
OPERATION
SPARROW
THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY OF THE SPIES WHO TRICKED HITLER AND WON THE WAR
JASON BELL
"A lively tale of deception and daring."
—GREGORY A. FREEMAN,
AUTHOR OF THE FORGOTTEN 500

OPERATION SPARROW

The Incredible True Story of the Spies Who Tricked Hitler and Won the War

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JASON BELL



HANOVER
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Dedication

To my wife, Jessica.
Without you, this book wouldn't be actual.

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Note to Readers
Dedication

Author's Note
Prologue
Chapter 1: Sparrow
Chapter 2: A Shot in the Dark
Chapter 3: Blackout
Chapter 4: The Hungarian Gambit
Chapter 5: Monsieur Paris Catches the Sparrows
Chapter 6: The Last Blitzkrieg
Chapter 7: The Transfer
Chapter 8: Missing in Action, Presumed Dead
Chapter 9: Name, Rank, and Serial Number
Chapter 10: Escape from Auschwitz
Chapter 11: The Blue Bird
Chapter 12: The Constrictor
Chapter 13: Madison Avenue, Budapest
Chapter 14: Gaslight
Chapter 15: Old Friends
Chapter 16: The Factory of Death
Chapter 17: The Secret Telephone
Chapter 18: Death Day
Chapter 19: Hannah's Choice
Chapter 20: Theatre of Deception
Chapter 21: The Protecting Power
Chapter 22: Escape into the Castle
Chapter 23: Professor Blokey and the Canadian

Chapter 24: The Last Winter
Chapter 25: Hide-and-Seek
Chapter 26: Colonel Death
Chapter 27: Fight for the Fortress
Chapter 28: The New Slang
Chapter 29: The Last Battle
Epilogue: The Sane Republican

Acknowledgements
Notes
Index
Photo Section
About the Author
Also by Jason Bell
Copyright
About the Publisher

Author's Note

Operation Sparrow was one of the most daring and successful missions of the Second World War, a razor's-edge campaign that diverted millions of Axis troops from the beaches of Normandy through cunning, espionage, and audacity. The mission was a masterpiece of strategic deception, and yet its story has never been fully told.

Like Ultra, Operation Mincemeat, and the mysterious Agent A12, the American commando mission code-named Sparrow was buried under decades of silence. It stayed secret for a reason: it was safer that way. Even when other secrets came out, Sparrow was too hot for the Cold War.

Sparrow's daring use of experimental radio technology, covert deception operations, and backchannel diplomacy with pro-democracy factions behind enemy lines rendered it politically explosive even decades after the Americans parachuted over hostile territory. Long after the guns fell silent, key details remained locked away in classified vaults, shielded by top-secret stamps, armed guards, and diplomatic discretion.

It was the highest-stakes commando deception since the Trojan Horse, but the operation created diplomatic complications that outlasted the war itself. That's why three brave American commandos who took a key leadership role in defeating Nazism—along with their British, Canadian, German, Hungarian, and Jewish supporters—have remained virtually anonymous.

Fifteen years ago at Mount Allison University in rural New Brunswick, I came across recently declassified espionage papers that ultimately brought me to the greatest unknown mission of the Second World War. Reconstructing Sparrow required visits to archives across continents, consultations with leading scholars of Hungarian history, declassification requests, and travel to Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, and Croatia, where the Sparrows were held captive. This story became a quest to uncover hidden truths about wartime leadership, courageous sacrifice, and the extremely sensitive operations that were concealed for so long, they never made it into

the popular narrative of the war. Years of research culminated in a thirteen-month first draft—coincidentally the same number of months as the Sparrows' mission behind enemy lines.

Before I discovered the origins of the Hungary mission, I thought I knew the intelligence war that led to Hitler's defeat: Ultra decryptions, the Pas-de-Calais deception, the Double Cross system, and Winthrop Bell, the MI6 agent who first warned of the Holocaust. I now realize that Operation Sparrow belongs to the pantheon of greats as the riskiest deception mission of them all.

In the story that follows, all dialogue in quotation marks is drawn from eyewitness accounts. Most quotes are verbatim, but some have been edited for brevity or clarity. Original Operation Sparrow intelligence reports did not, of course, record every grimace or glance out the window, but I have included details like these when they were natural for the situation.

Prologue

NAZI-OCCUPIED YUGOSLAVIA, APRIL 7, 1944

Four white walls tightened like a straitjacket. Florimond Duke, a US Army special forces colonel, sat on cold concrete beneath a bare light bulb that never blinked. His windowless cell reeked of mould, stale sweat, and old blood.

Boots echoed outside. A door slammed. Then screaming. The Gestapo was at work again. The colonel knew his turn was coming.

Guards had shuttled him from one prison to another for thirteen days, but this one under Belgrade, a tomb three storeys beneath the city, was the worst. Until now, the Nazis had weakened him with starvation. The real questioning was about to begin.

He thought of the mission—a dangerous gamble authorized in the highest rooms of Washington: Operation Sparrow, a deception to pull German attention towards southeast Europe and away from Normandy before D-Day. In mid-March, he and two other elite American commandos had parachuted deep into enemy territory. It was a calculated risk to send someone like him behind Axis lines—someone who knew secrets that could cost lives, operations, maybe even the war.

Now the Sparrows were alone, hundreds of miles from Allied forces in Italy. The army had already listed them as missing, presumed dead. No rescue was coming.

The cell door shrieked open. Black-uniformed Gestapo guards filled the doorway. A sharp command cut through the air. Duke was yanked upright, his arms wrenched behind him, handcuffs snapping tight. The guards dragged him, stumbling, down the corridor and shoved him into an interrogation room. A Gestapo officer sat behind a metal table, glaring in icy silence. Duke noticed the iron ring bolted to the bloodstained wall. Finally, the German spoke in English: “All three of you will be shot[1] tomorrow.”

The Nazi hoped the threat of death would make the American trade secrets for his life. Duke's heart hammered. Fourth and goal, just like when he played for the New York Giants in the NFL. If his last-chance play worked, he could keep his team alive. If he fumbled, he'd be shot a day early and D-Day could fail.

Duke lifted his chin. He wanted the German to wonder what kind of prisoner refused to beg.

"You don't dare shoot us."

The Gestapo officer stiffened at his unexpected assertiveness.

"We surrendered in uniform," Duke continued.

The Nazi's face darkened.

"As prisoners of war," Duke's voice rose, "we are protected by the Geneva Convention—"

The German slammed his fist on the table and exploded to his feet. "You are not prisoners of war! You are spies!"

He tore out his pistol and levelled it at Duke's head.

Chapter 1

Sparrow

Territorial male flies toward[1] intruder, erects crown feathers, puffs chest, and sings loudly.

—"White-crowned Sparrow," *Birds of the World*

MARCH 15, 1944—THE SOUTHEAST COAST OF ITALY

Colonel Florimond Duke stared through a rain-streaked window at the bomber sitting dark on the tarmac. Three days grounded. The storm over Brindisi refused to break, keeping every special operations plane locked down at this captured Italian airfield.

A grand palazzo now served as staging area for Allied commando operations into Nazi-held southeast Europe. Duke looked around the room: antique Italian furniture jumbled with army gear, British commandos waiting amid gilded mirrors and stacked crates to join resistance fighters in enemy territory.

He checked his watch: 1700 hours. They had four hours until lift-off, but they couldn't fly if the weather stayed rough. Tonight was the last night the moon would be full enough for a month. But in a month, it would be too late.

Operation Sparrow called on Duke to lead a crack three-man commando team on a night parachute jump behind enemy lines. The plan seemed impossible—intentionally walk into capture, face Nazi questioning, and make D-Day lies sound true.

In an ordinary war, the risk would have been unthinkable. But this was no ordinary war. The Allies knew the big picture of the Holocaust. If Sparrow's kickoff of the Operation Bodyguard deception worked, D-Day

could succeed and end the Nazis' murders. If Bodyguard failed, the coming Allied attack would be a massacre. Trickery could make the difference between a beachhead and a slaughter.

Everything was ready. Duke had set the jump coordinates near a village called Podturen[2] in Nazi-aligned Hungary: N 46°26', E 16°31'30″. They had packed the radios, memorized the codes, and rehearsed the cover story.

But the weather was the one enemy the Sparrows couldn't deceive. The storm had to end by 9 P.M. Their Royal Air Force plane wouldn't take off without enough time to make the drop and escape Axis territory before dawn. Once the sun rose, a lone Halifax bomber wouldn't last long against German fighters.

Finally, as grey dusk fell on the drenched airfield, the storm weakened. An operations sergeant appeared in the makeshift waiting room: "Colonel Duke, your party takes off[3] at 2100 hours."

The Sparrows quickly got ready and climbed up into the plane through the jump hatch, then wedged themselves between towering freight earmarked for Tito's offensive. There were no seat belts. Two other paratroopers were on board: young anti-Nazi Austrians wearing German military uniforms. They would jump in the forest near Vienna. The Sparrows knew their Wehrmacht uniforms would be death sentences if they were caught by the Nazis. The engines roared to life without a minute to spare. The plane rumbled down the runway, picking up speed towards the roiling sea.

Angry waves battered the end of the airstrip. Duke watched the surge, calculating odds. If they died here, at least it would be quick. Such mercy wouldn't apply if Adolf Hitler's brutal Gestapo got hold of them.

* * *

By March 1944, the Second World War had raged for four and a half years, killing tens of millions. Hitler wanted more dead, but his early lightning victories—Poland beaten in weeks, France in forty days—had turned into a grinding nightmare for the Nazis. The Soviets had broken the Wehrmacht at Stalingrad. Mussolini was gone. Allied bombers pounded German cities day and night. U-boats were no longer predators but prey.

Yet the Führer still controlled most of Europe with eight million troops at his command. Nazi propaganda called it Fortress Europe.

The Channel between England and France was only twenty miles wide at its narrowest point. But crossing was the easy part. Landing meant facing defences the Germans had spent four years preparing: concrete bunkers, minefields, beach obstacles, artillery, tank divisions ready to counterattack.

Duke knew the stakes. Either the Allies would lure the Nazis away from France or D-Day would fail. A catastrophic invasion would prolong the war for years[4], doom millions more to Nazi camps, and give Hitler time to perfect his wonder weapons: jet fighters, ballistic missiles, perhaps a nuclear bomb.

Millions of German troops were tied down fighting on the Eastern Front and in Italy, but Hitler had a million more elsewhere in Europe to use as reinforcements, as well as the troops of Axis partners. Only 150,000 Allied soldiers would attack on D-Day. Deception needed to make up the big difference.

As Churchill put it, “In wartime, truth[5] is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.” It gave the name to Operation Bodyguard, the most ambitious military deception in history.

One of Bodyguard’s late-game moves would be George Patton’s imitation army, complete with fake tanks and radio chatter, near Calais on June 6, 1944. But the game-opening play was Sparrow. The goal was to make Germany’s defensive linebackers step the wrong way. The Nazis would be ready, but for the wrong play. By the time[6] they realized their mistake, Allied troops would already be through the hole.

A feint to southeastern Europe made sense. Hitler was obsessed with the Balkan region. In his imagination, it was the ancient battlefront that divided his Aryans from the Slavs he despised. He also feared an Allied offensive through the Balkans would join forces with the Soviets, isolating his army in Greece and exposing Germany’s defensive line from behind.

Allied strategists wanted to feed his fears. The top-secret Bodyguard directive from January 1944 made it explicit: pressure the southeastern Axis satellites while threatening invasions against Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Dalmatian coast, keeping Hitler’s troops far away from France.

In spring 1944[7], Germany kept 826,000 troops in the southeast—five times more than the Allies would land on D-Day. If Hitler saw through Sparrow, he could redeploy troops to Normandy in overwhelming numbers.

The British had already proven that deception worked. In April 1943, Operation Mincemeat used a corpse carrying fake invasion plans to fool

Hitler into thinking the Allies would strike Greece rather than Sicily. A British submarine off the coast of Spain released a body dressed as a British officer with supposedly secret documents in a briefcase handcuffed to his wrist. German intelligence swallowed the bait. Nazi defences in Sicily were weakened, and the invasion succeeded.

But the Allies couldn't pull the same stunt twice. The next deception needed more than a dead man. It called for three living commandos. Elite American paratroopers would make an imminent Allied invasion utterly believable. It had to look real to German spies—and fail in just the right way, like a trick play in football—to make German troops run to the wrong part of the battlefield.

German intelligence knew that captured documents could be faked and radio chatter could be planted. But commandos caught behind enemy lines? That would be proof of a southeastern invasion plan. The Nazis would need to block the attempt. Then, when the real D-Day began, the Germans would be pinned down by Allied bomber missions and further drops of British and Canadian commandos.

When the Sparrows arrived in Hungary, as the plan went, the anti-Nazi Yugoslav Partisan leader Josip Tito would launch an offensive designed to make Hitler think D-Day was happening in March, in the Balkans..

Being live bait carried risks. To succeed, the Sparrows would need to sell the story, even if tortured.

* * *

The plane picked up speed down the runway. Thirty knots. Forty. Fifty. The wheels hammered the concrete, every seam a mortal threat. The runway was unlit, to prevent German strafing. Lifting a loaded bomber off a dark strip—in rain and gusting wind—was an act of blind faith.

Men had taken off before and never reached open sky. Heavy aircraft blew tires and cartwheeled into fire. Others clawed into the air only to crash into the sea just beyond the end of the strip. Takeoff was often the most dangerous phase: engines pushed beyond safe limits, runways left no margin, and failure came too low and too slow to correct.

That knowledge sat with the three commandos now, as heavy as the weight of the cargo. The Halifax surged forward into blackness, each second narrowing the distance between flight and catastrophe.

The roar of the engines vibrated through the fuselage, rattling bones and teeth, while supply crates shifted and groaned with every lurch. The engines were so loud the commandos would have had to shout to be heard. But they didn't bother. Their minds were elsewhere.

Sixty knots. Seventy. A crosswind slammed the Halifax. The pilot fought it by feel alone, hands tense on the yoke.

* * *

As Office of Strategic Services (OSS) intelligence chief for southeast Europe, Duke helped lead an organization that was today's CIA and Special Forces rolled into one. OSS was tasked with carrying out the January 1944 Bodyguard directive to pressure the southeastern Axis satellites while making it seem an invasion would happen in that region.

At the same time, a major opportunity was brewing in Hungary. American intelligence reported that Hungary's leaders in Budapest knew they'd backed the losing side[8]. Hitler's defeat at Stalingrad made it obvious: the Thousand-Year Reich wouldn't last another thousand days.

In January 1943, anti-Hitler Romanian and German emissaries had approached Allen Dulles, the OSS spy chief in neutral Switzerland, with a risky message: they wanted out of the war[9]. Next, Hungarian agents showed up at Dulles's door.

Miklós Horthy and Miklós Kállay, the country's regent and prime minister, respectively, knew that Hungary would perish with Germany if they kept fighting together. They feared Soviet takeover and hoped Britain and America would arrive first. Otherwise, Hungary would be smashed between the Nazi anvil and the Soviet hammer.

Dulles and Duke both knew the talks had to be handled with discretion. If Germany found out that Hungary was cutting a side deal with the Allies, Hitler would make an example of them.

That was another reason for Hungary to leave Hitler. Hungary's million Jews[10], including refugees from other Nazified countries, were the last large Jewish community in Nazi-aligned Europe. They had survived this long only because Horthy resisted German pressure to deport them. But Hungary's protection was in danger of crumbling.

When discreet signals reached Dulles in Switzerland that Hungary wanted to switch sides, the OSS saw a golden opportunity to break up the

Nazi alliance and save Hungarian lives. As Operation Bodyguard came together in late 1943, strategies in the southeast took on a new aspect: Hitler's wavering Axis partners could support the D-Day deception by causing real battles far from Normandy.

The plan that emerged was Sparrow, the opening act of Bodyguard. What made Sparrow irresistible was that it would serve two purposes at once. Like an iceberg, most of its mass lay hidden beneath the surface. Above the surface, Hitler would see southeastern Europe rising up against Germany. Below the surface was the plan to convince the Führer that the main Allied invasion would strike the Balkans, not France. Either part could end the Thousand-Year Reich.

Then came the leak. In December 1943, American intelligence discovered that Colonel Otto von Hatz, a Hungarian military officer involved in talks with the Allies, was "giving the Germans very full particulars[11] of his connections." The secret talks were secret no longer.

But OSS was mistaken about von Hatz, an Olympic fencer[12] with a boyish grin. He was loyal to Hungary and was communicating with the Germans simply to mislead them. He knew that Nazi spies would learn Hungary was talking to OSS, so he told Germany it was a counterintelligence operation to catch American spies.

Even though OSS was wrong about von Hatz's loyalty, they were accidentally right about Sparrow being compromised. The Nazis had many spies in Hungary, even though von Hatz wasn't one of them. Now they knew a military mission was coming to the country. And the Americans knew the Nazis knew.

Standard procedure dictated cancelling the mission. When the enemy knows you're coming and sets a trap, you don't walk in. But the OSS made a different calculation: instead of plugging the leak, they would exploit it. Dulles sped up the Sparrow timeline. He suspected Hitler had seen only part of the plan.

A magician's trick is to let the audience think they know the secret when the real trick is something else entirely. The Führer thought he had uncovered a conspiracy to invade southeastern Europe, and he planned to crush it. He had no idea he was falling for an American ruse.

* * *

The OSS started building the Sparrow team in January 1944 with two top commandos: Major Alfred Suarez, a radioman and explosives expert, and Captain Guy Nunn, a multilingual propagandist. But the agency still needed someone to lead. Dulles sought a high-ranking officer who knew the Balkans region and could earn Hungary's trust—someone experienced in large affairs and able "to confer on an equal footing[13] with individuals of rank and to influence them in matters of the gravest importance."

The job called for an officer with enough status to deal with admirals, generals, and prime ministers with noble titles. Dulles went to General William Donovan, the founder and director of the OSS, to tell him the kind of person he needed to lead Sparrow. Donovan knew the right man was Colonel Florimond Duke, a top executive officer who was itching to go behind enemy lines. Duke already knew about the mission and wanted to lead, even if it was dangerous. Tall and square-jawed, his hair streaked in silver, Duke was wealthy and an Ivy Leaguer. He was the American equivalent of a British aristocrat, able to move among Europe's elite. At forty-eight, he had the self-assurance of a former professional football player accustomed to winning in life.

When the war began, Duke left his Connecticut mansion and New York City advertising career to join America's new OSS. By December 1943, he was leading the agency's southeast European intelligence section. The job included[14] planning intelligence and sabotage missions from the Adriatic to the Black Sea and running spy networks across the entire region, from capitals like Prague, Bucharest, and Tirana to mountains in Greece and Yugoslavia.

Sending a man who knew as much as Duke into enemy territory for capture was insane, or so crazy that it might just work. No one could make a fake southeastern D-Day look as real as he could. For the former Madison Avenue advertising maestro, it was just one more sales pitch, with Hitler as the target audience.

Duke knew that Regent Horthy's police still patrolled the Great Hungarian Plain in their rooster-plumed hats, keeping order in a country secretly scheming to leave Hitler. He knew that Prime Minister Kállay was playing a dangerous game, smiling at Hitler while sending emissaries to the Allies in Istanbul, Bern, and Stockholm. Duke also knew that in Hungary's beautiful capital, Budapest, cafés hummed with arguments about poetry and politics, the press was relatively free, and Jewish businesses were still open.

If their hopes materialized, Hungarians would be able to keep it all—and their freedom.

Duke was doubtful it would all work, but if even some of it did, it could be enough. It wouldn't be risk-free: since late 1942, Allied commandos who went missing no longer turned up in POW camps. When operatives were captured, they went silent. OSS presumed they were dead. The army couldn't order anyone on a suicide mission. They could only ask for volunteers. Duke, Suarez, and Nunn had stepped forward, aware they might never come back.

The plan was bold: parachute into enemy Hungary, surrender immediately, and claim they'd been trying to reach Yugoslav Partisans but had jumped in the wrong spot. Their "mistake" might make them prisoners of war with legal protections, rather than spies facing execution. The Hungarians had agreed in advance to treat the Americans as prisoners for a few days. During that time, German intelligence would question the Sparrows[15], letting Duke sell the lie.

Nazi counterintelligence was so brutal that the Germans couldn't imagine enemy soldiers would want to get captured on purpose. Their status as prisoners would make their fake reports believable and cause Germany to defend the wrong front. Then the Hungarians would retake custody of the Sparrows and quietly transport them to Budapest to meet General István Ujszászy, head of Hungarian military intelligence. The prime minister and chief of staff had picked the general to coordinate the military mission of flipping Hungary to the Allied side.

The elaborate charade of pretending to be prisoners also served another purpose: if the Germans discovered that Hungary was openly receiving the American officers, they would invade their former ally immediately. The staged "mistake" and "capture" would give the Hungarians plausible deniability. The Sparrows' survival under Nazi questioning depended on the Hungarians handing them over to law-respecting German military officers, rather than the murderous Gestapo. But whichever Germans got them, the captured commandos would need to weave a web of plausible but fake intelligence to trap over a million Axis forces a thousand miles from the coming D-Day.

Twelve days before launch, some American intelligence officers were so horrified by the risk that they tried to cancel Sparrow. It was madness, they argued, to intentionally hand over a highly placed intelligence team to

the enemy. In response, Dulles sent an urgent cable to Washington before someone cancelled the flight: “This is the culmination[16] of months of work. We have now obtained agreement from 684”—the code name for the Hungarian envoy in Switzerland. Unless America acted immediately to start the mission, Dulles insisted, the Allies would “lose quite a unique opportunity.”

Because if Sparrow went exactly according to plan, the Allies wouldn’t just fake an anti-Nazi invasion of Hungary but actually trigger one. It wouldn’t be the one expected by the Nazis, though, because it would be led by the Hungarians, not the Americans. The Sparrow proposal was a risk, yes, but it was a potential war-winner.

The decision went to the top. President Franklin Roosevelt authorized the mission[17], one of the few covert operations he approved directly. He entrusted a message—too sensitive to commit to paper—to Duke for Regent Horthy: if Hungary surrendered to the Allies and fought Germany, they could join the victors’ club rather than end the war in the losers’ column. The appearance of Duke’s team would inspire confidence that a partnership with America was real.

Duke knew the mission had been compromised, but he hoped OSS counterintelligence had bought him some time. To offset the von Hatz security leak, another OSS team in Istanbul pretended to organize a fake Sparrow mission. The Americans made it look to German spies as if they were moving ahead, but slowly, buying time for Duke’s team to quickly touch down unseen by the Nazis. But the Nazis had thousands of eyes in Hungary, and they knew the Americans were already on their way. They just didn’t know what Sparrow truly was. General Jacob Devers, commander of US forces in North Africa, gave the order by word of mouth. Putting it in writing was too risky.

Duke understood that his team wouldn’t be rescued if things went wrong, and that he could never tell the enemy what Roosevelt had told him, even if they tried to torture it out of him.

* * *

The Halifax tore down the last yards of dark runway before it ended at the Adriatic Sea. Water sprayed from the rain-drenched pavement, stinging the fuselage. The Sparrows braced for takeoff.

A surge of power, a stomach-dropping lurch—the wheels lifted, clearing the waves by inches. The wind tugged and shook the bomber, but the pilot held her steady.

They were up. The mission was on.

Three men. Millions of lives. The fate of D-Day. It was the riskiest deception operation of the Second World War—yet almost no one knows the story.

Chapter 2

A Shot in the Dark

MARCH 16, 1944—2:25 A.M. OVER YUGOSLAVIA

Five hours after takeoff, the Sparrows' plane cut through the night sky low over enemy territory. The pilot and navigator scanned the skies for fighters and the ground for the meeting of two rivers.

Blood-red light bathed the three American paratroopers and a Canadian jump sergeant in an otherworldly glow as metal rattled in the freezing wind. The Halifax shuddered and lurched in turbulence. The commandos' legs dangled through the jump hatch as the bitter slipstream howled past them. They waited for the signal.

Colonel, major, captain: uncommonly high-ranking for a three-man drop. Colonel Duke sat at twelve o'clock, facing the tail, swallowing hard to clear his ears.

On Duke's left, Major Alfred Suarez—middleweight build, boyish face, intense will—made his final check: radios had their parachutes, his shoulder holster had its .45 Colt pistol. Before the war, Suarez had fought Nazis in Spain, learning to handle plastic explosives with steady hands and operate his radio under heavy fire. Men who made mistakes in battle didn't get second chances. Suarez didn't make mistakes fighting. He was a born scrapper, but this mission required that he take Nazi abuse without fighting back. If he snapped, everything would come undone.

To Duke's right sat Captain Nunn, built like a gorilla. He secured his harness straps and static line. A highly educated, trained killer, Nunn had volunteered for this mission without worrying about survival odds. At his size, he felt invincible. Six feet tall, two hundred pounds of pure muscle, Nunn was a left-wing labour activist who had a problem with authority—like wealthy Republicans named Florimond Duke.

The OSS had chosen the three men for their ingenuity, courage, and political diversity—right-wing and left-wing—which would let them work with both the conservative and the leftist anti-Nazi Hungarian factions. The three commandos were small enough to slip into Hungary unnoticed, yet large enough to spark rebellion.

The Sparrows' athletic backgrounds also likely played a role in their selection. Hungarian officers admired physical sports that rewarded nerve and stamina, and they recognized the power in an American football physique. The commandos looked like men who could be trusted.

The Sparrows knew their drop zone bristled with troops—nearby, Tito's fighters battled Hungary's army. Duke had chosen this location as the ideal spot because the fighting was close, and it would seem plausible that they were on the way to help the partisans.

Duke thought through the plan. First, surrender to Hungarian soldiers who knew nothing about their mission, while hoping their American uniforms would keep them alive long enough to reach General Ujszászy. Next, survive German questioning, let the cover story hold, and get handed back to the Hungarians. Then, while posing as prisoners, arrange to fly[1] Hungarian government leaders out of the country to sign a surrender document. That signature would stay secret until Hungary was ready to fight the Nazis with Allied help.

Meanwhile, from a headquarters near Budapest, the Sparrows would build a spy network, rescue downed Allied airmen, and help Hungary's army fight when the Nazi invasion came—if every link in the chain held. If it didn't, they'd be in a tight spot behind enemy lines.

The Americans would attack their targets[2] only after the Germans invaded. Destroying seven bridges would ravage German supply lines to the Eastern Front. Csepel Island's factories in Budapest produced a tenth of Germany's fighter engines. Oil fields near the Yugoslav frontier pumped 11 percent of all Axis petroleum—destroy the boiler houses, and you'd starve the Panzers. Vacuum tube plants produced critical components for German radar and radio, which were dependent on Hungarian tungsten wire. And finally, bauxite mines produced 40 percent of the Axis supply, the lifeblood of Germany's aluminum industry. Without it, no aircraft, no engines, no hope of matching Allied air superiority.

Suarez knew how to put the machines out of action. He would train Hungarian resistance fighters to use explosives delivered by Allied air

drops so they could strike the Axis with deadly accuracy when the time came. The industrial inferno would starve Hitler's war machine at its most critical hour.

Meanwhile, Nunn would weaponize words, organizing a campaign to sow Hungarian fear, suspicion, and resentment towards the German occupiers. Radio broadcasts, newspapers, and carefully seeded rumours would underscore Germany's desperate situation on the Eastern Front, the speed of the Russian advance, and the grim reality that retreating German units would once again sacrifice Hungarians to save themselves.

It was an intricate plan with a thousand moving parts, any one of which could become disaster. One betrayal or mistake could turn Operation Sparrow into a death trap.

* * *

Freezing air blasted through the open jump hatch—a black void waiting to swallow them. Duke stared into it. He had never jumped from a flying plane. Not once. Lousy weather had delayed his training in Algiers. His only practice was jumping from a parked plane while getting pointers from the jumpmaster.

He knew it was risky, but Duke didn't know the worst: a hundred thousand German troops had already encircled Hungary's borders, ready to invade once the Sparrows touched down. His team was flying blind into a trap.

Suddenly the bomber's engines went silent, and the plane began descending rapidly. The British navigator emerged from the cockpit, goggles up, earflaps hanging. "You'll jump at six hundred feet[3]. Two rivers dead ahead: one right, one left. This is your spot exactly!"

He flashed a thumbs-up. "Cheer'o!"

Cold wind pummelled their legs, and the rest of them soon enough. Eight hundred feet. Seven hundred.

The war's outcome now rested with a taciturn middle-aged strategist, a strongman propagandist with an anti-authoritarian streak, and a demolitions expert with a hair-trigger temper.

Six hundred feet. The cabin light turned green. Duke took a deep breath and shoved himself forward into the dark.

Chapter 3

Blackout

MARCH 16, 1944—2:30 A.M. OVER PODTUREN, HUNGARY

Florimond Duke plunged into the abyss.

He tensed when he left the plane, as if tackling an opponent in football. His lack of jump training meant no one had told him that not even tough guys can fight the wind. He got slammed. He'd taken hard hits in the NFL, but this was worse—like getting hit everywhere all at once. His thoughts scattered like the pieces of a shattered jigsaw puzzle.

Night jumps killed in many ways. A missed drop zone could land you in a Nazi patrol's lap. A parachute caught in a power line could lead to electrocution or leave you dangling helplessly until enemy boots arrived. Tree landings broke bones. Water landings in full gear meant drowning. Even a perfect touchdown could leave you in a minefield, a guard dog's jaws, or the crosshairs of a sniper.

One end of Duke's static line hooked to the plane's cable, the other to his chute pack. A dozen feet from the plane, the line snapped taut, tearing the pack cover off and yanking his chute out with a sharp pop. The line jerked his harness. A wave of pain shot through his groin, shocking him back to reality. It hurt like hell, but it was better than hitting the ground sideways.

His parachute billowing overhead, Duke squinted through the wind, scanning below. Everything was black. In football, you could see the tackler coming. In advertising, you could read the client's face. Here, the ground stayed invisible, ready to break your legs or snap your neck.

* * *

Only one millionaire businessman was falling through the darkness over enemy Hungary in the early hours of March 16, 1944. Duke had every excuse to avoid this war—age, wealth, connections, and a family to protect—and he had already served in the last war. But instead of staying at his estate, he volunteered for the deadliest mission the OSS could design.

Florimond DuSossoit, later Duke, was born to Belgian parents on October 2, 1895, in Rochester, New York. He was raised in a household where French echoed through the halls and Old World manners shaped American ambition. His parents, Octave and Marie, carried Catholic traditions and prosperity. For Florimond, religion was less about rites and more about responsibilities. He learned that integrity, decency, and courage mattered most. By the time the family moved to Massachusetts, his moral foundation was set.

By seventeen, Florimond was appearing regularly in the *Boston Globe.* Nicknamed Duke by his teammates, he dominated four sports while maintaining academic excellence. Dark circles under his eyes showed the cost. At the Greater Boston Interscholastic track meet, he threw the sixteen-pound shot forty-one feet, nine and a half inches—that winter's best local performance. Excellence became his only acceptable outcome. Pushing through exhaustion was practice for a future test he couldn't yet imagine.

At Dartmouth, Duke was a popular fraternity man with Psi Upsilon and Casque and Gauntlet. He was also the "college strong man[1]," as the *Springfield Daily Republican* put it, who "put up a sterling exhibition" in the big games. At nearly six feet tall and weighing 180 pounds, he had "an excellent football build and was a tower of defensive strength." He was a multi-threat: catching passes, returning kicks, and flattening runners behind the line of scrimmage. He even played quarterback in trick plays, learning how misdirection could win a fight.

A test came in November 1916, in a game against West Virginia. Duke caught what should have been the winning touchdown pass in mud, snow, and ice. Dartmouth went ahead 7–0. But West Virginia answered with fullback Ira Rodgers, one of football's greatest players. With legs like tree trunks, he powered through the worn-down Dartmouth defence for six points. West Virginia's kicker lined up for the tying extra point. The ball wobbled weakly through the air. Several Dartmouth players, positioned to block, watched it sail over their heads instead of jumping. Exhausted and

assuming it would succeed or fail anyway, they quit early. The ball flew through the uprights. Tie game.

Duke was furious that his teammates had stopped trying. He didn't lose his head, but he let them know it was unacceptable to quit before the final whistle. After the game ended, his fellow players elected him captain for 1917. The choice surprised no one.

But he wouldn't play his senior season. In April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson's voice crackled over the radio: German U-boat attacks had forced America into the war.

Duke left college early to join the first armed American unit headed to the front. "The loss of Captain-elect[2] DuSossoit," one sportswriter mourned, would be "a hard blow to the Green." But his choice revealed his character: duty over comfort, service over safety.

Duke soon discovered how fast war could find him. Twenty miles from the coast of France, a U-boat launched a torpedo towards his French transport ship at thirty-five knots. The shot missed by ten yards—a first down in football, the difference between another play and the end of the game.

For thirty minutes, the submarine stalked while the French gunners fired back. Duke listened as sailors described the fight, then translated for his American friends, former Ivy League students, now spectators at a contest with stakes beyond crisp New England Saturdays. On the fifteenth exchange, shells hit the U-boat. Duke's transport was soon ringed by French warships until it reached waters too shallow for submarines to follow.

Because Americans hadn't yet arrived in Europe in force, Duke served in France's Transport Militaire Unis, driving ammunition trucks over shell-cratered roads to front-line trenches. Sometimes he worked seventy-two hours straight. Adrenaline kept him going, along with knowing that soldiers depended on his deliveries.

When French forces mutinied at the 1917 Aisne offensive—a disastrous attack with hundreds of thousands of casualties—Duke held his position alongside the volunteers. French commanders were impressed by these young foreigners who maintained order when seasoned troops fell apart.

Duke's French fluency made him essential as a liaison between France and arriving American forces. He rose fast in the French army: corporal, sergeant, then officers' training near Paris. America didn't mind lending him to their ally for a while.

At Issoudun flight school in central France, Duke mastered the Nieuport fighter, a sleek aerial predator with wings like a dragonfly—fast, nimble, and deadly. The thrill wasn't risk-free. He learned that mechanical failure or momentary inattention could mean hitting French farmland at terminal velocity.

American newspapers reported on the strange case of the man from Massachusetts who had become a French officer. When America's draft lottery assigned him number 2323, Duke could have claimed exemption for his French service. Instead he volunteered. "I am going into the American Army," he told the papers.

The Armistice found Duke piloting a fighter with the First Aero Squadron, America's original air combat unit. For tense months, he flew over enemy lines while diplomats hammered out the Treaty of Versailles. Allied generals prepared attack plans in case Germany refused to sign. Duke had survived submarine attacks, trenches, and high-risk flying. Now he had to survive the peace negotiations.

After victory was finally secured in 1919, Duke came home to America. While his Dartmouth classmates settled into mahogany-panelled law and finance offices, he signed to play pro football with the first New York Giants in the new National Football League. In locker rooms smelling of wintergreen liniment and leather, he studied game plans, laced his cleats, and adjusted his pads.

On the field, he lined up across from stars like Jim Thorpe—the Native American who was the greatest football player of all time—and played every down on offence and defence. It was a full-impact sport. Back then, football rules didn't require helmets, and broken necks weren't unheard of.

Despite an affiliation with the Giants baseball team, the Brooklyn football franchise soon folded in an oversaturated New York sports market. But Duke had gotten back on the field—back to the strategy, the physicality, the split-second decisions that demanded everything. Pro football offered exactly what he was looking for: a game that required total commitment, where every play tested what a man was made of.

Other post-war pursuits included manufacturing in Worcester, Massachusetts, and coaching football at Worcester Polytechnic. His 1920 coaching season taught him how to hold a team together when everything goes wrong—in this case, faculty restrictions and injuries that decimated

the lineup. Despite the bad roster luck and lopsided defeats, a Worcester journalist appreciated how Coach Duke "kept his team fighting[3] to the end."

By the Roaring Twenties, he had moved on to Manhattan's glittering towers and the advertising department at Time Inc., where he earned more than generals and built a stock portfolio that made him a millionaire. In 1928, he married Mary Hincks amid garlands of lilies and golden acacia at The Oaks on Long Island Sound. Three hundred guests witnessed their union. Her parents were wealthy, but the military history may have mattered more. Her grandfather had won the Medal of Honor at Gettysburg after capturing the Confederate flag under heavy fire.

In 1929, Duke became advertising director for *Fortune* magazine. In an industry fuelled by liquor and exaggeration, he was a clean-living exception. No one ever saw him drunk, and people trusted him.

His surname, DuSossoit—elegantly French but endlessly mispronounced—didn't suit the world he had entered. Besides, he didn't want to spend the rest of his life explaining how to spell it. Friends called him "Duke," just like his teammates had in college, and in September 1929, he made it legal. A month later, the Great Depression hit. Duke's salary dropped, but he hardly suffered, taking increasingly important positions in the growing Time Inc. publishing empire.

By 1939, as Hitler seized Poland, forty-three-year-old Duke was wealthy and well connected; he didn't have to fight. He volunteered for active duty anyway, even though America hadn't yet entered the war. Behind the hedges, his marriage was falling apart. His wife's drinking caused constant fights. When Duke joined American intelligence, a background report wondered: Was volunteering an escape from domestic strain? The author dismissed the idea. Duke had volunteered because of loyalty, just as in 1917. For him, service was instinct.

The army commissioned him as a major, sending him first to Cape Town, then Cairo, where he handled sensitive intelligence operations in the shadow of the British Empire. America wanted someone bold to push the independence of Uncle Sam's intelligence. Duke succeeded, ruffling British feathers with his impressive bearing, charisma, and fluent French. Some British officers wanted to be the ones calling the shots and bitterly complained.

It probably helped his career. Annoying the British was an enticing résumé line for Office of Strategic Services recruitment. When the OSS

offered him a position in secret intelligence and special operations in 1942, he jumped at the chance.

President Roosevelt had created the OSS that year as an agency with two faces. One was public, one top secret. Newspapers described it as an information-gathering service, but sabotage and spying stayed classified. Under General William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the OSS recruited scholars and analysts while training saboteurs, guerrilla fighters, and assassins.

Duke would soon take on a leadership position within the OSS, but first came commando school, where he was the oldest student in his class. Professors like Major William Brooke told students that a single intelligence mistake would get them killed. The martial arts expert Captain William "Shanghai Buster" Fairbairn taught the "spinal dislocator," knife fighting, and techniques for silently killing sentries, while drilling truths about Nazi "assailants who will recognize no bounds."[4]

Duke learned to blow up bridges, break and enter guarded buildings, and defeat attack dogs with his bare hands. He even trained to resist torture, suffering electric shocks and baton hits. Football had been good practice for pain.

Duke's weakness was that he could say too little. Sports and advertising had taught him to keep things brief. He didn't always share his reasoning with his men. That was fine in a desk job, but on a dangerous mission behind enemy lines, it could prove fatal if subordinates couldn't understand an order he didn't explain.

From his comfortable Washington office at OSS headquarters, Duke ran the intelligence network across southeast and central Europe. He coordinated covert missions into Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia from African bases, recruited and trained field officers, and decoded reports that could change the course of the war. Just down the hall, a young researcher named Julia Child was developing octopus repellent to keep the predators away from underwater explosives. She would one day become America's most famous chef, but in 1944, her recipes were for fending off sea life, not delighting dinner guests.

Duke's position would have thrilled most men: issuing orders to commando teams, cracking secrets, steering the war. But he wasn't most men. Even though he was one of the war's top intelligence planners, he was frustrated. He was a fighter. It was agony to read and write reports behind a

desk instead of joining field operations with commandos who were risking their lives.

He wanted to fight with his teams, recruit sources himself, pack explosives, and wreak havoc on the Nazis inside their own territory. In 1943, he asked to go behind enemy lines, but OSS brass refused to take the chance. Obviously, top intelligence chiefs could not be sent into combat.

By early 1944, Duke was case officer to the war's biggest double agent: Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, chief of Germany's military intelligence service, the Abwehr. A secret volunteer for the Allies out of hatred for Hitler, the admiral was far and away America's most important spy inside Germany.

Hitler was finding it hard to win the war when his own spy chief worked against him. So long as Canaris cooperated, the OSS couldn't risk Duke on a mission behind enemy lines. Then, in mid-February, Nazi suspicions about the Abwehr became too strong for Hitler to ignore. A telegram arrived at OSS headquarters reporting that Hitler had fired Canaris. The Allies now faced greater danger as Nazi spies tightened their grip on the German intelligence apparatus.

Duke's networks throughout the southeast were suddenly vulnerable, just months before D-Day. Some people might despair, but he saw opportunity in danger. He again put in for a transfer to field duty. Canaris's departure meant that Duke might be chosen for the Sparrow mission to Hungary that he had helped plan.

Any normal intelligence chief would have laughed him out of the room, or straight into a psychiatric exam. The man held every secret of Allied operations from Athens to Vienna to Bucharest. Basic security demanded that such knowledge never leave headquarters. Duke wasn't just one secret intelligence file—he was the whole filing cabinet. The danger was insane. Put this walking library into Nazi hands, and the Gestapo could break him in days, unravelling years of intelligence work and sentencing hundreds of agents to death. Worse, it could lengthen the war by years and get millions killed.

Hungary wasn't just dangerous—it was a death trap. Thousands of German spies filled the country. Pro-Nazi officers controlled key military units. Even the Hungarian resistance, supported by the prime minister, warned the Allies that the Sparrow mission was extremely risky.

The enormous gamble should have been unthinkable. Yet somehow Duke's transfer request wasn't immediately burned. General Donovan was

no conventional intelligence chief—he showed up to the front lines himself. He admired Duke's courage and admired the colonel for wanting to fight.

Duke's bravery and Donovan's backing had brought the middle-aged adman to midair over Hungary, hanging under parachute silk. As he plummeted below the aircraft, he knew that he would need to rewrite the playbook.

Florimond Duke had excelled at everything he'd attempted. Now he was a rookie paratrooper, betting his life and the future of Europe on gut instincts.

The invisible ground rushed up fast.

* * *

Twenty-eight-year-old Captain Guy Nunn was the second man into the vortex. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and powerfully built. With serious eyes beneath heavy brows, he looked like a bodyguard or an enforcer. His big body hid an equally impressive mind: he was an Oxford University graduate, published poet, and prize-winning orator. He could speak eight languages, including excellent German.

At Occidental College in Los Angeles, he'd been football captain and class president, earning the college's highest GPA as an English major and joining Phi Beta Kappa. The California papers called him "Wotta Guy." A Rhodes Scholarship sent him to Oxford for a master's in economics and politics, but his hands-on education came from the anti-fascist organizers he met in Europe—democratic leftist activists fighting emerging extremist movements. He built a network of contacts who knew and trusted him: German machinists, French coal miners, and Dutch dockworkers. Nunn's friends measured worth by character, not nationality or race.

Throughout the 1930s, Nunn's fury grew as he watched fascism spread, turning proud workers into terrified machines, smashing unions, and using bodies as disposable tools for the Führer's glory.

After Oxford, he returned to America and settled in Detroit, where he could talk effortlessly about economic theory with university professors and Tigers baseball in union halls. He became an adventure story writer. A couple years later, America was at war, and Nunn was in special operations and secret intelligence, living the adventure he'd spent years writing about.

He joined the OSS Labor Desk in spring 1943, training in demolitions, small arms, radio operations, and secret intelligence. The Labor Desk existed because unions were already embedded behind enemy lines with established networks and access to critical infrastructure like factories, railways, and ports. Anti-Nazi workers could slow production, disrupt transportation, and gather intelligence as strategically positioned saboteurs. The OSS recognized that these networks in occupied territory would take years to build from scratch. So rather than parachute in strangers, they recruited people like Nunn who could activate resistance from within the existing framework.

His personnel report ranked him "of the very highest type[5]—an energetic, highly intelligent man of unusual courage." Duke thought he was "big enough and handsome enough[6] to play the part of hero in one of his own yarns."

Military assessments gave Nunn top marks[7] for "motivation, intelligence, leadership," and "physical ability," but ranked him slightly lower for "teamwork and tact; emotional control and maturity." His weakness was authority. He got angry seeing bosses push underlings around. Nunn had spent part of his childhood in a Los Angeles orphanage after rail bosses forced his labour-activist father into hiding. He was still angry. Nunn's anti-authoritarian streak might prove fatal to the mission if Duke gave him orders he didn't like.

Nunn gripped the risers and pulled, tilting his parachute's canopy forward and driving himself ahead. The ground remained black. He wasn't scared. He'd hit it when he hit it.

* * *

Major Alfred Suarez was third to jump. His parachute cracked open, silk catching air. The sudden jolt slammed him upright in his harness. Below him stretched the invisible Hungarian countryside, where enemy patrols lurked somewhere in the darkness.

Suarez was twenty-nine years old, five foot eight, 165 pounds, with dark hair, eyes, and complexion. Duke immediately liked "this tough young New Yorker[8] with the dark good looks of his Spanish-born parents."

Suarez had gone from a tough Bronx childhood to Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan, one of America's most demanding science and math

schools, then to advanced radio school and heavy engineering projects that paid him handsomely. After the Spanish Civil War started in 1936, Suarez volunteered to fight with the democratic Republicans against the Nazi-aligned Nationalists. Spain was the testing ground for Nazi weapons and tactics, like dive-bombing cities to terrorize the people living there.

Suarez learned modern warfare. A year spent sleeping in caves and bombed churches, fighting with explosives and radio, and watching German Junkers blow up civilians. When the Spanish Republic collapsed in 1939, he retreated to the Saint-Germain district in Paris, spending months in the shadow of the oldest church in the city and processing the horrors he'd witnessed. He returned to America and then worked on engineering projects for the US military, helping build large dams and military bases in Africa.

Guerrilla work wasn't richly paid, but his engineering work provided enough for a handsome house on Barker Avenue in Peoria, Illinois. There, his devout Catholic Irish American wife, Mary, waited for her husband with their infant son, Alfred Jr., now crawling and saying "Papá."

Suarez had returned to America carrying skills few had. When the US declared war on Germany in 1941, the Army Corps of Engineers recognized his combat value and commissioned him as a first lieutenant. He caught OSS attention as a radio and explosives expert who had experience under fire, and who understood both the technical and human sides of secret intelligence and special operations work.

OSS security investigations documented his many languages—Spanish as his mother tongue, French fluently, Portuguese well, Italian passably, some German from his childhood in an immigrant neighbourhood in the Bronx. His intelligence colleagues knew he had fought in Spain but advised him to keep it off his official work history. He instead stressed his engineering degree, explosives expertise, radio systems mastery, and proven ability teaching operatives.

Operation Sparrow needed someone with those skills. No one was better suited than Suarez.

He was "highly intelligent[9], active and aggressive," as the OSS put it. Duke knew he was a "good man to have in your corner[10] when the chips go down." Another officer declared him "a good guy to have around in an emergency."

The emergency was now. Hungary wavered between the Axis and the Allies, with the Bodyguard deception hanging in the balance. For Suarez,

the easy part would be fighting Nazis. The hard part was facing the planned capture, feigning defeat, enduring German interrogation while fascism's victory in Spain—children crying in the rubble, faces of Spanish *camaradas* who died believing democracy was worth the price—burned in his memory. He would need to let the Nazis threaten him. Never fight back. Every fibre of his being said that insults to honour demanded justice.

But perhaps the strongest warrior could swallow his pride, endure humiliation, and let his captors believe they'd broken a man who only pretended to break. The test awaiting him would decide if he'd learned his hard lesson, or if his warrior's heart would doom them all.

Earth rushed closer, dark and unforgiving. The wind howled past his ears as Suarez fell towards danger. His feet stayed together, knees bent, ready to absorb the impact.

In eighty-two days, Allied landing craft would storm France. Duke, Nunn, and Suarez needed to succeed in their mission or die trying.

Chapter 4

The Hungarian Gambit

MARCH 16, 1944—NEAR PODTUREN

Florimond Duke's boots hit the ground hard, clean as his pole-vaulting days at Dartmouth. Guy Nunn and Alfred Suarez landed nearby, their parachutes billowing like ghosts in the moonlight.

