter, and the deep-frozen and therefore stone-hard ground, there was no chance to rebuild the railway or to repair the road in the near future.

And that meant that the next cargo of wings for the ME-262 would have to make a long detour, or would have to be transported on trucks. Danzig promised to find out which solution the Nazis would
chose and inform Hogan afterwards. Maybe this would be something for the Allies’ air forces.

Kinch, Newkirk and Carter visited Hogan via the tunnel system; using the hidden entrance beneath the furnace in Klink’s living room. Olsen would be watching the compound and would alert LeBeau in the radio room if the Oberst left his office. Okay, Klink had proven that he was indeed on their side, yet Hogan didn’t want to give away the secret entrance to the Kommandant’s own quarters, yet. The colonel knew that Klink wouldn’t be too delighted about it and he wanted to make him privy to this detail in private during some calm minutes.

‘Calm’ was certainly the wrong word to use for what happened almost two hours after the successful end of ‘Mission Wings’.

_Fräulein_ Hilda knocked at Klink’s office door and opened it. “Herr Kommandant, I have General Burkhalter on the line for you. And he seems to be very… worked up,” she said quietly.

Klink had a certain assumption concerning his superior’s call and mood, yet the only thing he replied was, “Burkhalter is always worked up, that’s nothing new. Put him through, please. And then you can finish for today. Go home. The wind is becoming nastier and I don’t want you to get caught in it.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you, Herr Oberst, and a nice evening to you.”

“Thanks, my dear, the same to you.”

He waited until his secretary had closed the door and the phone rang. Lifting the receiver he put on his typical happy smile and said with excitement in his voice, “Ah, my dear General Burkhalter. How nice to hear from you again. I hope everything is the best in Berl…”

“Klink, shut up!” Burkhalter snarled through the line.

“I’m shutting up,” the colonel sighed. _Fräulein_ Hilda’s description had been an understatement. The general wasn’t just in a bad mood, he was comparable to a bottle full of TNT.

“Tell me that Colonel Hogan is still in no shape to go anywhere!” It was a demand, but also had an almost pleading undertone.
Klink smirked inwardly. So, the mission had been a full success – in every meaning. “Hogan?” he asked, pretending to be clueless. “You’re calling because of my senior POW? That’s nice of you to show so much concern. He…”

“Klink, simply tell me if Hogan is able to walk at all, or not!” The typical inpatient tone was back in Burkhalter’s voice.

“This midday he needed almost three minutes to reach the restroom, as I observed during my lunch. So, yes, he can walk – but more like Huckleberry Finn than…”

“So, he is still unable to move properly at all. Just like I said. And his men? Are they all present?”

“What?” The Oberst infused his tone with the appropriate irritation now. “Of course they are here! If I may kindly remind you that there has never been a successful escape from my camp and…”

“Klink, your no-escape-rate is the only thing that spares you and me the group of a hundred SS-men tearing your camp apart.” He took a deep, noisy breath. “I’m sitting here in my office together with Reichsführer Himmler, Reichsmarschall Goering and four further generals. And, above all, the Führer himself is honoring me with his current presence here. And do you know why every single one of them is in furious shock?”

“I have no clue,” the Kommandant lied through his teeth; impressed that one detonation initiated a powwow of the highest ranking Reichs-members, including the ‘tiny private with the moustache’. Yet the mere thought that Hitler himself was sitting in front of Burkhalter, at the other end of the line, woke nausea in him – out of fear but also out of loathing. He had faced the man in the early spring last year as he visited Stalag 13, and Klink had been really relieved as the short-tempered, moody Führer had left only a few minutes later. He couldn’t have known that the whole event had been a fake made-up by Hogan and his men. For him, Hitler had really been in the camp, and the mere thought that the man’s attention was driven to Stalag 13 – to Hogan – in a bad way sent chills down his back.

“Because an important railway very near your camp was blown up this afternoon”. Burkhalter explained. “And not only this, but also a special cargo-train that was transporting four hundred new produced wings for the ME-262. Can you imagine what this means?” The general sounded more than stressed.

“That the serial-production will start without wings?” Klink knew that this reply was silly at best,
but, after all, Burkhalter was used to getting idiotic answers from him.

“*That the whole serial-production will start later and with a lot of delay concerning its quantity. This can be crucial for the whole war!*” Burkhalter shouted – and Klink put some distance between the receiver and his ear; making a face.

“Yes, I understand this – and it’s absolutely horrible. But what does this have to do with your questions about Hogan’s health? You know that the terrible shape he was in after Hochstetter…”

“*Major Hochstetter has been questioned two days ago by some high ranking Gestapo officers concerning his deeds, like I already told you, and Reichsmarschall Himmler got the record of it. You are aware that Hochstetter accuses your senior POW officer of being an active spy – better to say that he is the infamous Papa Bear who operates mainly in North-Bavaria, but also in the Reichs-countries around. And the major gave some very interesting investigative details he gained over the last two years, which woke some suspicions not only in Herr Himmler, but also in the other gentlemen. The assault of today bears Papa Bear’s stamp. Therefore my telephone call to you and my question again: Colonel Hogan is in no condition to do anything at the moment!*”

“Yes, I could make an oath on the bible on it, Herr General,” Klink said, firmly and truthfully. “Colonel Hogan is barely capable of taking a few steps to the bathroom, and his arms are only a little bit usable because of stretched muscles and sinews. Furthermore, he is weakened because of a bronchitis he caught in the cellars of the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg, and because of the blood-loss due to the many injuries inflicted on him. Dr. Birkhorn, the chief surgeon of Hammelburg’s hospital, examined him and told me about these results.”

“And Hogan’s men are all present!?”

“Yes, according to the last roll call approx. two hours ago, Herr General,” the Oberst replied; grateful for the foresight to make a watertight alibi.

“A roll call in the middle of the afternoon?” There was something close to hope in Burkhalter’s voice.

“I made some surprise roll calls within the last days because of the laziness the POWs began to display with Hogan out of command.”

“An excellent idea, Klink. I shall advise the other camp-Kommandanten to do the same with their
prisoners,” Burkhalter answered, and it wasn’t clear if he was serious or was simply mocking his inferior.

A voice with a well-known hard dialect that rolled the ‘r’ a lot asked something in the background, and Klink felt his stomach drop. He knew who was speaking there. He had heard that voice in dozens of radio-broadcasts and one time live during the Olympic Games before the war started. He had also heard it during a personal introduction because he, Klink, had been a test-pilot of the new HE-111 six years ago, and he had heard it two times within the last year – over the phone and during the ‘visit’. And even if he hadn’t had recognized the voice, the general’s next words laid any doubts to rest.

“Yes, mein Führer, I thought about this detail, too. I will ask him,” Burkhalter answered, before he spoke into the receiver, “Klink, when did the last surprise roll call take place?”

Klink gulped as he realized that he had to answer to Germany’s first man through Burkhalter. ‘Stay calm, Wilhelm! They can’t see you, only hear you. Even Hitler can’t look through a line over hundreds of kilometers, so go on with the show!’ he encouraged himself. With a surprisingly firm voice given the situation, he replied, “The last one was… One moment, I made a record about it.” He shifted some papers around to pretend that he was searching; in truth he knew the exact point of time very well. “Ah, here it is. The roll call was between 15:05 and 15:25 and was done by Sergeant Schultz and me. All prisoners were present and also all my men, who were ordered to pass muster for an inspection of their uniforms. Everything was to my satisfaction.”

Another voice spoke in the background and Klink acknowledged Himmler. He waited, with his heart beating wildly and his forehead drenched in cold sweat – something he only became aware of as one drop rolled down his temple. The hand, with which he wiped it away, trembled slightly. ‘Stay calm! Stay calm! Don’t lose your nerve now!’ his mind echoed deep inside him.

“Yes, I know that the explosion was around 15:10,” Burkhalter’s voice replied something, obviously to his ‘dear friend’. Then the general turned his attention back to the telephone, “Thank you for the information, Klink. It is like I have already said: Colonel Hogan may be a witty man, but he isn’t Papa Bear. The Gestapo will investigate the whole incident within the area around Hammelburg and I expect your full support if it is needed.”

“Of course, Herr General. Everything they need.”

Again the well-known voice with the rolling ‘r’ was audible in the background, before Burkhalter said, “Of course, mein Führer. Klink? The Führer expects that you, as a high-ranking officer in the area concerned, will help to find the assassins responsible and that you support the Gestapo in every way possible!”
Klink felt really sick by now after receiving a direct order from the person with the highest position within Germany’s current regime. Cold sweat ran down his spine and his mouth was dry, yet he was able to formulate full sentences – and a lot of them. “It’s my pleasure to lend the gentlemen a hand. You know that I am always happy to help the loyal fighters of the Third Reich. It is and will be my holy duty to support my country,” Klink answered in one rush; knowing that he was babbling again, but his nerves lay blank by now.

“That would be all, Klink.”

“Thank you, Herr General. My best regards to you and the gentlemen in your office – and of course my obedient greetings to the Führer. If…” He stopped himself as he heard Burkhalter’s formal Nazi-greeting, returned it and hung up as soon as he heard a click in the line.

For a moment he simply sat there – trembling hand still on the receiver, sweat pearling on his forehead, face pale like a tablecloth. Then he took a very deep breath, rose and stepped to the little dresser where the tray with a bottle of Schnaps stood. He didn’t even waste time filling a glass, but simply put the bottle’s mouth at his lips and took three large gulps; feeling how his stomach calmed down as the warmth spread through it.

Deciding that he was definitely done for today, he put on his coat, switched off the light and a few moments later stepped onto the compound; cursing as he realized that the wind had indeed turned into a full storm.

Langenscheidt strolled towards him; blinking because of the snow that was blowing down on everything. “Herr Kommandant, I am reporting that Corporal Leitner left the camp to take Fräulein Hilda home by using our truck.”

Klink nodded. “Well done. I should have given the order myself, but I was distracted by a call from Berlin. Tell him that I’m pleased with his sense of responsibility.”

“Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” Langenscheidt replied; smiling inwardly. The guards could grouse about Klink all they wanted, but deep inside the man was soft like velvet.

Klink continued on his way hastily, and this not only because of the awful weather. He needed some privacy just right now – a place where he could calm down and regain some composure. He needed some good cognac and an ear that would listen. He needed someone who understood the fears he just had been through, and he needed someone who would offer some solace and peace.
He needed Robert Hogan!

TBC…

Yes, the whole mission HAD to wake up ‘Berlin’. And, believe me, it will stir up a lot of chaos. But, at least, our Heroes have begun to understand that their superior hasn’t turned nuts and that Klink is on their side.

In the next chapter, Stalag 13 will be the target of a big examination. And it will be a hard one – something that drives our ‘boys’ to a certain kind of limit.

I hope, you liked the new update, and – like always – I’m eager to receive reviews.

Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Preparations

Hi, my dear readers,

This is finally the edited version of chapter 30 (thank you for your patience).

Our two colonels make some more ‘tiny steps’ towards each other – especially Hogan shows some more trust in his German counterpart by revealing more secrets to him.

And then the Heroes and the two colonels have to make a lot of preparations, because the Gestapo investigates the last deed of ‘Papa Bear’ – and the guys in the long leather cloaks are not alone.

So, have fun,

Thank you so much for the feedback for the last chapter; you’re all the best,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 30 – Preparations

As Klink reached his quarters, he didn’t see the last movements of the furnace in his living room, while it was being shoved to its original spot from below, or the dirt near the stove. All he recognized was the warmth of the rooms, the golden light that fell through the open door to his sleeping room and the table, already set up for dinner. Yet, just right now he was anything but hungry.

“Hogan?” he called while he was opening his coat and storming through the living room.

“Here,” came the reply.

Klink stepped into his sleeping chamber – still deathly pale, shivering and with his stomach churning.
His gaze found the younger man sitting between the cushions and beneath the comforter – a book in his lap, a soft smile around his lips, brown eyes warm but also curious. And all of a sudden Klink could breathe again, the coldness in his bones beginning to melt. He felt homely and safe – and this was owed to the other man’s presence.

Hogan cocked his head, observing the Oberst, who seemed to be deeply shaken. “Has something happened?” he asked and realized with rising concern that the older man didn’t react, but simply stood there, trembling. Pulling away the blankets, Hogan carefully swung his legs over the bed’s edge; ready to rise. “Are you all right, Will?”

The Kommandant seemed to falter into himself for a moment, before he sighed heavily, closed the distance to the bed with uneasy movements and sat down beside Hogan. Now indeed worried, the colonel laid a hand on the other officer’s underarm. “Will, what is it?” he asked quietly. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Regrettably he isn’t a ghost, but still very, very much alive,” came the soft reply. Klink gulped, took another deep breath and looked at Hogan. “I just received a call from Berlin – from Burkhalter. The result of your mission reached Berlin shortly after the explosion, and it has elicited a large outcry.”

Hogan smirked. “Well, that was the whole reason, wasn’t it? A greeting from Papa Bear but with…”

“Robert, Burkhalter wasn’t alone. Goering and Himmler were with him – but, above all, I had to answer a few of Hitler’s questions, who was there as well. He was there, just in front of Burkhalter while I was talking with the fat Sacher-cake.” He shuddered and lowered his gaze.

The colonel’s eyes widened. “The ‘Moustache’ asked you questions in person?” He whistled. “This I’m calling…”

“You misunderstand. I only talked to Burkhalter, but hearing his voice in the background, asking questions I had to answer through Burkhalter, was… terrifying.” He swallowed. “I know, it sounds silly, but… But to know that a furious Führer in person demands answers from you, even over a line, scares the hell out of you. Himmler also asked questions.” He lifted his cap and held it tightly in both trembling hands. “Himmler got the records from Hochstetter’s questioning, and he, Goering and the Führer thought that the poison-gnome has some points when he suspects you of being Papa Bear – especially after today’s assault that, once again, took place near my camp. Burkhalter wanted to know about your current condition, and only after I swore to him that you’re still barely able to walk, and that all your men were here during a roll-call that took place during the sabotage, he stated that you cannot be Papa Bear.”
Hogan shortly pursed his lips, before he grinned, “So, the little private knows my name now. Well, serves him right. I really hope he learns some day before his demise that said POW had thrown so many stones in his way that his ‘glorious war’ went down the hill.”

Klink groaned, “Hoooogan, this is not funny! By the way, he already knew your name – after all, he met you almost a year ago, if you could kindly recall. I introduced you to him. Hell, you two even talked for two or three minutes or so, and afterwards he was in such a foul mood that even Burkhalter didn’t dare come near him and rather drove away.” He snorted. “At least he liked the camp, yet I’m absolutely certain that he doesn’t remember me. And this after I was personally introduced to him six years ago and we met again last year, so you really could assume… Hogan?” Klink interrupted his tirade as he became aware of Hogan’s contrite expression.

The colonel cleared his throat, bit his lips, carefully rubbed his still sore neck and took a deep breath. “Ung, Will, I don’t know how to say this, but…” He looked at the older man. “Hitler has never been here.”

Klink’s eyes widened enough to let his monocle slip, which he caught with the grace of practice without even looking. “What?”

Hogan shortly chuckled, before he sent his German counterpart an apologetic glance. “Hitler was never in Stalag 13. This guy was… an imitation.”

Silence.

Utterly stunned silence.

Klink gaped at him with disbelief. “He… he was shorter than I remembered him, and today he has gained some weight, but… Hogan, it was him! It was his voice, his rrrrolling dialect, his clipped movements. Who else could it have been?”

For once Hogan showed some guilt, because he knew how much ‘Hitler’s’ visit had stirred up the Kommandant. “It was Carter,” he admitted.

Klink’s jaw almost hit the floor, before he more or less squeaked, “WHAT?”

Shrugging one shoulder, Hogan grinned, “We needed to smuggle a film out of the camp and
arranged for ‘Hitler’ to come and drive away with it.” He turned serious again. “Carter had watched some broadcasts of the ‘Wochenshow’ (German news-show) and was entertaining us, parading as Hitler. That gave me the idea to use his talent. Yet he overdid it a little bit. He was carried away in his role, otherwise he would have already left the camp before Burkhalter arrived. Thank the Lord, Andrew can be a quick thinker sometimes, and began his grousing about ‘fat generals’ – the reason why Burkhalter sought refuge in flight.”

Klink blinked at him like an owl, before he let his chin touch his sternum. “Oh. My. God!” he gasped; aghast. He placed his monocle back in front of his left eye, rose, walked two steps to the door, turned around, walked to the dresser, threw his cap on it, paced again and finally leant against the wardrobe. “D-d-d-do you realize what could happen if Burkhalter ever mentions this event to Hitler? He’ll learn that…”

“Burkhalter would be stupid to speak about it – and he is anything but. He would have to admit that, firstly, he took flight rather than give the proper greeting to his beloved leader, and secondly, afterwards, if he learns that Hitler wasn't here for real, he would have to admit that he didn’t even recognize that it was an imposter, which would be a big offense against the ‘Moustache’. After all, both men have been working with each other for years now, and then Burkhalter couldn’t detect that the visitor was smaller than his boss?”

“But Burkhalter doesn’t even know that it was an imposter – that the whole thing was a fake. So he could mention it and…”

“And admit that he was too afraid to give the tiny private the proper greeting?” Hogan shook his head. “Don’t fret, Will, if Burkhalter hasn’t mentioned the whole thing until now, he won’t do it in the future. The war is about to be lost and I think I know how your Führer ticks. He will absolve himself of all responsibility by shifting the whole fault to his generals. It would be suicidal if Burkhalter drew too much attention to his person, and, above all, indicating to the testy Austrian that one of his generals didn’t even recognize an imposter would certainly irritate him.”

Klink returned to the bed and all but fell on its edge. Bowing his head, he cradled it in his hands while he looked unhappily into nothing. “The guards saw him, Schultz saw him, those guys who accompanied him saw him and…” He hesitated and sat up straight again. “And who were those three ‘officers’?” he demanded.

“Why, other POWs of course,” Hogan smirked.

Throwing both hands up, the Kommandant let off a stream of curses, before he glared at the younger man; pointing an accusing finger at him. “You… you… You! You don’t shy away from anything, do you? This particular play with fire could have turned into an inferno,” he snapped.
“But everything went well,” Hogan smiled. “So calm down. Hitler was never here and therefore he can’t remember you.”

“I had a phone conversation with him in the hours before D-Day happened and…” Klink stopped himself as he saw the sheepish smile the colonel flashed him. “Don’t tell me that this was Carter, too!”

“No, it was Kinchloe. He’s our best voice-imitator, you know,” Hogan admitted.

“You… you are able to piggyback into my line, aren’t you? How many times did I think I was talking with some members of the brass in Berlin, but it was, in truth, your men?”

The American chuckled with a hue of shame on his face. “I haven’t counted,” he answered with a hint of rue in his voice.

Klink silently glared at him, and Hogan sighed, “Wilhelm, neither my men nor I had the tiniest idea that you’ve been on our side almost the whole time. Like I said: Yes, I knew that you are no Nazi, but you were an enemy officer for us – and my mission is to weaken the German war machinery. For this I had to come up with a lot of schemes, to help the Underground and smuggle people and information to London. You can’t do this by playing by the rules or sitting back and waiting for a good opportunity. Yes, sometimes chances are given, but most of the time you have to create those chances – means, you have to create the reality you need. Believe me, you weren’t the only one we tricked with faked telephone calls. Burkhalter and even Hochstetter were more than often the ‘victims’.”

For a very long moment the older man simply looked at him, then he groaned, braced one elbow on his thigh and laid his jaw on his hand; giving the impression of a frustrated bundle of nerves.

“And there I thought that I had been, for once, acknowledged by the brass in Berlin.”

“Well, given the whole situation concerning the war and the upcoming investigation, it may be a good thing that you haven’t been acknowledged by the ‘Moustache’, don’t you agree?”

Scowling, Klink snorted. “I was introduced to him in 1939. I was one of the test-pilots of the brand-new Heinkel HE-111 E, like I already told you, and he shook everyone’s hand, wishing us luck and success.” He took a deep breath. “At that time I was proud of it.”
Hogan nodded slowly. “Yes, I do understand that you were proud to meet the first man of Germany in person. Hell, I don’t think there is one of our boys out at sea, on land or in the air who doesn’t want to shake President Roosevelt’s hand. It’s normal to feel honored if the highest man of a country stands in front of you and greets you in person.”

“Ja,” Klink admitted. “But today I see it in a completely different light.”

“Of course you do,” Hogan smiled; placing one hand on the Oberst’s shoulder. “By now you are aware of Hitler’s insanity – and of where his madness has led the entirety of Europe and a large further part of the world. No-one could have known about all this in the beginning. And luckily, there are enough people left who don’t close their eyes and are trying to stop him. They are the hope for a better future.” He cocked his head and gently changed the topic. “So, you flew one of the very first HE-111 E? My compliments.”

Klink chuckled shortly. “Yes, it was exciting – despite the fact that it was poorly armed for defense. Hitler never places any importance on his own men’s safety. He always prefers attack, not defense – like it is clear to see now, because using the new Messerschmidt as a bomber is nuts.”

“I agree – with all points. A leader who doesn’t care for his people's welfare is a bad leader. I know that being a soldier is dangerous business, especially during times of war, yet none of our generals would turn a blind eye on additional danger for the ‘boys’ if it could be prevented.” He sighed. “At least our little stunt with the railway delays the serial production of the ME-262. It saves a lot of lives.”

The Oberst nodded slowly and grinned for a moment. “Ja, this is a good outcome. And the second good thing is that the brass in Berlin is convinced Papa Bear was behind the attack, but also think that it can’t be you because of your lack of health.”

“So, the mission was a full success,” Hogan smirked.

Klink sighed again. “Yes and no. Burkhalter already told me that the Gestapo will start a big investigation within this area and I’m ordered to support them. Hitler himself gave me that order.” He pinched his nose. “What shall I do now? Of course no-one will learn the truth from me, but when those black-clad or leather-clad guys show up, what shall I do?”

Hogan watched him closely; saw how those long elegant fingers shivered anew and heard the quickening breathing that revealed how much Klink was troubled. It was almost sad that the political
leader of a country and his executives elicited such fear in his people.

Without hesitating a moment, Robert carefully wrapped his arm around the other man’s shoulders. “We’ll get through it, Will. Just support them like you’re ordered, let them stroll through the camp and check everything. Give them the guards they want to have. Do everything to convince not only Burkhalter but also the brass in Berlin that you’re supporting them with all you have. I’ll tell my men to seal the entrances to the tunnels and there will be absolute radio silence within the next days. And I’ll play the role of the lame duck to appear even more incapacitated than I really am. You’ll see, we’ll make it – just like we did many times before.”

Hogan’s confidence calmed Klink at least a little bit, yet he was still nervous, like rarely before. “Hitler expects me to solve the riddle together with the Gestapo – because I’m one of his ‘high ranking officers within the area concerned’. I bet the bastard doesn’t even know that Kommandanten of POW-camps have more or less tied hands.” He shook his head. “I fought for my land during the first war with everything I had, while this guy ran errands, stayed away from the real front for most of the time, got the nickname ‘White Raven’ because he always considered himself better than his comrades and still dreamed of studying painting. And now he orders me to do a job he has built a whole unit for – an unit that has been terrorizing our country for years.”

Hogan frowned. “Hitler… wanted to study painting?”

“Yeah. They didn’t accept him at the Academy of Art in Vienna because of his lack of talent.” He snorted. “I really wish they would have taken him in. What harm would have been done? The world would have had an untalented painter more, but how much suffering and pain we would have all been spared!” He grimaced and looked down on the cap in his hands. “And until now he denies it and excuses this failure with his ‘true’ intention of becoming a great architect, for which he wanted to ‘intensify’ his painting-talents, like I learned from an Austrian comrade who lived in the same house that Hitler did in Vienna. The result? Slave-workers are still getting bleeding fingers and die by the hundreds for his insane wishes.”

“One little ‘no’ or ‘yes’ had such an impact on the whole world,” Hogan sighed. “There is the proof again: The devil is in the details.” He rose carefully.

“Where are you going?” Klink asked.

“I’ll call my men and give them orders to prepare everything for the Gestapo. We’ve no clue when those guys will show up, and I want to have everything ready by then.” He walked with slow steps into the living-room and the Oberst followed him. Lifting the receiver, Hogan pressed a small button on the back of the phone and waited.
He had to wait almost a minute, until finally the well-known voice of Newkirk sounded,

“*Butchery Striegelmeier, good evening, how can I be at your service?*”

Hogan recognized the secret code instantly, but there was no need to return it. Newkirk would know it was him immediately. “I would like a few steaks, some tartar and sausages, please.”

For a second nothing was audible, then a small laugh was heard, “*Don’t we all want to have something like this?*” Then he turned serious. “*What’s up, Colonel?*”

Hogan sighed. “Please tell Kinch to come to Klink’s quarters – oh, and he shall use the invisible way.”

“*Ol’ Klink finally learned that his quarters are part of the tunnel-net?*”

“Not yet, but I'll prepare him for it while you get Kinch. Oh, and please don’t make yourself too comfortable. You and the others will have a lot to do until tomorrow morning.”

“*Something wrong, sir?*” Newkirk asked; obviously tensing up and becoming serious.

“The little stunt with the railway called the highest ranking persons of Germany on the scene – including Hitler. There will be an investigation and we’ve to be prepared for it. Send over Kinch and then tell the others to get ready to make everything invisible.”

“*Blimey,*” the Englishman murmured. “*I’m hurrying, Gov’nor. Until later!*”

Hogan only nodded, even if Peter couldn’t see him, hung up the phone and met Klink’s perplexed gaze.

“Invisible way?” the *Kommandant* asked; confused.

The American sighed before he slowly answered, “Will, I know you've had a hard day – and that's because of us. And I’m more than grateful for all you went through. I don’t want to burden you with
more, but in this case we’ve to be prepared for everything.” He took a deep breath. “I already told you that we’ve a few tunnels beneath the camp.”

“From what I get, there are a lot of tunnels,” Klink grumbled.

“Yeah, and one of them ends here,” Hogan let the cat out of the bag.

“It ends…” The Oberst was unable to finish his sentence, but gaped with large eyes at the younger man – almost losing his monocle again in the process. “You… you dug a tunnel to my quarters?” he finally gasped. As the colonel only nodded, Klink’s eyes became small. “Why!?” he all but demanded.

“We’ve only used it a few times, but we wanted to be able to reach you without being spied by the guards in case something bad happened. I’d had a few close-calls whenever I had to reach your quarters unofficially, so I decided to lower the risk by having a tunnel that ends here. By the way, like this we could also contact several visitors who weren’t the persons they declared to be.”

“Underground agents were my visitors?” The Kommandant snorted and crossed his arms in front of his chest; his anxiety because of the upcoming investigation forgotten for the moment. “I’m not certain I want details. But I really want to know one thing: How often have you been here while I lay in my bed, deeply asleep?”

“A few times – mostly to make certain that you’re warned in time when trouble was about to come up, or when I wanted to make sure you’re safe.” Hogan closed the short distance to the older man. “Will, like I told you during our big talk a few days ago, I never would have allowed any harm to befall you – even when I didn’t know about you being on our side.” He placed a hand on Klink’s shoulder. “I began to respect you as a honorable officer and a good man shortly after my arrival, and since then I always made certain that nothing bad would happen to you. And we certainly wouldn’t have used the tunnel to endanger or threaten you. Never.”

The Oberst sighed. “I know. We both have hearts too soft for this damn job, yet it retained our humanity.” He grimaced before he snorted, “To think that you obviously dug a lot of tunnels, without me realizing it, is… unbelievable. It must have cost you not only a lot of effort but also time.”

“Well, if we’ve one thing here, then it’s time,” the colonel shrugged; waving both hands in a very innocent gesture.
“And you couldn’t think of a better way to use it than hollowing out my camp?” Klink asked wryly.

For a second the well-known boyish grin tugged at Hogan’s mouth. “Nope,” he said casually.

The same moment a scratching noise was heard and, to Klink’s bafflement, the furnace began to move. “What the hell…” the Oberst whispered; shocked again. The furnace made room for a hole in the ground. In the light of the lamps the Kommandant could see the end of a ladder, from where a smiling Sergeant James Kinchloe climbed up until half of him peeked out of the tunnel entrance. “Good evening, Colonels,” he greeted; trying to hide his amusement as he saw Klink’s perplexed face.

“Thanks for coming so quickly, Kinch,” Hogan replied and watched his closest friend climbing out of the hole, before the sergeant closed the entrance by moving the furnace back over it; hissing as he almost burnt his fingers. “Damn, this thing is hot.” Then he saluted formally, before he couldn’t help himself anymore and chuckled, “Kommandant, are you all right?”

Klink came out of his astonishment. “Of course I’m all right,” he said sarcastically. “The Gestapo will search my camp and I have to lend them a helping hand in finding the saboteurs. I had to answer to Burkhalter, Himmler and Hitler and convince them that our Troublemaker here is still too ill to move one foot so he couldn’t be Papa Bear. And now one of my POWs has crawled out of a tunnel that ends beneath my quarters. So, of course, everything is perfectly fine.” He threw both his hands up.

Kinchloe laughed quietly, before he glanced at Hogan. “What’s up, Colonel? Newkirk said something about the Gestapo – and Colonel Klink even mentioned Hitler?”

The two colonels sighed and Hogan began to explain the new situation to Kinch, ending with the order, “Seal all tunnel entrances, cut all links to the bugs and remove them. Give London a message that we’ve to keep radio-silence for a few days, and warn our contacts in Hammelburg. They shall hold the ball as low as possible.”

“It costed us four days to put all installments back to work last time we had to remove them,” James threw in for consideration. “And to seal all tunnels…”

“Kinch, I know it’s a lot of work and making everything functional once again later is even more effort, but we cannot risk anything now,” Hogan interrupted him softly. “Remove all bugs and wires to them. Also seal all entrances to the tunnels. If they examine the whole area, I don’t want to take any risks.”
Kinchloe grimaced. “Aye, sir!” He glanced at Klink. “It would be a big advantage if you could skip roll call this evening.”

“We’ve had three today, I think that’s enough,” the Oberst murmured; sounding almost frustrated.

“Thanks,” Kinchloe smiled, before he looked back at his superior and friend. “Do you want us to call you when we’re done?”

Hogan shook his head. “No, thank you. I know that I can bank on you.”

The sergeant nodded; pleased with the colonel’s trust in him and the others. “Then: Good night, sirs!” he said, moved the furnace aside and climbed down the ladder. “Oh, Colonel Klink, when you hear some noises from here, don’t worry. It’s only us sealing the entrance.” He grinned at the indignant German officer and vanished almost completely, before he pulled the furnace back over the hole; cursing as he burnt his hands again.

Klink made a face and glared at Hogan. “‘Remove all bugs and the wires to them’? How many bugs are within my camp?”

“Uh,” Hogan smiled sheepishly at him. “Let me count: Two in your office, two in…”

Klink lifted both hands. “That’s already enough.” He grimaced. “Do I really want to know how many more little surprises are hidden in Stalag 13?”

“No, I think not,” Hogan smirked. “Sometimes even we have problems to remember all of them.”

Klink shook his head; grumbling to himself while he stepped to the telephone. Lifting the receiver he waited a moment while the call divert he made from his office to Schultz’s quarters connected. “Sergeant Schultz? It’s me. Skip evening roll call. Three gatherings are more than enough for one day. And order the guards at the main entrance to call me instantly when the Gestapo guys and/or the SS appear. I expect them tomorrow in the morning at the latest.” He listened a moment, before he replied, “There was an assault on one of the railways this afternoon – obviously these booms I took for thunder during the last roll call. Berlin wants to investigate the case, that’s all.” He listened again, rolled his eyes and grumbled, “I know, I know, the Gestapo means trouble. But there is absolutely nothing they could find to connect with our camp. Oh, by the way, if you hear some odd noises from below or think you see movement in the yard, just do as always and see and hear ‘nothing’, okay?”
He frowned. “What? Ah yes, good night!” He hung up and turned around. “Satisfied?”

Hogan smiled at him – a true, real smile. “Yes, thank you, Will.”

The Oberst only nodded, finally shrugged out of his coat and threw it over the backrest of an armchair. It told the colonel a lot. “You’re done with work for today?”

“I think this day was turbulent enough – and I really have no spare nerves to fight with the damn paper-work.” He sighed and looked hopefully at Hogan. “Chess?”

The younger man took the suggestion for what it was: A distraction and a chance to let out some tension. “With pleasure,” he replied.

Klink smiled for once, before he scowled, “And during our play you can tell me how it came Carter is such a good imitator of the Führer, and how you were able to perform the whole event!”

*** HH ***

The night wasn’t a restful one – neither for Klink, nor for Hogan. And certainly not for the Unsung Heroes and many other helping hands. One time in the night Klink woke up because of odd noises which seemed to come from below, but as he wanted to rise, a warm hand stopped him.

“Stay put, it’s only my men doing their work,” Hogan murmured; half asleep.

In the semi-darkness Klink glanced beside him at the younger man. “You Americans really have nerves of steel, don’t you?”

“Someone must have them,” Hogan answered and yawned, before he snuggled deeper into the blankets. “Just sleep, Will.”

Klink snorted and closed his eyes again; trying to ignore the scratching and scraping from below. Then, a few minutes later, Hogan rolled closer to him and wrapped one arm around him; using him as a personal pillow again. And it made the Kommandant relax, even against his will. Snaking his free arm around the younger man, he relished in the comfortable proximity – and it didn’t take long
until he, too, fell asleep.

The morning came too early, like so often. Klink untangled himself from a still deeply asleep Hogan and rose. In the dim light, he looked down at the slumbering American and smiled despite the tension that already held him in an iron grip. He didn’t know when exactly their sleeping-arrangement had turned into nightly snuggling – even if it was unaware from Hogan’s side – but Klink relished in it. Feeling the one he loved pressed against him and being able to hold him in his arms was the best thing that had ever happened to him.

His glance wandered over Robert. The hair that peeked out from the bandage was tousled, his still bruised face was relaxed and there was even a small content smile on his lips, while he slept with childish innocence.

Unable to control himself, Klink bent down and cupped Hogan’s cheek with one gentle hand for a few seconds, while he pressed a soft kiss on the bandaged forehead. God, what would he give to be allowed to do more! But these little stolen moments were the only opportunities for him to express what he felt – and it had to be enough.

Straightening his shape, he went to the bathroom and closed the door after one loving glance back.

An hour later he made a scheduled roll call and afterwards spoke with Kinchloe in his function as acting senior POW officer. It was still snowing, even if it was not snowing so hard anymore, but the wind was nasty. The other POWs hastened back into their barracks, and so the two men were undisturbed, which gave the Kommandant the chance to address the sergeant directly,

“Is everything ready?” he asked quietly, while Schultz had already gone to Klink’s office to seek shelter against the bitter weather.

“Yes, sir. Everything is prepared. All tunnels are sealed, the bugs have been removed, like their wires, and everything that shouldn’t be in a POW-barracks was brought down into the tunnels before the entrances were firmly locked and covered. The Gestapo can turn every stone, they will not find anything.”

Klink nodded, “Good, good.” He sighed. “I don’t think it will come to a real examination of the camp, but better to be over-prepared than to regret laziness afterwards.”

“You’re correct, sir,” Kinch affirmed and stifled a yawn.
Not without sympathy, the Oberst looked at him. “Long night?”

“You can say this. We were done with everything around four o’clock in the morning.”

Klink took a deeper breath. “Return to your barracks and try to find some rest. There is no need to shovel snow before at least a pretense of daylight graces us.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“And tell the others that I’m grateful for their efforts – as Hogan will certainly be when he wakes up. Dismissed.”

Kinchloe saluted and watched how the Kommandant stomped towards his office; his posture was once again bowed, but this could also be attributed to the wind. This, and the worry he certainly suffered because of the upcoming investigation.

“You really have no easy job at the moment,” he murmured, then he walked towards Barracks 2 to drink some hot coffee before he would hit the mattress.

*** HH ***

It was almost ten o’clock when three black cars and one truck neared the gates. Half a minute later Klink was warned as the phone rang and one of the guards at the gates informed him about the arrival of three Gestapo-members, two SS-officers and a whole load of SS-guards.

‘So, the brass is bringing the big guns now,’ he thought with a short wave of fear, before he took a deep breath to calm his nerves and rose to his feet to greet the men. Fräulein Hilda led them into his office, and Klink faced three males in their middle-age, wearing long leather-coats. Two SS-guards and – to his dismay – Leutnant von Neuhaus, who glanced with piercing, cold eyes at him, accompanied the Gestapo-officers. But where was the second SS-officer the guard at the gates had reported?

“Gentlemen, welcome to Stalag 13. General Burkhalter had already informed me of your upcoming arrival,” he greeted with a small smile of courtesy on his face.
“He did?” the man in the front asked slowly, and Klink nodded with a chuckle.

“Yes – in order of his personal friend Reichsführer Himmler. I assured the Reichsführer and the Führer in person that you’ve my full support.”

At the mention of Himmler and Hitler, von Neuhaus stared, surprised, at Klink while the three Gestapo-men straightened their postures. “You… spoke with the Führer?” the obviously leading officer of the Gestapo asked; thunderstruck.

“Oh it wasn’t the first time,” Klink answered casually; lying through his teeth, while he gave his visitors an almost arrogant smirk. “We even met a few times. Yet I’ve interacted more with your highest superior, Herr…?”

“I apologize for the breach of politeness, Oberst Klink. I’m Kriminalrat (crime counselor) Johann Lübkemeier from Berlin,” the man in front finally introduced himself, before he gestured to his two companions. “Commissioner Pönnighaus, my assistant, and Commissioner Leitner from Nürnberg. And you already know Leutnant von Neuhaus.”

“We already had the displeasure,” Klink said coolly, while eyeing the SS-man. He would have preferred that Schmidt had accompanied the Gestapo, but luck wasn’t expected all the time.

Lübkemeier lifted a brow. “You’ve differences with the Leutnant?”

Klink didn’t even spared the SS-officer a further gaze, while replying, “He has problems with obeying orders from higher-ranking officers in their own area of authority as soon as they wear another uniform than that of the SS, but I’m confident that he’ll learn one day. He is still young.” He gestured to the visitor chairs. “Please, Gentlemen, have a seat. Fräulein Hilda?” he called, and promptly the three Gestapo-men stopped in their movements to occupy the chairs and stood up again, as the young woman entered the room.

“Yes, Herr Kommandant?”

“Please bring some coffee for the gentlemen. I’m sure that they had a long and unpleasant night of travel given the nasty weather.”
“This is not necessary,” Lübkemeier tried to decline, but stopped himself as he took a closer look at Klink’s secretary.

Hilda smiled at the men, whose faces began to become softer. It wasn’t the first time that her appearance mitigated Klink’s visitors, who were rarely good-willed towards the Kommandant. “It would be a pleasure to show the Gentlemen some hospitality,” she said kindly, before she turned around, flashed von Neuhaus a beaming smile (for good measure) and vanished again. She had barely closed the door behind her, as she already grimaced. God, how much she loathed this theater she had to play!

Inside of the office, the three ‘policemen’ and von Neuhaus had sat down. Well, duty could wait a few moments if such a nice young woman was about to serve them some coffee. The latter had become rare by now, even for higher ranking persons within the Third Reich.

Klink, always eager to show how busy he was, folded his hands on the surface of his desk. “So, Gentlemen, how can I be at your service?”

*** HH ***

A few of the Luftwaffe-guards watched how the SS-men left the truck and began to spread through the camp; watching the POWs who had been shoveling snow for half an hour now. Other members of the SS shot the regular guards mocking looks. A lot of Klink’s men gritted their teeth, but they knew that it would be foolish to voice any protest. The SS were no military in their eyes, yet this unit held the not so secret power within Germany. None of Klink’s guards wanted to face the consequences of quarreling with the black-clad men again.

Therefore they mined their own business, yet a few of them still saw the lonely figure also clad in black that walked along the compound and vanished between the barracks.

“What the heck…” one of the guards murmured. “Is this guy sniffling around without Klink’s knowledge?”

“I think it’s the new CO of the Gestapo-HQ in Hammelburg,” another guard answered. “I saw him come to the camp ten days ago, or so, and pay the Kommandant a social visit.”

The first man shrugged. “As long as those guys stay out of my hair, they can do whatever they want.”
Horst Schmidt walked, determined, over the snow-covered ground between the wooden huts; ignoring his inferiors deployed at the barracks’ doors and the dark gazes he received from the POWs. He kept up his pretense of making rounds to check out security, like he had told Lübkemeier and von Neuhaus after they arrived in Stalag 13. It was the best excuse he could come up with to explain why he didn’t go to the Kommandantur first, but strolled through the camp’s yard.

Suddenly his eyes caught a tiny figure, who shoveled snow just like some other men, in front of a building that was marked as ‘Barracks 2’. Their uniforms gave them away as Americans, Englishmen and Dutchmen, but it was the small guy in the French clothes, including wine-red scarf and beret, who woke his interest.

For a long moment he watched the man. He had seen him before – and he remembered where and when: The morning Oberst Klink came to the Gestapo-HQ to get his senior POW officer out of Hochstetter’s clutches. This small man was the same he, Schmidt, had seen in the street after the Oberst’s departure. Yes, the guy wore different clothes now, but he was absolutely certain that it was one and the same man.

Von Neuhaus had groused the whole day after his return from Stalag 13 that a POW had escaped the camp and had alerted ‘this idiotic, impertinent excuse of a German officer who is called the Kommandant of a Stalag’. The Leutnant had gotten an ear full from General Burkhalter, who had also made certain that there was an official rebuke in the Leutnant’s file now, because said POW had fled while von Neuhaus was in charge.

And Schmidt knew now, who this POW – who ran to his jailer to get help for his own superior officer – had to be.

More curious than anything else, Schmidt headed towards the group and saw how the tiny man lifted his head. For a moment the POW’s eyes widened in shock, then he eagerly shoveled the snow with even more effort than before. It told Schmidt everything!

Ignoring the dark glances which he received as he reached the group, he stepped in front of the POW in question, who seemed to turn into a pillar of salt.

“It’s cold outside, isn’t it? No wonder you'd prefer to return to a place where it is warmer,” Horst said; referring to the current time as well as to the POW’s obvious trip to Hammelburg.
LeBeau shortly pressed his lips into a thin line while looking up at the German. He had recognized the SS-officer the moment their eyes met over the distance, and it was obvious that the man remembered him, too. Louis cursed inwardly. Klink had made him leave the staff car before they reached the Gestapo-Headquarters to prevent exactly the case that now took place: The SS-officer had seen him there, and now here. This could only lead to a catastrophe!

A flood of French came over his lips while he glared defiantly up at the German; trying to stall for time.

Schmidt smiled and answered him in passable French, which made LeBeau gasp.

“You speak French?” he asked, flabbergasted; partly happy to hear his own language for once (as terrible as the German's accent was), but also highly alerted.

“Yes, I speak English, French, Spanish and some Italian,” Schmidt answered; still in French. “And I could ask you why you didn’t flee, when you had the chance eleven days ago, in every language.” Then he switched back to English. “But let us speak in the tongue your comrades understand, too. So, why didn’t you use the possibility to flee when you were in Hammelburg the morning Oberst Klink got your superior officer away from Major Hochstetter?”

Newkirk and Olsen, who were among the group, closed up to LeBeau; ready to defend him if it should become necessary.

LeBeau gulped. “I don’t know what you’re speaking of. I’m a POW here and…”

“General Burkhalter gave Leutnant von Neuhaus a lot of trouble because one of the POWs here escaped during his watch and informed Colonel Klink of Colonel Hogan’s fate. And I saw you in the street only a minute after the Oberst left. So it has to be you who fled and went to the hospital. Obviously, Colonel Klink missed you – or forgot you. Given his worry for Hogan I think it’s the latter. You had all chances to escape, maybe even back to your country. Yet you returned. Why?”

“I’m sure you mistake him with someone else, sir,” Newkirk cut in.

“No, I’m more than certain that it was your friend here,” Schmidt answered, not unkindly, before he returned his attention back to LeBeau. “So, why are you still here?”
LeBeau sighed, frustrated, and gave in. He knew when any denial was for naught. “I slipped out while this Leutnant was making a big fuss to drive Klink’s secretary home. I went to Hammelburg where there was a curfew, hid in a nearby barn ‘til morning to not get caught being out in the streets, ran to the hospital, alerted Klink and promised him not to flee while he got Colonel Hogan out. And I always keep my promises.”

Schmidt pursed his lips. “Why didn’t you accompany him?”

Louis threw his free hand up. “Because some of your men know me and Klink feared that they would get nervous fingers at their weapon’s triggers. So he left me behind to pick me up later. As he didn’t appear, I got more than worried that something went wrong and walked in the direction that Klink’s staff car had taken. I saw him, Schultzie and mon colonel driving away, saw you – and headed back to the camp. On the road I was picked up by General Burkhalter.” He shrugged. “Like I said: I always keep my promises.”

Schmidt looked at him in awe. “Freedom was in your reach, yet you turned your back on it to keep a promise you gave an enemy officer. I… I just don’t get it.”

LeBeau put index and thumb together, while shaking the hand with its back down – a typical gesture of his if he wanted to drive a point home. “I’m a Frenchman, and French people always keep their promises. We do not say one thing and mean something else. We’ve honor.”

This time Horst almost smiled. “I heard that much.”

Sighing, Louis let his free hand fall beside him. “So, what now? Do I have to fear getting shot?”

Lifting both brows, Schmidt cocked his head. “What for? You escaped and returned. It’s up to the camp’s Kommandant how to punish you. And seeing as you’re free, I think Oberst Klink re-paid your sincerity in the only possible way: He let the incident go this time.” He lowered his voice. “I admire your loyalty towards your superior officer. You risked a lot, coming to town. And you returned because you gave your word to do so. I always respect men with honor – but don’t make a habit of it. The Oberst’s record of no escapes, about which I’ve heard so often since I arrived here, would be at stake.”

Louis gaped at him, just like Newkirk and Olsen did. Smirking shortly at the POWs, Schmidt gave them a short nod of greeting. “Good day, Gentlemen.”
He continued his way and vanished between the barracks – leaving a part of Hogan’s gang and some other POWs speechless. He was deeply impressed with the amount of risk the American colonel’s men were ready to take only to help Hogan. This man was held in high regard by his inferiors, yet for Schmidt there was another riddle that circled in his mind: How did it come that POWs sought out the aid of their jailer? How did it come that they trusted him the way they did? Klink seemed to be well respected if these men put their superior’s life in his hands. Maybe there was more to all this than you could assume at first sight. The fact alone that Klink had offered his senior POW officer a place to heal within his own quarters spoke volumes.

And said quarters were Schmidt’s destination.

Seeing that his own men were busy with securing the barracks, he sped up towards the separate building that held Klink’s little flat. Throwing a glance over his shoulder, he recognized that the Luftwaffe-members were talking, glaring at the SS or looking out into the woods, while the POWs were busy with freeing the compound of snow. Not wasting any more time, Schmidt closed the distance to the house, climbed up the stairs to the porch and stepped, a moment later, into the warm quarters.

Knowing where the sleeping chamber was from his last visit, he crossed the living-room and stopped at the door that led into the makeshift sick-room. His gaze found the American officer, who lay beneath some blankets and a comforter, and had his eyes closed. His face was still full of colorful but healing bruises, his head was still bandaged but at least his wrists, which were visible, weren’t wrapped up any longer. Yet the skin there was bruised and reddened – proof of the man’s desperate attempts to escape the chains. Again Schmidt felt a soft pang of guilt that he hadn’t acted sooner when the colonel had been held captive in the headquarters.

Hogan had heard the front door opening and closing, before quiet steps of booted feet drew nearer. Someone had crept into the house, and he felt tension rising in him. Whoever it was: They weren’t here officially.

The steps stopped at the threshold to the sleeping room, and Hogan braced himself. Being a man who never awaited for events to take place, but rather took action to face them, Hogan opened his eyes – and a bolt of anxiety knotted his stomach as he recognized the black uniform.

Lifting his head and gripping for the blankets to throw them away, he was about to jump up in a reflex of pure defense, as the visitor lifted a hand.

“Calm down, Colonel. I’m not here to harm you,” a slightly familiar voice with a strong German accent said.
Hogan’s heart beat in his throat, while he stared at the intruder. It was a man in his late twenties, with blond hair and…

“Do you remember me, Colonel Hogan?” the SS-officer asked almost kindly, and for a moment Hogan was thrown back in time. Once again he was in those cellars; the horror of almost being branded still echoed in him, while the same young man was in front of him – promising to get help.

“Schmidt?” he asked hoarsely.

The young German smiled; almost relieved. “Yes, it’s me,” he nodded. “I’m glad you remember.” He stepped into the room. “Please, remain in bed. Too hasty movements will do your injuries no good.”

Warily, Hogan lay back again; still ready to act if necessary.

“I’m sorry I startled you,” Schmidt continued. “That you react badly to the view of this uniform is no miracle given everything Hochstetter did to you.”

“Usually I’m not easily scared,” the colonel grumbled; irritated with himself. For a moment he had been really startled, and this was bad for every upcoming mission in the future – and it made him feel ashamed.

His half-pout elicited a smile on Schmidt’s face.

“This I’m believing utterly,” Horst nodded; then he turned serious again. “Colonel, I’m here to prepare you. There was an assault yesterday not far away from this camp, and Hochstetter gave some gravely statements in Berlin, a fact that has made Himmler and even Hitler suspicious concerning your person and your assumed true identity.”

Baffled that Schmidt obviously had come to warn him, Hogan still remained wary. There was no proof that the young man had no seconds thoughts, so the colonel clung to his role, as he replied hoarsely, “Do I have to fear another interrogation – in my condition?” And he had to admit that the mere prospect made him nervous all of a sudden. Of course he had known that the investigation could include a questioning, and only yesterday evening he had tried to calm down a hyper-nervous Klink because of these upcoming things, but now, as the time had arrived, he felt unease, too.
Schmidt sighed. “Let me put it like this: The suspicions were dropped when General Burkhalter learned from Oberst Klink that you’re still in no condition to do anything more than lie in bed or limp to the restrooms, like I learned from the investigating team this morning. Yet Kriminalrat Lübkemeier from the Gestapo and some others are here to investigate the whole case – and to satisfy themselves and the brass in Berlin that you being responsible for the assault is really out of the question. Lübkemeier and his men are in Klink’s office, and they will come here afterwards. Just answer their questions, plain and calm. Don’t irritate them. Lübkemeier is a steely dog who wouldn’t even hesitate to arrest his own grandmother. And…” He took a deep breath, “some personal advise from me: Don’t make hasty moves – or anything else that could give him, von Neuhaus and the others the idea that your healing proceeds better than it looks.”

Hogan frowned; inwardly thunderstruck that the Leutnant was obviously trying to help him again. “Have you just warned me about the Gestapo’s intentions?”

Schmidt grimaced. “What has been done to you was wrong – and I don’t want a repeat only because guys like Lübkemeier, von Neuhaus and Hochstetter are suffering from strong paranoia. To interrogate someone is one thing, to torture him is a different kettle of fish. I am aware that this is an almost common method of the Gestapo and SS by now, but this doesn’t mean that I agree to it.” He carefully stepped to the window and looked out through the curtain. “Shit, they are already coming.” He turned around. “Does this building have a back-door?”

Still surprised about Schmidt’s secret warning, Hogan watched him a second, before he said, “Are you fearing your own colleagues?”

“It wouldn’t be good if they catch me here with you. Von Neuhaus is still angry that I got the leading post and not he – and Lübkemeier is a lunatic with the behavior of an iceman. He would instantly suspect that you and I have to hide something. And, by the way, visiting POWs is forbidden – especially when no Luftwaffe-member is present. So, where is…”

“Through the kitchen. It’s the left door in the living-room when you’re coming from here,” Hogan interrupted him; realizing how much the young man had just risked to warn him. The least he could do was show him a safe way out of the upcoming danger he had maneuvered himself in.

Schmidt began to walk as quickly as possible towards the door. “Stay calm, Colonel. And no hasty movements,” he said over his shoulder. “That your condition is better than it seems was plain to see the way you reacted at my arrival.”

Hogan cursed inwardly. Dammit, the boy was really bright, yet there was only one answer possible. “Thank you, Lieutenant,” he said quietly. “You helped me the morning Hochstetter was about to
brand me – and you try to help me now. And one day I want to learn why.”

Schmidt grimaced. “It’s a question of honor, Colonel.” He nodded shortly at the American officer before he vanished. He only hoped that his advice would be taken to heart…

TBC…

Well, I think Schmidt is a very big riddle for Hogan, the Heroes – and you, my dear readers. Is he ‘only’ a honorable man who tries to remain true to his upbringing and point of views, or does he have an own agenda? Just wait (smile).

When I began to write the story I always had this picture in my mind from one of the Heroes coming out of the tunnel beneath Klink’s furnace with the Oberst being present to see it. I imagined Klink’s face then and had to laugh. I hope, I got the scene right, because in my eyes it bears a certain kind of slapstick. I also always imagined Klink’s reaction should he learn that the ‘little private with the moustache’ hadn’t been in his camp for real, but that it was an imposter. I hope, you liked these little funny scenes, as well as the rest.

In the next chapter Lübremeier shows his mean, sinister side – that he is someone who loves to ‘play’ with others and has no problem with demonstrating his power. Well, it’s time for another appearance of the ‘Iron Eagle’ – and that Klink can play dirty tricks, too, will be clearly seen then.

I hope, the new chapter met you approval, and I would love to get feedback from you, so… (*snicker*).

Have a nice rest of Sunday and a good start into the next week.

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so much for the feedback concerning the last chapter – and also thank you for putting up with my errors. My beta-reader sent the last and the actual chapter, and I replaced the last one parallel, while I publish the new one. So, who wants to read no. 30 without errors…

In the new one, more or less chaos breaks lose. The investigation will demand a lot from all – especially from Klink, who tries to safe the day by managing the whole mess that takes place.

Therefore, no long prologue.

Have fun with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 31 – The investigation

Klink headed towards his quarters; the three Gestapo-officers, von Neuhaus and the two SS-guards on his heels. His tension was growing to an almost unbearable level with every step he took, yet he knew that he had to keep up the charade for all their sakes. He only hoped Hogan could keep his witty mouth under control, or they would all be in deep water.

Lübkemeier frowned as he saw in which direction the Oberst was going. “Isn’t the infirmary over there?” he asked; pointing at the low building beside the casino.

“Yes, but Colonel Hogan was accommodated in the Oberst’s personal quarters,” von Neuhaus
sneered; shooting dark glares at the POWs, who were shoveling snow and glancing with loathing at him and the others.

The Kriminalrat stopped in his track and stared at Klink. “You did what?”

The Kommandant turned around. In earlier times, he would have quivered to receive such a look from a higher ranking Gestapo-officer, but to his own surprise his tension melted away all of a sudden and he became absolutely calm; the way it had happened a few times within the last two weeks. Something deep in him spread its invisible wings again and gave him strength – a strength also rooted in the knowledge that Robert’s life depended on him. And not only Hogan’s, but the lives of the colonel’s men and his own, too.

“Do you really think I’d waste a lot of valuable wood to warm the whole infirmary for one man?” he asked ironically; wondering for a moment from where he’d taken the courage to put up such a show. “I’ve to consider a low budget that allows me no special treatments,” he continued, nonchalant. “And given the fact that the man in question is a high ranking American officer who has the right to some benefits, I see no problem in offering him a place to heal within my quarters. Like this I can also keep a wary eye on him and realize when my hospitality is no longer really needed. By the way, this arrangement was made in agreement with General Burkhalter. So, if you have objections, please contact him.”

He turned around and continued on his way. Lübkemeier exchanged a glance with his assistant Pönnighaus, before he glanced at von Neuhaus; baffled.

“Like I told you, sir: Klink is a very peculiar individual,” the Leutnant murmured, before he followed the Oberst. The others did the same.

Half a minute later they reached the quarters and Klink entered first. “Please, Gentlemen, come into my parlor, and make yourself at home.”

Lübkemeier looked around. The quarters were made of wood like any other building within the camp, but they offered some comfort. Bookshelves, paintings, antique looking furniture, a set-up chessboard and gramophone told him more about Klink than anything else. The Oberst was a person with individuality who knew how to create his own little world of luxury. He was a relic of the Great War just like the silly monocle he wore – yet there was more to him. One moment the man was nervous and chuckled to cover it, the next he became stern, like steel. Lübkemeier had problems categorizing him, and this was something that didn’t happen often.

“Over there, Gentlemen,” Klink said and headed towards his usual sleeping-chamber. He knocked at

Klink admired the way Hogan acted. Slowly opening his eyes, the colonel took a deep breath, carefully turned his head and looked expressionlessly at the men, who stopped at the threshold – just as if he had been deeply asleep. “What?” he murmured, then he seemed to shrink into the pillow and comforters, as he glanced at the three men in leather-cloaks and at von Neuhaus. “What are they doing here?” he croaked; sounding alarmed.

Lübkemeier frowned, as he saw the beaten and patched up man in the bed. There was no doubt that this Major Hochstetter he had heard of a few times within the last hours, had lived out his obvious hate concerning the American. Yet how much the injuries still affected the enemy officer after more than ten days remained to be seen.

“Colonel Robert Hogan, correct?” he asked in fluid English.

“Y-y-yes,” Hogan answered; gulping as he pretended to be startled.

“I’m Kriminalrat Johan Lübkemeier from Berlin. Do you have any idea why I’m here?”

Hogan looked at Klink, who said firmly, “Just answer the questions!”

“You’re here to investigate the case of Hochstetter,” the colonel said quietly. “If you…”

“No, I’m not here because of Hochstetter,” Lübkemeier interrupted. “Or, better to say, the major’s suspicions concerning you are one point of the long list of questions I’ve to find answers for. Would you please rise?”

“Rise?” Hogan pretended to be clueless. He knew exactly what the Gestapo-officer was up to: Testing his real condition.

Klink, who had stood there with his typical posture – one hand on the back, the other one holding the riding crop beneath his arm, upper body bowed forwards – straightened his shape. “Herr Kriminalrat, Colonel Hogan is barely able to move. And every tour to the restroom is hard for him. May I ask why he should…”
“A simple test, my dear Oberst. I hope you’ve no objections?” Lübkemeier answered; glaring at the Luftwaffe-officer with challenge clear in his eyes.

“Despite the fact that I see no reason why an injured man should undergo an obvious effort that could slow down his healing process, I’ve no objections,” Klink answered, before he looked at Hogan; hidden worry lay deep in his eyes.

“It’s okay, Kommandant,” the colonel whispered and carefully pulled the blankets away. “Obviously the gentlemen’s belief in General Burkhalter’s honesty isn’t this big, otherwise they wouldn’t distrust his statements concerning my condition.”

“Are you trying to insult us?” Pönnighaus asked sharply.

Hogan, who had sat up by now, looked up at him. “I am only stating the obvious,” he rasped, “otherwise you would accept General Burkhalter’s statement without demanding proof of his seriousness.” Carefully, he slipped his legs over the bed’s edge. Taking a deep breath he pretended to have problems rising. Finally he managed to stem himself up and swayed dangerously for a moment, before he found some balance by steadying himself at the bedpost.

Lübkemeier watched him closely. “Make two or three steps, Colonel.”

“Pray tell me what this is all about?” Hogan asked; not masking his irritation. “Have you guys no other hobbies than pestering other people?”

“Hogan, that’s quite enough! The gentlemen are only doing their job!” Klink rebuked him sharply; inwardly begging the younger man for forgiveness. He hated having to act like this towards Robert.

“And what does their job have to do with my condition – besides one of their club being responsible for it?”

“There was an assault on a railway not far from here,” Klink began.

“And they think it was me?” Hogan asked, thunderstruck.
“This is something we’ve to find out,” von Neuhaus said, stepped beside the American and gave him a little shove.

It really took Hogan by surprise, and being indeed not too steady on his feet, he stumbled. If it wouldn’t have been for Klink, who reacted with lightning speed, he would have sprawled to the ground.

“Hogan!” He caught the colonel around the waist, who cried out in pain as his still bruised abdomen collided with Klink’s arm. Pain shot through Hogan’s body, while he tried to find some balance, but his legs and knees didn’t obey him the way they should. It was only because Klink used all his strength to support him that Hogan managed to regain his footing.

“Easy, Hogan,” Klink said quietly, while he helped the younger man to sit down on the bed’s edge again. For a moment he looked straight in Hogan’s eyes, saw the pain in them, and squeezed the American’s arm for a second, while he was still steadying him. Taking a deep breath, Klink turned around towards his visitors. The fury in his eyes was real, as he snapped,

“Was this necessary, Herr Leutnant? You saw the terrible shape he was in with your own eyes as you intruded in my quarters after Hogan was released from the Gestapo-HQ, and you got General Burkhalter’s statement. Isn’t this enough?”

Von Neuhaus lifted both brows. “I’m only doing my…”

“Is the word of a staff-officer, who belongs to the Führer’s inner circle and is a close friend to your highest ranking superior, not enough anymore? How dare you to doubt the general’s report – or my word for that matter!”

“This certainly wasn’t the Leutnant’s intention, Herr Oberst,” Lübkemeier cut in. “He only wanted to make sure that it is really out of the question that the American is respons…”

“‘The American’ has a name, Herr Kriminalrat, and even the lowest politeness demands that you use it,” Klink interrupted him with icy wrath. “I know that we’re at war and that Colonel Hogan belongs to the enemy, but in my camp the POWs will be treated with the simple human respect that is common between civilized people. We Germans were always well-known for our formidable courtesy, and we should all do our best it remains that way – war or not. Have I made myself clear?”

The three Gestapo-officers stared at him with wide eyes. Klink stood between them and Hogan tall
and firm like a strong tree; shielding the colonel who inwardly applauded the older man for the
courage shown. It amazed him anew how much his German counterpart had changed within the last
days.

Lübke meier cleared his throat. “Well, if you look at it from this point of view, I have to…”

A noise from the front-door distracted the men, then Hogan and Klink heard Schultz’s familiar voice,
“Bitt’schön, Herr Oberleutnant, die Herr’n san hier.” (Bavarian: Please/come in, Senior Lieutenant,
the Gentlemen are here.)

A few moments later the new CO of the Hammelburg Gestapo-HQ stopped at the threshold to the
sleeping-chamber, looked around and a short smile appeared on his face as he saw the Kommandant.

“Oberst Klink, nice to see you again,” he announced, while he stepped into the room and saluted.

Klink felt a short wave of relief as he saw the young man. An inner voice told him that everything
wouldn’t be so bad now. Schmidt’s timing had been perfect because the whole situation was about to
get out of hand. And Schmidt had honor – and this was more than Klink could state about the young
man’s direct colleague and the guys in the leather-cloaks.

“Oberleutnant Schmidt, the pleasure is mine,” he replied while returning the military salute. “I was
surprised you didn’t accompany the gentlemen, but as it seemed, you only decided to not join them
in my office.”

“I had to check a few things through first,” Schmidt answered, before his eyes found the cowering
shape of the American officer who had wrapped his arms protectively around his middle. Schmidt
took in the paleness and pain which hadn’t been mirrored on the other man’s face before and
frowned slightly. “What’s going on here?” he asked.

“Maybe you should explain to your inferior that the Geneva Conventions have to be followed within
my camp,” Klink said sternly. “Shoving POWs – injured men – around isn’t the correct way for a
German officer to behave. At least not if they’re officially matured to an adult. We’re not on a
schoolyard here where bullies think they can do whatever they want!”

Schmidt’s eyes narrowed, while von Neuhaus said, nonchalant, “I only wanted to check if the
colonel’s unsteadiness is an act or true. You can never tell if those clever Americans are or are not
playing a role or…”
“You pushed the colonel despite his grave wounds and the risk of relapse if he would have fallen?”

“Colonel Klink caught me,” Hogan added for good measure; making his voice sound hoarser than it was.

Schmidt frowned, irritated, before he glared back at von Neuhaus. “I thought General Burkhalter and I made it very clear that we are ALL following written laws. I am warning you one last time, Herr Leutnant. There is a big difference between distrust and paranoia, and what the latter leads to has been seen in Major Hochstetter’s case. Be careful you don’t follow him.”

He turned towards Hogan. “I’m sorry for the behavior of my inferior, Colonel.” Then he glanced at Lübkemeier and took a deep breath. “Back to business. I made certain that all our men have secured the barracks. As soon as the POWs are restricted to their lodgings, you can start the inspection, Herr Kriminalrat.”

“Inspection?” Klink all but demanded. “What inspection? Himmler himself agreed that my camp is free of all suspicion.”

Lübkemeier sighed. “Herr Oberst, I got my orders from the highest position within this land – to reveal the identity of those who assaulted the speed-railway in this area. And therefore I also have to check where they hide.”

“Hide – in my camp?” Klink scoffed. “Even if someone comes in here by his own free will, he certainly won’t be able to leave anymore.” He lifted a finger, the other hand was balled around the grip of his riding crop. “Just for you to know, Herr Kriminalrat, there has never been a successful escape from my camp.”

“Yes, we know. You already tore Major Hochstetter’s nerves to shreds pointing this detail out every time he was here,” von Neuhaus murmured.

Klink gave him a mocking smile. “Major Hochstetter’s nerves were always torn to shreds no matter what, going off because of everything and everyone – like it usually is when someone possesses such a choleric temper,” he scoffed. Then he shrugged and spread his hands. “But if the gentlemen would feel better if they check Stalag 13 through – please be my guests. I’ve nothing against it.” He looked at Schultz, who seemed to have real problems understanding what was really going on.

“Schultz, all POWs back into their barracks. They shall wait there for the inspection of their huts – except for Sergeant Wilson. Call for him; he shall check Colonel Hogan through.”
Lübkemeier frowned. “All POWs should be restricted to their barracks, and given the name of the man you just mentioned he has to be English or American. Certainly he…”

“Herr Kriminalrat, Sergeant Wilson is our medic here and is liable to special paragraphs within the Geneva Conventions which rule the handling of medical personnel and their duties, as you certainly know. And thanks to the over-eagerly Leutnant here, Colonel Hogan is in need of medical aid.” He nodded at Schultz. “You’ve your orders, Sergeant.”

“Jawohl, Herr Kommandant!” Schultz saluted and left the room after he cast a worried glance at Hogan; hoping that the American officer was okay.

Klink made an inviting gesture towards the door. “Please, Gentlemen, let us begin with the inspection so that we can start with the actually necessary work afterwards.” He turned his attention quickly to his American counterpart. “Lay down, Hogan. Wilson will look after you soon,” he said coolly, before he looked at the others. “After you, Gentlemen.”

Giving Hogan a last, estimating glance, Lübkemeier left the sleeping-chamber, followed by the two other Gestapo-officers, von Neuhaus and Schmidt. The latter shot Hogan an apologetic look; asking himself if the American officer would regard German people as human beings ever again after all he had to endure within the last two weeks.

Yet Schmidt hadn’t to fear everlasting loathing from Hogan. The colonel was well aware of the differences between fanatical fellows of the Führer and people who were forced to make a friendly face during this evil game. And then there were the third group of people – people like Wilhelm Klink; those who dared to fight against this madness for whatever reason.

Looking at the Kommandant, Hogan caught the worry and the hidden guilt in the older man’s eyes, and risking a lot he gave him a short, warm smile – signaling like this that everything was okay.

He earned a quick smile in return, then Klink left with typical hasty steps.

*** HH ***

Half an hour later, Lübkemeier looked around in the room that didn’t look any different than those he had already inspected. The POWs stood beside their stock beds, hands mostly folded on the back, legs slightly spread. The only difference to the other barracks was the door to the right that led to the
tiny office and sleeping area of the senior POW officer.

Pursing his lips, the Kriminalrat turned towards Klink. “And this is Colonel Hogan’s barracks?” he asked.

“Ja, this is Barracks 2,” the Oberst nodded; smiling in his usual obedient-silly way, yet the Unsung Heroes realized that it was nothing more than a charade to keep up the pretense. Inwardly Klink had to be inhumanly tense. Even Newkirk felt some sympathy for the German officer; knowing how much this all put additional stress onto the Kommandant.

“Tidy and clean like the others,” Pönnighaus murmured. “I rarely saw a Stalag that is in such a good condition.” He glanced at Klink. “My compliments, Herr Oberst.”

Klink only made an arrogant sound in his throat and cocked his head; riding crop still tightly held beneath his arm as if it would give him some hold.

Schmidt glanced around, too – more curious than he should be. So, this was the current ‘home’ of the American colonel. It was shabby and poor, yet there was a certain warmth within the atmosphere, despite the fact that the POWs did a bad job masking their loathing. His gaze found a dark-skinned man in American uniform, then one in the blue uniform of the Royal Air Force and finally his gaze found the tiny Frenchman. Pretending not to know him, he let his glance wander further through the room – and, just like he anticipated, the Frenchman didn’t react to him at all. Very good. Any call of attention could be bad.

Lübkemeier turned towards Klink. “You said the current acting senior POW officer is here, too. Who is it? I have some questions.”

Klink took a deep breath; already assuming the Kriminalrat’s reaction. “Sergeant Kinchloe, please come here!” he ordered.

Kinch, who had been torn out of sleep by Newkirk after the SS arrived, closed the distance to the two Germans and saluted brusquely. “Kommandant!”

Lübkemeier looked him up and down with arrogant disgust in his eyes, before he addressed Klink. “Can it even write reports?”
Kinchloe tensed and his eyes became small as he heard the insulting reference. Racism wasn’t new to him, even within his own army, but here, in Nazi-Germany, it was practiced to a twisted, sinister art.

But not all Germans thought this way, like Klink proved. And the Kommandant’s reply took James by surprise.

“‘It’?” the Oberst asked, confused, and looked at the table. “Here are no pencils which could be used to write reports, so to what are you referring?”

Lübkemeier gestured to Kinchloe. “To that here.”

The atmosphere within the barracks had changed dramatically. Newkirk and Carter stood taller than ever before, and glared threateningly at the Kriminalrat. LeBeau’s face had flushed into a deep angry red, and Olsen and some others had balled their fists. No-one insulted their highly respected and loved ‘Kinch’!

Klink stared for a few seconds at Lübkemeier, then at Kinchloe, and back at the Gestapo-officer. “Seeing that you decided to ignore the bridge I built for you concerning your slip of manners, I’ve to become more clear. Like I said after the incident in my quarters, Herr Kriminalrat; In MY camp every POW is treated with the general polite manners between civilized people!” he said sharply. “Sergeant Kinchloe is a well-schooled, well-brought up man and hasn’t the rank of an officer for naught. He is disciplined, polite and also liked by all POWs. And as the acting senior POW officer he deserves some respect – even from us. He…”

“He is a Nig…”

“Kriminalrat Lübkemeier, I know the point of view many of us have towards people who look different from us. May I ask you a personal question? Have you ever had a sunburn?”

Confused because of the sudden change, Lübkemeier blinked. “Well, of course I have. Who has not? After all…”

“What happens to your appearance then?” Klink lifted one finger before the Gestapo-officer could reply something. “I’ll tell you: Your skin turns dark. Does it mean that you’re a different, less worthy man because of it? No, of course not! The countries Sergeant Kinchloe’s people come from have sun during the whole year and heat far more intense than here in northern Europe. Ever thought of the
idea that the Lord gave those people a darker skin to protect them against the sun?’"

The SS- and Gestapo-men weren’t the only ones who gaped at the Kommandant, who smiled, satisfied. “I thought as much. We can make our own regards and overthink the whole evolution, but ‘men should never doubt the Lord’s wisdom’. This is something even our Führer said a few times. And you don’t doubt our Führer’s words, do you?”

Lübkemeier had flushed and his eyes were narrowed. “I don’t remember when he said something like this, end…”

“During the opening ceremony of the Olympic games, Herr Kriminalrat. I was there. And he said something similar as he congratulated me and some comrades in person for the successful test-flight of the HE-111 E1 I later flew constantly during my active time. I’m sure you have noticed that our Führer holds the Church in high respect, as the Church not only gives hope in dark times, but also protects weaker people. Sergeant Kinchloe may be from a lower race, but he has gained his place within society by hard work – an ability that was certainly given to him by the Lord, otherwise he wouldn’t protrude the way he does compared to many other of his people. So show him the simple human respect he deserves. By the way, you – as a high ranking Gestapo-officer – stand above bullying, don’t you?”

Lübkemeier and the others didn’t know what to make of those words. First Klink stood up for the dark-skinned man and obviously all Negros, and then he paraded the untouchable class of the master-race. The man was one big riddle – and the Kriminalrat decided to accept the challenge.

“Your views are… not easy to understand, but you have some arguments here.” He glanced at Kinchloe, who had crossed his arms in front of his chest and stared coldly at him. “Sergeant, I’ve a few questions,” he came back to business as if nothing had happened. “How long have you been here in Stalag 13?”

“Since the end of June 1942,” Kinch answered tonelessly.

“And did you ever try to escape?”

“Yes, a few times. Then I accepted that it is impossible to escape from here. Colonel Klink has a tight grip on the whole camp.”

Klink smiled at this, straightened his shape and bounced a little bit on his feet, while inwardly he still
glowered about Lübkemeier’s impertinence towards Kinchloe. He had learned to respect the dark-skinned man for a long time now, and the open racism the Kriminalrat displayed filled him with anger.

“And Colonel Hogan was already here when you arrived?” Lübkemeier continued his questioning.

“Yes, he was already in charge of the POWs.”

He looked down at some notes he had brought with him in a small, leather-wrapped notebook. “And he made you his PSO – despite the fact that Staff-Sergeant Carter is the highest ranking officer here?” He looked around. “Who is Carter?”

The young man stepped forward – lifting a hand like in school. “That would be me – sir.”

Lübkemeier looked him up and down; snorting. “Well, I think I know why the colonel chose the Ni… the sergeant. I’m surprised that someone like you is an officer.”

“Why, because I’m young? I’m sure you were it at one time, too – even if has to be long ago,” Carter deadpanned.

Promptly, the POWs began to snicker.

“No, because stupidity practically radiates from you,” Lübkemeier snapped.

Carter smiled at him. “Well, in the moment I’m only a POW, but if I have problems after the war because of my ‘stupidity’, I can always become a Kriminalrat. For that I’m intelligent enough.”

The POWs burst out with laughter – and Klink raised his voice, “SILENCE, or there will be consequences!” Yes, a part of him was amused, yet nervousness rose in him with a shrill sound of alert. Could this gang not behave one damn time? Hell, he tried to prevent them drawing too much attention to themselves, and then that! He shot Carter a glare that was ignored.

The men continued to snicker and grin a little bit longer, while Carter put on his best stupid-innocent expression. Lübkemeier pointed a finger at him. “I’ll get you for this, boy.” He scowled one last time
at him, before he turned back towards Kinchloe. “Even if he actually outranks you, as his acting superior you should put this infant down to his place.”

“Why? Because he stated the obvious? Don’t get me wrong, sir, but you’re certainly older than 23.” He smiled a little bit. “And, by the way, it’s the right of youth to push their limits. As far as I remember, Leutnant von Neuhaus did the same twelve days ago, just like a few of his men. What are their excuses? After all they belong to the ‘master-race’ and should be far more mature, don’t you agree?” Kinch taunted.

Lübkemeier gritted his teeth as he realized that he was outwitted by a mere boy and a ‘half-ape’. Turning his back at Kinchloe, he barked, “Commissioner Pönnighaus, this barracks will be searched thoroughly through! And if there is the tiniest hint that something is wrong, this whole bunch of rebels will be arrested.”

Klink straightened his shape to his full height. “You have every right to investigate, Kriminalrat Lübkemeier, but may I remind you that your highest ranking superior already declared this camp as above reproach? Shall I report to him that you ignored his statement and acted on arbitrariness because a mere boy irritated you and the current acting senior POW officer stood up for him like it is his duty as his superior? I think the Reichsführer expects more from his staff.”

“He expects me to find out the truth, Herr Oberst, and this is exactly what I’m doing,” Lübkemeier growled.

“By letting yourself be driven by the wish for pay-back because of some silly, little jokes?” Klink replied; surprising himself and the present POWs again by the bravery he displayed. “That’s beneath a Kriminalrat, if you allow this thought to be voiced. But please, do whatever you have to do – and I shall do what I have to do.” He went to the door, shot Carter another dark glance – who ducked his head as he realized that he had heightened the critical situation they all were in – and left.

Schultz stood with two guards at the Kommandantur and asked him, concerned, what had happened as he saw the unmasked anger on his superior’s face, but Klink passed him by with a “Not now, Schultz!”, and stormed up the stairs into the building, where Hilda was searching for something in the file cabinet. “Link me to General Burkhalter, urgently. Priority one!” he ordered, sharper than intended, and raced into his office; grousing, “Verdammter Grünschnabel! Jetzt haben wir den Salat!” (Damn greenhorn! Now we’ve to pay the cost!)

The telephone rang and Hilda’s voice reported that she had the demanded person on the line. “Thanks!” Klink breathed, then he cleared his throat.
“Klink? What’s the matter now? A priority-one call for what exactly?” the general’s voice sneered over the phone.

“Herr General, I’m calling as your friend,” Klink said with calm he didn’t feel. Hogan’s taunting about the distrust the Gestapo-officers displayed against Burkhalter had given Klink an idea how to stop Lübkemeier before it was too late, and he hoped it would be successful. “As it seems, sir, neither your word nor that of Reichsführer Himmler counts a lot within the Gestapo anymore. They openly doubt yours and therefore also the Reichsführer’s honesty.”

“What?” Burkhalter sounded as if he couldn’t believe his own ears, which came very near the reality.

“Yes, Herr General. It’s a shame how your reputation and that of the Reichsführer is eroded by his own men! Kriminalrat Lübkemeier, who is the man responsible for the investigation, arrived over an hour ago. He made it very clear that he neither believes your statement concerning the whole insanity that Hogan could be Papa Bear because of his injuries, nor does he accept the opinion of the Reichsführer that was made and accepted by our beloved Führer that my camp is beyond any doubt. Lübkemeier’s men are just tearing down everything here, threatening the POWs and even injured Colonel Hogan again by ‘testing’ his abilities to walk, even if he is barely able to stand on his feet. If I wouldn’t have intervened at the last moment, Hogan would be on his way to the hospital now.”

“I… I can’t believe this,” Burkhalter gasped. “Has something or someone triggered the Kriminalrat? Hogan has a witty mouth and…”

“Hogan had nothing to do with this. He obeyed the Kriminalrat’s demands to show him how poorly he is able to move. And if this weren’t enough, Hogan was even shoved by this Leutnant von Neuhaus so that he would have fallen if…”

“Von Neuhaus? Not this guy again!” the general growled, before he took a deep breath. “And now Kriminalrat Lübkmeyer is tearing your camp apart?”

“Yes, I pointed out your reports and the statements of Reichsführer Himmler to him, but he doesn’t care. His whole behavior shows that he neither believes nor respects a direct staff-member of the Führer – you – and his own superior – Himmler. I don’t know to what this will lead, sir, but if inferiors doubt the highest ranking men in our glorious Reich and therefore indirectly accuse them of lying, I can’t sit there and do nothing against it. You and I have our differences, but we always worked well together and I do consider you a friend. Therefore I thought I had to inform you about this infame…”
“I shall speak with Heinrich. Be ready to receive his call in a few minutes,” Burkhalter interrupted him, before he added quietly, “Klink? Thank you for your loyalty! I’ll put an end to this all.” Then there was a click at the line before it went dead.

Klink placed the receiver back and rubbed his hands. That went very, very well. For a moment he grinned. This had been a plan worth being schemed by Hogan – which brought him back to the start of the whole mess. “That deserves a verbal smack on the ear, my boy!” he hissed. “Not only from me, but from Hogan, too. To endanger us all like this is intolerable!” He went to the door and peeked out of it. “Fräulein Hilda, I am expecting a callback from Berlin in a few minutes. Put the general or the Reichsführer through me instantly!”

She looked with big eyes at him and nodded.

*** HH ***

In Barracks 2 all hell had broken loose. The SS-men had torn out the beddings and mattresses, were emptying the lockers now – not caring for the private belongings landing on the floor – and were about to do the same in Hogan’s office, as the door opened and Klink returned.

He gritted his teeth for a moment as he saw the chaos that was raging through the room. “Kriminalrat Lübkemeier? There is a call for you – from Berlin!” he said loudly, to be heard over the protests of the POWs and the sneering answers of the black-clad men.

The Gestapo-officer frowned, stared at Klink and narrowed his eyes. “Whom have you called?”

“No one important – I only talked with Heinrich a little bit, and let us say that he isn’t too delighted that you obviously distrust his and his good friend’s Burkhalter’s reputation.” On full purpose he used the Reichsführer’s given name to plant the idea that they knew each other very well. In fact that had been the first time ever he had spoken with Himmler in person – and he didn’t want a repeat. The man wasn’t less eerie than the Führer himself.

“You called…” Lübkemeier didn’t end the sentence, but stared at him for a moment, before he added coldly, “I underestimated you.”

“A mistake many people do,” Klink all but drawled nonchalantly, before he smiled. “I wouldn’t let the Reichsführer wait much longer, if I were you. He sounded very irritated, to put it mildly.”
With a curse Lübkemeier left the barracks, while Schmidt stopped beside Klink. “Any chance that this call will end this… this madness here?” he whispered hopefully.

The Oberst took a deep breath. “I don’t think you would be making an error if you call your men back now and warn off the two Gestapo-guys.”

Almost relieved, Schmidt raised his voice. “That’s enough, Gentlemen. Stop it – all of you!”


“He will as soon as he returns – and the more damage is done until then the more he’s in trouble. As it seems there is a big misunderstanding in the whole case. Reichsführer Himmler is clearing everything out with him at the moment.”

At the mention of the second highest man in Germany, the activities were instantly interrupted. Schmidt pointed to the door. “Everyone of my men: Out. We've wasted enough time here.” He nodded at Pönnighaus and Leitner, before he left the barracks behind his men; ignoring von Neuhaus’ glares.

“Gentlemen, I think your superior will expect you on the compound,” Klink said and made a gesture towards the door, too. “Please, after you.” He looked around. “Sergeant Kinchloe, take care that this chaos will be cleaned up. If you need tools or other aids, tell Sergeant Schultz. I’ll send him over to you.” He walked to the entrance, but stopped shortly beside Carter. “You did us all a bad turn, boy,” he whispered sharply, while his eyes shot daggers at the young man. “Keep your big mouth shut the next time, unless you want us all to face a firing squad. And be sure that I’ll tell Colonel Hogan about this mess here! I think he is going to have some words with you.” He left and banged the door closed behind him.

With guilt, Andrew looked towards his friends. The most of them had stemmed their hands on their hips and were glaring at him.

“This was really super, Andy,” Newkirk finally stated wryly. “If you want to spare us any boredom next time, please do not involve the Gestapo again.”

*** HH ***
The talk between Lübkemeier and the highest SS-man had been short, but obviously very intense and illuminating. As the Kriminalrat returned to the compound, his lips were pressed in a thin line, his face was flushed and his eyes burning, but his voice was even as he said to Klink,

“The Reichsführer gave me some information about your camp I obviously haven’t gotten before. The inspection is over now and we should… begin with the real investigation. I want to examine the place of the sabotage as well as the area around it. Do you have any charts which would help my men and me?”

Klink smiled patronizingly at him. “Of course I’ve detailed charts here, which have been already used by the SS several times whenever they sought for shot-down enemy pilots or escapees they weren’t able to hold. Come to my office and I can provide you with them.” He strutted towards his office. “And a little advice from a Wehrmacht-officer to the police, Herr Kriminalrat: You should always consider your superiors’ decisions before you compromise their reputation by not believing them. It spares a lot of anger. Reichsführer Himmler and General Burkhalter do not have their positions for naught, but because they belong to the brightest minds within Germany.” Inwardly he cringed. Yes, both men mentioned were highly intelligent, but in Klink’s eyes their ‘bright minds’ were strongly misguided – even in Burkhalter’s case one time or another. Yet he had to praise them to get Lübkemeier down another peck or two – and all this for his camp and ‘his’ troublemaker.

A quarter hour later the Gestapo- and SS-officers had conferred how to proceed. The surrounding villages would be searched for suspicious tracks, devices and people, including Poppenhausen, Bad Kissingen and Hammelburg. Furthermore the citizens would be asked if they had maybe seen something that would give the investigation team usable information. Every detail could lead to the saboteurs. To Klink’s utter dismay, Lübkemeier demanded that the Oberst should accompany him today and maybe tomorrow, too – after all, Klink had lived here for more than four years now, and Schmidt as well as von Neuhaus were relatively new to the area. The Kriminalrat was convinced that the Kommandant could help them with being their scout until they had come to know the area better. And, maybe, it was his own pay-back, calling Klink away from his comfortable camp into the icy weather for the next two days.

Smiling, but inwardly gritting his teeth, Klink agreed – after all he had gotten his orders during the telephone talk with Burkhalter from the highest position within the Third Reich, and he also had to play along to drive away any further suspicions concerning his camp, Hogan and his men, and his own person.

Stalling a few minutes by declaring that he had to get his scarf and gloves from his quarters, he walked quickly towards the separate building to keep Hogan updated. On his way he met Schultz, who had supplied Barracks 2 with some utensils so that the chaos inside of the hut could be eliminated. Telling Schultz of his absence within maybe the next two days he put the sergeant in charge, and after he received some questions which showed how confused Schultz was about everything, he promised to inform him in the evening.
Finally, he stepped into his quarters and headed straight to his usual sleeping chamber. Wilson was nowhere to be seen, but Hogan lay in bed and pulled a book out from under the covers where he had hidden it as he heard the front door opening. It was a book written in German, and Klink knew instantly why his American counterpart had secreted the literature away. It wouldn’t be good if someone of the SS or Gestapo learned that Hogan spoke and read fluid German.

“Is the coast clear now?” the colonel asked quietly, and Klink snorted.

“Far from it. I’ve the ‘honor’ to play scout for the Gestapo-dudes today and maybe tomorrow, too.” He stopped at the bed. “How are you?” he asked quietly; concern written plainly on his face and in his eyes.

Hogan gave him a short smile. “I’m okay, Wilhelm, don’t worry your head off. Fortunately you caught me before real damage could be done. Yeah, my abdomen got one more bruise and my legs give me new trouble, but these are minor damages given what I would have had to endure if you hadn’t reacted so quickly and steadied me.”

“Damn von Neuhaus,” Klink growled. “I could punch the bastard!”

“Don’t!” Hogan warned him quietly. “That you knocked out Hochstetter could be excused with your duty to stop him from killing me at the very last moment, but if you now attack a guy from the Gestapo without clear self-defense, they would surely court-martial you.”

“I know,” Klink sighed. “Especially after the ‘dance’ I had with Lübkemeier within the last hour.”

The American officer frowned. “What ‘dance’? Did you get in trouble because you stood up for me, or is it…”

“No,” the Oberst grimaced. “It’s because of Lübkemeier’s cursed racism and your dynamite-boy who couldn’t keep his mouth shut.”

Hogan abruptly sat up in the bed. “Carter? What has he done now? And what do you mean with racism?”

The Kommandant put down his monocle and rubbed his face, before he gave Hogan a short version of what happened. The noise that escaped Hogan after Klink ended the little story wasn’t even a
groan anymore. It was worse! Letting himself fall back into the pillows – and grimacing because of his instantly protesting back – he moaned, “I’m going to sew his big mouth shut! GOD DAMMIT! This chatterbox will really be our downfall one day!”

“You can say that. I called Burkhalter and…” Klink, who had put his monocle back into place, stopped and found the strength to grin. Hogan, confused as to why Klink had stopped talking, looked questioningly up at him and saw the broad smirk on his German counterpart’s face.

“What is it?” he asked warily; hoping that Klink hadn’t done something stupid, too.

The Oberst’s expression turned into pride and triumph.

“You can say that. I called Burkhalter and…” Klink, who had put his monocle back into place, stopped and found the strength to grin. Hogan, confused as to why Klink had stopped talking, looked questioningly up at him and saw the broad smirk on his German counterpart’s face.

“What is it?” he asked warily; hoping that Klink hadn’t done something stupid, too.

The Oberst’s expression turned into pride and triumph.

“Your dry comment about Lübkemeier’s distrust concerning the general’s and Himmler’s honesty gave me a splendid idea, Rob. I called Burkhalter and complained about the Third Reich’s beginning fall if inferiors like Lübkemeier start to doubt the honor and intelligence of our country’s highest ranking leading men by examining their statements in person – means, tearing one of my barracks apart because a mere boy irritated the Kriminalrat. And I also told Burkhalter about the other comments Lübkemeier and his fellows made which showed that they don’t believe their own superiors. I reminded Burkhalter that you and my camp were declared as ‘clear’ from him and Himmler, but Lübkemeier doubts their sagacity, which is more than an affront.”

The colonel stared at him; impressed. “Let me guess: Burkhalter informed his ‘good friend’ Himmler, who was instantly offended and called Lübkemeier off.”

The Oberst couldn’t help himself. He bounced on the balls of his feet again, cocked his head, smiled proudly and made the typical nasal sound Hogan hadn’t heard for two weeks. “Himmler himself called a few minutes later and – sweet Lord – did he sound furious. He asked me what exactly happened, and after I gave him a short report that was absolutely correct but, let us say, left out a few details, he demanded to speak with Lübkemeier instantly.” He chuckled. “The ‘highly esteemed’ Herr Kriminalrat came back shortly after, pale like a tablecloth, and ended the whole inspection. Your men are trying to put everything back in order at the moment.”

Hogan blinked a few times – and began to laugh, before he beamed at his German counterpart, “Willie, you’re really a genius sometimes.”

“Only sometimes?” Klink teased, then he turned serious again, while he pulled his scarf and the gloves out of the dresser. “Like I said: You’re a good teacher. And maybe you should teach the boy a lesson about when it is better to grit one’s teeth and keep one’s mouth shut. Lübkemeier is furious after Himmler gave him an ear-full. He doesn’t show it on the outside, but he has turned into an ice-
block. And Schmidt had already warned me days ago that von Neuhaus had put the knives outside for me because I took care his beloved superior Hochstetter was sent to trial. We really don’t need more trouble than we already have because one of your men is cheekier than usual.”

Hogan glared up at the ceiling. Carter should be ready for the high jump. “Kommandant,” he said, which instantly woke Klink’s attention. Hogan used to call him ‘Will’, ‘Willie’ or ‘Wilhelm’ in private for days now. To be addressed formally now showed that this was about duty.

“Yes?” the Oberst asked, while wrapping the scarf around his neck.

“Would you please inform Schultz that I’ve to speak with Carter?”

Klink nodded with a grim smirk. “Of course – and give the boy a verbal slap from me, too.” Then he vanished…

TBC…

Well, this was a near miss. Carter is always good for causing some trouble, but Newkirk and LeBeau aren’t this much better (*smile*). And even Kinchloe, who more the circumspectly guy, has his moments in which he acts unreasonable. In this case understandable, after all he really was offended and also had to stand up for a friend, yet he did himself and the others a disservice.

I also hope that Klink’s reaction finds your agreement. In my eyes he isn’t someone who justifies a person by heritage (race), and as such a man he chose his arguments to get Lübkemeier down a peck or two. Yet he had to be carefully not to speak too openly against the regime’s regards, and therefore he emphasized Kinchloe as a well-trained and schooled individual who is a big exception. His own opinion differs from this, because he has come to respect Kinch a great deal.

Von Neuhaus is the nasty boo-man again – and his clashing with Klink will lead to something very gravely, but more of this later.

In the next chapter, Klink is the ‘scout’ for Lübkemeier & Co., he and Hogan will talk about Will’s opinion concerning other races, Schmidt covering for LeBeau and warning our dear colonel. Of course both will realize that there is more to Schmidt that it seemed. Then Hogan realizes even more
how much he is used to have ‘Willie’ around and how strong he misses him, when he isn’t there. And then Klink meets someone he has no good memories to – one of his former kidnappers in the ‘Nimrod’-affair. And said someone recognizes him, too…

I hope, you liked the new chapter and that the whole ‘nasty Gestapo’ vs. ‘witty Heroes’ that is so typical for ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ came over well. Like always I’m curious about your reactions.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

As it seems, Monday is the new day for updates (*snicker*), and I hope you’re already curious about the new chapter.

The trouble with Lübkemeier isn’t over and poor Klink has to pay for his standing up for Hogan and his men. Yet exactly this circumstance will lead to a possibility to distract the Gestapo, because Klink is going to meet someone of whom he knows that said someone belongs to the Underground, and he takes the given chance.

But as hard and unpleasant it is for him of being the ‘scout’ for Lübkemeier and the others, as warm, cozy and pleasant are the evenings, because Hogan shows that he really care about his German counterpart. And the tensions between the two men will even increase...

So, have fun with the new chapter,

Thank you for the feedback I got for the last one,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 32 – Hard days

Carter got an ear-full from Hogan – a very big ear-full, so to say. Kinchloe, who had accompanied Andrew, told his friend and superior how it had all gone down and admitted that he, James, had also given the Kriminalrat some fitting answers. The colonel was anything but happy about it. Of course, he could understand his two friends, yet gaining so much of the investigation team's attention and irritating a high ranking Gestapo-officer hadn’t been very wise. They were all walking on thin ice here – thin ice that could break any moment – and holding the ball low was necessary to their survival.
Andrew was the living example of guilt, and Kinchloe stepped into the breach for him; telling Hogan that Carter had only been driven to taunting the Kriminalrat back because of the Kriminalrat’s own offensive remarks. He also related Klink’s little speech afterwards to his superior; still impressed that the German officer obviously didn’t discriminate against people with different skin-colors.

Hogan only smiled. Somehow he had guessed that Klink didn’t belong to the people who had a racist attitude, even if he’d made some rude comments about ‘Kinch’s people’. Both, the colonel and Kinchloe, took those remarks for what they were: A charade to cover Klink’s real views, which had been dangerous in Nazi-Germany for years now.

After the talk Carter trotted away like a rebuked schoolboy, but of course he knew that Hogan and Kinch were right. It had been stupid, but he had been so angry…

Kinchloe had in the meantime also learned from LeBeau (and Newkirk) that the Frenchman had been recognized as the ‘escaped POW’ by Schmidt and that the Oberleutnant had stayed quiet about it. As he told Hogan about it, the colonel became very thoughtful. As it seemed, the young German had his own agenda; maybe one that went against the regime. If they could win him as an ally, they would gain a lot of advantages, because at the moment they had no ‘eyes and ears’ in the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg. But they had to be very careful, and Hogan decided to get Klink on board for it.

*** HH *** HH ***

The rest of the day went by uneventfully – at least for Hogan. While his men were putting the barracks back into order, Schultz was again fighting with the paper-work, many POWs were battling with the snow and even the guards yearned for the end of their shifts. Klink wasn’t so fortunate to grapple with usual work, though.

Playing ‘scout’ for Lübkemeier and the others was both tiresome and frustrating. He had stayed in the icy snow and wind for three hours while the Gestapo were examining the derailed train. The wreckage and debris of the destroyed Messerschmitt-wings were spread in a wide range and had damaged not only parts of the forest’s edge, but also the road that led from Poppenhausen to Bad Kissingen via Oerlenbach and Arnhausen – both these villages were very near the place of the sabotage. The railway was practically non-existent on a length of a few hundred meters. The loco had been forced out of the rails but had at least remained standing, just like the coal-carrier that was sans any freight by now. Therefore dozens of foot prints were visible around the coal-carrier, footprints vanishing on the road where they were lost in the tire tracks.

Obviously a lot of people had taken advantage of the chance fate had offered them and had stocked
up material for their furnaces – something Klink couldn’t blame them for, just like Schmidt. Von Neuhaus made some disgusting comments about ‘thieves within their own line’, while Lübkemeier pointed out that they weren’t here to catch some coal-thieves. He knew how big the hardship was for the people by now, and he saw no reason to investigate in this direction. His whole concern was the sabotage – and the destroyed railway. As it seemed, all trains between the south and the north-east of Germany would have to take another route from now on. This railway had been the last connection between Schweinfurt and the frontier to Thüringen – after all, the railway in the north of Hammelburg had already been made unusable because of Papa Bear’s deed last December.

They checked the cart-tracks and the two small paths which ran between the two small villages, but there weren’t many tracks to be found. The snow that had been falling within the last hours had covered almost everything.

And Klink added even more oil to the fire as he commented that they might have found more tracks before the snow eliminated everything if they would have started the investigation here sooner – meaning, if Lübkemeier would have believed his own superior and had skipped messing with Klink’s camp and his prisoners. Schmidt held his face expressionless, but inside he was deeply amused, but also impressed. There weren’t many people – officers or not – who would dare to irritate a high ranking Gestapo-member. Either Klink was nuts or very, very brave. Schmidt didn’t know which one really fitted the Oberst – he assumed both – but the way the Stalag-Kommandant acted showed the young man that Klink didn’t give a damn about the Kriminalrat’s and his assistants’ mood.

They began questioning people in Oerlenbach, through which the railway ran just a few kilometers before the site the sabotage had occurred. The next villages would be Eltinghausen and Arnshausen – after all, all three localities were in visible range of the spot where the detonations happened. Lübkemeier also planned to ask the people living in the handful of houses called Wirmsthal and Ramsthal. Both small villages lay more in the west in the direction of Hammelburg, at the other side of the woods which adjoined the railway. The chance to find someone there who had seen something was small, but Lübkemeier wouldn’t take any risk of missing valuable information.

They trotted through the streets and quarters of Oerlenbach that were closest to the railway and practically rang the bell at every house. But no-one seemed to have seen anything extraordinary. The train had passed through like so many others, that was all.

In Eltinghausen they had no luck, too. Almost the same went for Arnshausen, where at least they got some statements from a few children who had been out in the fields to play in the snow. They told them that they had seen men in black uniforms an hour or so before a large detonation had made them run back to their homes.

“My, my, this sounds bad for the SS,” Klink murmured, while he watched the door of a small house being closed after the two boys and their mother had said everything they knew.
Lübkemeier whirled around. “You don’t think that this was really the deed of the SS, do you?”

“Black uniforms. As far as I know the Allies don’t have bl…”

“KLINK! That saboteurs are wearing different uniforms to cover their true identity and to avoid drawing the attention of eventual witnesses is a common trick even you should consider!”

“Of course this is nothing new, I only ask myself how the saboteurs were able to get a hold of SS-uniforms. Maybe you should start your search with this detail,” the Saxonian officer replied nonchalantly, before he straightened his shape. “And it’s OBERST Klink for you, Herr Kriminalrat.”

A low growl was the only answer, then the men continued going from house to house.

As evening came, every man’s mood had gone down the toilet. The three Gestapo-officers were more than frustrated since they had gotten many hints, but nothing detailed or something they could work with. Von Neuhaus was boiling with anger because of the many verbal stingers Klink had thrown, Schmidt was simply tired and Klink… Well, he was beyond tired. Yes, he had overcome his bronchitis, but the rest of the symptoms were still there and had increased during the afternoon. And above all he hadn’t eaten since early breakfast. All restaurants and inns were closed, because there wasn’t enough nourishment to sell anymore – and even if some inns should have something to sell, the Reichsmark was as good as nothing by now. The three Gestapo-officers had brought some bread and water with them, but Klink hadn’t thought about packing lunch and the same went for von Neuhaus, Schmidt and the other members of the SS. Therefore they were all hungry.

As Lübkemeier finally called it off for the day, Klink felt more than miserable. He was cold, tired, he felt starved, his left calf that had been healing very well hurt again, his feet were like ice and he had had to cough again here and there. Because even the Hausener Hof in Hammelburg was closed now just like all other hotels, Schmidt had no other choice than to offer Lübkemeier and his men a place to stay at the HQ, and because they had taken Klink with them in one of their cars, Schmidt ordered that first the Oberst was to be brought back to Stalag 13 before they would head to Hammelburg.

It was almost seven in the evening as Klink stepped out of the car within his camp, wished the ‘gentlemen’ a good night, gave Schmidt a short smile of gratitude and was about to close the door, as Lübkemeier informed him that the Oberst would be picked up in the morning again. Any protest that Klink had about running a POW-camp with almost 1000 POWs met deaf ears. It was more than obvious that the Kriminalrat was well aware of Klink’s current condition – after all the Kommandant was limping again by now – but Lübkemeier gave no reprieve. Rather the opposite. He took pleasure in making the Luftwaffe-officer more miserable than he already felt.
Grousing and in a foul mood, Klink walked over the compound; cursing the Gestapo and his calf. Schultz, who had come out of the Kommandantur, expended a lot of effort in catching up with him. One look at his superior’s face and Schultz knew that it was better to cut everything short and skip any questions concerning the morning’s happenings. He had been informed by Hogan enough to know what was going on by now. So he simply gave Klink a quick report of the evening roll call (all POWs were present, of course) and that nothing special had happened during the Oberst’s absence.

Klink only nodded, thanked Schultz brusquely, bid him a good night and vanished to his quarters. He knew that there wouldn’t be a warm meal for him today; warm food was only served during lunch, dinner was always made of bread and topping. So it took him by utter surprise as he stepped into the small building and smelled something very delicious coming from the kitchen. The dining table was set up for two and even a candle was lightened. The furnace radiated with comfortable warmth and all smaller lamps were switched on instead of the large ceiling light, bathing the whole room in golden shine.

It was like coming home – to a real home for once.

Baffled, Klink stopped dead in his tracks – looking around with large eyes. A movement at the kitchen-door woke his attention and his glance found a beaming LeBeau. “Good evening, Colonel Klink,” the tiny Frenchman said. “You’re just in time for dinner. I’ll serve everything in five minutes.” He vanished again, and Klink – still thunderstruck – walked to the kitchen.

“Warm dinner?” he asked; feeling an irritation in his throat and coughing.

LeBeau – in apron and cooking hat – looked over his shoulder. “Mon colonel insisted that you two have a warm dinner when you’re back. He meant you’re going to need it – and I’ve to agree. You look terrible.” He pointed outside; almost sounding like a father. “Strip off your coat and get ready for dinner. I’ll bring you and mon colonel some tea in a few.” Whistling, he began to fill a kettle with water to prepare some tea.

Klink watched him for a moment; feeling a wave of gratefulness and warmth. He had only gotten a small taste before of how it was to be a part of a group that took care of each other, and this here was another example. “Thank you, LeBeau,” he said quietly and meant it.

Louis shot him another grin and ‘fought’ with pan and pot, while Klink went to his usual sleeping chamber. Hogan was about to rise, but stopped in his movements as he saw his German counterpart.
“Hey,” he greeted gently and anything but properly concerning his and Klink’s position, but the Oberst didn’t care. As long as they were here in this little world and more or less alone, formalities were unnecessary.

“Good evening,” Klink answered, while stripping off his gloves and unbuttoning his coat, which he threw over the armchair. “Thank you for waiting with the warm meal for me.”

“It’s the least I can do,” Hogan shrugged, while he carefully put his feet over the bed’s edge and rose into a sitting position. His brown eyes observed the older man closely. “You look…”

“…terrible, I know. And I also feel this way.” He sighed, while he sat down on the arm-chair (and down on the coat; not caring that he would be putting some more crinkles into the material) and began to pull off the scarf and his wet boots.

He couldn’t help but complain about the whole day ‘out in the wilderness’, his hurting calf, being cold and hungry, while he also stripped off his wet socks and rose to get fresh, dry ones. He met Hogan’s gaze, which was full of sympathy. In earlier times there had often been mockery hidden in the American’s glances whenever Klink had groused about too much paperwork, too much this, too much that – but not anymore. Robert’s eyes spoke of understanding and compassion – and it did wonders to the older man’s spirit, who stopped in front of him.

Continuing to simply look at each other, Klink took new strength from the care Hogan showed, while the American colonel felt the sudden urge to offer real comfort by taking ‘Willie’ in his arms. Again! And he wasn’t even shocked about this impulse; only the inner wish of close proximity to calm down the other began to count. He reached out and laid one hand on Klink’s arm; his thumb moved in soothing circles.

And for a moment time seemed to stand still, while they held each other’s gaze – almost drowning in the other one’s eyes. Warmth spread through the room – a warmth that increased with every second that went by until the air seemed to be hot like the midday sun in summer. Both men felt their pulse rising and…

“If the colonels are done drooling over each other, they can come to dinner,” LeBeau’s almost bugged voice tore the two out of the peaceful yet somehow tensing up situation.

Startled, Klink turned around quickly, while Hogan snatched his hand back; flushing red. LeBeau stood at the threshold, grimaced at them and shook his head in admonition. “Really, Messieurs, a guy could get the wrong idea here if he watches you acting like this.”
Without another thought, Robert took one of the pillows and hurled it into Louis’ direction, who quickly moved aside and began laughing.

“OUT!” Hogan all but hollered, which made LeBeau laugh even more.

“Don’t forget to wash your hands, boys!” he called over his shoulder before heading back to the kitchen.

“’Boys’?” the colonel repeated. “You’re hanging out with Carter too much,” he yelled – and had to cough.

Klink chuckled, while he felt his mood lifting even more. “You really have your hands full with your men, don’t you?”

Hogan took a deep breath to calm his throat. “Men? You mean kids!” he deadpanned hoarsely – and Klink had to laugh, too.

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Dinner was nice, even if Klink almost wolfed everything down – not giving a damn about table manners for once. Hogan watched him with sympathy and even offered the older man something from his own plate; declaring that he wasn’t this hungry. He had stayed in bed most of the day and even if his body was still healing he didn’t have much need to regain his strength by taking nourishment like Klink did after being in the icy cold for hours. Yet the Oberst first wanted to decline the offer, but gave in as Hogan said he would have to then return it to the kitchen. Both men knew that this was only a half-truth, but in the end Klink took the offer and emptied the rest of Hogan’s plate, too.

The hot tea LeBeau had made for them warmed the Kommandant and helped him get rid of his irritated throat. Afterwards LeBeau cleaned the table (and the kitchen), wished both officers a good night – warning them ‘to behave’, which earned him another sharp comment from Hogan – and vanished with a broad grin.

He still thought that he was only teasing his superior with those ambiguous comments, yet there was a certain tension between the two officers he hadn’t witnessed ever before. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear there had been sparks flying around them. LeBeau frowned and put the idea off. There
was no way on Earth that Hogan would see something else in Klink than a kind of friend. The mere thought was laughable, after all the colonel’s reputation as a lady’s man was well known and the same went for Klink, even if the German officer had a success rate of zero concerning women. Yet there had been something… Something that had lasted even during dinner, and LeBeau wasn’t sure he wanted to know what it was for real.

Stepping out into the cold he looked around before he headed for his barracks. It was past curfew but the guards outside knew that the French POW had cooked for the two officers and only watched him warily until he vanished inside Barracks 2. Then silence spread over the compound.

Inside Klink’s quarters, Hogan – who had decided to ignore LeBeau’s jokes – told his German counterpart about the talk he'd had with Kinchloe and Carter; thanking Klink for standing up for them.

“It was not much I could do,” the Oberst shrugged. “Not if I didn’t want to wake even more suspicions within Lübkemeier. That I got furious after what von Neuhaus did to you triggered the Kriminalrat’s wariness – and then I gave him a piece of my mind as he referred to Sergeant Kinchloe as an ‘it’. I had to control myself yet couldn’t help but have to get Lübkemeier down a peck or two. However, I regret that I had to make some arrogant racist comments about Germans being the ‘master-race’ and Kinchloe’s ‘people’, but…”

“Kinch and the others took your comments as what they were meant: A cover to mask your real point of view,” Hogan interrupted him softly. “There are not many men who would dare do what you did.”

“My grandmother, who was very religious, taught me that all people are the Lord’s children.” Klink sighed. “Our regime thinks it has all rights on Earth to begin this war and fight it to the bitter end because our people are ‘better’ and ‘greater’ – the ‘master-race’ that should rule the world. And yet I wouldn’t bury even one of the brass or Hitler himself to the feet of other men and women, who are called ‘lower beings’, but in truth are thousand times better people than those nuisances will ever be. Sergeant Kinchloe is a fine and highly intelligent man – gentle, polite and counterbalancing with a touch of dry humor. Or take Sergeant Baker as another example. He is a fine man, too. A little bit quieter than Kinchloe, but he has a bright mind. Both men are black, but I cannot regard them as ‘lower beings’ only because God gave them another color than us. They love, laugh, fear, hate and weep like we do – because we’re all one human race, only from different continents. I have no problems with them looking different, having other traditions or following other religious beliefs, but this point of view alone makes me a traitor in this country that was once famous for its manifold nature.”

Hogan had listened closely and was again surprised by the depths of his German counterpart’s thoughts. “Your mindset is rare, even among many of us Americans. I… witnessed racism within our army often enough and utterly disagree with it, yet I can’t deny that there are a lot of flyers and
officers who think of different-colored men within the Army just like your brass does.”

Klink smiled softly. “That you make no distinction due to the men’s heritage is something I realized soon after Kinchloe’s arrival. I saw you and him talking in the yard and heard the sergeant laughing, while you grinned at him and slapped him comradely on the shoulder – you, an officer of higher rank. And your behavior towards Kinchloe was and still is no exception. I’ve often enough witnessed how the other POWs look up to you, smile at you and show more than the demanded respect. You seem to have a kind word for everyone – from the simple soldier to non-commissioned officers, like Newkirk or LeBeau. And you did it from the beginning. It was the first time I had ever seen an officer acting not stiffly and arrogantly but warmly and kindly, yet you become stern whenever necessary and they respect you for it, too. It was and still is something I’d hoped to experience for my own one day, but it’s impossible in the German army, regardless of regime. We only know harshness; anything else is regarded as weakness.”

“Believe me, the latter goes for many officers within the other armies, too,” Hogan said quietly. “And I’m sure that several of my superiors would be inwardly outraged if they learn of my way of acting towards ‘lower’ people – a term that in their eyes not only includes ‘colored’ people, but also simple soldiers. But since my teen years I’ve experienced what it means to be treated in a lofty manner – it was one of the reasons I rebelled in my own way. And knowing how shitty you feel if you’re confronted with the prejudice and arrogance of others, I try to avoid making the same mistake. No one is better or not because of their heritage. It’s what we do or don’t do that makes us the men or women we are.”

Klink smiled shortly. “Yeah, exactly my opinion, yet recent history shows that we haven’t learned about tolerance at all. I’m an officer who worked hard to get his rank. There were no benefits because of influential friends or other supporters who helped me become an Oberst. Yet most other higher ranking officers look down on me like I’m a disease. And they act even worse around the simple soldiers. Before and during the first war, it was no miracle that the soldiers spoke of ‘the officers’ like their superiors were demons or would spread pestilence through them. You only could visit a military academy if you were a nobleman, and as such the officers acted towards the soldiers as if they were inferior. After the November-Revolution in North-Germany that ended the first war, officers had to learn that they aren’t those ‘gods’ anymore and that they had to arrange themselves with the ‘simple’ people. The first democracy was developed but it went down the hill because the parties not only fought each other, but also quarreled among themselves. I know of what I speak. I entered the SPD shortly after it was founded, because even if I was already an officer with the correct Academy-graduation, I always thought differently than the rest of my comrades. I wanted to change our country to something better.” He took a deep breath and lowered his head.

“And then came Hitler,” Hogan murmured.

“Yeah, then the little Austrian came. Germany was estranging itself. Communists, socialists and capitalists were trying to be in charge, the high repudiation costs from the first war were nailing us at the wall, and the number of people unemployed was rising from month to month. Germany was drowning in chaos – and then came Hitler. At first he overdid it and was sentenced to jail for
attempted sedition. He wrote ‘Mein Kampf’ while in prison – and then he returned.”

“Hitler had been arrested for incitement of the people, but was able to become your leader in the end?” Hogan asked; thunderstruck.

Klink snorted. “Ja. He had a way to get what he wants – by simply saying what the people want to hear and weaving his net in the background. First we all thought that he was our savior. Thousands of new jobs, the economy was blooming again, the quarreling parties had to do their real job for once and we’d something to believe in again.” He grimaced. “And then he showed his true face. Not at once, but little by little, while he built up his strategy. As those who didn’t share his opinions realized his true intentions it was too late.” He shook his head in disbelief. “We both spoke of the racism the Nazis display. Well, I was a spectator of the Olympic Games in 1939. I remember that Hitler demonstratively left the arena as a dark-skinned runner won the foot-race. I couldn’t understand his reaction, because the runner was really impressive. Yet I quickly learned to keep my mouth shut – like so many others did. Today I think that we all supported Hitler by staying silent instead of speaking our mind. Maybe we could have stopped him in time.”

“Maybe – maybe not. He played his game very well. I’ve to give him this,” Hogan said quietly. “But it’s not too late to stop him now. And for this we’ve to give our best.”

Klink smiled shortly. “That brings me to your last mission. Your men really did a big job. I’ve never seen the outcome of one of your sabotages shortly after the deed except for the bridge you blew up last year while making this movie with Burkhalter as the trigger of the explosion.” He chuckled; thinking back once again at the general’s outburst afterwards and his frustration that he wouldn’t be able to give Berlin a correct report about the incident without facing harsh consequences. “I never thought that such a large cargo and so many wagons could be torn into pieces like this,” he continued. “And the railway – it’s practically non-existent on a length of almost two or three hundred meters, and the nearby road is blocked by the wagons and torn wings which had been hurled away.”

“Good,” Hogan nodded, while sipping at his second cup of tea. “This gives the Gestapo a lot to investigate.”

“Ja – with me as their scout,” the Oberst almost pouted. “At least Schmidt accompanied us. The boy is the only agreeable guy in this whole bunch of paranoid fanatics!”

Hogan snickered, then he frowned. “Apropos Schmidt: Shortly before you and the Gestapo arrived this morning, he was here to warn me.”

Klink was about to rise to get them a cognac, but now he stood frozen within the movement – jaw
“What?” he asked, flabbergasted.

His American counterpart nodded. “Yes. A few minutes before you came, he crept into your quarters and warned me of the Gestapo’s arrival and that ‘a Kriminalrat Lübkemeier from Berlin’ would ask me unpleasant questions because of an assault that had taken place not far from here.”

This time it was the Kommandant who frowned. “Why should he do something like this? Right, he already told me that he doesn’t agree with the Gestapo’s and SS’ methods, but…”

“That was the reason he mentioned as I asked him the same question. He said that what had been done to me was wrong and that he doesn’t want a repeat. And, what’s even more important, he asked for a back-door as he saw you and the others coming through the window.”

Klink pursed his lips. “So, he fears something,” he pondered.

“Obviously. I think he worries about von Neuhaus backstabbing him because he was chosen as the new CO, not von Neuhaus. And one thing more. I… reacted on reflex as I opened my eyes and saw a black uniform. Schmidt concluded that I’m healthier than it seems. He advised me to stay calm and to suppress any hasty movements so that Lübkemeier doesn’t get the wrong – or better to say – right idea about my real condition.” He sighed. “And what really confuses me: He recognized LeBeau being the POW who escaped the camp and informed you about my fate. LeBeau and he saw each other on the street in front of the Gestapo-HQ, and given Louis’ unique, tiny figure, Schmidt recognized him here in the camp. But he didn’t take any actions against LeBeau; rather the contrary. Newkirk told Kinch that Schmidt gave our cook the advice to not make it a habit of leaving the camp, and afterwards – during the investigation – Schmidt pretended not to know LeBeau; obviously to protect him against any punishments. He covered for him – and this gives me second thoughts.”

Klink rubbed his chin. “This is interesting. He knows more than he reveals and keeps secrets from his men. So there are only two reasons for his doing so: He wants to use his knowledge to his own advantage and is waiting for the best time, or he is against this whole madness within this land like you and me, and tries to fight it in his own way.”

Hogan made an affirming gesture. “Maybe you can find out more when you’re playing scout tomorrow again. If the Lieutenant – Oberleutnant – is out to gain himself some more stripes for his uniform, we all are at stake. If he really holds honor and goodness in a higher regard than the typical executive power of the Third Reich and his heart beats for a brighter future, we could win a valuable ally.”

Sighing, the Oberst stemmed one elbow on the table surface and laid his chin in his hand. “So we’ve
to check him through. And you trust me with this task?’

Klink felt his heart beat quickening, as he received a warm, gentle smile from Robert. “In earlier times I wouldn’t have entrusted you with something like this. You played your role of ignorance and incomprehension well. Today I know that you look through people very well and that your life-experiences equal a psychology degree. If someone can probe a man, then it’s you. Don’t forget, even I was fooled by you.”

“Just like you fooled me a lot, too. Just think of Carter playing Hitler,” Klink grumbled. “All right, I’ll try to learn more about our young former Abwehr-Leutnant. Usually I don’t let one of the SS or Gestapo near me, but Schmidt was likable from the beginning, and…”

“More likeable than I am?” Hogan half joked, half pouted – and Klink felt the sudden urge to snicker.

“Robert, the moment you stepped through the door of my office I knew that you would be trouble – yet I liked you from the beginning. And this is a position no-one will contest for. So don’t be jealous.” He rose to get them a cognac – and Hogan felt a little devil peeping over his shoulder, as he murmured loud enough to be heard,

“I do know that I hold a special place in your heart – yet a guy can ask, can’t he?”

Klink stopped dead within his tracks, turned around, gaped at the younger man – who flashed him an impish grin – felt his cheeks heating up like a kettle and stuttered, “Y-y-y-you… rascal!”

Hogan grinned at him, while he leant back again. “And you love me for it,” he teased.

The older man stared down at him; fighting the sudden, almost overwhelming, urge to kiss his American counterpart. ‘You’ve no idea how much!’ he thought, before he finally went to the other table to get the two cognacs.

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The Gestapo was well-known for nasty surprises and after Lübkemeier had shown his dislike for Klink the whole day after that morning’s mess, the Oberst expected some trouble – maybe even during the night, just to anger him. And because he didn’t really trust his guards to alert him before
some leather- or black-clad men would storm into his quarters, the Kommandant decided to sleep in the guest-room this night.

It shouldn’t have surprised them, but both colonels had a rather unsettled night despite Klink’s tiredness. Both were used to sleeping side by side – to sensing the other one’s closeness even in sleep. The lack of proximity held them both awake over and over again during short sleeping periods their bodies demanded.

Hogan was irritated with himself. Sweet Lord, this was crazy. Yes, Klink wasn’t asleep beside him, and what? Where was the problem? When he would return to Barracks 2 he would sleep completely alone in his own little chamber ’til the end of the war, so no big deal here. Yet he couldn’t find any real rest. He simply missed the older man – missed hearing Will’s soft breath or feeling those long arms around him.

A few meters away in the other room, Klink likewise suffered. The anxiety of some eventual trouble from Lübkemeier’s side, and Robert’s missing presence beside him made him roll from one side to the other and back again. And when he found some sleep, crazy and dark dreams haunted him.

Groggily, he rose early in the morning and crept to the bathroom. He wasn’t really surprised to find Hogan already awake, too.

“Slept well?” he asked.

The colonel slowly shook his head. “No, not really,” he answered truthfully. ‘I missed you,’ the unwelcome voice in his mind whispered and he groaned soundlessly. “And you?”

“Me neither,” Klink grumbled. “Stupid Gestapo! Next night I’m sleeping here again and if they think they can barge into my quarters, then…” He frowned. “I will order Schultz to install a bolt at the front-door. Then they have to knock very loudly to get my attention, which will wake me up and then we can still pretend that we two sleep in separate rooms.” He nodded determinedly to himself and went into the bathroom.

Hogan sighed and closed his eyes. That ‘Willie’ missed them sleeping together in one bed was understandable given his feelings for his American counterpart, but Robert could only shake his head about himself sharing Klink’s feelings on that matter. Dammit, in one or two weeks he would certainly have to return to Barracks 2, and then their sleeping arrangement would find its end. Better to get used to sleeping alone again. Only – he didn’t want to. He couldn’t deny the fact that last night without the older man beside him had been… cold, lonely and uncomfortable. And he really didn’t look forward to a repeat.
The only thing that raised his mood later in the morning was Wilson telling him that the last stitches could finally be removed. It was unpleasant – hell, it even hurt here and there – but the prospect of being able to take a shower made it up for Hogan.

Half an hour later he came out of the bathroom – showered, shaved, with washed hair, wearing his own fresh pajama and with a very large beaming smile on his face. “I feel reborn,” he announced; ignoring the fact that several parts of his body still stung, throbbed or otherwise pained him.

Wilson chuckled. “Yes, I think so. Yet I’ve to douse your mood. Please strip off the top. We’ve to carefully rub the antibiotic ointment on your healing back wounds, and afterwards I’ve to re-do the bandages.”

Hogan groaned. “Is this really necessary?”

“Have you seen this part of your left rib-cage?”

“Yeah, it’s dark because of the broken ribs.”

“And you don’t want them to shift and pierce your lungs, do you?” He helped Hogan out of the pajama top. “By the way, what if these Gestapo-dudes show up here again and find you sans bandages, Colonel?”

The officer stared at him. “Don’t tell me that you will also re-do the bandage around my head!”

“Your still bad condition would look far more convincing if you’re patched up,” Joe shrugged. “As long as these bastards are sniffing around here, we’ve to be careful. And Klink will certainly grant you some more time here if you’re still too injured to move back to your own quarters. And he also won’t be able to tell the Gestapo anything different, because he thinks you’re still…”

“Klink won’t say anything that would endanger the boys and me – not now or ever.” As he caught Wilson’s questioning glance, he murmured, “He knows about us.”

“WHAT?” Joe stilled within his doing; flabbergasted. He couldn’t believe his ears, and Hogan smiled softly for a moment.
“He’s known for over two years now and has covered for us the whole time. Why, do you think, did he make all those silly surprise roll calls in the two days before we sabotaged the railway?”

“That… was your men?” Wilson asked disbelievingly. “The whole reason the Gestapo turned the camp upside-down? And what has Klink have to do with it?”

The colonel smirked. “Easy, he made the roll calls to prepare the perfect alibi for Newkirk and Carter. The long speech about the ‘impossible condition of his men’s uniforms’ was to distract them, while Newkirk and Carter left the camp to sabotage the railway. Klink made the last surprise roll call exactly a few minutes before the detonation went off. Coincidence? No, knowledge. He was informed about everything and did more than simply cover for us this time.”

Wilson stared at him – and promptly sat down on the bed’s edge. “Klink… is on our side?”

“Yes. Without him the operation would have been revealed last year at the latest. He stalled for time for my men and me, distracted the authorities and sent Hochstetter, the SS and the Gestapo on wild-goose-hunts to keep us safe. He even lied to Burkhalter.” He took a deep breath. “I know that the men are still angry that he chased them out of the warm barracks for surprise roll calls within the last days, but everything was done to make the alibi more believable to Berlin. It was a clever move. Me being restricted to a sick-bed with a lot of still healing bad injuries and the roll call in the afternoon the day before yesterday convinced Berlin that I cannot be Papa Bear, like Hochstetter accused me of being during his questioning. We’re finally off the hook – and Klink is paying the price for it, being forced to play now scout for the Gestapo despite his calf hurting anew and being out in the cold while he is still suffering the remnants of his almost healed bronchitis.”

Wilson groaned, rubbed his face, shook his head, snorted, grimaced and rose again. “You really took me by surprise with these news, sir.” He grinned and snorted. “Who’d have ever thought…” He shook his head and regained control. With new mildness on his face, he looked at his superior. “When the Oberst is back, I’m coming over and checking on him.” He took the small canister with the ointment. “And now, please turn around, sir.”

Sighing, Hogan obeyed…

*** HH *** HH ***

Klink walked down the pavement in the tiny village of Ramsthal. It was afternoon and he felt more tired and irritated than rarely before. With narrowed eyes he looked at Lübkmeyer, who seemed to
be determined to question every living soul in the area – without any real results. At least Klink had taken a lunch-package with him this time and he could eat something during midday as they drove from Ebenhausen, that lay in the south of Oerlenbach, to Ramsthal, yet he was miserable again but masked it with a frozen smile on his lips and a false good mood.

Von Neuhaus seemed to be irritated that he, Klink, didn’t complain or try to sneak out of the situation, while Schmidt gave the Oberst glances of sympathy here and there. It really was unnecessary for the Luftwaffe-officer to accompany them again. The charts Klink had provided them with were detailed enough to let them find their way alone, but Lübkemeier drew pleasure from messing the Kommandant’s day up again – even despite the fact that Klink was limping more and more.

The Kriminalrat had asked the Oberst about his ‘clumsy way of walking all of a sudden’, to which Klink had answered with a cool, “The result of a shooting wound I received while doing Hochstetter’s duty during an ambush of Allied air fighters.” More he hadn’t said, but Lübkemeier had ceased any mention of it again since then. But Klink couldn’t deny that his leg was really giving him problems by now.

At least, the wind had stopped from blowing so mercilessly down on Earth and even the snow fall had lessened, yet it was still cold and uncomfortable outside.

They only met a few people, and Klink again didn’t miss that almost all of them looked with anxiety and nervousness at Lübkemeier and the others. ‘How sick and twisted must a country become that its own people are afraid of uniformed men,’ he thought with a shudder.

Then his attention was driven to a woman who was walking along the pavement on the other side of the street. She was a younger lady with shoulder-length brown hair and… And he knew her!

For a moment he was back in those wine-cellars approx. three months ago, as he had been mistaken for Burkhalter and had been kidnapped by the Underground to be traded against one of their most important leaders, Hans Wagner. This woman had been there, too – demanding that he be shot as the kidnappers realized their error. He had really undergone icy mortal fear then, and even if he had been traded at the end – because somehow Burkhalter and Hochstetter had for an hour or so believed that he was the master-spy Nimrod – he had had nightmares for days afterwards.

He pressed his lips into a thin line and watched the young woman, who looked over at him and the others – and paled dramatically as her eyes fell on him. Hastily, she looked away again and lowered her head, but it was too late. She had recognized him, just like she herself had been recognized – and Klink was still furious over what had happened that day. He was very aware of the fact that he couldn’t really confront her without giving her identity away and therefore endangering the Underground and maybe even Hogan and his men, yet he wouldn’t let this chance pass.
Without saying something to Lübke and the others, who walked in front of him, he simply crossed the street and stepped into the woman’s way. She glanced up again – and a hue of panic appeared in her eyes.

“Good afternoon, Ma’am,” he said; tipping his cap in a short salute. “I think we’ve already met.”

Her quick breath was visible by the smog in front of her lips, as she replied hoarsely, “You’re certainly mistaken, sir.”

“I don’t think so,” he replied. “Is the wine empty in the cellar or are you out for a little kidnapping again?”

All color had drained from her face. “I-I-I-I don’t know what you’re talking of,” she whispered.

Hard steps drew nearer and Klink didn’t need to turn around to know that Lübke was heading towards them. The woman saw the man in the long leather-coat approaching and began to sway. Klink steadied her by grasping her elbow. “Easy there, Ma’am. You really shouldn’t be out in the cold in your unhealthy condition,” he rebuked her with phony concern.

The Gestapo-officer stopped beside them and shortly bowed his head in a polite manner. “Ma’am, I think you belong to the people here I haven’t asked a few questions until now. Kriminalrat Lübke from Berlin,” he introduced himself. “And you are?”

“Ilse… Vormann,” she replied; her hands shook.

It didn’t slip Lübke’s attention. He was used to many people reacting to his presence with fear, but this here was more. “What’s the matter, Ma’am?” he asked, vigilant.

“The lady is on her way to the next pharmacy, but I think she overestimated herself,” Klink lied with new-found smoothness. “I saw her stumbling and offered some help.” He shortly looked at her face. “Obviously she sports a fever and I also heard her cough.”

Lübke glanced at him, then back at the woman, took in her pale face with the red cheeks (a result of the bitter cold), the wide dark eyes and heard her shallow breathing. “You really don’t look
well, Ma’am. Oberst Klink, maybe you should accompany the lady to the pharmacy down the street so that she reaches it safely. And you can, on the way there, ask her if she saw something that could be useful for us. We’re continuing our way so you can catch up with us again.”

“A pleasure, Herr Kriminalrat,” Klink replied and offered the woman his arm. “Shall we?”

Ilse was completely bewildered by now. Of course she had instantly recognized Klink – the monocle alone gave him away, not to speak of his tall figure and his sometimes unusual way of walking. And he had recognized her too, given his first words. He knew that she belonged to the Underground and that he had been held prisoner by her and Hans’ brother, so why did he just lie to the Gestapo-officer? Why hadn’t he given her away? What did he want?

“Ma’am?” Klink asked firmly but still offered his arm in a completely gentleman-like way.

“Th-thanks,” she whispered, slipped one hand in the crook of his arm, nodded at the Gestapo-officer, coughed for good measure and slowly walked down the pavement towards the pharmacy that was at the next corner.

When she was certain that she was out of the Kriminalrat’s earshot, she moistened her lips and asked hoarsely, “Why didn’t you give me away?”

“So, at least you admit it,” Klink growled quietly. “I never thought that I would see you again, but obviously fate is having a lot of fun throwing coincidences my way.”

Ilse took another deep breath. “Why… did you cover for me? You know that I…”

“Sh-sh, even the trees have ears these days,” the Oberst interrupted her, nodding towards the snow-covered trees in some gardens along the street. “Let us say, there is a bear and an eagle who look out for the moles.”

She gulped and looked up at him again. “What do you mean?”

“Moles are formidable as long as they can hide deep in the ground, but if they come out, they’re mostly blinded by the light of day and sometimes are even in need of some help. Seeing that the bear, who keeps them as safe as he can, is in winter sleep, the eagle has to do the bear’s job for now.” He glanced down at her and took in her thunderstruck expression.
“The bear is accused for the Iron Ross' fall the day before yesterday,” he continued in a hushed voice; getting an idea how to end this whole investigation in the area of Hammelburg that presented a large danger for Hogan and the camp. “The brass is more than furious now, just like the guys in leather-coats. For the moment the bear is off the hook given his condition, but the risk that some of the moles are caught is still high. Maybe it would be the best if the Gestapo is called to another place for further investigation. Do you think moles are capable of keeping a flock of birds on the ground by clipping more of their wings?”

Ilse knew she was gaping and closed her mouth with a click. Swallowing, she murmured weakly, “Don’t tell me that you belong to the bear!”

“I do – or why else, do you think, would he get me out from your kind hospitality? Or why did I just lie to a high ranking Gestapo-officer?” Klink’s eyes were narrowed, yet he kept up his polite façade to not draw any attention. After all, officially he was accompanying a sick lady to the next pharmacy out of chivalry and to ask her whether she had witnessed anything useful to the investigation.

They were nearing the pharmacy. “Why didn’t you say anything – back then?” Ilse demanded quietly. “We wouldn’t have threatened you.”

“Would you have believed me? And, by the way, I had my reasons,” Klink answered briskly.

“You… were almost killed,” the young woman replied; gulping again.

“Yes, but I knew that the bear wouldn’t let me down.” Well, during the hours of his captivity a part of him had somehow hoped that Hogan would pull one of his aces out of his sleeves to get him out of deep water – especially after he'd learned that Burkhalter wouldn’t move a finger to save him. Yes, Klink hadn’t had any proof at these times that Hogan was indeed Papa Bear, yet the Oberst had already assumed that his senior POW was an active Underground-member, and therefore his only chance of survival.

And he hadn’t been disappointed. The whole misunderstanding that he, Klink, was the master-spy Nimrod bore the colonel’s stamp. And the solution as to how he was cleared from any accusations had been a typical 'Hogan-trick’, too. Yet Klink hadn’t known for sure that his American counterpart would really come to his rescue, but Robert had been there for him – like so many times before. Yes, Hogan had killed two birds with one stone – saving Hans Wagner and Klink – yet the Kommandant was certain that there had been more at stake than ‘only’ his and the Underground leader's life. But this was something he would speak with Hogan about later. Now something else was more important.
“So, do you think there is a chance of clipping some more ‘birds’ before they can take flight?” he asked softly. He had to get Lübkemeier and the others away from the area without waking any suspicion. He had just had an idea how to manage it – with the Underground’s help, of course.

Ilse bit his lips. “You speak of another assault.”

“Preferably some distance away, but not far enough to give the brass the idea that someone other than Papa Bear is responsible for it. It shouldn’t be here, in the Hammelburg area, but more northern or southern.” They had reached the pharmacy and he stopped; turning towards her. “I know that the bear and his family have to keep silent within the next days. It’s up to the moles if they are throwing more stones into Goering’s way and protecting the bear or not.”

Making a tiny nod, the young woman watched him warily. “What’s in it for you?” she asked quietly.

“The same as you: The end of this madness,” he replied, before he saluted. “Get better soon, Ma’am and thank you for your patience with my questions,” he said a little bit louder.

Ilse stopped him before he could walk away. “You… you helped me,” she whispered; feeling guilty. “How can I make up for…”

“By thinking twice before you demand a man’s death the next time. Enough blood has flown on all sides and every death that could have been prevented darkens the world a little bit more.” He bowed his head politely; his expression was cold. “Good day, Ma’am.”

He left her standing there in the middle of the soft snow-fall and with a lot to ponder about…

TBC…

Well, Klink has definitely stepped into the ‘spying-an sabotage-business’, this time he doesn’t behave clumsy like he did all the other times he tried to spy on someone or something. Hogan is obviously a damn good teacher – and, above all, Klink’s new found strengths have undreamt-effects. If his idea to send the Gestapo on a new goose-hunt by initiating a new sabotage elsewhere (with the Underground’s help) will be successful, will be revealed later.
It also was important for me to let him have the talk with Robert about his regards concerning people of other heritages. Racism and discriminations in general are in my eyes one of the nastiest things you can do to other people, and in the TV-show there were several hints that Klink doesn’t share the opinion of the Third Reich (just look how normal he acts towards Kinchloe). Yet, in my story, he had to make a dance on the high wire in this case, otherwise his real opinion could have awoken Lübkemeier’s distrust even more what would have led to a lot of more trouble.

In the next chapter, our two colonels are growing even closer to each other. And because Wilson has all hands full with a few ill men, he has no time to treat Hogan’s healing wounds – a chance for Klink to offer personal help for his favorite troublemaker. And this will lead to more… Much more!!!

I hope, you liked the new chapter and – like always – I would be very happy to get some reviews.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

And once again I can only thank you for the comments, reviews, kudos, and so on. I’m still so happy that you like the story so much and that captures you like this.

Like I already told you in the little ‘epilogue’ of the last chapter, this one will be hot. Really HOT!!!!

It’s a pure adult-chapter and I want to advise you to get something cold to drink before you read it (or be ready to have a cold shower afterwards). Yes, it’s what you think it will be: THE first time.

More I don’t want to reveal.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 33 – Storm of passion

In the very late afternoon Klink was ‘released’ from his unwilling job as Lübkeimer’s scout and was driven back to Stalag 13. And the Kriminalrat announced that he wouldn’t need his ‘help’ the next day, as he and the others would be investigating further within Bad Kissingen and Hammelburg for the next days.

Finally!
Klink was almost too happy to feel the exhaustion as he stepped out of the car and limped to his office, where Schultz was doing paperwork. Hilda smiled at her boss when she saw him enter the building and greeted him with a warm “Welcome back!” before she took his coat and promised to make him some tea.

Schultz also beamed with relief as Klink stepped into the office; rising from behind the Oberst’s desk, saluting and reporting what happened during his absence to him: Nothing – like mostly always. Klink looked through the papers and, to his satisfaction, found no reason to rebuke the Sergeant of the Guards. Right, the important reports and documents hadn’t been touched by the large Bavarian, but that was fine with Klink. Better to have to catch up on some work than to have to re-do it.

After the evening roll call, the Kommandant went to his quarters; knowing that Hogan had again waited for him with the warm meal like yesterday. LeBeau had been absent during the roll call and Schultz had revealed that the tiny Frenchman was preparing some dinner for the two colonels, so Klink looked forward to finally being off duty.

To his surprise, he heard movement behind him and as he warily turned around, he recognized Wilson, who fell in step with him.

“Good evening, Kommandant,” the medic greeted with a polite salute. “It has been brought to my attention that the last days of physical effort caused your calf new problems, and I also think that your long stay in the cold wasn’t helpful to your cold ceasing. Please allow me to check on you.”

Klink blinked, baffled, at him. “Who told you that I am… Hogan!” He answered his own question; groaning.

Wilson smirked for a short moment. “You know him, Kommandant. He is always concerned about his men – and especially about his friends.” He caught the German’s asking glance, firmly nodded one time and accompanied him to the little building.

Inside it smelled formidable again, Klink greeted LeBeau in the casual way that was about to become routine when they weren’t out in the open, bid Hogan ‘good evening’ and went to the guestroom to get checked through by the medic.

Ten minutes later Wilson crouched in front of Klink, who sat on the bed’s edge, and was assessing the graze-shot at the Oberst’s left calf. The medic shortly pursed his lips. “Well, the area looks stressed, but it’s not inflamed. Yet you should let your leg rest within the next two days, sir.
Afterwards, I can remove the stitches.” He rose and glanced down on the Kommandant, whose upper body was still exposed after Wilson had listened to the man’s lungs. Fortunately the bronchi were still free and the irritation in his throat was only because of too much cold air. “The stitches on your left arm will be pulled now,” he declared and chuckled as he first received a relieved smile that quickly turned into a grimace because experience had taught Klink that this part of the healing process was really uncomfortable. “You and Colonel Hogan have a lot in common. He made that exact face like you are making just right now when I told him the same,” Joe declared.

“You removed some of Hogan’s stitches?” Klink asked and his eyes lit up. “That’s good to hear. So at least a few of his injuries are doing better by now?”

“Yes, but we’ve agreed to keep the bandages in place as long as the Gestapo is sniffing around, Kommandant. Just in case, you understand?”

Klink frowned. “And what do you know about this ‘case’, Sergeant?”

The medic smiled. “Just let us say that I know about the two eagles we’ve in the camp now – one European and one American. And I learned today how well they fly together.” He dared to wink at the Oberst, who sighed deeply. Okay, it was up to Hogan whom he entrusted with their secret and the missions, on the other hand it wasn’t the first time Klink was asking himself how many POWs were really involved in the whole operation.

Five minutes later Wilson was done, had treated the Kommandant with the same balm he’d used on Hogan, gave the German officer a few words of advice and went to the senior POW to place some more ointment on his healing scars on his back and left shoulder. After redoing the colonel’s bandages, he left. Klink watched him go and as the sergeant closed the front door behind himself, the German officer saw the latch and the bolt assembled to the inside of the entrance; guaranteeing some real privacy within these quarters for the first time ever. Smiling – and making an inner note to thank Schultz for the prompt completion of Klink’s request – the Oberst changed into more comfortable clothes; cursing quietly since the graze-wound on his arm still itched and stung where the stitches had been removed. He hated the latter.

A few minutes later he sat down at the dining table, shortly joined by Hogan. Yes, the bandages were still in place, but, nonetheless, the younger man looked better. His hair was clean, he wore his original pajamas beneath his new housecoat and his eyes shone. It was obvious that the shower he’d taken had done miracles for the peace of his soul.

“I hope I haven’t used your whole day’s ration of warm water,” the colonel said with an apologetic smile as the talk came to that topic. Klink returned the apology with a nonchalant wave of one hand and a kind, “And even if that is the case, I do not mind. You look very much better now – refreshed – and that’s all that counts.”
LeBeau brought dinner and Klink, being in a generous mood because he wouldn’t be called away tomorrow again, invited him to join them. There was enough for the three hungry men, and Louis had no problem accepting the offer gratefully; entertaining the two other males with funny stories of his youth. It was obvious that LeBeau had already accepted Klink as part of the group. Afterwards he cleaned everything up and left. Klink, being incredibly tired, locked the door behind LeBeau and called the evening off. Hogan didn’t mind. Yes, he felt better after being sans most stitches and finally having had a chance to shower, but the whole thing had been surprisingly strenuous for him, and like this both men lay in bed side by side half an hour later.

Klink told his American counterpart about the unanticipated meeting in the little village with one of his former kidnappers. Hogan tensed at first; almost fearing that the certainly still lasting anger would have gotten the better of the Oberst, but to his relief the older man proved one more time that he had himself under control. And Klink’s idea that the Underground should lead Lübkemeier to another place for his investigations – hopefully with a further successful sabotaging of Goering’s newest project – met Hogan’s full agreement.

“What about Schmidt?” the colonel asked finally.

The Kommandant shrugged. “I’ve no real clue. Not only Lübkemeier and his goonies questioned people, he did it, too. Yet he was polite, joked with the kids and was kind towards men and women who seemed to be afraid of him and the Gestapo. He also insisted that I was brought back to the camp in the afternoon so that I could warm up.”

“So, he did his job without any unnecessary sternness.”

“Correct,” Klink sighed; pulling the comforter higher. “He also keeps his distance to von Neuhaus, which is understandable. The Leutnant is a really unpleasant contemporary.” He groaned. “And thinking that I may’ve to endure him and the Gestapo again within the next days, makes my hackles rise.”

Hogan turned his head and let his gaze wander demonstratively to the Oberst’s neck, which elicited a chuckle from the older man. “Tease,” Klink murmured; not aware of the tenderness in his voice and the fondness in his eyes. But it didn’t escape Hogan’s attention, and he felt his mouth go dry, while his pulse rose. Heavens, something had to happen soon, or he would go mad.

Bidding his German counterpart good night, he carefully turned on his right side and closed his eyes. It didn’t take long until he dozed off – just like Klink.
This night they slept better – a lot. Both were overtired from the lack of rest the night prior and the last day had been stressful; especially for Klink. But these weren’t the only reasons why the two had a fruitful night's rest. Knowing that the worst was certainly over and subconsciously feeling the other one’s presence let them sleep soundly and deeply like children. Hogan woke first the next morning; finding himself lying half over Klink and more or less enveloping him, while the older man’s arms were snaked around him. Because he lay on his left side his broken ribs throbbed, yet he didn’t care. Being snuggled up against the older man felt too good to complain about a little bit of discomfort.

As his mind came to this conclusion, the colonel groaned inwardly. This. Had. To. Stop! But he had absolutely no clue how. And, something that even shook him a little bit, he didn’t want it to stop. He enjoyed those stolen moments far too much, and the more dutiful part of himself asked, not for the first time, where this would lead to in the end.

He pretended to still be asleep as Klink woke later. Just like before his arms tightened around the younger man for a few moments, before he untangled himself from him to start his daily routine. After treating his upper arm and his calf with the ointment from Dr. Birkhorn, he left it in the bathroom so that it could be used by Hogan, too. There was a lot of work the Oberst had to catch up with – again! And therefore he was early in his office; an hour before roll call.

The day went by uneventfully; just like those before Lübkemeier had shown up. Klink heeded Wilson’s advice and used the wastebasket, which he had turned upside-down, as a kind of footstool to lay his leg up. Hilda had made him some cups of tea and like this he felt a little bit better as he was done with today’s work.

Hogan had started to make the first careful training attempts – under Wilson’s vigilant watch. It was necessary that he began loosening his muscles, which were weakened and stiffened after such a long time spent mostly staying in bed. Yet it tired him to a degree that irritated him a lot. Just like Klink, whose patience wasn’t the Oberst’s biggest strength, the same went for his American counterpart; especially when something concerned himself. Wilson practiced some gymnastic routines in the morning and in the early afternoon with him – and Hogan was tired like a puppy. It showed him that his healing was far from being completed.

Later that day Wilson was called to the rec-hall, where two POWs had crashed into each other during a volley-ball outwork. Above all another man turned his left ankle because of a covered hole in the snowy ground on the compound, and four guards had come down with a cold – no miracle given the icy weather.

Just before dinner the medic gave the colonels his report – after all both officers’ men were involved – and was called right away again for two further POWs, who had caught a cold, too. He hadn’t even had time to change Hogan’s bandages and treat him with the ointment.
“As it seems, I will have to give some firewood for the infirmary now,” Klink sighed. “It’s better than a disease of cold spreading through the whole camp because the men infect each other.” He called Schultz and gave the according orders. It would need some time until the infirmary would be warmed up and therefore a few POWs and guards brought blankets and plaids to the building. It was a continuing process while Wilson was making the sickbay operational.

So it was no wonder that he didn’t even show up later to treat Hogan with the ointment, as the colonel made himself ready for bed. Standing in the bathroom sans pajama top and all bandages (including that on the head), he looked a little bit dumbly down on the can in his hands. There was no way on Earth he could treat himself with it except for that part of his shoulder he could reach. At least carefully rubbing something of the salve on the still sore and healing skin there, he closed the can and stepped out of the bathroom; pajama top in his hands.

“Sorry for the delay,” he said as he saw Klink standing at the dresser – clad only in his white shirt and the uniform trousers with loosely hanging suspenders, but sans boots and socks. He also had removed his tie and was just placing his dog tags on the dresser.

The Oberst’s glance fell on the younger man’s nude upper body he was completely seeing for the first time since Hogan’s rescue. Usually he would have loved to take a closer look at Robert’s well-built figure – with his slim waist, broad shoulders and the hairless chest – but just right now all he saw were the healing injuries. There were still a lot of bruises visible – several colorful, others still dark. A red stripe reached over his left shoulder and the dark dots of the removed stitches were clear to see there. It was obvious that Hogan would need longer to heal properly.

“How’re you feeling?” Klink asked quietly, while his gaze found the red and black bruises on Robert’s left side where the broken ribs were.

The colonel shrugged. “I’m healing.” He turned towards the nightstand to switch on the little lamp. Like this his bare back was revealed to Klink, and the Kommandant took a sharp breath as he recognized that there were still some lashes left which were treated with stitches. Others had closed enough to heal further without being supported by the medical yarn any longer. A few little spots had bled after Wilson had removed the stitches, but there seemed to be no inflammation at least.

Hogan turned around again and was about to slip into his pajama top, as he met the older man’s eyes which were shining with sympathy. “Don’t worry, Will,” he said softly. “Wilson said that everything is healing nicely.”

Klink nodded slowly. “Yet you need further treatment with the ointment.”
“It’s a little bit complicated with Wilson not here to do it,” Hogan shrugged.

“I’ll help you,” Klink offered without a second thought. “I wash your back and put the balm on the injuries, before I re-wrap the bandages. I’m no medic, but I think I can manage this easy task.”

For a long moment, Hogan only blinked at him. If Klink were to put the balm on his back, then he would have to touch him in a way that was… very intimate. Not that he would mind – and this, especially, shook him. The mere thought of feeling those long elegant fingers on his naked skin sent pleasant shivers down his back and sped up his pulse. He gulped; reminding himself that all this would be out of medical reasons and nothing more!

Clearing his throat, Hogan answered quietly, “You told me that you wanted to become a doctor, so I do trust you with bandaging me up. But do you really want to…”

“Hogan, I’m really able to do some basic medical treatments. Just let good old Willie help you,” Klink interrupted him – and Hogan had to laugh. Sometimes the Oberst showed a good portion of humor.

Klink went into the bathroom and shortly later returned with the can, washcloth and towel in hand. Hogan once again turned his back towards the Kommandant; feeling an odd tension rising in him.

“All right, I’ll be careful – promise,” Klink murmured, while he all of sudden became aware of the fact that he was about to wash Robert’s back – and touch him in a way that was certainly casual for a member of the medical staff, but not for a love-struck man who was head-over-heels for the patient. He felt his mouth go dry as he lifted the washcloth and cautiously began to wash the dry blood spots from the colonel’s back, before he softly dried the skin with the towel. He placed both on the nightstand and gripped for the can with the medical ointment, while his gaze wandered side-wards, to Hogan.

The American had lowered his head and had closed his eyes. His breath was a little bit uneven and his body was stiff, yet Klink somehow knew that these reactions weren’t because Hogan was in pain or feared getting hurt. This here was out of another reason. Somehow the atmosphere around them began to change – something was building up just like two evenings prior. Something that made Klink’s pulse quicken and woke an anticipation he was almost ashamed of. Hogan was in need of medical care, and he – Wilhelm Klink – could only think of the fact that he would be touching the younger man’s bare skin in a few seconds. This was… not right.

Getting a small portion of the ointment on his fingers, he placed the can back on the nightstand, took a deep breath – ‘Calm down, Wilhelm, this is outrageous – and dishonorable!’ – tested the balm a little bit by rubbing his fingers together and raised his hands to the colonel’s shoulders.
Hogan pressed his eyes shut more firmly, as a bolt of pure energy seemed to race through him at the first contact; something that had never happened before. He could feel his own heart beating hard against his ribs, and he was unable to suppress the shiver that ran through him. The fingertips moved with utter care along the healing gashes – soft like feathers and gentle like the breath of wind – yet Hogan was overly aware of the touches, which began to spread heat beneath his skin.

Moistening his lips, he tried to regain some control. This here was laughable at best. Klink was giving him medical attention that demanded him to rub some damn ointment on his healing wounds, and he was getting a new fit of lust for the other man. That was… unacceptable.

Yet he couldn’t change it. As Klink put some more balm on his hands and started to slather it carefully over his whole back, it was like the gentle fondling of a lover – and it reminded him far too much of those wet, forbidden dreams which had been haunting him for nights now. Hogan felt tremors running through his whole body, while his loins tightened. Trying to breathe more evenly and to ignore the desire awakening more and more, he prayed that this sweet torment would be over soon – or he would be doing something that would change everything.

Behind him Klink’s attempt to stay professional was greatly challenged. He knew that he had made a terrible mistake to offer Hogan this kind of medical care the moment his hands had touched the younger man’s velvety skin. He didn’t mind the ugly bruises and scabs. The skin was nevertheless soft like silk, warm like being sun-kissed and practically begging to be caressed.

Then he felt it: There were quivers and goosebumps beneath his palms while his ears caught Robert’s hitched breaths.

He held his own breath for a moment.

Could it be – that Robert returned his feelings? Could those soft shivers and uneven breaths be signals of rising desire? Were those hours, in which Robert snuggled closer to him in sleep, indications of some deeper running affection moving his subconscious? Was there the tiniest chance that his counterpart wanted him like he, Wilhelm Klink, yearned for him?

He didn’t dare hope – and yet hope flared up in him like a darting flame.

He didn’t know from where he took the courage to face the fulfillment or end of all his covert dreams, as he murmured, “Turn around.”
He heard how Hogan took a deep breath and saw him hesitating. The colonel’s hands closed into fists as he obviously tried to regain composure.

‘Oh no, Love, I want to see you NOW – with your emotions lying open!’ Klink thought, gently cupped both of the American’s upper arms and turned him around.

Hogan had his face lowered, but as he had to obey the gentle pressure, he looked up.

Their eyes met – and time stood still.

Fire!

That was what Klink saw in the younger man’s brown orbs.

A wildfire that spoke of naked hunger, unfulfilled need and barely suppressed passion. It seemed to radiate in hot waves from Robert, danced in invisible sparks through the air and reached for the older man.

Will felt his mouth going even more dry, while blood surged in his ears. A shiver ran down his spine and headed to his loins. Heat spread through his body, mind and soul, tore at the wall he had built around himself and sank with scorching claws into his control, while only one sane thought echoed in him:

Robert wanted him!

There was no mistake possible. One look in those burning eyes and he knew that his greatest and most secret wish had come true. This beautiful, brave, indomitable, wild man with the charm and the impish smirk of a boy, the mind of a genius and the recklessness of an adventurer wanted him!

The mere thought made him dizzy. What he had yearned for, since the moment Hogan stepped for the very first time through the door of his office, had become real. Robert had developed feelings for him which weren’t platonic.
Klink moistened his lips and watched how those blazing eyes followed the tiny movement. Fervor rushed through his veins, while he hardened even more. His so carefully established barrier that had offered him a place to hide his true self was falling into ruins as the flames grew higher – and Will knew that he was lost. There was no chance to turn the wheel; fate had finally caught up with him. Even if a part of him knew that he should bring some distance between him and his senior POW – that he couldn’t allow them both to live out what had built up between them during the last years – he was unable to do what every responsible officer would have done. The hunger was too strong and too desperate.

“Robert…” It was nothing more than a whisper, but it was enough to release the storm.

Hogan’s eyes widened for a second and a low growl escaped his throat – these were the only warnings Klink got. In the next second a strong hand was wrapped around his neck and hungry lips crashed down on his.

For a few seconds Klink turned into a pillar of salt. His mind was almost unable to comprehend what was going on – that Robert was really kissing him! The shock of finally being granted the fulfillment of his greatest wish, paralyzed him and shut off his mind. He felt the soft touch of his beloved’s tongue demanding entrance, and another breath of heat spread from his mouth through his body.

Hungrily, he opened his lips and sighed as Hogan instantly used the chance given to deepen the kiss. He tasted herbs and a manly sweetness as Robert’s tongue darted around; exploring, teasing… Just like the tempest the American so often was during other occasions.

And it was enough to let a tidal wave explode in Will that tore down the last remnants of his control.

Without his conscious doing, Klink snaked both arms around the younger man in front of him and pulled him flush against his body; starved for any physical proximity he could get from the one he loved. A moan vibrated in his throat as he felt the hard, hot proof of Robert’s desire pressing against his own, which told him that everything he yearned for was real. His hands stroked over Hogan’s back – one up to his head to bury his fingers in the thick, soft, dark strands to turn Robert’s head enough to give him better access to this witty mouth.

No longer passive, Will returned the kiss hungrily – their tongues entwining in one of the oldest and most intimate battles of the human race. Letting his other hand wander over Robert’s back, he cupped one of the younger man’s buttocks and pressed him even closer to him; taking over the lead now. He drank in the groan he was able to elicit from Rob, while he felt his beloved melting into him. Hogan shuddered; his arms slid around Will – clinging to him for dear life, while their mouths still devoured each other in an endless duel of freed passion.
Hogan’s mind had stopped working. The moment he had met Will’s gaze and had seen the naked desire in the older man’s eyes while Klink whispered his name like a prayer, his control had snapped. The nights filled with lustful dreams which left him lonely and hungry for more, the haunting curiosity to experience the taboo, the gentle displays of Will’s affection for him, the allure of the forbidden yearning, the suppression of increasing longings – this was all finally too much. He didn’t care that he was overstepping all limits and breaking dozens of laws. The only thing that mattered was this burning wish to be as close to Will as possible. He wanted to taste him, to feel those long elegant fingers on his own body and to still this lust that had been driving him crazy for many days and nights now.

