

The Devils of Langenhagen

by Sean McMullen

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Above us the sun was a dirty orange colour from the burning ruins of nearby cities, and the sky had the colour of muddy water. Soot and ash drifted down like dirty snow, and the smell of smoke had been with me for weeks. On both sides of the road the trees were either burnt or smouldering, and the road itself was torn and savaged by the bombing. Most of the time the truck that carried me could skirt the craters, but sometimes we had to stop and dig ourselves a path.

Looking back, it seems such a strange and alien scene, out of place in our world. Yet all battlegrounds must have been similar, whether of the Crusades, Poitiers, the American Civil War, or any from the Twentieth Century. In the future they will be the same, because wars of the future will be all the wars that ever were. That is my theory, at least: I am an elderly Lutheran minister now, and have no technical expertise. I have only my memories for evidence, and the events are forty years old as I write.

As we neared the airfield I saw thicker smoke rising up ahead, and from time to time could hear an explosion above the truck's engine.

"So the Allies still pay their respects to this airfield?" I said to the driver.

"Yes, last night, and the night before that," he replied wearily. "They bomb the runways, they bomb the forest, they even bomb the wreckage of earlier bombings. How can they have so many bombs?"

"They must know that our jet interceptors still operate from here. They are powerless against our jets in the air, so they bomb them on the ground. It is no different at the Lechfeld airbase, or anywhere else."

The road disappeared amid a tangle of torn earth and smashed trees, and the driver slowly picked his way through the burning woods. The trees thinned out, and gave way to mounds of rubble and twisted steel. The burned out wreckage of aircraft littered the ground, looming out of the smoke like the skeletons of dragons as we passed. It was worse, much worse, than at the Lechfeld airbase.

"Is anything left at all?" I asked the driver.

"Not much," he replied with a shrug. "There are a few of the underground hangars that the bombs have missed, enough runway intact to get the jets into the air, but that's all. Fuel and spares for the jets are nearly all gone."

"And what of the new super-fighter, the 'flying-wing'?"

"I saw it land yesterday, at dusk. It really was only two wings, with jet engines either side of the cockpit. Think of a huge bat and you have some idea. Something strange about the pilot, too. His uniform is clean, and I have seen him smoke *five cigarettes* since last night."

The road became a runway. Emaciated figures in striped, ragged uniforms struggled to repair the surface with shovels, carrying the earth in baskets, while guards strode among them, shouting and waving their weapons.

"Terrible, terrible," I muttered.

The driver nodded. "The surface is terrible, but it's the best we can do." We turned off down a dispersal track. Ahead of us two doors slid aside in a mound of earth, revealing an underground hangar. The truck entered, and the doors closed. Paraffin lamps hung from the roof, and the floor was littered with aircraft spares, radio equipment, drums of fuel and ammunition. An officer came over to the truck as I climbed down.

"Oberleutnant Willy Hirth?" he asked in a hoarse voice as we saluted.

"Yes. I am to meet a Major Schwartz with a consignment."

"I am Major Schwartz. You have some crates of R4M rockets from Lübeck, and a replacement pilot, I believe."

"I am the new pilot," I replied with a little satisfaction, "and the rockets are in the back."

He sighed heavily and steadied himself against a mudguard. "When I saw the truck arrive unescorted I thought it couldn't be the rockets," he said, then looked me up and down.

"No escort could be spared. Besides, a single truck attracts less attention from the Allies' aircraft."

"Ach, a realist," he said with a sudden smile. He called some men over to unload the truck and we walked out into the smoke and ash. "I assume that you have at least flown a jet fighter before."

"Only five missions in the jets, Major, but several dozen in other aircraft."

"Any actual combat experience in an Me 262?"

"Two Lancaster bombers destroyed, and an unconfirmed Spitfire."

"Good, very good. It's a wonder they let you go from your squadron." I stared down at the ground.

"The Spitfire attacked when I was landing and low on fuel. I had enough left to engage it, but not to get back to the airstrip. I ejected safely, but there were no more serviceable aircraft..."

"Calm down Willy, it's all right," he said reassuringly. "You're more than I'd hoped for. They sent one novice from the Hitler Jugend who managed to hit a tree while taking off on his first mission-- but no matter. We have four Me 262 jets still operational, and that experimental flying-wing, the Horten 229. Your aircraft is in that mound at the end of the row. You will take a full load of fuel and four dozen rockets."

"Four dozen, Major?" I exclaimed. "On that runway? I've seen carhorse tracks in better condition."

"It can be done. I have done it myself, though it took nearly 7000 feet to become airborne."

At that moment I caught sight of the flying-wing through the open doors of its hangar mound. It sat on a tricycle undercarriage with its cockpit jammed between two jet turbines. Racks for the antiaircraft rockets were bolted beneath its wings, and the wingspan was so great that it barely fitted inside the hangar.

"A strange looking aircraft, Major," I said as he steered me towards it. "How good is it in the air?"

"The pilot says that when fully laden it needs only 3000 feet to take off, and its top speed is a hundred miles per hour more than an Me 262. Have a closer look, Willy. Tell me what you think."

The Horten was painted in standard camouflage colours, mottled green and brown above, and light blue below. It was sleek and impressive in a way totally different from the sharklike lines of the Me 262. I ran my hand along the leading edge of the wing.

"Do you know how old this aircraft is, Major?" I asked.

"It's been in the air less than a fortnight," Schwartz replied. He peered into a turbine. "Today is its first operational test."

I nodded, puzzled. There were tiny nicks in the leading edge that accumulate only over months of flying. I examined the wheels next. The tyres were about a quarter worn, but had been cleaned carefully, and painted with blacking. The hydraulics were lovingly cleaned and polished, but although the grease on them was new there were fine grooves of wear along them. Everything pointed to an aircraft that had seen a great deal of use. I climbed the stairs beside the cockpit and looked in.