The Sparrows rushed to collapse their chutes, fingers stiffening in the cold. The mission hinged on quickly surrendering as uniformed soldiers to enemy troops who respected the Geneva Convention, instead of being found by Nazi collaborators first.

Above them, the Halifax bomber banked and turned back. Duke blinked a flashlight to signal they'd landed safely. In response, more parachutes bloomed against the star-filled sky. The Sparrows groaned as the supply chutes landed half a mile away across open ground.

Each commando carried a Colt .45 pistol, a small shovel, two thousand dollars in small bills, and pounds of gold coins hidden in a money belt. The money was for bribes and whatever else might come up. Duke also carried a fountain pen to sign the surrender, just in case his arresting officers didn't have one on hand.

The commandos unstrapped their spades and began digging to bury their parachutes. They wouldn't sleep tonight.

"The radio gear[1]," Suarez said. The enemy could have the rest, but the radios needed to be carefully hidden. One was standard-issue commando gear; the other was a transmitter designed by Polish scientists exiled in London. It looked like a briefcase but worked like a miracle—a quantum leap beyond ordinary spy tech.

Sparrow's top-secret radio was lightning fast. Typical gear could send only twenty words per minute. That was dangerously slow when German

radio warfare teams could trace signals within minutes. Then they'd dispatch motorcyclists with dogs to capture the enemy and torture them for the codes. Once the Nazis had those, they could mimic Allied commands—luring supply drops to the wrong coordinates or sending men to their deaths under forged orders.

The new device solved this deadly problem. Suarez would teach the Austrian resistance how to use it. An operator prepared a message in Morse code on paper tape wrapped around a motorized drum that spun at high speed. A light beam scanned[2] the message and sent it to the transmitter in seconds—too fast for German tracking teams to get a fix. Every second gained meant survival for operators. But speed also meant capacity: more detailed intelligence that could save Allied lives and destroy enemy targets. In the wrong hands, the device could be reverse-engineered by the Germans and used in their own operations.

Under the nearly full moon, Nunn spotted a tangled thicket. The team advanced, careful not to leave tracks. Suarez dropped onto his belly, worming under the bushes until he felt a hole in the ground.

"Arm's length deep," he whispered back. "Solid ground."

He carefully put both radios inside. Perfect fit. He covered them, and the team rearranged the brush to hide their tracks.

Their three supply canisters lay scattered across the countryside, steel shells catching moonlight like shards of a broken mirror. Each canister was a burial job: six feet long and fifteen inches in diameter. Each one contained coveted goods, the currency of revolution. To reach them, the Americans had to cross open ground in bright moonlight—easy to see, easy to shoot. Duke thought through the problem: Three men. Half a mile of open ground. Bright moonlight. Hungarian patrols in the darkness. The odds were tough, but there was only one thing to do. They set off across the frozen field towards the canisters, boots crunching softly on frost-covered stubble.

Suarez checked his watch: 3:47 A.M. They found the first canister. Inside, gifts like Lucky Strike cigarettes. A carton could sway a corrupt official. Many Hungarian officials were open to bribes. American trade goods, cash, and gold could help seal the deal of turning the country against Hitler, who hadn't given Hungary anything for a long time. In fact, Germany was robbing Hungarians blind. The Sparrows' trade goods would show what the country would get in post-war business with the West. It was

sabotage at the same time—an attempt to transform Hungarian soldiers into resistance fighters willing to save their country.

Duke whispered for them to hurry.

The commandos unstrapped their spades and started digging. Frozen soil and short tools made each shovelful a grind. A dog barked in the distance.

At the last scoop, Duke took a deep breath. The eastern sky was turning grey.

Suarez smoothed the disturbed earth, trying to make it look natural. He shivered slightly from cold and exhaustion. He'd been running on adrenaline for twenty-four hours.

Rivulets of red sunlight broke the horizon as they finished. The last stars vanished as golden light swept across the countryside. St. Martin's church spire rose from the mist like a sword thrust skyward. Podturen lay in the valley, white farmhouses with red tile roofs, sheep pastures divided by stone walls. The hills rolled towards the Drava River, where fog clung to the water like smoke from a dying fire.

The Sparrows had no time for pastoral beauty. They groaned as daylight showed their footprints in the plowed earth, leading directly to their burial sites. It would be impossible to cover the tracks in a bare field. But they had carefully walked along a line of grass to the thicket where they'd hidden their radios.

A church bell tolled. The village was waking.

Duke motioned for his team to move out. Their only hope for keeping their buried treasures hidden was to create a diversion in the village and pray that snow or rain covered their tracks.

They walked towards the village, towards capture, towards the most important performance of their lives.

* * *

At Castle Klessheim, the Führer's temporary headquarters, Hitler received the news: American commandos had penetrated Hungary. He exploded in rage.

German intelligence had broken Hungary's codes and intercepted conversations with the West. But intelligence had mixed up the facts. Sparrow had been inflated from three men to three airborne divisions. The

Führer thought he was stopping[3] twenty-five thousand US troops. The mistake worked for the Allies, though it wasn't part of Bodyguard. Hungary likely intended to eventually request three divisions to help fight the Germans, while Nazi intelligence incorrectly assumed that was already the plan.

Sparrow's landing made the invasion seem close. Hitler would unleash hell to win: a hundred thousand troops surging forward like a dark flood, waves of Stukas blackening the skies, Panzers rolling into Budapest in an iron tide. Twenty-five thousand American soldiers wouldn't stand a chance.

But the Sparrows knew that Hitler knew the Americans were coming—they only hoped the Führer had the timing wrong. Each side believed itself the cat in this game of cat and mouse.

* * *

In the early morning light on Thursday, March 16, 1944, the Sparrows walked towards Podturen, desperate to quickly surrender They hoped they would be arrested by someone decent, not a Nazi collaborator.

A bicyclist approached from behind. The Americans shouted greetings, but the man crouched low and shot past at full speed. Another cyclist came, his bike stacked with food. The Sparrows didn't bother hailing him.

As the commandos reached the outskirts of town, someone stepped from a cottage wearing a black German hat and suit and walked towards them. The Sparrows faced the man who could decide whether they lived or died.

Chapter 5

Monsieur Paris Catches the Sparrows

MARCH 16, 1944—PODTUREN

As the man in black approached, Duke noticed a flash of colour: a gaudy handkerchief. His Germanic outfit was out of date by years. It was from cosmopolitan Berlin before it was ruled by a mad dictator, back when the capital teemed with bohemians, artists, intellectuals, and cabarets. His clothing said: "I'm no Nazi. The furthest thing from it."

The Hungarian launched into a friendly stream of speech that none of the Sparrows understood. Despite the dozen languages among them, none was Hungarian—a gap that made them look less like spies. Duke tried English; the man looked bewildered. Nunn spoke German to him, but the man knew only enough to say he couldn't speak it. Next Suarez tried Spanish, though he correctly doubted it would work. Blank stares all around.

Finally, Duke tried French. The man's face lit up. Out came a stream of friendly greetings in thickly accented French. Duke asked him how a Frenchman came to be so far from Paris, grinning at the absurdity of his own question because the man's Hungarian accent made it clear he wasn't French. Still, the colonel knew his "mistake" would be taken for a compliment. The smiling man said he was a retired waiter who had worked in Paris. Duke mentally nicknamed him Monsieur Paris.

Duke acted embarrassed. He said they'd meant to jump into Yugoslavia but missed. The story made perfect sense to Monsieur Paris. Everyone knew there was a war, though it hadn't yet crossed the country's borders. The colonel kept up his charm offensive. They were lucky to land here, he said, because "*Le peuple américain considère le peuple hongrois comme le plus admirable*"—the American people greatly admire the Hungarians.

Monsieur Paris's smile widened at the praise. As he led his new friends down the street, it became clear that he was a good man to know, because he knew everyone in the village. He called to scattered cottages as shutters creaked open, curious faces peering out. Soon, whole families joined the impromptu parade as they made their way towards the village centre.

"You did well to come here[1]," the Hungarian said. "Here there is no war. Here a man can live in peace."

The American commandos appreciated having a friendly face to guide them. Hungary was part of the Axis, yet plenty of the locals admired the English-speaking nations. Many Hungarians had moved to those countries after the First World War, and they wrote enthusiastic letters to their relatives back home.

Besides, a lot of Hungarians were sick of their Nazi overlords. The war hadn't destroyed Hungary's cities yet, but hundreds of thousands of the country's soldiers had fallen on the Eastern Front. Hitler kept demanding more troops, grain, money. More everything.

Villagers continued to appear—men in embroidered linen shirts and women wrapped in colourful shawls, necks adorned with glass beads that caught the morning light and clicked softly as they moved. Podturen hadn't seen excitement like this in years. The parade advanced towards the village hall. Wooden chairs scraped the floor as locals arranged tables. Abundant food appeared for the distinguished guests. Even during Lent, the Catholic farmers used visitors as an excuse for a feast.

The Sparrows were astounded by the quantity and quality of the fare—it was as if this corner of the earth had never heard of rationing. Fried sausage filled the air with the aroma of a full Hungarian breakfast. After days of hard biscuits and canned rations, the Sparrows ate like royalty. They tucked into fried eggs, yolks golden and running, and thick slabs of ham. Then there were hot bread rolls that steamed when broken open, freshly churned farm butter, dumplings swimming in herb-flecked gravy, warm cakes drizzled with honey, and hot tea that sent fragrant clouds rising into the cool morning air.

The Sparrows needed to surrender quickly, but after breakfast would be soon enough. With a long fight ahead and no guarantee of meals, it was smart for them to eat their fill, just like their feathered woodland namesakes did before a hard winter. Duke gave Nunn and Suarez a look that said "Enjoy this while it lasts."

The Americans would soon be on call around the clock—coordinating intelligence networks into enemy territory, rescuing downed Allied airmen, and fighting a counterintelligence war against the Gestapo and the Sicherheitsdienst, the Nazi intelligence organization, in the shadows. It would be a hard life, and worse once the Nazis invaded. Watching the villagers' happy laughter at Nunn's attempts to pronounce Hungarian words, Duke felt the weight of what was at stake: these people's lives, their children's futures.

After breakfast their host offered the Americans slivovitz, the local plum brandy. Nunn threw back a shot like he knew what he was doing. He quickly felt his mistake. Trying not to choke, he wheezed a warning: "Hot enough to fire a steam boiler." Duke took the lesson and carefully sipped his drink after the locals had tossed back theirs.

Monsieur Paris, amused, assured him: "It is not to be feared!"

He poured a second round, and then a third. Duke wondered: Should a soldier drink on duty? Usually not, but refusing would be rude. Besides, the Sparrows had nowhere to drive, and their mission required making nice with the Magyar people.

"*À votre santé!*" Monsieur Paris toasted.

Duke replied warmly: "*Santé à tout le monde hongrois!*"

"*Egészségére!*" the townspeople shouted in Hungarian, clapping when the linguist Captain Nunn pronounced it correctly right away.

Duke was both pleased and confused. Where was the war? This wasn't how enemy territory was supposed to feel. The colonel finally impressed upon Monsieur Paris that the Americans needed to surrender to the nearest military authorities. Of course, he couldn't tell his host that Hungary's intelligence chief had been expecting them two days ago. The delay due to bad weather in Italy meant that they were in a hurry to meet the general who was waiting for them. General Ujszászy, code-named Aramis, would be their contact for getting a Hungarian politician out of the country to sign the secret surrender. He would also hand them the keys to the new American intelligence headquarters outside Budapest—the first Allied intel headquarters building in enemy territory.

Duke told Monsieur Paris that Podturen was pleasant, but they had to surrender as quickly as possible. Could they telephone the nearest military base?

Their host spread his hands apologetically. “Alas, in Hungary[2], very few hamlets so small as Podturen possess the luxury of a telephone. And of this select company, Podturen is not one.”

What about a car?

Monsieur Paris’s shoulders sagged. No one in Podturen owned a car.

But then his face brightened as he remembered a fast way: he knew a Roma boy, dependable and quick on his bike. While Hitler had massacred Romani throughout the Axis territories, their people remained relatively safe in Hungary, just like the Jews. The country was, for the moment, one of the best places in Axis Europe for non-Aryan minorities.

Duke wrote a surrender note with their cover story: “To the Commanding Officer[3] at Nagykanizsa: Having, through error, landed on Hungarian soil, the undersigned have the honor to report their presence to the Hungarian army and, under the terms of the Geneva Convention governing Prisoners of War, to place themselves at your disposal.”

Each of the Sparrows signed with his name, rank, and serial number. Monsieur Paris pinned the note inside the boy’s shirt pocket. The Sparrows and the happy villagers gathered to see the cyclist off, waving and shouting encouragement as he raced east, kicking up dirt on the road.

* * *

Within an hour, heavily armed Hungarian troops began arriving by truck, ready for war. Aggressive soldiers poured out, led by captains and majors with fearsome moustaches and harsh expressions. The Sparrows were quickly surrounded by an ever-growing army of soldiers in the brown uniforms and green collar patches of the Hungarian army.

Thousands of men stood ready to stop an American invasion. While squads of troops spread across the countryside hunting enemy forces, the commanding officer entered the town hall with his pistol drawn, ready for a shootout.

The Sparrows stepped forward with crisp salutes. Hungarian soldiers clicked their heels and returned the gesture. It was a land where chivalry was the law of war. The Sparrows gravely handed over their pistols, surrendering their primary means of self-defence. The officer tried English, but words wouldn’t come. Nunn tried German. It worked splendidly. Most of the Hungarian officer class could speak the language.

Nunn's report explained that they'd landed by accident in Hungary. They were three soldiers who had needed to jump from an airplane. It happened all the time in war. The commanding officer bowed deeply and thanked him. More officers and troops showed up. Duke kept explaining to the newly arriving officers that he wanted to surrender to the post commander at Nagykanizsa. Secretly, he wanted to put maximum distance between his team and the farmland hiding their buried treasures.

But the Sparrows soon realized that it was too late to save everything. Soldiers brought their three metal canisters into the town hall, clumps of dirt still clinging to the sides. Villagers, thinking they were disinterred American coffins, crossed themselves and knelt in silence. Officers ordered the locals out and began checking the containers. They were surprised when they pried them open and found treasure chests of valuable American trade goods, not explosives.

One officer picked up a carton of cigarettes. Another grabbed nylons. Item by item, everything disappeared. The Sparrows could barely conceal their contempt for officers who looted. These weren't eighteen-year-old privates but proud commanders acting like *kormos varjú*—Hungarian carrion crows. Duke wondered[4]: If this was how Hungary's military elite behaved openly, what were they like behind closed doors?

A tall man in civilian clothes pushed through the crowd. No one challenged him. Duke's suspicion flared: the Gestapo was full of tall men in civilian clothes who muscled past military men. The secret police could root out political enemies anywhere, and few dared challenge them. But this time it was no Nazi. The new arrival introduced himself in excellent English, with a Canadian accent, as Major Cornel Király, an expert on American, British, and Canadian intelligence and senior aide to Hungary's intelligence leader, General István Ujszászy. Duke recognized the name: it was the general he was supposed to meet two days ago, their contact code-named Aramis.

The three Americans and Major Király climbed into a truck with a driver and guards, bound for the Hungarian base at Nagykanizsa. Király assured the Americans that no one else on the truck spoke English, so they could talk freely. He wondered: Why had the Sparrows arrived so late? "We've been expecting you for days," he added.

Duke launched into the alibi about engine trouble, but Király interrupted. "Forget the cover story—I know you are expected in

Budapest." He signalled he knew the secret. "You were held up all along[5] the way by storms, and you just barely got in under the deadline."

The Sparrows exchanged quick glances. If this man knew what they were up to, who else did?

Duke expressed surprise at the major's excellent English. The Hungarian said he had spent six years[6] flying men and supplies into the Canadian wilderness—good pay for an easygoing outdoorsman, and perfect training for a pilot with a mercenary streak. Király was cheerful around danger, a man who could laugh through ugly brawls and come out smiling. He was also a wealthy, cultured artist who played the cello.

The truck drove into Nagykanizsa, crucial waystation to Graz, Vienna, Budapest, Italy, and the Adriatic Sea. Centuries earlier, it had been an ideal place for building a strong castle and charging transport tariffs. Now it was a good spot for preparing for war on the Yugoslavian front. Király warned the Sparrows to keep their cover story with other Hungarian officers at the army base—German spies were everywhere. But once they were at intelligence headquarters in Budapest, there would be open talk about military cooperation. The Hungarian knew that Nazi vengeance was inevitable. The only question was whether his country would face it alone or with Western help.

* * *

The Sparrows arrived at the army barracks and dismounted, heading to the officers' mess for a late lunch in a big, quiet room. A serving woman set down steaming goulash soup and then left without speaking. Cutlery clinked. No one else entered. When Duke saw they weren't being thrown in prison and this didn't look like a trap, he laid his cards on the table: their radios were still hidden in Podturen. Király was impressed by the danger but saw no reason to cut the meal short.

Afterwards, he and Suarez hopped into his German sports car and zoomed back to the hiding place. Meanwhile, Duke and Nunn settled into their guest cottage near the mess hall. They were pleased to see there were no bars on the windows. The car soon returned with Suarez and his radios.

Armed guards paced around the camp but didn't show the Americans any special attention. The Sparrows asked Major Király for permission to send a brief radio message to headquarters, but the Hungarian

recommended keeping silent. “The Nazi sympathizers are pretty clever at monitoring radio signals, and they might get a fix on you here.”

Duke knew using the radio risked exposure to German spies, but Suarez was irked that headquarters wouldn’t hear from them at the set hour. He pictured the radio operator in Algiers pacing, wondering if they’d been caught or killed. Don’t worry, the carefree Király explained. Your pilot will report back[7] that you landed safely. Tomorrow you’ll go to Budapest and meet General Ujszászy. And then you’ll have something to say.

The Sparrows couldn’t push it, but they calculated what each hour cost: delay reduced Hungary’s chance to act before the Germans invaded. The Americans needed all the time they could to organize the official surrender, make plans for the reception of Allied military aid, and train the resistance. Both the Americans and the Hungarians knew the Nazis would attack at some point in the future, but neither knew when.

It was an emergency, but hour after hour, nothing happened. The Sparrows paced and waited. Hungary had pleaded for this mission. But now that the Americans were here, the army acted like there was all the time in the world. Duke knew they weren’t just behind schedule but risked watching a chance to win the war slip away.

Something was wrong. They should have been in meetings already. They’d hurried to surrender expecting to be rushed to General Ujszászy for talks with Hungary’s regent and prime minister. The three commandos were the tip of the spear—the elite operators who would make a larger Allied operation possible. But first, they needed to get to Budapest, a few hours away by car.

Major Király probably didn’t know what General Ujszászy knew: Hungary’s regent, Admiral Horthy, had just left the country to meet Hitler in Austria. The Führer had pretended the meeting was to discuss the regent’s request to withdraw troops from the Eastern Front. The regent and his ministers were hesitant to make the trip at such a crucial time, but after long deliberation, they decided that he should accept the invitation. Hungary might get its troops home to help defend its own borders against the Soviets, and it would keep up the appearance of cooperation in the hope of staving off German occupation until the Western Allies could arrive. In reality, Hitler’s request to see the regent was because the Sparrows’ appearance had sent the dictator into a jealous rage.

Just like the Sparrows, Horthy was walking into a trap. In reality, Hitler had no intention of releasing Hungarian troops or letting the country's minorities survive.

Hungary's government was a careful balance of power. At the top was Admiral Horthy, who held ultimate authority but delegated many decisions to others. The regent was a wealthy landowner who loved sports, good movies, and hunting. He found Hitler's rude manners off-putting and wanted to leave the German side and get out of the war. A year earlier, in April 1943, Hitler had invited him to Castle Klessheim, near Salzburg. The regent wore his ceremonial naval uniform—white gloves included, giving him an excuse not to shake the loathsome Führer's hand. At any rate, the dictator wasn't in the mood for niceties, even on that beautiful spring day. He had produced a dossier—proof, he said, of Hungary's secret negotiations with the Allies—and struck it with his fist. "Here is the evidence of your treacheries!"

Horthy refused to read the document. His angry disdain was convincing because he was aloof from details. He had appointed Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, a key member of the anti-Nazi resistance, as his point man to get Hungary out of the war. That way, the regent could maintain plausible deniability if Hitler confronted him. The resistance planned to bring Hungary's head of state in at the last moment, when it was time to commit to defection. Now, a year later, that compartmentalizing was the tragic reason the regent was unaware that the Sparrows were in Hungary.

While the Americans waited at the Hungarian army base, in the dark about what was unfolding, Regent Horthy began his trip to Hitler's castle on March 17, even though it meant breaking his old sailor's custom of never starting a voyage on a Friday, the day Jesus was crucified. On Saturday morning, as his train neared Salzburg, the regent twice put a pistol in his pocket and twice removed it. He considered shooting Hitler if he refused Horthy's request to pull the country's troops from the Eastern Front. But he finally decided against bringing the gun, thinking the Führer would agree that Hungary's troops could serve more effectively in their own Carpathian Mountains.

At Salzburg station, the regent saw Hitler waiting with his Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop and Chief of Staff General Wilhelm Keitel. The regent noticed that the dictator "stooped more and looked much

older."[8] His physical decline showed both his physician's daily mix of toxic drugs and Germany's faltering battlefield performance since Stalingrad.

At the castle, instead of listening to Horthy's petition for troop withdrawal, the Führer demanded a new pro-Nazi government and a German occupation force in the country. He pledged it would be for just a little while, until the traitors were cleared out, and then the Hungarians could have their country back.

Horthy was furious. He refused and tried to leave. With a secret signal, Hitler staged a fake Allied air raid—complete with real smoke billowing across the castle, supposedly to hide it from enemy aircraft. But there were no Allied planes. It was all a show, designed to trap the regent inside the fortress.

The Führer delivered his ultimatum: accept German takeover peacefully, or face invasion by multiple enemies. The first option came with promises of temporary German control and eventual restoration. The alternative meant invasion not just by German forces but by Hungary's traditional enemies from the east, north, and south, ready to tear the country apart. If Horthy didn't want Hungary dissected, he should accept the German-only option. Hitler promised to return the country whole once the traitors had been dealt with.

Horthy bitterly agreed, believing Hitler's pledge that German troops would soon leave and Hungary's sovereignty would be respected. The Führer had been careful—as he always was with reluctant allies—to hide the truth of the Holocaust. The extermination camps, the cattle cars, the gas chambers: these were state secrets, known only to SS leadership and those who operated the killing machines. Horthy knew Jews were being persecuted and deported, but he didn't understand the industrial-scale genocide Hitler had engineered.

When the regent boarded his train back to Budapest, he was furious, but he believed he was still Hungary's head of state. In reality, he was now a puppet under German watch while the Nazis quietly transferred real power to their own man, Dr. Edmund Veesenmayer, Germany's diplomatic representative to Hungary.

Like King Aegeus sending the youth of Athens to be killed by the Minotaur, Horthy had unwittingly consented to the slaughter of Hungary's Jews, Romani, and Slavs.

Back at the military base in Nagykanizsa, nobody knew that Horthy had just resentfully agreed to German occupation, because Budapest's communications with the regent were cut off. Finally, on Saturday afternoon, March 18, Major Király showed up at the base in a commandeered army ambulance. By then, General Ujszászy suspected something was very wrong—no word had been heard from the regent since he crossed the border into Austria.

But the Sparrows were kept in the dark. They climbed into the back of the ambulance with their radio gear. They were driven to Budapest, along beautiful Lake Balaton, Central Europe's largest freshwater lake, but their vehicle wasn't designed for sightseeing. A shaft of sunlight crept through a small pane in the back—just enough to see the dim hollow of the ambulance interior, metal-ribbed and bare.

The secrecy around their transport sent a message that Duke and his men couldn't yet understand. With Hungary's regent unreachable, the Americans were dangerous cargo. They needed to be kept hidden from sight.

For the Sparrows, it didn't make sense. Only Hungary's prime minister and the country's intelligence chiefs should have known about their mission. The Nazis were meant to be watching a decoy mission that hadn't launched yet.

As the ambulance passed through the industrial outskirts of Budapest, the Sparrows still thought that they were setting a trap for the Nazis. Instead, they were driving into Hitler's snare.

Chapter 6

The Last Blitzkrieg

MARCH 18, 1944—BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

The ambulance rolled through Budapest's darkening streets at dusk, past grand Austro-Hungarian boulevards with ornate façades and café windows that once glowed warmly but now sat darkened behind blackout curtains. Tramlines gleamed faintly in the fading light as the Americans bumped over cobblestones towards the Danube. The Castle District's silhouette loomed against the dimming sky.

Streetlights were off, and windows were shuttered to hide the city from air raids. Hungarians thought the ritual darkness protected them. It seemed to be working: the city hadn't been bombed by Western forces. But Florimond Duke knew the blackout was a hollow ritual. Allied bombers carried advanced radar that could find a city in the Danube valley darkness as easily as a lighthouse beam. The capital remained untouched because the Allies were giving Hungary a chance to join their side. While other Axis capitals burned, Budapest stayed whole.

Hitler noticed. Hungary's defiant happiness, like its refusal to surrender its Jewish citizens, made him furious.

Duke stepped from the ambulance into a plaza lined with leafless trees. Alfred Suarez and Guy Nunn followed, as Hungarian soldiers escorted them towards an ornate stone government building. They brought the Sparrows into a ground-floor room with army cots and scarred wooden tables sealed behind a steel sliding door and left them alone. Nunn tested it with a gentle push. It slid open. He poked his head out and saw guards snapping to attention. He quickly ducked back into the room.

The Americans settled into their strange quarters, discussing the eerily peaceful atmosphere surrounding them. Despite the war raging across

Europe, Budapest felt almost carefree. Duke told Nunn and Suarez, "The Hungarians don't shoot[1] at our planes, and we don't bomb Hungary." The gentleman's agreement infuriated the Nazis, whose cities were being pounded to rubble.

As if called by the commandos' hunger, a waiter appeared with a large silver tray full of colourful dishes. He served them with theatrical flourish while a second waiter poured the perfectly paired wine. For Suarez and Nunn, it was the best meal they'd had in uniform. Even Duke, accustomed to State Department dinners, was impressed. He figured they were at Hungary's Central Intelligence Headquarters.

Welcome to the Grand Budapest Hotel. The only problem with this lovely place was that the Sparrows couldn't check out until the armed management approved.

* * *

At nine that evening, a Hungarian soldier led Duke up four flights of marble stairs to General Ujszászy's well-appointed office, where leather-bound books lined wooden bookshelves and Persian rugs covered the floor. The room was the nerve centre of Hungarian intelligence, as elegant as a gentleman's club in Mayfair, London.

The general was a dapper man with a greying moustache. Spies knew that he was attracted to beautiful, dangerous women, but Hungary's leading lady had finally pinned him down. He was secretly engaged to Katalin Karády—the "Blue Bird," Hungary's most successful singer and actress, adored by millions and gossiped about by more. Despite her Aryan heritage, the Nazis hated her for her Jewish friendships.

Duke and the general spoke in French, their voices echoing slightly in the high-ceilinged room. The Hungarian began: "*Quelle est votre proposition?*" What is your proposal?

Duke met his eyes, letting the silence grow long enough for the general to imagine every possible reply. A wall clock ticked.

"Unconditional surrender."[2]

The words hit like a judge's gavel. Both men knew the game, and the implied asterisk. America and Britain had already suggested, in two years of negotiations, the terms for unconditional surrender. The Allies would help Hungary fight the Germans after the great divorce, because Hungary

couldn't do it alone. That would give the Allies a second D-Day front that didn't require a naval armada. Allied support would come from the air, but fighting would be led by Hungarians on the ground.

Hungary insisted that only the Western Allies would be welcome. That part couldn't be acknowledged by the West because the Soviets would veto it. Moscow seemed to understand the game. It was worth it to beat Hitler, so long as the arrangement remained unstated and didn't set any precedents. Besides, having Hungary in the Soviet sphere might be more trouble than it was worth, given anti-communist hostility in the country.

Duke outlined what military cooperation might look like while stressing his political limitations. He was a soldier, not a diplomat. He could deliver President Roosevelt's message to the regent and relay Hungary's response back to Washington, but he had no authority to negotiate political terms. This carefully limited mandate was Allen Dulles's solution to Moscow's veto of Britain's Hungary mission the previous fall on the grounds that it was political.

If Hungary agreed, the Sparrows would airlift a top politician—likely the prime minister—out of the country to sign a surrender agreement, while they themselves stayed behind to help in the coming fight. Whether any would survive the German invasion to follow was doubtful.

The general understood what Duke offered—and what Hungary desperately needed. The country had walked a tightrope for three years, ever since the regent made his devil's bargain with Hitler in 1941. Budapest had no love for the Führer or his ideology. Their alliance was motivated by Hungary's devastating treatment after the First World War, when the Treaty of Trianon carved up the country like a Christmas goose, serving its pieces to six neighbouring nations. Hitler had offered to undo Trianon, giving back the land that had been taken away. How do you refuse the restoration of your country's soul?

For Hungarians, Trianon wasn't just shifting borders. It was dismemberment, taking two-thirds of the country's territory and much of its population. Romania seized a hundred thousand square kilometres, Czechoslovakia took sixty thousand, Yugoslavia claimed twenty thousand, while smaller parts went to Austria, Poland, and Italy. It would be as if the United States were stripped of most of its land and people: California, Texas, the Midwest, and much of the Northeast handed to its neighbours.

The amputation crippled the country, taking its industry, minerals, and people. Villages that had spoken Magyar for a thousand years now answered to Romanian or Slovakian officials. Overnight, Hungarian signs vanished from railway stations; officials forced children to pronounce their ancient rivers and mountains with foreign names. Hungary's population shrank instantly from 18.2 million to 7.6 million, with millions of Magyar speakers suddenly turned into persecuted minorities in their ancestral homeland, and thousands dying in ethnic violence.

At Budapest's Liberty Square, a memorial stood for what was lost. A flag flew at half-staff above a large bed of flowers planted in the shape of a map of the country's wound: white blooms showed what remained, while red blooms showed what was lost. Every Hungarian saw the red parts as rightfully theirs. They demanded to know: Why was their nation being punished when it wasn't even guilty?

Hungary had been dragged into the First World War by Germany, then punished far worse than Germany itself, which lost only a tenth of its territory at Versailles and kept its access to the sea. Trianon left Hungary landlocked. For the regent, an admiral in the former Hungarian navy, the loss was both national catastrophe and personal insult.

For centuries, Hungary had stood as Europe's front line, enduring brutal onslaughts from Mongol hordes and Ottoman armies. As Europe's shield, Hungary helped hold back these invasions, safeguarding the continent's future with fierce resistance. But after all this sacrifice, Trianon dealt Hungary a harsh blow, shrinking its borders and wounding its national spirit. In 1938, Hitler didn't need to be a psychiatrist to understand the country's pain—or to know what Hungary wanted most.

But by spring 1944, with the war turning against the Axis, Hungary's leaders understood that their deal with Germany would trigger another Trianon after the Nazis lost. The Wehrmacht was retreating on the Eastern Front after demoralizing defeats in Africa and Italy. Worse, Hitler kept demanding that Hungary turn over its Jews.

Budapest wanted out of Hitler's embrace—but not into Stalin's. For intelligence officers like Ujszászy, this wasn't abstract geopolitics; it was a race against time to save his country from ruin. He had watched the Red Army advance and knew what Soviet "liberation" meant: Hungary would disappear into Moscow's empire. The only chance was surrendering to Western forces before Soviet tanks came.

The problem was that Britain and America wouldn't act independently of their Soviet allies. American intelligence saw a solution: refuse any conditions to unconditional surrender, but calm Hungary by simply arriving first. Possession, after all, is nine-tenths of the law. Moscow could veto political deals with the enemy, but it couldn't veto military operations. If American troops came first, then Hungary would remain a self-governing nation.

Duke sensed General Ujszászy's eagerness to switch sides and his desperate hope that American support could help his country fight Germany. But something was clearly wrong. The general hesitated, looking anxious.

When Duke pressed for an immediate meeting with the regent to deliver Roosevelt's personal message, the general paced the room and returned to his desk before speaking.

"The regent is among the officials who are away from Budapest for the weekend," he finally said.

Duke was furious. "I have a personal message from the president[3] of the United States for your regent. It is most urgent that I see him immediately."

Hungary had sought surrender for years, but when the crucial moment arrived, its leaders were on vacation. The general knew but didn't say that his regent had accepted an invitation to meet Hitler in Austria. When he crossed the border, all communication lines between the two countries were cut. Hungarian intelligence must have known but couldn't admit that the regent had been kidnapped by the Nazis. Regents didn't just disappear. International communications weren't cut without a conspiracy. Only coordinated sabotage could have done it.

The country was in mortal danger. No one in Budapest could make important decisions without the regent's approval. Hungary was drowning, though the general couldn't yet concede it.

When Duke asked if he and his men could radio Algiers, having missed first contact, the general asked them not to use their equipment that night. The security situation, he explained with visible strain, made transmission impossible. He said he had silenced his own radio due to the crisis.

Duke protested that the Sparrows were supposed to radio twice daily, but the general, unwilling or unable to say more, promised they would be kept comfortable until Monday morning, when they would meet the regent and prime minister.

A guard escorted Duke back to his quarters. The exhausted Sparrows removed their boots and immediately fell asleep in their uniforms. As they slept, they were unaware of the unfortunate honour being bestowed on them: German armoured divisions and aircraft stormed across three of Hungary's borders in overwhelming numbers. It was Hitler's last blitz of the war, to stop three American soldiers from teaming up with the Hungarian resistance.

* * *

At 1 A.M., under a waning moon, Panzers churned through hills on the Austro-Hungarian border while German armoured trains roared across the frontier. Paratroopers seized all Hungarian military airfields, in the last big German parachute operation of the war. The smell of diesel fuel and gun oil drifted through the predawn dark.

The invaders avoided major military bases, though scattered skirmishes left some soldiers dead.

At Sándor Palace, the prime minister, groggy from sleeping pills, received word that a messenger was coming with news too secret for the telephone. Minutes later, the courier told him that German forces had crossed multiple borders in a drive on Budapest.

Hungary had made no plans for a German invasion. The regent was still missing, and he was the only one who could command effective action.

Soon, a Nazi representative arrived and gave the prime minister a letter from Germany's chief of Supreme Command of Armed Forces. Admiral Horthy, the letter claimed, had agreed to this occupation of his country. The invasion was friendly, but resistance would be ruthlessly crushed. Let our troops take over, Germany said, and nothing bad will happen. Fight, and we will invite Hungary's rivals to be part of the invasion.

The prime minister knew the regent would never agree to these terms. Either he had been coerced or the Germans were lying. Both possibilities were bad news. Kállay rushed to talk with Hungary's generals, but they were split. Some wanted to fight, while others refused to act without orders from the regent or the chief of staff, neither of whom could be reached. The prime minister knew that without unity, resistance was futile.

The German invasion was designed to overwhelm: more than a hundred thousand troops[4], multiple armoured divisions, nine fighter squadrons, and

seven anti-aircraft battalions. Hitler could have used the firepower to strengthen his French defences, but German intelligence believed that tens of thousands of American paratroopers needed to be stopped in Hungary.

The Bodyguard deception was working even though it had gone off-script. When Operation Sparrow arrived, Hitler saw confirmation: the invasion was already starting, and it needed to be met with overwhelming numbers.

With the Wehrmacht came the ruthless Schutzstaffel, the SS, Hitler's elite units, heavily armed and tasked with genocide. Adolf Eichmann arrived in Hungaryat the head of a special operations brigade, sent by Hitler to oversee the deportation of Hungary's Jews and other undesired minorities. While the regular army occupied the country, the SS would murder with brutal efficiency.

Forty-five minutes before dawn, a guard roughly shook Duke awake and motioned for the Americans to follow him. The Sparrows put on their boots and trailed the guard upstairs to General Ujszászy's office. Duke could tell at a glance that something was very wrong. The same man was facing him as yesterday, but the general was no longer his dapper self. His uniform was wrinkled, his eyes red, his face grey. He looked like a man who'd spent all night watching his country die.

He said with despair, "*Hitler envahit la Hongrie.*" Hitler is invading Hungary.

Chapter 7

The Transfer

MARCH 18, 1944—BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

On Castle Hill, democratic leaders rushed to feed papers to the flames before the Germans arrived. Smoke drifted over the Danube like funeral incense, burned secrets swirling through the mist. Duke was furious no one had told him when the invasion began. General Ujszászy said he had been too busy to think about the three commandos until the prime minister called moments earlier to approve releasing prisoners of war. The Sparrows were the exception.

The colonel's anger grew. If the prime minister was in Hungary, why hadn't they met earlier to plan resistance? If they had, American planes could already be attacking German columns.

The general confessed his fatal mistake: he'd assumed the prime minister had gone with Regent Horthy to meet Hitler.

Duke knew his team couldn't have stopped the invasion—Germany had rolled over France, Greece, and Yugoslavia despite fierce opposition—but Allied-supported partisans had proven that an insurgency could make occupiers bleed. The Sparrows could have begun the work they specialized in: coordinating with local forces to fight the Nazis behind the lines. Hungary could have made Germany pay dearly for every mile of occupied territory—if only the government and generals had a plan.

General Ujszászy hoped Duke could call in Allied bombers. Duke grimaced. It wasn't a good time to radio. Nazis would be monitoring the airwaves. And even if the Sparrows were willing to take the risk, Suarez couldn't call for hours because he needed time to set up his equipment.

Duke wasn't telling the full truth. He knew the Sparrows could transmit within an hour, but Algiers wouldn't tune to their frequency until 11 A.M.

sharp. The general wouldn't get that schedule, though. They'd only just met, and Duke didn't know if this was a Nazi trick. What if the general was working for German intelligence, probing for radio codes and transmission times? He seemed genuine, but Duke had seen too many spies play the friendly ally. Until he could verify Ujszászy's loyalty, every detail was classified.

The general slumped in his chair, his hope dashed. Effective resistance would need to begin within minutes, not hours. Late morning was too late to start a war. With a broken heart, he realized that Hungary had no more chips to play. No reinforcements would crest the hill. The Wehrmacht would soon roll into Budapest unopposed.

But what should Hungary do with the three Americans?

Duke knew dangerous intelligence. If the Gestapo tortured it out of him, he could get hundreds of Hungarians killed—including the general himself. If Ujszászy had been ruthless, he would have ordered the Americans shot to end the risk. Dead commandos tell no secrets. But fortunately for the Sparrows, the general wasn't planning to murder them. Knowing what not to do didn't tell him what he should do, however.

Duke had a suggestion: "Get us out of here."

The general wondered: "*Mais comment?*" But how?

Duke proposed flying them on a plane to Allied lines in Italy.

The general sadly replied: "It's impossible."

German paratroopers had captured all airports. One citizen reported that they "came in swarms[1], disarmed our soldiers, broke into the depots, ate and drank plenty and got drunk."

Duke tried again. "Let us go, then—we'll fend for ourselves. After all, the prime minister authorized the release of Allied prisoners."

"No," the general said. The Americans would be easy to spot hiking across open fields in their military uniforms when everyone was looking for them. They'd either be shot or worse. Putting aside the danger to their own lives, the political danger was too great. Other Allied prisoners were staying at a country estate where escape would look natural, but the Sparrows couldn't walk out of a heavily guarded compound without proving that Hungary was in on the plot. "We can't afford to take the risk," the general explained, "even if you are willing."

Duke switched to English to confer with his men. They agreed there was nothing more to do in the general's office. If Hungary wouldn't fight

the Germans, the Sparrows couldn't make them. It was supposed to be a Hungarian war against the Nazis with Allied help, not an Allied invasion.

After curt goodbyes, the Americans walked back down the stairs. A Hungarian guard followed with a submachine gun.

Suarez quietly suggested they grab the gun and walk out the door.

"Great idea! Where would we go?" Duke said.

Suarez suggested taking a cab to the edge of Budapest, then hiding out in the forest and making their way back to the partisans. They might be able to get to Tito's forces in Drvar, Bosnia, in a few weeks by travelling at night.

Nunn thought of stealing a car—commando school had taught them how to hot-wire.

Duke considered it. Hitler knew the game was afoot in Hungary. The Gestapo was hunting for them Duke knew that the secret police didn't treat their victims kindly. They usually tortured until there was nothing left to break, then killed what remained.

Duke calculated the odds. If they overpowered the guard, took his gun, and got out the door, they'd still have to get through the building and into the street, then somehow disappear in a country crawling with German troops. Worse, Hungary was a police state with eyes everywhere. With Nazis in control, hundreds of thousands of Hungarian police and soldiers would be looking for them. The odds of crossing from Budapest to Partisan-held territory in Yugoslavia were virtually zero.

Staying meant possible torture and execution too, but the odds might be better if they looked like ordinary captured soldiers. And if they survived interrogation long enough to plant false intelligence about D-Day, they could still trick Hitler and help win the war.

Running meant almost certain death. Staying meant probable death and a thin hope of mission success. But it was a chance. Everything depended on whether General Ujszászy was loyal.

Duke told his teammates the general was right about the hopelessness of escape. They needed to accept their fate. They had gone to sleep as make-believe prisoners and woken up as real ones. But the chance to misdirect Axis troops to a fake D-Day in the southeast was still there. Hitler's invasion of Hungary showed that Bodyguard was already working. The Nazis were walking into quicksand. Allied intelligence knew the Führer would rather double down than admit he was wrong about anything.

* * *

Not all Hungarians gave in. When SS men came for one leader[2] at home, he met them with pistol fire from behind his door. German submachine guns blew out the lock, and soldiers kicked the door open. Bullets tore through plaster. Water pipes burst in silver spray. Mirrors shattered. Blood pooled dark on the wood floor as bullets hit the Hungarian in the stomach and shoulder. His wife begged him to surrender. He tossed his pistol away. Angry German soldiers roughly handcuffed him behind his back. As the Nazis dragged him outside, he managed another act of defiance, shouting to the gathering spectators: "Long live Hungary, independent and free!"

He remembered what the generals had forgotten: Hungary's fighting spirit could outlast German tanks.

Meanwhile, Major Király came into the Americans' cell with his usual cheerful manner, despite needing a shave and some sleep. He had spent the night sabotaging Hungarian aircraft to deny them to the Germans, and he was in good spirits.

"I don't know what you three Yanks are up to,"[3] he said with admiration, "but it must be pretty big. The rumour is that this whole invasion of Hungary has been pulled off because Hitler had to stop you before you got started." Király grinned at the lopsided invasion. "Sixteen German divisions to stop three American officers. Not a bad ratio."

In the fog of war, the major wasn't right on the division count, but he was right that it was a big mistake for the Germans. Had the Führer known the truth—that Sparrow was three men, not three divisions—he might have sent Gestapo assassins or coerced the regent to fire those who'd conspired with the Allies. Instead, he foolishly overreacted, hurting Germany's active fronts and its French defences.

Hitler could have stopped the Hungarian conspiracy with far less force if he'd known how fragile it was. Horthy wasn't in on the details, and most Hungarian generals were still pro-German and wouldn't act without the regent's approval. But Hitler didn't know this, and he struck with his customary sledgehammer.

The question wasn't if the Führer would move on Hungary, but when. Timing was everything. Hitler couldn't stand Horthy's refusal to deport the Jews or his peace overtures to the Allies. At the latest, Nazi troops would invade when the Soviets neared the frontier. But by then, D-Day would

have already succeeded or failed. Operation Sparrow forced the dictator to pull armoured divisions towards the Balkans at the wrong time. With D-Day only weeks away, Germany's war planners were fixated on southeastern Europe, not the French shore where the fate of the war would soon be decided.

Major Király brought more key intelligence: the Gestapo was hunting for the Americans, insisting they would be treated as spies rather than military prisoners. That was the bad news. The good news was that the Germans still didn't know their names or where they were, because the Hungarian military was keeping quiet. Eventually, though, the Nazis would figure it out.

"We can do everything possible[4] to turn you over to German military before the Gestapo gets hold of you," Király promised.

That could make the difference between Geneva Convention protection and torture chambers. But to survive German interrogation, the Sparrows needed to match their cover story with Hungarian intelligence. They agreed on a line: *The Americans intended to join Yugoslav Partisans in northern Croatia but went too far and landed in Hungary by mistake.*

An earlier Hollywood-worthy proposal—that the Americans' plane had been shot up, and they'd nobly offered to jump to lighten the load—was wisely discarded. Three saints in one aircraft would be too much to be believed by any German interrogator.

At General Ujszászy's request, Király took control of the Sparrows' radios and their cache of gold. Protecting the top-secret Polish radio was crucial—if found and reverse-engineered, it would tighten Nazi control across occupied Europe. The gold, by comparison, was a trifle. Still, it was important to get rid of the coins because if the Nazis found them, it would prove the Americans had planned sabotage and subversion, and they'd be as good as dead.

"Where can you hide this gold?" Duke asked the Hungarian, passing over his heavy money belt. He felt ten pounds lighter.

Király smiled with Hungarian confidence. "In Chief of Staff Szombathelyi's safe. The Nazis wouldn't dare search there."

Duke was doubtful about Gestapo self-restraint. Hungary had the bad habit of thinking too much of Nazi decency, clinging to a world of chivalry that had long since vanished. But Major Király sustained the illusion with marvellous grace.

He also brought news of the regent, who was finally allowed to return to Budapest now that Hitler had collected his ransom—Hungary itself. Prime Minister Kállay had quickly briefed the regent at the train station: two dozen parliamentarians, 5 percent of parliament, arrested; police headquarters seized; the luxurious Astoria Hotel taken for Gestapo headquarters. The new German secret police building was a convenient walk from the Great Synagogue, the largest synagogue in Europe.

Returning to the palace, the regent and the prime minister found German sentries where Hungarian guards once stood.

Horthy told Kállay that he had met Hitler's new man in Hungary, Dr. Edmund Veesenmayer. The regent didn't realize the fatal significance—Veesenmayer had been personally chosen to implement the Holocaust in Hungary. A million Jews were on the doctor's kill list.

* * *

In Budapest, the Sparrows were both guests of Hungary and its prisoners. They were treated politely and fed well, just not allowed to leave. To pass the time until the Hungarians turned them over to the Germans, Duke proposed interrogation rehearsals. Their coming performance would receive life-or-death reviews.

The three commandos took turns playing two Nazi interrogators against one handcuffed American prisoner. The standard rule for a captured soldier was to give his name, rank, and serial number—nothing more, nothing less. But Duke's plan was more complex.

At first, the men would reveal only what they had to give under the Geneva Convention. Then, when pressured, they would admit to a Yugoslavian mission. When the interrogation got more intense, they would pretend to crack or slip up by revealing "secrets" pulled from American headlines.

Suarez was skeptical it would work, but Duke, as chief of an OSS desk, understood how information flowed. American newspaper headlines from when the men had left Brindisi would seem fresh to German interrogators. The Nazis didn't read enemy papers hot off the presses. By the time reports reached higher intelligence levels, events would prove the Sparrows' information to be correct. Then Nazi intelligence officers would be tempted to buy what the Sparrows would sell next: phantom Allied divisions massed

in Italy, air support planned with Yugoslav Partisans, and a spring offensive sweeping through the Balkans instead of France.

Won over by Duke's arguments, Major Suarez and Captain Nunn eagerly played Nazi interrogators, a rare chance to threaten a superior officer without risking court-martial. For days they practised their deception, appearing cooperative while revealing nothing of strategic value.

The acting rule was that the prisoner could say anything to interest his tormentor, so long as it came from *The New York Times* or *Time* magazine. The Americans traded news headlines: The Allies arming the communist Yugoslav resistance. Thousands of American soldiers discharged for mental illness. British troops rioting over horrible V cigarettes while the Americans got precious Lucky Strikes. Serious tension between the democratic Allies and Russia over Italian policy. Racial tensions in America with South Carolina's lawmakers pledging to keep white power whatever the cost. Continued German air strength despite media claims of the Luftwaffe's collapse.