At first, after he had dared to think closer about this forbidden want, he had been curious, but nothing had prepared him for what went through him the moment his lips touched Will’s. Fire was running through his veins and clenched in his belly in an almost desperate way. His last resolve burnt to ashes, as their kiss deepened. Will tasted of sandalwood, herbs and honey – a strange but absolutely delicious flavor Hogan feared he would be addicted to. He trembled as Will pulled him against himself. He could feel the older man’s iron-hard member pressing against his own – and sheer greed woke in him. Those long fingers slipped into his hair, forced his head into a position that granted Will a better access to his mouth – and then it was no longer him who was the lead.

The older man seemed to envelop him whole, while Will conquered his mouth. The monocle slipped away unnoticed, contrary to everything else. Those slender hands held Rob strongly and pulled him even closer; those long arms encircled him like belts made of steel; the other man’s heart beat hard against his own.

For the first time ever it wasn’t him who controlled the beginning of an intimate event. For the first time ever he was held by someone equally strong. For the first time ever he knew that he could let go completely – and it inflamed his desire even more. He felt his knees go weak and wrapped both arms around his soon-to-be-lover; holding onto him like a lifeline.

Another deep growl rumbled in Klink’s chest and sent shivers through Robert’s whole being – shivers of anticipation and pure lust.

The need to breathe made them tear their mouths apart finally, but before Hogan could only say a word, this soft, warm mouth was pressed against his throat – beneath his ear, just exactly there where one of his most sensitive spots were. He gasped and wasn’t aware that his head fell back or that he had closed his eyes. These gentle lips began to nip and suck at his skin, turning him into a puddle of nerves, before he felt this clever tongue snake out and lick him.

Neither his dreams nor any fantasy were comparable to the reality. Pure energy bolted from his throat to his already painfully throbbing member, and instinctively his fingers clawed into the older man’s shirt.
“Oh… GOD!”

The groan escaped him without him even realizing he'd spoken. His breath was heavy and he wasn’t aware of himself moving against Will, as his body took over control – increasing his desire.

Will was in heaven. Having the love of his life in his arms, finally, feeling and tasting him, listening to the soft moans and knowing that he was the reason for them, swept aside any sane thought.

Klink gasped as Hogan suddenly turned them around and moved backwards to the bed. Kneeling backwards down on the mattress, Robert tried to pull the older man with him, who interrupted the sweet torture for a moment.

“Your back – your broken ribs. We have to be careful,” Will whispered in Rob’s ear; his worry for his beloved’s condition present even in his lustful state.

“I do not care!” Hogan hissed and let himself fall backwards; leaving Klink no other choice than to follow him. There was no going back now. They had lost the battle against their feelings. They would both find no peace until this raging desire for each other would be fulfilled. And they both knew it.

With a predatory expression on his face and surrendering to fate, Will slipped over Robert, braced both underarms beside him, bent down and attacked his mouth again. The younger man’s arms were within a second around Klink again; his fingers began to explore the muscles beneath the white cotton of the shirt. Feeling Will’s weight pressing the lower part of his body into the mattress, while Klink obviously made sure not to hurt his sore chest and back, sent a short wave of gratitude through Robert that was quickly devoured by the passion that stormed through him.

Shifting his weight to the left to take the pressure off Hogan’s broken ribs, Will let his other hand wander over his beloved’s side – feather-like caresses which heightened the anticipation. Slipping his fingers into Klink’s short hackles, Robert relished in the tenderness shown, yet he wanted more. Arching up, he gripped the older man’s butt with one hand and pressed it down while he wriggled against him. Will gasped into his mouth and lifted his head.

“You’re playing with fire,” he warned him hoarsely, which only got him a “Good!” as an answer.

“As you wish,” Will growled. With a gleam in his eyes, he bent down and began to trail hot kisses
down his lover’s bare chest; smiling into the soft skin as he felt the goosebumps under his lips. He had wished for this – the chance to kiss better every bruised spot Robert sported. And now he’d gotten it.

Tenderly, he breathed open-mouthed kisses into the soft, sore skin, licked over the scabs and worshipped every healed place. He felt Robert’s quick heart-beat beneath his lips, heard him sigh and moan, and a mixture of deep love and triumph washed through him.

He had him! Finally he had his beloved troublemaker writhing and trembling beneath him; shaking with passion. This wasn’t only a dream come true, this was paradise!

Robert panted in pleasure as his lover’s lips closed around one nipple. God, in sleep he had imagined it, but the reality was so much better. He’d had his share of lovers in the past – all female, all passionate yet tender. Will was more aggressive, more demanding, but he was also utterly gentle and was giving more than he took. It was a whole new experience and it elicited a craving within the American that was unexpected in its intensity.

He felt himself melt under this warm, fondling hand, this hot mouth and the hard lean body above him. His hands wandered restlessly over Will’s back, but it wasn’t enough. He wanted to touch the other man’s skin – hell, he needed it!

“Too many… clothes,” he gritted out the same moment Will softly bit down. A throaty gasp escaped Rob and for a second he almost saw stars. Fighting for breath, he simply tore at his lover’s shirt. “Want… to feel you completely,” he whispered; his voice hoarse with desire.

Klink smiled into the human velvet beneath his mouth, looked up and another bolt of heat ran through his body as he saw the naked avidity in those brown eyes. Rob’s lips were swollen from the kisses, his face was flushed beneath the bruises, a thin layer of sweat shimmered on his forehead and his broad chest moved with heaving breaths. Will had known that the younger man was a passionate being, but this wildness surpassed every dream he had.

Kneeling up on the mattress, Klink unbuttoned his shirt under Hogan’s needy gaze. It seemed to be impossible, but the view of his lover watching him undress turned him on even more. And that Robert Hogan could easily lose patience was proved moments later, as the younger man gripped for the seams of the shirt and simply ripped the last buttons open – sending them flying through the air.

Usually the Oberst would have cursed – everything was rationed now in Germany, even some damn buttons! – but in this case he didn’t care. If anything he felt fond amusement spread through his lust-filled mind at Rob’s eagerness before it made room for another wave of fervor, as Robert sat up,
helped him out of the long-sleeve undershirt, cupped his hips with both hands and pressed his open mouth against his chest. The contact was nothing like he had ever felt before. Klink had had some male lovers when he was younger, but it had been fleeting liaisons – the risk of being caught had always been too great to let their relationship grow into more than some sexual games.

This here was different – something completely new. He LOVED his American troublemaker with everything he was. And to be finally able to express his feelings physically and to exchange affection showed him how poor the other liaisons had been.

His knees went weak as Robert’s hands wandered up along his sides only to caress his back with curious fingers. The lips on his chest moved; hot breath danced over his skin before this clever, witty tongue began to leave wet traces on his skin. Instinctively he buried both hands in those black-brown strands and bent down; pressing a kiss on this tousled shock of hair. He smelled of shampoo and the ointment, mixed with Hogan’s own unique scent, and he sighed in pleasure as Rob’s mouth began to explore his chest even more.

Robert couldn’t get enough of the scent and taste that was pure Will. He had seen Klink’s upper body bare before and knew about the few fine hairs in the middle of his chest and the long thin scar that was on his right side. And never in a million years had he thought that feeling these things beneath his tongue and lips would wake such want in him. But exactly this was happening. Wilhelm’s waist was slim, his body lean and slender, his muscles didn’t speak of training and sports, yet they were firm and plain – and exploring a male body and having it pressed against his own was utterly new to him, which woke some more curiosity in his passion-fogged mind.

Time seemed to lose all its meaning, as both men delved into learning about each other’s body and most sensitive spots. The air was filled with soft sighs and quiet moans, while hands wandered over naked skin and mouths savored the other one’s taste.

Hogan was dizzy with need; his loins throbbed with unfulfilled desire, his stone hard member burnt with painful pleasure. Acting without any sane thought, he rubbed against his lover who still knelt above him; silently pleading for more.

“Lie down,” Will murmured in his ear; his voice husky. He knew exactly what the younger man needed.

Not thinking twice, Robert obeyed – instinctively trusting his German counterpart to take the lead. This here was completely new territory for him; something he had no real experience with, and he was confident in Wilhelm to show him what to do.
The older man shifted a little bit and stroked Rob’s pajama pants and underwear down his waist – freeing the American’s angry red member that proudly pointed to the ceiling. Robert groaned in relief and lifted his legs to make it easier for Klink to strip the last remaining clothes off him.

Will looked down. He took in the dark hair that sheltered his beloved’s most sensitive part of the body; took in the long large shaft that shimmered with precum – and licked his lips. With male pride he watched how this little gesture was enough to elicit a strong reaction from Hogan whose member twitched while a low growl rumbled in his throat.

Robert felt sweat breaking out on his forehead; the air was suddenly far too warm around them. The view of how Will watched his most intimate part with cloudy, lustful eyes and licked his lips in anticipation drove the younger man almost crazy.

His dreams…

Those damn, forbidden, lustful dreams, which had robbed him of nights' rest and had made him come in the bathroom like a teenager, were about to come true. And waiting for it was a sweet torment he couldn’t bear any longer.

“Please!” he whispered; not caring that he was begging.

This gentle plea was Will’s undoing. Gripping Rob’s hips tenderly between his hands, he let them wander down over the outer sides of his thighs, while he bent down and blew softly against his lover’s most vulnerable part. Robert gasped and arched up, and as Will repeated the teasing, the American swore beneath his uneven breath. God, this was torture! An exquisite torture, but torture nonetheless.

“Will… Dammit, please… Don’t… let me wait… any longer,” he gritted out; his ability to speak had been reduced to a breathless stammering.

Sliding down towards the bed-end, Will placed himself between Rob’s spread legs. Taking his beloved’s waist in his hands again, he leant down and…

And the world around ceased to exist.

The moment Wilhelm let his tongue glide along the hard shaft and tasted the salty essence that was
pure Robert – and heard the soft outcry of his lover – he knew that he would never want someone else like he wanted this one man. Without further delay he opened his mouth to give his beloved the ultimate fondling possible.

Rob was lost in sensation. The instant that sinful mouth engulfed him and those gentle lips closed around him, a shout of pure bliss rose from the depths of his being, a shout which he was able to muffle in the very last second by slapping a hand over his mouth. The walls were made of wood and therefore anything but sound-proof when it came to loud noises.

And then any last sane thought was burnt in the flames of lust which closed around him.

Yes, he had had blowjobs before, but nothing was comparable to this, here. The strong hands holding him still as his body wriggled in pleasure, the hot breath that found its way through the dark nest of his pubic hair, this firm tongue on his most vulnerable part, the mere thought of WHO was giving him this pleasure – it was almost too much.

Eyes tightly closed, fingers clawing now into the sheets beneath him, heartbeat dangerously quick and breath far too heavy, Robert lay there helpless; unable to do anything else than fly in this storm of passion. Flames flickered through his veins and tremors rippled beneath his skin, while the pressure in his loins grew and grew.

Lifting his head he looked down along himself, just like he had done in his dream after which he lost the most of his control for the first time – and met those blue eyes which glowed with an inner fire he had never seen before. The sight of himself vanishing in this usually so talkative mouth was about to push him over the edge. His hands reached out, his fingers combed into the ring of soft hair, while he braced his feet into the mattress and bucked up. He felt the sensation building – how the pleasure was beginning to overwhelm him.

And then this wicked mouth set him free and cold air prickled on his over-sensible shaft.

“NO!” The throaty outcry was laden with desperate need, while Rob tried to grip for his lover, who sat up.

“Sh-sh, Rob, let me get out of my pants – and I promise you something even better,” Will rasped, while he opened his trousers and stripped off the remainder of his clothes. With almost wild eyes Robert watched him; sweat pearled on his forehead and built a soft sheet on his upper body.
“Please,” he whispered; giving a damn about the fact that he was really begging for the first time in his life. He was on the edge of ecstasy and he would surely turn insane if he couldn’t feel his lover again within the next seconds.

Will didn’t hesitate. The moment he was sans clothes, he slipped completely over the younger man’s body, who instantly wrapped both arms and even one leg around him – preventing him like this from slipping away again. Both men moaned as their shafts touched each other and driven by pure instincts, Rob began to move against the older man in desperate search for release.

Slipping one of his hands beneath their wriggling bodies, Will enveloped them both with long fingers – gave them the chance to move in the oldest dance of the world while rubbing against each other.

The sounds that escaped Robert were an almost inhuman mixture of growls and whimpers, and Will had to suppress a shout, as the younger man lifted his head and bit him in the juncture between neck and shoulder – not hard enough to draw blood, but strong enough to leave a hickey that would last for days.

Using the chance, Will slipped his other arm under Robert’s neck and buried his own face at his beloved’s throat, while he felt the younger man’s nails raking over his back. It heightened his lust even more and, hungrily, he sucked and nibbled at the tender skin beneath his mouth, while he squeezed Rob’s and his own members in unison.

Robert had been lost in the beginning spiral of fulfillment – and as Will teased the tender spot on his throat with blunt teeth, while his long fingers closed with even greater strength around both their most vulnerable parts, his last remaining shred of control slipped away.

The sensations, the feelings, the knowledge with whom they were together – this was all too much for both of them.

The fire closed up on the two lovers, enveloped them, took them with it upwards in a spiral from which there was no escape anymore. Clinging to each other they shouted into the other one’s skin as waves of ecstasy closed over them and took them away to a realm beyond the world, where nothing else existed than bliss in its purest form.

Everything around them seemed to explode into millions of glowing pieces, while they came long and hard – the built up hidden desire and suppressed yearning for each other were finally released, and left them breathless and utterly spent; overwhelmed by their feelings, which were echoing deep in their souls…
Still there, or have you all melted away? I warned you that it will be hot, tenderly but also passionate – and the night of our two ‘boys’ isn’t over yet. After the big storm of fire they went through, feelings of wonder, content and confusion have to follow. And of all this the next chapter will tell you.

I hope, the big moment in which our two colonels came finally together, is like you imagined it. Yes, the final ‘union’ has still to come, but the first steps have been done. And for someone, who never thought that he could feel for another guy something like this, this hour was a large step for Hogan – and he still has strange path to walk. Yet, of course, Hogan being Hogan, he never backs off of something, especially when his curiosity has been awoken or he wants something. And this time this ‘something’ has nothing to do with a mission, but with his own feelings.

So, the next chapter will tell of the ‘aftermath’, and it will be fluffy and sweet.

Hopefully you liked this chapter and this time I really ‘dying’ to know what you think of it.

Have a nice start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Usually I wanted to publish the new chapter yesterday after I got it back from my beta-reader, but the horrible reports on TV concerning the devasting fire in Notre Dame, Paris, kept our whole family paralyzed the whole evening until the early night. We were really shocked and sad, because this cathedral is not only one of the oldest gothic churches, it’s also a kind of mythos. I was in this cathedral about 20 years ago during a five-days-trip to Paris, and it really hurt to see this monument in flames.

For all outside there, who knows the cathedral in person or is maybe French or lives in France: My deepest sympathy. I mourn with you and hope that Notre-Dame, ‘Our Dame’, will be re-risen in all its breathtaking and beautiful glory like it was before.

Even if it maybe strikes as odd to pass back into a fanfiction given the whole situation, I do know that stories sometimes can offer strength and hope – or at least a distraction. Maybe the new chapter is a diversion for the one or other affected reader. And that the new chapter is a fluffy and sweet one, is maybe a little ‘balm’.

Thank you so much for the large feedback concerning the last chapter. I somehow knew that you would love it.

Enjoy,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 34 – Sweet afterglow

Both didn’t know how long they simply lay there – boneless and floating in the glow of the aftermath. Soft tremors vibrated through their bodies, pulse and heartbeat only slowly calming down, and both were bathed in sweat. But nothing of this reached their minds. There was nothing in the
world but holding each other and feeling the other one’s proximity.

Robert had closed his eyes, listening to both their pants, which were turning more and more into normal breaths again, and relishing in the sensation of Will’s warm skin and lean body. Somehow, the older man had found the strength to roll beside his lover to take any pressure off him, and Rob had followed him without being conscious of his own doing; snuggling against Wilhelm. Will held him close – one arm encircled Robert from beneath, the other hand was buried in his tousled hair, one long leg was wrapped around his calves. Hogan was utterly enveloped by his German counterpart and it gave him a sense of complete security.

Robert soared through a sheltering darkness holding him in its gentle embrace, just like Klink did for real. Being a passionate man by nature, he’d had his shares of love-nights and had enjoyed the storms he had experienced within them, but this here, was something completely different and new. Usually, a part of him held back – careful not to hurt the women he was with because of his greater strength and his larger weight. But this time, with Will, there was no need to hold his fire. Sweet Lord, he wouldn’t have even been able to, because never before had he been filled with so much greedy desire that had continued to grow the more their love-game proceeded. He had lost himself in the scorching hunger the older man had awoken in him, and he knew that this was only the beginning.

There was more to explore, more to experience and even though he felt tired out, he yearned to have this ‘more’ soon. Technically he knew how two men came together, and until a few days ago he had rejected the mere thought of it. Hell, it had made him uneasy – but not anymore. If there was one man on Earth he would give himself to and would allow to have his way with him like this, then it was Wilhelm Klink. And somehow, deep in him, this new craving settled roots.

But for now he was satisfied with enjoying the last remains of the afterglow and his lover’s closeness. He felt Will move beside him just before lips brushed first over his forehead and then over his mouth. For a long moment he simply returned the kiss and felt a short stinging on his bottom lip he didn’t mind, because a second later Will’s tongue glided gently over it and he sighed in content. Opening his lids he saw that the older man had lifted his head and looked with utmost tenderness and happiness down on him; the gentle, long fingers in his hair massaged him lovingly.

Wilhelm was inwardly trembling. Watching how his beloved was losing himself in pleasure, seeing the sheer bliss on his face and hearing the moans, before they were both overwhelmed with ecstasy, was a satisfaction on its own. Watching how Robert Hogan, genius mastermind of one of the most unruly Underground-organizations, lost all control in the swirl of passion, recompensed the older man for all the countless months he had dreamed of being together with him in the most intimate way. This here, was beyond any fantasy he had dared to dream of in the long, lonely hours in his empty bed. This here was a taste of heaven he wanted to have forever.

He held the younger man close to him; relished in their proximity – both physical and emotional. He felt tremors run beneath Rob’s hot and silken skin, heard how his beloved’s breath finally calmed
down and smiled as the American snuggled closer to him; melting against him like an oversized cat. Unable to suppress the rush of tenderness, he lifted his head and kissed Rob’s damp forehead, before he searched for his mouth. He tasted Rob’s almost familiar scent, but also something metallic and knew that one of the healing scabs on Hogan’s still sore lips had given away.

Acting on pure instinct he gently licked the blood drop away and drank in the soft moan he got in return. Then one of Robert’s hands caressed his shoulder and lifting his head, Klink looked down at his utterly relaxed and tired counterpart.

Their gazes met and Wilhelm wasn’t aware that everything he felt for the younger man was reflected in his eyes. He saw Rob looking at him with wonder and sighed, as Hogan moved his hand upwards and cupped his cheek. The gesture was full of such natural tenderness, it stole Will’s breath.

“I… I never thought it could be like this,” Robert whispered; utterly at peace but also filled with awe.

Will smiled down at him; realizing something that hadn’t come to his mind until now. “You had never been with a man before, have you?” he murmured; his voice still hoarse with emotions.

Hogan slowly shook his head. “No, never.” He pulled Wilhelm’s head down to him and took a deep, happy breath as the older man buried his face into the crook of his neck. It felt so inexorably good. “When I was sixteen I had a friend and we… were curious, but we didn’t get far. It felt… awkward.”

“And now?” Klink murmured; already knowing the answer. There was absolutely no denial possible about how much Rob had enjoyed their encounter.

“It… it feels right – with you,” Robert breathed, while tightening his arms around the older man. “I… I’m not gay – at least I don’t think that I am, but with you… I don’t know what it will lead to, but what I know is that I don’t want it to end. I… I want to explore more – with you. Only you,” he added softly, turned his head and pressed a kiss against Will’s balding head.

He heard Wilhelm sigh in relief and happiness, and, smiling, he held his lover close; enjoying the heaviness and lethargy the afterglow that was still sweeping through his mind and body.

For many minutes they simply lay there – relishing in what they shared. Then Klink took a deep breath and began to move away. A sound of protest rose from Hogan’s throat while he tightened his arms around the other man again. “Stay!” he mumbled.
To his bafflement he heard Will chuckle. “Hon, if we don’t move now and get clean, any attempt at separating our bodies will soon be very unpleasant.” Wilhelm lifted his head and met Rob’s confused glance. “How sticky, do you think, will the essences of our bodies become when they’re drying – and they are almost dry, believe me. I’d love to be glued to you, but not this way.” To his amusement but also absolute ardor he saw Robert blush, and he carefully separated from him. It already stung a little bit, and Hogan made a face as he looked at the mess on Will’s and then his own chest.

“Don’t tell me we’ve to rise and wash now,” he complained.

“I don’t see another way,” Klink snickered and began to rise.

“I don’t want to. I’m tired, it’s cold without you and I want my personal blanket back – meaning you,” Rob was all but pouting like a little boy. It earned him hearty laughter from his lover, who left the bed on uneasy legs.

“Demanding little fox!” Will said fondly, while offering Hogan a hand. “Come on, my gadfly. Let us take a shower, then we’ll change the sheets and then…”

“And then we start anew,” Rob grinned; taking the offered hand and sitting up; groaning in the process. Hell, his body ached, which showed him there was still a long way of healing lying ahead of him.

Again Klink laughed. “I bet that you’ll fall asleep the moment you hit the pillows, seeing how exhaust you are.”

“I’m not that tired,” Hogan protested – and yawned a moment later, while he rose.

Will’s eyes shimmered with deep, tender love as he wrapped one arm around the younger man’s waist and steered him towards the bathroom. “Yes, obviously,” he teased.

Grumbling something under his breath, Robert walked beside him on wobbling legs; feeling, to his dismay, that ‘Willie’ may indeed be right.

A minute later both men stood under the shower and relished in washing each other, which gave them the chance to explore each other’s body some more. Klink was careful not to inflict any pain on the younger man as he cleaned his upper body, while Hogan enjoyed wiping away the last remains
of their forbidden game of passion from Will’s chest and massaging some knots out of his counterpart’s uptight shoulder- and neck-muscles.

He bent forwards to get the soap and the water fully splashed down on him – awakening an uneasy feeling in him.

For a moment he was back in those cellars again, forced under water – and then the memory changed. He was under the shower – in this shower cabin – and strong arms held him. He was cold, hurt and filled with dread, but there were those arms around him and a gentle, familiar voice was whispering soothing words.

Robert’s hesitation didn’t slip Wilhelm’s attention, and as Hogan slowly turned around, Klink saw a short haunted expression in his beloved’s eyes. “You remember, don’t you?” he murmured.

Hogan didn’t need to ask what the older man was referring to. “Yes,” he said quietly. “I remember that I was here, in this bathroom, and that you held me beneath the shower to get me clean.” He looked straight into his counterpart’s eyes. “And I remember you kissing me earlier.”

Klink sighed. “It was… an impulse,” he whispered. “You were so badly hurt and alternated between apathy and panic attacks. Yet, when I held you, you calmed down. You… showed a trust in me I’d never thought possible. And as you were so numb with shock during our ride back to the camp and, afterwards, here while I stripped you, I acted on impulse.” He stroked one unruly lock away from Rob’s forehead. “I didn’t want to take advantage of you and your condition. It was instinctive, aiming to comfort and to soothe you.”

A smile curled Rob’s mouth. “And it soothed you, too.”

His German counterpart sighed again. “Ja, it did – because I was deadly afraid for your life and, later, for your sanity.” He lowered his gaze. “As LeBeau appeared in the hospital to alert me, I thought my whole world was falling apart. I was terrified that I would come too late to get you out. Thank the Lord I came in time, but you were so full of wounds and the tracks Hochstetter’s hate had left on you, I feared he had broken you.” He cupped Rob’s left cheek with one hand; his eyes roamed fondly over the other man’s face. “I thought I was still about to lose you – one way or the other – and holding you close and kissing you was the only way I could think of to tell you that everything was over; that you were safe again and that I would protect you.”

Robert had listened closely. Those admissions told him once again how deep Will’s feelings for him ran; how much it must have pained the older man to see him like this. And it shook him inwardly.
“You saved me – not only from Hochstetter, but also from falling apart,” he whispered. “Like I told you a few days ago, before we revealed our secrets to each other, I had really thought that he had taken a part of me away.”

“That was what I feared, too, but after the first days and nights, as I saw how you handled everything, I knew that this God-damned poison-dwarf hadn’t won.” He used the back of his fingers to caress the younger man’s cheek. “You’re still the Robert Hogan I know. The witty fox that drives me crazy on a regular basis but without whom my life would be nothing but a flat existence. And I’m utterly glad that this paranoid madman has been arrested and will not come back to threaten you.”

The love that was hidden between the lines struck a cord deep in Hogan’s being and echoed in gentle tones through his mind and soul. It warmed him in a way he had never experienced before. “At least this kind of danger is over,” he murmured; brushing his lips over Will’s. He felt his lover smile beneath his mouth, before he opened it and the erotic duel began anew.

Finally Klink lifted his head; face flushed, lips swollen, eyes shining. “I just remembered that there is another ‘danger’ we’re going to face if we remain in this shower any longer.”

Robert, feeling dizzy due to the deep, satisfying pleasure the kissing had woken in him again, blinked confusedly. “What do you mean?”

“That we’re using the whole water-ration of one week, not to speak of the fact that we’ll be running out of warm water within the next minute or so. And I really don’t want to get hit with a sort of ice-rain.”

The wry explanation elicited a clear, rich laugh from Hogan, who shut off the water. He would have loved to remain under the warm stream for longer, but Wilhelm was right when he pointed out that water was indeed rationed. So both men had no other chance than to put an end to their pleasurable enjoyment, dry themselves and return to the sleeping room, where an uncommon disarray had taken place. Pajama trousers and top, German uniform trousers, shirt and pants lay widespread around the bed; joined by some pillows and boots. And on the bed the sheets and blankets were a mess. The air was thick with the smell of their love-game, and allowing himself a deep sigh, Klink went to the dresser, took his housecoat, slipped into it, threw Hogan his own and went to the window to open it.

Robert grimaced as the first gale of cold air touched his uncovered body and quickly put on the housecoat LeBeau had made for him.
Folding their clothes they laid them on the chair, before they stripped the mattress off the sheets and did the same with the bedclothes. Klink threw it all on a heap, went into the bathroom, filled the shower tub with water and put the bed-linens in it. “We’ll say that you got sick, didn’t reach the bathroom in time and we had to change the bedclothes because of it,” he said.

“And why is it me who got sick?” Robert sulked, anything but serious.

“Because we’d better have a good explanation why your bed-linens of my bed were changed all of a sudden.” He went to the commode, got out new bedclothes and offered some of them to Hogan. “Here. If we both work on it, we’ll be back in bed in no time.”

Grinning, the American accepted the little job, and a few minutes later they were done. Switching off the lights in the living room and closing the window, Will insisted on rubbing some ointment on Rob’s back, who protested that there was no need for it.

“Everything was washed away and we don’t want to risk inflammation, Robert, so stop being a child, turn around and let me treat you,” Klink said, half frustrated, half amused.

“If you want a repeat of earlier, all you have to do is ask nicely,” Hogan teased; wriggling his eye brows.

For a moment Wilhelm blushed, then he gave the younger man a stern glance. “And if you want a repeat within the near future, you should skip this nonsense, strip off the housecoat, turn around and allow me to help you with this medicine. Because if one of your wounds gets inflamed, we’ll have to wait days, if not even a week or two, before I can show you the next step of pleasure that can be taken between two men.”

Giving Will his best pouting puppy-glance, Hogan batted his eyelashes. “Aw, Willie, you’re my friend and now we’re even lovers. You will not blackmail me, will you?”

“This, my dear troublemaker, is exactly what I am going to do if you don’t turn around immediately. It’s only for your own good, you know,” Klink replied with humor dancing in his eyes, yet he was also serious. This much Hogan could tell.

Sighing dramatically, he finally obeyed and let the older man take care of him. And, as he had to admit, he loved feeling those long hands on his back again. The memory of what they could do – what they had done to him – brimmed in him and he was unaware of the tiny moans coming over his
lips. If only he weren’t so tired, he would not have minded a real repeat of what they had shared half an hour ago.

“So, all done,” Wilhelm finally said with a hoarse undertone in his voice, and placed the can with the ointment back on the nightstand. “Let’s go to bed, or we will both oversleep tomorrow.”

Robert, who had stripped off the housecoat, looked at his German counterpart. “With or without pajamas?”

Klink licked his lips. “Well… that’s up to you,” he finally murmured; treating his calf with some of the ointment, too.

“Good!” Hogan nodded, took his housecoat, laid it over the nearby chair and climbed into bed as naked as the day of his birth – holding the blankets open for Will to join him. “Are you coming?”

Chuckling, Wilhelm stripped off his own housecoat and slipped onto the mattress beside his beloved; sighing in contentment when he felt the soft material around his naked skin and Robert’s warmth against his body, as the younger man instantly snuggled closer to him. Only the little lamp on the nightstand was still switched on, and, in its light, both men looked at each other – still in wonder over what had happened between them.

“I never thought that you would be drawn to me one day,” Will whispered. “I didn’t dare hope that there was the tiniest chance you could return my feelings.”

“For how long have you harbored feelings for me?” Robert asked softly, and the older man took a deep breath; again caressing his beloved’s cheek with one hand.

“The moment my eyes fell on you for the very first time, I knew that fate had walked through my office door.”

Eyes widening, Rob could only stare at the older man in mild disbelief. “You… you felt attracted to me from the beginning?”

Klink nodded. “Yes. You were brought into my Kommandantur by two SS-guards and a SS-major, and all I saw for the first few seconds was an opponent officer of my rank, belonging to the enemy air-force. Then you looked at me with those brown eyes – sizing, appraising, curious, but not hostile.
And then you smirked this infuriating, lopsided grin – and something clicked into place within me. I knew that you would mean trouble. A lot of trouble. Trouble beyond the usual mess of POWs trying to play up. And it turned out that I was right. You stood there, in handcuffs, dirty and obviously still in pain from the Gestapo’s questioning, but you behaved as casually as if you had just entered a neighbor’s house and were waiting for the afternoon coffee. As the guards unlocked your handcuffs, your very first words were a wry ‘Thank you for the nice hospitality. You Germans really know how to treat your guests.’ Then you rubbed your wrists and grinned again.”

“Well, never give the bad guys the satisfaction of showing that they had bothered you,” Robert smiled; remembering his arrival at Stalag 13 as if it had been only yesterday.

Will chuckled. “Ja, you’re right. I was absolutely baffled about your nonchalant acting. Most of the prisoners need days to come around after a questioning by the Gestapo, but not you. After the formalities were over and you were officially handed over to my camp, you sat down in one of the visitor chairs I'd offered to you out of common politeness – and then you looked at me again. There was no hate in your eyes, no loathing, no resentment – only curiosity and some careful mirth. Then I held my usual speech every newcomer gets and you only smiled cheerfully at me, commenting with ‘Colonel Klink, there is no need to shovel tunnels to make an attempt of running away. I’ll leave this camp through the main gate, mark my words. So don’t fear for your zero-escape-rate.’”

“Well, I did leave the camp through the main gate a lot of times – when you sent me away to test your car, when you allowed me to catch someone, when we were outside to do jobs we agreed on, when…”

“And still you shoveled your tunnels and sneaked out whenever you wanted,” Klink interrupted him; laughing quietly. “At the time of your arrival I could only assume what a clever fox had been put into my camp.” He chuckled. “I was enraged about the insolence you'd displayed at our first meeting, but deep down I was also amused, which showed me that I was about to get into a kind of trouble I hadn’t experienced within a lot of years. I felt it in my bones that you were a challenge that had nothing to do with being a witty opponent officer, but everything to do with being a highly attractive man with the charms of a boy. I knew that I would have to be very careful, or I would be lost.”

“You really felt drawn to me from the first minute?” Robert slowly shook his head. “You never intimated anything,” he murmured in awe. “Hell, if it hadn’t been for the gentle way you nursed me back to relative health, those tender gazes you gave me within the last days, and those soothing kisses I've begun to remember, I would have never guessed that you’ve feelings for me. I never took you for a man who’s into the same gender after all your flirting with any skirt that comes along the way.”

“In earlier times I tried to overcome my ‘weakness’ by flirting around with females, now me hitting on women is a cover,” Klink admitted. “In your country, relationships of the same gender are forbidden, too, but in the US you are only thrown into jail. In Germany you’re castrated while fully
conscious, which mostly leads to death – or you’ve the choice to become a slave-worker for ten years or more, which also mostly means death – last but not least because of the very special treatment from the guards, who regard these men as subhumans.”

Shocked, Robert stared at him. “This is… bestial,” he said quietly.

“Which is normal if something or someone doesn’t go hand in hand with the Nazis’ point of view, or Hitler’s insane desire to repopulate the world with perfect super-humans. In his eyes, ill people, people with different skin-colors or people with uncommon streaks are only subhuman beings that, preferably, should be eliminated. He regards mildness as weakness and knows no mercy, as much as I’ve heard.”

Hogan watched him with warm sympathy. “And therefore you pretended to be a man in search of marriage, who only has an unlucky hand wooing a woman for himself. And you increase this image by playing the fool.”

“Ja,” Wilhelm nodded. “When I was younger, I flirted a lot and one time I was just a step away from getting married, but something was missing. I only realized my nature later and the first months I tried to ignore it. Then I met a comrade who had the same streak as I and… Well, you can imagine the rest.”

“It was your first time,” Rob pondered, and Klink smiled shortly.

“Yes – and my last for many months. Then the first war broke loose and in the darkness of the nights, far away from home, there were suddenly chances to find some solace and comfort with others. But those who feel like I do had to be very, very careful. I don’t think that there would have been any superior who wouldn’t have regarded us as a shame for the army, if he would have caught us.” He took a deep breath. “Then the war ended and we returned to the so-called civilization in which there is no place for otherness. During the following years I learned to live with my longings buried deep away in the edges of my consciousness – a control I was even able to cling to during my active time concerning the Spanish Civil War and now in the current war. It was a question of survival. And then you came.”

Robert moistened his lips. “I turned everything you’d worked for so long and hard upside-down,” he mused.

“You can say that,” Klink chuckled; stealing another soft kiss from his American counterpart. “You haunted me in a way no other man had done before. The first months I tried to ignore my growing desire for you, but for naught. You were always around me, in my personal space, clapped me on the
shoulders, touched me in sometimes impossible manners and wove your web around me without
knowing what you really did to me. And then came the months in which I lie awake long during the
nights, captured in throbbing need for you, but I couldn’t give into it.”

“Why?” Hogan asked; already anticipating several reasons.

“For one you’ve been my prisoner – my senior POW officer above all. I harbor great respect for you.
And I’m also responsible for you in many ways, not only for your and your men’s health, but also
for keeping any risk of disarray and chaos that could endanger us all as low it possible. To imply my
desire for you would have lead us into dependence – another dependence than the one we developed
because of my later becoming awareness of your mission. As much as I enjoyed your constant
attempts at manipulating me – and a lot of the times you really succeeded, because I couldn’t resist
you and your damn games – I also had to make certain that this whole play wouldn’t get out of
hands. We could both have taken advantage of each other, and this is something I would never do.
Not with my men, not with my prisoners, and certainly not with the man who had wriggled himself
beneath my skin and check-mated me in a way he wasn’t aware of.”

“I’m still your prisoner and your senior POW, Will,” Hogan reminded him gently.

“Officially, ja. Unofficially, it’s partly you who leads this camp – don’t interrupt me, Hon, you know
I’m right,” he softly rebuked Robert, who was about to protest. “And, besides the fact that you’re
pulling so many strings inside and outside of these wires that I could sometimes lean back
comfortably and let you do my job, we’re partners now,” Klink continued. “Partners in crime, so to
say, but partners nonetheless. You’re equal to me, so the whole taking advantage of each other thing
doesn’t exist anymore. Yet I would have never revealed my feelings for you, if I hadn’t realized this
evening that you return them.”

“Why?” Robert asked softly again.

“Rob, I’ve watched you whenever females are in camp and I know that you’re flirting intensely with
my secretary. There was no hope for me that you would regard another male in a romantic way. But
I had gained your friendship and it made me happy. I know that you laughed at me in the beginning,
just like so many others did and still do. Then I sensed that you began to regard me a little bit in a
different light – that you no longer saw only the uniform, but the human being beneath it. Your
friendship was more than I could ever hope for, and it was enough. It had to be enough, because I
never hoped to get more from you. I feared your loathing or, even worse, your pity if you ever got
wind of my feelings for you.” He wrapped his free arm around the younger man. “And then this
miracle happened. The moment you turned around this evening and I saw the firestorm in your eyes
– the hunger in them – I knew that my prayers had been heard.” He lowered his gaze. “Even if I
don’t understand why you developed such desire for me. I know that you’re straight, yet here we are
– lying side by side after the first step of giving each other carnal pleasure.”
Lifting one hand, Hogan touched his German counterpart’s temple with soft fingertips and combed them through his ring of hair. “I don’t understand it myself,” he said under his breath. “I’ve never really thought of another guy this way. Yes, I love my friends, but not in this manner. I didn’t even think of you like this until a few days ago, but… there was the loving care you showed me. You held me when I was about to get lost in the emotional storms after my captivity, and being in your arms felt so good. I saw your gentle glances and then there were those moments in which I woke up from sleep only to find you wrapped around me. And it felt right, too. The latter shocked me and I tried to ignore it, but… being close to you like this seems somehow so natural. Then, the day after our big talk, I began to realize the one motive for your support you didn’t speak of. I recognized that you see more than a friend in me – and it didn’t repulse me, but… did these funny things to me I’d already experienced in the days before whenever you smiled at me.”

“Funny things?” Will wanted to know; happy that Robert opened up to him like this.

“You know, quick heart-beat, warmth in the cheeks, rising pulse…” Hogan rolled his eyes. “I thought I had gone nuts – that I interpreted something in the care you gave me, but after I knew what to look for, I got more and more confirmations of my assumptions. I began to see you in another way – your long, elegant fingers, the way you move, your body…” He sighed and blushed a little bit, as he caught Wilhelm’s shining glance. “Well, and then they started – those dreams.”

“Dreams?” Klink asked curiously.

“Yeah, dreams.” Hogan gulped. “I have to make a confession. A few nights ago, I didn't have the runs.”

The older man frowned. “No? But why did you race to the bathroom like this and…” In the dim light of the little lamp he saw how Robert flushed even more – and the famous scales slipped from his eyes. “No,” he snickered.

“Yes,” his American counterpart groaned. “I woke from a dream that was more than… stimulating to put it mildly, and even I have my limits.”

Klink’s eyes were wide like saucers. “No, you didn’t…” he began, and Hogan nodded.

“Yes, I did – like a teenager,” he admitted.
For the second time this evening Wilhelm had to laugh heartily. Pulling his beloved even closer to him and tightening his arms around him, he gave into his fond exhilaration, while he simply knew that Rob was pouting again. “Sweet Lord, my usually so witty fox, why didn’t you do the most logical thing and turn to me?”

“I… I wasn’t ready for it and so I ran,” Robert murmured; forehead buried against Will’s throat. “I knew that I would lose control otherwise and… it scared me.”

Still chuckling, Wilhelm pressed a kiss on the tousled, dark hair, while his hand caressed the other man’s back and shoulders; not caring for the healing scars he could feel under his fingertips. Another wave of sheer tenderness swept through him. “This is the whole point of giving into passion, Rob: loss of control,” he said gently; amusement but also understanding echoing in his voice. “But this evening, you were ready?”

“No, but then I saw the recognition in your eyes – that you knew what had awoken in me. And the open hunger that was mirrored in your gaze fed my want even more.” Hogan looked up again. “I couldn’t suppress it anymore and… Well, then it happened.”

Klink bent forwards and kissed his forehead again. “You made me the happiest man on Earth this evening, Robert Edward Hogan,” he said with returning seriousness; realizing how much it had cost the younger man to admit all this. It was one thing to think about something, quite another to say it aloud. “Not only because I found fulfillment in your arms and was able to give you a taste of what I feel for you, but also because of the ultimate trust you placed in me. When we’re on the brink of ecstasy we’re at our most vulnerable – and you trusted me enough to give yourself to me; knowing that you would be delivered to your desire and my care. This is a gift I will cherish forever.”

To his shock, Robert felt a soft stinging in his eyes. He had heard compliments and declarations of love before, but they had all sounded hollow and empty compared to this simple statement that spoke of devotion and true feelings. There was no doubt left that Wilhelm Klink really loved him. And it filled him with uncertainty but also with joyful warmth.

For once not knowing what to say, Rob closed the small distance to the older man and captured his mouth in a deep, tender kiss. And again he was hit with wonder that this here wasn’t awkward but felt so incredibly right.

The fire of passion had calmed down for now – both men were tired after the emotional and carnal storm they had experienced with each other after days, and in Wilhelm’s case even many months, of suppressed and finally released craving. What remained was a growing tenderness that enfolded them in a cocoon of security and peace.
Both men didn’t even realize that they slowly slipped away into sleep – wrapped around each other, skin to skin, heart to heart and drinking each other’s scent. For the first time in years, loneliness had no access to their souls…

*** HH ***

Slowly Klink woke up, and for a moment he only blinked, disoriented, in the semi-darkness of his sleeping chambers. It was warm and comfortable, and Robert was snuggled against him; his soft skin felt like silk against Will’s and…

One moment!

He could feel Rob’s skin???

Lifting his head he looked down on the younger man, who had wrapped himself around him, and given his own position he had snaked his arms and one leg in return around his beloved fox. They were entangled like the ropes of the famous Gordian Knot and…

And they were both obviously, utterly naked!

He could feel Rob’s shaft, hard with his morning erection, pressed against his thigh, while he became aware of the American’s hot breath dancing over his own exposed chest.

Then the memories returned. They had made love to each other…

All right, not to the full extent that was possible, but this first exchange of caresses, the kisses, the devotion, the upwards spiraling into higher spheres where they had soared through bliss, was more than he had ever dreamed of to experience with Robert one day.

But it had happened! They had been together, had cherished each other, had revealed their feelings…

Will thought he was flying on clouds; happiness squeezed his heart until he thought he couldn’t breathe anymore. Gently tightening his arms around his beloved, he closed his eyes again and
relished in those quiet, sweet minutes. It was pure heaven!

The shrill ringing of the telephone in the living room was like a cold shower.

No!

Not now!

There was no chance that something important enough had happened to disturb him now, in his quarters in the middle of the night, while he held his beloved naked fox in his arms!

Again the unpleasant sound echoed through the air – and it made Robert stir.

“Shomeone-shall-pick-up-tshe-phone, pleashe,” he mumbled; mostly still asleep.

The next ring pierced the air – and cursing, Klink untangled himself from the younger man (who grumbled a protest beneath his breath), threw the covers away and rose. Spying his housecoat laying on the chair he put it on and stumbled on wobbly legs and bare feet into the living room, where the phone rang for the fourth time.

“Ja, ja, verdammt noch mal, ich komme, ja!” (Yes, yes, dammit! I’m coming.) Lifting the receiver he barked, “Yes?”

“Herr Kommandant, are you all right?” Schultz’s voice sounded concerned through the line.

Klink’s face turned an interesting shade of red while his eyes became small. “You wake me in the middle of the night only to ask if I’m okay? Did you have a glass too much, or what’s the matter with you, Dummkopf?”

In the sleeping room, Hogan had pulled the covers back over himself and listened to the conversation in the living room only with one ear. He was tired in a very pleasant way, felt safe like a child in its parents’ house and he knew that something very good had happened to him, if he could only remember…
A high pitched squeak from the other room tore him fully awake.

“HOW late is it?”

Klink…

Will!

This Saxonian accent belonged unmistakably to his German counterpart, who…

Who'd just shouted an “I'M ON MY WAY. Just begin with the roll call… Oh, you already made it. Good. Very good. I’m… I’m on my way. And tell Fräulein Hilda she shall stop this stupid giggling in the background! Anybody can forget to wind up an alarm clock!”

The receiver landed on the phone and a few seconds later Klink came running into the bedroom. Stopping with waving arms in front of the nightstand, he looked down on his alarm clock and cursed violently.

Already assuming what happened, Robert lifted his head and looked up at the older man; his memories of what they had done the evening prior echoed softly through his mind now. “We overslept?” he asked innocently.

“That’s not funny, Hogan!” Klink gasped. “It's… It's half past nine!!! I've never overslept before.”

Robert smirked and snuggled back into the pillows. “You shouldn’t start the day with a lie,” he pulled the other man’s leg.

“And you'd better not deny the reason for it,” Wilhelm growled.

Peering from the pillows up to the older man, Rob used his famous puppy-dog-look, “These are the first words you say to me after last night? And there I took you for the more romantic type.”
Will let his head sink into his neck – this damn Ami would be his death one day! Then he looked down, caught the laughter in his beloved’s eyes, sat down on the bed’s edge, bent down and captured the younger man’s lips in a fierce kiss that was instantly returned. Before he could even try to rise again, Robert’s arms snaked out and held him close; the strong fingers combed through his ring of hair and clung to the material of his housecoat.

For timeless moments they forgot the world around them, then – with a wave of regret – Klink lifted his head, stroked tenderly over Rob’s shoulder up to his face, which he cupped lovingly, and whispered,

“I want nothing more than to lay down again, take you in my arms, show you a little bit more of how two men can lose themselves in passion, and have a nice long breakfast with you afterwards – preferably in bed, too. And hopefully we can make up for this lost chance within the next days, but just right now I’ve to go to my office. I’m almost two hours overdue, and…”

Hogan mirrored the gentle gesture of his lover by cupping his cheek and letting his thumb stroke softly over the older man’s lips. “Sh-sh, Will, I know. Even if the world ceased to exist for us yesterday evening, it is still very much present. The light of day doesn’t allow the secrets of the night to continue, but the next evening already waits for us. Go to your office, try to play it down, say that you overslept – the excuse that you forgot to wind up the alarm-clock sounds plausible – and we’ll see each other at lunch, okay?”

Wilhelm couldn’t help it. He was smiling like an idiot by now. Not only had Rob stood true to the next step of the forbidden relationship they had entered, he’d also deepened it by beginning to initiate a kind of ‘living together’ for them.

Again Will wasn’t aware of the love that shone in his eyes, as he bent down a last time, gave his ‘fox’ a gentle, warm kiss and finally rose.

A look at the alarm-clock told him that almost five minutes had gone by already, and, sighing, he went to the bathroom, only to see the heap of bed-clothes in the shower tub that prevented him from getting clean the quickest way possible.

Cursing again, he shut the door behind him, while Hogan closed his eyes with a wide smile on his face. He knew that he had lost a battle – the battle against himself and the rising feelings for a man who was officially his enemy, but in truth had become a lot of more than ‘only’ his savior and ally. And, as he couldn’t deny it any longer, this was the first battle he gladly lost…
Yeah, I told you it would be sweet and fluffy, and I hope it was how you wanted it to be. And, hopefully, it also soothed the one or other reader, who suffers a shock from the terrible stroke of fate that happened yesterday on the Île de la Cité.

The next chapter, the two colonels are getting even more comfortable with each other. After entering another level of their sometimes crazy relationship, they know that they have to be very carefully and certainly are going to face some complications. And while Klink ‘fights’ with the desk-work, Hogan had a lot of time to re-think everything. In the meantime, the Heroes began to realize that something had changed between their superior and the camp-Kommandant.

All in all, it is going to be a funny but also emotional chapter, before some more little actions begin.

I don’t know if I can publish the next chapter during Eastern. If not, I want to wish you all already BLESSED EASTERN. Should I get the next chapter back in time, I’ll publish it immediately.

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

I’m absolutely happy that my dear beta-reader was able to edit the next chapter despite the lot of stress she has at the moment. But thanks to her effort, I can publish the newest update just in time for Eastern.

Like I already pronounced, it’s a sweet, funny and emotional one, because our two colonels have to come to terms with the change in their relationship that was already crazy enough before they crossed the last threshold. There will be also a few references to some missions Hogan and his men did with the unwilling help of Klink – especially those in Paris. Poor Klink will be flabbergasted when he learns of the real reasons he went two times to Paris and why everything became chaotic there.

So, have fun,

Thank you so very much for the feedback of the last chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 35 – Getting comfortable with each other

Out of breath, Klink reached his office and stepped into the building. He had ignored the curious and even gleeful looks he had gotten from those POWs present on the compound while he had been practically racing towards the Kommandantur. Of course, the men had realized that he had overslept, just like his guards, who saluted dutifully but only poorly hid their amusement. And if he wasn’t inwardly soaring on clouds like he was, he would have certainly reamed them out.

Hilda looked up as he entered and greeted him with a polite “Good morning, Herr Kommandant.”
Her eyes shone with laughter and there was a suppressed giggle in her voice.

“Good morning, Herr Oberst,” Schultz said, too, as he was leaving Klink’s office. The edges of his mouth twitched and his round eyes gave away his amusement.

“Has anything happened?” Klink asked, concerned. “Did Burkhalter call or…”

“Nnnnnothing happened, Herr Kommandant. I only have to report that one member of the camp’s staff didn’t start his duty in time.” He couldn’t help it; he had to smirk.

Klink groaned; knowing that he would be in deep water if Burkhalter ever got wind of this. “All right, all right,” he groused. Hilda and Schultz thought that he would now snap at them, like he would usually do, but this morning everything was out of the ordinary, as they learned a second later. Klink lifted both hands and sighed, “Guilty as charged. I overslept. But!” He began to count on his fingers, bending one for every number “One: I am fighting with a relapse of my cold, two: I had worked into the very late evening on reports and lists Schultz here wasn’t able to handle because he’s no graduated officer – sorry, Schultz, but that’s the truth – and three: Because of the whole chaos within the last days I forgot to wind-up my alarm-clock. So…” He lifted both arms in one helpless gesture and shrugged.

Hilda began to laugh openly now, stepped away from her desk and stopped in front of her boss. “May I?” she asked.

Confused, Klink looked at her. “What do you mean?”

She only smiled, stepped on the tops of her toes and gave him a quick peck on the right cheek. As she caught his flabbergasted gaze, she giggled, “Welcome to the world of the ordinary mortal people.” Laughing, she returned to her desk, while Schultz beamed at him.

Promptly, the Oberst lifted both hands in a defensive gesture. “If you try to do the same, Schultz, you’ll get transferred to the Russian Front quicker than you can cry for help.”

“I’ve to kiss my hag at home every time I’m on vacation, Herr Kommandant, so do not fear…” Hans stopped as he realized what he had just said. “I… I’m sorry, but…” he began to stutter.

“Are you comparing me to your ‘hag’ at home, Schultz?” Klink only huffed and swung his right fist
in his typical gesture. He saw the sheepish smile his Sergeant of the Guards gave him and grumbled, “At least I wouldn’t see her well with my last monocle being done for.”

A little bit surprised about Klink’s extremely good and humorous mood this morning, Hilda crossed both underarms on the desk top and braced herself on them. “What happened to it?”

“Well…” Klink began, realizing that he couldn’t tell them that he had lost his monocle while kissing his senior POW officer passionately only to find it the next morning after a short, intense search under the bed – the same bed said senior POW and he had done a lot more than simply ‘sleep’. Clearing his throat, he said, “As I fell asleep during work I lost it and it broke on the table.” He shrugged. “Very unfortunate. Fräulein Hilda, please call my optician in Hammelburg and order five new monocles. Ask him if he can provide me with some sort of replacement until he’s made me new ones. If so, you, Schultz, please drive to Hammelburg and get it for me.” He rubbed his temple. “Otherwise I’ll have gotten a headache by midday at the latest.”

Hilda nodded with a smile. “Consider it done, Herr Kommandant,” she said; knowing that her boss really had a problem without a visual aid for his left eye. As far as she had learned, the visual acuity of his left eye was only at 30 percent after the incident over Spain that had forced him to quit the active flying service after his selfless deed that had saved dozens of his comrades’ lives, even if the brass saw it otherwise. In her eyes, Klink had been a hero then – only to be put in charge of a POW-camp in the middle of nowhere. Life could be unfair sometimes, but, on the other hand, Berlin’s decision over three years ago had certainly prevented Klink from finding an early death. There weren’t many pilots left who had still fought since the beginning of the war.

“Thanks,” the Oberst answered her with a short smile, before he addressed Schultz again. “One more thing. Colonel Hogan got sick last night and we had to change the linens. The used ones are in my bathroom in the shower tub. Please take care that they are brought to the wash house.”

Concerned, Schultz looked at him. “How is the colonel doing now?”

“Better. We think he can’t stomach the medicaments anymore, but Hogan will speak with Wilson about it, so calm down.” He glanced at Hilda who sat there, rigid. “That goes for both of you. Hogan is feeling better this morning, so don’t fret.” He shook his head and chuckled. “If someone from the brass learned how we’re worrying about the camp’s senior POW officer, they would throw us in the madhouse right away.”

“You only do what every honorable man would do: Take care of those you are responsible for,” Schultz said softly.
“I would subscribe to this instantly, Herr Kommandant,” Hilda agreed.

Klink chuckled again. “Thanks, you two are the best! And if either of you makes me some tea just right now, he or she will be enclosed in my nightly prayers.” Whistling a song, he went to his office with a never-before seen skip in his steps, as if he felt like dancing.

Schultz and Hilda looked at each other. Klink wasn’t just in a good mood, he seemed to be absolutely happy. What, for God’s sake, was going on here?

*** HH ***

Hogan had pulled the blankets higher over himself and was lost in thoughts. He had been in that exquisite state of dozing while soaring and dreaming the minutes before Klink left – and then, the whirl of thoughts had started.

What, exactly, did he feel after everything that had happened? Well, last evening and this morning he had been… happy. For the first time in years. It hadn’t been the relief after a mission going on without a hitch, or the joy of getting some news from home. It also hadn’t been the content feeling he mostly had after a satisfying love-night.

This here was utterly different – and ran deeper.

He was sated, yes, and his whole body was utterly relaxed after letting off steam for real. This all was certainly a part of what he felt, but until a few minutes ago the main part had been a warm, intense, buoyant happiness, as if he could fly.

And then confusion had spread through him.

How was it possible that he, an avid lover of women, felt drawn to a man like this? How was it possible that he had been lost in fervor the way he had, all because a guy was caressing him? He was anything but an inexperienced lover, and he was aware of the passion he himself harbored, but what had happened a few hours ago had caught him by surprise. Will had more or less driven him crazy with desire. He couldn’t remember when he had ever burnt like this – and it had made him hungry for more.

The latter was a part of his confusion, too. But besides the emotional matter there was something else
he couldn’t lose sight of: Law.

What he and Will had done was illegal – some people would even call it a crime. Even if he couldn’t understand this regard anymore. Yes, the Church preached that the togetherness of people was only ‘sacred’ when it was done to procreate and happened between lawfully wedded couples to increase their family. Well, he had always had a problem with this point of view. Sharing a bed out of lust was, for him, one of the best spices of life, hence his disobedience of the related religious rules – after all, they weren’t in the Middle Ages anymore.

And concerning the law… Why it forbid two men (or two women) from expressing their feelings to each other in a physical way was beyond him since the last evening. In his eyes, finding sexual gratification with a woman in return for payment was more of a ‘sin’ than sleeping with someone of the same gender if you had real feelings for him (or her).

Yet, especially, the fact that what they did was a breach of law could lead to a lot of trouble, to put it mildly. If they were caught by the wrong people, it would mean castration and maybe even death for Will – and the latter for him, too. At least here in Germany. In the US he, Hogan, would be thrown into jail and they would try to ‘heal’ him using ‘re-education’ and maybe medicaments. It would also mean the end of his career despite everything he had done and endured within the last three years. Not even General Butler would be able to save his neck then.

Hogan loved not playing by the rules. This was one of the reasons he had been one of the best candidates for the mission ‘Unsung Heroes’. And he had had his share of insubordination even since he became a member of the US Army. Only last year he had disobeyed orders by saving Tiger and he had afterwards an unpleasant discussion with the brass via radio.

Yet, somehow, he didn’t care for all of these points which spoke against continuing his intimate relationship with Wilhelm. Not really. Of course he didn’t want to be thrown into jail (or be executed in Germany; not for spying, but for having an affair with a man). He didn’t want to get kicked out of the US army or lose the freedom that hopefully lay ahead for him soon. And he certainly didn’t want something to happen to Will, yet this was a risk they both had to take if they wanted to continue and maybe even deepen this new kind of relationship. He, Hogan, was ready to take the risk. It was better than losing Will.

And the latter was another piece of his confusion.

He had had his casual affairs – mostly one-night-stands or only a few ‘encounters' with one and the same lady. And he had had two or three liaisons that had lasted for a few months, but not more. How was it possible that one night with Wilhelm had woken such strong feelings in him?
And this after they hadn’t even completely consummated their union. Robert could only assume how much stronger these feelings would get if he had the courage to walk this path further. He knew that this, what he had experienced the evening prior, was only the beginning – and even this ‘beginning’ had him flung over the edge with an intensity that still flabbergasted him.

He wanted to feel those long, strong fingers on his body and those soft, fierce lips on his skin again. He wanted to be pressed into the mattress and to feel his lover’s weight on him, a weight that gave him a sense of safety – of being sheltered – but also gave him the chance to let himself go completely. He could embrace and cling to his lover like he wanted, without considering the possibility of hurting his partner. Wilhelm wasn’t as physically fit as he, Hogan, was, but in bed running speed or weight-lifting strength did not count. Making love needed another kind of strength, and in this case Will was his equal.

Making love…

It had been nothing else than this. The hunger, the wonder at feeling each other, the craving for touch, the way Will had taken care of him during their passion and afterwards – this had been simply displaying and making love. Those minutes they had given themselves to each other had changed everything for Hogan. And he was convinced that the same went for his German counterpart. They had finally crossed an invisible threshold and had stepped into a new world that had been waiting for them to explore. A threshold they had been dancing on for some time now – sweet Lord, in Wilhelm’s case even for almost three years.

Robert admired the older man for the incredible control he had displayed all that time. Hogan doubted that he could have held himself back for almost 35 months like Klink had done. Hell, he had lost control after only a few days, and he had been already bottled up with such forbidden longing that it made him literally see stars when the fire in his entire being had been set free and had taken him to the heavens. He could only imagine how it had been for Wilhelm, who had been yearning for him like this for so long. Maybe everything had been even sweeter for Will than it had been for him, Robert, because Klink had to endure an eternity before he could fulfill his strongest desire.

The warmth, the tenderness, taking care of each other – this was a crime by law?

‘*No, this law is the crime, not the other way around,*’ he thought, while he carefully straightened his legs beneath the comforter.

He could feel the peace returning. Yes, what they did was illegal and he was certainly a big fool to risk his freedom, his career and maybe even his life for an intimate relationship with another man, but he knew that there was no going back now. He had gotten a taste of the forbidden fruit and wanted more.
There was so much to explore now and his curiosity was wide awake – together with this longing to feel Will cherish him again and to return the worship.

Who had ever thought that Wilhelm Klink could be this passionate – or could take the lead this easily? ‘Well, still waters run deep – even if Will isn’t ‘motionless’ in the original sense of the word,’ Hogan chuckled inwardly. Remembering how Will had kissed him good-bye this morning alone made his pulse quicken.

He groaned as he felt how, with this memory, the almost childish happiness returned, too. If he, Hogan, was still soaring on clouds and certainly grinning like an idiot, then Klink had to be likewise happy.

‘If the Kommandant is happy, the camp is happy,’ he thought with a touch of black humor, then he smiled into the pillow beneath him.

How happy Will had been could be clearly seen in his eyes this morning. The warmth and the love shining in those blue orbs had practically screamed ‘happiness’, and Robert could hardly wait to see it again.

‘Jesus, Rob, this game you’re playing is becoming more and more dangerous. Not only did you do forbidden things with your official enemy, no, now you’re stepping onto a path that can turn into a risky via ferrata of emotions, if you aren’t wary.’ And, something that really should ring an alarm bell but didn’t: It felt no less right than the suppressed desire had at first. He knew that it would be insane to allow more than ‘only’ a few more hours of passion, but the mere thought of Will sent waves of deep warmth through Hogan – a warmth he could get used to.

He wasn’t aware he had already gotten used to it – and that it would deepen within the near future to an extent that would turn his whole world upside down.

*** HH ***

At the later midday, Klink returned to his quarters only to get a surprise. Hogan was already up, wore his new housecoat, sat in the kitchen and chatted with LeBeau who was preparing lunch. For the first time after his rescue, Robert’s face showed an almost healthy hue; the paleness had made room for a more rosy appearance, and his eyes sparkled. Looking up as the Kommandant entered, his eyes widened at the unusual sight.
“Hey,” he smirked after two seconds. “They suit you.”

LeBeau turned around and whistled. “D’accord! You look… younger.”

Klink grimaced and pushed the middle piece of the glasses up his nose with one finger. “They’re… strange to wear, but my optician had no alternative until he has made a few new monocles for me.”

Hogan rose and stepped in front of his secret lover; cocking his head. Louis was right. The glasses Klink was forced to wear for now suited him. They weren’t really round, like it was currently fashionable, but more angular and were placed in a simple but elegant golden spectacle frame. He, indeed, looked younger like this.

“I have to agree with LeBeau,” the colonel said softly. “The spectacles suit you nicely.”

Klink felt, to his horror, heat spreading on his cheeks, and cleared his throat. “Well, I only need visual aid for my left eye, the right one is still absolutely okay. So the optician put plain glass in the right side. The monocle is more handy for me and… it also holds special meaning.”

Hogan shortly pursed his lips as he heard the gentle, sad undertone. “Your father wore one, didn’t he?” he guessed, and Wilhelm nodded with a sigh.

“Yes.”

LeBeau had closed the short distance to the two officers and looked up at the tall German. “Your father has already passed away?” he asked as he heard that Hogan spoke of Klink’s father in the past-tense. And for once Louis was really interested in learning some background information about the man he had regarded as an opponent for so long.

“He died in an accident when I was seven,” Klink murmured. “I loved him dearly and… And I sometimes even miss him today.”

The tiny Frenchman glanced at him with sympathy. Colonel Hogan was right when he said that even an adversarial uniform was worn by a man, and that sometimes seeing this man was worth it. For LeBeau, Klink had only been ‘the enemy’ – idiotic, yes, but still an enemy. Then he had started to
regard him in a different light after the Oberst risked his life to save Hogan. Sweet Lord, he had entrusted the Kommandant with Hogan’s life as he went to the hospital to alert Klink – and he hadn’t been disappointed. Since then he couldn’t help but soften towards the ‘Kraut’; especially as he realized how determined but also gentle and caring Klink was in nursing Hogan back to health. Then he had learned that Klink had known about them for two years now – and the Oberst had even supported them actively during their last mission.

LeBeau sensed that he had begun to see Klink as one of them – a part of their little family here in Stalag 13. And as he heard now how lovingly the German spoke about his late father, even after all those years, he felt his heart melt. Someone who mourned his father like this and honored him in such a way couldn’t be bad – no matter the nationality and uniform.

“I’m sure he knows it,” Louis said quietly and smiled a little bit at Klink. “I’m a religious man, you know, and I do believe that there is something like Heaven. And if so, he certainly knows how you feel and is keeping an eye on you.”

A little bit taken by surprise by this soft display of understanding and sympathy, Klink smiled back at him. “Merci, LeBeau,” he answered.

A quarter hour later the two colonels had lunch, and afterwards Wilson appeared for the second time this day. In the morning he had only checked on Hogan after learning that the colonel had been ‘sick’ during the night, and decided to discontinue the medicaments to spare Hogan’s stomach. Then he had returned to the infirmary where more than 20 men were now lying with a cold.

Now, in the late midday, Joe arrived in the Kommandant’s quarters again to remove Hogan’s last stitches and then he did the same with the Oberst’s graze wound at his calf. He admonished the two officers to still take it slowly, treated them with the ointment and insisted that Hogan had to bandage his upper body to prevent the healing broken ribs from shifting. Then he gave his report of the actual cases of illness within the camp. He was only glad that one of the newest arrivals among the guards, a young man named Thomas Hauser, had some basic medical knowledge and had offered to lend him a hand. His father ran a doctor’s office and the boy had learned a lot from him before he went to a medical university for one semester before he had been forcibly recruited like so many other male students. Klink accepted Wilson’s request to free the private from duty so that he could help more in the infirmary. Relieved, the medic finally left.

Klink extended the midday break long enough to have given Burkhalter a raging fit if the general ever learned about it. But the Kommandant couldn’t help it. He enjoyed Robert’s presence even more than before, and as he realized how casually Hogan reacted to everything, Wilhelm was downright happy.

He returned to his office half an hour later than usual and even ended his work earlier; sending
Fräulein Hilda home to enjoy some time with her parents.

Like this he was back in his quarters one hour before evening roll call; finding Hogan sitting on the sofa and reading. Yet the American couldn’t fool him. Robert was pale, which had certainly resulted due to his being up for very much longer than the days prior.

Worry rose in Wilhelm – this kind of deep affectionate concern you have for someone you love.

“You’re a lot of paler than you were during the midday break,” he said quietly. “So, to prevent you exacerbate your state, you’d better lie down until dinner.” He raised his voice as Hogan began to protest. “Even if you feel on the top of the world because Wilson removed your last stitches this midday, we both know that you’re far from being really healed. So don’t risk a relapse, lie down and get some rest. You’ve been up long enough for today.”

His American counterpart rolled his eyes and pulled the blankets closer around him, while he replied, “Just a notice for you: I’m not on top of the world just because Wilson removed my stitches.” He flashed Klink a grin that couldn’t be mistaken.

The Oberst flushed, yet he answered half seriously, half teasingly, “Then that is an added incentive for you to find some more rest or the other reason, which you hinted at, will be a taboo for you for the next days.”

“Blackmailer!” Hogan complained, which only earned him an amused chuckle.

“A little bit of your own medicine, Hogan. That’s all.”

Making a face, Robert rose and indeed headed towards the bedroom. Stopping at the threshold, he looked back over his shoulder. “You coming?”

Thunderstruck, Klink blinked at him “What for?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Some cuddling, maybe? We’ve an hour ‘til roll call. You can sit here and ponder everything or you can come with me, strip off your boots and jacket, and find some rest. You look tired, too.”
This was an invitation that was irresistible. And it showed Klink one more time that Robert seemed to relish the newfound version of their relationship. His heartbeat increased and a smile played around his lips without him realizing it. “Go first. I'll lock the door and follow you,” he said softly.

Robert grinned and stepped into the bedroom.

A few minutes later both men lay side by side – Hogan beneath the blankets and comforter, Klink over the blankets to avoid too many crinkles in his uniform trousers, but covered by the comforter, too. He had stripped off his boots, the jacket and tie and had even loosened his collar, but this all wasn’t the real reason why he felt free. Lying here with the man he loved and remembering what they had done only a few hours ago, made his mind and soul still soar.

“See, I knew you would like it,” Hogan teased while looking at Will.

The Oberst chuckled, turned onto his right side, reached out with his left hand and brushed an unruly lock away from Rob’s forehead. He asked himself for the utmost time how his American counterpart was usually able to keep this wild strand out of his face.

“I do like it,” he whispered. “I like simply being with you – whether we talk, play chess, eat meals together or…”

“Or make out?” Robert suggested; wriggling his eyebrows again.

Klink stared, flabbergasted, at him for a moment – and Hogan began to laugh. “I think this belongs to the repertoire of the world we dared to enter last night. And I don’t plan to leave this world soon again. For I like it too much.” He carefully braced himself on his left elbow and bent over the older man.

Almost in awe, Wilhelm looked up at him. “You had a lot of time today to overthink everything,” he whispered. “I mean, you… you said you had never been with a man before and I believe you. What happened yesterday evening was… was everything I dreamed of, but… for you it could be an one-time-thing… I… I mean… I don’t take you for a flighty being, but… this is new for you and… and against everything you thought of yourself. And maybe you’ve second thoughts… and…”

Rob smiled as he heard his secret lover stutter. Placing one finger on those soft lips, he murmured, “Stop stammering, Will. I want this – with you. Only you.” Carefully, he removed the glasses from the Oberst’s nose and placed them with one hand on the nightstand. “And you know me: I never
back off when I’ve set my mind on something.” His gaze found the hickey that had been hidden beneath the stiff high collar during the day, but was now plain to see. Brushing the tips of two fingers over the mark, Hogan added softly, “And this here proves that you’re mine.”

He bent down and kissed the older man – gently at first, but it soon became deeper; hungrier. He couldn’t help it; after he had crossed the threshold one time, he wanted more of what lay behind this door – more of Will. It wasn’t only Robert’s natural curiosity or his adventurous mind that loved challenges and exploring new things. Sure, these two things contributed to his eagerness, but he longed for the emotional warmth and the physical pleasure he had found with the older man far more. And the more he dared to walk the path he had stepped onto last night, the more he was driven towards his German counterpart. A border had been passed, an invisible line had been crossed and behind it lay a kind of freedom Robert had never experienced like this before.

Will groaned and wrapped his arms around his beloved; careful not to inflict any pain. He still couldn’t believe that this here was real and not a dream. He was afraid of waking up and finding himself alone and cold once again. He had been lonely and rejected so often, a part of his mind was almost unable to grasp that his time of solitude was over.

He relished in every second he could feel the younger man close – and having their lips touching, while Rob’s breath danced over his cheek and his hand moved in tender circles over Will’s waist and hip, was pure paradise.

For long moments – minutes – they did nothing more than taste, nip and tease each other’s mouths, while their hands explored and worshipped the other’s face, throat, shoulders, waist and back.

A warm haze, mixed with a few sparks and a rare sense of contentment, had weaved a cocoon of security and shelter around them. Both were not used to receiving real tenderness, and to feel and see it in each other’s eyes was like a little miracle for them. Outside – only a few hundred kilometers away – the war raged with unprecedented insanity, cruelty and inhumanity. But here, in this shabby little building made of wood in the middle of a POW-camp settled in the woods of nowhere, the two men were in their own small world that didn’t know any fury and hate.

Cuddling like children, seeking and finding peace in each other’s arms and simply enjoying being this close, they lay on the bed; the comforter covered them like an additional shield against the outer world’s harshness or any other harm that could befall them.

Klink had never been happier in his whole life. Lying here, with Rob purposefully snuggled against him, and being welcomed by someone for once was more than he had ever dared to hope for. He had always been alone; more or less. The few friends he had had were mostly gone – killed in the first war or now, in the second one; their lives snuffed out during fights or fallen prey to the regime’s brutality. He was tolerated by the other officers at best, most of his men disliked him and the POWs
saw, naturally, an enemy in him.

But not Robert.

Oh yes, Will knew that Hogan had jeered at him in the beginning, too. The war had not only placed them on different sides (at least during the first months), Klink was aware that the American colonel had only respected him on the outside, while inwardly Hogan had laughed his head off. A few times there had been even real anger in Hogan’s eyes, and Will had guessed that the ‘friendship’ beginning between them had been nothing but a farce – a necessity that allowed Hogan more liberties to do what he had been sent for. But then everything had changed – slowly, tentatively, carefully; week by week, month by month.

Hogan’s reactions whenever Klink was in danger had been more serious; heavens, sometimes the colonel had displayed real worry for him, Klink. And it had increased until… Well, one day Wilhelm had simply realized that the bickering and bantering wasn’t harsh anymore, but more a kind of real teasing. They had dared to joke when they were alone, had expressed sympathy to each other’s stress, had discussed serious or less serious topics, had shared chess games and cognac – and slowly something like trust had begun to develop.

And all this had led to the bloom of a real friendship – and had peaked now into emotions which were utterly forbidden in most parts of Earth, but had been inevitable for both of them.

Although, concerning Robert, it hadn’t been this inevitable. To admit the truth, Wilhelm was still almost shocked that he had been able to win the younger man like this.

“Stop thinking,” Rob murmured, while nuzzling his secret lover’s throat with his nose; placing tiny kisses on the tender skin and the hickey there. “I can hear all these wheels turning in your head like unoiled gears.”

“Very flattering,” Will grumbled, yet he was smiling, while he softly tightened his arms around his lover. “No,” he whispered. “I’m still baffled that… that you put up with me like this – that you… developed some deeper feelings for me at all. You’re straight and…”

Robert chuckled quietly. “At least I always thought so. I never really tried something with a guy before, but…” He lifted his head. “Somehow you caught me, Wilhelm Klink, and you caught me good. Usually I don’t mix duty and private pleasure with each other, but you… You woke something in me I had never felt before.” He sighed and buried his face at the older man’s neck again. “Once awoken, I couldn’t control it anymore. I was… helpless, and… and it feels so damn good to let go for once.”
He felt how Will cupped his jaw softly with one hand, while a kiss was pressed to his temple. Then the Kommandant began to laugh quietly. “Just this morning you admonished me not to start the day with a lie, and now you’re twisting the truth, too, my witty fox.” He met Hogan’s asking glance, as the younger man lifted his head again and looked questioningly at him. Wilhelm smirked, “So, you ‘don’t mix duty with private pleasure’, hm? I really have lost count of how often you’ve flirted with the women who came to Stalag 13 – how often you kissed them, including my secretary.”

“Well… You can’t judge a guy. It’s lonely here and…” Hogan sighed. “To say the truth, most of the times it wasn’t anything serious. Fun, you know. I never let it influence my work.”

“Never?” Will asked; knowing better. “I’m absolutely sure that the one or other lady who was here was a part of your reckless schemes and you also used their presence for some pleasurable moments.”

“You think so?” Robert asked innocently, and Klink began to laugh quietly.

“I simply know it. What about this Russian lover of furs – this man-eater Mayra – for example? I’m absolutely certain that she fits in this register very well. She shows up in my camp whenever something very spectacular happens – of course with you in the middle of it. Thinking closer on it, you were the center of all her games while odd disasters for the regime happened at the exact same time.”

Robert’s eyes widened comically and he then buried his face in Will’s chest. “Don’t remind me of her. I swear, if I’m forced to endure this diva one more time or have to hear her ‘Hogan-darling’, I’ll resign, escape this camp together with you and settle down somewhere in the mountains to never be heard from again!” he groaned; his voice muffled by Klink’s shirt.

Wilhelm chuckled for a moment; deeply pleased that the younger man hadn’t any ambitions concerning the demanding lady that seemed to cuddle and suck off the colonel’s face at any given chance – even in the presence of her current lovers. The Oberst loathed her – not only because she had tried to win the man he loved for herself, but also because he knew that she had brought Robert into the most hair-raising situations. And himself, too. If he remembers this dubious, almost suicidal, ‘Klink’s Commandos’…

“I know what you mean,” he smiled; gently massaging Rob’s neck. “I get the goosebumps and the silly urge to break all sprint records running away as quickly as possible whenever I hear her voice or watch her fuss over you.”
Robert lifted his head and both men shared a glance of full understanding. “Even if she did help me in the end, I still want to report myself sick with an contagious disease for at least a week whenever she bursts into the camp,” Hogan groaned.

“She helped you. So… she’s an Underground agent too,” Klink nodded. “I thought so. She’s clever, I’ve to give her that, yet she couldn’t fool me as she declared that you had switched sides. It’s more likely for the Rhine river to flow backwards than for you to support the … How do you call him sometimes? The big bubble-beard?” He caught Hogan’s smirk, and not for the first time within the last days he dared to laugh about such a vilification concerning the man who held his own people more or less hostage to reach his goal. “Nice – it fits.” He took a deep breath again, before he cocked his head; new curiosity shimmered in his eyes.

“How did you meet her? I mean, she came into the camp, declared that she has known you for quite a time – that you were even lovers. But I know for certain that Russia and the United States are never on the same page and that their alliance at the moment is a forced one to bring Hitler’s fall. So I’ve problems imagining that you, an American colonel, and she, a Russian spy, have met before you were sent to Germany.”

Hogan looked uncomfortable for a moment, before he lay his head back on Will’s shoulder and murmured, “Well, like you said, I was sometimes out of the camp without your knowledge and I met her like this – after my arrival in Germany. And we were never lovers!” he added after a moment.

“Hm, the last thing is good to know.” Klink shortly pursed his lips; swollen from the many kisses he and the younger man had shared. “But concerning how you two met: Since she came here the first time, I’d had a feeling that I had met her before, too. And after her last visit, I got an idea I want to speak with you about. You remember the week I spent in Paris in the autumn of 43?”

“You went away for a week and were very grumpy afterwards,” Robert nodded, anything but serious.

“I’m never grumpy – I thought we had already covered this,” the Oberst grumbled. Then he took another deep breath. “My car was stolen – officially – then I found out that it had been taken by the Gestapo. A female agent of the Gestapo was questioning a suspicious man in my car when I found it – and said female was some Russian hag. I asked myself why a Russian lady would work for the Gestapo – or why they would hire her at all, but the Gestapo always uses crazy methods to reach their goal, so I didn’t pay this oddity any closer attention. And a few months later Mayra showed up in my camp for the first time, and she somehow seemed to be a little familiar. And I think I know why. I’m absolutely certain that the lady in Paris and this diva in furs are one and the same pers…” He stopped – his eyes big.

“Just one moment!” he gasped; lifting his head. “You said you met her outside of camp – and I… I
thought I saw you a few times in Paris. Hell, I even thought I heard your voice and…” He caught Hogan’s half sheepish, half boyish grin, and pointed one accusing finger at him. “It was YOU in Paris.”

Hogan bent his neck to see Wilhelm better and smiled innocently. “You think so? Paris is a little bit far away from Hammelburg, don’t you agree?”

“Don’t you dare deny it!” Klink growled. “It was you – in the café, on the street, and if she was in Paris, and you too, then you met her there. And… One moment! It was you in the Gestapo-headquarters where I was held in custody because of the accusation I belonged to an Underground-cell that…” He gasped. “This was your doing too, right? It was you who gave false information to Backscheider of the Gestapo. Thanks to you I spent half of my holidays in custody.” He saw Hogan flush, remembered the short visit of Backscheider and his ‘business-friend’ in the cellars, and added accusingly. “You were this ominous Frank Durkin, who claimed to be an escapee from my camp. You were there in the Gestapo-Headquarters and…” He stopped. “How did you travel to Paris? Why go to all this trouble and why did you raise a wrong accusation against me so that…”

Hogan placed a hand on his chest. “Will, please calm down. Yes, it was me there in Paris…”

“I knew I recognized you in the café!” Klink interrupted him half irritated, half triumphant. “You wore a bright trench-coat and dashed away as I came in.” He smiled widely. “I told you I know you too well to be fooled. I know the way you move and…” His face darkened again. “Why all this, Robert? Why take care that I was arrested by the Gestapo? You know what they do to prisoners. If Himmler hadn’t intervened I would have maybe been killed!” There was suddenly true hurt in his eyes – and Hogan felt bad.

“Will,” he said gently while slipping his right arm around him; looking straight at the older man. “You weren’t in danger. Not one moment. You were too close to my tail, so I had to do something, yet I had already had a plan how to get you out. I wouldn’t have allowed any harm to befall you, yet I had to get you out of my hair.”

“By delivering me to the Gestapo!” There was still pain in the Oberst’s gaze.

“I kept Backscheider busy a lot. I knew he wouldn’t be able to question you seriously, because he had all hands full with me and his illegal businesses. Believe me, I wouldn’t have stood aside and watched you being hurt. I… I already cared for you then.” He saw the doubt in the other man’s gaze and he sighed; tightening his arm around him. “I did,” he repeated, before he admitted, “One time I even thought about telling you the truth during our stay in France. If I had bumped into you again in Paris, I wouldn’t have hidden any longer, but would have faced you. I knew you would be enraged but wouldn’t shoot me – or LeBeau. So…”
“LeBeau? He was there, too?” Klink asked, thunderstruck; forgetting for a moment that he was a little bit offended.

“Yes,” the American nodded. “He was there – and would have been our alibi for our presence in Paris.”

“Let me guess: A heart-wrenching sob-story about a dying aunt, granny or cousin he had to see one last time,” the Kommandant grumbled ironically.

“Something like that,” Hogan affirmed. “The truth is we had to free a caught Underground-agent who was being held by the Gestapo in Paris. I talked to her in the cell by pretending to be…”

“Her?” Klink frowned. “Of course – Hogan, the white knight in shining armor who helps the damsel in distress.” He felt a stab of jealously which he knew he hadn’t any right to feel – after all it had happened before they had sort of gotten together. Yet the green monster lifted its head and growled quietly.

“You know her, too,” Robert said softly. “Mademoiselle Marie Louise Monet. She…”

“She was brought into my camp by the SS last December and died afterwards in an explosion of the Berlin Express. A real waste! She was a nice girl and…” Klink stopped as he saw Hogan’s impish smile, groaned, rolled his eyes, let his head fall back on the pillow and finally grimaced. “Let me guess: You saved her, erased all tracks by blowing up the train, smuggled her away and she’s in London now.”

“Yep,” the younger man nodded. “We freed her one and a half year ago in Paris and we freed her last December. During our first meeting it was her who gave me the advice to contact Mayra – something I have regretted this since then from time to time,” he added with a grimace.

Klink turned his head and watched him; a certain dread began to wake in him. “This Mademoiselle Monet – you risked a lot for her. Are you… I mean, do you love her?” He didn’t want to hear the answer. He feared it. The young woman was Hogan’s type, this much he was aware of. If he had feelings for her, then this here – whatever it really was – stood no chance at all.

Hogan looked at him. He saw and felt how tense the older man was all of a sudden – and he saw something else: An odd kind of anxiety lay in those blue eyes. And he knew the reason for it exactly.
“No, I don’t love her,” he heard himself answer, to his own surprise. And it was the truth. Yes, he
admired her and he wouldn’t mind having a liaison with her, but love… No, this wasn’t love.
Affection, maybe a little bit of desire, but not love. “I felt drawn to her, this much I can admit to you
and to myself, but… it wasn’t what I feel for you. We’ve a connection – a kind of link – I never had
with anybody before. It’s still new and… I’m even a little bit uneasy at how natural it is to lie here
with you and to share proximity and kisses, but it also feels absolutely right. Something that didn’t
happen when Marie and I shared some stolen kisses and embraced.” He shook his head. “It’s really
odd – this intensity that draws me to you,” he whispered, more to himself than to Wilhelm.

Will had begun to relax and even smiled now; the fear left his eyes. Slowly he let out the breath he
had held. Robert didn’t love this young woman – thank the Lord! Hogan had no intentions
concerning the mademoiselle and he didn’t like this Russian diva. Maybe there was indeed a piece of
hope for a future together – after the war and if they could keep their relationship a secret.

Driving his attention away from those dreams, he came back to the topic of his senior POW’s
mission in Paris one and a half year ago. Making a face he grumbled, “Hmpf, and to free this French
girl you got me into custody.” He shook his head. “How did you want me to get out, by the way?”

“I did get you out of it by sending Himmler – well, a phony Himmler, mind you,” Robert said;
relaxing.

“He was…” Klink stopped. “Of course he wasn’t the correct Reichsführer. His reference to the czar,
his figure…. Himmler is smaller and thinner, if I remember correctly.” He glanced at Hogan again.
“He ordered Backscheider to release me the next day. I'll make another guess. You would be done
with your mission until then.”

“And again: 100 points go to the nice gentleman with the absent monocle,” Hogan smirked; feeling
relieved that the hurt had left Klink’s gaze. He didn’t want the older man thinking badly of him – or,
even worse, feeling betrayed. Yes, he had played Klink, but he would have never back-stabbed him
in a way that would lead to the Oberst’s demise. He had developed a soft spot for his German
counterpart during the first year and somehow it had grown strong enough to let some kind of loyalty
bloom in Hogan. And now – well, he would fight the devil to keep Will out of harm’s way. He
shook his head inwardly. Life certainly walked crazy paths sometimes.

Klink got a very good idea of Hogan’s whole plan all those months ago, moaned and rubbed his face
with one hand. “You and your damn schemes! And how did you and LeBeau get to Paris?”

“With your car,” the colonel said bluntly. “I thought you had figured that out, too.”
“With *my* car?”

“On the roof of it,” Hogan cleared up the detail. “LeBeau and I hid among the luggage. We did the same a year later as you won this prize, and…”

“THAT was you again in Paris last year?” Klink sat up again and stared down at him. “The guy in the black leather jacket who hurled the dirty water from the bucket almost on my feet?” As he saw Hogan’s very innocent expression, he growled in his throat and sent the younger man a dark glare. “What do you think my camp is? A travel agency?”

“You had a holiday, we had a holiday, everyone came back in one piece – so, no harm done,” Hogan smiled while rolling half on his back. “Well, we had a mission, you got a prize and…”

“A prize that wasn’t a real one, but a faked one.” He pointed one finger at the younger man again. “And I bet my last shirt that this was your doing, too.”

“Guilty as charged,” the colonel replied; lifting both hands in mock surrender. “We had to go to Paris again, this time to get some plans, and…”

“And so you thought it a good idea to give me a phony award prize and…” His eyes became smaller. “’The Kommandant of the year’, my ‘anniversary party’… These were all your ideas.”

“You had an enjoyable distraction and we could finish our missions. So we killed two birds with one stone.” Robert’s voice sounded very innocent.

For a moment Klink only stared at him; wavering between wanting to strangle or kiss the damn rascal beside him. Then he felt a chuckle rising in him he had to give in to, and asked wryly, “Do you have an excuse for everything?”

“No, sometimes I really have to think of one, but mostly I come up with an idea just in time,” the American colonel explained with almost boyish pride.

The Oberst looked at him for a longer time, until he finally said, “Your teachers, neighbors and parents have my deepest sympathies. You must have driven them crazy as a boy.”
“Not really,” Hogan smirked; eyes sparkling. “They knew me too well – and all boys play pranks. It’s nature.”

“And, again, he has an excuse!” Klink groaned. ‘Sweet Lord, it’s no miracle that I love you damn bastard so much!’

Hogan laughed quietly, “Of course. Otherwise I would be in real deep water sometimes and…”

He didn’t get further, as Will shifted to the right side and bent over him with a certain gleam in his eyes. “You are in deep water just right now, my dear Hogan,” he said with a soft growl in his throat and captured the younger man’s mouth in a searing, fierce kiss. Wrapping his arms around Wilhelm, Robert accepted the erotic assault and gave back as good as he got.

For a long time there was nothing else than gentle groans, hungry lips and tender fingers wandering over cotton and parachute-silk…

TBC…

Yeah, ‘making out’ is exactly what you get if you’re a passionate, fiery, oversized churl as a boyfriend. And making up by making out is one of the oldest but also best tricks to placate your lover (*smile*).

The next chapter will be a really hot one once again. Hogan has acquired a taste for the illegal but yet so delicious love-games, and – to admit the truth – both men can’t get enough from each other by now. And, for once, it’s Klink who is the teacher, so you can expect another hot scene in which our ‘Papa Bear’ entrusts his German counterpart with teaching him more about forbidden tenderness.

I hope you liked the last chapter and, like always, I’m curious about your reactions.

I wish you all now HAPPY EASTERN,
Love

Yours Starflight
Wings of fire

Hi, my dear readers,

I got the edited version of the chapter from my dear beta-reader and replace it now with the not-corrected one. I hope, this is better to read for you.

This chapter is only for adults. A little hint, get some cool juice or something else cold to drink before you start reading (*snicker*).

Therefore: Enjoy!

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 36 – Wings of fire

Klink made it just in time for roll-call and even managed to be completely presentable – despite the fact that he and his American counterpart had made out a lot and that he had needed all his self-control to will down his erection. Truth be told, he had splashed his face with cold water a few times, while he imagined less pleasurable things: Burkhalter in pink underwear, Gertrude Linkmeier in a pitch-green bathing-suit, Hochstetter in a night-gown complete with night-cap, or his grandfather swinging his walking-stick and sneering without break.

Like this Klink could at least walk almost normally while striding over the compound towards the lined-up POWs. Contrary to most of the time, he quickly demanded the report from Schultz, dismissed the POWs without any speech but with an unusual “Good night, Gentlemen,”, headed back to his quarters and rang for dinner. He was still half-hard, and the only thing he could think of was being done with the day’s routine and being alone with this damn oversized boy in the body of a well-built man who was driving him crazy!

And the fact that Hogan kept giving him heated, suggestive glances during their meal together and would even brush his leg against Wilhelm’s under the table whenever LeBeau was out of sight
wasn’t helping the Oberst the tiniest bit. And he’d bet his last shirt that Rob knew exactly what he was doing to him and enjoyed his uncomfortable state. The knowing smirk Robert gave him a few times spoke volumes.

‘Just wait, my witty fox! I’ll have you writhing and begging in a few minutes when we’re finally alone!’ Wilhelm promised himself inwardly and shot the younger man a warning glare, who simply smiled innocently back as if butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth. ‘An odd English alternative to the German idiom,’ Klink thought to distract himself. ‘We would say: He looks like he couldn’t cloud any water.’

As LeBeau cleaned the table and carried the dishes to the kitchen, he could have sworn that the temperature in the quarters had been rising by degrees. The dinner had been unusually quiet – without the usual talks or bickering between the two officers. They had both eaten in an odd silence, while Louis could have sworn he’d seen some fierce looks pass between them. Not threatening, no, rather… heated with emotions the tiny Frenchman refused to recognize. He was glad when he was finally done for the day and could leave Klink’s quarters. The atmosphere in the wooden building was tense enough to be cut with a sword, and LeBeau’s subconscious knew the reason for it exactly.

The Kommandant bid him good night and locked the door behind him, before he returned to the living room – only to find it empty. The light in the sleeping chamber was switched on and the door was half open. An invitation that needed no translation. With a low growl in his throat, Klink strode towards the little room; anticipation and suppressed longing flaring up in him even more.

Hogan had laid his housecoat on the chair, sat on the bed’s edge and looked with an impish smirk up at the older man, whose nostrils flared for a moment.

“You!” Wilhelm growled. “Have you teased me enough now?”

Robert chuckled quietly. “Tit for tat, my dear ‘Kommandant’. You left me behind in a very uncomfortable state…”

“I had to make the damn roll-call!” Klink snapped; recognizing only then that the curtains were firmly closed. Good! This here was nothing for spying eyes!

“… Then you flirted shamelessly during dinner,” Hogan continued as if he hadn’t heard the Oberst.

“Whose leg was stroking the other one’s? Yours mine, or the other way around?”
“And now you look at me like you want to devour me, but still you’re only standing there and…”

The colonel gasped, as a moment later his German counterpart was in front of him, bent down, cupped his face with both hands and whispered hotly,

“Who sows the wind, shall reap the whirlwind!”

“Good,” Hogan nodded. “We’ve many tornados in the US – and I’m curious as to how strong a German whirlwind is.”

An almost dangerous smile appeared on Klink’s face. “Think of Goethe, Robert: ‘Spirits that I’ve cited, my commands ignore’. He kissed him short and hard, before he placed his interim-glasses on the nightstand beside the can with the ointment that still stood there from the evening prior. Then he began to peel off his boots and then his clothes. He was barely done with ridding himself of the jacket, tie, shirt and undershirt, as he felt Rob’s hands cupping his hips and for a moment he feared the younger man’s hand-prints would burn through the material of his trousers, because the touch felt like fire. Looking down, he saw that Hogan had stripped off his pajama top and still wore only the bottoms and the bandage. Then Wilhelm caught the fierce glance Rob gave him from under lowered lashes, and felt his knees go weak. Good God, if Robert Hogan had been able to bend him to his liking in earlier times, then now he could melt any attempt of resistance with only one passionate look.

“Let me,” Hogan said softly; voice hoarse.

Klink could only nod; his mouth went dry as he realized that his secret lover wanted to strip him.

Rob made short work of the trousers’ fasteners and stroked the material from the older man’s waist. A wicked smile played around his lips as he instantly saw the hard proof of Will’s desire pressing against the pants. Glancing up again suggestively, he whispered,

“Yesterday you worshiped and pleasured me. You gave me the first sight of a new world and carried me over the threshold to help me make the first steps. You took me onto your wings and brought me to the heavens; caressing and setting me into flames. Now it’s your turn. Let me return the favor.”

To his shock, Will felt tears dwelling up in his eyes. Those almost poetic words; this simple display of thoughtful tenderness and loving consideration of his own needs – this all was something he hadn’t often experienced. To tell the truth: He couldn’t remember having a lover who wanted to give like he had received. Only his witty fox, his Rob, could think this way. And this despite the fact that
this all was so completely new for Hogan.

Combing his fingers into Robert’s thick hair, he bent down and murmured, “You don’t have to do this because you want to repay me in any way. It was my deepest pleasure to indulge you like this – to show you that there can be as much between two men as it is between man and woman. Yes, I would enjoy every second of being fondled like this, but… this is still an unknown territory for you and I can imagine that it must be… strange for you. So…”

“You misunderstand,” Hogan interrupted him softly; moved by how thoughtful Wilhelm was towards him. “I want this!” The intensity in which those three words were uttered sent shivers over Klink’s back and made the breath catch in his throat.

“O-okay,” he whispered and let go of Hogan; trembling inwardly with rising anticipation.

The underwear was pulled away from him, and new tremors ran beneath his skin as the most vulnerable part of his body met the cold air first – and then the hot breath of the younger man. A sigh waved gently through the room, and he wasn’t aware that it had come from him.

Robert looked at his lover’s groin with curiosity. Yesterday he hadn’t really thought about it – the hunger woken in him had prevented his mind from working properly – but now, in the golden light of the little lamp on the nightstand, he saw Wilhelm Klink in all his naked glory. He was long and firm, just like the rest of his body, and deeply reddened. Never before had he given much thought to another man’s shaft, but everything had begun to change within the last days and nights, and had reached its first peak yesterday.

Raising his arm, he softly took ‘Will’ in his hand, which elicited a throaty growl from his secret lover. He felt the tender, silken skin and the stone-hard flesh beneath it – such contrasting textures in one body part. Robert knew, from his own experiences, how much this could turn on a man – how much it could weaken him, but also how dangerous this could become. Wilhelm’s trust in him sent a wave of warm joy through him, and always being a man of action, he bent forwards and brushed his lips against the already wet head.

Klink closed his eyes and gasped, as new fire bolted through his veins. God, if he had been hard before, then he didn’t know a word for what he was now. A shudder ran through his body, and the moment Robert took him into his clever mouth, the low shout almost torn from his throat was only stifled in the last second by biting into his fist. His knees went weak and he needed all his control to remain standing, as this hot tongue began to swirl around him. Instinctively, he gripped for Rob’s shoulder; seeking hold against the flames raging from his loins through his whole being.
He had secretly wished for this – longed for it. To be fondled like this from his witty fox. It was one of the most intimate erotic games, and there hadn’t been many lovers who did this with him. But Robert… He offered it to him at only their second time together; as if he had known how much he, Wilhelm, had yearned for it. Maybe he did know – after all, he had been fondled like this yesterday and had learned how much pleasure it gave.

Burying his hands into Robert’s black hair, he could do nothing but try to remain on his feet and relish in the tender passion that was given to him. He could feel how the fervency was rising in him; how it blazed through his whole being. Without any chance to prevent it, he began to sway as his knees buckled.

The hot mouth vanished and the air – cold in its contrast – broke through the haze of his dizzy mind. “Rob…” he pleaded, felt movement and met Hogan’s fierce but also gentle gaze, as he opened his eyes. The younger man had risen and stood in front of him; steadying him by wrapping both arms around the Oberst’s waist.

“Easy, Will,” he whispered; giving him a loving kiss. “Lay down and let me do the rest.”

“Rest?” Klink asked; his fuzzy mind was unable to produce a clear thought.

“You clothes, for example,” Hogan laughed quietly, while his glance wandered tenderly over the sweat that pearled on Will’s forehead and the deeply flushed face, while he sensed the far too quick heartbeat nestled near his own chest.

Turning them around, he urged the older man to sit down on the mattress, knelt down and peeled off the trousers and the pants and threw them carelessly behind himself. With spread fingers he stroked his hands upwards over his lover’s thighs; smiling as he saw how Will’s body reacted strongly to it.

“My, my, here is someone eager,” he murmured the words from his own forbidden wet dream a few nights ago, bent forwards, pushed the older man with one hand down on the mattress and closed his lips around this hard pulsing member again.

Klink almost whimpered, while he instinctively bucked up into this sinful mouth. One look along his body and seeing his beloved troublemaker pleasuring him like this almost drove him over the edge. Combing his fingers again in Rob’s hair and whispering the younger man’s name like a mantra, he threw his head back and surrendered to the bright flames which began engulfing him.
A part of him tried to remind him that this here was still new for Robert – that he had to warn him before the lust would overwhelm him – but his mouth was unable to formulate something other than his witty fox’s name like a prayer. Rob’s wandering hands along his sides and his belly, his hot breath on Will’s skin, the movements of this scorching tongue – everything was driving Wilhelm almost crazy. The tightening in his loins and the wild drumming of his heart told him that he was about to be thrown over the edge, and somehow he was able to stammer something close to a warning – then the fire took him with it, while he screamed his lust into the hand Hogan had reached out and clapped over his mouth.

He wriggled and bucked as he came long and hard; riding the ecstasy that controlled his body, mind and soul. He wasn’t aware that a few sobs escaped him, while his movements only slowly calmed down. The whole world seemed to be far away, only this warm mouth around him seemed to exist anymore. He couldn’t even protest, as he felt the cold air against his shaft again, while those lips set him free. Boneless, trembling and soaring, he lay there; his sightless gaze glancing at the shabby wooden ceiling.

Hogan pressed a kiss on the older man’s belly and glided over him. Licking his lips, he compared the strange taste with the more familiar one of women. A man’s essence was… saltier, stronger and… And it tasted completely of Will. Robert decided that he wouldn’t mind pleasuring his secret lover like this more in the future.

Crawling over this long, lean body, he braced his arms beside Wilhelm’s head and looked down on the sweaty, reddened face that seemed to glow with happiness. Will’s chest heaved beneath him, a thin layer of sweat covered his skin and Robert could feel the older man’s heart beating like mad.

“You’re okay?” he asked with fond amusement.

Klink was obviously unable to say something, but the way he tiredly wrapped his arms around Hogan told the younger man everything. Chuckling, he buried his face at his lover’s throat – only feeling at the sidelines that his position, with the calves and feet out of the bed, wasn’t really comfortable.

“I know that you’re groggy, Will, but would you mind if we move into a better position?”

“S’egal. Mach-wash-du-willschst.“

Okay, Hogan spoke fluid German, but for a long moment he really had trouble with the translation.
“Well, if I interpret this slurring correctly, you just said that you don’t mind whatever I do, correct?” he asked.

“Can’t stop you,” Will murmured; sighing in deep contentment. He felt like flying and even the stinging of his two still healing injuries didn’t bother him.

Robert lifted his head, laughed with unmasked gentleness at his lover, sat up and urged him to shift until he lay in bed correctly. Grumbling, murmuring more in undecipherable German and groaning, Klink obeyed, and Rob lay down beside him; pulling the comforter over them both. He still wore his pajama bottoms and his erection was over-sensitive, even against the smooth material, but he knew that he had to grant Wilhelm a little rest. Will would take care of him later.

Pulling the older man closer to him, he took him into his arms and gave him a kiss on the nose. Klink opened his lids and looked cross-eyed at him, which elicited another laugh from the younger man.

“You can be so cute sometimes,” Hogan whispered; an intense tenderness was rising in him like he had never felt before.

“’Cute’,” Wilhelm murmured, while closing his eyes again. “Don’t let the others hear this.”

Robert chuckled. “Never, Hon! That’s not for other ears – and, by the way, you’re only allowed to be so cute when you’re with me.”

“Possessive much?” Klink whispered, while he slowly came around.

Another kiss was placed on his mouth. “Yes.”

Wilhelm smiled, while he snuggled closer to the love of his life. He felt Robert’s hot erection pressing through the silken material against his own belly and murmured, “Give me one or two minutes, and then I’ll take care of you.”

Even if Hogan had known this, he felt obligated to reply softly, “You don’t have to. This was your turn and…”
“And spare you a little revenge for your merciless teasing within the last two hours?” Klink moistened his lips; lids still lowered. “I don’t think so.”

Again, Robert chuckled. “Don’t promise something you can’t keep.”

“Don’t challenge me, my witty fox. I swore to myself that I will make you squirm and plead, and I have every intention of making this promise real.”

Robert smiled while he felt some warmth spreading through his cheeks. “You keep calling me ‘witty fox,’” he murmured; letting his fingertips glide over the older man’s cheek. “How did you end up with this nick-name for me? I’ve been called a lot of things, but certainly never this.” Pure curiosity sounded in his voice.

Wilhelm shrugged. “Well, General Biedenbender, who shot you down over Hamburg, told me that an eagle had been placed into my cage, and in his own way he is right. You don’t just have the Eagles on your collar, a part of you is indeed like an eagle. You love your freedom, you love to fly, and your courageous attacks were unexampled. Yet your true strength lies in your mind and your good nose, so to say.”

“‘Good nose’?”

“We say so when we mean that someone has a fine sense for things others don’t see or recognize,” Will answered; sighing. “You’ve such a ‘good nose’. But that’s not all. For now, you’re grounded. A fox lives in the woods in a spacious den with many tunnels, smells and hears things others would never sense and acts on them, and his clever mind outwits his sometimes larger opponents or the intelligence of his hunters. He avoids most traps and if he is really caught one time, he mostly finds a way to wriggle out of the danger. He’s a kind of animal bogey – always vigilant and observant, but also playful and reckless. A true prankster. And he is absolutely loyal to those who belong to him.”

Klink turned his head upwards to look at the younger man; blue eyes gentle. “I read in a book that several Indian tribes believe in a kind of animal spirit – an invisible companion in the form of an animal that fits the man or the woman’s mind and soul the best. If this legend should be true, then yours has to be a fox.”

Hogan had listened closely, and the many thoughts Will had obviously spent on his behalf touched him deeply. No one had ever bothered to think this closely about him – to give him an alter ego, so to say. It once again showed the strength of the other man’s feelings for him, but also the depth of Klink’s profundity. And not for the first time he felt guilty to have regarded his German counterpart only as a cowardly and babbling fool for so long. He knew now that this was only a mask Will was forced to wear to hide his sensitivity for which there was no room in an army, especially not in war.
He cupped the head of his secret lover with a tender hand; his thumb moved in gentle circles through the smooth hair. “Thank you, Wilhelm,” he said softly. “I never thought about such comparisons, but you are right. I heard about some Indian legends of the ‘spiritual companion’, too, and the way you described a fox being mine is a big compliment for me.” He chuckled. “But I have to disappoint you. At home I don’t leave my ‘den’ through tunnels and my former flat wasn’t in the woods.” He winked at Klink, who laughed quietly.

“Yes, I’m aware of it. The description of a fox’s home only fits here, in the camp, yet it doesn’t change the fact that you think and act like a fox. You even have his eyes sometimes – especially when you’ve pulled someone’s leg or after other kinds of fun.”

Robert snickered. “Well, that leaves you for the title of Eagle, don’t you agree?”

“I do – after all I look out for you, my fox, and if danger becomes too great, you can hide beneath my wings.”

This turned Hogan serious again and he pulled Wilhelm even closer to him. “An offer I don’t want to take advantage of too often, because it would put you at risk, too. But if our enemies come too close to us, I will come out from under your wings and snap at them – no matter the uniform and rank.”

“Please, not literally. Just imagine Burkhalter when he grouses at me and you bare your teeth and literally snap after him. I do think he would call the doctors then.”

Hogan burst out laughing; imagining the fat general’s face in such a situation. After he calmed down again, he glanced with deep affection at his secret lover. He remembered all the times within the last two and a half weeks, in which Klink overgrew himself – how he became the ‘Iron Eagle’ again only to protect him, Robert Hogan. He remembered how Will developed courage, bravery, fierceness – just like he maybe had been before the aftermath of the first war and the insanity of the second war almost cut his wings. He had risen again, just like…

“Phoenix,” he whispered.

Klink, who had been simply relishing in the warm proximity, looked questioningly at Rob again. “I beg your pardon?”

“Phoenix – this is what you are now. They almost killed the Eagle, tried to clip his wings and grounded him where he was about to burn to ashes in the raging fires of these dark times. But he rose
again. Changed, but no less strong. A phoenix.” Robert smiled. “My phoenix!” He saw how those blue eyes began to shimmer with unshed tears.

“Rob…” Will whispered; moved to the core. No-one had ever tried to comprehend his character and no-one had ever seen him like Robert just did. He felt understood for the first time in his life.

Lifting his head, he caught Rob’s mouth in a kiss that started out tender, then turned more fierce, taking Robert’s breath away. Moving slowly, but determinedly, Will braced himself on one underarm and bent over the younger man, while his kiss became even deeper. One of his hands wandered downwards and squeezed the younger man through the material of the pajama bottoms. Hogan gasped and his eyes widened in surprise at this unexpected erotic assault.

Carefully, Will slipped over the younger man; pressing the under part of Rob’s body in the mattress. He heard Hogan’s quiet, reckless laughter and caught those well-shaped lips hungrily with his own again. Robert’s arms snaked around him instantly, while he let his hands explore the older man’s back – fingers spread, massaging every moving muscle. To his bafflement, Wilhelm felt himself harden again. He’d never come around this quickly before, but – as he had to admit – he had never felt so much hunger and love for someone like he did for Robert Hogan.

“You’re wearing too much,” he murmured between hot and wet kisses.

“Then rectify it,” Rob answered, breathless; surprised but also happy about his lover’s already newly awoken passion, which he could feel clearly.

Klink pushed the comforter away, sat up and pulled the pajama-bottoms from the younger man’s slender hips and strong legs. Satisfied, he saw the unmistakable proof of Robert’s eagerness to find fulfillment, and letting one finger wander over the iron-hard, hot member of his beloved’s body, he whispered, “Are you ready for the next step?”

Hogan had absolutely no clue what Wilhelm was referring to, but he trusted his lover blindly in this case. “Yes,” he murmured.

A brilliant smile enlightened Will’s face, before he bent down and began to fondle his lover with care and experience; worshiping him wherever no bandage stopped him. Robert let himself fall; relishing in the tenderness shown, tenderness that sent shivers along his skin and woke lustful cravings in him.

Will’s clever lips followed his gentle hands; increasing the sensation the long, strong fingers
provoked in the younger man. The warm breath, waving like the soft wind of a late spring day over his skin, made him tremble with anticipation – especially after Wilhelm didn’t hesitate to tease him with some butterfly-light kisses at the most vulnerable part of his body.

And then one of those long, clever fingers stroked between his balls and touched the entrance to his body; massaging it gently. Rob bit his lips as his body began to tingle in a way he had never felt before. Looking up, he glanced, confused, at the older man, who gazed along his body upwards with hunger in his eyes, while he gave him another tender smile.

“What are you up to?” Hogan somehow managed to utter; sounding breathless.

Will’s smile turned predatory. “Do you trust me?” he whispered; breathing another kiss on his lover’s groin.

“Yes!” The answer came without hesitation, and woke happiness but also triumph in the older man. Sitting up, he stretched and reached for the tube of ointment on the nightstand; slathering his fingers with the content.

Robert watched him with hooded eyes, while his usually so clever and quick mind only slowly began to grasp what his lover planned. He felt how his mouth went dry and, despite a hue of unease, his pulse quickened.

Pressing a few open-mouthed kisses on Rob’s chest and belly, Will moved downwards between the younger man’s open legs again and began to fondle him anew – straight there. Robert closed his eyes and savored the daring caresses with which Wilhelm was slowly, but steadily, driving him mad.

A throaty noise of utter surprise escaped him, as all of sudden one of those long fingers entered him with utter care, but also determination. Eyes flying open, Robert looked, baffled, at his lover, who had braced himself on one elbow and was smiling wickedly up at him.

“Relax, my witty fox,” Will whispered. “Just trust me and relax.” The mere thought of where his finger was sent waves of lust through him, but he held back. This was for Robert – a first time of something that would become more later.

It felt… odd. Rob had never liked to be treated with suppositories when he had been a child and was running a fever, and this here felt similar, but the deep trust he had developed for his German counterpart – his secret lover – made him obey. His eyes widened, as the finger moved deeper and
Then, out of nowhere, something like a flash shot through his body and sparks bloomed in his mind. Without knowing what he was doing, he bucked upwards towards the seductive intruder, while a loud gasp escaped his mouth. He heard a chuckle and the finger touched him again – just. Right. There!

Pressing his eyes shut in sheer bliss, and feeling utterly helpless, Robert surrendered without even realizing it, while a long, low moan broke free of him.

Good God! He had never imagined this could be so…

He couldn’t finish the thought, because this finger began to move – and he was lost. The sparks changed into fireworks full of colors that ran through his body and set it aflame – and the fire enlarged with every touch of this sinful finger deep in him. And then this hot mouth was back on his member…

Every sane thought vanished into nothingness. Stammering Will’s name, Rob buried his hands in his lover’s circle of hair, while he braced his feet against the mattress; his toes curled into the linens. He wasn’t himself anymore, as wave after wave washed over him and began to flood him away.

Throwing his head from one side to the other and hearing his own heart drumming madly in his ears, he was spiraling upwards.

Suddenly these lips on his groin went along his upper body. The free arm was pushed beneath his head, lifted it and Will’s lips caught his own, yet this maddening finger remained where it was. As he felt Will’s member at his outer thigh, his mind somehow got one sane thought – ‘He needs you’. Acting on pure instinct, Rob gripped for his lover’s hot and hard shaft, and closed his hand around it. From afar he heard a deep growl, then reality began to skip.

Clinging to the older man with one arm and unaware of the small sobs which escaped him, Robert gave into the ecstasy that took him away. Will’s mouth swallowed the shouts of passion which rose from the depths of his soul, before everything seemed to explode in blinding stars…

He was floating – somewhere over an ocean of comforting dark waves on which invisible stars mirrored in thousands of gentle lights. He was weightless; soared in sheltering warmth and peaceful bliss.
Will sank down beside his beloved on the mattress – breathless and utterly spent after two flights to the heights. His body trembled in the aftermath, his pulse raced, his heart beat hard against his ribcage, but he hadn’t felt this good in a very, very long time. Yes, yesterday had been pure paradise, but this evening…

There had been not only blinding lust and glowing passion, now there had been so much tenderness, too. And thoughtfulness. Being at the brink of ecstasy himself, Will had thought that he would have to use his own hand to find release after Rob’s fierce reaction to everything told him that the younger man was about to be thrown over the edge. And then, in one single clear moment, Robert had taken care of him, too. To feel Rob’s body closing around his finger, the way Robert clung to him, the sheer fervor on his face – it had all made the experience so much deeper.

Sighing in content, Wilhelm stretched out his long legs and laid his head on the younger man’s shoulder; not aware of the satisfied smile on his lips. Murmuring something Klink couldn’t understand, Rob turned towards him, tiredly wrapped his other arm around him, too, moistened his lips – and lay still. Letting his free hand wander lovingly over Hogan’s side – not caring for the material of the bandages there – Klink closed his eyes.

They would have to wash and clean everything, but… To hell with it for now! He was unable to sit up, not to speak of rising and walking around. And it was obvious that it was the same for Robert.

Finally angling for one of the blankets, Klink pulled it above them both, and snuggled closer to the overheated body beside him. A soft purr rumbled for a long moment in Hogan’s throat, then he took a deep breath and lay still.

Wrapped around each other, light on the nightstand still switched on, and the sheets a mess, both men fell asleep within a minute. And for a few hours there was nothing but peaceful silence, until…

“Ouch!”

This came from both of them a few moments after Klink woke up, felt an uncomfortable itching on his chest and belly, and did the first thing that came to mind: He sat up. It was unpleasant – at least in the places where the two men’s bare skin, covered in soft body hair, had been touching at the chest and legs.

Looking down on a groggy Robert Hogan, who blinked confusedly at him before he pouted, Wilhelm began to remember – and let himself fall back beside the younger man with a loud groan.
that turned into a chuckle.

“Splendorous! We did it!”

Thirsty, sleepy, limbs heavy, Robert tried to understand, what exactly they ‘did’. Well, they had had another wild hour of nameless passion and…

And had fallen asleep afterwards; sticky with the tracks their lust had left on – or, better to say, between – their bodies. Will had warned him the evening prior how uncomfortable it could be when their seed dried and they got stuck together because of it.

“Don’t tell me, we’ve to shower and change the linens again,” Rob complained; feeling not the tiniest bit ready to leave their love-nest now – or to move at all.

Klink sighed. “At least I’ve to get washcloths and towels.” He grimaced. “And new linens for the blanket.”

The reply was a low groan, while Robert closed his eyes. “Do your worst.”

Wilhelm sat up again and began to snicker. “Don’t tell me I tired you out.”

“You did,” came the slurred answer. “Good God, I never thought it could be like this.”

Slowly, a proud smile appeared on the German’s face. As it seemed, he had managed to wring his hyper-active fox out. “Just wait until we really make love.”

Hogan’s lids opened. “You mean, it will be even more intense?”

Will nodded with a secretive smile. “Yes, it is.”

“Sweet Lord!” Hogan moaned and closed his eyes again. “Remind me to write out my last will and testament before we take the last step.”
That was it. Klink laughed out loud. “I don’t believe it,” he chuckled after he calmed down a little bit. “‘The most dangerous man in all of Germany’, the very same who acts up with the Gestapo and SS, and who throws so many sabots into Hitler’s war machinery that it already stutters like an old motor, thinks he will die because of love-making.” He glanced down on the younger man; face full of fond amusement. “Drama-Queen!”

Robert was huffing like a five-year-old, had crossed his arms in front of his chest and glared, sulking, at the ceiling.

A strong wave of tenderness washed over Will, and without wasting a thought he bent over his lover and placed a deep, loving kiss on that pouting mouth. He felt the lips begin to smile beneath his own, while one of Rob’s arms snaked around him. Lifting his head after a few moments, he whispered,

“Do you know that you gave me a big compliment here, by admitting that I tired you out?”

He could see the amusement in those dark brown eyes, while Hogan still pretended to sulk, “You laughed at me.”

“Not at you, but at your complaining, because we both know how much you enjoyed our encounter.” He laid his forehead against Rob’s.

“Yeah, I did – and it took me by surprise. Hell, I’ve had my share of love-nights, but I was never… wrung out like this time.” He grinned suddenly. “You exhaust me so much, I can’t help you with the sheet or the washing, so…” He almost squeaked, as Will pinched his waist.

“Always recognizing and using an advantage, my witty fox,” Klink growled, anything but serious. “But seeing that our love-games do such a big number on you, my still so lame duck, I think we’ve to give it a break for the next nights and…” He couldn’t finish the sentence, because all of a sudden Robert’s hand was around his neck while the younger man lifted his head – catching the German’s lips in a fierce kiss.

Many minutes later, Klink walked with anything but elegant movements to the bathroom to get a washcloth, a towel, scissors and new bandages. Once again, a few minutes later (after he had cleaned himself), Will sat on the bed’s edge, cut Robert’s bandages – sticky and dirty with both their bodily fluids – and washed his beloved afterwards. Rob was purring like an oversized cat, and even if he got a very tiny, little, small, barely recognizable tug of conscience that Wilhelm did all the work, and he – Hogan – lay here and got spoiled, he also relished in the tender care that was shown to him.
After Wilhelm was done, Robert sat up and lifted his arms – helping the older man to re-wrap clean bandages around his rib-cage like this. And as Will rose to take the utensils away, Hogan stripped the linens from the blanket and afterwards helped to put on new ones.

They both didn’t say much – at least not verbally. But their eyes spoke a language that didn’t need any words whenever they looked or winked at each other in mutual understanding.

“Thirsty?” Wilhelm asked at last, and Robert nodded.

“Very.”

“Stay here, I’ll get us something.” Slipping into his dark-blue bathrobe, Klink vanished and returned a little bit later with two glasses; offering one of them to his beloved. A certain scent wafted from it, and curiously Hogan sniffled at it.

“Wine?” he asked, surprised.

“Wine and water mixed. We call it a ‘Weinschorle’ – a ‘wine spritzer’ is how it’s named in English. It has less alcohol, vitalizes, soothes the thirst and tastes better than simple water.”

Hogan smiled at him and lifted his glass. “Prost (cheers),” he said in German, and saw how Will’s eyes lightened up.

“Prost,” Klink answered; loving it when the younger man spoke his language. Rob’s German was fluid but it held a certain throaty undertone you could mistake for a dialect, but was in truth his smoothed out, yet still existing American accent. And Wilhelm really liked it.

Hogan only realized how thirsty he really was as his mouth was filled with the first sip. He emptied the glass without interruption, and only when he had finished his drink did he become aware of Will’s amused yet understanding smile.

“More?” Klink offered, and Robert was ashamed to nod.
“This would be nice. Thank you.”

Like this they emptied half a bottle of wine and much more water, snickering about the heap of linens and cut bandage material on the floor and teasing each other like two boys. Wine, the intense experiences, the deep contentment and the feeling of absolute security in each other’s presence, brought the border to Morpheus’ Realm nearer again.

Half an hour later, both lay side by side in the darkness, wrapped around each other, tired and happy in one. It didn’t take long until they fell asleep again.

*** HH ***

That morning Klink didn’t oversleep, even if he couldn’t believe that the night was already over when the alarm-clock began to ring. Hogan was still asleep and only grumbled at the noise, but relaxed instantly the second the alert had been barely switched off.

“Sleepyhead!” Will whispered tenderly, as he disentangled himself from his beloved (and the sheets), slipped into the bathroom and began his daily routine in time. He did the morning roll-call – why were Kinchloe and the others staring at him like this? – started his office-work, returned Hilda’s cheerful “Good morning, Herr Kommandant!” around eight o’clock with a suitable reply, and began to fill out reports while whistling melodies which officially didn’t even exist.

At the same time Hogan woke up, realized that his body ached in certain places like it had never done before, rose and began to get some order into the sleeping room. He owed Will that much.

He was not aware that a broad smile seemed to be carved into his face, a face that shone a healthy hue. Wearing his pajamas again, freshly shaved and washed, he stepped out of the bathroom, only to come face to face with Schultz.

“Good morning, Schultzie,” Hogan said cheerfully; bypassing him.

“Good morning, Colonel Hogan,” the Bavarian replied; voice uncharacteristically serious. Observing the American for a moment, he closed the distance to the bathroom, threw a glance inside – new linens were swimming in the shower tub – and nodded as he got his assumptions proven. He turned around and looked at Hogan, who was slipping in his housecoat and knotting the belt; whistling softly.
Hans took a deep breath. The air was clean and fresh, yes. No wonder given the fact that the window was open. The bedclothes were plumped up, the Oberst’s worn shirt and socks lay neatly over the chair, and everything was in order.

At least for someone who didn’t know what to look for – or had no knowledge of the delicate secrets of the camp’s Kommandant.

Schultz had known Klink for almost four years now, and he had seen this man during good and bad situations. If everything went smoothly, Klink was well-adjusted. And sometimes the Saxonian was even in a good mood. But never before had Schultz seen him like this. Not when he’d had that ‘love-affair’ last year, not when he went out with the ‘Hofbräu’s’ landlady and not when pretty women belonged to the rare visitors within the camp.

Klink was practically glowing with happiness; a real smile was plastered on his face since yesterday – and this morning it was even worse. He walked with a tiny bounce in his step, his posture was straight and his eyes shone. Hell, even the prisoners had realized that something was completely off with the Kommandant. He was joking around, greeted the guards with their names, laughed with Hilda and whistled while doing his paperwork. He had even skipped rebuking Schultz for being late for roll call today.

Schultz also remembered Klink’s cheerfulness yesterday and that the Oberst had been late at every given occasion: He had overslept, came back late from lunch, ended work earlier, went to his quarters again, came more or less too late for the evening roll call, ordered dinner earlier – Schultz could still hear LeBeau’s grousing in his ears that even a French cook needed a break here and there – and this morning he came in time, but was beaming at everyone and everything.

And Schultz had a very good idea about the reason for it: Robert Hogan.

The Sergeant of the Guards had learned about his superior’s streak after the American colonel’s arrival at Stalag 13 almost three years ago. He had seen the intensity with which Klink had watched the younger man in the first weeks, then Schultz had realized the hidden yearning in the Saxonian’s gazes. He had witnessed a hundred times and more, how Hogan was able to wrap Klink around his finger and had been let off the hook often enough to give the whole brass in Berlin sleepless nights if they ever learned of it. And the reason for Klink’s display of mildness became more and more obvious: He had a very weak spot for Hogan.

Then, a few months after Hogan’s arrival, Schultz had gotten the first real proof of his assumptions concerning his CO’s eventual feelings. He had driven Klink to a meeting of different camp- and staff-officers in Fulda, from which the Oberst came back drunk. Of course he had managed to mask it until he was finally in the backseat of the car, and Schultz had brought them back to Stalag 13, but during the travel Klink had started to slur about ‘those mischievous brown eyes’, this ‘boyish grin’
and this ‘damn, disrespectful but so adorable behavior’. Schultz had begun to realize that Klink obviously wasn’t speaking of a female, because he always referred to ‘him’.

As they finally had made it back to the camp and Schultz helped the swaying and stumbling Klink out of the car towards his quarters, the Oberst had stopped and thrown a longing gaze at Barracks 2, whispering softly a ‘Good night, you damn troublemaker’.

The last of the famous scales had slipped from Schultz’ eyes, and after the first shock wore off, he had watched his superior closely. If it wouldn’t have been for this slip of control, Hans would have never thought that Klink had a weakness for the same gender – and especially for the witty, unruly, sometimes brash, manipulative, yet charming American officer, who bore a boyish-manly handsomeness you couldn’t deny. Klink remained the firm Kommandant, obeyed the rules and never tried to win one of the guys for himself. Even more, Klink’s attempts at flirting were strong and convincing enough to fool everyone around him – everyone but Schultz. And during some private moments together, Hans began to understand how lonely his superior was – with no family of his own, laughed about by many of his fellow officers and yearning for a kind of companion law had forbidden.

Despite the fact that he and Klink had their disputes and sometimes really got on each other’s nerves, Schultz had slowly developed a kind of protectiveness for his superior that had flared up last year as Klink was about to be executed. It was clear that the Saxonian hadn’t forgotten that he, Schultz, had tried to save him, because their relationship had been a lot better afterwards.

And exactly that protectiveness was what had now brought Schultz to Klink’s private quarters. He knew that his superior’s feelings for Hogan had never decreased. Rather the opposite, seeing that Klink had risked his life to protect the American almost three weeks ago, and had been ready to sacrifice his career and freedom two days later as he got Hogan away from the Gestapo. Now the two men had been practically living together for two and a half weeks – even sharing a bed, albeit in a platonic manner. At least until now.

Klink’s awfully good mood, his happiness, his cheerfulness, his urge to be in his quarters and therefore close to his American counterpart – this all was rooting in only one thing: He and Hogan had been together. Klink had certainly given himself away while taking care of Hogan, and the younger man had engaged in this affair.

Okay, the latter was none of Schultz’ concern. If the two men’s crazy and complicated relationship had turned into a more intimate thing, so be it. Yet Schultz knew for a fact that Hogan was a ladies man. And Hans was also aware that the colonel used every advantage given for himself – and for his ‘monkey business, for which he had won Klink, too. Schultz feared that Hogan was only using Klink’s feelings for him to gain even more advantages than he already had – and if this was the case, it would lead to a catastrophe.
So, after being released from Klink’s office and getting the colonel breakfast from the casino for once, Schultz had walked over the compound; telling LeBeau that he didn’t need to prepare anything for his CO this morning.

The moment Hogan had stepped out of the bathroom, grinning like mad, and Hans saw the linens in the shower-tub after one set had already been changed yesterday, the large Bavarian knew that his assumptions were correct. The two men had shared a bed in more ways than just for sleeping – and Schultz was determined to prevent a big mess from taking place.

“Colonel Hogan,” he began; watching how the American turned towards him.

“Yes?” he asked; still smiling and looking… content.

“A word, Colonel – from man to man.”

Robert’s expression turned from a smile to a frown. He had rarely seen the Sergeant of the Guards this serious and sincere, and he instantly knew that something was up. And Schultz’s addition ‘from man to man’ told him that this wasn’t a talk between leading guard and prisoner.

Cocking his head, Hogan glanced at him. “What’s the matter, Schultz?” he asked politely. There were moments he could make fun of the large man, moments he manipulated the Bavarian – and there were moments, like now, that Hogan took him really seriously.

Schultz went to the window and closed it, before he turned around and fixed the younger man with a stern gaze.

“I’m here because of what happened to Oberst Klink. He is not only my superior, but I also see a friend in him, and as such I’m worried. I’ve some questions for you – and knowing you and your way with words, I want plain and true answers this time.”

Hogan stared with large eyes at him. “Schultz, what…”

The Sergeant of the Guards made a firm cutting-off gesture with one hand – and Hogan knew that this here was far more serious than previously thought…
Well, Schultz is, besides Hogan, maybe the only living soul who knows Klink in and out. And I always loved it in the TV-show when Schultz showed concern for his CO despite the fact that they clash a lot. And I also took Schultz always for a kind of ‘father’ for everyone within the wires, but especially for Hogan and his gang, Klink and sometimes also Langenscheidt. Therefore I loved to write this scene that will continue in the next chapter. It’s ‘the’ talk a man usually only gets from his girl-friend’s father, yet Hogan never does ‘usual’, even in this case. And it doesn’t matter that Schultz is only a sergeant and Hogan a colonel. For now Schultz only follows his heart and his protectiveness he harbors for both.

I also thought it would be the best place to explain, how Schultz learned about Klink’s secret and why he developed such a loyalty to his CO, who often treats him anything but kind. I hope, you liked it.

And I also hope you liked the ‘hot’ part. Yes, they still have to make ‘real’ love, but this all is still very new for Hogan and it shows Klink’s serious, deep feelings for Robert by introducing him slowly to everything. And, at least, they shared further hours of passion, but also some fun what shows how comfortable they are with each other. Hopefully you also liked the part with the ‘fox’ and the ‘phenix’.

In the next chapter there is not only the talk between Hogan and Schultz, because despite the peaceful situation in Stalag 13 in the moment, outside the world drowns in chaos. There will be some references to true historical events which took place at this time, and Klink learns more about the secret and hidden facility where the ME-262 will be produced, what leads to another pow-wow with the Heroes.

I hope that those, who read the old version, still liked it and maybe I get some feedback now after the corrected chapter is published.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

I’m happy that I can already publish the next chapter, because my dear beta-reader has finished the most stress-full tasks with her studies and extra-jobs and is able to spend some time to edit my writing.

I hope, you liked the last chapter and it didn’t bore you, because this is the first time I didn’t get any feedback except for a few kudos. I know that you certainly wait for our two colonels to make the biggest step in their new-found relationship, but on the other hand this is all very new for Hogan and Klink doesn’t want to scar him off.

I hope, the new chapter is more to your liking. It will be about ‘the speech’ Schultz gives Hogan after he figured out to what the two colonels are up to. Furthermore Burkhalter will be an unwilling information source concerning secret projects of the Luftwaffe, Klink’s little idea of distracting the Gestapo by another sabotage hits home, and the Heroes begin to realize the great change in the colonel’s relationship.

In other words: A lot is going on.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 37 – Serious discussions

Hogan observed Schultz’ face, which he had rarely seen this earnest. He could already guess the
topic the large Bavarian wanted to talk about with him, but the directness Schultz displayed a moment later still took him by surprise.

“Herr Hogan, I do understand that your relationship with Oberst Klink has changed. The Kommandant is more cheerful and happier than I ever saw him, and seeing you smiling and whistling, too, I know why. I don’t care what two men can do behind closed doors in a sleeping room…”

“Schultz,” Hogan raised his voice to speak, the warning clear in his words. “This is really…”

“Let me finish!”

The stern tone and the firm glare Schultz used were utterly new for Hogan and, for once, he really shut up; thunderstruck.

“Like I said, I don’t care what you two do here,” Hans began anew. “I have known about the Oberst’s weakness for you for very long now, and I can also understand that those last weeks were more than hard for you. This war wears us all down, and every gentle gesture and nice word is absorbed like a dried-up sponge getting some water. So, it’s no wonder that you gave into the temptation of finding some solace. I know Klink well enough – he would never try to force himself on someone or abuse his position. And he certainly didn’t use the chance given to woo you openly, yet it is more than clear that you two are together in a way men are not allowed to. You two can do whatever you want – I won’t tell anybody about it. Yet there is one thing I’m demanding: Don’t hurt him!”

Hogan felt his jaw almost hit the ground. “I… I beg your pardon?” he gasped.

“You heard me,” Schultz answered strongly. “I know that you’re a ladies man and, contrary to those idiots in the government or the so-called scientists, I don’t believe that gayness is something you can be infected with. Therefore this relationship with Klink is something you either wanted, too, because you belong to the same group of men – which I don’t really believe after seeing you kiss and flirt with every pretty woman that comes along. Or you are doing this for a purpose. I don’t care what it is, what you plan or intend: But don’t hurt him. Klink’s feelings for you are real and run very deep. If you’re only playing with him – using him for your crazy tasks – then you’ll face a lot of trouble with me. The Kommandant and I may not always get along, but I respect him and don’t want to see him destroyed. Because this would be the result if you’re not serious about what’s going on between you two.”

Hogan, who felt as if he were getting ‘the talk’ from a girl’s father, didn’t know if he should be
irritated or touched, and for a moment he didn’t know what say except for, “Schultz…”

The large Bavarian made a step into his direction and added with calm urgency, “Wilhelm Klink is, beneath all his pompous and eccentric behavior, a very vulnerable man, Colonel. He doesn’t trust easily, he doesn’t let someone close to him easily, but he made an exception for you – because he harbors true, deep feelings for you, no matter whether it is forbidden or not. Love is not something you can control. Love can be the most beautiful thing in the whole world – but also the most cruel one. Don’t harm him! He doesn’t deserve this.”

Hogan knew that he had to be utterly truthful now – just like Schultz was with him. Usually, he would have given every other man a piece of his mind if he had been lectured by them like this, but he felt deep in his heart and soul that the other male had only spoken to him thus because he worried for his friend. His friend, not the Kommandant. And this was something Robert could not only understand, it even moved him.

“I know he loves me,” he said quietly.

Schultz nodded. “I thought that you had recognized it by now. You’re far too intelligent to miss something so important.” He took a deep breath. “And knowing that you at least respect and like him, let me make a request on his behalf. If this is only a game for you – even if you are obviously enjoying it for the moment – it would shatter him if you turned away in the end, or if he finds out the truth. It would break his heart. So, if this whole thing is only a nice side-effect for your many damn schemes, then end it before it goes too far. But if you really have developed feelings for him, then stand by him. He has been disappointed so often and was lonely for so long, I already feared he would inwardly die – but you gave him a new reason to enjoy life. If this all here –” He made a short gesture that included the whole room, “– is true for you both, I’ll protect your secret as best as I can. But if you are only toying with him, then…”

“I’m not!” Hogan interrupted him calmly, but firmly. He saw the open distrust in Schultz’s gaze and sighed. “I know, it sounds unbelievable. To say the truth, even I can’t believe it, but… Will caught me. He caught me good.”

“And your flirting with Fräulein Hilda or the other…”

“I do enjoy being with women, don’t get me wrong here. Until a few days ago I never thought that… that I could develop these kind of feelings for a guy.” He threw his hands up. “But here I am – having the big hots for another male. And not your usual guy, no, it had to be my official enemy and jailer.” He snorted and shook his head. “I was forced to admit to myself that I like Klink almost two years ago. Hell, I began to care for him and didn’t want to watch him get hurt, and then… a few days ago, everything changed. I think it began when he was almost killed during the aircraft ambush. We ran, I heard him scream, turned around and saw him sprawled on the ground. For a moment I… I
thought he was dead and…” He took a deep breath. “I was horrified, to say the least. Then I saw him move and returned, happy that he was still alive. I didn’t care that the next attack lay ahead, I only wanted to get him to safety. Then the walk back to the camp – better to say, our attempt. He became weaker and weaker because of the injuries and the cold and… I really feared for him. I think, this was the beginning of what developed later.”

Schultz cocked his head. “You realized that your feelings of friendship run deeper,” he pondered.

Hogan snorted. “No, not really. I thought about those hours a lot – about my near panic as I became aware of the danger he was in while we stumbled through the woods. Of course I knew that I care for him, but this… was stronger. Hell, I even didn’t mind cuddling up with him in the farmhouse to warm him. It didn’t feel awkward – not really. But all this was nothing compared to what happened later after he saved me from Hochstetter’s clutches.” He sighed and slowly shook his head. He bypassed Schultz and sat down on the bed’s edge. “The way he took care of me gave me a sense of security – of comfort and understanding. He did nothing that would have made me suspicious that he felt something other than friendship for me, yet… at night we snuggled up. He held me, I held him – and it was right. He comforted me when the nightmares got the best of me, talked with me, soothed me… And then those dreams began…”

“Dreams?” Hans asked; having a very good idea what kind of dreams Hogan was referring to. He got it confirmed a moment later.

“Yeah – dreams. Those dreams, you know.” He waved his right hand. “And they were all about him.”

Hans leant his rifle against the wall beside the door and lowered himself beside Hogan. “And it confused you,” he assumed.

Robert snorted. “Damn right. I was shocked, to say the least. I tried to ignore it, but… it grew and grew. The evening prior to yesterday… it happened.” He shook his head again. “Wilson couldn’t stop by to treat my back because of the increasing cold-epidemic he has to take care of, and Will offered to help me with the ointment. And then… it happened.” He trailed off; looking into nothingness.

Schultz shortly pursed his lips; realizing that Hogan had changed Klink’s given name to the English short-version, which could be considered a pet-name. From ‘Klink’ and sometimes a taunting ‘Willie’ to ‘Will’. Life really was funny sometimes.

“And how do you feel about it now?” he asked the younger man curiously.
A soft smile began to play around Hogan’s lips. “It feels right. So damn right that it should baffle me, but it doesn’t. Isn’t it crazy? Me, who doesn’t skip any chance to fool around with a pretty girl, falls for a guy.” He chuckled shortly. “I love my friends, yes, but I couldn’t imagine feeling what I feel for Will for one of them. It’s… it’s strange, and confusing, but… I’ve never felt like this before. Yes, I’ve fallen in love here and there, but it has never been so… intense.”

“Maybe you always had a streak for both genders,” Schultz thought aloud, “and…”

“Or it has nothing to do with the gender, but with the person. It’s Will I’ve feelings for – his person, not his gender. And… exchanging physical tenderness simply comes with the whole package.” He stroke one hand through his hair, messing it up. “And I don’t know where this will lead.”

“To hell or to the heavens – and what it will be, is up to you two,” the large Bavarian murmured thoughtfully; utterly relieved that the American obviously wasn’t up to some foul game concerning Klink, but had, indeed, developed sincere feelings for his German counterpart. That Hogan wasn’t lying about this issue was more than obvious. Schultz knew how clever the colonel was with words, but never had he heard the other man stutter like this. It told him more than everything else.

“Well, where it will lead is not only up to us, but also fate,” Robert said quietly. “I know that what we’re doing is a crime by law…”

“At least this is something you’re used to handle,” Schultz joked.

Hogan rolled his eyes and laughed quietly. “Don’t let anybody hear this,” he grinned, then he turned serious again. Looking at Hans, he became aware that he had opened up to the older man like never before – because he trusted the large Bavarian and knew that not only Klink, but also he had a confidante in the sergeant. Smiling, he said gently. “You’re a damn good friend, Schultz. Klink can call himself lucky to have such a loyal soul who watches out for him.”

The Sergeant of the Guards flushed a little bit. “You’re not angry that I tackled you about your changed relationship with Klink?”

A sigh escaped the American. “Every other man would have gotten a fitting answer from me had they confronted me like this about something so private, but I know you. You’re like a big brother, uncle and factotum in one – a real guardian, not only for the POWs, but also for your commanding officer. You care for everyone around you – and especially for those you think you have to protect.” He laid one hand on Schultz’s underarm. “No, I’m not angry. I’m… touched.”
Hans beamed at him. “I’m glad – that my fears were for naught, especially. I like you both, you know, but my first loyalty lies with the big shot.” He rose. “So, jolly-joker, have breakfast, then, and rest a little bit afterwards. I think you need it after the last two nights,” he teased.

“Schultz!”

The large Bavarian smirked at him and went to the bathroom. Wrapping the wet linens into a large towel, he re-appeared again. “A little advise from me to you love-birds: Don’t use so many linens, or the guys who are doing the wash-service will get suspicious.”

Hogan sighed. “But we need to change them after…” He stopped and felt, to his horror, himself blushing fiercely.

Schultz chuckled; his gaze was warm. “I’ll bring you some large towels. Use them instead of the sheets or, at least, spread them above the mattress before you two forget Earth and time. Washing towels is less unusual than changing linens every night.” He winked at Hogan, whose face was comparable in hue to a tomato, and walked to the door. “I brought you breakfast from the casino. It’s on the table. Until later.”

“Schultz,” Hogan called, while hoping that this damn flushing would stop soon.

The German looked back. “Yes?”

“Your rifle,” the colonel said and pointed at the weapon that still leant against the wall.

“Oh… joa mei, I always forget this stupid thing.” Holding the bundle with laundry in one hand, he took his weapon with his free hand and vanished; feeling relieved and even happy.

*** HH ***

Klink returned for lunch just in time today, and he had barely hung up his coat and placed his cap on the table, when the telephone rang. Sighing exaggeratedly, the Kommandant walked towards the dresser. “Not even during lunch do you get a break,” he grumbled, went to the phone and picked up the receiver. “Yes? Who? Yeah, put him through.”
He heard soft steps behind him and looked over his shoulder at Hogan, who had come out of the sleeping room with still slow movements, and looked questioningly at him. Placing his free hand over the mouthpiece, he whispered, “It’s Krimina…” He stopped, took the hand away and greeted, “Ah, Kriminalrat Lübkeimer, nice hearing from you again. How is the investigation goi…” He grimaced. “Yes, I’m shutting up.” He listened, and listened, and listened – and suddenly pulled the receiver away; grimacing.

“Kliiiink, why are you not answering me?” the angry voice shouted from the receiver.

“You demanded that I should shut up, Herr Kriminalrat, now you’re angry at me for doing so? You have to make a decision here: Either I stay silent as you wanted, or I answer your questions, but for doing so I’ve to disobey your first order. So, what is it?”

Hogan was, for a moment, completely baffled at Wilhelm’s dry and absolutely unusual reply, then he had to bite his lips to prevent himself from bursting out with laughter – especially as he caught Klink winking at him with amusement in his eyes. Obviously the Oberst’s new found strength not only resulted in steeling his nerves and giving him courage, but also in pulling the legs of men he would have feared earlier. Once again Hogan admired the older man for undergoing such a great change – only because he could live out his love, and his feelings were returned.

It was not understandable what the Gestapo-officer answered, even if he spoke loudly enough to be heard despite the fact that Klink had placed the receiver back against his ear, but that Lübkeimer was anything but amused was absolutely clear.

Klink sighed dramatically. “You guys from the Gestapo should really work at your moods. Is this the correct behavior for a high-ranking officer of the German police-department?”

Hogan turned his head away and chuckled quietly. LeBeau stood at the kitchen-door, looking with big eyes at the two officers and beginning to grin widely. Klink really had a way of annoying everyone, and, not for the first time, the two POWs asked themselves if all those silly discussions and comments Klink had had with Burkhalter (and in earlier times with Hochstetter) were his way of dealing with events and orders he loathed.

“Yes, yes, there are more important things, Herr Kriminalrat, I know. So, why do you ask after my senior POW officer and the last roll call?”

Quickly, the colonel looked back at his German counterpart, who had turned serious before a large
smirk spread over his face, yet his voice was absolutely neutral as he asked, “The whole cargo was destroyed? What… Jet-drives for the new Messerschmitt? Heavens, this sounds bad. I’m certain the brass in Berlin won’t take this news well and… Yes, yes, Goering can show temper sometimes, I know.” He bounced on his feet with glee. “But pray tell what this has to do with my… What? Herr Kriminalrat, do you really think Colonel Hogan could heal well enough within four days to run around and blow up bridges? By the way, there has never been a successful escape from Stalag 13 and – you know this? And why are you pestering me with those stupid questions about my senior POW’s presence then? He lies in bed and heals, and the other POWs are on the compound or in their barracks – and were all present this morning. What? I shall make another roll call? What for?” He rolled his eyes. “Oh yes, it’s absolutely possible to drive 60 km or more to the north-west of Fulda, blow up a bridge the moment a train passes over it, and then return to Hammelburg. And this all in those five hours between now and the morning roll-call. I do know that the Gestapo is distrusting by nature, but sometimes I think the prerequisite to climbing up the career-ladder in your club is being paranoid.”

Hogan had crossed his arms in front of his chest and listened to the conversation which he could only hear one side of. It was almost fascinating how Klink stultified the Kriminalrat and the man’s ideas, but also played along officially.

Suddenly, Will’s face turned red. “No, I’m not naïve, Herr Kriminalrat, I’m a realist. Wasting no time with things of which you know to lead to nothing is the subject of every first strategy-lesson at a military academy. And this is not the only difference between a schooled military officer and a police member, like I just realized once again.” He raised his voice. “I do not care if my comments irritate you or not. I’m angry too, since you hold me and my camp under suspicion again, despite the fact that you are exactly aware that Colonel Hogan is in a terrible condition and therefore can’t have been responsible for the sabotage – neither that of five days ago, nor that of this morning. Yet you are wasting my time by calling me and bringing into question the same silly idea Hochstetter was already obsessed with. And you learned what happened to him because of it. You’d better try to catch those people blowing up our railways, and stop keeping me away from my duty.” He listened shortly. “What? You are just doing it – by suspecting one single injured man, and by disturbing a high ranking Luftwaffe-officer for some silly questions you already knew the answer to? I’m curious what Heinrich is going to say to that.” He smiled, satisfied, as he obviously got no reply this time. Nodding, he said firmly, “And now excuse me, please. I have a camp to run.”

He ended the telephone talk by placing the receiver on the cradle, and took a deep breath, before he grinned at Hogan and LeBeau. “They did it. The Underground blew up another bridge in the north of Fulda. More than six hundred jet-drives for the new Messerschmitt were destroyed.” He rubbed his hands. “Everyone who still suspected you of being Papa Bear was disabused now.”


Klink shrugged. “He has absolutely no reason to doubt your condition and therefore has to let go of any doubt concerning us here.”
“When did the sabotage take place?” LeBeau asked; wiping his hands on the apron he wore.

“Half an hour ago. Lübkemeier just learned of it by receiving a radio message from the Gestapo-Headquarters in Fulda.” He smirked. “Wilhelm Klink, putting one of your former kidnappers up for another sabotage was a brilliant idea from you!”

“Now he starts to fly high,” LeBeau groaned, nodding his head towards Klink, while Hogan began to laugh quietly.

“Don’t worry,” he said to the tiny Frenchman. “I'll bring him back on the carpet.”

“Oh, my dear Hogan, I’m not the only one who loves to ‘fly high’,” Klink teased. “Even the carpet you want to bring me down on already took flight – just like in the oriental fairytales.”

With interest LeBeau watched how his superior and friend blushed fiercely, and pursed his lips. The way Klink wriggled his brows at Hogan, while the colonel displayed an unusual embarrassment, gave Louis something more to think about. It was just like their odd – no, silly! – behavior two evenings prior. They talked with their eyes and verbally between the lines about a secret. There was no doubt about it.

There was something going on between the two officers, this much was certain. And a part of LeBeau had a very good idea what this ‘something’ was, but – like before – he inwardly laughed it off. Imagining that the two men could have an affair was far too strange to be true.

*** HH *** HH ***

The news of the newest sabotage had reached Berlin a few minutes earlier than Lübkemeier’s telephone talk with Klink. Later a few people said that they had heard the enraged shouts of a certain man with a sharp hair side parting and a mustache even at the ground level of the partly damaged Neue Reichskanzlei (New Reich’s Chancellery). Burkhalter learned of the newest assault in the afternoon through a short telephone talk with Lübkemeier, who complained about the insolent way Klink had treated him just because ‘he dared to ask about the POWs’ presence’ after the sabotage.

Burkhalter knew without asking for whose presence the Gestapo-officer had really asked: For Hogan’s. And, of course, Klink went through the roof. Woe if someone was about to get too close to Hogan, and ‘Weakling Klink’ changed into the ‘Iron Eagle’ – or, as Burkhalter preferred, into a kind
of harpy. And, somehow, it was the same the other way around. Hogan was a prankster, an oversized boy with a sharp mind and a witty mouth, but Burkhalter had witnessed a few times that the American officer became a fierce warrior when not only one of his men, but also Klink was at stake.

And one day, maybe soon, he would confront the two about it. Yes, from time to time there had been – always would be – cases in which jailer and prisoner developed a kind of personal relationship, but Burkhalter had to admit that this, whatever Klink and Hogan were to each other, was different. He assumed that those two had built a kind of friendship, forbidden or not under the whole circumstances, and the general had played with the thought of transferring one of them a few times, but one thing hindered him: Stalag 13 was the only POW-camp in the whole Third Reich that functioned. And he simply knew that this was rooted in the fact that the two commanding officers – Kommandant and senior POW – went along rather well. And given the whole mess within Germany by now, he was glad for every little thing he hadn’t to worry about.

Yet he knew that Lübkemeier’s complains could lead to trouble, so Burkhalter called Klink and asked about the two days the Oberst had actively supported the Kriminalrat. With the typical boasting and chuckles, Klink answered his questions – a really odd behavior given the circumstances. It heightened the general’s already unhealthy blood pressure, and finally he almost burst with anger. The whole REIHMAHG-project was about to fail, two important railways were destroyed – and this fool was laughing and joking as if he was on a tea-party!

“You are in a hilariously good mood today, Klink,” he snapped angrily. “May I ask for the reason?”

In Stalag 13 at his desk, Klink realized that he had to be careful now. His good mood could be misunderstood by Burkhalter; especially given the fact there had been a big sabotage today that, indeed, could influence the further war. “Well, I got a good message from my optician only half an hour ago,” the Oberst came up with an excuse. “I had to order five new monocles after my last one broke yesterday, and he just gave me an extra discount of 10 percent.” He lifted his right index-finger. “That saves me a sum of approx. ….”

“Klink!” raged through the line. “The whole project in Thüringen is about to go down the hill because of the damn Resistance and the German traitors! This can be crucial for the war – and you speak about your stupid monocles?”

“Well, without one I’m half blind, as you certainly know,” the Kommandant defended himself, while he suddenly saw a chance to learn more about the project. If he was clever, he could gather some further information, which would certainly be important for London. He groaned inwardly. He had really begun to think like Robert! God help him!

“But what is it about Thüringen?” he asked; changing the topic carefully. “You said the cargo was
for the new serial-production of the *Messerschmitt*, and now you’re referring to Thü…”

A sigh was heard; obviously Burkhalter calmed down as the talk changed towards Goering’s temporary ‘favorite child’. “This is about the serial-production, Klink. The factory is in Thüringen and…”

Within the next minutes Klink learned more than he’d bargained for, and even if he was glad that he now knew where the hidden factory was located, he was also shocked about everything that was connected to it. Yet he managed to sound proud as he praised Goering’s ‘cleverness’ and the courage of the Luftwaffe and SS to start such a project at all.

Finally they changed the topic back to the reason why Burkhalter had called at all, and Klink balled a fist in triumph as he heard that the investigation in Hammelburg had been closed and further inquiries had been reoriented to the area of Fulda. Burkhalter had learned from his ‘dear friend’ that Oberleutnant Schmidt, Leutnant von Neuhaus and Kriminalrat Lübkemeier had given reports to Berlin with the results – they had found nothing they could use to catch the responsible saboteurs – and that the Gestapo was now concentrating on Fulda and the remaining railways.

Not only the two railways near Hammelburg and Fulda were unusable now, only a few days ago the English Royal Airforce had destroyed the railway installation at Gelsenkirchen, Dortmund and Hannover. The stations of Fulda and Aschaffenburg were also greatly damaged for three weeks now, and the same went for stations in other large towns. Since the 23rd January the Deutsche Reichsbahn (German Reichs-Train) was forced to stop a part of the civil rail-traffic; especially the express- and semi-fast trains. The still intact railroads were only used of the Wehrmacht and SS by now. The destroyed bridge in Fulda and the damaged railways around Hammelburg were responsible that the rail-traffic from the south to the east was out of order what also cut off a lot of supply-deliveries for the northern Russian Front. The brass in Berlin was raging since the news reached them.

As Klink placed the receiver back on the phone, he sighed deeply. As it seems, his little idea to distract Lübkemeier by initiating another sabotage, had been a full blown against the regime, and a part of Wilhelm was shocked that he was the one who was responsible for it. On the other hand, any attenuation of Hitler’s war machinery shortened the time of the current insanity. And, what was most important for Klink, the danger for his camp, for him – and for Hogan and his men – was over, for now. And there were also all those details he just got from Burkhalter concerning the Messerschmitt-project; something the Allies had to learn of quickly.

Rising, he went to one of the shelves and took out his lexicon; gathering more information which could be usable for the Allies. Ending his duty earlier than usual, he sent Fräulein Hilda home (“You really have worked long hours, my dear. Go home and enjoy the evening with your parents.”), and went to his quarters. Relieved, he heard the voices of Hogan’s men as he opened the front door. Like this they would save some time. Then he became aware of the topic, and straightened his shape. As it
seemed, he could give answers to a few questions the Heroes were obviously discussing.

Stepping into the living room, he found the colonel on the sofa and wrapped in one of the comforters, while his men sat on the on the armchairs and on two chairs they took from the kitchen.

“An early good evening, Gentlemen,” he greeted while opening his coat and loosening his scarf. “I hope I'm not interrupting anything.”

Instantly, Hogan’s little gang rose and saluted casually – what a difference to the earlier times.

At Klink’s voice Hogan quickly looked up, and his heart jumped as he saw Will. He wasn’t aware of the warm smile that played around his lips, as he replied,

“Good evening, Kommandant. You aren't interrupting anything,” he replied; skipping the military greeting.

Klink lifted both brows. “You could have almost fooled me,” he deadpanned. “Let me guess, the Gentlemen are discussing the last successful sabotage the Underground did in their name, and how this will delay the serial production of the Messerschmitt.” He hung his coat and scarf up. “Yet there was already a test-flight of the ME-262 V5 that was a full success. And you don’t have to be a genius to figure out what this will mean.”

Five alarmed faces glanced at him. “A test-flight?” Hogan asked, perplexed. “No, we didn’t hear anything about it until now.”

Cocking his head, the Oberst watched the younger man closely, realized that Hogan wasn’t joking and nodded in understanding, “Ah yes, you’re still cut off from London.” He closed the distance to the sofa and threw his cap on the table, while Robert put his feet down on the floor to make room for him. “But I’m glad to tell you that the radio-less time is over. I spoke with Burkhalter, who informed me that Lübke meier and his goonies are now in Fulda. The investigation in Hammelburg is finished.”

Kinchloe groaned. “That means one or two short nights to set up everything again.”

“See the positive,” LeBeau joked. “You don’t have to listen to Pierre’s snoring.”
“Who is snoring?” Newkirk asked.

“You!” came from Kinch, Carter and LeBeau.

Hogan chuckled while he exchanged a quick look with Klink. Sometimes his men really were oversized kids, but he loved them nonetheless.

The Oberst sat down beside his senior POW officer, pushed the glasses more up his nose and folded his hands in his lap. “But this is not all Burkhalter told me,” he continued.

Hogan smiled. “You got more information.”

“Yes,” Klink affirmed. “And I don’t know if you’ll be happy with the news.”

Klink’s announcement woke the full attention of the others and stopped any jokes.

“What did you find out?” the colonel asked quietly.

“Thüringen.”

“I beg your pardon?” Carter looked confused between the two officers forth and back. “What is a turing?”

Klink chuckled for a moment. “Thüringen, you call it Thuringia in English, is a German state – a province – north-east from here.” He turned serious again and glanced back at Hogan. “The final construction of the Messerschmitt is done there in a facility that is carved into a hill near the little town Kahla. They refitted and expanded an old mine, graded the top of the mountain and built a tarmac there.”

Thunderstruck, the Heroes glanced at him. “And how… do they get the finished aircrafts on the top of the mountains? By using a lift, or what?” Kinchloe asked disbelievingly.
“Exactly,” Klink nodded. “It’s a platform that works like a cliff railway – means it is pulled along rails with strong ropes onto the top of the mountain. The planes will start from there and are going to be stationed on different air-bases afterwards.”

“Clever!” Newkirk acknowledged.

“Boy, they must have bust away oodles of stone,” Carter murmured. “And only think of the whole equipment they must have installed inside. Or the tarmac. The whole wood on the top had to be cleared and…”

“You’re pointing out something very important,” Klink interrupted him; expression tight, eyes becoming furious. “The whole work was done by slave workers – coming from all conquered countries. Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Poland and so on. Even from Austria – and the most are from Italy – no matter the fact that Italy belongs to Hitler’s allies. Most of the workers are political prisoners – people who don’t agree with Hitler and his ways – or people of ‘unworthy heritage’, as it is called.” He grimaced. “But there are also workers from Germany who are accused of other crimes and try to avoid prison by working at the project. And they are all still there, because the facility hadn’t been completed until now.”

“So, if the Allies employ air-force attacks those workers would die, too,” Hogan said quietly. “How many are there?” The colonel assumed the worst – it was even worse.