It was upholstered in rich, red leather, the switches and controls were trimmed in brass and ivory, and there was red carpet on the floor. I recognised some familiar controls, including the new Ez 42 sight, but there were several panels of coloured lights and switches that I had never before seen in any aircraft. The material of the canopy seemed as thin as paper, yet it was absolutely rigid to the touch. Looking closer, I noticed that some of the brass controls were etched with perspiration from the pilot's hands. Only prolonged use would do that to brass.

"Remarkable," I said as I rejoined Schwartz. "Major, there is something odd about that jet. It reminds me of a very old, but lovingly maintained sports car."

"That's impossible. The prototype flew only weeks ago. It is well worn, that is obvious, but that must be because it has been test-flown so intensively."

I shrugged. "It's just an impression, sir. You say it will fly with us today?"

"Yes, and I'm sure it will perform well. Ah, what we could do with a thousand like it. We could shoot down enemy bombers like fowls on a roost."

"We could do the same with a thousand dirty, oil stained Me 262 jets," I snapped, annoyed. "I'm sorry, Major, but have you seen the stupid luxuries in the cockpit?"

"Yes Willy," said Schwartz, putting a finger to his lips. "Major Gestner is a very rich man, but a little eccentric. It seems that a lot of his own money went into the Horten 229's development. If he wants some extra trimmings in this pre-production model, so what? It's another fighter for Germany."

As he spoke I heard the rattle of a trolley, and turned to see two fitters wheeling a load of rockets up to the hangar. They were followed by a tall, blond man who was, perhaps, in his mid thirties. There was something easy and graceful in his walk, something that had never been disciplined by a parade ground. As he drew closer I wondered at his clean, crisply pressed uniform. Where, amid these bomb-shattered ruins, had he found a laundry and bathroom?

"Major Gestner, this is Oberleutnant Willy Hirth," said Schwartz as we saluted. "Willy is our new pilot, and will be my wingman."

Gestner looked at me with surprised curiosity. "So, you are to fly with us, Willy," he said in a melodious voice that was strangely high pitched for his build. "But you are very young."

"I am nineteen," I replied, vaguely annoyed.

"So? Brave lad! And are you nervous? Your first time?"

"Fifty one sorties, fourteen kills," I replied frostily.

"Ah, good, good," he said, taken aback, but recovering well. "I have, oh, over twenty. One loses count, eh?"

He was not in our war. His manner was certainly one of confident superiority, but it was not that of a veteran pilot. His gently bulging stomach was silent as my hunger rumbled. His eyes mocked my filthy uniform and unshaven face. His eyes were clear while ours were bloodshot from smoke and nights of bombing. Who was this man who slept far from the Allies' bombs, who had water to wash with that many thirsty Germans might kill for? I left the hangar angry and ashamed.

"His Horten 229 can stay aloft four times longer than an Me 262," said Schwartz as we walked to the mess shelter. "Just imagine: a top speed near 700 miles per hour, yet it can manoeuvre like a Spitfire!"

It was good for the war effort, to be sure, yet he only made me feel unhappy with my jet as well as myself. And there was Gestner's accent as well. Precise, educated German, yet with an underlay of something else. My mind kept throwing up comparisons: sportsman, big game hunter, driver of racing cars, rich adventurer.

We began a breakfast of black bread and cheese, washed down with rainwater. Food was more scarce than even fuel, and water was measured out by the tablespoon. As we ate, the air raid sirens began to wail.

I heard the anti-aircraft guns begin to fire, then the bomb bursts shook our shelter. We muffled our ears against the blasts as the floor beneath us jumped and heaved. One bomb must have hit only yards away, bringing down part of the roof and filling the room with dust. It seemed to go on forever, but was probably no more than a few minutes. At last the all-clear sounded, and we made our way outside. I was given a leather flying suit to put over my uniform, then Schwartz left to collect the other pilots for a briefing. Apart from some new craters, there was little change from the raid. Smoke still drifted everywhere, the fires still smouldered in the woods, and the sun shone coldly in a sky of pearly brown.

A squad of wretched deportees shuffled past me with their shovels and baskets, herded by SS guards with machineguns. If most of my fellow pilots and officers looked haggard, these deportees looked already dead and well into decay. Some seemed beyond suffering, moving nervelessly. They all looked the same, with ashen, starved, hopeless faces. All to repair the airstrip for my takeoff. I was looking after them when Schwartz collected me for the presortie briefing.

"Can all our struggles achieve anything?" I asked as we walked. "Our cities are in ruins, the Luftwaffe has been almost wiped out, and our factories are bombed as fast as we build them.

"And the SS murders deportee slaves to keep our runway operational," he added quietly. "I saw you watching. I watch too. They say it's not my concern, and that it's all part of the war effort. In a way I'm

glad that even the pilots go hungry now. It helps ease one's conscience."

Three officers, including Gestner, were waiting at an empty fuel drum beside one of the hangars. I was introduced to Major Reissel and Oberleutnant Weber, who was his wingman. Schwartz, who was Schwarmführer, spread some papers out on the drum.

"I won't pretend anything with you," he said, glancing about to make sure that he could not be overheard. "You have eyes. You can see that the whole of Germany is burning like Hamburg over there." He pointed to the north where the smoke was darker and thicker. "The enemy has thousands of bombers and fighters, yet we have only a handful of interceptors. Vastly superior in speed, yes, but only a handful. Why go on then? Why fight?"

"For honour. For glory. For Germany!" exclaimed Gestner. He smiled broadly.

"Well, yes, perhaps, but apart from that?" said Schwartz, leaning wearily on the drum. Reissel and Weber stared coldly at Gestner. To him it was just a game. For him there was nothing of value involved.