The truths would buttress the lie that the Sparrows were on their way to Tito, which would suggest a coming offensive in Yugoslavia. If the Germans believed it, Hitler would send his Panzers to the wrong part of Europe, fortifying the Adriatic coast and the Balkans while weakening France's defences before the coming D-Day.

The Sparrows would need to improvise, adapting Allen Dulles's deception plan from a controlled situation to an unpredictable one. Their rehearsed play would soon become a desperate scramble.

Meanwhile, Hungarian intelligence worked to manoeuvre them into the right hands: a German intelligence officer who wasn't a Nazi—if one existed.

* * *

On a chilly Saturday, March 25, a German sergeant and four guards finally showed up to collect the Americans. They wore Wehrmacht grey instead of Gestapo black—Major Király's final gift. But the soldiers' faces held the warmth of tombstones.

Duke asked with the authority of his rank: "Where are you taking us?"[5]

Silence.

“Under the Geneva Convention, you must tell us where we are being taken.”

The guards didn’t bother responding. The Sparrows never knew which type of German they might confront. Some Wehrmacht officers adhered to Geneva protocols, while others acted with lawless cruelty. Although many of the fanatical racists joined the Gestapo or SS, the distinction was never absolute.

Nunn repeated Duke’s demands in German, but the only response was clinking steel as they were shackled together like a Georgia chain gang. The guards pushed them through the door and onto an open truck without even the usual “*Mach schnell!*” to break the ominous silence.

Chapter 8

Missing in Action, Presumed Dead

MARCH 25, 1944—BUDAPEST, HUNGARY

Nine days after parachuting into Hungary, the Sparrows got their first view of Budapest by daylight: Queen of the Danube, Heart of Europe. A beautiful city, Duke thought, except for the occupying German soldiers. The soldiers looked young—boys with hard-set faces and twitching trigger fingers. Occasional shots rang out as Polish refugees were gunned down in the streets.

Fourteen hundred kilometres away in Algiers, OSS radio operators listened to silence on the Sparrows' frequency. The Hungarian intelligence networks had gone dark. The OSS concluded that Florimond Duke, Alfred Suarez, and Guy Nunn were missing in action and presumed them dead.

But on this clear spring morning, the Sparrows were very much alive, and the focus of a public parade. Still wearing their military uniforms, they rode through Budapest in an open truck, flanked by German guards. The Geneva Convention forbade exposing prisoners to "public curiosity," but for the Nazis, the propaganda message was more important than the law: *This is why we invaded your country. To catch the enemy in a trap.*

Duke's anger burst through Nunn's careful German translation: "Manacling and public exhibition of prisoners of war violates the Geneva Convention."

Geneva was their shield now—a better defence, perhaps, than the pistols they had surrendered in Podturen. The Sparrows would keep throwing the law in the Nazis' faces long after they got tired of hearing it. The guards sneered. Geneva had no troops—it was words against weapons.

Duke hid his satisfaction as he watched the endless stream of German troops through the city. He would have preferred to be fighting the Nazis

alongside the Hungarians, but at least the Bodyguard deception was working. Hitler kept his troops in southeast Europe, not the beaches of France. The Atlantic Wall, Germany's massive coastal fortifications, was weakening.

The OSS had designed Operation Sparrow to work whether the Hungarians fought or not. If Hungary had rebelled against Hitler and requested air cover, Duke's team would have coordinated the help. Still, a German invasion without Hungarian resistance fulfilled the objective of drawing Nazi defenders away from France.

While Duke recognized that Hitler's invasion served Allied strategic goals, his satisfaction was grim: he couldn't ignore the tragic cost to the Hungarian people. They now faced the brutal reality of Nazi occupation instead of fighting alongside the Allies for freedom. Like the rest of the OSS, Duke had hoped that Hungary would have time to break off from the Germans. He'd had no idea that Regent Horthy would walk into Hitler's Austrian trap, dooming his country to this brutal occupation. Millions of Hungarians would pay a heavy price for the regent's blunder.

But Germany also paid a price. Duke knew the numbers. For months he'd studied enemy forces in this region. From the back of this truck, he counted the cost of Hitler's mistake. Seven hundred kilometres east of the Sparrows, the Soviets and Germans waged a desperate battle in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. Thirteen hundred kilometres southwest, the Wehrmacht tenaciously defended Italy's muddy, rain-drenched hills against a relentless Allied assault. The battlefield that would soon decide the war's outcome, however, remained deceptively calm: seventeen hundred kilometres northwest, Normandy's underdefended beaches awaited the Allied storm. Meanwhile, in Budapest, Hitler's forces threw their full weight against nothing, like using a battering ram to break down an open door.

The other active battle fronts were also keeping Germany from reinforcing France, but at a high cost in Allied men and material. The Sparrows were just three men.

Despite the spectacle[1] of the American POW parade, the citizens of Budapest turned away in silent resistance. Duke noticed the pattern: the old man who suddenly found his newspaper fascinating, the woman who stopped to examine her groceries, the children called inside by their mothers. The Germans seemed unbothered. They controlled the streets with

tanks and trucks. Soldiers stood guard with Hungarian mercenaries offering a show of local control.

After days of silence, Budapest radio crackled back to life with Nazi propaganda advertising the restoration of wealth and morality in Germany after Jewish-led deprivations had wrecked the country. But Budapest knew that Nazi wealth meant theft. Hitler's morality meant murder. The once-peaceful city fell into deadly depravity. Thirty-seven Polish refugees were executed in the streets, their bodies stacked in the morgue. Hungarian criminals began robbing Jewish neighbours. A week into the German occupation, coal shortages bit and electricity flickered.

Escape for the Jews was impossible. The borders were sealed tight. Trains, boats, and streetcars were stopped before reaching Budapest's city limits so Gestapo men could check identity cards. Jews were hauled off without warning.

While the new radio announcers spewed venomous threats against Jews, bombed-out Germans flooded into Budapest for shelter. The two were connected: the propaganda justified the seizure of Jewish property. The broadcasts aimed to soothe the non-Jewish Hungarian majority, promising that Germany would socialize only Jewish homes. But Budapest's citizens knew that once Allied bombs rained down, no one would be spared.

Western bombs hadn't yet blasted their city, but unnerving air raid sirens pierced the stillness. The massive American Fifteenth Air Force waited across the Alps in Foggia, Italy, ready to strike once the weather improved. Wintry conditions grounded the big bombers for now, but small raids harassed the Balkans, keeping the sirens wailing through the uneasy calm. Allied intelligence needed to sell a coming invasion so that Hitler would be forced to defend against it.

The Germans drove the Sparrows to a crowded rail station, where guards pushed them off the truck. Locals refused to yield to the Nazi invaders. The passive resistance forced soldiers to use their rifle butts to clear a path. Defiance was clear in every stiff shoulder and averted glance. The citizens looked away, pretending the Nazis weren't there.

Inside a packed passenger train, the Sparrows pressed together on narrow seats meant for smaller men. Major Suarez took the window seat, his eyes blazing with resentment—and then awe. Outside the window, a beautiful blonde draped in a fur coat caught his gaze. Duke guessed she was an actress sent to entertain troops, in Germany's version of the American

USO. He'd seen enough touring performers to recognize the type—good-looking, well-dressed, and carefully protected.

Suarez couldn't help himself—he smiled at her, and she smiled back. For a moment, he forgot about war, shackles, and his wife in Peoria. But the woman's jealous security man saw the prisoner's dark Latino skin and enemy uniform as an insult to the master race. Suarez hadn't noticed him yet, but Duke tensed. He knew the major's temper.

The chaperone spat on the window. Suarez lunged, ready to fight, but several rifles jabbed sharply at his chest, pushing him back into his seat. He bitterly swallowed his rage. If he'd been alone, he would have gone down fighting. But he remembered, just in time, that he was part of a team. His fists clenched and unclenched as he mastered his instincts.

Duke angrily protested to the German sergeant, citing the Geneva Convention once more: "This is what happens when you shackle and parade prisoners of war!"

The sergeant ignored him. He took a mirror and comb from his shirt and calmly groomed his moustache.

Soon, the train inched south under a cloud of black smoke, often diverting onto sidetracks as Axis military and hospital trains rumbled to and from the Eastern Front. Hungary's still-unbombed rail network was a critical artery in the Nazi war machine.

Duke studied each passing train through grimy windows, mentally recording what he saw: troop strengths, unit markings, equipment types, the condition of the rail system. If the Sparrows escaped, it would be crucial intelligence. But for the moment, escape was impossible, so they needed to watch the situation develop.

The Americans were impressed by a railway traffic jam as movement slowed to a crawl. Trains came from the east carrying the wounded and returned from the west carrying fresh men and supplies. Soon, Allied bombers would make this a killing ground. Duke pictured it: rail lines twisted skyward, stations reduced to rubble, German supply lines turned to chaos. It would happen. The only question was whether it would happen while the Sparrows were on the tracks.

Their discomfort grew with each passing hour. Elbows dug into ribs, knees pressed into thighs. The Sparrows avoided brushing against the Nazis across from them, guarding their dignity as their captors crowded them.

Duke knew how the game worked: the Germans were making them miserable before questioning, wearing down their defences.

At Belgrade train station in Yugoslavia, 380 kilometres south of Budapest, the Americans staggered off the packed railcar, muscles cramped and joints aching. A rattling truck took them across the Danube. The ride was bumpy, but at least they had more room to get comfortable. The Sparrows flexed their muscles, getting their blood flowing for whatever came next.

After a short drive, they arrived in Pančevo, a flat Serbian town of low stucco houses and muddy streets, its church steeples and factory chimneys rising from the Banat plain. In 1941, it was the site of Nazi terror when innocent civilians were massacred to avenge the deaths of German soldiers. Three years later, the city felt drained and watchful. German signs hung over Serbian shopfronts.

Here, the Sparrows came under Luftwaffe custody, as arranged by their Hungarian ally, Major Király. Seeing the Luftwaffe uniforms, Duke allowed himself a moment of cautious optimism. German air force officers were known for observing the Geneva Convention. The Americans might just survive this war.

Their new cell was small but decent, with three bunks, a table, and a single guard facing their door. It was VIP treatment in captivity, though it wasn't close to the Hungarian standard. The Sparrows examined the room with professional eyes, noting the window placement, the door's construction, the guard's weapon and level of alertness. They weren't planning to escape yet, but the information would be valuable if they did.

The next morning, guards brought them to their interrogators. Duke's officer was Major Horst Krüger, head of Luftwaffe intelligence in the Balkans. Formal and correct, Krüger was a professional officer steeped in Prussian military tradition, a code of honour that was much older than the Nazis. Krüger listened, seeming to accept the Sparrows' story about parachuting into Hungary by mistake when they meant to land in Croatia. Duke thought their cover might hold.

Over the week, Krüger's interrogations shifted to conversations with a fellow officer. They walked along the Danube instead of sitting in an interrogation room, the major's dog trotting at their side. In the mild spring air, magnolias and tulips lining the riverbanks, their conversations came more easily—what began as enemy interrogation became mutual respect. It

gave the major a chance to have a pleasant conversation with a sensible man, far removed from a Germany that had gone mad with Nazism.

Krüger greeted his fellow officers with “Good morning,” rather than “Heil Hitler.” Duke coyly asked whether that was breaking the law, but the major responded that it wasn’t required. It became clear to Duke that the German had quiet scorn for the Führer’s purge of the members of the German General Staff who had tried to stop him from going to war. He and Duke even talked about the chances for political change in Germany. Duke recognized the major’s type: an old soldier wearing a new flag, his conscience and his uniform at odds.

Orders came: the three Americans would move to the Luftwaffe’s intelligence headquarters near Frankfurt. The Sparrows felt relieved. Frankfurt meant a prisoner-of-war camp, Red Cross packages, and letters from home. The Kommandant at Frankfurt was a former POW himself, and he ruled by the books. Krüger couldn’t see them off because he had been called to Italy, but he had arranged the best ticket the Sparrows could get in this war.

On April 1, they boarded a bus filled with downed Allied airmen. Nunn joked, “Looks like we got away with it.”

Duke looked at the faces around him—American, British, and Canadian bomber crews, men who’d been shot down and captured. But before they could introduce themselves, chaos erupted. Black-uniformed guards surrounded the bus while three plainclothes Gestapo agents clambered on board. They demanded papers with the casual brutality of men accustomed to absolute authority.

The Sparrows’ hearts beat faster as guards dragged them off the bus, past the stunned faces of the POWs. A black sedan whisked them away.

It had been the fourth quarter, goal line, victory in sight. Then the men in black uniforms stole it away.

It was a tough hit, but Duke knew you didn’t stop playing until the game was over—and it wasn’t over until the Sparrows helped win the war or went down trying.

The police car didn’t drive the Sparrows to Frankfurt. Instead, they motored across the Danube back to Belgrade, stopping at the service entrance of a deluxe hotel, headquarters of the Gestapo.

Chapter 9

Name, Rank, and Serial Number

APRIL 1, 1944—BELGRADE, YUGOSLAVIA

At the Hotel Moskva, a gilded luxury hotel in the best part of Belgrade, Gestapo guards shoved Florimond Duke, Alfred Suarez, and Guy Nunn down three flights of stairs, split them up, and threw them into tiny solitary cells.

Escape was impossible. Operation Sparrow was badly off-script. Colonel Duke was cut off from his team.

Thirteen days ago, Germany had invaded Hungary to stop Budapest from joining the Allies to fight the Nazis. The good news[1]: with only weeks to go before D-Day, heavy Nazi forces waited in southeast Europe—two thousand kilometres from Normandy—exactly where the OSS had hoped. The bad news: the Sparrows were now in the hands of the Gestapo. That wasn't part of the plan. German military intelligence was supposed to interrogate them, not the secret police.

Each American sat in his four-by-five-foot cell, its walls sealed in whitewash from floor to ceiling. The air reeked of death and mildew. Eleven feet up, too high for a prisoner to use to commit suicide, a single bulb burned at all times. No clock, no night, no bed, no toilet. Only misery.

The Nazis favoured the hotel for its beauty above ground and its brutal sufficiency below. Above street level stood an elegant art nouveau masterpiece, its polished Italian marble and Swedish granite a monument to luxury. Below, in the Gestapo's subterranean realm, lay a nightmare of cold terror. The muffled screams of tortured prisoners couldn't reach the opulence overhead.

One by one, the Sparrows were brought out of their cells to be interrogated, their hands cuffed behind their backs, cold metal biting into

their wrists. Each one had no idea if the other two were alive or dead.

In other rooms, interrogators tortured Serbian prisoners with clubs and blades to extract information about the resistance. The Sparrows heard heart-stopping screams echoing down the hallways and wondered if they were next.

They had all known about Gestapo torture when they volunteered for the mission. But theoretical knowledge was different than hearing the agony of tortured grandmothers. They knew the Nazis weren't only after intelligence. They were crushing the resistance—tormenting rebel fighters, punishing their families, and enjoying their sadism immensely.

The Gestapo henchmen in their long black leather coats offered the Sparrows a comparatively easy way out. Suarez's interrogator, a man with sadistic eyes, told him they had already been sentenced to death, and today was execution day. A confession would buy them dignity—a painless death instead of what the Gestapo usually did to spies.

Suarez looked towards the rusted iron ring on the wall. This was where his chain would be attached if he stuck with his foolish policy of giving only his name, rank, and serial number. One word from the Gestapo man, and there would be a lot of pain.

But Suarez wouldn't go quietly—his rage, disciplined by years of martial arts training, might drag a Nazi down with him, although it wouldn't be easy with his hands cuffed behind his back.

* * *

Duke, who knew state-of-the-art interrogation techniques, realized that the Gestapo's first plan was to wear them down by making them miserable and scared. He hoped the other Sparrows were sticking to the script, despite death threats and very little food. If one of them cracked, the whole operation fell apart. Name, rank, and serial number. When the Nazis pushed harder, the Americans would reluctantly reveal: "We accidentally parachuted into Hungary on our way to Yugoslavia to fight with Tito." When the Gestapo pushed harder, the team would pretend to shamefully surrender secrets they had actually read in recent American newspapers.

Thanks to their days of rehearsals while in Hungarian custody, the commandos didn't contradict each other. As if they had been broken, they went on in detail, keeping their scribes busy recording recent stories from

The New York Times and *Time* magazine as if they were top-shelf intelligence. They gave information like:

"American fuel is short. Gas rations have been slashed from 460 miles a month to 400 miles a month."

"The Allies have agreed to isolate the Republic of Ireland in a *cordon sanitaire* to prevent any intelligence leakage about the invasion."

"President Roosevelt is obsessed with getting more troops called up in the draft because there are too few soldiers."

"The new American submarine *Corvina* was sunk by enemy action soon after commissioning."

Duke's interrogator demanded to know why the American spies were coming to join Tito's anti-Nazis in Yugoslavia. It was a mystery the Nazis needed to solve quickly. If the Gestapo could get Allied attack plans in the Balkans, Hitler's forces would be ready to counter them. The Reich could win the war, and these Gestapo officers would be the apples of the Führer's eye.

Duke thought he could turn this game. He steered the conversation away from Tito, forcing the German to steer it back—making it look as though Duke were hiding something. The Nazi followed the clue.

"But what," the Gestapo man demanded, "does America want with Tito?"

Duke responded: after years of opposing the communists in favour of backing the Yugoslav nationalists, America had decided to join Britain in arming Tito's forces. It seemed impossible, but it was true: the Marx-hating Americans were going all-in to support the Reds.

For days, interrogators cycled through. Each time, Duke fed them newspaper headlines dressed as secrets. They wrote furiously, convinced they had broken him. For now, the truth kept the Sparrows alive, because everything they said was soon confirmed.

Duke noted with grim satisfaction that these Gestapo men were slow-witted. They were often drunk and high on drugs by early morning. They were the kind of men who enjoyed causing pain and saw no reason to show up sober to work.

But sooner or later, even drunk Gestapo agents would see that the Americans had outlived their usefulness. The Sparrows didn't know that their confidence game was fatally flawed: the longer they stuck to their cover story, the closer they came to execution. Hitler had ordered that

captured commandos could be kept alive only until they gave all their information, then they must be killed.

* * *

One morning, Duke was surprised to see Major Krüger as his interrogator—only now the German's former friendly attitude was gone. Duke watched warily as the Luftwaffe major shouted abuse at him, accusing him of withholding information.

Duke remembered the last time he had seen Krüger: the Sparrows thought they were being transferred to a fair, law-respecting military prison in Frankfurt—a transfer Krüger had personally arranged. But that hope was shattered by the Gestapo when they yanked them off the transfer bus.

Major Krüger finished shouting: "I need additional details to complete my report!" He led Duke to a map. Krüger pointed at various places and made notes while he whispered: "I thought you were safe in Frankfurt."

He said he had been on a short leave when the secret police sprang their trap. As soon as he learned of the arrest, he rushed to Belgrade and demanded custody. The Gestapo refused.

Krüger shot Duke a meaningful glance: "Never talk about the things we discussed while I was questioning you." Duke looked puzzled. Krüger clarified—his lack of stiff-armed salutes, the possibility of political change in Germany. It was more than enough for the Gestapo to arrest him for thought crimes.

Duke got the point. Gestapo murderers would get good performance reviews just as readily for executing a disloyal Luftwaffe officer as for shooting three American spies.

Krüger wanted to save his own neck, but he was also concerned about the Americans' fate. "The Gestapo told me I'd better[2] finish my questioning today," he said quietly. "They're planning to finish you off tomorrow."

Duke deadpanned his thanks for the good news. But the major wasn't done: the shootings, he said, might not happen. "The Luftwaffe is going to the top to get you back."

The German military was fighting for the Americans because they were desperate for invasion intelligence that the secret police didn't care about or understand. The Gestapo had no interest in war strategy; they were Hitler's political police force—enforcers who hunted down communists, dissidents,

and anyone who threatened the regime from within. After they squeezed out the names of Hungarian and Yugoslav resistance members, they would put bullets in the Americans' skulls.

For Duke and his men, this turf war meant everything. If the Gestapo won, it was death at dawn. If the Luftwaffe won, they might survive this round.

Krüger meant to show Nazi high command that the Gestapo was foolishly wasting precious time on trivial questioning—finding details about local resistance while the war's fate hung in the balance. His plan needed Duke's help. The major leaned in, voice low, so only Duke could hear. His face was serious as he laid out the scheme—a risky gamble that could save the Americans and turn the tide of the war.

"Keep talking," he whispered, his eyes darting to the door. "Let them think you know more than you are telling."

Krüger continued to point at the map and write notes, keeping his voice barely audible. Second: "Keep insisting on your rights under the Geneva Convention." Even though the interrogators didn't seem to recognize those rights, Krüger said that the Americans' legal arguments were making the local Gestapo men nervous.

Thus, the third point: "Keep reminding them it will be their necks if they violate your rights."

The major said that Hitler's secret police weren't used to prisoners who fought back. And they had another problem: none of the Belgrade Gestapo had the authority to order their killing now that the Luftwaffe was involved. The secret police needed someone higher to approve the order, but it would be hard to get a signature when the Luftwaffe, Wehrmacht, and Hungarian military all insisted the Sparrows were theirs.

The key was to make themselves so dangerous that the Gestapo would "want to ship you off somewhere else." The Sparrows needed to turn up the heat.

With this whispered plan, Major Krüger had done something extraordinary: he'd revealed the chink in the Reich's armour, showing Duke how to split Nazi factions. Krüger had no love for the Nazis. He couldn't come out and say it to Duke, but he was one of those Germans, like Canaris, who wanted to rescue their country from the Nazis, even if it meant losing the war.

Duke could exploit that fracture to plant a fake plan for D-Day into German intelligence headquarters. Rewriting the original script, Sparrow needed to make Bodyguard's Balkans D-Day loud and clear, rather than subtle. Only then could it decisively change Hitler's defence plans. At the same time, the Sparrows might save their own skins by making a case for their military value. The Luftwaffe and Wehrmacht were far more likely to offer Geneva Convention rights than the Gestapo.

Major Krüger walked out of the room with pages of deception notes, as if he had collected crucial details about the coming invasion that could help Germany win the war. His argument shielded the Sparrows by exploiting the only exception to Hitler's explicit order to execute captured enemy commandos. So long as they held important secrets, they might avoid a bullet to the head.

* * *

Meanwhile, in another interrogation room, Captain Nunn wondered if the Gestapo's death threats were tactics to make him talk. With his OSS experience in propaganda work, he was always on the lookout for mental warfare.

His interrogator brought in another prisoner in civilian clothes. It was hard to tell how old he was under the bruises. Nunn's German let him understand what was going on as the Gestapo talked among themselves: *This is Major Sykes*[3]*, British commando.*

The Gestapo man unholstered his Luger pistol and shot the Briton in the back of the head. Nunn started at the shot. Sykes crumpled as blood pooled. But the interrogator didn't look at the body—he looked at Nunn with calculation. It was the first time the Gestapo had made him flinch. The Oxford scholar immediately went back to looking like a six-foot wall of chiselled marble.

Captain Nunn understood the point: there wouldn't be a court martial. The Nazis would kill him whenever they wanted.

But Nunn had reason to believe that his interrogators weren't ready to shoot him quite yet. On the way down the hall, he had stolen a glance at the guards' bulletin board. The instructions for handling the three American "saboteurs" included the morbidly reassuring command: *Prevent any suicide attempt.*[4] The Nazis wanted the Sparrows alive, at least for a while.

The guards returned Captain Nunn to his cell to think about the horror of nothingness. He passed a chamber where a woman cried in Serbian: *My son, I promise, I know nothing.*

Back in solitary, he sank to the cold hard floor. He didn't know if Duke and Suarez were alive, or if the next door to open would be his last.

Above him, Belgrade went on—people walking, trains running, Gestapo cars screeching to a halt, people disappearing inside.

* * *

Alone in his cell, Duke sat on the cold concrete, his back against the wall, staring ahead. He thought about what Krüger had said. The Gestapo's torture-equipped cells were premium real estate, needed for extracting the intelligence the Nazis required to win the war. The former adman needed to convince the Germans that he had the product they couldn't live without: D-Day intel.

He also knew that the Wehrmacht, the Hungarian military, the Gestapo, and the Luftwaffe all claimed ownership of his team. Four agencies scrambling for control—and in that chaos lay Sparrows' best chance for survival. Duke knew from his football days what it felt like to be at the bottom of a pile-up. It wasn't pleasant, but it was better than being dead.

The next day, Duke was brought to his interrogation as usual—but this time, he was forced to stand before the Gestapo agent for an uncomfortably long stretch. The interrogator wanted to read weakness on the colonel's face, a flicker of fear to exploit. But there was nothing to go on. The American remained upright, broad-shouldered, every inch an unbroken man. Duke's expression was steady, unyielding: square jaw, commanding eyes, a presence that radiated controlled power.

The German declared: "All three of you will be shot tomorrow."[5]

Interesting, Duke thought. Yesterday it was today, and now it's tomorrow. Major Krüger had bought them another day.

With a new lease on life, the colonel executed Krüger's game plan, switching from defence to offence: "You don't dare shoot us!"

The German looked surprised as Duke continued aggressively: "We aren't guilty, we haven't been tried, and we are protected by the Geneva Convention."

The Gestapo man shouted back: “You are no prisoners of war. You are bandits!”

Duke got mad. “We were captured in uniform after we surrendered in Hungary!” he barked. “We are military officers, not bandits!”

“You are spies!” The German grew red-faced.

“We are prisoners of war and demand our rights!”

The Gestapo man pulled his pistol and aimed at Duke’s head. “I can shoot you right now. No one will be the wiser.”

“Shoot us and be damned. It will be your head too.”

Duke stared like an Old West gunfighter, unarmed yet unyielding. The Nazi blinked. He didn’t know what to do. A prisoner had never worried him before. He was a cheap crook who folded when he lost control. If he didn’t follow the Führer’s order to kill the commandos, he would be court-martialled. But if he shot the colonel, he would be court-martialled.

The American remained calm while the interrogator panicked. The man’s hand trembled on the Luger. The overhead bulb hummed. Duke’s hands throbbed from the tight cuffs, but he kept his face like stone.

The colonel knew the Nazi might do something desperate, so he filled the silence: “We were on our way to join Tito.”

The German looked relieved. “That is your confession!”

To the German, Tito’s men weren’t soldiers but bandits, and therefore, Duke and his men were bandits. That made them criminals with no protection from the laws of war. It would justify him shooting the Sparrows in a Gestapo civilian prison.

“No,” Duke countered. “Your own government recognizes Tito as a legitimate belligerent, and so do you.”

Duke had found his equivalent of a gun. If the German man disobeyed Nazi high command, then he’d get himself shot by his own side. By creating the cover story of a mission to Tito, the OSS had come up with something legally airtight.

The Nazi couldn’t beat Duke in an argument, and he couldn’t get him to sign a confession. So he returned to his strongest argument: his pistol. “If I shoot you, who will punish me?”

Duke shrugged. “Your own military. After the war, the Allies. When the war is over, they will have your head.”

“When,” the German asked, “will the war be over?” The interrogator tried to trick Duke into offering a date, thus giving away the invasion. The

colonel had briefly shaken him a moment earlier. Now the Nazi's shrewd confidence had returned.

"Soon," Duke responded. "The Russians are pushing you back from the east. Soon we will be running you out of Western Europe."

The Nazi jumped at the opening. "So you admit to knowing plans to invade France."

Duke pressed. "You'd give a lot to know about them, too, wouldn't you? Go ahead and shoot us now!"

The German figured that no one would bluff like that if he didn't have something. He put down his gun, picked up a pen, and asked Duke about the invasion. The colonel responded like a convincing actor. He said he didn't know anything—with just the right tone to suggest that he was hiding something. His years in intelligence made the game sound real.

The Gestapo man attacked the points Duke had indicated were his weak spots. The colonel led him along, pretending to be inept about concealing secrets he actually made up on the spot. When he refused to tell[6] division numbers in the Adriatic, his very refusal hinted at massed troops in the southeast. Showing concern about terrain south of the Carpathians made it seem as if the Hungarian mountains were something Allied planners were worried about. He hinted the Sparrows' parachute mission was linked to Tito's plans before trailing off as if he had said too much.

He didn't need to make up the fake D-Day plan on the spot. In 1943, Duke had helped write battle plans for a Balkan invasion in case D-Day did land where Churchill wanted it to, in the soft underbelly of the Reich. When the Allies followed America's desire to attack Normandy instead, Duke could safely tell those old plans.

To stop the invasion, Hitler had ordered a buildup of Adriatic coastal defences—troops, bunkers, artillery, and mines. Everything Duke let slip justified the Führer's worry.

The colonel knew he now owned the momentum in the deadly game. The Nazis needed his invasion plans. So long as he convinced them that he was hiding something, the Sparrows might live.

* * *

For Duke, hinting at an attack in France wasn't giving anything away—Hitler assumed that. Bodyguard's job was to convince the Führer that

France was only one attack vector for D-Day. The Allied goal was to keep Normandy defences thin. To the Nazis, an attack on France made sense—but an invasion through the Balkans and Hungary did too.

Given France's more than three thousand kilometres of coastline, intelligence about an attack would matter only if the interrogator could pinpoint the landing locations. Compartmentalization ensured that OSS-Southeast didn't know the secrets of OSS-Northwest, so Duke couldn't reveal those details even if he'd wanted to.

The interrogator had an important report to file. He ended the interview, and guards took Duke back to his cell. His door slammed and locked. Alone, he took a deep breath. The Gestapo thought they were winning, but he had just changed the rules. He felt a surge of warrior's confidence.

But the next day the game changed again. The interrogator slid Duke's one-time radio code book across the table. The front page was torn out, rendering it useless. Someone, maybe Major Király, had sabotaged it before the Nazis could use it. Still, it wasn't good that the Nazis knew the Americans had a transmitter.

The Gestapo man demanded: "Did you send a message?"[7]

Duke denied it. "I prepared one but didn't have time to send it."

"What did it say?"

Duke lied: "We unintentionally jumped into Hungary on our way to Tito."

The interrogator pressed: "What did you do with it?"

With the text, the Nazis could break the code, send a message to Algiers along with a convincing excuse for why the commandos hadn't been able to radio until now, and then send further fake messages to lure Allied forces into a trap.

But Duke disappointed him: "We burned it."

Verdammt. The scowling Gestapo man sent him back to his cell again.

Krüger appeared for a last prison visit with a little smile. Top Luftwaffe officers were trying to get the Sparrows back and making it hot for the Gestapo.

Duke wondered if the Gestapo would solve the problem by killing them first.

Guards gathered the Sparrows together. It was the first time they had seen each other in weeks. Until now, each man hadn't even known if the others were alive. But there was no time for a friendly reunion. The three

officers were roughly shackled together and pushed onto a train packed with guards.

During the days-long journey that followed, Duke subtly told Nunn and Suarez about the new game plan. The team might even be headed to a military prison now. But Suarez pointed out that the guards were Gestapo, not soldiers. Duke shrugged—maybe the Gestapo would hand them off to the Luftwaffe or Wehrmacht at their next stop.

Disappointment arrived the morning of April 14. Thirteen days after leaving Belgrade, the Sparrows entered Berlin, the heart of Nazi darkness. Their newest prison was a five-storey former museum that had once held treasures of gold, gems, and porcelain. Those days were long gone. A metal sign at the gate named its current owner: the Gestapo.

Duke knew that there were plenty of high-ranking Nazis at Gestapo world headquarters in Berlin who could order their killing. Many prisoners who entered here would never come out again.

Still, it wasn't all bad news. The move from Belgrade to Berlin proved that the secret police were taking their information seriously. The Sparrows were glad to see that Allied bombs had wrecked the top floors of their prison. The exterior walls were thick, made of virtually indestructible stone blocks, but the roof was tile. Allied bombs had punched through it like it was papier mâché.

The guards separated the Sparrows into solitary cells once again. The food stayed bad: all they had for breakfast was a cup of fake coffee and a piece of black bread. Lunch was a bowl of thin potato soup. There was no evening meal. Nothing ever happened except for the two meal deliveries through a flap in the door.

Still, this place was better than their prison in Belgrade. Duke's new cell was five feet by twelve feet—bigger than the tiny cubicle he'd had before. It wasn't fancy, with only a single wooden bench topped by a straw sack for a bed. But it was cleaner than the stinking underground labyrinth in Belgrade.

Best of all, Berlin's cell had a view. Duke's small barred window at shoulder height just above ground level let sunlight peek in. Outside, the colonel could see the world-famous Excelsior Hotel—inspiration for the film *Grand Hotel,* best picture winner at the 1932 Academy Awards.

"It's the most expensive hotel in Berlin. All the best people stay here," said the film's dying Jewish character, Otto Kringelein, as he blew his life

savings enjoying his last days on earth. Like Kringelein, Duke had also spent a fortune—the OSS gold and cash he'd left behind in Budapest. By day, he had a view of the Excelsior while the Nazis debated when to kill him; by night, he had a front-row seat watching Berlin burn.

Nearly every evening, Allied planes droned overhead. Distant whistling bombs grew louder and closer, followed by earth-shaking explosions. For the colonel, it was a patriotic spectacle, destroying the Nazi regime around him. But near misses were terrifying—the floor shook and plaster rained down. It seemed the Americans might be killed by friendly fire before the Nazis could do them in.

Chapter 10

Escape from Auschwitz

APRIL 7, 1944—AUSCHWITZ-BIRKENAU, POLAND

While the Sparrows faced a Gestapo death sentence, two prisoners vanished from behind Auschwitz's electrified fences. They carried intelligence that could warn the Allies about the coming annihilation of Hungary's Jews.

The Sparrows' capture had given Hitler the pretext he needed to exterminate a million Hungarian Jews. Now it was up to two Slovakian Jewish prisoners to save as many as possible.

On April 7, Rudolf Vrba and Alfred Wetzler began their escape from Auschwitz-Birkenau.They had just slipped into their hideout at a construction site the prisoners were forced to work. The building zone was between the inner and outer rings of fences and guard towers of the prison camp. The hideout looked just like one of the many piles of lumber at the site, but this one was piled in such a way as to leave a hollow space in the middle, just enough room for several prisoners to hide. The lumber was between the inner and outer rings of guard towers.

Their Polish helpers who were working at the site quickly covered the opening by adding a few more planks to the top. Their sanctuary reeked of gasoline-soaked Russian tobacco, which the men had scattered around the edges to throw off the search dogs. The Russian captain told them that only Russian tobacco worked.

It was 2 P.M.[1] The Nazis hadn't yet noticed that two prisoners were missing. Inside their hideout, Vrba and Wetzler inhaled the choking stench of petroleum. They stuffed cloths in their mouths to muffle their coughing. Though built for four, the space felt cramped for just two. Vrba and Wetzler

couldn't stand or stretch their legs. The damp chill crept through their civilian clothes.

If they survived three days, they might have a chance at escape. When any prisoners went missing, the SS flooded the perimeter of the camp with round-the-clock guards for seventy-two hours, assuming fugitives might be hiding in the outer work zone. But after three days, the Germans figured they had either got away or died trying. The guards then returned to their regular schedule, patrolling the outer fence only during daylight work hours. At night, when there was no patrol, the two men would make their move.

Germany's takeover of Hungary was complete. The slaughter of the Jews at Auschwitz would start on a mass scale next month, in May. Although Vrba and Wetzler were trapped in their hideout, no one was better positioned to sound the alarm.

* * *

Before his arrest, Alfred Wetzler had been a confident ladies' man who charmed his way through Trnava's cafés. Now, at twenty-five, after two years in this death camp, he was a ghost of his former self as he lay still, fighting the urge to move.

The other escapee was Rudolf Vrba, nineteen, born Walter Rosenberg. He had the looks of a young Marlon Brando, the build of a boxer, and the stubborn hope of a well-bred youth. Even now, trapped like an animal, he thrilled at finally taking action.

Vrba knew he was one of the lucky Jews. Because of his athletic build, the Nazis hadn't killed him with poison gas. Instead, they had given him a job that required muscle: hauling stolen Jewish luggage from the arrivals ramp to the warehouse called Kanada—the German spelling of Canada. For the Nazis, it was a land of plenty, brimming with stolen jewellery, gold, and diamonds taken from the dead.

Vrba used his job in Kanada to get civilian clothes for the escape: well-fitted Dutch suits, overcoats, and boots. Without these, the Slovakians would have been easily spotted in their striped prison uniforms.

Since his arrival at Auschwitz, Vrba had mentally gathered evidence against the Nazis. His amazing memory kept everything: of the nearly two million murdered since his arrival in 1942, he knew many of the victims'

names and hometowns, and he could explain the Nazi coding system for prisoners' patches. He could even predict the coming groups by listening to the guards' crude jokes about what they would steal next. In spring 1944, they were joking about Hungarian salami.

Most arriving prisoners at Birkenau were promptly killed, but sometimes Nazi doctors selected strong adults for slave labour, while children, the elderly, and women with small children were immediately gassed to death. Other times, when the labour battalions were already full, everyone was killed, even the strong and healthy.

* * *

For Vrba, the hours in the hideout before the escape alarm sounded felt like waiting for the opening bell in the boxing ring. But the alarms stayed quiet. The stillness nearly drove him mad. He wanted the battle to begin, wanted to fight—anything but suffering this choking stillness. It was past 5:30 P.M. They had expected the siren by now, but there was only silence. Vrba whispered his fear: "They're toying with us[2], playing with us. They must know where we are."

In truth, the Germans were triple-counting the prisoners to confirm two were missing. After 6 P.M., the escape sirens screamed to life. The sound rose and fell like thousands of wolves howling in unison, vibrating through the wooden planks and into the bones of the two men hidden there. The wailing continued for ten minutes while boots thundered past and furious dogs barked nearby.

In the tight space, Wetzler's breathing became rapid and shallow. The cold made every muscle ache. Through the long night, they heard nearby search parties. Boots crunched on gravel as German voices barked orders—commands to search more areas, bring more dogs. The sounds drifted closer, then farther. After the first intense search passed by, Wetzler whispered with a wink, "The stupid bastards!"[3]

By morning, cold had penetrated so deep they couldn't stop shivering. Every joint ached from forced stillness and hard earth. Wetzler tried to keep up their spirits: "Just a day and a half more. And it shouldn't be too bad. By now, they must be sure we're miles away." But it wasn't only a day and a half more. That was only when the outer perimeter would drop.

A Polish Jewish prisoner named Cytryn had engineered the escape plan, building a hidden cavity inside a woodpile in the construction zone. Several weeks earlier, Cytryn and three other prisoners had tested the method themselves: they hid for three days while SS guards and dogs searched frantically, then escaped after the seventy-two-hour mark, when the outer guards withdrew to their normal schedule. The four were later caught in a village south of the camp, but they had shown that the hideout worked and the guard schedule was predictable.

Usually, guards killed anyone who was caught. But in recent weeks, escapees who were caught were only beaten. The prisoners didn't know why, but it was because the Nazis wanted Jews to think Auschwitz was safe so they wouldn't resist deportations.

The prisoners didn't know how long the reprieve would last, but they knew they needed to seize their chance. To try again, the Polish escape engineers chose the two Slovakians: both were from the same hometown of Trnava and could trust each other completely. Both held administrative positions that gave them access to detailed information that the world needed to know about transports and deaths. Both spoke multiple languages, including German. And both were willing to take the risk.

The plan called for two Polish prisoners to join Vrba and Wetzler in the hideout after seventy-two hours, once the SS had called off the first search. Then they would wait another three days and escape together after the second ring of defences dropped. But as Vrba and Wetzler lay shivering in the bone-chilling darkness, weak from hunger, cold, and stress, they could barely think clearly. They doubted they could stand three more days with two more men crammed into the space.

On Easter Sunday, April 9, Allied bombs shook the ground while German anti-aircraft batteries returned fire, shaking the planks of their hideout. The explosions provided cover for a moment of normal conversation. Vrba wondered: "Should we run for it?"

"No. We'll sit tight,"[4] Wetzler said. "Those boys out there are soldiers, remember. Bombs or no bombs, the fellows ringing the camp and manning the watch towers will stick to their job, and that's catching us!"

* * *

On Monday, April 10, the security ring dropped at 6:30 P.M. But after hearing the words "*Postenkette abziehen!*"—Cordon down!—Vrba was wary, thinking it might be a trick to get them to show themselves.

Soon, the two Polish prisoners came to join them as planned, but the Slovakians refused to let them in. Vrba and Wetzler had agreed that they couldn't take another three days in this choking hideout. At risk of being spotted in the open construction zone, the angry Poles could only stand beside the woodpile for a minute or so. Without help from inside to move the planks, they couldn't get in. The double-crossed Poles were furious. In revenge, they quickly piled more lumber on top, burying Vrba and Wetzler. If they couldn't use the hideout they'd built, nobody would. The added weight made the roof too heavy for the weakened men to lift.

That evening, two Germans noticed something amiss in the timber yard. The planks were out of position on the lumber pile. Vrba heard their boots walking directly overhead. The planks flexed and creaked under their weight as the Germans began taking apart the structure. Voices drifted down. Vrba's hand found his knife. For a wild moment, he wondered whether to use it for self-defence or suicide. Either way, he knew he wouldn't leave this nest alive. Plank after plank was pulled away. Vrba could see light through the gaps. The voices grew louder, giving orders, grunting as they lifted. Six inches of wood separated them from discovery. Vrba held his breath, gripping the knife, every muscle ready for a fight he knew would end in his death. Then a disturbance erupted elsewhere in the camp, and the Germans ran away shouting.

At 9 P.M., the Slovakians pushed up the planks with great effort. The escapees had once been strong men, but now their arms trembled. Finally, they moved the boards up an inch, heaved them sideways, and saw the night sky above. After three days of hunger, cold, forced stillness, and gasoline fumes, standing was agony—their joints were locked, and every movement sent shooting pains through their limbs.

Wetzler whispered: "Thanks be to God[5] those bloody Germans nearly found us! If they hadn't moved those other planks, we'd have been trapped!"

Vrba looked back at Auschwitz for the last time.The blazing security lights made the compound an ominous glowing patch in the darkness. It might have been a more attractive effect if he hadn't known that murder lurked around every corner.

The two men crawled on their bellies towards the outer defences and the birch forest. The Nazis had once gassed prisoners there before constructing the far more efficient “shower” gas chambers. Each movement sent fresh waves of pain through their frozen muscles. The nearly full moon exposed them to every guard tower.

They reached the perimeter fence at a section where the electrical current had not yet been turned on. Using improvised handles, they lifted the wire from the ground and slid underneath. The lack of lighting along that stretch concealed them in darkness.

They reached the birch forest and stood to run through the trees towards the empty farmland beyond, then dropped to crawl again. To get to the Slovakian border, they had to jog through forests and crawl across open fields, always under the cover of night. Escaping Auschwitz was only the beginning of a hard journey.

* * *

Vrba had gotten pointers from a Russian captain who broke out of Sachsenhausen and travelled thirteen hundred kilometres before being recaptured near the Soviet front in Ukraine. In appreciation of Vrba’s knowledge of Russian literature, the captain shared his survival wisdom: Don’t get drunk with freedom. Don’t carry meat. Never carry money or you’ll be tempted to buy food. Eat only what you steal. Travel only at night. Bring salt and matches—with those and stolen potatoes, you can live indefinitely. Have a watch so you don’t get caught in an open field at daybreak. Avoid all roads and paths.

The only things the Russian captain couldn’t teach were luck and how to see in the dark. For days, Vrba and Wetzler stumbled through enemy territory, following the Soła River south towards Slovakia. Their stolen civilian clothes, a good enough fit at the beginning of their journey, hung loose on their shrinking frames.

After a week without food, hunger clouded their judgment. Wetzler had money, against the Russian’s advice, and he was tempted to use it, just as the captain had warned. When they reached a Germanized Polish town in the darkness, guards spotted them. Bullets flew in the air around them as they sprinted into the night, hearts pounding.

In another village, they saw a woman wearing a traditional Polish peasant dress: a stark difference from the assembly-line German clothing worn by Nazi settlers enjoying their new *Lebensraum* in Poland. She fed them—the first kindness they met in a long time. Other Poles along the way did the same, sharing their rations with the two ragged strangers who were enemies of their enemies. A Polish partisan guided them to Slovakia.

On Friday, April 21—two weeks after climbing into the Auschwitz hideout—they crossed the border into Slovakia. Their homeland was still controlled by a pro-German government, but because there were so few Jews left, the Nazis weren't conducting large-scale roundups there now.

* * *

Filthy and trembling from exhaustion, the two men stumbled into Žilina, a medieval town of cobblestone streets, timber-framed houses, and narrow alleys nestled in Slovakia's Váh River valley. It lay on a rail line, halfway between Auschwitz to the north and Budapest to the south. Soldiers moved alongside Slovak police through spring air heavy with the perfume of linden blossoms. Despite the danger, the Polish partisans managed to steer the escapees to the right people—trustworthy Slovak Jews.

Vrba and Wetzler were spirited inside a small basement room in a Jewish retirement home, where they met Oscar Krasniansky, an engineer. He would record what they had witnessed at Auschwitz. He leaned forward, pen poised, eyes fixed.

The Slovakians were interrogated separately to see if their stories lined up. They spoke haltingly at first, their voices raw. Every word carried the weight of the millions who could not escape. As they told the horrors—the endless lines, the chimneys, the screams—the engineer wrote without pause. Outside, merchants opened their stalls as usual.

The escapees had to remember every detail about camp layouts, transportation numbers, methods of killing, and the fates of hundreds of thousands of victims—all while knowing that a million Hungarian Jews were already being prepared for deportation.The two men were the only Birkenau eyewitnesses who could warn the world, and every single detail could make the difference between life and death.

The Nazis had been producing propaganda that Jews were treated well at Auschwitz so their victims would go quietly to their deaths. As Vrba

described, the lies worked so well that it had already lured 1.76 million Jews to their deaths in the gas chambers, most believing until the last moment that they were about to take a shower.

It was almost impossible for the interviewers at Žilina to believe that this mechanized horror could happen. And yet here it was[6], all spelled out in reports from two eyewitnesses.

Vrba assumed that the murders would stop once the truth got out. But on April 28, 1944, crushing news arrived. An elderly maid came into Vrba's room with his breakfast, crying openly as she told him that the Germans were deporting Hungarians through Žilina in cattle cars.

Despite Vrba's initial confidence that he would be able to prevent the deportations, the murders had begun. Still, his report spread, reaching influential people, beginning with the papal nuncio in Slovakia, who took the report to Geneva. From there, it was sent to leaders around the world who could still make a difference.

By June 1944, the warning was in the hands of powerful men. In the Oval Office, President Roosevelt held the thin sheaf of papers that described the industrial-scale murder of millions. Across the Atlantic, Prime Minister Churchill studied the same words by lamplight in his underground war room. In the Apostolic Palace, Pope Pius XII read the testimony of the two escaped prisoners, knowing that their words carried the weight of moral truth.

Pope Pius, then President Roosevelt, then King Gustaf V of Sweden sent messages to Hungary's regent, Admiral Horthy. They demanded action from the only one with the authority to stop the deportations. Hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews had already been murdered. The fate of the survivors depended on the regent. The coming weeks would determine whether he was strong enough to act.

Chapter 11

The Blue Bird

APRIL 18, 1944—BUDAPEST

Dust and diesel exhaust coated Katalin Karády's tongue as the Gestapo police van jolted over Budapest's cobblestones. At thirty-three, Hungary's greatest film star and singer was, in the words of critic Zoltán Egyed, "the rising sun[1], the wondrous blue bird"—with the head of a lion queen, a mysterious face, and a voice that conveyed both pure innocence and passion.

Critics and fans had once swooned over her miraculous green eyes and delicate fingers, her skin like milk and roses. Now her wrists ached where handcuffs bit into flesh. Her raw, chafed skin was a constant reminder of her new reality.