“More than fourteen thousands,” Klink said with a pressed voice. “They began with almost fifteen thousands, but…” He lowered his gaze.

“They fell prey to the work, the pressure and the whole circumstances – and to the cruelty of their jailers,” Kinch murmured. He didn’t need to see the Oberst nodding.

“Yes. They did the entire work in over a year – under inhuman conditions. A lot of them didn’t survive. Just like it is everywhere where the regime builds great projects. Burkhalter told me that there are more than forty thousand enslaved workers within Germany who are forced to build war machinery, bases and to repair destroyed roads and railways.” He lowered his head; deeply ashamed. “Another incomparable crime of my country.”

“Sweet Lord,” Hogan whispered; closing his eyes. He could only imagine the despair, hunger, pain and fear those people had endured now for years. “Where are they all accommodated?”
Klink snorted; his gaze shone with loath. “The workers in Thüringen are living in firmly guarded barracks and huts at the hill-side – as human shields against any attack the Allies may be going to start. The other workers at the other factories are mainly housed in satellite stations of the larger Working Camps, of which I – personally – can assume by now that the word ‘work’ is a wrong description.” He sighed. “But concerning the REIHMAHG-project: Every attack from above will cost hundreds – thousands – of innocent lives.”

“In other words only a ground-force attack can be done.” Hogan balled his hands into fists. “Concerning the ME-262’s final construction: Do you know where this hill is?”

“Yes. It’s called the Walpersberg near the little village Kahla that is famous for its porcelain. It’s not Meissen china, mind you, but likewise valuable. I can give you the exact location of the village and the hill – but I don’t think that your people will be able to do anything at the moment. Next month at least a few new Messerschmitts will have been produced and if any of your bombers come near the area, the ME-262 V5 will be used for what they’re constructed: For defense. Your air-crafts wouldn’t stand a chance against them. Not with the new stream-drive our machines possess.”

“What a devilishly clever move,” Kinchloe murmured. “Have I ever said that the Luftwaffe is a serious opponent?”

“No – and a few years ago I would have thanked you for the compliment, but not anymore,” the Kommandant growled.

“We’ve to do something,” Hogan said. “If every day a few aircrafts are commissioned, the whole war can change again.”

“As I said, if your people attack the hill, you will only kill those poor bastards who are forced to work for the regime. And even your biggest bombs wouldn’t reach the factory in the inner stratum of the mountain. I looked up the lexicon before I came here. The mountains, to which the hill belongs, rose during the last ice-time and consist of strong stone elements.” Klink took a deep breath. “But not all hope is lost. I congratulated Burkhalter and smeared a lot of honey around his mouth about the incredibly good scheming of our Luftwaffe, but he said that we lack pilots after the last big battle over two weeks ago. Over one thousand of our boys were shot down and were taken prisoner or were killed. Even if the serial production could start in time – impossible after the sabotages – there are not enough men, at the moment, to fly the birds. It will last until they’ve trained new pilots.”

“So we’ve a period of grace,” Hogan mused. “I don’t know exactly who will reach Thuringia first – we or the Russians – but I think only an attack from the ground is possible if we don’t want to cause thousands of deaths among the prisoners.”
“But if we wait for the Allies to clear this mess out from the ground, it may be too late,” Newkirk cut in. “I don’t think our forces will reach the area within the next weeks, so we need to act sooner.”

Klink nodded. “This would be the best. The only question is: How.”

“An open attack is out of the question,” Hogan said slowly. “At least in my opinion – and I will try to convince the brass in London so they come to the same conclusion. As urgent as it is to stop the serial production – or to prevent it from beginning at all – we can’t do this on the cost of innocent people. Those men who are forced to work there are already victims. It would be a crime to sacrifice them. There is already enough blood shed in this damn war!”

Klink gave him a short, rueful smile. “If all warlords would think like you, Robert, the world would be a lot better.”

Hogan snorted softly. “Thanks, Will.”

Newkirk and Kinchloe exchanged a glance. ‘Robert’??? ‘Will’???

LeBeau only pursed his lips thoughtfully. There really was something going on between those two. He would bet his last shirt on it.

Klink sighed. “But maybe the Allies can attack some of the still remaining railways which lead from the west and north to Thüringen. And it would be very nice of them to wait a few days before they take action. Burkhalter spoke with me about the whole thing and he might reach the right conclusion if shortly afterwards streets and railways near the secret factory, which was built within many months and had passed unnoticed until now, are suddenly under attack.”

Hogan placed a hand on his German counterpart’s underarm. “Don’t worry, Wilhelm. I’ll take care that you are not placed in any danger because of your active role as our supporter by now.”

The soft gaze Klink gave him let Robert’s heart beat quicker, while Kinchloe looked discreetly into another direction, Carter blinked with confusion, and Newkirk and LeBeau frowned. Okaaaay, Klink was an ally now, and the two men were officers of the same rank which maybe built a sort of link between them, but weren’t the two overdoing it a little bit with being so cozy with each other?

Clearing his throat, Kinch rose. “All right, we’ll try to get our base back to work. Colonel, do you
agree that we should first set up the radio station and open the entrance of the emergency tunnel before we take care of the rest?”

“Absolutely,” Hogan nodded. “As soon as the radio is working again, contact London and tell them what happened and, even more importantly, give them the newest information. Tell them we got the details from our new source. If they have questions about said source, they have to wait until I’m fit again to go down into the tunnels.” He glanced at Newkirk. “Peter, how quickly can you re-connect the telephone-station with that of the camp?”

“In a few hours,” the Englishman shrugged. “We’ve to wire everything again, because we removed the old links in case the Gestapo and SS were to look at everything too closely.”

“Well done,” Hogan smiled at him, before he looked at Klink. “When will the evening roll be call?”

“As usual, around six o’clock.”

Looking at the grandfather clock, the colonel mused. “So you guys have an hour until then. Start with the preparation as soon as possible so that you can begin work fully after roll call. I’m getting antsy since we don’t have any emergency exit and are cut off from London.”

LeBeau rose, grimaced at Newkirk and shook his head in the direction of Hogan, while he said to Peter, “He’s doing better, no doubt.”

“I agree,” Kinchloe chuckled and got up, too.

“At least he thinks so,” Klink commented. “That he is far from being really healed is plain to see if you look closer at him.”

Robert groaned. “Mother-hen!” he complained.

“Reckless churl,” Will smiled back far too kindly.

To the Heroes’ astonishment their well-respected and even beloved superior – the genius of their operation, the man half of Nazi-Germany’s forces were after – began to pout like a seven year old
boy. “You’re worse than my old man.”

“Like I already told you before at a similar occasion: Your father was right and certainly had no easy job, dealing with you,” Klink deadpanned.

Rolling his eyes, Hogan looked back at his baffled friends. “Okay, fellas, all fun aside, a few ways to the outer world have to be re-opened as soon as possible. Call me if something goes wrong, okay?”

“So, shall I renew the wire to the Kommandant’s quarters first, Gov’nor?” Newkirk asked; thunderstruck at how the two officers behaved in such a familiar way towards each other.

The colonel nodded. “Preferably – followed by the other bells and whistles.” He beamed at them. “Thanks, my friends, until later.”

The Heroes rose, gave him and Klink a quick, sloppy salute and left the building…

*** HH ***

Outside the winter wind had become stronger again, and burying both hands in the pockets of his jacket, Kinchloe walked with the others towards Barracks 2. Suddenly he chuckled. “We can consider us all very, very lucky that the whole camp hasn’t burnt down by now.”

Newkirk looked questioningly at him. “Why should it burn down?”

“Well, given all the sparks flying between the colonel and Klink, I’m really surprised that they haven’t set everything aflame by now.”

“Sparks?” Carter asked innocently.

LeBeau flipped his friend the bird. “You’re crazy, Kinch.”

“What sparks?” Andrew wanted to know.
“Even if it sounds completely insane, Kinch has a point here,” Newkirk nodded slowly. “The two are… very familiar with each other by now. Usually I wouldn’t waste a second thought about it. The gov’nor and Klink always got along rather well, and I think we all realized that they, indeed, have become friends long before they were ready to admit it, even to themselves. But now…” He shook his head. “If you’re cold, you only have to look at the gazes they give each other, and instantly the temperature seems to rise by a lot of degrees.”

LeBeau grimaced. “Not that I haven’t had the same thoughts within the last days here and there – especially after I found them sleeping in one and the same bed.”

“WHAT?” That came from all other Heroes, who stopped dead in their tracks in the middle of the compound, half on their way to Barracks 2. The icy wind was forgotten for now as they looked at LeBeau with eyes wide as saucers.

“*Oui,*” the tiny Frenchman nodded. “I found them a few days after the colonel’s rescue in the early midday – sleeping side by side under the same comforter, peaceful like little boys. And they didn’t even really react to it as I freaked out.”

“Klink and the colonel… rested in one and the same bed?” Kinchloe blinked several times, while a quiet voice in him pondered that he maybe hadn’t put *too much* into the gazes the two officers gave each other, but perhaps even *too little.* “What the heck…!” he whispered.

“Maybe they were talking with each other and simply fell asleep,” Carter mused. “Or the colonel had nightmares. After all he has been through, he certainly has nightmares. This would be normal, wouldn’t it?”

“And what does this have to do with Klink sleeping beside him?” Newkirk demanded; uncomfortably remembering the warmth and affection in both men’s eyes back in Klink’s quarters. Hell, he had even joked about it a minute ago, but without being really serious. And then Klink’s awfully good mood this morning during roll call. He hadn’t rebuked Schultz, who had been late and later, as he had opened the window to let some fresh air into his office, they had heard him whistling. What if…

“Well, Klink certainly wanted to comfort the colonel,” Carter continued. “I remember how it always soothed me when I had nightmares and my mother lay down beside me. It…”

“Carter, the *gov’nor* is almost forty. And Klink is neither his mother, nor his father or his brother.
Hell, he wasn’t even a real friend for a long time and…”

“They are friends now,” Carter spoke up. “After all Klink did for the colonel, you can’t say otherwise. You risk your life for a comrade, for a friend – but never for an enemy. Yet Klink didn’t think twice as he came to the colonel’s rescue, risking getting killed in the process. And then the way he acted around him afterwards. Boy, he was half mad with worry. This is friendship.”

“Or more,” LeBeau breathed more to himself than to the others, before he took a deep breath. “On the other hand, mon colonel is after every skirt, just like Klink. There is no way on Earth that…”

“Yet you and Newkirk have a point here, Louis. There are enough sparks between them to light up the whole area like a bonfire,” Kinchloe cut in.

Carter threw both hands up. “This again! Could one of you guys be so incredibly kind and tell me of which ‘sparks’ you’re speaking, and what it has to do with the two colonels sleeping side by side?”

LeBeau looked towards the skies; clearly frustrated now. “Mon Dieu, give me some patience and the garçon (boy) some enlightenment!”

Peter stared at the youngest member of the Heroes. “Blimey, Carter, how old are you?”

“I’m twenty-t…” He didn’t get further, as Kinchloe pulled him along by gripping his upper arm.

“Be quiet, Andrew. This is a topic for adults. We’ll tell you when you’re older.”

And he had to grin as Carter simply stuck out his tongue at him…

*** HH ***

The Heroes worked for hours. The evening roll call and the dinner were the only interruptions they had, before they resumed their task to re-open the tunnel entrances and – even more important – to set up the technical equipment again.
During the earlier evening the scratching and working from beneath was clear to hear in Klink’s quarters, and around ten o’clock p. m. the furnace moved and a dirty Newkirk looked out from the hole, smirking at the two officers who were playing chess. Hogan had to laugh.

“This gives the term ‘human mole’ another meaning,” he joked.

The Englishman rolled his eyes, wiped his face with the material of his left sleeve – which only smeared the dirt into another direction – and grumbled, “If so, you can call LeBeau a swallow, because just right now he is cowering on the roof of the Kommandantur and re-connecting the wires.”

Klink’s eyes widened which made the borrowed glasses slide down his nose. “On the Kommandantur?”

“The antenna is hidden in the flag-staff there,” Hogan explained; revealing another secret.

Wilhelm groaned and pushed the glasses back up his nose. “I really do understand Schultz by now: I see nothing and I hear nothing. It’s healthier like this. Without a doubt.”

Newkirk couldn’t help it; he chuckled. With a “I’ll call you when the telephone works again,” he saluted and climbed downwards – pulling the furnace back on its place in the process.

Klink looked at Hogan. “An antenna hidden in a flag-staff! You’re a genius, my witty fox,” he said softly.

The same moment the alarm began to ring – a shrill, sharp noise in the otherwise quiet late evening outside of the quarters. It tore like a sword through the warm and tender atmosphere in the living room and jerked the two men out of their comfortable mood.

“What the heck,” Klink gasped and rose quickly.

Hogan paled. “Sweet Lord, don’t let them have seen LeBeau,” he whispered…

TBC…
Well, Schultz really can be a kind of papa, uncle and big brother, and I always loved his protectiveness he displayed a few times. Hell, he even shielded Klink on a few occasions, and therefore I imagined what he would do in the given situation: Of course ‘the speech’ to Hogan. I hope, you had fun with it like I had while writing the scene.

this was a lot of information the Heroes got through Klink (and Burkhalter), and this will lead to more when the brass in London learns of it: Hogan has to tell them, who is source is – and he doesn’t go alone down into the tunnels. Yes, you assume correctly: In the next chapter Klink will see the tunnels for the first time ever – and I’m sure you’re going to love the whole scene.

But first there is the issue with the rang alert what only can mean one thing: One of Hogan’s men has been caught or is about of getting caught…

I hope, you liked the new chapter and I would be very happy to get some feedback about it (*smile*).

All those among you, who are mothers: Have a nice Mother’s Day,

For all the others: Have a nice weekend.

Love

Yours Starflight
The labyrinth downstairs

Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the big feedback I received. I knew you would like it – and I’m certain you’re going to love the new one. Finally it’s happening: Klink sees the tunnels. The reason for it is certainly amusing and sweet, but the background for Hogan to go down there despite his lack of health, is important for the next chapters.

Therefore: Off you go to Stalag 13.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 38 – The labyrinth downstairs

As the alarm continued blaring through the night, both officers exchanged a quick glance with each other. If LeBeau had really been caught wiring a cord with a hidden antenna on the roof of the Kommandantur, then not only the Frenchman, but also Hogan’s whole organization was at stake. All their lives, including Klink’s, would be as good as forfeit.

Klink stormed towards the entrance. “Stay here, Rob! I will try to get our cook out of trouble – and us all along with him.”

Forced to stay behind, Hogan could do nothing else but throw his hands up in frustration and watch Klink vanishing into the darkness of his quarter’s porch, while outside the spotlights were cutting through the late evening.
“SCHUUUUUULTZ, what’s the meaning of this?” Klink shouted after spying the Sergeant of the Guards on the compound. Several guards were about to free the dogs, while others sprinted through the yard – automatic pistols ready to use.

“The guards said that there were some movements on the roof of the Kommandantur, Herr Kommandant,” Schultz yelled.

“You’re tearing me out of my night rest preparations because of an owl?” Klink snapped back: walking quickly over the compound while wrapping his arms around himself. Hell, it was cold and the red housecoat wasn’t a protection at all. Why hadn’t he put on his coat at least? Ah yes, correct, the reason for this chaos could be one of Robert’s men.

Super!

“An owl wouldn’t crawl but fly away, Herr Oberst,” Schultz defended himself, while both men raced towards the office building. “And the shadow was large and definitely crawled away.”

Klink gave him a glare. Sometimes he didn’t know if Schultz really was this daft or if he only pretended to be unable to put two and two together. “You do know that you may have endangered one of Hogan’s friends just right now?” he whispered fiercely, while they neared the Kommandantur. And there he saw the next catastrophe waiting to happen.

“Keep the dogs in their kennel!” Klink raised his voice to drown out the noises from the alarm and the loud barking of the animals. If the dogs were let loose they would find whoever of the POWs was creeping around and this could only end in catastrophe.

He earned some confused gazes from his guards, which were busy letting out the dogs just in this moment.

“But… Herr Kommandant,” one of them began.

“Since when can a dog climb on a roof? Therefore the dogs wouldn’t be of any help, but would hinder us finding out what’s going on,” the Oberst snapped. “Sweet Lord, why can my men never think logically?”

He looked up and carefully watched the roof, which was brightly illuminated from the spotlights.
Nothing. If LeBeau had really been there, then…

Something clattered behind the building, and taking one of the rifles from his men, Klink ‘bravely’ walked towards the building’s edge. “Schultz, with me! The others, stay here and observe the area. If one of the POWs has indeed decided to make a little late-night-trip, I want to be sure that he doesn’t try to escape to one side while we’re coming from the other one.”

Well, his men were mostly aged or very, very young – and therefore they didn’t mind their superior officer going first to face possible danger and ordering them to stay back. They all had known most of the POWs for long and until now none of them gave the guards too much trouble, at least compared to what they had heard from other Stalags. But there was a first time for everything, and none of the guards wanted to fall prey to the first real trouble within these wires.

Schultz gulped and stayed more or less behind Klink; knowing that he would be rebuked for it any moment, but…

They stepped around the building, and Klink saw a tiny figure cowering in the shadows – exactly in the blind spot the searchlights couldn’t reach.

Schultz’ eyes widened. “LeB..oooff!” He was cut off by his superior’s elbow in his belly, while Klink began to laugh, before he loudly announced,

“Just have a look. Our guards are sounding the alarm because of a cat. My, my, if Burkhalter learns of this…” He shook his head.

“A cat?” Hans asked disbelievingly, then he caught Klink’s sharp gaze as the Oberst turned around.

“Yes, a little cat – that’s all.”

LeBeau let go of the breath held and, for good measure, gave a good imitation of a cat’s “meow”.

Schultz began to laugh, too – far too loud and too stiff, but at least he finally got what was really going on and played along.
“CUT OFF THIS HELLISH NOISE!” Klink bellowed while he returned to the open compound. “It’s only a cat! I didn’t know that my men were mice, panicking because of a mouser.”

Schultz looked back once and shot LeBeau a heated glare, while he hissed, “Look that you get lost, little cockroach, or we are all in deep water.”

Louis, relieved that he hadn’t been officially caught (which would have meant a few days in the cooler), rolled his eyes and grimaced. Even if Klink, Schultz and the Heroes were allies now, the big Bavarian still had to call him this horrid name. *Krauts!* It was always the same with them!

A moment later the alarm bell stopped and heavenly quiet spread through the camp.

“Finally!” Klink sighed. He got headaches from the shrill tones. Giving the rifle back to the soldier he had borrowed it from, he looked up at Schultz.

“Please don’t stir up the whole camp again if the cat makes some more noises or strolls through the compound in the night. We all want a quiet night and we should find some rest.” He wrapped his arms around himself again; shivering now.

“Guards, back to your positions. The men who are off watch: Back to your quarters. There is no need to freeze your butts off in this icy weather because of a cat. Good night, everyone.” He walked with quick steps back towards his quarters, raced up the few steps to the entrance and vanished into the wooden building.

Locking the door behind him, the warmth of the furnace welcomed him – and a worried Robert Hogan.

“Who…?” he began.

“A lost cat – by the name of Louis LeBeau!” Klink groused and closed the distance to the furnace. “Dammit, it’s cold outside. If your boys become lazy again this night, they can wait for someone else to save their asses.” Trembling, he remained in front of the heater; rubbing his upper arms.

A moment later a solid body pressed along his backside, while two arms encircled him from behind – offering warmth and comfort. “Come here,” Rob murmured and held the older man close to him. “We don’t want you to relapse.”
Wilhelm sighed and leant carefully against the younger man; remembering Robert’s injuries. Lying his head back on Rob’s shoulder and enjoying the embrace, he closed his eyes for a moment. A smile tugged at his lips as he felt his beloved’s mouth press a soft kiss against his cheek.

“I want nothing more than to slip into bed with you and have my way with you there,” he whispered. “But seeing that your men are setting up your equipment and that there will certainly be some call or the other as soon as the telephone line to my quarters is working again, I don’t think we can do more than cuddle.”

“Better than nothing,” Robert murmured. “And I promise I’ll make it up to you tomorrow evening.”

Klink felt his heart jump for a moment. “Be careful, my witty fox. I shall hold you to this promise.”

“Good,” was all Hogan whispered, before he lifted a hand, cupped Will’s jaw softly, turned his face towards him and sealed the other man’s lips with his own…

*** HH ***

The Heroes were busy the whole night. Newkirk had restored the telephone link to Klink’s quarters around eleven o’clock in the evening and made a test-call during which he updated Hogan about the whole process ‘downstairs’. At three o’clock in the morning they had rewired the bugs in Klink’s office and the radio in the tunnels. The hidden telephone exchange station was functional again and a larger part of the energy-supply they branched from the camp’s power generator was working again, too, which made the generator stutter a few times.

Three tunnel entrances had still to be re-opened and there was a problem with the entrance to Barracks 6, but the Heroes were back in business, so to say, and Kinch made the first test radio message to London at four o’clock in the morning; asking the communications officer in the Allied Headquarters to inform General Butler about important information he, Kinchloe, wanted to give him. They agreed on 1400 h for the radio transmission.

Afterwards the men fell into their beds like stones – exhausted, cold and more or less miserable. They even almost didn’t wake up as Schultz shooed them out for the morning roll call, and as their very tired condition was recognized by a few guards, Kinch came up with the excuse that they were all fighting a cold.
Klink – wrapped in his warm coat – listened to the short exchange before the official report was made, realized the true reason for the Heroes’ (and some other POWs’) exhausted state and ordered them into their Barracks to be ‘confined’ to bed-rest to ‘prevent’ the cold from breaking out completely. The men were more than grateful and lay down after a spartan breakfast.

Contrary to the Heroes and their helpers, the two colonels had slept rather well – entangled with each other, warmed and sheltered by the thick comforter and content because of the other one’s proximity and their new-found togetherness. Hogan felt the sting of a guilty conscience when he learned from Will in the later morning how tired Kinch and the others were and kept in mind to leave a commendation in their personal files the next time he spoke with London.

Kinch radioed General Butler precisely at 1400 h, while a very tired LeBeau returned from Klink’s quarters after he had prepared lunch for the two officers. Of course the general was glad that the radio-silence to one of the most important Underground-cells was over, and he, personally, was relieved to learn that his protegee Robert Hogan was doing better. Then the talk changed to the important topic. Butler hid it, but Kinch heard the satisfaction in his voice as he learned about the two successful sabotages which had delayed the planned serial-production of the Messerschmitt ME 262, but he was mildly concerned as he was informed about the test-flight. There was no chance of intercepting further tests. It would be done during daylight and the Allies’ combined air-forces attacked during the nights to hinder the German air-defense as much as possible. And, by the way, finding a single plane was like searching for the infamous needle in the haystack.

What woke Butler’s full interest was the newest information Kinchloe could give him concerning the place of production. But as he heard about the many slave-workers there, grim disappointment sounded along his words. There was no way of attacking the hill without causing a massacre among the prisoners – a sacrifice Butler was not ready to allow. And he stated that he would take care that his fellow staff-officers among the Allies would see it the same way.

They ended the transmission and Kinchloe returned to the Barracks. Only a minute later he slipped into his bed and fell asleep instantly, despite Newkirk’s nasty snoring.

*** HH ***

Yet the whole bundle of information that had reached London elicited a sort of aftermath-like response – not from the German side, but from the Allies. The details of the secret project were more than delicate and proved that the new source had to be an employee of the brass in Berlin or a high-ranking officer, who had access to the top secrets of the Nazis. And there was the big question: was the source indeed trustworthy or were they facing a foul game?

Evening roll call and dinner were over, as Kinch heard the incoming signal from below through the open ‘bed-entrance’. Groaning, he climbed down and knew something was wrong as he was
“Papa Bear, the whole nest demands some information about the fountain offering the water,” Butler said.

Kinchloe groaned. He had feared something like this. “Goldilocks, Papa Bear insists that he will tell you in person as soon as he can,” he said politely.

“And when will this be? You said that ‘sun warms his fur’, but is he still unable to reach his den?”

Kinchloe grimaced. Who had come up with talking in fairy-tales as a code? Ah yes, Robert Hogan – of course.

“Sir, some rats bit his paw, therefore he has problems climbing trees.” He sighed. “Just tell the others that our source is really trustworthy. He is on our side, so…”

“He?” Butler interrupted him.

James cursed inwardly. He had almost forgotten how quick-thinking and intelligent Butler was. “Affirmative,” he answered. “Our source is male.”

“That information is top-secret, therefore he must have some very large ears which reach even Berlin. How does Papa Bear contact him if he has to stay out of his den at the moment? Do they meet on a regular basis?”

Kinch pressed his lips into a thin line. Dammit! Why did Butler have to be such a genius?

“Goldilocks, you already answered your own questions. Please wait until Papa Bear can speak with you. We…”

“We have to know the identity of the source! Too much depends on it. Tell Papa Bear to give us the name or be ready for a talk. We will send you a new blind bird in ten minutes!” Butler sounded stern suddenly.
Kinchloe moaned inwardly. In other words they had to bring Hogan down into the tunnels and London would radio them on a new frequency that was safe – relatively.

“Give us twenty minutes. Papa Bear has to put on his fur first and we’ve to help him climb.”

“Understood,” the general confirmed. “Twenty minutes then.”

“Roger, Goldilocks. Papa Bear out.” Kinch threw the headset on the table and cursed. Dammit! Hogan would be anything but happy about it.

Rising, he stepped to the ‘ladder’ and called upwards, “Newkirk, Carter, get down here! We’ve to help the colonel make a trip into our parlor!”

“What?” Peter appeared first. “But Klink is already in his quarters and the gov’nor…”

Kinchloe threw his hands up. “I can’t change it. Butler insists on speaking with the colonel.” He sighed. “I’m not worrying about Klink, after all, he belongs to our pack now. But bringing the colonel down here will be risky for him.”

*** HH ***

The noises from the furnace in Klink’s quarters hindered the two men from finishing their dinner. Throwing their napkins beside the plates, both men rose and stared, rather surprised, at Sergeant Kinchloe, who appeared from the hole; telling his superior about London’s demand.

“They want him climbing down into the tunnels – in his condition?” Klink asked angrily. “Have they lost their minds?”

LeBeau, who had come out of the kitchen, crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I have to agree with Colonel Klink. Has London turned mad?”

Robert lifted a hand to calm them down. “They want certainty that our new source is really a source,
not a trick from the Nazis. Given the actual status of the war, I can understand them.”

Klink rolled his eyes, before he addressed Kinchloe. “Then you can tell them about me. If they want, I will speak with them and vow on my father’s grave that I’m not playing a foul game. But Hogan really is unable to climb down a ladder and…”

“Will, I myself gave the order that only I will tell the brass about you. I’ve baked the cake, now I’ve to get it out of the oven. End of story.”

“This isn’t even a real idiom, Robert. This much I know,” the Oberst snapped.

“But you understood it,” Hogan grinned back. Sighing, he walked towards Kinch. “Okay, let us…”

“No!” Klink stopped him. “I won’t let you down there.”

“You will not let me go down there?” Rob asked, flabbergasted.

“You heard me.”

Kinch braced his arms on the edge of the hole in the floor, placed his chin on them, exchanged a look with LeBeau and watched the two officers with rising amusement.

“Will, I’m still the leader of the operation and…”

“And still healing from torture and a bronchitis we don’t want to return. You’re barely able to walk properly and…”

“Don’t exaggerate. I’m in far better condition by now,” Hogan interrupted him.

“No, you are not. I’ll not risk you relapsing only because of some damn brass – and I don’t care if it is our brass or yours.”
“Will…”

“And if were Roosevelt himself on the line, I would tell him to consider one of his most important officers’ welfare if he wants him to continue this crazy mission!”

Kinchloe bit his lips trying not to laugh. The gestures, the gazes, the expressions… There was absolutely no doubt anymore that both men’s relationship had changed greatly. They sounded like a long-married couple more than ever before.

“What’s the matter up there?” Newkirk asked from below.

“Oh, nothing. Only a little quarrel between our colonels,” James grinned; inwardly replacing the word ‘colonels’ with ‘lovebirds’. “Did you know that they will soon have their silver wedding anniversary?” he joked, which earned him quiet laughter from downstairs and a big grin from LeBeau.

Hogan had placed his hands on his hips. “Will, they’ll be certainly opening a frequency soon and…”

“They can even open Pandora’s box, I do not care. You won’t climb down in this icy dark hole, only…”

“Will, I have no other choice! If I don’t convince the brass that my new source is trustworthy, they could decide to attack the Messerschmitt-facility in Thuringia, because they don’t believe the detail about the slave workers as human shields there. Do you really want me and you to be responsible for the death of thousands?”

Klink stared at him – and threw his hands up in sheer frustration. “You and your damn arguments! Okay, I’ve to bow to the necessity. But if you climb down there, then at least put on something warm – especially your boots! And you are to have support on the ladder. It’s either this or London can ring me by phone.” He hesitated and glanced back at Kinchloe. “Is this possible?”

“A call from England to Germany would certainly be recognized by the Nazis, and…”

“I don’t want to interrupt you, sirs, but we’ve ten minutes left until Butler calls again,” Carter’s voice sounded muffled from under the floor. “So, you should really hurry up, Colonel.”
Hogan made a step towards Kinchloe, but stopped as Klink called out his given name with his voice full of warnings. The Oberst was absolutely serious. He wouldn’t allow Robert to be exposed to the cold and unsafe ways of the tunnel net-system sans any protection.

Knowing this gaze by now, Hogan let his head bow down; surrendering. “You are impossible!” he groaned and limped as quickly as possible towards the sleeping room.

“This is the kettle calling the pot black,” Klink replied nonchalantly.

An “Hmpf!” was the answer, followed by “Someone should lend me a hand.”

“Peter, Andy, up here!” Kinch ordered with badly-hidden laughter, slid down by pressing his feet in his best fireman-style at the ladder’s side, and made room for Newkirk and Carter, who instantly climbed up. He himself hurried back to the radio.

Swearing under his breath, Hogan slipped into his boots with Carter’s help and put on his bomber jacket over the pajama. As he returned to the living room, Klink leant against the wall beside the secret entrance; arms folded in front of his chest. Pointing a finger at Carter and Newkirk, he said sternly, “You watch out for him! Make certain that he doesn’t fall off the ladder, or you’re going to face serious trouble with me.”

LeBeau gaped at him, while Newkirk rolled his eyes. “For your notice, sir, Colonel Hogan is our friend. Of course we…”

“Why don’t you come with us?” Hogan rose to speak.

Silence.

Silence and wide eyes from everyone. Grimacing, Hogan sighed, “Oh, come on, guys, Oberst Klink belongs to our bunch now. It’s about time we show him more.” He gestured for Newkirk to go first, and the Englishman obeyed instantly – helping Hogan down into the hole.

Klink, only wearing his shirt and his red house-coat again, followed immediately – curious but also concerned for Robert’s safety. He had never been good at sports, but this time he managed to climb
down at the side of the ladder while remaining beside the younger man to steady him. Carter went last and waved at LeBeau, who threw up his hands before he shoved the furnace back into place; cursing as he almost burnt his fingers.

“And what about dinner?” he asked, indignant; looking at the half-emptied plates. Sighing, he went to the kitchen to prepare some tea. There was no doubt that both colonels were going to need something warm to drink when they returned.

Downstairs, Robert shivered. It was cold in the tunnels and the thin silk and the bomber jacket weren’t really a protection against the iciness. Yet he felt like coming home – at least a little bit. The tunnels were familiar, but also strange; just like it is when you come home from a long journey.

Beside him, Klink looked around with eyes as wide as saucers. If he was wearing his monocle instead of the interim-glasses, he would have certainly lost it.

He saw petroleum torches fastened at the walls or standing on shelves, which held so many different things he couldn’t identify them so quickly in the semi darkness. There were power wires along the walls; small rooms which held equipment that was worth being mentioned in the Guinness Book of Records, because it was better and larger than what upstairs Stalag 13 officially held. He saw sewing machines, rolls of cloths, half-ended clothes, sheets of sewing patterns and hats. On another table there were hairdressing equipment, cameras and other utensils which were needed to run a photo lab. There were heaps of paper beside printing plates and ink-cans, and even if a blanket was spread over something beside the table, Klink was convinced that it was a kind of printing press. ‘And there I asked myself how Hogan got his hands on phony money he gave the two SS-dudes last summer’.

They bypassed a room where he saw a telephone exchange station – the place where he and others had been tricked with fake calls. Other tunnels branched off in different directions, partly illuminated, and if Klink wasn’t mistaken they led to the other Barracks.

This here was a warehouse for the most different products – and they all were needed for smuggling people away and running an espionage ring.

Wilhelm only shook his head. This all here had been done under his and his men's noses – and those of the Gestapo. If Hochstetter would have seen this, he certainly would have gotten a heart attack.

‘Then we would have been rid of the poison-gnome sooner,’ Klink thought with black humor, while he followed Hogan through the tunnels. He caught the younger man’s gaze, and murmured, “This here is fantastic. You do realize that this place is worth being reported about in any of the whole world’s newspapers?”
Robert grinned shortly. “Well, after the war I wouldn’t mind. Until then no-one shall learn of us – or should keep his mouth shut. What could happen was clear to see last summer.”

“Last summer?”

“Remember the article in the American newspaper Hochstetter got a hold of? It told about an espionage-ring in a POW-camp and…”

“… and the cantankerous screamer promptly suspected you.” Klink nodded. “I remember.” He laughed quietly. “Well, Hochstetter wasn’t this mistaken, don’t you agree?”

Hogan snickered. “No, but he better never learn of it.”

Finally they stepped into a small room at the end of which another ladder was placed that brought very much to mind a slatted frame and led upstairs. There was a door to the left, a table and two chairs were in front of it and on the table… Klink whistled as he recognized the radio device with the equipment for wide range transmissions. He knew that this was Hogan’s connection to London. “This is a 3Mk.II – the best radio device of the Allies,” he murmured. “Small, efficient, robust. As far as I know the first prototypes were produced in 1942.” He glanced at Hogan. “Did you bring it with you somehow, or was it send to you?”

Robert, impressed by Klink’s knowledge, flashed him a grin. “It was hidden in several packages of the Red Cross which were infiltrated by the Allies.”

Will shook his head. “My, my, no-one ever thought to check this through.” He snorted. “Another idea of yours, Fox?”

“No, from Bird Roc.”

“Why do I have the feeling that this guy doesn’t belong to Sindbad and the Orient?” Will deadpanned, while he felt almost overwhelmed. He could only slowly grasp what Robert and the others had gotten up here.

Kinchloe had lay down the headset and rose as the little group arrived; making room for Hogan, who
gratefully sat down. Good God, his legs felt like lead, and this only after the fifty or sixty meters he'd walked.

Carter, seeing his friend and superior trembling, raced up the ladder that led to Barracks 2 to get a blanket.

Klink, being too thunderstruck and fascinated to feel the cold, looked down on his secret lover. “And you built this all up since you arrived here,” he said quietly.

Robert smiled up to him. “We needed four months to install the most important things, but what you’re seeing here is the result of constant expansion during the last two and a half years.”

To say the truth, the Oberst was ready to sit down, and so he took the second chair on which he let himself fall. “And this whole secret command center,” he made a wide gesture with his right hand, “was done without my men and I becoming aware of it.” He shook his head. “Unbelievable.” He whispered and closed his eyes.

Hogan became aware of the bewilderment on Will’s face, and murmured softly, “We had a lot of help from outside, and we almost got caught a few times. Sometimes we got equipment from London that was smuggled into the camp, sometimes we used chances we were given to complete our tools.”

Klink chuckled. “You mean, you stole it.” He sighed and looked straight at the younger man. “What you were able to build here is almost too fantastic to believe.”

Carter returned with the blanket he wrapped around Hogan’s shoulder. “Thanks, Andrew,” the colonel smiled at the youngest of his team.

The radio sprang alive and Kinch was quicker than Hogan at picking up the headset. With unbridled irritation in his voice he answered. “Ready, Bird Roc, Papa Bear is here – and is going to need a lot of sun and honey to recover from this trip you forced him to make! A big ‘thank you’ from all of us!”

Hogan gave his friend a short smirk, mouthed a ‘Mother-hen’ towards him and took the microphone and the headset. “Papa Bear to Bird Roc,” he said; voice not so strong like it would usually be.

“Robert!” sounded Butler’s voice through the tiny speakers in the receivers. “Thank the Lord, son! It’s good to hear your voice.”
“The frequency is safe?” Hogan asked carefully; surprised that Butler called him by his real name.

“Yes, it is. We use a new way of piggybacking to send clear messages. Even if the Germans detect the frequency, they’ll only hear a song that is played in the front. Our voices are hidden.”

“You piggybacked the frequency with a song?” Hogan had to snicker. “Perfect.”

Klink rolled his eyes, before he chuckled quietly. It was always the same. Sometimes the one side then the other gained some technical advantages which were neutralized a few weeks later. Not for the first time he asked himself, how good life could be if all those aspirations would be used in a peaceful way.

Hogan still grinned. “A nice development, Alex. I only hope it was tested before we spoke here. I don’t want to be the one who finds out that the whole technique still needs some modifications.”

Butler laughed. “Don’t worry, Robert. We’ve been radioing like this for quite a time now and it was first tested between London and Washington many times before we began to use it in the field. How are you, son? Your parents are mad with worry after they learned from me that you were arrested and injured by the Gestapo.”

“I’m doing better, thanks. I’m still healing, but it isn’t comparable with the first days anymore. Medic Wilson did a good job, as well as the German surgeon.”

“That’s good to hear.” He sighed. “Robert, I know that you’re still in no good condition – the reason why I’m ignoring your Sergeant Kinchloe’s harsh comment. He is worried about you, just like I am. But we’ve to know more about your new source, and given the fact that you ordered your COP to keep silent about it, I’ve to ask you in person now. Who is it?”

Robert’s gaze wandered to Will and as their eyes met, he winked at him. “It’s the very same man in whose quarters I’ve been living since I was saved by him during the unfortunate assault of our airforces. He later rescued me from the Gestapo.” Hogan waited and slowly counted from one to three in his mind.

“One moment!” Butler stuttered. “Sergeant Kinchloe told me that you were saved both times from the German commander of your camp, and…” For a second there was silence, before the general burst, “Don’t tell me your new source is this Klink!”
Robert exchanged an amused glance with Kinch, whose keen ears caught some of the words despite the fact that Hogan wore the headset. Then Robert’s glance wandered back to his secret lover. “Yes, General, the source is our Kommandant Klink.” With amusement he watched Wilhelm straighten his frame a little bit, while in the headset a gasp was heard.

“Howgan!” It sounded more than shocked and flabbergasted. “You… you said he’s an idiot and that his stupidity is needed by you to fulfill your missions. And you’re telling me that he is the one the Allies have been listened to for over a week now?”

Hogan sighed. “Alex, Klink has known about us for more than two years and covered for us.” He heard the general moan. “He revealed himself to me over a week ago…” In the next minutes, the colonel told his superior and mentor how it came that Oberst Wilhelm Klink was not just their new source, but also their protector. He didn’t reveal much about Klink’s private reasons for fighting against the Nazis, but enough to make Butler understand that the German was sincere about his intentions.

After he ended, there was again some silence, before Butler answered slowly, “That your own jailer is in truth your supporter, is something I’ve to stomach – as well as the fact that it obviously slipped your attention that he not only was on your track, but also saw through your game.”

“I hope that you’re going to meet Klink after the war, Alex, and then you can understand that I really had no chance seeing through him in this case.” He had to smile as he saw Klink growing an inch or two with pride. “He is a highly intelligent man who has learned to walk between the raindrops and to do so believably, because it was his only chance to survive.” Both colonels still looked at each other; their eyes spoke a language no-one else could understand. “He had been forged, like I told you, during the first war, and follows the old codex of honor, but is forced to play along with the insanity that increases in the Third Reich day by day,” Robert continued softly. “At least he pretends to do so, but fights the madness in his own way – in the background. He wasn’t certain about my true identity until three weeks ago, and he revealed himself to me after I was a little bit more myself again. Since then he did what he did before: Covered for us. And even more. It was him who initiated the second sabotage yesterday and he supported us in many ways within the last two weeks. He also protected my men against the despotism of the Gestapo”

Butler grumbled something, before he asked, “You do know that this could be a trap – that he might be putting up a big show? It wouldn’t be the first time that the Nazis try to place spies and saboteurs among our lines. Hell, they even sent saboteurs under false names to the US to blow up our weapon-facilities, but the FBI could stop them as one of them switched sides. Klink could be acting on orders from Berlin, inflicting not only yours, but also the whole Underground’s demise. Do you really trust him?”
Robert’s gaze became warm while he still looked at Will. “Yes, Alexander, I’m aware that this could be a trick, but it isn’t. I know him too well, and I’ve seen and heard too much within the almost three years we’ve been stuck here together. Wilhelm Klink doesn’t belong to the Nazis and he wants an end of the madness in his country and the entirety of Europe. He has proven over and over again that he is on our side and shielded us – not only since he revealed himself to me, but the whole two years prior. Without him, my men and I would have been dead for months now. So, yes, I trust him. I trust him with my life – and that of my team.”

Klink’s eyes brightened for a moment while a real smile spread over his suddenly flushed face. It betrayed the deep joy he felt at those words.

A deep sigh was audible on the other end of the line, followed by the dry statement, “Well, I don’t need more as a guarantee. You’re a distrusting man, Rob, and gaining your trust is a hard thing. If Klink managed it, then that tells me more than anything.”

“Thanks, Alex. I want you to enlist him as one of our Underground-agents so that he is protected by the Allies should it come to the worst.”

Again Butler took a deep breath. “Okay. What shall be his code-name? Another fairy-tale?”

“We better stick to it. If we chose a completely different kind of code-name the Gestapo could get the right idea that the new agent hasn’t belonged to Papa Bear until now, and could spearhead new investigations.”

“Do you have something special in mind?”

A smirk began to spread over Hogan’s face. “What do you think about the Valiant Tailor?”

Klink stared, flabbergasted, at him. What shall be his code-name???

“Well, he has courage if he plays the Nazis like you say and is clever enough to even havefooled you,” came the dry reply. “Okay. It’s Valiant Taylor. Something else I have to note?”

“Yes, please also enlist Sergeant Hans Georg Schultz and Corporal Karl Langenscheidt as our supporters. Schultz has known about us even longer, and helped and covered for us in an active way. And Langenscheidt turns a blind eye here and there, too. I’m sure that he at least suspect us, but has
never made a move to give us away. In his own way, he’s on our side.”

“Understood,” Butler grumbled. “As it seems, you’ve the whole leading staff on your side by now.”

“Na, only those three, but you really don’t need more if you have Colonel Klink and the two others covering your back.”

Butler sighed again. “Consider it done. Back to the topic that put the whole brass in uproar: The Messerschmitt-facility. Are you also absolutely sure that your German friend isn’t overstating his estimation considering the whole slave-worker-matter at this mountain in Thuringia?”

“No, sir,” Hogan answered, now businesslike again. “I often heard from other contacts how many people are forced to work for the Nazis. Hundreds – thousands of them are building Hitler’s and the others’ insane projects, and no-one cares if they live or die. And imagine how many men are needed to realize the project in Thuringia. And using these poor bastards as living shields is typical for these devils here. If we attack the hill, thousands of these kidnapped guys will die – and we’ll gain no real success because the hill is made of solid stone our bombs will not be able to destroy.”

“Dammit!” It was rare that Butler cursed, but now he did it. “Okay, then we’ve to check other options.” He paused a moment. “Go back to bed, son and cure yourself,” he changed the topic again; voice gentle now. “I hope that you’ll be fit soon.”

“Yeah, me too. The walls are closing up on me by now.”

“Well, some forced time-out is not bad for you. I know you and your way of being antsy. Finding some rest will do wonders for you.”

Hogan groaned. “You sound like Klink,” he complained, and smirked as Will frowned at him.

“I don’t know this man, but if he thinks the same about your hyper-activeness and your need for some rest like I do, then I already like him. And he also gained my sympathy, because quietening you down is certainly hard work.”

The colonel grimaced. “You’re not nice!” he pouted and received short laughter in reply.
“I'll contact your parents tomorrow. Shall I tell them something from you?”

This time, Robert’s smile was wide and warm. “Yes. Please tell them that I love them and that they don’t have to worry. I’m safe and sound here in camp, and I’m healing nicely thanks to my friends.” He glanced at Klink and then at the others, before he turned serious again. “Have you heard anything about Jason?”

“The last I heard about your brother and his squadron, he’d been doing well. Flew some very successful attacks against the Japanese, and has his station in Pearl Harbor.”

“If you have the chance, Alex, then please send him my love.”

“This I’ll do, Rob. Take care of yourself, son. And my regards to your men.”

“Thanks. Oh, by the way, I want you to put a commendation into the files of the following men.” He named the members of his closer circle, as well as Olsen, Wilson and those, of whom he knew that they had spent hard hours during the night to re-install everything; risking health and life while scurrying through the camp and re-opening the secret entrances. After all, it wasn’t the first time they did it.

“They are really your boys, Robert. Even at night they don’t give it a rest.” Butler’s smile was audible in his voice. “I’ll take care that the commendations are noted in their files – just like yours. Take care, Rob. Good night.”

“Good night, Alex. Papa Bear out!” Hogan closed the frequency and pulled off the headset. He met the beaming grins of his men and shrugged, “Well, you deserved a commendation, no doubt here.”

“Yet we want to thank you, Colonel,” Kinchloe smiled; burying his fist in the pockets of his jacket.

Glancing at Klink, Hogan continued, “I hope I didn’t give away too much of your privacy, Will, but…”

Klink waved his right hand. “You told your superior what you have to tell him. It’s not easy, convincing a staff-officer that someone, who was regarded as an enemy, is in reality an ally. And, by the way, you didn’t mention real private matters, so no harm done.” He gave him a tiny smile. “Thank you for your consideration, Rob.”
The Heroes exchanged another pointed look with each other. There it was again: The incredible familiarity those two displayed to each other, and those warm gazes between them. And every one of them started to really acknowledge the kind of relationship both men had entered into.

*** HH ***

The two colonels returned quickly to the warmth of Klink’s quarters. They were chilled to the bone, and were very grateful for LeBeau’s tea that awaited them.

While sipping at the warm infusion, Klink watched his beloved, who sat tiredly at the other side of the table. He knew that Hogan had to be exhausted after the short, but tiresome trip, yet there was one thing he had to discuss with the younger man.

“The Valiant Tailor?”

Hogan, lost in thought, looked up, caught the way Will eyed him, and felt a smirk pulling at his lips. “Well, we all use fairytale characters as code-names, as you’ve certainly figured out by now.”

“Yes, ‘Papa Bear’, ‘Bird Roc’,” Klink nodded; chuckling. To give an Air-Corps general of the high command the code-name ‘Bird Roc’ was really amusing.

“Yeah, just like this. Usually our code-names don’t give anything specific that could bear evidence about the agent’s identity away, but at least the gender is correct.” He cocked his head. “And sometimes some names do have a deeper meaning – just like in your case.”

“Except for the fact that the typical tailor is portrayed as a long, lanky guy, I really have nothing in common with this professional field.”

“No, but with the fairytale character,” Robert smiled and laughed quietly, as Wilhelm huffed in half-offense.

“Oh please, I don’t kill seven flies with a flyswatter and boast that I’ve killed seven enemies afterwards.”
Hogan snickered. “You’ve to see the metaphor in it. The Valiant Tailor doesn’t fight his opponents openly, but he gains victory over them by tricking them. Take the episode with the giants, for example. He made them believe that he was stronger than they are by squeezing a stone so that he wrung out the water it still held – in truth he used some old cheese. Or he tricked the ill-willed guards of the king by spying on them and then making them believe he was clairvoyant because he knew about their intentions. He outsmarts his enemies instead of using violence – and this really fits you.”

Klink had listened closely and cocked his head. His blue eyes shone softly. “And again you’ve given it a lot of thought before you chose a name – not a nick-name this time, but a code-name.” He snorted gently. “Your profundity never ceases to surprise me, my witty fox.”

“Ditto, phoenix,” Robert smiled warmly.

And in the entrance to the kitchen stood LeBeau; arms crossed in front of his chest, lips pursed, exasperation but also amusement in his eyes. The two colonels seemed to have completely forgotten about him. And as he watched how absorbed they were with each other, he knew that the suspicions he had tried to ignore, were true. Those two were not only friends – they were more. Very much more. And LeBeau didn’t know if he should bang his head against the door frame in amused frustration or laugh his head off, because one thing was for sure: Those two were the most uncommon couple in the whole of history.

*** HH ***

The two officers called an early end to the evening. Robert was tired like a puppy; the trip had cost him more than he was ready to admit. The moment he hit the mattress, he groaned in relief and as Will came out of the bathroom, the younger man was almost asleep.

Hogan sighed in content as he felt the long arms of his secret lover slipping around him, and, snuggling against the lanky body beside him, he entered Morpheus’ Realm within minutes – his promise of making it up to Will for his help the evening prior was forgotten. And Klink didn’t mind. He had watched with concern how much the way back through the tunnels had tired Robert out and that his always hyper-active troublemaker crawled early into bed of his own free will for once told him even more.

Smiling tenderly while pulling his beloved to him, Wilhelm relaxed. But contrary to Hogan he didn’t find sleep easily. What had been revealed ‘downstairs’ to him, still roamed through his mind – and he knew that he hadn’t seen everything yet. Rob had promised him to give him a proper ‘sight-seeing tour’ when he was fit again, yet what the Oberst had already seen was almost enough.
Hogan and his men had managed to build a little city downstairs – with electricity for air-conditioning, lights, radio and telephone, and many things more. They could produce phony money and had pressure plates for Reichsmark and Dollars. They tailored clothes for the men and women who had to leave Germany, made passports for them and took care that they were picked up by the Allies. Yes, Klink had known the latter, after all Robert had told him how it came that this Williams had been able to expose him and his men to Major Hegel – because the treacherous flyer fled during his transfer to London and contacted the Gestapo to take revenge on Hogan, which – thank the Lord – backfired. Yet the Kommandant was still thunderstruck at how enormous the equipment Robert and his men had installed to fulfill their missions was; how cleverly and well everything was thought through.

‘Printing counterfeit money, making phony passports, smuggling away people, transferring secret information out of the land… Sweet Lord, every single deed would mean a death penalty for Rob. And he acts as if all this is the most usual thing of the world. He really has nerves of steel!’

Burying his face in the tousled shock of dark hair that rested on his shoulder, Will took a deep breath, relished in the familiar scent of the man he loved and closed his eyes; determined to protect those secrets even more than ever before. He had fought Hochstetter to keep his witty fox safe, he would also fight the devil to do the same.

He couldn’t know that both would turn to be one and the same in the future.

TBC…

Well, that this all ‘downstairs’ has to be a kind of shock for our dear ‘big shot’ was to expect. And that he needs a time to stomach this all, is understandable, yet – like one of you readers mentioned in a comment – Hogan can call himself lucky that Klink is so much in love with him. What the Heroes built up beneath the camp, is enough to let the hardest Gestapo-officers faint before he hands down a death-penalty for everyone not one but a dozen times. That Klink is really on the Heroes’ side is pure fortune…

The next chapter will be the beginning of another important event yet to come: Hochstetter’s trial. And given the major’s cleverness, his own statements and the fact that he got a real defense lawyer (and not the farce that was usual at those times), he is about to turn the wheel. Klink, Schultz, Schmidt and Burkhalter are summoned to the Court as witnesses, and Klink also can be in deep water because he attacked Hochstetter while freeing Hogan. In other words: New trouble is approaching – and there is nothing, Hogan could do this time.
I hope, you liked the new chapter and the way, Klink reacted to the tunnels, was to your liking. Like always, I’m dying of curiosity what you think about it.

Have a nice rest of Sunday and a good start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Invitation to Berlin

Hi, my dear readers!

Once again I’m sorry for the delay and that I can only present you an un-edited/corrected chapter, but my dear beta-reader is nearing big tests within her study and is therefore very busy.

To let you not wait any longer, you get – again – a chapter that in my rough English, yet I hope, you’re going to like it. The corrected one will replace this as soon as I get it, okay?

Thank you so much for the big feedback. I’m happy that you loved the whole event of Klink seeing finally the tunnels. Of course, it has been a kind of shock for our dear Oberst, even if he knew that Hogan’s network has to be an exquisite one, otherwise he wouldn’t have been able to do, what he did.

The following chapters are concentrating on Hochstetter’s trial. Of course, with him being a higher ranking Gestapo- and SS-officer, the trial won’t be a trivial one – or a farce like it was usual at those times. I did some very intense researches concerning the scission of the so-called justice within the Third Reich and how worked. The mentioned ‘departments’ of the different courts, the employees within the courts and the way of ‘justice’ are historical. Still I hope, I got everything more or less right.

The next chapters will also show that Stalag 13 – in the TV-show – is really a kind of oasis of peace within the whole hell war had produced. The mentioned issues within this chapter, Burkhalter will ponder about, are historical. And there will be more. Klink and a few others have to drive to Berlin and there they’re going to face the whole brutal darkness of the war, the camp is saved from until now.

Parallel, Stalag 13 will get an interims-Kommandant, and even the guards will realize how easy life is, when Klink is in charge.

Nevertheless I hope, you’re going to enjoy everything.

Love

Yours Starflight
Chapter 39 – Invitation to Berlin

The next morning started calm and peaceful – at least in Stalag 13. It wasn’t the same for Albert Burkhalter, as he entered his office in Berlin the same minute roll call in the POW-camp was over.

Rubbing his temples, Burkhalter braced his elbows on the desk surface and looked down on the report he and certainly also the other generals had gotten this morning. A report that let him doubt if there would be ever some light again in the darkness that had spread over the land. Sometimes he really wished there would be a loud bang and he would find himself a few months in the future – at a time when hopefully this whole insanity was finally over.

An insanity that grew day by day – especially after the Red Army had crossed the borders to East-Prussia at the 13th January and constantly gained ground in bloodily battles. Warsaw had been liberated at the 17th January – a town that had been completely destroyed after the failed revolution the summer prior. The citizen, who had survived the Waffen-SS’ revenge, had been deported into camps and were slave-workers now – or were killed. Burkhalter didn’t know the latter for sure, but when he remembered the disgust and hate in Himmler’s voice as he told him about the ‘total cleaning of this filthy town’, he had an idea what maybe happened to many people there.

And when he remembered the short telephone talk with his ‘good friend’ a few days ago, he felt sick to the core. He learned that Himmler ordered to ‘evacuate’ two of the so-called working-camps in South Poland, which held some POWs, but mostly political prisoners and people of ‘not-worth’ heritage. Burkhalter, only responsible for the Luft-Stalags, had argued that the most of these men (and women) were too weak to make it into the ‘heart’ of the Third Reich, and the Reichsführer’s answer had shocked him: The more of them died, the better. The Geneva Conventions didn’t count for him in this case, and Burkhalter had a bad foreboding that this was only the beginning of another war-crime that would go down in history in a very bad way. Yet there was nothing he could do about it.

And this wasn’t the only insanity that afflicted the tossed land that suffered from the storm Hitler and his fellows had released in their greed to gain domination over the world.

With the Red Army conquering more and more of East-Germany, chaos had broken loose. Refugees from Silesia and people of German heritage from Czechia began to flock Saxony, Thuringia and East-Bavaria. In the north people fled over the icebound Baltic Sea from East-Prussia to Western-Pomerania despite the fact that Hitler himself had forbidden them to retreat. The fear of the Red Army was stronger than the fear of the Führer’s henchmen. Yet their attempts to escape ended often in death and this not only because the frozen sea couldn’t carry those many people and gave away.
Words had been given that Russian aircrafts hunted them; shooting at the convoys made of carriages pulled by horses and oxen; killing hundreds of fleeing families.

Yet many made it. The towns and villages along the Baltic Sea were swamped with fled people, the harbors were crowded with refugees – injured, weak, desperate. Naval captains refused to carry weapons and other war machineries to the last ice-free harbors in East Prussia and back, but transported people as much as it was possible – always threatened by the hostile navy of mostly Russian heritage, and also first by the brass who hadn’t cared for the people’s survival.

Every captain, every staff-officer who more or less disobeyed his orders and chose people’s lives over continuing the battle, stood with one foot already in his grave. Yet many of them took rather the risk of being executed for insubordination than letting all those men, women and children down they once vowed to protect.

Now, since the 23th January, the order that the people had to stay in East-Prussia, had been cancelled and an official evacuation had begun. And the German doom continued. Since the 24th January the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS began to retreat from Slovenia; at the 26th January the Red Army managed it to cut off the land connection between East-Prussia and Pomerania and separated Königsberg; and only three days ago – at the 30th January – the German civil-ship ‘Wilhelm Gustloff’ had been scuttled, taking 5000 of 6000 civil refugees to the bottom of the sea. The Ardennes-offensive had been declared as lost two days ago, and even Hitler’s broadcast-address one day prior to hold on failed its intention.

Germany was drowning in chaos, Hitler and his closest fellows refused to see the truth and demanded more and more miracles from the last remaining staff-officers. They reorganized the troops, named new troop-leader and Himmler had been made the supreme commander of the new built German Army Group ‘Weichsel’ who was ordered to prevent the Red Army from conquering West-Prussia and Berlin. In Burkhalter’s eyes this task was lost before it even began, but no-one was ready to admit it. And the men, who were sent to the fronts, became younger and younger.

Burkhalter had enough of this all. He hated to get lists with the losses and reading the ages, which were sometimes even under 16. And he hated it to learn how many people were suspected by the Gestapo of being against the regime – a regime the general had come to loath and to fear simultaneously within the last weeks.

A knock on the door interrupted his dark brooding. “Ja, herein!” (Yes, come in)

His secretary entered and handed him a latter. “A messenger just brought this, Herr General. He said, it’s urgent.”
“Thank you,” Burkhalter nodded; already anticipating another catastrophe. While his secretary left again, he quickly opened the envelop, read the letter, grimaced and groaned inwardly. He just had gotten the information that Hochstetter’s trial had begun yesterday. And contraire to the usual habit of trials keeping short, this case had been adjourned to the next day because the defense lawyer had pointed out some serious crudities connected with Hochstetter’s investigations and Stalag 13, what needed the statements of witnesses in person.

Burkhalter cursed. Usually defense lawyers were nothing else than a farce by now. Often they and the defendants saw each other for the first time at the day of the trial, but obviously Hochstetter had still enough ‘friends’ in the SS – or Gestapo – who had taken care that he got an attorney who saw in his job more than a unpleasant duty, and tried to get his client out of the mess he had brought himself in.

Albert frowned as his gaze wandered over the addressor: The Volksgerichtshof (People’s Court) and not the Central SS-Court that was cognizant 1939 for cases of the SS and Gestapo and had been originated from the 1934 established Court of Honor. Okay, the main court was in Munich and had only a small dependence in Berlin. And – above all – this case included the Luftwaffe, and therefore – strictly speaking – it wasn’t a trial that only concerned the SS and Gestapo. The accusations which had been risen against Hochstetter, referred to a wider range than usual, and so it made sense that the court material was tried by the People’s Court, where last year the conspirators against Hitler had been sentenced, as well as many more traitors and suspects – independent if they were civilians or members of the army and / or SS.

So, Hochstetter’s trial didn’t take place in a SS-own court he certainly had hoped for, because hardly any justice was made against members of the SS or Gestapo. The People’s Court was a better chance that the major would be sentenced, even if justice wasn’t independent anymore for more than 10 years now.

1933 and 1934 Hitler had ‘reformed’ the whole justice, had made himself as the General Judge and had placed the Wehrmacht in charge of the courts. The Central SS-Court was an exception and was led by the Waffen-SS with Himmler as the highest ranking judge and his substitute Franz Breithaupt, a general of the Waffen-SS. That the Wehrmacht produced the judges applied for the People’s Court and several Special Tribunals, as well as for the Military Court. While the People’s Court and the Special Tribunals still belonged to the Justice Ministry, the Military Court belonged to the 1936 established Reichskriegsgericht (Reich Military Court) that mainly dealt with cases of high treason, defection, Wehrmacht-subversion and so on which had been committed by higher ranking officers. Lower ranks were still dealt with at the People’s Court. That Hochstetter’s case was tried there was another proof that maybe – this time – justice was dispensed.

Burkhalter re-read the letter and sighed deeply. He, Klink, Sergeant Schultz and Oberleutnant Schmidt had to appear to make their own statements as a witness and joint plaintiff tomorrow. Right, the general could live with that as long as this crazy ‘poison-gnome’, how Klink called the major,
would be laid up afterwards. And he wouldn’t mind if some more crimes which were done by the SS, would be court materialled, too, but he doubted the latter highly.

Grumbling, he gripped for the telephone to phone Klink. He knew that the Oberst would complain about the tight schedule and the trip in general, but Burkhalter couldn’t change it. Summons had to be followed, end of story.

*** HH *** HH ***

The morning post had not arrived until now, as Klink learned from Burkhalter that he had to travel to Berlin this day. The next part of Hochstetter’s trial would take place at the 3rd of February at 10:00 a.m. – a Saturday. To have trial during the weekend wasn’t unusual anymore. Therefore the Kommandant and the Sergeant of the Guards would have to arrive this afternoon, and – if everything ran smooth – they would be back tomorrow in the late evening.

Of course Klink tried to back out of it. He hated trials and he hated even more to leave his camp – now more than ever.

“But I have no officially substitute,” he complained. “Not after you sent Captain Gruber to the South-West-Front in December, and even Leutnant Bergheim was transferred. What, if the Gestapo or SS tries to intervene with my camp again while I’m gone? Langenscheidt is a promising corporal, but…”

“I knew that you would say this, Klink,” Burkhalter answered. “I send someone over today, who will be in charge for the two days you’re gone. Major Sandhaus from the Luftwaffe is a capable man who is still healing from a leg injury he got at the Russian Front. He’ll be able to keep an eye on your camp for two days, so don’t worry.”

Klink groaned inwardly. Super, this was exactly what he needed: A substitute who would poke around in a POW-camp that held an espionage-ring one level downstairs. On the other hand Hogan was officially still restricted to bed, and his men could keep still for two, not even complete days. And, by the way, there was nothing he could do about the major’s transfer to Stalag 13, so he replied as nice as possible, “Thank you so much, Herr General, this calms me.”

“I knew you would be glad, Klink.” Burkhalter sounded serious for once. “Maybe you can contact Oberleutnant Schmidt so that you, Sergeant Schultz and he drive in one car. It saves gasoline and one car is easier to oversee than two. We’ve to be very careful because the Allies fly more and more attacks.”
“A splendid idea, Herr General. I call him after our talk. Is there something I have to bring with me for the trial?”

“No, only the truth – and a little bit of your new-found backbone.” The last words echoed with mockery.

Klink made a face but chose to ignore the unkind remark. “Where are we going to reside, Herr General? As far as I heard Berlin isn’t this safe anymore.”

“Don’t let this hear the Führer. He is furious enough about it. But to answer your question: Given the fact that the allies attack Berlin more and more, you’re saver in one of our bunkers. Come to the Ministry of Aviation, and we’ll leave together for a save place to stay overnight.”

“Jawohl, Herr General, and thank you.”

Burkhalter ended the call and Klink put the receiver back on the cradle. “‘A little bit of your new-found backbone’! Yours is only needed to carry your fat belly, you arrogant Sacher-cake,” he grumbled, before he rose and went to the door. “Fräulein Hilda? Link me to Oberleutnant Schmidt in the Gestapo-Headquarters Hammelburg. And then send for Schultz. The sergeant and I have to go on a little journey.”

*** HH ***

“You’re driving to Berlin? Today?” Hogan stared shocked at Klink, who was packing his suitcase. “But… this is very dangerous by now! Burkhalter is right. The Allies are bombarding the city practically week by week and…”

“I have no other choice, Robert,” Klink interrupted him while he placed a clean shirt and his sleeping gown into the suitcase. “They want to question us before they can pass sentence. And if we really want to have a chance to get Hochstetter out of the way forever, we’ve to make sure that the jury sees the whole mess and his crimes likewise. I admit, this will not be an easy task, because the SS and Gestapo technically has a fool’s license, but a guy can hope- especially given the fact that the trial is held not the Central SS-Court, but in the People’s Court.”

The colonel groaned. “Do you really think they’re going to give him hell because he tortured an American POW? The members of juries today in Germany belong to the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS
“I know,” Klink sighed. “But he broke law, he gave instruction to his inferiors to tell a general he wasn’t available, he didn’t obey a direct order, he abused his rank and position for personal purpose… This is something the brass cannot tolerate.”

Hogan combed his fingers through his already tousled hair. “You attacked him. What, if he pressures charge against you?” he asked quietly; concern plain written on his face.

“He certainly will try to do so to get his own head out of the noose,” the Oberst answered. “Schultz and I agreed on the statement that I pulled the poison-gnome away from you and he was about to attack me, so I acted on pure defense. There is no-one who could say the opposite.”

“Schmidt,” Robert threw in for consideration.

Wilhelm shook his head. “No, he was still outside and argued with the guards who tried to stop me from entering the room. It’s Hochstetter’s statement against that of Schultz and mine. One against two. The statement of a high-ranking Luftwaffe-officer against someone, whose cholERICally temper and streak for violence are infamous. And, besides, this is the best way to explain why Schultz aimed at him and kept him with a weapon in check.”

“Schultz tried to protect you and me, and…”

“Exactly,” Klink nodded and went into the bathroom to get his washing utensils. “He protected his commanding officer of getting harmed by a man who had turned crazy. This whole scene will undergird our statements that Hochstetter simply lost it in his wish for vengeance.”

Hogan grimaced. “You’re very certain of this, aren’t you?”

“Not really, but it’s the best shot we can make,” Will replied. Coming out of the bathroom with his toiletries bag, he glanced at Hogan and his face softened. “Rob, stop worrying. Burkhalter wants Hochstetter out of his hair just like we do. It’s also in Schmidt’s best interest that Hochstetter doesn’t return. If we pull together, the black-cladded screamer is done for.”

“I do not fear so much that the whole thing will backfire, because even if the high-ranking Nazis are devils in my eyes, I do know that you German are stickler for details. I do believe that Hochstetter
will receive some punishment. What I fear is that you are getting hurt on your way to Berlin or in the city. You and Schultz. And, to say the truth, I have some concern for Schmidt in this matter, too. I do think that he is a honorable young man. I really would hate it if something happens to him only because of a trial that is made on my behalf.”

Klink smiled gently at him. “To get hit by the wrong bullet is a risk we all have to take during war.”

“You can take a greater or a less greater risk by choosing where you are. Here you’re safe. The Allies would never attack a known POW-camp,” Hogan protested.

“And if I go to Hammelburg and the Allies fly another ambush, it could kill me, too.”

“Hammelburg is not Berlin. They try to bring Hitler to his knees and the bubble-beard is in Berlin, not Hammelburg. The chance that you get harmed there is a few times higher than here.” There was real deep worry, even some fear, in Robert’s dark eyes, and Will stopped the packing to cup his beloved’s cheeks with both hands. Rob’s concern for him warmed him through and through.

“We travel during day. The air ambushes are mostly made during night so that our air defense recognizes them too late. How high, do you think, is the risk that we’ll be under attack under these circumstances?”

Robert lowered shortly his gaze, before he looked back at the older man. “And what’s during the nights you’re going to stay in Berlin?” he whispered. “What if the Allies plan an attack and hit the hotel you’re…”

Will’s thumbs moved in soothing circles over Rob’s skin; deeply moved by the younger man’s worry. He really seemed to mean a lot to his witty fox. “Burkhalter ordered that we arrive at Ministry of Aviation, and then takes us then to a bunker where we will stay the night.”

Pressing his lips into a line for a few seconds, Hogan glanced grimly at him. “Bunker or no bunker – I don’t like this. I don’t like it such a tiny bit.” He lifted his right hand where the tips of his thumb and index-finger were only a millimeter apart.

“I don’t like it either, but we cannot back out because of some bad feelings,” Klink answered gently, before he pressed a soft kiss on Hogan’s forehead. “If you were in my place, would you go or trying to wriggle out of it?”
Robert groaned and closed his eyes. “You know me. I rather face something instead of running away. But it’s one thing to take a risk you can calculate or not. So…”

“The risk is lowered because of the time we travel and where we stay,” the Oberst interrupted him quietly. “And just like you, I, don’t like to run away.”

“Before this whole mess three weeks ago, you would have backed up,” Robert said strained, before he turned his head and breathed a kiss on Wilhelm’s left inner wrist.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Klink pondered slowly. “I always try to avoid large risks – naturally. But there are still things which are worth to fight for – to risk everything for. I didn’t back off as you were about to die because of the air fighters. I didn’t back off as Hochstetter got you. And I certainly won’t back off when my presence is decisive for eliminating a large danger for you and us all here. I have to go, Rob, and you know it.”

Hogan swore under his breath, but nodded. He couldn’t be mad at Will, after all the older man was right: He would do the same if their positions were switched.

Klink, knowing that he had won the argument for once, bent down and captured his beloved’s lips soothing and lovingly with his own. Robert snaked his arms around Will’s shoulder, and for a long moment they simply held each other and savored the other one’s kiss.

“How long will you be away?” Hogan asked quietly, after Klink finally let go of him and straightened his lanky frame.

“Schultz and I leave within a quarter hour and we’ll return tomorrow in the evening or the day after at latest. We’ll take the staff-car, and Langenscheidt and a few of your men are busy in the moment to remove all signs. Like this we aren’t easy to identify should some spotters of the Allies are in the air.”

Robert sighed. “I can’t stop you, can I?”

“No, you can’t,” Will smiled, closed his suitcase and slipped into his coat. “Burkhalter sends a substitute over for me – a Major Sandhaus from the Luftwaffe. Do you think there is the tiniest chance that your men will behave for once and rise no trouble for the two days I’m gone?”
Robert rolled his eyes. “I’ll give the order to be as nice as possible to him.” He hesitated. “You said you were ordered to come to the Ministry of Aviation?”

“Yes,” Will nodded.

“So, there is the chance that you meet Goering?”

The Kommandant shrugged. “Maybe. He is the highest ranking military officer of the Luftwaffe, and not only the Reichsmarschall, so – yeah – there is the chance that I’ll meet him.” He frowned. “Why?”

“Uh… don’t mention his visit here,” Robert grinned sheepishly.

Klink stared at him. “Let me guess. His visit was a phony one like Hitler’s here and Himmler’s in Paris.” As he saw the lopsided smirk of his beloved, he rolled his eyes. “I don’t want to have any details,” he said and grimaced.

Hogan laughed quietly, then he rose from the bed’s edge he had sat on; knowing that the moment of good-bye had arrived. “You’ll be careful, okay?” he whispered; feeling suddenly so damn helpless.

Klink winked at him. “I will, Rob.” He reached out and stroke gently over the younger man’s right cheek. “After all I’ve someone to return to.”

Hogan cracked a smile, closed the small distance to his secret lover and pulled him into his arms. He sighed as he felt Will returning the embrace. For a few seconds they simply clung to each other, then Klink stole a last kiss from the man he loved, clapped him gently on the not injured shoulder, stepped back and took his suitcase. “Until tomorrow or the day after,” he said quietly.

“I hold you to this promise,” Robert answered, and watched with an uneasy feeling Wilhelm walking away. Wrapping his arms around himself, he murmured, “Sweet Lord, please keep an eye on him!”

*** HH ***

Klink wasn’t the only one, who was anything but delighted about the trip. Horst Schmidt was not
less irritated about the whole thing, but – of course – he obeyed the order. Klink had called him directly after his talk with Burkhalter and so the young man had time enough to pack his suitcase before the neutral Luftwaffe-staff-car held at the main-door of the Gestapo-headquarters. Having no other choice than leaving von Neuhaus in charge, Schmidt slipped onto the back-seat an hour after Klink’s call. At least he would have nice company, because contraire to the most other officers, he liked the Oberst. And Schultz was simply fun to be around.

They stopped at the optician’s shop, where Klink got his five monocles – only to realize that he had forgotten the interims-glasses in his quarters he had put down while packing his suitcase. Right, there certainly were more serious matters to think of. Promising the optician to return the glasses after he came back from Berlin, the three men were finally on their way to Germany’s capital.

*** HH *** HH ***

Klink’s interims substitute arrived four hours after the Kommandant and Schultz had left the camp. Langenscheidt had been in charge for the time, and didn’t mind as the guards from the gate reported the major’s arrival.

Major Joachim Sandhaus came in a simple staff-car together with his driver. As he left the car, Kinchloe and the others could see that he used a cane while he limped towards the Kommandantur; pulling his left leg after him. He seemed to be in his middle forties, had dark hair and sported a moustache which ended in up-curved peaks.

“Very Prussian,” Newkirk commented wryly, while leaning against the wall of Barrack 2. For once the sun was shining and even it was still cold, the golden rays did miracles on the POWs’ – and guards’ – mood.

They watched how Langenscheidt greeted him, and how the two men exchanged a few words, before they vanished into the Kommandantur.

Ten minutes later the POWs were summoned for an unscheduled roll call they had already expected. It was the usual procedure when the Kommandant was replaced with a substitute for whatever reason.

The major spoke a plain but very German-accented English, introduced himself shortly, demanded discipline and obedience until Klink was back, and asked then for the senior POW officer. Obviously the man hadn’t been really briefed by Burkhalter as he sent the major to Stalag 13 in haste.
Langenscheidt cleared his throat. “Usually the senior POW would be Colonel Hogan, but he still heals from the injuries he got from the ‘questioning’ by Major Hochstetter – the reason why Oberst Klink and the Sergeant of the Guards were called to Berlin.”

Sandhaus nodded slowly. “General Burkhalter told me that your usual Kommandant was summoned for the trial against a rouge gone Gestapo- and SS-officer, but not more,” he answered quietly. “Tell me more when we’re alone. Who is the colonel’s PSO?”

Langenscheidt sighed inwardly; hoping that the major didn’t share the, in his eyes, outrageous opinion of the Third Reich concerning other-colored people. The whole mess with Lübkmemeier and Klink standing up for Kinchloe had been the top-topic of the camp for days afterwards. “Sergeant Kinchloe!” he called, and James stepped forwards.

He wasn’t surprised to see open haughtiness in the major’s eyes, as he looked him up and down. “You’re the current PSO?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Kinch answered calmly.

“Okay, I’ll expect that you keep your men under control. You gave the daily report already to Corporal Langenscheidt?” His voice was almost too flat to be called polite, but Kinchloe didn’t let this getting through him. Hogan had not asked but ordered him and the others to play nice until Klink was back, and James acknowledged this command without hesitation. So he didn’t reacted offended. Rather he opposite. He gave the German a wide brilliant smile.

“Of course, Major, just like I do it for three weeks now.”

“Good,” was all Sandhaus replied, before he dismissed the POWs and turned his attention back to Langenscheidt. “I’ll pay the colonel a short visit soon – after all I want to speak with a leading POW who is at least a full human.”

Langenscheidt couldn’t help himself; he felt disgusted at the majors open racism. He had come to respect and to like James Kinchloe, and the discriminating words of the interim-Kommandant angered him. Yet he simply knew that he couldn’t give into his feelings – not only to hide his own true opinion what otherwise could transfer him to a suicide mission at the Russian Front, but also to protect the POWs who had a different color-skin.
So he simply said, “As you wish.”

Sandhaus nodded. “But first I want to move in. The general told me that Oberst Klink’s private quarters held a guestroom. Take care that my belongings are brought to there.”

Langenscheidt tensed inwardly. The major and Hogan would never get along, this much was for sure. Sandhaus was a Nazi, there was no doubt, and Hogan never hid the fact that he loathed true fellows of Hitler. Yet he couldn’t forbid the major of taking residence in Klink’s quarters, what certainly would lead to a clash between the two officers. Unless…

“Of course, Herr Major,” Karl answered smoothly. “I'll also make certain that there will be made some room in the bathroom for you utensils. Those of Colonel Hogan are only a few and…”

The major had already limped towards the Kommandantur, but stopped dead in his tracks now and looked with large eyes at the younger man. “I beg your pardon?” he asked thunderstruck.

“I said, I’ll take care that there is also be made room for your washing utensils in the bathroom. Oberst Klink took the most certainly with him, but those of Colonel Hogan are there, and…”

“Do I interpreted your words correctly, Corporal? The colonel is not in the infirmary but in the Oberst’s quarters????”

Karl managed it to stay serious as he saw the almost shocked expression of the interims-Kommandant. “Jawohl, Herr Major. You see, Oberst Klink offered Colonel Hogan a place to heal after the colonel was badly tortured by the Gestapo. Since then the colonel stays in the Kommandant’s quarters until his injuries will be cured enough. But I don’t think that he will disturb you, sir. Okay, he is the typical American – a little brash, a little bit loud here and there, but otherwise he is affable. So…”

Sandhaus had only stared at him, but now found finally his voice again. “This damn Amy lives in the quarters of one of our higher ranking officers?”

Inwardly, Langenscheidt smiled. It was clear that the major wouldn’t even consider to share a place with ‘the enemy’. “Yes, sir. For three weeks exactly now. And the doctor says that the colonel is going to need at least one week more or so, before he can start to walk around again.”
Sandhaus blinked. This was outrageous! “A personal question, Corporal: Has your Kommandant lost his mind?”

“No, sir, he has his own leading style and treats all POWs with simple human respect and politeness. Colonel Hogan has been here for almost three years and given his rank, he and the Oberst have to interact day by day. They respect each other, and after the colonel was kidnapped and tormented by an officer of the Gestapo out of personal reasons, Oberst Klink decided to give the man a chance to heal properly – of course in agreement with General Burkhalter.”

The Luftwaffe-officer shook his head, before he growled, “I’ll never live with a damn Amy beneath a roof for only an hour, not to speak of one or two nights. Take my belongings to the guards’ quarters. Even if they don’t offer any luxury, I certainly prefer a simple wooden hut instead a ‘nice’ house in which one of the cursed Allies sleeps!” He brusquely turned around and headed for the Kommandantur.

“Jawohl, Herr Major,” Langenscheidt acknowledged the order. And only as the major vanished within the building, followed by his driver Nolte, Karl allowed himself to grin.

Victory!

A quarter hour later, Sandhaus stepped into the small building that served the original Kommandant as quarters. He was surprised to find spartan but nonetheless appealing hue of cozy luxury that filled the main room with a warm atmosphere. And, what him surprised even more, a very good smell lay in the air. Obviously someone was cooking something delicious.

Giving Langenscheidt an asking glance, the corporal answered the unspoken question, “LeBeau is certainly preparing the lunch, Herr Major.”

“Klink has an own cook?” Sandhaus blurted out; scandalized. They were at war, half of Germany was starving and this man had hired an own cook from France?

“No, sir, Corporal LeBeau is one of our POWs, who already cooked for General Burkhalter and one time even for Reichsmarschall Goering. He agreed to prepare meals for Oberst Klink and Colonel Hogan as long as the colonel heals.”

Sandhaus shook his head. “What is this here? A vacation camp?”
“No, sir, it’s Luft-Stammlager no. 13 with more than thousand POWs. But we try to make the best of the situation – and given the fact that the Kommandant and the senior POW officer get along rather well, the whole camp runs smoothly. Why, do you think, was there never a successful escape from Stalag 13 – or any death cases?”

Inwardly Karl cringed. Dear Lord, he sounded like Klink.

Snorting, Sandhaus closed the distance to the door from where the delicious smell came and glanced inside. A small man with an apron and a cooking hat was working at the stove, looked his way and said coolly with a French accent, “The lunch will be ready in half an hour, Major.”

Sandhaus felt anger awaking him in. Usually he wouldn’t have declined, because the fantastic smell and the sight of dried, many herbs on the table together with potatoes and vegetables, were very tempting. The meals at the hospital in Munich where he had stayed the last five weeks, had been awful, and the sustenance in the caserns was bad at best. To get something delicious between his teeth was something he really would have liked to allow himself. Yet he wouldn’t share a meal with a damn Amy, even if the man held a higher rank than he did.

“Okay,” he answered flatly. “Take care that it will be brought to the Kommandantur. I will not eat here.” He turned around. “Where is the colonel?” he asked Langenscheidt, who pointed at the door to the left of the kitchen.

“Over there, Herr Major. As far as I know, Sergeant Wilson, our medic, is just treating him.”

Sandhaus nodded shortly. Stopping at the threshold he let his gaze roam through the room that was a sleeping chamber with well-chosen furniture, a furnace and carpets on the wooden floor. Two men were in the room – one was standing in front of another male who had turned his back towards the door. His back with healing several long thin injuries which obviously resulted from brutal lashes. A bandage was wrapped around the man’s head what made the almost black hear standing into all directions.

Wilson glared at the interims-Kommandant, yet inwardly he grinned. It had been Newkirk, who had come up with the idea to patch Hogan up again so that Klink’s substitute would get the imagination that the colonel was still in very bad shape. Like this, Sandhaus would have no reason to kick Hogan out of the quarters. And Wilson had made sure that the first sight, the major got, was Hogan’s still messy back – just for good measurement. Kinch, Newkirk and the others had realized within a minute that the interims-Kommandant was a true Nazi who would love to give all Allies a pay-back for the injuries he obviously got in combat. To wreak his loathe was certainly something Sandhaus would love to do, and the Heroes didn’t want him to find a reason for starting a quarrel with their beloved commanding officer.
Hogan had agreed to Peter’s simple but good plan, even if he really disliked the thought of being wrapped up like a mummy again.

The moment Robert heard the major’s cold voice at the kitchen door and the unkind words, he knew that neither Newkirk, nor Wilson had exaggerated. This man was a real fellow of Hitler’s sick points of view, and he was glad that the man had chosen to stay in the guards’ quarters instead here, because even before he met the major in person, Hogan knew they would clash.

“Achtung!” Langenscheidt was forced to say to wake the two POWs’ attention to the fact that the interim-Kommandant had arrived, even if he already knew that they were aware of the German officer’s presence.

Wilson straightened his frame and put his hands on the back, but otherwise denied any kind of greeting. Hogan turned slowly around – putting on a good show of how much effort it cost him to do so.

Sandhaus saw a large blue-black bruise on the left side of the man’s ribcage. Other healing bruises were on the man’s face, while further tracks of clear torture were exposed on his upper body. Stepping nearer, he looked down at the American. Dark brown eyes glanced expressionless up at him, while the colonel tipped his temple in a sloppy salute. The impertinence!

“Colonel Robert Hogan?” Sandhaus asked coldly.


“Major Joachim Sandhaus, Luftwaffe. I’m the substitute for Oberst Klink for the time of his absence. It has been brought to my attention that you still heal from a questioning of the Gestapo.”

“As you certainly can clearly see,” Hogan answered wryly.

“Yes, obviously you irritated them a lot,” Sandhaus deadpanned. “Corporal Langenscheidt also briefed me about the special treatment concerning your person that was ordered in agreement with General Burkhalter. Of course, I accept the current status that frees you of the usual duties of the senior POW, as well as your stay here in those quarters – after all this is an order of General Burkhalter. Nonetheless Corporal Langenscheidt will check on you and report me about your presence two times the day.”
“A shame. That really shortens my visits in the Hofbräu in Hammelburg or a stroll to the cinema,” Hogan mocked.

“Spare me and yourself those lame attempts of being funny, Colonel. You maybe can speak like this with Klink, but certainly not with me. When I ask you or order something, you answer with ‘Jawohl’ or…”

“I don’t speak German, so please repeat what I have to say to you,” Hogan interrupted him and saw with childish triumph how the major flushed. “After all, I don’t want to say it incorrectly,” he added.

Sandhaus pressed shortly his lips into a thin line, before he snapped, “I’m sure that you’ve heard this word so often within this camp that you’re able to repeat it. You, an officer who has studied at a Military Academy – even if it was an American one – has certainly some intelligence.” He turned towards Langenscheidt. “I want a guard posted at this building’s entrance, and someone who checks at this man every hour.”

“To pester and to disturb an injured POWs healing process on purpose is against the Geneva Conventions, Major,” Hogan cut in; sparing Langenscheidt an answer.


Robert nodded. “Yes. It’s mentioned in the additional article 35C-II that was made at the 28th August 1943 to complete paragraph 12, article 5B, passage 4. Or was it the 29th August?” He looked at Wilson.

“I’m sorry, sir, I’m not this familiar with the exact text of the Geneva Conventions au contraire to you and Colonel Klink.”

“Additional article 5B…” Sandhaus tried to repeat flabbergasted, and Hogan shook his head.

“Sorry, sir, it was article 35C-II that completes article 4, passage 5B of…”

“Excuse me, Colonel, didn’t you say it was article 5B, passage 4 that was completed by paragraph 12?” the medic cut in; realizing to what game his superior was up.
“No, Sergeant, it was the additional article 35C-II to complete paragraph 5B, article 12, passage 4. So…”

“STOP IT!”

Sandhaus’ outburst silenced the two Americans.

“If you think you can play your games with me, Colonel, you’ve to do better than that!” he hissed.

Robert blinked at him with the perfect mixture of innocence and offense. “Major, if you lead a POW-camp, you’ve to know the Geneva Conventions. Otherwise you soon will be in deep water with the Red Cross and therefore with your Führer.”

“Hitler has a high opinion of the Red Cross,” Wilson added. “At least this is something I hear over and over again.”

“Or why, do you think, a man of the caliber of Colonel Klink has taken this law gazette as a second bible?” Hogan asked kindly. “Klink is a stern Kommandant who rules this camp with iron fist, but he does it in consideration of written law – means in this case, of the Geneva Conventions. It spared him certainly the one or other trouble with the Berlin brass.” He smiled shortly. “Believe me, Major, you have to interiorize the Geneva Conventions if you want to start a carrier as a POW-Kommandant – and given your really bad injury I can see one mile from afar, it is the only thing that is left for you.”

Sandhaus, completely brought out of concept and too thunderstruck to think clearly, looked at Langenscheidt in silent ask for support.

The corporal cleared his throat and said formally, “I don’t want to mention this openly in the presence of POWs, Herr Major, but General Burkhalter really sets great value on the strict observance of the Geneva Conventions. We all here had serious issues with him, whenever those rules were broken.”

It was obvious that the major’s blood-pressure was about to reach a new record of level, as he flushed even more. Taking a deep breath to calm down, he addressed Hogan again.
“The corporal told me that you’re still too injured to move back into your Barrack. Can you walk at least enough to join a roll call?”

“I can limp to the restrooms, but not more. I think you know of what I speak,” Robert answered nonchalant.

“Well, shit is obviously the only thing you can manage,” Sandhaus sneered.

Hogan’s answer was icily. “Language, Major. Is this now the of way of behavior the so-called ‘master-race’ follows? My, my, the politeness in this country really has lost its touch.”

Sandhaus closed the distance to Hogan and glared with open loathe at him. “If you believe you can provoke me, Colonel, you’re mistaken. Be grateful that Klink and not I’m your Kommandant, otherwise I would teach you how to behave,” he snarled.

“Odd, the same I just wanted to say to you,” Hogan answered with a hint of his impish grin.

Looking the American officer up and down, Sandhaus only snorted, before he turned away and walked towards the door. At the threshold he stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. “I was told that you’ve been ‘kidnapped’ and tortured by a Gestapo-officer out of personal reason. I hold no sympathy for the Gestapo, but in this case I can understand the man. He should have been able to finish what he started!”

Hogan’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “The same should have been applied for my comrade who shot you down! But regrettable wishes are not always fulfilled.”

Both men shared another glare of disgust and contempt; then Sandhaus left.

Langenscheidt gulped. “This was… nasty,” he murmured.

“Did you expect something else?” Hogan replied; still too angry to be polite.

“No, not after I talked with him for a few minutes before we came here,” Karl admitted. “He’s the complete opposite of Oberst Klink.”
“Yeah, a true ‘loyal fellow’ of your insane Führer!” the colonel growled.

Langenscheidt turned to leave, but looked one time back. “No, Colonel Hogan,” he said softly. “He is not MY ‘Führer’.”

“LAAAANGENSCHEEEIIIDT!”

The shout came from outside, and Karl rolled his eyes. “At least, the major sounds like Klink,” he groaned. And he was relieved to hear some sudden chuckles as he left the building.

*** HH *** HH ***

“SCHUUUUULTZ! This was our exit!” Klink looked back over his shoulder as the staff-car passed by the highway-exit with the clear sign “Berlin”.

“Yes, Herr Kommandant, but the road was partly destroyed five weeks ago. Therefore we’ve to drive via Kassel and Magdeburg, just like General Burkhalter as he came to yours and Colonel Hogan’s aid,” Hans answered calmly while steering the car further towards north.

Klink groaned and slid deeper into the front passenger seat; pulling the cap over his eyes. If they only would be already at the in the capital. Behind him he heard Schmidt chuckling quietly.

“See it positive, Herr Oberst, like this we all have a further period of grace before we’ve to go into the lion’s den.”

Wilhelm had to smile in amusement at those words. “Well, Goering can roar if he wants, therefore you’re right.” He sighed. “I only wish everything would be already over.”

“You’re not alone with this wish,” Schultz said softly, while he still concentrated on the road.

The travel of the three men had been uneventful so far. One time, between Bad Brückenau and Fulda, they saw a squadron of air fighters which didn’t bear the German cross, but they veered all of
sudden and flew into the opposite direction as if they would have gotten another order. And Klink couldn’t shake off the feeling that this was simply the truth – that Robert had his fingers in the pie again.

As they reached Kassel, the journey got more and more distressing – especially the more they neared Berlin afterwards. Klink knew that the Allies were bombarding the West more than the East, but everyone’s declared target was – besides the large towns with facilities – Berlin. More than a dozen times they saw smoke from afar or as they bypassed cities which held a lot of ruins. Two tank divisions crossed their path and seven times they had to identify themselves at barriers set up by the SS.

It was in the very late afternoon after dawn as they finally reached Berlin – and the trip from the capital’s outer quarters to the center shook all three men to the core. Klink wasn’t sure but he thought that at least a quarter of the town was heavily damaged or destroyed. People, pale and silent, walked along the streets which were often covered with debris; remains of gutted houses lined the streets and squares. Patrols of the Totenkopf- and Waffen-SS roamed through the town, tanks made room for themselves and Wehrmacht-trucks. At some night-bars women stood outside to sell themselves, at other crossroads vehicles transported injured soldiers towards the Charité or other hospitals which were still functional.

They reached the long street along the Berlin zoo – the Tiergarten – that led to the Leipziger Street. Even here they saw destruction and it was obvious that certainly a lot of animals had been killed during air craft attacks – last but not least because of the zoo’s proximity to the government quarter which was the main-aim of the United Allies.

From afar the three men could see the remains of the Reichstags-building to their left. Klink had faced the ruins several times, but it never ceased to shock him to see the mighty building mostly burnt down – a building he had entered a few times during his time as a member of the political party SPD at late twenties and the early thirties. Yet he still couldn’t believe the official version of the reason for the devastating fire that happened twelve years ago – that this had been the deed of Jewish people what gave Hitler the power in the end to hunt them. They had no reason to do something like this – at least not then. The Oberst had his own idea about the whole matter, but it was better to keep his mouth shut if he wanted to live.

By now the Reichstag-building served partly as a bunker after many windows had been bricked up; in other parts of the building departments of the Charité had been placed. The last Klink heard, the gynecology was here now, but besides this department, there was also a military hospital now, as well as a facility of the company AEG that produced electron tubes here.

The building, where once the parliament of the last emperors and of the first attempt of democracy had resided, had become a place for general-purpose. Klink had never understood Hitler’s reasons why he didn’t give order to rebuild the Reichstag even after years. Before the second war started,
Germany had experienced an economic boom that was beyond example. Within a few years projects had been started and fulfilled, which took everyone by surprise. There would have been enough money and reasons to rebuild the Reichstag, but it didn’t happen. Heavens, when Klink thought back on the many giant buildings, broad streets, highways and so on, which had been begun and were finished before the war went down the hills, he really couldn’t comprehend why not this one building – the root of democracy – was still a ruin; even without the Allies’ doing.

Maybe this was the reason. Democracy and the Nazis’ way didn’t go hand in hand, and it was better to make the people forget about liberal opinions. And, maybe, the wrecked Reichstag was still a twisted memorial Hitler could abuse for his sick ‘politics’ and ideas he had hammered into the people’s heads.

Will turned his glance away from the destroyed building and looked shortly at the Brandenburger Gate before he turned his attention back to the road.

They drove along the Leizpiger Street and turned into the Wilhelm-Street where the ministry’s main entrance was. The large building with its six levels, many partly high windows and the grey color where built in the typical practical but also imposing style Hitler and his fellows preferred. Despite the fact that it was already after 5 o’clock p.m., the whole building was brimming with activities, yet you had to look twice to see some faint lights behind the covered many windows. Berlin always had to expect air ambushes and therefore every lights had to be switched off soon after dawn.

They stopped near the main gate and parked the car. As they left the vehicle, Klink put on a wide smile, but groaned deeply in his throat, while he looked at the entrance to the building.

Following his gaze, Schultz and Schmidt learned quickly the reason for the Oberst’s reaction. There, on the threshold to the ministry, stood two fat figures and talked with each other. And without any pleasure they recognized not only General Burkhalter, but also one of the highest ranking man in whole Germany – no-one else than the Reichsmarschall in person…

TBC…

Well, Sandhaus is a true fellow of the ‘bubble-beard’, and everyone within the camp is going to miss ‘the big shot’. I also had fun to write the scene in which Hogan pulled Sandhaus’ leg with messing with the Geneva Convention, yet he will learn quickly that the major is a complete different kind of man than Wilhelm is.
Within the next chapter, Hochstetter’s trial will begin. And while Klink and Hogan only miss each other in the beginning, doom is rising everywhere. The trial will endanger our dear Kommandant, while Sandhaus acts more and more on his hate he harbors for every Allied soldier.

Yet, despite the more darker atmosphere, I do hope you liked the new chapter, and – like always – I’m absolutely curious of your reactions.

Have a nice rest of the week (I hope I can replace the unedited chapter with the right one during the weekend),

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Sorry but once again you have to read a chapter that his not edited. My beta-reader seems to be very busy in the moment, because I haven’t heard anything from her within the last three weeks. So – maybe – if there is someone out there who has time and can pick up the slack a little bit, I would be VERY happy. Please let me know, if someone can help me with this issue.

Thank you so much for the big feedback, and you are all correct: The next chapters are going to be hairy, before the real danger appears. I did some serious researches concerning the justice in Nazi-Germany at 1945 (or the lack of it, to say it clear), and at which Court which kind of trials were held. The absence of real lawyers his real history, as well as the fact that after 1943 / 44 only officers were the judges (partly without any knowledge of law and justice). The place, where Hochstetter’s trial takes place in my story, is real, too. I researched the building, the address, the surroundings, and so on. The ‘president’s’ name of the People’s Court is also historical, as well as the trial that also takes place besides Hochstetter’s, but you’ll learn about this a little bit later.

Despite the fact that the whole circumstances and background of the trial is dark (and shows the insanity of – like I have to admit – my people’s way at those times), I hope you’re going to like this part of the story. After all, it is still a story and there are always things which can turn out better than thought. There will be a few twists and surprises, so be ready for some rollercoasters.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 40 – Hochstetter’s trial, part 1

„I tell you, mon colonel, this man is worse than toothaches,” LeBeau groused while serving Hogan a small, cold dinner. “He is a devil! Our exercising this afternoon was nothing else than a drill –
running in two lines side by side for an hour. Then he ordered two roll calls within thirty minutes, and he also ordered ‘lights out’ at seven o’clock in the evening, not eight o’clock. He made himself at home in Schultzie’s chamber, kicked Langenscheidt out of to make room for his driver, and I swear that Mademoiselle Hilda had reddened eyes as she went home.” Outraged he poured himself one of Klink’s cognacs. “And this midday he complained that the lunch was cold I brought over to the Kommandantur. I told him that this is the result when a plate with a warm meal has to be carried square over the whole compound in the middle of the winter, and he snapped at me that I would be cold like the lunch the next time it isn’t warm enough by locking me into the cooler.”

Hogan felt a vein at his temple drumming. “What did you reply?”

“I said that accordingly to the Geneva Conventions, POWs cannot be used for private tasks, and therefore I decline to cook for him.”

The colonel nodded. “Well done. Let him eat the trash that is served in the casino.”

LeBeau grimaced. “I think I did us all a bad service.” He all but knocked down the cognac; grimacing at this un-French way to have something valuable like a true cognac.

Warily, Hogan looked up. “How so?”

“He said that it obviously is about time to get some discipline in this camp and that we would be less rebellious when we’ve enough workout. What he meant came clear in the afternoon as we weren’t allowed to enter the sport-hall but had to run on the compound for an hour. Wilson already complained that his infirmary will be soon overcrowded, because thanks to Sandhaus’ idea of sport, seven more men reported themselves ill with throat-ache and coughing.

“So, he risks the POWs’ health to demonstrate his power,” Hogan said slowly. “This will get him into trouble.”

“The sooner the better,” LeBeau growled. “This man is a pest!”

Hogan put the napkin on his lap and wanted to say something, as the door opened and Langenscheidt stepped in. “Good evening, Colonel,” he greeted politely and completely against the rules, because usually a POW was never greeted first independent of his and the German guard’s rank. But Karl always had the urge to show the American the respect he held for him and now, with no German officer around, he simply did it.
“Hello, Langenscheidt. Something the matter – beside the fact that Sandhaus kicked you out of your own quarters to give it to his driver?” Hogan replied as he saw the sure face of the corporal.

Langenscheidt looked surprised at him, then he sighed, “The grapevine in this camp is really a quick thing.” He sighed. “I’m not allowed to complain openly about my superior, but if a bomb would fall on this guy’s head, I wouldn’t mind.”

“I would mind, because in the moment it would mean that the explosion would get us all,” Robert deadpanned. The comment had the hoped result: LeBeau and Langenscheidt chuckled. Hogan sighed and turned serious again. “I know he is not Klink…”

“I never thought that I would say this, but I miss the big shot,” Karl groaned.

“We all miss him,” Hogan smiled. ‘Me more than all of you together,’ he added in his thoughts. Then he cleared his throat. “But it’s only for one or two days. We’ll survive until then. When Klink is back, Sandhaus will get trouble, leave and our relative peace will return.”

“But until then he changes Stalag 13 into hell,” the former paratrooper grumbled. “He ordered me to tell you that you’ve…” He looked at his wrist-watch. “… twenty minutes left now to eat your dinner and to use the bathroom. If one minute after 7 o’clock the lights in the quarters are still on, he’ll make certain that a few guards bring you down into the cooler, even if they have to carry you. There you can use light as long as you want.”

Hogan narrowed his eyes. “He has to know that this is arbitrariness and breaks not only the general rules of the POW-camps, but also is a violation against the Geneva Conventions! Exactly like his order of ‘workout’ this afternoon that resulted in seven sick men.”

Langenscheidt shrugged. “I don’t think he cares. He asked for a printout of the Geneva Conventions, and given your little stunt you pulled this morning, I made sure that he gets the version for 1938.”

This elicited a smirk from Hogan. “Thanks, Langenscheidt.”

The corporal snorted. “I don’t think it was one of my brightest moments. As he realized that this is not the actual version, he got very angry and demanded from Fräulein Hilda to give him the valid one. I spoke with Hilda about your little trick this morning and so she told the major that Klink took the actual version with him to compare it with the newest one in General Burkhalter’s office. I don’t
know what he replied, but the next time I saw her, she obviously had cried. And I don’t remember only one single occasion at which our Hilda has wept because of something that happened within the camp.”

A deep growl escaped Hogan’s throat. Yes, he had fallen for Will – hard – but he really liked Hilda and had developed a strong sense of protection when it came to the young woman. Hell, a few months after she replaced Helga, he even had played with the thought to propose to her after the war, but then… Well, then he developed those completely insane but so strong feelings for Will. Yet it wouldn’t hinder him to defend and to shield their all ‘pretty Fräulein’, who always had some nice words and kind smiles for everyone in the camp, independent of the nationality.

Narrowing his eyes, Hogan would have loved to fight the bastard who wanted to turn their camp into a mess of tyranny. On the other hand he knew that they only had to hang on for another, maybe a further half day, and everything would be back to normal. And even if it bugged him, he said quietly,

“There is nothing we can do in the moment. Hilda will come around and I’m sure that Klink will make up to her after he returns. He highly respects her and I think I know him well enough to be the perfect gentleman who will be the ‘knight in shining armor’ with a little extra holiday in his pocket as a redemption for her suffering. And concerning us here – and I mean the prisoners and the guards – I think it all teaches us a lesson that we can be grateful that Klink is Klink. He may boast here and there a little bit, but he always protects us as good as he can.”

He gripped for the cup of tea, LeBeau had made for him.

“And… what’s about ‘Lights out at seven o’clock’ even for the Kommandant’s quarters?” Langenscheidt asked carefully.

A slow smile spread over the colonel’s face. “Let him have his way for now. If he wants to go early to bed, we should grant him this wish. His awakening will be rude enough when Klink returns.”

*** HH *** HH ***

“Thank you, Herr General, this is more than we could expect,” Klink said while he looked around in the small, safe, not so cozy… shabby, ugly, cold and dark chamber with a few field beds and metal locker as furniture. The mere thought that he and the others would stay overnight beneath earth in one of the government’s bunker, sent shivers down his spine.
Wilhelm’s mood was down to zero, and the reason was the ‘honor’ to have a little bit more than a ‘short talk’ with the Reichsmarschall and its aftermath.

After he and the others had reached the ministry’s entrance, they had payed respect to the Reichsmarschall and – in Klink’s and Schultz’ case – their highest ranking superior, and had exchanged a few words.

Given the whole disaster of the two sabotages within the days prior which destroyed two very important railways and a bridge between south-west and south-east of Germany, and the suspects of a higher ranking Gestapo officer concerning Klink’s senior POW officer, Goering took his time to speak with Klink about everything extensively in his office – Burkhalter and had been invited, too, while Schultz and Schmidt had been sent to the cafeteria.

Like this Goering had learned firsthand of everything that happened, lauded Klink’s level-headedness in the whole matter and also congratulated him for the zero-record of non-escapes in his camp. “There should be more like you,” he had said, before he expressed how regrettable it was that “such a good officer” was forced to leave the active Luftwaffe-service because of his eyes-sight problems he “got gloriously in combat”.

In earlier times, Klink would have grown a few inches in pride to be praised like this from one of the highest ranking men in Germany, but not anymore. His eye-sight may have turned bad at the left side after the last time he was shot down, but in return his inner eyes had been opened very wide. Everything the brass did, had become dishonest, twisted and sick – and Goering was not one bit better. Rather the opposite. The man radiated with falseness, vanity, smugness and self-love.

The only thing Klink really enjoyed, was Burkhalter’s reaction to this all. The Austrian looked as if he had eaten a very large dill pickle, bit in a lemon and drunk sure wine – in this row of order. With rising glee, Wilhelm had taken notice how the general was almost squirming in his seat and forced smiles on his round face, whenever Goering said something positive to him about Klink.

The payback came afterwards, as they were in Burkhalter’s office. The general discussed with him the last reports and objected about it to the tiniest details – including Klink’s handwriting. “I didn’t know that calligraph skills were needed to lead a POW-camp,” the Oberst had finally commented as he was about to boil over.

“There is indeed more necessary,” Burkhalter had sneered – and Klink had finally enough.

“For Reichsmarschall Goering it was enough, as you clearly heard. But I think, that’s the whole point, isn’t it?” He had shook his head. “To be jealous is beneath you. A general should be proud
that one of his COs got a compliment from one of the highest ranking men within the country; after all this shows his own commanding skills and his fine sense to choose the right men for the right tasks."

The general had first glanced baffled at Klink, then something close to appreciation had mirrored in his eyes, followed by a deep sigh.

“I hope you’ll be able to show a back-bone tomorrow during the trial,” Burkhalter had changed the topic immediately. “I got a report form the court. Hochstetter’s defense is nothing to sneeze at.” Then he had given Klink the report – and since then Wilhelm’s mood was in the cellars.

Just like the chamber he and the others would sleep in tonight.

Schultz, who knew his superior in and out, watched Klink simply standing there, balling his fists and glaring daggers at the wall. Sighing, he opened the Oberst’s suitcase to pack out the few belongings, while at the other side of the wall Schmidt was doing the same with his own luggage he had placed on the bunk there.

“What happened?” Schultz asked quietly and caught Klink’s angry, but also nervous gaze.

“Burkhalter showed me the trial-report of the court. Hochstetter wants to press charges against me for attacking him. This is the second reason why I was summoned for the hearing. They want to do it all in one, so to say.” He snorted and pressed his lips into a thin line. Robert had been right about Hochstetter’s choice of defense.

Horst turned around; frowning. Schultz looked equally irritated. “But you simply defended yourself,” Hans said in accordance what they had agreed on in the morning. “I was right behind you and saw everything. You pulled Hochstetter aside, who was about to drown Colonel Hogan, and he instantly lashed out at you. You simply reacted to protect yourself, that’s all.”

Schmidt joined them. “All I saw was that the major lay on the floor, dizzied, and that Sergeant Schultz held him in check with his riffle. So, he did attack you?” he asked Klink.

“He instantly charged at me as I separated him from Hogan. I blocked and punched him. There was absolutely no time to talk anything out with him, because Hogan’s movement had already stilled and I had to revive him instantly. And, by the way, the whole expression of Hochstetter’s face, the rage and hate in his eyes and this animalistic snarl he gave me, made it clear that his cholerically temper
had gotten the better of him and that his mind was unreachable in the moment. I simply did what
duty demanded from me,” he added with a shrug.

Schmidt crossed his arms in front of his chest. “That you were forced to revive the colonel is
something I can testify on – and also the major’s unreasonable fury as soon as someone tried to
interrupt him from getting his revenge on Colonel Hogan. As I intercepted the call from General
Burkhalter’s office and informed Hochstetter about the incoming call for him, he reacted very angry
and told me, to say it casually, to sod off. He was enraged that he was forced to interrupt the
‘questioning’ – meaning the attempted of branding the colonel.” He shook his head. “As I told you, I
heard him and the colonel talking before I entered the chamber. There is absolutely no doubt that this
was nothing else than a personal revenge from Hochstetter’s side.”

Klink huffed. “Concerning his intention to brand Hogan: He denies it.” He got his coat and pulled
out the several sheets of the report he had folded and put into the inside pocket. “Here,” he said;
offering Schmidt and Schultz the notes.

Reading them quickly, Schmidt grimaced. “He lies!” he said. “And I can prove it.” He returned to
his luggage, pulled his pajama out he had rolled up at the long inner side of the suitcase – and with a
clang something long and made of metal rolled on the floor. Quickly the Oberleutnant picked it up.

Klink’s eyes widened. “Is this…” he began with rising nausea and walked towards the young man.

Schmidt nodded. “Yes, this is the iron the major wanted to use at the colonel.” He showed them the
double-S at the fire-poker’s end.

For a moment, Klink thought to see the end of the iron gleaming white-red with heat before it was
pressed into the soft, silken skin he had caressed so tenderly within the last nights. He felt sick to the
core, while he glared at the now harmless piece of iron. This thing had almost branded his beloved
witty fox.

“I took it with me as I left the ‘questioning-chamber’ and hurled it out into the garden from the
window in my quarters at the HQ,” Schmidt continued. “After your call this morning, I ordered my
ordonnance to pack my suitcase and went out into the gardens to find it. I had a certain feeling that
this is maybe an important piece of evidence. It took me a quarter hour shoveling snow to find it.
Parallel I also ordered the guards, which were on duty during the colonel’s arrest and later in the
cellars this particular night and early morning, to write a witness report.” He pulled an envelop out of
the suitcase’s cover. “I think, this will be enough for the jury to make the right conclusion concerning
the major’s state of mind.” He handed Klink the envelop.
Opening it, the *Oberst* read through the reports, and even if the contains made him even more sick as he learned more details of these hours of torture Rob had been forced to endure, a smile began to spread over Wilhelm’s face. These reports would be the nails to Hochstetter’s coffin.

Looking up, he said quietly, “You do understand that this is the implement for Hochstetter’s downfall?”

“We are at war, but we still have some dignity and honor left,” Horst replied quietly, but firmly. “What happened to Colonel Hogan is something that occurs everywhere in Germany by now, and what is a shame on its own. I’m no one who closes his eyes to the fact that we’ve as good as lost the war, and the others know it too. And because of it, everywhere executives are psyching out and getting paranoid. This is not the real German way. Hochstetter is in my eyes a manic who has to be stopped before even more people are harmed because of his madness. This is the reason why those four guards were ready to make a statement against their former superior – and it’s also my reason.”

Klink put the reports back into the envelop and gave them Schmidt. “Thank you, young friend. I’m really glad that my first impression of you turned out to be true over and over again. You are a honorable man.”

Schmidt flushed, smiled at the *Oberst* and put the envelop back into the hide-out in the suitcase-cover. The same moment someone knocked at the door and a *Luftwaffe*-private peeked inside.

“Gentlemen? General Burkhalter asks you to join him for dinner.”

*** HH *** HH ***

The night was anything but peaceful – not for Hogan and also not for the three men sleeping in the separate chamber in one of the many bunkers which were dug deep into the ground in Berlin and the whole area. They were equipped with everything that was needed, yet to climb down into the earth and to walk those cold and harsh corridors with their gaudy lights, was almost eerie. Odd, Klink hadn’t felt this uncomfortable as he walked the tunnels beneath Stalag 13. Maybe it was because the tunnels were more natural, or because the lights were warmer. Or because they built the den and escape ways of his beloved witty fox. And, not to forget, Robert had been with him. Even during dinner he had missed the younger man terribly.

While the Heroes over 600 km away were still angry with this ‘damn Prussian slave driver’, Schultz and Schmidt were brooding about the upcoming hearing and questioning, before they slipped into sleep.
And Klink?

He lay wide awake after the spartan dinner he and the others had, and his thoughts turned in circles. Was everything all right in the camp? Did his substitute do a good job or was he one of those men who used the chance of seeking some revenge against members of the United Allies? If so, Robert wouldn’t keep still but would do everything in his might to shield his men, what would lead to trouble. Will knew from own experiences that his American counterpart had a talent to irritate even the most pious monk if he intended to.

But this was not all, Klink pondered about. The upcoming trial was like a dark cloud looming over him – even with Schmidt’s unexpected support by bringing further proofs with him for Hochstetter’s obvious madness. Okay, the former major wasn’t this insane, after all Hogan was indeed Papa Bear and Hochstetter had figured the colonel completely out, but the only thing that counted for Wilhelm now was to eliminate the danger Hochstetter presented for Robert. And after everything the former Gestapo-officer did even against the own people and underlings, he really had deserved a strong punishment. Klink hadn’t forgotten that Hochstetter didn’t only left him and Hogan during the air-raid, but also three of his own men. Usually comrades tried to get each other out of a danger-zone, but Hochstetter had abandoned those men – not looking back once – and this was a kind of cowardice no honorable man could accept. No, despite the fact that no-one believed Hochstetter that he was right about Hogan, the former major had done too many crimes to show him any grace.

Will sighed soundlessly and turned onto his right side. All these reflections and considerations kept him awake, right, but there was one thing that robbed him of a real rest more than anything else: Robert’s absence.

Yes, Wilhelm Klink was used to be alone – especially in private. He practically had slept his whole life alone, if you don’t count the nights he had snuggled up with his younger siblings when he was still a child. Okay, there had been a few love-nights, but how little they meant he had realized after his and Robert’s relationship had changed. It was something completely different to sleep beside someone you’ve fleeing liaison with, or to share a bed with someone you love. He missed the warm, strong body beside him, the familiar pleasant scent of the younger man or Robert cuddling against him.

Additional to this, the chamber he and the others slept in, was cold, smelled of earth and was far too silent. To be twelve meters under the ground-level cut off any usual sounds a town or even a nightly wood harbored, was like being in a grave. He felt like being pulled out from his own world and being thrown into an icy and dark one that held no warmth and light at all.

‘As soon as this damn trial is over, Schultz, Schmidt and I return to Hammelburg – and if we need the whole night to return. I don’t sleep a single night further in this tomb!’
Closing his eyes and imagining that the comforter around him were Robert’s arms, he finally was able to fall asleep.

*** HH ***

Hogan also couldn’t find any sleep, and stared at the dark ceiling above him he couldn’t even see; sulking. He terribly missed Will’s presence and it bugged him that he missed the older man so much.

Sweet Lord, they had slept separated only a few nights ago as the Gestapo sniffled around and – yes, he had to admit – it had bothered him then, too. But at least Will had been in the same building, only a few meters away. Now hundreds of kilometer lay between them, and this knowledge stirred him up deep in heart, mind and soul. And this again made him angry with himself.

Heavens, in a week or so he would have to return to the barracks, and then what? Sleepless nights because he missed his lover beside him? He was a well-trained elite-solider who should cover up something like this, but all the stern thoughts he turned against himself didn’t help. He felt cold and lonely without Wilhelm at least nearby, and he didn’t dare to imagine what would happen when he returned to his own little quarters or when they would have to walk separate ways after the war.

And, additional to this, Robert also was deeply worried for his German counterpart. Yes, Berlin was full of bunkers and other shelters, yet Hogan didn’t want to think of all the possibilities which could harm Will.

Highwaymen, rebels, Underground-members and so on would love to kill two Luftwaffe- and a SS-member. The Waffen-SS controlled the highways and main-streets by now, and even with Schmidt being an Oberleutnant of the SS and Klink being a colonel, the insane guys in their grey uniforms with black collars could find several reasons to detain them. A blind shell could explode when the car drove by – or a bombarded house within Berlin could collapse. Or…

“Stop it Robert!” he hissed irritated at himself. “You sound like your Aunt Joanna – always seeing black and fearing the worst! How high, do you think, is the chance that one of these things happen, hm? So stop being such a sissy and have some faith in the Lord!”

He pulled the comforter higher over himself and closed his eyes; determined to find some sleep, yet his thoughts turned over and over back towards the man, who had captured him a way he had never thought possible.
Was Will okay? Had he made it safely to Berlin and were he and the others really at a secured place? Was he sleeping or was he laying there in the cold darkness of a bunker, brooding like he – Hogan – did? Did Will miss him like he, Robert, missed him?

With a groan he snuggled deeper into the pillows; glad that they smelled of Will at least. And as he realized this detail, he rolled his eyes. ‘You’ve really lost it, Robert!’ he thought; knowing deep down to what all these signs were pointing. He sighed again and forced himself to relax.

But it lasted more than another hour until he finally drifted slowly into Morpheus’ Realm.

*** HH *** HH ***

The next morning began unpleasant for everyone in Stalag 13. Langenscheidt was ordered to chase out the POWs for the roll call at already at six o’clock. Tired, grumbling and freezing the men stood there, were told that there would be a special ‘exercise’ today and as some of the men coughed, Sandhaus said that, when they were finished with their today’s job, they would have a real reason to cough.

“I got a call from SS-general von Greifenhöh yesterday evening. The main road from Hammelburg and the Hoffenstein-Pass, which are barred by the rests of an avalanche, have to be freed from the snow. He sends two tanks which will do the main work, the rest has to be done with shovels. 250 of you will be the first working troop and will be replaced four hours later by the next prisoners.” He rose his voice as he heard the first protests. “Silence, or there will be consequences! Every one of you will be a part of the task.”

Kinchloe lifted a hand. “We’ve eight more cases of illness, Kommandant. I require to discharge them from duty.”

“Declined!” Sandhaus replied.

Kinchloe was a patient man, but slowly he had had enough. “This is against the Geneva Convention. Sick POWs have a right of medical c…”

“Prisoners have no rights at all!”
“I beg to differ, sir,” Kinchloe replied coolly. “We are no criminals. And we are none of your people who dare to use their brains and don’t like the ways of ‘dear Adolf’, for what they’re locked away. And we are also no men of ‘unworthy’ heritage or were born with handicaps, what is reason enough for you guys to regard them as half-humans. We are prisoners of war, and we do have rights like even your beloved Führer accepted!”

Sandhaus looked him up and down. “I don’t need lessons – especially not from a half-human,” he sneered, before he ignored the PSO. “Dismissed – and be ready for the transport as soon as it dawns!”

“Herr Major, we’ve only one truck,” Langenscheidt cut in; hoping to stall some time and better conditions for the POWs. “The transport and later switch of men you want is impossible to realize.”

Sandhaus gave him a sharp glare. “I took care of it. I spoke with Lieutenant von Neuhaus yesterday evening, the current acting CO of the Gestapo-Headquartes in Hammelburg. A very reasonable man, like I realized. He sends over three of his own trucks at seven o’clock and agreed to support us with the vehicles in the next days. So, put the troops together and make certain that at least a sergeant or another noncom of the POWs will have the watch. Send them over to me. They will bail with their lives that none of the prisoners tries to escape.”

“This is illegal!” Kinchloe protested; still fuming to be insulted as a ‘half-human’.

“What is legal or not, is decided by me. Dismissed, Sergeant. And don’t you dare to address me again if you’re not required to do so, or you can rest a few days in the cooler!”

“Herr Major, Sergeant Kinchloe is the current senior POW officer and has legally the right to interact with you. Please consider that you overstep your boundaries just right now,” Langenscheidt said quietly but firmly in German. He resisted the urge to made himself smaller as he received a fierce glare in return, and added politely, “You are coming from the active service and have no experiences with leading a POW-camp, and you are not familiar with the special rules which are in place for these cases here. May I assist you with a few details?” He nodded towards the Kommandantur and waited. He watched how the officer gritted his teeth while a vein became visible on his temple, but at last he gave the corporal an abrupt nod and gestured to him to go first.

“How dare you to lesson me!” he hissed the moment they stepped into the Kommandantur and had closed the door. “You have absolutely no right to speak like this to your superior!”

“I simply wanted to protect you from General Burkhalter’s anger, Herr Major,” Langenscheidt answered more calmly than he felt. To admit the truth, his heart was beating in his throat, but he
simply knew that Klink expected him to keep the camp together – to safe the relative peace between guards and POWs that had settled in after the Kommandant rescued Colonel Hogan and nursed him back to relative health.

“These men are POWs and protected by the Geneva Conventions and our own laws,” he continued; ignoring the fuming gazes and dark expression of the major. “Sternness is certainly necessary to keep the prisoners in check. No-one perfected that more than Oberst Klink – the reason that here was never a successful escape. The camp was even chosen for test-projects over and over again, because of the safety the Oberst grants here. But General Burkhalter and also Oberst Klink always made certain that the POWs are treated with simple human respect and the common politeness that is usual among cultivated people. I dare to add, Herr Major, that it certainly would have consequences when Klink returns, learns of the way you handled the POWs and makes some notes in your file. He is very strict concerning the rules. Therefore my interference a few minutes ago, Herr Major. I wanted to spare you any trouble with the brass.”

Sandhaus stared at him for almost a minute, before he took a very deep breath and nodded brusquely. “Understood, Corporal, and thank you for your concern. Dismissed!”

“What about the POWs which were reported ill this morning? They have a right of medical treatment, you know.”

“These whole bunch of bastards out there” – he pointed into the direction of the Barracks – “can be happy that we allow them to live their poor life at all. If I would have any saying in it, they have forfeit their right of life the moment they attacked us, yet they eat our scarce bread and have a roof over their heads. They should thank us on their knees instead of making demands!”

“The Führer decided otherwise,” Langenscheidt pointed out. “He agreed on the common rules concerning POWs and also ordered that the Geneva Conventions apply to the POW-camps. And they govern cases of illness, so…”

“If it makes you sleeping better than let this scum go to the infirmary.” He turned to leave. “And I don’t want to hear more about it, understood?” He limped into Klink’s office and banged the door close.

Langenscheidt sighed. “Jawohl, Herr Major, and now I inform Colonel Hogan per rule about the ordered task for his men.” He had said it quietly enough not to be heard, but at least he had reported his next steps – steps he so didn’t look forward to. Grimacing he left the Kommandantur to order Kinchloe to send the new ill-cases to the infirmary and then to keep Hogan updated. And he really – really! – wished Klink would be already back.
“We’ll need to prove it, otherwise we stand no chance at all,” Burkhalter reminded Klink and the others. While at Stalag 13 the first thirty men were transported to the section of the road they would have to clear, the general, Klink, Schultz and Schmidt stepped into the large building that harbored the People’s Court; glad to escape the harsh wind that was slowly turning into a storm outside. It was placed in the former King-Wilhelm-Gymnasium in the Bellevue-Street, near the Potsdamer Platz in the Tiergarten (zoo)-quarter.

Klink walked at Burkhalter’s side up through the vestibule towards the staircase that led to the upper levels. Behind him he heard Schultz and Schmidt whispering about their surroundings; Bavarian and North-German for once on the same page.

The trial took place on the first level and therefore the men hadn’t to go far. Listening to the noises, they walked into the directions a clerk showed them. It didn’t slip Klink’s attention that it was surprisingly busy within the courthouse given the fact that it was Saturday morning.

“Have those people no home, or why they are here at Saturday?” he asked casually.

“Saturday sessions are not this extraordinary anymore,” Burkhalter answered. “As far as I learned, the Court’s president – Roland Freisler – has a session here today.”

Klink shuddered inwardly. He had heard enough about this particular ‘judge’, who was a fanatically Nazi and infamous for treating any defendant with malice and exaggerated aggression to mortify the man or woman. It was ‘due’ to him that the right of real defense had been cancelled – at least for those, who weren’t ‘valuable’ for the Third Reich anymore. He was also the judge how had tried the trial against he conspirators of the 20th July the year prior. As far as Wilhelm knew, more than 2000 death penalties were carried out because of his sentences.

“But this session isn’t the one against Hochstetter, I hope,” Klink murmured.

Burkhalter snorted. “Of course not. For this Hochstetter is far too unimportant.”

They climbed up the stairs and Klink didn’t try to think about the fact that this building had been a gymnasium in earlier times. Pupils had studied here; worked to get a good abitur, played pranks, ran down the corridors whenever a teacher wasn’t present. A gymnasium always was a place of strict discipline, but also of fun, where young people learned their limits but also began to break those
boundaries in their desire to reach greater goals.

From this atmosphere nothing had remained.

Totenkopf-SS-men with automatic rifles were guarding the most doors, red flags with the Hakenkreuz were hanging down from the walls; covering the one or other pageantry from earlier times. Klink winced inwardly. In his eyes it was a shame that the flags hid the art of earlier days, despite the fact that Hitler always called himself a ‘lover or arts’. It was as if the ‘big bubble-beard’ and his fellows wanted to put their mark on everything within the world, no matter how much it defiled everything else other great people had done in the past – people, whose skills the Nazis used to adorn themselves.

‘It’s about time to put an end on this drama,’ Klink thought. ‘I only ask myself, why there are still so many men and women who adore this madman and his goonies. Yes, I applauded him, too – once, in earlier times, but I woke up. Why there are still so many people who walk with their eyes tightly closed? Yes, there are those who are afraid to stand up, but there are also those who really regard this insanity as a new kind of bible. What more has to come until they’ll see clear?’

Burkhalter stopped beside him, as the clerk pointed towards a waiting area; telling them to have a seat.

Sighing, the four men obeyed. Schmidt sat down beside Klink and placed the bag to his feet he had brought with him. Burkhalter had been curious about it but the Oberleutnant had only told him that it held something that could be very relevant for the trial. Klink had smiled inwardly; knowing exactly what the young man had brought with him.

Being nervous, Klink rose again, walked a little bit up and down, and finally looked at the sign beside the door. “Closed to public,” he murmured.

“Of course,” Burkhalter nodded. “After all this trial concerns a higher ranking member of the Gestapo and SS. The people shall not lose their trust in those institutions.”

Klink made a face. ‘As if the most people have already done this and even fear those guys!’ he thought.

As invited witnesses, the four officers had to wait outside and were called inside the courtroom. Burkhalter was the first who was summoned, then Klink. Exchanging a last short glance with
Schultz, the Oberst stepped into the courtroom; his heart beat in the throat. He hated questionings, he disliked lawyers who always twisted everything to their understanding, and he loathed the current trials, which were in his eyes mostly nothing else than a farce. Yet he hoped that this court material would be a real one, for once. This here was the only possibility to get Hochstetter out of his and Hogan’s hair, and he would use this chance with everything he had.

It was only a small courtroom where the trial took place. Klink looked at the jury and gulped as he realized that the chief-judge wasn’t alone but was supported by a higher ranking court-master from the Waffen-SS, who obviously belonged to the regional SS-Court. It made sense, after all the defendant was a major of the SS and Gestapo, while the accuser was the Luftwaffe, a part of the Wehrmacht. Returning his attention back to the chief-judge, Klink recognized the insignias of a lieutenant-colonel, what showed him that the officer held the rank of an Oberfeldrichter (likewise of a chief justice).

To the chief-judge’s right sat the prosecutor, the Untersuchungsführer (leader of the investigation) – a man in his late forties with the rank of a Hauptmann (captain). Beside the elevated seats of the judges, was the court reporter; an older man who also wore the uniform of the Wehrmacht that held the insignias of a sergeant. To the left of the podium were three further officers of the middle ranks, and Klink assumed that they were here to be trained in becoming ‘jurists’ themselves.

To Klink’s left were the rows of banks on which usually the publicum sat, but they were now abandoned except for the figure of General Burkhalter. To the Oberst’s right was the prisoner’s dock, where he saw another officer, also of the SS, who was obviously the defense lawyer, and beside him, guarded by two armed policemen, was…

Wolfgang Hochstetter.

Klink had seen the man so many times he had lost count. He had seen the Gestapo- and SS-major enraged, eager, furious, confused and sometimes even uncertain, but NEVER before he had seen the ‘poison-gnome’ like this.

Even if detained persons rarely wore their ‘former’ uniform, this favor had been granted to the major, but he seemed to have lost some weight and his hair wasn’t this neat as usual. He was pale and dark circles lay beneath his eyes. Yet this wasn’t what startled Klink. It was Hochstetter’s gaze that was fixed on Klink – a look full of furious determination and scorching hate that seemed to pierce the Oberst like a burning sword.

After confirming his identity, Klink remained in a standing position in the witness stand.
“Oberst Klink, you’ve been summoned to this Court to be questioned as a witness in the case ‘Hochstetter’,” the chief-judge began the questioning. “Given the fact that the defendant is a higher ranking Gestapo- and SS-officer with a high success-rate of convicting enemies of the Third Reich, and the risen accusations of the Luftwaffe against him are insubordination and abuse of rank, this trial is made to find out the whole truth.” The prosecutor murmured something, and the judge nodded. “Of course, you are right. The Luftwaffe, namely General Burkhalter, has also pressed charges against the major on the behalf of a POW-officer. We ask you to tell the plain truth of what happened from your point of view.”

Klink felt a familiar strong streak of nervousness, but somehow he was able to control it suddenly at the mere thought of Robert. He knew that every detail counted, and so he began his statement with the moment he came out of the Kommandantur because of the rising turmoil in the camp and watched Hochstetter punching Hogan, who had been hold by some SS-guards. He pointed out that, despite his questions, Hochstetter refused to give him any information about the accusation he had against Hogan, and only accepted Klink accompanying them after the Oberst exerted leverage on the major, citing the rules and laws.

Telling about the air raid during their drive to Hammelburg, he made no secrets of the cowardice Hochstetter showed as he took the heels instead of doing his duty; letting down three of his own men and a high ranking POW-officer. And especially concerning the latter, Klink pointed out that Hochstetter let his personal feelings ruling his decisions as he had shouted that he had sworn to be Hogan’s downfall and that the colonel could go to hell now.

Klink was well aware of the present men stiffening. It wasn’t so much because Hochstetter left Hogan to die, but rather because he didn’t care for his own men. It was an impossibility to let comrades down; seeking refuge in flight without caring about the own underlings. It was pure cowardice – a crime in the Third Reich. As the chief-judge asked, if Hochstetter also didn’t make any attempt to take care of the Oberst’s safety, Klink shook his head. “I regret to tell you that Major Hochstetter didn’t take care of anyone’s safety except his own. He was one of the first who ran to find shelter in the woods.”

“Were those three men still alive as he fled?” the SS-court-master wanted to know, and watched Klink intensely; still half baffled, half amused that the Luftwaffe-officer wore a monocle. The man really seemed to be a relic from earlier times.

The Oberst nodded.

“Yes, Your Honor. I saw it after I shot Colonel Hogan’s handcuffs and we turned to flee. We recognized that they still lived, but before we could do anything, the hostile air crafts were over us again and we threw ourselves on the ground in an attempt to escape certain death. As the attack was over, the three men were dead and I was wounded. I owe Colonel Hogan my life, because instead of using the chance to flee, he helped me to find cover in the woods, while from Major Hochstetter no
track was left.”

“Do I get this right?” the SS-Court-Master dug deeper. “Colonel Hogan was ready to help the three SS-men?”

“Yes, he wanted to help,” Klink nodded. Okay, they hadn’t even spoken about the wounded guards at this moment, but the Oberst knew his American counterpart far too well. If there would have been the tiniest chance to safe those men, Hogan would have helped.

“And afterwards he supported you,” the chief-judge frowned. “It’s an unusual behavior for a POW, don’t you agree?”

“I disagree in this particular case, Your Honor,” Klink replied. “Colonel Hogan is an opponent officer, yes, but also a man of honor. We have to interact every day with each other because of his position as my senior POW officer, so we came to know each other. It taught us to respect the other one. And concerning those minutes during the air raid: I saved his life only a few moments ago as I returned and shot his handcuffs. He wouldn’t have survived the next attack. After I got injured because of me rescuing him, it was a question of honor for him to aid me. We fled into the woods and waited until the air raid was over. We also waited if Major Hochstetter or a few of his men would come looking for us, but after nothing happened, we began to walk back to the camp, but lost our way. So…”

“I went back for you, Klink!” Hochstetter hissed; ignoring his own lawyer who tried to interrupt him. “I came back to search for you, but you preferred to tramp with your American friend through the woods instead of waiting for me.”

The chief-judge lifted his hammer to demand silence, but the Oberst was quicker.

Somehow Klink was very much calmer than he had ever thought possible, as he turned his head and looked the smaller man sternly in the eyes. “Even if you maybe returned, what I cannot affirm, it was too late. If it wouldn’t have been for Hogan, I would be dead – and he, too. You left us to die and ran for shelter. And not only us, but also three of your own men. If you would be half of the leader you pretend to be, you would have tried to safe them. But you preferred to run like a rabbit. That’s a fact. And it’s ‘Oberst’ Klink for you!”

Hochstetter stared at him for a moment; flabbergasted. Burkhalter, too, looked with big eyes at the Saxonian. There was no uncertainty, no ducking, no foolish behavior, only a display of coolly sternness. And this in such a situation. What, the hell, had happened to Klink?
The two leading judges, not knowing of the Luftwaffe-Oberst’s usual lack of courage, had their attention turned completely to Hochstetter. The chief-judge gave the shorter man a short gaze of disgust before he warned, “I ask the defendant to skip any further interruptions.”

Gritting his teeth, Hochstetter nodded. “Of course, Your Honor. I apologize.”

The judge looked back at Klink. “Herr Oberst, please continue,”

“Of course, Your Honor,” the camp-Kommandant bowed his head almost elegantly, and resumed to retell everything from his point of view. He told about his coming back to the camp together with Hogan the next morning after finding shelter in a farm. He spoke of his travel to the hospital, thinking his camp in good care, only to learn the following morning that the SS had taken over – without any reason – and that his senior POW officer had been all but kidnapped without a Luftwaffe-officer’s presence during the questioning like it was law; and like Hochstetter knew exactly.

“How did you learn of these events?” the prosecutor interrupted the tale, and Klink took a deep breath.

“One of my POWs, who belongs to the same barrack like Colonel Hogan, escaped the camp and sought me out in the hospital; telling me what happened.”

A few whispers from the three justice-trainees were to hear, before the SS-court-master asked thunderstruck, “One of your prisoners informed you? He didn’t flee but ran to you?”

“There are a few men around Colonel Hogan, who have become his friends. The prisoner in question belongs to them, and saw no other way to help his superior than coming to me to get my aid.”

“Major Hochstetter told me that you’re very proud of the fact that there was never a successful escape in your camp,” the defense lawyer cut in.

Klink gave him an almost arrogant smile. “At the time the POW escaped, not my men but the SS was in charge.”
“Do you imply that the SS doesn’t do its job correctly?” the SS-court-master cut in sharply, and Klink hurried to reply,

“No, of course not. I simply stated the fact that under the command of the Luftwaffe not one successful escape from Stalag 13 was registered.” A clever gleam lay in his eyes that – fortunately – wasn’t registered by the lawyers.

“What happened to the POW?” the chief-judge asked.

“He is back in the camp. He didn’t even try to escape but returned on his own free will – certainly to spare his friends consequences,” Klink answered.

“Was he punished?” the prosecutor wanted do know and the Oberst looked at him as if the man had lost his mind.

“Corporal LeBeau informed me of an illegal overtaking of my camp and my senior POW officer’s kidnapping. He didn’t even try to escape afterwards. No, I didn’t punish him – in agreement with General Burkhalter, of course.” He nodded towards his superior, who lifted a brow but made also an affirming gesture.

“It’s up to the Kommandant and General Burkhalter how to deal with their POWs as long as it done in the frame of rules,” the chief-judge cut in. “Please continue, Oberst Klink.”

The Saxonian took a deep breath, then he spoke about his arrival at the Gestapo-Headquarters, where Hochstetter was still ‘questioning’ Hogan in the cellars; trying to murder him the moment Klink stepped into the room. He told about the short combat that enfolded instantly, how he – Klink – was forced to retrieve the badly injured American and how General Burkhalter arrived a minute or so later, sending them both back to the camp.

Afterwards he gave a short report about Hogan’s condition and that a doctor from the Hammelburger hospital had to treat him. “He is still healing and is unable to resume his duty as senior POW officer until now,” he finished his report.

Taking a deep breath, he dared to ask, “May I add a personal opinion to the whole matter?” He straightened his lean frame, as the chief-judge made an affirming gesture. “This whole incident went completely out of control because of Major Hochstetter’s personal feelings. His decisions concerning my senior POW officer, me and his three dead men, bore the stamp of hatred towards Colonel
Hogan and partly towards my person. In my eyes, he abused his rank and position for personal reasons, broke several laws and rules in the process and also used unacceptable ‘methods of questioning’ against my senior POW officer.”

“The colonel belongs to the enemy,” the SS-court-master reminded him.

Klink lifted both brows. “I know that we are at war and that Colonel Hogan belongs to the enemy. I’m also aware that given the whole situation in this war, sometimes more harsh methods are necessary to protect our country, but this here was out of any league. POWs are usually protected by the Geneva Conventions and by several of German articles of law. The kind of torture, like Major Hochstetter used or threatened my senior POW officer with, are illegitimated, and shows the major’s state of mind – and his twisted sense of duty. To have an accusation against an eventually spy and to convict the person is one thing. To be obsessed with said person, denying any checking of given alibis and to break law because there was no other possibility left in the end to get personal revenge, is a crime and a disgrace for every member of the executive forces within our country – not to speak of his shown cowardice a day prior. I hope that the Court will consider this all when making the sentence.”

The chief-judge watched him for a moment mindfully, then he nodded shortly and looked down on some notes. “Oberst Klink, before I turn the floor to the defense lawyer, the Court has a few questions for you. It has been brought to our attention that there was a hand-to-hand combat between your and Major Hochstetter, you even affirmed a minute ago. The major wants to press charges against you for attacking a fellow-officer.” He looked up again and fixed Klink. “I’m sure you know that it is a gravely crime to attack a fellow-officer. If this court concludes that you are guilty of this deed, charges will be pressed against you at the Reichskriegsgericht (Reich Court Material) in Torgau. Have you anything to say to this accusation?”

Burkhalter pressed his lips into a thin line and looked at Klink; praying that the other man would remain this calm like he was until now, or him punching Hochstetter would come back at the Kommandant.

Klink took again a deep breath. Yes, he and Schultz had agreed on one of the same statement – that Hochstetter had attempted to attack first and that he, Klink, had only defended himself. Yet Wilhelm felt the first dread crawling up his spine…

TBC…
Well, of course Hochstetter has some aces up his sleeve, and with Klink attacking him while saving Hogan, is the major’s big chance to turn the wheel again – even with the evidences Schmidt has collected against him.

The next chapter will be about the whole trial; up and downs, hopes and risks – and a justice that isn’t a justice at all.

I hope, you enjoyed the chapter despite the (once again) existing errors, and – PLEASE – if there is someone who can help me with a little bit beta-reading, it would be so much better for all of us.

Like always, I’m curious what you think of the chapter, so… (hint, hint).

Have a nice week,

Love,

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the new given feedback despite my certainly big errors in writing and grammar. I’m absolutely glad that you put up with it during the last two chapters, and I’m happy to tell you that I got a new beta-reader. Thank you to ‘Missy’ for putting up with my rogue English and for editing the chapters now.

As I promised, this new update will be an emotional storm, because this chapter is about the whole trial Hochstetter (and the others, too) have to endure. Like I told you in the small prologue of the last chapter, justice was far from being real justice at Germany during the war, yet several laws and regards of morality, humanity and so on were still present. And those, who acted too cruel, were forced to face trial because their deeds weren’t in agreement with the ‘commons sense of honorable Germans’ (sorry, not my words, but preambles of many verdicts which were handed down – correct or not, *sigh*).

So, be ready to accompany Klink, Schultz and also Schmitz on a rollercoaster and dance of the high-wire...

To wish ‘fun’ for such a dark topic is certainly not sensible, nonetheless I hope you’re going to enjoy the chapter – and Klink being the ‘Phoenix’ once again.

Love,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 41 – Hochstetter’s trial, part 2

The atmosphere in the courtroom tensed even more, as the chief-judge looked expectantly at Klink; waiting for the Oberst’s statement that was in a way crucial for the Kommandant’s further career and maybe even life.
Klink suppressed the shiver that ran down his back. He had to remain calm, or everything would be lost, not only for himself, but in the end for Robert, too. And this he couldn’t allow.

‘Attack is the best way of defense’, his teacher had said once, and Wilhelm realized that this saying had never been truer than now.

Thinking of Robert, imagining his brown eyes, impish grin and passionate kisses, Klink felt some strength returning to him. Straightening his back he somehow managed to put up a good show of surprise. “Major Hochstetter wants to press charges…?” He shook his head and snorted: “Unbelievable!”

“Herr Oberst, please answer the Court’s question,” the SS-court-master reminded him. “Did you commit the crime of attacking a fellow-officer, namely Major Wolfgang Hochstetter?”

“It would have been a crime if I would have started the combat,” Klink replied, “but in this case I only defended myself.”

Hochstetter jumped up; face red. “That’s a lie!” he shouted, bending forwards in his typical aggressive stance.

“Silence!” the chief-judge said sharply and shot the major a glare, before he glanced back at Klink. “Explain, please.”

“As I entered the arrest cell in which the major ‘questioned’ my senior POW officer, he was waterboarding Colonel Hogan, whose movements had stilled. I quickly closed the distance to them and pulled the major away so that he would release the colonel but had no chance to address or to speak with him at all, because he instantly charged at me. I blocked his attack and punched back. As the major made another attempt of attacking me, I fought back which ended in the major laying on the ground.”

“He is lying!” Hochstetter hissed again, baring his teeth.

“Are there any witnesses for the incident?” the prosecutor asked.

“Feldwebel Schultz, my leading Sergeant of the Guards, was directly behind me. I’m not sure what he did or did not see, but he waits outside of this courtroom to be questioned, too.”
“We’ll ask him,” the chief-judge said at the same moment Hochstetter sneered:

“Schultz never knows anything. The guy is stupid like bundle straw!”

“Major Hochstetter, I warn you again!” the judge said sternly, before he nodded at Klink. “Go on, please.”

“After the major lay on the floor, I turned to Colonel Hogan, checked on him, realized that his survival was a matter of seconds since he was no longer breathing, and began with the resuscitation procedures. At the same time, I heard my Sergeant of the Guards ordering Major Hochstetter to stay down. Only after I successfully got Hogan breathing and turned around, I saw that the major had sat up and gripped for his pistol – the obvious reason why Sergeant Schultz held him in check with his own weapon. I dare to suggest that, if it wouldn’t have been for Sergeant Schultz, the major would have fired at me – even though I had turned my back towards him and was busy with saving a man’s life.”

“And you didn’t try to reason with the major before it came to the combat?” the SS-court-master wanted to know. Again, Hochstetter rose to speak with a snarl:

“I wouldn’t have… This man IS LYING!”

“SILENCE!” the chief-judge roared. “This is absolutely the last warning you get!”

Klink, who felt the heat of battle running through his body and mind, even if it was a battle of words, glanced quickly at Hochstetter before he glanced back at the judges. “Gentlemen, please have a closer look at the major right now. This is his normal display of temper when even something simple doesn’t go his way.”

The two judges glanced at the major and took in the blazing eyes, the flushed face and the silent snarl on the shorter man’s lips. “I see,” the SS-court-master said quietly.

Klink twisted the knife even more, as he added, “Just imagine his state of mind as I hindered him from his revenge on my senior POW officer, for whom he holds deep hatred. He wanted to kill Hogan before the colonel could be rescued, but I intervened in the very last second. The major’s gaze and face told me everything, when he turned around with balled fists. He was in a murderous frenzy – and I had no time to lose if I wanted to prevent myself from getting hurt and to also save the
Hochstetter growled quietly and ignored his defense lawyer, who whispered hastily in his ear, “You told me this Oberst Klink is a boneless, babbling, fearful idiot. But he is the straight opposite!”

The major took a deep breath. “I don’t know what happened to this fool. I never saw him like this,” he hissed, while he stared with gleaming eyes at the camp-Kommandant.

Burkhalter leaned back on his seat and clasped his hands on his lap in a typical gesture. His eyes hung mainly on Klink, while he tried to hold his expression neutrally. Inwardly, he was utterly baffled just like Hochstetter. Klink had done it again – showing this new sternness and strong backbone within the last three weeks. Usually the Saxonian would be quivering and babbling by now, after being questioned like this by two judges and a prosecutor, which in turn would tug on everyone’s nerves, but not Klink. Not this time. He stood there in the witness stand – straight stance, hands on the back in a posture of pride and superiority, head held high. What, in God’s name, had changed the man like this?

“May I ask, why the major holds so much hatred for your senior POW officer?” the SS-court-master asked next.

Klink sighed and shook shortly his head in intimate frustration. “They clashed from the beginning; yet concerning the major’s hate I can only speculate. Hogan is a typical American. Brash, cocky, sometimes a prankster. An oversized boy-man who has the tendency to irritate everybody, but deep down he is a honorable man. Major Hochstetter has a very choleric temperament and seems to see an enemy of the Third Reich in every person that crosses his way. And he lacks the usual polite manners. It is no wonder that both men don’t get along. Additionally, Hogan has a witty mind – and a loose tongue. I’ve lost count of the many times the major lost his discussions with Hogan, which increases his anger even more.”

“And you think this is reason enough for the major to break a few laws and for his attempt to kill the colonel?” the chief-judge asked.

“It’s one of the reasons,” Klink corrected him. “The further reason is maybe the major’s crazy idea that my senior POW officer is an active Underground member. He tried to convict him for more than a year now, but for naught. As it was already pointed out, there has never been a successful escape from my camp – therefore Hogan couldn’t walk around freely in the area, working as a spy and saboteur.”

“We’ve to change our tactics or everything is lost,” the defense lawyer murmured towards
Hochstetter and rose.

“Your Honors, concerning this particular topic, I think we should take the time to clear up this detail – after all, my client’s conviction of hunting down the dangerous saboteur he sees in the colonel, has brought him into this situation. I’ve the statements from other SS-officers and Gestapo-members, who tried to bring some light in this riddle concerning the wanted spy and saboteur ‘Papa Bear’ and his assumed connection with Colonel Hogan.”

“This trial is not about the question if this colonel is a spy or not,” the chief-judge voiced calmly.

“Yet it is the point of departure that led in the end to this trial,” the lawyer replied. “The accusers state that my client hunts a phantom and, as he didn’t succeed, abused his position and rank to fulfill the personal wish for revenge on the suspect. But if he is right concerning his accusation against the colonel, it would mean that his harsh, yet necessary methods were appropriate and that a master-spy is still running freely around and endangers our country.”

The chief-judge took a deep breath, exchanged a glance with the SS-court-master and the prosecutor, and lifted a hand. “Proceed!”

Klink tensed. This could lead to trouble. Dammit! Usually defense lawyer didn’t take their task this seriously since justice was changed under Hitler, but somehow Hochstetter had gotten an attorney who seemed to be determined to prove his client’s innocence. And the court was also willing to hear the ‘poison-gnome’ out – certainly because there weren’t so many SS-officers left who also served in the Gestapo and could look back on a longer career.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Hochstetter’s lawyer acknowledged and began with his defense argument. ”Major Pruhst of the SS and Gestapo reached the same conclusion as Major Hochstetter last autumn, because a witness of one of ‘Papa Bear’s’ sabotage acts described the man very well. The major was able to take a photo of Hogan and the witness affirmed that the man he saw and the man on the photo are identical. I took the liberty and spoke with Major Pruhst last week. He told me that he and Oberst Klink visited a party for Feldmarschall von Leiten in Hammelburg where he came across the mystery man. He was able to take another photo of him by using a small camera he had hidden in his gloves.” He pulled something out from his documents. “And I’ve this photo and a photo of Colonel Hogan. Both men bear a great resemblance as you easily can see.” He gave the photos to a court clerk, who offered them to the judge.

The chief-judge frowned as he looked at the two photos before he handed them to the SS-court-master.
In Wilhelm all warning bells were ringing. He hadn’t known that Pruhst had taken a photo of Hogan at the party. This could turn into a disaster. He took a deep breath and collected himself. And where he in earlier times would have had a nervous fit, he became icily calm. Robert’s life depended on this – his own life depended on the outcome of this trial – and he would give everything to protect his love and himself.

“The case was closed, because even Major Pruhst couldn’t prove his theory to be true,” he said. “I supported the major during his investigation and saw the man in the photo with my own eyes in person. Yes, he bears a great resemblance with my senior POW officer, but he is older, has grey hear and a grey moustache. He even spoke with a different voice. And, by the way, Hogan doesn’t speak German that well.”

“A trick from this damn Ami,” Hochstetter hissed. “He has so many masks you could equip a whole theater with it!”

“Does the colonel speak German?” the defense lawyer wanted to know.

“A little bit – with a nasty accent. I myself began to teach him our language properly during the last weeks, because it hurts the ears to hear him speaking like this.” Inwardly he crossed his fingers and asked Robert for forgiveness, because the younger man spoke a fluid German with a lovely ‘r’ sound Klink adored.

“You taught him German?” the defense lawyer asked flabbergasted.

“I’m still doing it – after all the whole world should speak our language after our great victory when this war is over,” Klink shrugged nonchalant with a wide smile; baffled how easily he was able to lie through his teeth like this.

The defense lawyer stared at him, took a deep breath as he saw another one of his arguments go downhill, and asked, “And because of these things you concluded that the colonel can’t be the man in the second photo.”

“Yes, partly. Added to my personal observation concerning this Doppelganger, Colonel Hogan was the whole time in the camp as Major Pruhst and I probed the other man,” Klink continued. “He was seen by dozens of my guards and had been watched by the Sergeant of the Guards. Hogan was the whole evening in Stalag 13. I don’t think a human can be in two places at the same time.”
General Burkhalter rose a hand. “May I add a detail to this topic, Your Honors?” As the judges nodded, the general stood. “During the time Colonel Hogan still suffered greatly from the injuries Major Hochstetter inflicted on him, there were two sabotage acts – one near Hammelburg, one in the north of Fulda. Both sabotages were done in the typical style of the infamous ‘Papa Bear’ that our Intelligence Service is after and of whom Major Hochstetter believes to be Hogan. But Hogan was even less able to walk at this time than now, which shows irrevocably that he couldn’t be ‘Papa Bear’. Both cases were investigated by Kriminalrat Lübkemeier and his team. The Kriminalrat as well as my good friend, Reichsführer Himmler, came to the same result: Papa Bear and Colonel Hogan are two different persons. There had been a great deal of evidence of this fact before – evidence Major Hochstetter ignored while he followed his obsession with the colonel instead of pursuing the real saboteur. If the High Court wishes to have a look at the documents of the investigation, I can arrange for it.”

“This won’t be necessary,” the chief-judge decided. “As I said before, this trial is not about the question if the American colonel is a spy or not.”

“Yet the whole case only happened because of the major’s obsession with this theory,” Burkhalter replied. “He couldn’t convict Hogan, therefore he tried to get his revenge by kidnapping, tormenting and almost killing him – and by disobeying direct orders from me, I want to point out again.”

“You want to prove that the major’s state of mind is responsible for this mess?” the SS-court-master asked.

“No, I want to prove that the major is unable to fill his post and to do his job because of his inability to separate personal things from duty. Even more, he broke laws and rejected clear commands – and this is inacceptable.” He sat down again.

“Objection!” the defense lawyer. “Even if General Burkhalter holds the higher rank than my client, Major Hochstetter belongs to the Gestapo and the Totenkopf-SS. He is not bound to obey orders from an officer of another military-unit.”

“In this case the delineation becomes indistinct,” the chief-judge disagreed. “The suspect is a POW of the Luftwaffe and therefore General Burkhalter’s responsibility, which gives the general the right to intervene. There are also strict laws that an officer of the Luftwaffe must be present when a POW is questioned. This was not the case, so the general’s order to stop any interrogation until his arrival had to be obeyed – something Major Hochstetter didn’t do.”

The defense lawyer pressed his lips shortly into a thin line and sorted his documents for a moment. The chief-judge watched him. “Does the defense have further questions for the witness?”
“Yes, I have,” Hochstetter’s lawyer nodded, left his place and stopped in front of the witness stand. “Oberst Klink, we’ve heard several times that there hadn’t been one single successful escape from your camp – except for the POW who informed you about the colonel’s imprisonment at the Gestapo-Headquarters and that the SS was in charge of Stalag 13. Compared with the other POW-camps is this indeed an incredible merit. Yet my client brought to my attention that he saw Colonel Hogan and some of his men out of the camp in Hammelburg a few times – together with you or your guards. Care to explain how this can happen?”

Klink frowned. “Easy, we’ve a medic, yes, but when it comes to more serious issues concerning the POWs’ health the doctors in Hammelburg have to be consulted. This is the usual procedure and goes hand in hand with the Geneva Convention.”

The defense lawyer nodded. “Yes, this I understand. What I do not understand is the fact that you allowed the colonel and a few of his men to enter a private house in which a member of the Underground was assumed to be, while you stood outside of the building and…”

Klink began to chuckle – to Burkhalter’s rising alarm and the judges’ confusion. But Wilhelm wasn’t folding; he put on another show of bravery, as he looked at Hochstetter and said, “You really picked up this incident for your defense – whatever defense strategy you and your lawyer are using?”

“May I ask the defense lawyer for the reason he speaks of this incident – even if it is an odd one?” the chief-judge wanted to know, and Hochstetter’s lawyer turned around.

“My client is a highly decorated, praised and very successful member of the Gestapo.”

“Yes, this was clear to see within the last year,” Burkhalter sneered under his breath, caught a warning glance from the SS-court-master and nodded in silent apology.

“His high success-rate only comes to a halt as soon as Oberst Klink, his senior POW officer and the inner circle of the colonel are involved,” the lawyer continued. “Major Hochstetter has suspected the Oberst for a while now to be a sympathizer with the Allies, and maybe he works hand in hand with Colonel Hogan, which would explain the POW’s presence in Hammelburg a few times. And because the major blew down their necks, they try to muzzle him by discrediting him now.”

“This is an offense!” Burkhalter said, rising while he flushed. “You accuse officially a high ranking officer of my staff, decorated with the Iron Cross for his courage as he saved two dozen recruits by presenting himself as the target towards hostile air-fighters! Also, he enjoys my full trust as well as that of Reichsmarschall Goering. My good friend Reichsführer Himmler himself has cleared him of any suspicion. So, before you accuse Klink between the lines of conspiring with the enemy, you had
better have some proof for this outrageous assertion!"

Klink couldn’t help himself; even IF he sympathized with the Allies, it felt good that Burkhelter suddenly came to his defense and stood up for him like this. Maybe the general did hold some respect for him after all.

“I’m just coming to it,” the defense lawyer answered casually, before he turned his attention back to Klink. “Please explain how it was possible that your senior POW officer and a few of his men were in Hammelburg in a private house that held a spy who had vanished as Major Hochstetter was finally able to enter the building.”

“Yes, this is something I wanted to know since then,” Hochstetter agreed.

The SS-court-master lifted a brow and addressed the major. “You saw the POWs outside of the camp and didn’t act on it?”

“First I met only Klink and he babbled a lot but nothing at all,” Hochstetter snarled. “Just like always! Then Hogan and three of his men appeared from the building. I demanded answers for their presence there, but Klink didn’t tell me anything.” He glared at the Kommandant. “And this is highly suspicious, too!”

“This is indeed… strange,” the chief-judge spoke his mind. “Herr Oberst, please explain what happened this day.”

Klink took a deep breath. ‘Don’t lose your nerves now, Wilhelm. ‘Play it cool’ as Hogan would say or everything is lost!’ he encouraged himself. ‘I’m not sure how familiar you are with the usual routine in a POW camp, Your Honors, Herr Verteidiger (Mr. Defender). POWs are doing jobs under the watch of guards – not only repairing streets, working in a factory or re-building facilities. They also help to do the daily purchases of the things which are needed. During one of those tasks one of the POWs flirted with a young woman – not once but a few times within the next days. He managed it to slip away with her, what was recognized by my men within a short range of time. Of course we started a search operation what could have ended nasty for said POW. Colonel Hogan, as his superior, had heard about the man’s beginning liaison and approached me, asking if he could come with me because he had an idea where to find the man.”