"Only a fool would say that Germany could still win the war," Schwartz continued, "but we could avoid an unconditional surrender by fighting the Allies to a standstill as they try to invade. Our jets are the finest interceptors in the world. They totally outclass Spitfire and Mustang fighters for sheer speed. Thus we have a very important role to play.

"We must attack only bombers. Ignore the fighters; they cannot catch us. Every bomber destroyed is less suffering for Germany, and a higher price for total Allied victory. We will be armed with the new R4M rockets, and they make the job easier. Each of you can expect to shoot down three or four bombers per sortie that is realistic. When we..."

His voice trailed off, and he stared past me to the woods. I turned to see a large car, a limousine, driving out through the swirling smoke and ash. It was all black and silver, gleaming and polished as if it had left its garage only minutes earlier. A little German flag flew at each mudguard. Slowly, majestically, it drew up to us and stopped.

I was nineteen, and had grown mature seeing little of women who were not either in uniform or in rags. The car door opened. Skirts and furs swirled, legs swung out that bared stockings and hinted at suspenders. High heels sank into the broken soil. Red lipstick accented her pouting amusement as her languid eyes assessed us and she was smoking! Even her long gold cigarette holder was not so amazing as seeing a cigarette in Germany in April 1945.

Another woman, similarly dressed, got out of the car. Linking arms, they made their way across to us.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Frau Guber and my wife," said Gestner, his words the first since the car had appeared. Frau Gestner smiled, but Frau Guber, the first of the pair to appear, maintained a haughty femme fatale expression.

"And where is Fritz?" asked Frau Guber. "Is he not here? Has he crashed?" She did not seem in the least concerned.

"Who is this Fritz?" snapped Schwartz. "I have been told of no Fritz Guber."

"He is the pilot of another experimental interceptor," Gestner explained hurriedly. "He has been delayed."

"We have chilled champagne in the car," said Frau Gestner. "Shall I tell the chauffeur to fetch it?"

"If you please!" Schwartz cut in. "This is an operational unit, and I have a briefing to finish."

Gestner laughed. It was as if he was indulging a child. He called to the driver of limousine to take the two women back to the safety of the woods until we returned. They walked back, waved to us, and were driven off.

"Getting back to our mission," said Schwartz impatiently, "there is a danger from Allied fighters attacking our jets as we come in to land. They've worked out that we run low on fuel very quickly, often landing with only a gallon or so left. We will cover each other as we land, with Major Gestner coming last. His fighter has a much better range. Is that all clear?"

We dispersed to our hangars. Ten minutes later Bokum's radar units reported a flight of Allied bombers coming in our direction. The fitters hauled my jet into the open, then wheeled the starter motor over as I strapped myself into the cockpit. The starter spun my port turbine, paraffin began to pump, the magneto spat, then the engine caught and came to life with a mixture of rumble and whine.

Once the other engine was started I taxied onto the dispersal track, following Schwartz. The flying-wing was behind me. Row after row of deportees stood watching us pass. I was now almost everything they were, except starving. Their suffering had prepared my path. Tired, hungry, dirty and frightened, I now had to pilot a metal thunderbolt against the vast formations of Allied bombers.

We lined up at the end of the runway. The fitters aligned my jet as Reissel, Weber and Schwartz took off. My turn. I revved the turbines, 6000, 7000, 8000 rpm, then began to roll forward. The surface was rough, and my jet shuddered as I sped over the newly filled craters. As I passed 120 mph I bounced, lurched, and lifted slightly, then thudded back to the ground. My wheels slammed and rattled on the hastily repaired surface. The airstrip was too rough, and I was running out of distance. I opened the throttle all the way and pushed the flaps right over, and at nearly 200 mph, I became airborne. Barely clearing the bushes at the end of the runway, I brought my wheels up, then climbed in a spiral. Below me Gestner's Horten took off using barely a third of the distance that I had needed.

I remember feeling not so much afraid of the enemy as of looking foolish in front of the other pilots. As we formed up and began to climb to intercept the bombers, I was perspiring heavily, with my stomach full of ice and my heart hammering. I had to show Gestner. I had to show him that grimy, hungry Willy Hirth in his Me 262 could be a brave, effective fighter pilot. In a way, I had to show myself as well, because somehow I never felt totally in control of the jet. Fighting the enemy was all split-second timing and reflexes, with my own aircraft to be fought no less than the enemy.

We climbed to 30,000 feet, then levelled off. Though it was now bitterly cold, I still perspired inside my leather flying suit. Below us all was haze and fires in the still spring air. Then we saw the bomber formation, 10,000 feet below us.

It was a vast block of aircraft, stretching back as far as we could see. Fighters flew at the edges of the formation, while flack burst within. Schwartz gave the order to attack, and I armed my rockets and the ejector seat. Down, down, gaining speed all the time, 590 mph, 600 mph. We spiralled through the Spitfires and Mustangs and they scattered in consternation, dropping their spare fuel pods. I streaked through a canyon of heavy bombers, tracer bullets swarming like angry wasps. There was a strange elation, and my speed seemed to make me immune to all danger. Targets danced in my sights for only moments at a time. I sprayed a Liberator with rockets and cannon shells, then swerved to avoid the smoke and metal confetti that was my victim. Swerve, swerve, and more bombers flung themselves into my sights. Another salvo tore a wing from a B17. Not good aim, but another kill. Then I was passing fighters like a boy on roller skates among elderly pedestrians.