The rumours about her were so loud that Allen Dulles had heard them all the way over in Switzerland: along with her fiancé, the chief of Hungarian intelligence, she had met three American commandos, and all five of them had been shot. The Germans had found the Americans' radio hidden in her piano.

But she was still alive.

She could feel the Gestapo officers' eyes appraising, measuring, leering, though she kept her gaze elsewhere. Through the window, she caught glimpses of the Danube glinting in the spring sunlight.

Karády's seductive voice challenged the feminine conventions of 1940s popular music. Her deep, smoky alto defied the era's preference for higher-pitched female singers. She sang with passion and control, stretching phrases, marking them with rapturous silences. She whispered as if telling secrets to each listener alone. Under Nazi interrogation, that voice would have to hide its strength and defiance.

In the month since the German occupation, the singer had watched her city transform from a cosmopolitan capital into something sinister. Jewish neighbours and shopkeepers she had known for years now walked downtrodden on the sidewalk with yellow stars sewn hastily onto their coats. They weren't permitted to move freely about the city, visit cafés, or sit on park benches. Shop signs vanished as Jewish-owned businesses shuttered. The city's rhythm faltered; homes stood quiet behind drawn curtains.

The Gestapo van stopped on Zrínyi Street, an elegant Budapest thoroughfare leading towards St. Stephen's Basilica. The grand nineteenth-century buildings, with their ornate facades and wrought-iron balconies, now served a darker purpose. Nazi guards flanked the entrance to a converted administrative building that would be her first prison. Inside, the cold crept through her clothes, uninvited.

In a bare room with tall ceilings, the interrogator demanded details about the three American commandos he insisted she had met. *Where is the American transceiver? Who are the Hungarians plotting with the Americans?*

In her deep voice that had made her famous, she answered: "I don't know."

A blow landed across her cheek. Her head snapped to the side; she tasted blood. A tooth loosened against her tongue. The interrogator yanked a fistful of her hair—that dark wave copied by thousands of Hungarian girls—and slammed her head into the table. It was the sort of thing the Gestapo wanted to do with the Sparrows, if the Luftwaffe hadn't intervened.

The Nazis knew that anti-Nazis within the Hungarian political and military elite were still influential. The Gestapo meant to root them out before D-Day. Karády's confession would help them do it.

They suspected her of bridging two resistance movements. Her relationship with General Ujszászy gave her access to conservative government officials secretly resisting the occupation. Her friendships with underground leftist intellectuals connected her to the radical opposition. She could link the communist and conservative wings of Hungarian politics—they hated each other, but they hated the Nazis even more. If she brought them together, they would become a powerful force.

She might have stopped the pain by implicating others, but she said nothing. Her interrogator's patience wore thin.

While the Nazis brutalized her, the new Nazi-aligned Hungarian authorities banned her songs, declaring them “foreign to the Hungarian soul” and guilty of causing “spiritual destruction on an emotional level.”

They took particular offence at lyrics that struck them as defeatist: “In vain you flee, in vain you run. You can’t escape your fate.”

* * *

From Zrínyi Street she was moved to Pestvidék, a sprawling district on the outskirts of Budapest where industrial buildings and workers’ housing spread towards the city limits. A converted warehouse was full of cramped and airless cells stinking of industrial pollution and unwashed humanity. Barred windows looked out over factory smokestacks and grey apartment blocks.

In the morning, they loaded her into a vehicle for the twisting drive up Sváb Hill. The elegant villas and hotels scattered across the hillside had once hosted Budapest’s elite. Now the Gestapo owned them, turning drawing rooms into interrogation chambers and wine cellars into holding cells.

The torture routine repeated day after day. Interrogators sneered as they questioned her about her protection of persecuted individuals. In 1942, Karády had been investigated for bringing George Dénes, her Jewish songwriter, back from forced labour—a brazen rescue marking her as someone willing to defy Nazi demands to save Jewish lives. Even then, when Hungary was still nominally independent, the Nazis had marked her as an enemy of the Reich.

A bright light blazed in the interrogation room, a glaring eye that never slept. Prisoners were forced to stare into it until disoriented. Then the beatings began. Heads were slammed against the wall until the prisoners blacked out. Cold water revived them for the torture to continue.

For many, it worked, and they told what they knew to make the suffering stop. But for Karády, the pain was familiar. Her shoemaker father viciously beat all seven of his children in their cramped Kőbánya apartment if just one made him mad. Her Catholic faith taught her to offer up her suffering, rather than surrendering to it.

The interrogators insisted she had met the Americans and hidden their radio, but she said she hadn’t. The Gestapo had reasons to be suspicious.

She would have been a natural liaison between Újszászy and Hungary's civilian resistance. But she denied knowing about it, just like the Sparrows and Újszászy were doing. If they had met[2], no one was admitting it.

Still, the Gestapo remained convinced she had an active role in fighting Germany. An interrogator shouted that her movies were orchestrated by Jews.

She thought her arrest had something to do with her latest film, a spy flick called *Machita,* which had been pulled from theatres per Nazi order. Perhaps her role had persuaded them she was a spy: anyone who could so convincingly act like a spy must be a spy. But then again, her accurate portrayal owed to knowing real-life agents at the highest level.

On the drives down Sváb Hill, she caught glimpses of Budapest spread below—the Danube threading between Buda and Pest, the dome of Parliament, the spires of churches where some of the city's two hundred thousand Jews might still find sanctuary from the gas chambers. As long as she didn't reveal any names, resistance networks could hold.

Like the Sparrows, she could not give up even one person. That was how the Nazis destroyed resistance—breaking one link, then the next, until the chain collapsed. Everyone needed to cover for everyone else, or all was lost. She could have confessed and saved herself. But she refused to say anything, despite the beatings.

Her silence shielded not just individuals but the entire rescue structure. If the Americans and Újszászy survived, and if the resistance could coordinate with Allied intelligence, the Jews of Budapest might stand a chance when the deportations began.

At night in her Pestvidék cell, her face swollen and dress torn, she quietly sang her famous songs. "The heart cannot bear everything, maybe tomorrow it won't hurt anymore."

So far, she had saved just one Jew. She meant to save many more. But first she had to get word to her friends in the Hungarian military to rescue her.

A German guard—young, hesitant—looked at her with pity. She caught his eye long enough to plant a seed.

Chapter 12

The Constrictor

APRIL 21, 1944—GESTAPO HEADQUARTERS, BERLIN

The Sparrows had been in solitary confinement for twenty-one days. Like a boa constrictor's grip, Nazi starvation maintained constant pressure. Weeks of hunger and loneliness at Gestapo headquarters were meant to break their loyalties before their bodies gave out. The secret police needed to extract their D-Day intelligence.

Each commando survived on a few hundred calories a day—a piece of black bread for breakfast and thin potato soup for lunch. The men either devoured the bread right away, only to lie awake at night with raging hunger, or tried to ration it, enduring the torment while their bodies cried out for more.

The Germans starved their minds too: there was nothing to read, nothing to do, and no one to talk to in their cages. They could only stare at bare damp walls, the silence profound and endless. This pain had no shape and no sound. Time circled in place, tightening with each loop.

Nothing ever changed. Annoyance hardened into fury, which turned into despair. The Nazis waited for a single depressing idea to take root in their minds: *This misery will go on until one day we are brought out and shot.*

While the Sparrows' eleven days in Belgrade had the wild excitement of pistol-waving Gestapo thugs, Berlin was the void at the heart of evil. The only breaks in the silence were the nightly Allied bombing raids. For Duke, the explosions became a cause for celebration, thrilling bone-rattling noise and light that interrupted the endless boredom. Then the last bomber engine faded into the night and he was alone again.

After a week, he yelled through the door, demanding to see the Kommandant. A few days later, on the twelfth day of solitary, the Nazi

arrived, his face a friendly mask of doting concern. Duke didn't return his annoying grin.

"What's the matter, Colonel?"[1] the Kommandant asked, his voice smooth with the practised warmth of a concierge at the Grand Hotel. The kindness was a tactic to make a prisoner, starved of human contact, talk—just to have someone to talk to.

Duke pre-empted the offer. He demanded to know if his fellow Americans were still alive.

"They are alive and in this very prison!" the Kommandant said, beaming.

Duke, inwardly grateful but outwardly stone-faced, pressed on. "You are starving us."

"You will live," the Nazi said, shrugging with his bland smile. The place was clean, he noted, and waved off the rest. "It's wartime. There is nothing you can do. There is nothing I can do. There is nothing anyone can do. So we all do nothing."

Duke refused to play along with this steady descent into hell. "I demand you turn my party over to the military under the Geneva Convention.," so his team would have the things to which all prisoners were legally entitled: Red Cross packages, human company, letters, and sunlight in a prison yard.

The Kommandant refused.

The next day, April 26, 1944, guards took the Sparrows from their cells and brought them together for the first time since they'd arrived in Berlin. Instead of being shackled together, each man was handcuffed behind his back.

The Americans were sped to a nearby airfield in a Black Maria police car and then hustled onto a waiting plane under heavy guard. They were being sent out of Berlin in a hurry. Duke figured the Kommandant had learned how to play hot potato: make the Americans someone else's problem. But Duke didn't know whether it was because of his Geneva Convention gambit, or because the Germans needed to keep valuable prisoners alive, or both.

Three German officers also boarded the plane. At the sight, the Sparrows allowed themselves a measure of hope. Regular military officers might honour the Geneva Convention. Duke decided to find out, loudly complaining about being cuffed behind his back. "I'm an old man.[2] We

can’t even try to get away up here.” Besides, he argued, there were far more guards than prisoners.

His pitch: “Why not handcuff us in front?”

The Gestapo guards grunted dismissively, but the three German officers nobly intervened. Honour wasn’t entirely dead. The outranked Gestapo guards obeyed. As he was recuffed in front, Duke stole a look at the cockpit’s compass. It showed they were heading south. He thought they might be on their way back to Budapest.

Are we too hot for the Gestapo to handle? the colonel wondered. Or do Hungary’s fascists want to get their hands on us?

Their plane descended into a capital where Hitler’s worst killers had gathered to plan the extermination of Hungary’s Jews. Moments after touchdown, guards bundled the Americans into a vehicle and drove them into central Budapest.

The Sparrows were hurried into a large stone building on the west side of the Danube. For the first time, they saw beaten-down Jewish prisoners with yellow Stars of David sewn onto their shirts.

Guards lined the Americans up against the wall, shoving pistols into their backs. Nunn flinched as he remembered the murder of Major Sykes in Belgrade.

After being searched, Duke asked where they were. The Gestapo officer in charge told him it was once the city jail on Main Street. Now it was a processing centre for civilian prisoners guilty of being Jewish, or committing political crimes, or both.

Here, the Americans’ case would be decided. Everything hinged on how the Gestapo read the Führer’s execution order: commandos could stay alive so long as they had useful secrets to reveal.

The only question was whether the Americans were still hiding something.

Chapter 13

Madison Avenue, Budapest

APRIL 27, 1944—BUDAPEST

In the morning, guards took Florimond Duke from his cell and drove him uphill for interrogation. As the car ascended Sváb Hill, the colonel took in a breathtaking view of the Hungarian capital. The Pearl of the Danube unfolded below him, a panorama of the distant, shimmering spires of the Parliament and majestic bridges spanning the great river.

The Gestapo car stopped at the Mirabell apartment building, an art deco masterpiece of streamlined elegance. The luxury reminded Duke that the Gestapo always took the best for themselves. Next door, at the equally magnificent Majestic, Adolf Eichmann finalized train plans for the coming deportation of Hungary's Jews.

Like many high-value prisoners before him, Duke was hustled upstairs and brought into a luxuriously appointed office, quietly removed from the muffled screams trapped deep in the cellars below.

Through the windows, Duke watched with grim satisfaction as smoke rose in the distance. The city was under siege from the skies, although Allied bombs still targeted the industrial districts on the outskirts rather than the ancient inner city. He guessed it was partly because Allied planners didn't want to kill the two hundred thousand Jews living there—after the Nazis had murdered millions, they were the last large Jewish population in Axis Europe. The Nazis were using them as human shields to protect a city that Hitler thought more beautiful than even Vienna.

Duke's newest interrogator, Gerhard Clages[1], was the head of Nazi security operations in Hungary. He was a dark-haired, clean-shaven forty-one-year-old, urbane and smooth as silk, who could have passed for a board member at one of Duke's elite Manhattan clubs. The polished veneer

concealed Budapest's architect of political terror. He wore tailored English suits, each worth months of salary to most Germans. The Nazi's gentlemanly refinement made him more dangerous than the pistol-wielding thugs back in Belgrade. They killed individuals, but Clages ordered mass executions.

"You look like an intelligent man," Clages told Duke with the easy charm of a salesman closing a million-dollar deal. He spoke with an American accent he'd picked up working for the Hamburg America steamship line before the war. Duke recognized his interrogator's style: the Nazi was building trust, showing understanding, and preparing to make his offer. But what was he selling?

"There is no use kidding each other.[2] Here's the story." The Nazi tossed a ten-page file onto a mahogany table polished to a mirror finish. The pages fanned out like a deadly poker hand.

Clages made a show of having all the time in the world for Duke to examine every line of the dossier. As the colonel began reading, his heart sank. The document, in English, was the confession of General Ujszászy, who had been the Sparrows' chief military contact. While the Blue Bird, Katalin Karády, had held her tongue, her military fiancé had apparently cracked under torture.

Duke was suspicious, though, because he knew the general didn't speak English. Clages admitted it was an English translation, and to the papers in front of Duke, he added the German original, each page of which was signed by the general.

Duke had steeled himself against capture, interrogation, and execution. This looked worse. If the document exposed him as a spy, any pretence at Geneva protections would be gone. And the confession could change the fate of D-Day by destroying the illusion that the invasion would happen in southeastern Europe.

As Duke slowly flipped through the pages, reading every word carefully, he showed no fear. He inwardly rejoiced when he reached the end and saw what wasn't there. The confession said the US military command had approved Duke's mission to Hungary—but it omitted a crucial detail: that it was a secret OSS operation, approved by President Roosevelt and tasked with contacting Regent Horthy.

Because it didn't name the regent, the partial confession left in place the one man who could slow, possibly even stop, the Holocaust in Hungary. At

the same time, Duke noticed that the confession gave no proof that the Sparrows were spies.

Duke didn't know it, but Ujszászy's signature was forged. The Germans had intercepted Allied communications and compiled the confession from those intercepts. Across town, the general saw the same document—with Duke's forged signature on it.

While Duke thought about what to do next, he stuck to his strategy: stay aggressive. "Why arrest the general?" he asked. He was just following orders. Any Nazi should understand that.

Clages, however, embraced a different, ruthless logic. "His superiors have escaped."

The German knew the simple secret to moving up in the Nazi ranks: if you don't have the guilty parties, punish scapegoats. That is what Clages had done while hunting the Czech resistance: when someone assassinated a German, he ordered the massacre of innocent civilians for payback.

Duke saw what Clages wanted: evidence against Hungary's regent. Horthy was the only barrier to Germany's plans to exterminate the largest Jewish population in Axis Europe, and Clages's career would soar if he could pin something on him. The Nazi demanded, "What do you know about the regent?"

At this crucial point in the interrogation, Duke insisted there was nothing to reveal. He knew the regent only by name.

To throw Clages off the scent, Duke conceded a fact of autobiographical importance. He admitted to the partial truth of working for US Air Force intelligence. He didn't mention that Air Force Signals had permanently loaned him to the OSS. He figured if he said anything about his commando employment, it would mean a death-after-torture sentence. But the Nazis might think that a colonel in intelligence was worth keeping alive.

Duke found new ways to say the same things, repeating the general's confession. That seemed like the best strategy to protect the general and the Hungarian resistance. If it looked like Ujszászy was telling the truth, maybe the Nazis would stop grilling him.

Duke pretended to lay all his cards on the table: "I was on a military mission authorized by the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the US State Department." He confirmed the confession document, while expanding the scope of the Sparrows' mission. They weren't on their way to help Tito after all. They came for Hungary. Duke let the Nazi infer that the State

Department and JCS wouldn't have got involved in a run-of-the-mill commando operation. Obviously something big was underway for the southeast.

Duke's technique was the same as before: to act like he knew more than he was telling. Questions about other teams? He'd start to answer, then catch himself. Operational timing? He'd begin explaining, then stop. Each mention of the Adriatic, Yugoslavia, the invasion—carefully dropped, then pulled back. It made Clages hungry for more.[3]

Duke was driven back downhill to the prison, where a momentary security failure gave him a few seconds to talk to Nunn and Suarez in passing. Since their arrival, they had been carefully isolated from one another. But now, with the game on the line, Duke had just enough time to change the play. Confirm JCS and State Department military orders. Don't mention the regent or the OSS. Hint that you know big secrets about a southeastern invasion.

Knowing was half the battle. The Sparrows would need to sing for their tormentors, while all carrying the same tune. Staying alive and fooling the Nazis about D-Day would require world-class performances, slowly revealing details while hinting at more. The trick was never to say too much. A prisoner who blurted out invasion plans would be suspected of feeding disinformation. Instead, the Sparrows had to let details slip under pressure, leaving the Germans to connect the dots themselves. The more the enemy felt they were reading between the lines, the more they would believe what they found.

Nunn and Suarez subtly nodded[4] at Duke's instructions. They were furious when they heard about General Ujszászy's confession, but their colonel told them to buck up. The general was saving their lives by concealing the political undertone of Operation Sparrow and emphasizing the military aspect. But not even Duke knew just how tightly the leaders of the Hungarian resistance had kept their mouths shut.

* * *

The next day, Nunn and Suarez faced their questioning. Guards pulled them from their cells, weak with hunger, and brought them to top Nazi interrogators who had closely studied Duke's confession. Everything they

said confirmed the colonel's account exactly. To the Germans, the triangulated story sounded like it must be true.

Both commandos stuck to Duke's whispered script. They confirmed the Joint Chiefs approval, told about State Department oversight, and when pressed about a southeastern invasion, they looked uncomfortable, suggesting that their interrogators were getting close to the "truth." When pressed about the regent, both insisted they knew nothing beyond his name.

Clages studied the interrogation reports[5] with growing excitement. Three men, held in strict isolation for weeks, yet their accounts matched with perfect precision. This was big.

When Dr. Hans-Ulrich Geschke, Clages's superior, reviewed the files, he was astounded. This wasn't some amateur sabotage mission gone wrong. The Sparrows were surely something more important: early scouting for a major Allied operation in southeast Europe. Their high ranks—colonel, major, and captain—made it plausible. Typical three-man commando teams had a lieutenant and two enlisted men.

At the same time, heavy Allied bombing throughout the Balkans showed a softening-up effort for a coming attack. It looked obvious that this major investment of Allied aircraft was too much for a ruse. With each two-ton bomb's worth of explosives, the Germans had more earth-shuddering proof that something big was underway. Meanwhile, the beautiful beaches of Normandy were as calm and scenic as a tourism brochure.

Day after day, Duke was driven up the winding roads for his interrogations with Clages. Despite the weeks of hunger and the ever-present danger of execution, he felt electric anticipation on each trip. This was the big game, the performance he'd trained for his entire life. He'd reached the brain trust of Nazi intelligence.

* * *

Although captured and seemingly helpless, the Sparrows remained powerful agents in the grand duplicity of Operation Bodyguard, defeating Hitler before the D-Day invasion by making him defeat himself. As the ancient war strategist Sun Tzu wrote, "All warfare is based on deception.[6] Hence, when we are able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must appear inactive; when we are near, we must make the

enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near."

Duke understood that the supreme problem for the Nazis was that an Allied invasion loomed, but they didn't know where. The Sparrows provided the solution—if the interrogators were clever enough to unlock their secrets.

Duke, the former advertising executive, pushed the ultimate deception campaign to the most important customer, Hitler himself. The Führer's nightmare was encirclement. Duke's job was to turn that fear into a waking terror that stalked the supreme commander's every decision.

Not even Allen Dulles could have dreamed that Sparrow would penetrate so deeply into the Nazi mind. The information collected in Budapest went directly to Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS, who then briefed Hitler.

After a week of separate interrogations, the Germans were so impressed with the Americans' cooperation that they rewarded them. Convinced the prisoners were genuinely broken and therefore providing valuable intelligence, they moved Duke, Nunn, and Suarez to a shared cell, a privilege reserved for compliant captives.

Despite their exhaustion and gnawing hunger, they grinned once the cell door slammed shut. The Nazis had worked to break their spirit. But the Americans only pretended to crack and made up a story that became reality for their captors. While the Germans believed they held broken men, the prisoners were breaking the Germans' grip on Europe.

* * *

One day the questioning ended. Germany's intelligence men realized they were only getting the same information over and over again. The commandos' already meagre rations were cut from two meals to one—a bowl of revolting bean mush that barely sustained life. Each night, the colonel lay on his thin mattress, listening to Allied bombers drone overhead and knowing that somewhere nearby, Clages was studying his notes, weighing every word the Americans had said.

Clages lifted the phone[7] and gave his report to Berlin. The American prisoners, he sensed, were proof that the Führer's strategic instincts were correct. A large Allied attack was indeed coming for southeast Europe. The

evidence was clear: three sources who couldn't have matched their stories, constant Allied bombing raids, heavy partisan activity, more suicidal commando missions. It pointed to another invasion in the Mediterranean, along with the one that had already begun in Italy.[8]

As Clages hung up the phone, he had no idea that he was sealing the fate of the Third Reich. The vast Axis army in southeastern Europe would remain exactly where it was, waiting for an invasion that would never come.

While the real invasion took shape across the English Channel, a fake one took form over the Adriatic Sea—three starving men spinning tales of attack while Allied bombs reinforced the lie. Hitler was falling for the deception that would destroy him.

At the same time, the Sparrows were inching closer to death. It looked like they had nothing more to tell. Hitler's orders for captured enemy commandos were final and specific. After they had been interrogated, they must be "slaughtered to the last man."[9]

Chapter 14

Gaslight

MAY 4, 1944—HUNGARY

As the Sparrows sat in their six-by-eight cell in Budapest, unarmed and slowly starving, the world back home continued in relative normalcy. On May 4, 1944, the film *Gaslight*[1] opened in New York City, its frightened audience watching Gregory Anton manipulate gas flames in his mansion, convincing his wife, Paula, that she was losing her mind. Meanwhile, the Sparrows were gaslighting Hitler, denying their victim a grasp of reality.

The commandos kept receiving just one snack per day, shoved through a slot by a downcast Jewish prisoner. The Americans tried to cheer up the delivery man with little jokes: "Feed it to the regent!" The Jewish prisoner couldn't respond because a guard was watching his every move, but he gave a sympathetic little smile.

Denied time outdoors, the Sparrows turned their cramped cell into a bare-bones gym, taking turns doing push-ups in the narrow space between their bunks. Exercise was a risky bet when they had so little food, but if they ever needed to overpower the guards, every ounce of strength would matter.

While the commandos sold German intelligence on fictitious D-Day attacks, Allied special effects crews[2] in England built props to make the Bodyguard illusions look real—balsa wood landing crafts, inflatable Sherman tanks, and entire fake army bases visible from German spy flights overhead.

Bodyguard sold Nazi intelligence on the idea that one punch was coming in the Mediterranean, another in Calais. Across from the Port of Calais, on France's coast near Belgium, sound engineers broadcast recordings of tank engines across the Channel. Associated Press headlines

proclaimed invasion preparations for the Balkans and Norway. From Italian and North African bunkers, radio operators transmitted coded messages between fictional divisions—the XIV Corps, Polish units, decoy armies preparing to strike through Hungary and Greece.

Double agents in Britain fed Berlin a diet of false intelligence, and German generals rearranged real forces to counter threats that existed only in Allied deceptions. The Führer studied intelligence reports describing flesh-and-blood armies massing for invasion along with imaginary units designed for deceit. But which threat was real? Which was fake? The questions gnawed at him like hunger gnawed at the Sparrows.

Meanwhile, the beaches at Normandy were silent except for the waves and wind. Allied bombers left the coming landing site alone so that Hitler wouldn't become suspicious and rush reinforcements to the zone.

By mid-May, Nazi intelligence estimates[3] placed Allied strength in Britain at seventy-seven divisions and nineteen brigades—50 percent higher than reality. But the inflated numbers were only part of the deception. The Nazis believed much of that force was positioned in southeast England, poised to strike at Pas-de-Calais. At the same time, the Sparrows were confirming an entirely separate threat: a major invasion through the Balkans. The fake Allied armies complemented each other perfectly—double agents in Britain fed lies about Calais, while three captured commandos in Budapest confirmed the Balkan threat. Each side of the fable strengthened the other, making both seem true. As a result, Hitler had to spread his forces across multiple fronts to meet armies that didn't exist. When the actual strike came at Normandy, it would face weakened defences.

Hitler's staff meetings stretched past midnight. Generals argued over maps dotted with red pins showing ghost armies. They debated taking countermeasures against General George Patton's First US Army Group—a force constructed from Hollywood props and faked radio signals. The German high command could not imagine that the Allies would place their most feared general in command of a fiction.

In Berchtesgaden, Hitler's mountain retreat, the Führer knew that D-Day was imminent and would strike on multiple fronts. Yet the dictator still worried: "Where is a diversion[4], and where is the real main attack?"

German engineering invented marvels that sounded like science fiction—jet fighters screaming through trials, robot tanks crawling across testing

grounds without crews. Yet the Allies possessed something even more valuable: the ability to make their enemy see threats that didn't exist. The fictional invasions were reinforced by real explosions. In a single day, eleven hundred missions struck southeastern Europe, while four hundred bombers hit Pas-de-Calais, each sortie another brushstroke in a masterpiece of deception.

On May 5, a heavy British bombing raid targeted Budapest's rail yards. The attack came close enough that the Sparrows felt the explosions through the prison's foundations. RAF Halifaxes and Wellingtons dropped blockbusters that weighed twelve thousand pounds each, creating explosions visible from miles away. Pilots reported violent secondary explosions and fires at Budapest's Rakos rail complex, the crucial junction that funnelled Nazi supplies towards the increasingly pressured Romanian front.

The mind games worked as designed. Paranoia directed Germany's war strategy. Commanders reinforced southeastern sectors[5] where enemy strength was uncertain, burning fuel and misdirecting firepower chasing shadows. Every move came with a high cost: men, oil, time.

But a paranoid Führer was still dangerous. Hitler kept technological surprises in reserve. The Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, promised Germans that the Reich commanded "revolutionary weapons of unimaginable power"—and this time, he wasn't lying. Beyond robot tanks and ballistic missiles, German scientists worked frantically to unlock atomic secrets, racing against time to build weapons that could incinerate entire cities.

Meanwhile, Nazi recruitment campaigns in Hungary grew increasingly brutal. SS gangs swept through the country, seizing men from their bedrooms and marching them right to training camps. Many barely learned to load rifles before being shipped to the Eastern Front, where survival was measured in hours rather than days. Those who resisted faced beatings or summary execution.

The SS called these conscripts *Freiwillige,* German for "volunteers,"[6] a bitter irony for Hungarian mothers who watched their teenage sons disappear into Wehrmacht uniforms to fight and die for the occupying enemy.

* * *

After five weeks on starvation rations, Duke's body was turning on itself, his metabolism devouring muscle tissue for fuel, flooding his kidneys with toxins. His vision blurred as his brain fought for glucose his body no longer made enough of. The three Sparrows were dying by degrees in a Hungarian prison cell, their intelligence mission nearly complete but their bodies failing just as Allied forces carried out the greatest ruse in military history. The captives had perhaps two weeks before organ failure became irreversible.

One day, an Austrian sergeant appeared at their cell with an offer that could save their lives. He wanted to learn English. Would the Americans teach him?

Nunn was suspicious: "Sure you weren't sent to get information from us?"

The Austrian laughed. "The Gestapo doesn't even talk to us, much less listen to anything we have to say." If the Gestapo found out they were talking, he continued, "I'd be put in the next cell."

"You must want to speak English[7] pretty badly," Nunn said.

"No," the Austrian said, "I want to speak English pretty good."

The Sparrows watched for signs of deception, but it didn't look like he was a Nazi. His accent had the feel of Austrian mountain valleys—from a different world than shouting Gestapo torturers.

The Austrian explained why he wanted to learn a new language. Germany was losing this war, he said—anyone with eyes could see it. When Allied forces arrived, he would need to be able to speak English. He was willing to wager his life now by talking to the three American prisoners, betting that learning grammar and vocabulary might help him survive and prosper after the war.

Nunn agreed to teach him—for a price: food. The Austrian's eyes brightened. "*Das kann ich einrichten.*" That I can arrange.

The guard appeared nearly every evening, carrying a cloth bundle that transformed their cell into something approaching civilization. Actual sausages, real cheese, fresh bread, and other Hungarian treats the Sparrows had never tasted. While the Americans taught him irregular verbs, their bodies remembered what it felt like to be human.

The transformation was miraculous but troubling. Duke finally voiced the ethical question that had been growing in their minds: "Where do you get all this stuff?" Prison guards didn't eat like kings.

Without a hint of guilt, the Austrian admitted that he was stealing food to pay for his English lessons. His job was to search the mail, ensuring that no weapons or messages reached the prisoners. “I just take a little out of each package.”

The revelation hit Duke like a blow. “But that means others have to go without.”

The Americans had been eating stolen food—bread meant for oppressed prisoners, cheese that represented some family’s sacrifice, sausages bought with coins that might have paid a smuggler to lead a Jew to freedom. The Sparrows would rather starve than take food from those already so cruelly deprived.

The Austrian clarified his moral reasoning: “No one is deprived. None of them misses the little bit I take from each package, and you need it more than they do.”

Duke objected—it was wrong to steal, no matter what. The Austrian replied like a patient ethics professor: “These Jews hate the Nazis. You Americans are fighting the Nazis. You must have been caught trying to help Hungary. If they knew you were here, they would be glad to share.”

Duke looked to Suarez, whose cheekbones cast dark shadows in the dim light. His eyebrows indicated the Austrian had a point. Duke’s eyes shifted to Nunn, who shrugged. He hated it when the rich and powerful oppressed the little guy, but this sure didn’t look like oppression.

The Sparrows agreed to the small wrong for the sake of the greater good. They were the deepest intelligence agents behind enemy lines. In the long run[8], their D-Day deception might save many Jewish lives.

The Austrian guard brought something else almost as vital as food: good war news. Allied forces were pushing German troops back through the Italian mountains while Soviet armies advanced on the Eastern Front. But the revelation that made the Sparrows’ hearts leap with joy came casually. The Austrian said the German army expected an attack[9] through the Balkans “any day.” It was just as Sparrow had planned. The Wehrmacht was at the peak of massive defensive preparations far from France.

Duke’s face stayed neutral, but his mind raced through months of training, briefings, maps studied until memorized. Every detail the Sparrows had shrewdly fed their captors—implied troop movements pointing at Yugoslavia, supply depots in North Africa, landing craft

massing in Italian ports—was working beyond their wildest hopes. Hitler had bought all of it.

Phase one of Bodyguard had been designed to pull German attention to the Balkans during the early spring, but Regent Horthy's kidnapping and the Sparrows' capture had derailed the Hungarian uprising before it began. There was no script for what came next. But the Sparrows were writing one anyway, and it kept working. Nazi forces were pinned down in the southeast, a long way from Normandy.

Since their capture, the Sparrows had lived on fragments of hope scattered among weeks of despair. But now they pictured liberating troops saving them from Gestapo execution.

Duke was so pleased that he wrote the Austrian guard a character reference addressed to the future Allied conquerors. The guard could hide the letter until liberation, then use it as a diplomatic passport stamped for survival. He might even land a translation job with the occupation forces.

The cell door closed behind the Sparrows with a clang, leaving them alone with their high hopes and the taste of sausage.

* * *

The following morning, guards took Duke alone from the cell. He walked down the prison hallways flanked by Nazis with menacing submachine guns, their footsteps echoing off the stone walls. The separation from his team felt like an amputation. As he was pushed into a Gestapo car, he worried that the Nazis had found the letter he gave to the Austrian sergeant.

The secret policemen drove Duke up the hill to Gestapo headquarters. His heart pounded as he wondered if his team would survive to see D-Day's triumph, or if the truth behind Operation Bodyguard's most daring lie would die with them.

The Sparrows had lit a fuse stretching two thousand kilometres across Europe. Whether they lived to see it explode depended on forces beyond their control.

Chapter 15

Old Friends

MAY 18, 1944—BUDAPEST[1]

The Nazis hadn't found the letter. Duke's newest interrogator[2], Captain Ramspecht, leaned across the table in a friendly way.

"You are close friends?"[3] Ramspecht asked. The captain was from German army intelligence, sent from high command to find out what the Americans knew.

Duke confirmed with a smile: yes, he and Ike were "the best of friends." He watched as the captain's eyebrows lifted, impressed. Duke had accidentally suggested a close friendship with the highest level of Allied command when he casually referred to Eisenhower as "Ike." Americans regularly called their heroes by nicknames. But to the German mind, nicknames were only for close personal friends. When Duke saw the impressed look on Ramspecht's face, he took advantage of the misunderstanding.

Duke was relieved to learn that Ramspecht had summoned him here not because of the Austrian guard but because he was looking for information on D-Day. Here was another chance to feed the Germans misleading invasion information.

Ramspecht wanted to know why Dwight Eisenhower, the supreme commander of Allied forces, was in England. The German continued listing top American generals: General George Patton? General Ira Eaker? General Carl Spaatz[*]? Duke smiled. Yes, they were all his close personal friends.

It was a mixture of truth and lies: he was friends with some of them, but others he knew only in his role as OSS director of southeastern intelligence (a job he had still not admitted to in captivity). He knew juicy inside gossip on the generals, but he didn't reveal it. The other Sparrows couldn't

corroborate details they hadn't heard, and any contradiction between their stories could unravel everything.

American newspapers had been full of warrior biographies before the Sparrows parachuted into Hungary back in March, giving Duke plenty to talk about. General Spaatz's poker playing was "more enthusiastic than expert,"[4] and Eisenhower was "spending all his time[5] on invasion plans." Yes, General Patton had slapped a soldier, but he stood "high with the soldiers[6] in the field."

Duke learned that Captain Ramspecht, a former textile merchant, was an elite German intelligence expert on the American army, sent directly from Wehrmacht High Command in Berlin. For Duke, it was another step up the Nazi intelligence ladder. Playing "broken prisoner" while feeding curated "intelligence" to the Gestapo was one thing, but the Gestapo weren't the ones making battle plans—that was the Wehrmacht's job. When his interrogators had learned that Duke was sent on a mission from the US State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff, it was proof that this American was a big fish. German high command needed to find out what he knew.

Ramspecht questioned him about Allied troop buildup. Duke played at being unable to give details, but sprinkled his refusals to answer directly with remarks that let the captain convince himself that the United State had about three million troops ready to invade. Duke didn't just deliver misinformation— he sold it. What he said confirmed what the turned German spies in the UK were reporting, because it was the same Bodyguard playbook.

Ramspecht asked Duke when and where D-Day would strike. The colonel replied energetically: "Any day now.[7] We'll jump off from England and land in France, Belgium, Holland, Denmark. At the same time we land in the West, we'll open up a massive drive in Italy, pushing north. The Russians will have enough supplies to pound you back from the East."

Duke leaned in, projecting the confident ease of a man discussing a sure win. "Then," he went on, "there are the Balkans. They are ripe enough to fall in our hands at the slightest shake of the tree. Hitler knows it, or he would never have pulled this occupation of Hungary."

The advertising maestro sold the whole Bodyguard deception up close and personal. The Allies would hit the Germans from every side. To show the Reich's coming fate, he mimed holding a large ball with both hands,

which he slowly brought together, indicating how the Germans would be squeezed in from all sides. He ended by grinding his palms to complete the imaginary destruction, then showed Ramspecht his empty hands. Nothing. That would be the Reich when the Allies were finished.

"It will never work," the German countered. "We are ready for you. We will drive you right back into the sea." The Atlantic Wall was invincible. Let the Allies come.

Duke played ball. He let himself look like he was being outfoxed, drawn into telling Ramspecht what Bodyguard wanted Germany to believe. Each apparent offhand remark would feed Hitler's suspicion that the Allies would strike not one beach but many. If the Führer scattered his armies across the European coastline, he would have no large force left to hurl the real invasion back into the sea.

Duke reminded Ramspecht of the Allies' air superiority. They could easily cover the millions of invaders, at each of their landing points. He added: "We have all the hardware[8] needed to back them up, and the industrial capacity to keep it coming to them faster than they can use it up."

Meanwhile, the Normandy beaches remained lightly defended. It seemed obvious to the Führer that it was impossible to invade at Normandy without a port. General Gerd von Rundstedt, Germany's commander-in-chief in the west, explained: "A landing *could* only be made[9] at high tide, and there are those reefs, those rocks below the water at high tide. Nobody could land there, as their craft would be wrecked."

The Germans, for all their experience fighting on land, didn't understand ocean invasions. The Allies planned to strike at low tide, using the exposed reefs as cover against incoming fire.

Duke and Ramspecht argued for a while as a matter of professional pride. Ramspecht seemed amused by Duke's confidence game and didn't threaten him like the Gestapo men had. For Duke the change was a welcome relief. This German had a friendly demeanour, and Duke could tell it wasn't an act.

When the session ended, Ramspecht drove Duke back to the prison, without guards. They chatted like colleagues, discussing their pre-war work. The captain, a reservist like Duke, lamented that his rank was capped because he wasn't in the regular military. In the American military, Duke proudly pointed out, reservists could keep moving up.

The American sensed that his interrogator was loyal to Germany, not the Nazis. Maybe he was even one of the anti-Hitler German intelligence officers who wanted to surrender to the West so the Soviets wouldn't take over their country—the same deal the Hungarians were hoping for. If so, Duke's performance gave the German resistance a tool to weaken Hitler's Atlantic Wall to permit a landing.

The American colonel was credible. Ramspecht would fly back to Berlin and report that Sparrow's mission commander, a man connected to the State Department and the Joint Chiefs of Staff—and a personal friend of generals Ike, Patton, Eaker, and Spaatz—had said three million American troops were ready to invade across a broad range of targets.

When the German's car reached the Budapest jail, Duke invited him to dine with the Sparrows, but the captain said he needed to return to Berlin for his niece's wedding the next day. Duke asked the German to give the bride a kiss for him. The amused captain agreed but warned with a twinkle in his eye that his niece might be surprised by a kiss from an American officer.

On the same day that Duke told Ramspecht of the coming attack on Hungary, Allen Dulles wrote from Switzerland to Washington, saying Allied deception should make the Nazis believe in a plot to "open the way to Hungary."[10] Duke and Dulles didn't need a radio connection to call plays from the same Bodyguard playbook. The plan was in their hands since late 1943.

* * *

Sparrow's lies worked on the Germans. But trapped together twenty-four hours a day in a six-by-eight cell, even master deceivers couldn't hide their real views. They finally tore into each other about politics. Duke was a conservative Republican. Nunn, a liberal Democrat. Suarez had fought alongside Socialists. In normal times, they wouldn't have been friends—they had different social circles, different workplaces, different neighbourhoods. The OSS had chosen them for the mission not because of their similarities but because of their differences: the team had been built to work with all factions of Hungarian politics.

After their fight, they agreed to leave politics alone. Instead, they could talk sports and cars, tease Suarez for getting the most bug bites because of

his good looks and hot Latino blood, or discuss fake D-Day plans in case German intelligence was listening in.

* * *

Soon after Ramspecht left, another German intelligence officer showed up. He was obsessed with just one thing: the Office of Strategic Services. If Duke admitted his involvement in OSS spying, it would be a fatal mistake. But if he played dumb and Germany had proof that the Sparrows worked for the agency, he'd be caught in a deadly lie.

The game had turned mortal again. Still, Duke exemplified the words of the war theorist Carl von Clausewitz: "Two qualities are indispensable[11]: first, an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead."

The colonel switched tactics. Before, he had played the part of someone who knew more than he was saying—cool, reserved, letting his silence suggest hidden depths. Now he flipped the performance, acting like a gregarious fool saying more than he knew.

"Oh, yes I know[12] all about OSS." Duke unleashed a torrent of details, painting the organization as a kind of university full of professors who "study and make reports"[13] about rivers, harbours, roads, railroads, bridges, mountain passes, natural resources, manpower, and industrial capacity. He listed these items one by one, pausing after each, waiting until the German finished writing.

Duke concealed the full truth, but he wasn't lying—the OSS did employ scholars[14]. It was a cover story that had the advantage of being true, as well as public—it had been plastered all over American newspapers since 1942. Duke painstakingly clarified the range of professors working for the agency: "economics, history, geography, sociology, psychology—specialists in all kinds of subjects." They knew literally everything there was to know about enemy countries, neutral countries, and their own allies.

Duke was willing to go on for a long time about these subjects, in case his interrogator wanted to know everything too. The German looked for an admission of spying, but instead Duke turned into a walking *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—the kind of man who could earnestly say that French wine production in 1943 had fallen to just over thirty-five million hectolitres, less

than half of what it had been in 1939, just in case his interrogator was curious about wartime farming economics.

The German stifled a yawn and sent him back to his cell.

Duke had won another round against his captors, but at his own risk. Now he was back in the hands of the Gestapo.

* * *

Several days earlier, the mass deportation of Hungary's Jews had begun with brutal efficiency. By the end of May, the authorities had sent away 217,236 deportees[15], most of whom were slaughtered at Auschwitz.

The round-ups began in Hungary's eastern provinces and moved west like a methodical harvest. In small towns that had been home to Jewish families for centuries, Hungarian police came with lists and timetables. They gave families minutes to pack one suitcase before hauling them to factories that served as collection points. From there, they were herded onto trains bound for Auschwitz.

The conditions were deliberately inhumane. Each train carried about three thousand Jews crammed into packed freight cars. Each car was supplied with two buckets: one with water and the other for the excrement of seventy to ninety people. Before loading them, Hungarian police conducted brutal searches for hidden valuables to confiscate before the Germans did. Some policemen were so appalled that they quit; others kept their jobs and willingly carried out the violence.

Éva Heyman, a thirteen-year-old girl, wrote in her diary about the lies used to trick Jews onto the trains: "It's no use that everybody says[16] that we're not going to Poland but to Balaton. Even though, dear diary, I don't want to die; I want to live even if it means that I'll be the only person here allowed to stay."

The Nazis soon murdered her in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Behind the statistics[17] were lives like hers—full of hope, fear, and the will to survive.

* * *

In the last days of May 1944, German intelligence intercepted surging Allied radio communications. Something big was about to happen. The

Führer needed to know everything the Sparrows knew. Now.

Guards drove Duke, Suarez, and Nunn to a train station. SS Sergeant Strehlitz viciously tightened the Sparrows' Solingen-steel cuffs behind their backs. Guards roughly pushed them onto a cattle car.

On June 1, 1944, the train lurched into motion, towards interrogation experts who knew how to get secrets from stubborn prisoners.

Chapter 16

The Factory of Death

JUNE 4, 1944—DANUBE VALLEY, AUSTRIA

The Sparrows knew the change of guards from Gestapo to SS was a problem. The Gestapo killed political opponents here and there when it suited them. The SS murdered by the millions. Hitler's Schutzstaffel could make the Sparrows vanish into an incinerator where not even sympathetic Wehrmacht officers would ever find them.

The train clattered through the emerald-green Danube valley under a punishing white sun. Nunn and Suarez clamped their eyes shut against the searing brightness. They hadn't seen the sun for weeks.

Seven guards with submachine guns stared at the Americans. During the Sparrows' earlier transfers, there had been only three guards. The increased firepower showed the commandos' heightened status in the Nazi intelligence hierarchy at a time when German battlefield manpower was running dangerously short.

The train steamed like a sauna. The guards wore heavy uniforms, as if the battle for Stalingrad might stretch into another winter. Sweat soaked their collars, but their postures remained stiff. Only the SS sergeant, like the devil himself, did not sweat.

Duke launched into his usual storm of legal complaints about Geneva Convention rights. Nunn translated into German. But here, in this sweltering train car, there was no translation for "Geneva."

The sergeant laughed softly. "What you say about the Geneva Convention[1] is very true. You even quote it accurately in German. But you must not persist in the illusion that you are prisoners of war."

The law meant nothing here; the SS meant everything.

At a way station, the Americans glimpsed a sidetracked hospital train poorly camouflaged against Allied fighters. Carriage after carriage was overflowing with wounded Axis soldiers from the Eastern Front. The walking wounded lifted their faces to the sun, desperate for life itself.

When Nunn asked what awaited them in Vienna, the sergeant shook his head. It was not clever to ask about such things. They also shouldn't protest if the guards at the next prison confiscated their uniforms. If they were taken, the Americans would get receipts.

"Receipts." The word echoed. Nunn thought again of Major Sykes, shot in the head. Did he die with a receipt in his pocket?

Sounding bored, the sergeant said their fate would be decided not in Vienna but in Berlin. It would be best for the Americans to go along with it quietly. Even for him, the sergeant bitterly added, decisions came from Berlin. He said he was notorious in Austria a decade earlier—one of the men who'd helped kill Engelbert Dollfuss, the anti-Nazi chancellor. Yet despite his "long services to the party," he remained just an Oberscharführer. He wasn't part of the right clique.

The sergeant was complaining to the captured enemy about his rank—a crack in discipline, a sign of disintegrating morale. This was two days before what would become the greatest naval invasion in human history. No one in the train knew the exact time. But the Sparrows knew that D-Day should have already happened by now. The last they had heard before being cut off from Allied communication when they dropped into Hungary was that D-Day was supposed to happen by the end of May.

* * *

The train hissed to a stop under the vaulted canopy of Vienna East Station. Steam billowed across the platform, momentarily obscuring the crowds. The station was quiet as their captors herded them onto the platform. A large clock ticked. Everyone, even children, looked away from the prisoners.

The Soviets were only about three hundred kilometres from the Austrian border. Citizens waited with grim patience, gripping their possessions like talismans. Nunn thought he saw a Russian slave labourer raise a finger to his cap in a tiny salute to the Americans, his eyes still on the ground.

The train station was intact. If the Nazi high command had paid more attention, they would have seen a clue that D-Day wouldn't be coming from the southeast, despite what the Sparrows said. If that were the case, the station would have been levelled.

The Americans stepped out into the hot sun and were greeted by a fine view of the gardens of the baroque Palais Schwarzenberg, but they could hardly enjoy the Austrian aristocratic grandeur.

They were pushed into a car and driven through the city's elegant core, past ornate facades and flower boxes, trams clanging by cafés where Viennese sipped coffee beneath Nazi flags. Spring in a conquered city.

Ahead loomed the Landesgericht, the state courthouse, a huge classical building of pale stones and iron gates. As they entered the foreboding prison, Duke thought of the inscription on the door to hell: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter."

Inside, guards with rifles ordered the Americans to strip. The Sparrows stood naked on cold concrete while Germans checked their body cavities with a thoroughness that would have made US Army doctors blush. Meanwhile, security men probed their uniforms stitch by stitch, hunting for razor blades hidden in collars, needles tucked in trouser cuffs, tiny nails concealed anywhere fabric met fabric. Even the buttons were examined because German intelligence knew that they sometimes hid tiny compasses for escape.

The Sparrows bore the invasive inspection in silence. Contraband searches were legal under the Geneva Convention.

But then the leader of the guards announced that their military uniforms were being confiscated, just as Sergeant Strehlitz had predicted. The German pointed to a stack of cotton prison clothes with red-and-white stripes and wooden shoes that they must put on. The Sparrows erupted in defiance.

Duke stormed in English: "That is an illegal order!"[2] Nunn translated into German: "*Das ist ein illegaler Befehl!*"

"All prisoners must wear these[3] clothes," the Wachtmeister insisted. "You will receive proper receipts." The Gestapo's meticulousness about receipts was a mind game, meant to lull prisoners into obedience.