“He gave one of his own men away?” Hochstetter’s attorney asked surprised.
“He had no other choice if he wanted to save him. When a POW is caught during an escape, he usually gets shot. If he surrenders, he’ll be punished. Hogan pleaded with me to give him a chance to convince his underling to surrender before it came to the worst. There has never been a death-case in my camp, because I treat the prisoners hard but fair, and make certain that the simplest but necessary conditions for life are fulfilled. And I wanted it to remain this way. Therefore, I agreed to the colonel’s request, but accompanied him in person. We found the house the POW had spoken of with his comrades during earlier occasions, Hogan and the closest friends of said POW went inside, convinced him to surrender, returned and we drove back to the camp.”

“You let them go inside there alone?” the prosecutor cut in.

“Colonel Hogan gave me his word of honor not to flee, that also went for the two men who accompanied him. He never broke his word in earlier times whenever he was outside of the camp to watch his men doing commanded work. The same goes for the two POWs who accompanied him.”

“Which belong to Hogan’s inner circle,” Hochstetter cut in.

“Yes, that’s correct. And where is the problem? I know these men and can be sure that they keep their promises. Therefore, I saw no reason to deny the colonel his request.”

“Of course not, after all you two are best buddies,” Hochstetter scoffed.

“Nonsense, we only talk with each other in a civil manner,” Klink replied impatiently.

“He has wrapped you around his little finger, Klink!” the major snarled, flushing again.

Before the chief-judge could call for discipline once more, Klink gave his opponent an arrogant half-smile, while he deadpanned wryly, “Nu, I always thought that only Hogan believes this. I’m surprised that you fell for this little trick, too.”

The trainees began to chuckle at this dry comment that was spoken with a broad Saxonian dialect.

“Silence!” the chief-judge called, but Burkhalter could see a short spark of amusement before the man controlled himself again. The general glanced back at Klink. He almost admired the younger man for this performance of superiority, cleverness and sleekness. As it seemed, he had underestimated him a lot.
“So, you allowed the colonel to walk freely around in Hammelburg,” the defense lawyer came back to the subject of discussion without any pause.

“He didn’t walk ‘freely around in Hammelburg’, only in a house.”

“In which a spy was located,” Hochstetter’s defender pointed out.

“And how should I know this – or Hogan?”

“Because Major Hochstetter told you about an apparent radio-man of the Underground in Hammelburg earlier.”

“So?” Klink cocked his head. “The major speaks a lot and very loud whenever he is in my camp, but he never gives me any details. And, besides, we’ve thousands of houses in Hammelburg. How should I know that he assumed the spy was in the same building Hogan and I drove to?”

The defense lawyer narrowed his eyes. “You allow your POWs a lot, as it seems. A free drive to the town to save an escaped prisoner, discussions between the Gestapo and your senior POW officer… Your leadership style is extraordinary.”

“Yes – and certainly the reason for my null-escape-record,” the Oberst nodded with a smile.

“Yes, because the POWs and he are in the same boat,” Hochstetter hissed beneath his breath.

“That’s big Stuss (Saxonian for nonsense)!” Klink huffed. “Only because we don’t insult each other at every given chance doesn’t mean that we are on the same page. I’m a loyal officer of the Luftwaffe who has kept the German virtue of politeness and manners, nothing more, nothing else!”

“Yet it seems that you grant your senior POW officer more benefits than necessary,” the lawyer replied coolly. “Colonel Hogan’s alibi three weeks ago, is that he played chess with you at the evening he was presumably seen in Hammelburg.”
“Correct. What’s wrong with it?” Klink asked brusquely.

“The report says you played chess ‘til two o’clock in the morning. Is there no curfew in your camp?”

The Kommandant rolled his eyes. “Of course there is a curfew, but it’s a difference if hundreds of POWs would stroll over the compound during the late evening or night, or if the two highest ranking officers of the camp are playing chess in a separate, guarded room.”

“‘til two o’clock in the morning?” the defense lawyer pressed.

Klink shrugged. “We got carried away. This happens when two chess-players are on the same level.” As the defense lawyer only stared at him, he added with another smirk. “There is the saying that chess it the ‘game of kings’. I rather take it as a game of strategy in which the better strategist wins. It’s a kind of battle of minds and intelligence without weapons and blood-shed. Members of the military love to play it. Maybe you should test it yourself.”

Again there were some amused snorts and quiet laughter which stopped the moment the chief-judge cleared his throat. Looking at Klink, he asked dryly, “I hope you won?”

“I won the first match, Hogan the second one and the third was a remis. We wanted to play a fourth game, but we suddenly realized the late hour. We agreed on a resume a week later – but it never came to it thanks to Major Hochstetter’s new display of obsession.”

“At the same level, indeed,” the judge murmured, before he took a deep breath.

“It is a violation of the rules that a POW is allowed to be out of his barracks this late in the night,” the defense lawyer said strongly. “It shows that…”

“It shows that at least some civilian habits haven’t died by now,” the chief-judge interrupted him. “I myself am a passionate chess-player and I can understand that someone – especially two trained officers – forgetting time when caught in a good match; enemies or not. This is no crime, only a breach of rules.” He glanced at Burkhalter. “Seeing that you got the Oberst’s report before the High Court did, I assume that you rebuked him for this slip of discipline.”

The Austrian man gave him one of his false smiles. “Of course, Your Honor, the Oberst got an earful from me,” he said, nodding with a sharp glance in Klink’s direction.
The chief-judge lifted a brow. “I thought so. Back to the topic. Has the defense any real proofs for the accusation you made against the Oberst?”

“Oberst Klink had some serious issues with the Gestapo and SS during the last years. He was arrested in Paris because suspicion was aroused against him as a member of the Underground,” the defense lawyer picked up the thread instantly.

Burkhalter lifted his hand. “The SS-colonel in charge was later sentenced because of illegal businesses he ran. Oberst Klink had tracked him down and the major felt threatened by him, so he abused his position again by arresting the Oberst. In the end he was caught red-handed concerning his ‘additional income’. I’m sure, the honorable Court-Master can provide this court with the investigation reports, if necessary.”

“I remember this case. It was tried by one of my colleagues in France,” the SS-court-master nodded. “Colonel Backsheider was found guilty.”

“So, again an accusation with the solid base of a bubble,” the chief-judge sighed. “I can’t shake off the feeling that the defense tries to discredit the witness to present his own client in a better light.” He glanced at the SS-court-master: “Do you have any further questions for Oberst Klink?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Good. Oberst Klink, please have a seat beside General Burkhalter, but be prepared to answer some more questions during the interrogation of Sergeant Schultz concerning you hand-to-hand-combat with Major Hochstetter. Thank you for your time!” and he let the gavel down.

“Thank you, Your Honor,” Klink answered and left the witness stand – to Burkhalter’s relief without a long speech of gratefulness, demands and silly statements he had feared to hear from the Kommandant.

‘He really has changed – or has he only restored some old strengths I didn’t know about before? I ask myself, what triggered it,’ the general thought to himself.

The door opened and Schultz was led into the courtroom. Looking at Klink and then at the judges, he gulped. He felt utterly forlorn and uncertain, yet he knew that maybe his statements were crucial for his superior’s and this crazy Ami’s survival – not a pleasant situation he found himself in.
“Please identify yourself, Sergeant,” the chief-judge said, seeing with one gaze that he faced a rather simple mind.

“Joa-mei, I’m Hans Georg Schultz,” the large Bavarian introduced himself, listened shortly to the court clerk who pointed at the witness stand, ducked his head with a “Sorry!” and closed the distance to the place of interrogation. As soon as he had entered the witness stand, he cleared his throat, he lifted his chin and snapped to attention. “Feldwebel Hans Georg Schultz, Sergeant of the Guards in Luft-Stammlager 13,” he reported.

“Well, Sergeant, please tell us what happened the evening Major Hochstetter came to Stalag 13 to arrest the senior POW officer Colonel Hogan, and what followed then.”

Again the whole story was told, this time from Schultz’ point of view. Like this it was brought to the court’s attention that Hochstetter obviously failed to inform the camp about the fact that Oberst Klink was missing after the air raid and assumed dead, but in return came to Stalag 13 to arrest Hogan a second time only half an hour after he learned by accident of Klink’s survival and move to the hospital later in the morning. And it was not less interesting for the judges and the others to obtain confirmation that Klink only defended himself after confronting the major in the cellars of the Gestapo-Headquarters the next day.

Schultz was sweating like mad as the defense lawyer addressed him about this special detail. “You said, you were behind the Oberst and had a free view on the scene. Yet, when the Oberst was directly in front of you, his body certainly blocked a free view. How can you be so sure that it was my client who attacked first?”

Schultz wished himself far away, but he knew that he had – for once – to stand his ground. “The basin, where Colonel Hogan was waterboarded, was more to the left of the door and Oberst Klink was two or three steps ahead of me. Therefore I had a clear view of everything.”

Hochstetter’s attorney nodded slowly, before he suddenly changed the topic. “How long are you serving at Stalag 13?”

“From the beginning,” Schultz answered.

“And Oberst Klink took over command a year after the camp’s founding. Therefore you can compare his and his predecessor’s leadership style. Are there any abnormalities?”
“What’s that for a question?” Schultz asked; confused.

“Just answer it!”

Hans frowned. Something was wrong here – and he had a very good idea, what it was. Hochstetter and his lawyer tried to frame Klink. But not with Schultz! Not if he could help it!

“Of course every Kommandant has a different style. I’ve served under seven different COs in the first war and two in this war. They all differ from each other. But concerning Oberst Klink I can only say that he is stern and firm, but also fair. Not only to his underlings, but also to his prisoners. He…”

“Oh, come on, Schultz!” Hochstetter complained. “I don’t know how often he groused about or with you whenever I was in the camp, and now you try to assure us that you and he are…”

“Major Hochstetter! This is enough! Thirty days arrest for disorderly behavior!” the chief-judge cut in sternly.

The major stared at him; his face flushing an unhealthy red.

“Of course there has been misunderstandings and disagreements here and there,” Schultz continued as if nothing happened, even if he felt inwardly some glee that finally someone put the choleric major into his place. “But I deeply respect the Oberst, and I’m honored to serve under such a fine man.”

Klink knew that this was a little bit exaggerated, yet there was a fierce undertone in Schultz’ voice, and it warmed him. The large Bavarian was really a friend, even if they had – indeed – their quarrels. He was glad to count Schultz as part of his staff.

The SS-court-master had a few questions, too, then Schultz was relieved from the questioning, and with weak knees he walked over to Burkhalter and Klink. The latter gave him a short nod; more Wilhelm didn’t dare to do. He would thank Schultz later.

The two judges talked with each other for a short time, before they turned towards the prosecutor. “Are there any more witnesses you need to question for this trial?” the chief-judge wanted to know.
The man nodded. “Yes, Your Honor, I want to interrogate a further witness concerning the processes in the cellars of the Gestapo-Headquarters in connection with the insubordination Major Hochstetter is accused of. This man was on duty the evening prior and in the early morning when the deeds took place and he had a crucial part in the whole case.”

Lifting a brow again, the chief-judge made an affirming gesture “Proceed.”

“I call Oberleutnant Horst Schmidt of the SS into the witness stand,” the prosecutor said and watched from the edge of his eyes, how Hochstetter tensed, gasped for air and then turned red with wrath, while baring his teeth. General Burkhalter and Oberst Klink were right. This man’s choleric temperament certainly made him break boundaries, legal or not.

The door opened and Schmidt stepped into the courtroom; carrying the long, thin bag he had brought with him. His look firmly fixed on the judges, he entered the witness stand, saluted and said, “Oberleutnant Horst Schmidt, commanding officer of the Gestapo-Headquarters in Hammelburg, member of the SS, reports in to be questioned, Your Honors.”

The chief-judge tilted his head a little bit, while the SS-court-master nodded openly; obviously pleased to face one of his own executive unit who, above all, acted with calm but strong politeness. “At ease, Herr Oberleutnant,” he said neutrally, but with a kind undertone in his voice.

“Herr Oberleutnant,” the prosecutor began, “Oberst Klink’s report and the official statement of Colonel Hogan speak of you being present in the cellars and having an active part in the whole matter. Please tell us what you saw and heard in those hours.”

Schmidt took a deep breath, before he began to tell of him being ordered to arrange a curfew in whole Hammelburg the day Colonel Hogan had been arrested. He returned in the late evening when everything was organized, found the headquarters in relative silence and retired to find some sleep, only to wake up early in the morning. He spoke of the screams he heard from downstairs again – just like in the late afternoon prior – and he knew that something had to be wrong. He went for the cellars, only to hear how the officer on duty tried to fob off someone at the telephone in the anteroom of Hochstetter’s office, saying that the major wasn’t in the HQ and therefore not available. Yet Schmidt had heard the major’s voice from the cellars only a minute ago. Becoming highly suspicious of what was really going on, he took over the phone, realized that it was a call from Berlin and obviously not for the first time, and took action. He spoke with General Burkhalter’s office and learned that any interrogations of the prisoner had to be stopped instantly until the general would appear in person.

“I told the general’s office that there seemed to be a misunderstanding concerning Major
Hochstetter’s availability, because he was present in the HQ and that I would get the major at the phone immediately. I put the receiver on the desk, ordered the officer on duty to leave the line open and went down into the cellars. I heard moans and stifled screams during my way downstairs, and I was aware that I would see something nasty, but this…” he hesitated.

“Please go on,” the chief-judge invited him to continue after a few seconds.

Schmidt straightened: “Major Hochstetter was not questioning the new prisoner, he was torturing him.” At that, the first whispers of surprise were heard. “The colonel hung in handcuffs from the ceiling, bathed in sweat, upper body bare and covered with lashes, bruises and other wounds, face barely recognizable anymore.” The whispers became louder. “And the major was about to brand him.”

“This is a lie!” Hochstetter snapped again.

Schmidt ignored him. “The colonel begged him to contact Oberst Klink, who was in hospital but could confirm that he hadn’t been in Hammelburg a few evenings prior meeting an Underground member, like he was accused of, but the major didn’t listen.” The murmurs became stronger. “He threatened to brand the colonel if he didn’t give him the admissions and answers he desired!”

“LIES!” Hochstetter raged and leaped to his feet, while the justice-trainees began to discuss with each other. Schmidt used the rising chaos to drive another point home and raised his voice.

“And I have the proof of the major’s illegal intention here!” He opened the bag and took out the iron with the double-S at the front. Lifting it, he said strongly, “This is the poker Major Hochstetter had threatened to brand the colonel with. I came into the room as he stood in front of the prisoner and was about to press the glowing runes to the man’s bare side – *square over bleeding lashes and other injuries*!”

The chief-judge was taken aback as he stared at the iron proof – literally – then he waved for the court clerk to bring him the poker, while the trainees, Burkhalter and even Klink talked with each other.

“Objection! This poker could be from anywhere!” the defense lawyer cut in.

“I’m ready to make an oath on the bible that this is the poker Major Hochstetter threatened the colonel with!” Schmidt answered sharply. “He was about to use it like a torture-master in the middle-
ages, and this is far beyond any limits! The Gestapo has to use strong methods to reveal dangers to our country, but this is barbaric and beneath dignity.”

The voices were very loud now, but Klink only listened with a half ear. He had known of what Robert had been through after he saved him from Hochstetter’s clutches but learning now in detail what his beloved was forced to endure, made him nauseous. He fought the urge to close his eyes, while his hands clamped around the armrests, knuckles turning white. He wanted nothing more than to return the camp, taking Rob in his arms and cherishing every inch of him; kissing every scar and still healing injury to worship and to comfort him again.

“This is a biased trial!” Hochstetter’s voice tore Klink out of the haze that was about to overwhelm him. He looked over at the major, who discussed something with reddened face with his lawyer, and icy fury woke in Wilhelm. He would do everything in his power that this monster would get his rightful punishment!

“Silence in the courtroom!” the chief-judge called and let his gavel slam down on the desk surface twice. “I will not allow any further turmoil from anyone in this courtroom!” Only slowly did the men present calm down, and the Oberfeldrichter looked everyone firmly in the eyes, while the SS-court-master addressed the young man in the witness stand again.

“How came you into the poker’s possession?”

“I took it with me after Major Hochstetter left the cell. I ordered the guards to let the colonel down from the ceiling and to give the man something to drink. I had heard enough of what was going on and wanted to go the hospital to get Oberst Klink, who was the only one who could confirm the colonel’s obviously correct alibi.”

“Obviously correct alibi’?” the defense lawyer asked.

“Show me someone who continues to lie when he is about to get a glowing iron pressed in the unprotected side of his bruised and bleeding body. The colonel was terrified and desperate enough to admit everything to spare him this further agony, and that he didn’t do it showed me that there simply wasn’t anything to admit. Anyone could realize this – certainly even Major Hochstetter, but he didn’t, because he wanted his captive to suffer. So I decided to get Oberst Klink; hoping to put a real stop on this insanity. I went to my room, hid the poker, and left the HQ to go to the hospital, but Oberst Klink had already arrived. We went down into the cellars and came in the very last moment to prevent Major Hochstetter from drowning the colonel by waterboarding him for too long – despite that General Burkhalter had ordered through his assistant that every questioning should be stopped instantly!”
More whispers were heard.

“Are you ready to make an oath that Major Hochstetter indeed intended to use this poker as a branding-iron against the prisoner?” the SS-court-master wanted to know, and Schmidt nodded determined.

“Yes, Your Honor, I am. I interrupted the torture and…”

“Objection!” the defense lawyer cut in and rose. “Threats are no torture.”

“I beg to differ,” the prosecutor rose to speak. “It is one thing if you threaten someone with a simple slap but another to threaten with a burning iron that is a few centimeters away from your exposed chest.”

“The man in question is a trained soldier and officer. He knew what could happen if he was caught as he attacked our country by flying air-raids. The branding hadn’t taken place, so it’s not torture,” Hochstetter’s lawyer replied stubbornly.

“In this case I want to voice a protest, because Colonel Hogan suffers from a strong trauma concerning this special ‘method of questioning’, Major Hochstetter was about to use!” Klink said sternly, eyes grim. He would never forgive Hochstetter this special thing – that the major had tried to brand Robert like an animal.

“A trauma?” the defense lawyer asked, scoffing. “The most soldiers are more or less traumatized when they return from the field.”

Klink rose and looked inquiringly at the chief-judge who nodded in a silent agreement to go on.

“You said it yourself, Herr Verteidiger: ‘When they return from the field’ – but Colonel Hogan is a POW for almost three years now and shielded from the war’s cruelty. Yet he is deeply traumatized because of what happened as he was in Major Hochstetter’s clutches – especially concerning this attempted branding. The treating physician attested a serious trauma that can mark him for the rest of his life, just like the physical scars he got.” He drove his attention to the chief-judge, and added with venom, “And the Herr Verteidiger says ‘a threat is no torture’. Torment can be both: physically and psychologically. And exactly this happened to my senior POW officer.”
Some murmurs were heard again, which the chief-judge cut off with a wave of his right hand, before he nodded at Klink (who took his seat again). Then he glanced shortly at the poker the court-master offered him after examining it, shook his head slightly, placed the iron on the desk in front of him and glanced finally back at Schmidt.

“Herr Oberleutnant, the listed accusations against Major Hochstetter include an abuse of his rank by using his position to get personal revenge. Seeing what methods the major was ready to use on the colonel, this part of the listed charges seems to be correct. Is there anything you heard or witnessed that can confirm that this whole matter took place because of personal reasons from the side of the major?”

“Yes, Your Honor,” Schmidt nodded; ready to pull his next card out of the sleeve. “As I went down into the cellars to get the major after I took the call from Berlin, I heard the major laughing about the prisoner’s despair with obvious glee. When I interfered by telling the major that General Burkhalter’s assistance is in the line and demands to speak with him, he became very angry and wanted to send me away, saying that he ‘wasn’t available’. As I insisted that he accept the call he became even more furious to be interrupted like this, but at least went away after I told him that General Burkhalter had threatened to obtain his arrest otherwise. Major Hochstetter threw the poker back into the fire-basket and told the colonel not to cheer too early, because he would get the truth out of him when he would be back, even if he had ‘to brand every inch of his body’. I also learned from two guards, which were called into the major’s office the morning prior to take the arrested colonel to the cellars, how the major told the colonel with a smile that he ‘would break him’ and that he was going to be ‘his masterpiece’.”

New whispers were heard, and the chief-judge pressed his lips shortly into a thin line – for the uncounted time by now. He glanced at Hochstetter, who had gritted his teeth and whose face sported some violently red spots.

“Those two guards heard this?” he asked, and Schmidt nodded.

“This and more, Your Honor. Two other guards, who had duty during the night, also confirmed that they heard the major giving order to the officer on duty, Corporal Huber, to tell anybody, who would call from General Burkhalter’s office, that he wasn’t available, no matter the topic. They also witnessed the most of Colonel Hogan’s ‘interrogation’.” He opened the bag again. “As I got the summons as a witness for today, I ordered the four guards to give a written statement of all they heard and saw in those hours. I have those reports here.” He pulled out the sheets and offered them the court clerk. “The men are ready to affirm their reports by declaring it under oath.”

The chief-judge took the documents and looked them through, before he gave the first pages to the SS-court-master; continuing to read the rest.
Hochstetter had turned white like a tablecloth, and Klink balled his fists in triumph. Yes!!!!

“The reports read that Major Hochstetter continued to ‘questioning’ the colonel with ‘harsh methods’ the whole night; only taking breaks when the prisoner passed out. They also declared that he seemed to take a sick pleasure in doing so, addressing the prisoner with pet-names and false kindness before he inflicted new injuries on him,” the SS-court-judge murmured, yet his voice was loud enough to be heard by everyone.

This time Klink couldn’t prevent it. He closed his eyes and felt nauseous to the core.

Sadism!

He had feared that Hochstetter could have this streak, but to get the affirmation of it because the major lived out this sick weakness on Robert, was about to make Wilhelm vomit.

“Klink, get a grip,” Burkhalter whispered beside him under his breath. “I know that this is rough, but we’ve to appear neutral if we want to win this trial.”

Hochstetter had balled his hands into fists. He knew that he was about to lose the case.

A few minutes elapsed, in which the two judges and the prosecutor read through the documents. Taking a deep breath, the SS-court-master watched the defendant and the defense lawyer, who were talking with each other intently, while the chief-judge’s gaze wandered to the general, the Oberst and a very pale sergeant, who appeared to be ready to throw up. And it didn’t slip his attention that the camp-Kommandant was a living example of a human stone, but his eyes shone with a fierce fire.

Bending towards the chief-judge he said something and his colleague nodded.

Rising, the chief-judge declared, “The members of the Court will retire for a deliberation. The trial will be continued in half an hour.” His gavel came down on the desk again, before he, the SS-court-master and the prosecutor stepped down from the podium and left the courtroom.

Burkhalter rose, too, and nodded at his three companions, who followed him outside into the corridor.
And no-one was aware of the firestorm that was heading on metal wings towards Berlin…

TBC…

Well, this was a chapter without Hogan & Co., but I think that Hochstetter’s trial was something you all looked forward to, and it needed a lot of details, because – come on! – there are so many evidences within the TV-show that the German Intelligence Service, the SS and the Gestapo was hair-widths away from revealing Papa Bear that it had be summed one day.

I also loved to show Klink, once again, in this new light. There is the saying that to find true love gives you a new life, and in his case this is really happening. During the TV-show it became obvious – here and there – that Klink can be a warrior if he is enough provoked or threatened, but now the one he really loves it at stake (and also his own life). And – voila – he gets a back-bone again.

It also was fun to write something about Hochstetter again, yet I hope it became obvious that the man is about to really ‘lose’ it. His character bases on the desire to make himself a name, to succeed and to show his ‘genius’, on the other hand he has a kind of paranoia and narcissism. For the first time ever it was him who was on the other side of the bars and have to endure the ‘shame’ of being accused of something, while partly several details were twisted and used against him – just like he did it certainly countless times with other people. To be on the receiving end of such an unfair treatment is going to initiate another chain of events you’ll read about later.

Just right now, in the next chapter, you’ll learn about the verdict. But where victory shines, shadows are not far away, so be ready for another wild rollercoaster (the last sentence of the chapter is a hint…).

I hope you liked the new chapter that was certainly better to read because of my errors being smoothed out (thanks to my new beta-reader). I’d love to learn what you think about the whole trial so far, so please let me share your thoughts.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love
Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the large feedback the last chapter got. I know, the whole episode of Hochstetter’s trial was something many of you looked forward to, but also didn’t know what really to expect – after all, true justice was a fairy-tale during this time in Germany.

I’m curious what you’re going to say to the verdict that will be handed down to Hochstetter.

But I also know that something else business your mind: The cliffhanger.

Yes, something dark is coming towards Berlin, and the whole thing is historical. The exact times which are mentioned for the historical disaster, are real, as well as the mentioned weather, the Divisions, the numbers, the warning-systems and its time, and so on. I think, you already assume to what I refer…

Well, ‘Hogan’s Heroes’ was a parody – one of the best I ever watched – but it happened during one of the darkest times of whole Earth’ history, and (just like historical events within the TV-show were mentioned), I included a real horror in this story. So, please don’t be shocked…

I hope, you’re going to like the chapter nonetheless. I did a lot of research concerning the street-names in 1945, the locations at this time, and so on – believe me, today the streets are mostly wear different names, just like the historical buildings, and so on. So, I would be glad if you can imagine a little bit Berlin of all those decades ago.

Love

Yours Starflight
Chapter 42 – Rising doom

“I almost didn’t recognize you, Klink. I never saw you dishing out like this – or standing by your man in such a strong way.” Burkhalter then continued, impressed, “And the way you fobbed off Hochstetter’s attempts to provoke or to daunt you… You really have grown a backbone, my friend.” He slapped the Oberst on the shoulder, who flushed.

“It was nothing,” Klink tried to play it down. “This is a question of justice – of right and wrong. Times may have changed, but truth remains truth – and Hochstetter overdid it. One and a half years of him are more than enough. He brings the entire executive branch into disrepute!”

Of course, when it came to ‘true’ and ‘not true’, Klink had to admit to himself that a few statements he – and Schultz – made were a little bit twisted or exaggerated. However, Wilhelm knew the regime’s version of ‘justice’; if you really wanted fair play against the Gestapo or SS, you had to use some tricks. Hopefully he and the others had played their cards well. The mere thought that Hochstetter might be not sentenced sent a shiver down the Kommandant’s back.

Schmidt, who carried the empty pack over his left shoulder, smiled at him. “I’m glad that you still make distinctions between the officers in charge within the Gestapo and SS. Not all are bad.”

Klink gave him a real smile. “Yes, exceptions prove the rule. You are such an exception, young friend.”

“Indeed,” Burkhalter nodded. “This was a nice surprise you had up your sleeves, Herr Oberleutnant. If I would have known about the written statements and you having the poker, I certainly would have slept better.”

“I apologize, Herr General, for letting you remain in the dark,” Schmidt replied. “I thought everyone would appear more objective if you didn’t know about this surprise.” He glanced shortly at Klink, who bowed his head the tiniest bit in silent agreement. It was better that Burkhalter didn’t learn that he was the only one of them who hadn’t known beforehand about the proofs Schmidt had brought with him.

“Well, at least it showed our dear Klink here getting into top-form,” the general deadpanned, as his lips curled in one of his rarely true smirks.

Sitting down on the chairs in the waiting area, the four men continued to talk with each other,
waiting for the judges to come to a decision.

“Herr General, Gentlemen, the judges are back and are about to declare the sentence,” the court clerk said politely while he looked out of the courtroom’s door.

Burkhalter looked at his wristwatch: 09:58 h.

“About time,” he grumbled. “I really don’t have all Saturday.”

“I agree,” Klink nodded. “I want to return to Stalag 13 as soon as possible.”

They stepped into the courtroom, where Hochstetter and his attorney had remained while the judges had retired for the deliberation. The chief-judge, the SS-court-master and the prosecutor had returned and stood at their desks, and waited, until Burkhalter and the others had taken their seats. The chief-judge rose to speak:

“Defendant rise!” he instructed, and Hochstetter obeyed.

“Defendant, this Court finds you guilty of insubordination and disobeying a direct order of a Luftwaffe-general within a regular cross-functional cooperation of Luftwaffe, Gestapo and SS. Further you are guilty of rank-abuse for personal purpose, and of shown cowardice during a raid by the enemy. We cannot legally find that your actions during the latter resulted in the death of three of your underlings and a Luftwaffe-Oberst’s injuries, but at the least your behavior eased the enemy’s attempts to eliminate said Oberst and members of your troop. It’s expected of a German man, especially a member of the SS, to hold his ground to the last and protect those who are his responsibility.”

“Concerning the entire incident between you and the POW-Officer Colonel Robert E. Hogan of the US Air Corps: to investigate and interrogate suspects is the sworn duty of both the Gestapo and the SS. Inevitably, harsher methods are sometimes required to produce the necessary results, particularly when the country and its people are in danger. Yet you allowed yourself to get carried away with uncalled-for cruelty, based on your personal feelings of hatred towards the suspect. Such conduct is unbecoming of our German dignity and is unbecoming of a commanding officer of the SS and the Gestapo. This special abuse in connection with the attempted murder of the suspect, was in complete contravention to the earlier clearly given order of a Luftwaffe-general. This cannot be excused under any reasonable claim of duty but can be and is regarded as your wish for personal vengeance. Given those facts, the Court has made its sentence.”
Klink was watching Hochstetter while listening to the chief-judge’s explanation. The major had first
turned white, then red and then white again, and Wilhelm felt satisfaction growing in him as he
listened to the judge’s words. A quick glance at Burkhalter’s face showed nothing – at least to those
who didn’t know him like the Oberst did. The general was pleased, this much was for certain.

“Gentlemen, please rise for the proclamation of sentence!” the prosecutor said strongly.

*** HH *** HH ***

While the judges deliberated and the four witnesses sat idly talking outside of the Berlin courtroom,
few were either idle or talking in and around Stalag 13.

In fact, it was messy – at least for most of the POWs and guards. Over 250 prisoners were spread out
between the Hoffenstein Pass and the main road south of Hammelburg, shoveling away snow that
the two tanks couldn’t reach. 50 camp-guards and another 20 SS watched the prisoners like hawks as
they worked without any breaks.

The mood among all both inside and outside the camp was low and almost dark. Yes, the POWs
were used to working for their German captors when ordered, but Schultz had always been in charge
and the jobs were relatively easy. And Klink really did comply with the Geneva Convention, since
the prisoners were allowed breaks for water and food (in addition to getting paid for their work).

Not so Sandhaus. The men working would not be allowed any food or water until after their return
to the camp. The presence of the black-clad SS soldiers added more stress to the situation, because it
was well-known how ‘trigger-happy’ these men were.

The core team was split; Baker, LeBeau and Carter were part of the first snow removal shift, while
Newkirk and Kinchloe remained behind in the camp. Kinch manned the radio while Newkirk
watched the grounds in case Sandhaus left the Kommandantur to check on the other POWs.
Unfortunately, their last defender, Karl Langenscheidt, had been placed in charge of the troops
guarding the outdoor workers. Since they didn’t know the remaining guards very well, Newkirk and
Kinch had to be very careful.

Yet Kinchloe was glad that he had manned the radio – not knowing how crucial this one talk would
be for everyone (and especially for the two colonels).

Hearing the incoming signal, James quickly activated the connection.
“Papa Bear to Goldilocks, we read you, over.”

“Papa Bear, message from Bird Roc. More information about the hill-project needed. Any chance Valiant Tailor can get some more details?”

Kinch groaned inwardly; he had hoped London wasn’t going to pump Klink for information every time the brass wanted something. And just now, there was no chance to ask their Kommandant for anything.

“Negative, Goldilocks, Valiant Tailor is not in his sewing-room, but in the Black Heart. I repeat, Valiant Tailor is in the Black Heart and will return tomorrow.”

Kinch waited for the reply. He knew that London wouldn’t be happy that their new source was unavailable for the moment, because the man in question was in Berlin – the ‘Black Heart’ – but the fact was unalterable. There was an unusually long pause, then London radioed anew.

“Come again, Papa Bear. Valiant Tailor is in the Black Heart?” The sound of the voice made Kinch wary. Something was very wrong.

“Yes, he’s attending a meeting about right and wrong concerning Dwarf Nose,” Kinch replied, having heard Hogan using this code-name for Hochstetter a few times while speaking with London.

“Papa Bear, bad news. Two big flocks of gulls are on their way to the Black Heart and will reach same within the next 45 minutes. Any chance to warn Valiant Tailor?”

Kinchloë felt lightheaded, as if the blood had drained from his brain, while his eyes widened.

Oh! My! God!!!

Kinch checked the time: 10:07 hrs. There was not much time left to act.
Back in Berlin, all present had risen according to protocol and the chief judge read the verdict:

“In the name of law and our people’s justice, as well as in agreement with the Court-Master of the Highest SS- and Gestapo-Court, the following verdict is handed down: Wolfgang Hochstetter, you are sentenced to 8 years of penal servitude.”

“No!” Hochstetter gasped horrified.

“Since the German eastern territories are endangered by the Red Army, the usual penal camp in Danzig-Matzgau for former SS- and Gestapo-members is unavailable. You’ll be handed over to a working camp where you at least can serve the German people by giving your manpower. Given the fact that your misconduct affected the Luftwaffe, the camp and project you’ll support will be decided in consultation with the Luftwaffe as the wronged party.”

Burkhalter couldn’t help the ghost of a smile that played around his lips. He knew exactly to where he was going to send Hochstetter. He would see to it that the ‘poison-gnome’ reached this special destination – even if he had to ask his ‘good friend’ for this little favor. Hochstetter would curse the day he disobeyed his command.

“Furthermore,” the chief-judge continued, “the defendant will be stripped off his rank and is ejected from the SS and Gestapo. He is also declared as unworthy to bear arms. The defendant’s behavior, especially his shown cowardice and his insubordination, is to a high degree unworthy for an honorable, decent and brave German man, therefore he also loses all civil rights for as long as the penalty will last. An appeal is not possible. The session is closed!” His gavel hit the desk with a bang of finality.

“No! This can’t be!” Hochstetter called. “I only did my duty and…” He stopped as his attorney spoke quickly to him. The two police-officers, which had guarded him the whole time, stepped to his side but waited as the defense lawyer said something.

“This I call a rightful sentence,” Burkhalter murmured and rose. “I knew that we could rely on our justice!”

‘For the first time since the mad-head with moustache took over control,’ Klink thought, but he had to admit that he was glad. Okay, given Hochstetter’s insubordination of a direct order, the Oberst had thought the former major would be sent to a firing square, on the other hand there was still the fact that Burkhalter’s power was limited when it came to the SS or Gestapo. Therefore, the whole verdict
was satisfying. At least Hochstetter would be out of his and Hogan’s hair for the next eight years – or longer, because Klink didn’t bury the head into the sand given the war’s situation. It wouldn’t last very much longer now, until the Allies would have the ‘big bubble-beard’ on his knees, and then he and all those who committed inhuman crimes would be punished.

“Joa-mei, he really is near a heart-attack,” Schultz whispered beside him.

Looking one time more at Hochstetter, Klink saw how the former major was breathing heavily as he was chained with handcuffs. Then the guards took his upper arms and led him towards the door, bypassing Burkhalter, Klink and the others.

For a long moment Hochstetter’s and Klink’s eyes met – and the former major stopped abruptly, forcing the guards to come to a halt, too.

“You’ll pay for this, Klink!” he hissed; eyes filled with rage and scorching hate. “You and your American pet will pay for what you did to me! We’ll see each other again one day and then…” The guards began to pull him away, but it didn’t stop Hochstetter from shouting over his shoulder, “I’ll get you for this, Klink! You and Hogan – and if this is the last thing I do. I’ll find you two one day – no matter how long it will last! And then you both will pay!”

His voice vanished as he was forced along the corridor. The defense lawyer smiled apologetically at the four witnesses as he, too, left.

“What an idiot!” Burkhalter murmured.

Klink tried to control his breathing to calm his frantic heartbeat. Yes, Hochstetter was an idiot – but a dangerous one. And, unfortunately, a very intelligent dangerous idiot. Klink didn’t doubt that Hochstetter would try to get revenge on him and Hogan given the tiniest chance.

He felt a hand on his arm and glanced at Burkhalter, who watched him. “Don’t fear, Klink,” the general said. “The chance that he survives the working camp is very low. And if he gives too much trouble, then one word from me will be enough to initiate his end.”

Forcing a smile on his lips, Klink chuckled, “I know, Herr General. And, by the way, eight years are a long time. Maybe he is chastened by then.” Yet he highly doubted it. Hochstetter wasn’t the forgiving type. Rather the opposite. He got all worked up about something he wanted.
On the podium the judges had gathered their documents, barely noticing the convict’s vow of revenge (something they heard often, therefore it was nothing unusual), and spoke now with the prosecutor and answered questions by the trainees.

Burkhalter left his seat and murmured to Klink. “Let us greet them at least personally. It’s more polite.”

Wilhelm didn’t feel like shaking hands with the judges, but he knew he had no other choice, so he followed his superior. Schultz and Schmidt accompanied them.

*** HH *** HH ***

“WHAT?” Robert Hogan looked in horror at Kinchloe, who had come up through the stove entrance into Klink’s quarters half a minute ago, practically running to the bedroom to find his friend and superior.

“It’s true,” he nodded breathless. “It’s a large-scale air-raid with more than 950 bombers from the 8th Air Corps, 1st and 3rd Air Division, heading straight towards Berlin. Over 160 fighters are with them to shield them from the German defenses. The first planes will reach town in about 40 minutes. Two attack-waves are planned.”

Hogan blanched, the bruises standing out the darker. 950 bombers! He knew exactly what that meant: a wide area bombardment that went hand in hand with a lot of destruction. And, of course, the main target was the government-quarters – where the People’s Court was located!

He looked at the clock on the nightstand: 10:12 am. Hochstetter’s trial had begun at 08:30 am – in other words, it certainly was still on-going with Klink and the others present as witnesses!

‘Will… Oh Lord, NO!’

He felt a wave of panic rising in him. Will’s life was in utter danger.

“They have to stop the raid!” he shouted, while he pulled the blanket away; almost leaping out of bed.
“I spoke with Butler before I came here,” Kinch reported. “He said the mission was planned long beforehand and can’t be stopped anymore. Our boys already fought off the German air-defense. So far, about 20 of our planes were shot down, but the rest are heading towards the target.”

Hogan was already up and limping towards the chair where his clothes lay. He had to do something. He had to warn Will – no matter what! “Has Newkirk joined the first work gang?” he asked while slipping into socks and shoes.

“No, he’s downstairs, waiting for your orders.” Kinch looked over his shoulder, “Olsen?” he called.

Hogan looked up in surprise the moment the “Outside Man” entered the room. “Your pajams. Pass ‘em over, sir,” Olsen said, “I’ll cover for you here while you’re downstairs.” As an experienced member of Barracks 2, Olsen already knew what his CO needed him to do.

“You really think of everything, Kinch,” Robert said while grabbing his bomber-jacket. “My second pair of pajamas is in the dresser over there,” pointing to the furniture, “lowest drawer.”

Olsen was already peeling off his clothes and handing them Kinchloe who would take them into the tunnels. If the going got rough, Olsen could always flee into the tunnels wearing the pajamas and switch clothes afterwards.

Hogan limped as quickly as possible to the hidden entrance. “Is someone watching the compound?” he asked.

“Harrison and Tallman are watching the Kommandantur. If Sandhaus looks like he’s heading towards Klink’s quarters despite his refusal to speak with you, they’ll start an argument to distract him.”

“Good!”

Not waiting for Kinch, Hogan climbed down the ladder into the tunnel. He refused to spare a thought about the weakness in his legs, heedless of the pain in his back and shoulder. He reached the bottom and hobbled as quickly as he could manage towards the section where the telephone-center was installed.

There was only one way to warn Klink; he had to call him at the People’s Court. In no more than 40
minutes, Hell would break lose in Berlin. Maybe it was enough time for Will and the others to get to safety.

“Newkirk connect me to the People’s Court in Berlin – quick!” he ordered the moment he reached his friend and the telephone-center. “Make it a priority-1-call from the camp.” He checked his watch: 10:15 hrs.

Peter wasn’t surprised to see his superior in the tunnels, half dressed. Once Kinch had told him of the upcoming disaster in Berlin, he knew that Hogan would move Heaven and Earth to warn Klink. He looked up at his superior’s face, saw the fear in his eyes, and knew that their suspicions concerning the two colonels’ relationship had to be true. The two men were more than friends by now. They were developing feelings for each other – maybe even more. But to his own wonder, he didn’t mind.

Calling the telephone operator, Newkirk switched to German, “Hier ist Luft-Stalag 13. Verbinden Sie mich sofort mit dem Volksgerichtshof in Berlin, Priorität Eins!” (This Luft-Stalag 13. Link me instantly to the People’s Court, priority one).

Hogan stepped beside him. “When you’ve got the Court on the line, tell them that we have a serious situation here and that Major Hoople has to speak with Oberst Klink immediately.”

Newkirk nodded with a short curl of his mouth, as he recognized the name. Hogan had used it last summer when he paid off the two SS-officers with the phony money at the Hofbräu - in front of Klink. By using this pseudonym again, the Oberst would know instantly that it was Hogan calling.

He heard a click on the line and then a male voice told him that he had reached the People’s Court in Berlin. Nodding at Hogan and Kinch, who just joined them, he began to make his demand to speak to Oberst Klink who was present as a witness in one of the courtrooms. Answering a few questions of the telephone operator he learned that the trial was already over but that the gentlemen certainly were still in the building.

“You can recognize the Oberst very easily,” Newkirk said, ignoring Hogan’s nervous pacing beside him. “He is tall, lanky, balding and wears a monocle.”

*** HH *** HH ***

“Lord, it’s really windy today,” Klink complained as he stepped beside Schultz out on the street, gripping for his cap to keep it on the head. It was cloudy, cold and almost stormy – the kind of
weather one can endure best when sitting on a comfortable sofa, sipping tea and reading a good book. Regrettably not one of these three things were available to the two *Luftwaffe*-servicemen, who wrapped their arms around themselves and marched in place to keep themselves warm.

Burkhalter had gone to the restrooms, while Schmidt had met a former comrade from Bremen in the vestibule, hanging back to chat with the man a little bit until the general returned.

“I could use a warm coffee just right now,” Schultz murmured, before he frowned and said, “*Herr Oberst*, look over there.”

Turning towards the direction Schultz had nodded to, Klink pursed his lips as he saw a security vehicle coming from the side-entrance of the Court. Behind the barred window he recognized Hochstetter, who looked over at him, bared his teeth and said something no-one could hear. Shuddering, Klink knew that the former major had repeated his threat and vow of revenge.

“What do you think, will he survive the working-camp?” Schultz asked quietly.

“I don’t know,” Klink answered softly. “I know it’s completely wrong and unchristian to hope for another man’s demise, but in eight years I really don’t want to have to watch my back constantly if this madman is somewhere, waiting for a chance to kill me – or Hogan.”

The car drove away, and the *Kommandant* sighed but brightened as he added, “Maybe this is the last I’ll ever see of this poison-gnome.”

He couldn’t know how wrong he was.

Glancing at his timepiece – 10:18 h – he sighed. “I hope Burkhalter comes soon. This damn wind is more than nasty.”

As if brought by that same wind, the door to the court-building behind them opened, and a man in SS black called out: “I’m sorry to disturb, Gentlemen, but is an *Oberst* Klink here?”

Klink turned around. “This would be me,” he said.
The man, a young sergeant in his mid-twenties, smiled in relief. “Thank the Lord we got you before you drove away. We’ve your camp on the line. A Major Hoople wants to talk to you. He said it’s urgent.”

Wilhelm went rigid. Hoople— in other words, Hogan was in the line.

Dammit!

Was Robert insane to call him here? What could be so damn urgent that he risked everything by pretending to be an official member of the camp’s staff?

“Hoople?” Schultz asked frowning. He had heard this name before, yes, but when and why? And, by the way, they hadn’t a Major Hoople in the staff. They hadn’t a major at all in the moment and…

He caught Klink’s gaze, who then raised his voice, “Thank you, Sergeant, I’m coming!” Then he whispered hastily to Schultz, “No words to Burkhalter. It’s Hogan who calls. Something has to be very wrong.”

One hand on his back, stance slightly stooped, Klink hastened with his typical movements towards the young SS-sergeant and followed him back into the building. They went towards some offices on the ground-level, passed Schmidt and his former comrade, and finally stepped into a room where the Court’s telephone-exchange was placed.

“Over there, sir,” the sergeant said and pointed to the left side of the equipment, where another SS-man sat.

“You got him?” he asked his colleague, who smirked,

“The man with the monocle. There is no doubt that’s him.”

Klink rolled his eyes. Why was everyone making fun of his monocle? He didn’t need glasses, only a support for his left eye. End of story!

Taking the receiver, he said firmly, “Yes, Oberst Klink is speaking.”
Even though he was angry about Hogan’s recklessness to call him here, at the Court, he felt his heart jump softly as he heard the beloved voice from the other end of the line. And he couldn’t help it that his anger vanished as he heard his witty fox speaking in properly accented clear German:


(Kommandant, Major Hoople is speaking. Please excuse the interruption but something happened that demands your immediate knowledge. The commander of the camp ordered a garbage disposal by burning it. Given the strong wind today, this can turn into a firestorm that could seize the middle of the camp, if not all buildings. The safety of the camp, including your personal belongings, are in great danger. I ask for counteraction.)

Klink frowned. This made absolutely no real sense. Of course, he knew that Hogan was trying to give him a secret message, speaking in codes, but – what the heck did he mean? Burning of garbage, middle of the camp, personal belongings, firestorm???

Hogan was definitely not speaking of Stalag 13, because in the middle of the camp was absolutely no room to make a big heap of garbage to burn it. And what about the firestorm? A firestorm was the most feared and destructive side-effect of a bombing because it built its own kind of wind-system. Especially when the target was in a valley. Wooden buildings fell easily prey to flames within a very short time, which increased the heat. Both occurrences put together were responsible for a strong updrift of heated air that devoured the oxygen, built a kind of vacuum and initiated something close to a tornado, without the typical twister, but no less strong and deadly.

Something like this couldn’t happen to the area of Hammelburg, because the hills around the little town and its neighborhood were too widespread to make a stack effect possible. Cities, which had high buildings and small streets offered a better ‘chance’ for such an inferno.

Another possibility of a firestorm was a burning, fan-like area whose tip pointed into the wind’s direction. The wind fanned the fires even more and propelled the flames spreading the fire more and more in its way.

But a ‘firestorm’ was also the pseudonym for a burning place – a village or a town.
A burning town…

Firestorm – the result of bombings…

Then the famous scaled slipped from Klink’s eyes and he felt himself turning pale. The choice of words – ‘personal’ and ‘great danger’ – and the other emphasis could only mean one thing: Fire was not about to seize the middle of the camp, but the middle of Berlin.

Fire – in other words: Bombs!

An air-raid of the Allies lay ahead. And given the risk Hogan ran by calling him in person here, showed that the air-raid was to be expected soon.

Wilhelm’s mouth went dry, while fear began to clench his belly. Still, he was able to keep a level head.

“Has the staff already begun with the preparation for the garbage burning?” he asked, using Hogan’s choice of code.

“Yes, everything is going to be ready in approximately thirty minutes, or so,” Robert answered, a soft quiver in his voice.

Klink gulped. Robert Hogan never really became nervous; he always kept a cool head. To hear the hidden fear in his voice now told Will how grave the whole situation was. Rob feared for him, and even if this told him once again how much he meant to his lover, this time he could have done without this emotional proof.

Then it hit him; the air-raid would take place in approx. thirty minutes. And the declared target was, of course, the center where the government and other official institutes were placed – among them this building. And he, Schultz, Schmidt and Burkhalter were in the center of the planned attack. Sweet Lord!

They had to leave – now! – and it would be the best if they drove into a direction that didn’t lay in the attack’s way. “From where blows the wind?” he asked.
“From the south-west,” came the tight reply.

Klink swallowed. So, the bombers came from the south-west – the direction he would have to drive if he wanted to make a beeline for Hammelburg. In other words, the direct route was no option. Even more, the bombers would traverse the main-quarters of the town. He didn’t want to imagine how many victims this would leave behind.

“Before I take any action – how big is this garbage hill?” he asked, feeling oddly separated from reality and calm despite the burning knot in his belly. Klink realized that he wasn’t helpless – he still had his years of Luftwaffe-officer training in strategy – he could assess the severity of the upcoming air-raid if he knew how many planes were about to attack.

“It’s large, sir.” the older man could hear the stress in Hogan’s voice now. “There will be two heaps, and they build together almost 1000 items. It really would be too dangerous for the camp, so I have to protest against this all.”

Klink had heard enough. He felt nausea washing over him. A thousand bombers in two waves – it meant that a bomb carpet would be laid over Berlin’s downtown. And given the strong wind, this attack, indeed, could elicit a firestorm that would cost thousands of lives.

He wasn’t aware that his hand that clutched the receiver was shaking.

“Thank you for your information, I’ll take the matters in my hand. We’re done here and I’m as good as on my way back to the camp,” Klink said forcing his voice to sound calm.

“The sooner the better, sir,” Hogan sounded depressed.

Wilhelm gulped. He knew that there was no chance to leave Berlin within thirty minutes or so. The traffic and the distance to the town’s edges would prevent it, yet he had to try to get as much distance between himself and his companions, and the downtown as possible. Unfortunately, there was the possibility that they wouldn’t make it – that he and the others were going to die today.

Klink became painfully aware that this was perhaps the last time he ever speaks with Rob.
He felt his throat tightening, while he looked at the men in the telephone-center room. Two were busy with talking to each other, a third one tried to fob off a caller and the sergeant who had fetched him had already left the room.

This was his chance – his maybe very last chance in his life to tell his witty fox what he hadn’t dared to voice until now. Turning away, Klink lowered his voice to a whisper – confident that no-one was eavesdropping – and murmured under his breath, “I love you, Rob! You’re the best that ever happened to me. Shine on, whatever may happen.”

“Will…” Hogan’s voice was a near-silent croak.

“I love you,” Wilhelm breathed. “Fare well!” Then he quickly turned around and placed the receiver on the phone. Taking a few seconds to collect himself, he looked at the clock that hung on the wall: 10:21 h.

Time to act.

“Thank you for your service,” he said to no-one and left the room – knowing that these men in this building will most likely be dead within the next half hour.

What a waste. Even wearing the damn SS-uniforms these young men had done nothing worse than work in the office of a Court.

Klink cursed the war and its inhumanity with everything he had, while he hastened through the vestibule. Schmidt wasn’t here anymore, and Klink hoped he was already outside. He wouldn’t leave this place without the young man who was an honorable boy with all of life ahead. As Wilhelm left the building, he saw his companions chatting with each other as they waited for him.

Burkhalter looked over at him as Klink reached the little group. “A call from Stalag 13? What has your favorite prisoner done now?” he taunted.

‘Done? Robert didn’t do anything – despite risking his life and mission to warn us, and maybe to save our lives, you idiot!’

He cleared his throat and said aloud, “My favorite prisoner?”
“Well, I mean Hogan, of course,” Burkhalter scoffed.

Klink forced himself to chuckle and to roll his eyes. “What could he do in his condition, Herr General? No, everything is fine. There was a little misunderstanding concerning the garbage disposal, that’s all.”

He ignored Schultz’ piercing glance.

Time… They were running out of time!

“‘Garbage disposal’?” Burkhalter repeated and made a face. “Can anything run normally in your camp?”

Klink rubbed his hands in the nervous mannerism that had been typical for him until three weeks ago. “You know how it is, Herr General. If I’m not there, everything goes down the hill.”

He had to come up with an excuse to say good-bye. Now! Or Schultz, Schmidt and he would certainly die!

Burkhalter snorted – and shuddered as a cold gust raced through the streets. “Well, it’s dreadful weather, but this shouldn’t lower our mood. Everything came out better than thought. Originally, I wanted to invite the gentlemen to lunch but seeing that it isn’t even half past ten, I think it’s far too early for it. Yet a good coffee and a second breakfast won’t be so bad.” He smiled at the other three. “Come on, Gentlemen, you’re invited.”

Klink pursed his lips. Of course, he could decline the invitation, offend Burkhalter and drive off towards relative safety. Burkhalter would return to the Ministry of Aviation and – well, Burkhalter couldn’t reach the government seat on his own, because they all had driven in Klink’s staff car; after all park spots were rare in this area. So, Burkhalter could call his driver and wait to be picked-up, but this would need some time – time the general didn’t have if he remained here. Most certainly he would be killed.

Yes, he and the ‘Sacher-cake’ had their shares of disagreements, discussions, problems and more but…
But could he really turn his back on a man he’d known for more than a decade now, and leave him here to die?

No! He wouldn’t be any better than Hochstetter and, by the way, Burkhalter wasn’t such a bad guy. Not really.

“This is a perfect idea, Herr General,” Schultz chimed in. “I could die for a warm coffee.”

‘Don’t say this too loud, Hans. The Grim Reaper has good ears,’ Klink thought with another shiver and made his decision.

No, he didn’t want Burkhalter to die. If he could, he would try to save the man’s life. And a further look at his watch told him that he hadn’t much time left to do so: 10:24 h.

“I have a wonderful idea. I know a perfect café nearby.”

“Klink!” Burkhalter sighed, anticipating the worst.

“It’s a Vienna Café with the traditional coffee-specialties of Vienna, Austrian sweet desserts and more.” He rubbed his hands again. “And given this awful weather we should visit it now! I’ll pay the bill.”

He didn’t wait for his companion’s agreement, but simply headed down the street where his staff-car was parked. The general quickly followed him and complained,

“Klink, just wait. It was me who invited you and…”

“And you, my friend, were such a nice host yesterday evening, so let me repay the whole thing by inviting you to a café that has a hint of the home you certainly miss,” Wilhelm called over his shoulder as he sped up.

“Joa-mei, I’ve never anything against a good sweet dessert,” Schultz said behind him. “Do you know something like this in the harsh north, Herr Oberleutnant?”
Schmidt was chuckling. “Yes, of course, even if they aren’t as well-prepared like in Austria.”

Klink stole another glance at the time: 10:25 h.

The hostile planes certainly had been spied by now. How long until the Reichs-ARP (Reich’s Air Raid Precaution) would ring the alert? Burkhalter would demand to return immediately to the government-quarters which would mean their doom.

They reached Klink’s staff-car and the Oberst slipped into the driver’s seat before anyone could protest his unusual behavior. Burkhalter sat down beside him, while Schultz and Schmidt occupied the backseat. With little care for the traffic, Klink steered the car out of the parking-space, snapped something unkindly at a driver behind him, blew angrily on the horn and drove down Bellevue-Street.

“You’re driving rakish, Klink,” Burkhalter grumbled. “To where are we off?”

Klink’s mind was running 1000 kilometers per hour. He didn’t know a Vienna Café – not here in Berlin, nor anywhere else. But one thing he knew for certain; they would stand the best chance in…

“Neukölln,” he said firmly. “We’re driving to Berlin-Neukölln.”

This quarter lay in the south-south-east and it was in the neighborhood, yet the chance to reach it within the next minutes wasn’t exactly high. As soon as the sirens sounded, chaos would break lose, preventing them from making good time. But at least they would drive out of the main route the Allies would traverse, and maybe they could escape the worst.

The combined air-forces had chosen the perfect way of destruction by coming from the south-west, given the wind and the heading of the streets. Klink had to give them this.

He kicked the gas pedal, ignored a police-man’s signals in the middle of a crossroad and turned the car into the Stresemann-Street, increasing the tempo.

“Are you in hurry?” Burkhalter asked, and Klink forced a smile on his face.
“I’m cold, I’m hungry and I’m really looking forward to a good coffee – not the trash we’re getting in the camp by now.” He steered the car down the road, turned into the Wilhelm-Street and headed to the south – away from the government quarter.

There was a lot of traffic what was no wonder – after all it was Saturday morning. All of Berlin were on the feet, so to say. Klink gritted his teeth and passed some other cars. He had to reach the Gneisenau-Street before the chaos began. The road would change its name a few times, but it led directly to the south-east to Neukölln.

Just then, the air was filled with the piercing sound of the sirens: a continuous tone that lasted for twelve seconds, took a break and was repeated.

“What the heck?” Schultz gasped.

Burkhalter stared with wide eyes out of the window upwards, as the second tone sounded. “Air-craft warning!”

Klink cursed and looked at his wristwatch again: 10:28 h.

“Dammit!” he snarled, trying to sound surprised. “Where is the next bunker?”

“Maybe this is a test-alert?” Schultz commented hopefully and gulped as the tone sounded for the third time.

“No, this is brutal reality!” Burkhalter murmured.

“The next bunker!” Klink demanded. “I don’t know the still intact parts of Berlin like you do!” He glared at Burkhalter, who shrank in his seat and was rather pale.

“There are two nearby in Kreuzberg. One of them is at the Gestapo-Headquarters and Heinrich’s office,” the general said hoarsely. He moistened his lips. “Turn the car!” he ordered. “We’ve to reach the _Fuhrerbunker._” (Bunker of the Führer that was built beneath the Chancellery of the Reich).
In earlier times, the Oberst would never have dared to speak against a strict order, but now he couldn’t care less if he would die because of bombs, or because of a firing squad.

“No!” he said strongly.

Burkhalter’s eyes were about to bulge out of his head; he could not believe his ears!

“I beg your pardon?” he gasped.

“The Allies are certainly attacking the government quarters. Given the fact that the Reichs-ARP sounds the ARP-sirens and not the Acute Air-Raid-Warning, the bombers will reach Berlin within the next fifteen minutes or so. We’ll never make it in time.”

Burkhalter gulped. “We’ve to return. Our knowledge and our ranks are needed by the people. Turn into the next street to the left and…”

“Herr General, given the direction of the wind the Allies will start their ambush from the south-west to achieve the utmost destruction. We both know of what I’m speaking. If we drove back now, we certainly will be caught in the middle of the ambush or, afterwards, will be trapped for days until the streets are passable again. Neukölln is maybe our only chance – or the quarters more to the east.”

“And what’s about these bunkers in Kreuzberg?” Schmidt pointed at a traffic-sign that showed they were near this town-quarter.

“The Allies certainly know that Himmler’s office lays there. Additionally, Kreuzberg adjoins to Tempelhof. I bet my last shirt that the Allies will try to destroy the airport there, too,”

Burkhalter interjected. “Therefore, we would come directly into the bombers’ way. The bunkers in Kreuzberg are out of question. Just like I said, the Führerbunker maybe not finished until now, but its construction has gone far enough to offer us shelter.”

“And then we’re trapped there – if the damn thing is already strong enough to withstand the bombing at all,” Klink said and turned the car into the Gneisenau-Street. Traffic was already hectic, cars from side-streets entering the main-road without any consideration of the vehicles that were there earlier. Everyone tried to flee the center of the town, simply knowing that this was the main-target of the upcoming air-raid.
“Neukölln is next to Tempelhof. A few wayward bombs and we four are history!” Burkhalter snarled.

“The distance between Tempelhof-airport and Neukölln is great enough, I think. The Allies will try to fly in a fanned line like it is usual. They’ll graze the area around Tempelhof and are going to concentrate on Berlin-Middle; ignoring Neukölln. There are no real facilities, only dwelling houses in this district. They are of no interest for the Allies.” He gripped the wheel tighter. “Neukölln is our only chance!” Klink repeated, while he increased the speed even more. “And there we’ve to find a bunker.”

Burkhalter really felt obligated to voice a protest of his inferior’s insubordination, but he also knew that Klink was right. All duties aside, he – and the others – certainly would die if he insisted on returning to Berlin-Middle.

One thing was also clear:

“I have no clue where a bunker is in Neukölln,” he admitted.

Klink’s hand gripped the steering-wheel even tighter, cursing inwardly while he concentrated on the traffic that was about to go wild. People ran through the streets to reach the next bunkers or their houses which often had a deeper cellar. Others left their shops or facilities, running down the pavement which became more and more crowded. They passed a school where the teachers led the children out, also heading for safety.

Dammit! Saturday morning! There couldn’t be a worse time for an attack. Klink didn’t dare to think of the dooming shadows which were massing together above Berlin and certainly would cost thousands of civilian lives…

TBC…

Yes, the historical disaster I warned you about in the tiny prologue, is this special air-raid that happened at the beginning of February 1945, and turned into one of the most disastrous attacks except this of Dresden. I think, the Allied Forces didn’t expect such a horrible outcome you’ll read about in the next chapter, because this attack had the most civilian victims (besides the three-day-attack of Dresden).
And our dear Klink is in the middle of it… Just guess, how Hogan feels.

Especially after he heard Will telling him that he loves him.

I always imagined, how and when ‘Willie’ will tell Robert about his feelings for him, and I thought that this, maybe last given chance is the most sweetest but also most painful moment of all. I hope it touched you a little bit, because both men are no people of large words – not, when it comes to the real stuff, but Klink knew that he was running out of time and a chance, so...

Concerning the verdict that was handed down to Hochstetter: it bases on a true verdict in 1944 and was given to a SS-officer who handled his ‘responsibility’ with so much cruelness that (even the justice of this time) the judges had no other choice than to sentence him. Everything was explained with the ‘common regard of honest and true German people’ – an excuse for everything, because (honestly) who had asked the people what they think and want, or not?? Yet Hochstetter’s vow will have consequences, because our ‘boys’ haven’t seen the last of it.

The next chapter will be about the air-raid. Schultz overgrows himself, Klink proves one time more that he has grown a ‘back-bone’, Schmidt becomes a certain kind of hero – and Hogan is sitting on the edge of the seat, so to say; even tangling with General Butler and the whole brass.

I hope you liked the last chapter, even if it was written in different style (with the whole time-designation, but I thought it makes the whole thing more real).

I’m looking forward for your comments and written thoughts, because I know this whole thing is hard stuff.

Have a nice rest of the week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Firestorm over Berlin

Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so much for the big feedback, and sorry for the delay, but the new chapter is so full of action, historical facts, details and loaded emotions, it had to be beta-read and edited a few times. I hope, it worth the longer waiting.

Just like I just mentioned, this chapter – even as a fiction – will include a lot of real facts, and I have to warn you that they show the ugly face of WW II. It’s easy to forget the sinister background when you watch ‘Hogan’s Heroes’, but – as I already wrote in prior prologues – I mix history into this story. Nevertheless, I hope you’re going to like it.

Knowing that you all are on the edges of your seats, and fear for ‘Willie’ and the others, I don’t want to keep you away from reading the new chapter.

So, be wary for a lot of action and emotional rollercoasters.

Love,

Yours Starflight

Chapter 43 – Firestorm over Berlin

“Dammit, Alex, this is insane!”

Hogan, wearing the headset, sat at the radio, while Kinch stood beside his superior and friend. It didn’t slip the radioman’s attention how incredibly tense Hogan was and how tightly he tried to control his burning anger.
Hogan had ordered Kinch to get ahold of London and demanded a direct connection to General Butler. Anyone listening in to the current conversation would never have believed that Hogan was now speaking with his mentor, who was also one of his highest superiors.

“Stop this raid before it’s too late!”

At the other end of the line Butler groaned. “Robert, like I already told Sergeant Kinchloe and you, there’s no way to abort the attack. Our boys are less than 70 miles away from Berlin.” He sighed. “You said you warned your German friend and his companions. Maybe he was able to reach…”

“This is not about Klink,” Hogan gritted out (even if this was only half the truth). Of course, he was afraid for Wilhelm – terribly. The prospect of losing him was like an icy stab deep in his heart, mind and soul.

‘I love you…’ God, those three words had hit home like nothing else before.

Yet Hogan also thought of all the people who were going to die – civilians who should be spared. “It’s Saturday morning, for God’s sake! All of Berlin is out and about. It’s impossible for all of them to find shelter in time.”

“I know, Hogan!” Butler sounded irritated now. “Don’t you think we didn’t consider this? B…”

“Obviously not, otherwise the brass would have chosen another schedule for the attack,” Robert snapped, and took a deep breath to calm down. “Sorry, I got carried away, but what the Allies are about to do is inhuman!”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve attack a town. It’s not even the first time we’ve attacked Berlin. We know that Hitler is there and…”

“And because of one damn man you’re sacrificing thousands of innocent people?” Hogan’s voice rose a little bit again. “Alex, on a Saturday morning most women are out doing the rounds of market-halls to exchange their food ration coupons for whatever groceries they can find. The plants are manned not only with civilian workers, but with slave workers and prisoners, our POWs and we both know that the ARP-facilities are forbidden to them. They’ll die in the bombing. What about the children? Every boy and girl between six and sixteen are at school right now – and most schools have no bomb-proof cellars. Where can they get to that’s safe before the raid begins?” He got no answer and he could imagine the guilt-ridden face of his mentor. “Stop the raid – or at least give the
people more time to find shelter. You’re not about to attack a military target but a town full of civilians.”

He heard Butler sighing: “Robert, we are very aware of the scale of devastation that can occur, but we have information that the Sixth Panzer Army will be using the rail lines at Tempelhof on the way to the Eastern Front. You know what delaying or derailing those tanks will do for our Russian allies, never mind what can be accomplished elsewhere by pulling the Luftwaffe out of position and into a fight with us. Add to that, Hitler, Himmler, Goering and Goebbels are all in Berlin today. If we only get one of them, then…”

“That bastards are already hunkered down snug and cozy, where they can sit out the entire air-raid and its aftermath. The government area is full of ARP-facilities. But what about the people?”

Butler murmured something under his breath, before he said, “I can try to buy them some time. A few minutes, no more. We already lost a bunch of the 116 fighters flying escort for the bombers because of the German defenses, but large squadrons of the Luftwaffe are on their way to Berlin. Any delay of our attack can be crucial for our boys – after all they have to escape after they’re done.”

Hogan grimaced. “Send them to the north-east. The Baltic Sea and the border to the former Polish Corridor aren’t that far from Berlin. I’m certain our ‘Russian friends’ there will be delighted to support our boys by shielding them against the German defenders, and then our guys can fly a northerly loop and return to good old England that way.”

A snort escaped the US-general. “Sure, stop at a few German fueling stations on the way, our boys can certainly make a little side trip to Sweden or Norway. No problem,” he said sarcastically. “Don’t wrack your brain with our problems, Robert. I’ll try to buy the Berlin people – and your friend – a few more minutes, but that’s all I can offer. And at the next suitable opportunity, we are having a little talk about bedside-manners towards superior officers. London out!”

Hogan pressed his lips together and threw the headset beside the radio with a fierce “DAMMIT!”

“And?” Kinch prompted, looking highly uncomfortable, hands buried in the pockets of his jacket. He had blanched as Hogan detailed the Berlin people’s usual whereabouts on a Saturday morning – and of the children who were at school now. The colonel was right. Too many innocent lives would be sacrificed to the upcoming air-raid.

“He’s going to delay the attack for a few minutes,” Hogan growled as he stood. “As if that will change anything!”
“Every life that can be saved is one death less,” James tried to comfort his friend.

Hogan gritted his teeth. “If Will dies, the brass can look for another idiot to do the job down here!” he growled.

Kinch didn’t take those words seriously, but offered with sympathy, “Maybe Klink already took cover.”

Robert checked the time again: 10:35 hrs. He gritted his teeth.

‘I love you…’

The colonel took a deep breath.

“We talked 15 minutes ago. How far, do you think, he’s able to run, or at best, drive by now – straight through the pure chaos that’ll erupt as soon as the sirens blow? The air-raid is organized in two wide fans, beginning in the south-west and heading to the north-east – straight over Kreuzberg and Tempelhof, too, to disable the airport, and then over the entire government-quarter and the adjoining districts. Butler told me that much. We know the People’s Court is in Berlin-Middle, near the government-district. Do you really think Klink and the others can get out of the way and avoid the main-attack in time?’

Kinch lowered his head. “I don’t know, Colonel,” he said quietly. “Klink can think on his feet. Maybe he and the others already found shelter somewhere. You did everything you could do to warn him and to buy him time. The rest…” He looked up again at his worried friend. “The rest is up to the Lord.”

“I wish I had your faith,” Robert whispered, as he turned away – looking into the dim light of the nearest lantern.

Will’s last words to him still echoed in his inner being like a mantra: ‘I love you’.

Yes, Robert had thought this much – hell, he had known it deep down – but to hear those special three words coming from his counterpart’s lips, had reached his soul. The mere thought that this declaration of love might be the last thing he would ever hear from his secret lover, was enough to shower his mind in ice and to freeze his soul.
‘Lord, please protect him. I beg thee, please protect him – and Schultz and young Schmidt.’

At 10:40 h. the ARP-Command of the Reichs-Town Berlin ordered Acute Air-Raid-Warning. The longer tones of the sirens changed into the up and down wail that was feared by all and had become a fixture in the mind of every man, woman and child. It meant only one thing; an air-raid was imminent.

Klink tried to steer the car through the erupting chaos, as Gneisenau-Street changed into Hasenheide-Street. Precious minutes were lost crossing the Hermann’s Platz (Hermann’s Plaza, named after Hermann the Cherusci) which then changed into Berliner Street and then into Berg-Street which led to the townhall. They were nearing Neukölln, but they were still too slow.

Burkhalter had turned quiet, Schultz was whispering beneath his breath – maybe he prayed – and Schmidt had bent forwards from the backseat, craning his neck between the Luftwaffe officers, on the look-out for…

“Watch out!” Burkhalter suddenly shouted and Klink tore the wheel to the left, as a din of horns belched into the air. His reaction wasn’t a second too early. A car sped out of a side-street to their right and couldn’t stop in time, ramming the car behind them. The following vehicles drove into the already crashed cars.

The chaos grew, enfolding them into its grasp, as they passed two more accidents. Everything with wheels was heading south, weaving around disabled and slower vehicles, ignoring lanes, rights of way and any other traffic-rules. People were running out into the street in their panic to get to the next safe place. Horns blared, cars crashed into streetlamps attempting to avoid the running pedestrians, traffic-policemen fled the podiums, unable to impose any order to the fear.

The road headed directly south-east now – and the traffic became even more tightly jammed, as the crowds became more and more heedless of the cars; why worry about landing on an engine hood, when the Grim Reaper was lifting his scythe above them no matter what they did?

Another check by Klink of his watch: 10:53 h. They had lost precious time in this bedlam.

How much longer would they have before the first hostile aircraft reached Berlin? The thirty minutes
Robert had given them were now gone.

“We’re still too close to the center,” Schmidt said hoarsely. “Any idea where the next bunker is?”

“Just watch the people. To where they’re heading, there must be an open ARP-facility,” Klink pressed out.

From afar they saw the townhall of Neukölln – a great building that was in the typical German Renaissance style after the first war. A large tower was its center, the façade built in the typical ornamented and decorated form of that past era.

“Why are they running back?” Schultz asked, eyes wide and face pale with fear. He pointed to the right where people streamed out of another side-street, and Burkhalter cursed quietly as he understood the shouted words which sounded through the thin window-glass.

“The bunker is full,” he murmured, before he glanced at Klink. “Any other ideas?” he challenged.

In answer, Klink slammed on the brakes to avoid yet another car that had also come to an abrupt halt. Horns blared from all sides, but for naught. The traffic had stopped completely.

It was all over.

Nothing on the road could move – the twine of people, cars and bikes was too tight.

“The subway!” Klink gasped with his heart in his throat, as he opened the car’s door. “At the townhall is an entrance to the subway they built 15 years ago.”

“Of course!” Burkhalter yelled in relief. “The North-South-Metro. We’ve to reach the entrance. The tunnels are nearly ten meters deep in the ground, and therefore perhaps safe enough to offer real protection.”

They left the car in the middle of the chaos not caring if it would survive the air-raid or not. Now, without the protection of the vehicle, the full blow of the events crashed down on them.
Women screamed their children’s names, others tried to help older ones, family-members desperately attempted to stay together. Horns were still blaring, threats and shouts were exchanged, people were pushed out of the way and fell, others clung to each other while running. And above all the sirens howled their eerie song like the Banshee of the old legends who heralds death.

Klink and the others were getting bruised and kicked as they were washed away together with the throng of people. It seemed hundreds of people had the same idea and wanted to seek refuge in the tunnels of the subway. Even police and SS, who tried to bring some order to the mess, were ignored and swept away with the masses.

Somehow the three older men and their younger companion managed to stay together, grabbing wrists or coats to prevent being separated. Although the two staff-officers were well-trained, and they and Schultz had already fought in the first war, nothing could stop the icy fear that crept through their entire being. Schmidt tried to remain calm, too (after all he had survived the heavy bombings of Bremen), yet the whole situation reminded him far too much of his last experience as a nameless target of Allied bombers. Despite his hard training, he was scared.

Klink looked up at the tower of the townhall that had at last seemed near and whose peak held a large copper-statue of the Goddess of Luck, Fortuna. Maybe the Lady would hold her hands above them for a little bit longer. Wilhelm’s gaze found the large clock beneath it: 11:00 h.

Then, he heard it: from afar the first explosion tore through the air, accompanied by the well-known droning of bombers.

The American Eighth Air Force had reached Berlin and began to unload their deadly freight.

Panic broke loose completely, no matter that the entrance to the subway was in reach. People thrust themselves forwards, jamming the entrance, as the crowd tried to squeeze in all at once. Several of them lost balance and fell down the stairs, while others around Klink and his companions stumbled in their haste to reach safety.

The detonations came nearer, and the four men felt the air-pressure change. Only a few meters ahead of them a young woman began to scream a female name in panic and tried to turn around, but she was pushed forwards heedlessly. And then they all heard it: the crying and sobbing of a little voice nearby.

While Burkhalter continued to run as fast as his fat body would allow, the other three stopped and
looked back, but it was Schultz who spied the child who had fallen and was about to be trampled by the careless mob.

“GO!” the sergeant shouted towards the woman, who looked on in sheer despair at him. “I GET HER!”

He used his large bulk to push through the crowd, ruthlessly elbowing his way against the flood of bodies. He bent down and lifted a wailing girl in his arms. Holding her close, Schultz followed the masses, trying not to lose sight of his Kommandant. Klink and Schmidt tried to hold their ground waiting for him but were both pushed relentlessly towards the subway-entrance.

Will had heard the woman’s screams, saw Schultz fight his way in another direction, and watched as only a few seconds later – a small girl of three or four years was in his arms – Schultz headed towards him again. The woman (obviously the girl’s mother) had seen the rescue and was now sobbing in a hysterical mixture of fear and relief.

“OUT OF THE WAY!” the Oberst roared, as he made his way to the woman’s side and grabbed her arm; Schmidt, a bastion, behind him – his black uniform pierced even the panicking minds of the people to give him some room. “Come on, Schultz brings your daughter. Don’t fear!” Wilhelm shouted over the cacophony at the lady, pulling her along with him. She tried to fight him, but a surge of strength enabled him to keep her moving forward.

Suddenly they gained the entrance and were half running, half floundering down the staircase. Progress was slowed by those who had fallen and had managed to regain their feet, but the high whistles of falling bombs and the thunder of explosions spurred them on.

Finally, they reached the end of the staircase and beginning of the underground station platform. It was only 70 meters long and already overcrowded, both on their side and on the opposite platform. Klink knew that it was only a question of time until people would be forced into the tunnels, another danger – at least while the power was flowing. True, engine drivers were ordered to stop the trains the moment the alert was given, but in the recent past, some simply continued until the train arrived at a point safe from the attack, which had led to horrible accidents whenever people were forced to enter the tunnels in their desperate attempts to escape the bombings on the surface.

Klink spied Burkhalter not too far ahead of him but ignored him for once. Pushing the woman to the right beside the staircase – out of the main-flood of fleeing men, women and children – he looked up the stairs. The large figure of his Sergeant of the Guards was in the middle of crowd which still hastened down into the subway station, the small girl in his arms.
“SCHUUUUULTZ!” he screamed. “OVER HERE!”

The Bavarian had spied him and Schmidt, who was still beside Klink – pale but calm.

The ground began to shake, the air pressure changing, even here, under the street. No one present, not the trained members of the Wehrmacht, nor the SS, nor even the police dared to imagine what was going on upstairs.

Reaching Klink, Schmidt and the young woman, Schultz handed her the little girl, who instantly clung to her mother, weeping and crying out all the fear the fine instincts of a child had woken in her little soul.

“Thank you,” the young woman sobbed, looking at Schultz as if he were a saint.

“You’re welcome,” he answered, out of breath. He almost stumbled as people behind him bumped into him. “I’ve five children and know how it is, when something is about to happen to them.”

“We need to put more distance between us and the entrance,” Schmidt interrupted the Sergeant as he pulled the mother and child along, shielding them both with his body against the continuing push of the crowd. Klink and Schultz followed him.

They found Burkhalter at one of the benches which were placed along the platform to offer waiting passengers a place to rest. Now they were a hindrance, yet also something like a bulwark that forced the masses to go around them. The general stood his ground, shot warning glares at everyone who came too near and waited for the others to catch up with him. He glanced at the young woman that Schmidt and Klink clutched between them, saw the bruised little girl clinging to her mother (who gave Schultz some more grateful glances over her shoulder) and knew what had kept the others.

“Adelheid!” A woman in her thirties appeared out of the crush and grasped the younger by the arm. “Thank the Lord!”

“The nice gentleman of Luftwaffe saved Amelie,” the young woman wept as she embraced her elder friend, who gazed at all four men with gratitude.

“Thank you, mein Herr (sir). You saved my goddaughter.” The older woman stepped on the tips of her toes and gave the completely surprised sergeant a peck on the cheek, then she steered Adelheid
and little Amelie along the station platform away from the entrance. The young mother gave them all a last teary smile, before she was swallowed by the masses around her.

Burkhalter had watched the whole scene with interest, despite the fear that had seized him. Obviously, Sergeant Schultz had risked his neck to save a little girl. Sometimes war brought out heroes you’d never have expected.

A man in his middle thirties, clad in SS-black with the insignias of Untersturmführer (the equivalent of a lieutenant), stopped beside them and saluted. “Gentlemen, Untersturmführer Nolte, district Neukölln,” he reported.

“Oberleutnant Schmidt, Headquarters Hammelburg,” Horst introduced himself, with the sinking assumption that he was most likely the highest-ranking SS-officer in the vicinity. “General Burkhalter, Heer, Oberst Klink, Kommandant of Luft-Stalag 13 Hammelburg. Are there more of your comrades here, Herr Untersturmführer?”

“Inferiors, sir,” the man answered, and Schmidt sighed inwardly. It was, indeed, up to him to bring some order in this chaos here.

Roaring thunder sounded suddenly through the entrance, followed by a wave of heat and dust. New panic was about to erupt, when Schmidt climbed on the bench, shouting for silence. But for naught. In their attempt to get away from the staircase, the masses pushed mercilessly against others who were on the station platform, forcing those closest to the edge into the tunnel and down onto the tracks.

The electric lights failed.

It was like a starting signal for another turn of mortal fear. Many screamed, only to fall silent after a few seconds. Shouts turned to whispers – as if with the vanishing of the light their voices had left them, too.

Schmidt saw his chance, calling out as loudly as he could:

“Ladies and Gentlemen, please listen! I’m Oberleutnant Schmidt from the SS. My subordinates and I will try to help you, but you must remain calm. Everyone remains wherever he or she is. Sit down, wherever you are, pull on your knees and bend your head down. If you are wearing coats or jackets, use them to protect your heads and don’t forget the children. Those who have been pushed into the
tunnels, stay there too. There is no danger of incoming trains with the power gone, so…”

Another loud detonation ripped through the air and another wave of dust came through the entrance.

Schmidt jumped off the bench – no chance to speak to the people now.

Klink ducked out of reflex, quickly sat down pulling Schultz besides him, stripped off his coat and covered himself and his Sergeant of the Guards with it. Little stones and dust fell on him. He gulped and made himself smaller beside Schultz, while he heard Burkhalter wheezing at his back. He only hoped that the ceiling above them was strong enough to withstand a direct bombing or the impact and weight of any collapsing buildings.

From afar he heard a constant growling and thundering, like during a heavy thunderstorm or firework. It told him enough: The Americans were attacking with hundreds of bombs, setting parts of the town in flames which would transform them into a desert of ruins. He only prayed that the number of victims wouldn’t be as bad as he feared.

A high whistle from outside sent a new bolt of adrenalin through his body and he knew what would come.

“Clap the hands over your ears!” he shouted to no-one and everyone, then followed his own advice.

A moment later a deafening explosion ripped through the air overhead. The ground shook, dust and debris rained down on all, oxygen was pulled away through the entrance as the erupting flames devoured the air above.

Wilhelm closed his eyes. asking himself how long this attack would last. He knew that Death walked through the streets in the shadows of the bombers.

Will tried to ignore the mortal fear that gripped him. He tried to think of Robert – of his dark, soft eyes, his impish grin, his strong arms, his tender hands, his gentle lips…

If he only could have seen his witty fox one last time…
If he only could take him one last time in his arms and tell him in person how much he loved him…

He would pay any price to be granted this one chance…

*** HH *** HH ***

The first assault wave almost lasted twenty minutes. Butler had managed to delay the first attack as promised, but only by a few precious minutes. Officially, the first raid began at 11:02 h and ended by 11:21 h. The bombing had begun in the south-west, but also a lot of the Boeing B17s attacked Tempelhof and Kreuzberg; many bombs also hit the adjacent areas. However, the main-flight headed towards Berlin-Middle.

Although the Allied bombers used primarily explosive ordinance and not the specialized incendiary bombs, the sheer mass and number of bombs started a massive fire; the strong wind increased the inferno, engulfing whole city blocks. The zoo was hit, freeing the animals which fled spreading more panic. To the north, the Zeitungsviertel (the so-called ‘Newspaper-Quarter’ in Berlin-Friedrichsdorf) was badly hit, as was the Ritter-Street which was the main-center of export-businesses. Whole market halls fell prey to the attacks, burying hundreds beneath their collapsing structures.

The intended main targets were, of course, the buildings of the government. The Reichstag, (still heavily damaged from the sabotage of 12 years previous), was hit as well as the Reich-Chancellery and many ministries.

The People’s Court had been mostly evacuated as the first alert sounded, yet a few members of the staff remained to clear the building – or because they wanted to save important documents.

Among them was the Court-President Roland Freisler, infamous for his maliciousness and merciless actions against defendants and his high number of pronounced death-sentences. While the others fled to the bunker only a few houses away, he remained in his office to pack the files of political defendants he regarded as the worst traitors of all. He was killed during the first assault-wave. As he was found later, he still clung to the half-burnt file of the defendant Robert von Schlabrensdorff, whose trial had been in progress as the sirens began to howl, and certainly would have ended in the defendant’s death-penalty. It was an irony of fate that Robert von Schlabrensdorff would years later become one of the first judges at the Federal Constitution Court in the newly founded Federal Republic of Germany.

In a final ironic twist, the doctor who was called to attend to Freisler (called away from aiding the victims in the street) was the brother of Rüdiger Schleicher – a leader of the Underground, Freisler had sentenced to death only a day prior.
In its own way, justice had finally been served.

The second wave of attack began at 11:24 h. – only three minutes after the first was over – and lasted just as long. Buildings, parks, streets and squares which had survived the first assault, fell now prey to the next set of bombs. Whole neighborhoods in the center of Berlin were set aflame and burnt down, either burying the occupants alive or killing their inhabitants outright as the buildings collapsed.

Police and fire stations, schools and hospitals, none were spared. The famous train station at the Alexanderplatz (Alexander-square) was destroyed, as were the stations in Potsdam and Anhalter.

The Royal Castle – built 1442 and extended in the 17th century in the typical Baroque-style – burnt down to the ground. The same went for the opera-house ‘Unter den Linden’, as well as for many other historic buildings and churches in the neighborhood, structures that had stood for centuries.

360 munitions factories were also destroyed, while another 170 were so badly damaged, production was completely halted.

As the last bombers flew away, they left a wide wake of destruction. Only later would the world learn of the air-raid’s true magnitude. More than 2000 tons of blasting agents and more than 250 tons fire-bombs had been released.

Compared with the released bomb-material it hadn’t been the biggest air-raid Berlin had to endure, but it was the costliest.

As the Wehrmacht and the regime were finally able to take stock many days later, the result was disastrous.

Some 2,300 buildings were destroyed, another 900 were condemned. Over 3,600 homes were damaged, 22,500 apartment units were uninhabitable, leaving more than 120,000 people homeless.

There was a huge discrepancy concerning the number of victims. While the NS-regime spoke officially of almost 2,900 dead, it became quickly clear that this was a lie to show the country the ‘safety and strength’ of Berlin even during a large air-raid. The truth had a far uglier and darker face. The US-military calculated and reported on 14th February in London (basing on reports of the
Underground and own spies) that there had been 22,000 – 25,000 victims; among them many slave workers and Jewish prisoners who were banned from bunkers and bomb-proof quarters.

The fires burnt for 4 days. Many citizens were trapped in the damaged or destroyed quarters, the firemen helpless. Those trapped were forced to wait until the fire had burnt down and the stone- and debris heaps had cooled enough to climb over them.

The raid was, given their declared (and undeclared) goals, a success for the Allies: the railways were damaged, the arms industry weakened, large parts of the government-buildings damaged or destroyed (and the Russian were appeased and pleased with the other Allies’ support). But the price was high – too high, as posterity later declared. More than 80 percent of the bombs had hit civil houses and facilities. And the real goal hadn’t been achieved: Hitler and his staff were still alive and healthy – and the Führer didn’t even think of surrender, but planned vengeance.

But all this was unknown to those who had found shelter in bunkers, subway-stations and cellars and withstood the firestorm. Yet many of these survivors were traumatized and marked for the rest of their lives – especially the children, not all of whom had reached safety in time. Whether caught outside or trapped in school cellars, they had seen schoolmates and siblings die. Even decades later psychologists were still treating adults who had survived this morning in Berlin as children.

*** HH ***

All this was unknown to the people in the subway-station at the townhall of Neukölln. As the thunder and droning quieted down, many started to stand, believing that the horrific attack was over, but Klink knew better – after all Robert had warned him that the air-raid was organized in two waves.

“Stay where you are!” he shouted into the darkness as he heard the telltale noises around him. “The most assaults are done in two waves! This here isn’t over!”

“The sirens haven’t given all-clear-signal!” Schmidt supported the Oberst’s attempt to keep the people down in the subway. “Wait for the signal!”

Yet a few pushed through the others to get to the entrance. Two men of the SS stopped them, using physical force to keep them in place. Then – just like Klink had said – they all heard it; the next attack was on its way and nearing swiftly.
Wilhelm made himself as small as possible as the horror began anew, focusing on his memories of Robert to control his fear. He coughed repeatedly, as the air became filled with more dust, pebbles and other debris. To keep his lungs clear, Klink was forced to breathe through the material of his sleeve. His ears rang and his head hurt from the shrill whistles and detonations. The ground shook several times more, heat pouring down into the subway from above. One could easily despair and imagine they were on the precipice of Hell.

After a seeming eternity, the hellish noises began to quiet down. A few minutes more, and finally! the sirens, which were still intact, gave the ‘all-clear’ signal. The long howl echoed over a town that was one third in flames.

Slowly, not trusting the sirens, one by one people left the subway station only to face the disaster above. As Klink, Schultz and Burkhalter reached the surface, all three men stopped for a moment at the sight before them, then making way for those behind.

Looking along the street they had driven down almost an hour ago, they saw burning rows of houses. Part of the townhall had been hit too and fire raged out of the roof – evidence of the loud explosion Klink had recognized in time. The air was filled with dust, ashes, burning particles and the sharp smell of devouring flames. The injured and dead, either unable to reach shelter in time or had been robbed of it, lay on the street and sidewalk. Another detonation roared up as one of the burning cars down the road exploded.

Klink looked up. The skies were covered with black smoke caught beneath the clouds; the day was dark as the night. No wonder it wasn’t until Klink wiped his face with his sleeve that realized he’d lost his monocle.

“At least we survived,” Burkhalter said quietly beside him, as he put his cap down, combed his fingers through his short hair and placed the cap back on his head. His uniform was covered with dust, just like the clothes of all others. “I don’t want to imagine what would have happened, if a bomb had hit the subway entrance.”

“Then we would search our way along the tunnel to the next exit,” Klink murmured, unvoiced but understood that those near the entrance would have died in that scenario.

Schultz stood silently beside his Kommandant; his mind was – like that of the most others – paralyzed. He had fought in the first war and had lain weeks in the trenches, until he could enter the first Luftwaffe, where he belonged to the ground-staff. He had survived canons, the first shells and tanks, and the first bombs, as small as they had been. But never he had experienced an air-ambush like this. His gaze wandered over the burning houses down the road, heard the moans and sobs around him, saw people wandering off with expressionless faces – and felt his eyes moistening.
So much anguish, sorrow and grief, so much pain and hurt – and for what? For a few men’s and women’s clinging to crazy beliefs and ideals, which had been proven to be wrong. He didn’t blame the pilots who had flown the attack; he didn’t blame the Brits or Americans – Hitler had declared this war on them, not the other way around. They were protecting their home-countries by fighting the madman and his fellows. It was the Nazis’ fault that this horrible disaster had happened here in and other towns – as well as for every air- and ground-raid still to come.

He heard Klink and Burkhalter talking quietly with each other and distanced himself from them a few meters. He needed a moment and…

And someone bumped into him. He turned around and saw two young men, who looked with wide eyes and sheer fright at him.

“E-E-E-Entschuldigung, mein Herr,” (sorry, sir) one of them said while he closed his coat firmly around him – but not quickly enough. Hans had seen a part of the yellow star that had become visible for a moment. Glancing up at the two males, he recognized the mortal fear that rose in their eyes. Slave workers and prisoners of all heritage – especially Jewish – were forbidden entry to any facility or room that was used as air protection. The regime held the opinion that those confined places were only for the ‘good’ and ‘honorable’ German people, not for the ‘scum’. Anybody else, who got caught, had to be shot instantly.

So, it was no wonder that the two young men, who obviously had hidden in the subway-station, were horrified that a member of the Wehrmacht had caught them red-handed – with stolen coats no less.

Schultz hesitated, then – to hell with Hitler and his sick point of views! – murmured, “Run, you two. Try to get rid of this damn yellow thing. Enough houses are burning so you’ll have no problem to let them vanish, but don’t get caught while doing so. Head to the south, lay low and stay small. Try to hold on until this insanity will be finally over. The Russians are already in Poland and the Americans are about to cross the Rhine. I’m sure the regime’s days are numbered.”

He saw the disbelief, hope and beginning gratitude in their eyes, nodded at them, and was about to turn back towards Klink and Burkhalter, (who were still talking). Then he saw movement behind the two escapees – and blanched as he recognized Schmidt, who looked straight at him.

The Oberleutnant had also emerged from the subway-station in time to witness the little scene. Although the duo had their backs to him, Schultz’s short hesitation after he had glanced at one of the men’s chest, and his reaction now told Schmidt everything. He knew what those two, as thin as matchsticks, hid beneath their ill-fitting coats.
He looked from a startled Schultz to the two other men, who stared in renewed panic at him, pressed his lips into a thin line and came to a decision. Gesturing with his head down the street he told them mutely to go, knowing full well what he risked if anyone had seen the gesture.

One of them mouthed something to him, eyes bright with rising tears of gratitude, then they quickly melted into the crowd, mixing among the dazed survivors, walking zombie-like down the street...

Schultz gulped as Schmidt closed the distance to him. “Herr Oberleutnant…” he began, but the young man shook his head.

“No word!” he murmured. “I think we both did the right thing.”

Burkhalter and Klink stopped talking and looked questioningly at Schultz, and he sighed, “Shall I look if the car is still functional?”

“Good idea, Schultz,” Klink nodded, sounding hoarse because of too much inhaled dust and smoke like everyone.

Schultz nodded and hastened up the street into the direction where they had been forced to leave the car. Simultaneously, another officer of the SS appeared from a side-street, a dozen guards in his wake. Calling commands, the newcomers tried to impose some order to the confusion in the street. Relieved, Schmidt saw that the leading man outranked him. Thus, he was no longer responsible for calming the mess out here, and he could – maybe – drive back to Hammelburg together with the others.

The SS-officer – an Obersturmbannführer (equal to a major) – closed the distance to them as he saw them, introduced himself and asked if the gentlemen needed help. Schmidt gave him a short report of what had happened, and the other officer thanked him for taking charge even though Berlin was not the Oberleutnant’s responsibility.

But when Klink mentioned that he and the others wanted to take the general back to the Ministry of Aviation, the SS-officer shook his head.

“Forget it,” he said quietly. “We don’t have much information right now, but one thing is clear: Berlin-Middle is cut off – just like the areas around it. Everything is burning north of here. There is no way to enter the attacked area without risking death.”
“Any chance to reach the Führerbunker by radio?” Burkhalter asked, and the Obersturmbandführer shrugged.

“I don’t know, Herr General. Our headquarters are heavily damaged, the Gestapo-Headquarter in Kreuzberg, too. I don’t think that…” He stopped himself as the sound of new droning announced of the arrival of more aircraft. Many people panicked, but as Klink and the others looked up, they recognized some ME-262s and other planes of the Luftwaffe – obviously pursuing the Allies. Yet Klink doubted that they would be able to catch the attackers. The Calvary had come too late – like so often.

Burkhalter grimaced and cursed inwardly. Goering had been right. They should have used the ME-262s for the defense, not for the attack, but there was no way to convince Hitler otherwise. Sighing, Albert thought about the options he had for his person in the moment. There was no thought of returning to the government, and a stay in Berlin was unwise, too, since the chaos was sure to increase in the aftermath. Yet he couldn’t simply return home to Hammelburg. Hitler or one of the Führer’s staff could all too easily interpret this as a kind of desertion. The headquarters of the Luftwaffe was in Berlin – in the west, straight into the bombing-carpet the Allies had laid out. He doubted that the building was undamaged. So…

He was a member of the Heer – officially. So, there was another alternative for him. He glanced at Klink. “Should your car still be drivable, then take me to Wünsdorf near Zossen. The high command of the Heer has its headquarters there, and the facility also holds the Wehrmacht’s communication center. I’ll stay there and try to get in contact with Heinrich or Hermann, as soon as the telephones and the radios in Berlin are functioning again.”

Klink nodded with a grumble. Zossen lay approximately 20 km to the south of Berlin, and it would cost him time before he could return to Hammelburg. Okay, the way square through Berlin, (had they traveled that path only yesterday?), was impassable – maybe didn’t even exist anymore. Therefore, they had to detour around everything, and given the fact that they already were in South-Berlin shortened the route to Zossen a lot, yet every minute he lost nagged at him. He wanted nothing more than to return to his camp, get a shower, a big cognac and a soft bed – with Robert wrapped around him and kissing away the horror he had been through.

“Sergeant Schultz tries to get our attention,” Schmidt said quietly beside him and looking down the street, Klink saw the Bavarian waving almost happily at them from afar.

“Well, our coach seems to be all right at least,” he murmured, then observing the chaos of crashed and abandoned cars on the street, Klink came to a decision and addressed the Obersturmbandführer, “We’re going to need some help to pass through this traffic-knot here. Any chance to give us a hand?”
“Of course, Herr Oberst,” the man answered and barked a few orders. Saying good-bye, the two Wehrmacht-officers and the Oberleutnant walked towards Schultz, while a few SS-men began to steer and push the other stranded and damaged cars out of the way.

Klink couldn’t deny that he was not only relieved, but almost happy to see that his car was covered with dust, but mostly undamaged. Other cars hadn’t been this lucky, but his sat in an area where the destruction wasn’t that bad. Further down the street in the northerly direction of Berlin-Middle – everything seemed to be burning and those houses nearer and not yet aflame, shimmered and smoked in the heat, but the southerly part of the street was still flame and mostly debris free.

They were about to man the car, when Schmidt suddenly checked his motion. “Do you hear this?” he asked Burkhalter, who had opened the door to the backseat.

The general listened and frowned, just like Klink and Schultz did. “There…” Burkhalter murmured. “It sounds like… baby-crying.”

Schmidt turned towards the pavement and looked back up the road. Dead men and women lay where they fell or were thrown by the blasts and debris field. The evidence of how they all had met their demise was so clear that Horst’s stomach rebelled from the sight and smell, but he forced himself to close the distance to them – because the crying became louder.

He stopped beside a young woman whose bloody head showed that she had been slain by flying debris – a few bricks lay nearby. The whimpering and crying came directly from here.

Gulping, Schmidt knelt and gently turned the dead body around. He gasped as he saw his assumption confirmed. The young woman had shielded her child with her body, dying in her desperate need to protect her baby-boy.

The infant was crying and kicking now with his mother’s weight gone.

“Sweet Lord,” Klink murmured, who stopped beside Schmidt and looked down at the child.

“Hush, little one,” Schmidt whispered, opened his coat and carefully picked up the tiny boy. “Hush, it’s over now.” He pulled the baby to his chest, held him there with one hand and closed his coat around the little body, offering warmth and shelter like this.
“Schultz! Look if the lady has some ID-papers with her,” Burkhalter’s voice ordered above Schmidt’s crouching figure.

“She has no bag,” the sergeant, who had joined them, said quietly. “She certainly lost it during her flight down the street.”

Klink looked up the road and saw nothing else than burning houses and cars. There was absolutely no chance to search the pavement for the missing handbag without getting cooked.

“She wears the dog-tag of a man around her neck,” Schultz said, as he in turn knelt beside the young woman, checking her pockets to find some other hints to her identity. He felt deeply uncomfortable as he carefully removed the chain with the broken dog-tag – the proof that her husband, brother or father had died in the war.

“What now?” Klink asked hoarsely. “I don’t know where the next orphanage is.”

“Even if we knew one, they are all overcrowded,” Schmidt answered quietly. “At least that it what I heard a few times.” He rose and held the baby safely in his arm beneath the coat; feeling the tiny fingers clinging to his jacket and tie. “I’ll take him with me and try to get some information about his heritage.” He nodded at Schultz, who still held the dog-tag in his right hand. “Keep that until we’re back in Hammelburg. I’m going to do some research afterwards.”

Burkhalter gaped at the young man. “You want to take the baby with you?” he asked flabbergasted.

“We can’t leave him here, as you certainly agree. The houses around are about to catch fire, everyone flees to the south. The little guy wouldn’t survive the next hour. Given the chaos in Berlin, I see no chance to take the little one to an orphanage, so he comes with us,” Horst decided and headed back towards the car.

“But… you can’t let him live in the Gestapo-Headquarters, and… and you’re unmarried, so who shall take care of the child?” Burkhalter seemed to be completely at loss.

Schmidt stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “I’ll find a solution. The little guy has survived this catastrophe, and his mother gave her life to protect him. To honor her sacrifice by taking care of her baby is the least we can do.”
“He is right,” Klink said firmly. “And I think I’ve a solution for the situation.”

“Such as?” Burkhalter challenged.

The Oberst sighed. “Let me check it when we’re back in Hammelburg.” With those words he followed Schmidt to their car. He wanted nothing more than to return to Stalag 13 and to feel Robert’s arms around him…

TBC…

Well, Klink and the others survived – and now they even have a very special reminder of the hell they escaped: A little baby-boy. And – boy – this will change a lot; at least for Schmidt and another person.

Like I mentioned at the beginning, the given details about this particular air-raid are historical facts. I know that it is hard to read about them, but they’re a part of the whole horror, WW II was for all, and I hope it didn’t trouble you too much.

In the next chapter, Hogan, the others, Stalag 13 and its current Kommandant will have a larger part again. And I can already promise that Robert and the major will clash again, while Klink and the others are reaching Zossen (an also historical correct location).

I hope, you liked the chapter despite its darkness, and – like always – I’m absolutely curious about your reactions and thoughts.

Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Old and new chaos

Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so very much for the BIG feedback the last chapter got, and I’m glad that you were to taken with it despite its dark topic. I’m also sorry for the delay, but my current beta-reader is very busy. And because I’m as good as off for my summer-holidays (they begin tomorrow in the early morning) I’m publishing this and the next chapter without any correction. I apologize for any mistakes, but I think you rather live with them for now than waiting further two weeks, before the story continues. I’ll replace this and the next chapter as soon as I get the beta-read vision, okay?

The new chapter is about the aftermath of the air raid that changed a lot for Schmidt and the others, but also has stirred up a lot in Hogan and his men. And Major Sandhaus has his own way to handle the news from Berlin, so get ready for a load of emotions you certainly undergo within this chapter.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 44 – Old and new chaos

Arms wrapped firmly around himself, Hogan sat beside Kinchloe, who wore the headsets and listened to the regular update London was giving him – a favor from Butler. Robert felt cold and somehow out of place – as if the real world was beside him and he heard and watched everything from another point of view. One of the remaining POWs of Barracks 2 had brought him a blanket he used to keep himself warm, but it was for naught. The coldness in the tunnels was nothing compared to the ice that flowed slowly through his veins.

Over and over again he glanced at his wrist watch – an hour now. How long until this damn raid was over? And, what was far more important: Had Will made it to a safe place in time? Was he okay? Was he even still alive?
Hogan knew that he wouldn’t get any answers for those three question in foreseeable future. Even if Wilhelm was well, he would need time to find a chance to call the camp – if he could do it at all. Yet Hogan prayed that…

“It’s over,” Kinchloe said quietly, while pressing the right part of the headset more firmly against his ear with two fingers. “London says that the last bombers left the area of Berlin and are heading to the north. German defense air-crafts are on their way to intercept them, but it seems our boys are to far-away to get in any danger.”

“Results?” Hogan asked pressed; not really wanting to hear the answer. After almost an hour of bombarding he didn’t need much information to imagine the town’s condition.

“Our boys said that approx. a third of Berlin was hit and burns.”

“Blimley!” Newkirk whispered, who had left the telephone station over half an hour ago. There was no chance that someone from Berlin would call the camp during the raid, so he joined Hogan and Kinchloe in the radio-room. “At least a third of the town? It’s very windy today. The flames will spread even more until…” He shook his head. Yes, after the disastrous attacks of London done by German air-crafts, Newkirk held even less sympathy for the country he was forced to be in the moment, yet one thing he never forget: the many civil people which fell prey during such a raid.

“More details can’t be given for now. To get a whole synopsis will last days,” Kinchloe repeated the message that was given to him from London. “A personal word from Butler: He hopes that your friends are safe, Colonel.”

Hogan growled deeply in his throat. “They would have been if he had stopped this damn ambush in time,” he said furiously. “Dammit, I don’t want to imagine how many victims this unfortunate time schedule has left! There have to be thousands of dead people!”

Kinch ended the connection with London while his superior was whispering harshly to himself, and put the headset down. Looking at Hogan, he felt deep sympathy for his friend. There was absolutely no doubt anymore what was going on between the colonel and his German counterpart. Those two always had an odd relationship – practically from the beginning – and a certain tension between them had risen within the last year that obviously had peaked into something else now. In earlier times Kinch would have laughed it off if someone told him, Robert ‘Tomcat’ Hogan would fall for another guy, but he would bet his last shirt that exactly this happened now. The two not only sounded like a long-married couple – this they did since the moment they met – they were likewise close.

And Hogan was burning for the Saxonian – a burn that now had risen dread in him at the mere
thought ‘Willie’ could belong to the victims. Kinchloe really hoped that the Kommandant – and Schultz – had made it. Not only for Hogan’s sake, but for their all’s, because one thing was clear: Without Klink their operation was done for. And, as he had to admit, then the camp would really turn into a prison. What happened if Klink wasn’t in charge had been clearly seen within the last 24 hours.

The same moment a head peeked through the open entrance in the bed over their heads. “Sirs? They’re summoning the next working troop!”

“Dammit!” Kinch cursed. “That refers to you and me, Peter.”

Hogan looked alarmed at him. “I need someone down here, who listens to the radio and mans the telephone station. I can’t stay here for very much longer and…”

“You should be back in bed for an hour now, Gov’nor,” Newkirk interrupted him with concern. Hogan looked like shit by now.

“Tell this London and fate,” Robert grumbled, before he looked back at Kinch. “Any chance to send Baker back?”

“I’ll try,” Kinch promised. “I also inform Benneton before I leave. He’s a communication-expert too, you know. He can watch the telephone, while Baker mans the radio if I can send him back, okay?”

Hogan nodded; feeling miserable. Will was out there in the burning town; maybe injured and cut off any help. And he, Robert Hogan, the so-called ‘mastermind’ of the most daring espionage-ring in whole Germany, lay in a damn bed, stared at the ceiling and could do nothing else than waiting. He HATED it!!!

He suppressed the shudder that ran through him and tried to control the chatter of his teeth. And, as he had to admit, his body’s reaction was NOT only because of his fear for the man who had wriggled himself deeper in his heart than he ever thought possible.

“Sir, go before you relapse or one of the guards checks on you and finds Olsen in your place,” Kinch said softly, but also firmly. His friend was cold to the bones, and you didn’t need to be a genius to know in what this could result.
Throwing up his hands, Hogan had to give in, handed Newkirk the blanket back and limped down the tunnels, while ordering, “As soon as anyone of you hears the tiniest thing about Klink or the others, inform me. And I don’t care how or when.”

Newkirk and Kinch stared after him, and James was about to follow him to give him a helping hand while climbing the ladder back into Klink’s quarters, but Peter hindered him by laying a hand on his arm. “We’ve to go or we rise too much attention. Come on, he makes it alone back.”

Kinchloe shook his head in frustration. “Dammit, this is one of the biggest mess we ever faced: A maybe dead Klink, a love-stricken Hogan who maybe will suffer a deep loss, a true Nazi as Kommandant and our operation barely functional in the moment.” He began to climb up the ‘ladder’. “I really begin to hate this war.”

*** HH *** HH ***

Klink’s staff-car was heading down the road, and bypassed the townhall where the fire was spreading more and more. Klink, who sat together with Burkhalter on the backseat, looked at the entrance to the subway – the place they owed their lives. This part of the subway was already evacuated and many people walked along the pavement; some clung to each other, others were going alone, others were clearly under shock. The realization, what happened, would hit home later.

On the passenger-seat was Schmidt; holding the infant safely under his coat and in his arms. The tiny boy was still weeping here and there, but his eyes were falling close over and over again; the stress the little body and his innocent soul had been put through was demanding its toll. Horst had cupped the baby’s head with one hand; his thumb moved in soothing circles over the soft skin of the small temple and the little cheek. He had no clue how to take care of the child, but he would do it. Yes, he would need help – this much was for sure – but maybe he could find some support from the nurses in the Hammelburg-hospital.

And he needed supplies for the infant: Nappies, clothes, a cradle, food. Sweet Lord, what did an infant in this age eat if no mother-milk was present? How old was the little guy anyway? He had no experiences with babies, so he could only guess how old his charge was – three, four, five months? God, he really was at loss, but he would manage it. Somehow!

They drove in silence and needed a lot of time until they reached the southern part of Berlin, because over and over again people used the street to flee towards relative safety, while fire trucks and ambulance-cars headed to the north; trying to help the survivals what depended on the chance to reach the hit quarters.
Burkhalter was very quiet, while he sat on the back-seat beside Klink. Finally he glanced at the Oberst and murmured, “Your refusal to turn the car and to drive back to Berlin-Middle, obviously saved us all for. Usually I should press charges against you for insubordination, but seeing that your disobedience based on clear thoughts, while I decided because of a gut-feeling, I let this deed go.”

“Thank you,” Klink said softly; knowing that he had been indeed in deep water for disobeying a direct order of his superior.

Burkhalter waved a hand. “I owe you my life – again. I haven’t forgotten how you came to my aid while these two traitors in Stalag 13 tried to kill me.”

“Hogan came to help you, too,” Wilhelm reminded him, and Burkhalter rolled his eyes.

“Yes, that he did. Somehow this damn Ami has a soft spot for us.” He looked shortly out of the window. “I wish, his comrades would have likewise feelings.”

Klink sighed. “We started the war – and Hitler declared war on the US, not the other way around.”

“An absolute crazy idea,” Albert agreed, but out of another reason than Klink, like it was proved a moment later. “It was far too early. We weren’t ready for the Americans. Our arms industry would have needed two or three months more, then we would have had a real chance, but so…” He shrugged, before he changed the topic. “Any chance that this Vienna café-house, you invited us to, survived?”

Klink shook his head and lied, “It laid more to the north-west, where the Allies attacked directly. I don’t think that there was one stone left standing.”

The general sighed. “A shame – I really would have loved to get a good Vienna Mélange again. I could have needed it after this damn trial.”

Hesitating, Wilhelm asked, “What do you think? Did Hochstetter made it to the prison?”

“It’s in the south-west. Therefore the paddy-wagon headed directly into the direction where the air-raid started. If Hochstetter was lucky, his guards took him with them as they certainly sought refugium in the next bunker. If not, he is history.” He glanced back at Klink. “If so, at least you don’t have to wreck your brain, if this ‘poison-gnome’, how you called him, will ambush you one day.”
He couldn’t know, how wrong he was…

*** HH ***

“The sirens are signaling ‘all-clear’,” a man in a black suite said as he returned into the bunker beneath the Gestapo-Headquarters in Kreuzberg that was placed at the Prinz-Albrecht-Street. It was an older building in the pompous style of the Belle Epoque and had been built 1901 as a museum. After its founding first the Gestapa and then the Gestapo used the house as the main headquarters, and had extended the building more and more, including a bunker that was installed behind the original house in the ground.

The house to the left had been the Prinz-Albrecht-Hotel, but had been closed in 1933 and were now the seat of Himmler since 1934.

Now, at this morning, everything changed. A large part of the former museum was in flames, Himmler’s office and the buildings in the neighborhood were gravely damaged. The men and women, who worked here, had found shelter in the bunker and several important files and documents had been saved just in time before the air-raid started; then hell had broken loose above their heads and had quiet down now for maybe ten minutes.

At the man’s arrival, the other people rose from their sitting positions and looked expectantly at him.

“And the building?” a Kriminalrat asked.

“Was hit. The higher levels are burning. Giesselmann, Vogt and Brandner are trying to save more of the important documents, but we shouldn’t leave the bunker within the next one or two days. As it seems, a large part of Kreuzberg and the quarters in the north were hit very hard. All I could see were flames and smoke.” He sighed. “At least we’ve enough nourishment here to hold on for a few days.”

Curses were to hear, while others voiced deep worry for their families.

Only one man seemed to be unmoved of everything. He sat in an edge and was chained to the chair he occupied. Hochstetter still wore his black SS-uniform, but every insignias had been removed forcefully – the clear signal that he had been given an dishonorable discharge. No one took notice of him, while he looked with burning eyes at the next wall; face deathly white.
The paddy-wagon had changed the direction the moment the first alert was given, and had headed to the Gestapo-headquarters. The drivers had took him with them, but at first the entrance to the bunker had been denied for him – him, a sentenced prisoner.

How often had he been here, in this building, within the last elven years? How often had he exchanged information with colleagues, had sipped coffee in their offices or had nice evenings afterwards with them in the restaurants around? Others had lifted the hat when he walked down the street to this house, inferiors had shown him respect, men of equal rank had shaken his hand. And now they denied him first the entrance to the bunker, presenting him to almost certain death. A former colleague, he had an easy friendship with, had finally spoken up on his behalf and he had been allowed into the bunker – like he was an unworthy individuum all of sudden.

He didn’t think how often this had been done to other people the Nazis regarded as ‘unworthy’. He didn’t think that he had done the same to Hogan only three weeks ago – denying him any chance to escape certain death by leaving him behind. He didn’t think that he was a sentenced man now because of insubordination and also abusing of his rank and position. He only thought about the wrongfulness that he was now on the other side of the desk, so to say – that law had been turned against him. Not once it occurred to him, how often he had done injustice in the past – or how often the latter was in Germany day by day.

He only saw the unfairness that had been done to him in his eyes. That he was now here, in this bunker, and would be brought to a working camp where he would have to bust a gut for the next eight years – if he survived at all – was only the fault of the others; namely Klink, Burkhalter, Schultz and this traitor Schmidt.

But mainly Klink!

This foolish coward who all of sudden grew a back-bone, had LIED during the trial as he stated he had defended himself. It had been the other way around, end of story. Hochstetter remembered very well how Hogan’s movements stilled and the short bliss of triumph to whip finally his nemesis from the face of earth, only to see all of sudden Klink in front of him, before the Oberst tore him away and punched him hard enough to make him seeing stars. Klink had attacked first, not the other way around! And this was also out of ‘personal reasons’, because this God-forsaken bastard was a traitor and had befriended Hogan – an enemy of the Third Reich!

If this damn bastard would have admitted the truth, he – Hochstetter – would have had maybe a chance to turn the wheel once more, but no. Of course Klink had lied to save his own skin, supported by this big ox Schultz. And Hochstetter knew exactly why Klink had done it. Not because they both weren’t exactly on good terms with each other, but because of Hogan. Klink had wanted to protect Hogan – again – by getting him, Hochstetter, out of the way, and therefore he had moved
earth and skies that the judges would see it his way.

Yes, Hochstetter was furious that Schmidt had brought more proofs with him – that his own guards had stated against him – but this didn’t wake his fury like the thought of Klink. And Hogan.

Both were still free, even in the American’s case, because Hochstetter simply knew that Hogan could leave and return to the camp to his liking. He was anything but a real prisoner. And after the war, he would speak up for Klink and would make certain that his friend wouldn’t be put to any court material – if the Allies would press charges against the Oberst at all, after all he was one of their spies, too! Klink and Hogan would live their lives in freedom, while he – Hochstetter – would remain a prisoner.

They would pay for it! He didn’t care how long it would last, until he could get revenge. He didn’t care how long he would have to hang on, but he would survive this all here, and afterwards he would search for them. And if it would need years and more years to find them, he wouldn’t give up until he had reached his goal.

‘Don’t think you’re safe. I’ll come back one day – and then you’re dead!’

*** HH *** HH ***

“What?” LeBeau stared with open mouth at Kinchloe and Newkirk. He had been forced to join the first troop despite the fact that usually he had a job as a cook now. Sandhaus’ opinion of this matter had been clear: ‘There are more important things to do than cooking for this blasted Ami. He shall eat what he gets, or stay hungry. I do not care!’

“It’s true,” Kinch murmured and looked over his shoulder at the guards, caught Langenscheidt’s gaze – who grimaced and turned away – and whispered, “At least a third of Berlin is burning.”

“And Klink – and Schultzie?” Louis asked; feeling real worry rising in him. He had come to like the large Bavarian – and Klink… Well, the man was their protector and supporter now; had it been for approx. two years and more. Somehow during the three weeks he, LeBeau, had been at the Oberst’s quarters and cooked for the two colonels, he learned to see the man beneath the uniform. He was indeed concerned for the two Germans’ welfare. And, as it became more and more clear, this SS-guy Schmidt was a fine man, too. He really didn’t want to see them hurt – or, worse, dead.

“We’ve no clue,” Newkirk murmured. “The gov’nor called Klink at the Court where Hochstetter’s
trial took place, and warned him. But if he and the others made it…” He shrugged with an
uncomfortable expression on his face.

on your feet. You’ve to go back to the camp and watch the radio. Benneton already manned the
telephone station. The colonel is beside himself with worry for Klink – and Schultz, too, of course.”

Richard smiled shortly. “So, the two are really… You know?” As Kinch looked with a frown at him,
Baker smirked, “Louis and Peter told me.”

James grimaced, “Tattlers,” he grumbled, before he shrugged. “We’ve no real proofs, but the two
colonels seemed to be rather close by now.”

“Okay, then someone really should keep his ears open, if our walking monocle survived,” Baker
murmured, before he added, “I return to the camp. I really don’t need much effort to sway on my
feet. This work is inhuman.”

They glanced at the road they were freeing of the snow. A path had been shoveled away by the two
tanks, but the snow was nonetheless house-high on both sides of the street and needed to be shoveled
away to prevent the snow from sliding down and closing the gap again.

“Is something the matter here?” Langenscheidt had closed the distance to them, and looked quickly
at the other POWs, who had come to replace the one or other man, but mainly were forced to join
those who already shoveled snow for hours now. He felt sympathy for them and he would have
loved to send the first troop back to the camp, but Sandhaus’ changed orders were clear: The second
troop had to support the first one who only could return in two hours. Karl was furious inwardly.
The current Kommandant was a slave-driver, nothing more!

“Baker caught the cold, too – and it’s getting worse,” LeBeau said, and Baker put on a good show of
being barely able to remain on his feet, while he coughed.

Langenscheidt watched him. Okay, he had to admit that he still had some trouble of recognizing
paleness or not by people with dark skin, but Baker really didn’t look so good. And the coughing
sounded bad. Yet Karl couldn’t skip the thought that this was an act to get back to the camp – for
whatever reasons. Baker belonged to Hogan’s inner circle, and Karl couldn’t shake of the
assumption that this damn gang was up to something, but he didn’t care. Not really. Until now
everything turned out well in the end, why shouldn’t it be different this time?
“Okay, go back to the camp, report yourself sick to Sergeant Wilson and hit the mattress.”

“Thank you, Corporal,” Baker wheezed.

“You’re welcome. PRIVATE NOLTING?” he shouted and one of the camp’s guards jogged towards them. “Take Sergeant Baker back to the camp. He caught this damn nasty cold, too. If Major Sandhaus complains about it, tell him that we make good process here and that I only obeyed the Geneva Conventions by taking consideration of the sergeant’s health.” He nodded at Baker. “Get better, Sergeant.”

“Thanks, Charly,” Baker coughed and followed the private, who led him to one of the trucks.

Kinchloe and Newkirk exchanged a look. One task was done!

*** HH *** HH ***

“Donnerwetter! (gosh / golly!). Just have a look. The High Command knows how to reside.” Schultz, who had driven them the whole way to Zossen-Wünsdorf, looked with big eyes at the buildings behind the heavily guarded fence and gate, where he had stopped the staff-car. He saw country houses with pretty roofs, timbre-framed facades and even small gardens. They built in a circle with a plaza in the middle. Woods and meadows were around them, another street crossed the one from the gates not far away. Everything looked almost idyllic, if it wouldn’t be for the guards at the gate and the men in Wehrmacht’s- and Waffen-SS-uniforms which walked down the plaza.

No-one could even assume that this was the headquarters of the Wehrmacht’s High Command since the late summer 1944, and that these houses, which once had been indeed nothing else than cottages, had been changed into strong bunkers. The rest was only a mask to confuse the civil-people and the Allied air-crafts. In truth this here was the bunker-facility Maybach I. Beneath the houses, were wells with drink-water and plumbing, air-filter systems (as protection against eventually gas-attacks) and diesel-engines which delivered the power.

Not far away was Maybach II which looked almost identically, and the Bunker ‘Zeppelin’ that once held only a telephone exchange for the Wehrmacht. Now it was the signal intelligence center of the whole army; disguised with the cover-name ‘Amt 500’ (office 500 – officially a post office branch). The bunkers underground held the most modern radio- and telephone equipment of whole Germany, as well as all technical fundamental requirement to offer the High Command everything that was needed to work and to live here.
Two guards came towards them; automatic pistoles aimed at them, while a sergeant followed them.

Lowering the window, Schultz saluted quickly. “Good day, Gentlemen, I bring General Burkhalter.”

The sergeant stepped in front of the two guards and spied into the open window, recognized the staff-officer on the back-seat and saluted quickly.

“General, welcome to the OKW (Oberkommando Heer – High Command Heer / Wehrmacht). May I ask who are your companions?”

“Oberst Klink from Stalag 13 and SS-Oberleutnant Schmidt from the HQ in Hammelburg. We’re coming straight from Berlin.”

“From Berlin?” the sergeant asked; shocked. “Are the gentlemen well?”

“Yes, as far as someone can be well if he had to hide in a subway station while outside the bombs were falling,” Burkhalter answered non-characteristic softly.

“How… how is the situation in Berlin?” the sergeant barely dared to ask.

“A catastrophe,” the general replied. “The smoke and flames could be seen even here if there wouldn’t be no trees and hills which block the view.” He shook his head. “We’ve no idea how bad it really is, but one thing is certain: There was no chance for us to reach the government-quarter.” He sighed. “Is Colonel-General Guderian here?” (hist., acting Chief of the OHK General Staff ’til March 1945)

“No, sir, he is… was… is in Berlin,” the sergeant gulped, obviously shaken by what he heard. Then he turned towards one of the guards. “Call House 1. Tell them that General Burkhalter and two other officers are here – and that they come from Berlin.” He let his glance wandering over the car that was still dirty with ashes and other tracks, and shuddered inwardly. While the man jogged instantly to the guardhouse, the sergeant said. “I’ll take care that the gentlemen get their visitor-passes.” He looked at Schultz. “Your name, please?”

“Sergeant Hans Georg Schultz.”
The same moment the baby who had fallen asleep, began to move beneath Schmidt’s coat and squeaked quietly in obvious confusion.

Instantly the second guard aimed his rifle at the SS-officer, who rolled his eyes. “I assure you, Private, a several month old baby is no real threat for this facility here.” He couldn’t mask the mockery in his voice.

“A baby?” the sergeant asked thunderstruck.

“What, do you think, are these squeaks?” Opening his coat a little bit, Schmidt showed him the infant, while Burkhalter explained, “A surviving citizen of Berlin we found beneath the dead body of his mother after the catastrophe. The Oberleutnant took care of the child.”

The sergeant nodded. “I call the infirmary that a doctor can check the gentlemen and the baby through, and inform the cantina that some milk and purée is needed.” He smiled at the infant, who snuggled closer to Schmidt’s chest.

The guard, who had run to the guardhouse, called, “General Burkhalter and his companions are expected at House 1 as soon as possible.”

‘Of course, like this the High Command gets information about the air-raid first-hand,’ Burkhalter thought; making a face.

“I’ll let the visitor-passes bring to you as soon as they are issued, sir. You know the way to House 1.”

“Thanks Sergeant,” Burkhalter nodded, who had been here several times, and leant back in the backseat. He knew that this facility would be his home for the next days.

*** HH ***

They stayed there for almost two hours, answered questions and told what happened. Parallel more and more reports arrived in the Headquarters, and one was worse than the prior one. The four men cleaned themselves as good as possible, brushed out their uniforms, and got a very late lunch with a lot of to drink (water and milk to fight the tracks of the smoke they had breathed in). The doctor, who was called to examine the four men – and the baby – found tracks of a small fume poising and their
all hearing had suffered, but this would heal within the next days.

He also examined the baby for any injuries. There was none despite some scratches and bruises, which happened as his mother lay above him – protecting him against the fallen debris – yet the doctor wasn’t sure if the baby’s hearing had taken any damage. Time would show it. He also said that the boy had to be three or four months old and certainly was already weaned – or his mother had been about to wean him. Now, during the war, nourishment was rare and the own mother milk was the best way to keep an infant feed as good as possible.

Because a military base had no baby-supplies, they used a triangular bandage as a nappy and the doctor handed Schmidt some more of them so that he would be able to change them if necessary during their drive back to Hammelburg. Something close to panic appeared on Schmidt’s face then, because he had absolutely no clue how to change nappies, but Schultz calmed him by stating that he could do it; after all, he had risen five children and had given his wife a helping hand often enough. One of the cooks made a purée from grey and mixed it with scrapped apple and banana. He also warmed some milk with water, and while the officers talked about everything that happened more, Schultz took care of the infant – to Schmidt’s relief, because in the moment the young man was unable to cope with everything the baby was going to need.

At four o’clock in the afternoon, Klink, Schmidt and Schultz were ready to leave. Burkhalter offered them to stay overnight and to begin their tip back to Hammelburg the next day, but the Oberst declined. He wanted only one thing now: Back to his camp and then straight into Robert’s arms.

They got a few spare canisters with gasoline so that they – hopefully – could drive to Hammelburg without having to stop at a filling station. Because they were forced to leave their luggage behind, they were also supplied with washing-utensils should they have to stay overnight in a hotel during their way back, and they also got bottles with water and nourishment, including a few portions of the purée the cook had made for the baby, and some milk.

Burkhalter assured them that he would make certain that their belongings would be sent to Hammelburg as soon as there was a chance to reach the bunker they had stayed in the night prior, and the luggage could be retrieved.

Two times Klink had tried to get a telephone connection to Stalag 13, what Burkhalter prevented. “The telephone lines are really needed for more important things in the moment, Klink. I’m sure your men were able to handle the garbage-problem!” the general scoffed in his typical way.

“But they certainly have heard about Berlin by now and worry for Schultz’ and my welfare,” Klink had protested; knowing that word of his survival would spread through the camp within minutes, what would calm down Robert who certainly worried his head off for him.
Burkhalter had rolled his eyes. “Yeah, we all know how much your men love you,” he had mocked.

“They were happy as Hogan and I survived after the air-craft ambush, and even applauded as we returned to the camp.”

“If this wasn’t only because of Hogan,” the general muttered mockingly beneath his breath. “The lines are needed for other, really important purposes in the moment. Your men will hold on until you’re back!” he had said aloud, and this was the end of the second discussion.

Like this, the still dirty staff-car left the facility around four o’clock in the afternoon and headed to the south – and the black skies over Berlin and even the shimmer of still raging fires were to see for a very long time whoever of them dared to look back.

*** HH *** HH ***

“No word or track from them until now.” A very tired Kinchloe had crept into Klink’s quarters, and leant now against the door frame of the bedroom; arms crossed in front of him. During the hard work he had sweated, now he was chilled to the bones after sitting on the cargo area of the truck that brought him and a part of the other POWs back to the camp first. An icy wind was blowing and the men felt like living icicles.

Hogan nodded silently; feeling likewise cold even if he was covered with the warm comforter. He had spent the last hours with wandering through the little building or laying in bed, staring at the ceiling. He felt locked up with the walls closing up at him – more than ever before. He wanted to drive to the north-east and search for Will (and the others). Of course, this would be not only utterly crazy, it also would be completely senseless. To find a single person in such a big town was impossible even without that said city war partly in flames. There was absolutely nothing he could do than waiting, yet he had the feeling of slowly going mad by ‘sitting’ here and hoping for a miracle, while even his hard military training couldn’t prevent his mind of seeing horrible scenarios which could have befallen Will – and Schultz (and Schmidt, too).

His glance found Kinch. He saw his friend shivering and he forced his thoughts away from the haunting imaginations of a dead and maybe burnt body of his secret lover. He was still the commanding officer of the POWs here – and the chief of the ‘Unsung Heroes’, which were also his friends. And they were miserable because the slogged to their limits during this day.

“How are you and the others?” he asked quietly.
He couldn’t fool Kinchloe. Okay, that Hogan was concerned for their welfare was something that seemed to be a living part of the colonel, yet it was obvious that his mind was somewhere else – with his German counterpart who seemed to be so much more for Hogan now. ‘Sweet Lord, Robert, he got you good,’ he thought with a mixture of amusement but also sympathy. Should Klink be among the many, many victims the air-raid left behind, it certainly would hurt Hogan in a way he didn’t want to think of.

Clearing his throat, he murmured, “Tired like puppies, cold and hungry.” He caught Hogan’s alerted gaze and nodded at the unspoken question in his superior’s eyes. “Yes, the last meal we had was this morning.”

“Goddammit bastard!” Hogan snarled; being completely distracted for now. “I’ll report him to the Red Cross. This is against every rule and…”

“Kinch!” Carter’s voice sounded through the open entrance in Klink’s living room. “They’re making a roll call.”

Groaning and grimacing, James turned around. “Are all of us back?” he called back.

“Yeah, that’s the reason for the roll call.”

“Go,” Hogan murmured. “I’ll think of something to stop this sick bugger.”

Kinch only nodded; knowing there was nothing his superior and friend could do in the moment against the bitter and hateful acting Kommandant. If Klink would return, this beginning nightmare would be brought to a halt. If not…

He climbed back into the entrance, pulled the furnace above the hole and jogged through the tunnels back to Barracks 2, together with an exhaust Carter. As he stepped two minutes later on the compound, he instantly could feel the changed atmosphere. A deep and odd tension lay in the air, laden with uncertainty and a certain dread.

Looking up at the watch towers, he saw the guards quietly talking with each other – duty forgotten for the moment. Other guards on the ground stood there with shocked or expressionless faces, and Kinch pressed his lips into a short line for a moment. ‘They know,’ he thought. ‘They heard about Berlin.’
He glanced at a pale Langenscheidt, who counted the members of Barracks 2 in the moment, and their gazes met. Forcing an asking expression on his face, Kinch cocked one eye-brow – after all, he already knew what happened. Karl shook slowly his head and murmured, “Later!”

The same moment Sandhaus came out of the Kommandantur, watched the sergeants ending the counting and demanded report.

“All prisoners are present,” Langenscheidt announced, while closing the distance to the acting Kommandant.

“Very well,” Sandhaus said; face pale, expression icy, eyes burning with fury. “Prisoner!” he said loudly, “A third of the road has been laid free, like I learned from Leutnant von Neuhaus. You can do better. Tomorrow we’ll see, how much you’re able to manage.”

“Maybe we can work better, if we would got our rightful ration of nourishment – means, a lunch,” Kinchloe commented strongly.

“Tomorrow is Sunday!” another voice shouted from somewhere at the left.

“I don’t care what day tomorrow is – just like your comrades didn’t care about the weekday this morning!” Sandhaus stated grimly. He stepped a meter closer to the first row of POWs. “Knowing that nothing is so quickly like rumors, I’ll want to give you some information about the gossip’s topic that already makes the round in the camp. This morning, around elven o’clock, American air-fighters attacked Berlin. It was a cowardly devious ambush without the tiniest display of humanity, seeing that at this time almost the most civilians were outside of their homes to follow their private businesses for the weekend, and the most children were at school.”

“Just like it was in London as you Nazis attacked without any care how many civilian people would be killed!” another voice shouted from the background

Sandhaus flushed with fury. “Who was this!” he demanded. As no reaction came, he repeated more firmly, “WHO. WAS. THIS!”

To his shock – and Langenscheidt’s amusement – one by one all POWs lifted their right hand. Gritting his teeth, the major needed a few seconds to collect himself. “As you wish,” he growled. “Rations will be lowered, lights out at half past six and…”
“You’re breaking your own German laws and rules, Major,” Kinchloe spoke up. “I know that you Germans have a knack for collective punishment, but POWs are left out of this kind of penalty.”

“I do not care!” Sandhaus snarled. “To your all information: Oberst Klink and his companions were at the People’s Court as the air-raid took place. First information say that the court is still burning and is not savable, just like the most other buildings in the street. Given the fact that we haven’t heard a peep from him until now, we’ve to expect the worst. Should the Oberst belong to the victims, I’ll purpose for the command here, and I can already promise you one thing, Gentlemen, then you’ll see which way the wind is blowing.” He raised his voice as the first protests were to hear. “I’ll change the tune, believe me! And to show you, what I mean, you’ll have one hour to eat, wash and to find your bunks. In one hour, at six o’clock, the lights will be out and…”

“This is against regulations!” Kinch spoke up.

“One word more, nigger, and you can count the minutes in the cooler for the next days – if you can count so far at all.”

“Herr Major…” Langenscheidt protested, but Sandhaus ignored him.

“You heard me: One hour. DISMISSED!” he snapped at the prisoners, before he turned his attention to Langenscheidt, who took a deep breath.

“Herr Major, those men are not responsible for the air-raid. For them the war is over for months – years even.” He spoke quietly, but firmly. Before Sandhaus could answer, he added, “What are you doing here, is indeed against any regulation.”

“I’ll make the regulations here, Corporal, and I interpret the rules. If you have a problem with it, I can arrange for your transfer to the Russian Front.”

“Well, this front isn’t too far away anymore, isn’t it!” Karl hissed; feeling his control slipping. “But one thing is for certain, Herr Major: I made a vow and I signed in for the compliance of regulations, like every other guard here in this camp. If you think you can break them because of your personal feelings and desire for vengeance, I’ve no other chance than reporting you to Berlin.” He continued despite the fact that Sandhaus snapped something at him. “You wouldn’t be the first camp-Kommandant who faces trouble because of violations of rules. This is still a state of law and…”
The major narrowed his eyes and interrupted him sharply, “Herewith you’re removed from your position and released from duty. You’re confined to your room until…”

“May I drive your attention to the fact that your driver lives in my chamber?”

Sandhaus took a deep breath. “Corporal, go to your current dorm and remain there. I’ll take care of your case as soon as I learned if Oberst Klink survived or not. And believe me, I’ll make certain that you face court material! Dismissed!”

Langenscheidt simply looked at him. “People who lives in a glass house shouldn’t throw stones, because it was not me who broke law!” Then he turned away and headed for the guards’ quarters; too angry to be worried in the moment.

Kinchloe had watched the whole scene with rising concern. Langenscheidt was their only real ally here in the camp for now, and to lose him could be crucial. Walking back to Barracks 2, he reached them at the last, but stopped at the door as LeBeau murmured, “The bosche is heading to Klink’s quarters.”

“If he kicks out the colonel, he’ll face pure hell as soon as Klink returns,” James murmured, before he sighed, “If Klink returns.”

*** HH ***

Hogan heard the door to the little building opening and closed his eyes; pretended to be asleep. His ears caught nearing steps and he knew who was coming. The major had a hard gait and… The steps stopped beside them the moment a hand gripped his shoulder and shook him roughly. The little assault took Hogan by surprise and with a gasp he opened his eyes – shocked about the impudence. “What…?” he began.

Sandhaus stared down at him with open loath in his gaze. “Your blasted comrades attacked Berlin this morning and as it seems, your benefactor Klink fell prey to their assault. See that you’ve healed enough until tomorrow afternoon, because afterwards you’ll leave this warm nest and you can heal in a wallow, for all I care. But one thing is for sure: I’ll make you American swines pay for what you not only did to me and my squadron, but especially what you bastards did this morning.”

“The own medicine always tastes bitter, doesn’t it?” Hogan answered calmly and set slowly up.
“Now you get a feeling how all those thousands and thousands of people felt as they lost dear ones and the roofs over their heads, because your insane leader wants to rule the world. And every cruelty you display will come back to you a dozen times and more, so be careful what you’re doing!”

“I know this idiom, but it doesn’t count for me. I’m not a religious man, Colonel. You damn Allies robbed me of any belief.”

Hogan snorted. “For the case you haven’t noticed, Major: Your leader declared war at us, not the other way around. It was your leader who held up his own neighbor countries with inhuman brutality and planned raids on my home. So don’t cry if you get some pay-backs. And as a soldier you’ve to know that death accompanies everyone of your steps!”

The major sneered. “The last sentence goes for you as well, Colonel.”

“I know, but given your youngest injury and your hate, I think you got a severe drubbing at the beginning of this year. Operation Bodenplatte, as I learned from General Burkhalter, right? (An attempt of combined Heer- and Luftwaffe-forces to regain ground in the Ardennes that began at the 16th December 1944 ended finally at the 25th January 1945 after several gravely disaster for the Wehrmacht.)”

Gritting his teeth, Sandhaus hissed, “Your comrades shot us down even from behind and killed many young pilots who had their whole life before them.”

“Young men, who volunteered for the job and still applause Germany’s insane leader and his goonies despite the fact that Hitler dooms everyone he and his government swore to protect. And if you think you can blame us for defending our homes, then you’re not less mad than the tiny private with the moustache is.”

The Major stared with fierce eyes at him. “Don’t forget, Colonel, that your life and this of your men will be depend on this ‘mad men’, how you dare to call me. Your all lives are in my hand, not only today, but certainly within the next month and maybe years, too. If I were you, I would start praying, because believe me: If I get the command here ‘til the end of war, you all will wish you’d never had come over the Atlantic!”

“A wish certainly you are going to utter before the war is over, because we’ll send you damn Nazis to a place you really belong to: To hell!”
Sandhaus turned around one last time and smiled ugly at him. “But for your and the others here in the camp witness an eventually victory of the Allies, it will be too late for you. Another commander in a KZ-camp said: If the war is over at elven o’clock, you’ll be dead at ten o’clock. And believe me: Should the Allies win, you all will not live to see the hour of their victory!”

The gravely threat hung darkly in the air, yet Hogan didn’t let any fear getting through him.

“And just right now you got yourself a ticket to trial – even within Nazi-Germany, Major,” he snarled. “Believe me, there are still enough honorable men within this country left, who will take care that laws are followed and upcoming murders are stopped.”

Sandhaus chuckled. “No accuser, no trial. I rather make certain that you won’t survive for another day before you can speak ill about me, Hogan, so be careful what you’re saying!”

“Did you just threat to kill me, Major?” the colonel asked slowly with a dangerous tone in his voice.

“No, I just warned you,” Sandhaus replied coldly. Then he walked away and left the quarters by banging the door close after him.

Hogan growled deep in his throat. He didn’t take the threat easily. If Sandhaus wanted him dead, then he had to be very wary within the next days – at least until he could send the bastard as a new package to London, or until Klink was back.

Wilhelm…

If he really was dead (a thought that pained him too much to think closer of it for now), then he – Hogan – would have another task to manage. At least he would try to continue Wilhelm’s work by keeping this camp together. He would protect the POWs and even the guards – at least those who had gained his and his men’s respect. And if this meant to get rid of Sandhaus, he would arrange for it. It wouldn’t be the first time he made people vanish who were a threat to his friends or to him.

Yet the major’s open hate showed how many German officers and soldiers still thought. They had started the war and were furious if the attacked nations defended themselves and counterattacked. They only saw what happened to them and their families, but they didn’t care how much sorrow and death they brought first over the others.
‘If you think you can tyrannize us here, Sandhaus, then you’re wrong. You’re quicker in London than you can shout for help.’

He lay down again and looked out of the window. All he could see from his position was the sky – dark grey, with approaching darkness of the night and racing clouds which were hunted by the wind. The same wind that had spurred on the flames in Berlin, which maybe had cut off Will from any escaping route – if he hadn’t found shelter in a bunker in time.

Hogan closed his eyes; imagining Wilhelm standing at this bed and packing his luggage. God, hadn’t he practically begged the older man to stay here – here, where it was so much safer than in Berlin? Hadn’t he had this damn gut-feeling that something was about to go horrible wrong? And hadn’t Will promised him to come back this evening or tomorrow morning at latest?

‘Woe you, Wilhelm Klink, if you don’t keep your promise,’ he thought with a childish hue of defiance that masked his fear for his German counterpart. ‘Woe you don’t come back and leave me all alone here. Then I’ll get you one day when we’re… how did you call it? When we’re all on the great plaza up there?’

Hogan laughed with a tight feeling in his throat as he remembered those minutes at the train, as he had wakened Will to tell him that they were back near the camp, and no longer on a suicidal mission. Klink had offered him to call him ‘Wilhelm’ when they would meet in heaven again, before he learned from Hogan that the ‘orders’ had been changed and that the day of death hadn’t come yet. Will had spoken in poesy before he got it that the suicidal mission had ended before it even begun, and in those moments Robert had seen the real man beneath the uniform – the vulnerable and gentle guy Will was in truth.

‘There will be time to parade on the Great Plaza in the far future, Will, so – dammit – come home!’

He closed his eyes; sending silent prayers to the Heavens…

TBC…

Yes, Hochstetter is not ‘done for’, and Sandhaus really is a bastard, and sadly there were a lot of camp-commanders like him. His point of view and his way to handle the POWs are no exception, but something close to standard. Yeah, there were certainly some commanders, which treated the POWs with simple respect, but on daily basis they were anything but kind. In the case of my story, help is on the way and in the next chapter Klink will be back in the camp. Just imagine his reaction
Another thing is the OHK in Zossen. It really existed and the rests of the bunkers, masked as country-houses, are still there. The Red Army conquered the base a few days before the war was over and claimed the whole technics which were completely intact. Later they tried to blow up everything, but the ‘houses’ were too strong. If you’re interested you can look at the web under ‘Zossen’, ‘Maybach I’ and ‘Wehrmacht’. There are a lot of photos so that you can get an idea of the area, Klink, Schmidt and the others visited within this chapter.

I hope, you liked the chapter and like always, I’m absolutely curious what you think of it.

The next one will be published during the next hours. Klink returns to the camp – more I don’t want to reveal, but I’m sure you’re going to melt (and to rub your hands in glee, too).

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Just like promised, here is the next chapter – not beta-read, like mentioned, so sorry for the errors. For those who just saw that the story is finally updated, but don’t remember the last chapter-number and clicked on this chapter: It is the second chapter I publish today, so if you haven’t read the prior one, please switch back or you’re going to miss some crucial things. I only posted two new installments, because I’m as good as off to holidays and I know how much you all wait for the reunion of our two boys.

This chapter is a crucial one, too.

Schmidt gets help with the baby, Klink returns to the camp (and to the deeply worried Hogan) and Sandhaus gets his first lesson what it means to mess with Wilhelm’s Stalag and men (and with the POWs). Once again the ‘Balding Eagle’ becomes the ‘Iron Eagle’, before he finally sees his witty fox again.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 45 – Coming ‘home’

It was deep at night and the wind drove along the snowflakes which had begun to fall an hour ago. The air was icy and woe those who hadn’t a warm place to stay. The snow scrunched beneath the tires as the car searched its way along the small street in the middle of the woods; the headlights glowed like pale ghosts through the darkness.

At the end of the street a farmhouse with a stable and a barn was to see, and a minute later the car stopped in front of the house whose inhabitants were deeply asleep.
But not for very much longer.

Leopold Schneider was torn out of his slumber, as he heard a loud pounding at the front door. Given the fact that during night every power was switched off, the doorbell didn’t ring, and so he needed a moment to became fully awake.

“Poldi, someone is at the door,” his wife Luisa whispered beside him fearfully.

Visitors at night could only mean two things: People at need or the Gestapo.

“Good dammit,” the older man murmured and threw the covers aside; flinching as his crippled leg (a ‘souvenir’ of the first war) gave him new trouble. Slipping into his housecoat and gripping for the matches and the candle on the nightstand, he heard the pounding again. Cursing, he enlightened the candle, limped out of the bedroom and down the wooden stairs to the ground-level.

“I’m coming!” he called, reached the door, unlocked it and opened the entrance.

He had assumed everything: Allied soldiers, escaped POWs, the Gestapo, the SS – but never this.

“Oberst Klink!?” he gasped, as he recognized one of the two men he knew from former short meetings, and who stood now at the threshold – dirty, eyes reddened and obviously exhaust. “Thank the Lord, Herr Oberst, you’re alive!” he said; real relief washed through him. “We were so shocked as we learned about the air-raid, knowing that you are in Berlin.” Then he looked at the second man this late night had brought at his doorstep. “Sergeant Schultz, how good that you made it, too. Hilda was beside herself with worry for the two gentlemen.”

Klink smiled tiredly at him; trying to get the shivering under control. Exhaustion and the temperature chilled him to the bones. “Thank you, Herr Schneider, and I apologize for the disturbance at this God-forsaken late hour, but we need your help,” he answered hoarsely; teeth chattering

Hilda’s father, glad that the two men survived the horrible air-raid in the capital, smiled at him as he recognized how much the staff-officer was freezing. “Of course, Herr Oberst. Please come in. You too, Herr Feldwebel. It’s far too cold outside.”
Klink shook his head. “I would like to have a short break and to get warm, Herr Schneider, but see, we’re not alone and…”

“HERR KOMMANDANT!”

The female scream came from above. A moment later, Hilda stormed down the wooden staircase. Only clad in her nightgown and an open dressing gown, with slippers on her feet, she steadied herself at the hand-rail while racing down to the house’s ground-level. Not caring that she was anything but properly dressed and that the man at the threshold was her boss, she ran towards Klink and fell round his neck; sniffing in deep relief. “Thank the Lord, you’re all right!” she said at his shoulder; squeezing him. “I feared the worst!”

Completely taken by surprise by this kind of warm welcome and open display of honest joy, he returned the embrace a little bit gauche and clapped the young woman gently on the back, as he heard her suppressed sob.

“Easy, my dear, I’m okay,” he mumbled; touched how much she cared for him.

“Hilda!” her father rebuked her softly. “This is really no proper way to greet your superior.”

Klink gave him a short smile. “Please don’t get me wrong here, Herr Schneider, but I prefer your daughter’s impulsive reaction a hundred times over the display of false reactions from my colleagues.”

Hilda looked up at him; eyes damp but shining. “I’m so glad that you survived, sir.” Stepping on the tip of her toes, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, what made him chuckle awkwardly.

“Well, I did my best to send the Grim Reaper away again.”

Hilda giggled, then her gaze found the large Bavarian, and with another happy squeal – “SCHULTZIE!” – she gave the Sergeant of the Guards the same welcome like Klink.

“Hilda!” Luise Schneider, carrying a second candle, came also down the stairs now. “Child, you can’t simply hug the Herr officers!” That Schultz was no officer, didn’t count in the moment.
“It’s all right, *Frau* Schneider, our Hilda is the best,” Schultz smiled at the lady of the house, while Klink had lifted his cap; bowing with stiff movements.

“Ma’am, I’m deeply sorry to disturb your well-earned night-rest, but… we need your help. Better to say, not we, but someone else is in need for your support. And regrettable it can’t wait until tomorrow morning.” He turned around towards the staff-car that parked a few meters away, and waved.

The door of the passenger seat opened and *Herr* Schneider stiffened as he recognized in the still switched on headlines the black SS-uniform. Asking himself why, for God’s sake, a SS-man needed help, he waited silently until the officer came nearer.

“Oberleutnant Schmidt,” Hilda said with a completely different, yet gentle smile. “I’m happy that you made it, too.” She hadn’t forgotten that this man spared Robert one of the most cruel tortures and that he even tried to get help for the American. If Schultz was one thing, then he was a gossipmonger, and like this she has learned of Schmidt’s honorable deeds.

Her father looked shortly at her – somehow her voice sounded different; not warily but… warm? Glancing back at the newcomer, he carefully observed him. He was a younger man – at his late twenties, if Schneider saw it correctly, with blond hair and an attractive face. His black uniform and the coat showed the poor attempts of brushing off dust and ashes, just like this of the two *Luftwaffe*-members, and he was pale with exhaustion, yet he moved with strong steps. And Leopold asked himself, what the young man carried in the blanket he held carefully in his arms.

“Good evening,” Schmidt greeted quietly. “I apologize deeply for the disturbance, but… we’re in need for your help.” He cleared his throat as he saw Hilda standing between Klink, Schultz and an older man, who obviously was her father. Of course it didn’t slip his attention that she only wore a night- and open dress gown, and it made her even prettier than the skirts, pullover or blouses she usually wore. Rebuking himself for his slip of attention, he began anew, “I wanted to say that not *we*, but *he* needs your help.”

He looked down on the bundle in his arms and carefully pulled one part of the plaid away. Herr Schneider gasped. A baby?

Hilda stared with wide eyes at the little face, peaceful in sleep, that emerged within the thick folds of the blanket. “Oh my God,” she whispered, edged her way through Klink and Schultz, and stopped in front of Schmidt; the iciness of the wind forgotten for the moment. Her large, dark eyes hung with spontaneous affection at the infant, while she reached out but didn’t dare to touch the little guy; concerned she would wake him. Looking up at Schmidt, she asked quietly, “How did you get the little one?”
“We found him beneath his mother’s body in Berlin – after the air-raid was over” Klink’s voice sounded softly in her back, and she looked over her shoulder at the Oberst, who continued, “We hid in a subway station, and after the ambush we found our car, but before we could get into it, Oberleutnant Schmidt heard baby-crying, despite the hellish noises around us. It was him, who found the little guy.”

“And… his mother?” Frau Schneider asked, who had joined the men by now.

“She obviously tried to protect him by shielding him with her body, but… she was slain by flying around debris,” Schmidt answered quietly. “As we found her, she was already dead.”

Hilda had reached out again and moved gently one finger over the warm, soft cheek of the little guy. The result were quiet bubbles and a satisfied smacking of the lips.

“Any idea, who he is – or if he has some family left?” Herr Schneider wanted to know; seeing with a mixture of alert and surrender how much his daughter was caught by the baby.

“The woman wore a dog-tag around her neck we took with us,” Schmidt answered. “Tomorrow or the day after I’m going to do some intense researches about the fallen owner of the dog-tag, and if there are any relatives left, but it will last until I get information. I’ll try to contact the WASt, where all Wehrmacht-members are listed, but then… I don’t know if the Reichs-Citizens Registration Office in Berlin was also hit, and as far as I know all telephone-lines to Berlin are cut off in the moment, so it will cost days until I maybe get some answers. I also try to get some information from the Wehrmacht concerning the dog-tag. Oberst Klink promised me his help, but…” He looked down at the small boy in his arms.

“Before we talk more, please come in. It’s too cold for everyone out there,” Herr Schneider insisted; being the practical person just like his daughter.

A few moments later the entrance door closed behind the three men in uniform and the others. The vestibule was only illuminated by the two candles, and therefore Frau Schneider quickly enlightened a petroleum lamp that stood on a small table near the entrance. In the dark semi-light she turned around again. Her gaze found the young man, who held the infant protectively against his chest.

“You want us to take care of the baby until you find members of his family,” she hit the nail on the head.
Almost sheepishly Schmidt glanced at her. “Yes,” he nodded, before he hastily added, “It will be only for a few days. The orphanages are overcrowded, not only here but also in Berlin. Everything around us was burning, and I couldn’t leave the little guy, so I took him with me.” He sighed. “I know that everything is rare and rationed now in Germany, and you certainly pull through only barely in these dark times, but I got some utensils for his needs from the Wehrmacht-base we stopped at after we left Berlin. Make-shift nappies, semolina porridge, some apples and bananas… I even got a baby bottle at a pharmacy we stopped at during our way to Hammelburg.”

Before her parents could answer, Hilda smiled, “We’ll manage, Herr Oberleutnant. We’ve one cow left so we’ve milk for him. And…”

“I’ll get you additional ration stamps,” Horst interrupted her with a beginning mixture of hope, relief and gratefulness. “It will equal your need for nourishment and… And will help you to care for him properly.”

For a long moment there was silence. Then, “Where shall he sleep? We’ve no cradle here and…” Frau Schneider began hesitantly.

“Margarethe’s son is three now and she told me that she and her husband put the cradle in the cellar. I’m sure she lends me the cradle for a few days,” Hilda smiled. “Maybe she has some baby-clothes spared and…”

“Hilda, Margarethe is pregnant and will need the cradle for her own baby,” Frau Schneider threw in for consideration.

“She is not due for the next three months, and until then everything will be arranged.” She glanced up at Schmidt. “I’ll take care of him.”

Horst sighed facilitated. “Thank you, Fräulein Hilda. I’ll support you as good as I can.”

“Hilda, what’s about your job?” Herr Schneider asked quietly; looking at Klink.

“If you need a few days off until everything is settled, I’ve nothing against it,” the Oberst said softly.
Hilda sighed. “*Herr Kommandant,* thank you for your kindness, but I think you’re going to need every help you can get to put some order back in your office – and the whole camp.”

Alerted, Klink made a step into her direction. “What do you mean? What happened in my camp?”

“Major Sandhaus happened,” she deadpanned. “He is a tyrant who mistakes a POW-camp with a KZ, hates every POW on principle, ignores the Geneva Conventions and regards civilian volunteers as a waste. Therefore I didn’t come over to the camp today, like I do it often at Saturday. I didn’t want to see him again and hoped for your return ‘til Monday.”

Klink had stiffened; his eyes were narrowed. “He’s this bad?”

“Worse! I don’t know how Sergeant Kinchloe could remain calm like he was – despite the low offenses he was confronted with because of his heritage.”

“What about Ro… Hogan?” Wilhelm asked; tensed.

“He and the major clashed. Karl… Corporal Langenscheidt told me how unpolite and insolent the major treated the colonel, yet Hogan remained in control, but gave the major some pieces of his mind.” She smiled shortly. “You know him.”

Klink groaned, closed his eyes and shook his head. He hoped that not everything had gone down the hill. Taking a deep breath, he looked at Hans. “Schultz, get the utensils for the baby from the car. I think, I should have been back in the camp *hours* ago.”

“*Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,*” Schultz said and left quickly the house.

Hilda reached out with both hands, and Schmidt put the baby carefully in her arms. His gaze hung warmly and almost lovingly at the tiny face. “Behave, little one,” he whispered; touching the soft cheek with one finger.

“Does he have a name?” the young woman asked, and Horst sighed.

“Certainly, but I don’t know it.” He smiled shortly. “I’ve begun to think of him as Manfred during
our way back to Hammelburg.”

Hilda chuckled, while she cradled the baby against her chest. “You do know what this name means?”

“Yes, ‘Man’ is the ancient German word for ‘man’, and ‘fred’ means ‘Friede’ (peace). I think, what the little guy needs the most is peace, so…” He shrugged. He caught Hilda’s shining glance, and felt – to his horror – heat spreading into his face.

Looking down on the baby-boy in her arms, she murmured, “Manfred… A strong name. You’ll have it good here.”

Schmidt felt a short pang in his chest at the thought to leave the baby now. He had feed, cradled and hold him during their way back to Hammelburg, and along the hours it took, the little guy had calmed down and even snuggled closer to him; instinctively feeling safe in the man’s arms who had brought him away from all the noises and smells his senses identified as danger.

“Thank your for your help, and once again my deepest apologizes for the late disturbance,” Horst said to the family and bowed his head. “With your permission, I’ll come tomorrow in the afternoon and try to organize some supplies for the baby.”

“You’re welcome here, Herr Oberleutnant,” Herr Schneider said; having realized that the officer was a decent man despite the uniform he wore. And he intendent to ask his daughter some questions about Schmidt, at whom she looked with a special gleam in her eyes.