I turned, climbed, then made a long, shallow, corkscrewing dive through the fighters, bombers, clouds of tracer and machine gun smoke. Gestner went by in his Horten and was lost from view. My rockets slashed into a B17, snapping it in two. I was later told that part of the wreckage brought down another bomber. Weave to miss a broken wing, swerve, roll, unleash the last of my rockets into the huge, silver blur in my gunsight, then a long dive took me clear of all those men who were trying so hard to kill me. Minutes later everyone but Gestner rendezvoused above the Aller River.

"Did anyone see the Horten go down?" Schwartz asked.

"I saw him put most of his rockets into a Lancaster," said Weber, but nobody had seen him after that.

Low on fuel, we returned to Langenhagen, circling high over the inferno that was Hanover. I landed first, Schwartz covering me, then the other two landed. I had reached my hangar when Schwartz began his approach-- then the anti-aircraft guns opened up. He raised his wheels, banked and climbed, the RAF Tempest roaring after him. Schwartz rolled and twisted into a climb, evading the other fighter, then his fuel ran out as he tried to straighten up. The Me 262 glides like a brick. He came down too steeply, bounced very hard, cartwheeled, and crashed into a bank of earth. The deportees were sent to dig out his body.

Reissel was the new Schwarmführer now. He called us together for debriefing: two jets had been lost for sixteen bombers confirmed destroyed. It was pointed out that the Tempest pilot would report that jets still used Langenhagen as a base, and another bombing was sure to follow.

"We will take off just as soon as our aircraft are armed and refueled, and there are bombers to attack," said Reissel. "Then we shall land at Lübeck instead of returning here." He stopped. Jet engines

whined somewhere in the distance.

The Horten 229 descended, resembling, as my driver had said, a great bat. It bounced a little on the rough surface, then slowed and taxied to its hangar. As it approached we saw another aircraft coming in to land. It was propeller driven, but that was the only thing familiar about it. The propeller was at the rear, along with the main wings, and the tailwings were in the nose. Then Gestner came striding over to us and the new fighter was forgotten for the moment.

"Two kills!" he exclaimed proudly, unzipping his furlined flying suit. "A Lancaster bomber and a Tempest fighter. My Horten is invincible!"

"A Tempest?" said Reissel. "Why did you not outrun it and rendezvous with us?"

"Why, I had to show that the Horten is effective in a fighter-to-fighter duel. I had plenty of fuel and ammunition."

"Your extra fuel and ammunition could have protected us as we came in to land!" shouted Reissel. "There was a Tempest here, too. Major Schwartz ran out of fuel and crashed while trying to escape it. And why did you use all your rockets on one bomber?"

"Rockets and bombers? Pah! There is no honour in them. Only duels between fighters--"

"Damn honour! You are a pilot of the Luftwaffe and you have a job to do, fighting for Germany. You're not some bloody knight errant, riding about in the woods, looking for challenges. Your orders are to destroy bombers."

Two things happened then. The limousine appeared at the edge of the woods, and the pilot of the airscrew fighter joined us.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Oberleutnant Guber," said Gestner. "I felt it necessary to escort his canard fighter to the airfield. The antiaircraft gunners might have taken it for some new allied aircraft otherwise."

Reissel closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "My radio was functional, as was that of Major Schwartz. You could have informed us."

"Major Reissel, I had an important experimental fighter to escort. There was no question of asking permission."

Exasperated, Reissel dismissed us until the next alert. I went over to my jet's hangar and sat on a packing case, watching the fitters fuel, arm and service it. From Over by the limousine I could hear laughter and jolly voices. To my right a gaggle of deportees struggled to repair the dispersal track and I watched them, thinking how the gap between us narrowed as Germany crumbled. Then I turned to see one of the women from the limousine, Frau Guber, mincing toward me through the rubble. I stood up hastily, brushing at my uniform.

"Ah, there you are, Herr Willy," she said, her words sounding like perfect German spoken with Chinese intonations and an Italian accent. "We are having a little party to celebrate this morning's valorous deeds. You must join us."

Valorous deeds! The expression was so preposterous that I smiled, and very nearly laughed.

"Frau Guber, I have to remain near my plane..."

"Pah! Silly boy. We have champagne, chicken and coffee. All things that give you strength for more fighting. Your leader, Major Reissel, is already with us. Come on, I like brave, silly boys."

I followed her, fascinated by the way she teetered and swayed on her slim, high heeled shoes, mesmerised by the rolling motion of her bottom within the tight skirt. The material moulded itself well around her, her clothes hanging perfectly with her every movement as if some invisible maid were fluttering about her, constantly adjusting the cloth. Expensive, well-cut clothes-- even Willy Hirth knew that. Yet I also knew that she was not entirely used to them, and that she found them as unfamiliar and novel as the bomb ravaged setting of the Langenhagen airbase.

"And here is Herr Willy," called Gestner as we arrived at the fuel drum that was our table. "Five kills, Willy. You are the big hero."

Frau Guber's eyes widened in amazed astonishment at his words. "Oh! Little Willy!" she cried, clapping her hands. "Such a brave little cubtiger."

I muttered something suitably modest, then eagerly tore at the chicken on the plate that was handed to

me. The visitors smiled condescendingly as I coughed and gasped between mouthfuls. Reissel and Weber were sipping at their coffee from fine china cups, chicken bones at their feet. Four dead birds and some ground up beans had atoned for the death of Major Schwartz. These odd, ridiculous people just didn't belong on this battlefield, but I was losing my sense of the normal by then. Was a cold sun in a brown sky any less real? They laughed often, inexplicably: at burning trees, at the sun.

"This is all so exciting, like the knights and tournaments," said Frau Guber. "What a pity the fighting is so far away."

"Yes, and those little biplanes flew slowly, and close to the ground," Frau Guber added. "One could see everything."

"If you please now, Major Gestner," said Reissel, "there will be no more engaging with fighters?" His authority had been sapped by these people's food and drink. For a moment it seemed to me that the clear-eyed, well groomed Gestner was reprimanding my new Schwarmführer for having a dirty uniform.