This time it wasn't a suggestion, but an order. The Americans *had to* surrender the only visual signifier of their Geneva Convention rights, which had until now made them bulletproof. It looked like the Sparrows' flight

had ended, and they would be dead by this time tomorrow—if they made it that long.

Duke demanded to see the Kommandant. When faced with the worst of the worst, the colonel knew how to play the odds: take on the biggest rank around. He would be the Nazi hanged for war crimes after the war. The underlings would say they were just following orders.

"I'm as near to the prison Kommandant[4] as you will get," the officer proudly replied.

"Then bring me the Protecting Power," Duke shot back, invoking the Geneva Convention. Switzerland, as the neutral go-between, was in charge of ensuring captured soldiers were treated according to international law—though getting access to the Swiss inside a Gestapo facility was another matter.

The Nazi erupted. The Americans were civilians now, not soldiers, and they had no Geneva rights.

Ordinarily, it might have seemed welcome to the Americans to trade in filthy, reeking uniforms that they hadn't taken off in two months. Fresh, clean clothes beckoned. But the Sparrows were thinking beyond the present moment. They knew their uniforms were a kind of shield against Nazi depravities; to shed them meant certain death.

As they started putting on their uniforms once more, the German officer threatened to use force to stop them. Duke dared him: "Just try it."[5] He glanced at Suarez and Nunn to let them know to get ready. The silence stretched. The Sparrows sized up the distance to the guards. Duke held the German's eyes while his mind ran the calculations that months of commando training had burned into muscle memory.

Seven targets. Six guards, one officer.

The officer is six feet away. If he reaches for his Luger, explode forward—pin his gun hand at the holster, elbow to his jaw. Officer down. Sidearm mine.

Suarez and Nunn break on my move, closing eight feet to the flanking guards. Grab the barrels, drive the stocks into their faces. Two seconds. Two guards down, their rifles in our hands.

Never stop moving. The door guards swing their Mausers up, but we're firing. Their officer down, their own weapons turned against them.

The last two guards lift their rifles, aiming into chaos. Their own men down, muzzle flashes, no clear command. I put two shots from the Luger

into the nearest while rolling. Suarez or Nunn drops the last one.

Nine seconds, maybe ten. Seven enemies neutralized.

Without speaking, the Sparrows knew the plan. Duke balanced on the balls of his feet. Suarez and Nunn coiled, waiting for his move.

The Sparrows knew that if it came to a fight, they wouldn't make it out of Europe alive. Even if they killed these guards, German stormtroopers could keep coming in endless numbers. Still, if the Americans were going to get killed, they wanted it to be on their own terms. They'd take as many of the bastards with them as they could.

The German officer's Luger stayed in its holster. He shifted uncomfortably, eyes glancing over to his guards. They didn't speak English, and their blank stares gave no sign of understanding. He looked over his shoulder for the SS sergeant, desperate for help. But Sergeant Strehlitz had vanished—gone without so much as a "Heil Hitler."

The Wachtmeister thought things over. His many guards would eventually win the fight against the outnumbered Americans. *Ja.* But some men—perhaps even him—could get mangled or killed along the way. And if the Germans killed these officers, these high-value intelligence assets, there would be trouble coming down the pipeline.

Whether he won or lost the battle for the uniforms, the mess would be a humiliating blow to his career. He decided the gamble wasn't worth it. The Americans could keep their uniforms. Once the Sparrows left through that door, they'd be someone else's problem.

Still, the Nazi needed to save face. He brought them to a table. In a low voice, speaking English, he asked each man for his name, rank, and serial number, glad that his guards didn't realize he had given in.

Somehow, with all the guns on the German side and the Americans shouting about the Geneva Convention on the other, the Sparrows kept winning. The Gestapo were used to prisoners coming in scared and easily bullied. Suddenly, they saw what it looks like when soldiers stand up to their bullies.

* * *

The commandos were once again split up into solitary cells. Duke was given a tiny cell on the third floor, barely big enough for his bunk and toilet, while Nunn was given a roomier cell on the second floor.

Nunn's cell measured eight by twelve feet and had a wooden bunk, a thin mattress and a threadbare Gestapo blanket stamped "*Geheime Staatspolizei* 1934," a stool, a water jug, and a toilet. On one wall loomed an iron ring, perfectly positioned for chained men to be beaten. The good news was the view: for the first time in seven weeks, Nunn had a window. Bars narrowed the gap, but light entered. He stood at it for hours, hungrily feasting on the sight of objective reality beyond his depressing prison walls.

The Sparrows' mattresses had dark bloodstains left behind from suicides. Nunn understood why some prisoners wanted to end it all. For many, it was the only way to prevent endless pain or avoid betraying others under torture. Even after the guards had confiscated belts and bootlaces, the *Selbstmord*—self-murder—rate in Nazi prisons was thirty times higher than among the general population.

The cell doors were covered with heavy steel, with a flap for meals and a peephole through which unseen eyes watched. Even without hearing or seeing anything, Nunn could feel them like icy hands on his back.

The prison rules, posted in German, forbade singing, whistling, sitting on the bunk during the day, talking to the guards, writing on the walls, planning to escape, and keeping quiet about other prisoners who were planning to escape. The Sparrows broke the rules intentionally, sitting on the bunk when forbidden and loudly drawing attention to their rights under the Geneva Convention. Each small act of defiance forced the guards into confrontations they didn't want. Like a schoolyard bully avoiding a scrappy classmate, the guards increasingly left them alone.

But the night gave no victories. There was no leverage against the relentless, crawling onslaught of thousands of bedbugs. Suarez crushed a season-best 180 in a single night. Still the bloodsuckers pressed on in a relentless charge. The quiet terror left the men squirming and exhausted.

* * *

The next morning, guards took Duke from his cell and marched him down the prison halls—not for exercise, but to terrorize him. Guards took him past heavy gates and iron doors into the execution room, where a guillotine stood over a bloodstained wooden block. It was a warning: his team would suffer the same fate if they didn't tell everything.

Next they brought him to the *Blutbank,* the blood bank. Prisoners destined for the guillotine were drained a day before, leaving them with just enough to walk to their own beheading. Their blood would be used to save the lives of wounded Nazi soldiers.

"Damned efficient,[6] you Germans," Duke muttered angrily. The Gestapo man smiled as if receiving a compliment.

In his bleak loneliness, Duke looked up at the prison windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of Nunn or Suarez. But he saw "neither sound nor movement[7] anywhere in this vast factory of death."

The men of Operation Sparrow had hit rock bottom. They were stuck in a murder factory run by blood-sucking vampires. Filthy, flea-bitten, exhausted, and starving, they stared at their imminent beheading—unless they were chained to iron rings and beaten first.

Despite this gruesome theatre, the Americans stayed alive. They had been saved not just by their military uniforms and their bravado but also by the Nazis' certainty that these captives knew priceless intelligence about the coming D-Day invasion. It was clear to their interrogators that the Sparrows were stubbornly holding back some key information. It needed to be scared out of them.

* * *

While the lead actors of the southeast's phase one of Operation Bodyguard languished in Nazi torture chambers, Britain's double agents—the stars of the western European part of Operation Bodyguard—ran their part of the D-Day deception from the comfort of London, shaken martinis in hand.

The grand strategy of John Cecil Masterman's MI5 Double Cross system, the French deception, was simple in concept but intricate in execution. Because the preparations for D-Day couldn't be completely hidden from German reconnaissance, the Allies had to convince Berlin that there would indeed be an attack on France, but it would happen at Calais, two hundred kilometres northeast of the actual Normandy landing beaches. And if something did happen at Normandy, Germany must believe it was merely a diversion from the real coming assault.

Double Cross used apparent Nazi spies to feed their masters just enough truth to seem credible. The real information was interlaced with lies, to keep Germany convinced that their agents had penetrated British defences.

The British agents had virtually the same job as the Sparrows, but with better working conditions. Juan Pujol García, known to British intelligence as Garbo and to the Germans as Arabel, sat at his typewriter in his home in northwest London, writing fictitious reports supposedly authored by twenty-seven invented sub-agents. Through coded messages filled with fake troop movements and unit names, he made sure Berlin thought the Allies were preparing for an attack near Belgium, a few hours north of Normandy.

Meanwhile, the smooth playboy and lawyer Dusko Popov masked his razor-sharp intelligence with easy charm. He moved easily between worlds: by day he toasted champagne with MI5 officers who called him Tricycle; by night he whispered creative lies about non-existent army groups and phantom divisions to the Abwehr, who knew him as Ivan.

Roman Czerniawski worked under dual identities—Brutus to the British, Hubert to the Germans. The Polish officer and former head of the Interallié Network in France posed as a spy with access to Allied headquarters. He fed Germany false invasion times and places salted with scraps of real army movements to lend credibility to the ruse.

Then there was Elvira de la Fuente Chaudoir, code-named Bronx by MI5. The Germans called her Dorette. Her careful and determined messages to Germany showed Allied strength in places they barely occupied, keeping German forces distracted from the true target.

The Double-Cross committee was the toast of secret London.

Meanwhile, the Sparrows, starving in solitary, couldn't help feeling depressed. They had flown out of Brindisi in March expecting D-Day in May. Now it was June, and there was still no landing. Something was badly wrong. It was hard to be optimistic after months in Nazi hell, even for the bravest.

Nunn sat in his cell, staring at nothing, while a worm of despair burrowed towards the core of hope.

Chapter 17

The Secret Telephone

Sound travels in pipes at the same speed that it travels in open air.

—Professor Brian Collett

JUNE 5, 1944—VIENNA, AUSTRIA

On the Sparrows' second day in Vienna, Guy Nunn awoke to dull thumping on the wall next to his bunk. Ten thumps.

Captain Nunn returned ten.

Ten thumps came back. He tried Morse code in German and French. He heard ten thumps. He was stumped.

At 10 A.M., the American got his breakfast: a piece of black bread. It was sour and gritty with sawdust. He drank a lot of water, hoping to fill his stomach with something, anything.

Later, for lunch, he would get disgusting Swiss chard soup: slimy, gluey, like green bile. At least there were two meals a day now, double Berlin rations.

It had been eight weeks since the Gestapo handed down the Americans' death sentence in Belgrade. Yet somehow they were still alive. Nunn paced in his cell, but walking fast made him dizzy and burned too many calories. The trick was to find the golden middle: just enough exercise, but not too much.

He flopped down on the bed, hopeful that a guard would come in to yell at him for breaking the rules. If Nunn looked asleep at this illegal hour, a guard might burst in, thinking he was getting a jump on him. Then Nunn was ready to leap up and thunder his case like a prosecuting attorney. He

would loudly demand to see the Kommandant, the Red Cross, the Protecting Power. His strategy: "Be more overbearing[1] than they are."

Aggressive indignation, Nunn knew, "saves you the petty abuses and indignities in which the guards are such expert practitioners."

Like boxer Jack Dempsey, he knew that "the best defense[2] is an aggressive defense." But the door stayed shut. None of the guards wanted to tangle with him. They had weapons, but these prisoners were supposed to be kept alive. A French voice woke him, calling through his window: "*Camarade Americain! Viens à ta fenêtre!*" American comrade, come to your window.

Nunn saw a face in a window on the fifth floor across the courtyard. The man shouted, "A comrade in the cell to your right has a message for you. Watch for it."

When the guards changed shifts, the prisoners took advantage of the gap in supervision to break the rules for a few minutes.

On cue, Nunn saw a stick with a piece of paper on it extend near his window. His big hand struggled through the bars and grabbed it. Opening the note, he found a sketch of a toilet, with directions.

Following the diagram, he found a heavy square mop rag behind his toilet. He put it in the toilet bowl and used it to push water down the pipe. Fifteen frustrating minutes later, he finally pushed the water level below the exit pipe.

A foul odour hit him, followed by a muffled voice: "Hallo. Speak German?"

Over the next hour, Nunn spoke with Gerhardt Lange[3], a Viennese *Mischling*—or to the Nazis, mongrel—meaning he was part Aryan and part Jewish. That made him a criminal to the Germans.

Lange explained the security protocol for the "secret prisoner telephone system."[4] If guards peeked through the peephole and saw a man leaning over the toilet, they might assume he was ill. But if Nunn heard a key click in the lock, he must yell "Halt! Halt!" and quickly flush the toilet to break the connection. He also clarified the limits of the connection. Not all the prisoners were on the same plumbing line, but messages could be shared through different junction points.

Lange told his story. After the takeover of Austria in 1938, he had been denied employment and quarantined to the Jewish section of Vienna. He

fought back, joining the resistance and transmitting political intelligence to Germany's enemies in the West and East.

In early 1940, the Gestapo arrested him and sent him here. This prison was for people being questioned and those sentenced to death. There were five thousand prisoners.

Once a year, they took him out of his solitary confinement for questioning and beating, and then he was returned to his cell for another year. Since his arrest four and a half years ago, there had been no trial.

Another voice came on the line, this one belonging to *der Schwarze,* or "the Black"—a nom de guerre the husky-voiced man had chosen five years earlier. His deep, resonant voice sounded, Nunn thought, "like an echo from the pits of hell."

Der Schwarze asked about news from Broadway and Hollywood. Nunn knew nothing about the New York stage, but being from Los Angeles, he told of the latest news from the silver screen. Der Schwarze chuckled to hear that Shirley Temple had returned to the pictures. Then he turned to business, reading questions he had collected from his fellow prisoners. "What is the rationing system like in America? Is there really a chance for an independent Austria after the war? How are your relations with the Russians? Is it true that the Allies have developed an amphibious tank? Is it true that a Liberty ship has been built in nine days?"

Nunn wanted to ask about the young Austrian parachutists who had jumped near Vienna on the Sparrows' flight to Hungary. Owing to an error[5] by their jumpmaster, their radio was destroyed because its chute didn't open. They were left alone in Austria wearing German military uniforms without a way to contact headquarters. Nunn wondered if they might have been arrested and brought to this prison. But his impulse to ask passed. Better not to say anything—this could be a Gestapo trick. Paranoia, perhaps, but in OSS special operations and secret intelligence work, you needed to be careful.

Soon, other voices joined: Nunn counted seven in all. He was amazed to find the joy of community in this unlikely place. It was an "unexpected escape into a kind of freedom."

Suddenly, a sharp voice cut in: "*Geht zu euren Fenstern,*" Go to your windows. "You can see them now. They are coming out."

Nunn looked out his window and saw five men in grey prison fatigues shuffle slowly across the courtyard, chained together at their ankles and

wrists. Their heads were shaved, and they had unkempt beards. Three guards with rifles followed them.

The chain gang's wooden shoes clattered like a death rattle. Nunn saw one of the condemned men look up to the top floor. Half-smiling, he nodded his head twice. After they marched past, Nunn went back to his drain pipe and asked who they were.

"Those are five of twenty-seven who will be executed tomorrow morning," Lange answered. "Every Tuesday is guillotine day."

After the Gestapo announced a death sentence, Lange explained, the prisoner was brought to a special cell on the main floor and kept chained to the wall, day and night, for up to ninety-nine days. Then one day, guards would bring him out to have his blood drained, and the next morning he would die. The men who had walked past were coming back from the blood bank. That was the reason for their slow steps.

Nunn's stomach turned, then rage flooded in. The blood bank. He hadn't heard about it before—he and Duke had been kept apart—but now he understood. They were bleeding these condemned men before the guillotine, draining them like livestock. His big hands tightened into fists. If he escaped, the Nazis were going to pay.

Most of the condemned were political prisoners, Lange explained, from an underground organization of everyone who opposed the Nazis—socialists, communists, liberals, Catholics. Anyone who resisted. It was the same opposition among different groups, united in a loyal spirit. To defeat the Nazis, the resistance turned to propaganda, sabotage, and intelligence gathering.

The Gestapo scooped up hundreds of resistance members per week, subjecting them to vicious torture and mass execution. Yet the resistance was gaining momentum. "Hence the necessity for the severest Nazi countermeasures in mass proportions," the Austrian said.

But the repression wasn't working. Lange insisted that the movement couldn't be killed off. "It will be strong enough to take care of itself after the war too. It will be impossible for anyone outside to play one part off against another."

Nunn thought he heard a note of defiance—a warning to the Americans, in case they were thinking about playing the bully after the war. Austria's future would be decided by Austrians. In trying to perfect evil, Hitler had

forged something he never intended: a kinship of the condemned—men and women, shackled and bleeding, yet united in patriotic purpose.

The conversations with various other prisoners on the pipes went on for much of the day, with a break when the midday soup was being delivered. Later in the day, Lange told Nunn he wanted to introduce him to Erich Launer,[6] one of the condemned men who would die the next day.

"*Grüss Gott,* Erich," Nunn started. "I saw you for a moment today."

"*Grüss Gott, Amerikanischer Kamerad.* We have a few questions you might be able to answer. First, will the Allies invade western Europe this year?"

Nunn tried to speak with the same confidence he had in March, when Operation Sparrow took off. "They will certainly come. They will come before the end of the month."

He didn't know. But he knew he needed to sound confident.

"We do not count," Launer replied. "Tomorrow we will go, but if they come soon, there will be much left to salvage. In six months, many more of us will be gone."

He had another question: "Do people outside really know about us? Do they feel with us?"

"Yes," Nunn said. "The war, for people outside, is more than just a military struggle. Millions of our people have never seen the Nazis and know of them only through people like those in your movement. But they are fighting them in the same spirit and for the same reasons that you are."

The condemned Austrian answered that he knew it, but "it is somehow good to hear it fresh from someone outside."

His last question: "Once you have beaten the Nazis, will you work with or against people like us?"

Nunn responded: "With whom else would we work?"

The condemned man laughed. Nunn was right. A cause made of democrats, communists, socialists, conservatives, resistance fighters—it was a strange political landscape in Austria, but it was the only one left.

The next day the Austrian would meet his fate, but his loyalty would live on. He gave Nunn his blessing. "We would like very much to work with you. The guard is coming. *Lebewohl, Amerikaner.* Remember us to your people."

"Goodbye. I will."

* * *

The Sparrows were briefly reunited for another search by the guards. Nunn quietly explained to Duke and Suarez how the prison communication system worked. The colonel tried it. He painstakingly removed the water from his toilet with a cloth, then lowered his head to the bowl, fighting nausea, and summoned his courage to shout into the drainage hole. He was disappointed to learn that the prisoners on his line couldn't speak English or French, while he couldn't speak German. Duke said goodbye. He wouldn't try again, but he felt better knowing he wasn't alone.

The Sparrows might be the next ones taken to the blood bank, but it inspired Duke to know they weren't the only ones fighting.

In another cell, Nunn thought about the condemned man's words: "Remember us to your people." First, he needed to get out of this prison alive.

Chapter 18

Death Day

JUNE 6, 1944—0400 HOURS, VIENNA

The Sparrows tossed and turned in their sleep, attacked by lice and bedbugs. Their dreams were haunted by the knowledge that their new Austrian friends would be killed today. Sooner or later it would be their turn. They knew that D-Day had been delayed, but they had no idea what was wrong. Eighty-two days after the Americans landed in Podturen, it may have been their lowest point.

The commandos were unaware that the moment[1] they had sacrificed for had finally come. In the early morning darkness off the coast of France, the largest invasion fleet in history emerged from pre-dawn mist. Thousands of ships and aircraft carrying 156,000 Allied soldiers readied to attack fifty miles of beaches defended by only 50,000 German troops—half the number that Hitler had sent into Hungary to stop the Sparrows.

It was everything Bodyguard had hoped for. From the Mediterranean to the North Sea, millions of Axis soldiers sat idle. Hitler had been outsmarted by Allied deception from Sparrow to Double Cross.

Just after midnight on June 6, 1944, 23,400 Allied paratroopers had begun jumping into the darkness over France. Their job was to make sure German troops and supplies couldn't reinforce the beach when Allied boats landed. The American 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions and the British 6th Airborne Division landed in scattered formations, often far from their drop zones. They fought a brutal, chaotic battle to secure their objectives.

Among the paratroopers who jumped before dawn was Private David Kenyon Webster of the 101st Airborne, whose mission was a descent into fear. He watched from the plane door as tracers and flares lit up the sky, feeling the aircraft shudder from the flak.

Webster parachuted into the void and soon landed hard in three feet of cold water. He felt terribly alone in the darkness, surrounded by the rattle of German machine guns and the crack of sniper fire. For hours, he wandered through flooded fields, stumbling into deep ditches. He was soaked, cold, and unable to warm up. As he walked, Webster passed the pale, still bodies of dead paratroopers floating in the water. The nightmare struggle tested him before he reached the main battle.

And still, hours after it began, the Führer knew nothing of D-Day. Hitler and his fiancée, Eva Braun, stayed up late at his retreat in the Bavarian Alps watching newsreels with his entourage and talking about films and theatre. It was like the "good old times,"[2] the Nazi propaganda director Joseph Goebbels put it.

As the party broke up around 2 A.M., two hours into the Allied invasion, the Führer still didn't know the assault had begun. A thunderstorm broke over the Alps, soaking Hitler's departing guests. The bad weather across Europe had convinced Germany that no attack could happen that day.

Around 3 A.M., Hitler drifted off to sleep in his jade-green bedroom under heavy cotton sheets monogrammed with his initials, a swastika, and a large eagle. Above him, Harz Mountain canaries slept in gilded cages. The Führer had ordered that no one wake him, so no one did. He slept soundly, confident that when the Allies invaded, it would be at Calais and along the Adriatic Coast. From his top intelligence sources in Britain, he knew to expect action in Normandy, but that it was just a feint.

It seemed especially foolish to wake the dictator to announce an Allied tactic that he expected. Besides, Hitler needed rest for two meetings that would reinforce his southeastern front, with the Austrian foreign minister later that day and the Hungarian prime minister the next. Hitler wanted to coordinate defences against the Balkans invasion that the Sparrows had helped convince him would soon hit.

* * *

Although there was still work to do readying the Balkans defences, the Führer was confident about the Western Front. He had put General Erwin Rommel in charge of shoring up the Atlantic Wall. The savvy general had transformed Normandy's coast into a daunting barrier. To get to the beach, Allied ships would need to pass sinister shore obstacles, like steel girders

and railway tracks set in deadly pyramids that funneled ships into explosive traps.

And even if the landing ships got past them, the assault troops would face fire from massive steel-reinforced concrete bunkers, pillboxes bristling with machine guns, and mortar pits behind minefields and networks of barbed wire. Further inland waited long-range artillery and armoured divisions. The Allied invasion would likely turn into a debacle.

But Rommel had one problem. Even though the Atlantic Wall was well built, it lacked enough men. Meanwhile, from Croatia to Denmark, German sentries peered through binoculars at empty horizons.

Around 4 A.M., Private Fuchs of German 7th Army intelligence told his duty officer of front-line reports of paratrooper landings in France. If Hitler got word quickly, massive German firepower could soon be aimed at the sea to blast enemy ships. The Luftwaffe would roar in to hammer the slow-moving landing craft. The Führer had planned for a thousand Nazi fighter planes to attack the invasion beachhead. The chances of Allied success at D-Day would plummet.

But Hitler slept on as the officer calmly told Fuchs: "Don't make a big production[3] out of it. Remember Dieppe." The officer might have been in on the secret intelligence that the first invasion would be a fake, sharing Hitler's smug certainty that Germany was ruining the Allied plan by seeing through the illusion. Meanwhile, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, confident in his Führer's genius, kept the Luftwaffe all but grounded.

If D-Day had the same casualty ratio as Dieppe, over ninety thousand Allied troops would be destroyed by the end of the day, and German victory on the Western Front would be assured, at least for a long time.

Curiously, three key German commanders weren't there as the attack began. General Rommel had gone home for his wife's birthday, while his chief of staff, General Hans Speidel, entertained friends who happened to be anti-Hitler conspirators. General Hans von Salmuth—commander of the powerful 15th Army in Calais—was on a hunting trip.

Hitler's bad luck kept getting worse. When Field Marshal Rundstedt ordered two Panzer divisions towards the beaches in the middle of the night in response to reports of Allied landings, General Jodl cancelled the move. Only the Führer could authorize tank attacks, and no one dared wake Hitler against his orders. He had commanded that he be allowed to sleep in[4], and that was the end of the story.

Germany's command paralysis might not have been coincidental. Historian Thaddeus Holt writes that a top German intelligence analyst, Colonel Alexis Baron von Roenne, a devout Christian who despised Hitler, wasn't "the only officer to fantasize[5] that if Germany should give in to superior force in the West the Allies would help hold back the Soviets."

* * *

Canadian soldiers knew[6] they had drawn the hardest job at Normandy. Juno, their target beach, sat directly in the path of the massive Panzer divisions, which were ready to counterattack. Farm boys from Manitoba checked their rifles one last time as their ships bobbed across the Channel.

In the early dawn light, war correspondent Ross Munro looked from a warship towards the French shoreline and saw a calm scene that reminded him of a holiday postcard. "Strips of white beach[7] and brown dunes, slender church spires at Courseulles, Bernières and St.-Aubin, the water towers behind the towns." Beyond them lay "rich green and brown fields where some of the finest crops in France are grown."

The concrete German coastal defences looked as calm as the rest of the scenery. The troops had expected their ships to be taking heavy fire by now. Instead, an eerie quiet hung over the coast. The German guns stayed silent. They had not been warned.

At 5:30 A.M., the silence shattered as hundreds of Allied naval guns roared at once. To Munro, it sounded like "the rhythmic beating[8] of a gigantic drum."

From west to east, American transport ships closed on Utah and Omaha, the British 50th Division neared Gold, the Canadians prepared to hit Juno, and the British 3rd Division approached Sword. As the ships neared the shore, the big Allied guns lifted their barrage to avoid hitting their own men.

The troops ran off their landing ships into waist-deep water. German machine gunners raked the beach as invaders waded ashore and tried to sprint across hundreds of feet of open beach into a hail of gunfire. Sand exploded around their boots.

On Juno, a Toronto factory worker stumbled three steps before falling. A Montreal teenager made it less than a hundred feet before shrapnel found his chest. Private Jim Wilkins of the Queen's Own Rifles jumped from his

landing craft into the chaos. He saw blazing machine gun fire coming from a concrete pillbox directly in front of him. Within moments, his section leader, Corporal John Gibson, was killed after a few steps in the water.

By mid-morning, Canada's Regina Rifles and First Hussars controlled their part of the beach. Bodies littered the sand, but the survivors kept pushing forward.

* * *

On Omaha Beach, German machine-gunner Franz Gockel was in the thick of it[9]. When the naval bombardment ended, he opened fire, but a blast tore the weapon from his hands, jamming it with sand. Switching to his rifle, he fired at the first wave of American soldiers as they jumped from their boats.

The attackers were tightly packed and struggled in the chest-deep water. Gockel watched as many fell dead after only a few feet. Assault crafts spun in circles, out of control. A second wave of Americans arrived and faced the same heavy fire, leaving the beach strewn with dead, wounded, and soldiers seeking shelter behind a low sea wall. German mortar crews unleashed a deadly barrage on preset coordinates along the wall, with rounds exploding on impact and inflicting severe casualties.

By 8:30 A.M., Gockel's unit had suffered only light casualties and still had lots of ammunition. Watching the American transports turn back towards the sea, he thought the invasion was beaten.

In truth, the attack boats were returning to their mother ships to bring in more troops.

* * *

On Gold Beach, the British 50th Infantry Division pressed forward against entrenched German positions. The area was heavily mined, so British flail tanks led the way, their spinning chains setting off German mines in violent explosions. On Sword, the British 3rd Division fought off a fierce Panzer counterattack aiming to split the beachhead.

Inland from the beach[10], Private Norman Millward of the 2nd Battalion, King's Shropshire Light Infantry, saw a little girl standing by a road in the middle of a battle and knew she was about to get killed. He leaped out from

his cover behind a garden wall, pulled her to safety, and got her back to her family.

The heroism of the morning wasn't found in a single charge but in the strength of ordinary men—mud on their hands, smoke in their lungs, nerves frayed—who held their ground and inched forward under fire, as well as in those who fell before they could see what their sacrifice had won.

* * *

At his cozy Bavarian retreat[11], Hitler slept soundly until nearly noon. When he was finally informed of the attack, his face lit with joy. "It's begun at last!"[12] he told his generals. This was the feint he had warned about. Everything was going according to plan.

He didn't know that his intelligence had been turned into a screen showing what Allied intelligence wanted him to see. Their lies had become his reality. Hitler summoned Reichsmarschall Göring to his map table. The dictator's finger stabbed triumphantly at Normandy. "Just where we expected them!"[13] He then pointed to the places on the map where the "real" coming Allied attacks would strike, delightedly picturing his enemies being destroyed.

Three Americans locked in a deadly Austrian prison had helped convince Hitler to look the wrong way at the key moment. German defences sat uselessly[14] in the wrong places, staring at empty seas while the battle raged on the northwest coast of France.

The Bodyguard deception was so complete that the Führer was celebrating his enemy's success, thinking it was his own.

* * *

The morning's heavy silence at Vienna's Landesgericht prison was broken as a guard read twenty-seven names. Guy Nunn heard rattling keys and unlocking doors. The condemned shuffled across the courtyard, chains binding their ankles and wrists. A priest in white lace surplice walked slowly at the front of the line.

At the midpoint of the courtyard, in the most theatrical spot, the condemned suddenly halted. In unison, as if they had practised, they stood tall and threw their arms up, shouting, "*Rächt uns!*" Avenge us![15]

Nunn watched as the prisoners then walked the rest of the way, almost swaggering, their wooden clogs tap-dancing towards the guillotine. Their steps faded into silence.

Avenge us. The words echoed in Nunn's mind long after the condemned had shuffled past. He would do it. He didn't know how, not yet.

An hour or two passed. Nunn's door flap clacked open. A hand offered the little piece of dark bread. But this time, the hand hesitated for a moment before releasing it.

Nunn nibbled the bread, making sure it would last the whole day. After a careful bite, he felt something between his teeth. First sawdust, now this —a piece of paper. He unfolded it and read a message too lovely for the secret telephone: "This morning the Allies have landed[16] on the coast of Normandy. Congratulations, sir! Live the Freedom!"

The Austrian freedom fighters who sent the message didn't know the half of it. The Sparrows were the only Allied operatives who had delivered the Bodyguard lies while being held in Nazi custody.

Nunn grinned as he read the note again. He had been in darkness for months. Now he saw a crack of light.

But Duke and Suarez were in as much darkness as ever.

* * *

The two Panzer divisions that Hitler finally ordered towards Normandy began moving on the afternoon of June 6. But by then the clouds had cleared, and the heavy German tanks became targets for Allied fighter planes. The tankers needed to stop and hide in woods until darkness fell.

The roughly fourteen-hour delay between the first Allied paratrooper landings and Hitler's Panzer order meant that Germany missed two critical opportunities: to move tanks to the beaches under cover of predawn darkness, and to advance under cloud cover. A third chance wouldn't happen until darkness fell once again. Around 10 P.M., the Panzers finally moved towards the beach, twenty-two hours after the invaders began landing.

Around midnight, as undermanned German defences burned under Allied fire in Normandy, Hitler called Axis dignitaries and their wives into the music room at his mountain retreat. His lavish space featured expensive Teutonic furniture, a great red marble fireplace, and a towering picture

window overlooking the peaceful Alps. Within the wooden wall panelling, invisible until the cupboard doors opened, sat his gramophone and hundreds of catalogued records. It was a comfortable place to end the longest day.

The guests were treated to a four-hour gramophone concert[17] featuring the music of Hungarian composer Franz Lehár, alongside Wagner and Strauss. The Führer listened to fiddling while Normandy burned, certain this was the beginning of his Reich's absolute victory.

Meanwhile, his messengers sent him glad tidings of high Allied losses. Over four thousand Allied troops died on D-Day with ten thousand total casualties. It was devastatingly high for a mere feint.

These were, however, losses that Allied commanders had planned for, and the assault wasn't a feint. The American, British, and Canadian generals knew that the price of taking a beachhead would be steep, but worth the cost. Every hour of delay meant more Jewish, Slavic, and Roma civilians murdered in Nazi death camps, more Russian and Polish prisoners worked to death, more Allied sailors drowned in the Atlantic, more ballistic missiles crashing into London.

As D-Day's scale became clearer, urgent calls about the Sparrows crackled between Berlin and Vienna. Colonel Duke had mentioned an Allied invasion in France in his earlier interrogations. At the time, his claims had been dismissed as too foolish for the Allies to consider, given the strength of the Atlantic Wall. But now a big attack was underway in France, exactly as Duke had predicted.

Nazi intelligence didn't understand that Duke's warning of an invasion of France was part of the trick. The colonel knew Bodyguard included multiple deceptions across Europe, including in France. By vaguely mentioning the country without details, he remained in perfect agreement with the overall plan for the Allied feint.

Duke's first goal had always been to convince the Nazis that the Balkan Peninsula was an Allied invasion target. Now that he had predicted the French landings as well, his credibility soared, giving the Nazis even more reason to believe him about the coming attack in the southeast.

* * *

For the Allies, the first day of the invasion was a strategic victory, even if it was tenuous. British and Canadian forces seized two hundred square miles

on the eastern side of the invasion while Americans secured their western beachheads despite an unexpectedly heavy German defence. Still, the Allies were vastly outnumbered on the continent and made steady progress in Normandy only because Hitler hadn't yet ordered an overwhelming counterattack.

The Sparrows' mission wasn't finished. Hitler needed to keep believing Normandy was a deception. If German intelligence realized this was the main attack, they could rush troops from every corner of Europe, and the Germans might soon outnumber the invaders ten to one. The Allied troops who had perished storming the beaches on D-Day would have died for nothing.

Meanwhile, the three American commandos were in more danger than ever. It wasn't clear whether anyone would save them from their own shuffle towards execution. There was a thousand miles between Normandy and their prison in Vienna. Millions of fanatical German soldiers stood between them and liberation.

The German military once again demanded the Gestapo turn over custody of the Allied agents because of their strategic value. The Gestapo still refused. Politics was politics, and orders were orders. The prisoners were under the Führer's execution decree, and the Gestapo would perform the honours.

But the Wehrmacht was insistent. It looked like there would be a custody fight.

Heavy footsteps stopped in front of Duke's cell. He heard rattling keys and his door unlock.

Chapter 19

Hannah's Choice

JUNE 7, 1944—NORMANDY, FRANCE

At dawn the day after D-Day, American, British, and Canadian forces had secured their beachheads despite unexpectedly heavy Wehrmacht defences in the American sector. But the Nazis had planned a Panzer counterattack against the centre: the Canadians holding the centre at Juno Beach. The tanks had orders to "drive the enemy into the sea[1] and destroy them."

If German armour seized Juno, they would split the beachhead in two, isolating Allied forces into pockets then destroying them one by one—unravelling what had taken years to plan and forcing either mass surrender or another disastrous Allied evacuation like at Dieppe two years earlier.

In the afternoon, three Panzer divisions hit the outgunned defenders, striking Canadian positions around Buron with Panzer IVs, 88s, mortars, and waves of infantry. Despite superior German weaponry, the Canadians blocked the road to Juno. Black smoke rose from burning tank hulls on both sides, while unfazed French cows grazed in the fields. The Canadians bent back towards the Atlantic Ocean with heavy losses. They didn't break.

Meanwhile, on the Drava River between Yugoslavia and Hungary, a British Special Operations Executive (SOE) team prepared to cross into Hungary, not far from where Sparrow had landed three months earlier.

Operation Chicken's radio operator was Hannah Senesh[2], a British-Jewish-Palestinian soldier, tall and fine-featured, with penetrating blue eyes and an irrepressible spirit. Hannah's father was a well-known Hungarian journalist and playwright who died when she was six. His death had secured the family financially through the Great Depression, but Hannah also inherited her father's literary soul, keeping detailed diaries and writing poetry from childhood until her work with the Yugoslav Partisans. Her

colleagues on this mission were Tony, a Frenchman, and two Hungarians who went by Kallos and Fleischmann.

Like the Sparrows, the Chickens would enter Hungary with radio codes—a potentially deadly liability if captured. The fascists badly wanted those codes. If they had them, they could play the radio game with SOE.

And also like Operation Sparrow, Chicken's high-risk mission into Hungary had two goals. On one level, the mission was rescue. Hannah and her three fellow SOE operatives would save who they could, especially Jews and downed Allied airmen.

On another level, sending missions like Chicken into enemy territory contributed to the appearance that invasion in this part of Europe was imminent. Across the theatre, hundreds of thousands of partisans and hundreds of Allied commandos coordinated operations with the D-Day attacks, keeping German troops busy in the southeast rather than being sent to reinforce Normandy.

The Chickens didn't have to do all the work alone. Yugoslavia's anti-Nazi National Liberation Army[3] had grown to over three hundred thousand fighters by the end of 1943 and continued expanding through 1944, tying up German divisions that might otherwise have reinforced the Western Front.

At the same time, Hungarian officials secretly negotiated with the Allies to pull the country out of the Axis, while operatives like Hannah Senesh prepared to kindle the flame of armed rebellion once inside the country.

* * *

To start their Hungarian adventure, the commandos of Operation Chicken first had to cross the border. Earlier scouting had found points where the Drava River could be crossed by jumping from rock to rock, but it turned out that was outdated intelligence. With sinking hearts, Hannah's team saw that the spring melt had turned the river into a torrent.

Obviously it was impossible to cross at the heavily guarded bridges. That meant the only way in was swimming through the frigid current as many times as necessary to get all their equipment to the other side. It might have been tempting to turn back, but the Chickens plunged in, each fighting the river with one hand and using the other to ferry their gear. By the end, they were blue-lipped and shivering violently. They dragged themselves onto the far shore with all their equipment but felt too exhausted to move.

Getting across the river was the easy part. Now they were hypothermic behind a heavily militarized border. They urgently discussed whether to sleep on the riverbank or head inland, where they could find a better place to hide. Their bodies said stay, but their minds said to move to where they wouldn't be so visible. Despite their exhaustion they obeyed their minds, trekking into the bush and carefully camouflaging themselves against patrols.

In the morning light, they saw a village two or three kilometres away. Kallos and Fleischmann, both Hungarian-born and fluent in the language, went to confirm it was the village they were looking for. Meanwhile, Tony stayed in the bushes[4] while Hannah hid the transmitter. Only she knew the code, and she also had the code book, a collection of French love poems.

Hours passed. Kallos and Fleischmann were gone too long. Tony noticed a squad of Hungarian soldiers approaching. He and Hannah started crawling back towards Yugoslavia's partisan territory, making for a forest a few hundred metres away. When they got closer, they realized it was useless: the forest was held by a strong enemy detachment. Hannah counted two hundred soldiers searching systematically. It was impossible to hide, so she and Tony enacted their cover story as the fascists swept towards them.

The operatives hid their pistols and everything else that looked suspicious. Their only remaining weapon was Hannah's book of poetry. Hannah and Tony struck their cover pose: "a young man in the bushes, his head in the lap of a girl fondling his curls," perhaps reading from the little book of verse. "*Ce baiser est un sceau par qui ma vie est close.*" This kiss is a seal by which my life is closed.

It was designed to be the perfect camouflage—young lovers stealing a moment for themselves. The Hungarian soldiers soon found them. One skeptically asked: "Are these the ones we were chasing?"

His sergeant said that it wasn't for them to decide. They would arrest the couple. "If it's a mistake, we'll let them go and they can carry on making love."

As the saying goes, if you haven't done anything wrong, there is nothing to worry about. But for Hannah and Tony, there was a lot to worry about. The guards brought them to a clearing where Kallos lay dead with a gunshot wound to the temple. Fleischmann was bruised and chained.

Hannah knew that the game was over. They were surrounded by hundreds of soldiers with sharp steel bayonets gleaming at the ends of their

rifles.

The three operatives were brought to a nearby military intelligence centre and separated. The fascists beat Hannah brutally, costing her a front tooth. Then they tied her up and beat her palms and feet with truncheons.

The cruelty defied imagination, but Hannah knew the aim. The enemy wanted her radio and codes. If they got them, they could lure an Allied bomber armada into a trap of waiting anti-aircraft defences. Hundreds of thousands could die—not just Allied air crews, but the innocents murdered if Hitler gained time to keep his industrialized killing machines running at death camps like Auschwitz, Treblinka, and Bełżec.

In March, the Nazis had failed to get the code book from the Sparrows before it was sabotaged. Now, just after D-Day, Hannah was another chance to crack an Allied code. But despite torture, she denied knowing about a radio.

The guards drove her to the field where she had been caught to make her show them where she had hidden the transmitter. She saw Tony and Fleischmann outside the village guardhouse. They looked inhuman, bruised from head to toe. The interrogators had pulled Tony's hair out by the roots. All his teeth were missing. It was a message to Hannah. She had suffered, but nowhere near this much. Perhaps it was because of her captivating blue eyes, or because she knew the secret code, or both.

The enemy soon found her radio. The British device proved beyond any doubt that the Chickens were spies.

A car driven by a local policeman took Hannah to the train station. Counting on his ignorance of modern espionage, she left her poetry book in the car, hoping he would dismiss it as worthless foreign drivel—never suspecting the smart-looking little book was precious spy equipment.

But the officers at district intelligence headquarters knew that Hannah needed a code book for her radio to work. They assumed she'd hidden it near her radio, and certainly not in a police car. A thorough search near where she was arrested revealed nothing.

Her torture began anew. *Where is the code book?*

Between interrogations, she could hear Fleischmann and Tony screaming in the dungeon. Then it was her turn. Despite the excruciating pain, Hannah kept repeating: "The code was next to the transmitter."

She wasn't lying. At one time, they had been next to each other. But the Nazis wanted to know where the book was now, and she wouldn't tell. The

beatings continued.

Finally, Hannah couldn't stay silent any longer. What harm, she wondered, was a little white lie? She gave them a fake name. Two hours later, they came back, having uncovered the deception, and beat her worse than before.

Next she gave her real name, doubting it could do harm. She assumed her mother, Katherine, had fled Hungary when the Germans invaded in March. She couldn't know, however, because Hungary had gone dark. The Gestapo had destroyed some resistance networks and silenced others. Even top British agents lost contact as the country plunged from relative openness into total darkness.

An hour later, Hannah was brought into an interrogation room and saw her mother facing her. Pain and joy crashed together as she rushed forward, "two souls hovering in space,"[5] as she later put it to a fellow captive. The SOE operative uttered meaningless sounds, like a child who hadn't learned to speak. Hannah Senesh was a woman who didn't cry under torture, but she wept when she saw her family.

"Anniko"—her mother's nickname for her—"How did you get here? What happened to your face? You've been beaten!"

Suddenly Hannah remembered she was in prison. And so was her mother.

"Mother, forgive me!"

"Anniko, did they torture you?"

"No, Mother!"

Before the fascists hadn't known how to torture her. But now they had found her weakness. Her chief tormentor, a Hungarian secret policeman named Rozsa, separated the two. He told Katherine to convince her daughter that it was for her own good to tell everything.

But when it was time to repeat the message, Katherine silently looked her daughter in the eye, telling her that it was her choice. Rozsa ordered Katherine to leave and took up Hannah's interrogation once again.

Rozsa assumed her mother had convinced her to speak. He told Hannah in a friendly voice: "I'm sorry I resorted to extreme methods[6] with you. After all, you are the daughter of a great writer, Béla Senesh. I regret that I caused your mother sorrow. Such a refined woman. I can see how much you love her."

But, Rozsa continued, Hannah had committed a "great sin" against her homeland by working for the enemy as a spy. There was only one penance: "Reveal the code and you'll have made up for it. If not, I'll execute your mother in front of your eyes. They'll kill her and afterward they'll kill you. The choice is in your hands."

"No!" Hannah shouted. "Don't touch my mother. You can't do that."

Hannah watched Rozsa's lips twist in a "satanic smile," as she later described it to Yoel Palgi, a fellow captured parachutist.

"In front of your eyes," the Hungarian repeated, "I'll have her executed."

Hannah pleaded: "Kill me, torture me, curse me, just don't touch my mother." She wept, "Mercy, mercy . . ."

"The code."

"Mother . . ."

Rozsa gave her three hours to confess or they would both be killed—first mother, then daughter. Hannah's choice was a pure horror: she could become a traitor or condemn her mother to death.

A third option: suicide. She broke from her guards and sprinted for the stairs, three floors up to oblivion through glass. She tripped and fell before she got to a window, and the guards pounced. They brought her back to her cell and put her on twenty-four-hour suicide watch.

What did it matter, Hannah wondered, if she told the enemy her code? After all, the radio operators on the other side of the sea would doubt her signals after Chicken had been off-air for so long. And why, SOE intelligence would surely think, would she be radioing bombing coordinates when her team's job was a rescue mission?

But perhaps the Allies would believe the fake messages and send a huge bomber force into a trap. Still worse, she would be betraying her chosen people, the Jewish community of Palestine, the remnant of the group expelled by the Romans two millennia earlier.

"No, I could not turn traitor,"[7] she told herself. "I must not reveal the code." And then she heard the other voice in her head: "But what about my mother?"

She lay motionless in her cell, silently debating the alternatives for three hours. Only one of her loyalties could survive.

The time for her interview arrived. As the guards walked her down the hall, she decided to reveal the code to save her mother.

In the interrogation room, Rozsa asked, in a friendly way, “What have you decided?”

Before she spoke, Hannah imagined her mother’s words: “You have to sacrifice me. Don’t turn traitor.” She had to take a leap.

“I have nothing to say. I left the code beside the transmitter.”

Rozsa jumped from the table. Hannah saw his body “twist like a snake, the wall behind him billowing above his shoulder.” She tried to find something to lean against. Finding nothing, she was suspended in the air, and the lights went out.

She regained consciousness in her cell, but she didn’t know how long she was out. For days afterwards, she was left alone. No one even came to beat her. Instead, she tortured herself with regret. A satanic voice accused her of killing her mother. Was it real, or only in her mind? She was nearly driven insane. Perhaps her interrogators noticed the signs of madness in a woman talking to herself, and that is why they decided to rescue her before it was too late. If she went insane, she wouldn’t be able to reveal the code.

She was brought to an interrogation room and told to look through the window. Hannah saw her mother, alive. Not a figment of her imagination, but the real person.

The revelation struck her like lightning. The fascists had meant to break her, but now she was unbreakable. Hannah realized that if she had revealed the code, she and her mother would both already be dead.

The fascists needed her code. Once they had it, two Jewish women would be of no use to them. Keeping the cipher secret was the only way she could save her mother, Allied airmen, Hungarian Jews, and perhaps even herself. Hannah, like the Sparrows, damaged the Reich’s hopes of victory by keeping her secret.

She couldn’t know how her mission would end. Yet as a poet, she had already seen its essence. Before crossing into Hungary, she had written: “Blessed is the match[8] consumed in kindling flame.”

The only question for Hannah and the Sparrows was whether the kindling would catch and burn or flicker and die.

Chapter 20

Theatre of Deception

JUNE 7, 1944—CASTLE KLESSHEIM, AUSTRIA

Morning mist clung to Castle Klessheim's baroque walls as the Austrian Alps rose beyond. Inside, servants hurried through gilded corridors, preparing Hitler's meeting that could decide the fate of the war. Mozart's patron once owned the palace. Now it orchestrated genocide in neighbouring Hungary.

The day after D-Day, the Führer hosted Hungary's new prime minister, General Döme Sztójay.[1] The name Döme came from Demeter, the Greek goddess with connections to the underworld. Like his namesake, the general had good connections in low places.

The prime minister had spent decades cultivating ties with the Germans. Yet his true loyalty belonged to Hungary's regent, Horthy. This balancing act was not unique to the prime minister. Though the regent appeared to be a powerless figurehead, many Hungarian officers followed his orders. Loyalty was a deeply ingrained virtue in Hungary—often outweighing property, personal ambition, and even life itself. Devotion to the regent and to the homeland kept Horthy's influence alive, no matter how limited his official authority now that the Germans ran the country.