“Good night, Ma’am,” Klink said; bowing in front of Hilda’s mother and shook then Herr Schneider’s hand. “Fräulein Hilda,” he addressed his secretary. “As much as I’m glad whenever you take lead of the office and do the worst of my paperwork, you’ll be in trouble if I see your pretty face near the camp at Monday. First take care of ‘Manfred’ and I would be grateful to be kept updated. I’m sure General Burkhalter wants to learn, too, what had become of the little guy.”

“So, General Burkhalter made it, too?” Hilda asked not without a little bit relief. Yes, Burkhalter was someone who sailed close to the wind and ignored the one or other rules, especially concerning those which handled the presence of dangerous weapons or storages at POW-camps, yet she knew that he was, deep down, no bad guy.

“Yes, we were on our way to South-East-Berlin after the trial, as the alert sounded. Like this we
escaped – barely,” Schultz said, who just came back into the house, carrying the sack with him, in which the supplies were they had gotten at the Wehrmacht-base and the pharmacy. He offered it to Frau Schneider, while Hilda looked at her boss.

“You were already done at the Court as the alert began? This I’m calling fortunate. They said at the radio that Berlin-Middle and the quarters from the west-south to the north-east were hit at strongest.”

Wilhelm nodded. “Yes, the trial was over and we all wanted to forget the ugly scenes, so I invited the Gentlemen to a Vienna Café-House I knew from my time in Berlin. We didn’t make it to there, but found shelter in a subway-station in Neukölln.”

Hilda cooked her head. “And Major Hochstetter?”

“Was stripped off his rank, kicked out of the Gestapo and SS, and was sentenced to eight years working camp – mainly for insubordination, abuse of rank, cowardice and display of dishonorable behavior.” Klink shrugged; even if it bothered him that the verdict was handed down without consideration of what Hochstetter had done to Robert. Yet the outcome counted more. “We’re rid of him; this is all that counts.”

The young woman nodded; glad that this danger for Robert and the others, but also for Klink was finally over. Looking down at the infant in her arms, she turned her attention to her mother. “I will get my linen chest ready in my room with a few pillows and blankets. This will do for tonight.”

“I’ll help you,” Frau Schneider nodded.

The three men in uniform bid farewell, apologized for the late disturbance once again and thanked for the help, then they left. And it didn’t slip Klink’s attention that Fräulein Hilda and Schmidt exchanged a look that was full of softness – something that filled him with relief out of two reasons:

One, the two would have to interact with each other within the next days (or weeks), and two: He knew that Hilda and Hogan flirted, and that the young woman harbored deeper feelings for the American. If her interest changed now towards another man – a decent and honorable one, no less – then it meant that the flirting between his secret lover and his secretary would sooner or later stop.

No, he didn’t distrust Robert – or Hilda – but he knew himself. He would get jealous if he would see the two battering their lashes at each other as soon as Hogan was well enough to resume his duties as POW-officer. And if Hilda developed feelings for young Schmidt, it would be good for all of them.
Climbing into the passenger seat of the car, he glanced at Schmidt, whose gaze still hung at the farm-house. “Tear yourself away from the young lady, Herr Oberleutnant,” he teased with a tired voice. “You’ll see her soon enough again.”

Horst flushed. “I… I thought of Manfred.”

Klink chuckled, while Schultz rolled good-willed his eyes. “Of course,” the large Bavarian murmured, while slipping behind the wheel. “Where to, Herr Oberst?”

“Would you mind much, if we first go to the camp and one of my guards drives you to Hammelburg afterwards?” Wilhelm addressed Schmidt, who sat down on the back-seat.

“No, no problem,” he replied; too lost in thoughts and too tired to mind anything in the moment. He wanted nothing more than take a shower, lay down and sleep for the next twenty-four hours – even if the latter was impossible. And then he wanted to go back to the farm-house to lend the incredible young lady a hand – and to see ‘Manfred’ again.

As Klink suggested that his secretary would take care of the baby, Schmidt had first declined. No, he didn’t think that the young lady was incapable of taking care for the little tad, but he didn’t want to drop something this unexpectedly on her. He had come to regard her as a fine young woman, who stood her ‘man’ within a world full of men. How extraordinary she had to be was clearly to see in the POWs’ behavior towards her, because never Schmidt had witnessed during his two visits in Stalag 13 that the prisoners met her with something else than kindness and respect. To take her by surprise like this now, had cost some clear arguments from Klink to convince him.

And now he was happy – happy to have found a place for the baby and to see that he hadn’t misjudged the young woman. She really was someone special. And when he remembered her shining eyes as she looked at him and then the infant, his heart-beat increased. He remembered how the candles had bathed her open hair in a bright light, and how she had looked in the long night- and dress-gown: Like an angle. And for the first time since he had come to Hammelburg, he hoped to have found another reason than duty to stay here.

Sighing he leant back and glanced out of the side-window. They drove in silence down the small street and five minutes later they saw the searching lights shining through the branches; then the wires came into view. “Home, sweet home,” Klink murmured; feeling a part of the tension and the echoes of the horror he and the others had faced, leaving him a little bit.
They stopped at the gate and, to Klink’s joy, the guards stared at first with big eyes at him and Schultz, then grinned, stiffened and saluted properly. Yet their relief to see him, warmed him. Maybe Robert was right, and the guards did regard him – Klink – in another light now.

They parked the car beside the Kommandantur and left it. It was eerily silent; only the wind howled through the empty branches nearby, while snow and frozen soil crunched beneath their feet. Yet Klink felt at peace for the first time since he received Burkhalter’s call two mornings ago, and he took a deep breath; relishing in the well-known scent of the soil and the woods around him, mixed with the smell of furnaces.

A sergeant came running, saluted and said quietly, “Welcome back, Herr Kommandant. We’re very glad that you and the others escaped the air-raid in Berlin.”

“Thank you, Sergeant Hainer,” Klink nodded. “Please be so kind and take care that the car is refueled. Afterwards one of the guards shall take Oberleutnant Schmidt to the Gestapo-headquarters.”

The sergeant saluted. “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant,” sat down on the driver seat and steered the car towards the motor-pool. And clearly Klink could see the happy expression on the man’s face. Sweet Lord, what had this Sandhaus done in only two days that the guards beamed like children beneath the Christmas-Tree because he, Klink, was back?

Looking at Schmidt, he offered his hand. “Thank you for everything you did, Herr Oberleutnant. Your matter of prudence to get the statements of the guards in the Gestapo-HQ and you taking the poker with you, were the last stones which sealed Hochstetter’s doom. With him gone, there will be finally some peace in the area.”

Schmidt smiled and shook Klink’s hand. “It was a question of justice. And it was a pleasure to work together with you.” He offered his hand to Schultz. “The same goes for you, Sergeant. I hope, the gentlemen have a fitful night-rest.”

“Yes, as short as it will be,” Klink sighed while looking at his wrist-watch: Almost three o’clock in the morning. “Good night, Herr Schmidt – and… my deepest respect how you handled the crisis in Berlin in the subway station and later with Little Manfred.”

“The same goes for you, Herr Oberst. The way you remained calm while driving us away from the danger-zone, was formidable. We all certainly wouldn’t have survived, if it hadn’t been for your level-headed reactions, so: Thank-you!” He saluted. “Good night, Gentlemen.” With those words he headed towards the motor-pool to wait there until the stuff-car was refueled.
Klink watched him go and looked at Schultz, as the sergeant murmured, “We’re alone for the first time since Berlin, Herr Kommandant, so please allow me a question. It was indeed Hogan who called you at the Court and he warned you about the upcoming air-raid, correct?”

Klink nodded slowly. “Yes, it was him. And he risked everything to warn us.” He smiled shortly. “Damn rascal!” he whispered gently, then he straightened his shape. “Please be so kind and leave a note at Langenscheidt’s chamber, Schultz. Roll call shall not take place earlier than nine o’clock. You can take the day off tomorrow.”


Klink waved it off. “No reason to thank me, Schultz. You did damn well in Berlin, too. And you saved a little girl. I’m proud of you.”

Hans took a deep breath, even if it was uncomfortable cold. “Where will you sleep? I think, the major took your guest-chamber and you can’t sleep beside Colonel Hogan with the major being in the same house.”

“Don’t remind me,” Wilhelm murmured. “I’ll take the sofa. It will do for tonight.” He nodded at the large Bavarian, who saluted and left for the guards’ quarters.

For a few minutes Klink did nothing else than standing in the compound and let the calmness and peace of the night and the snow sinking in. Here he was at home – as odd as it sounded. Here, among the wooden barracks in the middle of no-where, save from the war’s cruelness and near the man he loved.

Robert…

He pondered the thoughts to wake the younger man up to let him know that he was back, but he didn’t know if…

Loud voices from the guards’ quarters drifted through the night, and in one he recognized Schultz. A very furious Schultz!
This was… strange.

It needed a lot to get the man really angry.

Sighing and throwing a longing glance at the single, little house not far away, he turned around and headed to the long building that held the dorms; cursing inwardly. God dammit, hadn’t he earned some rest by now?

Stepping into the house, he was greeted with some sleepy soldiers who came out of their dorms – partly in nightgowns, partly in pajamas, and looked with hooded eyes and barely awake at him.

“Herr Kommandant!” several whispered as they recognized him, and again he saw a few beaming smiles (what a difference to the hidden dislike he was used to in earlier times), but his attention was driven to Schultz’ furious voice and another one, he had never heard before.

Turning to the right, where the single chambers of the lower-ranking officers were placed, Klink stopped dead in his tracks at the view in front of him.

Schultz stood at the entrance of his chamber, held in his left hand his rifle and gestured wildly with his right arm; face flushed in the light of the lamp at the ceiling. In front of him stood a man of middle age and with dark hair. He wore a moustache trainer beneath his nose and was clad in a nightgown, under which spindly, hairy legs peaked out. Usually this would have been an amusing view, if it wouldn’t have been for the man’s enraged expression on the flushed face and his shouts, which matched Schultz’ own loudness.

And the man had obviously come from Schultz’ chamber! What the heck…!?

“Was ist hier los?” (What’s going on here!)

Klink’s voice rarely thundered, but just right now it did – and it silenced the two squabbles instantly.

“Herr Kommandant, this roughcast hoaxer here has made himself comfortable in my chamber during my absence, and has no scruple to beef about me disturbing his night-rest!” Schultz complained, while pointing nonchalant at the intruder. “And then he has the nerve to shout at me.”
“How dare you to call me something like this and to point a finger at me!” the other man snarled. “Stand at attention when you’re speaking with the camp’s Kommandant, Sergeant, or I’ll make you face court-material.”

“Haaaa,” Schultz laughed loudly without any humor. “And now this rowdy says, he’s our Kommandant.” He looked down at the smaller man. “Usually I’m a patient man and it needs a lot to irritate me, but so much insolence has to be punished. GUARDS!” he called over his shoulder.

Promptly three guards on duty appeared. “Arrest this man!” both apples of discord said in union; pointing at each other.

The three guards looked uncertainly at Klink, who had crossed the arms in front of his chest, cocked his head and pondered the decision, if he should be amused or angry. He chose the first, because he assumed who the ‘hoaxer’ was. Groaning, he stepped nearer. “Schultz,” he said calmly. “I think, I know who this man is.” He glanced at the other male. “Major Sandhaus, correct?”

Sandhaus looked him up and down – a stiffened. “Oberst Klink, I presume.”

“Indeed,” Wilhelm nodded. He closed the distance to the two men and straightened his tall frame, as he faced Sandhaus. “Oberst Wilhelm Klink, Kommandant of Stalag 13. And you, Herr Major, are occupying the chamber of my Sergeant of the Guards, who is – by the way – my substitute. Care to explain, why you’re sleeping here and not in the guest-room of my quarters? Are they not to your liking?” A small dangerous undertone echoed in his voice – exactly this kind of undertone that told everyone, who knew him, that he was about to explode, because against his own will irritation woke in him.

Sandhaus took a deep breath, saluted shortly – after all the other man held a higher rank – and answered coolly, “Your quarters have a pleasant atmosphere and you certainly know how to make you at home here, Herr Oberst, but I rather sleep on the street than sharing a roof with a damn Ami!” He spat the last words.

Klink felt deep anger rising in him. No-one insulted his Robert! Yet he had to be carefully to give not them both, and his own regards of the Allies away. “Colonel Hogan is the senior POW officer of this camp for almost three years now, and a well-risen and honorable man. His heritage is no reason to insult him.”

Sandhaus gritted his teeth. “I already learned that you have a rather high tolerance for the scum within the barracks, but…”
“Major Sandhaus,” Klink warned. “I have some tolerance for everything, but one thing I do NOT tolerate: Insults and general hate against everyone who wasn’t born in this country. My POWs are no scum!”

“He called them worse before,” another voice said from behind. “He treats them like dirt and wanted to deny the sick-ones medical care.”

The men turned around, and Sandhaus snarled, “You’re restricted to your dorm. Return or you can spend the rest of the night in the cooler!”

Klink frowned as he saw one of the corporals, he worked closer and very well with. “Langenscheidt?” he asked baffled.

“Herr Kommandant, I’m glad that you’re well and back,” the corporal answered and saluted properly, despite his nightgown. Klink returned the greeting, before he glanced back at Sandhaus. “Corporal Langenscheidt is restricted to his ‘dorm’? He has an own chamber.”

“Where the major’s driver sleeps,” Karl threw in.

“The corporal was released from duty because of impertinent behavior against a superior, insolence and beginning rebellion.”

“Karl – ‘impertinent behavior’? ‘Rebellion’? Ha, that gives one a horse laugh,” Schultz scoffed with an unamused sneer; eyes flashing.

“I only drove the major’s attention to the Geneva Conventions, for which he ‘doesn’t care’, and to the rules ‘which are made only by him’,” Langenscheidt said calmly; having Klink’s full attention. “His words, not mine. He also threatened the POWs – especially the Americans – to make them pay for him being shot down and for Berlin yesterday. As I tried to explain to him – again – that there are other rules within a POW-camp, he released me of duty.”

“You threatened me!” Sandhaus hissed.

Langenscheidt felt a new bolt of adrenalin shooting through him that was mainly initiated by his
sense of justice. “I dared to drive your attention to my duty to report misbehavior, breaking of laws and cruelty to Berlin, if necessary. And seeing that your personal feelings of hate are ruling every single decision within the last two days, I tried to warn you that you were crossing borders. But you preferred to ignore this all and tyrannized the POWs. You even threatened them of ‘living in hell’ in the future, if Oberst Klink wouldn’t have survived the air-raid of Berlin; already speculating to take over his command.”

The major made a threatening step towards the corporal, but stopped as Klink moved into his way.

“Gentlemen,” the Oberst said firmly, “as far as I understand the situation within the last two days, some serious issues happened. But giving the fact that Sergeant Schultz and I are up for almost twenty hours, survived by hair-width a gravely bombing-raid, got something like a smoke-poisoning and are really ready to shower and to hit the mattress, I think it the best to continue this later.” He lifted a hand as Sandhaus wanted to protest, and turned towards Langenscheidt.

“Corporal, please return to your current sleeping area and try to find some rest. Be sure that I will hear you out, as well as the major and the current acting senior POW officer.” He looked at Sandhaus. “I’ll expect you in my office at half past nine o’clock, as well as Corporal Langenscheidt and Sergeant Kinchloe.”

“Sergeant Kinchloe is divided for the first working troop tomorrow at eight o’clock, sir,” Corporal Hauser spoke up.

“Working troop?” Klink asked; confused. “What working troop?”

“The POWs are freeing the Hoffstein pass and the main road from Hammelburg to the south from the avalanche that came down at the beginning of January,” the major answered coldly. “I received the enquiry from the SS for sending over POWs at Friday late afternoon. A third of the route is freed and tomorrow the work continues.”

“With the same troops which worked today for many hours without any break, and even without lunch,” Langenscheidt growled.

“Without any break and lunch?” Klink knew, he shouldn’t ask – or he would never get the chance to find a few hours sleep before duty called him, but this was something he had to know. “You denied them lunch?” he demanded; glaring at Sandhaus.
“They are better nourished than the most other POWs I saw within the last half year. A cancelled ration won’t kill them. If you would shorten the rations, nourishment would be saved for our men at the front, and I’m sure your budget would be better,” the major said coolly.

“Many soldiers at the front are called back or flee. And there are even more civilians who are in need for nourishment, or Hitler will lead a country of death sooner or later,” Klink said icily. “But the men within these wires haven’t the chance to escape hardship and death. And Berlin and I are satisfied with my needed budget for keeping them alive. I’m responsible for these men’s health and I always take my given duty serious. And given your illegal act by denying the men food I want to give you a piece of advice for life: Who works, has to eat – or the work will end sooner than thought.” He glanced at Hauser. “Roll call at nine o’clock, no matter the arrangements concerning the time they should start to work. Sunday is the day of the Lord and we shouldn’t forget all traditions, even during the war. Because warm lunch is impossible outside of the camp, take care that enough bread and toppings are ready, as well as enough water to drink. Tomorrow evening will be given the warm food – a double ration for everyone.”

The man looked almost glad at his superior. “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant.”

Klink glanced back at Sandhaus, who glared at him. “We two and the other involved parties will speak about everything else later in my office at half past nine o’clock. Until then you’ve time to sleep, to pack your belongings and to have breakfast. Don’t bother with the camp’s businesses, I’ll take over command now.” He turned his back at the major and glanced at his Sergeant of the Guards. “Schultz, I’m sorry that you are the victim now, but for the sake of peace and quiet, please use a field-bed in one of the dorms. Major Sandhaus will leave your chamber in the morning after putting everything in order, what also goes, of course, mainly for your private belonging of which I hope he didn’t damaged.”

“Herr Oberst!” Sandhaus protested; indignant.

“Is’ scho’ recht, Herr Kommandant,” (Bavarian: It’s all right), Schultz sighed.

“Langenscheidt, please go to sleep, too,” Klink addressed the corporal again almost kindly, who saluted with rising gratefulness in his eyes. Karl knew that Klink would make the right decisions, and that he was as good as out of the deep water.

The Oberst headed towards the entrance. “And now: Good night, everyone!”

He heard a chorus of “Good night, Herr Kommandant,” and it sounded almost happy. For a moment his lips curled. ‘You learned within the last days that it is better to have someone you know than
someone who’s a stranger and can ruin everything,’ he thought. He stepped out onto the compound, and one of the guards jogged towards him, saluted and reported that Oberleutnant Schmidt was already on his way to Hammelburg. Thanking the man for keeping him updated, Klink headed towards his quarters. Only one thing began to rule his mind: Robert.

*** HH ***

Hogan hadn’t found sleep easily. Rather the opposite. His thoughts circled around Will – and his own talk with Sandhaus. The soldier and trained spy in him had already come up with a few ideas how to get rid of the major, before the man really would change the camp in a living hell in which no-one would be safe anymore – Hogan included. However, his heart and soul could only think of Wilhelm.

What, if the older man was really dead? What, if he was indeed killed in the air-raid? It would change everything for Hogan – not only here in the camp, but for his whole further life, because one thing was for sure: Wilhelm Klink had caught him – and he had caught him good. He wanted to continue this dangerous, but also so delicious affair – their relationship that was still so young, but could grow into a strong tree of life given the chance. He wanted to relish in this new-found passion, tenderness and closeness as long as possible, and a still hidden part of him already dared to dream of a future together.

But all this wouldn’t matter anymore, if Will was dead.

‘You’re the best that ever happened to me,’ Wilhelm had said, added with another ‘I love you’. Those had been Will’s last words to him before the connection was broken. Hogan prayed with everything he had that these words only had been the last of the telephone talk, and not the last he ever would hear from Will.

Brooding, filled with a sickening mixture of dread and hope, Robert had finally fallen asleep, only to wake up late in the night because of some noises on the compound.

With instantly wild beating heart he raised and peaked out of the window from behind the curtains, but there was nothing to see, despite some guards which walked along, and later a car left the camp, but he couldn’t recognize any details.

Laying finally down again, he didn’t stop to hope, until suddenly he heard the entrance door opening and the light in the living room was switched on.
Again his heart seemed to beat into his throat with new hope, while he all but leaped out of the bed and closed the distance to the door. What he saw, made his throat tightening – not in sadness, but in flaring joy.

Placing a bag on the floor beside the dresser and hanging his coat at the hallstand while placing his cap on the top of it, stood Wilhelm Klink – tired, dirty, pale, but alive!

For a moment Robert couldn’t breathe. Will was back! He was here! Alive!

Then the overwhelming relief broke out of him. “WILL!”

Hearing the beloved tenor in his back, Klink turned around – and all the tension, coldness and numbness that still echoed in him, began to lessen at the sight in front of him. There he stood: His witty fox; clad in pajamas, bandage around the head, pale and with far too large eyes, but with utterly happiness on his face.

A blink of an eye later the younger man all but stormed towards him – still limping a little bit and with unusual awkward movements, but quicker than Klink had seen him within the last three weeks. A moment later Rob was in front of him, and then Will gasped as he was pulled into strong arms, which closed around him and held him like belts of steel. He felt Rob pressing his face against his throat and heard him whispering his English pet-name, while a shiver ran through Hogan’s body. Without wasting a second, Wilhelm sank against his lover and clung to the younger man as if he was the only hold in the world.

Home!

He was home again – in his camp, in his quarters, and in Robert’s arms! Considering what he had survived, it was a miracle that he was here at all.

“You’re back,” Robert murmured against his skin over the stiff collar of the uniform-shirt; bathing in the familiar scent his senses caught despite the smell of dust and ashes. “You LIVE!”

“Thanks to you,” Will whispered; feeling how some of the frostiness drained out of his body and soul, and how warmth began to fill the empty places. Sighing, he began to relax, while he leant his head against the tousled shock of black hair and closed his eyes.
Robert took a deep breath and tightened his embrace. The relief to have Will back safely in his arms, was almost too much to handle – and later it would show him, how important and dear the older man had become for him.

Hogan laughed softly, lifted his head and looked at his secret lover, who turned his face towards him. For a moment Robert saw only those soft, dark blue eyes – reddened from too much smoke, dust and exhaustion. Then he cupped Wilhelm’s neck with one hand, pulled his lover’s face towards him and their mouths found each other in a deep kiss that quickly turned urgent and fierce, as their hearts and souls drank in the other’s ones presence, while their senses savored the so well-known tastes. Both minds could rarely grasp that everything had turned out well, despite the deadly danger Wilhelm had been through. Thousands of people had died more than fourteen hours ago in the fire of bombs, but Will had survived. Both lovers couldn’t get enough from their proximity and the relief that their home with each other was safe again.

Sheer need to breathe forced them to end their kiss, and breathing hard, Will leant his forehead against Robert’s. He looked in those beloved dark eyes, which shone with happiness, while there was still an echo of the fear of uncertainness, the younger man had been through.

“I… I feared I had lost you,” Hogan murmured; the thumb of his hand that still cradled Wilhelm’s neck, moved in soothing circles through the older man’s hackles.

“I certainly would be dead, if it wouldn’t have been for your call,” Klink replied softly. “You risked everything to warn me.”

“I had to,” Robert whispered. “I couldn’t let anything happen to you. Hell, I even snapped at Butler,” he added with a chuckle.

“Do you have trouble now?” Will asked quietly, and Hogan shrugged. “He said he would have to speak with me about bedside-manners towards superior officers the next time we meet, but then he kept me updated about everything in Berlin.” He sighed again and lowered his gaze. “I tried to stop the attack. I demanded, begged and argued but… our air-crafts were too near to Berlin and had already overcome the German defense. There was no way to stop it anymore.” He looked up again; the memories of the fear still shimmered in his eyes. “I was terrible afraid for you.”

Will tightened his long arms around the younger man. “As I sat down in the shelter we found, the only thing I could think of was that I maybe would never see you again.” He swallowed a lump in his throat. “I hoped for a chance to take you in my arms again and to have you near – and I thank my maker that I was blessed with this chance.”
Robert felt a strong tightness in his throat. What Wilhelm just said was another ‘I love you’ only with different words. And for the first time he began really to grasp what it meant to be truly loved. His heart seemed to constrict for a few beats because of too much deep emotions, which rose from the depth of his soul. Closing the small gap between them, he caught Will’s lips in a gentle, warm, lovingly kiss; not knowing what to say.

He felt Wilhelm’s mouth smiling beneath his own, and for a long time there was nothing else than holding each other and trying to kiss away the dread that had haunted them within the last hours…

TBC…

Yeah, they’re together again – finally. And this is only the beginning of the next step within their relationship; promised.

I hope you liked my idea that Hilda takes care of the baby for now, what will lead to more – not only concerning the little guy, but also a certain young man who falls more and more for her. I also had a lot of fun to write the scene in the dorms, and to let Schultz and Sandhaus clashing with each other, before Klink intervenes. And this is only the first little pay-back the major gets, because woe someone messes with Hogan. And believe me, Klink will learn first-hand what Sandhaus did (and said).

But at first Hogan turns into a complete mother-hen in the next chapter. There comes a lot of ‘candy’ in the beginning, before Klink begins to get anything in order again in the camp. You also are going to learn more about his past and I had an own idea why he had to quit flying, got his monocle and was made the Kommandant of Stalag 13.

For now I’m off for my summer-holidays and I’m back in the middle of August.

Please let this not hinder you to leave some comments / reviews (*wink*).

Have nice time,

Love
Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

I’m back from holidays and I’m glad that you liked the last two chapters so much, despite the errors. Regrettably, this chapter is without any beta-reading, too, because I haven’t heard anything from my beta-reader for four weeks now, and she doesn’t answer my mail. I hope, it’s only because she doesn’t find any time to do so, and that nothing serious happened.

Nonetheless, I don’t want to let you wait any longer, and therefore you’ll get the new chapter (I apologize for the grammar- and spelling mistakes in advance).

Like I hinted, this chapter is first a little bit fluffy and then Klink gets into action again. Major Sandhaus should be ready for the high jump, so to say. You also learn, how Klink’s left eye needs support and how it came that ‘Willie’ ended as a camp-Kommandant at all.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 46 – To set things right

Hogan helped Klink to get rid of the dirty clothes. Okay, the Oberst had washed in the secret Wehrmacht-base in Zossen in the southern of Berlin and had the chance to brush out the worst dust and ashes from his uniform-coat and boots, but the fine particles had pierced everything ‘til the skin. Even the shirt was partly grey, not to speak of the tie, the uniform-jacket and the trousers. The whole man was grey and after he got the bag he brought with him – which held the washing-utensils he got from supply-department of Zossen – he vanished into the bathroom.

Robert put the clothes into the guestroom and switched on the lights so that the window was enlightened behind the closed curtains; a pretense for everyone outside that Klink was using this room, because the window was – despite the closed thick curtains – illuminated. He checked that the
entrance was indeed locked and returned to their bedroom. Hogan listened shortly at the closed bathroom-door, and as he heard the water still running, he stripped off his own clothes – including the, for days now unnecessary bandages – and entered the small room; knowing deep down that Will needed him.

He saw his secret lover through the half closed shower-curtain. The older man had turned his back towards the door and his head had sunken in the neck, while the water splashed down on him. It was more than obvious that he was absolutely exhaust but still tensed.

With a gentle “Hey,” Robert stepped into the shower cabin, saw Will flinching, closed quickly the distance to him and slipped his arms around his waist. “Sh-sh, it’s only me,” he whispered – and with a deep sigh, Wilhelm leant his head back once again, this time on Rob’s shoulder. The water washed over him; its warmth began to loosen up the stiff muscles. Holding Klink for a minute like this, Hogan finally gripped for the washcloth that hung on the hook at the wall, wettened it beneath the shower and began gently to wash the older man’s chest from behind; offering his own body as a solid brace. How much the roles had reversed.

To say the truth, the warm water began to soothe Rob, too. Will was back – alive! – and he couldn’t believe how deep shaken he was still at the prospect to lose his secret lover; how dear Wilhelm had become to him. To hold him now in his arms and to wash away the tracks the Grim Reaper had left as his shadow grazed Will, was like heaven. Without his own doing, he pressed a gentle kiss against the older man’s temple, while he tightened softly the embrace; his hand that held the washcloth moved in gentle circles over Wilhelm’s belly and chest.

Wilhelm began to relax the moment he felt Robert’s presence and then the younger man’s arms around him. Even if he had begun to slack off as the warm water poured down on him, his mind couldn’t stop thinking of what happened a few hours ago, while he thought to hear the hostile aircrafts in the air, the whistles of the falling bombs and the explosions afterwards, followed by screams, trembling ground, dust and heat.

Such an experience always left scars – visible and invisible ones – and even if this was already the second war he served in, he would never get used to the inhuman brutality with which people fought each other; turning many of them from humans into animals. The hour down in the subway-station and their ride through the partly burning Berlin afterwards had shown him his own vulnerability once again – how little a single man could do at death’s door. During such a raid there was nothing left except of praying and hoping. It shook him how close the Death had been within those endless minutes.

He felt Robert moving and then, how the younger man began to wash him with utterly ministration, while he remained behind him like a solid rock he could lean on. Keeping his eyes closed, he let himself being taken care of like a toddler; relishing in the affection that showed him that he was really home – here, with this one, particular man who was officially his enemy.
“Turn around,” Rob murmured at his hear, and sighing he obeyed; opening finally his eyes as he faced the American. Robert’s face was full of compassion and tenderness; his gaze was filled with deep warmth and understanding, yet there was also a haunted expression in those chocolate orbs. Both men had their shares of almost death-experiences, and if there was someone who could comprehend what was going on inside of Klink, then it was Hogan.

Using some soap, Rob continued to clean his lover’s body – washing away the dust that still clung to Wilhelm’s soft skin. And with the ashes also a part of the dread was rinsed away. Filling some shampoo in his hands, Robert murmured a softly, “Close your eyes,” and began to wash the older man’s hair as soon as Wilhelm had obeyed. His fingers moved in soft yet firm circles while Klink let his head sinking once more into the neck. Rob’s strong yet gentle fingers massaged away the headache and lessened the ringing in his ears.

Finally, after a few minutes, Hogan was satisfied that his German counterpart was clean again, slipped out of the shower cabin, wrapped a towel around his waist and took a larger bath towel he held open for Will. Looking gratefully at his witty fox, Wilhelm shut off the water and allowed his lover to wrap him into the towel. A further smaller one was used to towel his hair almost dry, while he sat down on the toilette; thankful for the help.

“Go to our bed and lie down,” Robert instructed him gently after he was sure that Wilhelm was dry. “I put some order in the room, and follow you afterwards.

“Danke,” Will mumbled; too tired to think straight anymore. Winded up, he crept into the sleeping chamber, let the towel fall to the floor and slipped beneath the blankets; groaning in nameless relief as the familiar scent of Rob and himself surrounded him, while his body sank down onto the mattress and into the soft pillows.

Hogan made certain that he was dry, too, hung the towels over the rod of the shower-curtain, switched off the light and did the latter in the guestroom and the living room, before he returned afterwards to their bedroom. Switching off the light here, too, he fumbled along the bed to the free side of it and lay down. Almost instantly Will turned towards him, and without hesitating a second, Rob opened his arms and pulled the older man close to him; holding the tall lanky body in a warm embrace full of solace.

Yet he felt some tremors running through Will’s muscles and he laid his cheek against the balding head. “Try to find some sleep, Hon,” he murmured. “Tomorrow everything will shine in another light.”

A small nod was the answer and for a few minutes there was nothing else than silence, until Klink
suddenly murmured, “Hochstetter was sentenced to eight years prison. He’s to serve it in a working camp Burkhalter will chose.”

For a moment a smile played around Hogan’s lips. “Eight years – a long time,” he said quietly. “But it serves him right. I’m not the only one who suffered because of him, you know.” He cupped Will’s cheek and moved his thumb in soothing circles. “And Burkhalter survived, too?”

“We had driven to the court with my car, because parking spaces are rare there. After I received your call, the others were waiting outside for me and I used an excuse to drive us to the south-east. I hoped to leave Berlin in time, but as the official air-raid alert was given, chaos broke lose. Cars, people – everything moved around like headless chickens. We made it to Neukölln, as the sirens alerted us of incoming air-crafts within a few minutes. We abandoned the car and found shelter in the subway station in front of the townhall of Neukölln.”

“Sweet Lord!” Robert whispered; closing his eyes. A subway station was really no solid shelter against falling bombs, and he shuddered at the thought how close he had been to lose Will. Tightening his arms around the older man, he moistened his lips and waited, but as Wilhelm skipped from speaking more, Robert asked softly, “Do you want to talk about it?”

Klink sighed. “Certainly – but not now. I… I have to stomach everything and… roll call is at nine o’clock. If I don’t want to fall asleep on my feet, I should find some rest now.”

Hogan chuckled quietly; not aware of the tenderness that was in his voice as he said, “Then sleep – and don’t fear any nightmares. I hold you and will keep them away,” he murmured, lifted his head and pressed a kiss to Wilhelm’s cheek.

“The roles are switched now, hm?” Will smiled for a moment, before he added, “Schultz and Schmidt made it, too.”

“I’m glad,” Hogan replied honestly. He felt attached to the large Bavarian, who was mixture of an older brother and uncle for him, and he liked Schmidt – no matter the uniform the young man was forced to wear for now.

He heard Will sighing and snuggled closer to him; holding him in a cocoon of his arms and legs.

Wilhelm felt himself – finally – relaxing utterly. Robert’s proximity, the American’s strong limps around him, the familiar surroundings – they did wonders to his shaken soul. He didn’t even realize
that he drifted away.

Hogan remained awake for a longer time. Will was back – alive and healthy. Robert thanked the Lord and all higher beings that they had protected the man he had fallen for.

‘I love you.’ Will’s almost last words to him still echoed in his heart and soul, and instinctively he nestled even closer to the older man; too confused of the whirlwind of feelings which waved through him whenever he thought back of Wilhelm’s voice at the phone.

Holding his secret lover firmly in his arms, he closed his eyes. Sleep claimed him not easily this time…

*** HH ***

Klink hadn’t set the alert-clock, yet Hogan was awake early enough to wake him a quarter past eight – enough time to prepare for the day. The older man hadn’t rested well. Even in the depths of his exhausted sleep, he murmured unintelligent words and shifted nervously – certain signs of the horror he had been through and that haunted his dreams. Robert woke up during those short periods, pulled his secret lover even closer to him, stroke his cheek, shoulder, back or arm and whispered soothingly nonsense at him, while giving him soft butterfly-kisses on the cheek or temple. And every time Wilhelm calmed down within a minute; his subconscious felt save in Robert’s presence.

Understandable, Klink was still absolutely exhaust as he made his morning toilette and began to slip into clean clothes. His whole body felt like made of lead and seemed to weigh tons, while his head still arched and there was constant, low ringing in his ears. His mood was accordingly in the cellars, yet he used the given chance to ask Robert about the last two days. And what he heard, lowered his mood to a new level of fretfulness. The major had mixed up Stalag 13 and its habitants – prisoners and guards – in a way that was unforgivable in Klink’s eyes.

Yet there was one thing that almost made him explode. “He… he threatened to kill you?” he gasped; shocked.

Hogan, sitting on the bed’s edge, shrugged. “He said he would take care that I wouldn’t see another day before I get the chance to speak ill about him.” He caught Will’s furious gaze and added, “But there was something else he uttered, what I take very much more serious than this threat against me. He said that he would share the opinion of a KZ-Kommandant: If the Allies should win and war is over at elven o’clock, the prisoners would be dead at ten o’clock.”
Klink stared at him; face flushed with horror and fury. “Whoever this so-called ‘Kommandant’ is and said this, should be sent to hell. And if Sandhaus really shares this point of view, I’ll make certain that he will never set a foot in any camp again – except if he’s on the lined-up side of a roll call.” He took his cap. “He restricted Langenscheidt to the dorms because of ‘insubordination’ and ‘disobedience’. I spoke with both last night shortly, and think, I know what Langenscheidt did to wake the major’s anger: He tried to protect you all.”

“What are you going to do?” Hogan asked; not surprised that Langenscheidt stood up for the POWs. The corporal was, after all, a decent man.

“Sandhaus gets an ear full from me and a very bad report to Berlin, before I kick him out of our camp!” He got his riding-crop. “But first I’ve to make up for what he did yesterday – and then I call Burkhalter. He can send Sandhaus to the Russian Front, but never again to Stalag 13 or another POW-camp!”

He took the interims-glasses which still lay on the nightstand and shrugged at Hogan’s asking glance, “The new monocles are still in the bunker we stayed overnight and the one I wore didn’t survive Neukölln.”

Hogan chuckled quietly. “You really have a wastage with those things.”

Klink sighed. “Don’t remind me. It will last until we get our belongings back, in other words, I have to order one or two new monocles.” He shook his head. “My optician has to think, I’m crazy.”

“No, he simply his happy that you’re his future pension,” Robert laughed, what raised Klink’s mood a little bit. Bending down he stole a kiss from the younger man, winked at him and left the sleeping room.

Content that everything would be back to normal soon, and still overjoyed that Will had survived the firestorm in Berlin, Hogan slipped back under the covers. Odd, in earlier times he would have never trusted Klink to handle such a delicate issue like this with Sandhaus and the mess the major had made, but by now he didn’t doubt the tiniest bit his German counterpart’s hidden, but existing competence.

As Klink left his quarters, he saw three trucks of the SS parking outside of the fence and some black-clad men, who smoked, paced along the wires or talked with each other; obviously deeply bored and impatient. The POWs were all on the compound, while an older corporal was counting them.
At Klink’s familiar “REPOOOOOORT!” the most of them turned around, saw him hurrying over the compound with his typical stooped stance and movements, riding-crop beneath his arm – and began to grin. A few even applauded, among them Hogan’s team and a few other men, who worked closer with the American colonel and therefore knew of Klink’s involvement in Hogan’s missions. The guards on the towers and along the fence already learned of their true superior’s return, saluted and looked rather relieved at him, while Sandhaus leant against the wall beside the steps which led to the Kommandantur and wore a sour expression. Yet he saluted with the demanded respect as Klink looked at him, who returned the military greeting casually, before he turned around towards the POWs and looked at them.

He saw Wilson, Kinchloe and Baker smirking, while LeBeau practically beamed at him. Even Newkirk smiled, while Carter looked as if he had gotten a candy.

“Prisoners,” Klink began his little speech, “as you can clearly see, an old saying has become true again: Dead live long.” Here and there a laughter or chuckle were to hear. “As I learned, Major Sandhaus already hoped to gain my position, but I think you’re not too disappointed that you’re stuck up with me again.” Several hands were clapped, while new laughter and even the one or other comment like “Thank the Lord!” or “There are really worse guys than you!” were to hear.

Wilhelm couldn’t himself: He bathed in the shown approval of his person he had never experienced like this before. The fingers of his hand played with the handle of the riding-crop he had clamped beneath his right arm in his usual way; the well-known almost vain smile played around his lips for a moment, before he turned serious again.

“And regarding the hard work almost the half of you did yesterday without getting the necessary nourishment, I want to express my regret for the lack of food that is due to you. We’re at war and face harsh times, but who works has to eat. And given the whole work of yesterday and today…” He lifted his free hand as some protests were uttered at the confirmation that they had to work today, too. “I know, Gentlemen, it’s Sunday and the half of you is still groggy from yesterday. Yet the road and the pass has to be freed from the snow – but not in the hard way like yesterday. Those, who already did their share of duty, have today off. The others are brought to the road and the Hoffstein Pass, yet I make sure that there are enough of you so that you can take turns every half hour. There will be also enough bread and toppings, and of course water for you. In the evening, everyone gets an extra warm shower and also a warm meal – a double-portion.”

Cheers broke lose, and Klink had to wait a minute or more, until the POWs calmed down again. “Thanks for the flowers,” he deadpanned, before he looked at the tiny Frenchman. “Corporal LeBeau, you and those who can handle a cooking spoon, should support the cooks in the mess hall. Take what you need from the food-stock, but in agreement with the stock-manager. I don’t want an empty pantry tomorrow, so please consider my budget. We’re at the beginning of a new month and I can’t spent the whole money for February already now.”
“No problem, mon Commandant,” LeBeau called. “I think Beauf Stroganoff is exaggerated. A Filet Minong will do it.” Klink waved a warning finger at him, and LeBeau added with an innocent smile, “Okay, then a strong ragout with rice or potatoes – or a hefty goulash soup?” New cheers were to hear, and the Oberst threw up his free hand; huffing.

“As long as you don’t bankrupting me,” he sighed, then he turned serious again. “Okay, Gentlemen, back to serious business. Sergeant Kinchloe, please choose the men who will work at the road and the pass. They may line up near the gate, the half of our guards will accompany them. Afterwards I expect you at my office.”

“Aye, sir!” Kinchloe nodded. He couldn’t suppress the satisfaction as he saw Sandhaus’ flushed face and anger, while Klink – pale and obviously still very tired – stood there like a strong oak in the wind; standing up for the POWs in his own way one time more. Whatever was going on between him and Hogan: It had done wonders to the usually so gauche man.


Usually it was forbidden that a casual POW addressed the CO of a camp, but the men of Hogan’s inner circle held a special place for Klink, so he only gave the young man a stern gaze, yet those, who knew him, saw the hidden joy at this question in his eyes. “Sergeant Schultz is, like Oberleutnant Schmidt and me, well so far. We only swallowed a lot of ashes and dust, and we’ve the permanent imagination of a ringing alert-clock in our ears, what certainly will vanish within the next days. So: Thank you for asking.”

Anew relieved faces were the result. The most POWs liked Schultz, and those who were relative new in the camp, had come to respect the large Bavarian for his gentle character, his kind tone and his fairness.

“Okay, Gentlemen, one little last word: Don’t think that you can use the opportunity of having only the half of our guards here and try to make an escape. Even the half of our men could give you a lot of trouble. And, by the way, you don’t want to miss the dinner made from our gourmet-cook.” He smiled inwardly as he saw several rolling their eyes, others were obviously amused. Very good. The mixture of sternness and diplomacy was the secret key to lead a POW-camp; something he would have to teach Sandhaus.

Taking a deep breath, he shouted, “DIIIIISSSMISSED!” Then Klink turned around and headed to the Kommandantur. “Private Diekmann, get Corporal Langenscheidt,” he called, while gesturing for Sandhaus to follow him. They entered the building and Klink’s gaze found the desk in the anteroom. Documents and files were piling up on it’s surface, and the Oberst grimaced.
“Your secretary didn’t show up yesterday,” Sandhaus said as he caught the older man’s frown.

“No wonder given the way you treated her,” Wilhelm said sharply. “She may be a civilian, but she has a strong sense of duty and handles the whole office with high skills.”

“Yes, her sense of duty was proven yesterday,” the major scoffed.

Klink, whose hand already rested on the door knop of his office, looked over the shoulder; the things Hogan had told him before roll call, where very fresh in Will’s mind. “Herr Major, Fräulein Hilda works for me for more than two years now. There were ups and downs, but NEVER she had been pestered enough to shed tears – not from me, not from my staff, not from the guards, and even not from any prisoner. But you managed it to make her cry within one day.”

“If she is this over-sensible, then she is…”

“This has nothing to do with over-sensibility, Major Sandhaus – and given everything I already heard about your doings within only those two days, I regard it as an impertinence that you of all people speak of ‘sensibility’ – a streak you obviously don’t possess.” He entered his office and pointed at one of the two visitor-chairs. “Have a seat,” he said, while stripping out of his coat and sitting down behind his desk. It felt good to be back in the familiar surroundings. Folding his hands on the desk-top, he observed the man in front of him.

“You were not even two days in charge of this camp, and I already got so many complains like I don’t receive in a whole year. I know that this is a completely new territory for you, but even without detailed knowledge about the rules which apply for a POW-camp, several crucial things should be vivid by using simple logic and a hue of leadership skills. The men within these wires are humans, no animals, and this goes for the staff as well as for the prisoners.”

*** HH ***

Inside of Barrack 2, in Hogan’s quarters, the Unsung Heroes sans Kinchloe had gathered around the coffee pot; curious what Klink would do concerning Sandhaus and the whole situation that had stirred up during the last two days.

Because all of them spoke German, they could understand the Kommandant’s words, and LeBeau caught himself balling a triumphal fist as he heard Klink beginning to rebuke Sandhaus. “Bravo,” he said; grinning.
Then they heard someone knocking at the door and Klink’s “Herein!”

*** HH ***

Langenscheidt entered the Oberst’s office and saluted. “Herr Kommandant, Herr Major,” he greeted politely but avoided it to look at Sandhaus.

“Ah, Corporal Langenscheidt, there you are. Very good.” He pointed at the second visitor chair. “Please sit down, Corporal. I have a lot of questions regarding the obviously dispute between you and Major Sandhaus, so…”

Again it knocked, and Kinchloe entered the office. “The working troops are lined up and the first of the men are already taken to the working area, Kommandant,” he reported.

“Thanks, Sergeant, please wait until this little issue here is cleared out.” He looked back at Sandhaus and Langenscheidt. “Meine Herren, ich möchte wissen, was sich hier zugetragen hat. Lagenscheidt, Sie beginnen!” (Gentlemen, I want to know what happened here. Langenscheidt, you start.)

The major lifted a hand and nodded disparagingly towards Kinchloe. “Soll der Gefangene alles mit anhören?” (Shall the prisoner hear everything?)

Klink rolled his eyes. „Sergeant Kinchloe spricht kein Deutsch, also bleiben Sie locker.“ (Sergeant Kinchloe doesn’t speak German, so stay loose.) He avoided it to look at Hogan’s substitute, because he knew exactly that the radio-man spoke German like every other man in this office.

*** HH ***

In Barracks 2, Newkirk snorted in amusement. “So, Kinch doesn’t speak German. Tut-tut, Kommandant, you really have learned to lie smoothly through your teeth.”

“And he even sounds absolutely normal and even arrogant,” Carter chuckled. “He really learned from the colonel a lot.”
“Silence, let us listening to them!” Baker ordered; yet humor lay in his eyes. It was more than obvious that Klink was about to set things indeed right for once by tricking this damn Nazi-swine Sandhaus.

*** HH ***

Klink made an inviting gesture towards Langenscheidt, who began to tell everything from his point of view. The Oberst interrupted him here and there for more details and permitted Sandhaus to give comments or explanation, before he questioned him. Afterwards he ordered Kinchloe in English to tell him about the last two days. The picture he got was even darker. To call the sergeant a ‘half-human’ and ‘nigger’ was more than a low down, and Klink was furious about it, yet he had to remain in control. It was a fact that the regime regarded people of foreign heritage with colored skin as ‘lower beings’ and Sandhaus was obviously a fanatically Nazi. Therefore he, Klink, had to be careful how to get the major down on the carpet without facing trouble for ‘wrong regards concerning worthless beings’.

Taking a deep breath, he finally rose from his desk, gestured to the two other Germans to remain sitting and stepped at the window; hands folded on his back. Looking out onto the compound he saw a few POWs doing some sport, others were standing together – talking, just like a few of the guards did. Everything looked peaceful but Wilhelm knew how fallacious this imagination was. Despite the fact that Hogan held this large bunch of men together and that many of them accepted him, Klink, now after he saved their beloved superior two times, one wrong spark could be enough to turn the camp into an inferno. And after what happened in the last two days, Wilhelm thought he could feel the flames of fury below the surface like an uncomfortable itching beneath the skin. He didn’t dare to think of what would certainly happened, if he hadn’t survived and Sandhaus had taken over charge permanently.

Pressing his lips shortly into a thin line, he said quietly,

“To lead a POW-camp is a continuous dance on the high wire with the staff on one side and the POWs on the other end. Who loses balance first will fall down, but believe me, Herr Major, the swing of the wire afterwards would be enough to bring the other side to fall, too – a scenario that has to be avoided. To keep this fine balance is an act of art, so to say, that only will be successful if certain things are considered. Simple human respect towards each other is one thing. To grant the prisoners the rightful nourishment, medical treats and other things which are dictated by the written rules, is the next thing, or the whole camp will go off like a barrel of powder. Approx. 120 men are holding more than thousand prisoners together. Do you have any idea who would gain victory, if the POWs see no other chance any more than rebelling?”

“The guards would shoot them down, like it is their duty,” Sandhaus replied harshly.
Klink turned around. “Yes, ten, twenty, maybe even hundred. And what about the other nine hundred? Men, who are about to break under too much pressure and are desperate enough, to rather risk death than enduring torment any longer, are a tidal wave who can wash you away at the first attempt. You were about to provoke a storm, do you realize this?”

He stared firmly at the other officer. “Threatening them with tyranny and death, is the best way to rise a revolution within these wires. I can understand that you’re obviously bitter because you were shot down and seriously injured, but this is the risk every pilot has to face. Do you have the tiniest idea, how often I was shot down – not only in this war but also in the first one?”

“Obviously enough times to get yourself a comfortable desk-job here,” Sandhaus answered; his tone barely polite anymore.

*** HH ***

The secret listeners in Hogan’s quarters frowned. They were furious, not only because they learned of the details Sandhaus had said about them or what he did to Langenscheidt, but mostly because of the major’s actual statements. Klink was right if he assumed that Sandhaus’ leading-style could have led to a revolution within the camp, and to hear now how the major spoke ill of the Kommandant because he begrudged the Oberst’s job, woke anger on Klink’s behalf in them.

“Comfortable desk-job? What a nasty envier!” Carter grumbled. “I rather would be stuck within a collapsed tunnel for a week than doing one day Klink’s job.”

“And this says something,” Newkirk commented wryly.

*** HH ***

“Ah,” Klink nodded with a half bitter, half frustrated smile at Sandhaus’ words. “Yes, my ‘comfortable desk-job’ here is like a magnet for many men. Believe me, Herr Major, you aren’t the first one who wants to walk into a ready-made position – a position you’re obviously incapable to handle. Do you know, what you need most for this job here? The same that changed my career and let me end up here, in Stalag 13: Leadership-skills. You have to take the responsibility for those in your charge utterly serious, or everything will be lost sooner or later. Do you know, what banned me at the desk?”

Sandhaus shook his head, and Langenscheidt and Kinchloe also were curious now.
“I lost 70 percent of my left eye-sight – therefore I’m unable to be an active flyer. And do you know, why I’m almost blind on my left eye?”


“Yes and no,” Klink replied calmly. “It was in the later summer ’41. I had been given the chance to test the new Heinkel-bomber HE 111-H2 and afterwards I was entrusted with the task to school new pilots on them. We flew over France some maneuvers, as all of sudden English air-fighter appeared. Two dozen trainees who sat for the second or third time at the controls of the new planes, against fifty well-trained fighter-pilots. A rather forlorn situation, don’t you agree?”

“At least for the trainees,” Sandhaus nodded.

“Yes, at least for them. Twenty-four young men – a few of them had just turned eighteen, one was about to marry three days later, another one joined the service to find his missing brother. Everyone of them had an own fate but one thing they had I common: They were in my charge. I was responsible for their health and lives – and so I acted. I sent them away to the next German air-base and forbid them to come to my aid, while I steered my aircraft directly into the hostile squadron to busy them. Nevertheless some of the boys wanted to support me, but I insisted of them trying to escape. I don’t know, if our frequency was intercepted or if the leader of the hostile squadron was experienced enough to recognize the whole situation, but only a few of them followed the boys, the rest concentrated on me. I managed to shoot five planes down before mine was hit. Yet I tried to lure them away from the route my inferiors had taken, by attacking the enemy over and over again. Then my plane was hit again and I knew I had to parachute out if I wanted to survive, so I abandoned the engine. And then it happened.”

He placed a hand on the desk-top as if he needed a solid item to steady himself.

“The moment I left the plane, its left wing exploded – while I was behind it. I remember the burning pain on my left side and the harsh stinging in my left eye, gave up the hold on the open cockpit and let myself fall. To make it short: I landed more or less safely while above me my plane was shot into pieces, yet I wasn’t out of danger. Fate wanted to play with me again, because after I landed near a little wood in the middle of French nowhere and began to walk towards the north where I knew our base, I crossed paths with one of the English pilots I sent to the ground earlier. We both were injured, we both were shaken and we both were lost in a more or less hostile country, because even if we Germens had already conquered France, the Resistance was a great danger – especially to a single officer. And for the Englishman to walk through a conquered country could be deadly, too.”

Langenscheidt, who had only heard a few rumors about Klink’s injury and reason, why he had been
grounded to a desk-job, looked in awe at him. “What did you do, sir?” he asked quietly.

“The Englishman and I pointed our pistols at each other – both at the same time. A remise, so to say. He asked me if I had a death-wish to fly directly into his swarm. Obviously he didn’t expect me to speak English, but I spoke it already fluid at this time, and answered that the planes, he and his comrades attacked, were flown by mere boys – that we were a flying-school and that I had to protect my pupils. He was surprised to say the least, asking me since when a ‘damn Nazi-swine’ cares for others. I answered that the boys were in my charge and that I, as their teacher, had to protect them. He was baffled then, meant I had risked my life, what was a fact. We looked at each other for another minute or so, then he said finally that I’d shown a courage he had to respect and suggested that we both should go our ways. We both lowered our weapons, saluted from flyer to flyer and then we walked away – he towards west, I towards north.”

Sandhaus stared at him; obviously not knowing what he should think. “Didn’t you fear that he would shoot you from behind?”

Klink shook his head. “No, not one minute. You see, this is the point when true respect has risen: You come to see the human being beneath the uniform – and it’s a fact that the English people are sportsmen. To shoot someone from behind, is cowardly. To shoot someone from behind who gained their respect, is a big no-go. And the same went for me. The man had shown respect for my way of acting prior and we had agreed of going separate ways. I never would have risen my weapon against him in those minutes we walked away. Our ability to develop respect for each other, saved our both lives – at least in my case. And I do hope that this pilot from all those years ago is still alive, too.”

Sandhaus pursed shortly his lips. “Yet you let someone go who was an enemy.”

“We both were strangers away from home – pawns on a large chess-board who crossed paths. If we both hadn’t been fair to each other, we maybe would have killed each other – a worthless waste given the whole situation. He and I were replaceable, of course, but like this we both could continue to serve our countries. It was a question of honor and luckily we both were on the same page, despite our heritage.”

Langenscheidt, Kinch – and the Unsung Heroes – had listened intensely Klink’s tale. It said more about the Saxonian man than everything else. And one thing was for sure: This story was also a lecture for Sandhaus, who watched the Oberst thoughtfully. “You made it back to the air-base, I assume?” the major asked.

Wilhelm nodded. “Ja, a few hours later I was picked up by a patrol of the Wehrmacht and returned to our base. I was hurt, I was exhaust, I wanted nothing more than to find a place to rest and I couldn’t use my left eye. I knew what this meant – that I would have to quit the active service. But my sacrifice was not for naught. All of the boys had made it safely back. Not one loss was to mourn.
It made up for everything I had endured and would go through within the future. I needed almost two months to heal enough to leave hospital. Burkhalter, at this time still a colonel like I am, offered me the command of a camp. First I declined but then I was offered to take over Stalag 13 – a POW-camp. In the late autumn of ’41 I took charge of this camp here – a chaotically cluster of wooden huts with a rag-bag of POWs of different nationalities and heritage. I needed half a year to get the camp into the today’s condition and I needed very much longer, to gain something close to respect from the prisoners. The latter is also the merit of Colonel Hogan and his team, who keeps the POWs in check and also conciliated between the prisoners and my staff. And believe me, contraire to the opinion of the brass in Berlin, you can’t lead a camp like this without a little bit conciliation and diplomacy.”

The major took a deep breath. “Yet those prisoners came to kill our comrades.”

“Just like we did and still do it the other way around,” Klink nodded. “This is the ugly side of a war – people fight and kill each other.”

“They are scum and…”

“These men outside there –“ Klink interrupted him sharply and pointed firmly out of the window, “– have done nothing else than fighting for their countries. This isn’t a crime, but a natural thing; their duty even. They were weaker than we are or we had more luck in defending us – one way or the other, they ended up here. The war is over for them and to regard them as ‘scum’ because they tried to protect their homes, is beneath a honorable German man. To develop hate against everyone of a nation who made you stumble, is no solution. A soldier, who is ruled by his feelings, doesn’t see clear anymore and is therefore a danger for his comrades. Be careful that your hatred doesn’t result in future comrades’ demise or your own.”

*** HH ***

LeBeau pursed shortly his lips. “Now I begin to understand what mon colonel sees in Klink. Have you ever thought that Klink is a kind of hero – and would stand up for his prisoners like this? Or that he has so much… profundity?”

“No,” Newkirk murmured. “But silent waters are deep.”

“Only Klink is not silent. Boy, he talks so much that even my aunt seems to be mute. And she really is like a waterfall and…”
“Carter,” Baker sighed. “Be careful what you’re saying. This is really the pot calling the kettle black!”

*** HH ***

Klink sat down at the desk again; his gaze fixed on Sandhaus. “I hope, a few of my words got through you and you will digest them in the future. And don’t justify another comrade because he has a ‘quiet job’. The war has reached a point at which everyone, who is still able to fight, is summoned. This would apply for me to, if I were able to be back at the active service. I’m not, but I serve my country otherwise – what is certainly not ‘quiet’ and ‘comfortable’. And I’m certain that your service will be needed, too, as soon as your injury has healed better. And it doesn’t matter if you will fly again, or if you support our people in another way. We serve how and where we can. Only one job is absolutely nothing for you: To lead a camp – and I will inform General Burkhalter about it. I’m sure he has other tasks for you.”

He glanced at Langenscheidt. “You can resume your duty, Corporal. Your ‘disobedience’ was nothing else than an attempt to keep the camp together and to follow written law. There will be no further accuses against you.”

Karl almost sighed in relief and he allowed himself a very small smile. “Thank you, Herr Kommandant.”

“Dismissed!”

Langenscheidt rose, saluted, turned around, grinned broadly at Kinchloe – who couldn’t help but smiled back – and vanished.

“Sergeant Kinchloe,” Wilhelm addressed Hogan’s substitute; switching back to English, knowing fully well that the American had understood every word within the last minutes. “I’m sorry for the way you and the others were treated. Be sure that normality will settle in again. Please remain here for another minute while I show the major to the door. We’ve to speak about the work within the next days.”

Sandhaus rose and followed Klink without a further look at Kinch, who glared after him and whispered, “Asshole!”

A minute later Klink re-appeared and closed the door behind him. Exchanging a long look with each
other, the *Oberst* said quietly, “I apologize for my fellow-German’s outrageous behavior towards you, Sergeant. The way he treated you is absolutely unacceptable, yet you kept a level-head and didn’t allow the situation to escalate. Thank you.”

Kinchloe, touched by Klink’s unexpected apology, sighed, “The others and I hoped that we have to endure this bastard only two or three days until you’re back, sir, and therefore held our anger in check. Colonel Hogan more or less ordered us to stay calm.” He cocked his head while he allowed himself a short smile. “The boys and I are very happy that you made it. I… We *all* were shocked as we heard about the upcoming air-raid and…”

“‘Upcoming’? It was you who heard about it first and alerted Hogan?”

Kinch shrugged. “I received a radio message from London concerning a question for you and after I told them that you’re in Berlin they got nervous.” He smiled. “I thought, the colonel would jump down General Butler’s throat as he learned that the attack couldn’t be stopped anymore.”

Klink chuckled softly. “Typical Hogan’s temper.” He sighed. “So, to say it clear, you alerting Hogan saved the others and me in the end. Thank you, Sergeant.”

“You’re welcome, sir,” James answered. “So, about the work within the next days…”

“I’ll take care that it won’t be too hard for you all,” Klink interrupted him not unkindly. “The road really as to be freed from the snow – not for the Wehrmacht’s sake, but for the civilian people, too. Just imagine there is an emergency in one of the near-by villages and the patient reaches the hospital in Hammelburg too late because the ambulance car has to take a detour.”

Kinch nodded. “No problem, sir. We can manage.”

“I thought so,” Wilhelm replied. “Dismissed, Sergeant. As well as you, Gentlemen!” He had risen his voice during the last words, and James frowned in confusion. “Sir?”

Klink grimaced. “Don’t tell me that Carter, Newkirk, LeBeau and the others haven’t listened – and still do so – to the whole talk via the hidden bugs.”

With interest Will watched how Kinchloe’s dark face became even more darker, while he grinned sheepishly. “Well…”
In Barracks 2, Hogan’s core-team stared with big eyes at the coffee-pot – and hastily cut the link.

“Dammit, he really is smarter than given credit for!” Newkirk said, while Baker chuckled,

“We can call us lucky that he is on our side.”

“Boy, he indeed told us a cock- and bull-story all those years, pretending to be an idiot,” Carter said; burying his hands in the pockets of his jacket.

“He knows about the bucks in his office – after all he saved me from being caught while re-linking them a few days ago,” LeBeau threw in for consideration. “But that he assumed us listening, tells us something very clearly.”

“And what would this be?” Carter asked.

Louis made a face and grumbled, “He knows us too well!”

In Klink’s office, Kinchloe stilled smiled very boyish-innocently at the Kommandant, who pointed with hidden amusement at the door.

“Out with you, you rascal,” Klink grumbled.

“Aye, sir!” James saluted with a smirk, but stopped one last time at the door. “Sir, may I address something private?” As Klink only nodded, he continued, “You should find some rest. You really look like spat-out.”

“Thank you so much, Sergeant. This is exactly what I needed to hear,” Wilhelm scoffed, but it was
obvious that Kinchloe’s careful display of concern touched him, because the left edge of his mouth curled, and his eyes began to shine.

James chuckled, saluted again and left the office. Rubbing tiredly his face, Klink stood for a moment simply in the middle of the room, then he walked to the small table at the wall and poured himself a cognac. Outside he heard a car driving away and knew that Sandhaus had left. Emptying the glass, the Oberst returned to his desk. He would call first Burkhalter at the OHK near Zossen, then he would try to get some order in the chaos here – and then he would take the rest of the day off. Kinchloe was right. He not only looked like spat-out, he also felt this way.

TBC…

Well, I do hope you liked the background-story I came up with. Klink has his moments here and there, and I thought the well-hidden courage he showed here and there within my story must have a root in something more than ‘only’ in his love for Hogan. It was also fun to write the Heroes’ reactions parallel. I always loved it, when they listened to something that happened in Klink’s office and comment it.

In the next chapter, Willie and Robert will have a special talk about Klink’s ‘last words’ in the line the day prior. Serious but also fluffy feelings-stuff will happen, and I think you’re going to love it. Schmidt will try to find out more about Little Manfred’s family, and the foundation for the TV-episode “Rockets or Romance” will be laid.

I hope, you liked the new chapter and I would be happy to get new reviews.

Have a nice weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the feedback and I hope, you all had nice summer-holidays so far.

Minnie, I know it’s your anniversary today, so: HAPPY BIRTHDAY!!!! Just like I promised, here is the new chapter – regrettable without a beta-reading again, because I haven’t heard from by beta-reader anything within the last five or six weeks. I nonetheless hope, you love the new chapter.

Just like I said in the epilogue of the last update, this chapter is an emotional one – last but not least because of Klink’s admission at the phone, serious stuff has to be talked and thought about.

Have fun

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 47 – Admissions

It was about lunch-time as Klink returned to his quarters. LeBeau had been in the little building for half an hour to make him and Hogan some bread with toppings and tea; telling his superior and friend about the way Klink had lectured Sandhaus before he kicked him out of Stalag 13. He dropped some hints accordingly the reason for Klink to wind up in Stalag 13 at all, but he decided to let the Kommandant tell the whole tale by himself; only sparking Hogan’s curiosity. As the two officers had gotten their lunch, he left to support the other cooks with the double ration for the evening.

Will all but devoured the lunch; the stress was demanding some toll again now. Robert watched him
with a mixture of amusement, understanding and tenderness. Usually the strict German man showed only the best table-manners, but now he wolfed everything down like a seven-year-old, what spoke volumes. Klink was far away from coming to terms with everything he had been through the day prior.

Afterwards, Wilhelm stripped off his uniform-jacket and tie, while Hogan prepared for them both a cognac and sat down on the sofa. It was a grey, cloudy day outside, and so he switched on the reading lamp after turning off the lamp at the ceiling, what gave the whole atmosphere a warmer hue. Then he waited.

Klink came five minutes later, wearing his house-coat. He looked ready to drop, but he smiled as he saw the glasses and sat down beside his lover, who offered him the cognac.

“I think I really can need another one now,” Wilhelm murmured and emptied the glass in one gulp; savoring the sharp burning and the heavy taste. Rob did the same; feeling tired, too – now, after the last tension had finally left him with Will’s survival, Sandhaus’ departure and with the camp setting back to normality.

“You’re not alone with this need,” he chuckled, leant back in the sofa and closed his eyes. “Good God, I hate this war!”

“Then we’re already two,” Will sighed and leant back beside the younger man; beginning to tell Robert what happened in the Kommandantur. He only mentioned by the way that he gave Sandhaus a lecture by telling him why he got the ‘comfortable desk-job’ in the end, and spoke more about the working-arrangements he had made with Kinchloe, but Hogan’s curiosity had been woken by LeBeau’s hints, and so he asked Will about the incident that almost clipped the Iron Eagle’s wings. Klink hesitated first a little bit, but a deep warm gaze from the younger man accompanied by a soft “Please?” did it, and Wilhelm told him the tell of ‘the monocle’ how he called it.

First with interest, then holding breath, Hogan listened how it came that this camp had gotten Oberst Wilhelm Klink as its Kommandant – a story worth to tell not only young recruits but also officers who had forgotten how it was to be at the front-line.

“You… you’re a hero,” Rob said quietly, as Will came to the end. Klink laughed and shook his head, while soft flush spread through his cheeks.

“Isn’t it odd? There I boast about every little detail I maybe did or stumbled over to impress my superiors, and when I receive admiration concerning the maybe only real important and dangerous event I managed, I get… embarrassed.”
Hogan lay a hand on is secret lover’s arm. “It’s because you’re a good man who tries to stay out of the crossfire, but show an unusual courage as soon as others really need him.” He smiled. “You are not used to be praised, because your colleagues are too busy with themselves to accept that someone, who acts different than they would do or did, displays more braveness than they have.”

Will looked gently at him. “You’ve a way with words,” he chuckled. “You explanations are sounding like compliments, and the other way around.”

“Well, in this case it was a mixture,” Robert grinned, before he turned serious again. “As irritating the whole episode with Sandhaus was – it was a little issue compared to what you and the others have been through.” He wrapped one arm around the older man. “I don’t want to imagine how close you’ve been to death.”

Placing his head on Hogan’s shoulder, Wilhelm sighed, “Sergeant Kinchloe told me how he got knowledge about the upcoming air-raid and how you reacted.” He chuckled. “Major Hoopel… What an idea!”

“I had to use a cover-name and one you would instantly look through. So I came up with my pseudonym of last summer, as you caught me running around in German uniform in the Hofbräu.” Rob snorted. “I never thought that this episode would be this useful one day.”

“Ja, indeed. I realized within a second that you were at the phone. Only you could be daring enough to call as a POW at the People’s Court.”

“I would have called your Reichs-chancellery and even would have gotten you out of a meeting with the bubble-brain, if necessary.” He pressed a short kiss to Will’s temple.

“Yes, this sounds like you,” Wilhelm smiled, before he lifted his head. “Thanks to your call we made it to relative safety.”

“A subway-station is no bombing-proved place,” Hogan protested.

“Yet it was the only shelter we could find. And all of us surpassed ourselves. Even Burkhalter, only in very selfish way. I never knew he can ran like this – given his fat belly – but his sprint to the station-entrance was possible record-breaking. But Schmidt and Schultz…” He shook his head. “Schmidt was the highest ranking SS-officer around, so he took over charge – cool, calm, level-
headed. Yet as the power failed and everything turned dark, panic was about to erupt, but it’s surprising how civilians can hold on control if there is someone who takes the lead and can wake some trust – and this was exactly what Schmidt did. He was able to nip the beginning in chaos in in the bud; certainly saving people like this. And Schultz recovered a little girl who had been separated from her mother, and brought her down into the subway; re-uniting her with her mother seconds before the first bombs hit the streets above us. He didn’t even hesitate as he saw the little girl in need for rescue.”

“Typical Schultz. When something is about children, he overgrows himself a dozen times over,” Robert said softly.

“Yes, and the same went for Schmidt.” He caught Rob’s asking glance and said, “After the raid he heard baby-cries near our car that somehow survived the mess. All around the sirens were howling ‘all clear’, the flames raged and roared, peoples were screaming – and he heard the crying of a baby. We found the little guy on the pavement; shielded by his mother’s dead body.” He saw, how Robert closed his eyes. “He took the infant with him,” Wilhelm said gently.

Tearing open his eyes, Hogan stared at him. “He took the infant…” He sighed. “I knew he’s a good man. Where is the little one now? In an orphanage?”

Klink shook his head and smiled a little bit. “No, he’s here, in Hammelburg – with Hilda and her parents.”

“Wh…WHAT?” Hogan stared flabbergasted at his secret lover.

A real smile appeared on Wilhelm’s face. “He cradled the baby beneath his coat and took him with him. You should have seen the faces of the staff-members of the Wehrmacht-base we arrived two hours later. They looked at the baby as if he was an alien.” He chuckled. “And Schmidt? He remained in the infirmary where a doctor examined the baby, asked for triangular bandages as a replacement for real nappies and only after he could leave the baby in Schultz’ care, he joined us as we were interviewed of what we witnessed in Berlin.” His smile turned into a grin. “And then the base’s cook. He brought purée, scrunched apples and bananas, mixed milk with water and explained sharply the thunderstruck staff that children are our future and that we’ve to take care of them. During our way to Hammelburg we stopped in Magdeburg at a pharmacy and despite the fact that Schmidt – or we – hadn’t any vouchers for baby-utensils, the pharmacist gave us a baby-bottle, baby powder and several things more after he learned from where we came and why we had a baby with us. Schmidt was like a lioness when it came to the little guy – and then he was at loss how to go on for now.”

Hogan chuckled and shook his head. War was in his eyes the most inhuman thing of the world, yet it made people overgrow themselves in the most human ways over and over again. “Let me guess: To
involve Hilda was your idea.”

Klink nodded. “Ja. First Schmidt was almost shocked; telling me that I can’t demand such an extensive support from my secretary, but I know Hilda. She is the typical family-woman. I knew she would take the little one in for a few days – or one or two weeks.”

Pursing his lips, Rob frowned, “And then? Do you know, who his mother was? Are there any relatives?”

Taking another deep breath, Will shrugged softly. “She had no handbag with her, no passport, nothing. But Schultz found a dog-tag around her neck. Schmidt wants to do some research of the dead soldier’s identity. Like this he hopes to find the family the little guy belongs to.”

Hogan nodded slowly, before he said quietly, “And if there are no relatives?”

“To say the truth, none of us has thought so far, but I can imagine that Schmidt would be ready to keep him in his charge. He offered help to the Schneiders and wants to support them.” He looked straight at Hogan. “I think, he would try to adopt the little guy.”

“He is not married,” Robert added for consideration.

“Well, things can always change. Just look at us two. I think, from our first meeting as enemies and now being lovers, is a big – BIG – change that took place.” Klink took a deep breath. “And we’re just at the beginning – I hope.”

Robert moistened his lips. ‘I love you’ – Will’s words at the phone, which could have been so easily the last ones Hogan ever heard. Since then, they echoed in his heart and soul like a constant gentle whisper, and he knew they had to speak about it, even if he didn’t know how to begin.

He had no real experiences with his whole ‘true-love’-department. Yes, there had been women who had told him that they were in love with him and he had felt affection for them, but this here was different. Will had shown in him so many different ways, with so many little things or tiny gestures what he felt for him that words hadn’t been necessary. Heavens, the proof of love practically screamed from the skies, if you added the great things he did – like Will risking his life for him and saving him two times, not to speak of the many, many times he obviously covered for him. Wilhelm indeed loved him, yet – this much Hogan knew – if it wouldn’t have been for ‘Berlin’ and the very real chance that Will would die, the older man certainly would have kept those three special words to
himself for a little bit longer.

Yet the depth of Will’s feelings were finally voiced and couldn’t be ignored. And obviously Wilhelm wanted to know where they stood now.

Rubbing his temple with one hand, Hogan shifted his body until he had turned completely to Will’s side. Reaching out, he let the tips of his fingers wandering over the older man’s back of the hands which rested on his lap.

“You said at the telephone that you love me, and to say the truth: They hit me hard. Yes, I was somehow aware of your feelings, because I saw and heard them in every gaze and word from you that is directed on me within the last weeks.” He caught Will’s uncertain and almost hesitating glance. He saw the question in those eyes, the hope and the hidden fear, and felt his heart going out to his German counterpart once more. “My feelings for you are running deep.” Rob whispered. “This much I realized within the last hours as I feared for your life. I have to admit that I never felt this deeply ever before, and the mere thought of losing you drove me almost mad. But… everything is still new for me – not because you’re a man, but because I never had my feelings running this wild like they’re doing now. I have no name for them, but I… I think I know what they are.”

Will nodded slowly with a beginning smile. “I know what you mean,” he replied gently; a wave of intense love washed over him as he watched the usually so cocky and self-confident American struggle with words. “It’s a hard way from realizing something to admitting it.”

Hogan took a deep breath. Will was right. “Well, there is one thing I know for sure: I don’t want those feelings to end. I want to explorer them with you. I want you in my life, and no-one else. I said something likewise after our first night together, but how true this is, I began to understand yesterday as I was about to lose you.” He lifted his hand and cupped Wilhelm’s cheek. “I cannot lose you, Will. The mere thought pains me more than everything Hochstetter could have done to me. You mean more to me than I’m able to find words for.”

He saw Wilhelm’s eyes dampening and he bent forwards to place a gentle kiss on the older man’s lips. “You got me, Willie. You caught me in a warm, shining net that is like a cocoon for me I never want to leave again. I… I hope you know this.”

For a moment, Klink closed his eyes; aware that this was a love-declaration as near as Robert was able to give it in the moment. He wrapped both arms around the younger man; overwhelmed by the sheer burst of love that seemed to seize his whole being. Pulling Rob closer, he relished in the proximity that gave him the strength to admit something more.
"As the bombs fell outside of the subway station, the detonations shook the ground and explosions roared through the air, filling it with dust and heat, there was only one thing that kept my panic at bay and made me clinging to hope: The memories of you." Tears rose stronger in his eyes as he was for a moment back in Berlin-Neukölln, down in the make-shift shelter. "I imagined your face and thought to hear your voice deep in me – and the bombs weren’t this loud anymore and in the darkness there was all of sudden a gentle light that seemed to shield me. I knew I had to survive somehow so that I could return to you.” He moistened his lips. "What I also said at the phone, is true too: You’re the best that ever happened to me. And I prayed to get another chance to tell you in person how much I love you.”

Robert gulped; to hear those words again and seeing their truth shining bright and strong in his lover’s eyes, squeezed in inner being almost painfully. Emotions can be sometimes too much, and Hogan – who always played it cool – was reaching his limits.

Leaning their foreheads against each other, their gazes locked. Besides the impact of those three words, Robert was also touched that the memories of him had kept Will sane during such a horrible situation, and gave him strength to cling to faith. It was a declaration of love on its own. A special one – and his heart and soul yearned to return it, yet he wasn’t ready to utter those important three words.

Will didn’t need to hear them. He saw them shining in those dark orbs in front of him and heard them inaudible within his beloved’s words. And it was enough for now. Rob was a man of strong feelings, but he had learned to control them – at least the real deep ones. Yes, he was impulsive, yet he had nurtured the grip on his true emotions to an art. He needed time to learn to let go of them, and Will would grant him any minute he needed for this progress.

Catching the younger man’s lips with his own, both shared a kiss full of tenderness, warmth and nameless gratefulness that they were able to do this again at all. It really hadn’t looked good for Wilhelm – and the others – yesterday.

Finally coming up for air, Rob let himself sinking against his secret lover’s body; relishing in feeling the lanky form half beneath, half around him. Will leant his head against the American’s, and for a moment they simply sat there and held each other.

For a few minutes they did nothing more than simply snuggling, then Robert murmured, “Any chance that Hochstetter didn’t make it to the prison?”

“This is not very Christian of you, my dear Hogan,” Klink rebuked him anything but serious, before he sighed. “I’ve the same hope, even if it is wrong to hope for a man’s demise. But I watched him being driven away in a paddy-wagon minutes before you called me. I don’t know if he and his guards found shelter in time, but at least for the two policemen I hope so. But one way or the other:
I’m sure that we won’t hear anything from him in a very long time.”

He couldn’t know how wrong he was – but for now normality was returning to Stalag 13, and for the moment that was all that counted.

*** HH *** HH ***

At the same time, Schmidt had resumed his duty and had gotten a status-report. He didn’t know what he should make of the fact that three of their trucks were transporting working troops from Klink’s camp to the road and pass which were buried beneath snow, but – as it seems – the unpleasant job had been ordered for the men of Stalag 13, and therefore he agreed to support Klink by sending over even a further truck later in the afternoon so that four vehicles and the truck of the camp were busy with carrying the men back to the Stalag.

Parallel he tried to get vouchers for baby-clothes, nappies and baby-food – not an easy task. The offices were closed at Sunday, he wasn’t a parent who had the right to get those vouchers at all, and in the end it was his uniform and a threat which did the miracle. He didn’t feel proud about it, but he saw no other chance. Funny that German’s famous/infamous bureaucracy was outdone by another officialdom because the latter was dangerous for everyone to mess with.

In the later afternoon he drove to the Schneiders’ farm, where Hilda had already arranged for a cradle and some nappies she got from her friend, yet she was indeed relieved as the Oberleutnant arrived with some more supplies he had gotten from the pharmacy in Hammelburg, and the needed vouchers he handed to her. He was almost shocked to be this happy to see the baby again – well-feed, content in the cradle, and sleeping. ‘Manfred’ sighed and bubbled a little bit, as Horst bent over him and stroke one tiny cheek with a finger; making soft, cooing noises the baby reacted to. Maybe, deep down in his subconscious, the little guy recognized his savior.

Hilda’s parents watched the two young people; how they crowded around the cradle, talked in whispers and gave each other here and there some curious, but also shy glances. There was no doubt that both had taken the first gentle liking to each other, and Frau Schneider impulsively invited Schmidt to dinner; having learned from her daughter during the morning that the Oberleutnant, despite the department he had to serve in, was a decent an honorable man. It was not much she could offer, but it was enough for them. And while in Stalag 13 the POWs were devouring the spicy and delicious ragout, the three Schneiders and Schmidt sat at the dining table, had a modest evening meal and talked causally.

Bidding Hilda and her parents good night, Schmidt left finally; promising to make the first attempts of a research concerning ‘Manfred’ the next day. Yet it was clear that the young woman had already taken the little guy to her heart, and Horst had to admit that he felt more and more attached to the
baby after he had seen Hilda feeding and diapered him. And, as he tried to ignore, he felt also more than attracted to the young woman.

*** HH *** HH ***

The day had gone by peacefully – despite the fact that the working troops came back tired and in not a very good mood. Klink held the evening roll call short, thanked the men for their effort – to the surprise of many of them – and dismissed them with a brusque “Good night, Gentlemen!” Then he vanished back into his quarters; still deeply tired and haunted by the suppressed memories of the day prior.

Klink’s unexpected nice words, the warm shower and the ragout with rice or potatoes LeBeau and the others made, lifted the spirit among the POWs quickly again, and as they gathered around the tables in their Barracks and were allowed to use the light for an half hour longer than usual, the casual and lazy mood that usually ruled the camp was restored.

The two colonels enjoyed their dinner, during which Hogan learned more details of the trial – including Schmidt’s unexpected additional support by bringing the poker and the written statements of the guards to the court. Robert realized, how much of those evidences were responsible that the judges convicted Hochstetter. If Schmidt hadn’t brought those proofs of Hochstetter’s madness and personal desire of revenge to the trial, the verdict could have been completely different. Hell, if Hochstetter would have been discharged, the whole hunt for him – Hogan – had begun anew; maybe even with some additional support from other Gestapo- and SS-members which held more ability than Hochstetter. The whole thing could have turned to the worse – and not only for Hogan and his men, but also for Klink and even Burkhalter.

Schmidt’s decision to take the poker and some written statements with him to present them to the judges, had tipped the scales – last but not least one of those ‘judges’ was an SS-officer, who – of course – believed one of his own lines; especially when said one was a clear-thinking, promising young man and the defendant gave his madness away in front of the present members of the court.

Hogan would thank the Oberleutnant at the next given opportunity. Okay, maybe Schmidt wasn’t a real alley in the common sense, but he was a honorable man who tried to do the right things by damming terrorism and cruelty, and by following the old rules. And this was more than you could say about many other men in his position. And now the young man burdened himself even with a little orphanage; bothering with trouble to do again the right, human thing. One thing was certain: If the Allies would win and the leading people and higher ranking officers of this country – uniform or not – would face trial, he, Hogan, would make sure that Schmidt wouldn’t have to fear punishment. He owed the man this much.

After the two colonels talked about the events in Berlin for almost an hour, they began to distract
themselves with a game of chess, but Hogan quickly realized that Klink wasn’t in it. Yes, the Oberst was usually a passable chess-player – he even had set the American check-mate a few times without Hogan letting him win – but this evening he made mistakes like a beginner.

“Shall we continue this tomorrow or another day?” Hogan asked after he sized one of Klink’s rooks.

Wilhelm sighed and looked down onto the chess-board where he was definitely and gravely losing the match. “Ja – if you don’t mind,” he murmured.


“Very – yet I know I’ll get nightmares, so…” He shrugged and rose to get them a cognac, but stopped as Robert reached out and placed a hand on his arm.

“Drinking will not stop them, you know. But maybe talking will help.”

The German officer laughed softly. “Don’t you think we spoke enough about everything this evening?”

Robert glanced up at him; his eyes gentle like velvet. “We spoke about the trial – but not about what you faced during everything that happened later. To share fears and horrors unburdens the soul.” He cocked his head. “At least it helped me two weeks ago, remember?”

Wilhelm snorted. “Of course I remember – after all it changed everything between us two, and also your men and me, didn’t it?” He sighed and sat down again. “I… I don’t know if I can already speak about it. It… it was far too similar like it was during the first war – laying there, ducking and hoping that none of the explosions comes too near you. As the Luftpaffe wasn’t this strong in the beginning, I…”

He began to talk – and to talk, and to talk. As Robert realized that the dam was finally breaking, he rose, led his secret lover to the sofa and sat down there with him; listening closely to everything Klink told him about the first war and then – in an odd blending – began to speak about the days prior. He spoke about the night in the bunker and the feeling as if he was already in a tomb – cold and lonely, yearning for Robert’s presence. He talked about the trial, the fear that gripped him as he received Rob’s call and then the beginning flight to the south-east of Berlin; desperate to get as much distance to the doomed districts and themselves as soon as possible, but without being able to reveal
this all. He spoke about their run to the subway-station, the hour in the darkness with death walking along the streets above them, taking with Him the souls of even hidden people and those who thought to have found shelter. He talked about the heat, the ashes, the reek of burning houses, the screams and moans of injured or dying people – his own helplessness to do anything…

He wasn’t aware that silent tears slipped down his pale cheeks, while Robert pulled Klink’s interims-glasses away and held him afterwards close to him; knowing that he was maybe the only hold Will had for now – just like it had been the other way around two and three weeks ago. Enveloping the older man in his arms, letting his hands roaming in a soothing and calming manner over Wilhelm’s arms, shoulders and back, Hogan sat silently there and continued to listen.

Somehow, during the talking, Will’s words began to slur until he simply fell asleep in the middle of a sentence – completely exhaust in body, mind and soul, but Robert realized after some time that at least a little bit of the haunting ghosts had left his secret lover.

Not caring that time ticked by or that he sat in anything but a comfortable position on the sofa, Hogan held his German counterpart and watched over his sleep – just like Klink had done for him all those nights ago.

Sitting there, with nothing else to do than thinking, Robert let his mind drifting.

To say the truth, there was a lot he had to think about – mainly about Klink, himself and the declaration of love. Yesterday it had woken a painful mixture of warmth and agony in Robert – to know that he was really loved with all his edges and flaws, but uncertain if this love, he was gifted with, would not be taken away from him by the Grim Reaper who, ironically, walked in the shadows of his own comrades’ duty.

Those simple three words – I love you – had hit home. He had wanted to return them, but there hadn’t been any chance for it, because Will had ended the call immediately afterwards. And Robert hadn’t known if he would have this special opportunity ever again – to say something he hadn’t dare to voice ever within his whole life. And, dammit, he was turning forty in two months!

The hours afterwards ‘til deep in the night, as Will finally stood alive in front of him, had been hell. The fear for the man who had captured him in another way than only within these wires, had come in icy waves; mingled with despair or fury, because he was trapped in the camp and could do nothing than waiting. To be forced to stand back was something he truly hated, but this time it had almost driven him crazy.

And it had shown him one thing: Wilhelm Klink was not only an affair for him. Yes, he had already
admitted this to Schultz, but how true this admission was, had been shown in the hours he didn’t know if Klink was still alive or not. He had been half mad with fear for his secret lover, and he had hoped – prayed – for the chance to tell him how he felt.

And then, as the moment came within this afternoon, he had been unable to utter those three words.

Why?

Because they were so final?

Because they would be the beginning of another change within his life?

Because the ‘great’ Colonel Robert E. Hogan didn’t do serious feelings-stuff?

No.

It was because he had been a coward!

Yes, what he felt for Will was new – not the emotion itself, but its intensity. He had been in love before and it always had been ardent. He was a passionate man and every new liaison had made him feel great. A fresh affair was like a kind of drug – but this time it was different. It ran deeper, seemed to infiltrate and to fill his whole being with gentle warmth, bright light and fierce fire he simply needed. And this need wouldn’t end any time soon – if ever at all. The more he got from Klink, the more he wanted – not only during the hours of passion, but in general.

Will’s presence, his voice, his silly but adorable dialect within the German accent when he spoke English, the sometimes shy then fierce glances, the smiles, the huffs, the laughter, his morbid sense of humor, his sometimes almost child-like innocence… Rob was addicted to them, yet the only thing that really counted was Will’s welfare. Hogan’s fright yesterday hadn’t been only because he feared to be left behind and the pain that came with such a loss. No. The real reason for his angst had been for Wilhelm’s life. He, Robert, would pay any price if it meant that Will was safe. And this told him more than anything else.

Deep down he knew that this liaison – this affair – had turned into very serious, despite the short range of time it lasted. To the say the truth, their relationship had already begun month – years – ago, and had grown slowly but inevitable. There had been a certain connection between them from the
beginning, but what happened now was something he had never experienced before – a kind of belonging, he had thought to be impossible (least of all with a guy and the, above all, with ‘Willie’ Klink). But even now, while realizing all this, his thoughts were afraid to use the “L”-word.

Yet he had seen that Will had understand him – that he had recognized Robert’s feelings, without being voiced. Wilhelm’s eyes had shone with love and joy this afternoon while they talked about the more unimportant things, and it had given Hogan the unfamiliar feeling of being completely understood. Will gave him time to sort everything out – a kind of thoughtfulness and consideration Robert was not used to get. And it showed him one time more the seriousness of Klink’s love for him.

A love he craved and couldn’t imagine to lose.

So, where did this all leave him? He was an American officer of the US Air Corps, Klink was a German officer of the Luftwaffe. The war was as good as lost for Germany, and then the Allies would make a clean sweep. Okay, Klink belonged to the Underground, and Hogan would make certain that the older man wouldn’t face any trial. Klink – like Schultz and also Langenscheidt – would come out of the war as free men.

But what become of Wilhelm and himself afterwards?

Hogan hadn’t thought much about the time after the war. In earlier months and years he had dreamed of returning home to the US, to stay in the Service and to start an own family – maybe with Tiger. But now this all had an odd sound to his inner ears.

He couldn’t imagine to live together with a wife and children, while a large part of him yearned for a man, who would be thousands of miles away on the other side of the Atlantic – in a destroyed country no less. He couldn’t imagine to live with a pretense, because nothing else would it be to have a common family, while his mind and soul belonged to Will.

Robert hesitated, while his right hand played with his lover’s short strains; mind absent.

Sweet Lord, the imagination of having a normal family even rejected him – and there he thought that those special three words would change more in his life, when already everything had been changed!

On the other hand, the changes had just begun. His whole world was upside-down by now, and for
once he hadn’t a clue or a plan how to proceed. Maybe fate would show him a way –what to do later. But for now… Well, he would enjoy every minute he could spend with his secret lover ’til the end of the war.

His secret lover…

Hell, it sounded forbidden and delicious dangerous. No-one – or so he thought – only assumed the true nature of their relationship by now. A relationship that hadn’t been completely fulfilled until now.

This had been another issue that had haunted him while waiting for news yesterday. He had experienced nameless passion in Will’s arms and bed, yet the last step was still to make. Robert knew how much Wilhelm wanted this – and fate had almost separated them forever before they could reach the last rung of the ladder that led to Heaven.

Rob pursed his lips and looked down on his sleeping lover. Today Will was still too exhaust – physically and psychically – but Hogan knew from own experiences that it helped a lot to get serious stuff off the chest by talking about it with some you trusted utterly. It had helped him two weeks ago; now he certainly had been able to aid Wilhelm in the same way. His German counterpart would feel better tomorrow and then…

A low smile spread over Robert’s face. Tomorrow would be the day – evening! – they would consume their lo… passion wholly. And Hogan had already an idea how to surprise Will with it.

*** HH ***

It was close to midnight, as Klink finally woke and glanced disoriented and confused around.

“Was…?” (What) he mumbled rather unintelligent, and Robert couldn’t help himself: He had to chuckle.

“Had a nice nap, sleepy-head?” he teased softly.

“Hm-hm,” was the only answer, while Will snuggled back against him and was already drifting back into Morpheus’ Realm.
“Oh no, you don’t!” Hogan said, rose and pulled the half-asleep Oberst on his feet. Ignoring the protests, which were mumbled in German, Robert maneuvered Klink into the sleeping room, where he sat him down on the bed’s edge. He began to strip them, what woke the older man enough to help him a little bit at least, before he sank onto the mattress – only clad in his long underwear. He was asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

Spreading the blanket and the comforter over Wilhelm, Rob watched him for a moment; not aware of the tender smile that played around his lips. Reaching out to cup Will’s cheek, he bent down and pressed a kiss on his secret lover’s forehead, then he returned to the living room, switched off the lights and made himself ready for bed.

Ten minutes later he slipped beneath the blankets beside Will, who snored softly, yet he seemed to sense Hogan’s presence even in sleep and rolled towards him. Taking Klink into his arms and holding him close again, Robert began to relax; hoping that the talk would prevent Wilhelm from having new nightmares…

*** HH ***

The next morning began calmly. Klink felt a lot better after a long, fitful sleep. Okay, two times Robert had woken him because the older man suffered from nightmares, but the other time Wilhelm slept deep and soundly like the baby in the Schneiders’ home; enveloped in the warm cocoon of the younger man’s arms and hidden love.

Klink fought with the paper-work after roll call and breakfast; missing Hilda’s talent of organizing and practically knowing his wishes before he even voiced them. Yet, as she called him around midday and asked if he needed some information or if she should come over (somehow she would manage, how she assured him), he declined her offer kindly and practically ordered her to remain with the baby for this and maybe also the next day. The little guy had priority, no doubt. Klink wasn’t aware of it, but he sounded like a concerned uncle, and he even acted like one.

Hogan informed London of Klink’s survival but waved off any request of information the brass wanted to have from the Oberst as they tried to contact him via the Heroes at Saturday morning. “Tell them that he was this far away from the Grim Reaper!” Hogan growled as Kinch brought him the message; showing him an inch between thumb and index finger. “He has to come around from it.”

Kinchloe stared at him. “Shall I really tell them that a German staff-officer is too shaken after an air-raid to answer a few questions?” He shook his head. “They’ll take him for a softie.”
Hogan groaned. “He is no ‘softie’, but he really suffers from what he has been through.” He pinched his nose. “Ask them, what they want to know and I’ll try to get some answers.” He looked up again. “But not sooner than tomorrow!”

Kinch didn’t dare to ask why it had to be not ‘sooner than tomorrow’. He didn’t think he would get a true answer – and, given the obvious relationship of the two officers, he was convinced that he didn’t even wanted to have some details.

“Okay, Colonel. I’ll try my best,” he nodded and vanished through the entrance beneath the furnace; asking himself why the most things couldn’t be easy.

*** HH *** HH ***

Schmidt stood true to his given word and began his researches. Schultz had handed the young woman’s dog-tag to him as they had left the Schneiders’ house at Saturday night, and now the Oberleutnant tried to get some information about ‘Little Manfred’s’ family.

First he contacted the Deutsche Dienststelle WASt in Saalfeld / Thuringia; an archive in which the serial-numbers of all Wehrmacht-members (independent if Heer, Luftwaffe or Marine) were listed, including copies or original of personnel-files and background-information. He didn’t know if he was there at the correct address or at the second headquarters in Meiningen (also in Thuringia), but it turned out that the office in Saalfeld was the contact he needed. The office had been founded in 1939 in context with the Third Geneva Conventions, which ruled the handling of POWs and fallen soldiers.

When Schmidt had been a member of the Abwehr, he had needed to legitimate himself and to explain, why he needed information from institutions like the WASt. As the CO of combined headquarter of Gestapo and SS, he got the required answers within an hour without any further questions. It showed him how corrupt everything had become by now.

At the early midday, he knew that the man who once wore the dog-tag instead of the baby’s death mother, had been a Fahnenjunker-Unteroffizier (flag-squire subordinate officer) within a Panzer (tank) division that had been stationed at the Russian Front. His name had been Alfred Bornheim, born in Berlin, and was married to Mathilde Bornheim, née Heesel. He had fallen in August 1944 and had lived with his pregnant wife in Berlin-Neukölln, Weser-Street. He had had a brother, Otto, who had been by the Marine and was officially missed on sea for three years now, and he had a sister, Charlotte Schwaigel. His father had fallen during WW I and his mother was in a hospice. It was not known if the lady still lived; the file of Alfred Bornheim had been closed and not been actualized since his death.
Having those information, Schmidt demanded an actual road-map of Berlin, an inferior brought him from the registry. The Gestapo was not known for collegial team-work, but a road-map from all larger cities within Germany belonged to the standard-equipment of all headquarters – independent of the inner-German country.

Schmidt’s gaze wandered over the map, until he found the townhall of Neukölln – the place, he, Klink, Burkhalter and Schultz had found shelter beneath the surface. Then he searched the streets around – and closed his eyes in pain as he saw the location of the Weser-Street. The place he found the dead young woman and her baby was not more than two- or three hundred meters away from the crossroad that led directly to the Weser-Street. The lady had been a stone’s throw away from home as the deadly debris hit her; turning her tiny son an orphan.

Sighing deeply, Horst sat down behind the large desk the map lay on, and needed a moment to collect himself. Then he gripped again for the phone and demanded a connection with the registry office in Berlin-Neukölln.

He was told that the required office was cut off since the fire within the townhall that had started during the air-raid two days ago. Even if the firemen had been able to stop the flames before they could destroy the whole building, all telephone-lines were out of work for now. Another attempt to learn more of a maybe common registry office in Berlin found an end, too, because all larger offices within Berlin-Middle were still unreachable and – maybe – not existing anymore.

Thanking the lady of the telephone-exchange, he put the receiver back on the phone and cursed whole-heartily. As long as the fires were raging in Berlin, he had reached a dead-end. There was no chance to get any information about Alfred Bornheim and his family until some normality was restored in Berlin.

Unless he could find Bornheim’s mother or sister. Again he called the WASSt in Saalfeld, but given the fact that the persons he needed more information about were civilian people who weren’t under any suspect, he had to file an application. He agreed to it; knowing that the answer from WASSt would last. In other words: He wouldn’t get any more details about ‘Little Manfred’s’ family within the next days.

Again his eyes found the map that lay unfolded on his desk. His fingers moved over the paper – from Kreuzberg to Berlin-Middle and further to the north-east. He only could imagine the enormity of destruction the hostile bombers had left behind. His glance wandered back to Neukölln that only had been grazed by the disaster, and he gulped. If Klink hadn’t insisted of driving them to the south-east to this Vienna café-house, they certainly would have been trapped in the inferno and had died. A café-house that certainly had found its end, too.
Klink had said it was located more to the north-west of the place they had found shelter, and everything seemed to burn there, but maybe the little restaurant he and the others owned more or less their lives, still existed.

As soon as he would get a connection to Neukölln’s townhall he would try to get some data about the café-house. Maybe it had survived – and maybe they would sit there all together one day, thinking back of everything. Later, after the war – if Berlin would still exist then at all.

Folding the road-map he laid it aside and glanced at the heaps of paperwork beneath it. Who had said that to be a commanding officer was the peak of a carrier? Whoever said this, had to be insane. One thing was sure: This damn paperwork was killing him! Yet there was one thing he would have to do first: Writing to the WASt. He hoped to get the needed information about ‘Little Manfred’s’ family soon. And, if it came to the worst, he certainly could use the advantage to know in person a Wehrmacht-general: Albert Burkhalter.

*** HH ***

This Monday was for Burkhalter even worse than for the others. He sat in the office that was usually occupied by Colonel-General Guderian and rubbed his temples; already suffering from a strong headache. He had received Klink’s call yesterday concerning his temporary replacement in Stalag 13, and Burkhalter had learned that this Major Sandhaus had done everything in his power to turn the camp into a mess. Klink’s detailed written report was on its way to Zossen, but of what Burkhalter had heard he had to agree with Klink that Sandhaus was completely unable to fill the post of a camp-Kommandant. At least a POW-camp. Burkhalter assumed that the Reichsführer would love to have such a man for the other prisoner-camps, Albert so didn’t want to learn details about, and therefore he wouldn’t earmark the major for this job to anyone!

But just right now he had a lot of other problems. Bombers of the RAF had flown air-raids against Bonn the day prior, and the last Wehrmacht-divisions had fled from Belgium. Hitler had raged as he learned about it, and Burkhalter was anything than disappointed that he was in Zossen and not in Berlin. A furious Führer was always a lurking ticket to the Grim Reaper’s realm. Yet Burkhalter heard enough via the radio – the only connection to the other staff-officers, who had found shelter in Berlin. And given the many static and interferences, no-one could be sure if this was a result of the still lasting many fires in the capital or if the Allies were intercepting them. Maybe both.

Being cut off from his own office – he didn’t even know if it still existed – and being the highest ranking Wehrmacht-officer in the OHK in Zossen-Wünsdorf in the moment, he was in charge of the most important telecommunication center of the whole army AND of the headquarters. Orders from Colonel-General Guderian, Goering or Hitler came only sporadically, while one catastrophic
message followed the next. Even now, two days after the air-raid, a real damage-report was impossible. The first aerial photos which had been made from some aircrafts, and on which was more to see than only smoke, showed that the government quarter was heavily damaged, including the Reichs-Chancellery. Whole streets were partly still burning, and Burkhalter felt sick when he saw how many civilian house-lines and streets lay in ruins; knowing that the buildings had taken their occupants with them to death.

First reports spoke of two or maybe three thousand dead people, but Burkhalter had witnessed the whole attack and had seen enough afterwards to know that this was the understatement of the year – no, of the whole decade! If he interpreted the photos correctly, a third of the town was damaged or destroyed. The number of victims had to be seven or eight times higher than the first statements from the government’s side said.

And it infuriated Burkhalter – both things: The beginning lies of the regime about something so horrible only to make themselves looking strong, and the cold-blood in which thousands and thousands of people had been killed within one hour. Women, children, healing men, old and young. Yes, he knew that the Germans had done attacks which history certainly would call war-crimes afterwards, but why were so many medias and officers of the Allies calling them ‘demons’, when they didn’t hesitate to do similar things?

Burkhalter had his doubts concerning the ways the regime had chosen – especially within the last weeks. Yet, after what happened two days prior, he thought to know that the only chance Germany still had was to fight back.

Sitting in Colonel-General Guderian’s office, he glanced at the pinboard that held many sketches, drawings and photos of the newest guided missile battery. The weapon was about to enter the last testing phase and it would start a whole new level of warfare: It would send missiles for the first time to space from where the attack would take place. Until now he had quarreled inwardly with this augmented rocket he had heard about a lot during the last meetings in Berlin, but not anymore. After everything he had been through and what he had seen, it was about time to strike back with a force the Allies wouldn’t expect.

Being now in charge of the OHK until Guderian would be back, he maybe could have a part in the weapon that eventually could change the warfare again.

Last testing phase…

Maybe he could take over this project and…
He didn’t get further in his thoughts, as the telephone rang. “Yes?” he asked brusquely; being in no mood for politeness.

“How General, I have the Gestapo headquarters in Berlin for you in the line,” one of the officers of the telephone station told him. “A Kriminalrat Ebersberg wants to speak with you.”

“What?” Burkhalter straightened his shape. “I thought the building lies in ruins.”

“A larger part certainly, but a wing of it was spared of the flames – and, by the way, the call comes from the bunker.”

The general frowned, then he remembered that the bunker was for the Gestapo-members in Berlin as well as for Himmler and his fellows with his office directly beside the headquarters. Of course the shelter in the ground was equipped with the all technics which were needed to stay in lead and giving commands.

“Put the Kriminalrat through,” he ordered. A click was to hear, then an unknown voice sounded,

“General Burkhalter?”

“Yes, this is General Burkhalter,” Albert replied.

“I’m Kriminalrat Helmut Ebersberger, Gestapo Berlin. Please excuse the disturbance. I know that you certainly has a lot on your hands in the moment, but… we’ve a prisoner here at whose trial you were involved with only an hour before the air-raids happened. We want to bring him to the correct location of his punishment, but…”

“Let me guess,” Burkhalter interrupted him. “You speak of the former Major Wolfgang Hochstetter.”

“Yes, Herr General. The two policemen, who brought him here to find shelter, only told me that he was sentenced to a working camp and that the Luftwaffe has to decide, which camp it should be. The People’s Court is unreachable and there are the rumors that it burnt down to its walls, so there is certainly no chance to get some answers concerning Hochstetter’s verdict from there.”
Burkhalter sighed. He really was almost about to develop a certain paranoia because of the ‘poison-gnome’. Even now the former major haunted him.

“Hochstetter was sentenced to eight years working camp I’ve to choose. I want to send him to Weingut 1 (code-name for an armament facility / bunker in Mühldorf, Bavaria.). I’m sure they can always use two strong arms there – after all, only six halls of the planned twelve are finished and we should have started with the production of further ME 262-planes there yesterday. I think, Hochstetter’s fierce temperament can be put to use there – by pouring concrete.”

For a moment there was silence in the line, then the Kriminalrat chuckled shortly. “Understood, Herr General. As soon as there is a chance to transport the prisoner, I’ll make certain that he will be brought to Mühldorf. The Kommandant of the facility belongs to the Waffen-SS and is a cousin of me. I’ll inform him in advance. Only one question, Herr General, what exactly was Hochstetter accused of? I’ve to write a report with as much details as possible, given the fact that the case records certainly were destroyed in the fire of the Court.”

Burkhalter nodded, even if the other man couldn’t see him. “Abuse of rank, insubordination, uncalled cruelness against a protected POW-officer out of personal reasons, and cowardice, because he left three of his own men in the middle of an attack; presenting them to death while he fled.”

A snort was to hear. “Unbelievable! I’ve worked with Hochstetter two or three times in the past, but I never thought that this man is such a coward. I’ll take care that he will be transferred to Weingut 1 within the next days.”

“Thank you, Herr Kriminalrat. How is the situation in Berlin?”

They spoke for a short time about the whole chaos in Berlin, then they ended the call, because another message reached Burkhalter: A large squadron of more than 500 Allied aircrafts was heading from the west towards the south-east and the German air-defense was alerted. Groaning, Burkhalter rose and went to the table with the charts; trying to find out what the enemy’s target could be, while a captain tried to reach the Führerbunker.

Burkhalter rubbed his neck, while he made a connection line between the location the Allies had entered German air space and the eventual target. If the attackers wouldn’t change the course, they would crossed the north of Bavaria. His eyes found the place that was called Hammelburg, and for a moment he grimaced.

Even in such a case Klink’s Stalag was present…
I do hope that the errors didn’t scare you off and that you liked the chapter nonetheless.

Well, there was a lot the two lovebirds had to talk about and I think it’s a big difference between an affair and real love that grows. Okay, Rob hasn’t said the three important words, but at least he knows that he feels them – and in the next chapter the two men will come together with everything that belongs to a real love-making. So be ready for some hot scenes.

Parallel Schmidt begins to learn more of Manfred’s heritage – and he begins to learn that there is something odd about the “Vienna café-house” Klink wanted to invited him and the others to.

I really hope that the gramma- and spelling-mistakes weren’t this awful and that you enjoyed the chapter. And I really would be happy to get some new reviews. And if someone of you think he/she find some time to be my beta-reader, not only I, but also the other readers would be more than happy!!!

I know that in the most countries the summer-holidays are nearing their end, and I hope you all had a beautiful and relaxing time.

Until next weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

I hope you all got beautiful summer-holidays and that the return to job / school wasn’t so hard.

At first I want to tell you that I got a new beta-reader, so this chapter is certainly better and easier to read without my rough English-writing. I hope, you’re going to enjoy it – last but not least, because this chapter becomes a hot one again (take care to have something cold to drink nearby, *smile*). A big thank-you to Kaitlin who offered her help and did a good job at the new chapter here.

Thank you all for the feedback despite the errors within the last chapters,

Have fun now,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 48 – Love is more than a word

“And you think I can have a short walk over the compound?” Hogan asked Wilson, almost eagerly, who shook his head in amusement. The colonel sounded like an excited child.

“The weather isn’t too bad today, and you’re really in need for some fresh air. And, by the way, many men are confused by now that you’re still here – in the Kommandant’s quarters. A lot of them think by now that you’re more gravely hurt than Klink and Kinch let on.”

Robert rolled his eyes while he slipped into his boots. “A flu and tracks of torture need time to heal. And Klink is the mother of all mother-hens – even worse than Kinch and the others. He won’t let me leave until I’m as good as new,” he said, crossing inwardly his fingers because – yes – Will was a mother-hen and spoiled him a lot, but the true reason was far more egoistical.
From both sides.

They simply didn’t want to give up their shared nest here. Okay, to say the truth, Hogan knew that he wasn’t fully healed until now. The one hour down in the tunnels on Saturday had proven it. But, if he was honest, he could return to his own quarters in Barracks 2. Hell, it would be his damn duty – yet he couldn’t bring himself to do it so soon. He loved the shared meals and the evenings together with Wilhelm, and to wake up beside him – or to feel him during the nights close by; bathing in the comfort and secureness of his secret lover’s presence. The prospect of the cool and drafty room in the wooden hut that was called a ‘barracks’ sounded even less appealing whenever he added a ‘no Will there’ to it. So, a few days more here wouldn’t hurt – even if he would give a damn bad example to his men and the other POWs if they knew the truth.

Wilson watched him thoughtfully. He had his own guesses why the colonel was still here in Klink’s quarters. Not because they offered some luxury. That Hogan was an officer who could live without luxury was something he had proven over and over again. No, the reason was the little house’s original occupant. There was no doubt about Klink’s feelings for his senior POW officer, and Wilson would have bet not only his last shirt, but a whole year’s salary that the two men had developed a far more ‘familiar’ relationship with each other than just a friendship.

Hogan’s ‘sickness’ should explain the many needed lines within two nights a few days ago. The Kommandant’s extremely cheery mood and generosity, the easiness between them Wilson had witnessed whenever he had examined them…the two shared more than these quarters; they shared a bed! And not in a platonic way.

And if this was really the case – of which Wilson was convinced – then he knew the real reason why Hogan still accepted Klink’s offer to stay here.

Inwardly he shook his head. Who had ever thought that these two, so different men, could develop romantic feelings for each other? On the first sight, they seemed to have nothing in common except for being officers of the same rank and serving in the equivalent department of their armies. Yet Wilson knew that they must complement each other very well. Otherwise it wouldn’t have come to this kind of relationship.

He glanced back at his superior and saw that Hogan was done with getting clad and slipped into his bomber jacket.

“No longer than ten minutes,” Wilson said firmly. “We don’t want to overdo it the first time, okay, sir?”
Robert smiled at him, mouthed a “Mother-hen!” and left the room. He couldn’t help it, but he looked forward to being out of the quarters for once. As cozy, warm, and comfortable this living-arrangement was, the walls were closing up on him by now, and he really needed some fresh air.

The moment he stepped out of the quarters and down the three steps to the ground, he sighed in relief. For once the clouds were scattered and allowed some sun rays to reach the ground. It was still cold – okay, after all it was only the 5th of February – but the wind had silenced. Therefore, the temperature was bearable.

Carefully he made some steps out onto the compound and caught the gazes of some of the guards in the watch-towers – two of them nodded even into his direction. He replied with a smile – and walked slowly towards the Barracks.

His presence was recognized within a dozen seconds.

“Colonel!” One POW gasped, began to beam, and quickly saluted, which woke the attention of three others who reacted likewise. And then the news of Hogan’s ‘return’ spread like a wildfire through the camp, as more and more men saw their superior on the compound – still pale with bruises on his face, walking carefully with Wilson at his side, but he was there! Impulsively several men began to clap their hands, and then the applause surged up.

Will cocked his head. Rob hadn’t told him that he wanted to make a stroll over the compound as they had lunch this midday. Usually Hogan would have mentioned something like this, so this here seemed to be an impulsive decision. Then Klink’s gaze found Wilson beside the senior POW officer and realized the reason for Robert’s little walk. Obviously the medic had advised Hogan to get some fresh air – and to show himself to the other POWs, which certainly worried by now about their superior’s long absence.

Over the heads of the other men, Hogan and Klink’s eyes met for a few seconds, and the Kommandant nodded at him with a hidden smile; approving Robert’s little trip. Stepping down from the porch, the Oberst headed into the direction of his American counterpart, and he realized how the other POWs made room for him; neutrality and partly even respect on their faces.
“Colonel Hogan,” he greeted formally; ignoring LeBeau and Newkirk’s amused snorts. The two corporals flanked their friend and superior, replacing a grinning Wilson.

“Colonel Klink,” Robert replied neutrally, what made LeBeau quickly turn away; the Frenchman’s coughing masked the laughter that bubbled out of him. To hear those two speaking in such a formal way with each other was more than funny given the fact that the Heroes practically knew of those two sharing bed and table, so to say.

“A good weather you chose to get some fresh air,” the Kommandant said, before he glanced at Wilson. “I hope in agreement with our medic?”

“Of course, sir. We all know how scary he can be if a patient doesn’t obey him,” Hogan joked, smirking at Wilson who rolled his eyes. Other POWs around them began to chuckle and to laugh quietly.

The same moment they heard from afar a deep droning in the air. The two colonels shared a glance, knowing exactly the reason for this noise. Rob saw something flickering in Will’s eyes and realized that his secret lover still had trouble coming to terms with what happened two days prior. Instinctively, Hogan stepped beside the older man to offer some comfort with his proximity before he turned around and looked up into the skies.

The talks on the compound had died down, while one by one, everyone looked up.

In the northwest, the skies seemed to darken as if a giant flock of birds would draw closer. And, yes, it was birds – mechanical ones. Built by human hands; hundreds of them.

“And it doesn’t stop,” Wilhelm murmured quietly, shielding his eyes with one hand to have a clearer view.


“Hm, the latter certainly without our old Messerschmitt-drives,” Klink grumbled; giving his beloved a certain glance as he referred to their trip to London and the trick the Allies played on the Wehrmacht by sticking an old Messerschmidt-drive in a ‘new’ P51.
Hogan shrugged. “Well, we have our own drives, no doubt.”

“To where they’re off?” Newkirk asked. “What’s located in this direction?”

“Regensburg,” Klink answered and grimaced, as he heard Schultz’s voice behind him.

“The *Messerschmitt*-Werke are there.”

Hogan turned around. “Weren’t they destroyed in 1943?”

“Partly,” Klink murmured. “They re-built a few halls.” He sighed, knowing that his answer could be news or not for the Allies – and certainly could be regarded as treason. But the *Oberst* had already begun to walk the path of fighting the regime, so it didn’t matter anymore how often he supported Germany’s opponents.

“Eventually these halls are their destiny,” Newkirk mused.

“Maybe, but there is also a large fuel-plant,” Schultz grumbled. “A cousin of me worked in the latter until he was crippled during an accident shortly before the war broke loose. I bet that this is the target – that the *Messerschmidt*-facility or the railway-knot in the south.”

“Are those targets more outside of the town?” Hogan asked quietly.

Klink made a face. “The *Messerschmidt*-facility is outside of Regensburg, and the railway-knot is in the south of the city area. I’m not sure about the fuel-plant’s location. Schultz?”

“Also outside of the township,” Schultz remarked. “It would be too dangerous to put something like this in the middle of housing areas.”

“Ha, the *Wehrmacht* had no problem with rising such facilities near POW camps. Like the one last year in July directly outside of our wires,” Hogan deadpanned.

Klink sighed. “You know that this General von Heiner was nuts. I mean, come on, who takes such a
crazy man-eater like this Marya as his lover on his own free will?"

“Marya is no man-eater or crazy, but a beautiful, brave, fiery, incredible, lovely…” LeBeau’s fierce protest was shut off as Kinchloe, who had joined them by now, simply put his hand over the tiny Frenchman’s mouth.

“Stop it, Louis. We all know that you’re in love with her – even if I don’t understand why.”

Schultz began to chuckle. “All Frenchmen are a little bit crazy.” He caught LeBeau’s threatening glance and added kindly, “But this makes them so loveable.”

“One word against Marya, and you’ll never get a Strudel from me again!” Louis said sharply the moment Kinch gave him free.

Schultz groaned and shook silently his head.

Klink exchanged a glance with Hogan. “What a couple: the little cook and the fur-loving diva,” he whispered under his breath, making Robert smirk.

The noises became louder and louder by now, and the men had to lay their head into their necks to watch the bombers and air-fighters, which flew directly over the camp in a few kilometers’ height.

“I hope they don’t let something fall around here,” Schultz said quietly, before he bent down to Carter. “Thank the Lord you’re not one of the crew up there. Otherwise I would fear for us.”

Andrew stared with big eyes at him, and so the Sergeant of the Guards added, “I do remember Colonel Hogan’s ‘birthday party’ and your trigger-happiness during it two years ago.”

Hogan had listened with one ear and had to chuckle again. Of course he remembered perfectly well the incident the large Bavarian referred to. At the beginning of April 1943, Hogan had kidnapped General Biedenbender and the staff-officer’s own Heinkel-bomber to destroy the oil refinery by Stuttheim, but were forced to take Schultz with on the ride. The poor sergeant had to parachute back to the camp – just like the others – and had had uncounted sleepless nights afterwards.

Klink knew of the affair by now, threw a quick glance around – none of the regular guards were near. Only the POWs – grimaced and shook his head. “Bandidos,” he murmured, low enough to be only heard by Hogan, whose grin broadened even more. Then he turned serious again.
Another air-raid – another waste of lives on both sides. If only the maniac in Berlin would finally admit that the war was lost for him and his goonies. It would spare so much pain and death, but the American officer had analyzed the mind of the free world’s most fierce enemy. The ‘bubble-brain’ would never capitulate until everything lay in ruins – and Hogan feared that these last three of four weeks were only the beginning.

He should be right…

*** HH *** HH ***

The rest of the day went by with routine – at least in Stalag 13. For Burkhalter, one of the worst days of his life continued. The air-crafts Hogan, Klink, and the others had seen in the afternoon had indeed attacked the fuel-plant by Regensburg that went off in flames. Fortunately, without many civilian victims. Parallel, the Führer heard that in Aachen, which was already conquered by the Allies, the first newspaper had been printed under American control a week ago informing the citizens about the Nazis’ crimes and of the rules which now applied for the town – “American propaganda”. How the ‘tiny private’ screamed. The Red Army was about to cross the Oder River in the east, and despite the regime’s orders, more and more people from East-Prussia fled over the Baltic Sea, while in the west the Wehrmacht retreated in haste for Belgium.

Burkhalter yearned to be back to his usual responsibility concerning the Stalags. His original job was pure heaven compared to the insanity here in the OHK.

None of this was known to the inhabitants of Stalag 13 – neither to the guards, nor to the POWs. Roll call happened like every evening. Those who had freed the main-road and the Hoffstein pass from the last snow were granted an extra portion of white bread and something close to peace settled down in the wooden huts.

Hogan, already in pajamas after his little trip in the afternoon, and Klink enjoyed their dinner, had a game of chess and then – to Will’s confusion – Robert called it a night. “You’re in need for some rest,” he said softly to the older man. “This was no walk in the park within the last few days, and I’m sure your hearing and your head still give you trouble.”

Wilhelm sighed and nodded slowly. “Ja, certainly.” He sighed. “Yet it is so cozy in the moment.” He looked gently at the younger man. “I love those quiet evenings with you. Talking, playing chess, or exchanging thoughts,” he admitted. “I look forward to it every day.”
Robert felt his cheeks getting warm and lowered his head. This was maybe one of the sweetest compliments he ever got – that someone was happy to simply share time with him. Smiling he looked up again and met those gentle, blue eyes behind the interim's glasses (the new monocles wouldn't be ready until the end of the week).

“Maybe the evening hasn’t ended just right now,” Rob said softly, and saw curiosity sparking in the older man’s gaze.

“To what you’re up to, my witty fox?” Klink asked; beginning to assume something more… intimate.

Hogan rose. “Why don’t you go to the bathroom? I’ll put everything in order here and make certain that the doors are really locked.” He winked at Will, whose eyes began to shine. Yes, they had slept wrapped in each other’s arms within the last one and a half nights, but he yearned to feel Rob’s soft skin on his for more than only cuddling.

So, without any more questions, he rose and went to the bathroom. Rob watched him go and hurried to get everything ready. Deep inside he felt some nervousness rising in him. They were about to make the last step, and he did know that it would be unpleasant at first – at least for him. On the other hand, the two days prior had shown him brutally how quick their still developing relationship could be torn apart, and he didn’t want to miss the chance to complete what they started. Will had admitted that he loved him. It wasn’t Wilhelm’s fault that he – Hogan – was in this case too cowardly to return those words which went for him, as well. He couldn’t say them – not now – but he could show his secret lover how strong he felt for him by trusting him utterly by surrendering to him.

Combing his spread fingers through his dark hair, Rob looked down on the bed he had prepared with drawn covers and a large bath towel he had gotten from the bathroom. Then his glance wandered through the room and nodding with satisfaction, he slipped out of his nightclothes.

Will appeared a few minutes later – and stopped dead in his tracks the moment he left the bathroom.

The sleeping room was bathed in the soft shine of a few candles, the curtains were closed, the gentle cracking of a warm fire sounded from the furnace, and on the bed… lay Robert Hogan in all his naked glory; one knee bent, one arm behind his head which was turned into Will’s direction, a soft smile on his lips. His chocolate brown eyes shimmered with emotions too deep and strong to voice.

Offering the older man his free hand, he whispered, “Come here, my phoenix.”
Wilhelm felt his mouth going dry and moistened his lips, while heat began to float through his veins. Opening his bathrobe, he let it simply fall where he was and walked towards the bed. How quickly his body reacted to the view in front of him was more than obvious and brought a predatory gleam to Hogan’s eyes.

Entwining the fingers of his free hand with Will’s right ones, he gently pulled the older man down to him; sighing in pleasure as the lanky body slipped over his – warm from the shower. Wrapping both arms around the older man’s neck, he lifted his head and caught his lover’s lips with his own in a tender, slow, loving kiss. Letting his mouth glide over Wilhelm’s cheek, he whispered into his ear huskily, “Take me.”

He sensed Will stiffening in surprise before the older man lifted his head and glanced with large eyes down on him. “Rob…” he murmured thunderstruck – almost hesitating. “Do… do you mean…”

Hogan nodded slowly; his smile was one strong promise.

Will gulped. “Are you sure?” he whispered; knowing instinctively what this one step meant for the younger man.

“I’m absolutely sure,” Rob replied; hooking one leg over the long ones of his German counterpart. “I almost lost you. I will not allow fate trying to intervene even one time more with us.” He slid one hand in the soft, short hackles of his lover. “I want this, Will. I really want this – and I trust you.”

Those blue eyes above him moistened before Wilhelm buried his face into the American’s neck; inhaling the beloved scent. “I can’t promise that it won’t hurt at first,” he breathed into the soft skin. “You’ve already endured so much – so much more than I knew before I traveled to Berlin… I don’t want to be the reason for you to be in pain again.”

Hogan didn’t need to ask to what Klink was referring to. It was clear that during Hochstetter’s trial all details had been laid open. There was nothing the older man didn’t know now about Robert’s captivity in the Gestapo-HQ in Hammelburg. And seeing how much Will loved him, Robert was very aware how much the revealing of those last hidden things must have pained the Oberst. That Wilhelm was willing to delay the fulfillment of his greatest desire touched Hogan deeply, but he wouldn’t allow Hochstetter’s poison to affect them any longer.

“If this last step is only a little bit like the last time you caressed me in- and outwardly, then I can hardly await it,” he said softly; letting his hands roaming over Will’s long back. “I want you, Wilhelm. I want to feel you deep in me – to be one with you.” He rose one hand and cupped Will’s cheek the moment the older man lifted his head from his throat again. “I want our bodies to meld...
with each other just like our hearts are already doing. I want you to be a part of me.” He brushed his lips over his lover’s again. “Take me. Make me yours.”

Wilhelm groaned anew. Rob’s words sent pure happiness but also rising fire through his whole being. Kissing the younger man for a moment strongly, he glanced towards the nightstand to see if the tube with ointment was reachable and only now saw the bottle with colza oil Hogan must have gotten from the kitchen. A soft laugh escaped him. This clever Ami was always prepared!

Looking down on a still smiling Robert, who winked at him, he breathed an adoring, “You really plan everything in detail, don’t you?”

“Yes – the detail makes the success,” Hogan answered with a hidden snicker; feeling lightheaded in the prospect what would come.

“And once again a victory for Papa Bear,” Klink chuckled before he bent down and caught his beloved’s mouth with his own. His hands began to roam over the strong, solid body, and the human silk that had suffered so much under the brutal assaults of Hochstetter’s fury. Will had promised himself during the trial that he would cherish and kiss every spot of Robert’s body when he returned – and this was exactly what he began to do now.

*** HH *** HH ***

Schmidt groaned as he loosened the tie around his neck and peeled off the thick uniform-jacket. For a moment, he looked at the black cloth, then he threw it over the bed in the small quarters he occupied within the Gestapo-Headquarters. It was the only uniform-set left for him. The other one was still with his assistant, who tried to clean it from ashes and dirt.

Sighing, he sat down at the living room suite that was placed beside the window and pulled off his boots. He was tired – more than tired. He had to catch up on a lot of paperwork, had a new unpleasant discussion with von Neuhaus concerning the fourth truck he had sent over to Stalag 13 to help Klink to transport his POWs forth and back to the road and pass which were finally freed from the snow, and he also had made some more calls concerning ‘Little Manfred’.

And especially the latter didn’t let him rest. As he had visited the Schneiders yesterday, he had realized how attached he already was to the little guy. He had been happy to see him again and had loved it as he took the baby in his arms and had held him there for a few minutes, certainly grinning like an idiot as the infant snuggled against him and smacked his tiny lips in content. He remembered Fräulein Hilda’s gaze – the soft shimmer in her eyes while she gave him a warm smile. Even now at these memories, his heartbeat increased, and he felt a certain fluttering in his belly.
Sweet Lord, he had no time to fall in love. It would be unfair to Hilda. Contraire to the brass in Berlin, he simply knew that the war was as good as lost, and he had heard rumors from the Russian Front what happened to SS-men there. He didn’t doubt that he would be arrested and court-martialed as soon as the Allies took over Germany – if he survived the next few weeks, that is. Especially should the Russians reach Hammelburg first. And then what? Hilda and the baby would be alone as soon as he was enchained, and her connection to him could give her trouble. And…

‘Stop it, Horst! You don’t even know if she really likes you; not to speak of love. Hell, you don’t even know if you’re in love with her or simply attracted, because – dammit! – she is hot. Beautiful. Intelligent. Lovely… Why should she consider someone like you in her life? You both barely know each other, so…’

The thoughts were interrupted as someone knocked at his door.

“Enter!” He called, rising.

A guard opened the door and stood to attention. “Please excuse the disturbance, Herr Oberleutnant, but we got a call from the WASt in Saalfeld. A Sergeant Teigel wants to speak with you.”

Schmidt’s eyes widened. He hadn’t expected that the WASt would react before even the written requirement would reach them. Maybe his tale of the baby had moved something in Teigel, with whom he had spoken at the phone two times today.

Looking down on his sock-clad feet, he rolled his eyes and went without boots or shoes towards his office; not giving a damn about rules. Almost sliding into his office – ignoring some baffled faces on his way – he finally reached his desk and took the receiver from an older SS-man – Fuhrmann – who rose both brows as he saw the anything but correct state of Schmidt’s dressing.

“Schmidt here,” he reported and heard from the other end of the line the slightly familiar voice of the Wehrmacht-sergeant he had talked with earlier. For the next few minutes, he listened and took notes of the information Teigel had found out. “Thank you very much for your un-bureaucratically help, Sergeant,” he said, smiling a little bit. “The official requirement is on the way and… Yes, no problem. You can throw it away. The information I got is enough.” He listened again and nodded. “Yes, I also hope to find the young lady who maybe can take care of the little guy. Once again, thank you so much for your support. Have a good night.” He hung up the phone and took the paper with him on which he had written down the information he got.
Fuhrmann glanced at him. “Good news?”

“It depends how you look at it. Alfred Bornheim’s brother, who is missed on sea, lived in Prenzlau. His wife is still there working in a sewing facility, and has four children. I don’t think that she has the chance to feed another mouth – especially given the fact that Manfred is still a baby who needs additional care. Yet I will ask her.” He grimaced. “The sister of Alfred Bornheim lives in Usingen. Approximately 30 km in the north of Frankfurt / Main. He got the address. Bornheim’s mother died a few weeks ago and as it seems his sister Charlotte is the last remaining direct family-member. She is married to Kurt Schwaigel, an engineer who works in Rödelsheim in Frankfurt – the industrial area there.” He sighed. “Usingen hasn’t been affected by the Allies’ attacks until now. I hope the young lady and her husband are still there. Sergeant Teigel said because of Herr Schwaigel’s job as a civil engineer, the Wehrmacht has no further information about him.”

“She will I try to find some data – like they have a telephone or if his sister and his brother-in-law are alive at all?” Fuhrmann offered. “Frankfurt and the area have been the target of several massive air-raids within the last few months, and… Well, it could be that the Schwaigels fell prey, too.”

He earned a grateful smile from his superior. “That would be nice. Please gather every information you can find and keep me updated. Manfred has it safe and cozy at Fräulein Schneider’s home, but I don’t want to occupy her support any longer than necessary.”

Fuhrmann nodded knowingly. He was 56 and had his experiences with young men who fell in love. And if he wasn’t mistaken, then his superior was indeed developing deeper feelings for the young woman of whom he only knew that she was the secretary of the POW-camp’s Kommandant nearby. And he could have sworn that ‘Manfred’ had not only conquered said young lady, but also the Oberleutnant. Schmidt’s eyes gave him away – and Fuhrmann hoped that everything would turn out well for the three people. Bidding his superior good night, he left the office – and a young man lost in thoughts.

Schmidt remained standing at his desk, glancing down on the notes he made. With a little bit of luck, one of the two female relatives of ‘Little Manfred’ were still alive. The question was only would they be able to take care of him?

If not, he would try to adopt the baby. Never would he hand him over to an orphanage.

Then he rolled his eyes. ‘Sometimes, Horst, you’re really a romantic. How and where do you want to take care of him? Here – in a half ruined building that harbors the Gestapo-Headquarters of this area? Without female help, above all?’ He pursed his lips. ‘Maybe Hilda is interested in you and… And you really don’t want to win her only to have a mother for the baby, but it would fit so well and...’ He groaned, shook his head and left his office, notes in hand.
He really should stop daydreaming. That led to nothing. Yet, after he returned to his quarters, his thoughts drifted over and over again to a certain young lady who had caught him in a way he hadn’t expected. And to a little baby that held his heart in tiny, weak, but capturing hands.

*** HH *** HH ***

Robert Hogan wasn’t aware that the low groan that hung in the air had come from him. Never had he expected that it could be like this.

Yes, it hurt, even if Will had prepared him – and prior had driven him almost mad with lust and desire. Will’s lips had kissed every part of his body. The older man’s long elegant hands had cherished and conquered him in a way that had made him crazy with passion before Wilhelm had begun to prepare him for the last step with clever fingers. Yet Rob had to held his breath as his secret lover finally began to become one with him. He knew from their past love-encounters how well-built Wilhelm was, but to feel this burning, hot sword of human flesh entering him, was completely different than everything he had experienced before.

And, dammit, it hurt! Yet he wanted it. He wanted this last part of fulfillment and to hell with the pain. It would go away, no doubt, so…

He opened his eyes and looked up at Will, who hovered above him; underarms braced beside Rob’s head, his fingers buried in the younger man’s dark hair. Wilhelm’s face was flushed and contorted with concentration and self-control, and a thin layer of sweat covered his forehead, yet all Robert really saw were those blue eyes – cloudy with passion, but also bright with concern.

“Are you… all right?” Klink gritted out; clinging to composure. Everything in him screamed to shift forward – to be finally sashed completely in his beloved’s body, but he held himself back, knowing that this first intruding had to be very painful for Rob. Sweet Lord, it almost hurt him, too, because – dammit! – his witty fox was tight!

“I’m okay,” Robert whispered; forcing his body to relax. Lifting his head despite those gentle fingers in his strains, he caught Will’s lips with his, wrapped both legs around his lover’s tights – and surged up; impaling himself. He gasped into Wilhelm’s mouth, who tried to move back, but Hogan wouldn’t allow it by tightening his legs and arms around his lover’s lanky frame. He knew that his body simply needed a moment to adjust; then everything would be fine.

Klink tore his mouth away from the younger man, satisfaction to be completely enveloped in his
beloved’s body mixed with rising worry for this damn recklessness.

“Rob!” he moaned. “Are you crazy!?”

“I thought… we covered this detail already.” Hogan panted wryly, taking deep breathes to soothe the pain, but also to give his muscles enough oxygen to relax.

Will couldn’t help himself. For a moment he had to laugh, while the fire in his loins roared and demanded to be released – finally, after all those months, years, of yearning. How he was able to hold himself back was beyond him. But he had to – for Robert. He didn’t want this first time to be too distressful for his love. Pressing his forehead against Rob’s, he looked him deeply in the eyes. He saw the pain shimmering in them, but also triumph while the younger man’s hands wandered over his back.

“Mad-head,” Wilhelm whispered, with a new wave of tenderness that swept through the inferno that lurked beneath his iron self-control. “You could get injured like this, don’t you understand?”

Hogan shook slowly his head. “You took good care of me before we made this step and…” He gasped as Will shifted the angle and moved slowly – touching this special spot deep in him just like those long fingers had done a few minutes before. A new bolt of pure energy seemed to spread through him and made this burning deep in his butt slowly ebbing away. He sighed in relief and tried to think only of this new, intense feeling that woke in him.

Will groaned as he felt those muscles around him loosening up, while the younger man’s member – that had become flaccid because of the pain – hardened again between their bodies. Carefully, he began to move – sighing in pleasure as Rob’s body began to welcome him more and more.

God, this was heaven! Pure paradise! To be deep in Rob’s whole essence was like nothing he had ever experienced before. He sensed how his beloved relaxed more and more, and with the knowledge that Rob’s pain was subsiding, his control began to break. He needed to take the one he loved. He needed to make him his – and ferocity began to overwhelm him.

Robert thought he was about to lose his mind for real this time, as any hurt left him and made room for the maddening sensation that spread through his body and gripped for his heart and soul. The sheer lust that bolted through him every time Will touched this special spot deep in him, the friction of his member between their moving bodies. The simple knowledge that his lover was in him was overpowering him. He was falling, yet he soared. Every sane thought began to leave him, while his nerves sensed everything with a strength that was beyond everything he had experienced before. It was simply too much, and then he felt himself surrendering completely – giving into his lover’s greed
that demanded everything from him. Will was everywhere – in him and around him. And yet it wasn’t enough. With the submission, Robert’s desire increased until he heard himself sob.

Instantly, Wilhelm caught the younger man’s mouth again with his own. His clever tongue dueled with Rob’s, who clung in an exclusive mixture of desperation and ecstasy to him, while the American’s nails almost clawed on his back. He didn’t mind the soft pain. The only thing that counted was the fulfillment of his greatest wish – he was buried deep in his beloved’s body and was giving him the pleasure of his life that was returned to him.

They burnt skin to skin; flames seem to rise around them and threatened to engulf them.

And then he rose on mighty wings – the eagle who had become a phoenix; taking the fox with him. Together they soared towards the stars which beckoned them with the promise of salvation and soothing, cool light. The way back was closed for them until they would reach their destiny.

Will swallowed Rob’s outcry, while he felt his beloved’s muscles spasming around him – and the last ties were ripped apart. Wilhelm growled as the younger man tore his mouth away and let his teeth sinking into the junction between Will’s neck and shoulder to stifle the shout that was ripped from his throat. Wilhelm wasn’t even aware that he did the same, while the fire caught up with them. Then everything around them burst into thousands of sparks as ecstasy overwhelmed them.

Robert came slowly around. Everything seemed to be far away, and he was flying in a cloudy, surreal world that knew only warmth, light, and weightlessness, yet something heavy lay over him and covered him like a strong blanket. He relished in the absurd difference while his mind drifted through star-drenched darkness that offered cozy shelter. He felt dizzy, his heartbeat was far too quick and seemed to have an echo, while his whole body tingled beneath his skin.

Forcing his eyes open, he saw above him a wooden ceiling, bathed in golden light.

Odd, he always thought heaven would have a ceiling made of clouds.

Then he felt it: a panting against his neck that… stung?

Bit by bit, the fogginess began to give him free, while he became aware of the now soft, yet incredible warm intruder that filled him completely.
Will…

He was still in him; their bodies fitting as if they were made for each other.

They had done it!

They had finally made love to each other in every sense of the idiom.

Content and happiness waved like a breeze through Robert’s mind and soul, and without his doing, his hands roamed over the sweaty, hot human silk of his lover’s back. Parallel, he sensed stickiness between them and beneath himself, while his softened member pulsed in the aftermath. Tremors ran through the older man’s body and turning his head, Rob kissed the cheekbone that was reachable for his lips.

Never before he had felt like this – so crazy with lust and so lost in ecstasy, what brought him to a new level of bliss. Never before he had submitted to someone like now. He always had needed to stay in control, but not this time. He had capitulated to Will’s desire and cherishing – had bowed to the older man’s experiences, wishes, and seductions. And his surrender had set him free in a way he never thought possible.

He was soaring. The chains which had bound him to the normal world had been torn apart by this last step of living out their love.

Robert tightened his arms around the long human frame above him. In the waves of the aftermath his mind, heart, and soul tore down the wall he carefully had built around himself to shield himself from emotional uncertainness and hurt.

“I love you,” he whispered, feeling tears rising in his eyes as his lips formulated those three words for the very first time. It felt so good – so incredibly good and relieving. He sensed Will’s relaxed body stiffening, and tightened his hold on him. “God have mercy on me, but I love you.” He pressed another kiss to the older man’s cheek. “Ich liebe dich, Wilhelm Klink.” (I love you, Wilhelm Klink.) he repeated in German, knowing how much his lover liked it to hear him speaking in the German tongue.

Wilhelm had been caught in a complete haze of lust, need, and graving what had raced through his whole being like an inferno. To know that he was finally one with his beloved’s body, feeling the sensation of being buried between those hot, human inner walls, and to be lost in this final fulfillment
had robbed him of any sane mind. Nothing else existed; only Rob and their love-making. He had been half mad with passion – rode out this giving and taking by letting himself go completely. The ecstasy that had washed his mind away had been like never before – not only consisting of raging flames, but also of an all devouring tenderness until he was spent; too exhaust to even move one finger.

He sensed Rob’s heartbeat at his own. The strong arms of the younger man still clinging to him even after they came slowly down from heaven.

And then those words had reached his returning mind.

‘I love you.’

What he had seen in his Rob’s eyes and had heard in his rich tenor had finally been voiced in words: ‘I love you.’

It was like a balm to his soul, while sheer happiness mingled with hopeful disbelief. Yes, he had known that Robert had strong feelings for him, yet the younger man hadn’t dared to say those three words – until now. The moment they finally made real love to each other had prompted his beloved troublemaker to utter this revelation – not only to Wilhelm, but also to himself, too.

Taking a deep breath and feeling his heart being squeezed in the tidal wave of love that washed over him, he lifted his head.

Robert’s face was still flushed from the aftermath, sweat pearled on his forehead. Yet it was those brown eyes which caught Will. They shone with love and wonder, yet there was also something like shock in them – shock to have voiced what he had hidden for so long.

Another wind of warmth breezed through Klink. “I love you, too, my witty fox,” he whispered. “I love you with every fiber of my being.”

He bent down to claim this tempting mouth again. The kiss was deep, slow, and breathless – the perfect mirror of what went through their minds, hearts, and souls. And through their bodies too, which still trembled from the high flight they had experienced in each other’s arms.

Finally, Will gave his beloved’s lips free. Bracing on one arm and combing his fingers of his other
hand through the damp, dark strains, he glanced down on his American counterpart, who still seemed to be in a daze.

“You’re all right?” he murmured; his voice hoarse.

“Hm-hm, never been better,” Rob replied softly, ignoring his still racing pulse and far too quick heartbeat. God, he had really said it, hadn’t he? He had told Will that he loved him. What he had denied to himself – and therefore to the older man as well – was out in the open at last. He was baffled about his own courage. Usually, when it came to serious feelings, he preferred to flee, but not now. Not with Willie Klink. Like everything that had to do with the older man, this here was an exception, too.

He moistened his lips and looked up into those happy, teary blue eyes. He took in the loving smile, the reddened face, the tousled ring of hair – and tightened his arms around his lover’s long frame. “You know that this is really fucked up? Two hostile officers are in love with each other. Our brasses would get the greys, lock us away, and throw the key into the Atlantic.”

Klink laughed softly, his whole being almost burst with happiness. “Let them think whatever they want – I do not care.” Then he looked back down on the younger man, smiling as he became aware of his complete sweating and tousled appearance, and shifted his weight to give him more room to breathe. The movement made both men aware that their bodies were still connected in the most intimate way, and Rob gasped as he felt his lover’s soft member touching this special spot in him again.

“Give me a minute,” he whispered – and Will began to laugh again. A rich sound full of tenderness.

“Don’t fear, my witty fox. I’m really not up to another round in the moment.”

Hogan, slowly feeling like himself again, smirked up at the older man. “So, I tired you out again?”

“Just as I did with you,” Klink replied, with a big satisfied grin, looking like the cat that got the cream. Then he frowned suddenly, stopped to play with Rob’s hair, and touched carefully the juncture between the younger man’s neck and shoulder. “I… I bit you…” he whispered, shocked. “Dear God, Robert, I bit you.”

Hogan fumbled for the spot that indeed stung a little bit, felt how over-sensible the bruised skin was there – and grinned broadly. “Just have a look. A decent German gentleman marks his lover like a
wild beast.” He wrapped one leg around Will’s again. “The silent water is indeed deep.” He
wriggled his eye-brows – and then his eyes widened. “Oh…” he murmured, as he saw the track he
had left on his lover’s body in return. Lifting one hand, he carefully touched the love-bite Klink
sported exactly at the same spot than he did. There were even some drops of blood where his teeth
had broken the tender skin. “Will…” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Wilhelm began to chuckle. “Well, foxes can bite.” He leant down and pressed his forehead against
Rob’s. “Don’t worry, it will heal. And if it leaves a little scar, I’m proud of it. It shows that I belong
to you.”

“Like I belong to you in return,” Robert replied. A part of him was still thunderstruck that he really
surrendered and now even admitted to belong to someone. The larger part of him bathed in the peace
and content this knowledge brought him. The knowledge that he wasn’t alone anymore or had to be
always the strong one, was filling him with a deep kind of relief and gratefulness. He was Will’s, just
like Wilhelm was his. They both were there for the other one no matter what. Both would catch the
other one if needed, both would support the other one. They were partners – equals. Hand in hand
through the life that lay ahead – a wish Robert would move Hell and Earth for to make it come true.

The moment he, Robert Hogan, surrendered and gave up a part of his independence had been the
moment he had been set free in another way he had never imagined. The urge to live this rising
happiness out couldn’t be suppressed.

Kissing again and caressing each other, it was no wonder that slowly new fire was built deep in their
hearts and therefore quickly in their loins. Will felt his beloved’s member hardening between their
bellies and looked up questioningly.

Hogan smirked and clamped his muscles around Wilhelm’s sword of lust that was still in him. The
older man gasped, and Rob’s smile became almost mischievous, as he sensed the intruder spring
back to life.

“Gott – Rob!” Will panted, as the younger man repeated the little trick.

“End of period of grace,” Hogan whispered suggestively, grinning like mad while new hunger
mirrored in his eyes.

“You’re the death of me one day,” Klink growled, while he slipped one arm beneath the younger
man’s neck, cradling him into the cocoon of his arms.
“Well, we both would walk this path then,” Robert replied, bucking up against the older man.
“Ready, Kommandant?”

“Now he remembers that it is me who is in charge here,” Wilhelm groaned – and laughed again as he felt Rob’s lips on his throat, while he resumed slowly the rhythm of the oldest dance of the world.

TBC…

FINALLY Rob took the courage to say them: The famous three words. What he felt for longer now, is finally voiced. I hope, you liked the whole thing and that the love-scene was to your liking.

In the next chapter, Hogan will realize that to love someone changes the whole world. And his men began to recognize the soft changes in their superior and friend. There will be some cute and cozy, but also some funny scenes – after all such a love-night leaves tracks not only on but also in the body and usual common things can give problems what can give somebody away. Just guess who becomes aware what happened and how the reaction is (*snicker*).

Schmidt will learn more about ‘Little Manfred’s’ backgrounds that will lead him away from Hammelburg – very much to the dismay of Hilda, who worries for his safety (yeah, the two begin to develop feelings for each other).

I hope, you liked the new chapter and I really would be happy to get some comments / reviews.

Have a nice weekend,

Love

Your Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you so much for the feedback. I’m happy that you stood true to the story despite the not beta-read chapters. Now Kaitlin is doing a great job, and I’m glad that she put up with my writing at all.

Well, the last chapter our love-birds came REALLY together for the first time, and I’m happy that you liked the whole thing so much. Now, with the last borders burst away, the two could face a cozy but also passionate future – as long as the war goes on at last.

But the wind brings more changes.

So, have fun with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 49 – A changed world

The morning was once again a grey and stormy one, but the dreadful winter-weather didn’t matter for the two love-birds in their little wooden nest. Somewhen during the night, Klink had managed to pull the large bath-towel away from under himself and Hogan, and had used it to clean them up before he threw it on the floor. Robert had barely woken up, only grumbled something unintelligent, before he snuggled back against the older man and fell asleep instantly again; Will followed him soon.

None of them had considered to set the alert-clock, yet both woke up in time, yet out of different reasons.
It was not his way that the first thing he said in the morning was a curse, but this time Robert Hogan couldn’t suppress the swearing, as he sat up – and a certain part of his body told him instantly in no-unambiguously way what it thought of the wild activities of the last prior. Placing his feet on the floor and remaining seating on the bed’s edge, he cursed again. His butt burnt like someone had stuck a flaming torch in it, the backside of his upper legs gave him hell and his lower back thought it to be a good idea to punish him with an angry throbbing as well as his left side of the chest. And all this only he had tried to stand up. It really killed all morning needs for the restroom.

“Wash-ish’n?” The question was mumbled in an odd mixture of German and English.

“I try to figure out how to sit down today without giving proof to the whole world what happened last night,” Robert groaned; ignoring the stinging of the love-bite between neck and shoulder. Reaching out, he switched on the little lamp on the night-stand, and looked shortly at the burnt-down candles and the heap of textiles on the floor. The almost empty bottle of oil lay beside it like an accusation.

To his astonishment he heard a low chuckle and glanced back over his shoulder at his secret lover, who looked with shining, yet hooded eyes up at him. “You get used to it,” Klink smiled; feeling still tired but also hilarious. He had slept deep and soundly; with no nightmares but dreams of his witty fox. His loins felt heavy and his member burnt a little bit, but he loved to sense these evidences of a perfect love-night.

Yet, as he tried to move, he felt how exhaust his body was, but he was happier than ever before in his whole life. Rubbing with one hand over his face, he snorted, “If we would have made love one time more, I think Burkhalter would have been forced to take care for my burial. But this time for real.”

“For mine, too,” Hogan smirked; feeling great despite his burning butt that hurt in- and outwardly. “But we better don’t tell him the reason for our early exit.”

Klink laughed out. “I imagine his face. He would get a heart-attack.” He felt a soft stinging and itching on his back, but he ignored it. He turned the head. In the light of the little lamp on the nightstand, his gaze found Robert’s, who also looked at him – eyes hooded, too, lips still a little bit swollen from too many passionate kisses, hair sticking out from dried sweat, but he smiled like a little boy under the Christmas-tree.

“This is the best that ever happened to me,” the American whispered. “The next time, you’ll be on
the receiving end. Promised.”

A gentle chuckle escaped Will. “I had my share of flaring passion. That’s the whole advantage when two men make love to each other – both get the money’s worth, so to say.”

“Well, the same goes for men and women, too.” Rob lay back again and rolled towards Will – an act of utmost effort, how he realized. His body seemed to weigh tons.

“I don’t have so much experiences in the man-woman-department,” Klink admitted, before he smiled at the younger man. “But it doesn’t matter. Nothing had ever felt so utterly right and replete like being with you.” He reached out and cupped Rob’s cheek.

Robert smiled back at him and for a long moment they did nothing else than simply laying there and looking at each other; still feeling the rest of the wonder they had experienced last night. Both hoped that there would be many, many repeats, but one thing was for sure: This one particular night – their first in which they really made love to each other – would live forever in their minds and souls. There were no words necessary. Silently they drowned in the other one’s eyes, while the soft sound of the early morning seemed to sing an own gentle song.

“How are you feeling?” Will asked finally; feeling still utterly relaxed.

“Great,” Rob murmured with a gentle smile. “Completed in a way I never thought possible, because I didn’t know that I missed it.” He edged closer to the older man. “You’re a dangerous seducer, Wilhelm Klink, not only because you’re such a damn good lover, but also because you’re so loveable.” He took a deep breath. “I meant it last night, you know. I do love you.”

There, he had said it again – and the world didn’t come to an end. ‘You really were a coward, Robert Edward Hogan,’ he rebuked himself.

Will’s smile was bright enough to outdo even the sun, while he closed the short distance to the younger man and kissed him tenderly. Within a minute hands roamed over backs, sides and shoulders; legs became entangled; tongues and lips danced together.

With large effort, Klink finally tore himself away from his beloved and sat up. “Good God, if we don’t stop, it will lead to more – very much more. And then I come too late to roll call. Or, worse, Burki really has to take care of our funeral, because we died of sheer bliss.”
Hogan, a little bit breathless and with a throbbing morning-erection, stared at his secret lover. “‘Burki’?” he echoed; not believing his ears.

Will looked down at him and winked, “Ja, why not? Everyone has a few nicknames – and to call him always the ‘fat Sacher-cake’ gets boring. And his wife calls him ‘Hansi’ – what he loathes, by the way – so why not ‘Burki’?” He smirked. “You know that we Germans often shorten the name and use an ‘i’ as a minimization?”

“Burkhalter – ‘Burki’?” Robert’s eyes were about to bulge out of the head – then he burst into laughter. Just the imagination of the arrogant yet cowardly, fat general having a ‘nickname’ like this, was too funny to stay serious.

Klink chuckled while he watched the giddy American. “The big, ‘great’ general is often nothing more than a spoiled child with too much kilos on the hips, and grips for Mama’s skirt if something becomes risky and pouts. So, yeah, ‘Burki’ fits.”

Hogan laughed even more until his belly hurt. “Lord, don’t call him this when he is present. I think, even my biggest trick-repertoire couldn’t stop him from sending you to the Russian Front then,” he gasped between laughter.

In early times, Klink would have gone rigid only at the mentioning of the ‘Russia Front’, but not anymore. After he finally admitted his love for his American counterpart and even got it returned now, he had found a strength in him he didn’t know he possessed. Grinning, he deadpanned, “He would mess with the wrong guy. One call to his sister Gertrude, who loves to conspirer with his wife Berta, and the topic would be from the table.”

Hogan still tried to get his laughter under control. “Just have a look: Now you remember that you can steer Burkhalter by sticking to Gertrude. Look out, Will, or she wants you as the payment.”

Wilhelm only smiled. “No way, my dear Hogan. I only belong to one soul on this whole planet, and this one soul lays beside me just right now; giggling like a child.” His glance became tender, before he added. “And, by the way, chickens always stick together and ‘fight’ against the males. Believe me, not one of the two ‘ladies’ would allow ‘Burki’ to play mean, if they have a reason to be mother-hens.”

Robert had calmed down by now, yet still he had to control some bubbles of more laughter which threatened to rise from his belly. Clearing his throat a few times, he said, “Never say ever again that you haven’t any experiences in the man-woman-department, Willie.”
“Oh, here and there I got some experiences – after all I flirted a lot to cover my true nature. And, if it would come to the worst, we always can make new compromising photos of Burkhalter, and he backs down.” He winked at Hogan, who shook his head in amusement; remembering the incident in which the Heroes did exactly this to save Klink from being sent back to the active service. It had been one of the not so few occasions in which the Kommandant, Hogan and his team had pulled it together and it always had been a big success in the end. And this during a time, as they still thought Klink was their opponent. Now, with the Oberst officially-unofficially in the same boat, they had become stronger than ever before.

For another moment the two men simply glanced at each other in mutual peace, then Wilhelm sighed heavily and sat up. He grimaced as his body, too, gave him a lecture about uncontrolled behavior during love-games, grumbled something under his breath, pulled the blanket away and swung the legs over the bed’s edge.

Hogan gasped. “Oh… sweet Lord, Will!” Sitting up and ignoring the instantly angry burning in his butt, he reached out and placed a hand on the older man’s shoulder blade, while he looked startled at the thin red scratches he had left on his lover’s back; here and there having torn the soft skin.

“What is it?” Wilhelm asked; glancing over his shoulder.


To his wonder, the older man only smiled. “A love-bite and some scratches… Well, foxes do not only bite, they also use their little paws. No reason to freak out, Rob. These things happen during passion. And, by the way, I think I gave you a little pay-back.” He nodded with a grin towards the younger man’s juncture between the right shoulder and neck.

Hogan lay back again and fingered for the bruise; smirking. “Well, just like you said yesterday: A scar worth to have because it was you who marked me.”

Klink laughed softly in utterly joy, and rose with rather inelegant movements. “As proud as I am to give you my stamp, so to say, you should think about a way to cover it. The high collar of my uniform will help me, but you…” He chuckled. “We don’t want to give our medic the shock of his life.”

Robert rolled his eyes. “I think, he already assumes something. He is no idiot, but an experienced
man who is in the Service from the beginning. I can be mistaken, but when I see his gazes and this hidden amusement in his eyes, I think he knows more than he leads on.”

“As long as he stays silent, I have no problem with it,” Klink shrugged, walked stiffly around the bed – and stopped in his tracks as he saw the heap on the floor. Sighing, he picked the large bath-towel up; careful not to enfold it. “What a clever trick, Rob. Our lines are clean and a dirty towel is no reason to suspect anything. Especially when I wash it out and let it dry before I’ll give it to the laundry.”

The American officer smiled. “I don’t want to get the credit for someone else’s thoughtfulness. Schultz gave me the advice to use it during our… not so platonic moments.”

Klink turned into a pillar of salt and his eyes became wide as saucers. “Schultz gave you… When did you speak with him about… Why, for God’s sake?” he stuttered; feeling himself blushing. Hell, yes, Schultz knew about his nature and his damn weakness for this crazy American troublemaker, who lay in his bed and had the nerve to smile at him despite the topic. But this went too far.

A soft chuckle escaped Hogan. “He came a few mornings ago here into your quarters – after our second… well, ‘making out’. He knew what was up because you were in a far too happy and hilarious mood. He gave me THE speech – practically the talk of a father or older brother.” He snorted in amusement. “I felt thrown back in time, when I was still an almost adult; receiving a serious monolog from my first girl-friend’s dad.”

Still, Wilhelm stared in disbelief at him, then his expression darkened. “How dare Schultz to confront you like this – concerning our relationship?!” he snarled.

Robert sighed; knowing that he had to smooth this out for Schultz’s sake. “He was worried about you. He told me in unmistakable terms that I would be in really big trouble, if I only would play a foul game with you – ‘monkey-business’, how he calls it. He came into the sleeping room, walked to the bathroom, saw the wet lines in the shower-tube and asked me bluntly about the change in our relationship; saying clearly that it would do me no good if I would take advantage of you, only to let you fall afterwards.” A smile appeared on his lips. “He really sounded like a stern father – or older brother. He likes you and sees a friend in you, therefore his worry that you would get hurt because of me. Only after I convinced him that I’m absolutely serious about our changed relationship, he was satisfied – promised me that our secret would be safe with him, and that he would cover for us whenever it would become necessary.” He laughed quietly. “He really was sweet.”

Klink let his head sink into the neck and stared at the ceiling; bath-towel still in hands, frown disappearing. “I don’t believe it. My Sergeant of the Guards lectures my senior POW officer about the seriousness concerning his love-life with the camp’s Kommandant.”
The colonel chuckled again. “He is very protective of you, Will, there is no doubt left. And this after you’re complaining about and with him at every given chance.”