"Of course, Major Reissel, we have to be a team," he said instead, but the illusion lingered. Frau Guber was watching me, smiling through her eyelashes and rolling her hips ever so slightly. I looked away, feeling embarrassed and foolish.

"Er, has your Horten 229 proved itself?" I asked Gestner.

"Ah yes, without question," he said, beaming. "All my life I have argued for it. Also, it is built mostly from wood, with steel frames. We could produce thousands very easily."

"Something like my Lightning canard would be far easier to mass produce," interjected Guber, who was shorter and more rotund than Gestner, but just as well turned out.

Gestner snorted. "The Horten is as far ahead of our own Me 262 jet as that plane is ahead of the Allied fighters. It is so simple to build that we could revive the Luftwaffe, wipe out the Allied bombers and fighters, and rule the skies again. To destroy that Tempest fighter was nothing-- "

"Hah, a mere Tempest!" snapped Guber, gulping his champagne.

He had been drinking a fair amount, and was gracefully unsteady on his feet.

"The biggest, fastest, most effective airscrew fighter of the war," retorted Gestner. "Your Lightning had only a few test flights."

"So did your Horten. Against my interceptor your primitive jet would not stand a chance."

"You and your little putt-putt fighters," sneered Gestner. "What do you say, Hero Willy? Is a putt-putt a match for a jet?"

"No, of course not," I said flatly, finding myself staring at the tiny swastika that hung at Frau Guber's cleavage. "Jets are too fast. That's all there is to it."

"The theoretical limiting speed for a propeller driven aircraft in level flight is above 530 mph," Guber insisted.

Again Gestner snorted. "Hah! Have you reached such a speed in yours?" said Gestner.

"Of course, I-- er, ach, damn you, I've, ah, read it in technical works."

"I have read that a cow jumped over the moon," I said, "but just being in print does not make it true. " Guber, bordering on intoxication, bristled.

"Should you meet with a really good airscrew fighter, you would not scoff! " he snarled.

"I agree with young Willy," said Gestner, standing beside me and folding his arms. "Propeller is all very well when one fights with biplanes, but here it must be jets. Why, it was like shooting chickens in a farmyard this morning. "

"The finest airscrew fighters of this war-- "

"Are just faster chickens," laughed Gestner.

Guber drained his glass again, smashed it to the ground, and stamped off to his aircraft. Gestner and the women laughed. When they agreed their voices blended as if they were singing a madrigal, but when they argued it was stormy and dramatic, like a Wagnerian opera. Reissel and I could have been dogs barking, in comparison.

* * *

I sat among the ruins some distance from the hangars. My world was burning, and nothing but a few fighters was left to it. It was Hell, and I was a devil, tormenting starving deportees by eating in front of them.

"Herr Willy, where are you?" It was the voice of Frau Guber. I hesitated for a moment, my chest tightening, then stood up and waved.

"Ah, there you are," she said, walking out of the haze, an incongruous apparition. "I came to apologise for Fritz. He has a bee in his helmet about propellers."

"Some of it was my fault, Frau Guber," I said, sitting on a block of concrete. "His aircraft seems very fine."

"Ah yes, his Lightning Shinden thing. It was developed by the Japanese." I was so startled that I gasped aloud and stared at her in astonishment.

"The Japanese! But they're a world away. How did they get it here?"

"Oh Willy, how should I know? By submarine or rocket or something."

She was so close that I could smell her perfume above the ever-present smoke. She smiled at me, then ran a finger down my coat, lightly horrified by the dirt. Then she reached into her shoulder bag and produced a folded cloth. When she shook it out it was the size of a blanket. She spread it on the ground, touched some coloured spots at the edge, then knelt and gestured for me to join her on it.

It was as if ants were being blown over my skin by a thousand little air jets, and I started, gasping. After a moment the feeling dwindled to a vague tingle, and she touched another of the spots. The blanket was soft, yielding, as if it was inches thick, and very warm. When I noticed that my uniform had become spotlessly clean, I was already accepting it all as part of a huge dream.

"Don't be afraid, Herr Willy," she purred, pulling me down beside her. "Fritz and I are only together for a little, ah, holiday. We are not really married. He is a tinkerer, a squirrel hoarding his stupid little facts." Her face floated closer and closer, and I became very tense. "You are a real hero. A real man, Willy."

And then we were clinging to each other, our lips jammed together, my hands clawing at her rump, feeling the suspender straps beneath her skirt. There was a soft, heady pressure from her breasts, her thighs. Clumsily, I pulled her skirt up.

"Can I... do you..." I stammered, quite unable to string any sentence together.

"You are a man who kills," she whispered, wriggling under me. "This is so exciting, seducing a killer. Nobody kills in..."

The name that she said was like none I had ever heard, and we said no more until our frantic lovemaking was over. Lying beside her I began to notice small, strange details. Her clothes and her makeup were expensive, but just a little tasteless. The lipstick was too heavily applied, the beauty spot was too large, and her eyeshadow was a bilious shade of green. My fingernails had torn a couple of holes in her stockings, yet they had not run! From my mother and sisters I knew that stockings always ran long ladders when torn. Her skin was creamy white; not just a healthy white skin, but perfect, like spilled cream.

"That was your first time, Willy," she stated rather than asked. I nodded. "I knew it!" she exclaimed. "So Hermann has his fighter kill and I have my killer virgin."

I did not know what to make of this. "This is a strange blanket," I observed stupidly.

She laughed. "Yes, it is the perfect seduction aid for outdoors. It uses electrostatics to give a soft bed, to clean our bodies, and even keeps rain off to a yard overhead." She touched a spot, and the crawling tingle cleansed us again.