Hitler entered his war room like an actor taking the stage, guards flanking him as extras in his deadly theatre. The bespectacled Führer took his seat at the centre of a large table. At his right hand, in the position of honour, sat Sztójay. The highest-ranking German military leaders stood behind them, ready to answer questions and give advice.

Medals glittered on every chest, but the only man whose decision really mattered was the tyrant from Braunau am Inn. The Führer's finger traced

death across the battle map spread out on the table, pointing out how his forces would trap the enemy here and destroy them there.

Despite Hitler's confidence, tension filled the room. The fighting was difficult in Italy and on the Eastern Front. German intelligence warned of another landing, perhaps two or three, in the west.

Duke had told Nazi intelligence officers that there were millions of Allied troops to make all the attacks happen. The colonel was a credible man with a credible threat. Across the theatre of war, other Allied agents kept up the ruse with explosions, ambushes, and carefully leaked "secrets." The Germans kept falling for it, leaving their forces spread thin along the European coast instead of concentrating them for a powerful counteroffensive in France. The Sparrows, like the rest of Bodyguard, continued working their deception magic.

D-Day analyst Mark Lloyd reported that no German divisions were pulled from the Mediterranean region "in time to influence[2] the battle during its first crucial weeks."

Astoundingly, Bodyguard's first stage was still convincing Hitler that a major invasion would happen in the southeast months after the deception had begun. Stage two confirmed for German intelligence that Normandy was a feint and Calais would soon be hit. Hitler believed it all. In the Reich's darkest hour, the dictator pointed his finger at the wrong places on his war map.

Soon Hitler, Sztójay, and Ribbentrop, Germany's foreign minister, broke off from the group for a long private conversation. Despite the great events of the previous day, the Führer didn't talk about France. Instead, he fixated on Hungary, lecturing the prime minister on the value of eliminating his country's Jews. After all, he argued, Germany was powerful because it had gotten rid of its Jewry. Once Hungary did the same, it would become powerful. Together they would win the war.

Sztójay did not seem to share, or understand, the Führer's race theory. Instead, he was there to talk about Hungary's sovereignty. Regent Horthy was upset that the country's independence had been violated, despite what Hitler had promised just before the occupation. The Führer assured the prime minister that Germans were in his country as helpers, to clean out the scheming Jews and their traitorous servants. Then, naturally, the Germans would leave.

Hitler insisted, “The Jews aren’t defenceless,”[3] pointing to the Allied bombing raids that were killing German women and children—like the forty-six thousand who had died in Hamburg. He cast these raids as Jew-ordered. “An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,” he added, using them to justify his brutal policies towards innocent civilians.

If Hungary slackened, the enemy would win. As Hitler had recently explained to his co-belligerent, the Japanese general Baron Hiroshi Ōshima, if the Allies were victorious, “our peoples will be exterminated.”[4] The Führer sent the same message to Hungary. If the Axis lost the war, “Germany and Hungary will hang on the same rope.”

Sztójay’s people needed to pitch in, Hitler clarified, or the Jews would destroy them. The claim didn’t make much sense to Hungarians. They had never feared that the Jews would exterminate them, but the Führer nevertheless demanded that the country build more fighter airplanes, airports, roads, and train lines to fight the war. When Sztójay protested that this would mean taking on a lot of new debt when there was already a mountain of it to deal with, Hitler’s face darkened. It was vulgar, he thought, to whine about money when the Allies were about to attack the southeast.

Moreover, the dictator snarled, when Germany had won its bloody, costly war against France in 1871, it had gained only 14,700 square kilometres for its trouble. But Hitler felt he had very generously given Hungary ten times that much land in order to right Trianon’s wrongs. And now this?

“I don’t need your gratitude,”[5] Hitler sneered, “but I don’t want to keep being insulted.”

The Führer noted that they had arrested Allied officers in Hungary, meaning the Sparrows. The situation, the dictator continued, had gotten almost as bad as in Italy before the anti-Mussolini rebellion, and everyone knew how that one had turned out. That was why Germany needed to help Hungary eradicate the Jewish influence before the country was destroyed.

But Sztójay persisted in advancing his regent’s message: he wanted the Gestapo and the Sicherheitsdienst out of Hungary. Hitler responded that it was impossible until the Jews were removed from political life. He patiently explained his theory: once “the Jew is absent in times of crisis,[6] there will be no catalyst for revolution.”

Rather than speak openly about exterminating Hungary's Jews, the Führer used his coded medical language from *Mein Kampf.* The Jews were a "world plague."[7] They needed to be "cleaned up." He didn't use unpleasant words like "murder" or "killing." He added that it would be a relief for Hungarians once their country was Jew-free.

Few people could read between the lines to understand Hitler's euphemistic language. Most lacked the historical framework to imagine systematic industrial genocide. The scale and methodical nature of the Holocaust was unprecedented in human history. In 1944, many rational people still could not fathom that "cleaning up" and solving the "plague" meant exterminating entire races in gas chambers.

When the prime minister told Hitler that Budapest's "solution to the Jewish question is being performed to the maximum," he likely imagined that meant deporting minorities to work camps to meet Hitler's demands.

Sztójay then became pushy about the release of Hungary's arrested secret intelligence officers István Ujszászy, Gyula Kádár (head of Hungarian military intelligence), and Károly Kern (of counterintelligence) —all of them involved with Sparrow. Leading Nazis wanted these officers dead, but Hitler agreed to investigate their release to keep Hungary on board. It would take until October and required a drawn-out military tribunal to exonerate the three—but Döme, like Demeter with her daughter, Persephone, managed their rescue from the underworld. The prime minister's manoeuvring returned three powerful leaders to Hungary's fight against the Nazis.

Hitler didn't see the danger lurking under the surface as Hungary's spies plotted against him. He was in a light mood on the day after D-Day. He was convinced that once Jews were gone from his Reich, he would be unbeatable.

The Führer even tried to cheer up the prime minister, who was discomfited throughout the talk. "These extraordinary circumstances also have their good side," Hitler promised. "A fundamental clean-up is now being carried out and the Jewish business is finally being put to an end."

Hitler ended on an optimistic note. He would be pleased to receive the regent to celebrate their coming victory. "I would always be happy to welcome Horthy." The Führer might even serve vegetables grown in the fertile farmlands near Auschwitz.

* * *

As the attack on Normandy unfolded, Nazi interest in the Sparrows intensified. The intelligence they possessed could turn the tide for Germany. As the Allies battled to secure their beachhead, the Gestapo moved the three Americans again to see what else they could learn. Guards handcuffed Duke, Suarez, and Nunn and forced them into a truck that drove them to Stalag 17, a sprawling prisoner of war camp in Kaisersteinbruch, outside Vienna.

Stalag 17 stretched across flat Austrian countryside. Barbed-wire fences and watchtowers were manned by guards with machine guns, search lights, and attack dogs. Inside were rows of wooden huts and long brick barracks crammed with prisoners. If the Sparrows didn't escape by next spring, they would be forced on a death march when Soviet troops neared, but breaking out seemed impossible.

Still, this prison looked like it was run by the German military, which meant Geneva Convention rights. The Sparrows thought they had won a legal victory, getting what they had demanded ever since the Gestapo declared them spies and sentenced them to death two months earlier. Few of the tens of thousands of prisoners at Stalag 17 were happy to be there, but the Americans' hearts lifted thinking of Red Cross food parcels, outdoor exercise, and letters from home.

Despite appalling living conditions, the Sparrows saw things getting better. After months of hunger, it was Christmas in June for the Americans to open a food package from Canada.[8] There were biscuits and butter. Marmalade. Whole milk. Then came salmon, bully beef, Spam, coffee, cheese, prunes, raisins, chocolate, sugar, salt and pepper, and a precious piece of soap.

They were allowed an hour of outdoor exercise each day, and even invited to write letters home, Geneva Convention rights they'd been clamoring for months to get.

But the Sparrows saw odd things about their new prison. Stalag 17 was a camp for enlisted men, rather than officers. The Sparrows were kept segregated from the general prison population, like the Germans didn't want them to talk to anyone. Their prison block was heavily guarded with extra bars on doors and windows, bricked-up bathroom windows, two rows

of barbed-wire fencing, and doors lined with steel. Even a trip to the toilet meant soldiers pointing bayonetted rifles at them the whole way.

The Sparrows had no proof they were still in a Gestapo cage, but Stalag 17 was indeed another trap. The Americans' high-security unit was a prison-within-a-prison secretly run by the Gestapo, not the Wehrmacht.

The calories in the Red Cross parcels were real, but the Nazis had stolen them from official supplies, because the Sparrows had not been registered as prisoners. The Gestapo kept the captured commandos a guarded secret. They still needed to extract their information and then execute them, by the Führer's commando order.

The invitation to write letters home was also a trick. The letters weren't sent. Nazi intelligence suspected the three officers would try to send their handlers coded messages. Codebreakers analyzed each word for secret meanings, hunting for repetition and anomalies in ordinary phrases, hidden acrostics strung down the page, or numerical codes disguised as dates and addresses. If the Germans could crack the Allies' code, they would be able to anticipate follow-up landings, find commando operations, and redeploy Panzer divisions to stop the real invasion when it struck.

Then Hitler could destroy his enemies once and for all.

The Sparrows watched the evening sun slanting through the barbed wire of their new prison home, casting shadows that stabbed the walls. In the distance, guard towers stood silhouetted against the darkening sky. The commandos had no way of knowing that hundreds of miles away, Hitler ranted about their role in a Jewish plot to exterminate the Aryan race.

Chapter 21

The Protecting Power

The protecting Power . . . shall be authorized to proceed to any place, without exception, where prisoners of war are interned.

—Geneva Convention

JUNE 1944—STALAG 17 PRISON, AUSTRIA

Florimond Duke learned that prisoners had converted part of a barrack to a chapel where inmates gathered to devoutly sing hymns. The colonel lobbied his German captors for the right to attend. He wanted to be saved.

Though Duke was Catholic, he wasn't particularly pious. He wanted to go mainly because he hoped a visiting Swiss diplomat might notice an unfamiliar face in the pews. As the Protecting Power, Switzerland had the authority under the Geneva Convention to inspect conditions, demand prisoner lists, and report violations to the international community—leverage that could expose the Gestapo's secret prisoners. But the Swiss hadn't visited the Americans yet, making Duke suspect that they hadn't been informed.

But the Nazis were determined to ensure the Swiss never discovered the commandos. The German authorities said *nein* to Duke's request. They weren't stupid enough to jeopardize their great intelligence asset: the Americans who knew D-Day secrets.

The Nazis kept Duke's men strictly separated from the regular Stalag prisoners lest word leak to the Swiss and the Red Cross. The Americans shared their ultra-security isolation with eight British soldiers under the command of Brigadier Edmund Davies—a broad-faced officer his men called "Trotsky" for his disciplined socialism. Earlier that year, Davies had

led a mission into Albania to work with the underground. Someone betrayed them. After a bloody battle, they were captured.

Like the Sparrows, Davies and his team were too dangerous to keep alive but too valuable to kill. Hitler's commando order didn't offer clemency. On the other hand, executing a brigadier could have legal consequences after the war. Any move would weaken the Nazis, but they had to do something.

It seemed the captives were in as much darkness as before. But a few days later, light shone through an unexpected place: the Russian prisoners' showers.

Because of his rank and the Germans' racial admiration for the English, Brigadier Davies was allowed to shower once every ten days in the same facility used by Russian prisoners from another part of the camp. Davies smuggled a message through a Yugoslav prisoner to the British camp leader, Sergeant Major Brown. It read: *Russian baths,* and the time he'd next be there.

The shower was the only time Davies was let out of the Gestapo wing's confinement. At the appointed hour, the Sergeant and Brigadier stood under the water, enjoying a long private talk.[1] Davies urged: *Get word to the Red Cross. Let them know we're here.*

Brown nodded.

On June 21, Rudolf Denzler, the sharp-eyed diplomatic representative of the Swiss government, arrived and demanded to see the British soldiers who had been hidden from him. The Kommandant responded that no one fitting that description was under his command. Yes, there were some British men here, but they were not prisoners of war. They were civilians lodged within the military prison. He had no authority over them and therefore could not let anyone see them.

The Swiss diplomat insisted on visiting them anyway. The Kommandant relented. Denzler found the British prisoners in filthy, cramped cells, separated from the general prison population and under heavy guard. Davies told him about the Americans who were also housed in the ultra-secure wing of the prison, and Denzler insisted upon visiting them too.

"I found Davies and Duke[2] in an excellent military deportment," Denzler wrote, "and possessed of unshaken morale," despite the sanitary conditions being the worst he had seen in any military prison.

The curtains fell around the Gestapo's secret prison-within-a-prison. Still, the Kommandant stubbornly insisted the commandos were not prisoners of war, despite their uniforms. They were criminals without any rights. Denzler browbeat him with the law. The Kommandant still refused to count them among the POWs, but he sounded worried.

Hitler's order said kill all commandos, but factions within German intelligence vied for control of these prisoners. Some wanted the commandos dead, while others wanted them alive for questioning. The Kommandant had no idea which order would win or whether the Führer had weighed in on this case. The wrong choice meant a firing squad or a war crimes trial. The safest choice seemed to be to let the codebreakers decipher the Sparrows' letters home, while keeping the commandos isolated.

He reported the problem to his superiors, to make it someone else's problem. Finally, a top German commander intervened in the tug-of-war between the regular military and the Gestapo that had been stalemated since April 1. General Adolf Westhoff, director of the POW headquarters at OKW High Command, told the Gestapo to hand over control of the British and American prisoners to the Wehrmacht. The Gestapo gave in.

* * *

The Sparrows couldn't be sure it wasn't another trick. What could they trust in a land of lies? But the Swiss diplomat seemed real enough, and his anger at the commandos' miserable conditions looked genuine. Perhaps after four months of losing, the Sparrows were finally winning their legal case against the Nazis.

The American and British commandos continued living in the segregated block for more than a month. While they awaited their fate, they received war news through the prison grapevine. The reports weren't always accurate, but the news was good: German tank divisions in France had finally moved from Calais, but the Allies were holding them back. Hitler had waited too long to see the threat at Normandy. Bodyguard was meant to work for days, but it kept paying dividends for months.

During the day, the captives watched through barred windows as Allied bombers hit Austrian oil plants and factories. At night, the prisoners had a "front seat for the fireworks[3] displays," as Brigadier Davies said. Bright target markers were followed by heavy bombs.

For the Americans, it was the best Fourth of July ever. German air-defence flak was thick, but they rarely saw an Allied plane go down. Earlier in the war, the Nazis' radar and anti-aircraft fire had been deadly effective, but one day the radar suddenly stopped working. At dawn, the prisoners saw the ground carpeted with glittering "silver strips of paper[4] to fox the German radar," as Davies put it. The conductive aluminum strips, called window or chaff, were tuned to the frequency of enemy radar and effectively jammed signals. This cheap technological trick had rendered the Germans' early-warning network useless. Their big guns now fired blindly towards enemy formations instead of aiming through a high-tech radar scope.

Nunn taught his fellow prisoners a jaunty chorus to sing at sundown when the German orderly solemnly checked their section: *The day will come, without a doubt, when you'll be in and we'll be out!* The song cheered the prisoners and annoyed their captors. It was musical warfare, the soundtrack to their defiance. Nunn, an OSS propaganda expert, knew how to use words as weapons. It wrecked enemy morale to see the prisoners in a better mood than the guards.

Respect for the prisoners' legal rights replaced the earlier torture. The commandos' letters were finally sent, and the Sparrows enjoyed decent food once the Red Cross parcels were included. In August, two months after arriving at Stalag 17, Davies and Duke were moved into a small room together, clean and light, with two military-style bunk beds and a table. It wasn't the luxury Claridge's Hotel in London, but it was more suitable for a brigadier and a colonel than their earlier foul accommodations.

The war news the commandos heard through the grapevine kept getting better. On August 16, Hitler ordered a retreat from Normandy. The Führer, who considered himself infallible, couldn't admit that he had made months of consecutive blunders in France: first by positioning forces at the wrong beaches, then refusing to send timely reinforcements, and finally waiting too long to order a retreat. Instead, German propaganda celebrated Aryan forces inflicting heavy casualties on an enemy nearing collapse.

A quarter-million of Germany's Normandy troops retreated across the Seine, but escape came at a high cost. The Germans suffered three hundred thousand casualties in Normandy, as well as huge losses of artillery and tanks.

Meanwhile, Soviet forces confidently advanced through Hungary's Carpathian Mountains in the east because Hitler had refused to let the Hungarians establish a defensive line there. The Führer was too distracted by anti-Nazi political activity in Budapest—and by the hundreds of thousands of Jews still provocatively living behind his front lines—to focus on strengthening frontier defences.

Soon Germany would be fighting fierce battles in Hungary's flat heartland on less favourable terrain than the Carpathians. Hitler had predicted an Allied invasion when he sent troops into Hungary in March to stop the Sparrows. But the Führer was off by half a year, and wrong about the direction of the invasion. The mistake meant he defended against an attack that didn't come and failed to prepare for the one that did.

Operation Bodyguard kept paying dividends. In mid-August 1944, Hitler kept a dozen divisions north of the Seine to guard against a sea attack on the northeast coast of France near Belgium that never came, while heavy defensive forces garrisoned the southeast, three thousand kilometres away from the fighting. The Nazis might have won on one front, but they were now fighting on three with the threat of even more invasions striking soon.

Allied battle success was one thing, but the survival of the Sparrows was another. While Nazi propaganda reassured the masses, powerful people in the Reich knew that Germany would eventually lose. If Duke's men lived to see Allied victory, they could give evidence against their captors in war crimes trials. But dead Sparrows couldn't testify.

* * *

On August 20, 1944, the feast day of St. Stephen, Hungary's first king, the captive Americans and the British officers were brought together and told they were being moved. Duke, Suarez, and Nunn got their first shower in five months and were finally allowed to wash their uniforms.

But ominously, the guards escorting them weren't Wehrmacht. The man barking orders was wearing a green police uniform. He was Ordnungspolizei, the Order Police, under the control of Heinrich Himmler, primary overseer of the Holocaust. The green policemen herded Jews, Slavs, and Roma to death camps.

The angry green policeman shouted that the Allied prisoners must be chained together for their transfer and had to give up their identity tags. If

they escaped and were caught, they would be shot as spies. The demands seemed dubious. It looked to the commandos like a ruse to execute them.

The Allied officers refused to comply. The Stalag 17 camp officer backed them up, telling the green policeman he wouldn't enforce any order to chain them. Himmler's henchman insisted on using force. The argument went back and forth without progress.

Finally, the camp officer discussed the matter with Duke and Davies. He wouldn't force them to go, but if they didn't agree to be chained, the green policeman wouldn't take them to the train. It might be their only chance to transfer to a prison for military officers. If they missed their ride, they could be permanently stuck at disease-ridden Stalag 17, one of the worst military prisons in the Reich.

The commandos talked the matter over. Stalag 17 was better than the Gestapo torture that had come before, but there were other factors to consider. Brigadier Davies commanded seriously wounded men who couldn't get adequate medical care here. Chances were better if they were moved to an officers' prison.

They decided to gamble with their lives and agreed to be chained. The policemen handcuffed them together two by two. Duke and Davies, as the senior officers, were shackled together. The brigadier thought it must look comical because the American was so much taller than he was, but neither of them thought it was funny. Duke muttered that the whole business was "thoroughly degrading."[5]

At the train station, policemen herded the captives into a cattle car for a gruelling three-day journey. Armed guards faced the prisoners, separated by barbed wire. The guards occupied two-thirds of the train, with the prisoners squeezed in the other part. Straw covered the floor on the prisoners' side, perhaps for a bed, or maybe to soak up blood.

Narrow spaces in the metal walls let the prisoners glimpse the world beyond. At every bridge and tunnel, the prisoners saw heavy guard details on both sides. Helmeted machine-gunners in field-grey uniforms crouched behind sandbag emplacements and barbed wire, their barrels glinting in sunlight. It was a major investment of German manpower far from the front, and to the Sparrows' trained eyes, proof that the anti-Nazi insurgency was paying off. Soldiers stationed here couldn't shoot the Allies in France.

Occasionally the train shuddered to a stop. Guards hustled the prisoners off to relieve themselves. Each time Nunn heard German boots crunch

behind him on gravel, the hair on the back of his neck stood up, as he remembered Major Sykes's execution in Belgrade.

The Sparrows weren't out of the woods yet. The Nazis could gun them down and claim they'd been shot while escaping. Without a Swiss diplomat to witness the massacre, no one could prove otherwise.

Chapter 22

Escape Into the Castle

Colditz . . . home for the ones[1] who caused the most nuisance.

—Brigadier Edmund Davies

AUGUST 23, 1944—SAXONY, GERMANY

The temperature hit a stifling ninety-two degrees as the German countryside shimmered in the heat, dust rising in waves over dirt roads. It was even hotter inside the Sparrows' prison train. Florimond Duke, Alfred Suarez, and Guy Nunn tried to catch a breeze, wool uniforms clinging, sweat stinging their eyes, with guards staring at them across the barbed wire.

They felt the force of the train's deceleration as brakes screamed against steel, bringing them to a stop with a final lurch. When the guards ordered them off the train, a sign said they were at Colditz. The Sparrows knew from the maps that it was a strategically important town between Leipzig and Dresden.

The commandos stepped onto cobblestone, the air heavy with coal smoke and horse manure. On a hill a half mile away to the southeast, a fairy tale stone castle overlooked a quaint German town. Hot, tired, and hungry, the Americans were in no mood to enjoy the postcard scene. They were annoyed by the heat, pointed German bayonets, and the weight of iron chains.

A coal cart rattled up, drawn by horses straining against their harnesses. The captives were pushed on board. The bumps jarred their bones as the horses pulled them uphill towards the castle. The commandos noted the

tactical dimensions of the fortress—its thick stone foundations that had withstood centuries of warfare, firing positions cut near Renaissance decorations, parapets offering commanding views of the 250-foot height advantage over the countryside. The medieval builders had known their craft; walls that had once repelled siege engines could provide cover against modern arms.

If this fortress fell to the Allies, Duke calculated, it could control the region. The chains biting his wrists reminded him: survival first, capture the castle later.

The Sparrows crossed the stone bridge over the Mulde River, where Napoleon's Grande Armée had shattered a defensive force in 1813, with countless soldiers drawing their final breaths beneath drifting leaves.

Then as now, the bridge was worth fighting for, and Colditz Castle defended the pass. War was heading this way again.

The cart turned left, up steep and narrow cobblestone streets, towards the towering fortress.

* * *

The Sparrows passed through the castle's first arched gateway, then crossed a bridge over a dry moat and passed under another strong archway. Heavy doors swung open, then shut behind them with an ominous iron clang. The Sparrows found themselves in the outer castle courtyard, with tidy gardens and paths lining the space. This was part of the guards' quarters, and the nice view was for the Germans, not the prisoners. They passed through another archway with strong doors, then a fourth, past row after row of galvanized barbed wire and armed guards. Finally, the commandos entered the heavily guarded inner sanctum of the castle, a large stone courtyard surrounded by tall grey towers on all sides. There were no flowers or grass. Little sunlight penetrated this grim place.

The Sparrows were taken into a guardroom. Keys turned in their handcuffs, and their chains clattered to the floor. Duke's shoulders relaxed slightly as he saw the uniform of the head security officer: regular German army, not Gestapo or SS.

The officer, Reinhold Eggers, was a tidy man with rimless glasses. He had been a schoolmaster before the war, and still carried himself like one, treating prisoners like pupils rather than a hated enemy. He was qualified as

a professor, but in the 1930s the Nazis demoted him to teach elementary school for his pro-Anglophone thinking. The war then brought him into military service.

Eggers lectured the new arrivals in clear English: it wouldn't be wise to try to escape this place. Inside the castle walls, they would be safe. If they tried to leave, guards would shoot to kill. And even if the escapees got past the rifles and machine guns, six barbed-wire fences, and search dogs, it was still hundreds of miles to Switzerland over heavily patrolled country. If German soldiers caught them, Eggers said, they would likely be shot on the spot. If German civilians found them, it would be worse. He paused to let this sink in. Propaganda portrayed Allied pilots as deliberate killers of German civilians, stoking popular anger and a desire for revenge.

Duke got the point. Why risk death in desperate gestures when Allied bombers were writing the Reich's obituary across the sky in steel and fire?

Eggers studied Duke's handlebar moustache: "Have you always worn it?"

It looked like it could have been on his face since his days as a First World War fighter pilot, but Duke touched the upswept bristles and explained that he only had time to grow it once he was Germany's guest. Security Officer Eggers chuckled, and Duke inwardly rejoiced that he had found a German with a sense of humour.

Eggers sighed: "It will be the first thing that comes off if you escape." Escapees immediately cut their hair as an easy and effective disguise.

The Security Officer read off a list of rules. For instance, forbidden were: "All kinds of clothes[2] and underclothing which can be used as civilian clothing" he began, adjusting his glasses. "Red Cross armbands for unauthorized persons—forbidden. Arms or objects that can be used as weapons. Munitions and explosives."

He continued methodically. "Large knives and scissors. Tools, twine of any kind. Ink, steel pens, even goose quills. Fountain pens. Compasses. Rucksacks. Geographical maps."

Eggers paused, then added, "Cameras, binoculars, pocket lamps, lighters. Highly inflammable articles. Radiators." He looked directly at the assembled prisoners. "Single parts of telephone and wireless sets. Transmitters and receiving sets."

He seemed annoying at first, but Duke realized that Eggers's strict devotion to regulations kept the prisoners alive. The Nazis wouldn't let him

keep his job if there was disorder. If he were fired, he would be replaced by someone worse, likely SS. If that happened, there would be bloodshed.

By German prison standards, Colditz's security officer was practically a saint. He didn't permit illegal punishment of the prisoners under his care. He wasn't quite perfect—his guards still shoved prisoners with rifle butts when they dragged their feet. Still, it was a big step up for the Sparrows compared to nihilistic Gestapo thugs.

Duke learned in their conversations that Eggers had moral principles. He had always refused to join the Nazi Party, a career suicide that had likely cost him his own promotion to Kommandant.

The Sparrows learned other interesting things. Colditz was Germany's maximum-security prison for Allied officers who had caused trouble elsewhere, were politically prominent, or both. The Sparrows occupied the "both" category. They were troublemakers for threatening their previous interrogators with punishment, and politically important because of their link to the US State Department, Joint Chiefs of Staff, and top Allied generals.

Other high-value prisoners at Colditz included Churchill's nephew and King George VI's grandnephew As the war went against Germany, Hitler declared that if the prominent hostages fell into enemy hands, the Kommandant would pay with his life. The Führer needed those prisoners as human shields.

The regular prison population was packed twenty to a room with crude double-decker bunks and six chairs for everyone to share. In contrast, the Sparrows, as "Prominents," were locked up for the night an hour before the rest of the prisoners in eight-by-ten-foot solitary cells, watched more closely and by a heavier guard. But now, at least, they had conversation, books to read, enough to eat, and outside time for exercise.

When night fell, the inner courtyard turned into a theatre of floodlights and trigger fingers, but during the day the Sparrows could roam the castle to talk with its elite company of British, Australian, Czech, Polish, and French prisoners. The relative freedom reassured the Americans that they no longer needed to fear what had haunted them constantly in Gestapo custody: that today could be the day of their execution.

Still, the Sparrows knew there was no guarantee they would stay safe. If an order came from the Reich security chief to send them to Mauthausen concentration camp, then their fate would be torture and death, as happened

to the Anglo-American secret mission code-named Dawes. Other captured Allied commandos[3] were murdered at Buchenwald, including Canadian Roméo Sabourin, an Errol Flynn lookalike.

But now, at least, the Sparrows had time to learn history: the area around the castle had been settled thousands of years earlier by the Sorbs, a Slavic people, though Colditz was now German-speaking. King Augustus had rebuilt the castle as a hunting lodge around 1690—his honorific "the Strong" came from his ability to break a horseshoe with his bare hands and other amazing physical feats (including supposedly fathering over 350 illegitimate children).

After the nobility had left, the castle served as a state mental hospital. When the Nazis took power in 1933, the staff starved disabled patients to death to clear the way for Hitler's coming Übermenschen. In 1939, Colditz became a prison for officers who had escaped from other prisons and those judged *Deutschfeindlich*—anti-German, meaning they kept causing problems even after they were captured.

Duke's team was counted among the *Deutschfeindlich.* The Sparrows would have corrected the record if they had been asked: they weren't anti-German—they were anti-Nazi.

* * *

The Sparrows got on well with their fellow prisoners. As the British flying ace Douglas Bader put it, the three Americans on a "highly secret and special mission"[4] were "our type," adding a "freshness and a new outlook to our lives." Likewise, the British Brigadier Edmund Davies admired Duke, with his "brushed-up moustache[5] and humorous twinkle in his eye," and viewed him as "a great asset to our circus."

For the officers who had spent much of the war interned at Oflag IV-C, the favourite pastime was planning escapes. The Sparrows learned from their fellow prisoners that "Goons up!" meant guards were coming: quickly hide forged papers, maps, civilian clothes, digging tools, and entrances to escape tunnels.

The escape materials seemed impossible to obtain, yet prisoners found ways. They traced maps for escaping from atlases in the prison library onto thin paper recycled from Red Cross packages. Table knives were carved into tools. A miniature printing press churned out fake passports.

MI9, the British intelligence escape department, smuggled equipment in packages from fake charities but never touched Red Cross packages, fearing Germans would ban all deliveries. Meanwhile, to obtain other supplies, prisoners bribed guards with Red Cross luxuries: coffee, chocolate, and cigarettes.

The prisoners' escape committee worked on plans, but for now it was only preparation—escapes were currently forbidden by the British senior officer, the pipe-smoking Colonel William Tod. His surname meant "death" in German. He would change his order only if the SS was on its way to massacre the prisoners. Otherwise, it was a stupid risk this late in the war.

Old British hands regaled[6] the Americans with stories of successful earlier escapes, like that of Briton Pat Reid, Canadian Hank Wardle, and their two companions. In October 1942, they broke into the prison kitchen, went through a window onto a roof overlooking a floodlit courtyard, climbed into a storeroom, and then reached an air vent so narrow they had to strip naked and squeeze through like toothpaste from a tube. Once the floodlights had passed over, they sprinted over the dry moat and out of the castle grounds. Disguised as foreign workers, they travelled south by train. Within a week, all four had reached Switzerland.

But now that escapes were forbidden by their own senior officer, the British prisoners had long faces. Many had been stuck here for years, helping others escape, but their own turn had never come. Still, they kept themselves busy with Operation Heavy Industry, building a two-man glider in the attic above the chapel, using bed slats and other pieces of wood they secretly scrounged from the castle. A prison library book called *Aircraft Design* provided the details. The glider looked good, but the pilots wouldn't know if it would fly or crash until launch.

* * *

The Colditz prisoners followed war news on a hidden British radio tuned to the BBC. Momentum kept shifting in the Allies' favour. The day the Sparrows arrived at Colditz—August 23, 1944—King Michael of Romania, Hungary's eastern neighbour, switched from the Axis to the Allies. Nazi divisions rushed to crush the defection.

Meanwhile, Suarez was excited to hear that Spanish Civil War veterans —his comrades from the anti-fascist struggle in the 1930s—led the Allied

advance into Paris. On August 25, German forces surrendered the French capital, defying Hitler's command to fight to the last man and blast the city to rubble. Church bells rang throughout Paris, celebrating liberation.

On August 29, Slovakia, Hungary's northern neighbour, erupted in open revolt against Nazi rule. To Hungary's southeast, Bulgaria edged towards defection. Hungary's regent, seeing the writing on the wall, stepped up secret negotiations with the Allies, despite still having German troops in his country.

Hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews had already been murdered. Those who remained alive—concentrated in the Budapest ghetto and slave labour battalions—faced their last chance at survival.

Chapter 23

Professor Blokey and the Canadian

SEPTEMBER 14, 1944—NEAR LAKE BALATON, HUNGARY

Search dogs bayed in the distance. Golden shafts of sunlight pierced the canopy of beech and oak trees, casting dappled shadows on the forest floor. It was perfect late-summer weather[1] for a hunt.[2]

The hunted, Lieutenant Joseph Gelleny, crouched motionless in a tree, hearing the barking get closer. The twenty-year-old Canadian Hungarian was separated from the other two members of his SOE Operation Dibbler team since their parachute jump in darkness the night before. Now, camouflaged with leaves and praying his scent was masked, he gripped his pistol and waited.

Captain John Coates, Dibbler's British team leader, was a former pacifist turned battle-hardened commando who spoke multiple languages fluently, including German and Russian. The third member of the team, Lieutenant Mike Turk, was a Canadian of Hungarian descent.

But when dawn came, Gelleny was still alone. He had no idea where his comrades had landed—or if they were even alive.

Code-named Joseph Gordon, Lieutenant Gelleny knew that no matter what, he couldn't give the fascists his secret radio codes if they caught him. Operation Dibbler could still terrorize the Germans if he kept his codes secret.

The hounds were almost beneath him now, straining against their leashes, pulling their handlers behind them.

* * *

Like Sparrow, Operation Dibbler was designed for double duty. The official plan was to spark resistance among Hungarian factory workers that would cripple enemy production, while sabotaging strategic targets for maximum disruption. But beneath the surface, every southeastern parachute drop, every bombing raid, every sabotage reinforced the Bodyguard lie.

The price in Allied commando and pilot lives was steep, but the strategic payoff—keeping pressure off the Western Front—was enormous.

The hunt for Lieutenant Gelleny was no accident. Fascist Hungarian intelligence, working with German radar, had known Operation Dibbler was coming before they jumped. One after another, SOE infiltrators were caught: Gustav Bodo in Pécs had been tortured and forced to send false messages to lure Allied commandos into a trap. Hannah Senesh's Operation Chicken was compromised.

* * *

When eight barking dogs and forty armed soldiers surrounded his tree, Gelleny knew his luck had run out.

A Hungarian lieutenant shouted in English: "Throw down your weapons[3], then come down slowly and surrender. My men will not shoot if you do this!"

Gelleny knew that the odds were impossible. He dropped his pistol and then his knife and climbed down.

As they handcuffed him, he was grateful that he had buried his two hundred gold coins and two radios. He had smoothed the landscape to make it look undisturbed, then urinated on the burial site to throw off the dogs—a ploy picked up in commando training.

He hadn't buried everything, though. His tiny code book, radio crystals, and several thousand dollars in cash were sewn into his uniform lining. If the tormentors searched Gelleny's clothing or punched him where the crystals were hidden, they'd notice the lumps. He would likely either be executed or forced to send messages luring Allied paratroopers into traps. But without the crystals and the code book, the radios were useless.

Guards forced Gelleny into a canvas-covered military truck reeking of diesel fumes. Every pothole sent him bouncing against the steel bench until the vehicle stopped. He was brought to district intelligence headquarters and led into an interrogation room.

His interrogator was Colonel Ferenc Csongor, a smiling man in his forties wearing a tailored grey pinstriped suit, patent leather shoes, and massive gold cufflinks. He looked like a wealthy businessman who expected to be far more than a mere colonel. Gelleny thought Csongor looked like a comic-book villain.

Flanking the colonel were a young frog-eyed translator and a hulking sergeant carrying a black leather case. Csongor asked questions in Hungarian and then Slavic. Gelleny pretended not to understand, though he was fluent in the first and could get by in the second.

The sergeant kicked him hard in the shin to see what language he'd swear in. Gelleny grimaced but stayed silent.

"Where is your radio?"[4] Csongor asked in German.

Gelleny said in broken German that he didn't have one.

"Where have you hidden your codes?"

"*Keine codes.*"

Csongor laughed at the Canadian's bad German and nodded to the sergeant. Another hard kick. As Gelleny grimaced, Csongor opened the black case and laid out several torture devices.

Gelleny knew what was coming. British commando school had prepared him with practice hits with truncheons and mind-jolting shocks from a hand-cranked telephone magneto. The horrid but brief pain in training was meant to inoculate agents against the real thing. But this time it wouldn't be practice.

On Csongor's command, soldiers removed Gelleny's shoelaces and socks, then tied his feet together and placed them on a chair, exposing his soles.

"Why are you and your comrades here?" Csongor demanded.

Gelleny gave his code name, rank, and serial number. The sergeant whacked him hard on his soles with the truncheon. The Canadian bit his lip so hard it bled.

Csongor praised his sergeant on his fine swing, and turned to the Canadian. "Why did you come here, SOE Secret Agent Lieutenant Gordon: sabotage, assassination, or subversion? Answer!"

The colonel was willing to dole out any amount of pain to get the radio and codes. If he succeeded, he'd be promoted to general for giving Hungary a powerful new weapon: a radio line into SOE headquarters that didn't run through the Germans.

But Gelleny said nothing. His torturers clamped the generator's cold, merciless alligator clips onto his toes. The sergeant twisted the crank. A bolt ripped through the Canadian, blinding and jagged, seizing every muscle. His jaw locked, his body arched, and for a moment he went blind.

There was a break as they splashed water over his feet to increase conduction. The next shock struck harder, fiercer, as the current found its way into Gelleny's bones.

He writhed in pain until he was delirious. His life flashed before his eyes: "Helen . . . Squirrels . . ."

Csongor gave him a rest so he could come back to his senses. The colonel wasn't being kind. He knew it wouldn't do any good to drive his victim insane or he couldn't tell his radio secrets.

* * *

The only thing between holding fast and breaking was commando school. Lieutenant Gelleny had first studied at the top-secret Camp X near Toronto, then graduate training at forested Bletchley Park in England, and next at Morar, Scotland, where the rain never ended but the pubs were perfect. He had learned to kill a man silently in thirty different ways, practising techniques until they became habit. He knew how to shake a two-person tail in the city and jump from a truck at thirty kilometres per hour.

His advanced sabotage training had taken place at the SOE finishing school hidden in England's New Forest—Beaulieu, pronounced Bew-lee by the students. Gelleny's favourite instructor was Professor Blokey, a master burglar who, though he was sentenced to "Indefinite Detention[5] at His Majesty's Pleasure," had such extraordinary skills that the authorities released him from prison to teach breaking and entering to the special forces.

Gelleny was charmed by this gentleman criminal who spoke in a cultured Oxford accent and freely quoted Scottish poet Robert Burns. Professor Blokey could pick any lock and slip any guard.

One day, a stranger appeared next to Gelleny at a Beaulieu party for highly trained commandos. "Mum's the word, mate!" the man said, finger to lips. He asked Gelleny to get him a beer. The Canadian obliged.

"Thanks, Gordon, dear fellow," the stranger said. "I'll remember this! It's me, Blokey!" He spoke in his cultured accent, unlike the dodgy stranger

a moment before. Gelleny's eyes popped open as he recognized his teacher.

Blokey gifted another lesson. "I make use of voice training[6] and the basic tricks in the actor's stock in trade, to get the ageing effects, like hair colour, style, and skin tone. It's the eyes. Learn to exploit the eyes. You can always find a few cosmetic aids without much effort."

Later, after the Canadian aced his next test, burgling a house guarded by soldiers, Blokey told him: "I live by my wits, lad,[7] and always, always plan for the unexpected. You must too, if you're going to survive. Think first and always plan for the worst. Chances are it won't happen, but something just as bad likely will. At least you have a chance if you have your head about you. Plan your escape route. Never, ever panic!"

Now, in the midst of his agony, Gelleny thought of Blokey. Like Hannah Senesh hearing her mother's voice at her darkest moment, the Canadian commando heard his professor speaking to him: "Time to talk,[8] lad. Give him something to chew on, or it'll be worse. But be economical with the truth."

Gelleny listened to his professor. He told his tormentors: "I was sent to meet with Partisans in Hungary and help them resist the German occupation."

Csongor grimaced at the mention of German occupation. Excellent. Gelleny deduced what kind of Hungarian Csongor was: a sadistic nationalist, but no Nazi. The colonel resented the Germans occupying his country.

Gelleny again insisted he knew nothing about codes. "You are lying," Csongor sneered. "All wireless operators have codes. You have forced me to be more persuasive."

Switching to Hungarian, he addressed the guards: "You two, unfasten his ankles. Remove his trousers and spread his legs; make sure you hold his knees apart."

A soldier affixed the magneto's alligator clips to the Canadian's scrotum.

Blokey's voice broke in again: "You knew this could happen, laddie. Doesn't make it hurt less, but others have survived worse. Scream bloody blue blazes—loudly!"

The professor was right. His screams appealed to Csongor's pride and got him talking between bouts of pain, letting Gelleny collect his thoughts and plan his next move.

Blokey promised: “You’ll get through it and have many long years and babies who, God willing, will look like their mother.”

As the torture continued, Gelleny thought of Joan of Arc, who was also accompanied by voices through her trials before she was burned at the stake. He wondered if she had been insane or divinely inspired.

So far, Blokey hadn’t led him wrong.

* * *

Days blurred. The torture was agony, but the prison food was surprisingly good—he didn’t know it, but it was much better than what the Sparrows were getting in German prisons. The Hungarians were too proud of their national cuisine to serve slop, even to enemy spies.

Gelleny found dark humour in his situation. When Csongor escorted the Kommandant to his cell to receive a grateful salute for the fine cuisine, Gelleny stood stiff and looked away. All he had to do was salute, and maybe he’d even get more, but he didn’t move. To Csongor, it looked like insubordination.

In reality, Gelleny was clenching his jaw so hard it hurt. One glance at the Kommandant’s expectant face and the laugh building in the Canadian’s chest would explode. The Canadian stared at a point on the wall, barely breathing. Standing at attention while the prison boss fished for compliments about the goulash? The absurdity was killing him. Gelleny fixated on one thought: “Do anything to avoid staring[9] at His Goofiness!”

The short and stocky old Kommandant looked like the ghost of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, returned from the assassination that ignited the First World War. The prison boss wore a full pre-1914 uniform with jewel-encrusted sabre scabbard, white ostrich-feathered field marshal’s plumed tricorn hat, and endless swirls of gold braid—like Groucho Marx playing emperor of a made-up kingdom.

Csongor screamed, leaning close to Gelleny with a purple face, his breath reeking of garlic and cheap wine: “Prisoner, salute the Kommandant!”

He struck Gelleny on the side of the head. The Canadian didn’t break his stone stare.

Earlier, when he heard Blokey’s voice, Gelleny wondered if he were going crazy. Now he knew he was the sane one in an asylum run by

madmen. The Kommandant was certifiable, with a sadistic megalomaniac as his enforcer.

Finally, the humiliated old man left, followed by a seething Csongor. Gelleny stayed still as a statue. He knew the coming torture would be worse than ever, but at least he hadn't died laughing.

* * *

Word spread fast through the prison about the Canadian who wouldn't salute. Who hadn't broken under torture. Who had turned Csongor's rage into a spectacle. The next morning, a guard named Bela appeared at his cell. Before the war, he'd been a farmer in rural Hungary. Before that, he'd lived in Canada long enough to see a fellow Canadian as something other than an enemy saboteur. He soon became Gelleny's unexpected ally.

Bela hated Csongor and revealed that the sadistic colonel was a rapist and murderer who targeted female Jewish and Roma prisoners.

"I am so ashamed to be here," Bela confessed.

Gelleny asked if his new friend could arrange fresh fruits and vegetables for him and his comrades at a fair price. The farmer heartily agreed. Gelleny also requested a hatpin so he could open the seams of his uniform and retrieve the cash he'd hidden there to pay for the food. His radio crystals and code book stayed sewn in, secret and safe.

Bela delivered the groceries in abundant quantities, bringing only the best. It wasn't just a business deal—it was penance.

Gelleny looked at his six-inch hatpin and wistfully thought about using the sharp tool to kill Csongor and his henchmen with quick thrusts. But the commando resisted the temptation. There was no escaping alone. He was responsible for his two Dibbler compatriots. Even if they were still alive, he had no idea where they were. He was certain that if he killed Csongor, all the Dibblers would be killed in revenge.

During another torture session, Csongor whispered in his ear: "Make a transmission to Bari. If you refuse, the pain won't end."

But if you transmit, Csongor said, "I can release you,[10] just like that, with safe passage back into Yugoslavia. I do have that power. Guaranteed no tricks."

Blokey's voice shouted down the offer: "He's lying, laddie! Then you'll have no chips left. Use your wits and stall!"

Gelleny followed the advice.

* * *

One day, Gelleny's torture stopped. Csongor announced that higher-ups had decided he was a prisoner of war, not a spy. The Canadian had an hour to get cleaned up and put on civilian clothes. The commando, worried it was a ruse to trick him into giving up his Geneva Convention rights, refused new clothes. He insisted on keeping his blood-spattered British uniform.

Csongor reluctantly agreed: the Canadian could keep his old uniform.

Guards brought Gelleny to a first-class train car with his Dibbler colleagues, Captain John Coates and Lieutenant Mike Turk, accompanied by Csongor and a heavy guard. Gelleny's teammates were as alive as ever, but worse for wear—especially Turk, who was arrested wearing civilian clothes and tortured more severely than the other two.

Gelleny admired the fine craftsmanship inside his first-class wagon: ornate reading lamps and polished walnut doors with burnished brass hardware. But his critical eye observed that the opulence was fading.

The bench seats, once plush, were now threadbare.

Csongor sat next to him and made himself comfortable. The Canadian eyed Csongor's expensive Swiss Army knife, but decided against making a move. Instead, Gelleny looked out his window. American bombers passed lazily overhead with fighter escorts, unmolested. The train might have seemed a fat lumbering target, snorting and shuddering, black smoke curling from its stack.

"God damn America!"[11] Csongor hollered.

"Don't worry, Colonel," Gelleny replied. "Yanks don't bomb civilian trains. Only Germans do that."

Csongor's jaw tightened, but for once he didn't respond.

Soon, a waiter brought a lavish dinner. Along with prestigious red and white wines, Gelleny enjoyed delicious vegetable soup, boiled potatoes, and chicken paprikash. It was a lot better than the rations he had gotten in the British army.

Gelleny focused on his food while the train's wheels clattered over the rails. If this was a trick, it was an expensive one. The lieutenant's secret knowledge of Hungarian allowed him to understand the conversation around him: Lieutenant Colonel József Garzuly, Hungary's new head of

counterespionage, had saved Gelleny and his Dibbler colleagues from execution and shielded them from Germany's Sicherheitsdienst.

Gelleny kept his face blank, hiding any hint of curiosity as he wondered what his captors intended. It could hardly be worse than what came before.

* * *

On October 12, 1944, guards brought him into the inner sanctum of Budapest intelligence, seven months after the Sparrows had visited. A chain-smoking Hungarian general who wouldn't reveal his name asked him to broadcast a surrender message to the Allies. Hungarian intelligence had found Gelleny's hidden radio, but it was useless without the crystals and the code.

The general was Regent Horthy's personal envoy, backed, he said, by anti-Nazi Hungarian officers. Another of the officers explained the matter so the general could continue smoking his cigarette. "Our country is almost certainly pulling out[12] of the war within the week. An urgent message must be sent to alert the Allies."

Hungary was ready to break with Germany and receive another Allied parachute mission, despite German troops still in the country. It was a huge risk for the Hungarians to explain this to a captured enemy soldier, especially after torturing him. Still, they wagered that Gelleny would hate the Germans more than he hated the Hungarians, who had at least kept the Dibbler team alive.

The Hungarian resistance was impressed that Gelleny hadn't broken under torture. Obviously he knew the code, but he hadn't given it up. If he hadn't betrayed his loyalty after weeks of pain, the Hungarians figured he wouldn't betray them either—especially when their plan would hurt the Nazis.

Gelleny had conditions for sending a message: Mike needed a doctor, and the torturer, Csongor, must be fired from overseeing prisoners. The general agreed and picked up the phone on his desk to make the arrangements. Gelleny's knowledge of Hungarian let him understand both sides of the conversation. It was real.

For the rest of the war, Csongor would count equipment, unable to hurt anyone again. Thanks to the Canadian's stand, Csongor's dismissal saved many lives, particularly Jewish and Roma women.