Something flashed in Wilhelm’s eyes as he glanced back at his beloved. “He’ll hear something completely different from me this morning, and if he still is protective of me afterwards, he’s crazy.”

“Will,” Robert reasoned with him gently. “Schultz really likes you and sees a kind of younger brother in you. He feared that I was up to something tricky that would hurt you. I think, it’s not only sweet – in a special way it was even his duty.” He caught the German’s asking glance, and explained, “Your safety is his duty. Not only bullets or other weapons present danger, a lie or a betrayal can cause gravely injuries, too – not on the body, but the soul. A hurting soul can be deadly in its own way. Schultz knows how strong you feel for me. He feared that you would be deeply hurt if I were up to a foul game. As he realized that our relationship is for me important like it is for you, he calmed down. Heavens, he even offered his support and gave me the advice with the big bath-towel so that the boys, who do the laundry, don’t get suspicious of your sudden additional usage of too much lines. This, combined with me living here, really would lead to only one conclusion – and not all men are tolerant like Schultz is. For many it is a crime, what we do, so we’ve to be careful. Schultz decision to intervene and to help us in his own way, got us rid of one risk. So, please, don’t rebuke him but thank him, because he proved one time more that he is, indeed, yours and mine friend.”

Klink pondered what his American counterpart had said, and he could turn all he wanted and regard it from all sides: Hogan was right. Like so often. Dammit! His beloved really was a clever fox.

“Okay, you’re right. I shouldn’t give Schultz an ear full.” He made a face. “But to think that he had the guts to confront you at all, is… Well, it demands respect.” He shook his head. “Big Schlawiner (German slang for prankster)! Sometimes I don’t know if I should curse or kiss him.”

“Cursing is unwholesome and you’re allowed only to kiss one man: Me!”

Wilhelm snorted in amusement. “Possessive much?” he asked; lifting both eye-brows.

“Very,” Robert nodded, and Will got the hint. Letting the towel fall, he returned to the bed, bent down and gave his beloved a deep, warm kiss, before he straightened his lanky frame, smiled at him and went to the bathroom; picking up his bathrobe and the towel on the way.

With a satisfied and absolutely happy sigh, Hogan let himself sinking back into the pillows, only to
grimace again. Dammit, to sit down today would be a big, BIG, problem.

*** HH *** HH ***

The morning went by uneventful – at least for the men in Stalag 13. While Burkhalter still fought with his interims-post at the OHK, Schmidt tried to find out more about ‘Little Manfred’s’ still living relatives.

He was able to reach Bornheim’s sister-in-law in Prenzlau at the phone. The little village that was near the Baltic Sea, was overcrowded with escapees from East-Prussia, and the young woman already hosted two families in her house, beside her own three children. She was shocked to learn that her sister-in-law had been killed in the air-raid four days ago that was still the main-topic within the town, yet she was also glad to hear that her nephew had survived.

Like this Schmidt learned the true name of the baby: Johann Manfred Alfred Bornheim. The Oberleutnant managed it in the last second to stay serious, because – hey! – coincidentally he had given ‘his’ foundling a name the little guy was, indeed, christened with.

As it came to the question of taking Manfred in, the young woman sounded almost desperate because she barely managed to feed her own children, not to speak of the support she was ought to give her ‘guests’. Schmidt didn’t press her further. He could understand that she tried to avoid this new duty, given her situation.

Unfortunately he couldn’t get more information about the other relative, Alfred Bornheim’s sister Charlotte Schwaigel. She and her brother in Prenzlau hadn’t spoken with each other for more than four years – ‘different points of view’, how Schmidt learned. He didn’t need to ask further questions. He knew that those ‘different points of view’ certainly were about German’s regime and politics (if you could call the latter still ‘politic’ at all). At least he learned the last address where Bornheim’s sister Charlotte lived before the siblings cut off any contact.

Thanking the young woman and promising here that Manfred was well cared for, he ended the talk. Fuhrmann came half an hour later. He had gathered some more information about Charlotte Schwaigel. The address was still the same, Schmidt had gotten from Bornheim’s sister-in-law, yet he learned that her husband had been killed in an air-raid last year in September near Frankfurt. Frau Schwaigel obviously had no telephone, and Schmidt didn’t think it right to contact the Gestapo in the area to let her summon to speak with her via phone.

Sighing he glanced at his desk. Files and more files were piling up on it, so he decided to make the next necessary step concerning Manfred tomorrow or the day after. He ordered his ordonnance to get
him a ticket for the train – something only Wehrmacht-, SS- and Gestapo-members were legalized for after the most railways were destroyed by the Allies. The trains within Germany were now only strict used by members of the military and executive forces – or for supplies for the boys at the fronts.

Afterwards he took care of the daily routine and the many, many files which held nothing else than appalling suspicion against many, certainly utterly respectable citizens. You really had to be paranoid to get all those ideas, members of the Gestapo and SS got concerning complete harmless events. He thought back at Hochstetter and the former major’s obsession with the American colonel. Insanity seemed to lurk in every shadow within Germany now, and Schmidt was tempted to wish that the Allies would gain victory and would send those maniacs to Satan’s realm, because otherwise normality would never be restored within this country.

*** HH *** HH ***

With good reason Hogan had stayed silent about his longer trip to the tunnels at Saturday towards Wilson. He really would have had a problem to explain, while he felt ‘fit’ at Sunday after the trip, and now was feeling like hell after walking a few steps through Klink’s quarters.

Joe Wilson scratched his head and watched his superior half hobbling, half creeping to the bathroom. Hogan was obviously not well and complained about aching muscles in his thighs and his lower back. Hm, a stiffness of the muscles like this only because of the short walk over the compound yesterday??? That was… unusual, to put it mildly. Hogan had been up a lot during the last days. On the other hand, the colonel had stayed in bed for more than two weeks without big interruptions and maybe he overdid it in his urge to be his old independent self again.

Hogan had refused to do anything else than lying down. The medic was baffled that the colonel even snapped at him to leave him alone, but then he saw his superior going to the bathroom – and the movements were… well… extravagant. As the door opened and Hogan vanished through into the refreshing-area, Wilson saw a very large bath towel hanging over the Halter of the shower-curtain, but also two other standard bath-towels hanging for drying at the hooks at the wall. A third, very big towel? For what, for God’s sake, did two men need three bath-towels and…

And it began to dawn on Wilson, why Hogan seemed to have a lot of trouble to walk today – or to sit down in his presence. And the scarf, the officer all of sudden wore around his neck, became also a new meaning. ‘Fear of relapsing because it is so cold,’ had been Hogan’s explanation that had taken the medic by surprise, but now it made sense.

Hogan wasn’t afraid of catching a new cold, he was afraid certain tracks would be visible. Tracks, which spoke more volume than the whole encyclopedia.
Snickering to himself, Wilson granted his superior the time-out, wished him a “Get better soon, sir,” and left the quarters; laughing inwardly his head off. Well, love-making between men could lead to certain consequences – especially in the beginning – and it was clear that Hogan was suffering these ‘consequences’.

Shaking his head in amusement, Wilson strolled over the compound to his own Barracks, glanced shortly at the Kommandantur and asked himself, if Klink was suffering likewise; imagine the Oberst squirming on his seat. Then he wiped those thoughts away. They really were indecent.

*** HH ***

LeBeau called the two colonel to lunch; hearing the German officer washing his hands in the bathroom, while Hogan came slowly out of the sleeping room, wearing his house-coat and a scarf around his neck.

“I’ve to be careful. The window was open too long and I don’t want to relapse,” Hogan explained, as he saw LeBeau’s confused glance.

Louis nodded. “A good idea. Just take a seat, mon colonel, I’ll bring the lunch immediately,” he said kindly.

“Uh, thanks, LeBeau,” Hogan nodded, but remained standing beside his usual chair. Klink appeared and beamed at the Frenchman.

“It smells formidable, Corporal. What will you serve today?”

“Chicken in wine sauce with rice,” LeBeau answered, and Klink frowned.

“From where did you get the wine?”

“From your storage,” Louis said cheerfully, smirked as he saw the Kommandant’s shocked gaze and walked whistling to the kitchen. Before he entered, he stopped and rolled his eyes. He had forgotten to ask what the two officers wanted to drink. Turning around, he stopped dead in his tracks. With large eyes he watched Hogan finally sitting down; very slowly and carefully, with an almost painful grimace and a barely suppressed groan. What the heck…? Then he heard Klink chuckling, followed by a quietly, “Troubles, my witty fox?”
“No repeat this night, or I have to put my butt into a bucket with cold water for the whole day tomorrow,” the colonel gritted out.

“Tja (well), this would be a sight to behold,” Klink teased, what earned him a dark glare, followed by an eye-roll and impish yet suffering smirk.

LeBeau felt his whole face burning up. It was almost clear what had occurred the night prior. And as Louis heard the pet-name Klink had used for Hogan, and the colonel’s reply concerning a bucket with icy water to cool his butt, every last doubt vanished through the window. They had slept with each other – and who had been on the ‘bottom’ so to say, was also clear. And the scarf became a complete new meaning all of sudden. Hickeys – big hickeys – were difficult to hide when you only wear pajamas and a housecoat. A scarf was a very nice cover in this case.

The Frenchman was not prude – far from it – but now his cheeks burnt with embarrassment. Gulping and deciding to simple ignore what he had just heard and concluded, he hastened into the kitchen. He would need brain-bleach to forget the imagination he got as he heard the two officers’ teases.

*** HH ***

Wilson left Hogan alone at Tuesday, but became very strict at the next day. Grimacing, the colonel made a few rounds over the compound, but obviously everything that had troubled him the day prior, had more or less vanished. Yet Robert caught himself that he malingered to gain a few days more he could spent in Will’s quarters by limping and making a show of how much effort it cost him to be up. Yes, the dutiful part of him was ashamed, on the other hand London had no new tasks for his men and him – and even had skipped to ask Klink more questions about the project in Thuringia; the whole reason why Hogan learned of the Berlin air-raid at all. So, a few days more of the current living arrangements wouldn’t hurt.

Wednesday passed by, too. In Berlin the last fires burnt down and the rescue workers could finally enter all streets. The degree of destruction was disastrous, and even the most experienced firemen suffered from traumas as they had to recover the many burnt or slain dead bodies, which seem to find no end in number.

The brass and the Führer’s direct staff continued to keep the rising numbers of victims a secret, while they returned to the surface and trying to take over their offices again; planning revenge. At Thursday, Burkhalter was released from his unwilling position as acting CO in Zossen, but remained in the base; winning Goering’s and Hitler’s approval to take over the upcoming last tests of the new rocket launchers and rockets. He already had some ideas, where and how to proceed the project and found agreement within the brass. The tests had to be done at a place the Allies would never attack,
and there were only a few left – namely the KZ- and POW-camps. The first were unrealistic to use, therefore the POW-camps were the best choice. It wasn’t the first time that one of those camps had been used for the Wehrmacht’s and Luftwaffe’s tests.

To his frustration, Goering suggested – of course – Stalag 13. The Reichsmarschall had been impressed by Klink’s null-escape-record and the Saxonian’s way to keep a leveled head during the crises within the last weeks – especially during the air-raid the Saturday prior. Burkhalter had told him how cold-calculating his ‘awesome Oberst’ had been, and promptly the head of the Luftwaffe had chosen the ‘most though POW-camp in the whole of Germany’ to be the perfect and most save place in the country to make the last rocket-tests. That the Geneva Conventions forbid something like this, didn’t matter for him.

Sighing, Burkhalter had agreed. What other choice did he have? Fortunately the rockets and the portable launching pads wouldn’t be ready for the final tests until the end of February – enough time to prepare anything. But without informing Klink in advance. Knowing the Saxonian he would complain about the breaking of the Conventions. And knowing Hogan, the American would scream bloody murder for endangering the camp like this. But Burkhalter couldn’t have any regard for something like this now. Even if an inner voice whispered that it would make anything worse and that only the evil hour would be put off, he saw no other chance for Germany to continue to fight.

And so he began to make plans for the last level of the tests, while the engineers did their best to finish the whole new weapon in new record-time.

*** HH *** HH ***

In Stalag 13 no-one could even assume what the Berlin brass was planning to do with the camp. Wilson trained Hogan’s muscles during the morning and the afternoon of Wednesday more sternly than before, and already promised him another day of hard training – something, Hogan really didn’t look forward to.

The whole, relative calm routine of the two days prior changed at Thursday – not in Stalag 13, but in the world outside of the wires. A day prior the Red Army had crossed the river Oder in the south-west of the town Breslau, and got ready to attack the town what happened during Thursday. The same day, Paraguay declared war against Nazi-Germany – the first of many South- and Middle-American countries, who would make the same step within the following days. It was more or less only proforma, because none of those countries had even the chance to get an active part in the war, but it showed one thing for sure: The name World-War had become sad truth, because in the end of February more or less the whole world had entered the official status of being at war.

During the morning of Thursday, the British Home Office published the number of civil victims since the war started. Approx. 57.000 Brits had been killed since the first attack. Parallel the
Canadian 1. Army began to attack the German Defense at the border between the Netherlands and Germany, while in the east the fight for every meter continued.

Those things were unknown to the habitants of the camp – no matter if German guard or POW, or the two lovebirds who did a poor job of hiding their happiness. And it was also unknown to Schmidt, who had been driven to Würzburg were he could board a train that drove into the direction of Frankfurt. Usingen was located in the north of the Main-metropole Frankfurt at the edge of the Taunus-hills and Schmidt knew that he would have to hire a car when he arrived in Frankfurt. He didn’t like to leave von Neuhaus in charge, but the Leutnant was the second in command by rank, so he had no other choice.

Of course he knew that several of his men had no understanding that he put his back into the whole matter concerning Little Manfred, and now even travelled in person to the baby’s aunt at the other side of Germany, but he took his responsibility very seriously. And, by the way, the little guy had wriggled himself into his heart – closely followed by a certain young lady with shining blond hair and a sweet smile.

Hilda was worried, as he told her at the phone the evening prior that he would take a train to Frankfurt and would visit the child’s aunt in Usingen. You never could tell when and where the next air-raids happened, and so she was more than concerned.

At a calm minute, she left the Kommandantur and went to Klink’s quarters; not caring what the others may think or say. That she and Colonel Hogan were on friendly terms, so to say, was an open secret, and being him the perfect gentleman there wouldn’t be any rumors of indecently.

Yet Robert was surprised to hear the entrance door open and recognized Hilda a few moments later, as she stepped into the living room, where he sat together with Kinchloe and Newkirk. Both had come through the hidden entrance beneath the furnace and were discussing with their superior some new issues from London. The Allies’ brass hadn’t pressed Klink for more information and therefore Hogan was more relaxed when London sent messages.

“Hilda!” Hogan (still wearing the scarf Will had lend him) rose, just like the other two males did, and bowed his head. “To what do we owe this pleasure?”

Hilda smiled shortly at him; glad that he was doing so much better. The bruises on his face were mere shadows by now and his movements had become more powerful. It was obvious that it was only a question of days until he would be declared as good as healed and would return to his own quarters.
“I’m sorry if I interrupt something,” she said to him, while she gave Kinch and Newkirk a short, warm nod.

“No problem,” Hogan shrugged. “Is something wrong?” he asked; seeing at her stance and in her eyes that she was more than tensed.

Klink’s secretary sighed. “Robby, we never spoke openly about it, but we both – we all four and the rest of your team – know that I’m aware of your little secrets and that I helped you here and there. Sometimes I even supported your missions fully.” She kneaded her hands – a display of uncertainty he had never seen on her ever before. “And… now it’s me who is in need for support.”

“What happened?” he addressed her seriously; knowing that she would have never brought up the issue if she weren’t in need. “Are you in trouble?” Despite his love for Will, he would never allow that any harm would befall her. For this he liked and respected her too much.

“No, it’s not about me.” She took a deep breath and straightened her slender frame. “Oberleutnant Schmidt traveled to Usingen this morning. Manfred’s aunt lives there, and Horst wants to speak in person with her. Usingen is 30 km in the north of Frankfurt am Main and… And I want to know if the Allies plan something against Frankfort or its area today or tomorrow. It would calm me if I know if… if he’s to face danger like he, the Kommandant and Schultzie did in Berlin – or General Burkhalter.”

It hadn’t slipped Hogan’s, Kinch’s or Newkirk’s attention that she used the Oberleutnant's given name. James and Peter quickly glanced at their superior; almost expecting his face darkening, because they knew that he was the type of man who would never tolerate a rival. Yet Hogan was still fully relaxed and only showed concern for Hilda. Well, a proof more that his affection had turned to someone else – to a lanky someone with monocle.

Hilda still looked at Robert, and it was obvious that she was really worried for Schmidt.

‘Uh-uh, from there comes the wind,’ Robert thought; imagine Schmidt, Hilda and a baby on a picture. ‘They would make a nice couple – maybe even family,’ he thought. And, what showed him that he really was in love with Will, was the fact that there didn’t rise any jealously from his side. Hilda and he had flirted, kissed, made-out – yet the little green monster didn’t raise its head at the prospect that the young woman was developing feelings for another man. If all, Rob was almost relieved about it. He knew that she liked him a lot – maybe even more – and he already had wracked his brain how to turn her down without hurting her. Maybe, if she got feelings for young Schmidt, the whole problem would solve itself.
Sweet Lord, the world had really changed for him.

He exchanged a quick glance with Kinchloe, who nodded shortly an affirmation, before he turned his attention back to Hilda. “I can’t promise you anything, but I’ll call you as soon as I get some information, okay?”

Hilda blinked. “You call me?” she asked thunderstruck.

Grinning, he flipped a thumb towards the phone. “I’m officially linked with the rest of the camp, don’t you agree?”

She laughed quietly and gave him one of her beaming smiles. “Thank you, Robby.” She turned serious again and lowered her head. “Don’t… don’t be angry that I’m concerned for the Oberleutnant, but…”

“Why should I be angry with you?” Hogan interrupted her softly. “He is a nice guy – and a fine man. One, who knows what honor means.”

Frowning, she cocked his head. “You’re not jealous?”

Hogan grimaced, rubbed his neck, took a deep breath and said finally, “We both know that there wouldn’t be a real future for us. And I’ve the feeling that within the last months we developed a more a kind of… comradely friendship instead of… love. So…” Dear God, why was this so difficult?

Hilda pursed her lips. “You found someone else,” she deadpanned. Promptly he flushed – an odd view regarding the fact who and what he was: The leader of the most unruly espionage-ring in whole Germany with Death constantly about to get him. And now he flushed like a boy because she said him plainly that he had to have someone else because he didn’t became jealous about her developing relationship with Horst Schmidt. Sometimes he really was, what Klink said about him here and there: An oversized boy – a boy with a very dangerous job.

Hogan moistened his lips. “Well… yes,” he murmured quietly; very aware of his two friends presence behind him. And knowing them, they got very big ears just right now.

Hilda watched him almost squirming, enjoyed his uncomfortableness a few seconds and finally
chuckled softly. “It’s okay, Robby. I’m not angry.” She went to him, stepped on her toes and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “I hope, you’ll be happy.”

“Thanks,” he breathed in relief. “For you the same.”

“So, Schmidt is on his way to the baby’s aunt. About time, after all it was him who dropped the little one at your doorstep,” Peter said.

Hilda giggled gently. “He asked for my help, and after I saw Manfred, I fell for him. He is so sweet. He cuddles a lot, bubbles with tiny laughter and all but flirts with my family and me. And with Horst. I think, Horst is smitten with him, like I am.”

The three men looked shortly at each other. Mother-instincts. There was nothing stronger on the world.

“What, if his aunt can’t take him in?” Hogan raised the next logical topic. “What then?”

Hilda sighed and lifted both hands. “I don’t know. I would not mind to take further care of him. The farm grants our survival, certainly even after the war, and Horst promised to support us. Maybe, if Manfred’s relatives have no chance to take him in, I can keep him – officially, of course.”

“To adopt him won’t be easy,” Kinch add for consideration. “You’re not married and…”

Hilda shrugged. “I don’t think the authorities will be the same after the war and that laws will change, but nevertheless one thing certainly will apply also then: Every solved problem is a problem less.” She took a deep breath. “I just wait what Horst will achieve. The rest comes later.”

Hogan smiled at her. “If you need help, just tell us, okay?” He glanced at Kinchloe. “Would you please be so nice?”

James nodded, walked to the furnace, pushed it away and climbed down the ladder. Hilda’s eyes became wide as saucers, before she looked at Hogan and pointed an index-finger at him.

“You! You… scallywag! You even have a tunnel ending in Klink’s quarters?”
“Why, of course,” Robert answered with another grin. “And, before you lecture me of taking advantage of the ‘poor Kommandant’: he knows about us – just like you do.”

“But, please, don’t give away any internal details to ‘Horst’ when you two have another nookie,” Peter deadpanned.

“Newkirk!” That came from both, and the British pilot had to grin.

Shaking his head in a mute rebuke, Hogan returned his attention to Hilda, who glared shortly at Newkirk, before she glanced up at the American colonel again. “So, the Kommandant knows about you and the others?” she asked flabbergasted. “And he doesn’t get a heart attack?”

Robert sighed. “Actually, he knows about us for more than two years now, and had a big part of sending the Gestapo on goose-hunts or to turn a blind eye and deaf ear on us. He told me a few days after he got me away from Hochstetter. As it seems, Willie is our big protector.”

“And the gov’nor didn’t realize it until the Balding Eagle revealed himself to him,” Newkirk snickered; nodding in Hogan’s direction.

“Do you want an extra shift of exercising, Peter?” Hogan asked with faked kindness, but only earned another smirk from his inferior and friend.

Hilda snorted unladylike in amusement, stemmed her hands on the hips and shook her head. “Boys, behave!” she chuckled. “So, Klink covers for you for years now – just like I do, or Schultzie.” She shook her head. “You’re a lucky guy, Robert Hogan.”

He wasn’t aware of the big smile that appeared on his face. “I know,” he affirmed; brown eyes gleaming.

“And don’t forget it,” she laughed and turned to leave.

“I call you when I know more, okay?” Robert said, and the young woman flashed him another smile; then she left the wooden building.
“She calls him ‘Horst’,” Newkirk said; watching Hogan closely. He wasn’t really surprised that the colonel only shrugged.

“They fit nicely together,” he said and sat down on the sofa again.

Peter only pursed his lips. After what he heard from LeBeau three days ago after he served lunch for the two officers, and Hogan’s reaction a minute ago, there was no further proof needed. The two colonels were a couple in all senses of the word – and it didn’t repulse but amused him.

*** HH ***

It lasted not more than a quarter hour and Hogan could call Hilda in Klink’s anteroom to tell her that no attacks against the area around Frankfurt, South-Hessen and North-Bavaria were planned within the next two days. Kinch had not only asked for Frankfurt but for the whole part of Germany, Schmidt travelled through. Hilda was more than relieved, thanked Hogan gratefully and concentrated on her work again. There was a lot she had to catch up with after having the last three days free to take care of Manfred.

While Schmidt arrived in the late midday in Frankfurt and went to the next Gestapo- and SS-office to lend a car from the ‘colleagues’, Hogan and Klink sat together during lunch; speaking about the Oberleutnant’s trip both had learned about from Hilda.

“I’m touched that Schmidt took the effort and drove in person to Usingen,” Klink said while finishing his meal. “And I don’t think this is only because he takes his responsibility very seriously. I think, he really loves the little guy.”

Hogan saw the gentleness in the older man’s eyes and teased, “He’s obviously not the only one, who had taken the boy into his heart.”

“The little one is cute,” Will admitted. “I held him during a halt near Kassel. It’s something special when you have such a tiny human in your arms – so vulnerable and helpless, yet so trusting.”

Robert nodded; a soft smile played around his lips. “And so ‘Little Manfred’ caught a hand full of people. You, Schultzie without any doubt, Schmidt, Hilda and even her parents.” He cocked his head. “And, as a nice side-effect, Hilda and Schmidt see each other on regular base now.”
Klink pursed shortly his lips, before he made an affirming gesture. “She told me about his visits during the last days and her eyes shone with a certain gleam. I think that she begins to develop feelings for him. And when I remember the way Schmidt looked at her as we brought Manfred to her parent’s farm…” He watched Robert closely. “Would it be a problem for you, if they grow closer?”

Robert blinked. “Why should this be a problem for me?”

Lifting both brow, Will rolled his eyes. “Because, my witty fox, I know that you and her not only flirted with each other, but there was even more. So…”

Hogan sighed, before he pressed his lips shortly into a thin line and finally looked straight into Will’s eyes. “I would have had a problem with it a few months ago. I really was attracted to her and I hold great respect for her, because she’s a fine lady. But… despite some kisses and so on, there was never more. And… since you and me… are together, I… I can’t imagine to have a relationship with someone else and starting a family.”

“So, you wouldn’t mind if Hilda finds someone else?” Wilhelm asked, relieved, and Hogan chuckled; knowing the real hidden question beneath those words.

“No, I wouldn’t – because I’ve you now, and this is everything I want.” He smiled lugubriously to himself. “If Hilda finds a honest and honorable man, I would be glad, because it would relieve me from a bad conscious I got concerning her. I really want the best for her – and this isn’t me. So, if she and Schmidt get together, I’ll give them happily my blessing.” He sighed. “And I would take Schmidt under my protection. To the say the truth, inwardly I already did so. I’ll make certain that he doesn’t face much trouble after the war. SS-men are on the black list of the Allies, but Schmidt isn’t in this unit by his own free will and, above all, he is a fine man – and he helped me not one but two times. He covered for LeBeau and now he even overgrew himself to take care of a child for what he isn’t ready. If he and Hilda really develop feelings for each other, I’ll make certain that they have a future together – without him being imprisoned for years.”

Klink laughed quietly and looked full of love at the younger man. “This is so much you, Robert. You show mostly mercy even against your declared enemies – and you protect all those you regard as decent and honorable people. If there would be more of you in the world, then there wouldn’t be any war ever again.”

To his horror, Hogan blushed like a school-boy, what earned him a soft laughter from his secret lover. Sweet Lord, where was the deft, crafty, playing-it-always-cool colonel when he needed him the most?
TBC...

Yes, changes and twists are about to come – and the first basis has been laid.

The next chapter will show how much the world proceeds outside of the camp’s wires. You learn what has / will become of Hochstetter, and new paths are open for Little Manfred, Schmidt and Hilda.

I hope, you liked the new emotional, cozy and sweet chapter – and, like always, I would love to get some comments / reviews.

Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

The weekend has arrived and with it a new chapter of the story. While our love-birds in Stalag 13 have their own little world in the moment, the life on the other side of the wires continues — and sometimes happenings will have influences on the camp.

While Schmidt visits Little Manfred’s aunt, Hochstetter arrives at the destiny of his punishment. For once, he is the one who stays at the other side of the desk and learns first-hand how it is to be a prisoner whose life and health means nothing to the guards. And of course, it will increase his desire for revenge concerning the two colonels (whose lives are so much better than his now).

I hope, you’re going to enjoy it.

Thank you so much for the feedback; you’re the best.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 50 – Fate takes it course

Usingen was a small town in the Hochtaunus-Kreis in Hessen at the Usa River with a very long history. The first settlements within this area were raised in the Young Stone Age, but the first village in the modern time after Christ began in the 8th century during the Carolingian Time. In the Middle Ages, a castle was built, and the village began to expand. Different lords resided in the castle, and the town developed cultural life; especially after the Reformation, as many schools were placed there. In 1895, it got a railway connection, and being a school town for centuries now, modern gymnasiums, Latin schools, and high schools were more established.
Because the town did not hold its own industry that was worth to be mentioned, and the existence of many schools were well known, the Allies had seen no reason to attack Usingen, and the interruption of the railway connection to Frankfurt was all the little town suffered from so far. Contraire to another part of this area, Merzhausen, located only a few kilometers away in the next valley, held a munitions stock and a frontline airstrip of the Wehrmacht – the reason for the strong attack of the Allies on the Holy Eve prior that had cost many lives. Usingen itself had been spared.

As Schmidt reached the valley in the late afternoon, he looked down on the small town that was idyllically nestled between hills partly covered with snow. The older buildings were all half timbered houses including the town hall that was risen in 1637. A few minutes later, Schmidt drove along Wilhelm Street, named after the famous violinist who had lived there decades ago, turned into the Zitzergasse, and afterwards into the Kreuzgasse that led to the Old Market. Knowing that the town halls were always risen at market places within the older villages and towns in Germany, he easily found his destination, hoping to get information on how to find the street where Charlotte Schwaigel lived.

In the foyer of the town hall, he was quickly helped by the lady in the information office. She handed him a street map and marked the address in red. He didn’t miss the many careful or even nervous gazes he received while he returned to his car, what showed him one time more how much the world had changed. A few years ago, the people had reacted with kind respect; today, they feared the Gestapo and SS almost as much as the attacks of the Allies.

Ten minutes later, he turned the car into the small street near the town’s cemetery at the other side of the castle area. Not many houses were located here, and most had gardens where sticks and tents showed fruits and vegetables were raised here. Of course, after all nourishment had become more and more scarce within the last year and a half, by now it was rationed. Lucky were those who could raise something in the own gardens.

Schmidt parked his car and went down the street. It was here, like in the rest of the town, his black uniform was eyed cautiously, and he tried to appear as non-threatening as possible. He reached the house that offered a few families room to live, crossed the small garden, and glanced at the nameplates. A movement to his right caught his attention, and he saw a curtain being pulled away. A woman in her middle ages looked out and went rigid as she saw him.

Lifting his cap, he politely bowed his head and signaled for her to come to the door. Pale like a tablecloth, she nodded, and he didn’t have to wait long for the front door to open.

“Yes?” The woman asked with tension. A three or four-year-old girl hid behind her.
“Good afternoon, Ma’am. My name is Horst Schmidt. Please excuse my uninvited arrival, but I search for Mrs. Charlotte Schwaigel. I was told she lives here. Can you tell me which flat she occupies?”

A boy of maybe eight years came out of the flat the woman had come from and looked half defiantly, half fearfully at him. “What do you want from Mommy?”

The woman hushed him and returned her attention back to Schmidt. “She is not here, but at work. Is there anything I can help you with?” She remarked.

Schmidt cringed inwardly. The deep distrust almost hurt, but he could understand the lady. The executive forces of Germany weren’t the most famous institutions by now, to put it mildly.

“I’m here because of her sister-in-law in Berlin. Something happened that I have to inform her about – it’s strict privacy.”

“Berlin?” The woman asked. “Has something happened to Frau Bornheim during the air raid a few days ago?”

She knew the family, no doubt. “May I ask about your connection to the family?” Schmidt prodded.

The woman sighed. “Charlotte is my neighbor and a good friend. I watch her children when she’s at work, and I knew her late husband and her brother from Berlin for almost seven years.” She cocked her head, giving up a little bit of her distrust. “What happened?”

Horst lowered his gaze. “Frau Bornheim was killed in the bombarding of the town last Saturday.” He heard and saw the woman gasping, while she paled dramatically. “I was there in Neukölln at the time and found her little son, Manfred, shielded by her dead body. I heard him crying and…” He took a deep breath. “I took him with me to get him to safety, as well as the dog tag Frau Bornheim wore around her neck – the only identification I could find. Like this, I got some information about her heritage and that of her son, and now I’m searching for Manfred’s relatives.”

The lady, who had pressed a hand in front of her mouth, looked with teary eyes at him. “The poor woman. First her husband, and now she, too.” She obviously tried to regain some self-control before she said, “Charlotte works in the hospital as a nurse. She certainly will be home within the next hour.” She stepped backwards and held the door open, her behavior changing from caution to kind politeness. “Do you want to wait in my flat? There is not much I can offer you, but a tea maybe will
do it?"

"Please, don’t inconvenience yourself, Ma’am. If I could simply wait here away from the cold, it will be enough."

“It’s a tea then. I’m Eva Wehage, by the way."

“Nice to meet you, Frau Wehage,” he replied, bowing his head again. He smiled down on the little girl and winked at the boy, who still was at the entrance to the flat, watching him curiously. Above them, a door closed, and Schmidt sighed inwardly. It was clear that his arrival had stirred up all occupants of the house.

As he followed Frau Wehage into the flat, an older woman and man waited for him in the hall, nervous and wary. “My parents,” she introduced the older couple. “Their house fell prey to the air raid in Merzhausen last Christmas, and I took them and my sister in. She’s at work, too.”

Schmidt introduced himself and tried to ignore the tensed atmosphere as he sat down in the small living-room, listening to the ticking of the grandfather clock. The children quickly lost their interest in him and began to play, and after Frau Wehage served the tea, he began an easy talk with the three adults, hoping that it wouldn’t last too long until Manfred’s aunt would show up.

*** HH *** HH ***

Mühldorf was located at the River Inn in Upper Bavaria. It was a smaller town with a little bit more than 8000 citizens. Yet the town had been important for centuries. In the Middle Ages, it had been a large commercial center between Austria and Bavaria – a place that had been the reason for many battles between Salzburg and Bavarian Lords, and a Salzburg enclave for decades before it was finally conquered from Bavaria at the end of the 19th century. Being located between Munich, Passau and Austria, the town was now, during the second World War, even more important because it harbored one of the largest transshipment stations within Bavaria. Five main railroads spread in different directions, making it possible to transport supplies of every kind to the east, north, and south.

Most citizens of the town didn’t know that the railway that came from Munich had an additional meaning. It parted a few kilometers before Mühldorf into a secret side track that led more to the north. To Mühldorf-Hart, where a secretly large facility for the production of the Messerschmitt ME 262 was under construction. In April 1944, project ‘Ringeltaube’, the cover name for the centralization of aircraft constructions, had begun, and the production area in this little Upper Bavarian town, south of Landshut, had begun instantly after the planning was done.
Every one of the production halls should harbor eight levels – three in the underground, five above it – and the halls were 400 meters long. Built in low bows, painted green, and covered with plants and camo nets, they were practically invisible for the air scouts of the Allies. Especially because none of the brass in London (or Washington) assumed such a project in an agrarian area like Mühldorf.

Originally, the leading construction engineers and officers had promised to finish the project within six months. An ambitious scheme that was impossible to do, like even Armaments Minister Alfred Speer admitted. And he should be right. Now, in the middle of February 1945, six of the twelve planned halls were done, the seventh still under construction.

The area was barred with electrical wires, signs with mortal threats, and gates at the two small roads which led to the building lot kept curious people away. The truck that passed the gates in this later afternoon, drove down the road accompanied by a few guards of the Waffen-SS. The men on the truck’s loading ramp wore the grey clothes of prisoners and were chained with handcuffs.

Wolfgang Hochstetter looked out into the dark wood. The ground was covered with dirty snow, and the truck all but limped down the road. It was lousily cold, he was hungry and tired, and an intense headache throbbed behind his temples – the headache of constant anger. He didn’t know much about the camp he was sentenced to until the project was finished and before he would be handed over to the next one – if he survived. He only had been informed that it was a larger project of the Luftwaffe in South Bavaria. The same went for his ‘comrades’, of which four had been transported together with him from Berlin to Mühldorf. The other ones were transferred from other prisons.

He got big eyes as the truck came to a halt, and he and the other prisoners were ordered to jump down from the loading ramp onto the ground. His gaze wandered over the six giant, mostly done bowed halls. A seventh one was under construction. Confused, he watched hundreds of workers stacking up stones, which already built a hill in the same length as the finished halls.

“This way!” One of the guards said brusquely, and Hochstetter had no other choice than following the guards and the other prisoners towards a barracks that held the Kommandantur of the local Waffen-SS. Beside it was other barracks, which held the offices of the leading engineers.

Lined up beside the Kommandantur, he had to wait while one by one was brought into the building, returned a few minutes later, and led to another place within the giant area.

“Prisoner Hochstetter!” One of the guards called and pointed to the door.
Gritting his teeth – the humiliation – he entered the building. It didn’t differ much from the Kommandantur in Stalag 13, because all these kind of barracks were built in the same way. After passing an anteroom, where not a pretty young woman sat but a younger, grim looking SS-member, he came face to face with the leading officer of the local Waffen-SS.

“Wolfgang Hochstetter reports…” he began, but was instantly interrupted.

“You only speak when asked, Prisoner!” The Kommandant, a man in his middle ages with red-brown hair, said sharply. He looked down on the file. The ex-major balled his fist, remembering the dozens – hundreds – of times Hogan had marched into Klink’s office in casual manner, only receiving a glare for it. If Klink was in the mood to rebuke his American counterpart at all. The most times both men had instantly begun to bicker or play a verbal game of hide-and-seek, being more at ease with each other than anything else.

“Sentenced to eight years to a working camp for cowardice, cruelty, illegal methods of torture, abuse of rank, and insubordination. Quite a criminal report you got yourself here.” The Kommandant tore him out of his memories and looked up again.

“I’m a Kriminalrat of the Gestapo, and a major of the Totenkopf-SS. As such, I tried to reveal a dangerous spy behind our lines and…”

“You were all this, Hochstetter,” the other man cut in. “And as such, you obviously overdid it while also being cowardly enough to leave comrades to die instead of supporting them. I was informed from the Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin about your case.”

He leaned back in his chair, braced his elbows on the desk surface, and folded his hands casually in front of his face. He had a long scar reaching from his left temple square over his face to the right side of his neck. “I was also told that you tortured a POW officer out of personal reasons. Not a big crime in my eyes, despite the fact that your motivation was private. Laws forbid something like this. Not that I can’t understand you. We have more than 3000 Russian POWs here, and they really can be a pest sometimes, yet there are other possibilities to keep them down and to punish them instead of using methods of the Middle Ages. Discipline is the strength and the back bone of our country – something you forgot.”

“Said POW officer is the leader of an underground espionage ring and…”

“I spoke shortly with General Burkhalter this morning,” the Kommandant interrupted him again, as if he hadn’t heard Hochstetter at all. “A clear thinking, honorable man who has a lousy job of taking care of the POW camps – full of rats, which eat our nourishment and give us nothing but trouble. Yet
laws and contracts have to be followed. And some of those bastards are even useful if they’re giving their men strength to build our glorious projects the Allies will come to fear soon.” A short, cold smile played around his lips. “I regard them as drudges and treat them as such because they’re nothing else. And the same goes for the other prisoners. We have all kinds of them here: POWs, criminals, labor workers, and Star wearers (Sternenträger – disparaging Nazi name for Jewish people). Seeing that you have a problem with POWs in general and let down your own men while running like a rabbit, you’ll begin your work with the early shift at construction part 5. Russians and prisoners from Dachau are there. Your sleeping place will be in the camp M1 near Mettenheim in Barracks 4. Seeing that you once belonged to the SS and the Gestapo, I’m sure you know that the camp is an outpost of the Stammlager Dachau.”

Hochstetter wasn’t able to make a reply. Yes, he had heard about this camp, M1, that once had been a uniform storage for the Luftwaffe for the nearby risen airbase Mettenheim. It had been changed into a prisoner camp last year. And he had heard something else, too; the camp’s Kommandant, Sebastian Eberl, was a sadist even for the SS. He had heard that the man got himself a nickname he was proud of: Neck Shot Commissar.

The Kommandant had watched the new prisoner closely, saw him blanching, and knew that the man was very aware of what lay ahead for him. He rose and straightened his grey uniform before he fingered shortly for the black collar that was the well known double-s.

“I advise you not to make any attempts of escape or revolution. You will be instantly shot. Lazing around, attacks against your fellow prisoners, and any other kind of breaking the rules will be seriously punished. The Sergeant of the Guards, Sergeant Eidinger, will hand you a list with the rules. Your work begins tomorrow.” He hesitated a moment before he added, “One little personal piece of advice from me – from officer to former officer so to say. You shouldn’t mention your former job. Those pigs out there have developed a certain aversion against the Gestapo and especially against the SS in general. They would love to give one of us a payback, even if said ‘one’ isn’t more worth now than they are.” He smiled shortly as he saw fury sparkling in Hochstetter’s eyes at this nasty mixture of warning and offense. He nodded shortly. The sooner the prisoner learned his new place, the better. “Dismissed!”

The guard, who had remained beside the door the whole time, led the fuming Hochstetter outside, where a sergeant already waited with other guards.

Hochstetter was used to the round, friendly Hans Georg Schultz. This man here was the straight opposite. Almost tiny with a bird like face and piercing eyes. “You, come!” He barked and pointed at Hochstetter “Don’t creep like a snail, I don’t have all day!”

The ex-major had again no other choice than to obey, asking himself again how his life could have changed this drastically. Looking over to the large hill of stones, on which pinched men climbed up and down like ants, he balled his hands into fists.
Hogan and Klink!

It was their fault!

Hogan’s clever schemes which fooled everyone, even Burkhalter, and Klink’s lies and treacherous machinations.

It was because of those two that he – Wolfgang Hochstetter – was damned to live now among scum and would have to work inhumanely within the next eight years or until the Allies maybe won the war.

As he reached Eidinger, the sergeant handed him a sheet of paper with the rules of the area and the camps – rules Hochstetter mostly knew in and out, but was now forced to accept for himself.

“Read and remember them,” the leading guard ordered, before he added with a grin. “Welcome to Hell.”

Gritting his teeth again, Hochstetter took a deep breath to calm himself, took the sheet, and waited for the sergeant to give him further orders.

He would survive this here. He would play along – and would be on his way at the next given opportunity. And if he would be killed, so be it. But as long as he could breathe and a drop of blood was running through his veins, he would look out for a chance to flee. And then mercy on Klink and Hogan. And on young Schmidt. The boy would pay, too, for his betrayal and the way he got himself Hochstetter’s job.

*** HH *** HH ***

Horst Schmidt sat in the small kitchen of Eva Wehage’s: Charlotte Schwaigel vis-à-vis. The woman was in her early thirties, had brunette hair she had twisted in a knot behind her neck, and was thin – almost haggard from too much work, too much mourning, and too little nourishment. Her large, dark eyes held a haunted expression and seemed to have lost any shine. She certainly could be called pretty, but worn down as she was, she woke rather his pity than anything else.
After she returned home and was about to pick up her children from her friend, she had learned of the Oberleutnant’s presence, and Frau Wehage had suggested that the two should speak in the kitchen, where they were undisturbed.

Schmidt had introduced himself and assured Charlotte that his visit was strictly personal and that she or her children weren’t in any trouble before thanking Eva for giving them a place to talk in private.

As carefully and gently as possible, he told her about the death of her sister-in-law, and this time he got the expected reaction from a relative: Frau Schwaigel began to weep, and Schmidt – the perfect gentleman – offered her his handkerchief. He waited until she had calmed down and told her afterwards the whole story, patiently answering her questions.

She sighed in relief and even closed her eyes, as she learned that at least her nephew had survived, was healthy, and in good care. And then it dawned on her the further reason the young SS-officer was here.

“You want me to take Johann in,” she said, referring to Little Manfred.

“You are his last living direct relative,” Horst answered softly, watching her.

Charlotte lowered her head. “My brother Alfred and I were always close – far closer than he was with his brother Otto. To say the truth, during the last few years, they grew apart from each other and the same went for me. In the end, my husband and I hadn’t had any contact with Otto and his family, and Alfred had distanced himself from Otto, too.” She took a shuddering breath and glanced up again. “Alfred and his family were here last spring, and I traveled to Berlin to comfort Mathilde as she informed me of his death in August. I was there as his burial took place – Mathilde was heavily pregnant then. Alfred never got the chance to meet his son. My husband Kurt remained here during the two weeks I was in Berlin, and Eva was so nice to watch out for the children.” She moistened her lips, and a haunted expression rose in her large eyes. “I was back for a few days, as as the facility my husband worked in fell prey to an air raid of the Allies. Kurt didn’t make it. Since then, I try my best to take care of the children. Thank the Lord for Eva. Without her, I couldn’t even go to work where I earn at least a little bit of money – even if it loses its value more and more.”

Schmidt pressed his lips into a thin line. His heart went out to the brave woman in front of him. “How do you do so far – in a financial way, I mean.”

“Not good. Because I have three children, I got some extra nourishment and clothes coupons, and we’re living in the countryside here, where we can raise fruits and vegetables. But during the late winter now, the storages are lowering dramatically – despite the fact that we are careful. And until
new fruits and vegetables have grown…” She shrugged. “I also got people into forced quartering into my flat after last Christmas. A woman with her two children and her mother – survivals of the bombarding of Merzhausen.” She rubbed her neck. “To say the truth, I don’t know how to get enough nourishment for my children, not to speak of feeding a five-month old baby, because I don’t have the needed equipment for him, but… somehow… I’ll manage.”

Schmidt realized that this was no theatrical show the young woman performed, but brutal reality. Just like it was with her sister-in-law in Prenzlau. Counted the kids together, there would be six of them if Little Manfred would be added to them. Six children and three adults in a small flat – including a baby. It sounded impossible.

He cleared his throat. “There is also the chance that Johann Manfred could…”

“He won’t be handed to an orphanage, Herr Oberleutnant,” Frau Schwaigel interrupted him quietly. “I’m his godmother, and I promised Mathilde that I would take care of him should something happen to her. With her living in Berlin in my parents’ home, the… the possibility that one day an attack of the Allies would… harm her…” She gulped. “The chance was big. Yet she didn’t want to leave Neukölln – the place she had lived with Alfred so happily.” She lowered her head again, new tears rolling over her cheeks. “I loved her like the sister I never had. It’s not only my duty, but also implicitness to take her son in.”

Schmidt nodded slowly, knowing that fate would be harder to Manfred if he would live here and not with Hilda in Hammelburg. Yes, he had promised her parents – and her – that her help was only a matter of a few days, but so much had changed in those few days. It was more than obvious that Hilda already loved the little guy, and her parents weren’t less taken with the sweet ‘dwarf’. And he…well, he had to admit that the prospect of raising the boy sounded not only appealing, he would love it. Okay, there was no doubt that Manfred would be loved here, too, but the circumstances would be miserable. Not only concerning nourishment and medical care, but also the whole approaching situation.

If the Allies would conquer more of Germany and would make it so far to this little town here – and it damn well looked like that this would happen sooner or later seeing that they were about to cross the Rhine – then the matters for Frau Schwaigel and the others wouldn’t change to the better. Hell, maybe it would be worse. He had no clue how the Americans handled people of a defeated enemy.

If everything would be lost in Hammelburg, Hilda, her parents, and Little Manfred could find shelter in Stalag 13 – not in Oberst Klink’s protection, but in Colonel Hogan’s. Schmidt didn’t doubt that the American officer would take care of the young woman and her family, given the many hints he got until now and Hilda’s words of gratitude towards him concerning his support for Hogan. For a moment, he had feared that she had feelings for the American, but she had told him that she, yes, liked Hogan and flirted with him, but it was more in a comradely way. And out of nowhere, he believed her. And now this knowledge showed Horst a way out for Hilda should it come to the
worst. He didn’t know Hogan well, but after everything he heard about him, he was a man of honor. Schmidt was convinced that Hogan wouldn’t allow that any harm would befall the young woman, and therefore, she and her dear ones would be safe. And with them Little Manfred.

This was another argument that spoke for Manfred remaining in Hammelburg – and, in an objective regard, the most important one.

“Maybe I have a solution for you, Frau Schwaigel,” he said softly. He met her asking glance and continued. “Fräulein Schneider, who currently cares for your nephew, is very smitten with the little guy. He already wriggled himself into her heart, and he also caught her parents. I think she wouldn’t mind to offer him a home for a longer time – maybe even would adopt him given the chance. She…”

“Please excuse me for interrupting you, Herr Oberleutnant, but…given you reference to her as ‘Fräulein’, the young woman is unmarried and… and she certainly hopes for a family of her own one day. With a husband and children. To have an adopted child maybe a problem for her to find a partner – that means, if she hasn’t already someone who wants to marry her…if he survives the war.” Her voice was quiet and pressed, yet understanding for the other woman lay in her eyes.

Schmidt gave her a short smile. “Due all respect concerning your shown sympathy with Fräulein Schneider, but I don’t think that she will have a problem to find a partner – despite the fact that so many good men have fallen prey to this damn war. She is an independent, strong, attractive young woman who knows what she wants, and has a certain way to charm anybody to do to her liking. Her parents have a little farm that guarantees enough nourishment for the inhabitants, and she has a good paying job that could grant her and her family even personal safety should Hammelburg be conquered by the Allies, too. I think the latter could be most important for your nephew.”

Charlotte rubbed her temples with both hands. The whole situation she was in since her husband’s death, the news about the demise of her sister-in-law, and the fate of her little nephew she had to decide was pushing her to her limits. “May I ask, what her job is?”

“She is the secretary of Oberst Klink, the Kommandant of the POW camp in Hammelburg,” Horst answered, and caught her startled gaze as she gasped.

“A POW camp?”

“Yes, an extraordinary one, may I add,” the Oberleutnant nodded. “The Oberst is respected among the POWs because he treats them in a fair and humane way, and I’m convinced that he won’t face much trouble after the war. I’m sure Hogan will take care of it. Hogan is the senior POW officer of the camp. An American colonel, and…”

Schmidt shrugged. “Don’t ask me. He was sent there maybe to hinder him making too much trouble in an Oflag, because he seems to have a streak to do so. Not in a nasty way, rather…well, Oberst Klink calls him an ‘oversized boy’, and he is right about it. The colonel has certainly leading qualities and is loved by his inferiors like I learned firsthand, but he is also a prankster. Yet, he can be stern – at least that is what I heard. Fräulein Schneider knows him far better than I do, because I’m only for not even two months in Hammelburg now, while she works at the camp for almost two years now.” He took a deep breath. “Oberst Klink and the colonel have become something like friends, and I know that the colonel and Fräulein Schneider have a comradely relationship. I’m sure that he would protect her and her family if the Allies would seize Hammelburg. Johann Manfred would be safe there, no doubt.”

Charlotte pursed her lips and pondered everything. “Pretend – please only pretend – I would agree to all of this. How does Fräulein Schneider want to make the necessary steps to adopt Johann? She is unmarried. The authorities certainly would regard this as a disadvantage, because there is no husband who could guarantee financial safety. And she has a job, so she isn’t there the whole day to take care of the baby. I don’t think the authorities will agree to her request because of those reasons.”

Schmidt sighed. “Ma’am, we don’t live to the emperor’s times anymore. That a woman has a job today AND takes care of her family has become a regular situation within the last two or three years. Just take yourself as an example. The authorities are certainly grateful for every child that is taken in and not sent to an orphanage, because these facilities are over crowded in a way that makes me dizzy to only think of it.”

Charlotte pursed her lips for a moment. “You are certainly right, and I’m aware that many women are widowed by now and have to raise their children alone. But they are their own kids. I doubt that the authorities will allow a single woman to adopt a child.”

Schmidt cocked his head. “Maybe this could be a problem, but…I got an idea. Many children, independent of the age, have been brought to relative safety within the last few months. Mainly away from the larger cities into the countryside that isn’t much attacked by the Allies. They live in host-families, and I’m absolutely sure that many kids have become orphans during their absence from home. Those host-families mostly keeps them within their folds. It could be the same for Manfred. You and your sister-in-law are the last remaining relatives of him, but both of you have no chance to take him in because of your given situations. The Schneiders offer him shelter, and if Fräulein Schneider marries within the next few months or year, she can officially adopt him. I’m sure the authorities will see it likewise.” He took a deep breath. ‘And if not, I always can make use of my current position,’ he added in his thoughts, almost ashamed of this idea, but these times didn’t always allow an honorable handling of a situation.
Charlotte had watched the younger man closely, and it hadn’t slipped her attention that his eyes shone every time *Fräulein* Schneider was mentioned. And his voice became… richer and softer at those moments. Pursing her lips again for a short moment, she folded her hands on the table. “May I ask you a personal question, *Herr Oberleutnant*?”

He looked surprised at her, but nodded. “Of course.” After all, this here was a purely private visit.

“*Fräulein* Schneider… could it be that you have taken a… stronger liking to her?” With a hue of amusement, she saw him flushing before he sighed.

“I’m this obvious?” He almost sounded like a little boy.

Out of nowhere, Charlotte had to laugh before she hastily clapped a hand before her mouth, shocked about the unfitting reaction concerning everything.

Horst smiled at her. “Don’t be ashamed to laugh,” he said softly, realizing instantly the reason for her reaction. “The times are dark enough, and a laugh can bring some light into it – despite your personal losses.” He took a deep breath. “I know *Fräulein* Schneider only for a few weeks, but… but I can imagine to… to court her.” Sweet Lord, had he just admitted to a complete stranger his personal feelings and intentions? Yes, he had. He really was a superb member of the SS. His trainers would throw up their hands in horror.

*Frau* Schwaigel gave him a gentle smile. “Just court her, *Herr Oberleutnant*. Like you already said: the times are dark enough – and love is the brightest light of all and can chase away the darkness.”

Schmidt couldn’t help himself. He sighed melancholy. “I don’t think that it would be good for *Fräulein* Schneider to be associated with me. You know the unit I’m serving in. And I think the rumors how the members of said unit are handled by the Allies – at least by the Russians – are no rumors, but the harsh truth. No wonder given what the SS did and still does even in our own country. What I heard of their doings in Belgium, France, and Russia…” He pressed his lips into a short line, knowing that he had said too much. If the young woman would be ill-willed towards him, he was done for. Yet instinctively, he knew that she wouldn’t give him away. Yet.

“Why are you in the SS, if you would prefer another department to serve our country?” It was pure curiosity; this much was clear.

“I belonged to the *Abwehr*, but what happened to this unit last year after the failed attempt of killing
“The Führer, is well known. I had no other choice, then…” He shrugged.

“Then tell the Allies that you were forced to enter the SS,” Charlotte suggested gently. “They will understand – and your current membership won’t be a hindrance to court Fräulein Schneider.”

Schmidt laughed without any humor. He didn’t know if the lady was simply naïve or a deep optimist. “How many of my so called ‘comrades’ do you think are going to use this as an excuse?”

Charlotte cocked her head. “And this American colonel – Hogan, or how his name is? You said he would protect Fräulein Schneider, and you seem to know him a little bit better than you lead on. If he likes the Fräulein and would protect her and her family, don’t you think he would put in a good word for you? Maybe even shield you should the Russians make it to North Bavaria before the other Allies do? If he and Fräulein Schneider are ‘friends’, he won’t allow that someone she likes – loves – come to harm no matter the uniform.”

With big eyes, Schmidt looked at her. Until now, he had never thought about this. Well, Hogan did owe him the one or other favor. Not that he had done it to win the American’s support if needed. He had helped him because it had been the right thing to do. But in a certain way, Frau Schwaigel was right. Maybe Hogan would be willing to keep him out of harm’s way should the Russians conquer Hammelburg, and he and his comrades would face death – at least the officers.

Charlotte had watched him and smiled again. “I see. You haven’t thought of this way out.” She reached out a hand and placed it on one of his underarms, which rested on the table. “Speak with the colonel. If he really has a kind of friendship with Fräulein Schneider and already offered his protection, he maybe is willing to help you too. Even if it is only for Fräulein Schneider’s sake. That means, if he isn’t interested in her himself.”

Schmidt chuckled. “They flirt – but in a harmless way. She works in the camp for almost two years now, like I said, and if there would be more between them, it would have already happened.” He frowned. “Weren’t we talking about Manfred?” He asked all of sudden – and Charlotte laughed quietly anew.

“Yes, but I think in this case, the one topic belongs to the other one.” She let go off him and leaned back on the chair, crossing her thin arms in front of her. For a long moment, she simply observed him, then she asked, “If there is a happy ending for you and Fräulein Schneider, would you consider to adopt Johann?”

For a few seconds, a bright smile appeared on his face before his self-control was restored. “Yes,” he said calmly, but firmly. “I… I’m taken with this sweet gnome and…and even if I have children of my
own one day, he always would be my son.” He moistened his lips. “Of course, I would try to stay in contact with you – the same goes for Fräulein Schneider. We, better to say, she would keep you updated about him. And we also would tell him of everything that happened so that he can contact you when he is old enough for it.”

Charlotte nodded slowly. “It sounds…reasonable and almost perfect, but can I really expect a complete stranger to take care of my nephew? I don’t even know her.”

“You could accompany me to Hammelburg and meet her,” Schmidt suggested, almost eagerly. “Then you can get an idea of her and her environment.”

The young woman sighed. “I would love to do it, but…I cannot leave work. Nurses are rare. Many of us are at the front or in the large infirmaries in the towns, and our little hospital is over crowded because those, who can’t stay in the infirmaries, are transferred to the medical facilities around the cities. But…maybe I can call her?”

“This would be no problem, but you have no phone.”

“Eva has – and she hasn’t anything against it when I use it from time to time.”

Horst looked at his wrist watch: half past five p.m. “When the connection can be made quickly, you can still reach her in the camp.” He rose, but Charlotte protested,

“I cannot disturb the lady at work. What would the Oberst say?”

Schmidt grinned. “Oberst Klink held your nephew at a break during our travel from Berlin to Hammelburg and became all protective. He already acts like an uncle when it comes to Manfred, how Fräulein Schneider told me. He wouldn’t mind, believe me.” He left the kitchen, Frau Schwaigel on his heels.

“Eva?” Charlotte called. “Can we use your telephone?”

Frau Wehage came out of the living room. “Of course.”
“It’s a long distance call, but I’ll pay you for it,” Schmidt said, earning a baffled glance from the older woman.

“There… is no need for it, Herr Oberleutnant,” she stuttered, not used to the incredible polite and thoughtful behavior from someone of the SS. She showed him the phone in the small hall, and he took the receiver.

“Oberleutnant Schmidt from the SS. Please connect me to Stalag 13 in Hammelburg, North Bavaria,” he said and waited. There was a click in the line after almost a minute, and then the known voice with the Saxonian dialect was to hear.

“Stalag 13, Oberst Klink on the line. Who’s there?”

Schmidt lifted both brows. “Herr Oberst? This is Oberleutnant Schmidt. Have you gotten yourself a second job in your own anteroom now?” He joked, and heard the older man chuckling for a moment.

“No, but I sent Hilda home already so that she can take care of the little imp. She told me that you’re visiting the child’s aunt. So, any news?”

“I’m still in Usingen, and I suggested Frau Schwaigel to leave Manfred in Hilda’s care, because she has three own children and already hosts a homeless family.” He hesitated. “Uh, I hope that gives you no trouble and…”

“No, of course not. The main point is that the baby gets a new home. And if Hilda needs here and there a few hours off – well, she already has so many extra hours, she could take a two-week holiday from them.”

Schmidt smiled in relief. “Thank you so much for your support, Oberst Klink. When did Fräulein Schneider leave? I’m going to try to reach her at home.”

“Fräulein Schneider? So formal all of sudden? You can’t fool me, young man. I do know that you cast not one, but two eyes at my secretary.” There was a teasing tone in his voice before he turned serious again. “She left an hour ago. I’m sure you can reach her at home.”

“Thank you, Herr Oberst – and have a nice evening.”
“For you the same. When will you be back?”

“During the day tomorrow,” Schmidt said. “I’ll call you to inform you about everything.”

“That would be very considering, young friend. Have a good stay near Frankfurt and come back safely.”

“I will. Auf wiedersehen,” Schmidt replied, smiling.

“He…he really seems to be nice,” Charlotte said, baffled of what she heard from the Luftwaffe officer through the receiver.

“He’s a special individual,” Schmidt grinned, and added with a whisper and a twinkle in his eyes, “He wears a monocle.”

Again, the young woman got the impulse to laugh. Good God, she hadn’t felt this easy for a long time now. The young SS officer really was a nice man with a casual streak of good humor.

Winking at her – glad that he was able to make her laugh again – Schmidt tried to reach Hilda at home. Again, he had to wait a little bit before Hilda’s father answered the phone. A minute later, Schmidt heard the gentle, beloved voice through the line – and from where, please, came the word ‘beloved’? Oh God, he was so lost.

“Hilda? It’s me.” He smiled. “Yeah, I’m okay. Everything is quiet here.” He cleared his throat. “Uh, Hilda, I’m still here with Manfred’s aunt and…” He glanced at Charlotte. “She has three of her own children and hosts a family, so…well…I don’t think…better to say, I thought…” He gulped. No, he couldn’t be lost of words. Not now!

Charlotte recognized the younger man’s nervousness and took the matter in her own hands. She waved at him and pointed at herself.

“Frau Schwaigel…wants to speak with you,” Schmidt said hastily, and offered Charlotte the receiver, almost ashamed of the relief he felt as the two women took the matter in their own hands.
“Fräulein Schneider? I’m Charlotte Schwaigel, Joh…Manfred’s aunt. Thank you so much for taking care of him.” She glanced at Schmidt, and he got the hint. With an “Excuse me, please,” he went to the living room, tensed like a bow ready to let an arrow fly. Eva and her parents looked at him, and as Frau Wehage saw the almost helpless expression on his face, she offered him a seat again. But it was her father who took mercy on Schmidt and asked him what was going on, giving him a chance to get rid of some obvious burdens on his soul.

Horst sighed. To speak about private matters was something that was casted out at the beginning of any training within the SD and later within the SS (and the Gestapo), but…what the heck. Schmidt caught himself beginning to talk about Manfred – and Hilda. And as he saw the amused understanding on the older couple’s faces (and on Eva’s), he flushed again.

Soft steps neared the door, and a moment later, Frau Schwaigel entered. She rubbed her neck and laid her arm around her eldest son, who instantly ran to her and cuddled against her.

“I spoke with the young lady who took my nephew in until now.” She collected herself and took a deep breath. “We agreed that she continues to take care of him.” She lowered her head. “I feel bad because Johann is my nephew and godson, but…I don’t know how to raise him in the given situations, and Fräulein Schneider has far better personal circumstances than I have – last but not least, because her parents have a farm and can provide themselves with the needed nourishment. Mostly, at least.”

Eva rose, closed the distance to her, waved the boy gently away, and wrapped an arm around her friend. “You did the right thing,” she said softly, while she thought to recognize something like relief and even joy on the Oberleutnant’s face. Uh-uh, the young man was not only in love with this Fräulein Schneider, he obviously loved the baby, too.

Charlotte looked at her. “Did I? I really have a bad conscious now, but…I do think that Johann will have it better with Fräulein Schneider. Not only because she really can take care of him with everything he needs, but also out of safety reasons.” Her glance found Schmidt. “You talk with the colonel?”

Horst, who had risen the moment the young woman had stepped into the room, nodded. “I will,” he affirmed.

“What colonel?” Frau Wehage’s father asked.
“The senior POW officer of the camp Fräulein Schneider works as the Kommandant’s secretary,” Charlotte explained. “He and Fräulein Schneider have built a kind of friendship, and the Herr Oberleutnant is convinced that the colonel will protect her and the baby if it comes to the worst.”

“A full colonel in an ordinary POW camp?” The older man shook his head in surprise. “Are the POWs there so wild that such a high ranking officer of their own lines is needed to keep them in check?”

Schmidt snorted in amusement. “As far as I can calculate the whole situation in the camp, the POWs there are more like a large bunch of comrades who even get a little bit along with the guards. And yes, I do think this is because of Colonel Hogan – and Oberst Klink, the Kommandant. What is the saying; the fish smells at first at the head?”

Eva tightened her arm around her friend, then Charlotte walked towards Schmidt. “Concerning the formalities…if Fräulein Schneider really considers to adopt Johann – and she just told me so – I won’t throw not stones in her way, but…before it comes to this, I want to visit her. Maybe in one or two weeks. I’ll speak with my boss when I can take off two days. Yet, there is the problem how to travel to Hammelburg. I have no car, and the trains are forbidden for civilians. So…”

Schmidt shook gently his head. “Contact me at the Gestapo Headquarters in Hammelburg, and I’ll take care that you get an exceptional permission and a ticket. I’ll pick you up at the station and bring you to the Schneiders, okay?”

Charlotte nodded with a small smile, yet her eyes were sad. “I…I would love to have Johann here, but…” She shrugged helplessly.

“Johann? Aunt Margrethe’s son?” The boy asked, and the young woman took a deep breath. “Yes, sweetheart. Margarethe died last Saturday, but her baby survived. A young woman in the town the Herr Oberleutnant works, takes care of him.”

The boy stepped to the two adults and looked critically up at the SS officer. “You watch out for him?” He asked sternly, what almost was cute given his young age. Yet Schmidt took the boy’s concern seriously.

“Yes, I will take care of your cousin. Don’t fear for him. And when the war is over, you, your mother, and your siblings can visit your cousin. I’m sure Fräulein Schneider would love to welcome you.”
The boy lowered his head. “Do you think the war will last any longer?”

Schmidt sighed, knowing that he couldn’t say the truth. Children spoke a lot, and the risk that his true opinion would be revealed and certainly lead to a lot of trouble was high. So he said, “I don’t know, little friend, but our soldiers are very brave and will not give up, so don’t be afraid.”

Charlotte stroke through her son’s tousled hair and said, “Pick up your sister and go upstairs, Fritz. Else is already there, and our guests certainly can need a hand. I’ll follow you soon.”

The boy grimaced and gave Schmidt a hesitant smile before he walked over to the small girl that sat on the older lady’s lap, picked her up, and headed to the door. “Bye, Herr Oberleutnant, and please greet my cousin from me.”

Horst chuckled. “This I will do. Goodbye, Fritz.” He drove his attention back to Charlotte. “I’ll drive back to Frankfurt, where I certainly will find an open hotel. Please call me when you can come to Hammelburg.”

_Frau_ Schwaigel made an affirming gesture. “I’ll show you the door,” she said softly.

Schmidt bid the others farewell, slipped into his coat, took his cap, and followed Charlotte to the entrance. He saw her sadness and said gently, “You’re a brave woman, _Frau_ Schwaigel, and I hope the sun will shine for you again one day. And please, don’t worry for Manfred. If everything runs smoothly, I’ll be able to take care of him, too.”

Charlotte gave him a tiny smile. “I hope that everything will be fine for you and _Fräulein_ Schneider. And thank you for sacrificing so much time for our family.”

“It’s my duty, but also my pleasure,” he answered. “As I found Manfred in Neukölln, I knew that my life would change a lot.” He hesitated, as another idea struck him. “_Frau_ Schwaigel, you were born in Neukölln, weren’t you?”

“Yes,” Charlotte nodded. “I spent the first eighteen years of my life there. Why?”

“Do you know where there is a Vienna café house and what its name was – or is?”
The young woman frowned. “A Vienna café house, you say? I don’t know such a café there. Not in Neukölln – or in the neighborhood. Maybe it opened after my husband and I moved away?”

Schmidt blinked in confusion. “No, it has to be older. Certainly twenty years, or so.”

Charlotte shook her head. “I’m sorry, Herr Oberleutnant, but I don’t know any Vienna café house there. I also have never heard of one in the area. Are you sure that it should be in Neukölln?”

Schmidt stared at her, half confused, half baffled. Klink had said that he knew a Vienna café house from his time in Berlin, and he had invited them to it before the air raid alert was given. Had he been mistaken this much? Well, he had said it was in Neukölln after the alert was risen, and maybe he had been wrong because of the whole situation, but he had sounded very certain, hadn’t he? On the other hand, the Oberst had hesitated with the answer, as he had been asked – as if he had to make up his mind. But this gave even less sense.

“Or it is located in another quarter of Berlin,” Schmidt mused.

Charlotte shrugged. “To say the truth, I haven’t heard of any Vienna café house in Berlin at all, but Berlin is big, and I only know Neukölln, Kreuzberg, and Köpenick better – the last because a friend of mine lived there.”

Horst pursed his lips. Odd. This was really odd.

Sighing, he put on his cap. “Maybe the Oberst was mistaken, or I misunderstood something – after all, there was a big chaos in Berlin as we drove away.” He bowed politely and shook Charlotte’s hand. “Farewell, Frau Schwaigel, and I’m looking forward to receiving your call.”

“Thank you so much for your help, Herr Oberleutnant. Without you, my nephew would be dead now. The rest of our family owes you.”

He shook his head. “You owe me nothing. Just like I said, it’s my duty, but also my honor to help our people where I can.” He tipped at his cap in a final salute and left the house, inwardly happy that Manfred would remain in Hammelburg.

Yet, a part of his thoughts drifted to the mysterious Vienna café house that saved them all, but eventually didn’t even exist.
Well, Schmidt’s suspects are risen – and his clever mind will not give it a rest until he found out the truth. Just guess, what this could mean for our two love-birds despite the fact that Schmidt is a fair and decent man. But just right now he has other worries: How make it happen that Hilda can adopt Manfred, how will his aunt decide an how to go on from now on (after all, life circumstances in the country grow bitterer day by day).

Of course, Hochstetter thinks he is treated unfair. People like him are unable to realize when they have done something wrong – and his appearance in this chapter isn’t the last you will read about him. Far from it.

The next chapter will be a fluffy one once again – sweet and romantically, before the dark side of the war will send its shadows even towards Stalag 13.

I hope, you liked the new chapter (even without our boys in it), and – like always – I would be very happy to receive some reviews.

Have a nice weekend

Love

Yours Starflight
Song of love

Hi, my dear readers,

I’m sorry, but I only realized now that I skipped to publish this chapter – and it’s such a fluffy and sweet one.

Here you go – a time of love for our two lovebirds.

I hope, you enjoy it.

Yours Starflight

Chapter 51 – Song of love

While Schmidt reached Frankfurt in the evening, and Hochstetter found himself in an over-crowded barracks in which 200 men were penned in, Klink and Hogan had a decent dinner. The colonel learned that Hilda would keep the baby in her care for the next few months – maybe even forever. The latter depended on the boy’s aunt, if she would be willing to give up the infant for adoption, and if Hilda would find a husband. And both colonels already had a good idea who would be the candidate for the latter.

While Hochstetter cursed the whole world and tried to find a comfortable position on the hard make-shift bed, and Schmidt fell into a soft hotel bed like a stone, the two love birds fooled around and teased each other, of which quickly became more. Excitement changed into passion, passion into fire – and this time, it was Robert who conquered his lover in all meanings of the word.

This kind of love making was familiar for him – to be buried deeply in the other one’s body and to feel those silken walls around his throbbing member was an old, yet also a new heaven, because it was WILL in whom he was sashed. It was the person he had fallen in love with. And to be one with him was pure paradise. And he heard in every moan and sigh, sensed in every move of Will’s hands on his back and saw it in the bliss on his lover’s face, that Wilhelm felt likewise.

Will was in heaven. Despite the fact that he had not been taken like this for many years and that his
body wasn’t used to this large kind of invasion, he relished in every moment of it – turning half mad with desire and bliss to surrender to the man who held his heart and soul. The second he glanced up at Rob’s flush face, he became aware of the possessive expression that also spoke of pure rapture and caught the fire, but also devotion in those scorching brown eyes. He knew that he never would love someone more than he loved his witty fox.

Clinging to each other, lost in sensation and scorching desire, they reached for the stars only they could see and left the world behind. Completely out of breath, slick with sweat, and far too filled up with pure bliss to be reasonable, they came back to Earth so to say. The aftermath of ecstasy held them in a gentle, but firm grip for longer before they resumed their forbidden, but so delicious game again. Both could not get enough from each other. They were addicted to the way they made the other one feel, and both knew that this here was ought to be for very, very long – maybe forever.

It was late in the night they finally fell asleep – utterly spent, exhaust, but happy. The next morning, it was Klink who groaned and cursed because of a very sore butt, and it was Robert who pulled Will’s leg now, yet the sympathy in his eyes made up for his teasing.

The movements, with which Klink walked over the compound for the roll call, were more than funny and got him some comments he simply ignored. He was in a far too good mood to get irritated because of a burning in his backside and a few rude whispers. At least none of the POWs assumed the truth, and the rumor that he had fallen out of bed spread through the camp – something he would not correct. It was better to be on the receiving end of a stupid joke than to be revealed as a man who loved another guy.

Hilda came at approximately eight o’clock like every morning and told Klink about her telephone talk with Manfred’s aunt. Klink stood true to his word that she could take off some extra hours if needed, and he offered his support should she be in need for it. It earned him a brilliant smile and words of real gratitude before the daily routine began.

In Mühldorf, Hochstetter had his first ‘working-shift’ and quickly learned in a hard way that there were not any liberties allowed.

Back at Stalag 13, Hogan had another training session with Wilson in the rec hall. And, again, he had some trouble to do the training as good as the day prior. Yes, he had lost himself in Wilhelm this time, and not the other way around, yet his beaten body was anything but fully healed, and therefore, the passionate love making of the night prior demanded its toll.

“Where does it hurt, sir?” Wilson asked, while Hogan rose with a grimace from the mat.
“Lower back, hips…” He shrugged nonchalant and ignored the medic’s piercing glance.

‘Given Klink’s funny movements this morning and yours now, I bet my last shirt that the most pain is in the front of your middle body, Colonel,’ Joe thought wryly, and shook his head inwardly. Those two!

At the same time, Klink had a different problem that based on the same reason. To sit on his desk chair was not only unpleasant, it was almost hell. He had shifted front and back, to the left and to the right, but his butt did not stop burning. In the end, he called for Schultz and ordered him to bring him a sofa cushion from his quarters.

“Decent, Schultz! I don’t want every man within these wires seeing you carrying a pillow to my office!” He called after Hans, who only rolled his eyes.

“Is’ sho’ recht,” (Bavarian: It’s okay) Schultz sighed, exchanged a half amused, half frustrated glance with Hilda, and left the Kommandantur. A minute later, he reached Klink’s quarters, got the pillow, and put it in a bath towel. The large one that hung in the bathroom and was sopping wet spoke its own language. Shortly afterwards, he stomped over the compound back to the Kommandantur. Hogan and Wilson came out of the rec hall, and it did not slip Schultz’s attention that the colonel, too, walked oddly.

“You two should not overdo it so much,” he murmured, as he passed by the American officer, who stopped dead in his tracks and gaped with big eyes at him.

Wilson coughed to mask the chuckle that escaped him; knowing exactly what the Sergeant of the Guards was carrying towards Klink’s office. He caught the far too innocent glance of his superior, as Hogan said with a sigh, “Schultz really is the big father type. Now he even worries that you and I do too much sports in my condition.”

Wilson bit his lip and nodded very seriously, but inwardly, he was laughing his head off. The day Robert E. Hogan was at a loss for an excuse was the day the moon would wander backwards.

They watched Schultz enter the Kommandantur again, and Hogan had to fight the grin that was tugging at his mouth. He could imagine how uncomfortable Will had to be. Well, served him right. After all, the German had a lot of fun on Robert’s behalf three days ago.

Klink groaned in relief as he sat down on the pillow, ignoring Schultz’s amused smirking. The same
moment, Hilda entered his office to bring the first reports she wrote for him, caught his reaction, and shortly pursed her lips.

“So, the rumors are true? You fell out of bed on your…well, bottom?” She asked, with a mixture of sympathy and amusement.

He shot her a short glare, ready to deny the humiliating gossip, and remembered in the last second that this rumor was his alibi. Grimacing, he nodded with a grumble, listened to her soft laughter, and surrendered to fate. Let them all think whatever they want, he had had one of the best nights in his life, and that was all that counted.

“I hope you’re doing better tomorrow, Herr Kommandant. I don’t think that the harmony of the music will be the best if you still have problems with sitting down.”

Klink frowned. “What has music to do with me sitting down?” He asked, confused. “And what do you mean with ‘tomorrow’? Tomorrow is Fasching Saturday, but given this damn war, I’m really not in the mood to have a party with masks and to swing to music.”

Hilda placed the records on his desk in front of him. “I’m also in no mood for Fasching, Herr Kommandant, but tomorrow is the monthly meeting of you and the other gentlemen you’re playing music with,” she reminded him. “It was cancelled in January because of the whole situation, and tomorrow is the second Saturday in the month – when you meet with the gentlemen regularly.”

Klink stared at her thunderstruck. He had really forgotten about it. Usually he looked forward to those meetings; now they had slipped his mind completely. Sweet Lord, love and what it could do to a man!

Hilda cocked her head. “Shall I call them and cancel the meeting again?” She offered, but Klink shook his head.

“No, let them come. There is no reason to break our routine again. And, at least, to play classical music is good for the soul and heart. It’s no duty, but a pleasure.”

Schultz controlled his features in the last second to not give into his urge to pull a face. As much as his superior loved music, his playing was terrible. And in this regard, he asked, “Herr Kommandant, can I take tomorrow afternoon off?”
The *Oberst* frowned. “What for?”

“Well… you see… I have a friend in Hammelburg and….”

“Your friend wears the name ‘beer’ or ‘Weißwurst’, and then you come back with the mother of all hangovers. Request denied!” He bent over his reports to sign them.

“But… *Herr Kommandant*…”

“You had last Sunday off, and this is quite enough in one week. We’re not here for fun, you know.” He did not even look up while signing the documents with his typical, almost hastily movements.

“That says the right one,” Schultz grumbled under his breath, yet he was heard.

Now, indeed, glancing up from the papers, Klink fixed him with one of his infamous stares. “Shall we speak about your talk with Hogan a few mornings ago, Schultz, and overstepping your limits how far you can throw yourself in your superior’s private affairs?”

The large Bavarian looked confused at him, and then it dawned to what the *Oberst* was referring to. Of course Hogan had to talk about it with ‘Willie’. Sometimes the American was really a chatterbox!

“I had only your best interest at heart, *Herr Kommandant*. I did not want that troublemaker to hurt you,” he defended himself.

Klink, half bowing over his desk, glared up at him. “Yes, Robert convinced me of your well-meant intention. And this is the only reason why you don’t get an ear full from me.”

Hilda had listened with growing bafflement. ‘Private affairs’, ‘that troublemaker not to hurt you’, ‘Robert’?? “May I ask what is going on here?” She asked.

“No,” it sounded from both males at the same time.

“Well, then don’t.” She shrugged, took the signature folder with her, and left the office; closing the
door a little bit stronger than necessary. Klink watched her go and shot his Sergeant of the Guards another glare. “Very sensitive, Schultz. Of course she now begins to get ideas. Why don’t you just shout it through the whole camp that Robert and I are together?”

Hans’ eyes became wide. “May I drive your attention to the fact that you began with the whole topic, Herr Kommandant?”

“I spoke in riddles, but you have to use clear words so that Fräulein Hilda…”

“I did not say clear and plainly that you and Colonel Hogan are a couple. I would never mention it officially. You know I know nothing, and I see nnnmoothing!” He took his rifle and went to the door. “And hopefully I HEAR nothing tomorrow afternoon!”

Klink frowned, recognized to what Schultz was referring to, and balled his fist. “Schultz, you’re a music-philistine!”

“I love good music,” the Bavarian corrected him, almost regally. “Especially when the right note is stroked.” He left before his superior could react to this little potshot, and heard Klink shouting his name in anger a few seconds later while he bypassed Hilda’s desk and stepped out of the Kommandantur.

Inside the office, Klink huffed in offense, grimaced, glanced down on the reports, and rose to get himself a cognac. So much anger had to be flooded away, no doubt. And only as he had stood up, he remembered his sore butt – better to say, his backside gave him a paining reminder of its condition.

He groaned. Hopefully this day would be over soon.

*** HH *** HH ****

Schmidt returned to Hammelburg after a chaotic trip, because he had to change trains four times. The many destroyed and damaged railways, and especially the latter, gave the Reichsbahn (Germans State Railroad) a lot of trouble to keep up with any schedules. He was tired as he reached the HQ, went to his room to get rid of his tiny luggage, and entered into his office, where he took over charge from von Neuhaus. Thank the Lord this time there had not been anything happening that needed his attention.
He called Hilda in Stalag 13 and informed her of his return. He would stop by at her parent’s house in the evening, and his heart beat increased as she invited him to dinner. He heard Klink’s voice in the background and bid hastily farewell. He did not want to be the reason for Hilda to get into trouble with her boss should she spent too much time for private matters while being on duty.

Looking at the telephone, Schmidt pursed his lips. To hear Klink’s voice had brought up another issue he couldn’t forget: the mysterious Vienna café house in Berlin. He believed Frau Schwaigel that she did not know one in Neukölln and within the next boroughs. And his curious and trained mind that could smell a riddle or a mystery in 100-mile distance did not give it a rest.

Picking up the receiver, he called the townhall of Neukölln that was finally reachable by telephone again and tried to get some information about the café – for naught. And, as he realized, his telephone partners at the other end of the line were anything but understanding that he asked for a café house at the given situation in Berlin.

Pursing his lips, Schmidt rose, went to the window, and stared out into the snowy street.

Something was wrong here.

Something simply did not fit.

And he knew what this ‘something’ was. Klink had driven in haste towards a café house he knew ‘from earlier times’, but that obviously had never existed just before a grave air raid happened. An air raid that left a path of destruction through all of Berlin, but the borough they drove to was only grazed.

Coincidence?

Luck?

Or… a result of knowledge?

Klink had been called to the telephone at the People’s Court and after he came back, he had been in great hurry to get them to this ominous café house in Neukölln – Neukölln that was not as strongly attacked as Berlin-Middle and the other borough where Burkhalter had wanted to take them.
Klink had driven like the devil was after them. Well, in this case, it hadn’t been the devil, but hostile aircrafts.

What if Klink had learned about the upcoming air raid during the call he received? What if the ‘garbage problem’ had been a fake and, in truth, someone had called Klink to warn him? And if so, who was this ‘someone’? What if Hochstetter had been right and Klink had a connection to the underground who warned him about the upcoming attack?

“You’re seeing phantoms, Horst,” he murmured. “Klink is eccentric in a certain way, yes, but he is an honorable man and no traitor.” He turned away from the window and returned towards his desk. But a certain suspect had been risen, and he knew he would not stop thinking about it as long as the riddle was not solved.

If there was chance to learn who had phoned Klink, then the other questions would be answered automatically. But the only one who knew who had called the Oberst was Klink himself and the young SS-man of the telephone exchange office at the People’s Court that did not exist anymore. The whole building had burnt down like he knew by now.

But… maybe the man who had received the call still lived. Maybe he had found shelter in the bunker a few houses down the street in time and had survived. If so, he – Schmidt – could get the answers he needed. On the other hand, if he contacted the SS-Headquarters in Berlin and asked questions about the employees at the People’s Court, he certainly had to tell them why he needed the information, and he did not want to bring Klink into discredit. On the other hand, if the Oberst played a foul game, it was Schmidt’s duty to find out the truth. Yet, there was no denying in the fact that – even if Klink was in contact with the Underground – he, Schmidt, owed said contact his life. Klink had made certain that they all got away in time instead of taking the heels and running off alone. Even if the Kommandant was in touch with the Underground, he had shown honor and trustworthiness by protecting his companions.

So, what now? If Schmidt would follow his duty, he maybe would be forced to arrest the man he owed his life to. If he ignored the inanities, he made himself guilty of covering for a traitor.

Schmidt groaned and closed his eyes. For the first time he did not know what to do.

*** HH *** HH ***

The rest of Friday went by uneventful. Klink was glad to be finally back in his quarters where he
could use more than one pillow to sit down on, ignoring or answering Hogan’s teasing with a scowl that was not meant seriously – and Robert felt compassion for his secret lover. He remembered very well how uncomfortable his butt had been even a day later after their first real love making, yet – this much was clear – both men did not mind too much. They even looked forward to a repeat. Both had never experienced such an intense whirlwind of feelings and sensations. This kind of true belonging, and they would love to have this incredible closeness again.

Well, in two or three days.

Just right now, Will needed some time to ‘cure his butt’, like he put it, but he could not fool Hogan. The Oberst’s eyes gleamed with mischief, but also tenderness whenever he glanced at the younger man. His ‘butt’ was the last thing he cared about then.

They went to bed early this evening, and the next morning was a sunny one. Skies blue, sun bright, temperature bearable. Hilda came for four hours before she finished her duty for the rest of the weekend. While Hogan took some more training lessons with Wilson in the rec hall – accompanied by Kinch and Carter – Klink got ready for the music session with the other gentlemen.

In the early afternoon, they arrived carrying their instruments – and at a moment’s, notice the compound was sans of any POW. Most of the guards went into the casino, cantina, or their quarters. Only those who were on duty remained outside of the wooden buildings.

Klink ignored them. He was in far too good of a mood to get irritated of this ‘lack of music-understanding’. Welcoming the other four gents, they occupied his now tidy office where he had ordered more chairs be built a half-circle. The men set up the music stands, unpacked their instruments, and began to adjust them. They agreed on some classical themes, and the music began to fill the air.

Outside in the watch towers, the guards stood stoically and waited for the inevitable stress for their hearing. And then some of them began to frown or blink in surprise as the music that sounded from the Kommandantur was sweet and harmonic – without the typical mistunes their CO managed to produce from his violin on principal.

After a few minutes, the first German guards reappeared from the casino, cantina, or their quarters; curious who was playing there so well. In the rec hall, Hogan, Kinch, and Carter interrupted their training session as they heard the music from afar. Wilson had opened a window to let some fresh air into the hall.

“For once, this doesn’t sound like someone stepped on a cat’s tail,” Kinchloe joked.
“Is that Klink?” Carter asked, a little bit out of breath.

“It seems so,” Wilson nodded, his attention fixed on Hogan, who listened with a soft smile closely to the music. There was the saying that someone could play an instrument the best when being in love. Well, in this case, it really fitted. There was no doubt that the German officer’s feelings for his American counterpart had changed his lack of any talent into something enjoyable.

In the Kommandantur, the piece was finished, and the gentlemen looked in awe at Klink, who stood there, held his violin, and had played it like never before. There was an inner peace and almost gentleness on the Oberst’s face that none of the other males had ever seen before.

“My dear Wilhelm, you’re playing like an angel,” one of the men said.

Klink felt his cheeks flushing at this unusual compliment and shrugged. “I had a little bit of time to practice, that’s all.” He smiled awkwardly and looked down on the notes he had not needed at all. His thoughts went to Robert, and the warmth that filled him shimmered in his eyes – and had found its way through his fingers to the violin.

Without losing another word, he began to play again – his fingers and the violin bow elicited the instrument with new tones, following a melody only Wilhelm could hear sung in his heart and soul. It spoke of happiness and bliss, of tenderness and passion, of love and peace – a mirror of what a certain oversized American man-boy with the brilliant mind of a genius had woken in him.

The melody soared on gentle wings through the camp and brought more and more men out onto the compound. Uniform and heritage did not matter for now. Farraginous, POWs and guards stood next to each other – listening and smiling at the unusual, yet gentle and strong melody that woke the memories of the better and brighter times before the world was seized by insanity.

Robert had left the rec hall and remained between his friends. He knew who was playing there – and what Will was playing: a song for him – a song that melodized their feelings and what was a declaration of love on its own. And he felt his throat tightening as far too much emotions swept through him.

After several minutes, the last tones sounded away, leaving an echo of quietude, light, and yearning in the camp. There was not a single man independent of heritage who did not miss his dear ones or who remembered the better times years ago. Yet the melancholy was not a sad one, but rather a looking forward to the day everyone could go home.
Here and there, the first hands were clapped, followed by more and more applause. It did not matter in the moment that the most present men were POWs and applauded their jailor – or that the guards acclaimed their Kommandant, who only had begun to gain their respect within the last few weeks. Music had no limits and tore down walls and borders where human acts usually failed. Music could unite people, even if only for a few minutes, and this was exactly happening now.

Robert clapped his hands, not aware of the affectional smile on his face or how much his eyes shone. He knew that this melody did not officially exist and that Will simply had given tones to his feelings for him, and the depth of the older man’s love for him made Hogan almost breathless.

LeBeau and Newkirk exchanged a glance with each other, looked pointing at their friend and superior and locked eyes with each other again. Uh-uh, this here was definitely more than ‘only’ an affair. This here ran deep – and they did not know if this should make them happy for their friend or upset. The chance the two officers would have a future together was not really big.

*** HH ***

Klink’s unusual beautiful violin playing was the topic for the rest of the day. The other musicians had praised his ‘incredible art’, meaning really what they said. And the Oberst even felt a little bit embarrassed about the compliments – like it happened here and there by now since he and Robert were together. His vanity seemed to have vanished most of the time and also his arrogance. Instead, he displayed something close to modesty – a completely new behavior from him.

It was shown again during the evening roll call, as a dozen POWs and more whistled and applauded, calling things like “Great play!” or “That sounded good!”

Hogan had returned to Klink’s quarters after the music (and his training), still wavering between of being touched and shocked. A part of him could not believe that the feelings of someone for him had elicited such beautiful music. That Will’s love for him had gifted the older man with such a sudden change in his usual, not existing talent of playing the violin.

As Klink entered his quarters after evening roll call and hung his coat at the coat stand, Rob stopped behind him and slipped his arms around his waist from behind, nuzzling his secret lover’s neck.

“You played this for me, didn’t you,” he said quietly.
Klink flushed and turned around with a sigh. “I don’t know what came over me. I…I simply played what came into my mind. I hadn’t any real saying of how the melody went. My fingers had an own kind of will, as it seems.” He looked at Robert, wrapped his arms around him and murmured, “I thought about you and how we grew closer within the last few weeks – of our time together, regardless if we sat on the sofa talking or rolled between the sheets, blind with lust and need. The memory and the thrill of anticipation for what maybe still lays ahead for us found a way into the melody I came up with.”

To his horror, Hogan felt himself blushing. To be the reason for someone creating a love-melody – to be the center of someone – was utterly new for him, and he felt his heart beat speeding up.

“I hope; you still have the melody stored in your memories. I would love to hear it again,” he whispered.

Klink smiled and tipped with one finger against his temple. “It’s in here. And maybe I’ll write it down so that it can be played by more instruments.”

“But with your violin as the first voice,” Rob replied softly. “There is no other instrument possible because it represents you.” He cocked his head. “And it needs a title.”

“‘Flight of the Two Eagles’,” Klink said, without hesitation. “Because despite everything we’ve become by now – or call the other one – this is what we still are: Eagles.”

“And they fly together very well,” Hogan said beneath his breath, remembering Wilson’s words a few days ago as he said he knew that the camp had a German and an American eagle now, and that they fly in harmony.

Will chuckled and nodded. For a long moment, both men simply looked at each other. Then – in mutual agreement – they bent forwards for a gentle kiss and relished in the warm peace that settled around them.

They only parted quickly as the front door was opened, and LeBeau appeared to have prepared dinner for them. The tiny Frenchman rolled his eyes as he saw the two officers quickly going separate ways. Swollen lips, flushed faces, shining eyes… Merde, the day they would have to settle back to the old living arrangements would be the day both certainly would be grumpier than his Aunt Sylvie. And this meant something.
On Sunday, Wilson examined his superior again. After almost five weeks, the broken ribs had mended well – at least this was the result he came up with after propping Hogan’s left side with expert fingers until the colonel began to swore and to ask him if he wanted to break them again.

The injuries on his back and shoulder had left some scars, while other wounds would be red for a few more weeks more until the deeper layers of skin and flesh would be properly healed, but otherwise he was as good as cured.

While on the Crimea, an important meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin ended, Hogan returned from the rec hall towards Klink’s quarters accompanied by Wilson. He returned greetings, talked with a few men here and there, and discussed a few things with Kinch while being watched from other POWs from afar. It became more than clear that he had to return to Barracks 2 soon. There was no way in hell that his comrades (and especially Wilson) would believe him still to being too weakened and too injured to accept the Kommandant’s hospitality for very much longer. And the thought to leave this new found ‘home’ filled Hogan with unease; not to say with sadness. Yet, he knew it was inevitable to move back in his own little quarters within the next few days.

“I knew that the hour would come you have to move back into the Barracks,” Wilhelm said quietly in the afternoon, as Robert brought up this topic. “But…I really would appreciate it if you managed to delay the whole thing for a few days more.”

Hogan groaned as he saw the puppy look Will was giving him. Rubbing his forehead, he whispered, “I don’t want to leave, believe me. I don’t want to be separated from you like this. Sleeping alone and yearning for your nearness. I had this unpleasant experience when we were forced to sleep in different rooms during the Gestapo investigation and when you were in Berlin.” He glanced straight into Will’s eyes, which were still behind the spectacles. The monocles would be ready on Monday, but in Robert’s opinion, the spectacles suited his lover far better. But in the moment, they had something very different to discuss. He swallowed, “I would love to spend the rest of the war here in your quarters, but we both know that this can’t be. Not only my men, but also every other single POW and every one of your guards would get the maybe right idea about our current living arrangement, and then all hell breaks loose.”

Klink nodded and sat down into one of the arm chairs. “I know prudence demands this step. Yet…” He shook his head. “I don’t want to be without you,” he admitted softly. “I want to wake up beside you, have my meals with you, and listen to your voice. If you return to the Barracks, we’ll see each other during the roll calls and your daily visits in my office, sure, but… that’s not the same.” He almost sounded forlorn.

“We still have our chess games – at least officially. I certainly get carried away while gambling with
you and have, therefore, a good excuse for a late return to the Barracks.” He winked at him.

Klink chuckled for a moment. “Well, this excuse would get lame after two or three times. And if General Burkhalter gets wind that you’re out of your Barracks after curfew this often, we’ll both face consequences.”

Hogan sighed deeply. “True – but if I use the tunnels, no one besides my men know about my visits here.” He suddenly snapped his fingers, and a smile spread over his face. “That’s it. I’ll tell them that I have to discuss missions with you or that you invited me to chess and…” He stopped within the sentence, and his beginning grin subsided. “And this still doesn’t mean that I can stay the whole night here.” He shook his head. “Damnit, I HATE the prospect of not feeling your arms around me during the night – or of waking up without you.”

Klink reached out to him and offered him his hand, closing his fingers softly around Rob’s as the American placed his hand in his. “To say the truth, I can’t even imagine to live alone again,” he murmured, before he set his shoulders into a firm line, showing a strength he did not feel. “Yet I know that this time comes soon. We’ll find a way to see each other in private. Knowing your cleverness and my experience in this special department, we’ll come up with ideas and excuses the others will believe – no doubt here.” He smiled sadly, while his thumb moved in gentle circles over Hogan’s wrist. “But for now, stay a few more days, please?”

Robert gulped, deeply touched. “Will, you’re the Kommandant of this camp. If you order me to do something, I have to obey.” He caught the pointed gaze Wilhelm gave him and groaned. “Yes, I know, I’m not THIS obedient, I get it.”

“This is the understatement of the year,” Klink deadpanned. “I’m baffled how your superiors put up with you at all.”

“Hey, I’m not that bad!” Hogan more or less pouted, eyes sparkling again.

“No, you’re worse,” Will nodded, smiling again now, too.

For a long moment, they only looked at each other. Both really did not want to think about the upcoming new/old living arrangements – yet this would be a small problem compared to what began to loom outside the camp but would not stop at its wires.

None of them could foresee what would happen within the next few days – that this Fasching no one
celebrated this year in Germany would leave haunted scars in most people. Not only within Germany, but also in many others who felt empathy.

*** HH ***

The two love birds spent the night with intense love making. The upcoming separation loomed like a sword over them. It made their love game even wilder and almost desperate until passion and lust washed away anything else beside the fierce need to feel each other with everything they had. Their bodies still had to become used to the side effects of everything, but on Monday morning, after both showered together – accompanied by taking care of each other tenderly – it was clear that their butts were not this sore like after their first times.

Klink went after morning roll call to his office and switched on the radio like he did so often now within the last few days. A radio broadcast of Reichsleiter Martin Bormann, the party-chef of the NSDAP, stirred up not only him, but certainly also many other people. Per decree, women and girls were called to enter the emergency service, the so called Volkssturm that was founded in October 1944. Until now, approximately six million men the ages between 16 and 60 years old had been recruited. Even women who did not have small children, sick or worked in facilities which were important for the Reich, were prompted to enter the service to support aiding offices. And, if there was no other way, new battalions would be built, casted with young, strong women.

Klink, who had listened to the broadcast, shook his head in horror. Women should not fight. They should not be forced to carry and use a weapon. And even least, they should not be sent to the battle fronts. “Goebbels and Bormann lost it – no doubt here.” He whispered.

A knock came to the door, and Hilda peeked inside. “Herr Kommandant, have you heard that…”

The Oberst nodded with a scowl. “Yes, I heard the newest insane idea of our regime. Just imagine: women clad in pseudo-uniforms, trained for two or three weeks to know where the front and the back of a rifle is, then off they go to fight against well trained, real soldiers. The Volkssturm is until now a disaster, and it won’t get better if women support it.” He glanced at his secretary. “No offense here, Fräulein Hilda. I know that most women can stand their man so to say, but to send them into battle without a real training is murder.”

Hilda smiled at him, knowing that her boss belonged to the old school and was therefore a cavalier. Then she lowered her head. “What if they summon me, too?”

Will’s eyes widened, and the new monocle Schultz had got from the optician in Hammelburg only an hour ago almost, slipped. Luckily it fell down on a pile of files and remained unbroken. “They
won’t. You have a baby to take care of – and you’re filling a very important job within the Luftwaffe, means, you’re my secretary. If they try to recruit you, they have to get through me, so don’t fear.”

“Sorry, Fräulein Hilda.”

Schultz appeared behind them, pushed the young woman gently aside and entered the office. “Herr Kommandant, have you heard…”

Klink lifted a hand. “I know, Schultz. They call the women to the arms now and…”

“That’s not all,” the large Bavarian interrupted him. “There was another publication. With immediate effect, all nourishment rations for the civil people are shortened more than 10 %,”

Hilda gasped. Nourishment was already rare, but now even more than 10 % less was… a little catastrophe.

Klink cursed. Yes, the new order did not count for the Wehrmacht or the other military-like departments, but – dammit! – they all had family at home. Their dear ones would even suffer more now. His mother and younger brother were already thin like bean poles. The supplies in Düsseldorf had been reduced dramatically – and half of the town lay in ruins what forced the city government to shut off other necessary supplies like water, power and gas for several hours every day. A further shortage of nourishment was insane. Yet, this much Klink was aware of, Germany was running out of food. In the countryside, the people had still enough because of the kitchen gardens and the fields, but the many destroyed streets and railroads prevented that the goods could be transported to the larger cities – and therefore, the people in the towns were especially hungry. And now the rations were even more shortened. It was… inhuman.

“That means that they are going to take more of our harvest despite the fact that it wasn’t this good all last year,” Hilda said quietly. “My father said that we’ll make it only barely through the winter.”

Klink gave her a reassuring smile. “If it comes to the worst, you can take some things from our stock, so don’t worry.” She began to protest, but he lifted his hand again and said gently, yet strongly, “You provided us with milk, fruits, vegetables, and so on within the last years. So, if you and your family are in need for some basic food, I see no reason I shouldn’t give it to you. We have more than a thousand men here – three hungry mouths more are really no problem.”
As well meant as this offer was, Klink could not know that the future held even more drastic changes – even for Stalag 13.

*** HH ***

The news that women were called to arms spread quickly through the camp, and most POWs’ reaction were one of disbelief and shock. Yes, there were women serving in the US Army and also in the British Army, but they fulfilled duties in the offices, at the telephone centers, in hospitals, and so on. It was unthinkable that a female was forced to take a weapon and to join active battles. And, above all, everyone knew that the Volkssturm was anything than a serious opponent. Rather the opposite. Miserably armed and clad, barely trained in combat, and mostly consisting of too old or too young men, the Volkssturm’s only strength was its amount of members. But in open battle or protective fighting, their success was zero. Those who were captured were treated as usual POWs, and mostly being captured was the men’s luck, because it meant survival. The prospect that now females should join this militia (that was lously structured and lacked of any military discipline what was necessary to stay alive) made the men in Stalag 13 shake their heads.

“The bubble-brain must be more insane than I ever thought,” Newkirk grumbled, smoking a cigarette.

“Or very clever. Imagine, you would face a woman in the middle of a fight. Would you fire at her?” Carter asked.

“I would try to disarm her, but proposedly killing her…?” Newkirk shook his head. “No, I don’t think I would do that.”

“There you have your answer,” Kinch grumbled, burying his hands in the pockets of his parker while looking over the compound. “A clever move, I have to give this to the damn Krauts. Send women to the front and hope the Allies are gentlemen enough to spare them.”

“Yet I bet my last shirt that there are enough guys who haven’t this scruple – or worse, show them their ‘strength’ afterwards in another way,” Baker said quietly, his face displayed his distaste and anger.

“What Hitler there does is another crime,” Newkirk murmured. “First he recruits old men and mere children, and yet even young girls and women. Just imagine they would try to recruit our Hilda. That’s just what we needed – or our Balding Eagle.”
Newkirk could not know that his dark thoughts were almost prophetic.

*** HH ***

The rest of Monday went by. Where in earlier years the Rosenmontag during the Fasching had been celebrated with happy street parties, costumed people, and a lot of beer (or wine, depending on the region), this year no one was in the mood for it. Not even the people in the Rhine area. The times were too dark, too sinister, and too uncertain even for the most loyal Fasching devotees.

Hogan learned from Wilhelm during their lunch of the German brass’ newest ‘idea’ and could only shake his head in disbelief bafflement. It showed how desperate the Nazis were now by gambling even with the maintenance of their own people by risking girls and women like this. And it showed Hogan one thing more: Hitler would not give in – never. He would fight to the last breath. This much was clear for Hogan. And he was certain that the brass in London saw it likewise.

Apropos, Hogan was becoming more and more suspicious concerning the generals in London. He and his men had not gotten any tasks for more than two weeks now – and this made him wary. There was something cooking. The brass was up to something big, this much Hogan simply knew out of his experiences, and it he had a bad feeling. His gut was almost always right – and this time should not be any exception.

The next day, Tuesday, was a calm one and full of boring routine – at least until the evening. Schmidt visited the Schneiders again and brought some ration coupons for them, knowing that the little farm had to fee the most products to the distributing offices. Hilda’s shining eyes were the best payment he could get – including the shy kiss she pressed on his cheek.

And while later Schmidt bid the Schneiders’ goodnight, and Robert and Wilhelm tried to catch their breath after another round of fierce love making between the sheets, in the southeast of Germany, air raid alerts were given – an air raid that should change a lot for the future warfare, for the mood world wide, and the moral in general.

*** HH *** HH ***

The next morning in Stalag 13 began like always – at least for the guards and the POWs. For Klink and Hogan, it slowly became usual to wake up with love marks on their bodies and sore butts in and out. Yet both men felt happy and at peace while they did their morning routine (again together), and Klink finally left for roll call that still took place two hours later than the months and years prior.
He heard Schultz chasing the grumbling men out onto the compound, held a small morning speech, and dismissed the POWs back into their barracks. It was windy and icy cold today, and the Oberst saw no reason to keep anybody out of shelter longer than needed. For a moment, he really pitied the guards in the watch towers and along the fences, which froze their butts off and certainly yearned for their shift to end.

His glance wandered over them. In earlier times, younger men of the Luftwaffe had served here. Now, for two or three weeks, more than half of them did not originally belong to the army anymore because they were too old or invalid. Yet they had been forced to enter the service again – members of the Volkssturm, but at least they wore the correct uniforms. What could not be said about their ‘comrades’ at the front or at dispositions they had to defend. Most of them wore pseudo-uniforms or even civilian clothes with a brassard. That was all.

Sighing, Klink went to his office. Hilda certainly would show up within the next half hour, and then the daily routine would start. Switching on the light and the small radio, he afterwards slipped out of his coat. The reporter’s voice sounded through the tiny speaker like so often and…

… And the world seemed to stop…

TBC…

Well, hopefully you liked it. I thought Klink loves to play the violin but he does it badly, because he has no inner harmony. The latter is history now with him finally finding true love – and, voila, his playing is beautiful. I imagined that this was an affirmation of love of its own and shows Hogan, how deep his lover feels for him.

The next chapter is the one I already published; the following one will be online during the weekend.

Sorry for the chaos – and I hope for some comments (*smile*).

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

When you click on this chapter, don’t be confused. It’s the already published one. Somehow I made a mistake and skipped the prior chapter, what I changed now. So please go one chapter backwards and you’ll read a very fluffy and sweet one, before this darker one here comes.

I’m very sorry for the chaos, and I hope you’re not irritated.

For those, who hadn’t read this one here:

As I warned, this chapter (and the next one) will be about the most darkest days within the last weeks of the war. I pondered, if I should approach these two topics at all, which rule the two chapters, but then I thought, to avoid them wouldn’t be right. One showed the brutal truth of how far Hitler and his fellows went, the other one was crucial for the stubborn refusal of the staff in Berlin to quit ’til the bitter end (and is also a part of history that still has influence even today). I don’t want to reveal too much, but only want to give a little warning that these two things were never brought up in the TV-show, but are inseparable connected with WW II.

Yet I hope, I don’t scare you readers off – or to hurt anyone’s feelings.

Disclaimer:

The mentioned persons (officers and politicians) are historical persons, and I refer to them with respect and no intention of offending their heirs. In this chapter – for the first time within my story – two real persons have a short appearance, and I wrote about them with great respect and no ill-will, but as public persons: Prime-Minister Winston Churchill and General Vandenberg.

For once, I don’t wish you to have fun, but hopefully you’re still going to like the whole chapter.

Love

Yours Starflight
Chapter 52 – Opinions differ the question

Hogan had lain down again after Klink left. It was still early in the morning, and there was no reason why he should not linger in bed a little bit longer. At least as long as he would still stay in Will’s quarters. Yes, his bad conscience grew, knowing that he was snuggling in warm blankets and cushions in a real bed with a cozy quarters around him while his men stood outside in the cold during roll call only to return afterwards to the cool barracks. Heavens, he really should return to them. He was as good as healed despite the scars on his back, the still mending broken ribs, and the effort his leg muscles gave him here and there. Okay, the training Wilson had made with him did wonders, and he felt stronger day by day.

Sports could help a guy to regain his feet, not to speak of the ‘training-sessions’ he and Will had within the last few nights.

Robert grinned for a moment; imagine his friends fainting in shock if they should ever learn that he and Klink had become a couple.

Pulling the blankets higher and closing his eyes, he began to plot some ways on how to stay evenings and maybe the one or other whole night with Will, but officially living back in his own quarters in Barracks 2. The tunnels were a solution, yet he needed a few good excuses for his men and why he was absent in the late evening. To have chess games with the Kommandant or to speak about some missions with him would get old during the weeks and…

Robert was torn out of his musings as the front door banged open. “Colonel Hogan!” Schultz sounded…upset? Yes, this was the right word.

He heard the large Bavarian nearing and quickly sat up. “I’m here, Schultz.”

The next moment, the door of the bedroom opened, and Schultz stopped shortly at the threshold out of breath and…and there was a lot of sorrow and even some horror on his face. “Colonel Hogan, I think…I think the Kommandant needs you.”

That got Hogan’s attention quicker than any raising of alarm. “What happened?” He asked, throwing
the blankets away and swinging his legs over the bed’s edge.

Schultz gulped. “Something terrrrrible happened…it is still happening! And…and I think the Kommandant needs you right now. I…I’ve never seen him like this.”

The American officer was already slipping into his clothes. “Care to tell me what is happening?” To say the truth, Schultz’s paleness, wide eyes, and shaking voice unsettled him a lot.

“Just…just please come with me, Herr Hogan. It’s better you see it with your own eyes or learn everything from the Big Shot.”

Okay, now Hogan was worried. That Schultz referred to him as ‘Herr Hogan’ always implied that something was private, yet it was obviously bad enough to stir up the Sergeant of the Guards a great deal. Putting on his leather jacket and cap, the colonel gestured to Schultz to lead the way, and a few seconds later, both men left the Kommandant’s quarters. Hogan shivered as he crossed the compound; not only because of the coldness, but mainly because of the changed atmosphere. It was almost eerily silent. Even among several POWs, which stood in the yard confused and watching everyone carefully. On the watch towers were more men than necessary, and for a moment, he thought whatever happened had forced Will to reinforce the guards. But then he realized that half of them were telling their comrades something in earnest…and everywhere he saw the same shock and horror spreading over the Germans’ faces.

What the hell?

They reached the Kommandantur, and Robert followed Schultz inside. Hilda had not arrived yet, and the door to Will’s office was half open. Hans laid a finger against his lips before he pointed towards the door, gesturing to Hogan to step in without him. So, this really was private – and also not, seeing the unsettled guards outside.

Robert was more than worried now. Had something maybe happened to Will’s family? A reason he could think of for Schultz’s behavior. Then why were the guards so horrified? Or had something happened within Germany that fazed everyone so severely? It could not be the eventual death of Hitler. Hogan was certain that most guards would be relieved, and Will would celebrate instead of reacting in a way that worried Schultz enough to get him for the Kommandant’s sake.

He knocked gently at the door frame and entered Klink’s office like he had done it hundreds of times before. And for the first time ever, he was met with a tense, dreadful ambiance.
Will sat at his desk, shaking hands holding each other on the desktop in a vice-like grip, head lowered. The radio was switched on, and the broadcast obviously had some errors, because there was more static than anything else.

At his arrival, Klink slowly lifted his head, and Rob was taken aback by the tears which streamed down his lover’s cheeks. But the worst were his eyes. They spoke of a deep loss mixed with sorrow, disbelief, and pain.

“Did you know it?” Klink whispered, voice hoarse.

Robert blinked, aware that something really terrible must have occurred. “Did I know what?” he asked quietly, wracking his brain to what Will could refer.

“Dresden,” Wilhelm replied quietly. “Did you know that this would happen?”


For a long moment, Klink only looked at him – testing, probing, uncertain, almost imploring that Hogan really did not know anything before it happened. Despite his blurred sight because of too much tears, Will saw the honest confusion on the younger man’s face, and his stance folded into himself. On the one hand, it was pure relief that Robert had not kept something like this from him; on the other hand, it showed him how much the warfare had changed towards a hell that had to be born from the devil’s mind and opened its doors even wider.

“It burns,” he murmured. “Dresden is burning. They’ve been broadcasting it for a few hours now, but I only learned about it after I entered my office.” He swallowed a large lump in his throat, his voice shaking. “They came in the later evening yesterday…destroyed everything. The historic district – the Semper Opera, the Dresden Castle, the Royal Chapel, the Zwinger with the exhibits of generations of kings from all over of Europe, the Brühl’s Terrace, the Italian Little Village, the Lady’s Church – the Frauenkirche – the Academy of Arts…everything is in flames. Buildings which stood for centuries…are burning down and collapsing.”

“Oh my God,” Hogan whispered, feeling all the color draining from his face.

Klink’s hands clung to each other in a way that had to be painful, but obviously he did not even feel it. “And the people… The Allies seem to use new brand bombs. It elicited a firestorm. People were
pulled into the flames even if they were many meters away; houses and whole streets are filled with fire. The whole downtown burns, Rob! On both sides of the river…and they didn’t stop after the first raid. Another one was flown three hours later – after every still living citizen thought the attack was over and left shelter!” He gestured towards the radio. “They say that the second wave was not only meant for downtown, but also for the large parks within Dresden and for the grassland of the Elbe River. To where many survivals fled after ‘all clear’ was given. They…they had no chance to stay alive even if they managed to leave the burning streets. They say the river banks are crowded with dead bodies…and no one knows how many victims are within the streets, houses, and parks.”

He had glanced towards the radio while speaking, but was now looking back at Hogan. “Is this the way you Allies fight now?” He breathed, face ashen-pale and almost expressionless all of sudden. “Flying attacks and after everyone thinks the horror is over, attacking again to kill even more people?”

It was like a slap into the face, and Robert knew that this one air raid, this particular attack, could change a lot. Not only in Germany, but also concerning the Allies’ supporters. To attack not military, but cultural targets and civilian people on purpose was a taboo. A taboo Hitler broke a lot of times, yes, but the London brass were not fellows of the insane little private. Yet they had done it – had gone the same way Hitler did before.

But those thoughts were not the reason why Robert went to the desk, rounded it, and closed the roll up curtains before he, without any further thought, bent down to gather Will into his arms. He felt his secret lover shaking, body stiff. Not giving a damn who was going to see him or not, Rob opened with one hand his jacket and pulled the leather around the Oberst to protect him from the cold. Just like he had done it during their trip through the woods in the beginning of January. Yet he knew that no blanket or fire could warm Will in the moment, because the ice that obviously flew through the older man’s veins poured down from his hurt soul.

Every Saxonian loved Dresden. It was their capital. And this was not the whole reason for these people’s devotion for said town. Dresden was the ‘Florence of the Elbe’. The Baroque town in Northern Europe. The town of the king, whose many affairs, but also fairness towards his mistresses and his people (rich and poor), partly changed the worldview of many other mighty men who came after him: August the Strong. Dresden’s splendor, its fortune, honor, and esteem had been built for centuries after this one man, whose heart and soul still seemed to roam the streets, keeping alive the memories of a time long ago.

And now this town was burning down. The respect and the history of its cultural importance forgotten in the insanity of this century’s second war.

Hogan was not without sympathy for those Germans who did not know what Hitler and his goonies really did – or for those, who had no chance to fight against the Führer without risking their families’ lives. He could imagine how much the destruction of towns, villages, and other places hurt many,
many people. Not only because of personal losses of family members and friends, but also because their homes were gone. Hell, he had argued with Butler only a few days ago during the destructive attack of Berlin that certainly costed thousands of civilian lives. But to destroy something of such cultural value was…was simply WRONG! And Hogan always went against something that was wrong in his eyes. Especially when it was something of humanity and moral concern.

He felt Will shaking, while the older man almost folded into himself. Robert tightened his arms around his secret lover and tried to be an anchor for him, while Klink listened to the radio broadcast that became clearer now.

‘I repeat; the first alert was given at 21:45 hours. A quarter hour later, the first bombers arrived. The skies were cloudless. The stars were clear to see – and showed our enemies the way so they could select the most important and vulnerable spots of the town by marking them with magnesium bombs. The lights were the targets. And then hell opened its doors; its unholy fires gripped for every man, woman, and child. Every building and street within the town. We’re here on the northwestern hill of the city, and even if daylight tries to break through the smoke, there is no need for the sun to show us what’s going on a few kilometers away. The town is in flames. All we can see is flames. All we can hear is raging fire and the cries of people in need for aid and in despair despite the roar of the inferno. Dresden, the town of Baroque and art, is no more.’

Hogan had heard enough. Even if the report was given in German, he translated it fluidly without any problem. But what gave him trouble was the reporter’s voice. Yes, Goebbels led his PR-ministry formidable despite the fact that he was as insane as his boss. And Robert had heard enough German broadcasts within the last few years to know that the reporters were encouraged (better to say, ordered) to exploit even the tiniest details and happenings for the Nazi-PR to steer the German people’s mood. But not in this case. The man was horrified, shocked beyond everything, while he gave his reports as an eye witness near the burning town. And after everything Germany had suffered until now (even if the bubble-brain and his goonies provoked it), to hear this man’s fright told the colonel all he needed to know. Here had something happened that had gone too far. This air raid had to be worse than all the others, and it made him sick to know how many innocent people had and still were dying.

He bent down even more and laid his head on Will’s. “I’m so sorry.” He whispered, meaning it in every sense of the words, while one of his hands moved in soothing circles over the other man’s upper arm. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

He felt Klink leaning into him, the mask of the proud and sometimes vain officer that covered Klink’s true uncertainty completely gone. All that was left was Wilhelm. A man who mourned for his people and for a town he had dearly loved.

*** HH ***
The chastened and almost dark atmosphere in the camp went on for the rest of the morning. Hilda had been pale as she arrived, but kept her distance as she saw the reddened eyes of her boss and a still charming, yet very protective Robert Hogan, who blocked the view of the Kommandant and asked her gently to give the Oberst some time for himself.

The first rumors of the nightly double attack made a quick round among the Barracks, and many POWs simply shrugged it off with a few, sometimes rude comments about “The Krauts must be used to something like this by now” and “Serves them right”. Then, as more and more details became known, a lot of those men became silent. As it seemed, this time there had been no military targets which could be the reason for the air raid. Even those POWs, who had never visited a gymnasium or had not been given a good education, knew that Dresden was mainly known for its many museums and baroque buildings, including special churches which were unique around the world. It was a center of culture and nothing else. To attack and destroy this all without a higher purpose stuck in their craw.

Hogan’s men were outside of Barracks 2. It was almost midday, and the weather was as bad as it had been in the morning. Carter had seen their superior and friend practically running to the Kommandantur together with Schultz shortly after morning roll call, and curious, they had switched on the ‘coffee-pot’ to learn what had made their officially still so ill CO hurrying to his lover’s side.

They had not needed to eavesdrop much to learn what happened, cut off the link to grant the two men privacy, and had switched on one of the secret radios they had hidden in their Barracks. All four of them spoke fluid German, therefore they could follow the reporter’s broadcast easily.

First they had reacted like most of the others: another town was attacked – hell, it was war after all. Then it had dawned on them that said city was not more than a cultural town with no greater industry. And then they learned that the second attack wave was three hours later – killing certainly even more people then during the first attack, because they had left their shelter to flee the burning houses and streets. This second wave had been murderous, and every one of Hogan’s men felt uncomfortable. If this report was correct and there were not several things added to exaggerate everything like it was usually within this country, then this air raid’s target had been civilian people and cultural monuments – something they could not tolerate.

“I really don’t see any reason why our boys attacked this town,” Newkirk said quietly, flipping away the ciggy of his smoked cigarette. “I mean, yeah, it’s a larger town in Germany and it is located at a statically interesting place: near the Czechian border at the Elbe River, but this is no bloody reason to burn down all those historical buildings.”

“The people,” Kinch murmured, sticking his fists into the pockets of his jacket. “Don’t forget the people. I listened to the last broadcasting a few minutes ago. They’re saying that thousands of
German fugitives from Czechia, Hungary, and Slovakia arrived a few days ago. They found shelters in made shift camps on plazas and in streets. There also arrived large convoys with wounded Wehrmacht-soldiers – a few thousands of them who had been brought to safety from the East Front after they were forced to leave Hungary. The town must have been over crowded with refugees. Just guess how many of them found shelter in time.”

“No too much – if at all,” Carter said quietly, his boyish features betrayed his dismay. Yes, he loved to tinker with everything that can detonate and suggested over and over again some harsh missions at which certainly many more SS-men and Wehrmacht-members would have died had it not been for Hogan, who always tried to keep the number of victims as low as possible. But the imagination of make shift camps in streets and on plazas going up in flames with no chance for the inhabitants to flee unsettled him. Just like it did with the others.

Awkward silence lingered among the Heroes. Battles within a war was one thing. To burn down a town full of civilian people and fugitives, including casualties, was another thing. And when they listened to the quiet talks around them, many of the other POWs saw it likewise.

*** HH ***

Hogan had remained with Klink in the Oberst’s office. There was no thinking of starting any daily routine. After awhile, Will had come out of his shock, and Robert had switched off the radio. There was no need to hear the horrible news over and over again. It only stirred up more sorrow and pain, and the American wanted to spare his secret lover any more hurt.

After a few minutes of silence, Wilhelm began to talk about the dozen times and more he had visited Dresden as a child. His father’s younger brother had married a young woman from Dresden, whose father ran a chocolatery there, and he would be the new owner one day. They married in the Frauenkirche, and it had been the first time Little Wilhelm had been in Dresden. He had been struck with awe at the sight.

Before his father died and they moved to Düsseldorf, the little boy had been in Dresden a few times. Later, as a teenager, he had visited to celebrate important family anniversaries at his uncle’s branch of the family. He had enjoyed every visit, and his uncle had taken him to the Dresden Palace, to the Zwinger, and one time, Will had been even allowed into the Semper Opera. He had been lost in wonder as he walked through the main foyer, the side foyers, and the halls. Walls and bowed ceilings covered with paintings of different opera scenes. Floor and columns covered with green and red marble. Breathlessly, he had followed the orchestra’s practice in the afternoon, eyes wide when he saw the mighty chandelier for the first time and the king’s loge with its large, red velvet curtains, columns coated with gold.

They had made a ship’s trip along the Elbe River on a paddle wheeler that belonged to one of the so-
called ‘White Fleet’ to visit the Elbe Sandstone Mountains, bypassing the manors of princes and rich industrialists, as well as King August’s summer residence.

Those had been Klink’s most beautiful and happiest memories of Dresden – but there were also sad ones.

His uncle fell prey to the first war, and Wilhelm had been granted home leave to attend the burial. Afterwards, his aunt ran the chocolatery alone until she died five years later. The contact between Wilhelm’s and his late uncle’s family branches had fallen asleep during the following years. Telephone calls at Christmas between him and his cousins had been all, and Wilhelm knew that his cousins had not joined the Wehrmacht officially. Yet he heard through secret channels that two of them were in the Volkssturm now, and his oldest cousin was too ill to join even this ‘service’. Their sons were in the Wehrmacht and SS – and Klink hadn’t the tiniest clue if they were still alive, POWs somewhere, or still free and fighting.

Robert let Wilhelm talk. He knew that this was the best for the mourning man. Sitting beside him on a visitor chair he had pulled behind the desk, he had wrapped an arm around his lover’s shoulder and listened. To admit the truth, Will’s description of the town woke his curiosity, and he felt some sadness rising in him at the knowledge that he would never be able to see this all with his own eyes. The chance had passed away, and neither of the two men could guess that it would need almost 70 years until the city would be back to its old glory. Yet the original buildings were gone. Even if the re-rising was done by using the still standing ruins, the spirit of the old times had died together with the town and its people.

It was midday when Hilda knocked softly at her boss’ door and peeked in, not too surprised seeing Hogan sitting beside Klink and offering comfort. Those two had really developed a deep friendship, this much she had known for weeks now, and it calmed her to know that there was someone there for the Oberst, who had to hurt because of the events. She hated to bring more bad news, but there was no way Klink would not learn of it within the next few hours. It was better if he learned it from someone he knew and trusted instead of some distant radio report…and in the presence of a caring friend, no less.

Robert glanced at the young woman. “Hilda, what is it?” He asked softly. Klink remained silent.

Hilda took a deep breath and made a step into the room. “I’m sorry to disturb you, but…” She took another very deep breath and addressed her boss. “Herr Kommandant, they just broadcasted that…that another attack is about to happen.”

Klink only looked at her, while Hogan felt his guts twisting. Attacks were done everywhere, so why did Hilda bring it up? Unless it had to do, again, with Dresden.
Hogan tensed up, while he asked quietly, “Where?”

Her glance hung full of searing sympathy at Klink. “Dresden again.” She whispered.

The Oberst leaped onto his feet, his monocle fell on the stacks of paper on his desk unbroken. “NO!” He gasped in horror, while Hogan swore beneath his breath.

“They gave alert a few minutes ago. A large squadron is heading towards Dresden – bombers and escort fighters. They say the aircrafts will reach the town within the next few minutes. The live broadcast was shut off to give the reports the chance to flee more to the west…away from the Elbe Valley,” Hilda whispered.

Hogan cursed savagely, fury woke in him. “For God’s damn sake, do they want to RAZE the town or what?!” He rose and went to the radio, switching it on. For a long moment, he listened to the reporter, who broadcasted from a radio station somewhere else in Germany. Maybe even directly from Berlin.

“More than 300 bombers and over a hundred escort fighters are attacking Dresden again. The whole town is still in flames, yet the Allies continue their destruction. Our Luftwaffe wasn’t prepared for a third attack, seeing that the downtown is already burning down. Before our reporter had to stop the broadcasting to search for shelter, first eye witnesses spoke of the unbelievable devastation that took place already and of the brutality the attackers displayed. We got first reports that strafers hunted fleeing people along the Elbe shores – especially on the other side of the historical center, where the banks are wide and without any shelter. They shot hundreds of civilians. The same went for the Great Park. The lights of the fire changed the survivals into good visible targets, and they fell prey to strafed attacks. One moment, the first reports are coming in.” For a moment there was silence, then the man began anew. “It has begun: a third aircraft raid. New bombs are falling on Dresden. It is not imaginable what this will do to the already…”

Hogan had heard enough. He switched off the radio and stared with a dark expression on the device, as if it was the radio’s fault for what was happening. No word was spoken, then life returned to Robert. Abruptly, he turned around and headed to door.

“Where are you going?” Klink asked quietly, his voice sounded forlorn like that of a child.

“Talking with London and asking them if they have gone insane!” Hogan snarled, tore open the door, and left the office.
He went with hard, quick, large steps towards Barracks 2, ignoring the murmurs and questions of several POWs on the compound. He entered the hut and met the startled gazes of his friends and other inhabitants of the Barracks, who sat around the long table to have lunch.

The Heroes did not dare to address him as they saw his face. The signal ‘Thunderstorm’ was plainly written over his features as he barked, “Kinch, with me!” Even the level-headed sergeant hurried to follow the order. He knew his friend well enough to realize that Hogan was boiling with anger.

Knocking at the upper bed frame next to the door, the secret entrance to the tunnels opened, and Hogan gestured to Kinch to go first. “Call London. I want to speak with General Butler. And I do not care if he is a meeting with Churchill, the blasted King of China, or in the restrooms! He gets his ass to the next radio possible now!”

Newkirk, Carter, and LeBeau looked at the colonel while he climbed down the ladder after Kinch, and then at each other. What for God’s sake had enraged their superior this much? Okay, they knew that Klink was Saxonian and what happened in Dresden really was a no-go that certainly hit the Kommandant hard, but what had triggered Hogan this much now, many hours after the attack?

“Olsen, watch the door!” Newkirk said quietly, glanced at his other three friends, pointed with his head towards the entrance, and he and the others followed Hogan down into the tunnels.

Kinch was at the radio, while Hogan paced back and forth; arms crossed, head lowered, shoulders tense.

“What happened, Gov’nor?” Newkirk asked softly.

He caught a heated glare from his friend and CO before Hogan shook his head. “You’ll learn of it soon.” He growled. He glanced at Kinch. “No answer?”

“No, they…ah, finally. Goldilocks, this is Papa Bear. We need to speak with Bird Roc. I repeat, we need to speak with Bird Roc now.”

He listened and said, “They’ll send a safe frequency, and asked the general to give us a few minutes. He is next door in the radio centrum.”
“I said, I don’t care if he is in a damn meeting or in the restrooms! I want to talk with hi…” Hogan was interrupted, as Kinch lifted a hand to stop him, listened anew, and said, “Thank you, Goldilocks.” He switched to another frequency, and Robert stepped beside him.

The colonel only nodded curtly with a “Thanks”, sat down on the chair Kinchloe made free for him, and put on the headset.

A minute later, the known voice of General Butler sounded from the tiny speakers. “Papa Bear, Butler here. This better be important, Robert. We’re in the middle of…”

“Have you gone all insane over there in London?” Hogan did not care that he risked court-martial right now – and with it his rank, job, and freedom. Rarely he had been enraged like this. He heard his friends gasp and did not need to look at them to know that they were shocked about his outburst. Towards a general, no less. But right now, protocol did not matter to him. “What, the hell, are you planning? To raze the town, or is Dresden only the beginning of what you have in mind for every city in Germany? Are you planning to delete this country from the globe, or what?”

“Robert…” Butler began, an edge of warning in his voice.

“The whole town of Dresden is already burning after two air raid waves, and now you decided to attack a third time – again hours after the last raid?”

The Heroes paled, and Newkirk felt his jaw sinking towards the floor.

“The second time was already a foul move – with our aircrafts coming out of the dark and the smoke, three hours after ‘all clear’ was given, catching the survivals by surprise and giving them no damn chance to find shelter in the burning city. They were utterly exposed to the attack,” Hogan snarled. “But to do it now, hours later when the first emergency aids have begun…it borders to murder!”

Butler sounded irritated. “Robert, this is war. And during attacks people die, but…”

“To gun down flying people on a river bank and in large parks with air fighters, and to set a historical center of culture into flames by bombing it not one, two, but three times has nothing to do with warfare! Not in the sense honorable warriors used to do!” Hogan interrupted him sharply. “This is the behavior of savages!”
For a moment, there was silence before Butler answered, "The Brits and our boys have gunned down fleeing civilians? By all my means, I can’t imagine this. We can ask the CO of the mission, Major Harris, about it, but I don’t think that our boys would do something like this."

“Really? Bloodlust can seize every soldier. You don’t have to wear a Wehrmacht or SS-uniform for it!” Hogan snapped. “What’s going on there has become a misdeed. A crime that is worth to be done by Hitler. Until now, I thought we were standing above these kinds of wrongdoing – that we’re better than that cursed bubble-beard. As it seems, I was mistaken, and I want to know why the brass in London has decided to skip everything we originally stood for!”

“You’re about to go out on a limb, son, so calm down!” Butler’s voice betrayed anger now, too. “And concerning the strafers, I don’t think our boys have lost the nerves, but if so, especially the Brits, I cannot damn them.”

“What do you mean?” Hogan asked.

“We got the number of killed British civilians since the begin of war. 54,000, Robert, approximately 54,000 British civilian people were killed since the war started!”

“54,000 dead British civilians since the start of war?” Hogan murmured, unsettled.

Newkirk closed his eyes and groaned like being in pain, while Robert pressed his lips shortly into a thin line. What a number of senseless losses. For a moment, he lowered his head, then he took a deep breath. “Those facts are horrible, and Hitler should rot in Hell until the end of all time, but do his crimes justify what we have done last night and today?" He asked hoarsely, dreaded by the news from both sides. “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth? Is this the new way the brass goes now?”

“Of course not, Robert. We’re not in the damn Romanian times!” Butler snapped.

“Right, of course the brass doesn’t want revenge,” Hogan said sarcastically. “But the last air-raids sound an awful lot like large paybacks to me. Attacks which costs mainly civilian people their lives and had less to do with getting down the enemy’s facilities or military installations. How many people died in Berlin last week?"

Butler sighed on the other end of the line. “We got the number a few hours ago. Hitler lies about the victims. Concerning our information, there were 22,000 to 24,000 of them.”
“More than 20,000 dead civilians in Berlin and now this inhumane attack on Dresden which certainly cost much more lives than the air raid in Berlin,” Hogan said bitterly, while LeBeau lowered his head, and Kinch closed his eyes. “And how many died in Frankfurt last year? Or in Munich?” He did not get an answer, and so Hogan continued. “Too many! Too many killed civilians. How many of them have to die until London regards the blood-bill as paid?”

“Robert, you allege us to attack out of revenge?” The general sounded almost shocked.

“What else shall I believe when I hear that you attack in waves in temporal larger distance so that the people think they’re out of the woods only to die at the end of the streets while trying to escape the inferno? This is a sly move. Worth of the damn Nazis, but not of us!”

“Robert…”

“I always thought that we were better than Hitler and his fellows. That we follow the code of honor and haven’t forgotten what mercy means. Especially when it comes to civilians and not military targets. But, in the end, he rubbed off on us. Now we embark the same sinister and inhumane game this cursed bubble-brain plays.”

Butler groaned. “Dammit, Hogan, you’re not a schoolboy. You’re long enough in the Service to know that sometimes harsh decisions have to be made and that you can’t play fair all the time. Especially not during a war. ‘Operation Thunderclap’ was planned since last summer. A large-scaled mission of several heavy air raids to break the Germans’ resistance. I know it sounds harsh, but after Hitler showed neither honor, nor mercy when he shot his damn new rockets at Belgium and England, retaliatory strikes were the only possible answer. He spread terror and death through the hit towns and villages. He didn’t care how many civilians would die as long as he can prove his strengths.”

A snort escaped Robert. “And you accepted his challenge and play dirty now, too. Doing what he did before: spreading terror. Hell, Alex, if Hitler jumps into the Spree River in Berlin, do the brass in London jump into the Thames, or what?” He shook his head, despite the fact that Butler could not see him. “Until now, this was the big difference between him and us; we knew at least some fairness and honor. We left this path last night, and you know it.”

Again, there was a short moment of silence before the general sighed. “Sweet Lord, Robert, I know that Dresden holds some cultural buildings and that it is a waste to destroy them, but…”
“I don’t talk about the culture buildings, Alex. Their destruction is a crime for itself, because – dammit – those monuments held value for the whole world. Yes, our ancestors left Europe and therefore also Germany mainly within the last two centuries to build a new home in the US, yet our roots are still here. This attack not only destroyed historical buildings, but also a part of the cradle of our past and history. But worse is the fact that the town was full of fugitives and wounded Wehrmacht members, which fell prey to our bombs!”

“WHAT?!“ Butler gasped.

Hogan grimaced, a bitter expression was around his mouth and in his eyes. “The reporters spoke about it during the last broadcastings. Dresden was overcrowded with refugees from the east and injured soldiers. Latter are the fighting enemy, okay, but this gives us no right to kill them in cold blood when they’re wounded and helpless! This is NOT our way!”

The general sounded still shocked. “Robert, we had no reports that there were larger numbers of…”

“Those women, children, and wounded men camped in the streets and parks, stayed in make shift shelters and mobile hospitals,” Hogan continued merciless. “Can you imagine how many of them were killed during the first two raids – and how many of them are still dying right now while we two are talking?”

“Sweet Lord,” Butler whispered. “If your sources are right, then…”

“Stop this attack, Alex! I asked you the same one and a half week ago out of the same reason – and I did it NOT to heighten the chance of survival for my friends. My radio contact with you now has also nothing to do with personal feelings. Rather regard it strategically and for moral reasons. You attack towns now when its inhabitants are most vulnerable and have no chance of escaping death. It’s the same as if you shoot someone from a hideout in the back, and this is not what the code of honor allows. What the brass is doing now will not only bring the war to a new level of inhumanity and insanity we avoided from our side until now, it can change everything!”

“What do you mean?” Butler asked tensed, knowing that he could trust Hogan’s judgement. Robert had been chosen for the mission ‘Unsung Heroes’ because Butler and the other generals knew that the young colonel looked through all eventualities, pondered all given facts, regarded them from different point of views and only then acted. And, this much Butler had to admit, his chosen son had a damn good gut feeling.

Hogan snorted. “How do you think the world will react if it becomes known that we destroyed one of the most important cultural towns in Europe, killing thousands and thousands of innocent people,
fugitives and casualties without any military target?! It’ll backfire at us one way or another. And even if the books are written by the winners, this particular attack will leave a bade of shame on us for decades, if not centuries!”

For a moment, Butler was silent, trying to stomach everything he had heard. Then he took a deep breath and said quietly, “Robert, I can understand that you’re angry. And I personally agree that this one mission should have been considered more carefully. But you’re mistaken if you think that there were no military targets.”

“Of course there are certainly a few dispositions of the Wehrmacht and SS – or the ‘glorious’ Volkssturm,” Hogan scoffed. “But they certainly don’t warrant the many thousands of dead men, women, and children, and the devastation of cultural monuments on such a large scale! As far as I know, we – the US – the Brits, and dozens of other countries signed the contract of Hague Convention. I think you know article 22 that had been modified after the foundation of the different air force departments: ‘Air bombing as a method of terrorizing civilian people and the destruction of private belongings of non-military character is forbidden.’ Non-military character, Alex! Now tell me what makes Dresden an exception that you raze this town and kill its people without any mercy?”

In London, Butler sighed. He could understand his protegee’s fury. Hell, he himself belonged to those generals who had voted against this mission. A lot of the American staff officers had tried to stop Churchill’s and Roosevelt’s decision, supported by the British House of Lords, whose members were against this kind of inhumane air war for almost two years now. But their voices were unheard. The latest reports they had gotten from Dresden had sealed the town’s fate.

“Robert,” he began calmly, ignoring the younger man’s insolent behavior towards him. He understood his chosen son, who had a far too big heart. You can not live in a country for three years – even as a prisoner and smuggled-in spy – and not get attached to its people at least a little bit. “In January, British Intelligence told us that the Nazis are able to send 42 more divisions to the Russian Front despite the fact that we’re able to force them to retreat from the conquered countries. That was crucial for the whole war.”

“I know – after all, my men and I delayed three divisions by sending an avalanche down their way.” Robert growled.

“Yes, it was a very welcomed act on your part,” Alex nodded. “But three division could be delayed and stopped by our air fighters. 39 could still be built and sent against our Russian Allies. Colonel General Antonow practically begged us to do something or his men and he would maybe face defeat. And you know what that would mean. Not only for the war, but especially for the people in the countries we were already able to liberate. At the same time, our Intelligence reported that the Wehrmacht is changing a part of Dresden into a fortress. Along the Elbe River at the historical side of the town may developments and military fit outs have been already done to stop the Russians and us. Parallel, they’re storing ordnances and supplies for the Wehrmacht in the east, and the station in
Friedrichstadt in the south of the center has become a turnstile for the Reich’s trains. Dresden was about to become the main bastion of the Nazis for their counter strike in the east – something we couldn’t allow to happen. This is the reason for our attacks now.”

A groan was to hear, then Hogan’s voice answered, “I understand the strategically importance Dresden got because of all of this, but do you have to burn down the whole town – killing certainly most of the citizens and fugitives? With three attacking waves, no less? Don’t tell me a few heavy weapons, some storage halls, and a few trains are an excuse for this madness and waste!”

Butler clung to patience – because this was Robert Hogan, his protegee. Every other officer would have been in deep water by now, but Butler ignored protocol once again.

“There are also weapon facilities within Dresden’s downtown. Small ones, no doubt, and well hidden in backyards, but their output is remarkable. They were undiscovered until a few weeks ago, and they have a greater output than many larger factories. Then the collecting point of the railways in Friedrichstadt… the whole success of our allies in the east depends on stopping the Nazi’s reinforcement, and Dresden was becoming one of the hub cities of it.”

Under Stalag 13 in the tunnels, Hogan grimaced. “I understand. Yet I don’t think this all was reason enough to kill thousands of people and to destroy a whole culture metropole! Maybe a few direct assaults done by the Underground cells would have had the same result, but without so many victims. Dammit, Alex, this went too far. Not always the end justifies the means. What happened and still happens there is an act of a war crime.”

He heard Butler sighing for the uncounted time. “Tell this Hitler, who terrorizes Europe for almost six years now and did the same to hundreds of places. Hell, he gave order to raze Paris last year while we still fought in Normandy, and only because some of his generals’ refusal to give into this madness the town was spared! He razed Warsaw, killed more than half of its inhabitants and forced the rest into working camps. The Red Army liberated a ghost town so to say. The SS-men massacred thousands and thousands of civilians all over Europe in villages and towns…”

“And because of Hitler’s brutal misdeeds, we decided to play in the same league now, Alex? A crime is not less a crime because it’s done by men in different uniforms.” He rubbed his forehead. “At least tell me that this third attack is the last one.” Silence. A silence that hung strongly in the air. “No, please no! You’re going to kill the last survivals who’ll certainly try to dig out their family members and friends with bare hands as soon as the stones are cold enough to be touched at all. Our boys did enough by hunting the people down the river banks and within the parks. For the Lord’s Mercy, Alex, try to stop it! The world will not forgive the Allies in this horror despite the tactical reasons!”

Again, there was only silence on the line, before Butler breathed, “Given those rumors about our
boys hunting down people along the river’s shore, I’ll make certain that this will be investigated. But concerning everything else, the world maybe shocked about this particular attack, but the world will never forgive what Hitler and his fellows did concerning a certain ethical minority within Germany and the conquered countries. I spoke shortly with Roosevelt after he returned from the Crimea, and I had a longer talk with Prime Minster Churchill on Monday.” The undertone in his voice changed slightly, but recognizable for those who knew him. “What do you know about Auschwitz?”

Hogan frowned. “A large prisoner camp in the seized Poland. Many Polish people as well as Gypsies and Jews are locked up there and are forced into labor work. A few reports within the last year accuse the Nazis of abusing and killing prisoners there, and…”

“Those rumors are not only true – the reality is the evilest thing I’ve ever learned about,” Butler interrupted him. “As it became clear that the Red Army cannot be stopped at the end of last year, the Nazis tried to destroy everything while they vacated the camp – the word ‘facility’ fits better. Yet they left enough traces to reveal their monstrous misdeeds.” He took a deep breath. “Colonel General Kurotschkin, who commanded the 322nd infantry division, gave a detailed report. Even in my most sinister nightmares I never would have imagined something this terrible. The Nazis have murdered hundreds of thousands of prisoners in Auschwitz – like at an assembly belt. Those who were still strong enough had to work ‘til they died of exhaustion, hunger, or sickness. The rest of them were sent to gas chambers shortly after their arrival.”

Every color had drained from Hogan’s face. “What?” He breathed, his voice failed him.

“You heard me.” Butler’s voice sounded hoarse by now. “We learned about it two weeks ago. They masked gas chambers as shower chambers, in which the prisoners were led, locked them up and then – instead of water – came the gas. Zyklon B – a cyan hydric-gas that originally was used as a pesticide in Europe and even in California before it was abused by the Nazis for a complete different purpose: to murder people ferociously. The damn gas mixes up the cellular respiration, the people suffocate while their bodies chemically burn from the inside out. The death fight lasts around 15 minutes. 15 minutes of agonizing dying – just imagine! The walls of the ‘shower-chambers’ are covered with scratches and other marks of hundreds of thousands of desperate fingers as the people tried to claw a way out of the execution rooms. Churchill brought photos from his meeting with Roosevelt and Stalin last Sunday. I vomited like a bloody flying beginner after his first flight lesson!”

“Oh my God,” Robert croaked, feeling his stomach churning.

“The Russians found burnt down crematoriums, which held even larger gas chambers in the cellars,” Alexander continued. “They also found pit firings in which the corpses were burnt. And they found mass graves. Dozens of them. They are still digging out the mortal remains which weren’t destroyed during the burning. Kurotschkin gave a modest estimate of the number of victims. The Nazis must have murdered over one million people there – if not more.”
“Jesus!” Hogan tasted bile in his mouth, while ice crept through his veins. Alone the imagination was too terrible to think of it clearer. He gulped down his stomach contents, which were about to rise in him. He felt Kinch stepping beside him and laying a hand on his shoulder. Obviously he looked bad enough to worry his friends. But right now, he could not take any consideration of them.

“The victims were mainly Jews from East Germany, Poland, Hungary, and other conquered countries in the east, but also Gypsies, Polish people and political prisoners, as well as POWs – mainly Russian ones. Kurotschkin’s men found thousands of dresses and trousers, shoes, and tons of human hair. 6,500 prisoners had been left to die as the Nazis evacuated the camp. The men, women, and children were still there and barely alive as the Russians came and liberated both camps Auschwitz consists of – one in Monowitz. The main-camp in Birkenau. Hundreds of them didn’t survive the following days and died of exhaustion and starvation despite the Russian’s intense attempts to save them. For those people, the help came too late.”

Hogan closed his eyes, while he continued to listen to his mentor’s narrations.

“Those who made it told us about the horror that happened there within the last four years. Guards with gas masks got the killed people out the gas chambers when the last noises finally had died down, removed gold teeth, jewelries, and hair, and brought the corpses to the pit firings and crematoriums. Obviously, it made those SS-men sick too, because none of them worked for more than a few weeks there before they were replaced. The life itself in the camp must have been one living nightmare for the prisoners. The barracks held more than 400 of them at once, who got barely food, no medical care, and often had to sleep naked. And to top the bestial crimes, camp doctors ran experiments on them they often died of or were killed afterwards.” He caught his breath and obviously struggled with his self control.

“And now tell me, who did and still does the crimes here.” Butler sounded calmer now, after he got some of the horror off his chest he inwardly fought with since he learned details about it. “There is absolutely no doubt left that the same happens in Dachau, Colditz, and all the other camps which are called ‘concentration-camps’. Hell, they even call some camps ‘extermination camps’ which have only one purpose: to kill people continuously.”

Hogan had lowered his head, his right hand clamped around the microphone strong enough to turn his knuckles white. He felt his friends’ gazes hanging on him, while Kinch squeezed his shoulder, but he could not look at them in the moment. There was only one thought circling in his mind and soul for a few seconds: those monsters! Those God damn monsters! Those guards and executers, doctors and other swine were bare of any humanity. Without any soul! Yes, soldiers killed – especially during war. But it was something different if you do it during combat, or if you murder unarmed, helpless, and innocent people en mass.
Those beasts deserved any punishment possible. They deserved to suffer.

Yet…the German people in the towns did not do those misdeeds. They did not murder all those men, women, and children. Hogan could not acquit them wholly, because their looking away and ignorance made them guilty in a certain way, too. But they were not the killers. They were not the one who did all this, yet they were taken to the woodshed.

He moistened his lips.

“So, these attacks on the civilian parts of Berlin and now Dresden are a kind of revenge?” He asked quietly. “Killing two birds with one stone to stop Germany’s war industry and to avenge the murdered prisoners?”

“It’s not the primary reason, but…it made the decision easier to lower any consideration of the citizens,” Butler trailed off and sighed.

Despite everything Robert had just learned, his deep anchored Christian belief made him utter the next words. “You can’t amend the wrong by paying back with wrongness. What the SS did there, is…there are no words which fit. But the German women, children, and old men in the towns don’t know about the horrible things their regime did and still does. Yes, they chose Hitler as their chancellor, but most of them didn’t look through his real intentions until it was too late…just like we did. And they are feeling the lash the bubble-beard and his fellows swing down on them. Every day now. Yesterday, German women were called to enter the Volkssturm, nourishment was reduced by 10 %, boys over the age of 16 are forced into the Service. Gestapo roams the street, smelling traitors everywhere; SS-men terrorize the towns and villages. The people in this country are already paying the price for their naïveté and blindness, Alex. Without that, we kill them in their thousands during air raids, which are not only aimed on military targets, but also on the people’s demise.”

“I know this, Robert. I know this. The other officers know this. The President and the Prime Minister know this. But if we don’t force Hitler on his knees, then…”

“The Chiefs are mistaken if they think this will speed up the victory. ‘Operation Thunderclap’ is ought to fail because you won’t be able to break Hitler’s resistance like this. I’m living in this country, Alex, and I hear enough broadcastings and get newspapers from the Underground to realize this. Hitler becomes crazier day by day – and instead of gaining support from the German civilians by showing mercy and encouraging them to stand up against the madman, you drive them even more into the corner until they see no other way anymore than to fight till death. You can attack as many towns as you want, burn them down. Heavens, you can destroy the whole country until no man or damn dog is still alive – Hitler won’t give in! He doesn’t care about ‘his’ people, he’d rather watch them all die than surrendering. So it’s up to the brass in London to decide the Germans’ fate: extinction or survival. It’s not only a matter of defeating those maniacs anymore, but also how history
will justify us later. Are we better than the Nazis, or have they driven us to the same level of mercilessness and inhumanity they display every day?"

A low groan was to hear. “I share this opinion, Robert. I know that we’re approaching very fast a kind of crossway we never thought to reach, yet here we are. I agree with you concerning many arguments you pointed out. Mercilessness was never my style, but...”

“I’m aware of it, Alex. After all, I know you too well. So use your influence to make the brass see that they are about to play the whole warfare into Hitler’s hands, because any eventual rebellion within Germany will never happen if the people here think the Allies are going to kill them no matter what they do. Cologne, Frankfurt, Munich, Berlin...everything can be justified with stopping the war machinery and to destroy military targets. But what you did in Dresden will come back to you and will slap the brass in the face. The world will not care for a Nazi’s attempt to change the town into a bastion. The lost monuments and many, many dead people – especially casualties and escapees – will tilt the mood. Mark my words. In a few days, there will be many people who point their fingers at you in London enraged; something Hitler will use to his advantage to get former opponents on his side. This is a risk we can’t take. Not a few steps before we reach the final line.”

In London, Butler – who had sit down in front of the radio by now – rubbed his forehead with his free hand. To tell the truth, the whole talk had increased his already stinging headache a lot, but he could not blame his protégée of adding more problems to his shoulders. Deep inside, he was proud of Robert for standing up for his regards like this – and he was relieved that the war hadn’t twisted the younger man’s character to something dark and sinister like it was done to so many other officers and common soldiers. He had known that Robert harbored strong humanity – another reason he had supported the idea to train him in the spy business and to make him ‘Papa Bear’. Because like this, he could be certain that Hogan’s missions in Germany did not turn into more bloodshed than absolutely necessary. To spare potential victims was something they both had in common. He could understand his protegee’s shock and anger concerning both large topics they just discussed.

And that Hogan still demanded that those murderous attacks on the German civilians should stop, despite everything he learned a few minutes ago, proved to Butler that the brass indeed was going too far. Robert was right; if they continued like this, they would not be much better than those they were battling.

“Concerning the world’s regard of this mission, we’ll see how the people react,” he said quietly, but firmly. “Concerning further attacks like the ones done now, I and a few of my colleagues will try to change the others’ opinion…but I can’t promise you anything.”

He heard Robert breathing deeply. “This is all I ask of you, Alex. I want those monsters caught and punished just like you do, but the civilians aren’t responsible for these bestial crimes. So don’t let them pay the bill. We’re still Christians, and if others follow the devil and turn into demons, we should hunt THEM and not the people who hadn’t any chance to stop the evilness – especially when
Butler swore something beneath his breath and closed his eyes. He almost hated it when Robert used his ultimate ‘weapon’ on him – Christian rules and believes. The younger man knew exactly that he got him with this, as if it was necessary to make him at least try to change the brass’ opinion to more humanity. Hell, he could understand his colleagues that they were enraged and gave a fuck of German civilians in the moment. Yes, staff officers should stay neutral and should not be led by emotions, but dammit, they were all human. And after they learned firsthand from Roosevelt and Churchill what really happened in these blasted ‘camps’, they all had wished to avenge the hundreds of thousands of victims. Yet Robert was right; those murderers had to burn in Hell. Not non-involved civilians, fugitives above all.

“I’ll speak with our staff and the others. And you should prepare your new German friend that the attack isn’t over. If I remember his file correctly, he was born in Leipzig. I think what happened to Dresden hit him hard – and is one of the reasons you got that little fit.” He heard the younger man clearing his throat, and added quickly, “Don’t deny it, I know how you react when one of your friends is hurting. You’re a damn mother hen, Hogan, so stop ruffling your feathers. Tell him I’m sorry for the loss he certainly feels, but maybe he understands us better when he learns of everything.”

“Thanks, Alex. I don’t think he’ll be ready for the whole truth at the moment because he really mourns for Dresden. And to add more sorrow to it by telling him of the shame many Krauts have brought upon themselves is nothing I want to do just yet. But I’ll speak with him later about everything. Just please, try to stop any more assaults. The town is already in flames. You can’t gain anymore advantages by spreading more fire through it.”

“Maybe I can convince the brass to delay the next air raid so that the people have a chance to get the casualties and themselves out of town. We would have to involve the Underground then to warn the people, but this can be eventually done. And before I forget it, one thing of advice from me: work at your tone, son! We two certainly will have a talk when you’re back in London or the US, so prepare yourself for getting a thick ear!” He warned him not too seriously, yet sternly

“Aye, sir.”

“Don’t ‘sir’ me, you rascal! We both know that you have a damn big problem with showing respect towards your superiors. Go and comfort your German friends – and be ready to receive some new missions within the next few days. You are healed enough for a few tasks, aren’t you?” He cursed himself as he heard the concern in his voice while speaking the last words. Dammit, he really had a weak spot for this oversized churl with the mind of a genius.

“Yes, I am ready for new tasks. I’m already rusting, so give me something to do.”
“Hm, it certainly would distract you from melting with too much pity, no doubt. You’ll get a few jobs soon. Be safe, Robert. Bird Roc out.” He switched off the radio and let the microphone fall on the table.

“Is Hogan about to switch sides?” The question was asked by General Vandenberg, the commanding officer of the 9th Air Corps Squadron, who was also a member of the Combined Chiefs of Staff that had its headquarters in London since September 1943.

With his 48 years, he was the youngest general since Ulysses Grant, and was a strategical genius who had planned the most successful air battles over North Africa and now over Northern Europe. He had no problem with joining the squadron and troops at the front and had a large share of battles during the last few months. But now he was in London after the meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin to organize the next missions. He had heard how one of the sergeants had murmured ‘Papa Bear is on the line for you’ to Butler, and after almost five minutes, he became suspicious what took his colleague so long. Usually radio talks, even by using safe frequencies, were held short. Especially when they were done with Underground agents. Something had to be wrong, otherwise Alexander would not stay so long away from the gathering, at which the whole Chief Staff and the British Prime Minister listened to the proceed of the attack against Dresden.

Leaving the briefing room, Vandenberg had stepped into the smaller radio room next door and listened long enough to the one sided talk to realize the topics and the reason for ‘Papa Bear’s’ call. Obviously the colonel was furious because of “Mission Chevin”, and the general felt unease rising in him. Was the man switching sides after almost three years being in the enemy’s country?

“No, never!” Alexander said strongly and rose. “Rather the Thames is left without water or the Niagara Falls dry out before Robert Hogan becomes a traitor. But he is a compassionate man with a big heart…and as it seems, we made a big mistake.” He left the smaller radio room and returned with a curious Vandenberg to the other chamber, where most members of the Chief Staff sat. Butler met the asking glance of the bulk, balding man in a civilian dark suit who sat at the end of the table and smoked one of his famous cigars: Winston Churchill, the British Prime Minister who was already a living legend.

Butler’s return interrupted any talk and report from the radiomen around them, who updated them about the air raid’s proceeding, and he used the pause to let off some frustration.

“How the hell did we miss that this blasted town was over crowded with fugitives and casualties?!”

TBC…
Well, I told you that this chapter will be a downer. I did a lot of research on both ‘topics’, and new insights, which has been published today, forced me to edit this chapter a lot.

At this point, I – as a German – want to express my deepest condolence for all the people and their descendance, who suffered in the concentration- or execution camps, and have experienced or learned of them first-hand. I tried to refer to this darkest part of our whole history as neutrally as possible, even if I can imagine that the members of the Russian 322nd infantry division, who liberated Auschwitz, had been horrified like all the others, who came to help the survivals and revealed the evilness that happened there. To really voice everything, would be too much for this story, but at least I wanted to bring this crime into it, because what happened there and WWII are tightly connected with each other.

Concerning the destruction of Dresden: The rumor of strafers hunting down citizen or of the Allies using napalm-bombs, exist even today. Investigations with new technics couldn’t confirm, but also couldn’t really tell them off. I think, many things which happened in the night from the 13th to the 14th February 1945 and the day after, will remain a secret for all times. Yet a few things are brutal reality – like people being pulled into the flames, the extensive heat and the large devastation.