"Germany is in ruins," I said before I could stop myself, "yet our scientists waste time with things like this?" She ignored what I had said, stood up and arranged her clothes. Then she collapsed the blanket and folded it.

"You are my little heroic knight, Sir Willy," she said as she put the blanket away. "You will go back into battle with my name on your lips and my favour at your heart." She produced a lace handkerchief and held it to her lips.

"Now, Sir Willy, accept Lady Astrid's favour." She put her handkerchief into my breast pocket-- and

the alert siren sounded!

I was scrambling away over the rubble before I realised that I had not said thank you or goodbye. Blundering through a group of deportees I reached my hangar in time to see Guber's Lightning and Gestner's flying-wing roaring down the dispersal track. I was last into the air, and when I joined Reissel and Weber the two experimental fighters were nowhere to be seen.

"We three will attack together," Reissel said over the radio as we climbed through a bank of clouds. "Those two lunatics can do whatever they wish in their experimental contraptions."

Just then we rose clear of the cloud. For a moment the sky above seemed clear, then Weber's jet exploded in a shower of rockets and Reissel's port turbine belched black smoke. The two experimental fighters plunged past us into the clouds below.

"What in hell?" screamed Reissel. "Are they mad?"

I suddenly thought of the favour handkerchief in my pocket. Like medieval knights they were challenging us to a duel.

"They want to fight us, Major," I called over the radio.

"To fight? But they are Germans, like us."

"I know-- maybe not, though. Here they come." Reissel had no margin of speed over the Guber's Lightning now that one turbine had been shot up. I rolled and dove for the clouds as the flying-wing came for me, but began climbing again as soon as I was out of sight, hoping to return and assist Reissel.

As I returned to the clear air I found that an American Mustang had appeared from somewhere and was raking the Lightning with cannon fire as it pursued Reissel's crippled jet. Guber tried to break off and climb, but it was now his own engine trailing black smoke, and the American pilot had no trouble keeping up and pouring shells into the canard. I noticed Reissel dive into the clouds and escape.

Now the Horten climbed out of the clouds below me, and I shouted crazily into the radio. Guber's canard Lightning exploded under the Mustang's onslaught, then the fireball, smoke and wreckage vanished entirely! I shouted again, feeling the panic take hold of me, then recovered to become a veteran fighter pilot again. There was no question of which of the two planes to engage. I cut across to one side of Gestner as the Mustang dived almost vertically for the clouds to get clear of the two jets.

The Horten had an incredibly small turning circle, and he was easily able to break inside my turn, but his timing was poor, and his shots went wide. I followed the American's example and plunged for the clouds with my nose pointing straight down. This time I made no attempt to pull out of the dive until I was well below the cloud mass. Gestner emerged some distance away, and turned at once to follow me as I began climbing. His rate of climb was like that of an Me 163 rocket fighter, just as I had hoped. I throttled back once in the cloud layer, then pushed the throttle right forward as I returned to the clear air. We came out of the cloud at almost the same moment, and before he realised that I had slowed down so very much, he was ahead of me and in my sights.

I poured three quarters of my rockets after him as he drew away. Small fragments tore from his fuselage and one of his engines trailed ruddy flames and smoke. We climbed in a spiral, and he kept trying to break and cut across my path. My jet was undamaged and faster, and each time I was able to break and roll away from him. As he changed his mind and tried to dive, I sent the last of my rockets after him, and one shattered his port wingtip. I dived, determined to catch him before he reached the cover of the clouds. My speed climbed to 600 mph, then edged past, and the Messerschmitt began pitching and shuddering violently as the speed exceeded its design. Gestner banked very sharply, and I followed, the G forces crushing me into blackness as the jet's endurance passed mine.

I squeezed off more cannon shells as my field of vision became a tunnel and all colours flowed into blue, violet, then black. The dim outline of the Horten expanded into a great sheet that became the entire sky and closed to enfold me, then I was... stretched. In all directions. There are no other words to describe it. Reality became the blood I could taste in my mouth. Then I noticed that the sky was dark, and the land below me was a deep, glowing red.

I was badly disoriented and sure that I was hallucinating, but I never doubted that Gestner was close by and dangerous. A moment later I saw the Horten some way below me, a black bat against the glowing floor of what seemed to be hell. All I had to hold onto was the thought of destroying Gestner,

and I dived after him. He seemed to be unaware that I was there, and with only my cannons left, I opened fire.

Pieces flew from his wings, then there was a small explosion in the engine that was already damaged. Gestner dived for the ground, trying to lose me in a forest of slim, glowing red crystals. Swarms of bright orange bubbles scattered as I chased him, pouring shells into the flying-wing. At last the fighter gyrated violently and slammed into one of the crystals, exploding in a cloud of black smoke and glittering red slivers.

I circled and climbed, watching the upper part of the crystal collapse and fall in a cascade of red sparks.

So this was hell, but why was I not dead? Or was I dead, and was Gestner dead? Where do devils go when they die? Red and orange globes swarmed around the shattered crystal like wasps at a broken nest. I climbed past ten thousand feet according to my altimeter, but could see no end to the forest of crystals. It extended to the horizon in every direction, and the horizon did not seem to curve properly. There were no hills, rivers or lakes. There was nowhere to land. Was I damned to fly hell's skies for eternity? A Flying Dutchman-- no, surely a Flying German, I laughed to myself, near hysteria.

I tried all channels of my radio but heard no more than a soft, musical babble. No human language, not even static.

"Wilhelm Gustav Hirth reporting," I spoke into the microphone. "Oberleutnant in the Luftwaffe of the Third Reich. May I speak to an air traffic controller? I am running low on fuel."