* * *

The Hungarians left Gelleny alone with his radio on the desk: glowing Polish vacuum tubes, new earphones, battery pack connected.

To the uninitiated, the wireless transmitter might have seemed like magic. But the lieutenant understood every component of the delicate B Mark II radio crammed into its small suitcase: the precisely tuned whip antenna, the seventy-foot aerial, the empty place at its heart where the quartz crystals needed to go. The crystals were everything, resonating at a unique frequency to connect with a specific receiver across the sea. Without them, the radio was thirty pounds of useless metal. With them, he could reach Allied intelligence.

He took a crystal from its hiding place in his uniform and snapped it into position, then fixed the antenna to the window. He struggled to remember how to undo his radio jiggering. He had scrambled the machine at the airport in Brindisi before he took off for Hungary, just in case the fascists found it. Hoping for the best and sweating heavily, he turned broadcast power to maximum and tapped out the regent's surrender message across the sea.

Regent Horthy "wishes acknowledgment[13] by the British and Americans so that he can secretly arrange, if agreed by the Allies, to send a small force by parachute to a designated safe area in Hungary. This would hasten the pullout by German troops and facilitate the safe passage of Russian soldiers through, without any actual fighting in Hungary. Russia is not to occupy Hungary. An Allied force is to be in control of Hungary. This will save thousands of lives: Hungarian, Russian, and Jewish."

Regent Horthy would publicly announce Hungary's surrender October 15. He knew from the battle maps that Soviet forces would reach Budapest sooner rather than later.

Allied advanced intelligence headquarters in Italy radioed back almost immediately: "Message received[14] and understood."

By refusing to give up his codes, talking while revealing nothing, and keeping his head, the Canadian had advanced the mission despite capture, just like the Sparrows.

While Gelleny broadcast, American forces were engaged in grinding urban warfare to capture the heavily defended western German city of Aachen. Meanwhile, British and Canadian forces battled for control of the

Scheldt, the waterway leading to Antwerp's port. The rapid initial Allied advance following D-Day had stalled against stiffening German resistance and logistical challenges. Hitler moved troops to counter the invasion, arriving too late to destroy the beachhead but perhaps in time to mount a more effective defence if he trusted his generals' judgment rather than overruling their decisions.

The southeast kept diverting Hitler's attention and weakening his defence of Europe. Hungary's second attempt at switching sides was about to give the Führer another headache.

* * *

The three Dibblers were finally housed together. The food improved, and there was no more torture. Gelleny recited his favourite Canadian poems for his fellow captives, like William Wilfred Campbell's "Indian Summer":

Now by the brook the maple leans
With all his glory spread,
And all the sumachs on the hills
Have turned their green to red.

And John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields":

If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Outside, the war continued. But inside their poetic cell, three men who had kept faith with their mission enjoyed a well-earned rest.

They knew it wouldn't last forever. The Germans wouldn't take kindly to Hungary's newest attempt to switch sides. The commandos needed to escape before the Gestapo came for them.

Chapter 24

The Last Winter

FALL 1944—COLDITZ

As summer darkened into fall at Colditz, hunger and uncertainty gnawed at the prisoners. Everyone wondered if they would be there much longer, if the US Army would reach them before the Soviets, and if they would be liberated or killed. Cynical prisoners insisted the SS would soon come to massacre them all.

The prison food got worse as Germany's transportation network came under air attack: typical meals now consisted of sawdusty bread and watery turnip soup. The war's chaos disrupted Red Cross deliveries. Still, for the Sparrows, it was better than what they'd endured in Gestapo prisons.

Roll calls, card games, chess, and empty hours blurred together as autumn deepened. New arrivals occasionally broke the monotony as Hitler steadily increased his collection of Prominents. With the war turning against Germany, Colditz became the dictator's bank of hostages. He could use them for negotiations or revenge.

Some prisoners arrived under death warrants, like American Lieutenant Colonel H.W. Schaeffer from Illinois. He had been sentenced to execution in a previous prison for blocking a guard from hanging a poster declaring that escapees would be shot. Duke argued the case to keep his fellow American alive. It helped that the castle's military judge, Kommandant Gerhard Prawitt, knew the war was lost and wasn't in a hurry to carry out Berlin's orders. Approvals stalled. The same bureaucracy that usually ground prisoners down now became their shield of mercy.

Prawitt's personnel file praised him as "an affirmed National Socialist"—in other words, a committed Nazi. But Duke knew to watch men's actions, not their paperwork. Unlike other German commanders who

worked prisoners to death or shot those who couldn't keep up, Prawitt ran Colditz by the book. It made the castle a strangely civilized place in the midst of Nazi barbarity.

Instead of slaving away in chain gangs, Colditz prisoners had time for hobbies. Duke became a zealous bridge player. Nunn studied Czech under Lieutenant Chalupka, a dashing pilot with Clark Gable looks. Suarez practised hard to beat Colditz's chess champion, Major Kiril Sabadosh. Once he succeeded, he retired from the game as the castle's undefeated champion.

Then there was culture, among the best ever in a prisoner of war camp. The castle had a theatre, and the inmates staged shows for each other like *Gaslight,* performed with costumes sewn from blankets and makeup made of boot polish and Red Cross cocoa. In a Reich stripped of humanity, the play reminded them of the world beyond barbed wire.

The war continued its march towards Colditz. As Allied advances crept closer from west and east, the guards sensed danger coming their way. German propaganda reassured the people that Hitler's forces were winning all their battles, but this usually seemed to be while they were retreating. Nazi propaganda also broadcast reports of enemy brutality to civilians, convincing Germans to fight like hell so the same wouldn't happen to their families. Colditz's guards had families like everyone else, and they were getting nervous.

The prisoners felt the tension in their guts. The Germans were "getting jumpy,"[1] as the British flyer Bader put it. Prisoners bristled at every barked order. Angry German riflemen and Allied defiance made for a potentially deadly combination. Duke's strong voice repeatedly cooled hot tempers before they exploded.

Even though the British prisoners vastly outnumbered the handful of North Americans, Duke became co-senior officer of the camp alongside the stoic Scotsman Colonel Tod, who represented the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth. The senior officers litigated prisoner rights under Geneva Convention rules, challenged illegal punishments, and ensured proper medical care for the sick. But much of their real work happened in the shadows—coordinating with the prisoners' intelligence network, analyzing German troop movements, and considering which guards and officials might cooperate as the Reich collapsed. Once an intelligence chief, always an intelligence chief.

The Colditz intelligence committee ran a complex network mapping pro- and anti-Nazi sentiment in the town below. Their chief German agent was seventeen-year-old Irmgard Wernicke, who was deeply in love with Nunn's Czech teacher, the dashing pilot Chalupka. The two had met in the town's dentist office, where she worked, when Chalupka was brought under guard to have his teeth fixed. She decided he was far more interesting than the local Hitler Youth boys and volunteered for the enemy.

Through Wernicke and other anti-Nazi townspeople, the prisoners set up an early warning system. If the SS planned to move into the castle to massacre the captives, these local sympathizers would signal so the inmates could launch a rebellion.

The captives didn't just wait around until the SS invaded—they waged asymmetrical psychological warfare. A favourite tactic was refusing to do what the guards ordered until they were forced to pull out their pistols; then complying with exaggerated courtesy. Other times, the prisoners cheerfully explained to the guards that Hitler was losing the war so they could watch German confidence crumble with each news bulletin.

The English airman Bader was an expert at the game. He delighted in giving Germans valuable treats from his Red Cross packages: coffee, chocolate, gum, and cigarettes. It wordlessly suggested that the prisoners had more than enough, while the German people went hungry.

The prisoners' defiance, along with their frequent escape attempts earlier in the war, meant there were often more guards than inmates. It was a drain on manpower, weakening the German war effort elsewhere. Most guards at Colditz were too old or unfit for combat, but they could have worked in war factories or built defensive fortifications. Instead, the prisoners' non-violent warfare made the castle a resource drain on the Reich.

* * *

Nazi radio propaganda fought back against the Allies humourlessly, with tales of an epic struggle to be won by the side with the most willpower. Obedient German masses believed it. Local militias consisting of teenagers and old men dutifully prepared Germany's defences around Colditz.

Meanwhile in Berlin, top Nazis bickered behind closed doors about whether they should fight to the bitter end or negotiate a deal. Some

German officials had been impressed by the Allies' willingness to let Hungary switch sides, despite their earlier demand that the Axis surrender unconditionally. Top Nazis, likely including Hitler, entertained hopes that the English-speaking allies hated the Soviets so much that there would be a war between them, and Germany would join the western powers. The desperate hope was that it would stave off the Soviets before communism engulfed their country.

But the Allies' flexibility on "unconditional surrender" applied only to Germany's satellites, not Germany itself. Hitler was right that the democratic and communist sides of the Allies didn't like each other, but he didn't understand that they disliked the Nazis still more. There was no chance that the English-speaking Allies would stab their Soviet ally in the back, especially when the Nazis were carrying out the Holocaust.

The Sparrows continued to follow the war news from the castle's hidden radio with intense interest. On October 15, Tito's Yugoslav Partisan forces took Belgrade, and Regent Horthy proclaimed Hungary's withdrawal from the Axis, seven months after three American commandos had parachuted into the country to create a problem for Hitler in the southeast. But now the illusion had become reality. For Hitler, the Balkans weren't a diversion anymore; it was a real crisis.

Hitler rushed divisions to plug the gap in France, while yanking others back east when Hungary defected. Then Yugoslavia wavered and demanded reinforcements. Then to Romania. Then more troops went back west as the Allies invaded Aachen. Nazi armies remained disciplined and well-armed, but they were stretched thin, always arriving too late or in too few numbers. The Führer could no longer tell which fires to fight first—the Bodyguard deceptions poisoned his strategic instincts so completely that real threats and phantom armies blurred together. He became paralyzed by paranoia, fighting enemies in all directions while his Reich crumbled on all sides.

There was still plenty of time for Hitler to wreak vengeance in territories he controlled. Nazi plans were already in motion in Budapest as soon as the regent broke his country's alliance with Nazi Germany on October 15. Within hours, a German putsch rose up to overthrow the Hungarian government and install the genocidal Arrow Cross regime in its place.

The impeccably dressed Otto Clages, Duke's former interrogator, was killed leading a mission to kidnap the regent's son. Despite taking casualties

when Hungarian bodyguards returned fire, the Germans got their hostage.

The kidnapping and the pressure worked. The regent ceded control and was put under house arrest. The racist fanatic Ferenc Szálasi, founder of the Arrow Cross, took over leadership, under the heel of the Germans. The protection that Horthy had extended to Budapest's Jews was over, and the only hope for saving them now was the local resistance.

Four hundred miles southeast of Colditz, the tragedy of Budapest's Jewish population entered its most brutal phase. The regent's government had resisted full deportations for months, but the October takeover by the Arrow Cross unleashed a new horror. The previous Hungarian regime had kept the most fanatical racists at the margins, but now they ran the country, under Nazi supervision. Fascist thugs roamed like rabid dogs, herding Jewish families—men, women, children—to the banks of the Danube. There they ordered their victims to remove their shoes before shooting them and kicking their bodies into the frigid water. Then one last theft: collecting the shoes, because the leather was valuable.

Katalin Karády, the Blue Bird, had survived her months of Gestapo torture, even though it nearly killed her. She was finally released from prison after she managed to get word to her friends in Hungarian military intelligence through a sympathetic German. She probably hadn't been a spy when she was arrested by the Germans in spring 1944. But by the fall, she was. She was no longer the sultry star who had once made audiences weep with her smoky voice. Her body bore the evidence of systematic torture, her spirit fractured by months of calculated cruelty.

The Gestapo had ransacked her apartment. It would have been easy for her to seek sanctuary in the countryside. Instead, Karády did something far more dangerous: she stayed in Budapest, dressing in disguise to keep ahead of the Gestapo.

In the winter, she saw a group of twenty Jewish children, torn from their families in the ghetto, shivering on the Danube riverbank in the bitter cold, surrounded by Arrow Cross guards readying to shoot them. Among the children was eight-year-old János, whose father had already been deported to Auschwitz, leaving the boy with his mother and grandparents until the Arrow Cross came for him. He and the other children had been selected to be massacred. The boy didn't fully understand what was happening, but he felt the terrible danger in the freezing air.

"Suddenly a big black car[2] braked next to us, and Katalin Karády got out," he recalled. "She spoke to the Arrow Cross men, then reached into her purse, gave them something, and all of us children could squeeze into her car." The movie star bartered her gold and jewellery for lives she didn't know.

Karády drove them away from the killing ground and kept the survivors hidden in her villas.

This heroic rescue was not an isolated act. She became a conductor on an underground railroad of survival. Rooms where she had once entertained Hungary's cultural and military elite now sheltered innocents who had nowhere else to turn. Her basement was a hidden refuge where rescued children would try to survive until Budapest's liberation.

The actress who had lost nearly everything—her career destroyed, her fiancé kidnapped and tortured, her health shattered by beatings—devoted herself entirely to those children. She somehow procured chocolate even in wartime scarcity and did everything possible to shield them from the oppressive atmosphere of terror. The woman whose voice had once filled concert halls now sang lullabies in a hideout; her elegant hands, once gracing magazine covers, now worked to keep children alive through the Holocaust.

* * *

Locked behind the stone walls of Colditz, the Sparrows heard through the BBC that Germany was retreating on all fronts, but the fighting was still hundreds of miles from the castle. The captives hoped the war would end by fall 1944, knowing that snow and short days would slow Allied progress if fighting stretched to winter. But the news grew grimmer as the nights grew longer.

The Battle of the Bulge erupted from the Ardennes on December 16, as a quarter-million German troops launched a surprise attack towards Antwerp. The prisoners at Colditz listened to reports of Bastogne encircled and the 101st Airborne cut off behind enemy lines. The Reich was far from finished.

Christmas Eve arrived at Colditz with empty bellies. No Red Cross packages made it through because of American bombing. Duke's stomach cramped with hunger as he swallowed his last spoonful of watery vegetable

soup. The situation seemed miserable, but as darkness fell, the prison choir filled the courtyard with hopeful carols: “Once in royal David’s city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed.”

The hymn carried across the stone walls to teary-eyed men, once proud soldiers, now reduced to the most basic existence. If God had lived in humility and vulnerability, perhaps their own miserable captivity held some hidden purpose in the grand design of things.

Someone had brewed illicit plum brandy from sugar and dried fruit squirrelled away from their Red Cross packages and shared it around. At midnight, Lieutenant Chalupka, having lost a bet that the prisoners would be free by Christmas, streaked naked across the courtyard to riotous cheers from prisoners bundled at their windows.

On Christmas Day, prisoners held a freezing church service in the chapel. The evening concluded with a live-action production of *Snow White* at the prison theatre. These shot-down pilots and captured tank commanders found themselves staging a fairy tale that hit close to home. Like Snow White herself, they had been torn from everyone they loved and left alone in a hostile world. Yet they managed to get by with help from their new friends.

* * *

The castle’s barter economy spiralled into hyperinflation. In December, a prisoner traded ownership of a 1938 Renault coupe—on return to England—for five pounds of chocolate and ten pounds sterling. The same car might have cost two hundred pounds sterling[3] in London.

The air war crept towards Colditz. In mid-February 1945, prisoners watched green anti-aircraft tracer fire streak across the night sky at Allied bombers pounding Dresden and Leipzig.

In Dresden, Allied firebombing destroyed what Private Kurt Vonnegut considered the world’s most beautiful city. Sheltering sixty feet underground in Slaughterhouse-Five—an underground meat locker that would later give its name to his famous novel—he survived the inferno. He emerged to a barren moonscape broken only by German soldiers wielding flamethrowers to burn the tens of thousands of bodies that could not be buried.

A ruined Budapest fell to the Soviets in mid-February, after one of the bloodiest battles of the war. It killed well over one hundred thousand civilians and soldiers, after desperate German attempts to lift the siege had failed. After years of manoeuvring to escape both Hitler and Stalin, Hungary had fallen to each in turn.

The Colditz prisoners feared more than ever that the SS would liquidate them, just as they had done with countless other prisoners throughout the Reich. The Nazis' fanatical ideology and fury at Allied bombing, combined with their terror of being captured and facing war crimes trials, made them more dangerous than ever.

* * *

Duke helped maintain discipline despite the hunger and fear. He organized bridge tournaments, settled disputes over hoarded cigarettes, and continued his quiet campaign to win over German centrists. The colonel knew that when the end came for the Nazis—and now anyone with eyes to see knew the fall was coming—the behaviour of men like the Kommandant and the security officer could mean the difference between liberation and massacre.

For the Colditz prison staff, the choice seemed impossible. If the castle fought as a defensive bulwark against the invading Americans, it would be destroyed by Allied artillery and bombs. But surrendering meant the SS would shoot the prison officers first, then liquidate the prisoners.

Each day, the war came closer to the castle. In the dark early morning of April 10, 1945, a Russian airplane broke from formation to strafe the fortress, sending shrapnel into the cell of a Polish general who had led the Warsaw Uprising. The general was convinced it was an assassination attempt, but other prisoners thought it was just a coincidence.

The next day a lookout shouted: "Smoke, dead west!"[4]

The senior officers needed a plan, and fast. If the SS decided to execute the prisoners before liberation, there would be no second chances.

Colonels Duke and Tod huddled for urgent planning. Even if the SS didn't kill them, American bombs could. The castle had no bomb shelter.

Chapter 25

Hide-and-Seek

Cry "I spy!" And run away and hide all day . . .

—W.H. Neidlinger

APRIL 12, 1945—COLDITZ CASTLE, GERMANY

The chill seeped through the stone walls as Florimond Duke thought about how to stop the SS from taking over the castle and massacring the prisoners. He knew he'd need guns for the fight. Though the calendar said spring, winter held the castle. Duke scraped frost from a window and watched German refugees trudging west through mud and snow, away from the Soviet advance. An endless line of civilians crossed over the Adolf Hitler Bridge, families with overloaded wagons, old men pushing handcarts, tired mothers carrying bundled children. The sound of creaking wheels rose up to the fortress windows.

A French officer savoured the irony. "Now they will understand[1] what happened in France in 1940. They should also have planes strafing the roads, to give them the full flavor of it." He had lived through the German invasion—Wehrmacht troops executing surrendered colonial soldiers, Stukas dive-bombing refugee columns, and the systematic brutality that followed the French army's collapse.

The evacuation also travelled through the skies, a steady stream of German aircraft flying from Berlin to the southern German mountains. Hitler's Germans, safe in the mountains, would survive and win the war. The airplane passengers were rich, influential Nazis and their families

seeking safety in Hitler's last-ditch fortress. Meanwhile, ordinary Germans fled the Russian advance the hard way—on foot through the snow.

Able-bodied males needed to stay and fight. Colditz's local civilian militia, old men and young boys, prepared defensive positions on the Mulde. Nunn found their discipline "depressing and amazing." Two huge armies were heading this way, and regimented children and retirees prepared to stop them.

The civilian flow across the bridge stopped for a while to let German military units cross. Armoured trucks and cars, tanks, troop vehicles, and staff cars headed south, towards Hitler's mountain fortress around Berchtesgaden. At half past one, the dull thunder of artillery fire rolled across the valley from the west. The prisoners ran to their windows.

That afternoon, a secret order arrived in Kommandant Prawitt's office. The Kommandant had two hours to evacuate the Class I Prominents—Hitler's famous hostages, including George VI's and Churchill's relatives. The Sparrows didn't qualify. Class II Prominents, like the Sparrows, were staying for the time being.

The Kommandant and his security officer agreed it would be impossible to evacuate a dozen Prominents in just two hours. If the guards tried to haul off a few prisoners while the rest roamed the castle freely, there would be a riot, and shooting. That would give the SS the excuse they needed to move in, kill the prisoners, and use the castle to fight the incoming American attackers. The transfer could happen only after evening lockdown.

That night, the prison kitchen had nothing to prepare, because food deliveries were impossible. Still worse, the Sparrows learned from the BBC that President Roosevelt had died that afternoon of a cerebral haemorrhage.

Eight hundred SS troops poured into the village, bazookas bristling from their trucks. They set up wicked-looking 88mm guns on the hill behind the castle—making the fortress ground zero for a coming artillery duel. Duke knew those 88s by reputation—seventeen feet of high-quality steel that could put a twenty-pound shell through tank armour every four seconds.

After the captives were locked up, an unusually large number of guards took their posts, their eyes scanning every movement with rigid precision. The prisoners exchanged uneasy glances; something was wrong. Prawitt finally informed Duke and Tod, the prisoners' representatives, that the Class I Prominents would be shipped out.

Among those on the deportation list was twenty-two-year-old John Winant, the son of America's ambassador to the United Kingdom. Lieutenant Winant's steely blue eyes and athletic build marked him as Princeton crew material, but the jagged scar bisecting his left cheek spoke of flak and fire. On his thirteenth mission as the pilot of a B-17 bomber, he was shot down on a run over Münster. Because of his influential father, he was brought to Colditz.

Duke, Tod, and Davies demanded an audience with Kommandant Prawitt.

Prawitt sat gaunt behind his oversized desk, his uniform hanging loose on his frame. He held out a letter. The Allied officers read it while standing.

The document bore Himmler's letterhead but no signature—it had been transmitted by wire for speed. It ordered the Prominents moved, that night, to an unnamed top-secret location.

If any of them got away, Prawitt's life was forfeit.

Tod commenced the counterattack. It was madness, he stormed, to send prisoners into a war zone with Americans on one side, Russians on the other, and Germans in the middle.

The Kommandant insisted that there was nothing he could do. The order was specific and final.

Brigadier Davies answered that an illegal order wasn't an order. The Geneva Convention banned jeopardizing prisoners' lives. Moving the Prominents meant putting them in the crosshairs of Allied aircraft.

The Kommandant replied that they would be safe under heavy SS guard and would move at night to avoid Allied fighters.

The senior officers raised the darker question: Who would guard them from the SS?

Prawitt said he would send Security Officer Eggers and several guards along to ensure their safety. Eggers would get signatures from all the Prominents at their next prison and deliver it back to Colditz.

It wasn't what Duke and Tod had hoped for, but it was the best they could get. They grudgingly agreed to the terms.

* * *

Duke returned to his cell to find another problem: Nunn told him that Lieutenant Winant would rather disappear than be deported.

Winant wasn't being paranoid. Here he was a POW with rights. Under the SS, he would become a hostage. In Hitler's final desperate days, he could use the Prominents as human shields or bargaining chips, or he could kill them in a last act of spite.

The young American decided to play a game of hide-and-seek. His fellow prisoners offered him a spot in the prison's most hidden niche, where they kept their radio and forgery tools.

Duke had another meeting with Kommandant Prawitt, with Nunn as translator, and informed him Winant would go missing if he was called out. Perhaps his disappearance would make the Kommandant reconsider, or at least delay, the order.

Prawitt's voice shook. "There are 800 SS troops in the village.[2] If I should refuse to comply with the order, it would serve no purpose at all. I should be found in the morning, wrapped in newspaper, in the gutter. It would mean only that we should all be killed. They would burn the castle with everyone in it."

Prawitt pulled out his handkerchief and wiped sweat from his brow, as if he already felt the coming flames.

He made a frank confession. "Look. I have been a regular Wehrmacht officer for 20 years. This gang which has wrecked Germany has beaten us, for now. We were beaten on June 22 last year."

He meant the disaster on the Eastern Front: the Soviet Union's Operation Bagration, which had shattered twenty-eight German divisions and opened the way to Berlin. The Soviets had advanced seven hundred kilometres, liberating Minsk and crossing into Poland while the world's attention was focused on Normandy. Hitler had been caught completely off guard by Stalin's surprise attack—now his Eastern Front was collapsing faster than his Western one.

It was obvious to Prawitt that the war was lost. "For now," he continued, "the only thing to be done is to save as many lives as possible, both among the guards and among the prisoners."

And if Winant refused to go? "If the lieutenant is not at the gate," the German insisted, "my own guards will come after him—and if they do not find him, God help us all."

Duke headed back to his quarters to talk it over with Captain Nunn, a friend of Winant's who knew how to find him. Nunn wanted Winant to stay hidden, and most prisoners agreed.

Nunn argued that Prawitt could use his 550 guards to fight off the SS—they had a castle, remember. "It might be a winning gamble,"[3] Nunn figured, to keep Winant hidden. After all, the hiding spot had worked for months. Only six prisoners knew the room's location. Winant would enter it from above. The walls were covered with thick blankets to dampen noise. There was a trap door in the floor and a rope hanging down if he needed to make a quick getaway.

Nunn felt good about Winant's chances—but he wasn't thinking about the SS on the hill above the castle. They could use their 88s to bombard the fortress if the prisoners rioted.

Prawitt sent four guards into the prisoners' quarters. Hungry and sluggish, they did a half-hearted job of searching and couldn't find him.

Nunn went into the courtyard and found Duke standing in a small corner unlit by search lights. The lieutenant urged his colonel to let Winant remain in hiding, speaking not just for himself but for the young officers ready to fight the Germans. But Duke knew it would be suicide with all the guns on one side. He thought Winant would be safe transferring prisons. But even "seen in the worst light," he said, it was a "case of one man's safety against that of all prisoners."

Nunn argued back. He still felt compelled to stick up for the junior officer. But Duke knew that if those 88s levelled the castle, Winant would be dead too, just like the rest of them. The colonel looked around the courtyard for a while. "Tell Winant to come down. Tell him it's an order."

The word "order" hit Nunn like a slap. He hadn't heard "order" in over a year. Duke's leadership relied on respect rather than bossing people around, but now he pulled rank because he knew the Kommandant wasn't bluffing.

Nunn trudged inside in a bad mood. He whispered Duke's order to Winant, hidden in a bed, but told him it was his own choice. Prisoners would help him if he disobeyed the order, even if it got them all killed. Nunn was angry enough to risk insubordination, and much worse.

"Well," Winant said, "I guess I'll go down[4] . . . it would have been fun, though." He pulled himself out of the mattress, picking straw from his close-cropped hair, saving his fellow prisoners from getting slaughtered on his behalf.

Just after midnight, a dozen prison guards, bayonets pointed, entered the courtyard and surrounded the Prominents' separate quarters. Nunn seethed

as the Germans pulled the dozen Class I Prominents from their cells like "prize pigeons," as he put it.

Nunn realized the hungry, demoralized guards had made a mistake—his cell door wasn't even locked. He stepped out and went down to the courtyard, where he asked Eggers if he could say goodbye. The surprised security officer agreed.

Of the dozen Prominents, most looked grim. Only one was smiling: war correspondent Giles Romilly, Churchill's nephew. "This is like a bad novel.[5] It ought to be interesting."

Another Prominent wept. "They're going to shoot us, the bastards."

As guards put them onto their buses, Romilly chimed in: "I thought you'd all like to know today is Friday the thirteenth."

Of course it was.

Security Officer Eggers entered the lead vehicle. The convoy disappeared through the gate, flanked by SS motorcyclists. The remaining prisoners shouted from their tower windows into the darkness.

Chapter 26

Colonel Death

APRIL 14, 1945—COLDITZ

In the dark early morning on Saturday, Florimond Duke watched explosive flashes light up the Saxon countryside. The US First Army was closing in from the west. The future looked grim: Either the SS would massacre them so they could use the castle as a defensive fortification, or the Americans would blow them up when the German 88s behind the castle opened fire.

Exhausted, Duke tried to sleep. He knew from the BBC that the drive from Normandy had cost the Allies dearly. There were hundreds of thousands of casualties among the Americans, the British, and the Canadians, and the price kept climbing with every yard gained. If the SS took the castle for a firing position, it would mean a lot more Allied dead.

Outside the castle walls, SS troops and German militia rushed to build defensive positions with the frantic energy of men who didn't know they were beaten. By morning light, Duke saw that machine-gun nests had sprouted overnight around the castle like mushrooms. The incoming Americans were going to get hit hard.

The danger to the prisoners was growing. German troops had summarily executed hundreds of captives from the Battle of the Bulge. And if the SS didn't kill the men of Colditz, friendly fire might, like the American bombers that had accidentally killed four hundred POWs on a train in Italy. Even worse, Duke knew that if American artillery reduced Colditz to rubble, its ruins might become another Monte Cassino—a deadly fortress that could bleed an invading army for a long time.

* * *

On Saturday morning, Kommandant Prawitt stared at the telegram from district Wehrmacht headquarters in Glauchau.

Destroy and evacuate.

There were different ways to read it. Prison chiefs across Germany received similar messages. Many took it to mean they should massacre the weak and death march[1] the rest. But Prawitt decided it meant he must destroy documents and communications equipment, then march the prisoners east, away from the approaching Americans.

Security Officer Eggers had just returned from Castle Königstein with proof that the Class I Prominents had arrived safely. The Kommandant found the British senior officer, Colonel Tod, and told him the good news about the Prominents. He showed him the confirmation letter, signed by each of the dozen.

Then came the bad news: he had orders to evacuate all remaining prisoners, for their safety, because of the coming battle.

Tod's response was forceful and immediate: "No."

Driving a dozen prisoners from one prison to another under cover of night was one thing. Forcing fifteen hundred to march through mud and snow at bayonet point to an unknown destination was another—especially when Nazi death marches were synonymous with murder.

Tod, whose surname meant "death" in German, spoke with the authority of a man who'd prepared for this moment: The prisoners would fight evacuation. If the guards wanted to move them, they'd need to use their guns, and there would be casualties.

The Colditz prison population had recently swelled with French captives who hated their guards with an intensity that made the British look friendly by comparison. The German garrison numbered 550 men, many of them older soldiers deemed unfit for front-line duty. Able-bodied men had long since been fed to Hitler's appetite for manpower. Now the prisoners outnumbered the Germans three to one. But the guards had rifles and machine guns.

Prawitt felt the weight of a choice faced by a long line of German officers before him. Order violence to make the prisoners move, and the Allies would eventually charge him with war crimes. Refuse, and Hitler's executioners would add more names to their hit list.

As the Kommandant thought about his grim choice, tragedy unfolded a mile across the Mulde River. At a former porcelain factory turned slave

labour camp, Nazis had starved and tortured Hungarian Jews while forcing them to make the Panzerfaust anti-tank bazooka. That camp's Kommandant also received an evacuation order, but he acted differently than Prawitt. Prisoners who were unable to move or refused to go were shot as warnings, while those who fell behind on the death march were executed with single bullets.

It could have been the fate of Colditz's prisoners if Tod had agreed to the evacuation.

* * *

Duke was studying maps of the castle's defences when Tod arrived at his cell door. The American listened to the briefing with the focus he'd once brought to planning commando operations in the Balkans. When Tod finished explaining, Duke nodded. Of course the Americans would help the British fight if the Germans ordered a death march.

Duke and Tod next found General Albert Daine of the French army. When Duke explained the situation, Daine responded immediately: *Oui,* the French would fight. Daine had a right to be angry—one of his fellow French generals had just been murdered during a prison transfer.

The senior officers confronted Prawitt together in his office. The German tried to maintain protocol, but desperation showed in his voice. He knew that if the prisoners rioted, the SS would storm the fortress. They were looking for an excuse to use it in the upcoming battle as a strong point. The fairy tale castle would be destroyed.

The Allies protested that there weren't enough trucks to move all the prisoners. The Kommandant explained that they would march.

"These men are half-starved,"[2] Tod snapped.

Duke added flatly: "Half would drop dead."

The Allied officers refused to order men to their deaths. Prawitt looked helpless.

Finally, Tod suggested: "Call and say the prisoners refuse to move."

What followed might have been comedic if men weren't about to die in Colditz. Kommandant Prawitt called district headquarters and let the Allied officers tell him what to say.

First, Prawitt explained that the prisoners refused to move. Headquarters said he must use force to make them obey.

Tod told the Kommandant to ask whether HQ would accept responsibility for the prisoners' deaths. Prawitt repeated it. The voice from Glauchau suddenly developed hearing problems.

The Kommandant stared at the dead receiver as if it might offer salvation. Duke stepped into the silence with calm authority. "With freedom only hours away,"[3] he said, "not you nor anybody else will ever get these men out of Colditz."

American flare shells bloomed over the town, marking German positions for Allied aircraft. The sound of incoming artillery grew louder.

When Prawitt rang Glauchau again, headquarters had discovered flexibility. The prisoners could stay in Colditz—*if* the Allied senior officers took responsibility for their lives, absolving German commanders if they got killed. The hot potato could hold itself.

Headquarters even threw in a sweetener: the Kommandant was authorized to surrender the castle to the Americans when they arrived. It was noon. American artillery explosions were now within sight of the castle.

Duke and Tod left satisfied. But soon they wanted more. Back in their quarters, the two strategists mapped out their next move: capturing the castle. Seizing Colditz, the fortress standing between Leipzig and Dresden, would strike at the heart of Germany's Southern Front.

The prisoners returned to the Kommandant in the afternoon with their plan. To resist the SS, the prisoners needed access to the rifles and machine guns kept in the castle's armoury. Duke and Tod made it clear: armed prisoners would fight so hard that even the ruthless SS would hesitate to pay the price.

Prawitt's voice cracked. "You're suggesting[4] that I surrender Colditz to its prisoners?"

Duke said matter-of-factly: "That's the idea."

The logic was clear. German HQ had already authorized surrender to the US Army. And here stood Duke—a colonel in that army. "Now is the time."

The Kommandant saw the point. After an hour negotiating the fine print, he handed over the armoury keys to the enemy officers, formalizing the secret surrender.

In the corridor, Duke and Tod agreed on a plan. If the SS came for the castle, the glider escape plan would be activated: the prisoners would open

the roof, set up the runway and launch system, and two men would climb into the aircraft and fly west over the Mulde River to alert the advancing US Army. Meanwhile, Duke and Tod would unlock the weapons. Hundreds of captives would transform into soldiers, fighting to survive until help came.

Until then, guards would patrol as usual, so the SS wouldn't get suspicious. Kommandant Prawitt agreed his men wouldn't shoot at the Allies when the battle came—neither the prisoners nor the attacking troops—no matter what happened.

In exchange for the castle's secret surrender, Prawitt got a safe passage letter for use after the conquest; the letter also recommended quick release for the guards who had behaved correctly towards the prisoners and those who were either too old or unfit for German military service.

Through the strange twists of war, Duke secured an enemy surrender—though nothing like the one he had envisioned thirteen months earlier. He had been sent to Budapest to arrange Hungary's capitulation but instead found himself in Saxony, accepting the handover of a German castle two hundred kilometres south of Berlin.

Saturday evening, Duke lay on his cot listening to happy, terrifying white noise: American artillery explosions coming closer to the castle, foot by foot. He distinguished the artillery sounds with a soldier's ear: outgoing shells warbled as loud as a diesel truck on the highway; incoming rounds began as whistles that grew to urgent shrieks, ending in crashes that shook dust from the medieval stonework.

The next days would bring either freedom or death. With keys to hundreds of guns, Duke had reasons to be optimistic about his odds against the SS. But he wasn't so sure about American artillery and bombers.

Chapter 27

Fight for the Fortress

APRIL 15, 1945—COLDITZ

On Sunday morning, instead of breakfast, the prisoners watched American fighter planes roar through the skies, diving and strafing German targets in the woods across the river. The sharp chatter of machine gun fire echoed off the fortress walls.

The American fighters enjoyed total air superiority. Their planes carried eight .50 calibre guns and there were no Luftwaffe planes in sight. Prisoners shouted encouragement out the windows, as if the pilots could hear them over the thunder of their engines.

At 10 A.M., while the prisoners spelled out "POW" with bedclothes in the courtyard, British fighter ace Douglas Bader—who had lost both legs in a flying accident before the war—rushed to the top of the castle on his prosthetic legs. He took in a grand view of the air battle against the backdrop of smoke rising from Leipzig in the distance.

The acrid smell of gunpowder and burning wood drifted on the morning breeze. The sky was free of flak. Colditz's anti-aircraft guns had been replaced with anti-tank guns. The American pilots saw little danger and didn't bother flying fast, like it was a lazy Sunday morning. Bader shouted his disapproval—he who would have gone full throttle if he were in the cockpit.

His great view nearly killed him. There was a blinding flash as an Allied shell hit the corner of the window where he was standing. The blast threw him backwards, plaster cascading down and coating his dark hair white with dust.

* * *

From Colditz to Dresden to Leipzig, a single defensive line held the Reich together. If it collapsed, Germany's northern and southern armies would be torn in two—cut off from reinforcements, supplies, and retreat. Between the Americans at Colditz and the Russians at Cottbus ran the last road and rail links still binding Hitler's forces into a unified fighting front. German radio called for an all-out effort to keep the corridor open.

It would have been much safer for the prisoners to huddle in the inner recesses of the castle, but they wouldn't dream of missing the show. A blast hit the fortress, killing a German guard. Blood pooled on the ancient cobblestones where he fell. Another shell hit Bader's bed on the third floor. The lucky British pilot wasn't there to get killed because he was busy zooming around the courtyard, mocking the German guards: "Where is the Luftwaffe?[1] Where is the Luftwaffe?" His voice carried across the courtyard, sharp with the same aggression that had made him a legendary fighter pilot. Most of the captives had stopped harassing the guards by then—it was easy to feel sorry for the old men now that Germany was beaten. But Bader wouldn't stop fighting until the Krauts surrendered.

The prisoners watched as German combat engineers drilled holes in the bridge for explosives to stop the Allied advance. Two miles west, puffs of smoke and sharp reports rose from a tank battle. The German Panther tanks—heavily armoured monsters with powerful 75mm guns—outmatched the American Shermans in firepower, but there were a lot more of the Shermans.

In windows throughout the castle, hundreds of boisterous British, French, Dutch, Polish, and American POWs cheered American hits and jeered German misses, like it was "the most important football game[2] in the world," as one prisoner said.

German soldiers set up machine-gun nests along the west side of the river, facing the American advance. The outnumbered Wehrmacht tanks fell back from the west at 10:30 A.M. The prisoners watched in frustration as the American Thunderbolt fighters took three lazy minutes to complete a circle overhead, giving the German Panzers just enough time to dart safely over the bridge. The tanks took positions in the narrow medieval streets around the castle, ready for an ambush. Colditz looked ready to meet its end in rubble and ashes.

The front line had nearly reached the fortress. The sound of German tank treads on cobblestones mixed with the rumble of artillery. For some,

the tension became unbearable. A German security staff captain came into Duke's cell, his face streaked with tears. "The situation is terrible,"[3] he wept. He was terrified about what would happen to his wife and seven-year-old son when the Americans arrived. The radio was full of news about enemy depravities.

Duke reassured the German that the US Army "does not fight women and children." The German calmed down a bit. Word had got round that Duke would write letters of recommendation for Germans who had treated prisoners fairly—and the guard was clearly hoping to receive one. Duke had grown to like this guard during their months of interaction and said he wouldn't mind putting in a good word.

As the relieved captain rose to leave, Duke saw an opportunity. "You have a nice sidearm there," he said casually. The German's face lit up with pride as he described his Mauser .25—one of the highest-velocity pistols in the world.

Duke raised his eyebrows, impressed. He added: "You won't be needing it now."

The German got the point. He took off the holster and belt and handed them over. The colonel was now the only armed prisoner at Colditz. The weight of the gun felt reassuring on his side—it would be useful if he needed to fight his way to the castle's armoury.

At 2 P.M., six American Sherman tanks emerged from the pine woods to the west and moved onto the sloping fields in full view of the fortress. They halted in unison at a radio command and began firing at German machine-gun positions to the south. Satisfied with the destruction, the Shermans swivelled their turrets north towards the village.

The long barrels of the feared German 88mm anti-tank guns—massive weapons capable of destroying targets up to fifteen kilometres away—fired from behind the castle. These notorious tank-killers were among the most feared weapons of the war.

The stationary Shermans sat exposed in the open field like sitting ducks. The prisoners held their breath, expecting the American tanks to explode in flames fifty feet high. But somehow, incredibly, the deadly 88s kept missing their obvious targets. It was either a miracle or bad aim. Perhaps the castle blocked the gunners' line of sight, or slave labourers had sabotaged the ammunition. It could be that the gun crews were hastily trained replacements; normally it took years to master such complex weapons, and

the Wehrmacht no longer had time. It was even possible that some Germans intentionally aimed wide, preferring American occupation to Soviet revenge.

But SS soldiers armed with Panzerfäuste had better aim and disabled two Shermans with direct hits. Black smoke poured from the crippled tanks as their crews bailed and ran for cover. The surviving American tanks pulled back to the woods but kept up their shelling.

As Colditz village burned, a dozen SS men in black uniforms appeared on the riverbank. Each carried two Panzerfäuste. It was the backup demolition team, ready to destroy the bridge if the first explosives failed.

The bridge over the Mulde River was critical. Without it, the American advance could stall for weeks, giving the Germans time to reinforce Leipzig and Dresden while the Soviets rushed in from the east.

On the main street leading to the fortress, a grim-faced German soldier crouched over a detonator and pushed the plunger down. The prisoners ducked. The huge explosion shattered every remaining window in the castle and sent shock waves through the ancient stones. For a terrifying moment, it seemed the blast might knock down the walls.

But as the smoke and dust cleared, the castle still stood. So did the bridge. An English officer peered out and crowed: “They bogged it![4] It didn’t come off!” A chunk of stone had been blown from the southern edge of the bridge, and twisted iron railings hung over the water, but there was more than enough left for tanks to drive over.

The desperate Nazis launched plan B. The SS men with their Panzerfäuste began firing rocket after rocket at the bridge supports. Each blast sent shock waves through the castle, rattling the prisoners’ teeth and raining dust from the ceiling. But the bridge’s stonework, built to last centuries, absorbed the punishment. Only chips and scars marked the piers.

The failed demolition attempts went on through the afternoon, becoming hilarious to the jeering prisoners. But the German guards weren’t laughing. Nunn watched nervously from his cell window as a guard on the parapet below fingered his rifle trigger. Military discipline was crumbling under the strain.

When prisoners hung white surrender flags from their windows, the SS commander sent an ultimatum to the prison guards: remove them or the castle would be destroyed. The flags quickly came down.

Meanwhile, American artillery shells blasted holes on both sides of the fortress. A British artillery officer among the prisoners knew the pattern—the gunners had zeroed in. “Get below!” he shouted.

Outside the village, Lieutenant Kenny Dobson had clear orders: destroy all resistance. German fire was coming from the direction of the castle, and the US artillery officer’s howitzers were ready to reduce the ancient fortress to rubble. The artillery units hadn’t received word that the castle was a prison. His radio crackled with range corrections as his gun crews made final adjustments.

As the prisoners hurried down the castle’s stone stairway, an artillery shell exploded where they had been standing moments before. The walls shook as chunks of mortar rained from the ceiling.

The prisoners were ready for this moment. They unfurled homemade flags from windows throughout the castle—the Union Jack, the Stars and Stripes, and the French tricolour—bright against grey stones.

Dobson raised his field glasses for one last look at his target before ordering fire. The red, white, and blue flags made him freeze. If this was a German trick, they would have used perfect copies. These looked like children had made them—or else it was the desperate handiwork of men with limited materials. He held his fire and called for intelligence.

* * *

As darkness fell, broken only by artillery flashes, the Kommandant came to Duke’s cell. “Your Americans will be here[5] soon,” he said, looking nervously towards the windows. “I shall need someone to meet them.” That someone had to reach the advancing army before it was too late, to tell the invading Americans that the castle had already surrendered.

The prisoners had no other way to contact the approaching Americans to warn them. The British radio could only receive, not transmit. They had no telephone, or telegraph. Not even a carrier pigeon. The Sparrows needed to do more than whistle to make themselves heard over the fury of battle.

A courier was their only hope, but the ground between the warring forces was a killing zone where movement drew fire from both sides. The colonel ran through the possibilities again and came to the same conclusion: a courier was the only hope they had, but he couldn’t order anyone on a

suicide mission. He needed a willing volunteer who spoke perfect German and English. And it needed to be American English.

Duke knew the man: Guy Nunn was the only prisoner who spoke both fluent German and perfect American slang. He was brave enough to walk through fire—and he could prove to GIs he wasn't a German impostor. The front-line American forces had no idea Allied prisoners were in the castle. They would assume any English they heard was a Nazi trick. Nunn needed to sound undeniably, one hundred percent American.

In the lower rooms of the ancient castle, hundreds of men who had lived through years of captivity now flinched at earth-shaking blasts. The explosions were no longer background noise but threats to their survival. Emotions swung wildly between hope and terror. Freedom had never been so close, or so dangerous.

Chapter 28

The New Slang

Make it colloquial.

—Guy Nunn

APRIL 16, 1945—COLDITZ

The night was dark before dawn at Colditz, thirteen months to the day since the Sparrows had landed in Hungary. It seemed a lifetime since well-fed, clean-cut Colonel Duke, Major Suarez, and Captain Nunn had leapt into enemy territory in early morning darkness and drank rounds of fiery slivovitz at Podturen's breakfast feast. Now the Americans were shaggy, hollow hungry, and pinned down by an artillery barrage. Not even Ernest Hemingway could have gotten a bottle of slivovitz early Monday morning in this conservative little German town on the front line of the Second World War.

Shell bursts echoed off the castle walls, rattling the bars on the windows. Nunn fell asleep at 2 A.M. while Duke stayed up talking to the other American POWs.

An hour later, Nunn was shaken awake. Duke told him to meet Kommandant Prawitt at the gate.

Prawitt knew a hammer blow was coming from the US First Army, but he didn't know that it was scheduled to begin at dawn, with infantry on the right, artillery on the left, and Shermans in the middle. Still, Prawitt knew that sometime today an attack would destroy the castle—if the SS didn't kill the prisoners first.

Unless "Wotta Guy" Nunn could save the day.

* * *

The castle courtyard lay in darkness, the floodlights cut. Nunn walked carefully over the cobblestones, guided only by aurora-like orange artillery flashes lighting his path.

Duke couldn't order him on a mission this dangerous, so Nunn volunteered. He didn't mind the mortal risk. But he wasn't happy when he found out that his job called for taking instructions from the Kommandant. Grumbling, he went to the gate to hear what the German had to say.

"In an hour or two,"[1] Prawitt told him at the gate, "American infantry will approach the castle. They've been across the river for two hours."

The Kommandant had told his guards not to resist, even if fired on. Nunn's mission, he continued, was a tall order. "You can save lives if you will try to make contact with your forces as they approach. Station yourself at the entrance to the castle and use what means you see fit to let your troops know that this is neutral ground. The guards have been ordered to do as you say."

Without a please or a thank you, the German swung away, his cape billowing behind him. Prawitt was ninety feet away down the walled path when Nunn registered his insult: *How dare he boss me around?* The prisoners had captured the castle, and the US Army was closing in. The balance of power had shifted, but the Kommandant was still barking orders like it was 1941.

Nunn swallowed his anger. He ordered the guard to tell the Kommandant he "wanted a bottle of schnapps or he'd be too cold to tell the Americans not to blow Oberstleutnant Prawitt's brains out."

The guard saluted, giving Nunn the respect he deserved. "*Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann.*" Yes, Captain.

The German's boots clacked smartly down the cobblestones. He returned in ten minutes, cradling a bottle of excellent pre-war Grand Marnier, better than schnapps.

The guard brought glasses for Nunn and his companion, Captain David Walker, a Scotsman appointed by Colonel Tod to lead Britain's reception of the invaders. Walker had been chosen in part because the guards didn't dislike him—he had treated the Germans with formality over the years.

He was probably also chosen because he looked undeniably Scottish. Captain Walker wore his impressive Black Watch uniform from the

Highlands: battledress jacket with pips, tartan trousers, and tam-o'-shanter cap with feathered red hackle. The look wouldn't be easy for a German imposter to pull off.

When Walker saw Nunn in his ordinary US military uniform, the well-dressed Scotsman was annoyed. The ceremony he'd envisioned didn't include sharing the spotlight with an American junior officer.