The family of my father comes from Dresden. He himself was two years old, as the big attack happened, and he, his brother and my grandparents only survived because they lived in Dresden-Streelen that is more on the west-hillside, approx. 15 km away from the historical part of the town, yet on the same river-side. My grandmother told me a lot of those two (three) days, and how she was forced to watch the town, she loved so much, burning down. The three children of my grand-aunt died that night; the wall in the cellar they hid broke down, burying only the children. My grand-aunt was out of town with my grand-uncle to gather food; leaving her children with her neighbors. Both saw from afar the attack and walked back to Dresden (more than 20 km). They only were able the street they lived in, two days later – the house they lived in, collapsed. They dug out their children with bare hands – my grand-aunt was never the same afterwards, like my granny told me.

I think, this little example shows what really happened to the town and its people at this night and the day after.

The story of Klink’s uncle marrying in the original Lady’s Church is a mirror of my family. My grandparents married there 1928. Regrettable my granny never saw the re-rising of the Lady’s Church. She died twenty years before the rebuilding was finished, yet I visited this church two times by now. The originally cross is exhibited in the church interior – twisted, blackened, sans the gold it once was coated with, but still recognizable. It was found beneath the debris – and held the original construction plans so that the church could be rebuilt. The Lady’s Church remained a hill of debris during the time of the DDR (as a ‘memorial’), but every still existing stone and one of the portals, which remained standing, were used to complete the church. If you watch pictures at the web, you
may wonder of the black stones and window-parts. Well, these are the original stones from the original church.

Thank the Lord, the historical part of Dresden was completely rebuild after the re-union of West- and East-Germany. The houses around the Lady’s Church are only wearing the façade of the baroque epoch, behind them modern buildings offering flats, restaurants and shops. The castle is finished, the Semper-Opera (I visited, too) is re-built as well as all the other old buildings, yet only one cultural monument remained undestroyed during the attack: the Procession of Princes. It’s a large picture of all Saxonian Princes, made of Meissner china tiles, which build a kind of mosaic on the back of the castle’s tartan track. Only four or fife tiles burst in the heat of the flames, all the others were only sooted – a miracle given the temperature of almost 900 °C within the streets.

Sorry, I got carried away, but ‘Dresden’ is still a kind of traumata for us Germans, because none of us knew about the military development there and we all thought – until a few years ago – that the Allies’ attack was only targeting for our soul, so to say.

I hope, the chapter was nonetheless satisfying for you and that you maybe understand my reasons to bring up those two topics within a genre that originally was ‘only’ a entertaining parody.

The next chapter will be the second part of this theme, while parallel our two love-birds give and need comfort – the latter especially from Klink’s side – before the big moments comes and Hogan returns to Barracks 2, what is the beginning of the second part of the story.

I really hope, the chapter met your approval – not only concerning the two real historical topics, but also how Hogan reacted. I always saw in him a man, who has great fairness in him and whose temper didn’t allow any hesitation to do or to say what is on his mind or what he thinks is right (a good thing that Butler is more like a father to him, than a superior, or he really would be in deep water).

I wish you all a nice weekend, and I really curious what you think of the update, so please do not hesitate to leave some reviews.

Love,

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

I hope, you forgive the chaos concerning chapter 51 and 52, and that you enjoyed no. 51 – as late as it came.

Concerning no. 52: I know that the two main-topics of it are critically and wake very different emotions – especially concerning Auschwitz. This topic is always volatile, but to our big shame it belongs to WW II. I also know that certainly many readers have different opinions concerning the whole thing around ‘Dresden’, yet I hoped that I was fair – in regard of how we ‘felt’ about the whole disaster and how the rest of the world saw / see it. The real backgrounds and truths about the attacks, including the rumors of strafer-attacks, were only ascertained approx. 15 years ago. Until then the old reports of eye-witnesses or victims were true for the whole world.

I also thought, how a man who is a spy and saboteur, but also is as human as Hogan would react to something like this For the first time within WW II Germany was portrayed as a victim, even in the international press. How should a man, who always tries to act human even within the enemy’s country, react if he learns that this one time his own people / Allies did something wrong? Okay, like I said, later the truth came out, but during the first 35 years (!) after the air-raid of Dresden the rumors of men-hunting and inhumanity lived on. I thought that Hogan would react to something like this in his typical characteristic: human.

Even if I didn’t get one review, I still hope, I did a decent job and that you aren’t shooed off because of the topic. I know, “Hogan’s Heroes” almost never referred to such serious issues, but – sorry – they belong to the whole mess 80/75 years ago.

At the new chapter, the aftermath is still there – and more. Our two ‘boys’ find solace with each other. And yet Hogan knows that he has to return to his own quarters (what lowers Klink’s mood even more) and the two colonels have to find their way back to ‘normality’ – means, they have to keep up the pretense of a little mixture of respect and friendship. And they do a very good job with it, as you’re going to see.

I hope, you enjoy the next chapter.

Love
Chapter 53 – Dark times

Hogan had pulled off the headset and had all but thrown it on the table; frustrated, shocked, and angry. His friends knew better than to address him now and gave him time to stomach everything he learned.

Robert had closed his eyes, trying to soothe his still rebelling stomach. Sweet Lord, how could they? How could these monsters in human form do something this cruel and bestial? He still could not believe what Butler had told him, but he knew that Alex would never exaggerate something this important. And even if the colonel trusted the Russians to twist a few things to their advantage and justify their sometimes indeed rough behavior, he realized that even the ‘Ivans’ would not come up with such a story. So, everything his mentor told him was true. There even existed photos, and therefore, at least a big part of this all was true.

Hogan took a few deep breaths to calm down. He knew that his friends had a lot of questions and wanted an explanation for his anything but professional behavior at the beginning of the radio talk and his reactions now. Yet he was very aware of something else: if word spread through the camp of what the Nazis did in Auschwitz, then the uncertain peace here would be over. The balance would skip what could lead to a catastrophe. Something that had to be prevented at all costs. They could not risk a rebellion and the SS’ intervention afterwards. Not a few weeks before this damn war was certainly over. And he would never put Will’s safety and life at risk. Not that he thought his fellow POWs would harm the Kommandant. The Oberst had gained their respect by now and a few knew about him being on the Allies’ side. And Hogan also knew that no one would threaten Schultz – or Langenscheidt – but any kind of uproar would bring the SS on the scene, and then even Schmidt would not be able to soothe the situation.

Finally looking up again, he straightened his shape and turned around towards his men while remaining on the chair. “You want to know what got into me, don’t you.”

“Boy, you really got a fit here… sir!” Carter nodded.

“Against you, my Uncle Philippe is a gentle lamp – and he is called ‘volcan’ within the family and among his amis,” LeBeau nodded, folding his arms in front of his chest.
“Did I get this right? Dresden is attacked a third time in the moment?” Kinch asked, having concluded a lot because of Hogan’s words during the radio talk.

Robert nodded slowly. “Yes – they’re flying the third attack in at the moment. It is done, like the second one, namely hours after the one prior. It means that the people thought it would be safe to be out in the open and trying to flee the burning town, only to be away from any shelter as the new raids begun.” He pressed his lips into a short line. “I hope for RAF Major Harris that his boys – and ours! – didn’t hunt the people on purpose on the river banks and in the parks. That this all is one big lie or simply rumors spread by traumatized people. If not, this couldn’t be excused anymore. It would be murder, nothing else.”

“And there were a lot of fugitives in the town – and casualties?” Newkirk asked quietly.

Hogan threw up both hands. “I don’t know. At the German radio, they said so. Butler said the brass in London lacked of any information concerning this detail.” He rubbed his neck. “One way or the other, this went too far despite what the SS did in Poland and in other camps. Their heavy loaded guilt cannot be paid by civilians, who are not to blame.”

Kinch cocked his head. “Something very big had stirred you up, Colonel. You went pale like a table cloth.”

“And you still are,” Carter nodded, ignoring Newkirk’s exasperated sigh and glare.

Glancing at the Heroes one by one, Hogan said quietly, “What I’m telling you know cannot leave this room. Under no circumstances can you speak about it on the compound or even in secret to the other fellas. Not even in our own barracks. I’ll tell Baker later about it, but all the others cannot learn about it before this camp is officially liberated or the war is over. It would lead to an enraged uproar that would give us and our mission away because this knowledge has been kept a secret from the Nazis even in front of their own people. If the guards learn what I know – and you in a few moments, too – there will be no doubt left that there is a spy in the camp with contact to the Underground. And you have three guesses on who would be under suspicion instantly.”

“You and our Balding Eagle,” Kinch nodded.

“Exactly. And before I tell you what Butler told me, I ask you to remain calm. I’m sure you’ll be upset and furious, but – please – control yourself. And I’m convinced that Klink knows nothing of it, too. The same goes for Schultz and Langenscheidt. Those men are far too empathic and humane to learn something like this and stay quiet about it. I’m certain that Will would have told me if he had knowledge about it, but he didn’t. So don’t blame him – or the guards. Most of them are from the
Volkssturm now. The remaining Luftwaffe guys were never involved in this…horror, so don’t blame them.”

The other four men exchanged a glance with each other before Kinch said slowly, “No problem, Colonel. If you declare something as top secret, it remains like that. But you certainly woke our curiosity and caution by now. What have the Nazis done that you’re this enraged, but also worried?”

Hogan took another deep breath for the uncounted time, preparing himself for what he had to tell and trying to get some emotional distance before he began just the way Butler had done ten minutes before. “What do you know about Auschwitz?”

*** HH *** HH ***

The third attack wave lasted until 12:31 – fourteen minutes of wide spread bombing. The main target were some weapon facilities and, again, the Reichs trains workshop and crossroads in Dresden-Friedrichstadt. The bombs also hit the large hospital there, burning it completely down. Boroughs in the neighborhood, who had been more or less spared during the last two attacks, were hit, too. Most parts of the whole town were in flames.

And another disaster happened, as two bomber squadrons missed the course because of the weather and attacked Prague instead of Dresden, mistaking the baroque buildings of Czechia’s capital for the Saxonian town.

In Neustadt, a smaller town 35 km away from Dresden, showers of ashes fell from the skies and turned the snow grayish-black: the result of the two nightly attacks.

The overheated air in Dresden woke new firestorms. People who had survived until now were pulled into the inferno to burn alive or found dead because of heat shock. Most died in their cellars because of smoke, collapsing buildings, and fire gases. Glass and metal melted in the incredible heat, sand stone pulverized, whole street lines ceased to exist. Shock, injuries, and flying debris killed hundreds of more people while they tried to escape the town in panic.

As the last bombers left the ‘Elbe-Florence’, the historical part of the town was destroyed. Those buildings which still stood were burning. Among them the famous Lady’s Church, built by the wife of August the Strong, who remained a Lutheran while her husband converted to the Catholic belief to become the King of Poland. The church was one of the few cathedrals around the world that was built with domed structures. Just like the St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome or the St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. The Dresden Castle, the Royal Chapel, and the Semper Opera had already collapsed, as well as the Church of the Holy Cross (famous for its legendary boys’ choir) and the baroque houses...
around the Dresden Strietzelmarkt that were famous for their unique Christmas Market. Only the Anna Church still stood, saving hundreds of people who had found shelter in it.

Many boroughs in the southeast and the so called ‘Newtown’ were partly lost, too. And with them, ministry buildings and townhalls from the Belle Epoque. The fires also destroyed a large part of the Great Garden, setting free many animals of the attached zoo. But worse, many casualties and other people who had survived the first (and second) attack wave and had fled to the large park died, too – surrounded by flames and unable to escape until they burned alive or, if lucky, suffocated before the fires reached them.

The whole outcome only became visible days later after most of the fires died down. It would turn out that Hogan had been right concerning the world’s reaction to this one particular large strike of the Allies. The newspapers were full with horrible photos, shocking high numbers of victims, and accusations against the London brass, blaming them of inhumanity. Many reports were exaggerated – especially concerning the number of death: 100,000 – 150,000 victims, eventually even 200,000. There was also the news that Dresden held more than 2.5 million people in those days, mainly because of the many fugitives. The newspapers pointed out that never another town had been destroyed like Dresden and that the ruthless action of the Allies had killed more people in two days than during the last half year together.

It should last decades until the truth came out – that the high number of victims had been a misunderstanding and also the result of deliberate NS-propaganda. Swedish reporters, of all people, spread those numbers around the world, took up the NS-reports that showed Dresden only as a culture metropole that lacked of any interesting arm industry and fortification. A lie, yet it was believed.

The same went for the rumors of strafers hunting down fleeing people along the river banks and the parks, shooting them from above. Major Harris and the other squadron leaders stated that they did not do such a thing, yet more and more eye witnesses or escaped citizens spoke about this particular act of war crime – rumors, which did not die down for many years. It would last decades until new investigation methods spoke the attacker free of the accused deeds because of no proof. Yet, most people still believed the witnesses, and this part of the air raid became a dark legend.

The world was outraged. Especially after a British Correspondence Officer made a big mistake during a conference of the Allies Press in Paris three days later, commenting that ‘the attack was also meant to break the still lasting morale of the Germans and to speed up Hitler’s defeat’. This sideline sentence prompted the international press to formulate the statement like this: ‘…A decision that lead to a terror bombing of the German people as a ruthless way to speed up Hitler’s demise’. Even if this statement had been done without a second thought from said officer, and the Allies attempted to reduce the done damage, the article increased the outrage among their own people and other befriended countries even more. While in Great Britain, the article was stopped before it could be released. Radio Paris and the newspapers in the USA published the interview, irritating even more people around the world.
And of course, the NS-regime did nothing to correct the false numbers, but used them to their own advantage. They not only tried to get foreign countries, who had declared war against Germany, to become neutral again, they also used the destruction of Dresden to distract their own people from the real status of the war and to poison their mind against the Allies even more.

Yet the whole uproar resulted in its own success – this time for the German people.

Six weeks later, Prime Minster Churchill distanced himself from ‘Operation Thunderclap’. Most American staff officers urged the British Army that this kind of warfighting would not lead to any success, but the RAF was mainly armed for area bombing and refused to agree. Finally, the American staff officers were able to convince Roosevelt to stop any more air raids, which had not any real military targets. At first, the President declined the suggestions, but the generals pointed out that it would be a big disadvantage for their own troops if they only found burnt down cities and destroyed streets they could not use to conquer more of Germany. At last, Roosevelt gave in, and the attempt of stopping Hitler by attacking civilian targets was returned to mostly pure military operations, sparing as much civilians as possible who would face new horror coming from their own government soon enough. And, after a letter from Churchill to his own staff officers, the RAF quitted from bombing German cities to increase the terror. ‘Operation Thunderclap’ was stopped – but for many towns it came too late.

Of course, the regime in Berlin plotted revenge after Dresden – something that would involve Hogan and his men, as well as Klink soon. All this would happen within the next few weeks; a future no one could know about at the moment. Just right now, all of Germany was shocked as it learned about the burning town at the Elbe River. And many of them mourned the loss of one of the most beautiful towns within Europe.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan returned to the Kommandantur after he had told his men everything he learned from Butler. He really admired their display of self control. Disbelief and shock had changed to naked fury during his tale, yet they remained calm. Heavens, Carter even had some tears in his eyes, and it was more than obvious that all of them had the strong urge to vomit. But somehow they showed a lot of self composure. It did not surprise him that none of them felt hungry and offered their lunch to the other men of Barracks 2, seeking something like comfort by lying down on their beds and brooding in silence.

While Hogan walked over the compound towards Klink’s office, he became aware of the many harsh gazes he and the few other POWs on the compound received from the guards. The two men in front of the Kommandantur he knew for almost three years now glared at him, making him stop in front of them and saying quietly, ‘I know that you’re furious of what happened in Dresden, and I can
understand you. But neither my men nor I am responsible for it, so stop glaring daggers at us.”

He passed them by and entered the building. Hilda looked up with red eyes at him and whispered, “When will it stop?”

He shrugged helplessly and murmured, “I have no clue. I spoke with…with one of the Chiefs. He’s trying to delay the next attack, but the rest…” He felt so damn helpless as he saw tears rising in her eyes. Impulsively, he closed the distance to her and placed a hand on her small shoulder as she wept softly.

“Why Dresden? Why this town? There is nothing of interest for the Allies; only historical and cultural buildings.”

Hogan pressed his lips into a thin line before he murmured, “Wrong, Hilda. Dresden was undergoing serious outfits to change it into a fortress, delivering new soldiers, weapons, and other supplies to the Wehrmacht in the east. This is why London decided to attack.” With good reason, he stayed silent about the other grounds for the air raid.

“There is not much room for military buildout in the historical part of Dresden,” Klink said quietly from the door, face still pale; eyes puffy.

“Yet the Nazis used exactly these locations to buildout the town to their purpose,” Hogan answered softly, while straightening his shape and turning around towards his secret lover. “They used the baroque buildings as shields – or, better to say, as pawns; thinking the Allies would decline from an attack there.” He took a deep breath and rubbed his neck. “Berlin was wrong.”

“And all the people – the citizens, the fugitives, the casualties…” Real pain mirrored on Will’s face.

“Butler said the brass had no information about a larger number of escapees and casualties in Dresden,” Hogan answered slowly. “But I told him about the rumors that air fighters hunted down people along the river banks and in the parks. He promised to investigate these accusations.”

Klink wrapped both long arms around himself and lowered his head. He felt cold and somehow away from reality, as if everything was a sinister nightmare he hopefully would wake up from soon. “Was this the last attack?” He wanted to know, pointing one thumb over his shoulder towards the radio, where Hogan heard a German newsman report that the air raid was over.
Despite everything Hogan had learned from Butler, he felt bad and almost guilty as he was forced to shake his head. He hated it to give Will more pain, but he would not lie to him. Never.

“Butler’s trying to delay the next planned attack and to give the people a warning. More I couldn’t demand from him.” He sighed. “I already adopted the wrong tone at the beginning of the talk because I was completely outraged. I can call myself happy that he doesn’t send me to a court martial.”

“Because you took pity on Dresden’s citizens,” Klink croaked.

“No, because I asked him if the brass in London has become insane, and if we’re up to the same cruel and inhumane games now like this damn bastard in Berlin. I told him that we aren’t better than Hitler’s fellows. Guess how Butler took this,” he grumbled. He felt Hilda squeezing his wrist, gave her a quick, half-hearted smile, and turned his attention back to Wilhelm, who looked with wide eyes at him.

“I can imagine how your superior reacted to this accusation,” he whispered.

“Yeah, lucky me that he sees a son in me. Otherwise I would be in deep water now. But what happened in Dresden went too far. Plain and simple.” He sighed. The temptation to tell Will of the unbelieving, horrible crimes which happened in Auschwitz was great, but Hogan controlled himself. He knew that this all would be too much for Wilhelm to bear in the moment.

For a few seconds, they all listened to the broadcasting that was done from a place far away from Dresden and did not give any real news, but this did not change the shock that seemed to pour out from every word.

Hogan felt the atmosphere tensing up even more and met his German counterpart’s eyes. “Do you want me to go?” He asked quietly, assuming that his uniform and his heritage must not be easy for Klink to deal with.

To his relief, the older man shook his head. “What happens there is not your fault, Robert. You and the other POWs here have no part in it. I…” He cleared his throat. “It would distract me if you remain here – if you don’t mind. I don’t think that I’m up to do any work today, and to listen to everything with someone there to share it… will help me.” He glanced at Hilda. “If you want, you can take the rest of the day off.”
“Thank you, Herr Kommandant, but I think I’ll remain here – for the case that telephone calls come in or other problems appear. I’ll get them off your back so that you are left alone today.”

Klink gave her a sad, short smile of gratitude. “Thank you, my dear.”

The young woman only nodded at him, watching her boss and the American officer closely. The Kommandant had no problem to address Hogan by his given name even now – in the relative privacy of his office, yet this display of familiarity was unusual and absolutely new. Even under the given circumstances. The next uncommon behavior was the way Hogan had acted on Klink’s behalf – his protective nature towards the Oberst and the way he comforted him. Not to speak of him confronting his own superior concerning the air raid. Hogan always tried to smooth out a situation. After all, it was in best interest if everything ran well in the camp so that he could concentrate on his missions. But his reactions today were new. He seemed to suffer with Klink, understanding him completely, and was hell bent to stop his pain. And Klink even asked him to stay and to share these weary hours with him – in other words, he needed Hogan to comfort him.

Something was going on here. Something she could not catch, but it was something big. And she would find out what it was. She respected and liked Klink, Hogan was her friend, and she had her own shares of a mission no one – not even Robert – knew of. If Hogan risked court martial to stand up for German people, and Klink practically begged him to stay with him in his office to not be alone, then something drastic had changed in their relationship. And as she saw the compassion and comforting warmth in Robert’s eyes, and the tentative relief on Klink’s face as the American followed him to his office, she began to assume that this ‘friendship’ Hogan first had only faked before had become real and had increased immensely.

What in the name of the Lord was going on here?

*** HH ***

The rest of the day Hogan remained in Klink’s office. They listened to the radio, talked quietly with each other, and also spoke with Schultz as the Sergeant of the Guards came in the office late afternoon to report that everything was tense, yet calm in the camp. The large Bavarian was upset too, and Klink did not mind that the three emptied the half filled bottle with cognac.

Hogan returned shortly to Barracks 2 half an hour before evening roll call. The Heroes were still in a dark mood, but they stayed silent about the reason for it. And their comrades in the hut had finally given up to ask them questions, yet it was clear that they did not like to be kept in the dark. Olsen even sulked a little bit, but was distracted as Hogan appeared.
“When will you return to your own quarters, Colonel?” Kinch addressed his superior and friend, while LeBeau filled a cup with coffee and gave it to Hogan.

Sipping at the hot, bitter beverage, Robert sighed. There was no way in hell that he would leave Klink alone within the next two or three nights. The man was badly shaken and simply needed him. Hogan knew that his German counterpart had to be comforted and that his presence would soothe the emotional suffering Will under-went at the moment.

“Wilson said that I’m as good as healed, yet my broken ribs are still mending. You know bones need six weeks to do so, and Klink doesn’t want to let me go until I’m as good as new. If I understood him correctly, he wants Dr. Birkhorn to make a final examination before I’m declared as healed. Until then, I enjoy his hospitality.” He shrugged.

“And you can distract and comfort our Balding Eagle,” Kinch made a soft attempt of teasing. “He really seems to take the disaster in Dresden to heart.”

“You can say that,” Robert agreed. “He’s absolutely beside himself. He told me about his visits there as a child and teen, and about the historical buildings and streets. He deeply loved Dresden. As it seems, our boys and the English flyers not only left a big hole in the culture cradles of Europe, but also in the hearts and souls of many people – including our Kommandant.”

“Damn war,” Carter said softly. “And this all because one man and his fellows want to rule the world crowded by ‘pure and clean’ people.”

“Insanity and to what it can lead,” Hogan nodded, and emptied his cup. Placing it on the table, he carefully rose. “Okay, I’ll return to Klink’s flat. A few days more, and I certainly can be back in my own quarters.” He glanced at Kinch. “If you hear something from London, inform me immediately, okay? Butler mentioned a few new missions for us, and…”

“Butler’s secretary radioed us an hour ago,” Kinchloe interrupted him.

Hogan tensed up. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” He demanded.

“Because this call has nothing to do with our operation. Butler wanted to update you that the next and last strike against Dresden for now is planned for tomorrow. The people will be warned in time before it happens.”
Robert lowered his head and closed his eyes. “This is something at least,” he murmured. “Yet I really want to know what they want to attack. There is nothing left they can smash.” Bitterness sounded in his voice before he took his cap and placed it on his head. “Good night, Gentlemen. See you tomorrow.”

He listened to the echoing “Good night, sir” from the others and left the barracks. Crossing the compound, he was more than aware of the guards’ gazes, but he ignored them. As long as the situation in the camp did not get worse, he saw no reason for interference, and he hoped that the atmosphere would calm down within the next few days – a hope that should not be fulfilled.

*** HH ***

Klink was done with evening roll call quickly. He knew that he should say something, prompting the men within the camp to remain calm and not to alter the status quo, independent of their heritage and uniform. But he lacked of any inner strength in the moment, received Schultz’s report, and dismissed the POWs with a few words, hurrying over the compound towards his quarters afterwards. He felt tired, emotionally exhausted, and chilled to the bones. He and Hogan had skipped lunch, yet he did not feel hungry as he stepped into his quarters, where LeBeau had set up the table and the dinner before he joined the roll call.

Hogan still wore his uniform and had rolled up his sleeves. Wordlessly he watched the older man slipping out of his coat, scarf, cap, and gloves before he walked to him and took him simply into his arms – something he had not dare to do after the first comforting embrace in the morning. The curtains were already closed and therefore no one could see them, as Will instinctively wrapped both arms around the younger man and buried his face at Robert’s shoulder, monocle forgotten. The warmth of the furnace, the golden light of the three enlightened candles, the smell of tea – nothing really reached him. Only the proximity of his witty fox brought his hurting soul some comfort.

Somehow, Robert managed to get Wilhelm to eat something. He himself did not feel hungry too, but he knew that he needed to regain more strength for the next missions London would give him. And Will needed nourishment as much as he did. So, he persuaded Klink to take at least two slices of bread with toppings and to drink some tea.

Afterwards, they sat quietly together, not in the mood to do anything and not tired enough to go to bed. Quietly, Hogan told Will of the planned last attack tomorrow and that Butler had asserted the other staff officers (and the Prime Minister) to give the citizens of Dresden a warning in time.

Klink only nodded mutely, controlled despair on his face. He knew that there was nothing he could do – not without giving himself and Robert away. Yes, a part of him urged him to warn Berlin – to alert the Luftwaffe so that the next attack maybe could be prevented, but he knew that he was forced to stay aside and to watch, feeling guilty for every victim the next air raid would leave. But he had
chosen a side, and there was no going back now. He still wanted Hitler to lose and to be brought to his knees. This maniac and his fellows were responsible for all the horror that went on in the country and all of Europe so that the rest of the world was forced to stop him on all costs. Yet, his heart bled at the mere thought that the terror was not over in Dresden yet.

Both men went to bed, and Robert had been right concerning Will. The older man suffered from strong nightmares as his subconscious mixed the nasty experiences in Berlin one and a half week ago with the imaginations of the burning in Dresden. Rob needed all his sensibility and repertoire of comfort to soothe his hurting love, who wept himself silently to sleep.

When Wilhelm finally was in Morpheus’ Realm, Hogan tried to find some sleep too, but not very successfully. His own dreams were filled with pictures of people in shower rooms, screaming and trying to escape the gas mixed with dead bodies in large graves and fleeing people in burning streets, hunted by air fighters.

He felt absolutely groggy the next morning, and Klink did not do any better. The Oberst looked worse than after his return from Berlin, and Robert was convinced that everything that happened within the last few weeks were bottling more and more up in his secret lover. There was no thinking of telling him about the regime’s crimes in Poland within the next few days. Every man could bear only a certain amount of stress, and Hogan realized that Klink was nearing his limits. And there was nothing he could do despite being there for Will.

They showered together in relative silence, yet Robert saw the gratitude in the older man’s eyes for every little support and tender comfort he gave him. They had an early breakfast before Klink left for duty. Roll call passed by, and then he tried to catch up on some work – listening to the radio.

Hogan used the given chance to call Baker to Klink’s quarters and to inform him of everything. His second radioman reacted just like the rest of the Heroes: with utter shock that changed into enragement. Yet he understood why the colonel wanted to keep these horrible crimes a secret for now. He had to agree that the mood in the camp was loaded enough. A spark could elicit an inferno no one wanted.

At midday, Klink returned to his quarters with his hands shaking, composure barely in place.

“She collapsed,” he whispered instead of a greeting, as he stepped into the small building.

Hogan, again clad in his casual uniform and doing some paperwork he usually had to do with being the senior POW officer, looked up from the table. The soft noises from the kitchen where LeBeau was preparing lunch did nothing to calm both men’s rattled nerves.
“Who collapsed?” Robert asked, worrying that Klink was referring to Hilda. He rose and closed the distance to his secret lover.

“The Lady’s Church,” Will answered, and Hogan realized that the older man used the German grammar for once, referring to a building in the gender form of his mother tongue. “She burned out but still stood – until a quarter past ten this morning. Then the walls folded into themselves. The heat was too much. They…they said at the radio that the large bells were to hear during their fall until they were buried beneath the debris.” He gulped. “The only thing that still stands is…is the effigy of Martin Luther in front of her. It…it remained undamaged – like a memorial.”

LeBeau came out of the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe with his arms crossed. He could not help himself. He felt compassion rising in him at the sight of the so miserable looking Oberst. “This church meant a lot to you, didn’t it?” he asked quietly.

Klink nodded, while he felt Robert’s hand on his shoulder. “My uncle and my aunt married there – and I visited it a few times as a child. It was…something very special.”

Louis cocked his head in sympathy. “This church held a special place in your people’s heart – just like Notre Dame in that of us Frenchmen.” He sighed. “If I imagine something like this would happen to France’s heart….” He shook his head.

The Oberst gave him a glance of gratitude for his understanding before he said hoarsely, “But there is more. The next attack started at 12:00 hours. Dresden received a warning one hour earlier – too late for the Luftwaffe to interfere, but maybe enough time for the people to flee. That means who is still able to move at all.”

LeBeau rubbed his face with one hand, while he met Hogan’s intense gaze. Getting the hint, he turned away and returned to the kitchen – not without looking once more back over his shoulder, seeing his friend and superior wrapping an arm around Klink. Cursing the war in French, he continued his work with the pan and pots, feeling against his will pity with the citizen of Saxony’s capital.

*** HH ***

A detail Hogan warned Butler about became true. At the same day the last attack happened, Goebbels’s PR-office published a report about the ‘utter destruction of the culture metropole Dresden’ that was broadcasted in many foreign radio stations, as well in the German ones. It accused
the British government of lying concerning the key transportation location within Dresden and that the attacks had nothing to do with some defensive works within the town, but had only aimed at living areas and historical buildings. Further, Goebbels pointed out that any eventual surrender of Germany’s would not stop the Allies and that the people could not expect any mercy should they fall into the enemies’ hands, but would be enslaved – that even the Red Army had stopped to spread sheer terror among civilians by targeting them on purpose, but not the ‘barbarians from the island and the US’. Regarding the fact that the international press jumped on that train because of the destroyed historical boroughs, the Germans were for the first time in the role of victims.

While the world discussed sometimes neutrally, sometimes outraged this particular air raid, the war continued. On Friday, after another unrestful night for Hogan and Klink, the Messerschmitt facilities in Regensburg were attacked, which stopped the production of the jet stream engines. Parallel, the Council of Switzerland ordered that all German depots in the Swiss banks closed – all of a sudden, Germany lost one of its last counter values of its already dramatically fallen currency.

Saturday the whole atmosphere in the camp calmed down finally. Klink had been forced to remind his guards that none of the POWs were responsible for what happened in Dresden, while he also told the prisoners firmly to decline any provocations. The mood was loaded enough, and he reminded them that this ‘victory’ for the Allies had been bought with the blood of eventually hundreds of thousands of victims. It was a dance on the high wire for him, but somehow he managed to keep the balance in Stalag 13 between guards and POWs. He also permitted a home relief for three men, whose family lived in Dresden. It was better to let them go officially than telling Burkhalter that they had deserted.

Hogan still waited for a chance to tell Wilhelm of Auschwitz, but as he saw that his secret lover found only slowly back to himself, he delayed the whole thing. Will had to build some distance to everything before he would be confronted with the next news of horror.

Robert visited Barracks 2 now more often, yet he made certain to walk slowly and to prevent any hastily movements. Yet he knew that his stay in Klink’s quarters had to end. He had hurried over the compound on Wednesday, he had climbed down into the tunnels with his old strengths, and even his friends would not accept his excuses for much longer.

He told Klink about his explanation to be still living in the Kommandant’s quarters he used towards his men – that Dr. Birkhorn wanted to check him through before he was declared as healed. Will did not only accept this excuse, he agreed on the whole idea. On the following Monday, he would call the doctor to examine Hogan officially before the colonel would return to his own quarters – something both of them dreaded.

Despite the emotional storm Wilhelm, and also Robert, went through, both found solace and peace in each other’s arms in the night from Saturday to Sunday. And the next night, they made love again. The war’s cruelty once again banned from their shared bed, while they clung to each other with
the urge to be as close as possible, and to forget everything while exchanging tenderness and passion.

Finally, sated and spent, they rested breathlessly on the bed, wrapped around each other, limbs entangled. They knew that this would be the last night they could spend together. After the next day, Hogan would be only a visitor here again.

Robert lay on his back, Will’s head on his shoulder, the fingers of one hand playing with the older man’s soft ring of hair. “I don’t want to go,” he admitted quietly after he caught his breath, feeling an unusual pang of sadness and regret. “I want to stay here – but I would risk both our lives if anybody became suspicious of us.”

Klink sighed and snuggled closer to the younger man, trying to think not too hard about the upcoming separation. He would never forget Robert’s silent comfort within these last, harsh days – and even less, he could not imagine to sleep alone from now on. “I’m going to miss this here,” he whispered. “Not only our love nights, but to fall asleep beside you, to wake up with you in my arms, and to share my life with you.” He lifted his head and pressed a kiss to the still sweat damp shoulder of his American counterpart. “But I know it has to be – at least until this damn war is over, and we can leave this camp to return home.”

Robert cupped the older man cheek and smiled melancholic at him. “If you believe it or not, but this camp here – simple and basic as it is – has become something like a home for me. Last but not least, because of you.” He brushed his lips over Will’s. “Yet I would love to show you the States.” Their eyes met while he continued, “I promise you, my phoenix, when this war is over, I’ll show you the Great Plains, the Grand Canyon, the bayous in Florida, and the Rocky Mountains. We stroll along Broadway, explore Central Park, and greet Miss Liberty. And I’ll show you Miami – and New Orleans. You’re going to love the French Quarter, the typical music they’re playing there, and the mixture of French and Caribbean cuisine.”

Will’s eyes betrayed his yearning – not only to see all those things, but to be surrounded of heal buildings, an intact nature, and happy people. He longed to feel peace again and to go to wherever he wanted without fearing agents of the Gestapo or the SS, overthinking every word before he spoke it. Yet he knew that such a vacation was not meant for him for a few years more – at least concerning the travel to the US. He had his duties here in Germany – not towards the country, but towards his family. He hoped to be able to visit the States sooner or later – together with Robert. Always with Robert. He knew without his witty fox he would fall into a deep dark hole full of loneliness and coldness. He would be able to manage a few weeks without him – as long as they would be for him – but to be separated from him for maybe a longer time was unthinkable. Yet he had the dreading feeling that this lay ahead for him.

Because he did not want to darken their mood, he did not speak of these things now. He did not want to tell Robert that he would have to return to the US without him within the near future, and so
he murmured, “I would love to explore this all together with you.”

Rob smiled and pulled his lover even closer towards himself. “We’ll make this work,” he whispered. “You and me – somehow we’ll make it work. Not only here in the camp, but also later. You have my word. I won’t accept a life without you.”

Klink could not help the smile that spread over his face. Hogan and his optimism. If everything went to hell, Robert Hogan always saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Was it a wonder that he loved his American troublemaker so much? Lying his head back on Rob’s shoulder, he tightened his arms around his beloved, wishing time would stop.

*** HH ***

Monday came far too early for the two men in love. For the last time, they showered together; making love beneath the pouring water. They had breakfast together, what delayed the morning roll call, but for once Klink gave a heck on duty. The mere thought to return to his quarters in the evening and Robert being gone sent chills down his back.

Giving the love of his life one fierce, last kiss and clinging to him for a moment, he finally left the building to attend his duties – feeling Robert’s sad gaze on his back while he walked over the compound, where freezing and grumbling POWs still waited for the roll call.

To keep up their cover and to not wake more suspects as they already did, it was Schultz who brought Hogan in the camp’s truck to the hospital in Hammelburg during the later morning, and not Klink. The colonel was checked thoroughly through, and Dr. Birkhorn found no reasons to declare the American NOT as healed, but warned him not to overdo it in the next few weeks. His body had suffered a lot and had not regained its full strength.

Afterwards, Schultz used the opportunity to place orders of food for the stock of Stalag 13 – getting less than a week ago. The market was simply lacking of larger amounts of basic nourishments, flesh, and vegetables. There was no doubt that sooner or later the inhabitants of the camp had to tighten their belts.

Because he and Hogan were alone in town, a few helping hands put the boxes and bags on the truck before the two men returned to Stalag 13, where several POWs unloaded the truck. Schultz had the big displeasure to inform the Kommandant of the even more streamlined rations. The money he had paid for the few things he got was even less worth than before – and the free offered products were drastically reduced by now.
While Himmler went behind Hitler’s back and contacted the president of the International Red Cross, Folke Bernadotte, to make a peace offer to the West Allies, LeBeau helped Hogan to pack his few belongings and to move them back to Barracks 2, where the colonel shared a common lunch with his men. Only at the sidelines he became aware of another fact in connection with him returning to his own quarters: the deal of LeBeau cooking for both colonels was over now. But Louis, whose sometimes grumpy behavior was only a pretend to mask his far too soft heart, offered to cook here and there for Klink, too. After all, their ‘Balding Eagle’ belonged to them now.

Hogan was welcomed back in the barracks with a loud ‘Hipp-hipp hurray!’, as if a father or brother came home from a very long business trip. LeBeau had prepared some cake, and Robert did not want to know how the tiny Frenchman got a hold of the ingredients. Schultz, who helped him carry his belongings, got a piece of it, smiling and groaning in delight.

For an hour, everything seemed to settle back to normality, but as Hogan stood in his own tiny quarters unpacking his hygiene utensils after the little welcome back party, the reality of this new/old status crashed down onto him.

No, he did not mind the shabby walls, the hard bed, the simple desk, or the old sink which built the furniture. He also ignored how the wind found here and there its way into the room or how it howled around the corner of the little chamber he called ‘his’. He had never been a man who needed luxury to be content. No, he missed the warm and cozy atmosphere he had experienced in Will’s quarters. He missed the soft ticking of the grandfather clock, Will’s scent and… and simply Will’s presence. As his gaze found the top of the stock bed he usually occupied, he knew that he would need nights to get used to this here again. Not because of the miserable excuse of a mattress or the cool air, but because of Wilhelm’s absence.

Good God, he was away from the little house fifty meters away for only an hour, and he already yearned to be back there – together with his German counterpart.

Love and what it could do to a man.

Sighing, he finished unpacking before he returned to the main room. The beaming faces of his friends and comrades distracted him, but he knew that something had changed in him drastically. That nothing would be again like it had been before.

He reported to London that he was back at his original location, what earned him a surprised “You’ve been in the Kommandant’s quarters the whole time?” Hogan only rolled his eyes. What did they think in London? That Klink would kick him out while he was still injured and healing? Had they not learned anything about the man who protected Hogan and his men for two years now? He
growled inwardly. Sometimes the staff was really slow. It had to be with being placed at a desk most the time. And he knew that would delay any commotion as long as possible to avoid the fate to become a slow, thinking individual.

Evening roll call happened at the usual time, and Robert could not deny that he felt a soft stab in his chest as he lined up with the others and watched Klink coming out of his office, steps in hurry, stance bowed, one hand on his back, the other clinging onto his riding crop. Their eyes met, and only Rob saw the short pain in those blue eyes before Wilhelm straightened his shape.

“Prisoners, like you already saw, Colonel Hogan healed up nicely and was declared as cured from the doctor. From now on, he can return to his duties as Senior POW officer of this camp – and I hope, Colonel, you give me a little less trouble than usual.”

It was odd. Strange to hear Klink addressing him so formally, but he knew that this had to be done to keep up their cover.

“As long as you don’t give us trouble, Kommandant, I’m as nice as a schoolboy.”

The first laughter was to hear.

“Hogan, if you were only half as good as a schoolboy like you’re now, then I’m taking your words as a sincere warning.”

More laughter, while the two officers exchanged a look no one could portend.

“All right, Gentlemen, dismissed!” Klink waved them off, gave Robert a last intense glance, and returned to his office. God, he would delay the return to his quarters as much as he could. He almost feared to step into the empty building without the younger man waiting for him.

The Heroes had watched the little scene and took now a closer look at their friend as he turned around to them. For a moment, something seemed to cloud his eyes, then he put on a brave face. “As it seems, I have to convince him of me being a ‘good boy’ during the next games of chess,” Rob grinned. “And maybe I should remind him as soon as possible.” Whistling, he walked towards Barracks 2.

And in the background, Newkirk shoved his hand beneath LeBeau’s nose. “I won,” he said.
“Oui, I know. I owe you one British Pound now,” Louis sighed.

Kinchloe stopped beside them. “On what did you bet?”

“And the first excuse the gov’nor would use to visit Klink in secret,” Newkirk deadpanned, smirking from one ear to the next.

Hogan’s second in command groaned, already assuming that this would not be the last bet the others would put on their CO’s white lies to get to his secret lover.

TBC…

Well, you can imagine, what kind of excuses and how many of them Hogan/Klink will come up with to see each other in semi-privacy. In the next chapter, both are almost overdoing it, while the Heroes laugh the head off.

Parallel another real history event lays the base for the last episode of the TV-show, namely “Rockets or Romance”, in which our two lovebirds will have to play the acting-roles of their life...

I hope, you liked this chapter more, and I also hope to get some feedback.

Have a nice rest of Sunday and a good start into the next week,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Just like promised, here is the next chapter. It’s a more fluffy and funny one in the beginning, just to ‘make-up’ for the last two dark ones. Our boys really need a break for once, and even if Hogan lives in his own quarters again now, he and Will find enough chances to see each other in private – sometimes with a crazy outcome. Parallel they’re acting officially like they had done before – by bickering, yet sticking in an odd way together; not knowing that the Heroes know about them as good as everything.

In this chapter I also refer to a historical detail that will be the base for the original episode “Rockets and Romance”, the last one of the TV-show. And the following two chapters will approach this episode, yet it won’t be a retelling, but rather the whole adventure is written with additional scenes and mention of filmed sequences. The whole thing begins at the end of this chapter, and I really hope you’re going to like it.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 54 – Hide and seek

Klink was more than happy to find Robert in his quarters after he finished his duty for today and walked with dread to the little building. He was even more surprised to find his beloved sitting there, waiting for him – with a set-up chessboard and two glasses of cognac no less.

“I told them that I owe you a revenge for the lost chess game of yesterday night.” He smirked.

Wilhelm, beaming like mad, began to chuckle. “Chess game. This is how you Americans are calling
a passionate love night?"

Hogan’s grin became even more broad. “Well, preparing everything, planning the seduction, and winning in the end is a certain kind of strategy – just like you need it to win a chess game.”

Klink began to laugh and closed the distance to him. “You and your excuses. I think you’ll never run out of them.” He pulled the younger man close to him and whispered, “I’m glad that you’re here. Then the separation isn’t…that hard.”

Rob smiled and captured the older man’s lips with his own. The chess game was instantly forgotten.

*** HH ***

He returned far too late at night and faced a not too amused Kinchloe, who had been waiting for him. After all, Kinch couldn’t ban his superior from the Barracks by closing the secret entrance. “Anderson sleeps in my bed.” He grumbled, referring to the flyer whose bed built the hidden door to the tunnels.

“Sorry, Kinch. Klink and I got carried away.” Rob murmured, making certain that the collar of his leather jacket was turned up to cover the hickeys.

“This, I’m believing,” the radioman deadpanned, avoiding to look at Hogan. He knew that, otherwise he would give away that he knew exactly what was going on between the two colonels.

Smiling sheepishly, Hogan gestured to him to go first and followed him, tiptoeing to his quarters to not disturb the others. He knew that he had to be more careful, or his friends would get suspicious sooner or later. Yet, he couldn’t help the grin that spread over his features as soon as he was back in his own quarters. He and Will had made love in almost desperate urge, and it had been wonderful – until Hogan had to get dressed again and vanished in the tunnels. He would have paid a whole month’s salary to stay with his secret lover for the rest of the night, but these times were over for now. Those stolen hours were all that was left for them.

And as he climbed up the stock bed and lay down on the hard mattress, he felt the cool air coming partly through the wooden planks the hut was made of, and he knew that he wouldn’t get used to this again.
“Why are you sleeping in Anderson’s bed, Kinchloe?” Schultz’s loud and distrusting voice woke Hogan up the next morning. For a moment, he was absolutely disoriented as he saw the wooden ceiling so close to his face, smelled the damp material of the bed cloths, and heard noises from the room next door, then he remembered: he was back in his own quarters, separated from Will.

Dammit!

He was really missing what he had had during the last few weeks.

“I’ve had nightmares during the last few nights and almost fell out of bed a few times. Anderson was nice to switch beds with me so that I don’t get hurt should I really fall out of it,” Kinchloe’s voice sounded from the next door, and Hogan chuckled quietly; betting that Schultz wouldn’t buy this one.

He was right.

“Nightmares? Falling out of bed? You? After more than three years? Don’t tell me fish tales here, young man. You’re up to some new monkey business! I knew it. Colonel Hogan is barely back here, and you boys are giving me the greys again.”

Hogan jumped down from the upper bed and walked to the door, bare footed and clad in his usual pajamas. “Good morning, everyone,” he greeted casually and smiled at the large Bavarian. “Schultz.”

“Good morning, Colonel Hogan,” the Sergeant of the Guards answered, looking rather irritated with him. “Please tell me that you don’t plan any monkey business again, Herr Hogan. I’m already punished enough with the Big Shot having a mood that is in the lowest cellar level.”

Surprised, Hogan cocked his head. “What got knickers in his boxers? Does he miss me already this much?”

Newkirk coughed, while LeBeau quickly began to search his bunk for something, hiding his smirk. Schultz gaped at him for a second before he laughed loud and far too faked. “In your dreams, Colonel Hogan,” he said, shaking his head.
It told Robert everything he needed to know. Will was angry with the whole situation that he woke up alone, and that they both couldn’t share their lives together anymore…at least until the war ended. He could understand Wilhelm; he himself had slept miserably and missed the older man to an extent that was almost laughable. But they had to keep up the charade, or they would be in deep water.

“Well, I’ll talk with him later. Maybe I can cheer him up,” he said, returning towards his quarters.

“I’ll bet my last shirt that you can cheer him up,” Kinchloe whispered under his breath and caught the suddenly sharp gaze of the large Bavarian.

“What was this, Sergeant?” Schultz asked formally.

“I said that the Colonel certainly can cheer up our Balding Eagle. He always could.” He shrugged, looking harmlessly at the older German.

Hans grumbled something and turned towards the door. “Hurry up, boys! Roll call is in a quarter hour.” He raised his voice. “The same goes for you, Colonel Hogan!”

“I know,” came the slurred reply from the tiny quarters at the end of the hut, showing that Hogan was brushing his teeth.

Gripping his rifle more tightly, Schultz left the Barracks knowing that something was going on.

*** HH ***

The next few days went by in relative peace…at least within the camp. Outside, the war continued with all its cruellness. The troops of the West Allies conquered most parts of the German area at the left side of the Rhine River. The US Air Corps and the RAF flew strong attacks against Nürnberg, Dortmund, and Duisburg to destroy more weapon factories. In the east, the Red Army enlarged the liberated parts.

In the very early morning, even before roll call, Kinchloe heard the peeping of an incoming radio call and hurried down the ladder into the tunnels. He affirmed the message and climbed back upwards into the Barracks, closing the entrance the moment Schultz came in to shoo them all outside.
“One moment, Schultzie,” he said, almost running to Hogan, who just came out of his quarters. He looked a little bit tired, which was no wonder after another ‘chess marathon’ with Klink. This time, it had been officially with Hogan going to the Kommandant’s quarters after dinner and being accompanied back by him at almost midnight. Kinch asked himself how long those two would be able to keep on going like this, because the little sleep they were getting was plain to see on both their faces by now.

“Colonel, message from London. They advise us to stay during the later morning in our Barracks. The weather is finally good enough for a certain mission of the British boys they planned for a few days now.”

Hogan frowned. “Here – in the area of Hammelburg? What is so important here that…”

“A large, wide-spread air raid over all of Germany, aiming only for road and rail junctions,” Kinch said quietly under his breath. “They say they sent approximately 3,700 bombers. They are already over the north and west of Germany.”

Robert gaped at him and shook his head. “Bravo. A super idea – destroying the roads and rails we need for our own troops,” he commented sarcastically. “I ask myself whom of those desk-jockeys came up with that splendidous plan!” He placed the cap on his head and left the Barracks, waving Schultz off, who was complaining about Hogan and Kinchloe’s delay.

“Ah, Colonel Hogan and Sergeant Kinchloe.” They were greeted by an already waiting Oberst Klink. “How nice of you two to finally join us.”

For a moment, Robert felt thrown back in time to those days he and Klink were simply opponent officers, their friendship barely in progress to becoming real. Then he saw the hidden question in his secret lover’s eyes that was masked so perfectly with a scowl on his face.

“Sorry, Kommandant. I simply hang too long at the phone while talking with Mom. And she so wanted to have an advisory from Kinch concerning her radio. She loves those broadcasts about the baseball team of…”

“HOOOGAN!” Klink bellowed, swinging his fist with a huff. “The day you speak with your ‘Mom’ via phone from this camp is the day I grant you this little consolation, because you Allies lost the war.”
Robert tore his eyes wide open in faked shock. “What…I shall never talk with Mom again because *we* win the war?”

Many of the POWs were laughing by now, relieved to hear the familiar bickering between the two highest ranking officers again. In their eyes, normality had finally returned to the camp. Robert only grinned at his German counterpart, answered with a tiny nod from the older man. Message received.

Raising his voice, Klink called, “Diiiiissmisssssed!” Then he addressed the colonel. “I think your time off as the senior POW officer made you lazy, Hogan. Into my office. Now!” He pointed a strong finger at the *Kommandantur*, and Hogan made a big show of frustration and half-hearty protest, but obeyed.

Kinch stuck his fists into the pockets of his jacket, while Newkirk, LeBeau, and Cater closed the distance to him. “I’m really at a loss here,” Kinch said quietly, with barely hidden amusement in his voice.

“About what?” Peter wanted to know.

“Which of those two is going to win the Oscar this year.”

His friends began to chuckle and walked back towards the Barracks, curious of the reason London had called them before roll call happened.

*** HH ***

The office door had barely closed as Klink’s eyes already hung questioningly at the younger man, whose dark circles under the eyes betrayed how tired he was. Well, he – Klink – was tired himself, but for nothing in the world he would miss the opportunities he and Robert got to be together in the late evening.

The last three days, mainly the mornings and the early evenings, had been anything but pleasant. He missed his beloved fox sharing his quarters with him terribly. Okay, Hogan had come on Monday and Wednesday evening, and they had made intense love; laying together afterwards entangled on Will’s bed. Their fooling around first and the aftermath later had been mingled with relief to be together again, but the two times Robert had been forced to leave in the late evening had showed them the harsh truth. And even worse were the mornings. To wake up cold and alone in his bed had
almost pained Will. And to smell Rob’s scent in the bedclothes had only strengthened his longing for his American counterpart’s presence.

He also skipped from having lunch in his quarters. He preferred to stay in his office. Like this, he was less reminded that his ‘flat’ was empty now – with no one waiting for him. Robert at least had his friends to distract him, while Wilhelm had no one to keep him company. Yet, the Oberst had learned from his beloved that Rob missed the simple sharing of each other’s life just like he did. Not that this was any comfort. It was the proof that they both were more or less miserable, but there was no way to change the current living arrangements back to what they were during the last six weeks.

And when the war was over, they would really be separated, only for much longer – a prospect Klink did not want to think of.

Concentrating on the reason for Robert being in the Kommandantur, he said quietly, “Alright, spill. What’s going on? Who was the real ‘mom’ at the radio?”

Hogan sighed and watched Will removing his cap and gloves. God, how much he loathed to see the older man only sporadically besides their stolen hours in the evenings. As much as it was fun to be with his friends again, he simply missed the calm time in the morning together with Wilhelm, the comfortable talks and discussions during lunch, and the cozy life in the evening.

Rob rebuked himself. Hell, when the war was over, they certainly would be separated at first. Not for long – for this Hogan would take care of – yet rationality told him that his wish for them leaving Germany together for the US was illusory. So, he could regard this new-old status of their position as a ‘training’ for later, but it didn’t mean that he had to like it.

Turning his thought to the new information he got from his superiors, he began. “You should order that all prisoners are restricted to their Barracks until the later morning. Come up with an excuse for some inspection of the wires and the watch towers, or something like that, or…”

“What for?” Klink asked, perplex. “You know how much this would make them all even grumpier than usual and…”

“I think 3,700 bombers are reason enough to rather bear the men’s grousing then presenting them to danger,” Robert interrupted him, frustrated.

“What?” Klink breathed. “And they’re flying to Hammelburg?” His voice became alarming shrill.
“No, they’ll try to break down the traffic in Germany by attacking important roads and rails,” Hogan huffed, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “Like this, your Wehrmacht and SS can’t transport supply to the fronts, but the plan will also result in the fact that we’ll have a problem to make advances into Germany as quick as it was done until now. Super plan, if you ask me,” he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

“And two roads which come from Hammelburg and leading to the east and to the south are one of the more used traffic ways of the SS,” Klink nodded in understanding. “One mislead missile, and it can get very uncomfortable in our camp.” He threw up his hands. “Great. Your Air Corps really knows how to begin a day.”

“Thanks for the compliment, but this strike is done by the Brits,” Hogan corrected with a grimace.

“And that makes which difference exactly?” Klink snorted and leaned against his desk, his right hand almost shoving the Pickelhaube away as he braced himself at the desktop. “I’ll give the order in half an hour. Is it early enough?”

Hogan shrugged. “I hope so. As we were summoned to roll call, London just radioed us and told us that their boys are already over the north of Germany.”

“In other words, in less than an hour they’ll be here.” He shook his head. “Dammit, that interrupts breakfast.” He straightened his shape before he stopped dead in his tracks. “Oooh Mist (shit)! Fräulein Hilda!”

Hogan gasped. Sweet Lord, in half an hour, Hilda would come to the camp. And if the air fighters were quicker, then she was in real danger to be hit on accident.

Klink already had the phone receiver in his hand, demanding of the telephone exchange in Hammelburg to be linked to the Schneiders, priority one. Both looked at each other, deeply worried that the call could be too late.

“How? Herr Schneider?” Will spoke up. “Is your daughter still at home?” The seconds Hogan didn’t know what the other man answered seemed to crawl like a snake, then he saw the utterly relief on his lover’s face and sighed deeply. “She’s still at home? Very good. Please let me talk to her. Thank you.” He grinned at Robert and waited a moment before he continued. “Fräulein Hilda? Oberst Klink here. Sorry for the early call, but I’m glad that I could still reach you. We have to make an inspection of the wires and the gates here, and we have to shut down energy for it. That means that a
little chaos is to be expected. It will be better if you stay home today.” He listened and forced a laugh over his lips. “Don’t fear, my dear, the work on your desk will not run away. Take the day off, okay? Robert suggests the same.”

At home, Hilda knew instantly that the ‘inspection’ was an excuse and that her boss wanted her to stay at home for her own safety. ‘Robert’, spoken in German, meant nothing more than something was about to happen. From the Underground or the Allies. And as Klink added an, “How is your father’s work at your cellars proceeding,” warning bells rang in her head. The danger that telephone lines were intercepted by the Gestapo – even lines of the Luftwaffe – was nothing new, so the Oberst had to speak in riddles. And ‘cellar’ obviously meant that she, her parents, and Little Manfred should make themselves ready to find shelter in the cellars. In other words, he expected an air raid over this area. She felt her belly clenching.

“Oh, thank you for your polite question, Herr Oberst. He was able to repair the wooden beams and wires.”

“That’s good to hear. Please give him once again my greeting. I’ll see you tomorrow. Auf Wiedersehen.” The link went dead, and Hilda looked at her parents.

“Make yourself ready to go to the cellars,” she said strongly, walking towards the stairs to go to her room where the baby rested. “I’ll get Manfred.”

“What for?” Her father asked, alarmed.

“The Herr Oberst gave me a warning. He got information that an air raid over this area is about to happen.”

*** HH ***

“They’ll do what?” LeBeau stared with big eyes at his superior and friend, while Newkirk, who nipped at the bitter tasting coffee, snorted.

“Blimey, first we shovel this damn road and pass free, then our boys damage it, and then we’re going to have it to repair again. I understand something different under the word ‘hobby’.”

“They can wait until they turn blue,” Louis said, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “I won’t
move one finger for one of those damn roads here ever again.”

He couldn’t assume how wrong he was about the latter. That exactly this would become a part of their next mission.

The door opened, and Schultz stepped in. “Every POW is restricted to the Barracks until midday!” He announced, receiving protests for it. “RUHE (silence), it’s an order from the Big Shot. The energy will be cut down for an hour or so to make a check on the wires’ function and therefore none of you troublemakers can be outside.”

He shot Hogan a glare, knowing deep down that the American colonel was responsible for this ‘test’ Klink had ordered. He only didn’t see the reason for it, but he was, after all, only a simple sergeant with too much responsibility and too low of a salary, while Klink and Hogan were the officers. So…

Alarm sounded all of sudden. Not the alert of escape, but the up and down for an air raid warning.

Schultz whirled around surprisingly quick for his large belly. “Was zum Teufel… (What the heck)!”

Hogan grimaced and looked at his wristwatch. Damn, the British bombers were quick that they were already so near. Slipping out of the Barracks, ignoring Schultz’s order to stay inside, he looked up into the skies from where the first noises were to hear.

Klink left the Kommandantur, clad in coat and cap, riding crop and his beloved Pickelhaube under his arms. With a loud voice, he gave orders for most of his men to seek out cover, while he hurried over the compound. From afar, the first whistle of falling bombs were to hear, followed by loud detonations.

“What your comrades attacking now even POW camps?” He shouted from afar, keeping up the façade he and Hogan had agreed on.

“They’re bombing something a kilometer away or so,” Hogan called back with loud voice. “I didn’t know that our camp is THIS large that you assume they’re attacking us. You should consider to encircle the new Barracks with our wires, too. Otherwise the new POWs could get the wrong idea of being in a camp at all.”

The joke was not lost on Klink, while he stopped beside his American counterpart. Sweet Lord, was
there ever something this man could take serious?

“Very funny, Hogan,” he answered, loud enough for the others within a range of a few meters to be heard, and flinched heavily as several more detonations were heard. “Damn, they’ve come even nearer!” He growled.

With worry, Robert saw stones and ripped off branches flying through the air not far away. “Blast it!” he growled, gripped Klink at the collar and pulled him with him into the Barracks, pushing Schultz into it, too.

“This they’re already doing – blasting things,” Carter deadpanned, but stopped his smirk as he received a few glares, including from the two officers.

“You should use this instead of carrying it,” Kinchloe said to Klink, pointing at the *Pickelhaube*. “If the ceiling should come down, there is at least the chance that this pointy end pierced the wood before it can reach your head.”

The *Oberst* didn’t know if Hogan’s second in command was pulling his leg or was serious, so he only grimaced at him and went deeper into the Barracks. The same moment the ground began to shake, and dust fell down on them.

“Beneath the table!” Klink and Hogan shouted parallel, exchanged a quick look, and went for cover. The others, including a wheezing Schultz, followed them.

Huddled up like a bunch of ferrets, the men cowered under the table, Robert and Will side by side. Rob felt the soft tremors that went through his secret lover’s body and glanced shortly at him. Klink’s face was pale, his eyes were wide and dark. There was no question that he remembered the air raid in Berlin twenty days ago. He laid one hand on Wilhelm’s hand and squeezed it, trying to comfort him while outside, detonations ripped through the air accompanied by the booming of the bombers.

The attack was over as quickly as it had begun. As the noises vanished, Klink and Hogan exchanged another short glance with each other, checking if the other one was okay. Then they crawled out from under the table. Helping each other to their feet, the two officers went to the door to have a look at the camp.

Behind them a loud ‘bang’ was to hear, some chuckles and Schultz’s swearing as he obviously hit his head at the table plate. At least he wore his steal helmet so that there was no damage done beside
to his pride.

Stepping out on the compound, both colonels glanced carefully around, but it seemed the camp was still completely intact. From afar, they saw dust filling the air and some smoke that build a line towards the south. One look to the north, where Hammelburg was located, and they became aware of a far more alerting smoke rising into the skies.

“Not the rail station again!” Klink groaned. “Dammit, how shall we get enough food for the town and the camp if your damn flyers destroy all the rails and roads?”

“Well, this is the other side of the coin of hindering the *Wehrmacht* and SS of transporting supplies for themselves,” Hogan murmured, knowing that the rationed food could bloom into a real problem for all of them within the following weeks.

One by one the other POWs left the Barracks and stepped onto the compound, while in the watch towers, the guards rose from their cowering position, looked warily around, and pointed some rifles at the prisoners, but there was no need for it. Most gathered in groups and began to talk, pointing to the dusty and smoky tracks the attack had left.

“Herr Kommandant, shall we begin with the wire tests?” Schultz asked quietly from behind the two officers.

Klink went rigid. “Now – after a nearby air raid?” He snapped. “There are more important things to do now, Dummkopf!”

“Will, this surprise package from our boys isn’t Schultz’s fault – or your jumpiness,” Robert whispered. “He is your friend and had the same nasty experience in Berlin like you. Don’t forget this, please.”

The Oberst rolled his eyes. Yes, he and Schultz had been through the same thing in Berlin, and the large Bavarian was his friend; but sometimes the man’s stupidity really got on his nerves. Yet he knew that he shouldn’t be too harsh to him. Schultz was no officer who was trained to adjust decisions to changed situations. He was only a sergeant – and someone who kept his and Robert’s relationship a secret. Looking over his shoulder, he said kindlier now, “Take a few of our guards and the truck and have a look if people were hurt around the camp. And check the roads. As it seems, the Allies attacked the traffic lines now.”
Hans nodded, saluted and walked away, shouting for a dozen men to accompany him.

Hogan pushed his hands in the pockets of his jacket. “Well, if our flyers were successful like they were obviously here, Goering and Himmler have a new big problem at hand.”

“I couldn’t care less,” Klink scoffed beneath his breath. Then he turned around, voice louder and formally now. “Continue whatever you’re doing, Hogan. You and your men. The order to be restricted to the Barracks is ceased.”

Robert saluted casually to keep up the pretense for the guards in the watch towers. Klink returned the military greeting before he stomped towards the Kommandantur.

“Sir, Colonel Klink forgot his Pickelhaube beneath the table,” Carter said, offering his superior the old fashioned helmet.

Hogan hid a smile as he saw it, grateful that fate had presented him with another reason to seek out his secret lover in the evening.

*** HH ***

The attack of the Allies, which was meant only for the traffic junctures in Germany, hit more than 9,000 targets. 90% of every traffic possibility within the country was interrupted or delayed any transportations for many days.

While Klink had worried for the replenishment of nourishment for the camp, General Burkhalter in Berlin was furious for another reason. The test of the mobile rocket launchers should have begun the next day. The weapons were already on their way to North-Bavaria, but were now stuck near Fulda. This meant a delay of two or three days until the road they had to use would be drivable at all.

Hitler demanded that the next counter strike against England should be done within the next two or three days as vengeance for Dresden, yet to use the V2 of the main base in Peenemünde was difficult. Peenemünde, on the island Usedom, where the large test area was located, had been spotted by the Russians and had suffered serious damages. To attack from there was out of question. Therefore, the Führer demanded that the test of the mobile rocket launchers was also the ordered counter attack, together with squadrons of the Luftwaffe. In other words, the tests had to be done within the next few days, no matter what – and damaged roads be dammed.
The leading staff of the Reichs ministry for traffic and rail was called to the Führer, who demanded impossibilities. The most important roads and railways had to be repaired within a week – and those between Hessen and North-Bavaria within two days.

Already in the evening, an official ‘requirement’ was broadcasted asking the people to support the repairs by ‘swinging the shovels’. Parallel, Himmler ordered SS-members, who didn’t have other tasks, to do the same.

Burkhalter was relieved that the tests maybe still could happen in a short range of time. Where he earlier had still believed that an agreement could be made with the Allies, he had given up any faith after Dresden. For the moment, he was convinced what the government in Berlin said: that the his people couldn’t expect any mercy from the Allies. Okay, he was Austrian, but he lived for more than thirty years now in Germany, felt like a German, and had sworn to protect ‘his’ people. And if this meant to fight ‘til death, so be it. The period of grace he always had followed was over.

The more he was enraged as he received a call from SS-General Freiberger at his flat in Berlin-Kreuzberg, informing him that a higher ranking officer of the Luftwaffe in Berlin Headquarters was under suspicion of being a spy and was on the run now, Burkhalter cursed. If this traitor knew details about the upcoming project, then the Underground and London would learn about it, too.

Therefore, the whole start of the project was even more urgent – and swearing under his breath, he continued to pack his luggage to travel to Hammelburg. Given the damaged traffic-net, he would need many hours to reach his destiny: Stalag 13.

Sighing, his gaze found the bag in which Klink’s, Schultz’s, and Schmidt’s belongings were packed, which had been retrieved from the bunker they had slept in the day prior to Hochstetter’s trial. He hadn’t found any time to send them to Stalag 13, and so he gestured to his ordonnance to take the bag to his staff car. He hadn’t forgotten that Klink’s foresight had saved his and the others’ life, and to play the deliverer for once was the least he could do.

An hour later, he was on his way to North-Bavaria, hoping that everything would run to his satisfaction and that this blasted ‘Papa Bear’ wouldn’t get into the way for once.

*** HH ***

Klink obviously didn’t miss his Pickelhaube the whole day – or he simply realized that Robert could use this as an excuse to visit him in the evening. Saying ‘until later’, Hogan slipped into the tunnels after dinner, the helmet beneath one arm. The radio station was unmanned, and only a few petroleum lights were on as he walked beneath the ground towards the Kommandant’s quarters. For the darker
parts, he used a hand lamp that enlightened the last remaining part of his way.

Klink offered him a helping hand as he climbed out of the hole beneath the furnace in the living room. “Ah, I knew you would bring it.” He smiled, taking the beloved helmet his father once wore to the dresser at the wall.

“I thought you would miss it.” Robert smirked, pushing the furnace back to its original place; cursing as he almost burnt his hands.

“Yes, but I knew that I would get both things I miss if I left it in your Barracks: the helmet AND you.”

Hogan laughed. “Who is the fox here?”

“It’s still you – but a phoenix is clever, too. After all, to burn only to be born anew is a clever way to escape death.” He cocked his head. “And that’s what happened to me. I burn in your love and passion – and since then, I’m reborn.”

The younger man smiled, his eyes full of warmth and tenderness. Closing the distance to his secret lover, he pulled him into his arms. He didn’t want to think of how close to death they had come to in their camp today. If only one bomb had missed its target, then…

No, he didn’t want to think of it. And the same went for Klink. He had faced death within the last six weeks so often, he wouldn’t allow the Grim Reaper’s shadow to intrude his mood and those hours in which he could hold his beloved in his arms.

Their mouths met first gently and almost teasingly, then more firmly and heated. It didn’t last long until they made their way to the bedroom, pulling off each other’s clothes and letting them fall where they were.

*** HH ***

“And you’re certain that this big thing, whatever it is, is planned for the Hammelburg area?” Hans Wagner, one of the leading Underground members in North-Bavaria, listened closely to his contact in Berlin via the radio. They had to keep the talks short to hinder the Gestapo from finding out their location.
“Okay, we’ll arrange the meeting. Roger and out,” he said after half a minute, and put the headset down on the table while switching off the radio.

“And?” Little Red Riding Hood leaned against the wall and watched him, her eyes firm, yet soft.

“They said that something big from the Luftwaffe is planned for Hammelburg. General Burkhalter is in command of the project.”

“Burkhalter?” The woman frowned. “I thought he is only responsible for the POW camps.”

Wagner shrugged. “Obviously they’re running out of generals – or Stalag 13 is involved.” He sighed. “Major Heintzer of the Luftwaffe, a defector, is on his way to Hammelburg to give more details to us. The problem is that the Gestapo is already after him. So the meeting has to be done quickly and secretly. That screams for Papa Bear. Hogan must find out what’s going on.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “It’s past midnight. None of his men will be down in the tunnels now. I’ll call him tomorrow early in the morning. Major Heintzer will reach the area during midday. This means that Hogan would have to leave the camp during the day…no easy task. But knowing him, he’ll come up with an idea. Maybe he and his men can volunteer for the job of repairing the roads. They said at the radio that everyone who can hold a shovel is required to help with the repairs. Like this, he can contact the major. I’ll clear the details in the morning.”

*** HH ***

Morning came, and for once again, the weather wasn’t snowy or windy. The sun that had shone here and there the last few days had melted some of the snow, yet spring was still far away.

Hogan woke up with a weight lying upon him and a long arm around his waist. A smile played around his lips, while he tightened his own arms around the lanky form of his secret lover, happy to feel Will’s proximity, and content with the soft mattress and warm blankets which covered them. This was a far better way to wake up instead of turning around over and over again on the bunk in his own tiny quarters, sans the older man in whose closeness he drank now like a starving man. This here was far better, and…

One moment!

There was some light that shone through the closed curtains, which meant that it was morning…and
he was still in Klink’s quarters???

Opening his eyes, he quickly glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand beside him. A half hour prior to roll call.

SHIT!

“Will,” he whispered hurriedly. “Wake up!”

Klink grumbled something and snuggled closer to him. Not that Robert minded it. Not the tiniest bit. But just right now, it came anything but in handy.

“Will, we fell asleep, and it’s already morning,” he said, louder this time.

“’s okay,” the older man mumbled, obviously still more asleep than awake.

“Oh, for the love of God!” He gently, but firmly pushed Wilhelm down from him and sat up. One glance on the floor where his and Will’s clothes lay wide spread, and he groaned loudly. Great! He had fallen asleep after their love making, giving into his lover’s plea to stay a little bit longer, and now look what that led to: he had slept the whole night through.

Well, he had needed a good and restful night’s sleep, because it was the first one since he moved back into his own quarters. But how he should explain his absence during the whole night to his men was a miracle for him.

Klink finally woke up. Blinking into the semi-darkness, he glanced at his beloved who sat beside him; hair tousled, fingerprints on his back, and obviously unsettled. “What’s the matter, hon?” He asked, still too satisfied with the current situation to think clearer of it.

“I slept the whole night here! Pray to what I’m going to say to my men?” Hogan sighed and scratched his head, which messed up his hair even more.

Will smiled from half-hooded eyes at him, loving the sight Hogan gave in the moment as the oversized boy in the well-built body of a handsome man. “The truth,” he shrugged. “The half-truth.
We had a game – of chess, of course – you fell asleep and only woke up now.”

“And they’re so going to believe that,” Robert scoffed.

“Why not? Don’t forget, they have no clue what’s going on between us. Why should they not believe you if you tell them that you fell asleep on the sofa and woke up this morning? Maybe you should complain about a stiff neck and back, then they certainly won’t doubt any word from you.”

Looking down on his lover, Rob began to chuckle and shook his head. “Never tell me again you’re at loss for excuses.” He sighed again. The damage was done; all he could do now was try to wriggle himself out of the mess he brought himself into. “But one thing we can’t do now, and I really will miss it.”

“And what is it?” Will asked, pulling the blanket higher above himself.

“To have a shower with you. They’re never going to believe the story of ‘falling asleep’ if I come back from here freshly washed and neat.”

Klink began to chuckle, feeling absolutely glorious after having a full night with his beloved beside him again. “You’re the expert of masks, pretends and covers, my witty fox. I’m sure you can fool them.” He winked at Hogan, who rolled his eyes before he bent down and stole a kiss from the older man before left the bed.

Five minutes later, he climbed back into the tunnels, called a “And once again, thank you for your kind hospitality, Kommandant!” before he closed the furnace. Should someone who didn’t belong to his inner circle being down here, his formal addressing of the Oberst wouldn’t wake any suspects.

The tunnels were quiet and dark. Thank the Lord that he had taken a hand light with him as he brought back the Pickelhaube yesterday evening. He crept down the underground halls, hoping that maybe his men were already up and not down here.

Then he heard it; the unmistakable noises of someone morsing the radio, accompanied by silent voices.

“And you’re certain the Underground tried to contact us?” This was Baker.
“Yes, I heard the radio spring alive while I shaved.” This was Newkirk.

Hogan groaned inwardly. He already could imagine their faces. Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the radio room, and was instantly in the focus of Baker and Newkirk.

“’morning, gentlemen,” he greeted.

“Good morning, Colonel,” Baker replied, surprised to see his superior coming not from Barracks 2 above them, but from the tunnel system.

“’morning, Gov’nor,” Peter said, casually straightening his shape. “Sleep well?” He asked neutrally, hiding his amusement.

“Yes and no,” Hogan sighed, moving his shoulders and rolling his head. “I fell asleep on Klink’s sofa while our Balding Eagle was preparing some tea. I only woke up now.”

Newkirk nodded very seriously. “That certainly wasn’t very comfortable,” he faked sympathy.

Hogan snorted. “You can say that. My back and my neck are giving me hell,” he complained.

Peter had stuck his hands into his trouser pockets and cocked his head, still very ‘sincere’. “It was nice for Klink to let you sleep there instead of kicking you out.”

“Yeah, he even spread a blanket over me. He really can be like a father sometimes.” He came nearer and directed his attention on Baker, missing Newkirk’s barely hidden grin.

‘Like a father indeed. Rather like a lover. And I guess this ‘blanket’ was our Kommandant himself,’ he thought, laughing his head off inwardly. He really asked himself how long Hogan wanted to keep up the pretense until he would admit the truth.

Robert glanced down on Baker, ignoring the smirk that lingered around the radioman’s mouth. “Some news?” he asked.
Richard sighed. “That’s what I just tried to find out. Newkirk informed me that he heard some noises from the radio ten minutes ago, and I sent a message to the Underground in Hammelburg and to London, asking whom of them tried to reach us. No answer until now. They’re more than careful in the moment.”

Hogan nodded, then he looked askingly at Newkirk. “What about Kinchloe? Why did you need to get Baker down? It’s not his shift and…”

“Kinch coughed almost the whole night,” Peter explained. “He caught a cold, we think. To send him down here would be…”

“… more than unhealthy, I understand,” Robert agreed. “Well done, Newkirk.” He glanced at his wristwatch. “Twenty minutes ‘til roll call. About time I make myself presentable. Keep me updated, Baker.” He smiled at the radioman, clapped his shoulder, and climbed up the ladder into the Barracks.

“Bonjour, mon colonel,” LeBeau greeted him, slipping into his sweater. “Had a pleasant night?” He made certain not to look in Hogan’s direction, as he couldn’t help himself but ask this double meaning question.

“As pleasant as you can sleep on a sofa,” Hogan groaned, staying true to the story. “My back is giving me hell,” he added and rolled his head for good measurement.

“Poor colonel,” LeBeau teased, smirking at him. “I’ll give you a back massage later,” he offered with a far too kind smile Hogan simply ignored.

“That would be nice, Louis, merci,” he replied and headed to his quarters. He was not aware of the amused gazes on his back, as LeBeau and Kinchloe watched him go before they glanced at each other. Newkirk climbed out of the tunnels at the same moment, saw the door to Hogan’s office closing, and turned his attention to his two friends. All three had real problems to not burst out laughing, while Carter glanced with confused innocence at them.

And down in the tunnels, Baker answered the incoming hail, not knowing that this would be the beginning of a chain of events that would steer all their fates within the future until the end of the war.
Yes, you really could ask yourself, why Hogan doesn’t realize that his friends know more than they let on. But what you don’t want to see, you simply don’t see – that goes even for clever-scheming Underground-agents.

Like I said in the little prologue, the next chapter will refer to the first part of “Rocket and Romances” – a mission that will lead to much more and is going to have a lot of ramifications.

I hope, you liked the new chapter, including the ‘fooling-around’ of our two lovebirds in secret, while they in public act as if nothing happened – at least on the surface. I really would love to get some reviews about it, so please tell me if you liked it or not.

Have a nice rest of Friday and a beautiful weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so very much for the feedback. I’m glad that you liked the last chapter so much, especially the more funny and sweet moments. Yes, our lovebirds have to be carefully or they really get caught – despite the fact that the ‘Heroes’ already know about them.

Like I hinted in the last epilogue, this and the next two chapters are about “Rockets or Romance”, but only a few scenes from the original episode are there, I rather wrote some background or things which hadn’t been shown, added a few more happenings following the original scenes and also put some thoughts into details, which maybe happened this way. I also tried to explain why Burkhalter all of sudden is so icy and hostile towards Hogan. There are more certain scenes, which I wrote from another point of view – for example the quarrel in Klink’s office. I hope, you’re going to like it.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 55 – The first quarrel

Just before roll call happened, Hogan got the message from the Underground concerning the facts that the Nazis were obviously planning something ‘big’ in the area of Hammelburg, but what this was no one knew. Everything depended on Hogan getting in contact with the defecting Luftwaffe major to learn what this ‘big thing’ was at all and to act on it afterwards.

Robert groaned. Great. He had a few hours to get out of Stalag 13 and meet the major, which meant that there was only one chance to get the very needed information. And this outside of the camp.

Okay, the latter was no problem given the fact that Klink was on their side. And the damaged roads outside of Stalag 13 came in very handy. Yet Hogan was aware that he had to be careful. He and the
major would meet in the open, and absolutely no one should get suspicious that this wasn’t a pure accident. Otherwise he, his men, and Klink were done for. Even with Hochstetter out of commission, it was deadly to underestimate the Gestapo and their paranoia.

Visiting Will in his office after roll call, like he did almost regularly even as they hadn’t been lovers, Robert heard the older man agreeing to something on the phone with a sour face.

“Yes, I understand the importance of it. I’ll do my best.” He put the receiver back on the phone hard and glanced up at Robert; hands flat on the desktop. “Now the damn SS demands that I shall support them by repairing the main roads coming from Hammelburg to the south and the Hoffenstein pass. I’m running out of men, and the blasted SS thinks I have an endless reserve here. Ha, those who are here, are greenhorns or grandfathers, and the few which are still trained, are good men and are needed to keep the POWs in check. No offense, Rob.” He rose and began to pace. “The nerve! As if…”

“We’ll repair the damn road – at least the Flensheimer Road,” Hogan interrupted the beginning tirade.

“You will?” Wilhelm asked surprised, stopping his movements.

“Yes. My men, a few dozen other POWs, and I volunteer for the job.”

Klink cocked his head as he became suspicious. “There is something in the bush, Rob. Only because we two are the newest children of Amor, doesn’t mean that you offer your men’s strength out of kindness.”

Hogan sighed. “No, there is indeed something ‘in the bush’ – or in this case, on the road.”

A groan escaped the Kommandant. “I knew it. Let me guess: a new mission that requires you out of the camp – officially, for once.”

Hogan glanced quickly over his shoulder before he stepped beside Will and murmured, “I got news from the Underground. The Nazis are planning something big within this area, and I have to meet someone around midday to get more information. I was informed that the man in question is coming down the Flensheimer Road, and said road is in need for repairs, isn’t it?”
Worried, Wilhelm put a hand on his arm. “Yes, said road is lined with holes, but…how do you want to speak with him? Schultz will look away, but the other guards…”

“The Underground contacts him while we’re speaking here. He’s going to have a car breakdown, which will give him and me a few moments to exchange the necessary information while my men repair his car.”

Lowering his head, Will said quietly, “And you think our guards will not get suspicious that you and him are talking?”

Robert grinned. “Oh, we exchange pleasantries of the nasty sort, and he’s going to teach me some lessons while my men work.” He turned serious again. “Don’t fear, Will. I’ll be okay.”

Klink nodded slowly. “I hope so. Don’t risk too much, do you hear me? I don’t want to lose you.” He took a deep breath and moistened his lips. “Concerning your men’s work – I can’t offer a lot as payment, Robert. Nourishment becomes more and more rare and…”

“For three nights longer light and two warm, extra showers for the men will do it,” Hogan bargained. He couldn’t help himself; he loved to strike deals with Will like this.

“You bankrupting me!” The older man groaned, throwing up both hands, then he gave in. “Okay, we have a deal.”

“Thanks,” Hogan smiled at him and turned to leave.

“Be careful, will you?” Wilhelm called after him, worry in his voice and on his face.

“Always,” Robert answered over his shoulder, touched by his secret lover’s deep care for him. He winked at him, put his cap back on the head, and left the office.

“Good morning, Hilda,” he said cheerfully, loud enough to be understood in the office and signaling like this that the young woman had arrived.

“The same to you, Colonel,” Hilda answered formally, for the case that some of the guards heard
through the window she had opened after her arrival. She and her parents – and Little Manfred – had weathered the attack against the traffic lines two days ago well; sheltered and safe in the deep cellar the old farmhouse her family offered.

Robert left the Kommandantur and called for Schultz, who was just on his way to the cantina. Because the large Bavarian wasn’t alone, Hogan couldn’t tell him what was really going on and stuck completely to the official reason for him and a few of his men leaving camp to repair the road: an order of Klink.

Sighing, Schultz assembled a few guards, while Hogan talked with his men.

“I said I wouldn’t move one finger for this damn road ever again!” LeBeau began to swear, all but scowling at his CO.

“And I said we have to do it to get in contact with a defector of the Luftwaffe. A Major Heintzen. Something big is going on and only he can tell us what it is.”

Newkirk clapped his French friend on the shoulder. “Head up, Louis; like this we’re coming out of the camp for once. I really began to feel like a POW.”

“You are a POW,” LeBeau answered, making a face.

“Come on, fellas, we don’t have all day. The said informant will try to reach us during early midday, so hurry up.” Hogan interrupted the beginning bickering and looked at his wristwatch. Two or three hours until the man would show up on the road. So, there was no time to waste.

*** HH ***

Half an hour later, Hogan and his team, a few other POWs, some guards and Schultz were at the main road towards the south and began their work. Well, the colonel watched the POWs, Schultz watched Hogan, and the guards watched everyone.

They worked for more than two hours, and Robert was beginning to worry while he listened to a further bickering between LeBeau and Schultz. Sometimes he asked himself if the two were married with each other – a funny thought, given the fact of LeBeau being one of the most devoted Casanovas in the camp, and Schultz being after every pretty skirt that distracted him from his wife
home in Heidelberg. Hogan had only met Frau Schultz once, and – from man to man – he could understand Hans of why he spoke of his ‘shrew’ at home.

Finally, as Hogan already thought that something must have happened to his contact, a staff car of the Luftwaffe neared the working group with a flat tire at the front left side. ‘Very originally,’ he thought with some black humor, but at least the little plan was succeeding.

The man of middle age, clad in the major uniform of the Luftwaffe, left the car, and Schultz hurried towards him to greet him respectfully. Acting with the typical arrogance of a German officer towards anyone who wasn’t at least of his own rank, an important industrialist, or a pretty woman, the major demanded that his tire would be replaced with the spare. Hogan had closed the distance to the major and Schultz; realizing with rising tension that the sergeant made no move to leave him and the major alone. And giving Schultz’s absolute lack of acting talents, any open talk between him – Hogan – and the major would certainly elicit reactions from the large Bavarian the guards couldn’t miss.

Knowing that every captured officer would try to refuse to accept order from an opponent officer, which gave him the perfect reason to ‘irritate’ the major, Hogan engaged the German officer into a short verbal quarrel until he was ‘threatened’ to get shot. To his frustration, Schultz instantly volunteered to change the tire, and only after the major pointed his pistol at Hogan, the sergeant became silent, and the colonel gave the signal to his men to begin with their own part of the distraction: to change the damaged tire. The show had been good enough for the German guards to not get suspicious, and, to Hogan’s relief, Schultz went with Newkirk, LeBeau, and Baker to watch them.

“The three mobile rocket launchers have been moved to this area,” the German murmured, pistol still aiming at the colonel to keep up the pretense.

Hogan, playing along, stemmed his hands onto his hips and replied quietly, “Any idea where?”

“No,” came the answer Robert had already anticipated and feared, And again, Great. Why was he always the one who had to find the pearl in a bowl full of peas?

“I knew the general location of two, but they have been moved. You are to find them and report it to London,” Heintzen added.

Hogan almost grimaced. “There had been easier missions.”
The major didn’t react to this, but continued. “There is a spotting check on the top of a hill near Hammelburg. One of our agents, Frankel, is there to help you.”

Frankel…Hogan controlled his features. The major couldn’t refer to Lily Frankel, could he? The young woman who had covered her spy business as a singer and dancer in the Hofbräu had been one of Hogan’s best informants. But he had helped her get to England after her last mission. That had been last summer, and he had hoped that she would stay in London until the damn war was over.

And not only her safety was of his concern. He had flirted with her a lot – well, even more – and he had really taken a liking to her. She was smart, courageous, pretty, and could be cold-blooded like he was. She had tempted him once, and he worried what would happen if he saw her again. Yes, he loved Will. Dearly, he loved Will. And he knew that his feelings towards Lily wouldn’t be the same like all those months ago. Yet, he asked himself how to explain to her his lack of interest in her if they would meet again…if this agent Frankel was Lily at all.

“Can’t the agent handle it alone?” He asked softly. Usually he didn’t try to shake off a task, but this whole thing was more than delicate. As soon as ‘rockets’ came into the picture, the Nazis became even more paranoid than usual. And to operate outside of camp during day, with him well-known by many higher ranking German officers now, was almost suicide. And if said agent really was Lily, he would prefer to avoid her. Better to say the problems she presented with him no longer interested in her and him deeply in love with a guy.

“Unfortunately, Frankel hasn’t operated a radio before.”

Hogan swore beneath his breath. Yep, this ‘Frankel’ was certainly Lily.

“I’d do it myself, Colonel, but I’m afraid the Gestapo is following me.” The major added hastily, seeing that the American was irritated about something.

“Major,” Schultz’s voice interrupted them. “The tire is changed.”

“Sehr gut, Sergeant. Danke schön,” (Very good, Sergeant. Thank you.) the major answered, putting his pistol away and beginning to head towards his car.

Again, going on with the show, Hogan made a sarcastic, rude comment that was answered with a sneered, “Cease your sarcasm, Colonel!”
The senior POW officer simply shrugged nonchalant. “This all belongs to the service,” he deadpanned, and added another snide remark while the major stepped into his car. Hogan watched him go and hoped the man would make it to Switzerland or one of the Allies’ camps before the Gestapo got a hold of him. He really didn’t want the major going through the brutal torture he had endured more than six weeks ago at Hochstetter’s hands.

Without any hesitation, the German drove away, Hogan’s men scowling after him. While Schultz urged them to return to their original job, Newkirk sauntered to his CO.

“What did he say, sir?” He asked quietly.

Hogan was anything but happy with the new mission. “We got some rocket launchers within the area, and we’re gonna have to find them,” he grumbled, hands still akin on his hips. Damn, how should he fulfill this task? The cursed launchers could be anywhere! The woods around Hammelburg were tight, the hills were high, and there were so many possible hideouts he felt dizzy only to imagine them all. To find them in time before they could do harm would be pure luck.

Newkirk knew what went through his friend’s head. “Well, this is like finding a needle in a bloomin’ haystack.”

Robert nodded, but before he could say something, engine drones neared, a deep rumbling accompanied by howling motor noises. Looking up the road, he couldn’t believe his eyes. Promptly his face lit up a little bit. “But we got a break,” he said, with hidden amusement. “There comes our needle.”

The other men on the street turned around, and Newkirk wasn’t the only one who glanced flabbergasted at the truck that transported something very big on a trailer: a mobile rocket launcher including a rocket.

*** HH ***

The Heroes and the other POWs returned to Stalag 13 in the afternoon. They had repaired a great deal of the road and were tired and hungry. Yet Hogan knew that there was no rest for him until he had spoken with London. He had barely washed himself and was ready to go down into the tunnels as a loud rumbling was heard nearing the gates.
Thunderstruck, he and the others watched the mobile rocket launcher they had seen on the road a few hours ago brought into the camp, parking in front of the Kommandantur and near Barracks 2.

“Are they crazy to bring such a beast into our camp?” Newkirk raged.

“This is against any rule of the Geneva Conventions.” Kinchloe nodded, who coughed again and wrapped his blanket tighter around himself.

“This goes too far!” LeBeau groused. “If this thing goes off, the camp is history – or at least the buildings around this damn missile.”

“And with them, we and our Balding Eagle,” Baker agreed, who had accompanied the others to Barracks 2 to take over once again Kinchloe’s place as the radioman.

“Look, who comes there.” Newkirk sneered, pointing at the staff car with the double axe. “Of course he is behind this mess. After all, it ain’t the first time that Burkhalter used our camp for some bloody Nazi nasties.”


“This is no reason to joke now,” Newkirk rebuked him.

Hogan shot them a glare over the shoulder. “Listen to the coffee pot,” he ordered. “I’m sure Burkhalter has brought this devil thing not for naught into the camp and will boast about it towards Klink. Maybe we’ll finally learn what Berlin is really up to.”

“Aye, Colonel.” Baker nodded, and hurried with the others to Hogan’s office to activate the hidden bugs in Klink’s office.

Robert’s concentration was fixed on the launcher and the rocket, while he tried to store as much information in his mind as possible. Every detail could be important for London, and so he eyed the weapon intensely. He knew that he had to voice official protest against the weapon’s presence in a POW camp and that Burkhalter would try everything to keep him and the others away from the missile afterwards. So he observed the device as good as he could before he finally walked towards the Kommandantur, minutes after Burkhalter’s arrival.
Hilda was already home (after all, it was Saturday), but Burkhalter’s driver was in the anteroom. The young man looked almost curiously at him, but made no move to stop him as Hogan headed to Klink’s office, barging into an obviously heated discussion between Burkhalter and Wilhelm, who walked around the staff officer that had sat down in one of the visitor chairs.

“I’m sure, General, that Colonel Hogan will have something to say about this rocket launcher…”

“I have a lot to say,” Robert used the cue to voice his anger as he stepped into the room, his crush cap in hands.

Burkhalter felt irritation rising in him. Of course Hogan had to bust into Klink’s office – without being called. This damn Ami really knew how to get onto his nerves. Sitting with his back to the door, Albert didn’t spare him even a glance. The shock and fury after Berlin and Dresden, now Duisburg and Dortmund, made him forget for once that somewhere, deep down, he respected the colonel usually. Taking a deep breath, he tightly addressed his inferior, “Klink, tell this man to leave.”

Will blinked. What the hell was the matter with Burkhalter? He sounded like Hochstetter. Hell, he even acted like the poison gnome did so often. Hogan stood beside the general, a meter away at best. Why didn’t he speak with the American directly? What had Robert done to deserve Burkhalter’s sudden loathe? Hoping to prevent an escalation, Klink decided to play along for now and simply saluted the younger man with an easy, “Dismissed, Hogan!”

Hogan wouldn’t dream of doing so. Burkhalter broke the law the moment he brought the damn rocket into Stalag 13, and Robert wouldn’t stand aside doing nothing against it.

“One moment, General. According to the Geneva Conventions, you cannot bring an assault weapon into a POW camp,” Hogan refused to follow the order, eyes small. Yes, maybe to have this damn thing here was a good thing for the mission, but – blast it! – the rocket was dangerous like hell, and he had to think of his men. And Wilhelm!

Again, Burkhalter didn’t look at him. Maybe the damn troublemaker would go if he ignored him long enough. “Klink, tell Colonel Hogan I’m not listening,” he ordered icily.

Klink felt real irritation – not only with his superior, but the whole situation. For God’s sake, what had gotten into the fat Austrian? He never had ignored Hogan or had treated him this rudely. Why all of sudden this unpolite behavior? The last time the two men had seen each other had been after
Burkhalter intervened with Hogan being held captive by Hochstetter. So why was the general this angry with Robert?

He saw the rising anger on his beloved’s face and to take some sharpness out of his superior’s words, he ‘translated’ the order more politely. “Hogan, General Burkhalter says he does not want to discuss this with you.”

Robert stared at his secret lover, who seemed to be serious for once and stressed. Of course. Hogan knew that Will was falling between two stools right now. Being on his side, but having to obey his superior. Hogan growled inwardly, ready to fight. If Burkhalter was stubborn, he could be, too. And, after all, here was the safety of his men – and Will’s – at stake. His voice lowered in a dangerous way, as he answered, “Tell the general that I will report him to the Red Cross.”

Klink stared him. Now he should be the messenger for Robert, too? What was he? A damn mouthpiece?

Glancing down on the stoic face of his superior, he knew that he had to be careful to prevent a real quarrel breaking lose. “General Burkhalter, Colonel Hogan says that he will report you to the Red Cross.” Usually this was a kind of threat Burkhalter always reacted to. Berlin simply didn’t want to irritate the Red Cross, but Klink couldn’t know that Switzerland’s decision to freeze Germany’s money in the Swiss banks had changed a lot of the Führer’s and the other staff members’ opinion about the international accepted organization for human help and first aid. The regime in Germany was so cornered that no one on the staff wanted to take consideration of a single organization anymore – as big and neutral it was.

So for now, Burkhalter couldn’t care less what the Red Cross would think of him. He had his orders. The whole situation in Germany had become a fight ‘til the end. Former regulations be dammed! How dare this man – a prisoner! – blackmail him. He was responsible for the newest development of the Luftwaffe. The whole staff in Berlin counted on him, and he should step back because of a silly threat of a captive? And why the heck didn’t Klink put Hogan into place? This here was a prisoner camp, and not the Reichsrat, dammit!

“I’m not discussing this with Colonel Hogan. Why are you?” The general sneered at Klink, refusing now to even look at him.

Will threw his hands up in frustration. God, what had crawled up Burkhalter’s ass and died to have him in such a foul mood? Of course, he would discuss something like this with Hogan. Even if Robert wouldn’t be the man he loved more than life, he would have to speak with him about something this important for all habitants of the camp, because Hogan was the senior POW officer and had a right to take care for his men’s safety. This was protocol, dammit! “I’m...”
“STOP talking to him!” Burkhalter all of sudden almost exploded, glaring from the edge of his eyes towards the Oberst. He knew exactly how big Klink’s weak spot for the witty American was, but this had no room here in the moment. If this fool treated the Reich’s enemies with velvet gloves, then it was his decision. At least as long as he held the camp together and could keep his cursed ‘zero-escape-rate’.

But he, Albert Burkhalter, had to defend this country and had no time for foolish games. Not after what happened within the last two weeks. Berlin and Dresden – he wouldn’t forgive this that easily. Goebbels had said it: there was no mercy to expect from the Allies. This much Burkhalter had ‘learned’. The last two large attacks had opened his eyes, and the two air raids on Wednesday against Duisburg and Dortmund, and the destruction of the most important roads and rails on Thursday, had intensified his decision to fight ‘til the end. So why should he take any consideration of captured enemies? The shock and wrath sat still too deep in his bones to treat any members of the Allies neutrally at the moment.

Klink balled his fists. No one would forbid him to speak with his Robert! But to direct Burkhalter’s obvious bottled up anger towards himself too was no solution. Not when he wanted to support the mission Hogan had received. For this, he had to show the general that he was fully on his side to keep the staff officer’s trust. He glanced at Robert and saw the mute prompting in those dark eyes to DO something.

Well, Will would do something, and he was certain Rob wouldn’t like it. “Schultz!” He addressed his Sergeant of the Guards, who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here. Closing the distance to the large Bavarian, he said strongly, “Tell Colonel Hogan that I don’t wish to discuss this with him.”

Hogan controlled himself in the very last second not to gape at his secret lover. What the hell…were they all crazy here at that moment? He continued to look at Wilhelm, who stood at his desk and had wrapped both arms around himself, obviously very uncomfortable with the whole situation. He didn’t even look at him, but turned half his back towards him.

“Colonel Hogan, Colonel Klink doesn’t wish to discuss this with you,” Schultz repeated obediently, thinking of being in a madhouse.

For a second, Robert was lost for words. Will wouldn’t give into this craziness, would he? Hogan spared a side glance at his German counterpart, who still avoided looking at him. Okay, two could play this game. “Tell Colonel Klink that he is going to be in the same trouble like General Burkhalter,” he instructed Schultz, looking back at the Austrian, whose face he could only see from the side had become sourer and sourer.
“Klink!” Burkhalter snapped. “Tell Schultz to tell Hogan that I’m in no trouble.”

It was at the tip of Klink’s tongue to ask his superior if they were now in a Kindergarten class, but one look at Burkhalter’s expression, and he skipped the idea. The words ‘court martial’ seemed to hang in bright letters over the general’s bulky figure.

“Schultz, tell Colonel Hogan that General Burkhalter is in no trouble,” he ordered, gesturing with his hands. Good God, he was asleep and was caught in a silly theater production. This was the only explanation for this all here.

Hans groaned inwardly. They called him a ‘Dummkopf’, but acted like little schoolboys. Hell, his youngest son was more reasonable than the three other adults in the room – and they called themselves ‘officers’. This was something for the memorials. Yet, he knew he had to obey, so he began. “Colonel Hogan, Colonel Klink says General Burkhalter is in no tro…”

Hogan had enough. That Germans could behave crazy was nothing new for him, but this here was the top of nonsense!

“You both will be in trouble because of this damn rocket launcher!” He addressed Burkhalter forcefully. Hell, Wilhelm really would face trouble if the heavy weapon’s presence in the camp became knowledge to the Red Cross. This was no empty threat, damn it!

Finally, Burkhalter reacted like he was ought to do. Almost whirling around on his chair, despite his fat figure, he glared with daggers at Hogan while he pointed a finger at the colonel, hand shaking with fury. “Klink! Tell him he can’t threaten me!” He shouted.

Klink was aware of the fact that the situation was about to get out of control. For the love of God, couldn’t Robert shut up for once and let him handle the whole affair? There was no advantage to making the general even angrier than he already was. This would only lead to Rob being locked up in the cooler (at best), hours of grousing from Burkhalter, and a mission unfulfilled.

“Schultz!” He snapped, shaking a warning finger at his American counterpart in the hope that Robert would finally get the hint to stay out of this. “Tell him he can’t threaten him.” Well, technically Hogan could, but in this situation, it was insane to do so.

The large Bavarian was frustrated by now, too. He recognized that Hogan’s mulishness worsened everything, but what should he expect of a man whose middle name was ‘troublemaker”? With a
dark face he began, “General Burkhalter told Colonel…”

Hogan ignored him. He had to keep his men and Will safe, no matter what. Enraged he pointed his own finger at the German staff officer, eyes blazing. “This is my last warning!” He snarled, meaning it.

Burkhalter harshly waved it off. “I don’t need warnings from prisoners!” He spat, face turning red with anger.

“Neither do I,” Klink stated with an elegant gesture of his hand, hoping to calm down his superior by agreeing to everything he said…for now.

“You will this time!” Hogan said strongly to Burkhalter, and felt Will closing the distance to him.

“Hogan, listen,” the Oberst began, and Robert turned sharply around towards him, staring at him. For once, the American was really angry with his secret lover, who should demand from Burkhalter to follow written law and not play along with the dangerous, mad idea to keep a rocket launcher with a rocket ready to be shot off in the middle of the camp. The colonel didn’t hold back as he demanded once again that the rocket launcher had to be removed from Stalag 13.

Will saw the true irritation in those brown eyes, but for now he couldn’t act on it, but had to keep up the pretense that he wanted to put him into his place. Gesturing wildly, he hissed back at Hogan, trying to reason with him. Burkhalter joined the verbal quarrel, and within seconds, all three yelled at each other without listening.

Schultz stared from one colonel to the next, then to the general, and back. The furious voices of the three men rang in his ears, fingers were shaken warningly at each other. And for God’s sake, he couldn’t follow anything they were hurling at each other. Schultz had enough.

“PLEEAASSE!” He shouted, which indeed shut up the officers. Being confronted with three angry gazes, which were now directed at him, he put on his best innocent expression to prevent him from being in trouble for snapping at them, and said quietly. “Wait for me.”

*** HH ***

In Barracks 2, Baker unplugged the coffee pot. He and the others couldn’t believe what they just
witnessed. Three high ranking officers screaming at each other like in a catfight after they had addressed each other via the other one like offended girls in a schoolyard.

“They’re worse than my little sister and her friends,” Kinchloe said hoarsely, who had joined them. Then he had to cough.

LeBeau had crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Trouble in paradise.” He commented. “I think this is the first time the two love birds had a fight since they stepped on l’amour’s way.”

“Love birds?” Carter blinked like an owl at them, received nervied glances, and pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “You mean those two…” He gestured towards the coffee pot, and Newkirk let his head sink into his neck with a groan.

“Andrew, don’t tell me that you really didn’t get it as we spoke about the ‘sparks’ between the gov’nor and our Balding Eagle.”

Andrew chuckled nervously. “You mean…” He shook his head. “You can’t be serious. The colonel – both of them – are after every skirt that comes along the way, and you think they have…feelings for each other?”

“Now he understands the ‘sparks’,;” Kinchloe grinned. “There is still hope for him.”

The youngest of the Heroes scratched his head, moving his furred cap back and forth in the process. “You mean, Colonel Hogan and Klink are…a couple?”

“He really is a quick thinker,” LeBeau grumbled, rolling his eyes.

Newkirk clapped a hand on his shoulder, strong enough to make Carter almost stumble. “Welcome to the world of grown ups, mate. You just learned the last secret of ‘sharing a bed’ can also be between two guys.”

Blushing, Andrew looked first at him, then at the others. “I don’t believe it,” he murmured. “I…I mean, the Colonel flirts with every woman he meets, and Klink…Okay, that he wasn’t thrilled Burkhalter’s sister was after him is understandable. If I would have been in his place, I would have run until there was nothing else to see of me anymore than dust at the horizon, but…the red haired girl last summer, the new land lady of the Hofbräu two years ago, Lily Frankel, or even this witch
“Think about it, mon ami. Distraction is the best way to keep something secret,” LeBeau said, with a twinkle in his eyes. “For almost three years, the two colonels dance around each other, always bickering, teasing, and irritating each other without becoming too serious. And the many times Klink let mon colonel off the hook – especially last summer as he caught him running around in a German uniform. Then he risked his life to save Colonel Hogan and even started a fight with the Gestapo to keep mon colonel safe. Do you really think this is all platonic?”

Carter bit his lips and laughed softly for a moment before he gulped. “It’s forbidden, isn’t it? I mean that two guys are…”

“Love knows no border,” Kinchloe cut in, hoarse voice gentle. “They already grew close before the colonel realized Klink’s true feelings for him…and his own in this matter. They are not only together, they’re in love. There is absolutely no doubt about it, if you know which signals you have to look for.”

Again, Carter snickered before he took a deep breath. “Who had ever thought…” He shook his head before he turned suddenly very serious. “You know what this quarrel from a few minutes ago means, right?”

“Yes, the gov’nor will be in a hell of mood,” Newkirk sighed.

“But the making up is the best thing after a quarrel. I know this from a friend of mine back in the States,” Andrew grinned, which made the others groan. Why was the boy always so damn optimistic?

*** HH ***

It was later in the evening. Hogan had returned to Barracks 2 furious and grumpy. He controlled himself around his men, but his friends could clearly see the deep irritation shimmering in his eyes, recognizing his set yaw and his flushed face.

Carter watched his superior and father-figure closer. Hogan and Klink had had their differences in the past, and there had been a few times the colonel had been highly irritated with his German counterpart. But never before he had been this seething. And Andrew simply knew that this had nothing to do with the rocket launcher in camp, but rather with the whole quarrel that happened in
the Kommandantur. You can only be really reared up by someone if you care about said someone a great deal. And Carter realized that this was exactly the reason for his CO fuming with anger.

So, the others were right. Hogan and Klink were together, and now there was trouble for the first time in their self-created little paradise. Andrew was curious. What would happen next to the two men? He knew how stubborn Hogan could be, and the same went for Klink. It was a topic worth to make a wager about.

Robert was outraged. How could Will give into Burkhalter’s obvious mad plan to test a damn rocket launcher in the middle of the camp? How dare he to tell him off, not considering the danger and that he broke a dozen laws. Burkhalter had threatened to send him, Hogan, to the cooler until he would rot. Or worse. And Klink had finally pushed his American counterpart out of the office, snapping at him to obey for once. Robert felt angry and betrayed. Yes, of course Wilhelm had to obey direct orders from his superior, but law gave him the right to demand changes of the current situation concerning the assault weapon in the middle of his camp. Why did he play along?

Sweet Lord, usually Hogan would have no other choice than to inform the Red Cross for real. Okay, he would have to wait until the next exception of the organization to voice his accusation, but this would mean trouble for the responsible German officers. He could care less about Burkhalter, but he couldn’t bring Will into trouble. Even if this damn guy seemed to have lost his backbone all of sudden and even played the general mouthpiece. Hogan was too proud to admit it, but the moment Will didn’t address him personally, but via Schultz, had hurt! Good God, he trusted Wilhelm with his life, his heart, and his soul, and then this crazy monocle on two legs dared to treat him like a king would a stable boy.

He was glad to be distracted, as his men told him what they had heard by eavesdropping in Klink’s office before he entered the Kommandantur. So, the two further mobile rocket launchers were still heading towards the south to be tested in the area. That made three of them, of which one parked twenty meters away, and two were hidden somewhere in the woods as soon as they reached their destiny. And they would shoot their deadly missiles tomorrow at England – parallel with a planned lightening attack of the Luftwaffe. Hogan asked himself how many aircrafts the German still had left after the disaster ‘Bodenplatte’ in January. Yet, if the mobile launchers worked flawlessly, it wouldn’t only mean that many, many people would die, it would also mean that Hitler had a new way to haul deadly strikes against the Allies…even without so many aircrafts.

Had he already mentioned that this whole mission was ‘great’?

Evening roll call was skipped on Burkhalter’s order. Different sergeants counted the prisoners in the Barracks and reported their complete presence. Obviously the general wanted to prevent any chance that some POWs could get closer to the rocket in the compound. Parallel, it was ordered that on the next day dozens of POWs should work at the mess hall and the cantina. Like this, guards were spared, which had to watch the rocket launcher. Hogan could understand this measurement and also
that Klink obeyed this order, yet it didn’t soothe his anger.

After dinner, Baker finally was able to reach London. With his friends around him, Hogan listened to London’s instructions as the radioman switched on the little speaker Kinchloe had installed months earlier. It was rarely used, but now it was easier if all the Heroes heard what ‘Mama Bear’ ordered them to do.

Of course, it was up to Hogan to find the two hidden launchers, and – to add a further ‘thrilling’ task to the whole mission – he should radio London their exact location as soon as he found them so that the air forces could destroy them. To top everything was the ‘nice’ answer that Hogan and his men had to take care of the rocket in the camp all by themselves. After all, an attack on the camp was out of question.

Hogan leaned against the wall, arms crossed, lips pressed into a small line, and expression dark. Taking the microphone from Baker, he affirmed the given mission and closed the frequency.

London became more and more crazy. First he had to delay a whole division, what was only possible because the heavy snow and the avalanche seven weeks ago. And now he should find two mobile rocket launchers, give their location to London – as if the Gestapo wouldn’t listen to every single whisper of any possible radio in the area! – and then it was up to him to sabotage a rocket in the middle of their camp. And above all, Will had suddenly lost his backbone and this now, in this situation.

Hogan cursed inwardly. He was tempted to throw in the towel!

His men began to discuss the mission with him – a mission that was more or less suicidal. Whoever would meet with the Underground agent tomorrow to watch the main roads coming from Hammelburg was in the open like on a serving plate. And there was no doubt that the Gestapo would send radio detectors everywhere. One or two radio signals would be enough to lead them directly to the place where the Underground hid. And, regrettably, the Gestapo and the Totenkopf-SS were even better now after they had mixed their organizations to an extent you could call them almost one and the same club. The chance to get caught was incredibly high.

Hogan was well aware of those facts and insisted that he would go. He wouldn’t send one of his men, his friends, into mortal danger. Of course they protested, arguing that he was the most important man of their little group, but he remained hard. If there was the tiniest chance to protect his friends, he would do it. No matter what.

He climbed back into the Barracks while Newkirk and LeBeau exchanged addresses of girls they
had promised each other to give should one of them not make it back from the mission. A mission not they, but Hogan, would go on. He heard them almost squeaking one and the same name and felt a short wave of amusement. Obviously, both had fallen prey to one and the same ‘lady’ in Paris. A part of the colonel felt the short urge to laugh. Even in the most serious situations those two were able to lighten the mood.

He heard Carter following him while he stepped out of the tunnels. The same moment Olsen, who watched the door, called, “Colonel? Klink and Burkhalter are leaving the Kommandantur, and they are arguing.”

‘Maybe Will came to his senses,’ Robert thought with a mute growl.

“And they’re headed towards here,” Olsen added, and closed the door hastily.

“Newkirk, LeBeau, get your asses up here! Quick!” Hogan called down into the tunnels and waved at Carter, who hurried to the table to set up some fake card gambles. Olsen and three others joined him, and a few seconds later, Newkirk and LeBeau, too. Hogan clapped forcefully at the hidden mechanism at the upper bed frame, and the entrance closed, leaving nothing but a normal looking lower part of the stock bed.

The door opened, and they heard Klink calling, “Don’t bother with driving your points home once again, General. I’ll make certain that Hogan will behave and gives you no trouble anymore until your mission is fulfilled.”

“I hope so, Klink,” Burkhalter’s voice sounded from afar. “Otherwise I’ll put not only him, but also you into the cooler.”

Klink stood on the threshold, but turned around again towards the compound. “But my dear General Burkhalter, I’m responsible for the rocket launcher’s safety, you said. How shall I do it if I…?”

“Maybe you guarantee better for its safety when being locked away,” the general sneered, but headed further towards Klink’s quarters.

Klink faked a laugh. “A good joke, my dear General. Just give me a few minutes, and then we’ll cost this super cognac I’ve gotten from my brother as a Christmas gift.”
Burkhalter’s answer was not understandable anymore, as the fat Austrian vanished into the semi-darkness of the compound towards the separate little building.

Watching him go for a moment longer, the Oberst finally turned around, thunder on his face. His gaze found his American counterpart, and he pointed a finger at. “Hogan, into your office. NOW!” He gestured towards the separate room, his other hand tightening around the grip of his riding crop he carried under his left arm.

“The politeness in this country lessens more and more,” Hogan drawled, with a stern expression around his mouth. “What about the word 'please'?”

“Hogan!” Klink snapped and shut the entrance door forcefully. “This is no joke, but damn seriousness.” He closed the distance to the younger man, gripped his arm, and pulled him along with him. “Into your office, verflüxt noch mal (damn it forth and back)!”

A few of the POWs began to protest at the rough handling of their superior, while Hogan stopped and stemmed his feet on the ground, giving Klink a hard stare. “Hands off,” he said dangerously quiet.

Will realized that this was no pretense, but reality. Hogan was really, really angry with him. He groaned inwardly. “Robert, stop being a child. I had enough trouble to calm General Burkhalter down and to prevent him from sending you to the cooler – or worse, to arrest you for threatening a staff officer of the German Reich and transferring you to a camp that is known as hell!” He lowered his voice. “I’m here to help you, dammit! You and your mission, of which I think I know what it is. And you need to get any support you can get, believe me. So don’t play the offended diva and let us talk! Now, as long there is time for it. General Burkhalter will get even more suspicious if I don’t show up within the next ten minutes in my quarters serving him my last cognac.”

Something on Will’s face and his voice told Hogan that he better listen to Klink. Shrugging his arm off the older man’s grip, he went first with firm, wide steps, the Kommandant followed him.

“No disturbance…except Burkhalter’s fat belly rolls into the Barracks,” Klink ordered and closed the door to Hogan’s quarters behind him.

For a moment, the other POWs were silent before Kinchloe smirked. “I so want to be a mouse right now so that I can hide in there.” He nodded towards his friend’s office while he ignored the irritating tickling in his throat he felt for hours now. “I would pay a whole month’s salary to witness that talk!”
Yes, trouble in the lovers’ paradise for once, yet Hogan is going to learn that Klink more or less saved his neck by remaining ‘iron’ for once. And Carter finally got it, what is going on between the two colonels (as brilliant as he is with technics, concerning inter-personal affairs he really can be naïve sometimes).

I hope, you liked the additional or compleventive scenes of “Rockets or Romance”, and how I changed the undercurrent to let everything fit in our lovebirds’ world.

In the next chapter, Hogan and Klink trying to smooth out their first quarrel, before our colonel – of course – meets Lily Frankel, and he will learn something very important about himself because of her presence. Parallel the episode continues like you know it, only with further additional scenes, which will lead to more in the end. Hogan’s short interaction with the German Luftwaffe-Major hasn’t been unnoticed, and will make Schmidt ask himself very interesting questions, which will lead to more thinking because of everything that happens afterwards.

I wish you a nice weekend – and please don’t forget to activate the ‘review-button’ (*wink*).

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you for the feedback. I’m glad that you liked the ‘re-telling’ of the real TV-episode so far – and the next part comes now; again with some additions, background-scenes and different interpretations, yet the original story-line of the episode will be followed.

Yes, our two ‘boys’ had their first quarrel – and the mutual debate will come now. Both stubborn, both thinking of being right, both only want the best for the other one. Yet it will be sweet, before afterwards Hogan becomes once again Papa Bear and meets Lily. In the meantime Schmidt gets seconds thoughts because of Hogan’s involvement with the German defector.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 56 – Rockets, romance and leaving tracks

In Hogan’s quarters, the American colonel turned around the moment he heard the door close, ready to give Klink a piece of his mind, but this time the Oberst was quicker.

“Are you crazy to threaten General Burkhalter officially?” He hissed, closing the distance to the younger man. “To ‘warn’ him was a daring step, but to threaten him went too far. I needed half an hour to calm him down and to stop him from arresting you.”

Hogan looked darkly at him. “You better should have demanded from him to get this damn thing away from us!” He pointed towards the right, where outside of the hut the rocket was parked.
“For God’s sake, forget this wingless bird for once, and think about your behavior earlier! You were this close –” The thumb and the index finger of his right hand was half an inch away from each other, “– to getting arrested and deported to Stalag 375 in Oerbke that is feared for its brutal handling of POWs, harsh life conditions, and many death cases because the prisoners have to work until they collapse without much food.” He let his hand sink. “Do you understand that? I had to speak with the tongue of an angel to him, practically coaxing him with my last cognac and the promise of a formidable dinner to let the topic and therefore you go.”

Robert gulped as the reality crashed down on him. He really had been this close to being sent away – into a camp that was, indeed, infamous for its inhumanity? He knew that only seven Stalags and a few Oflags and sub camps belonged to the Luftwaffe and the rest to the Heer or SS. And Stalag 375 was a mixture of a Dulag (Durchgangslager = transit camp) and a working camp, comparable with concentration camps. Even if it didn’t belong to the Luftwaffe, one telephone call from Burkhalter would have been enough to seal his fate. If he would have been transferred to that place, he knew what would happen to him.

Scratching his neck, he murmured, “Thank you, Will.”

“You’re welcome,” Klink answered, still upset. “Maybe you’ll think of it the next time you’re going to threaten General Burkhalter.”

Hogan rolled his eyes. Hell, Burkhalter really was jumpy for once. Who was the ‘diva’ here? “Come on, Willie, I just pointed out that he’ll be in deep water if the Red Cross learns of him bringing such a weapon into a POW camp.”

“You didn’t ‘point’ something out, you threatened to go against him – officially. And this in the only possible way for a POW to get some rights by making a complaint by the Red Cross – at least until a few days ago. You…”

Robert had crossed his arms in front of his chest, but now tensed up. “What do you mean with ‘until a few days ago’. The Red Cross is…”

“Is an organization that was founded in Switzerland and that, as an organization of a neutral state, was allowed to watch over the human rights which are written down in the Geneva Conventions. But last Saturday, the Swiss skipped to be neutral in this war and froze all German money in their bank accounts. Our currency fell even more into the cellars because of it. Berlin – Hitler – rages about it and is about to stop any cooperation with the Red Cross. The talks between Berlin and Basel are one big shouting session by now, and Geneva – means the Red Cross – adds its own arguments which displease the Führer immensely. And you threatened General Burkhalter with reporting him
to said organization. Him, the staff officer who is responsible for Hitler’s newest favorite child, namely those damn mobile rocket launchers. Do you have the tiniest clue what storm you were about to elicit here and especially towards yourself?”

Hogan stared wide eyed at him. “Switzerland…froze the German money?” He whistled. “Just have a look, the alphorn blowers got some backbone after all.”

Klink snorted and threw his riding crop and cap on Hogan’s little desk. “Take your own safety serious for once!” he barked, taking a deep breath to calm himself down. “If Hitler decides to skip any cooperation with the Red Cross, not only all POWs can tighten their belts even more, because it would mean no Red Cross packages anymore,” he continued, more quiet now. “It would also mean that the whole medical personnel aren’t regarded as neutral anymore. A ‘fine’ prospect, don’t you agree?”

Robert gaped at him and lowered his gaze finally. Good God, Will was right for once. “If I really report Burkhalter to the Red Cross at the next chance, he’ll be in trouble, what will irritate the bubble brain even more, because the Sacher cake handles Hitler’s newest toy. And then the whole ‘cooperation’ with the Red Cross could really come to an end. In other words, I have to shut up for the sake of all POWs and the casualties in Germany and those countries, which are still conquered by the Nazis. On the other hand, this means that I’m risking my men’s safety and life for it. And yours.” He added, looking back at the older man.

For a very long moment, they exchanged a long gaze, and some of the tension began to leave the room as they saw the true concern for the other one in each other’s eyes. Both faces softened.

“Don’t worry for me, Rob,” Klink said, after a few seconds. “General Burkhalter is a coward and won’t risk anything for his person. If I stick near him, I’ll be safe, too.” He sighed. “But I’m responsible for my men and the prisoners, and this damn rocket is a threat for them all.”

Hogan placed both hands on his hips. “So you agree that this damn thing shouldn’t be even near our camp, not to speak of it being in here.”

“Of course, I agree,” Will groused, throwing up his hands in frustration. “We’re completely on the same pager here, but can you tell me how I shall demand from General Burkhalter its removal AND keeping his trust in my loyalty? The latter is my only way to support you and your mission.”

Robert grimaced, realizing that Wilhelm really had only tried to help him during the discussion two or three hours ago – even in a very uncommon and confusing way. And Will was continuing to do so. Hogan sighed. “I don’t think that you can help me this time. This whole thing is one big mess.”
“Let me guess: you have to sabotage the rocket launcher. But do you know that not one but…”

“…but two more of them in the area and that they should be launched towards England together with a planned lightening attack of the Luftwaffe tomorrow?” Hogan saw the perplexed face of the older man, and the left side of his mouth curled for a moment. “My men listened to your talk with Burkhalter before I joined the… ‘discussion’,“ he grumbled, nodding towards the door.

Klink stared at him and groaned. “Himmel die Berge (heavens the mountains, a German adage to show frustration), can I even speak one word in my own office without your boys getting long ears?”

“Long ears?” Hogan asked, confused.

Klink waved it off. “You know what I mean.” He shook his head and grimaced. “What will London do?”

“They’re warned concerning the double way attack – even if I ask myself, how many air-fighters the Luftwaffe still has after the big loss during operation ‘Bodenplatte’. Aren’t you running out of aircrafts by now?”

“Not with the new Messerschmitt in production. Yes, the output is smaller than planned – last but not least thanks to ‘Papa Bear’ and the Underground, which did a good job in delaying deliveries of engines, wings and so on.” He looked shortly at Robert before he continued. “But there is still the hidden work in Thuringia. And until a few days ago, the Messerschmitt facility in Regensburg sent a lot of new engines which reached Thuringia. Approximately 600 planes are ready to go into mission.”

Hogan groaned. “I think I commented this whole mess a few times with ‘great’. Now I top it with ‘super’!” Frustrated, he shook his head. “It’s like fighting a swarm of bees. Kill five and six new ones come again…like battling a Hydra.”

Klink nodded before he sighed. “But if the Allies hold on, there is hope. The Wehrmacht runs out of road – hell, all of Germany bleeds out. I don’t think they can keep going like this for very much longer. Try to steal something from an empty pocket, it’s the same.” He pressed his lips shortly into a thin line. “What do you want me to do? I mean, to sabotage the launcher here is almost impossible. It’s heavily guarded, and General Burkhalter insisted of me increasing security. So, if you only came near this damn, explosive cigar would be a miracle. But to find the two others and to stop them is… practically like a search of a black cat in a dark room.”
Robert had to grin at the idiom. Typical Wilhelm. He always found the funniest comparisons. Then he turned serious again. “London needs their exact location, then our air forces can eliminate them.”

“And how do you want to find them? If I understood General Burkhalter correctly, they’re still on their way to this area, but they use more hidden roads, so skip any idea that the RAF or the US Air Corps would be able to see them.”

Hogan nodded. “I know – and the Underground already prepared everything. I’ll meet one of their agents tomorrow at a meeting point from where we can watch the Flensheimer Road and the other street that comes from Hammelburg and leads to the south. As soon as…”

“Tomorrow?” Klink blinked at him. “Don’t you think the general won’t become more than suspicious if you don’t show your face on the compound for hours and then maybe something happens to the project? This practically reveals you as ‘Papa Bear’ with bright letters on your forehead.”

Hogan pursed his lips, while his clever mind was already scheming again. “Maybe my ‘behavior’ earlier gives me an alibi now. What do you think of putting me into the cooler for a day or to restrict me to the Barracks? I have to obey, or I’ll be sent to another camp. Of course, I choose to stay here. Officially. For real, I leave the camp via one of the tunnel exits and try to stop Hitler’s newest toys.”

The Oberst shortly pursed his lips. He didn’t like the thought of Robert taking such a risk, but he knew that this was maybe the only chance to stop the new rising insanity and to save thousands of lives. As dangerous as such a mission was, the well being of the many outweighed that of the few. It was what Robert Hogan did – trying to protect people, doing the right thing. It made him so loveable – and a damn good agent.

“Restricted to the Barracks it is then,” Will sighed, grimacing. “I don’t send you to the cooler during this blasted winter.” He moistened his lips. “But even if you and this agent can spy the two other rocket launchers, you can’t follow them without being caught. And somehow you have to learn where they will be parked to inform London about said location.”

Shaking his head, Hogan replied, “I’ll meet the agent in an abandoned hut. The Underground has equipped it with a radio and when we’ve seen the launchers, I radio London so that some of our bombers will fly to the given location. End of launchers.” He spread his hands.

Klink cocked his head before he said softly, “Good plan, yet a bad idea. As soon as you send a few
radio calls, you’re detected. General Burkhalter thought of everything and required radio detectors
from the Gestapo. General Freiberger in person is entrusted with the task. If the Gestapo or SS find
you, then not only the rockets, but you will also find your end.” His voice was very quiet now. ‘What
will also be my end, the one way or the other,’ he added in thoughts.

Hogan wrapped his own arms around himself. “Well, the others pointed out this little problem, too.
But this is a risk I…”

“…will not take!” Will said firmly, straightening his shape. “Maybe I can be of your assistance.
Nothing is bigger than General Burkhalter’s ego. He already boasted for more than an hour that he
had been chosen to lead this ‘glorious’ mission. He wants to prove to Berlin his ‘talents which don’t
lay only in leading POW camps’. He won’t allow that everyone gets a piece of the big cake he
expects to be presented with when the mission is successful. I try to put a bee in his bonnet that he, as
the CO of the mission, has to rule everything – even the Gestapo’s deployment. He’ll demand that
Freiberger will keep him updated and has to wait for his orders. Like this, we learn of any radio calls
the Gestapo maybe detects. I’ll stay with General Burkhalter in my office and man the telephone. As
soon as I get the call that Freiberger detected suspicious signals, I contact your boys and…”

Hogan, approving the suggestion already, snipped his fingers. “Just say it loud enough so that my
men hear you clearly through the bug. I’ll take a handie-talkie with me, and they can warn me.”

Klink nodded slowly. “Good idea.” Then he stared at the younger man. “A handie-talkie? Don’t tell
me that such a wireless telephone belongs to your equipment.”

A broad smirk appeared on Robert’s face. “Yeah, we have one. By the way, it’s in truth called a
‘transceiver’. It has a communication range of 3 miles, has five valves, doesn’t need much energy,
and only weighs 2 kilos; the reason why you can hold it with one hand… ‘handy’.” He chuckled.
“Yet, I would advise you to make the calls short. Two kilos can weigh tons after a few minutes.”

Klink shook his head. “I think your equipment would elicit the jealousy of any intelligence-center
around the world.” Then he cocked his head, and worry appeared in his eyes. “But nonetheless,
you’ll be careful, won’t you?”

Robert felt himself softening even more as he saw the true concern on his secret lover’s face.
“Promise,” he said. “Just make sure that my men learn of any detections in time – and maybe Schultz
and some guards won’t be too firm when two or three of my friends come near this blasted cigar out
there.”

A sigh escaped the Kommandant. “The latter I can’t promise you. General Burkhalter is like a hawk.
I barely recognize him at the moment. The experience in Berlin has changed him, no doubt about it.”

“Yes, to be on the receiving end of the own started mess can be a shock…especially when a desk jockey faces the real life outside of the office for once.” Hogan smirked.

Will lifted a finger. “Rob, I’m a desk jockey, too.”

“Well, yes,” the American officer smiled almost sheepishly. “Yet you’re far more at the ‘front’ like Burkhalter – and you have your share of battling week by week, only in another way than the Wehrmacht and SS.” He cocked his head. “You asked me to be careful. The same goes for you, okay? Burkhalter shall never get the idea that you’re not loyal to the regime.”

Klink snorted. “No problem. I continue to be the ‘babbling idiot’, and everything is fine.” He took his cap and riding crop and was about to walk to the door, but stopped one last time. He glanced over his shoulder and asked quietly, “Are we two alright again?”

Robert saw the puppy look, combined with a hint of fear – and felt his heart melting. Sweet Lord, how uncertain Will was of himself was clear like the skies on a sunny midday. Closing the distance to him, he wrapped one hand around Wilhelm’s neck, pulled his face towards him and whispered, “We’re more than alright.” He gave him a short, soft kiss. “Thanks for your help and your effort to keep me here,” he said, smiling.

“The day they’ll take you away is the day I would run amok. The only one who is allowed to remove you from this camp are the Allies when they liberate everything.” He leaned his forehead against Rob. “Or when you want to leave.”

Hogan wrapped his arms around the slender waist of his secret lover. “Not as long as I’m needed here – independent in which way.” He winked at Will, who gave him a short peck. “And now do your duty, Kommandant.” Hogan smirked, tightening his embrace for a moment before he stepped back.

Will smiled happily at him, then schooled his features and went to the door. Leaving the room together with Hogan, he looked at expecting faces all around him. Both officers rolled their eyes before Robert grinned at his men while following Klink to the entrance that the Oberst opened forcefully.

“This is my last word in the matter, Hogan. You’re restricted to the Barracks until General
Burkhalter’s mission here is fulfilled. And I don’t want to hear any complaining about it anymore. Good night.” He stepped onto the compound and closed the door with a loud ‘bang’, ignoring the curious gazes of a few guards nearby.

In the hut, Hogan chuckled quietly and turned around, once again impressed with Will’s sudden, existing acting skills. Spreading his hands, he beamed. “Well, this is an alibi for me tomorrow, don’t you agree?”

*** HH *** HH ***

The next morning, roll call was skipped again, and the counting was done like the evening prior. Schultz didn’t ask any question as he was told that Hogan lay still on his bunk sulking, and only threw one glance into the tiny quarters. He could have sworn that the heap beneath the blanket on the upper stock bed were pillows and not Robert Hogan, but like hundreds of times before, he ‘saw’ and ‘heard’ nnnnnothing.

Hogan was already on his way to the abandoned hut he had gotten the location of from the Underground. Clad in his usual civilian clothes – brown trousers, red turtleneck pullover, black leather jacket, and black leather cap – he walked through the woods, a bag with the handie-talkie, a spyglass, and a few other needed tools hung from his shoulder. The pistol in his belt poked him in the back as he finally reached the Flensheimer Road, saw the hut that seemed to be a little cottage on the top of the small hill on the other side, crossed the street, and climbed up the hill.

He felt his tension rising. What if said agent ‘Frankel’ was indeed Lily? How should he react? What would she expect from him? They had flirted, danced, kissed – made out even. He always had liked her level head, her way of wrapping everyone around her little finger (including Hochstetter and a few other SS guys), and the cold blood in which she did her real job. Yet he knew that he didn’t feel for her in the same way anymore like he once did. His love for Will ran too deep and too strong to allow any other flirts.

But somehow, he knew that he maybe had to fake some romantic reactions to prevent her from becoming suspicious. Okay, that he had fallen in love with a guy was certainly something she would never guess, but she would think that she had a female rival – and there was no fiercer hell on earth than a woman who felt betrayed. Yes, they both were in the spy business, but where he had been drilled within the army, she had taught everything herself, supported by some members of the Underground. She was no professional, and the risk that she would react offended and could become dangerous for the mission was something he couldn’t deny.

Hopefully everything would run smoothly.
He reached the hut that was eerily silent. Not one noise was to be heard. If this ‘Frankel’ was Lily, she must have recognized him the moment he was in the open while crossing the road. If she already had been caught by accident, then there were two possibilities: the hut was empty, or a bunch of SS men waited for him.

Heart beating in his throat, he pulled out his pistol and carefully opened the door, half expecting to look into a dozen muzzles. To his relief, the first possibility was true: the cottage was abandoned.

Stepping into the little building, he looked around. The wooden house must have been once a hunting cottage. Antlers and other hunting trophies hung on the wall, and the one room the hut consisted of was furnished spartan. The furniture looked old and was dusty.

What really caught Hogan’s attention was the Morse radio that was set up on a table, together with a headset. A coffee pot stood on the coal stove, and a basket seemed to hold some nourishment. Not taking anything for granted, Hogan crossed the cottage to the window at the other side of the building for what he needed only a few steps. Looking out, he saw the other street that would cross the Flensheimer Road within the range of sight. There was no chance on Earth that they would miss the convoy with the mobile rocket launchers. Convinced that the cottage was safe, he got the handie-talkie out of the bag, pulled out the antenna, and activated the mobile radio.

“Papa Bear to Goldilocks. Come in, Goldilocks.”

He didn’t need to wait for long to hear Baker answering, “This is Goldilocks. Go on, Papa Bear.”

If he hadn’t been so tense, Robert would have smiled now. Of course his men waited for his call – not only dutiful, but concerned about him. He didn’t know how many officers in the Army were this fortunate to have not only such a good team, but above all such loyal friends.

“I arrived safely. Everything seems to be in order,” he reported, knowing that this would calm his gang.

“Roger, Papa Bear. We’re standing by,” Baker replied.

“Roger. Over for now,” Hogan shortened the usual reply. Ending the call, his gaze found the basket of nourishment again, only seeing now the bottle of wine.
Wine? In these times? During such a mission? Well, he and Lily used to share some wine last year. He became more and more convinced that his partner was – indeed – the brave female Underground agent.

A soft knock on the door startled him. Quickly, he placed the handie-talkie down on the table and rushed to the door, where he pressed himself beside the entrance, pistol ready. Only then he realized with shock that he made the beginner mistake of all beginner mistakes: pressing himself against a window, becoming a clear target. If there was the SS outside, they only had to pull the trigger, and he was done for.

The door opened, and the slender figure of a woman stepped in. She whirled around the moment she saw him linger beside her, eyes wide.

“Colonel Hogan?” She addressed him, knowing that a formal greeting would get his attention quicker than calling him by his given name.

Robert stared at her, half shocked, half disbelieving. It was her. “Frankel?”

She took a breath of air in. Something was different about him. He glanced differently at her. “Lily Frankel,” she reminded him. After all, they were on the first name base.

Loosing her headscarf, she closed the distance to a dresser at the other side of the cottage.

He saw her large eyes, the short hair, the firm yaw, and her curvy yet slender figure. She smiled for a moment at him, and he felt himself withdrawing into himself. The decision to play it cool was made before he even realized it.

“Look, not that I have anything against the smell of perfume, but this isn’t exactly the mission for a woman.” Yes, she was a good agent, but this here was almost suicide. So what was she doing here? At the same moment, he remembered that he asked Tiger almost the exact same question when they met for the first time. He knew that this was macho behavior at best, because women had proven over and over again within the last few years that they could stand their man formidable, yet he was, just like Klink, old fashioned enough to see a female rather safe than in the middle of a dangerous situation.

Lily hesitated for the tiniest moment, surprised. Sweet Lord, she was in this business for more than four years now, and Robert knew it. Why this stupid question? Why was he so…formal?
Without looking at him, she tried to laugh it off. “Colonel Hogan, I’ve faced danger before.” ‘Just like you did hundreds of times,’ she added in thoughts. She felt him helping her out of her coat.

“When was the last time you were alone with a man who was a prisoner of war for three years?” He challenged dryly, knowing that he exaggerated. After all, his 3rd ‘anniversary’ of being the ‘guest of honor’ in Stalag 13 was in six weeks.

She turned around. “Now that is what I call ‘danger’,” she deadpanned. She looked him up and down. He hadn’t changed…much. There was a sparkle of silver at his temples and a harder strain around his mouth, but otherwise he was the same, damn handsome man with the half smirk she remembered.

Hogan saw her half smug, half amused smile and knew that the coming hours would be more difficult than originally thought. Not because she tempted him like she had done the other times they interacted with each other, but because he knew that she expected his usual, flirtatious behavior he was not really up to. He sighed inwardly. Obviously it was him now who put on a show to hide his secret just like Will did for years – decades – now.

*** HH *** HH ***

In Stalag 13, Kinchloe fought against his cold as he manned the radio, taking over for Baker despite his illness. Yes, they just received the first message from Hogan, yet he was nervous, which was a rare thing. This time, so much depended on their little ‘club’. The mere thought that the whole counterstrike against England done with air fighters and three V2 rockets launching from mobile devices chilled him to the bones. The war would reach a new level. One he didn’t want to think too close about.

He heard above him the door closing and knew that the others, including Baker, went outside to get closer to the mobile rocket launcher. Carter had come up with a plan to sabotage the damn thing by pulling some wires out of their original place, but for this, he had to get under the launcher – in the middle of the day. The guards had been strictly ordered from Burkhalter to keep any POW on distance, and so their only hope was Schultz.

“Suicide – for all of us this time,” he murmured, while waiting for Hogan’s next call. Every contact was dangerous, yet it was inevitable – and the danger came nearer in the form of a detection unit.

*** HH *** HH ***
Hogan sat down the glass of wine. He and Lily had shared private information – no, she wasn’t married, and she didn’t have a boyfriend (bad for the business, like she said). They had exchanged cordialities, some wine, and he had flirted with and kissed her, realizing to his own shock that Wilhelm had ruined him utterly for these kinds of fooling around. He had felt nothing while playing his old role as playboy. Hell, he rather got a bad conscious and suppressed the yearning to have Will this near.

He was even relieved as the Morse radio sprang alive. The bombers of the RAF had launched and were on their way to North Bavaria. Because no rocket launcher was still in sight, Hogan suggested that the aircrafts should make some loops and, maybe, use another target for now.

Knowing how he tooled with females in the past, including Lily, he kept up his role as a tempting seducer, even if he felt no thrill at all. To his luck, he was once again contacted, this time by Baker, who took over again for the badly coughing Kinchloe. To learn that his men had had no chance to go through with the sabotage plan because of Burkhalter’s intervention that ended in shooing them away on gunpoint was irritating for Hogan. As much as London feared all three rocket launchers, he only was unsettled because of the one in Stalag 13.

Dammit. They had to eliminate this danger – somehow!

It was Lily who came up with the idea. The rockets were steered with a gyrocompass – and this could be easily manipulated. A simple electromagnet in close range would do wonders.

Getting some distance from the young woman he still liked, but not in the way he used to, Hogan called Baker again, but was interrupted as he received a new message from London.

And only a few kilometers away, one of the Gestapo’s detection units got a hold of the used frequency.

*** HH *** HH ***

Horst Schmidt looked at the man who sat on one of the visitor chairs in his office, wearing the black uniform of a general of the Totenkopf-SS. General Freiberger was one of the Chiefs of the SS and Gestapo Staff and chosen by the Führer to take care of the mission’s security. He had waltzed into Schmidt’s office yesterday with orders from Berlin, demanding that Schmidt put half of his men under the general’s command and practically took over all of Headquarters. He was searching for a defector who was about to reveal military secrets to the Underground.
Well, nothing new then.

Of course, Schmidt had seen no other way than obeying and had inwardly shaken his head as the man got a raging fit as he learned that the traitor, Major Heintzer of the *Luftwaffe*, had escaped. And this under the nose of his pursuers. His car had a breakdown and as two SS-recruits, who had spied on his car in the street and followed him, saw how a working troop of POWs changed his flat tire, they had called for reinforcement. They hadn’t dared to do anything on their own, but had waited for the comrades like protocol demanded when members of any military/semi-military unit were still in training. The full apprenticed SS men came too late. The bird had already flown away, so to say.

Freiberger had called the POW camp, Stalag 13, and had groused about the whole matter. Schmidt didn’t need to hear Klink answers. He already knew that the *Oberst* had defended his guards and the POWs. After all, how could they have known that the officer they were forced to help was a defector? He could read on the general’s face how unsatisfying he was with Klink’s answers Schmidt could clearly imagine. The *Luftwaffe* officer had a certain way with words Schmidt almost admired.

In the evening, Schmidt had interviewed the two recruits, who had witnessed everything. As it seems, the major had demanded assistance, had quarreled with an American officer who had been in charge of the POWs, and had enforced help on gunpoint before he had driven away. Schmidt knew that the American officer had to be Hogan, because he was the only higher ranking US officer in Stalag 13. And deep down, Horst was pleased that the man had healed well enough to lead even a working troop outside of the camp.

Everything the two recruits told him sounded normal given the fact that the major was on the run, and had no time to spare. What didn’t fit was something else: Heintzer and Hogan had talked with each other – the major still pointing a pistol at the colonel, yet they had spoken less aggressive like one of the two recruits pointed out. Only after the tire was exchanged, the colonel had obviously said some unpleasant things, and the major had barked at him again.

The two SS recruits had been too far away to understand anything, and they didn’t even get suspicious of an American colonel and a *Luftwaffe* major talking with each other at all, but Schmidt thought it was more than odd. He *still* did. While he watched Freiberger reading some files and waited for Schmidt’s men detecting secret radios and transmitters in the area, he began to ponder the whole thing once again.

To point a weapon on a POW to force the others into assistance was strange. Okay, there wasn’t a single POW who would help a member of the *Wehrmacht* on his own free will, but he had to follow orders. The ‘big, large *Luftwaffe* sergeant’ one of the recruits mentioned couldn’t have been anybody else than Schultz, who simply could have given the order to exchange the staff car’s tire, yet the
The two males had been the Frenchman and maybe Hogan’s second in command or the other negro man – after all, there were two of them now in Stalag 13 as far as Schmidt knew. Both the black skinned man and the Frenchman belonged to Hogan’s gang, as well as the Englander. So two – or three – of the colonel’s inner circle had lent a helping hand, keeping Schultz busy with watching them while Hogan talked with the major.

Schmidt didn’t know if he was becoming paranoid like so many others of his comrades, but something was off here. Heintzer had defected and was on the run. But that he had come to North Bavaria where a secret project of the Luftwaffe should be tested the next day, suggested that the traitor was involved in said project and wanted to blow the whistle. To whom? To the Underground to stop the whole test? Therefore, his arrival in the area made sense. But the rest…

Okay, that his car had a breakdown and that Hogan and his men were doing repairs at the same road could be pure coincidence. But what if it wasn’t? What if this whole thing was planned to meet Hogan? Why the colonel? To deliver secret details to the Underground – via Hogan? The latter would mean that Hochstetter had been right and Hogan was, indeed, an Underground agent. This meeting by accident and how it went in detail screamed ‘oddness’ to the skies.

As much as Schmidt wanted to ignore these surmises, they couldn’t be denied. If Hogan was indeed a spy and used his captivity in Stalag 13 to work for the Underground, then he also had to be in contact with London – giving and receiving crucial information of intelligence and military heritage. And this would also be the answer to the riddle why Klink eventually had known about the upcoming air raid in Berlin three weeks ago and brought them all to safety at the very last second. Why this close call? Because he had learned about it shortly before the attack happened.

How?

The ominous call he received. ‘A call from the camp’ – it would make sense. If this call really came from Stalag 13 and it had been a warning about the approaching attack, then Klink’s source sat in his camp. The same source Major Heintzer now eventually used to give details about the secret project he was involved with to the Underground.

And who was involved yesterday and maybe also three weeks ago?
Colonel Hogan.

What if the American learned of the planned bomber attack in Berlin and it had been him who had called Klink at the People’s Court to warn the Oberst of the upcoming air raid? He had lived in the Kommandant’s quarters at that time where there was a telephone he could use in secret. Hogan spoke German – ‘not so well’, like Klink stated during the trial, but what if this was a lie? What if Hogan spoke German well enough to wake no suspects when confronted with German people? You can’t differ between a German and an American when both were fluent speakers. And even less you could differ between them on the telephone. If the caller had been Hogan, the young man of the SS had no chance to recognize that the man on the other end of the line was a captured US officer.

Schmidt pursed his lips. Maybe he really should investigate this case. Maybe he really should try to find out if the SS man, who received the call from Stalag 13 at the Court three weeks ago, was still alive and ask him for details. If Horst knew the name of the caller, he could find out what really was going on – and if Hogan was maybe an active Underground member and therefore also ‘Papa Bear’.

And if so, then Hogan was also the man, he – Schmidt – and Little Manfred owed their lives.

He groaned inwardly at the dilemma. As a dutiful member of the Third Reich’s defense units, he shouldn’t hesitate even a second to reveal a spy and to eliminate him, yet he knew that he couldn’t simply deliver his savior to his doom.

‘What are you thinking, Horst?’ He rebuked himself. ‘If Hogan is a spy, and therefore Klink a traitor, you have to arrest them as the Reich’s enemies.’ Yet, he knew that this was a step he maybe was unable to do – for personal reasons. If Hogan was the spy the Gestapo and SS were after, then he not only saved Schmidt’s life, he also was the ticket for Hilda and Little Manfred to remain safe should the Allies conquer Germany. And the latter became more and more inevitable. On the other hand, strong sabotage only made it possible for the Allies to conquer Germany – or speeded it up. So, what to do?

The telephone rang and tore Schmidt out of his thoughts. Accepting the call, he listened closely and offered his current guest the receiver. “For you, Herr General.”

“Freiberger,” the SS staff officer answered the call and listened for a moment. A large grin spread over his face that vanished as quickly as it came. “Very good, Hansmann. Wait for my call. Unfortunately, I have to contact the project’s leader before I do anything else.” He put the receiver on the phone only to lift it again. “Link me to Stalag 13, General Burkhalter. Schnell!”
While he waited, he looked at Schmidt. “Two of your men detected radio signals. I think we have those damn traitors and saboteurs.”

Schmidt nodded – and he asked himself why was his belly beginning to clench?

*** HH *** HH ***

At Stalag 13, Klink sat at his desk and was barely able to calm his heart beat and nerves. He had seen LeBeau and Newkirk talking with Schultz outside of the Kommandantur near the rocket and had known that Robert’s men were up to something. He had ignored them for quite some time, hoping that Burkhalter wouldn’t notice them. But his hope had been for naught. Only two or three minutes later, the general had walked to the window to let in some fresh air, had seen Hogan’s men near the rocket launcher, and had raced out of the building like pursued by a tarantella. Of course, Klink had accompanied him – not to support him, but to prevent the worst.

Robert’s friends – all of them – had been there, and to Klink’s shock, a few of his guards gave them warning shots in front of their feet to reinforce Burkhalter’s order to get the hell away from the weapon. Wilhelm still had to stomach the scene. Only one and a half week ago guards and POWs had had a kind of peaceful co-existence with each other; now many of them had found back to the old hostile ways. The wide range attacks of the Allies and helplessness many of the guards felt about it were demanding their tolls. And Klink hated the changes. It would need time to restore some of the semi peace they all had experienced the weeks before. And the mobile rocket launcher in the middle of the camp wasn’t really helpful in this case. Rather the opposite. Its presence tested the nerves of all. The guards and the POWs.

The telephone ringing tore Will out of his musings and quickly accepted the call. With Hilda not being in the office (after all it was Sunday), he received the incoming call in person, for which he was glad. It made it possible to be the ‘outer ear’ for Hogan’s men without much trouble.

“Yes, who is this?”

He listened to the woman’s voice from the other line and gulped down the piece of cake he was eating. “Oh, put him on,” he ordered, fearing the worst. Cupping the mouthpiece of the receiver with one hand, he said quietly to Burkhalter, “It’s General Freiberger of the Gestapo.”

Burkhalter, who sat in front of his desk and sipped at his cup of coffee, only nodded, rolling his eyes towards the ceiling for a moment. At the desk was a plate with a large piece of cake placed that had
been brought from the cantina. Not for the first time, Wilhelm asked himself when the day would come the general would simply burst from too much food.

Wilhelm heard the sharp voice through the line and felt his mouth going dry, while he forced a smile on his face. “Yes, my dear General Freiberger,” he said, ignoring protocol. For a moment, he felt something close to panic as he listened to the SS general’s message he had dreaded. Yet he managed to answer, “Yes Sir. Yes, I’ll tell him immediately. Thank you, General Freiberger.”

To play out time, he simply hung up, knowing that calling back would need a minute or more – a minute that could be crucial for Robert. Speaking a little bit louder, and acting as the eager officer, he addressed his superior, “One of the detector units has picked up a wireless code sending messages.”

This got the general’s attention. Lowering the cup down on the saucer, he said slowly. “It must be the Underground.”

“That is exactly what I was going to say,” Klink agreed, nodding firmly. Well, it was exactly what he knew, and he tried to ignore the fear that rose on icy wings in him. Wireless code, the transmitter, and certainly Robert’s handie-talkie. The only way to warn him was cut off, because the damn detector unit located this transmission frequency of all others.

Burkhalter’s eyes had widened in realization. “They must be sending out the location of our mobile rocket launchers.”

‘Quick-thinker’, Klink thought sarcastically before the graveness of the situation caught up with him again. To stall more time, he smiled and waved off one hand. “Exactly what I was going to say,” he repeated, playing the fool again who agreed to everything to show that he was as intelligent as his superior was.

Staring with cold determination into nothingness for a moment, Burkhalter turned towards him. He wouldn’t allow the Underground to ruin his mission. “Order your men to search the area. If they find anybody suspicious, shoot them.”

Klink felt ice flowing through his veins. Firing order. If they would find Robert, they would instantly kill him. The fear for the man he loved was almost getting through him, yet he somehow found the strength to remain composed.

Time. Robert’s men needed time to warn him somehow. They couldn’t contact him via the handie-
talkie. He knew it – they certainly knew it now, too. Therefore, they would have to act in person. And for this, they needed time.

Risking Burkhalter’s anger again, Klink forced an even bigger goofy grin on his face and lifted an index finger. “That is exactly what I was going to say,” he repeated for the third time, knowing he was testing the general’s nerves to a new extent.

The general grew stiff. “Klink, stop agreeing with me. You’re undermining my confidence,” he sneered, putting the cup on the desk.

Wilhelm only continued to smile, as if he hadn’t understood the offense at all. Freiberger’s men were in the field, so they should learn about the order last. It was another chance for Hogan’s men to warn Robert. Therefore, Klink called first Schultz to summon troops for the search. Yes, it was illogical given the situation from Burkhalter’s and the regime’s side, but if you took the general’s order literally, Klink only obeyed. Only after he had spoken with Schultz, he called Gestapo Headquarters back to inform Freiberger about the general’s order. Freiberger had waited for the information impatiently and was furious that he had been forced to wait for more than ten minutes to get an official reaction from Burkhalter, but Klink played out well the few trumps he could use.

While leaning back on his chair, there was only one prayer that ruled his mind: ‘Get away from there, Rob. Get the hell away from that hut!’ Then he took a deep breath and added in his thoughts, ‘Warn him, boys. For God’s sake, warn Robert in time!’

*** HH ***

Carter and Baker climbed out of the tunnels, happy that Hogan had found a way to sabotage the rocket in the camp. Thank the Lord that Frankel knew so much about the weapon’s technic. There was an easy way to manipulate the rocket’s control, which would make the weapon useless. An electromagnet…who had ever thought that this was the simple solution to their problem? After their failure an hour ago during which they had been chased away from the rocket, they needed a plan B to stop the missile before it could be sent on its deadly journey. The colonel’s new plan was super…but not easy to do. They would have to branch off a power supply wire from the rocket launcher’s battery to get power for the magnet, and they had to hide the magnet somewhere near the rocket. It could only confuse the control system over a short distance, so a close range was necessary. They would manage it…somehow.

They turned around as LeBeau and Newkirk all but stormed out of Hogan’s office.

“Listen, you guys,” Louis began, while Carter started to speak enthusiastically at the same moment.
“Colonel Hogan has a plan on how to take care of the rocket…”

Newkirk didn’t have nothing of it, as he stopped the whole talk by simply taking over command for once. “LeBeau and Carter, take care of it,” he said, and tapped Baker on the shoulder. “You come with me.” He hopped into the open ‘bed’ on the ladder and began to climb down into the tunnels.

“Where are we going…” Baker began, but Newkirk interrupted him.

“To lay out a bait,” he said, deep worry on his face.

While LeBeau informed Carter, a coughing Kinchloe, and the others of what he and Newkirk had heard from Klink’s office, the Englishman jumped down the last steps of the ladder and raced towards the storage room, Baker on his heels.

“The bloody Gestapo detected the gov’nor’s radio activities including the frequency of his handie-talkie. If we warn him this way, they’ll have him quicker than he can call for help. We need to send them on a goose hunt, or Colonel Hogan’s done for!”

Baker nodded, realizing why Newkirk wanted him to go with him. To distract the Gestapo, they needed a second transmitter to lure them on the wrong track. And he was, besides Kinchloe, the only one who could handle a radio well enough to trick the Gestapo.

“We need time to…”

“Klink does his best in the moment to stall time,” Newkirk cut in, helping Baker to pack their mobile transmitter. “But I don’t think he can buy us more than ten minutes at best. So hurry up!”

*** HH *** HH ***

While Lily sat at the window and tried to spy the convoy, Hogan sat at the radio, ready to inform London as soon as the rocket launchers were spied. The young woman was alerted like he was and tensed up as she thought to hear low engine noises coming their way. And then she saw them: the mobile rocket launchers. Two of them. Driving down the Flensheimer Road 3.2 miles away from Hammelburg and heading for the river.
Feeling some triumph, Hogan quickly sent Morse messages to London and informed them of the correct location, while Lily continued to watch the convoy. Within a short range of time, the rockets would be history. The British bombers weren’t far away anymore; they were waiting for the order and the location for the attack, which would be given within the next few minutes.

Hogan’s fingers moved the Morse leveler with practice, affirmed the location once again, and cut off the link. London would wait for the convoy to get some distance between Hogan’s hideout and the place the bombers would do their work. To detonate rockets meant a lot of destruction in the nearby area, and the brass didn’t want to risk the life of its top agent.

All of sudden, Lily saw something else and felt her belly tighten. “Colonel Hogan,” she addressed her partner, realizing that he was more professional than the flirty man she once knew. “There is a radio detecting truck coming from the other direction.”

Adrenaline shot through Hogan’s veins. The Gestapo had intercepted his signal – they were on their way to his hideout. He felt his mouth going dry, knowing that only one little radio signal from London or his men would reveal his exact location.

“There’s nothing we can do anymore,” he said quietly. “The bombers are already in the air.” He tried to calm his nerves and took a deep breath. He sent a prayer to the Heavens that no one would try to contact him now.

TBC…

Yes, we all know the outcome of this part of the episode, and how Hogan is going to trick Burkhalter – better to say, the rocket’s technics. Yet there were some crudities and I tried to close those gapes (the same goes for the ‘Heroes’ in the next chapter concerning the electric magnet).

It was also fun to write the additional scenes – or the ‘making up’ of our two lovebirds in the beginning. It also fun to let Klink being a part of the upcoming conspiration, and how he plays along or acts on own initiatives; tricking and fooling Burkhalter like this.

In the next chapter, the rest of the episode will be told, but also some more things which will lead to further consequences concerning Hogan, his men and also Klink. The whole failed mission of the mobile rocket launchers – a chain of sabotages that had again around and even in Stalag 13 –
wakes Schmidt’s suspicions even more. The whole thing will also lead to Burkhalter being ordered to Nürnberg, where he meets with the second and third highest ranking men of the Third Reich. His close distance to Stalag 13 will become important for what follows then.

And the destroyed radio transmitter that was originally used by Baker and Newkirk to distract the Gestapo, will become a key part soon, and this in many ways.

I hope, you liked the new chapter and – like always – I would love to get some reviews.

The next chapter comes already during the next week.

Have a nice weekend,

Love

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Thank you so much for the feedback. I’m glad that the different-told episode finds you approval, because it really was a challenge to write it just like it was filmed all those many years ago, yet to give it another atmosphere, and to add several things.

In the new chapter now, the last part of it happens – and its outcome will have a certain impact concerning the next coming showdown. In the end I mixed some true history events with it, but also added several scenes which should complete the episode but also it’s end.

I hope, you’re going to like it.

Have fun,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 57 – Rockets, romance and the outcome

In Stalag 13, LeBeau already came up with an idea to set Hogan’s plan concerning the sabotage of the rocket launcher within the camp into motion. An empty barrel that served as barbeque, Schultz’s gluttony, and one of Carter’s toys (namely the high power magnet he had crafted weeks ago to kill boredom) would be the path to success.

Of course Schultz knew that some big ‘monkey business’ was going on, as LeBeau appeared in an apron and chef hat with a plate full of utensils for cooking, offering to cook dinner for him because he was on duty. As much as he, Hans, and the prisoners of Barracks 2 had grown close, he knew
that this here was completely out of line. Yet, Schultz played along. After all, Klink had told him during a calm minute that Hogan’s men needed any support they could get.