There was nothing but the babble by way of reply. The odd curves of the horizon made my head spin. It was like tunnel vision, yet was not. The horizon curved up in one direction, yet went on forever in another. Far above me I could see... another horizon! At that moment, when I began to doubt my very sanity, all colours abruptly flowed red into blue into black and I stretched out to enfold everything. All around me twisted into white, and beyond my cockpit, I could see nothing. I could hear the roar of my engines and feel the controls under my hands. I shot out of the cloud into brilliant sunshine, the jet in a shallow climb. Descending, I found the Aller River, and all was familiar again. Laughing insanely, I did a few rolls, then slapped at the sides of the cockpit, just to feel them solid. I returned to Langenhagen, having insufficient fuel to go elsewhere. The airfield was deserted, but the runway was free of bomb craters and I was able to land. Nobody came to meet me. Not a soul was there. I rolled down the dispersal track to the hangars and stopped the engines. There was a little mist about, but no smoke. The fires were all out and cold. I found some tools in a hangar and removed the film from my guncameras, then walked to the edge of the forest. The next time that I saw the jet, it was in a war museum in America.

For a long time I wandered through the charred woods, confused and frightened. There seemed to be nobody else alive in the whole of the world. Finally, I caught sight of an Allied army truck. I hid the film canister and surrendered. The men in the truck were surprised that I could have been lost for so long, because the war had been over for two days. I had taken off in April, and now it was the second week of May!

I met Reissel in an internment camp shortly after. He had managed to nurse his damaged jet back to Langenhagen and had landed safely. Months later I recovered the film and developed it with Reissel's help. It was all there: the flying-wing of the devil's Luftwaffe, with hell as a background.

"This shows you destroyed the Horten," Reissel said as he stared at the wet print.

"Yes, but I cannot account for the circumstances. What should I do, Kurt?" The fighting was over, it was time to rest. Reissel seemed to have more concern for me now, when there would be no more death in the skies.

"Do nothing, Willy. Say not a word. These pictures show you attacking a fighter of your own side. That means a charge of murder, and a firing squad. We must burn these prints." He picked one up and stared at it, shaking his head in disbelief. "But no," he finally decided. "Could I keep those with the... the other place in the background?"

"Why not?" I answered. "Who would believe them?"

* * *

In the years that followed I became a Lutheran minister. Even though the idea might be theologically unsound, I somehow suspected that I had been given a vision of hell in order to direct the rest of my life to a more straight and narrow path.

I still saw Reissel from time to time, but I did not attend any reunions of Luftwaffe pilots. My new work was the repair of damage done by the war, and I had no wish to reminisce about the fighting. Reissel would question me at length about that glowing red world, and make copious notes and diagrams. We talked a great deal about Gestner and his friends being, perhaps, from the future or even from hell, but could not arrive at an answer. There was a predictable divergence between our viewpoints. Reissel was an engineer, and could not accept the idea of time travel because of the many paradoxes involved. I was a self-styled theologian, and could not accept that hell was a physical place.

By 1986 I was fairly senior in the church and Reissel was a project engineer in the European Space Agency. Not long after the Giotto space probe's encounter with Halley's Comet, I invited him to dinner to celebrate his part in the project. He asked if he could bring two other people, and I thought that he meant his wife and daughter. To my surprise he arrived with two American men, both about the same age as ourselves. Cooper was a scientist, while Colonel West was in the U.S. Air Force. All through dinner I assumed that they were something to do with the Giotto project, but as we settled down for coffee before the fireplace, the officer took a large print from his briefcase and handed it to me. It was a guncamera photograph, showing smoke, debris-- and a hole in the sky with that terrible crystal landscape beyond it.

"Kurt has told me that you piloted jets in the Luftwaffe during the last war," said West. "I've been showing former Luftwaffe pilots this picture for the last forty years, looking for one man who flew an Me 262 about three weeks before the war ended. Kurt said you used to fly those jets, so I asked to meet you." I cast a reproachful glance at Reissel, then looked at the photograph. Fragments of exploding aircraft, a hole punched in the sky, the blurred outlines of a strange, alien, yet familiar landscape. I rubbed my face, trying to gain time to compose a reply, but it was hopeless.

"What do you wish to know?" I asked stiffly. West smiled, but warmly, not in triumph.

"I was flying a Mustang fighter above the Aller River in April 1945, when I blundered into a group of German jets that seemed to be fighting each other. I didn't know what was going on, but I selected a canard fighter and opened up at him. It was one of those bursts that just turned out perfect. The aircraft exploded, and a second later a sort of hole in the sky swallowed the debris. Luckily my guncamera caught it. There were two jets left by then, an Me 262, and a Horten 229 flying-wing. Just then I heard a voice over my radio, saying 'Achtung, Yankee--'"

"-- Der Fledermaus, Der Teufel," I said, almost relieved that I had been run to earth. "Yes Colonel, I was piloting the Me 262, and I did attack another Luftwaffe fighter. Am I under arrest?"

Reissel spilled his coffee as he tried to wave reassurance to me, Cooper squirmed in his seat, and West looked as if he were going to laugh. Finally he did laugh, and it was with relief. I had already accepted being caught, yet I had the feeling that I was still free.

"It's all right, Willy," Reissel explained. "I told them all about Gestner and Guber without mentioning your name. It seemed best to introduce you to them and let you make your own decision about talking. They know that those two were renegades."

Over the next ten minutes Reissel showed them the prints of the films from my guncameras that had been in his briefcase all along. I examined West's photographs, and the Colonel and I exchanged versions of the dogfight. My story was longer.

"I didn't see you disappear," he said. "Here was I in a Mustang against two jets when someone calls out 'Hey Yankee, the bat, the devil'. I mean, that Horten did look like a bat." He smiled, and I nodded. Death had been close by in those months, and we were all more sensitive to its images than in the modern, rational world. "Anyway, I just decided that it was all a bit weird and dangerous for Jim West, so I got the hell out of there while your two jets sorted things out for themselves."

The scientist, Cooper, had only been making notes until now, but he opened a folder with photographs

of a Shinden and a Horten and passed it to me.

"The Shinden, or Lightning, was being developed by Japan at the very end of the war," he explained. "The first prototype flew two months after Guber's machine turned up on Colonel West's guncamera film. The prototype had only three test flights before the atomic bombs were dropped. With the Horten it is less clear. An experimental model was in the earliest stages of flight testing in April 1945 at Oranienberg, but this was damaged before Allied units arrived. I've seen the remains and spoken to a technician with the project. He was sure that the Horten 229 never reached the operational testing stage of Gestner's aircraft."

We sat silent for a moment, staring at the photographs or into the flames of the fireplace.

"One thing I can say for certain," I said, holding up the picture of the Oranienberg Horten. "Those people had no interest in either side in the war. They were there for thrills and excitement while we were fighting for our countries and our lives. And another thing: the canopy of Gestner's Horten was of a very strange material, and I doubt that my cannon shells could have breached it." There was one last matter that I could delay no longer. I went across to my desk and took out the little carton containing the handkerchief that Frau Guber had given me. Although I had often prayed for strength, I still could not help but admit to a little perverse pleasure that she should have chosen me for that strange little consummation of life and death amid the Langenhagen ruins.

"This was given to me by one of the women," I said as I handed the box to Cooper. "You may care to have it analysed." He examined the little square of white lace under my desk lamp, but found nothing unusual about it.

"Are we agreed that they must have been from the future?" asked Reissel. West and Cooper nodded. I shrugged, then nodded too.

"They are like big game hunters with high powered rifles," he went on. "Perhaps they have no wars, so they come back to play in historical wars." He picked up the photograph of the hole in the sky. "I have always doubted the idea of time travel, yet what can I say to evidence like this?" He dropped it back on the table.

"Warriors from the future need not be from our own future," said Cooper. "You described a world that seemed to be inside a giant cylinder, and such a world could be built in space." He was what I thought of as a typical American engineer, always eager to confront the impossible. "Just consider this: a huge spacecraft with a teleportation device could travel in some spacetime reference system so that events on Earth were slowed down a great deal, or speeded up as in a normal relativistic case.

"They could circle the region of the solar system for many centuries, speeding up Earthtime relative to themselves during peace, but slowing it down so that, say, World War Two might last for centuries. Perhaps there are many ships, all stopped almost dead in time, so that people can travel between them, sampling all manner of historical wars. You go to a worldship, become familiar with the war that it is holding down and become proficient with its weapons, then go for a stint in the real world and fight." This seemed like the wildest of speculations to me. "How could they live long enough?" I asked.

"If their lifetimes were measured in millions of years it would be no problem," Cooper explained without hesitation. "They might even seed intelligent life in selected planets, then, ah, catch them up in time after slowing down their own spacetime reference."

"I cannot accept it," said Reissel. "You could not grow a whole world just to play soldiers. We would know, surely."

"What does a bull know of bullfighting?" said Colonel West. "Can it know that it was bred to die in a ring, that a huge amphitheatre was built so that people could see it die, and that a whole body of cultural, economic and sexual values are based on a matador teasing and killing it?" There was something about what he was saying that struck a powerful chord within me. Perhaps I was the bull that had killed the matador and had run free among the spectators. Or was I the Space Invader that shot live lasers out of the screen? I had often marvelled at the number of wars and the ingenuity of their weapons throughout history-- it was almost as if our world and society were designed for war. And now, for forty years the world had been building up weapons that would have made Gestner's mouth water, yet there had been no global conflict. I thought long and hard about that. Had I killed someone important or damaged

something vital in that remote and glowing world? Had my little intrusion alerted what passed for the authorities in that place to an illicit game of war?

Cooper the scientist and Reissel the engineer drew diagrams and equations and speculated far into the night. In the months that followed, they and their colleagues estimated that the world of red crystals was a vast cylinder, about twenty five miles across and at least fifty in length. The handkerchief was made of spun organic polymers with electrically conductive properties. It has been shown to behave like a complex tuned circuit, but its power source remains a mystery. Is it an emergency beacon, a homing device, or something with a more subtle purpose? Months later the Americans took my poor jet out of their war museum and pulled it to pieces. I was flown to the MIT to comment on some microscopic slivers of red crystal found in the cannon ports and wing seams.

So where was I taken? At the time of my writing, the theory is that I spent a few minutes in a vast spacecraft, and that Gestner's Horten might have crashed into some part of a machine that held it almost stationary in time. It began to accelerate into the future, so that when I was returned to the Earth, weeks had passed.

On the night that I met West I knew only rekindled anger at Gestner and Guber, who had used the wonders of their technology to kill my friends and shoot at me for sport. In ages to come, I wondered, would humans come to regard war the same way? We still hunt, after all, and we do not need to. Instead of hunting preserves there may be war preserves of protected, aggressive species. How does a wild boar feel when he has managed to gore a well-equipped and armed hunter to death? Pretty damn pleased with himself, this minister of the Lutheran Church is ashamed to admit. While Reissel and Cooper talked excitedly before the fire, Colonel West and I went out into the garden for some fresh air. The night was chilly, and the stars were clear and crisp overhead.

"Weber, Schwartz, and all those other brave men just died for sport!" I said bitterly as we looked up at the sky.

"Goddamn amateurs, Willy," agreed my former enemy. "But we showed 'em, didn't we? We nailed the bastards."

I held no resentment for this man who would once have been pleased to shoot me also out of the sky. Long ago we had fought the war of the distant future, and we had been on the same side.

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