Carter and Olsen wheeled a barrel beside the Kommandantur that held a grit and a heater LeBeau used to fry the steak. The Sergeant of the Guards simply knew that this whole ‘cooking favor’ had to do with the blasted rocket launcher and that Hogan’s men wanted to stop the deadly rocket before it would cost thousands of lives. And he could have bet a whole month’s salary that the ‘barbeque barrel’ held some technical device that was ought to sabotage the rocket.

Risky, but doable. And he was more than okay with it.

To be not the only one who could become a suspect by an obvious, paranoid Burkhalter, he invited another guard to join him for the unexpected dinner. Because any heater needed power, no one really minded that Carter used an electrical cord he connected with the truck’s energy supply. While Louis cooked, using the barrel as a kind of electric barbeque grill, Carter activated the hidden magnet for a test. It worked on the fork, which instantly seemed to be glued to the grit.

Like this, no one became suspicious of the barrel’s presence beside the Kommandantur, and Schultz was happy with the early dinner. The Heroes had been able to place the toy for their sabotage into the correct range of the rocket launcher. Now they only had to wait for Burkhalter to launch the rocket, and the missile would fly away…but not in the wished direction.

They were almost done with everything as they heard the approaching droning of aircrafts and looked up. They saw a few bombers heading to the northeast, and a minute later detonations ripped through the air. While Schultz and the others gaped at the pillars of smoke, which rose towards the skies, LeBeau and the others grinned. As it seemed, Hogan’s mission had been a full success.

One of the windows of Klink’s office was torn open, and Burkhalter and Klink looked out. The curses the general shouted didn’t need any translation. Of course the fat Austrian knew what had exploded a few kilometers away. Screaming at Klink to contact his men and order them to check on the mobile rocket launchers, Burkhalter all but slammed the window closed that made the glass shivered.

“Poor Klink,” LeBeau murmured. “He certainly gets the whole load of fury Burkhalter has to burst with.”

“Yeah, even if our Balding Eagle is not to blame for the first failure of the general’s mission,” Olsen whispered.
“Do you know what this partial success also means?” Carter said quietly, looking at his friends. As they only glanced questioningly at him, he said, “The planned air raid of the Luftwaffe is cancelled, too.”

“Hopefully. The Krauts could still attack without the support of the rockets – or simply delay the whole assault and plan a new one…this time with only one rocket,” LeBeau grumbled, glaring at the missile a few meters away from him.

From inside of the Kommandantur, loud voices were still to hear, and Louis scratched his neck. “Maybe we should cover our device here with firewood. If one of the guards, or Burkhalter, should check on it, no one will find our magnet and think the barrel is being used to stock firewood for Klink’s office.”

“A good idea,” Carter nodded and looked at Olsen. “Come on, let us get some wood before Burkhalter is finished with screaming murder and comes out of the office.”

LeBeau began to summon the cooking utensils and threw one last look to the smoke. This part of the mission was fulfilled, yet one very important detail was still at risk: Hogan’s safety.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan watched the grey SS truck with hawk eyes. For more than a quarter hour now it practically parked at their door step down the hill. He had switched off the transmitter and the handie-talkie, yet even with the devices cut off, the Gestapo could detect incoming signals. They could not lead them to Hogan, but to the broadcaster, and this was Baker in Stalag 13.

All of sudden, the truck began to move again, and for a few seconds, Robert felt a hue of panic, then he saw how the truck left the street and drove straight into the woods. Hogan didn’t know if he should catch his breath or not. Obviously the Krauts had caught new signals and were following them.

Then it hit him. The transmitters here had been detected, and the men in the truck had contacted Burkhalter. Like this, Klink, and therefore Baker and the others, had learned of Hogan’s radio being revealed, and his men were now outside to distract the Gestapo. He didn’t doubt that his friends wouldn’t move hell and earth to protect him, becoming themselves the bait.
On the one hand, he was glad that they were there, distracting the Gestapo. On the other hand, they had brought themselves into mortal danger. And if they were caught, Burkhalter would realize instantly that ‘Papa Bear’ was indeed Hogan.

With a dry mouth, Hogan watched the truck vanishing between the bushes, ruthlessly tearing down branches and little trees, which were not higher than twenty centimeters.

All of sudden, the colonel’s hearing caught the typical droning of approaching airplanes. The bombers were coming. If out there, not far away, his friends were luring the Gestapo away from him, they were in dangerous range of the detonations.

So danger was coming from two sides now: from the Gestapo and from the British bombers. And there was nothing he could do about it.

‘Be safe,’ he thought, deep worry running through his whole being. ‘Don’t risk too much. The Gestapo AND our bombers are coming, so get away from this place.’

He flinched as he heard the rapid shots of a MP not far away. He didn’t need to be a genius to know that the Gestapo had found what they were searching for and opened fire. Pressing his lips into a thin line, he could only stand there and wait.

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Baker and Newkirk had adjusted the mobile transmitter not far away from the Flensheimer Road a few bends from the cottage they knew their friend and superior was hiding out in. The faked signal they planned had to be near the original source to make the Gestapo suspicious, but also far away enough to keep Hogan and Frankel safe.

They heard the truck nearing, and Newkirk urged Baker to come with him, but the radioman continued to tap Morse signals to nobody until he heard the truck stopping and doors opening. Only then he and Newkirk raced away, seeking shelter in the tightly covered brushwood around them.

One black cladded SS-man began to fire into the direction of the transmitter before he came nearer. The man’s face contorted in rage as he saw the radio and opened fire at it again. His colleague, who followed him, nodded with grim satisfaction before he stepped to the transmitter and lifted it together with shot away parts from the ground.
“I’ll take it with me in case General Freiberger wants to have a closer look on it.”

“At least we stopped the damn transmission,” the other man said, securing his MP again. “A shame that the spies escaped. I would have loved to send them to hell and…” He stopped as he, and also his colleague and the two friends in the bushes, heard the nearing droning of heavy aircrafts.

A minute later, loud detonations ripped through the air as the two rocket launchers and their loading found an inglorious end in the falling bombs of the Royal Air Force.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan was glad that this part of the mission was a success, and he was even happier as Newkirk and Baker appeared in the cottage healthy and well. And he didn’t mind that they interrupted Lily from kissing him. Where in earlier times he had very much liked to have her in his arms, he now felt as if he was betraying Will, even if he only played along to make her not suspicious.

Relieved, he learned that his two friends had been able to distract the Gestapo and fool the detection unit. The two SS/Gestapo men were convinced that they eliminated the danger, only to witness the destruction of the two mobile rocket launchers. Hitler and his goonies would be furious; this much was sure.

Hogan wanted to help Lily to dismount the Morse radio and to erase all tracks before they left the hut, but Baker urged him to return to the camp immediately. They would need time to get back, because dozens of Klink’s men were in the area searching for the Underground agent who sent the signals. Therefore, they had to be careful. And the news that the two rocket launchers were destroyed wouldn’t need long to reach Burkhalter. Klink’s men and the Gestapo would confirm the disaster within a short range of time. It would be much better if the colonel was in his Barracks, where he was restricted to. It wouldn’t be the first time that Burkhalter checked in person on Hogan’s presence when something happened in the area.

Accepting that his men were right, Hogan bid Lily goodbye, asked her to be careful, and vanished with his two men into the wilderness around Hammelburg.

They were able to avoid the sent out guards of Stalag 13 and the Gestapo, and made it just in time back to the camp…or not. Entering the tunnels via the tree stump, Hogan was not completely done with changing back into his usual uniform as Olsen shouted down from the Barracks, “Colonel, hurry up! Burkhalter is stomping towards our Barracks, and Klink is walking after him like a scared up duck!”
“Dammit.” Hogan snarled, took his shirt and shoes with him, and climbed up the ladder. Newkirk, also not fully back in uniform, did the same, while Baker remained in the tunnels. Racing towards his tiny quarters, Robert had barely closed the door behind him as he heard the entrance banging open, followed by Klink’s flustered voice, “But my dear General Burkhalter, where else would Hogan be? I restricted him to his Barracks until your mission is fulfilled and…”

“STOP repeating yourself like a broken LP, Klink! What happened screams the name ‘Papa Bear’, and I want to know once and for all if Hogan is behind it or not! Out of my way, Corporal. And why are you half naked?” The general’s voice sounded furious, gazing in Newkirk’s direction.

“Because my jumper is getting washed, and I didn’t exactly have my whole wardrobe with me when I was shot down over Germany,” Peter deadpanned, stalling time.

“Doing laundry on Sunday? Your POWs have no manners, Klink,” the general sneered, then took heavy, quick steps towards Hogan’s quarters. Robert lay on his bed, shirt hidden beneath his pillow, boots beside the stock bed, book in hand. He looked up as the door was forcefully opened, and Burkhalter stopped at the threshold, Klink almost running into him before coming to a halt at the very last moment.

“Is something the matter?” Robert drawled. “Is the order that I’m restricted to my Barracks cancelled, Kommandant?”

Burkhalter only stared at him – half relieved, half angry – before he wordlessly turned around, pushed Klink out of the way, and stomped away. “Tell Hogan that there are uniform regulations even within the Barracks.” He snapped before leaving the hut.

Hogan’s “Yet clothes have to be washed from time to time!” reached him just before he was out of earshot.

Klink looked up at Hogan, who had braced himself lazily on one underarm, and a smile spread slowly over the Oberst’s face. Robert was back safe and healthy. That was all that mattered – well, and the successful bombing of the two rockets.

“You’re okay?” he whispered.

Rob nodded. “Yes, thanks to you…and Baker and Newkirk. They distracted the Gestapo just in
time.” He gave the older man a glance full of warmth and love. “Danke, Wilhelm.”

Klink’s smile even grew, then Burkhalter’s voice shouted from the compound.

“KLIIIIINK, have you taken root in there or what?”

Will rolled his eyes. “God, his mood is the foulest one I ever had the displeasure to bear.” Then he took a deep breath. “The air raid against England is deferred till tomorrow – with the last rocket.” He nodded into the direction where the rocket launcher was parked. “It’s meant for the centrum of London – Buckingham Palace and the Defense Ministry. I hope you have a good plan to prevent this catastrophe.”

Hogan nodded and only asked, “When?”

“The assault is planned for noon. The rocket needs twenty minutes to reach London, and our aircrafts start earlier to attack a few minutes after the rocket hits home.” He gave Hogan a pointing look before he left, closing the door behind him. With quick steps, he crossed the Barracks and gave Newkirk a short smile. “Well done,” he said quietly, and headed for the entrance.

“KLINK!” Burkhalter yelled again. “I’M STILL WAI…there you are. What took you so long?” The general’s voice was sharp like a sword.

“I only reminded Hogan of the uniform regulations and that laundry shouldn’t be done at a Sunday,” Will used Burkhalter’s angry words from earlier as an excuse.

Inside of Barracks 2, the Heroes and the others smirked at each other. Poor Klink. To be the whipping boy for the general’s wrath was really no walk in the park, yet they all admired how well their usually so gauche Kommandant did.

Hogan left his quarters, shirt open, shoes in hand. He sat down at the table and slipped into his shoes, lacing them together. “Okay, fellas; as you certainly all recognized, two of three rockets are done for.” He glanced up. “And now, please tell me that everything is prepared to make the third V2 useless.”

*** HH *** HH ***
Burkhalter became aware of the barrel beside the *Kommandantur* as well as Klink. They found it stocked up with firewood, and Wilhelm, used to finding excuses for everything within seconds, explained that the firewood could have been gotten for the office without a guard or *Fräulein* Hilda taking care of it.

Grumbling about ‘everyone does only what he wants by now’, Burkhalter accepted the explanation and returned to Klink’s office, calling Hilda and ordered her to stay at home the next day. Even if he trusted the *Luftwaffe* and the scientists who had developed the launcher (and the rocket), there was still a risk that something would go wrong with the technic, and he didn’t want the young woman to fall prey to it should the damn thing tear down the camp.

An hour later, he and the Kommandant went to Klink’s quarters calling it an early night. Tomorrow a second attempt for a counterstrike against England would take place, and Burkhalter wanted everything perfect. The guards were doubled, twelve of them stood around the mobile rocket launcher armed with MPs, and two of the searching lights were trained on the device for the whole night.

Hogan sent the warning of the delayed, but still existing plan of the assault to London, giving them all the details he knew. He promised to try his best to prevent the rocket from reaching England, trusting that the Allies were able to intercept the approaching *Luftwaffe* air fighters the next day.

Later the Heroes received a message from Wagner, who informed them that Lily had made it safely back, including the equipment. All tracks had been eliminated and even if the Gestapo got the idea to turn the cottage upside down, they wouldn’t find any hint that the source of the sabotage happened there. Even all fingerprints had been removed by a thoroughly cleaning of the furniture, door-knops and window-handles.

The night went by uneventful. Hogan’s mind wandered a few times to Lily and how…strange it had felt to have her in his arms. He was used by now to embracing a lean, yet firm body, and to have long arms wrapped around him. Lily had been so soft and fragile somehow, he had feared to hurt her. What a difference of having Will close by. He could live out his passion with the older man all he wanted without the risk of harming him. And he felt safe and sheltered with Wilhelm, while being with Lily, he had been forced back into his role as someone who always had to take care of the other one.

Rolling from one side to the other, Robert didn’t find sleep easily. The day’s events, including the close call, and the bad conscience of kissing and flirting with Lily kept him awake. He would speak about it with Will at the next given opportunity. He didn’t want to have any secrets between them, and Wilhelm deserved the truth…that Hogan had been forced to fall back to his old ways for a few hours, but had felt nothing for it. He hoped that Will would understand him.
The next morning came far too early, and again, no roll call happened, but the counting was done in the Barracks. To reassure Burkhalter that everything was all right, Klink made the counting in person in Barracks 2, getting the chance to speak with Robert in private for a few minutes. Like this, he learned of the Heroes’ plan on how the rocket would be sabotaged.

“The magnet needs approximately ten seconds to delete the programed course and let the control system go crazy,” Hogan said quietly. “So when I connect it with the electrical cord, I need…”

“Ten seconds or more until the magnet does its work,” Klink nodded. “I understand. I’ll distract General Burkhalter to stall for the time you need.” He looked softly at Robert. “Be careful. If you’re caught, General Burkhalter will shoot you without hesitation. He is so full of anger I think I have another person with his face in front of me.”

Robert smiled. “It’s all right, Will. Just try to calm the situation when he sees me on the compound. After all, I’m still restricted to the Barracks.”

“Not anymore,” Klink replied. “I cancelled the order to show you the ‘strength’ and ‘glory’ of the Third Reich that can’t even be stopped by a few sabotages.” He winked at him before he left the Barracks. The next few hours would be crucial.

At eleven o’clock, Hogan couldn’t help himself. He became nervous. And half an hour later, he left the Barracks. His friends followed him, warily watched by the guards in the watch towers.

“Colonel Hogan, you’re restricted to the Barracks,” Schultz announced, as he stepped into the American’s way in the middle of the compound.

“Not anymore, Schultz. Colonel Klink wants me to witness this ‘glorious’ moment of the Third Reich.” He looked firmly into the large Bavarian’s eyes, who realized that Klink had given this order to make it possible for Hogan to stop the next attempted attack on London with a rocket.

“Be careful with your monkey business,” Hans whispered, before he said more loudly. “Oh, for goodness sake, then stay here. But make no trouble, do you hear me?” He lifted a warning finger before he walked away.

LeBeau, arms crossed, and Newkirk stepped beside their superior. “Good show, our tubby delivered.”
“Yes, he gets better and better,” Hogan nodded, eyes on the rocket launcher. “Is everything ready?”

“We have to remove the firewood from the barrel, but that is all,” Louis shrugged.

“Okay, bring it into the Kommandantur. I don’t take the risk that something goes wrong because of some damn wooden sticks. When the plan works, Burkhalter certainly will have other worries than checking the barrel again – or getting suspicious of it at all.”

“D’accord,” LeBeau nodded and headed towards the barrel, the others following him. Promptly, Schultz headed towards them while frowning.

“What’s that?” He asked, pointing at the firewood.

“Ah, come on, Schultzie, you don’t need glasses, do you?” Newkirk teased, gathering some of the sticks of the wood. “I’ll bring this into the Kommandantur like ordered.”

“’Like ordered’,” Schultz grumbled, knowing that there simply didn’t exist such an order, but he let it go. Following Newkirk into the building and taking care that the Englishman wouldn’t disturb Klink and Burkhalter, he watched Newkirk leaving afterwards. The Oberst’s order to come into his office prevented him from leaving, too.

“What’s going on here?” Burkhalter demanded, still in the same foul mood like yesterday. “What was Newkirk doing in the anteroom?”

“He brought some firewood in, that’s all,” Schultz shrugged.

The general rolled his eyes and checked his wristwatch. “Five minutes to go,” he said. “It’s about time, Klink.” He stemmed his fat figure off the visitor chair. “Schultz, take care that all POWs are restricted to their Barracks.”

Hans hesitated for a moment. He received a short nod from Klink, sighed, and turned to leave, confused how the sabotage could take place with Hogan being sent away.
Schultz stepped out of the Kommandantur closely followed by Klink and Burkhalter. Instantly, he saw not only Hogan’s men and the American troublemaker near the rocket launcher, but also a few other POWs.

Knowing his orders, Hans rose his voice loud enough to be heard even at the other side of the camp. “All right, everyone back to the Barracks,” he began to shoo the men away. “Back-back-back-back-baaaaack! Macht schnell (hurry up)!" He waved at a slow Carter. “SCHNELL!” He barked.

Klink walked beside Burkhalter, looking dutiful at his wristwatch just like the general was doing again. Berlin had ordered that the last remaining rocket should be launched at an exact point of time so that it would hit the aimed target, London, two minutes before the German bombers – and the new Messerschmitts – would be there. He felt sick at the pure imagination what destruction it would bring over the town and the people if Robert’s little plan should fail, and the missile would fly straight towards England.

“Colonel!” Robert's voice sounded hard and angry.

Klink turned around, seeing his beloved heading with large steps into his and Burkhalter’s direction. “Yes, Hogan,” He replied, hoping the younger man had found an excuse to disobey Burkhalter’s order.

“I wish to register another protest…’’ the American officer began, flipping a thumb backwards to the assault weapon, but was instantly interrupted by the Oberst.

“I’m not interested in your protest, Hogan!”

“Neither am I.” Burkhalter snarled. Clapping his hands behind him in a typical gesture, he forgot for a moment that Hogan should be restricted to his Barracks. Goering’s and then Hitler’s voice still rung in his ear as they voiced their anger about the destroyed rockets. The general’s small eyes hung furiously at the opposing colonel. “Yesterday two of our rockets pointing to England were bombed by your barbarian Air Force.”

Hogan stared at him. The Krauts wanted to attack London and Buckingham Palace with rockets and bombers combined in one assault, and Burkhalter called the Air Force ‘barbarian’? The nerve! Who was the savage here, eh?

Glancing firmly at the fat Austrian, Hogan growled, “Then they will also bomb this camp if you
don’t move this rocket launcher.” He pointed backwards at the missile.

A cynical smile appeared on Burkhalter’s face. “I’m not afraid,” he sneered, satisfied that the prospect of getting a bomb on his head made Hogan obviously very uncomfortable. For a moment, he almost wished that something like this would happen…with him out of the camp, of course, but then he would finally be rid of one of his biggest troubles.

“Your speech is a little bit off base,” Hogan countered.

Burkhalter’s face turned sour again before he took a deep breath. No, he wouldn’t let himself being provoked by this cursed Ami.

“I personally am going to punch the switch and send this rocket to England!”

For a long moment, both officers only glared at each other, no one giving in. And Hogan realized that something really seemed to have changed within the general. The hint of humanity he always displayed seemed to have died. Or was it still somewhere in him, only paralyzed by the events in the last three weeks? Robert wasn’t sure, but if Burkhalter really had become a fanatical follower of the bubble brain like so many others, Hogan wouldn’t show any mercy should it come to the worst someday.

Burkhalter walked with hard steps towards the rocket’s control. Klink followed him and saw from the edge of his eyes how Hogan hurried towards the ‘firewood barrel’ beside the Kommandantur. None of the Heroes had dared to activate the high power magnet too early to prevent the guard from realizing something was wrong. Klink felt his mouth going dry. Be careful, Rob. Don’t let yourself get caught,’ he thought.

The two German officers saluted the guard, who had watched the missile for hours now and returned the greeting before he stepped back. Klink didn’t dare to look in Hogan’s direction, but he knew that the younger man needed a few seconds more to activate the electric magnet.

“General Burkhalter, would you allow me the honor?” He asked, stalling time like promised.

At the other side of the mobile rocket launcher, Hogan connected the hidden electric magnet with the energy wire they had branched from the launcher. Instantly, the device sprang alive and did its work. No one saw how the control system of the rocket reacted; its readouts and displays going crazy for a moment before they adjusted to the nonsense the control was programmed with now.
“Of course, Klink.” Burkhalter agreed ‘generously’ to the Oberst’s request, handing the control switch to him, and gave a hearty “Thank you” – out of another reason the general maybe thought. Yes, Will was indeed grateful. Finally, he had the control over the damn ‘cigar’ in the middle of his camp and could give Robert a helping hand. Literally.

Taking the start button in one hand, Wilhelm glanced one time more at his wristwatch. It looked as if he was checking the time again to make certain that the rocket launched at the exact moment Berlin had ordered. In truth, he wanted to know if it was safe to start the rocket already. Robert had said the whole process to de-program the rocket’s control system would need ten seconds, and if he, Klink, activated the launching process too quickly, everything was lost.

After a few more seconds, sensing Burkhalter was getting impatient, he punched the button with his thumb, and the rocket was started.

The Heroes, Klink, Burkhalter, the guards, and even Hogan ducked or turned away as the strong blow back whirled up dust and snow. Robert held onto his crush cap and closed his eyes, while he wished for another pair of hands he could have covered his ears with. The noise was deafening. Yet he used the short time to pull the plug of the high power magnet from the electrical cord, letting the latter fall to the ground before he leaned casually on the frame of the mobile rocket launcher.

As the wind calmed down, everyone in the camp looked up, seeing the rocket racing into the sky. For a few moments, Hogan thought that something had gone terribly wrong, then the missile began to spiral and alter its course. If anybody would have looked his way, he would have seen the impish glee on the American officer’s face.

While Hogan rejoiced, Burkhalter recognized disbelievingly that the rocket went out of control and flew into another direction.

“KLINK!” He yelled. “England is that way!” He pointed to the northwest, the exact opposite way the rocket was taking now, while it made a half loop midair.

“My dear General Burkhalter, I cannot understand what’s happening.” Klink defended himself, his voice a little bit shrill because of the odd mixture of fear and joy he felt as he saw how well Hogan’s plan ran.

Robert still watched the general from the other side of rocket launcher. As he saw the absolute horrified expression on Burkhalter’s face, and the rocket headed straight towards the ground in some
distance, the American officer knew that something was off.

“What’s that way?” He called to overtone the still present noises.

“MY HOUSE, for one thing!” Burkhalter yelled back, without looking at the colonel. He and Klink watched how the rocket raced downwards, then a loud explosion ripped through the air. Soil, grass, stones, wood, and many other things sprayed up in a giant fountain accompanied with flames.

A shout was ripped from the general’s mouth as he realized that the missile must have hit his home exactly. While he and Klink continued to stare at the still lasting tracks of destruction like every other guard in the camp (and many POWs), Hogan had to fight the grin that tugged on his mouth. Bracing himself casually on the empty rocket launcher with both arms, he looked at the broad figure of Burkhalter and couldn’t suppress the little devil that poked his playfulness. “Frankly, General, I thought that neighborhood was lousy anyway,” he commented wryly.

Burkhalter, still shell-shocked that the rocket obviously had destroyed his own home, heard the mockery in Hogan’s voice, and his blood began to boil. Taking a deep breath not to lose control, he turned around and glared daggers at the younger man, who looked far too smug for his taste. Opening his mouth to give Hogan a fitting answer, he saw how the American suddenly paled, eyes widening in horror. What the heck?

Hogan felt pure glee at the turn of events. This rocket had been meant for Buckingham Palace – one of the most important English buildings, centuries old and the seat of the English kings and queens. It was a part of Britain’s heart, and Berlin had chosen this target as vengeance for Dresden’s historical town quarter. But instead of bringing death and disaster over London and King George’s seat, this rocket had destroyed the man’s house who had wanted to send it on its deathly path. What an irony of fate.

And there was still another point. Burkhalter had not cared for any men’s safety in this camp, ruthlessly risking their lives. Now not the camp, but his house lay in ruins. Served him right and…

And this house had been occupied with Burkhalter’s family – not knowing what hit them before it was too late.

The moment the general turned around, face flushed with wrath, Hogan realized that this turn of events had maybe cost Burkhalter’s family members their lives.
Sweet Lord, this he hadn’t wanted to happen.

Before the staff officer could give into his fury, Robert croaked, “General, what about your wife… and the rest of your family? Were they at home?”

All color left Burkhalter’s face as the outcome of the misguided rocket crashed down on him. “Berta,” he whispered. “Gertrude, she’s here for a visit.” For a moment he felt dizzy, then new adrenaline raced through his body, setting him into action.

Shouting for his driver, he all but ran towards his car. His duty to inform Berlin about the failed rocket start was forgotten. Yes, his wife was a shrew, and if there was someone on Earth who could give him hell – besides the Führer and Goering – then it was Berta. But she was his wife! They had loved each other in the past, and somehow they still harbored respect and even a kind of affection to the other one. And his sister? Yes, she killed his last nerves, but she was of his blood, and he still loved her despite her sometimes bossy behavior. If they had been at home, they were dead. Icy fear gripped him while he climbed in the backseat of his car, urging his driver to take him home…or, better to say, what was left of it. He didn’t look back as his driver kicked the gas pedal and almost raced out of the camp, the gates barely opened yet.

Klink watched his superior driving away like the devil was after him and felt, to his own surprise, some dread on Burkhalter’s behalf. He knew Frau Burkhalter, who loved food even more than her husband did and couldn’t be quiet for more than ten seconds. And he knew, of course, Gertrude Linkmeyer. Every time she had shown up in his camp, he had wanted to run away as far as his feet could carry him, but she was not evil. She was bossy and anything but beautiful, but she was not a bad person. He didn’t want her any harm, but maybe harm had befallen her now.

He heard someone stepping beside him and knew it was Robert without turning around.

Hogan had crossed his arms in front of his chest. He had used the chaos to hide the magnet’s wire and the electrical cord he ripped away from the launcher before he went to Klink. He couldn’t deny it. He was shaken because of the possible, personal outcome for Burkhalter. Yes, the general had angered him a lot within the last three days, but now this…

“I hope his family wasn’t at home,” he said softly.

Looking at him, Will recognized the guilt in his beloved’s eyes and sighed, “Even if so, it wasn’t your fault, Robert. You didn’t program a course, but the damn thing flew of its own.” He lowered his gaze. “Yet…I hope, too, that the ladies weren’t at home. Not that I would miss Gertrude, far from it, but I don’t want something bad to have happened to her – or Frau Burkhalter.”
Hogan nodded. He could understand Will. Burkhalter’s sister was like a sandstorm: dry, deafening, and blowing everything away in her path she didn’t want. As Klink came to him for help because of ‘Gertrude’, he hadn’t hesitated to support him. He hadn’t known about Wilhelm covering for him and his men at this time one and a half years ago. The Kommandant had been for him nothing more than an opponent officer he had to interact with and somehow had come to respect and even like him. Yet, he had instantly agreed to help him as the ‘lady’ was after him. Not only because it fitted perfectly into one of Hogan’s schemes concerning a given mission, but also out of manly solidarity. Gertrude Linkmeyer wasn’t bad, but she was a man’s nightmare in many regards. The three times Klink had tried to get rid of her, Hogan had helped him because such cases needed men to stick together, no matter the heritage and the current war.

But all this was no reason to wish said woman ill – or the general’s wife, who was the typical goose with her never ending jibber-jabber. Newkirk had groaned about it even hours later, after dressing up as a woman for another mission and had been forced to bear not only Frau Burkhalter’s chatter, but this of other officer wives, too. Hell, even Burkhalter had been nerved, and that said something given the fact that he shrank back from his wife’s eventual irritation and more or less feared anger.

The latter had become clear as Hogan hinted he would give the photos, which had been shot of Burkhalter kissing a young woman, to Berta. Burkhalter had ripped up the written order for Klink being transferred to the Russian Front in return, which had told Hogan enough. The fat Austrian was very careful when it came to his wife. Why those two had married in the first place was still a riddle for Robert. Maybe she had the political and social power he needed to climb up the career ladder, while she needed a certain financial base for her lifestyle with him being an officer. The Burkhalters wouldn’t be the first couple that married out of these reasons.

“What will happen now?” Schultz tore both colonels out of their musings, and Klink looked over his shoulder at his Sergeant of the Guards.

“General Burkhalter will try to find out if his house was occupied when it was destroyed – if the rocket really hit the building.” He took a deep breath, straightened his shape, and gripped the handle of his riding crop tighter. “And I’m going to do something I wanted to do for two days now.” He strutted towards the truck that had transported the mobile rocket launcher.

Out of the edges of his eyes, Hogan saw Newkirk and Carter nearing the barrel beside the Kommandantur and knew that they wanted to retrieve the electric magnet and the power wire before those two things could be revealed.

He heard Klink raising his voice. “Bring this damn thing out of my camp – now!” Two of the Wehrmacht members, who had accompanied the weapon, began to protest, but Klink wouldn’t have anything of it. “I said take this whole equipment away from my camp. That’s an order! Or do the
gentlemen need an extra intervention – including a one-way ticket to the Russian Front?"

The men quickly saluted and manned the truck, while two privates climbed on the launcher to guard it again.

“OPEN THE GATES!” Will shouted, glad to get finally rid of the cursed launcher.

That was the perfect opportunity for Robert to steer the guards’ attention onto his person. “Well, this is an order I hoped to hear for almost three years now,” he deadpanned loudly. “Good day, Kommandant.” He gave his German counterpart a mocking salute and headed towards the gates, well aware that he got the guards’ full attention now.

“Hogan, what do you think you’re doing?” The Oberst snapped, realizing that the younger man was up to something.

“You ordered to open the gates, and because I told you during our very first talk that I would leave Stalag 13 through the gates, I’m doing that now.”

“Hier geblieben (equivalent to ‘you stay here’),” Klink ordered, swinging his fist while closing the distance to his senior POW officer. “Do you think this is funny?”

“No, I think this is very nice of you,” Hogan replied innocently, pointing at the gates. “Like this, the Allies don’t have to force their way into the camp and also spare time to liberate Stalag 13.”

“HOOOOGAAAAAN!” Klink shouted. “You really killed enough nerves within the last few days, including mine. Behave for once, or you can spend the rest of the week in the cooler.”

“It’s just Monday, Kommandant,” Hogan almost whined. “You can’t do that.”

“Don’t tempt me!”

They stood nose to nose now, and Robert used the chance to whisper, “Carter and Newkirk are removing the electric magnet and electrical cord. I’m distracting your guards.”
“You can try to bribe me with all chess games all day, Hogan, but I mean it. Retreat, or you’ll be in trouble!” Will replied loudly, as he instantly played along.

“You’re really tough, Kommandant, do you know that?”


Looking over Wilhelm’s shoulder, Hogan saw that his two men were done with the task and heading back to Barracks 2. Putting on a very disappointed face and sighing dramatically, Hogan replied, “Well, then not. And I so hoped to see the New York Rangers playing their final game next week live.” He stepped away from Klink and headed towards Barracks 2, joining Newkirk and Carter. Andrew grinned at him and nodded down onto his chest. Hogan suppressed a smile, knowing that the magnet and wire were hidden beneath Carter’s closed jacket. Mission fulfilled.

When the German bombers could be intercepted before they reached England, everything would be perfect.

“Well done, fellas,” he said, as he closed the Barracks’ door behind him. “What about the barrel?”

“We let it remain there where it was,” Newkirk answered. “No chance to remove it without waking suspect. Its absence maybe would have given Burkhalter the right idea that it has something to do with the failed rocket start.”

“We put more firewood in it,” Carter nodded, while he pulled the electric-magnet and rolled up wire out from under his jacket.

“Good idea,” Hogan nodded, while looking out of the window. He saw how Wilhelm watched the departure of the truck and vanish behind the curve of the street that led away from Stalag 13 to the next main road. He smirked. They did it. They hindered the Nazis from striking against Great Britain with rockets. The topic ‘mobile rocket launcher’ was hopefully off the table and…

He frowned as one of the guards, who usually watched the Kommandantur, ran to Klink and told him something that made the Oberst hurry towards his office.
“Coffee pot,” Robert ordered, and dashed to his own office, setting up the listening device while his
friends gathered around him. “Olsen, watch the door.” He called, while activating the bug in Klink’s
office.

“Yes, Herr Reichsmarschall, regrettable I have to inform you that the rocket isn’t on its way to
England, but left course and exploded not far away from here.” They heard Klink’s voice. Silence,
then, “I have no clue, Herr Reichsmarschall. The rocket started out perfectly, then it spiraled and
finally tumbled over so that…what? No, Herr Reichsmarschall, I regret. I can’t link you to General
Burkhalter, because the rocket hit his house, and he drove home to check if his wife and sister
survi…yes. Yes, yes, I’ll tell him, Herr Reichsmarschall. He’ll call you the minute he returns.” Again
there was a moment of silence before Klink asked, “But the strike of our glorious Messerschmitts
and the Heinkels certainly saved the whole mission…intercepted? The Brits and Amis still shot our
planes down from the skies? That’s terrible! What? Yes, Herr Reichsmarschall, just like promised
I’ll tell General Burkhalter to…what? Ah yes, Heil Hi…” He stopped before he had to finish the
loathed greeting, and the Heroes heard the soft clicking of a receiver being placed on a phone.

Then a sigh was to hear. “I ask myself for what this man needs a telephone. You really almost could
hear him screaming from Berlin to here without any device.” Then a chuckle sounded before Klink
asked softly, “Robert, did you hear this? If so, please come over to my office.”

Hogan disconnected the receiver of the small transmitter in the coffee pot and closed the lid. Rising
from the chair at his desk, he said, “Sorry, guys. I have to accept the nice invitation.” Winking at
them, he left his office and then the Barracks.

The others looked at each other. “So, our combined Air Forces are giving the Krauts hell before they
were able to reach England. This I’m calling a damn good message,” Newkirk grinned.

“This will teach those filthy bosches not to mess with us,” LeBeau nodded before turning serious
again. “What do you think? Will Burkhalter be fired now?”

“Certainly not. It wasn’t his fault that the rocket didn’t work flawlessly. This is the risk when you’re
operating with prototypes of a new development. Errors are daily routine then,” Carter replied before
he smirked, “But I don’t want to be in the technician’s skin who built the rocket and the launchers.
Knowing the madman in Berlin, they can break stones from now on.”

*** HH ***

Hogan stepped into Klink’s office, crush cap in hand. “I came to apologize, Kommandant,” he said
loudly. The Oberst hadn’t called for him officially, therefore Robert needed an alibi for going to the
“Nu, this I’m calling a nice streak for once, Hogan,” Klink answered, and lifted a warning finger as soon as his American counterpart had closed the door. Yet, there was also a teasing smile on his face. “So, you did eavesdrop,” he stated.

“Yeah. I saw you hurrying to the Kommandantur after a guard came running to you and thought maybe you needed some support.” He threw the cap on the top of the Pickelhaube, what elicited the typical reaction.

With a frown, Klink snipped it down before he said, “This was the ‘Fat Hermann’ – Goering, I mean. He wanted to know if at least the last remaining rocket was on its way to England after our bombers were intercepted over the English Channel. In the moment, your boys and the Brits are plucking our aircrafts one by one from the skies.”

Hogan smiled now, too. “Thank the Lord. Even if some of your air fighters and bombers make it to London, the devastation is warded off.”

Klink nodded. “Knowing Goering, he will insist to terminate the mission to save as much aircrafts as possible. With the low output of Messerschmitts and the great losses the Luftwaffe suffered in January, Hitler will have no other choice than to stop the attack before he loses more than he could gain from a half attack.” He leaned back in his chair and watched his beloved with pride in his eyes. “You did it, Rob. You stopped the hopefully last big strike against the Allies for the next few weeks. You saved thousands of lives like this. I’m honored to be called your friend.”

Hogan felt himself blushing. Sweet Lord, what this man did to him. Clearing his throat, he replied, “I couldn’t have done it without you, Will. You warned my men that Lily and I were about to be revealed. You stalled time for my men to interfere. You stalled time for me to activate the electric magnet. And you distracted the guards so that my men could remove the magnet before it could be found. Thank you, Wilhelm. Not only in the names of my men and me, but also of all those men, women, and children who will live to see another day in London because of your bravery.”

The sincere choice of words and warmth in Robert’s voice touched Klink deeply. He saw the real gratitude in the younger man’s eyes and felt the urge to kiss him, but with the curtains wide open, there was no way that they could behave anything but professional.

“Thank you for your kind words,” he said quietly. “I know that the brass in Berlin would instantly demand my execution if they knew what I did, but I’m glad that I could help prevent more civilian people from dying…heck the heritage.” He sighed. “Yet I hope the next missions you get are less
“I hope so, too,” Hogan nodded, not knowing that the next mission wouldn’t be a task London would give him, but would be forced upon him by an old enemy.

TBC…

Well, that the uncontrolled rocket that hit Burkhalter’s house would lead to more than ‘simply’ teaching the general a lesson, never came up in the episode, but I thought that the whole gag had a very serious outcome for Burkhalter. He not only lost his home, but no-one seemed to think of his family which could have been in the house. For the first time Burkhalter learns how all the other people feel in such a situation, and it will give to think him a lot.

I also tried to find an explanation how it was possible for the ‘Heroes’ to hide an electric-magnet in a barrel (that never had been there before) between the Kommandantur and the rocket without waking suspect – or how Hogan was able to set the whole magnet to work and to remove it afterwards, before someone would check everything. I hope, you liked the ideas I had about it.

In the next chapter, Schmidt has to investigate the whole mess with the mobile rocket launchers (together with General Freiberger), and he gets several interesting thoughts concerning ‘Papa Bear’. Schmidt is anything but stupid, and you can guess that his first assumptions from days, combined with everything now, will give him a few ideas…

And then Robert has to confess to Will about Lily. Any idea, how our Oberst will react?

I hope, you liked this whole part and I would be very happy to get some reviews. I’m damn curious what you think of this whole ‘re-telling’ in conjunction with my story.

Have a nice weekend,

Until next week,

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

I hope you – who celebrate it – had a Happy Halloween and that you had fun.

Thank you for the feedback I got for the last chapter, and I hope the following one will be to your liking, too. Of course, the whole thing with the mobile rocket launchers has to be investigated, and you not only meet Freiberger in person, but Schmidt also will be there. And he gets the one or other idea concerning Papa Bear – in other words, step by step he begins to recognize the truth.

And then Hogan has to relieve his bad conscious concerning Lily, even if nothing serious happened. Just wait, how ‘Willie’ will react.

Have fun with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 58 – A Special Investigation

The moment Schmidt was informed of a ‘fire-ball’ in the sky and an explosion in the southeast, the Oberleutnant knew that the last rocket had failed. He exchanged a short glance with Freiberger, who flushed with anger, and took a deep breath. He was a man in his middle fifties, with dark-grey hair, brown-green eyes, and a hard expression around his mouth.

Schmidt frowned at the news. Of course, the rocket could have had an error and therefore left course. After all, the V2 was a new technology and bore risks, yet Schmidt didn’t believe in such a production flaw. First, the two mobile rocket launchers were destroyed after the Underground obviously informed the Allies, and now the third rocket came down not far away from its start location. That practically screamed ‘sabotage’.
While Freiberger began to curse like a garbage coachman, Schmidt pondered the given facts.

Where had the defector Heintzen had a flat tire? Near Stalag 13.

Who had lent him a helping hand – even at gunpoint? POWs from Stalag 13.

And where had the two other launchers be destroyed? A few kilometers away from Stalag 13.

From where had the last rocket started and left course? From Stalag 13.

Despite the fact that this whole act of sabotage bore the stamp of Papa Bear, there was one common thread: Stalag 13.

And deep down, Schmidt couldn’t shake the gut feeling that this ominous super spy was indeed the man Hochstetter had suspected for almost two years. A certain American officer with the charm of an oversized boy and the dangerous intelligence of Einstein.

Schmidt needed proof, and he would get them. He didn’t know if he would arrest Hogan should the assumption about the colonel’s double life become true, but the young man wanted to find out the truth.

The radio transmitter his men had detected and found had been thoroughly examined. Only the fingerprints of the two Gestapo men were on the device, including the suitcase in which it was transported. Schmidt would check this in person later again, but for now…

His thoughts were interrupted by the ringing of the phone. Accepting the call, he listened for a moment before he paled. “WHAT?” He gasped, feeling Freiberger’s gaze resting on him. “My God. Are you all right, Herr General? What? You don’t know if your wife and your sister were in the house?” He gulped, real compassion rising in him. “I’m on my way, Herr General. Don’t do anything rash and stay away from the fire. The risk of gas pipes or munition exploding is too high.” Again he listened closely before he answered, “As I said, I’m on my way – and I’ll bring General Freiberger with me. Just stay calm, okay?” He hung up and looked at the alerted SS general. “That was General Burkhalter. The rocket hit his house. And he doesn’t know if his wife and sister were in the building.”
Freiberger closed his eyes for a moment, unable to ignore the wave of sympathy. He took a deep breath and walked to the door. “Let’s go. There is nothing we can do for General Burkhalter at the moment, but we should be there with him. And then we have to find out what went so terribly wrong.”

They left the office, and Schmidt was now determined to find out if Colonel Robert Hogan had his hands in the whole game or not.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan had returned to his Barracks to celebrate the successful mission with his friends with coffee and tea. The times they could smuggle in some spirits or wine had been over for a few weeks now. The black market was about to become empty like the official one. Yet it didn’t lower the mood. Everyone was happy that they had been able to protect London and to stop the Kraut’s assault.

And yet, a part of Robert was still tense. He really felt some unease because of Burkhalter’s destroyed home – not because of the material value, but the people who may have died; among them two ladies. Klink had promised him to keep him updated as soon as he learned some news, but until now, no word was given from the general. A bad sign, this much Hogan knew. And, by the way, the smoke was still to see where the rocket had come down. What ever it had hit, it still burnt.

While in a new broadcasting, Himmler informed the people of special drumhead trials in every larger town to interfere with any kind of dishonorable subversion of Wehrmacht and civilian courage – the beginning of a new insanity within the German borders that should peak in the execution of hundreds of soldiers and civilian men – something close to routine began to start in Stalag 13 again.

At least until the early afternoon, as Burkhalter’s staff car finally returned to the camp. And he didn’t come alone. The black car that followed him was well known to most of the guards and as good as every POW. In earlier times, an always enraged Hochstetter had jumped out of it. Now an SS general left the car accompanied by Schmidt.

LeBeau, who had watch at the window, instantly alerted Hogan, who only gave one command: “Coffee-pot.”

Half a minute later, the connection to Klink’s office was activated and not a second too early, like Olsen reported with a, “They’re vanishing in the Kommandantur.”
With rising tension, the Heroes listened to the discussion.

*** HH ***

“General Burkhalter!” Klink all but jumped from his desk chair as the door opened, and the Austrian entered before Schultz could announce his arrival. The worry on the Oberst’s face was not faked. “What about your house – and your family?” Wilhelm asked quietly.

Burkhalter’s uniform was covered with ashes, dust, and dirt. His face was pale, his eyes betrayed hectic, and his mouth was firm. “Everything is in flames. It will last at least a day until the fires burn out.”

“So, your house was indeed hit?” Klink wanted to know and was surprised at the mixture of pity, sympathy, but also of an unfitting glee as his superior nodded. Wilhelm had been at Burkhalter’s house three times – better to say, residence – and he was absolutely certain that the expensive furniture, the paintings, and the marble that had been used for the stairs and terrace couldn’t be paid for with Burkhalter’s salary. Klink was certain that Burkhalter had a second kind of payment – shush money; ‘benefits’ from ‘friends’ and so on. ‘Dirt money’ how the saying went, and dirt money had no future. And for the first time, the general experienced the same loss like hundreds of thousands of other people everywhere in Germany and all those countries which still suffered because of the war. Maybe now he would realize the real costs of such an insanity.

_Sometimes I think no one would be at war if those who initiated it would have also suffered the most,’ he thought._

Burkhalter took a deep breath while he put up his cap and laid it beside the Pickelhaube. “Nothing is left. The flames are still burning high. And…until they die down, there is no chance to check if the house was abandoned or not.”

Every kind of glee left Klink. “So, you don’t know if your wife and your sister are…” He didn’t need to finish the sentence, as Burkhalter only shook his head. The staff officer visibly collected himself and gestured tiredly to the SS general beside him.

“May I introduce the gentlemen? Oberst Klink, Kommandant of Stalag 13 – General Richard Freiberger of the SS.”

The two men exchanged polite pleasantries before Klink also greeted Schmidt with a short, but warm
smile. Offering the gentlemen chairs, he ordered Schultz to get the one from Hilda’s office for Schmidt before he sat down behind the desk again. The large Bavarian brought in the chair, nodded kindly at Schmidt, and left.

“As I can see, you removed the mobile rocket launcher from the camp,” Burkhalter began finally, and Klink nodded.

“I thought it was too risky to keep it here after the failure of the rocket.”

“You think the launcher is responsible for the error?” Freiberger asked.

“It was either that or the rocket itself. And given the fact that the rocket doesn’t exist anymore to be checked for the error, only the launcher remains to be thoroughly examined – but not within the range of my camp. Even if the circumstances within the last two days demanded a rather…tolerated reading of the Geneva Conventions, the danger the obviously flawed technic represents is something I can’t allow any longer within these wires. The risk that my men and the POWs getting harmed is too big.”

Freiberger nodded. He looked tired. Klink didn’t need much fantasy to imagine the position the man was in now. It had been his job to catch the traitor, and he had been in charge for the mission’s safety…he succeeded in neither task. There was no doubt what the staff in Berlin would say to all of this.

The telephone rang, and Klink lifted the receiver. “Yes, Stalag 13. Oberst Klink is spea…ah, Leutnant von Neuhaus. What? Yes, General Burkhalter is here. One moment please.” He offered his superior the receiver, who took it with hesitation.

“Yes?” He asked quietly. “You link me to someone? What do you men with…” He stopped and all but leaped to his feet, eyes wide as saucers. “BERTA! Is that you?”

The other men in the room exchanged a short glance with each other. Everyone had to smile.

Burkhalter closed his eyes and sank back on the chair, dizzy with relief. “You and Gertrude were invited to lunch at Field Marshall Mannheimer’s residence – THANK THE LORD! What? Yes, it was one of the rockets that left course and fell from the skies. I’m sorry, Berta, but…no, of course it wasn’t my fault but…if we wouldn’t have tested the damn launchers within this area, our house would still be standing.” He listened and hue of a smile appeared on his face. “I know, Sweetheart, I
know. Everything for the Führer and the Fatherland. Yet I’m sorry that you lost all your clothes, things – and reminders of your parents. What? Yes, at least we still have us. How is Gertrude doing? Yes, I understand. Sweetheart, concerning the question where you can stay now…that is a great idea. Maybe Frau Mannheimer is this nice to offer you two a place, if only for a few days before I can arrange something for you and Gertrude. Me? I’ll stay in Stalag 13 tonight and…yes, I’ll keep you updated. And Berta? It was clever of you to go to the Gestapo as you found our house burning. I was mad with worry what happened to you and Gertrude.” He chuckled for a moment. “Yes, I love you, too. And give Gertrude my love, will you? Yes, auf Wiedersehen.”

He hung up and for a few seconds, he wasn’t the proud general anymore, but only a man who was nauseated with relief that his dear ones had been spared. Yes, he and his wife had their differences – strong ones often – but in the end, they always got it together again. And concerning Gertrude, despite her nerving manners sometimes, he loved her.

Klink felt relieved, too. Smiling at Burkhalter, he said clear and strong, “I’m glad to hear that your wife and sister weren’t at home when the rocket came.”

For the first time within the last few days, Burkhalter gave him a real smile. “Thank you, Klink. You really are a good friend.”

Freiberger nodded kindly at the Austrian. “I’m glad, too, Herr General. The personal loss of family members is always the hardest thing within a war.”

‘Maybe you should remember this when you want to attack London the next time,’ Klink thought sarcastically, but kept his goofy smile on his face.

Burkhalter took a deep breath and straightened his shape again. “Well, let us now find out what happened. Berlin wants answers, and I contacted Hermann from my car radio after I called Oberleutnant Schmidt and told him what happened.” He glanced at Klink. “Hermann already knew the most from you.”

Wilhelm shrugged. “He called the camp shortly after you drove away and wanted to know if at least the last rocket was on its way to England. He told me about the Allies’ air forces, which intercepted our boys over the Channel, and…regrettably, I had no other choice than to report to him that the last remaining rocket failed.”

Burkhalter nodded. “Yes, the whole mission was intervened with betrayal and sabotage. First the defector Heintzen escaped…”
“After a few of your POWs changed his flat tire, may I point out,” Freiberger said, looking at Klink.

The Oberst threw his hands up. “How should my Sergeant of the Guards know that the officer, who demanded help, was a defector? He followed order and protocol, that’s all. If you would have informed me sooner, I would have been able to warn him about a defector on the run and…”

“I saw no reason to inform a POW camp about the eventual route of a defector,” Freiberger defended himself. “You have nothing to do with catching traitors and…”

“Yet Himmler himself demanded that all people, who can hold a shovel, have to repair the streets and roads. And, of course, POWs are brought into the task, too. It’s a typical procedure. So, if you would have informed me sooner, my guards would have caught the traitor instead of helping him unknowingly.” He sighed. “But done is done. We should concentrate on the mess afterwards.”

“Yet it was certainly Heintzer who gave intelligence concerning the mission to the Underground in the first place,” Freiberger added for consideration.

“Yes, that’s my opinion, too,” Klink nodded. “But he could have done it before or after he met my guards and the working troop on the road. So, the point of time when and where he informed the Underground is irrelevant, only that he was able to blow the whistle counts. It is also interesting what happened in the following two days. How was it possible that the agents of the Underground the Gestapo detected could escape? Why were no interceptors of our Luftwaffe nearby? They could have prevented the bombing of the two rocket launchers before it took place.”

Schmidt watched Klink and listened closely. The Oberst asked interesting questions which certainly would prompt different thoughts, yet one little detail was odd: how quickly he steered the talk away from the incident that happened on the road between Heintzer and the POWs, and how he pointed out that the information flow could have happened before or after the meeting on the road. He pursed his lips.

Burkhalter frowned as he perceived Klink’s words as a challenge. “There were no interceptors of our Luftwaffe, because the aircrafts maybe would have awoken the Allies’ suspect. The RAF and the US Army Air Corps are roaming through our airspace like they own it, and we have to be careful now if we want to trick them. The project was top secret. The convoy was held as small as possible to be less noticeable.”

Wilhelm grimaced. “I’m sorry, General Burkhalter, but rocket launchers including rockets are
anything than ‘less noticeable’. You have to be blind not to see them, and regrettably, the Underground has sharp eyes everywhere.”

“We should have been able to protect the launchers better – by detecting the wireless radio transmitter and the Underground agents sooner,” Freiberger cut in. “We should have been able to catch them before they informed the Allies about the route the launchers took.” He glanced at Schmidt, who crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Hansmann and Leitmüller are our best radiomen. They did everything they could do,” he defended his men. “The Underground was quicker, that’s all.”

Freiberger snorted before he asked, “Have you examined the seized radio transmitter?”

Schmidt nodded. “Yes, Herr General. No fingerprints, no other useful tracks.”

The SS staff officer sighed. “It would have been too good to be true if the damn traitors would have done us the favor of leaving some tracks.”

Schmidt nodded, his face neutral. He would examine the transmitter himself for some tracks that had been missed. Yes, the device was strongly damaged after the salvages hit it, and there was indeed not much hope left to find something useful. But maybe he would have some luck and secure a few fingerprints which had been left on the shot off parts his men also brought to the Headquarters. If so, Schmidt would try to get some fingerprints of Hogan and his men to compare them. Maybe like this he finally could reveal ‘Papa Bear’.

The only problem was he had to do it in secret. If there was any track that led to Hogan, and this became known, it would mean the colonel’s certain death, and Schmidt was still uncertain what to do should the American and the Underground agent be one and the same person.

Burkhalter had rubbed his face with one hand. “So, the seized transmitter leads us to nothing. What about the rocket here in the camp?” He glanced at Klink. “Was there something…odd as you punched the button?”

The Oberst shook his head, hesitated, then shrugged. “Herr General, I’ve never started a rocket before. How should I know what is usual and what is not? I punched the button you gave me, and the rocket took off. Only after a few seconds it began to spiral before…well, you know the rest.” He sighed.
Burkhalter glanced at Schmidt. “Any suggestions, young man?”

“Maybe we should have a closer look at the close by area the rocket launcher was parked,” the Oberleutnant said. “If there was any kind of extraneous influence, then some tracks were left. Otherwise, we have to consider that the rocket was not correctly programmed or that simply the technic failed.”

“I would prefer the last possibility,” Burkhalter murmured. “Then Berlin has at least one reason less to give us a piece of the Führer’s mind.” He rose from the visitor chair and walked to the door, Schmidt and Freiberger following him.

In the compound, several POWs were busy with doing some sports, others stretched their legs, and the others stood in groups and were talking. Schmidt looked around to see if Hogan was there, but the colonel was nowhere to be seen. At Barracks 2, a man entered the building and closed the door, otherwise no life signs were there.

“Where did the rocket launcher exactly stand?” Schmidt asked, and Klink, who only now came out while putting on his coat, pointed at the place ten meters away from the Kommandantur.

“Over there. You still can see the tire tracks of the truck.”

Crouching down beside the tire tracks, Schmidt observed the ground critically. Foot prints – hundreds of them – and tracks their staff cars left were pressed into the dust and dark snow. It was impossible to detect something from it.

Burkhalter, who had stemmed his hands on his hips, looked around. There was nothing off the normal and…

“Klink,” he addressed his inferior slowly. “You said the barrel over there was placed there to supply the Kommandantur with firewood.” He pointed at the drum.

“Yes, a great idea, don’t you think so?” Wilhelm smiled, playing the idiot again.

“Is there usually no barrel?” Freiberger asked, tensing up.
“No,” Albert answered. “There has never been a barrel since last Saturday. I checked it through myself, but only now I realize how close it was beside the rocket launcher. And this makes me suspicious.” He walked with strong steps towards the drum, the others on his heels.

“Like I said, this is a barrel with firewood,” Klink began to explain again, clenching to the grip of his riding crop that was, like always, placed beneath his left arm. “It was put there to supply the Kommandantur with firewood while none of the POWs were allowed to come near the building and…”

Burkhalter didn’t listen and lifted the cover. He saw wood – just like he saw it the day before yesterday. Letting off some steam, he gave the barrel a violent push, skipping it off. If the wood was only a trick, the real content would be now revealed. With a loud ‘clang’, the barrel hit the ground, and wood spilled on the compound. Sticks, branches, and logs. Nothing else.

“Just like I said: firewood for the Kommandantur,” Klink piped up. “Because no one was allowed near the rocket, this barrel was set up here so that I could serve myself with the needed firewood – and you, when you were in my office.” He looked with a half-smile at Burkhalter.

The general shot him a glare – and hesitated. “Yet I remember that a few hours ago one of the POWs was in the Kommandantur to bring firewood. It was this Englander – Newkirk, if I remember correctly.”

Freiberger lifted both brows. “You think this drum, the prisoner’s presence in the Kommandantur, and rocket’s failure are connected?”

Klink felt his belly clenching, but again he managed to stay in control. “If you want, I can call for Corporal Newkirk,” he offered, no one in particular, before he turned around and shouted, “SCHUUUUULTZ!”

The large Bavarian came running around the cantina’s corner. “Yes, Herr Kommandant?” He already asked from afar.

“Get Corporal Newkirk at once!”

Hans groaned inwardly. What was it now with this damn gang?! “Jawohl, Herr Kommandant!” He quickly walked towards Barracks 2, like Schmidt registered with interest, and returned a few
moments later with the British POW Horst had already talked to as he had confronted the tiny Frenchman. So, this was another member of the gang around Hogan, and…

And, of course, Hogan was coming, too. With a stern face, he hurried to catch up with Schultz and Newkirk and obviously asked the Sergeant of the Guards something, who simply waved it off. “I have no clue, Colonel Hogan, you have to ask the Kommandant!” His voice sounded over the compound towards the four German officers.

The two POWs and the sergeant hadn’t even closed the last distance to them, as Hogan’s gaze locked with Burkhalter’s, and he walked quicker, overtaking Schultz. “General Burkhalter, what about your house and your family?” He asked, his face, indeed, concerned. Yes, Hogan already knew the truth, but he had to go on with the show.

“My wife and my sister were not at home as the rocket hit the house,” Burkhalter answered, a little bit pleased that the opponent officer obviously cared enough to feel some real worry. He could damn Hogan to hell and back, but one thing could be said about the American: he bore great humanity.

Hogan sighed, what was not faked. “Thank the Lord,” he said, and even smiled a little bit. “I really hoped that they were okay. And your house?”

“Is burning down,” the general growled, pressing his lips shortly into a thin line.

“Well, the rocket hit the bull’s eye then,” Newkirk deadpanned, as he stopped with Schultz beside Hogan, ignoring the enraged gaze of the Austrian.

Klink quickly distracted everyone by introducing Hogan to General Freiberger, who only nodded shortly at the colonel before Robert’s glance found Schmidt. “Lieutenant, nice to meet you again,” he said casually.

“The same goes for you, Colonel. I’m glad that you have healed.”

Hogan nodded. “Yes, the Kommandant’s hospitality did some wonders.” He glanced at Klink. “That brings me to the topic why Corporal Newkirk was called without me being informed about it. You know that you can’t interrogate a POW without his superior officer.”

Wilhelm almost groaned. As much as Robert loved to trample on protocol, he remembered very well
every written, damn word if necessary. “This is no interrogation, Hogan. General Burkhalter simply has a question.”

Peter, who really had no idea why he had been summoned, gave the German general a very short salute and stood still afterwards. Schultz remained beside him, nervous.

“Corporal Newkirk, if I’m not mistaken, you were early midday in the Kommandantur despite the strict order that none of the POWs come near the rocket launcher. Is that correct?” Burkhalter’s eyes were narrowed. Newkirk belonged to Hogan’s gang, and everything that went wrong had somehow to do with this damn Ami. If…

“Yes, I brought new firewood from the barre…” Newkirk stopped as he saw the tumbled over drum. “Which moron overthrew the barrel? Just have a look, now we have to clean up the mess.”

“That ‘moron’ was me, Corporal!” Burkhalter barked, but calmed down as Klink made a calming gesture with his free hand. “I wanted to check if some technics were hidden in there and used to influence the rocket.”

Newkirk blinked in faked confusion at him. Hogan glanced surprised at Burkhalter. “Some technics to…influence the rocket? A rocket can’t be influenced except for bringing it down before it launches.”

“Just like it happened to the two other rockets, you mean?” The general sneered.

“Ah, your angered comment about our ‘barbarous’ air force a few hours ago,” Newkirk grinned, putting his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “You were good to hear over the whole compound. Well, it’s irritating when the victim strikes before the attacker can…well…attack.”

“Your mockery brings you nowhere, Corporal!” Freiberger cut in, face hard. “Tell us why you brought firewood into the Kommandantur when there was a barrel that supplied the office.”

“Jo-mei, I gave him the order,” Schultz rose to speak, hoping he wouldn’t begin to sweat as he found himself instantly in the middle of the two general’s attention.

Burkhalter stared at the large Bavarian. “You, Schultz? Whatever for? The prisoners were restricted to the Barracks and…”
“I’m sorry to interrupt you, Herr General, but the prisoners were no longer restricted to the Barracks – including Colonel Hogan,” Klink cut in. “We spoke this morning during breakfast about the strong demonstration of the Third Reich’s glory when the rocket starts and that the whole world would shiver if it becomes known how powerful we still are. Therefore, I cancelled the order of restricting the POWs to their Barracks so that they could watch the glorious beginning of a new level of warfare.” He lifted his fist in faked pride before he let it sink and sighed. “Regrettably, the damn cigar did what it wanted, and not for what it was programmed.”

“Do I get this right? The POWs were ‘invited’ to witness the rocket start, and because they weren’t restricted to the Barracks anymore, you, Sergeant, ordered the corporal to bring new firewood into the Kommandantur?” Freiberger asked himself who was the fool here: The Kommandant, the general, or the sergeant.

Schultz put on his most stupid face. “Well, yes. Corporal Newkirk, Sergeant Kinchloe, and three other POWs are told off for supplying the Kommandantur with the needed firewood for years now. Just ask our guards. Always the same POWs are doing it, and Newkirk was on the compound, so I called him over.”

Freiberger glanced back at the tumbled over barrel and the wood that lay around it. Everything sounded a little bit crazy, but harmless. Yet he was certain that he missed something.

Schmidt looked at Hogan, who stood in the perfect mixture of being relaxed and tensed beside Klink. There seemed to be nothing off. Still, Horst could have sworn that something wasn’t right here. But what?

Burkhalter took a deep breath. “We have to check the technics of the rocket launcher. Maybe the error lay there. If not, the only way to find out the truth, namely examining the rocket, is blasted.” He shook his head. “The Führer and Hermann will not like this.” He glanced at an uncomfortable looking Freiberger. “I’m sure Heinrich will speak with you concerning your given tasks. If you need some support, let me know. We are good friends.”

Hogan barely managed to control his features as the mentioning of the three men, who held the reins of the German’s fate in their greedy and insane hands, and how easily Burkhalter used their given names. It made him almost sick and…

Quick steps distracted everyone. Corporal Langenscheidt jogged towards them, stopped in front of them, and saluted respectfully.
“Yes, Langenscheidt?” Klink asked, as he saw how stirred up the young man was. “What is it?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt the gentlemen, but…a few comrades and I listened to the radio after our shift and…Herr Kommandant, the Allies are attacking Berlin at this very moment.”

The news struck like a bomb itself. While the two generals flushed with wrath, Schmidt and Klink paled. Quickly, Will shot Robert a glance, who barely shook his head. No, he hadn’t known about it.

“But…I thought the Allies are fighting off our aircrafts over the Channel,” Klink said, really confused for once.

“Yes, they are,” Freiberger nodded.

Burkhalter cursed before he glared at Hogan. “How many aircrafts do your damn air forces have to fight at two places at once!?” He snarled.

“Not to forget the Amis also battle in the Pacific area,” Freiberger murmured.

The colonel shrugged nonchalant. “How shall I know, General? I’m a POW for almost three years now. The only news I get are some results of our football or basketball teams.”

It seemed as if Burkhalter was too furious to find a fitting answer. Balling his fists, he nodded towards the Kommandantur. “Let us hear how much the cursed Air Force reduces now to rubble. There isn’t so much left of Berlin middle to be razed!” He shot another look at Hogan, who simply lifted both brows.

“Don’t look at me, General. Your Führer started this war, not us. Don’t complain if you’re biffed on the nose. By the way, maybe you should consider that the bill is paid by your citizens, not by the chief of staff and the tiny private with the moustache.”

Freiberger stiffened. “What are you calling our beloved Führer?!” He demanded.

“Didn’t you know? During the whole first war he didn’t manage to become more than a private – and now he acts as a leader who is better than the whole staff of trained generals together.” He
pushed the hands into the pockets of his leather jacket. “If you trust an amateur, it’s your decision. But don’t cry when the whole thing backslaps now.”

Swearing, Freiberger stormed towards the Kommandantur. Burkhalter stared at Klink. “You should teach this man a lesson, Klink. Now!”

“Why, because I said a truth you don’t like?” Hogan topped the whole ‘discussion’.

“HOGAN!” Klink snapped. “That’s quite enough! To voice your opinion among your men is one thing, but in the presence of our chief of staffs you behave!” He turned to leave. “Last warning, Hogan. I mean it.” With this, he hurried after the two generals, only Schmidt remaining where he was.

Hogan had rolled his eyes, realized that the Oberleutnant was still there, and looked at him. “With the Iron Eagle and two sour generals out of the picture, I finally can do something that is overdue.”

Schmidt turned towards him. “And what would that be?”

The colonel gave him a real smile. “I haven’t had the chance to thank you for your support until now, Lieutenant. Thank you.”

Schmidt’s face showed the surprise he somehow felt. “Whatever for, Colonel?” He asked.

“You brought the poker as proof for Hochstetter’s insanity to the trial as well as written reports of witnesses.” As he saw Schmidt’s thunderstruck expression, he added, “The Kommandant told me what happened at the People’s Court – that your statements and reports were mostly responsible for the judge’s sentence in the end. To go against a superior officer is a dangerous thing – especially in your country, I think. You always need sound proof in such cases. In Germany, you certainly need waterproof evidence ten times over. But courage is something you, thank the Lord, don’t lack of – seeing that you took over charge down in the subway station during the air raid and afterwards, saved a little baby boy.”

Schmidt, who had flushed a little bit by receiving such a compliment, frowned a moment later before he murmured, “Oberst Klink shared a lot with you, Colonel Hogan.”

“We’ve become something like friends. I worried for him as the air raid in Berlin became public
within the camp, and he told me later about his and your struggle to stay alive,” Hogan answered softly. “And what made me really impressed was that you took an orphan into your charge.” At the mentioning of Manfred, Schmidt had to smile, and Hogan knew instantly that his assumptions had been right. “I think the imp caught you good,” he teased, and Horst shrugged.

“Well, he is such a sweet little guy. You simply have to love him.”

“And the current foster mother belongs to this affection, too,” Robert joked. He had to chuckle as the young man blushed strongly and lowered his gaze. “It’s okay,” Hogan said. “Our Hilda is a very special young lady…and I hope you’re serious about this affair.”

“Herr Hogan!” Schultz protested, “As nice as it is that you worry for the big shot’s secretary, I do not think her private life is any of your concern.”

“On the other hand, Hilda is my friend…and I always take care of my friends, as you know by now,” the American officer answered.

“Yes, he really can show claws and teeth when it comes to us,” Newkirk nodded.

Schultz groaned dramatically. “Yes, this is well known. But I think in this case the colonel has absolutely no saying in the matter. Of course the Herr Oberleutnant is serious about courting our Hilda. He is, after all, a decent gentleman. Am I right?” He addressed Horst, who looked with big eyes at him.

Was he mistaken, or was he tested by the colonel and the Sergeant of the Guards concerning his intentions with Hilda? He glanced at both and saw the same expression on their faces and the same look in their eyes. He had to chuckle. “And there I thought Hilda already had a father. But, as it seems, she has three.”

Hogan cleared his throat. “For your information, Lieutenant, I turn 40 in April. Therefore, I couldn’t be her father.”

Schmidt grinned for a moment. “Vain, Colonel?” He laughed quietly, as Hogan rolled his eyes. “All right, then she has an older brother in you, and a kind of uncle in you, Sergeant Schultz.”

“Well, she really is a sweet lady. She reminds me of my eldest daughter: Anna. Of course I watch
“SCHUUUUULTZ! Stop chattering around and come over here!” Klink stood on the porch, gesturing wildly.

Hans sighed again. “Jesus, Maria, und Josef, I wish the two generals a good riddance. Maybe then the Kommandant will be himself again.” He headed towards the Kommandantur.

“Poor Schultz,” Newkirk chuckled. “I think only a Strudel from LeBeau can save his day.”

Schmidt watched the large figure walking away, and the expression on the two POWs’ faces: sympathy.

‘This here isn’t a normal POW camp,’ he thought. ‘The senior POW officer and his men are far too chummy with their guards. And Klink always steps in when Hogan is about to get into deep water with General Burkhalter. They ARE friends. I ask myself what I would find if I got the chance.’

*** HH *** HH ***

The large air raid over Berlin was successful, but also gravely for the citizens. As the 1,112 bombers and more than 700 air fighters left the area, suffering the loss of only 13 bombers and a few fighters, more than 80,000 citizens were left homeless. By now, more than 70% of the town lay in ruins, yet the leading staff officers, ministers, and Hitler himself were safe in the Führerbunker that was almost finished with being constructed. In the following weeks until the end of war, it should function as the commando center of the regime.

Burkhalter received a call in the evening that he had to come to Nürnberg the following day. As it seems, Goering and Himmler had left Berlin before the air raid happened and had traveled towards North Bavaria to the NS party’s central office to investigate the whole failure and to demand answers.

Inwardly, Klink applauded, but was also grumbling because concerning the first, it meant that Burkhalter would be out of his hair, and concerning the second: why had the Reichsführer and Reichsmarschall left before the raid happened. With a little bit of help from Lady Fortuna, those two could have been history now, but no chance. As is seems, those two men as well as the Führer himself had made a pact with the devil in person, because every attempt to get rid of them failed – and mostly with a big portion of luck. When Klink thought of the many tries of assassinations against
the *Führer* and that the man was still very much alive, continuing with his insane plans and regards, he got frustrated.

At least Burkhalter would be away tomorrow, and then – hopefully – Will could spend some cozy (and passionate) hours with Rob again. They had to celebrate the successful mission in their own way.

At the next morning, Burkhalter left Stalag 13, and no one was irritated to see him go. Especially Hogan. The general was often in a bad mood, but the furious and hateful way the Austrian had reacted within the last few days gave the colonel second thoughts about Burkhalter’s character. Until now, he only had him regarded as a rather cowardly man who wormed through his job and life like a snake, ready to spit some poison if necessary, but he always had kept some humanity and sympathy with others. This seemed to be over now – or, Hogan hoped, was only buried beneath a big deal of shock.

Klink had said that ‘Berlin’ had changed Burkhalter, something Robert could understand. To be caught in such a situation certainly left mental scars in everyone, and Hogan was even satisfied that Burkhalter had been forced to endure for once what the German people did on a regular basis now. Yet, to have a spiteful Burkhalter was less comfortable than having the old one, and Hogan would have a problem less if the ‘old’ Burkhalter would re-appear again.

*** HH *** HH ***

While Lebanon declared war against Germany and Japan, and RAF aircrafts attacked Mainz, Winston Churchill published the British government’s agreement with the joint resolutions of the conference in Yalta.

This all didn’t count for the high ranking staff members who met in Nürnberg in secret. Burkhalter knew that he, as the man in charge of the failed mission, walked on thin ice now, and his only chance was his friendship with the two *Reichs* staff members. Freiberger had been called to the meeting, too. Because he had taken over command of the Hammelburg Gestapo Headquarters, it was up to him to answer to the staff, and Schmidt was off the hook. After all, the *Oberleutnant* hadn’t been in charge of the whole mission.

In the meantime, normal life returned to Stalag 13 – and Klink was in the best mood, happy to be rid of Burkhalter and the ‘damn flying cigar’. Because they hadn’t had a chance to speak in private with each other more than a few words within the last few days, Klink invited Hogan over to his quarters for lunch. Like this, they could talk about the last mission.
Robert was glad for the opportunity to tell Will what happened…especially concerning Lily Frankel. It was something that weighed on his soul, even if he had been distracted at most times since he left the little hunting cottage and, therefore, the young woman.

How well Wilhelm knew him by now was clear to see, as the Oberst said outright, “Spill, Rob. Something is eating you inwardly, and I think it has to do with this chaos in the last few days.”

For a moment, Hogan could only stare at him, then he chuckled and shook his head in amused affection. “You really know me, Will.” He sipped at the water and dried his mouth with the napkin before he said slowly, “It’s about the Underground agent I worked with.”

“How well Wilhelm knew him by now was clear to see, as the Oberst said outright, “Spill, Rob. Something is eating you inwardly, and I think it has to do with this chaos in the last few days.”

For a moment, Hogan could only stare at him, then he chuckled and shook his head in amused affection. “You really know me, Will.” He sipped at the water and dried his mouth with the napkin before he said slowly, “It’s about the Underground agent I worked with.”

“Was something the matter with him?” Klink asked.

“Not ‘him’…her,” Robert replied, and watched the older man closer, who looked only expectantly at him.

“A lady spy, huh.” Will felt for a short second something close to fear reaching for him. That Robert maybe had found a liking to the woman, then he rebuked himself. Rob loved him. There was no reason to doubt him. “And what was the problem?” He prompted.

Hogan sighed. The trust Will show increased his bad conscience. “I knew her from earlier times. You know her, too. Lily Frankel – the singer at…”

Klink nodded with a short smile. “Yes, I remember – legs ‘til the throat, movements of a cat, a warm, seductive voice, good songs.” He chuckled. “So, she was a spy. I always thought that there was something off with her, but that she is in the spy business had never occurred to me.” He sighed, before he grinned. “And to think that Major Hochstetter tried to woe her and even took dancing lessons from LeBeau for it.” He laughed quietly. “And I used her as an alibi for my true nature. And you know her from your secret job here within Germany. The world is truly crazy.”

Hogan felt a smile tugging at his mouth, too. “Yeah, you’re telling me. I think every male flirted with her.”

Klink pursed his lips. “Including you,” he stated.

“Yes, including me,” Robert confirmed. “You know me. I used to flirt around a lot.”
The famous scales fell from Wilhelm’s eyes. “And you did again – as you met her on Sunday.”

Hogan sighed deeply. “Yes, I did. She expected this behavior from me, and I…well, I didn’t want to put her nose out of the joint. I know she feels more for me, and…I feared she would react unprofessionally if she thought I’d dropped her.”

Will nodded slowly. “So you flirted back like you did all the times before.”

“Yes,” Robert admitted softly. “I also…wanted to know if there’s something between us…if I could feel for her more again as simple respect.”

“And?” Klink wanted to know – really wanted to know. Yes, he was aware of Robert’s love for him, yet until a few weeks ago, Hogan had been strict straight. Curiosity if something of the old life was still there was something Will had expected sooner or later.

Hogan let himself fall back against the chair’s backrest. “What shall I say? You’ve ruined me for everybody else, Wilhelm Klink.” He saw the beginning proud smile on his lover’s face, and added truthfully, “I held Lily in my arms…and felt nothing. Absolutely nothing, despite an extremely bad conscience and guilt…because it was like betraying you.” He lowered his gaze. “She kissed me, and all I wanted was to be far away…here with you.” He looked up again. “I’m sorry, Will. I simply didn’t know what to do for once, so…” He stopped, as Klink rose, laid the napkin beside the empty plate, and rounded the dining table.

For a moment, Robert felt his mouth going dry, fearing that his lover was angry and would accuse him of disloyalty. He did feel like he had been unfaithful to Will, despite the fact that he had been highly uncomfortable with Lily hanging around his neck. But he had – indeed – flirted in his old ways with her, and this hadn’t been okay with him being taken.

Then he saw the loving expression in those blue, impressing eyes as Will bend over him. Hogan turned towards his beloved and smiled, as Wilhelm’s long, sensual fingers combed through his hair.

“Rob, you’re not gay. Not in the common sense,” Klink whispered tenderly. “Yet, here we are – madly in love with each other, but still everything is new for you. That you wanted to test yourself if there is something left of your old way of feeling is understandable.” He bent down even more. “I knew that this day would come. The day you would try to give the old way a go again. And that you told me about it like an admission of guilt shows me how deep you really feel for me and that I have no reason to be jealous.” He smiled softly. “Don’t worry that I’m angry. I’m not. You did what you
had to do to end the mission successfully…and used the given chance to find out if you still could be
tempted by the softer gender. Obviously, you’re not tempted.”

“No,” Rob murmured, feeling relief washing over him like a tidal. “Just like I said: you ruined me for
anybody else. The gender doesn’t matter. It’s you, I love.”

“I know,” Will breathed. “I know, and I ask myself over and over again why you love me, but I’m
too grateful to have you in my life to try and find an answer for that question. And I’m happy that
you trust me this much to tell me about the whole thing at all.”

“Of course, I had to tell you,” Robert answered quietly. “I don’t want even the tiniest thing to stand
between us. And…I really did have a bad conscience.”

Seeing the big puppy eyes, Wilhelm couldn’t help himself anymore. Catching his beloved’s lips with
his in a soft, sweet kiss, he murmured finally against Rob’s mouth, “Forget your worry, hon. I
understand you. But please don’t let it become a habit, okay?”

Hogan laughed quietly, as he wrapped both arms around the older man, eyes shining with relief.
“Never. I want only one person this close to me, and that’s you.”

“And that’s all that counts,” Will answered gently, before their mouths met again. This time, with
passion and longing.

TBC…

Well, sometimes Klink shows a wisdom you would never assume. Of course, he is older than Hogan
and has far more experiences in this kind of love-department, including confused partners, yet I think
his reaction shows, how much he not only loves his witty fox, but also how much he understands.

Burkhalter departed from Stalag 13, and usually there should come some calm time now – but fate
has other plans.

In the next chapter, you’ll meet Hochstetter again. A very fateful incident gives him the chance he
had waited for since he was brought to Mühldorf, what will lead to something very nasty and
scaring.

I hope, you liked the new chapter and I would be very glad to get some reviews (hint-hint).

Have a nice rest of the weekend,

Until next week (eventually Wednesday or Thursday)

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers,

Even if I don’t get so many comments in the moment, I know that you’re still reading the story, and I’m glad about it. I also can already update and I hope, you’re happy about it.

Just like I said, in this chapter is the beginning of Hochstetter’s comeback, and – believe me – it will turn nasty. I don’t want to reveal more, so: Have fun.

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 59 – A fateful day

While Hogan and Klink had lunch together at Stalag 13, Schmidt made some telephone calls. He had examined the seized radio transmitter himself, and there really hadn’t been any other fingerprints than those of his own men.

With a little exception that obviously had slipped his men’s attention.

On the Morse ticker that had been shot off, but Hansmann had taken with him to the Gestapo Headquarters, one single fingerprint was there that didn’t belong to Schmidt’s men. And the same fingerprint together with a second one (obviously from a thumb given the form and size) were on two electrical connection pins. Schmidt knew that those two fingerprints belonged to the radio operator – one of the two Underground agents which escaped unseen.

Wiping the ticker and the wires clean and hiding the paper with the fingerprints in the breast pocket of his jacket, he left the room.
Horst was convinced that the person who had those fingerprints was to find within Hogan’s inner circle – or belonged to the colonel himself. Yes, the young Oberleutnant hadn’t forgotten that Hogan had been restricted to his quarters on Saturday, but this had given the American the perfect alibi to go through with his mission outside of the camp.

There remained the question if the seized transmitter really had been used to inform the RAF about the rocket launchers’ way, or if it was a second one to distract the men from the detection truck. Schmidt would bet his last shirt that the latter was the case – that his men hunted down a faked radio signal to steer them on a wrong track to cover for the real transmitter and the man who operated it.

And who was this man? The answer was clear if you regarded the whole thing from one special point of view – namely that the two men, who set up the faked signals, were ready to risk their lives for the one who operated the real radio.

What had the Englander said yesterday? That Hogan showed his claws the most when someone came near his friends? Even Schultz had pulled the colonel’s leg because of it. But this wasn’t a one-way-loyalty. Schmidt was aware of the men’s deep friendship towards their superior officer. They loved him like an older brother and would risk their lives instantly for him. The little Frenchman hadn’t hesitated to flee the camp to get help for his superior facing the danger of being shot. And everyone of Hogan’s men would do the same.

So, what if Hogan was the one who spied on the rocket launchers’ secret path and informed London while his men distracted the Gestapo? It sounded simple and logical.

The next question was where had the real transmitter and Underground agent been while the rockets rolled towards the south.

Schmidt and his men had also searched the whole area where the mobile rocket launchers had been driven through, and like this he had found the hunting cottage not far away from the crossing main roads. It was the perfect spot to watch them. The rockets couldn’t have been missed like this, and the cottage was near the location the Gestapo had seized the radio transmitter.

Of course, no tracks had been found. The little hut was incredibly neat, everything was wiped clean, there wasn’t even any dust to find, not to speak of shoe prints or a hair – anything but normal for an abandoned cottage that once belonged to a family who had left Germany before the war started.

There was no doubt that whoever had used the little hut for their own purposes had erased all tracks afterwards. This was the handwriting of a professional spy; someone who was trained in this kind of business.
Reading Hogan’s file made by German intelligence, Schmidt learned that the colonel had been in special trainings in New York before he was sent over the Atlantic to lead the 504th bomber squadron. This ‘special’ training could be anything. From learning new strategies or how to handle new bombs to becoming a spy behind the enemy lines.

Schmidt knew that this Major Pruhst of the Gestapo he had heard about during Hochstetter’s trial had followed the same train of thought. Hochstetter had pointed it out over and over again at the People’s Court, but his statements had been picked to pieces by Burkhalter and of course Klink, sticking to the story of a doppelganger. Horst was no fool. He knew that doppelgangers existed. You don’t have to be related by blood to bear the same appearance.

Yet, how high was the chance that a hunted Underground agent had the same face like an American colonel who was a POW for almost three years now and lived without ostentation in an ‘escape proofed’ POW camp? Klink was a capable officer, this much Schmidt was convinced of. But he was no superhuman. It was simply impossible that no one even tried to escape from Stalag 13, yet the Frenchman had been able to slip away to alert Klink in the hospital. Simple like this: he slipped away. Right under the guards’ noses – guards which were from the SS. And then he returned to the camp without using the given chance to get back to France.

And Schmidt had heard by now a few times that every POW who had been outside of the wires returned on his own free will. Hilda told him amused of an event almost three years ago as her predecessor had been still Klink’s secretary. Newkirk had wheeled a drunken Schultz back to the camp in a barrow. It sounded funny, yet it showed that simply no one wanted to flee.

No, something was very, very off here, and Schmidt was more than determined to find out the truth than ever before.

Trying to reach the Gestapo in Berlin was unsuccessful. Like during the last large bombing, the power supply in most parts of the town were still down. He remembered that he had met a former comrade from Bremen in the People’s Court, Johann Peters, who had told him that he belonged to the security team of the court. Therefore, Johann certainly knew who the young man in the telephone exchange office had been…if he had survived.

A call to the Bremen Gestapo and some chatters with a colleague from earlier times did the magic. He got the address where Johann lived in Berlin and, yes, he had survived the air raid. What had become now of him was unclear. And there was another question: how to reach the man? Yes, Peters had his own telephone, and Schmidt even got the number, but the line was still interrupted.

Ordering the telephone exchange in Hammelburg to make attempts of reaching Peters periodically,
he continued with his regular work, hoping to get the connection to his former comrade soon.

*** HH *** HH ***

Not aware of the imminent danger to be revealed, the two colonels in Stalag 13 lived up to the daily routine – Klink in his office, Hogan in his own quarters and later on the compound doing some sports with the others.

During the late afternoon, the weather changed. Like a forerunner of the looming, hazardous dark clouds began to cover the skies, and an uncomfortable cold wind began to blow.

But the real danger didn’t sit in the Gestapo Headquarters in Hammelburg, still waiting for a connection with a former comrade, but was flying over Munich towards the east in the form of a few US recon aircrafts. They had been spotted by the Luftwaffe and tried to escape, trading fire against each other.

*Messerschmits* against Black Widows – a bitter struggle given the fact that the jet streams of the *Messerschmits* were stronger than the drives of the Black Widows. And here, only 2,500 meters over the ground, the German air fighters could use their better maneuverability to its full potential.

It was almost five o’clock in the afternoon as the aircrafts of both sides reached the area around Mühldorf, battling against each other despite the town that lay beneath them, or the nearby prisoner camp M1 that was even now, as the war was about to reach its peak, a taboo for every fighting activity nearby.

Sergeant Matthias Rooney tried to give the *Messerschmidt* behind him the slip. He cursed as he avoided another salve within the last second. Dammit, the damn *Kraut* was good. The boy was really good; Rooney had to give him that. Yet, he didn’t plan to be killed or caught today. It was the German boy or him, so he pulled his Black Widow up into a loop and tried to get behind his opponent. But again, the German pilot acted different than thought. He simply dived down with his aircraft and let it roll over the left wing – a maneuver Rooney would have applauded if his life didn’t depend on his opponent’s actions.

Full concentrated on the hostile *Messerschmidt*, he recognized too late that another German flyer came to support his comrade. The salve cut into the Black Widow’s right wing like a knife into butter, and Rooney felt the lost control over his plane.
Over and done with. There was no chance to continue the fight. And if he didn’t want to die together with his aircraft, he had to abandon it.

Opening the cockpit canopy, he began to climb out of the tumbling aircraft, hoping that none of the Krauts would shoot at him. Usually such a behavior was bad form among fliers, but given the young generation of pilots who had grown up under Hitler’s insane ways, Rooney was not sure if his opponents would act honorable enough to give him a chance of survival.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw how the aircraft he had battled with was heading towards him, and for a long moment, he could see his opponent’s face. It was indeed a mere boy, but Rooney couldn’t deny that he admired the young man’s abilities. Then the German flew away, not trying to kill him.

Sighing in relief for a moment, Rooney left the cockpit and was able to cling to its edge at the very last moment as the aircraft began to spiral downwards. Cursing, the pilot strengthened his grip and glanced down, looking at what was under him.

He gasped as he saw in the dusk many, many huts lined up and encircled by wires and watch towers. The prisoner camp…and his Black Window raced exactly towards it.

Hopefully the poor blokes down there were able to avoid the upcoming crash. They were running around – aware of the danger – but locked up because of the fence. It was a question of luck not to get caught in the disaster that was approaching.

Taking a deep breath, Rooney pushed himself away from his aircraft’s side and tried to steer with his feet a little bit more to the right. If he was lucky, he would land outside of the camp near the gravel pit that was located at the east side of the camp. The chance to disappear there was realistic. Otherwise, he would be a POW within the next few minutes; delivering himself to a prisoner camp.

Waiting to the very last second, he finally opened his parachute and soared slowly towards the ground. With a hint of horror, he watched how the tank of his dying air fighter exploded and broke the plane into several burning pieces, which crashed into the camp just before he landed not far away from the gravel pit in the dark.

*** HH *** HH ***

Wolfgang Hochstetter had never been this tired in his whole life. He was only here for two weeks
now, but it felt like two years. No, twenty years. A shift lasted ten hours. There was one meal per day, mainly cabbage soup, some bread, and on Sundays, broth made from bones. They all got the water they wanted, but nothing else. He had lost weight, his clothes hung at his frame like at a frump, and it was constantly too cold in the Barracks, coals or wood for the ovens given at one portion per day.

Additional to that, it had become known that he was a former member of the Gestapo and SS. That it became public was no miracle. After all, he wore the two SS runs as a tattoo on his left upper arm like others of the ‘club’ did, and to wash or shower in private was nothing the prisoners were granted. The moment the others learned of his former job, he was treated like an outcast…even from the guards.

The worst was Sergeant Kurt Vogel. A man of his size, but more shrewishly than any bulldog. He loved to pester the prisoners at every given chance and to turn the living hell into an even worse scenario. A true bully. If Hochstetter had been the same man he had been one or two years ago, he maybe would have realized that the man did, in a lower way, more or less the same thing he did for years towards suspects and underlings. But, being half mad with wrath, jealousy, and the conviction to be unfairly treated, the only thing he saw was a man in a black uniform who, in his opinion, didn’t deserve to wear it at all.

Coming back from the morning shift today, Hochstetter was ready to drop on the hard bunk without any hesitation. His hands were rough, chapped and bloody; his back hurt like hell, and his stomach burned with hunger. He had barely lain down as he heard from afar the droning of aircrafts and the unmistakable noises of salves.

And they came nearer…too near.

Hochstetter had his share of experiences concerning air raids and air battles. The latter could turn out to be dangerous because of those planes which were shot down.

Leaving his bunk and hearing the other men in the Barracks swear, he quickly walked to the door as alert was given. The sirens shrilled through the air, but were almost drowned out by the fight that happened over their heads.

Looking up into the twilight of the quickly approaching evening, Hochstetter and the other prisoners, as well as the SS guards, saw a few US air fighters struggling with German Messerschmidt, then one of the opponent aircrafts was hit and went into a tailspin. While a few of the guards cheered, SS officers, POWs, and labor workers recognized the beginning disaster: the hit aircraft was falling down into the camp.
Realizing the danger finally, guards began to yell orders; prisoners ran around, panic-stricken; others tried to reach the fences, but were held back at gunpoint.

For one second, Hochstetter became icy calm. Completely in control, he watched how the burning aircraft broke into several larger pieces as the tank exploded, which headed straight towards the camp. Seeing where they would come down, he raced towards an area that was relatively safe, then the rests of the Black Widow crashed into a few Barracks, setting them instantly on fire.

Fire alert was given, prisoners tried to get injured comrades to safety, guards yelled at others to hurry up the first fire fight operations. Fire hoses were enrolled to connect them with the few hydrants installed many months earlier, other prisoners got water buckets to fight the fires with them. Time was of the essence, because the wind was about to make the flames leap over to other huts.

Hochstetter joined the troops, which tried to rescue wounded prisoners or those in the burning Barracks, too exhausted to make it out on their own.

Helping a man to leave one of the huts whose roofs began to catch fire, Hochstetter saw Vogel not far away screaming at the prisoners, gesturing with his rifle, kicking one of them to hurry him up before he stood still and groused about the ‘lame ducks’.

And he had his back turned towards the former major.

Hochstetter’s crazy, yet still intelligent mind, saw a chance when it was given. And staking everything on one card, he acted. Only one desire burned him: getting revenge. On Hogan. On Klink, Schmidt, Burkhalter, and on a few of the guards here. And he began with Vogel.

The camp was in pure chaos. Sirens, shouts, moans, cries for help, and the roaring flames were ear deafening accompanied by the continuing air battle in the skies. Like this, no one saw or heard Vogel’s gurgling yell as he was gripped from behind, his weapon arm twisted on his back, another arm wrapped around his throat hard enough to cut off oxygen. The sergeant tried to fight back, struggled, but his attacker was too strong. The fury and the wild determination to escape unlash led to Hochstetter no one would think to be possible giving the man’s condition by now.

Walking backwards, he dragged Vogel with him into the burning Barracks. Encircling the man’s neck with his free hand, he shoved his forehead brutally against the frame of one of the stock beds, inflicting a head wound. The sergeant screamed hoarsely and tried to turn around, but Hochstetter wouldn’t have anything of it. Twisting his ‘enemy’s’ arm even more, he heard with satisfaction how a bone broke, while he gripped for the dagger many SS guards carried with them.
There was no regret, nor any kind of guilt, as he slit the man’s throat with one swift motion. Letting the sergeant fall, he began to rip off his own clothes, kicking them away. One look at the ceiling above told him that he had to hurry if he didn’t want to be trapped in here. The flames were already eating the roof away, fire showers came down, flames licked along the walls.

Never before in his whole life Hochstetter had stripped and re-clothed this quickly. Not a minute later, he wore SS black and took the Sergeant dog tag and papers with him. Gripping the dagger, he put it back into the sash. Taking the rifle, he made certain that the cap was deep in his face as he left the burning Barracks, never looking back.

“Is someone still in there?” One of the guards shouted, and he shook his head.

“No, all are outside except for one swine that is already dead. Let him burn, like this we save us the trouble of a burial.” He flinched, as not far away new gunfire was to hear in the air, then he pointed towards the fences. “What about the wires?”

Okay, the guard didn’t know this sergeant. He didn’t recognize him as one of the prisoners wearing the black SS uniforms now, but the man was a noncom, and he was only a private. He hurried to answer. “They are still safe – I think. Sir!”

“Check them and…”

New alert was given. A few prisoners had used the opportunity to make an attempt for escape.

Hochstetter felt the old thrill of earlier times rising in him. To be clad in the familiar black again was like coming home, and to hunt someone was something that had been burned into his blood and heart, while his still clever mind saw instantly the next given chance.

“Guards, with me!” He yelled, and raced towards the motor pool. “On the load bed with you!” He shouted, and waved two dozens of guards to one of the trucks. He himself climbed into the driver’s cab and behind the wheel. Like it was protocol, the ignition key was in the lock to save time at emergencies. And without a second thought, Hochstetter started the motor.

Someone knocked at the driver’s door, and for a moment, his belly clenched, then one of the guards shouted, “The men are all on the truck, Sergeant.”
“Danke,” Hochstetter called back, and kicked the gas pedal. The gates of the camp came closer. One of the officers at the gate lifted a hand, and Hochstetter stopped the truck, his body pumped full with adrenaline.

“Some prisoners escaped, Herr Leutnant. The men and I are…”

“Hurry up, man – and good luck! In this damn dusk, they’re grey like cats,” the lieutenant answered, and waved the guards to open the gates.

Baring his teeth in triumph, Hochstetter steered the truck through the gates down the small street and turned left as he reached the paved road towards Mühldorf.

Flashes of lights above him distracted him for a moment, and looking up he saw that the Luftwaffe and the US Army Air Corps were still battling. One of the aircrafts spiraled down towards the hills, this time a Messerschmidt. But the whole fight was moving towards the south now. Hochstetter assumed that the Americans would try to get rid of their pursuers in the Alpen, which weren’t far away, by using the small valleys and mountain tops. It was something Hogan would do.

Hogan…Klink…he would get them both. And Schmidt.

But first, he had to get rid of his companions. Braking sharply, he heard some loud protests from the loading bed. Opening the door, he jumped out of the truck.

“Alles raus!” He shouted. “Raus, raus! The escapees are over there!” He pointed towards the woods to their right. Within seconds, any protest was forgotten, and the guards jumped off the loading bed, rifles in hands, faces grim.

“Quick!” Hochstetter snapped, and lead the troop into the woods. Waving them to go ahead, he cursed suddenly and gripped one of the privates who ran as the last one. “Chase them to the east. A small path is there. I drive to it and cut off their way. Like this, we have them surrounded, and we can bundle them into the truck.”

“Jawohl, Sergeant!” The man saluted and followed his comrades in a hurry.
Hochstetter couldn’t hide the malice grin that spread over his face as he ran back to the truck and slipped again behind the wheel. Turning the truck on the broad road, he headed towards the west, bypassing camp M1 again where he saw fires raging, and the silhouettes of thousands of men who tried to douse the flames or ran around like panicking hens. He grinned.

“Auf Wiedersehen, Hölle!” (Fare well, hell)

Five minutes later, he reached the country road that led to the northwest. He knew that he had a head start and that because of the chaos in the camp, Vogel wouldn’t be missed within the next few hours. Yet he would have to get rid of the truck during the night. The close net of Gestapo and SS guards all over Germany certainly would be alerted sooner or later because of a stolen truck in conjunction with a missing prisoner and SS sergeant.

He would try to get to the north of Bavaria as far as possible before he would abandon the truck near a town where a railway station was. Thanks to his former job in Hammelburg, he knew this part of Germany in and out.

Yes, he had eavesdropped from the guards in the camp that the Allies had destroyed almost 80% of Germany’s traffic routes. Roads, as well as railways, during the large attack last Wednesday. But there were enough railways left to give him the possibility to man a train to the Hammelburg area.

He would reach Hammelburg somehow. Then Hogan and Klink would be done for.

He knew that he was forfeiting his freedom and certainly his life, but he had been robbed of his life the moment he was sentenced to a working camp and had been stripped of his rank and civil rights. He would stop at nothing to get his revenge. Death be dammed.

*** HH *** HH ***

Schmidt was about to leave his office as the telephone rang. The young woman from the telephone exchange in Hammelburg told him that the links to Berlin Kreuzberg, where Peters lived, were repaired. A minute later, Horst had the still familiar voice of his former comrade.

Exchanging pleasantries and relief that the other man had survived the last two air raids of Berlin, Schmidt finally asked the question he had contacted Peters for.
Yes, most people who had worked at the Court had survived except for the a few lawyers, the Chief of Judge, another judge, and four guards. It had been fortunate that the Court hadn’t been fully manned on that Saturday three weeks ago. Otherwise the number of victims certainly would have been higher. Last, but not least, because the bunker for the Court was a few houses down the street.

Peters gave him the names of the men who had worked at the telephone exchange, but he didn’t know where they were now. The Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin had been hit during the air raid the day prior…again. That the Gestapo was still able to re-start their work at all was either a wonder or showed how well organized, but also fanatically, the men were.

Like this, Schmidt also learned that more of Berlin-Middle and the boroughs around it were bombed, but this time also outskirts. The damages weren’t even counted until now, and Schmidt asked himself if the Allies wanted to raze the town completely only because they wanted the Führer and his staff. Well, regarded strategically, they did a logical thing, yet Horst felt sick when he thought of the thousands of civil victims lost in those raids.

Learning from Peters that the Gestapo and SS Headquarters wouldn’t be reachable until tomorrow or later, Schmidt called it a night and left the office, satisfied that he had made some progress.

He would reveal the secret identity of ‘Papa Bear’ even if he deep down already knew it.

*** HH *** HH ***

“Checkmate.” Hogan leaned back on the chair in Klink’s living room and grinned broadly, while he watched his secret lover.

The Oberst stared with a scowl on the playboard, recapitulated Robert’s last moves, checked the possibilities he still had, and tipped over his King with a groan. “You did it again,” he complained.

Hogan laughed quietly. “I told you it was a mistake to sacrifice your Queen.”

“Yes, but your Rook was a threat and so…” Wilhelm threw his hands up in defeat. “You and your unorthodox ways.”

“Well, if you know your opponent, do what he would never suggest you would do, and then you win.” Robert looked far too smug, and if Will wouldn’t love him so much, he would give him a
So, he only rose and walked to the dresser at the wall. “Cognac?”

“You still have one? Even after Burkhalter stayed here for three nights?”

“I could save a little rest – no thanks to you, may I add. I had to refill his glass several times until he calmed down Saturday after his argument with you,” Klink said, while he poured Hogan and himself a glass of the fine French liquor.

Taking the offered glass with a “Thanks,” Robert cocked his head. “There really was something wrong with him. I never saw him like that.”

Klink sat down at the other side of the table and shrugged. “He certainly was ticked off after Berlin. And I think that being in charge of the OHK in Zossen for a few days went to his head. Otherwise he never would have volunteered for the project of the mobile rocket launchers and…something the matter, Rob?”

Hogan had straightened his shape and looked with big eyes at his lover. “The German OHK…is where?”

Wilhelm blinked in confusion. “In Wünsdorf-Zossen, not far away from Berlin in the south.”

The American officer put his glass on the table, mouth agape. “Southern…” He trailed off before he began to laugh in surprise and shook his head. “The brass searches for ages for the new location of the German OHK and…” He snorted and rubbed his neck. “Sweet Lord, I never heard of this Hicksville ever before, and then the commanding center of your Wehrmacht is there.”

Klink grimaced, took a large sip of his cognac, and sighed. “And just like that, I blew the whistle again.” He also put his glass beside the playboard and bent forwards. “Listen, the whole facility is masked as a gathering of small country cottages and farm houses surrounded by fields and some smaller forests. In truth, the cottages are bunkers with two-meter-thick walls – and they’re only the tip of the iceberg. The really interesting things are laying beneath it: the main communication center of the Wehrmacht, equipped with the most modern communication technics you can think of. I was only there for one or two hours, but what I saw in that short time surpassed my expectations. Hell, even Schmidt was baffled, and with him coming from the Abwehr and being in the Gestapo and SS now says something.”
Robert frowned. “When have you and Schmidt been…ah.” He nodded, understanding the coherence. “You told me that after you made it out of Berlin you stayed in a *Wehrmacht*-base for a short time to get cleaned up and to drop off Burkhalter.”

“*Ja*,” Will nodded. “In Zossen. I thought you know about it.”

“No, I didn’t,” Hogan replied. “Our intelligence tried to find out the location of the OHK since it abandoned its old base in Potsdam, but we never found it.” He grinned and lifted the glass in a salute. “Thanks a lot, Will.”

Klink groaned and let himself fall backwards against the back rest of his chair. “And another betrayal.”

Hogan knew that this bothered the older man a lot. Wilhelm Klink was a soldier through and through, and loyalty was in his bones. But now…

“Will,” he said softly. “You don’t betray your people, but help them and us to get rid of this damn madman and his fellows in Berlin. That’s a big difference.”

The *Oberst* waved a hand. “I know, yet…” He sighed again, gripped his own glass, and emptied it. “Do you want to inform London about it?”

“Better now than a minute before,” Hogan nodded and rose, heading towards the furnace, but stopped after a few steps. “Will, I know that this all goes against everything you were taught and stand for, but…”

Klink closed the distance to him and lay a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t get a bad conscience because you’re going to tell your superiors what I told you. As I said before: I made my decision.” He lowered shortly his head. “Are you coming back when you’re done with London, or…”

He was silenced by a soft kiss.

“I’ll be back in a few, so set up the chessboard.” Hogan turned towards the oven, but hesitated again and added with a grin over his shoulder, “Or fold back the blankets and plump up the pillows. And
don’t forget the bottle of frying oil from the kitchen.”

Klink felt his mouth going dry. They hadn’t been together for four nights, and he wanted nothing more than to forget everything in his beloved’s arms. “Bed it is,” he said.

Robert chuckled, while he felt a wave of heat washing over him. But duty came first.

A minute later, he hurried through the tunnels towards the radio room, eager to be done with the report and return to his secret lover.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hochstetter cursed the night, the street, the woods nearby, the clouds above him…the whole world, at that.

An empty tank could do this even to a controlled and sane man. Someone, whose mind was twisted as that of the ex-major was by now, it could become a danger to everyone who crossed his path. At two different gas stations he had tried to get some gas, but with the power supply shut down during the nights and no one at the stations to unlock the pumps for a manual function, there was no thinking of getting fuel.

He had hoped to cover half of the way to Hammelburg within the night, but had begun to doubt it as he realized how much main roads were damaged and blockaded to prevent cars from having accidents in the bomb holes, which were ripped into the streets. He had to take a lot of detours and had to pass four checkpoints of the SS. He passed them without any problem; his uniform opening him all boom gates, and he even got information which route to take towards Nürnberg – his destiny and reason for his travel at night, as he officially said.

Yet, shortly past midnight, his luck left him. The truck’s tank was empty and with no gas station in function, he had no other choice than to abandoned the truck and begin to walk.

The last traffic sign had shown that he was approximately 100 km away from Nürnberg’s town border – something he wouldn’t be able to manage without help. Maybe he would be given a ride in the morning.

Hungry, thirsty, freezing, and miserable, he began to walk towards the north. He had to be careful
Furious, he continued his way, trying to ignore the raging hunger in his stomach, the thirst in his dry mouth, and the tiredness that slowed him down. His hate and burning desire for revenge kept him going on.

He bypassed a crossroad and stopped dead in his tracks as he saw two spotlights coming from the east. A few moments later, he heard motor noises. Risking everything again, he placed himself in the middle of the crossroad and waved both arms.

The truck that neared him was Wehrmacht’s grey and…and it was manned by two men in a black SS uniforms. ‘Sharing of equipment – this far the war had brought us,’ he thought, with a sneer.

The truck slowed down and stopped, the co-driver leaning out of the window. “What are you doing all alone by yourself in this God forsaken region, Sergeant?”

If Hochstetter was good in one thing, it was in acting. Putting on a mixture of smile and scowl, he stepped nearer. “What a luck that you came this way, comrade. I’m on my way back to Nürnberg, but the damn old truck I drove had a breakdown. No chance to get it back to work again.” He snorted. “No wonder this beast was built at the end of the Great War.”

“An old timer then,” the driver deadpanned, amused. “We’re on the way to Nürnberg, too. We can take you with us if you want.”

“That would be lots of help, Corporal, danke.”

“Where shall we drop you off?”

Hochstetter didn’t hesitate. “If you could take me to the Regensburger Street near the church, that would be very nice. My parents live nearby there and the Gestapo Headquarters isn’t far away. I’m expected there tomorrow.”

“No problem,” the co-driver grinned at him. “Comradeship is a thing that is still written with a capital “C” in our unit.” He flipped a thumb backwards. “Hop on the load bed. There are a few more of us. In two or three hours, you’ll be home.”
Hochstetter smiled at him, suppressing the urge to grimace at the comment of ‘comradeship’ within the SS. “Thank you very much. I’m Sergeant Vogel, by the way.”

“This is Corporal Achner, and I’m Sergeant Hellmann,” he introduced the driver and himself. “Hop on. We don’t have all night.”

Nodding, Hochstetter went to the back of the truck and looked up the load bed where two other men offered him a helping hand.

“This I’m calling luck that we came your way,” one said, while the former major took a seat between the dozen men.

“You can say that,” Hochstetter agreed. The same moment, his stomach growled, and a younger man began to laugh.

“Did your forgot your food ration in your truck?” He bent down and opened a backpack. “Here, you can have some bread from me,” he said, and offered a little package.

“Danke.” The relief wasn’t faked. And as another man offered him a coffee from his vacuum flask, he felt better than he had in a long time.

*** HH *** HH ***

Hogan snuggled closer to Will, laying half on his belly and half over the older man. Both were damp with sweat, and their heartbeats calmed down slowly. Pressing a kiss on his secret lover’s shoulder, he buried his face against Wilhelm’s throat and closed his eyes, happy and satisfied.

He felt how those long, elegant hands moved in tender circles over his back and waist, and utter peace washed over them in the sweet glow of the last remaining aftermath.

Robert had relished in their lovemaking. What a difference between holding a woman or Will in his arms – all firm, lean and strong, yet soft and covered with human silk. Hogan knew that his general point of view and his feelings had changed forever. He felt so incredible loved and sheltered, safe and protected in Wilhelm’s presence, yet he could live out his passion without the necessity to hold
Yes, he had opened up to the idea to be intimate with the same gender, because it was Will – the man he had fallen in love with. Yet he realized that he not only took immense pleasure in their love accouters, he couldn’t imagine to do it with anybody else ever again – independent if it would be a woman or a man.

And one thing also became clear: he would move Earth and Hell to stay with Will. He had a few ideas how to make this wish come true, and he would speak with the older man about it when the time was right, but his determination to share his life with Klink seemed to grow from day to day.

Sighing in content, he tightened his arm around the older man and then lay still, enjoying every minute he could stay there before he had to return to his Barracks.

“Tired?” Klink murmured, and Robert began to chuckle.

“Yes.”

“Very tired?” Will asked.

A “Hm-hm,” was the answer.

“Too tired?” There was a teasing undertone in Wilhelm’s voice that woke Robert’s attention. Lifting his head, he glanced down at his lover, saw the suggestive smirk, and began to grin.

“You’re insatiable, Willie.”

“Yes – for you,” Klink affirmed, and with a playful laugh, Hogan bent down to capture his lover’s lips with his again.

*** HH *** HH ***

The fires in the prisoner camp near Mühldorf had been doused finally, and many men sat simply
exhausted on the ground that was wet from the extinguishing water. They all were dirty with ashes and smoke, and for once uniform or prisoner clothes didn’t count.

Yet the leading SS officers knew no mercy. Barking orders, they first demanded a roll call, then a damage report. It lasted almost an hour to count the prisoners, because dozens of them were in the infirmary with smoke intoxication or burn injuries. Like this, it came out that Hochstetter’s false alert of fleeing prisoners had – indeed – a real background. Eleven men had escaped in the chaos that erupted in the first minutes after the broken aircraft parts had fallen down onto the camp.

The leading officers also learned that a sergeant and two dozen guards were already on the hunt for the escapees, and the camp’s Kommandant Eberl ordered two more troops to comb through the area to support the others with their search. Dogs were also involved, which quickly found the track, but left it at a near small river the fleeing men obviously had used to trick the dogs. The only thing that was found by other guards was a parachute – certainly used by the pilot whose hit aircraft rose chaos in the camp. The American flyer and the escapees left no track at all.

None of the SS guards could know that Rooney had watched the escape attempt of ten prisoners and had taken them under his lead, knowing enough tricks to fool their pursuers. While the Krauts searched the area, the American and the escapees were heading towards Mühldorf, hoping to find some shelter and clothing to change into civilians. The pilot tried to cheer the men up, telling them that the Allies weren’t far away anymore. Because one of the escaped prisoners was an English POW, communication was possible and the escapees trusted Rooney to bring them to safety.

In the M1, the burned down Barracks were torn apart and like this, the corpse of a man was found. One of the guards reported that a sergeant, who had checked the hut, had said that the man had already died and therefore, no one knew exactly if the missing eleven prisoners were indeed all escaped, or if one of them was the dead man. The same sergeant had also summoned the first troop to hunt down the escapees.

In the very early morning, one of the sent off troops returned with double the amount of guards than originally.

Giving report to the camp’s Kommandant, who was feared even by his own men, the guards told a story the CO couldn’t believe. One of the sergeants had seen the prisoners fleeing, had taken the troop with him, spied the escapees in the woods, led the troop after them, then announced to cut off the fleeing men’s way with the truck…only he never reappeared.

The Kommandant became suspicious and ordered a report of all sergeants. It lasted ‘til very early morning. Everyone was here except for two: the sergeant who was still outside trying to catch the escapees, and Sergeant Vogel.
No one seemed to have seen him after the aircraft crash happened. Searches were unsuccessful, and the CO got a certain assumption. Ordering the camp’s doctor to examine the corpse that had been found in one of the barracks, he got the result shortly after eight o’clock. The man was burned beyond all recognition, yet the doctor was able to identify the victim. The eyetooth and the tooth beside it on the left side of the man’s mouth were missing, and this for a longer time. They had been removed professionally, and some tracks on the teeth showed track of melted gold – the proof that the man had gold teeth as a replacement.

Sergeant Vogel had gotten the nickname ‘Gold-grin’ because of them. And the doctor found further proofs of the victim’s identity: the little finger on the right hand had been broken and had mended together wrong – the burned skeleton showed the same, and the seize of the victim fitted to the missing sergeant, too.

There was no doubt left: the corpse belonged to Sergeant Vogel.

The Kommandant was raging. One of his leading guards had fallen prey to the disaster, while a mysterious sergeant no one knew had fooled a troop of SS men and abandoned them in the woods, disappearing with one of the camp’s trucks. One didn’t have to be a genius to know that the mysterious man had to be one of the prisoners who had taken Vogel’s identity to escape M1.

Furious, he demanded the files of the eleven men who fled and checked them. Vogel had been of a rather small size, and the guards who had followed the ‘sergeant’ had reported that the man had been small, too. The uniform fitted. This was the only evidence, but it was enough.

All escaped prisoners were of larger size – except for one: Wolfgang Hochstetter.

And of course the former major knew how to act as a superior officer, giving precise orders and behaving like it was typical within the SS. It was crystal clear.

As the Kommandant finally made an announcement to the SS and Gestapo Headquarters to expand the search for a ‘dangerous murderer’, it was after ten o’clock in the morning. It would need many more hours until the information would reach all HQs.

*** HH *** HH ***

While the doctor was still examining the corpse, Wolfgang Hochstetter reached the Nürnberg
station…or what was left of it. He knew that the large building, constructed in the beautiful art
nouveau, had been heavily damaged already two years ago, yet it had been secured enough to be
functional. Now he had learned from some men he traveled with on the load bed of the truck that the
station had been even more damaged during the German-wide air-raid last week and that the train
traffic was cut down to the lowest necessity possible.

Yet the rising black pillars of smoke showed that at least two locomotives were ready for travel, and
Hochstetter was determined to catch a train to the northwest.

Turning up his collar to hide his growing beard stubbles and saluting a few SS guards, which
watched the created emergency entrances to the station platforms, he stepped into the still standing
part of the building. Grid and little debris crunched beneath his boots. Reaching one of the still
passable rails, he stopped for a moment, taking in the destruction around him.

Over half of the buildings was burned down, many locomotives lay on their sides or were otherwise
damaged, wagons destroyed. SS men guarded labor workers, which tried to repair the rails, but of
what Hochstetter saw, he knew that only two trains at once could enter or leave the station within the
next few weeks. The Allies made a good job of hindering the train traffic in Bavaria.

He looked around and asked the next SS private who came his way which of the two trains would
head towards northwest, and the man pointed to a quickly risen Barracks at the other side of the
railways.

“The train office is over there, Sergeant. I’m sure the station master can provide you with the new
schedule.”

Thanking the man, Hochstetter took the short way over the rails to reach the platform on the other
side and walked with brusque steps towards the hut. Not bothering with knocking, he simply
entered. A desk, a chair, a telephone, a Morse radio, and a lot of papers tacked to the wall built the
whole equipment. To by a ticket wasn’t necessary anymore, because all trains were only transporting
Wehrmacht, SS, and Gestapo members now; the running costs were defrayed by the government.

“Sergeant Vogel,” he instructed himself shortly to the man who was in his sixties, and added the
formal greeting before he asked, “I have to travel to Hammelburg. Any chance that one of the trains
leaves into the direction?”

The man gulped as he saw the SS Sergeant in front of him and hastily began to search in some
papers. “One moment, please. I’ll check.”
Hochstetter frowned. “Don’t you know the schedules of the trains within your own station? How…”

“I’m sorry, sir, the station master died in the air raid last week. I’m…” He gulped again. “I’m a called substitute and still not really familiar with the procedures here.”

Grimacing, Hochstetter gestured to the man to continue his search. “Hammelburg, Hammelburg… it’s in the northwest from here, isn’t it?” He asked.

“Yes,” the former major nodded. ‘At least he remembers the geographic lessons from school.’

“Here I have it,” the man said with relief and pride. “Train B15, over there.” He pointed towards the left of the two trains. “Travels to Frankfurt, and because of the destroyed railways, the train has to detour towards Würzburg and leaves the main rail in Rottendorf to head towards Schweinfurt. From there…”

“Danke, Schweinfurt will do it,” Hochstetter interrupted him, knowing he was going to need a transport possibility to get to Hammelburg. And he needed more. He needed support. And there was only one man he could trust in this matter.

“I have to make a telephone call. Please leave,” he said firmly.

The interims station master hesitated. “Sergeant, I’m not allowed to leave my…”

“Out! The call is top secret and not for your ears. Out, or I have to arrest you!” Hochstetter snapped, eyes blazing.

The man flinched as if he had been slapped, rounded his desk, and hurried towards the door. “Of course, Sergeant. I apologize. The office is yours,” he croaked, and closed the door behind him.

Hochstetter sneered. The old methods were always the best. Picking up the receiver, he barked, “This Brigadier General von Stetten.” He didn’t know if this man even existed. But this was secondary as he made his demands to the lady of the telephone exchange office. Leaning against the desk, he had to wait a minute for the connection until he heard the still familiar voice, “Leutnant von Neuhaus, Gestapo Headquarters in Hammelburg. How can I be at your service, General?”
Hochstetter grinned. “Von Neuhaus, it’s me.”

TBC…

Yes, Hochstetter hadn’t lost his bite – and, regrettable, also not his scheming mind but also his hate. Believe me, he’ll trigger a lot of chaos and a battle on its own that will shake Stalag 13 thoroughly.

In the meantime, Schmidt closes up on Hogan, but he also will be entrapped in the revenge Hochstetter plans, because the ‘poison-gnome’ not only wants to seek vengeance on Hogan and Klink, but also on the Oberleutnant. Just wait, if he can win von Neuhaus for his intentions…

I hope, you liked the current chapter and the new twist in the story that will stir up almost everything. Like always, I hope for some reviews (battering my eyelashes).

Have a nice rest of the week,

‘til Sunday

Yours Starflight
Hi, my dear readers!

Thank you for the reviews and kudos. I’m happy that the new ‘adventure’ obviously woke your interest. And, be certain, the next chapters will be one big rollercoaster.

Hochstetter is back, and even insane he has still a clever and almost brilliant mind, how it will be proven in this chapter. He plans his revenge carefully and makes certain that everyone will face it.

So, have ‘fun’ with the new chapter,

Love

Yours Starflight

Chapter 60 – Hellish plans

Leutnant Stephan von Neuhaus strolled into his own office, already in a bad mood. He had thought that after what happened two days prior with the whole disaster of the project of General Burkhalter, Schmidt would be kicked out of his job. Yes, Freiberger had taken charge, but Schmidt had chosen the men who had to observe the area during the last few days and which radio men should try to detect any possible forbidden signals – and they had failed.

But Schmidt was still here, leading this HQ, and Freiberger was with Burkhalter in Nürnberg; answering to two of the Reich’s highest ranking men. Maybe Freiberger would pin the blame on Schmidt, and the blasted boy would stripped of his rank. Then…

The telephone rang and interrupted his dark brooding. “Yes?” He barked into the line, and frowned. “Who? Brigade General von Stetten? And he calls from Nürnberg?” Well, he didn’t know a general who went by this name. Maybe someone had been promoted a short time ago, but that this was a priority-one call, came from Nürnberg, and was only for him woke von Neuhaus’ interest. This call had to do with Schmidt and the Reichsmarschall, or the Reichsführer realized who was guilty at the shameful failure of the mission. “Yes, put him through.” He waited, tensed. As it clicked in the line,
he reported with his strong voice. “Leutnant von Neuhaus, Gestapo Headquarters in Hammelburg. How can I be at your service, General?” His mind was fully clear and concentrated on the upcoming talk.

But the voice that answered made him almost leaping on his feet. “Stephan, it’s me.”

The Leutnant needed a moment to collect himself as he heard a voice he had never thought to hear again. He felt adrenaline flowing through his veins while his heart beat quickened – but not out of fear or anger, but out of disbelief mingled with hope. “Major Hochstetter, is that you?” He asked quietly, looking to the closed, thick door made of strong oak wood. Good, no one could hear him.

“Yes, it’s me,” came the answer through the line. “Can we talk?”

Von Neuhaus sat back in his desk chair, the hint of a smile moving his lips. “Yes, Herr Major, I’m alone and protocol hasn’t changed concerning the top secret status of a priority-one call.” He took a deep breath. “Sir, I take it you escaped?”

“Yes, thanks to an US air fighter that was so nice to drop down on our camp and awake some chaos during which I was able to flee.” His voice sounded tired, yet hard and determined – just like the Leutnant knew it from several occasions before.

“How are you, Herr Major?”

A sigh was to hear. “I’m not a major anymore and…”

“For me, you are,” von Neuhaus interrupted him almost softly. “They really played a dirty trick on you.”

“I see it likewise, but you’re in a bad position if a general, an Oberst, and a traitor speak against you.” He sounded bitter before he added. “I need your help, my friend.”

“Of course, Herr Major,” von Neuhaus agreed instantly, assuming that his former superior needed his support to disappear. But what he heard then made his eyes wide.
“I’m in Nürnberg and catching a train that travels to Frankfurt via Schweinfurt. Can you pick me up there? And I need some supplies. Something to eat and drink – and a pistol.”

The Leutnant frowned. Out of more than one reason. “You’ll take a train? They are only allowed for members of…”

“I’m wearing SS-black – as a sergeant. Not my original rank, but it is enough to get a free ticket for the railway,” Hochstetter interrupted him. “Pick me up in Schweinfurt midday. I’ll be at the main entrance of the interims building – that means, if it is still existing after the damn Allies’ attack last week.”

“I’ll find you, Herr Major, don’t worry,” von Neuhaus said, asking himself to what his former superior was up to. “I’ll also bring some food and…” He hesitated before he sighed in resignation. “And a pistol. What about papers? Are you in need for…”

“No, I don’t need papers, but you should think of a reason to visit Stalag 13 afterwards.”

Von Neuhaus stiffened as he began to realize Hochstetter’s intentions.

“Herr Major,” he said quietly. “I can understand that you want to make Klink and his damn Ami pet pay, but this would be suicide. You won’t be able to escape from there if…”

“I don’t care, Stephan. My life ended the moment I was sentenced and transported to a working camp, robbed of rank and honor. But I’ll take those with me who brought me to fall. I’m still a SS and Gestapo officer of the Third Reich and know my duty – even if the Reich didn’t help me. Klink is a traitor, and Hogan is a dangerous spy who has to be stopped…even if it is too late for it, seeing the fact that we’re about to lose the war. But what he did can’t go unpunished. Those two have to be stopped once and for all. And you should think of a chance to kick out this whelp Schmidt. Maybe you can put the blame of my success on his shoulders.” He took a deep breath. “I have to end the call. The station master I sent out of his office is getting nervous by now, and a few SS men are heading into our direction. We’ll speak when you pick me up in Schweinfurt.”

Von Neuhaus wanted to argue – to make him see that there was still the chance to disappear from Germany and to return later, but it would be better to discuss with Hochstetter in the privacy of a car. “I’ll be there, Herr Major. Please be careful.” He heard a soft click in the line and put the receiver back on the phone.
For a long moment, he had to collect himself. He knew that he was about to cross a line if he really helped someone kill a *Luftwaffe* officer. On the other hand, if Klink was really a traitor – and given the velvet gloves he treated his POWs with and how strong he stood up for Hogan, Klink maybe was really a Judas – then he had to be eliminated. And if legal ways weren’t enough, then more drastic methods had to be used.

Von Neuhaus wasn’t blind. He knew that Hochstetter was right when he said that the war was as good as lost for the *Third Reich*, but those who had betrayed the Fatherland and helped the Allies to gain victory had to pay… *now*, before it was too late, and they would remain free and become ‘heroes’.

Von Neuhaus still had a bone or two to pick with Klink for the Oberst’s impertinence as he kicked him out of Stalag 13 and later treated him with arrogance and effrontery during the investigation of Kriminalrat Lübkemeier.

And concerning Hogan, there was something off with the American. Klink protected him far too much, while the colonel had liberties not even lower ranking German officers would have within the camp. Despite the fact that Hogan’s cheeky manners were something von Neuhaus loathed, he also had heard all the arguments his former superior Hochstetter had signposted, and he believed him.

If he only thought of the failed mission last weekend with two destroyed and one amok running rocket, a mysterious transmitter radio, and a completely cleaned hunting cottage close to the place where the radio was found and the rockets were destroyed, his hackles rose. And then the fact that everything happened in close range to Stalag 13 – including Hogan and a working troop changing a wanted traitor’s flat tire. He was convinced that Hochstetter had been right about the American the whole time.

There was no real proof, but the evidence spoke its own language.

Hochstetter’s re-appearance gave him, von Neuhaus, the chance to kill not two, but three birds with one stone. Klink and Hogan would get what they deserved, he, von Neuhaus, could maybe overtake Schmidt’s job, and Hochstetter would get real justice by taking revenge on those who tried to eliminate him. The only drop of bitterness was the prospect that the whole thing would be suicide of his former superior, yet he could understand him. They all had made an oath to the *Third Reich*, Himmler, and the *Führer*. To fight ‘til the last breath, to protect the dictated ideals, and to destroy the sworn enemies.

So, how to proceed now? He needed an alibi for being away. For visiting Stalag 13, and he needed something that would lead to Schmidt’s removal from his post in result of Oberst Klink’s impending death.
And von Neuhaus already had an idea. But to make his plans work, he had to distract Schmidt with another task. Something that would take him away from the HQ in the late afternoon. With a smile, he gripped for the telephone again.

*** HH *** HH ***

No one in Stalag 13 could guess what darkness was beginning to reach for the camp – and especially for the two highest ranking officers in it.

Hogan had left his lover’s cozy bed during the night and had returned to his own Barracks by creeping through the camp – just like he had done several times before his men and he had dug the tunnel to the Kommandant’s quarters. His men had been deep asleep and, just like he had assumed, the bed that hid the secret entrance was occupied. He wouldn’t have a chance to climb back into the Barracks without waking everyone in the hut. Good thing that he took the riskier way to return to his quarters.

Roll call happened like every morning, and everybody became aware of how easily the typical banter between the two officers went; making everybody laugh.

The lovebirds had had a very ‘intense’ night with each other, and Hogan had some minor problems with moving smoothly – just like Klink.

Will had been a storm of passion, and Robert had immensely enjoyed their hours of love making. But today they both had to pay the price for it. He was well aware of the partly questioning or amused gazes of his friends during roll call this morning and wracked his brain with what to tell them. He was slowly running out of explanations and excuses, and for once he would remain in his own Barracks this evening.

During midday, the weather changed again, and the clouds lifted. The sun didn’t break through, but at least the daylight was brighter. Many POWs were doing some sport in the compound, while Klink brooded over his books, asking himself how to get the needed nourishment for all of them within the next four weeks. The prices had climbed to the skies, ration coupons weren’t enough anymore, and the black market was an almost empty desert.

At the same time, von Neuhaus parked his staff car and headed towards the station. The arrival part of the station, including one of the best restaurants in Schweinfurt, had been destroyed on August 17, 1943 during a grave air raid, and the other part of the building was only stabilized to serve as an
entrance to an interim area with new built railway platforms.

The bombs, which had been sent down a week ago during the wide range attack of the Allies against Germany’s traffic lines, had missed the most important parts of the station, and it was still usable.

As von Neuhaus arrived, the dark pillar of smoke showed that the train from Nürnberg had already arrived. Wehrmacht and SS members left the station in this moment, and the Leutnant watched them carefully in order to not miss his former superior.

He recognized him instantly. Even if Hochstetter had lost weight, was unshaved, and looked unhealthy, von Neuhaus knew instantly it was him. He strolled out of the building, nodded at some other men he obviously had shared a compartment with, and stopped on the pavement to look around. A rifle hung from his right shoulder.

“Sergeant von Stetten,” von Neuhaus called loudly, using a mixture of Hochstetter’s cover and current ‘rank’ to wake the ex major’s attention.

The smaller man turned around, saw him, lifted hesitantly a hand in greeting, and headed towards him. Both men stopped in front of each other, and von Neuhaus was shocked as he saw the condition his former superior was in. Thin, sunken cheeks, three day stubbles, pale, and with an unholy gleaming in his eyes which spoke of a still determined mind. He couldn’t help himself but lay a hand on Hochstetter’s shoulder. “It’s good to see you again, sir,” he said quietly beneath is breath. “Even if you look like hell.”

The ex-major looked up at the younger man with whom he had worked well with – someone, who shared his point of views and his methods. He had hoped to make von Neuhaus his successor one day while he climbed up the career ladder. Okay, the Leutnant maybe would really become his successor when the next day dawned, but concerning his own career, it was at an end. And those who had robbed him of everything would pay for it in the next few hours.

“I’m glad to be out of this hell hole,” he said softly. “Thank you for coming, Stephan.”

“Any time, sir,” von Neuhaus replied, and saw the other man shuddering. “What is it?” He asked concerned.

“Too little sleep, too little food, too much hard work,” Hochstetter answered, before he took a deep breath and straightened his shape. “Do you have…”
“Everything is in my car over there. Please, come with me, sir.” He turned around and crossed the street, Hochstetter following him. Getting into the car, von Neuhaus first gave his former superior a package with food and also a vacuum flask with coffee – sweetened with sugar, like the ex-major preferred it.

“Thank you,” Hochstetter said between bites. “I knew I could count on you.”

Von Neuhaus nodded and steered the car out of the parking lot, heading to the west. Because many streets were barely traversable, those roads which were negotiable were full of people and a few cars and trucks from the Wehrmacht and the SS. Giving his ‘passenger’ a short glance, he saw how Hochstetter watched out of the window while eating the bread. He granted the older man some time while he concentrated on the traffic.

Hochstetter had had anything but a pleasant travel. Not that the company on the truck or later in the train had been bad. Yes, the mood wasn’t this enthusiastic anymore like it had been even a few weeks ago. After all, even the biggest idiot began to realize that the war was about to be lost for the Third Reich. Yet Hochstetter had felt the almost stubborn determination to keep on. But somehow he had been oddly distanced from the men and everything around him. The whole world seemed to have changed in the weeks he had been locked away. The people, the landscape, the houses, the streets – between everything and him seemed to be an invisible wall that separated him from the rest of the world. He felt numb, yet he had rarely been alive like he was now – at least deep inside. There was a fire burning in him that grew with every hour and kilometer which brought him nearer to Stalag 13.

Vengeance.

That was what made him hold on during his captivity in M1 and Weingut 1. That was what made him act during the catastrophe in the camp and moved his hand as he killed Vogel. That was what let him walk kilometer by kilometer towards the northwest last night. That was what made him man the train and ask his colleague and confidant for a support that would lead to his death.

Revenge. It was what stirred the fire in him, the flames of the burning hate that was about to eat him alive.

There was nothing left for him despite the all consuming desire to destroy the men who sealed his downfall: Klink, the traitor, and Hogan, the master spy.
It certainly would be the last thing he would ever do in his life, but it almost felt good to have this one last task before he finally would find peace in death. He even looked forward to the end, knowing that he had wiped the two biggest thorns of his existence from the face of earth.

They had left Schweinfurt now, and von Neuhaus had to avoid potholes as he drove the car down the road towards Hammelburg.

“No, thank you, Stephan, but I made my decision. Hogan and Klink have to pay for everything they did. Not only to me, but also to the Third Reich. It’s my sworn duty to eliminate enemies of our Fatherland, and this time it also will be my revenge.” His eyes were lowered to a small slit, nonetheless von Neuhaus saw a malic gleam in them as he looked to the right. The ex major had bared his teeth, and fury played on his face.

The Leutnant sighed, knowing he couldn’t change his former superior’s mind. “I brought a pistol for you – one from the gun room. I also made certain that the report from the last counting of our weapons speaks of crudities which hadn’t been followed up afterwards. It will seem as if Schmidt is lazy with his responsibilities.”

Hochstetter sipped at the hot coffee, his belly burnt with the unaccustomed nourishment and wrath. “And you think this will be enough to kick this liar and traitor out of his chair?”

Von Neuhaus allowed himself a grin. “No, but it’s one thing of a few. I’ll make sure that it looks like you intruded the HQ through the open window in his chamber and got the weapon like this. The windows have to be closed when the occupant of a chamber isn’t there, but he ‘forgot’ it – or simply ignored protocol. Only like this you were able to get the gun you shot Klink and Hogan with.” He side glanced at Hochstetter. “And while everything happened in Stalag 13, he isn’t on his guard, but rather follows private interests.”

The ex-major frowned. “How so?”

“He has fallen for Klink’s secretary.”
“Fräulein Hilda?” Hochstetter became wide-eyed, and for a moment, the fire of lurking insanity drew back a little bit. “Those two are a couple?” He whistled. “I don’t think Hogan will like this.”

Von Neuhaus frowned. “Hogan? What has he…?” He realized to what Hochstetter was referring. “Ah, I understand. He’s after the young lady, too.”

“At least they used to flirt with each other. They thought I missed this detail, but I didn’t,” the ex-major said. For a few seconds, he was his old self again. “Have you witnessed Hogan and Schmidt together? Was there any rivalry?”

The Leutnant shook his head. “They rather act nice to each other, as if it doesn’t matter that they are on different sides and wear different uniforms. Schmidt even rebuked me as I tested Hogan a few weeks ago if his injuries he got from you are really this serious, or if he puts up a show. Klink was like a watch dog, and Schmidt even apologized towards Hogan for my behavior. Can you imagine this?”

Hochstetter sneered. “Concerning Klink: yes, I can imagine this. Those two always were too close despite the fact that they are opponent officers. Both showing their claws if the other one’s safety or life is at stake. But Schmidt…” He pursed his lips. “The boy is a wimp with a too big heart that is absolutely out of place given his rank and position. And that Hogan doesn’t show any signs of jealousy concerning Fräulein Hilda proves that he has lost his interest in her.”

“Maybe he found someone else?” von Neuhaus suggested, and the other man snorted.

“How and whom? Don’t you know: he is a POW for almost three years who never leaves the camp except he’s brought to the hospital or fulfills some tasks Klink gives him. The ‘poor man’ has no chance to meet only one single woman while being locked up in Stalag 13.” His voice dripped with mockery, then shrugged. “It could be that he fell for another woman during his many sabotage acts and spying tasks within the last few months. But this isn’t of any interest for me. If Fräulein Hilda finally opened her eyes and preferred a German man, the better for her. It will give her less to mourn when Hogan dies.” He chuckled. “On the other hand, the young lady certainly will get some heartache when her new ‘sweetheart’ is stripped of his rank and position and rots in some working camp for his laziness of duty that led to a Luftwaffe-Oberst’s death.”

Von Neuhaus took a deep breath. “Fräulein Hilda is a nice woman, and I almost pity the circumstance that it will be her who initiates Schmidt’s failure and downfall.”

Curious, Hochstetter looked at him. “How so?”
The *Leutnant* smirked. “Just wait.”

*** HH *** HH ***

“Colonel,” Baker said, and stepped into the few rays of sun which came through the scattered clouds above them. Hogan, who leaned against the Barrack’s wall and had his face turned up to the warm shine with his eyes closed, looked at his friend.

“Yes?”

“I got a message from London. They want to know exactly where the German OHK is. Zossen is a small part of another small town that is surrounded by farms, country houses and cottages, and our boys don’t want to attack civilian buildings.”

“Since when?” Hogan grumbled, still highly disagreeing with ‘Operation Thundercap’. To fight soldiers of the enemy was one thing; to spread terror among civilians to bring a hostile government to its knees was out of Hogan’s league. Yes, Hitler did the same, but – dammit! – the US and Great Britain weren’t fellows of the crazy madman! Yet they used similar methods for several weeks now. So why all of sudden this change of heart? Not that he didn’t welcome it. Rather the opposite. But he didn’t think that Roosevelt and Churchill changed their minds this quickly. Maybe Butler was behind this, and Robert was grateful for it.

Seeing the exceptional glance of Baker, he sighed and pushed himself away from the wall. “I’ll ask the boss of our travel agency. He visited the grand hotel there and certainly can give us some advice.”

Baker and Newkirk, who was nearby, chuckled at the dry humor their superior displayed like so often. And they couldn’t control the grin that spread over their faces as they watched Hogan walking quickly over the compound towards the *Kommandantur*.

“They really use every tiny chance to be together, don’t they?” Baker smirked.

“Inseparable – like the two poles of a magnet glued together,” Peter agreed before he snorted. “Thank the Lord I don’t have to see them together when they get all cozy. LeBeau said he needed days to forget the sight of seeing them laying side by side in bed – even if both were asleep and in pajamas as he burst into the sleeping room.”
“Pajamas and nightgown, you mean,” Baker teased, winking at Newkirk as he mentioned the second vision of nightclothes.

“Why does everyone laugh about my nightgown?” the English flyer pouted. “It’s an old traditional way in my country.”

Richard began to laugh. “And now I need brain bleach when I imagine your prime minister in a nightgown.”

Promptly, Peter stuck his tongue out, but his eyes gleamed with fun.

*** HH ***

Hogan knocked at Klink’s office door and stepped in even before the usual “Herein! (enter)” was spoken.

Will looked up from the papers he was working at, the show of formality firmly in place. “Hogan, I’m busy. Whatever it is…”

“… can’t wait, Kommandant,” Robert finished the sentence – a kind of duet they had ‘sung’ for almost three years now even before they became friends and more. Closing the door and keeping his cap in both hands like usual, Rob closed the distance to the desk, turning private now.

“Sorry if I really disturb you, Will…”

“You? Never!” Klink answered with a tender smile, while straightening his shape. “What is it?”

“London wants to have the exact location of the OHK. They don’t want to attack real farm houses or country cottages which are spread everywhere in the area.”

Klink leaned back and let the pencil sink to the desktop. “At least they try to spare civilians this time,” he sighed and rose. “I can show you on a map of Berlin and the nearby area.” Getting out the
map from one of the dressers at the wall, he unfolded it and pointed to a spot that was marked with ‘Zossen’. “Here,” he said, laying his index finger on a green nothingness in the west of the village. “Your pilots can’t miss it. The country cottages are forming an oval with a larger, grassy area in the middle. The cottages are seemed to built in wooden framework style, but it’s a mask. One road leads to the houses. The entrance to the bunker is at the left from the only crossroad, and the headquarters are beneath the fields to the left row of the cottages. The whole area is one big bunker with different chambers, entrances, and even an elevator for trucks.”

Hogan memorized the exact position. “I have a map of Berlin in our tunnels. I’ll mark the location and send it to London. Like this, mistakes can be precluded.”

“Good idea,” Klink nodded, and put the map back into the drawer. “Tell your boys to take well aim. I really couldn’t live with myself if civilians in Zossen would die because of my statements to the Allies.”

Rob laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it gently. “I’ll tell London. Promise.”

A knock at the door made both men step away from each other, and Hilda peeked in. “Herr Kommandant, they’re broadcasting a speech of Minister Goebbels.”

Klink rolled his eyes. “More propaganda, more lies, more sand to throw into the people’s eyes.” Nonetheless, he stepped to the radio and switched it on while Hilda left again.

Both colonels grimaced as they heard the sharp, clear voice of the man whose twisted but regrettable brilliant mind had taken care that more or less all German people were brainwashed with the Nazis’ sick point of views. Those, who had looked through him, were locked away or dead.

He spoke of the losses the Wehrmacht suffered because of the advancing Red Army and the Russian’s winter offensive. Warfare didn’t look good for Germany by now, but – of course – this was only temporary. ‘Of course’ the Wehrmacht and the Waffen-SS would soon start a counter strike that would lead to a recapture of those areas the ‘Russians’ and the ‘West Allies’ had conquered.

Shaking his head, Kink switched off the radio. “Just what I thought – nonsense and more propaganda. I don’t know if the Führer has somewhere a secret workshop where he creates all the soldiers he’s going to need to force back the Allies, or if he finally is going to realize that we’re not only running out of supplies, but mainly men who are able to fight.”
Hogan made a face. “Even if he realizes this fact one day, he won’t give up. He’d rather send every single human being who is able to move an arm to the front instead of quitting.” He cocked his head. “Is Germany really running out of soldiers?”

“Of course,” Will scoffed. “Why do you think they’re sending now 17 and 60-year-old boys and men into battle? Just ask your mentor how many German POWs are already kept in camps within France, Belgium, and maybe even Russia. Our people are large at number, but many men are dead or taken prisoner by now. Only the bubble beard won’t see it.”

Robert grinned shortly as he heard the silly nickname Klink had created for Germany’s first man. “Hitler has no beard, Will; only a tiny moustache.”

“Beard is beard. In German, it’s a common word for all face hairs around the mouth despite its form,” Klink explained.

Aha, another difference in their language. Even someone who spoke German this well like Hogan could learn a thing or two more. Then he turned serious again. “I hope you’re right. It really would be sheer horror for those people who had been liberated only to fall back again into the Nazis’ hands.”

Klink nodded slowly, then he hesitated as he saw a short, grim expression in his beloved’s eyes. A wrath that was untypical for him. “What is it?” he asked quietly, assuming that he didn’t want to know at all.

“What do you mean?” Robert replied.

“There was something in your eyes as you spoke of the liberated people – and in your voice. Has something happened that I don’t know?”

Hogan stared at him. God dammit, Will knew him really very, very well. There hadn’t been a fitting chance to tell Wilhelm about Auschwitz – a topic that still weighed heavily on Robert’s soul. He knew that Will would take the terror of this ‘camp’ to heart and would be completely horrified. After everything the older man had been emotionally through within the last two weeks, Hogan hadn’t found the strength to speak with him of what Butler told him, but deep down he knew that there never would be a ‘fitting chance’. And it was better if Will learned from him the truth instead through a pedestrian report.
“Yes,” he said slowly. “Something happened. Something bad. But… I don’t think this is the right time and place to tell you about it.”

Klink sighed and gave him a glance full of warmth and love. “Robert, I will not melt, and I’m not fragile.”

“I know,” the American nodded. “But, trust me; this is something you rather want to learn of in private and not in the middle of your office where every minute someone can burst in.”

Watching his beloved carefully, Klink saw that Hogan was serious and accepted it with a nod. “Okay, this evening in my quarters?”

Robert groaned. “My men are going to get second thoughts when I’m going to your quarters this evening again. I swear, they already think I’m nuts.”

“As long as they stay loyal to you, no damage is done. And this here seems to be very serious, so no fooling around.” He rubbed his butt. “To tell the truth, even if I love our nights, I wouldn’t be up to anything intense this evening.”

“Tell me about it,” Rob grimaced with a chuckle. “You really are a storm of passion and lust, Wilhelm Klink.”

“The same goes for you, Robert Hogan,” Will grinned back, then he returned to his desk. “This evening, seven o’clock?”

“I’m there,” Robert nodded and placed his cap back on the head. “Have a good afternoon.”

“Dismissed, honey,” Will answered, and the abstract difference between the military order and pet name made Hogan laugh out.

“If someone of the Brass would hear us now, they would faint.”

“Yours and my Brass,” the Oberst agreed with a chuckle before he pointed at the door. “Out with you – and remind London to be careful where they let their bombs fall.”
Hogan saluted. “Aye, aye, sir.” He vanished and closed the door behind him. Winking at Hilda, he left the building, while inside his office Klink sighed. “If he would always be this obedient, it would spare my nerves.”

*** HH *** HH ***

At four o’clock in the afternoon, Hilda bid her boss goodbye and went home. She and Klink had agreed that she left the office half an hour early than usual to be there for Manfred. In compensation, her midday break was half an hour shorter. An arrangement both could live with.

A quarter hour later, she arrived home, unlocked the front door, and stepped into the house kicking her boots off. “I’m home!” She called, but got no answer.

“Mutti? Vati?” (endearment form of mother, father)

Her father appeared in the door that led to the kitchen, using his crutch. He was pale – too pale. “Hilda,” he said quietly. “Please come over.”

Simply knowing that something bad must have happened, Hilda hurried towards her father. “What is it, Papa?”

He wordlessly turned around and entered the kitchen. Her mother sat at the table, Manfred was asleep in his cradle near the oven. Frau Schneider was white like a tablecloth and looked shortly at a letter in front of her before she whispered, “This message came in early afternoon. It’s a conscription order. You have two days to report to the next recruiting office for the Volkssturm, otherwise you’re recruited by force.”

“What?” Hilda almost ran to the table and took the letter, reading it through. “But…this cannot be,” she croaked, while she let the letter sink. “They said recruitment of women is on a voluntary base, and that mothers and otherwise needed women are left out.”

“Maybe they changed this part of Himmler’s orders – or the recruitment office doesn’t know that you have a foster child,” her father said quietly. “The letter seems to be the real thing.”
“One moment.” Not hesitating a second longer, Hilda turned around and hurried into the large hallway where the telephone was. Picking up the receiver, she demanded to be linked to the Gestapo-Headquarters and Oberleutnant Schmidt. If someone could help her, it was him.

*** HH ***

Schmidt had just ended his call to another Gestapo Headquarters in Berlin. The links had finally been restored, and he had spoken with the registration office there, demanding information about the four men who had manned the telephone exchange at the People’s Court on February 3rd.

He had stated that he needed to speak with them because some Underground members had wanted to try to intervene with a trial that should take place at Monday the 5th, and he attempted to track them down. Even if this was nonsense, by now the most Gestapo members were paranoid enough to believe everything as soon as they heard the word ‘Underground’.

The man in Berlin had promised him to inform him about the current location of the four men and how to contact them, but it would need a few hours…certainly until tomorrow. Schmidt could wait. He wasn’t in a hurry; he only wanted to find out the truth.

He was about to rise from his chair, when the telephone rang a second time, and the woman in the telephone exchange said that Fräulein Schneider was on the line for him.

Somehow Schmidt instantly knew that something was wrong. Hilda had never called him in the HQ before, so something had to be off. “Put her through, please,” he said, sitting back again.

“Horst?” Came the beloved voice through the speaker.

“Yes, it’s me. Has something happened?” he asked, concerned.

“Horst, I…I need your help,” Hilda answered, her voice trembled.

Adrenaline shot through his whole being while he stiffened. “Anytime, sweetheart. What
happened?” In the next minute he listened and finally asked her to read the letter to him. The formulation sounded official and in the typical demanding style of the Waffen-SS, yet this all here couldn’t be right. He hadn’t been informed that women were recruited by force now and of nothing else spoke this letter.

“Darling, calm down,” he said, not aware of the endearments he used. “This is certainly only a big misunderstanding. I’m coming over to have a closer look at the document. Maybe it’s fake, and this is only a bad joke.” He smiled as he heard the relief in her voice and added, “Just like I said, I’m coming over to your house. Don’t do anything rash, I’m on my way, okay?” He took a deep breath. “Don’t fear, I will not allow that you’re put into danger. I promise. See you soon.” He placed the receiver back on the phone and rose.

He would help Hilda. And if it means to smuggle her, Manfred, and her parents out of Germany, he would do it. Eventually he really had to confront Hogan with his assumptions regarding the colonel’s double life and simply beg him to bring Hilda to safety, guaranteeing his silence in return. Yes, it would be treason, but he didn’t care. He loved Hilda too much not to go to the utmost to keep her safe.

With large steps, he crossed the room and opened the door. One of the privates headed towards him, hands full of papers. “The reports and daily announcements for you, sir,” he said. “The postman only brought them now.”

“Lay them on my desk. I will look through them when I come back,” he ordered, flipping his thumb backwards towards his desk.

“An official warning from Munich in form of a telegram is among them,” the man pointed out. “It’s marked with ‘urgent’.”

That caught Schmidt’s attention. Sighing, he returned to his office, gestured to the man to put the pile of papers on his desk, and fished out the telegram. While the man left, Horst opened the envelop and began to read – and went pale.

‘Ex Major Wolfgang Hochstetter, former SS + Gestapo, escaped working camp – STOP – Killed a sergeant + took his identity as Kurt Vogel – STOP – Is on the run – STOP – Escapee is armed and dangerous – STOP – Increased alertness – STOP – German wide search is ordered’ – signed by Oberkriminalrat…

Schmidt didn’t read further, but let the paper sink onto the desk. “Sweet Lord,” he whispered. Hochstetter had escaped, killing a sergeant in the process and took his identity. And he was armed –
certainly with the sergeant’s weapon. And Schmidt had the nagging feeling that Hochstetter 
wouldn’t use his regained freedom to disappear and leave Germany. He remembered very well the 
bottomless hate the man had displayed towards Burkhalter, Klink, and him – Horst Schmidt – during 
and after the trial in Berlin. Even if it would be insane trying to get some revenge on the Oberst,
there was still the chance that Hochstetter would attempt it at least.

Feeling his belly clenching, Schmidt quickly gripped the telephone receiver. “Stalag 13, Oberst 
Klink. Quick, please,” he said, and waited for the connection.

A few seconds later, it clicked, and the familiar voice with the Saxonian accent was to hear, “Stalag 
13, Oberst Klink is speaking.”

“Herr Oberst? It’s me, Schmidt.”

The Kommandant’s voice became instantly less stern. “Good evening, young friend. What can I do for you?”

Horst took a deep breath. “Herr Oberst, I’m calling because I have to warn you. Hochstetter escaped 
the working camp he was sentenced to and is on the run.”

“What?” Klink’s voice got a high tone.

“I just got a telegram from Munich warning of Hochstetter’s escape. He wears the uniform of an SS- 
sergeant he killed, is armed, and no one knows where he is off to.”

For a moment, there was silence before Klink said slowly, “Two possibilities: He’ll try to leave 
Germany – or he is on his way to Hammelburg to get revenge on Ro...Hogan and me.” He added 
softly, “And on you.”

“Maybe,” Schmidt admitted, only realizing at the sidelines that the Oberst had almost referred to his 
senior POW officer by the American’s given name. “Just be careful and double the guards, okay? 
I’m on my way to Hilda. She has a problem she needs my help with and...”

“Do you really want to leave the safety of HQ now, my friend? Hochstetter could waylay you 
somewhere.”
“Yes, he could, but he escaped only last night and given the lessened traffic possibilities in the moment, I don’t think he could reach Hammelburg within this short range of time. I’ll be careful, but please be the same. And…maybe you should warn Hogan, too. If Hochstetter really chooses the way of revenge instead of flight, then he is after the colonel, too.”

Something like a smile was to hear in the Oberst’s voice. “I’ll warn him, be sure of it. Thank you for your call, Herr Oberleutnant – and please, take care of yourself. A special young lady and a sweet imp need you.”

Despite the serious situation, Horst had to smile. “I’ll be careful, I promise. Have a nice evening, Herr Oberst.”

“The same for you, Schmidt – and don’t turn my secretary’s head more than you already did. I caught her daydreaming a few times with a certain smile on her lips.” His voice sounded light hearted, and Schmidt had to chuckle.

“Sorry, Herr Oberst, that is a promise I can’t make.”

Laughter was the answer, and then another greeting before the line went dead. The seriousness of the situation crashed down on Schmidt again, and with rising dread, he put the receiver back on the telephone before he went to the window and looked outside. Dawn was rising in the east, and wind rushed through the streets, tearing at the branches and the bushes. Klink was right. The chance that Hochstetter could be somewhere outside waiting for him was indeed possible. But not so soon after his escape. And Hilda waited for him. She needed his help, and he wouldn’t stop because a madman could be nearby.

Determined, he went to the door, switched off the light, and walked down the hallway to his room. Five minutes later, he left the building wearing his thick coat and a scarf, while he headed towards his car – not aware of the pair of eyes which watched him from a window at the first level.

*** HH ***

Von Neuhaus watched his superior walking to his car and driving away. So, Fräulein Hilda had gotten the letter and had, like expected, phoned Schmidt for help. One call to a friend who worked at the recruiting office had done the trick, and von Neuhaus congratulated himself for the idea. Everything went like planned!
Of course it was a low trick, but on the other hand, the young lady had turned him down and was flirting with Schmidt. Maybe after Schmidt got arrested, she would realize her mistake in choosing the whelp over him – especially when he took care that she wouldn’t be recruited by force.

Smiling, he left his own office he had returned to half an hour ago to set the next steps of his plan into motion. Hochstetter was in the trunk of his car, covered with blankets and certainly freezing, but they had to be careful, and they needed the correct point of time to start ‘Operation Vengeance’.

Von Neuhaus had heard how one of the employees mentioned a ‘warning from Munich’ from the Gestapo leading headquarters, and he had a good idea of what this warning was. Slipping into Schmidt’s office, he quickly found the telegram and read through the message.

His assumption turned out to be true. It was a warning about Hochstetter’s escape. As crazy as it sounded, this letter came very handy for von Neuhaus. He laid the message open on the desk, the envelop and the paperknife beside it as if Schmidt had quickly read through it, but abandoned it. He rather had his private affairs in mind than doing his duty and calling Stalag 13 to warn Oberst Klink. This letter was another nail for Schmidt’s coffin – or so von Neuhaus thought.

Satisfied, the Leutnant left the office – not aware of the pair of eyes which watched him from the other end of the hallway.

Sergeant Heinz Fuhrmann frowned as he saw the Leutnant coming from Schmidt’s office, knowing that the Oberleutnant had driven away only a few minutes earlier. Well aware of the rivalry between the two officers and liking Schmidt, Fuhrmann went carefully to his superior’s office, entered it, and switched on the light. Warily, he looked around and saw nothing out of order. Whatever the reason for von Neuhaus’ presence in this room had been, it seemed to be nothing off with it. Maybe the Leutnant had brought some papers – Schmidt’s desk was full of them.

Shrugging, he switched off the light and left the office again, closing the door behind him.

In the meantime, von Neuhaus hurried to Schmidt’s chamber that was located at the raised ground floor. Opening the window, he scattered some soil and mud on the floor before he stepped onto it and walked towards the door, making certain that it looked like someone had come through the window and used the Oberleutnant’s chamber to intrude the building.

After his arrival and before he had returned to his office half an hour ago, he had walked into the garden and rounded the building to Schmidt’s window, leaving the same footprints there. Given the
fact that Hochstetter and he wore the SS standard boots, no one could get the idea that the footprints could be of someone else than those of the former major.

Wiping his boots clean afterwards and hiding the cloth in the pocket of his coat, he quickly headed to the evidence room, got one of the paper boxes form the shelves, and put the radio transmitter in it they had found last Saturday on the hunt for the Underground agents. Yes, he could have taken it with him as he picked up Hochstetter in Schweinfurt, but the risk that the transmitter was missed by someone in the meantime had been too big. He only took it with him now – when he really needed it.

Since Schmidt’s departure and von Neuhaus’ walk to his car, ten minutes had passed. Placing the box with the radio transmitter on the backseat, he rounded the car and opened the trunk.

“Are you okay, sir?” He asked into the semi-darkness.

“Yes, despite of being cold, I’m okay,” came the answer.

Bending into the trunk, von Neuhaus whispered, “This is maybe the last time we will speak with each other. I want to tell you that it was an honor to serve with you and that I’m going to miss you. You have my highest respect that you’re ready to sacrifice yourself to stop our country’s enemies.”

Hochstetter looked up at the younger man, and for a short moment, regret woke in him. He really had taken a liking to the Leutnant, and he would have loved to watch him unfold his full potential, but what shouldn’t be couldn’t be. “Thank you for your loyalty and friendship, Stephan. It’s up to you now to fulfill my job, and I’ll die with the knowledge that a worthy successor will sit at my desk. Everything managed for the whelp’s downfall?”

“Yes, Herr Major. Your success will be his failure.” He took a deep breath. “For the Führer and Fatherland!”

“For the Führer and Fatherland, my friend. Farewell,” Hochstetter answered, and as the trunk was closed, he felt the thrill of hunting racing through him mingling with the flames of raging hate. His hand curled around the pistol von Neuhaus had given him while he felt the rifle poking in his back. Not long now, and he would get his revenge…

TBC…
Yes, von Neuhaus really would have been Hochstetter’s true successor. He is as mean and tricky as the former major is. It doesn’t look good for our two boys, Schmidt and even Hilda, even if they are more or less warned. But the devil travels fast, so to say, and the two colonels and Schmidt are mistaken if they think, Hochstetter is still away from Hammelburg.

In the next chapter (I’ll publish during the week), Hochstetter will strike, and in his insanity and bottomless hate he is incalculable. Additional to this, he knows Stalag 13 very well and makes full use of it. So, be anxious what comes next.

I hope, you liked the new chapter and, of course, I’d love to learn what you think about it.

Have a nice rest of Sunday

Love

Yours Starflight

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