Nunn went into the guardhouse, which was furnished with a table, some chairs, and bunks. They could probably nap for an hour or two while waiting for dawn to arrive with the advancing Americans. The guard would make sure they were roused before that happened. Nunn struck a match, found another glass, and offered the guard a drink. The amber liquid danced in the firelight.

"Here. To the end of the goddamn war," Nunn toasted in German.

"*Jawohl, Herr Hauptmann. Zum Ende des Krieges.*"

Captain Walker now had another reason to be annoyed with Nunn. Being civil with Germans was one thing, but drinking with them was quite another.

On an empty stomach, the alcohol hit like lightning. Nunn let the Grand Marnier work its soporific magic on Captain Walker, who was soon asleep on one of the bunks. Now, Nunn could meet the advancing American troops the right way. He had worried that Walker could screw things up. Nunn knew the meeting with the lead American troops needed to be handled with care. A stuck-up tone in an unfamiliar accent could get them all killed. GIs approaching a German castle in the dark would be coiled tight, ready to shoot at anything unusual that moved—and a fussy Scotsman in a tam-o'-shanter was plenty unusual.

Just before sunrise, Nunn readied himself for meeting the Americans—alone, while the Scotsman slept.

The Kommandant had told Nunn to station himself at the entrance to the castle, but he didn't care about the German's orders.

"Open the gate,"[2] Nunn told the guard, who obeyed.

The Sparrow walked out of the castle towards the village below, drunk on freedom and possibly Grand Marnier.

The day has come without a doubt. Now they are in, and I am out.

* * *

Four American scouts from intelligence and reconnaissance (I&R) crept forward on the western side of the Mulde, M-1 rifles raised, bayonets fixed, and lampblack smeared across their cheeks. They were from the 69th Infantry Division, the Bitchin' Bivouacking Bastards, and they were ready to give the Nazis what was coming to them.

Nineteen-year-old Frank Giegnas, nicknamed Blacky, hailed from New Jersey. Alan Murphey was from New York City. Walter Burrows and Robert Miller were both from Pennsylvania. On the west side of the Mulde River, they reached a half-dozen American infantrymen crouching behind the low wall bordering the bridge's parapet.[3]

The 69th had recently entered Buchenwald concentration camp on the day of its liberation. The smell of dead bodies and the images of living skeletons were burned into their memories.

The Bivouacking Bastards knew all about dirty Nazi tricks: flying a white flag to lure Americans into an ambush by child soldiers or donning American uniforms and asking in English about Superman and Joltin' Joe DiMaggio before shooting GIs dead.

Germany's war was as good as lost, but the Nazis still fought like hell. The 69th was in the mood for revenge. If they had a reason, American artillery would blow Colditz to rubble.

As I&R neared the river, Emil Miskovic, a twenty-seven-year-old Slovak American sergeant from Chicago, poked his head up to investigate a noise on the other side. A teenage Hitler Youth shot him dead from across the river. The GIs returned fire and killed the boy. His body lay crumpled near his family's front door.

A sergeant motioned for the four I&R men to stay down. He told them that the Americans who arrived yesterday had faced a brutal all-day firefight that continued through the night. GIs were hit by intense fire from dug-in enemy positions. An SS division backed a German infantry regiment.[4]

During the night, American soldiers who had crossed the river over a railway bridge south of Colditz were surrounded and annihilated. Wounded survivors were executed where they lay.

I&R learned the battalion had taken heavy casualties in the fight for the town of Colditz—seventeen men down under a storm of bazooka blasts and machine-gun fire so fierce that trees crackled and splintered around them.

I&R didn't have orders to cross the bridge, but they didn't think they needed permission. The GIs sprinted over the bridge, jumping over a dead child soldier and past barbed wire. On the eastern side, American howitzers blasted around them. The gunners didn't know friendlies had crossed.

The four GIs knew they were now the most advanced troops on this part of the front, with nothing but fanatical Nazis ahead of them. I&R saw the dim outlines of a castle uphill. A fortress looming out of the dark was exactly the kind of place fanatical Nazis would make a last stand. The four GIs tightened their grips on their M-1s and advanced. Murphey and Giegnas went in front while Burrows and Miller followed behind.[5]

* * *

Nunn sauntered past the barbed wire as the cold April air bit his face. To the east, the black sky showed the first purple hint of dawn. The German guards held their fire, as promised.

His head felt light, his steps loose. The captain felt the joy of freedom as he breathed the air outside the prison walls.

A burst of machine-gun fire killed his buzz. Nunn dove face first to the ground, cursing his stupidity for being so casual.

He worked his way on all fours down the low-walled road towards the village, peeking around the corner at the main road leading to the bridge.

He froze and watched. As the growing light revealed shapes, he made out two crouching figures advancing cautiously, halfway between the bridge and his position.

Nunn remained motionless. Finally he made out two American steel helmets. The pre-war adventure author and prize-winning orator had been mentally composing his speech for hours, but now he couldn't remember any of it.

The machine gun fire had rattled him. His tongue stuck to his teeth. Eight languages, and he couldn't speak a single word.

Nunn's loud, low-pitched whistle got I&R's attention.

They froze. It didn't make sense. Nazis weren't in the habit of giving away their position.

Nunn found his voice and spoke in GI slang: "This is a Yank,[6] you jerks!"

Giegnas and Murphey aimed their rifles towards the voice and launched into their own rude slang. But they were talking, and that was better than shooting.

One of them said that there couldn't be Americans in front of them. Between them and Berlin, there was nothing but millions of Nazis. Therefore, Nunn was a Nazi.

Nunn smiled at the GI outburst and responded in his easy Los Angeles manner: "Nuts to that," fixing their outdated intelligence. "You have Americans ahead of you. We've been here for months. What was keepin' ya?"

Another volley of disbelieving oaths came up the hill. Luckily it was still words, not gunfire.

"This is kosher," Nunn replied. It was the smartest slang of all. The Nazis would never use it, given their hatred for Jews. He added: "There's a prison up here, and it's all yours. The guards are ready to surrender."

I&R responded that they hadn't heard about any prison.

Nunn continued: if the GIs believed him, they'd have a shot at a Medal of Honor and would give speeches at war bond drives back in the States. Who gets to capture a castle anymore?

The GIs told Nunn in graphic terms where he could stick his medals and war bond rallies.

"That's no malarkey!" Nunn shouted. "Work your way up here behind this building."

Crouching, with rifles ready, the GIs advanced. Nunn sure didn't talk like a Nazi. His accent was West Coast, not classroom English.

The captain stood with his hands high and wide above his head. I&R got close enough to see his American uniform. The big Californian flashed a movie-star grin, as if he were at a Hollywood party instead of staring down M1 carbines that could cut him down in a heartbeat.

I&R demanded, "How did you get out of prison?"

"Just walked out. Always take an early morning stroll! Good for the appetite."

Nunn decided that a nonsensical answer was best, because a Nazi impersonating an American would have a detailed, logical explanation. The two GIs conferred suspiciously in low voices. Nunn gestured for them to follow.

He crawled back towards the castle gate, keeping under the right wall. He didn't want a sniper's bullet to end his war just before Allied victory.

Behind him, the I&R men darted from cover to cover, rifles trained, ready to unleash devastation if this were a trap.

Chapter 29

The Last Battle

Florimond felt himself a-fire . . . he believed that he could accomplish this fine adventure.

—Arthur Quiller-Couch, *The Sleeping Beauty*

APRIL 16, 1945–DAWN, COLDITZ

At first light, nearly four hundred days after the Sparrows parachuted into enemy territory, Colditz was as quiet as if a spell had been cast on it.

Guy Nunn approached the gate with the two American GIs from intelligence and reconnaissance behind. They advanced in fighting posture with rifles pointed. Two more I&R men Nunn hadn't spotted provided cover from behind.

Nunn broke the silence with an urgent whisper to the guard: "*Öffnen Sie das Tor.*" Open the gate. The pale, frightened German obeyed, hands shaking. He fumbled with the iron lock, metal scraping in the quiet.

Nunn slipped into the guardhouse where David Walker slept. The Scotsman was supposed to formally receive the Americans at the gate, and Nunn didn't want to ruin the official ceremony. He made it seem like the guard was letting both of them know at the same time: "*Sie kommen gleich.*" They're coming right away.[1]

Walker rubbed sleep from his eyes, straightened his Black Watch uniform, and adjusted his feathered bonnet.

The Scottish captain went to the door to greet the invaders. An amused Nunn watched him shout through the thick oak door to the GIs on the other side: "Hullo! Good morning! How d'you do? Good morning!"

The GIs advanced through the gate in fighting position. The trembling German guard still held his rifle but he made no move. Giegnas roughly disarmed him.

The prisoners liked this German, who had always treated them decently. Captain Walker, who didn't know American slang, asked the GIs to "take care of him." Nunn saw by the killing look in their eyes that they had misunderstood what Walker meant. The Californian spoke quickly: "Nobody in here[2] wants a fight. The guards are alright."

Nunn and Walker saw this German as a person, but the GIs saw a monster. They had walked past death camp ovens radiating heat from unspeakable crimes. For the 69th, a German uniform meant inhuman murder and hate.

Murphey explained: "We had civilians firin'[3] on us all night—from behind—from out of houses with white flags hangin' out of 'em. Blacky here lost his buddy this morning—'bout an hour ago. A Kraut kid did it, a little kid with a rifle, hidin' in a house. I shot the kid when I saw what he had done. I didn't like to do it, but I shot 'im. It ain't right to use kids like that, but these Krauts bin doin' it right along."

Giegnas's rifle slowly came down, but his fury needed release. He went into the guardroom and pulled Hitler's picture off the wall. Entering the cobblestone courtyard, he threw it to the ground and stomped on the dictator's head.

Glass ground under his boot[4] as gaunt faces appeared at barred windows, blinking in amazement. The evil ogre was destroyed, the spell broken. The castle awakened with a roar—the cheers of the freed prisoners frantically making up for lost time.

For his encore, Giegnas raised his rifle and blasted the gate lock. The captives shouted their approval. Blacky grinned like a Broadway star.

"I got me a hit[5] in that act!"

As the prisoners erupted in cheers, thirteen months of weight lifted from Duke's shoulders: the screams of the tortured in Gestapo prisons, mock executions in Belgrade, starvation and solitary confinement in Berlin, the guillotine, the constant danger of the SS taking Colditz Castle and killing the prisoners. Giegnas's bullet blew a hole through the oppression.

The party stopped when Nunn heard movement outside the gate. He warned I&R that it could be the SS checking on the commotion.

The GIs snapped to fighting stance. But the newest arrivals knew the code word: it was the other two I&R men.

The newcomers stepped through the gate, ready for an ambush. With prisoners rushing around them, they cringed as their minds reached for familiar categories—enemy, threat, target—but found nothing. It made no sense: embracing figures, tears of joy, hands reaching for their shoulders rather than their weapons. For an eternal instant, they stood frozen between fight and flight. Then reality hit them. This was no German ambush; there were no hidden machine-gun nests. These were liberated prisoners welcoming them like long-lost brothers.

A British inmate told them: "We could see everything.[6] We watched you battling through to get up here. I'll never forget it."

Throughout the day, thousands more Americans arrived for the celebration. Douglas Bader, the British flying ace, asked which army they were from. A soldier from Brooklyn responded: "Dis is de Foist[7] Army, de fightenest army in de woild."

The First Army had fought through France, Belgium, the Battle of the Bulge, and half of Germany. The tired, bruised soldiers knew the war wasn't over, but for the moment they enjoyed the festivities.

A stream of GIs huffed up the fortress's steep stone steps like tourists on holiday, marvelling at the medieval architecture that housed prisoners' ingenuity. Inside a hidden attic room, Operation Heavy Industry stretched before them: a nineteen-foot-long glider crafted from bed slats, floorboards, wires, and bedsheets sealed with boiled porridge. The GIs ran their hands along the improvised wings, shaking their heads in amazement at what determined men could build with time, stolen materials, and a copy of *Aircraft Design* from the prison library.

Meanwhile, Colonels Duke and Tod went into the German officers' mess. There, Colonel Leo Shaughnessey from Massachusetts accepted Colditz's formal surrender from Kommandant Prawitt. But Shaughnessey knew the signature was just a formality. The prisoners had already captured the castle.

Outside the castle walls,[8] Captain Walker enjoyed a walk across the bridge with a group of his friends. They saw a barbed-wire compound a mile away from the castle and went to explore. As they neared, they were horrified to see barely living skeletons in a Nazi slave labour camp—Hungarian Jews so starved it seemed impossible they were alive. They had

survived by hiding under the bodies of the machine-gunned dead while the Nazis forced the rest on a death march. The Colditz prisoners would have shared the same fate if the Allied senior officers hadn't refused the evacuation order.

Earlier, in the summer of 1944, British prisoners had heard BBC broadcasts about the Nazis murdering thousands of Jews every day. They had hoped the horror was exaggerated. Standing before the dead and dying, they could hope no longer.

* * *

Within hours of the castle's liberation, embedded reporters swarmed the courtyard. Lee Carson of International News Service interviewed Duke. Her story reported that a "rescue mission" with tanks and "handpicked infantrymen[9] blasted their way through the prison barriers to break down the gates of a medieval castle." She also told of three captured American commandos who had turned up alive, but just barely. "The three parachutists were kept by the Gestapo for six months, during which time all the abuses and subtle tortures of which the Nazis are past masters were used to break them down."

The Sparrows told reporters about the "evil-smelling" Gestapo prisons where captives were "treated like dogs." Major Suarez spoke with caged fury about the Gestapo who threw them in solitary confinement with lice and bedbugs. "They always handcuffed[10] us wherever we went and tried to intimidate us by threatening to shoot us," he said. "They put us in civilian jails like common criminals even though we wore uniforms."

Duke watched reporters scribble notes and knew they were getting only part of the story. Sparrow's role in Bodyguard, like Bodyguard itself, was still top secret.

Bureaucrats in Washington would decide which pieces of their ordeal could be printed and which would disappear into locked vaults. Hungary was already shaping up as the front line between democracy and weaponized communism.

The history of Sparrow became entangled in a deeper, murkier Cold War of secrets, shifting loyalties, and competing empires.

* * *

Colonel Shaughnessey, leader of the strike force, ordered the frightened town mayor to prepare a morning meal for the gaunt former POWs. “Get meat, potatoes,[11] vegetables—anything you’ve got—and plenty of something to wash it down with, ready tomorrow morning at seven sharp.”

At the appointed hour, the freed men joyously celebrated liberty and the end of hunger. For Duke’s company, thirteen months in enemy territory was bookended by breakfast feasts, from Podturen to Colditz.

After the meal, an army truck drove Duke, Suarez, and Nunn west to Kölleda airfield. Along the way, they proudly watched American troops of every creed and colour confidently highballing heavy trucks and fighting vehicles over rutted roads towards the Battle of Leipzig.

The Sparrows were flown to England for recuperation in Oxford, Nunn’s old stomping grounds. British doctors measured the damage Nazi hospitality had wrought on their bodies. The doctors decided that there was no permanent physical damage from malnutrition, but the commandos were underweight. Duke was down thirty-five pounds.

Nurses appeared with pitchers of eggnog to drink between hearty meals, the right prescription for men who’d learned to stretch a single piece of bread across an entire day. By the end of their agreeable hospitalization, Duke had regained ten pounds, and the Sparrows were given a clean bill of health.

The colonel was called to London. His debriefing with OSS brass would take place over a five-star dinner at Claridge’s, where Churchill ate between War Cabinet meetings.

Duke’s driver brought him to the aristocratic Mayfair neighbourhood. In the restaurant, sparkling chandeliers and towering marble columns contrasted sharply with his memory of claustrophobic prison cells. The colonel savoured the difference.

Allen Dulles, architect of the Sparrow mission,[12] rose from his chair as Duke came in. The OSS spymaster’s face broke into an unguarded smile. After the Germans invaded Hungary, when the radio silence stretched past all reasonable hope, Dulles had written the Sparrows off as another loss. Now, seeing Duke alive, Dulles felt something he rarely allowed himself in wartime: relief.

Over fine wine and pilaf de homard au curry (lobster pilaf with curry), Duke described his mission to an amazed audience. Sparrow had continued advancing Bodyguard even after capture. In Nazi interrogation rooms in

Germany, Austria, Serbia, and Hungary, the Sparrows had revealed just enough truth to maintain credibility, while steering every conversation towards false strategic conclusions. Dulles, in turn, confirmed the other half of the story for Duke: Normandy had indeed been under-defended. The Führer had kept too many troops in the wrong places. The Bodyguard deception had many parts, but the most audacious of all was sending three OSS officers to execute it inside Nazi custody.

Duke knew that Regent Horthy had tragically blundered the Hungarian play, undermining his country's freedom. Still, the Sparrows had scored a touchdown in the war against the Nazis.

As the OSS officers tucked into Le Bread Pudding, Claridge's specialty, the stories kept coming. The bloodthirsty Nazis were about to kill them when another German came rushing in, all fury, berating Duke and demanding information. Then, when they were out of earshot, he dropped the act: he was trying to get them transferred to military custody. The advice that saved their lives was the same advice that had advanced Bodyguard.

Everyone at the table knew the Sparrows would get a medal for this. They had stood up to their captors to fight for survival: they had refused to give up their uniforms, resisted the Nazi death-march order, taken control of the castle prison, and insisted the Germans hand over the armoury keys. They had not only survived, but had endured months of interrogation and inhumane conditions without revealing their deepest secrets. The Germans never knew they were OSS operatives or the true purpose of their mission.

* * *

Duke returned to his intelligence job in Washington on April 27, 1945, and settled into his desk chair. People came by to welcome him back—colleagues who had mourned his death last spring, after reports that the Sparrows had been shot.

The war in Europe still wasn't over, but it was close. Soviet forces surrounded Berlin, launching the final assault on Hitler's headquarters. Meanwhile, American troops advanced towards Munich in the south, the British pushed through northern Germany, and the Canadians cleared the Netherlands. As Germany collapsed from all sides, Italian partisans captured and executed Mussolini.

Allied victory was in the air, as sweet as spring, but Duke knew the danger wasn't over. Millions of Europeans were starving because of the destruction wrought by the Nazis. America asked him to run a rescue operation as head of Greek War Relief. He knew the heroes of the Greek Resistance. Earlier in the war he sent them guns and ammunition; now he sent them food to save hundreds of thousands of lives.

Duke was busy, but his thoughts returned to his months in captivity, when every interrogation was the championship game and one wrong move meant death. He marvelled that every member of his team had stuck to the script, even when Krüger changed the second act.

But victory came at a cost. A half million Hungarian Jews were murdered by the Nazis and Hungary's Arrow Cross. The Nazi and then Soviet invasions ravaged the country.

The Sparrows had also suffered. Duke remembered the dark moments of early June 1944 in Vienna, when he realized D-Day had been postponed. Suarez had barely restrained himself from attacking his tormentors, and his rage still simmered. Nunn had come dangerously close to insubordination when Duke ordered Lieutenant Winant to surrender.

Yet no one crossed the line. None of the Sparrows cracked. That is why they were still alive, and how their part in D-Day succeeded, keeping millions of Axis soldiers pinned thousands of kilometres from Normandy's beaches. The Madison Avenue PR executive Florimond Duke had just pulled off one of the greatest ad campaigns in the history of warfare.

The men who stormed Normandy won D-Day. The spies who tricked Hitler gave them the chance.

Epilogue

The Sane Republican

JULY 10, 1945–WASHINGTON, DC

On April 30, 1945, Hitler shot himself. A week later, the war ended on May 7 with Germany's unconditional surrender.

Soon after, a Hungarian officer approached an American officer in Budapest and returned the gold Duke had given Major Cornel Király for safekeeping before the Germans took custody of the Sparrows. The officer wanted to give it back to its rightful owners before the Soviets stole it. Duke wondered if it was the happy-go-lucky Király himself who had handed it over, but no one in the American military knew.

The army promoted the Sparrows: Duke to full-bird Colonel,[1] Suarez to Major, Nunn to Captain. Before their mission to Hungary, they had gotten these temporary promotions to increase their negotiating heft, but now the ranks became permanent. Duke was retroactively certified as a paratrooper starting on his jump date into Hungary, getting fifty dollars per month in back-dated hazard pay, enough for a down payment on a Cadillac.

General Donovan recommended the Sparrows for Silver Stars. The nomination recognized that Sparrow was both triumph and tragedy. The general's letter acknowledged[2] the Sparrow's success despite Hungarian failure. American intelligence knew that the Sparrows were betrayed by Hungarian spies, but they didn't yet know who did it.

Beyond deception, the Sparrows accomplished another vital purpose: protecting American secret operations. As OSS Secret Intelligence head Whitney Shepardson praised them, "By their ingenuity,[3] their boldness, and their coolness under frequent questioning by the Gestapo they escaped identification as OSS agents." Thus the commandos protected "the secret

intelligence service of the United States from the kind of unmasking which torture can produce."

The Sparrows got their Silver Stars. But medals and ribbons couldn't protect them from what came next. After surviving Gestapo torture and Nazi prison camps, they discovered that the fight for dignity continued even in the nation they served.

On July 10, 1945, Major Suarez had a gold oak leaf on his uniform shoulders and a room reservation four blocks from the White House. He had checked in the day before, feeling lucky to have reserved weeks in advance. Since then, the chaos of redeploying forces from Europe to Japan had filled every decent room in Washington.

That first evening, he and his wife visited the Nunns in Arlington, Virginia, and ended up staying the night. Meanwhile, a drunk couple slipped a bribe to the hotel clerk, who gave them the keys to Suarez's room and cancelled his reservation, knowing he wasn't in his room at the time.

When Suarez learned his room was gone the next day, he confronted the clerk in protest.

The clerk taunted: "You are a disgrace[4] to the American uniform."

Keeping his voice low, Suarez warned the clerk that he'd better retract the insult.

The clerk raised his voice, loud enough to turn heads across the lobby: "If you think you are such a hot shot, come on over the counter and try it!"

For over a year in Nazi prisons, Suarez had swallowed the urge to hit bullies. Losing control, even once, could have gotten his team killed. But this was the United States, and he wasn't shackled anymore. Suarez jumped the counter. The clerk punched but was no match for the commando. In no time the clerk was unconscious on the floor, and Suarez was behind bars.

At least this time, there weren't any bedbugs.

His phone call went to Florimond Duke, who came to the cell block to give one more inspiring speech to a jailer. He spoke with the same confident authority he'd used as football captain, college debater, Madison Avenue executive, secret diplomat, Sparrow's leader in captivity, and American senior officer at Colditz.

Suarez walked out, smiling gratefully.

An official military investigation decided whether formal charges were needed. Eyewitnesses were interviewed. Lawbooks were consulted.

The resulting report declared that Suarez was the victim of assault and battery. “Major Suarez started over the counter and was struck in the mouth” by the clerk’s fist. “While it is undoubtedly true that Major Suarez became incensed to a point where he lost his head for a moment”—he obviously shouldn’t have jumped the counter—it was also the case that the clerk challenged him and swung first, both crucial legal points.

The report philosophically continued: “The line, beyond which a human being can no longer refrain from physically defending himself against personal and official insult, is indefinable.” The thin red line must be judged in each instance. In Suarez’s case, “where the officer[5] had been captured by the Gestapo while carrying out a mission of extreme hazard in enemy-held territory and had been subjected to the well-known insulting and atrocious treatment” by the Nazis, “the amount of insult he could absorb without accepting the challenge physically was a great deal less than that which could have been absorbed by an officer who had not undergone the experience of Major Suarez.”

The report fired like a machine gun, levelling any possible legal objection. No charges were filed.

But the glitzy hotel had picked a fight with the wrong man. Duke, *Time-Life-Newsweek-Fortune* man, enjoyed many close media connections. Nunn had more. Newspapers across America told of the corrupt Washington hotel clerk who flew “into a rage,”[6] taunting and attacking a “returned hero” who had been tortured in the “harshest of Gestapo prisons.” Was it any wonder “the officer leaped the hotel desk and laid the clerk flat”?

Overkill was underrated. Like Suarez’s knockout punch, the newspaper battle was swift and one-sided.

* * *

After retiring from the army, Duke founded an advertising agency, Day, Duke & Tarleton, with offices in New York and Toronto. After his rocky first marriage ended badly and publicly, in 1948 he married Ellen Hess, general editor of *McCall’s* magazine, a brilliant and elegant woman who modelled at charity events.

They bought a farm near his alma mater, Dartmouth. He was elected Republican state representative in New Hampshire. His political platform supported efficient transportation and fiscal sanity: taxes should be high

enough to cover necessary expenditures, and everyone should pay a fair share. Politics, he insisted, should serve the common good and protect human dignity.

Duke was deeply involved with civic and cultural affairs. In his free time, he argued against the Allied bombing of German civilians in the war and the "sick" agreement giving Eastern Europe to the repressive Soviets at war's end. Duke loved freedom and hated bullying in all its forms. For the same reason, he argued against American involvement in the Vietnam War. The Nazis had threatened the United States; Vietnam did not. War, he believed, could only be justified when truly necessary for defence and when conducted with respect for innocent life.

Duke became close friends with Major General Horst Krüger, the anti-Nazi German interrogator who showed the Sparrows how to win the counterintelligence war against the Gestapo.

In 1963, the two men talked to Arizona reporter Maggie Savoy over brunch in Duke's Paradise Valley home. The old friends reflected on the their experience when they met during the war, and on how Duke's gratitude helped shape the major's career.

Nearly twenty years had passed since their last interrogation, where one had worn the uniform of the Luftwaffe and the other had been a prisoner. The winter light seemed impossibly bright compared to that dim Gestapo basement three storeys underground in Belgrade.

Savoy's newspaper story[7] told how Krüger had saved American lives, and how Duke helped Kruger in return. He had worked to get the German out of prison after the war, then helped him attend Harvard and MIT to study defence planning.

Duke's recommendation sped him through the ranks. In 1955, Krüger became the first Luftwaffe officer assigned to NATO headquarters, helping bring the newly reconstituted German Air Force into the Western alliance formed to deter Soviet expansion. He later became West Germany's air attaché in Washington, where he met frequently with Duke.

Duke's endorsement of Krüger's character served as the foundation for a career dedicated to international cooperation. Kruger helped develop the concept of inner leadership,[8] which emphasizes that soldiers must remain thinking citizens who serve democratic values rather than display blind obedience, a principle that guides the German military to this day. For his lifetime of service, Krüger received Germany's Grand Cross of the Order of

Merit, among the highest honours the Federal Republic could bestow. A street at a Luftwaffe base now bears his name.

But even in 1963, Krüger couldn't publicly admit he had worked against the Nazis, because that would mean admitting a role in Germany's defeat. Instead, Krüger explained philosophically: "One serves the ideas[9] of his country—fights for them, may be ready to die for them. But if he loses human contact and love in his heart, he loses himself." True loyalty meant fighting the Nazis.

In March 1944, Hungary's intelligence officers had hoped that putting the Sparrows in Krüger's hands might spare their lives. They didn't know how far he'd go. As a highly-placed German intelligence officer, Krüger was in a position to change the war. By helping the Sparrows trick Hitler, Krüger may have hurt the Führer more than any other anti-Nazi[10] German officer.

* * *

In 1968, Duke was busy writing *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* his account of Operation Sparrow. He visited Soviet-dominated Budapest to complete research for his book. When he met retired Hungarian spies who had played a role in the 1944 anti-Nazi fight, their faces showed amazement —they'd given him up for dead when the Gestapo arrested him.

As Duke drove through Budapest, he noticed he was being tailed by the communist secret police. He wasn't worried. The secrets he was interested belonged to history.

The once-proud country was depressed, with the world's highest suicide rate and lowest birth rate. The beautiful old capital city was run down. Dreary black grime covered once-bright limestone buildings. The central train station looked like it hadn't been painted in decades. There was no free press. Hungary's economy suffered while its people died of despair.

The country was forced to pay Moscow for the cost of eighty thousand occupying troops. Communist central planners replaced grand prewar buildings with ugly concrete blocks.

Duke understood Hungary's suffering. The Nazi trauma of 1944–45 was compounded by Moscow's cruel occupation after the war. The Soviets deported hundreds of thousands of Hungarians as slave labourers and

demanded painful tribute from those who remained. Three hundred thousand Hungarians died brutal, lonely deaths in gulags.

Communists mismanaged the country's rich soil. A land that should have exported grain instead imported it from America to survive. Even then, food was expensive and hard to find.

Religion was oppressed to the point that few young people knew it existed. Cardinal József Mindszenty, an opponent of Nazi and then Soviet dictatorship, took refuge in the American embassy in Budapest when the Soviet Union invaded his country in 1956. Duke saw soldiers and plainclothes policemen guarding every exit to ensure the seventy-six-year-old holy old man didn't escape.

All the bridges in the city were heavily guarded. The air was static with paranoia, and there were spies everywhere. Anti-aircraft radar was hidden among trees. Duke easily found them by the "No photography" signs on the nearest streets.

Despite the depressing atmosphere, Duke saw glimmers of hope. The country still had its rich farmland. Despite the neglected upkeep of its grand old houses, Hungary was blessed by ideal geography at the meeting of southeastern and central Europe. The economy was well ahead of its eastern Soviet neighbours. And Hungary's nationalistic politicians were restoring the once-grand buildings on Vár, Castle Hill. Beautification was quiet sabotage against the faceless block architecture favoured by their Soviet overlords. Hungary was sad, but proud.

As Duke walked along the mighty Danube, he wondered: How did we survive?

The Sparrows couldn't have made it without courage. Despite Gestapo brutality, they refused to reveal details that would have undermined D-Day, exposed Allied agents, and gotten them killed.

But other captured commandos were brave and defiant—and the Nazis still murdered them.

Sparrow's survival had also depended on the courage of anti-Nazis in Hungary and Germany. Duke learned from his Hungarian sources that the Gestapo had lied to him about General Ujszászy's confession. Duke had doubted him for two decades, until he made his trip to Hungary and met the old spies who knew the real story. Yes, some of Ujszászy's men were German spies, but the general himself was loyal to his country.

The general wasn't alone. Even when tortured, Katalin Karády and Major Cornel Király didn't denounce the Sparrows. Instead, they kept the secrets they needed to keep to defend Hungary and three American commandos.

While these heroes protected military secrets, others fought to save civilian lives. Approximately 250,000 Hungarian Jews[11] survived while half a million were murdered. That any lived was testament to the tenacity of the resistance, including the armed resistance of Budapest Jews.

* * *

Duke's book with Charles Swaart, a Second World War vet turned freelance writer, began as a draft Swaart assembled from Duke's interview notes. It leaned heavily into Duke's heroism. Much to Swaart's dismay, the colonel cut everything suggesting his own bravery. Duke didn't want to look like a braggart. He wanted to make other people look good.

Swaart was frustrated to co-author a book with "a hero who didn't want[12] to appear to be one." It got worse when he saw Duke's red slash marks through half the manuscript about the enigmatic diva-spy Katalin Karády.

At first, Duke had approved her role in the book, then his research brought him to New York City, where Karády had established herself as the owner of a high-end hat boutique following her dramatic escape from Hungary. Duke came back to Arizona changed, ordering almost every trace of her cut.

Swaart never cracked the mystery of the New York encounter. Perhaps Karády confided to Duke that exposure would hurt Hungary's democratic resistance still fighting behind the Iron Curtain. Her shop's appearance in FBI surveillance files suggests she remained active in the shadow war against Soviet occupation. Duke chose to protect her work over his book's success.

Duke evaded his co-author's requests to put the material back in. Eventually, Swaart gave up, watching in despair as the book's blockbuster sex appeal vanished. He was especially disappointed because the draft had already been optioned by MGM and he'd slotted the Hungarian actress Zsa Zsa Gabor as female lead.

After Duke made him delete the most thrilling parts, all that remained was a short book about a secret mission "to help shorten and win[13] the war." Still, the colonel's book was able to reveal one bit of gossip about some figures who were already dead or living in exile. When Regent Horthy had needed to establish secret contact with the Soviets in late 1944, he turned to General Ujszászy, Hungary's intelligence chief. However, there was a problem: Ujszászy's interrogations had sent many Hungarian communists to torture and death, so how would any communist trust him? The solution was his fiancée, Katalin Karády.

The legendary actress used her connections to locate the head of the underground Hungarian Communist Party, László Rajk. After a harrowing chase to shake off Gestapo pursuers, Rajk met with the general. A bottle of brandy turned an icy encounter into a warm handshake between former enemies, with Rajk offering forgiveness and the two plotting to form a united right-wing and left-wing force against the Germans. The plan unravelled when German spies again uncovered the conspiracy. Still, Duke marvelled at the iron will of Hungary's leading lady, who had barely survived Gestapo torture yet once again risked her life for her country.

Upon Duke's request to Allen Dulles, certain parts of the story were declassified so that he could share key elements with the public. Other details were kept classified by the CIA. Operation Bodyguard itself would remain secret until the 1970s, but aspects of Sparrow would need to stay hidden even longer, owing to the Cold War.

On April 4, 1969, a heart attack ended Duke's life at age seventy-three. He was buried near his beloved Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. As the bugler played taps, Florimond's wife, Ellen, smelled boiling maple syrup wafting from their little farm over the hill.

Duke's book came out soon after his death. When Swaart got his copy, his wife, Betty, wept all weekend. "I can just see Colonel Duke[14] striding up and down the Valley," she said. "He has his book under his arm, and a big smile on his face, and he is inviting everyone to the biggest autographing party Arizona has ever seen."

* * *

After the war, Guy Nunn continued to serve his country by working on the prosecution team at the Nuremberg war crimes trials. He designed visual

exhibits to help judges picture the Nazis' massacre of millions, transforming abstract numbers and testimonies into evidence in the largest murder trial in history.

In 1947, he published his anti-racist novel *White Shadows.* He became the biggest radio star in Detroit, as the "Voice of Labor," and a well-known name across the nation fighting corporate greed. His confident voice signed off each broadcast: "Take it easy, fellas—but take it."

His first marriage ended in divorce, and he subsequently married Lyn, daughter of an Okinawan farmer. Nunn eventually became a professor of sociology at the University of Hawaii, where he directed the Center for Labor-Management Education. In Kauai, he and Lyn opened the Guy-Lyn Nursery, a business that specialized in tropical plants and treating its employees fairly.

He died October 14, 1984, at seventy, the day the Detroit Tigers won the World Series.

* * *

Fittingly, after Alfred Suarez's hotel fight, he ran luxury resorts like the Hotel Flamboyant, the only beachfront hotel in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands ("$13 and up"), and the Condado Beach Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico ("located between beautiful lagoon and mighty ocean").

Suarez advertised that guests' "own personal comfort and enjoyment is the management's sole objective." His staff would never insult your honour or take a bribe to cancel your reservation.

Circumstantial evidence suggests Suarez may have stayed in intelligence work after the war: his hotels were in Cold War hot spots, when American and Soviet interests often collided beneath the surface. He worked in his resort business alongside Arthur Goldberg, a top OSS executive who held multiple high-level diplomatic posts with intelligence overlap.

More than the other Sparrows, the major was traumatized by his Nazi imprisonment. Unlike strategic Duke and cool Nunn, Suarez suppressed powerful urges to lash out against his captors. There is little doubt that he suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder. He left his young family after the war.

On January 29, 1974, Suarez died at fifty-nine under mysterious circumstances, reportedly drowning in shallow water in Hawaii on a calm day. Newspaper reports weren't sure where he lived or how old he was. Investigators didn't know if it was foul play, suicide, or natural causes. He was buried in an extinct volcano, Punchbowl Crater, in Hawaii.

Suarez's only son, also named Alfred, became a devout Catholic. At seventy-one, Suarez Jr. walked the length of the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage from France to Spain, finding peace with his father's memory and connecting with his Spanish heritage.[15]

* * *

Not all the Hungarian heroes central to Sparrow's success lived long lives. General István Ujszászy disappeared into Stalin's killing machine.

Hungary's Arrow Cross executed the Palestinian-British paratrooper Hannah Senesh in November 1944. At her execution, she refused a blindfold, facing the firing squad with courage.

But others survived, like Hannah's mother, Katherine, who later emigrated to Israel. In 1956, Cornel Király the English-speaking Hungarian intelligence officer who met the Sparrows in Podturen the day[16] they landed, hid their gold, and was probably responsible for getting it back, died a wealthy man in British Columbia, at age sixty-eight, after having survived Nazi torture.

The Hungarian-Canadian commando Joseph Gelleny escaped prison after his October 1944 transmission to offer Hungary's surrender to the Allies. He joined the Resistance in Budapest, working with the Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg to save Jewish lives during the last desperate fighting. He died in British Columbia in 2017, at the sleek old age of ninety-four, his people dwelling in prosperity around him.

In 1967, Rudolf Vrba, one of the Auschwitz escapees who warned of its horrors, moved to Vancouver. He became professor of pharmacology at the University of British Columbia and a research fellow at Harvard University, writing more than fifty research papers on topics such as immune responses to toxins. He died in 2006 at eighty-one.

* * *

None of the Sparrows lived to see Hungary's freedom reborn in 1989, forty-five years after it was lost to Nazi invasion followed by Soviet occupation. But Duke, Suarez, and Nunn would have appreciated that it came with a meal.

In April 1989, Hungary turned off its electric border fence, becoming the first nation to breach the Iron Curtain. This heavily fortified barrier between East and West had stopped citizens under the Soviet heel from escaping to freedom, but now there was a crack in the armour.

Hungarians worried: Would Moscow invade again? In 1956, pro-democratic forces organized an uprising. The Soviets crushed it with tanks. Thousands of Hungarians were killed and tens of thousands imprisoned. Hundreds of thousands more fled into exile, many of them settling in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Thirty-three years later, on August 19, 1989, the Pan-European Picnic spread a meal along the militarized Austro-Hungarian border. An unlikely alliance planned it: Otto von Habsburg, conservative heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and Imre Pozsgay, a communist reformer.

The meal heralded the beginning of the end of Europe's communist dictatorship. A thousand East Germans used the feast to cross into freedom, abandoning their picnic baskets and Trabant automobiles along the way. Two months later, on November 9, the Berlin Wall fell. Two years later, in 1991, the last Soviet troops left Hungary, and the country was free.

The alliance between right-wing and left-wing Hungarian patriots echoed a truce forged in 1944 in a Nazi prison cell in Budapest, when the conservative Florimond Duke, the liberal Guy Nunn, and the leftist Alfred Suarez[17] laid down their political differences to fight a shared enemy.

The Sparrows didn't have to agree on everything. They only had to agree on what mattered most.

* * * * *

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Thanks to: Mount Allison University Archives, where this research path started in the correspondence between Winthrop Bell and Francis Deák. In 1939, MI6 secret agent Winthrop Bell (subject of my book *Cracking the Nazi Code)* told Deák about Hitler's plans for the Holocaust. It was the first intelligence warning in the West about Hitler's genocidal intentions. During the war, Deák became a central figure in American secret planning for Hungary. While there is no smoking gun to prove that Deák was directly involved in Sparrow, it is certain that his influence was felt on the mission.

Subsequent visits to the National Archives in the United States and United Kingdom were crucial to my research. David Mawhinney at Mount Allison and Duncan Bare of the US National Archives were especially helpful.

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Notes

PROLOGUE

1. “All three of you will be shot”: Florimond Duke and Charles M. Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number* (New York: Meredith Press, 1969), 74.

CHAPTER 1: SPARROW

1. *Territorial male flies toward:* "White-crowned Sparrow *(Zonotrichia leucophrys)." Birds of the World,* Cornell Lab of Ornithology, accessed October 31, 2025, https://birdsoftheworld.org/bow/species/whcspa/cur/behavior.
2. A village called Podturen: Podturen is the modern name of the village in what is now Croatia. When the Sparrows parachuted into Hungary, it was called Bottornya. I have followed Duke's spelling in *Name, Rank and Serial Number.*
3. "Colonel Duke, your party takes off": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number, 5.*
4. prolong the war for years: According to General Richard Dannatt (former head of the British army), if D-Day had failed, it would have taken "years not months to gather the strength for another attempt at invasion." Richard Dannatt, "D-Day 75: How Close Did D-Day Come to Failure?" BBC, https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/how-close-did-d-day-come-to-failure/zkmd382.
5. "In wartime, truth": Winston Churchill, *The Second World War: Closing the Ring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1952), 383.
6. By the time they diagnosed it: "Overall Deception Policy for the War against Germany," January 23, 1944, CAB 80/77, COS43/779, reprinted in Michael Howard, *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 247–53. On the American side, the plan was formalized by Christmas 1943.
7. In spring 1944: General Alfred Jodl, Briefing May 5, 1944, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, BA-MA N69/18.
8. they'd backed the losing side: "Political Background," US National Archives, NARA 226/A1-215/4. For an in-depth account from the Hungarian perspective, see Laura-Louise Veress, *Clear the Line: Hungary's Struggle to Leave the Axis During the Second World War,* ed. Dalma Takács (Cleveland, OH: Prospero, 1995).
9. they wanted out of the war: Allen Dulles, *From Hitler's Doorstep: The Wartime Intelligence Reports of Allen Dulles, 1942–1945,* ed. Neal H. Petersen (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 30.
10. Hungary's million Jews: A million was Allen Dulles's estimate. Contemporary scholarship estimates there were around eight hundred thousand Hungarian Jews, but I have used Dulles's figure because there significant number of undocumented immigrants from countries like Poland fled to Hungary when the country was still relatively safe for Jews.
11. "giving the Germans very full particulars": Dulles, *From Hitler's Doorstep,* 186. Von Hatz was actually misleading the Germans, but Hitler had so many spies in Hungary that it didn't make a difference.
12. An Olympic fencer: For a study of Hungary's expertise in sports diplomacy, see Judit Trunkos and Bob Heere, "Sport Diplomacy: A Review of How Sports Can Be Used to Improve International Relationships," in *Case Studies in Sport Diplomacy,* eds. Craig Esherick, Robert E. Baker, Steven Jackson, and Michael Sam (Morgantown, WV: FiT Publishing, 2017), 1–17.
13. "to confer on an equal footing": NARA 226/87/1, Box No. 085.
14. The job included: An example of the kind of intelligence that Duke oversaw for OSS-Southeast can be found in Pavel Žáček, "Charles Katek, a Friend Devoted to Our Cause: A Case of American-Czechoslovak Intelligence Cooperation, 1943–1945," *Aparat Represji w Polsce Ludowej* 1944–1989 22 (2024): 305–347.
15. German intelligence would question the Sparrows: Dulles, *From Hitler's Doorstep,* 178.
16. "This is the culmination": NARA 226/190C/5.
17. President Franklin Roosevelt authorized the mission: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number.* 46.

CHAPTER 2: A SHOT IN THE DARK

1. arrange to fly: National Archives, NARA 226/92A/27. Two likely candidates for those to be exfiltrated were Prime Minister Miklós Kállay and the minister of the interior, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer.
2. The Americans had memorized their targets: NARA 226/87/1, Box No. 085.
3. "You'll jump at six hundred feet": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 10.

CHAPTER 3: BLACKOUT

1. “college strong man”: “Dusossoit Leader: To Captain Dartmouth,” *Springfield Daily Republican,* November 24, 1916.
2. “The loss of Captain-elect”: “Colleges with Raw Material Have Shown Well on Gridiron,” *The Tulsa Telegram,* October 30, 1917.
3. “kept his team fighting”: *The Aftermath: Worcester Polytechnic Institute* (Spencer, MA: Heffernan Press, 1920), 215.
4. “recognize no bounds”: W.E. Fairbairn, *Scientific Self-Defence* (London: D. Appleton and Company, 1931).
5. “of the very highest type”: NARA RG 226/A1/224.
6. “big enough and handsome enough”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 8.
7. Military assessments gave Nunn top marks: NARA RG 226/A1/224.
8. “this tough young New Yorker”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 6.
9. “highly intelligent”: NARA 226/A1/224/565.
10. “good man to have in your corner”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 6.

CHAPTER 4: THE HUNGARIAN GAMBIT

1. "The radio gear": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 12. The Sparrows most likely carried one of the new Polish high-speed radios, though documentary gaps prevent absolute certainty. The circumstantial evidence is compelling: the British Sandy mission to Hungary, temporarily cancelled and eventually replaced with Sparrow, explicitly included the Polish radio in its equipment manifest. The intention to get a radio to the powerful Maier-Messner-Caldonazzi resistance cell in Austria was central to OSS thinking at the same time Sparrow was put together, and both countries were Duke's intelligence backyard. Further support for this intention is provided by the fact that Suarez wasn't just a trained radioman—he was noted as an expert capable of training others, the kind of master technician required to operate cutting-edge technology in enemy territory. Nunn was also radio-certified. Furthermore, both German and American intelligence showed extraordinary concern about the fate of Sparrow's radios. Finally, when Duke published his account in 1969, based on partially declassified records, he mentioned only one radio even though his mission was carrying two—suggesting one remained classified even decades later.
2. A light beam scanned: Jan Bury, "TELMA—A Polish Wireless Communications Security Machine of World War II," *Cryptologia* 30, no. 1 (2006): 31–38. Some of the patents on the device are apparently still classified.
3. The Führer thought he was stopping: ". . . either that the landings were to consist of as many divisions as they actually would have numbered men, or at least that the divisions would follow." C.A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: A History of Modern Hungary, 1929–1945,* vol. 2 (Edinburgh University Press, 1957), 223.

CHAPTER 5: MONSIEUR PARIS CATCHES THE SPARROWS

1. “You did well to come here”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 15.
2. “Alas, in Hungary”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 28.
3. “To the Commanding Officer”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 29.
4. “Duke wondered”: It seems intentional for the Sparrows to leave the treasures where they could be easily found, so that if the contents were plundered, it could prevent the discovery of the more carefully hidden radios. This cannot be proven for certain in the documentary record, but it is clear in OSS reports from this period that corruption was widespread among Hungarian officials, so it is likely that the diversion was intentional.
5. “You were held up all along”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 33.
6. The Hungarian said he had spent six years: For a discussion of Major Király’s group, see Sándor Szakály, “Szombathelyi Ferenc vezérezredes és társai a Honvéd Vezérkar főnökének bírósága előtt. Budapest, 1944. október 11–12,” *Hadtörténelmi Közlemények* 33, no. 1 (1986), 182–203.
7. Your pilot will report back: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 34–35.
8. “stooped more and looked much older”: Miklós Horthy, *Memoirs* (London: Hutchinson, 1956).

CHAPTER 6: THE LAST BLITZKRIEG

1. "The Hungarians don't shoot": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 44. I suspect the arrangement was made by Francis Deák of the Pond, which was, like the OSS, a predecessor organization of the CIA.
2. "Unconditional surrender": There are in Duke's published account, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* indicating that he needed to leave out some details that that were still top secret. We can surmise what he told the general based on now-declassified papers: with Hungarian permission, a US military mission would help the country break away from Germany.
3. "I have a personal message from the president": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 46.
4. more than one hundred thousand troops: As a recently declassified CIA history put it, Sparrow "triggered an unnecessary German invasion of Hungary with over 100,000 troops, including several armored divisions that were desperately needed elsewhere." "The Tangled Web," *Studies in Intelligence* 31 (Spring 1987), https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000624332.pdf.

CHAPTER 7: THE TRANSFER

1. “they came in swarms”: Maria Madi, *Budapest Blackout: A Holocaust Diary* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2023), 27.
2. one leader: This was Endre Bajcsy-Zsilinszky.
3. “I don’t know what you three Yanks are up to”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 57.
4. “We can do everything possible”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 57.
5. “Where are you taking us?”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 64.

CHAPTER 8: MISSING IN ACTION, PRESUMED DEAD

1. Despite the spectacle: In addition to pro-democratic anti-Nazis, there were also fascists in Budapest—some of them pro-Nazi and others anti-Nazi Hungarian nationalists. The situation was complicated. Some Hungarians protected Jews; others denounced, beat, and murdered them. There were even strange cases of Hungarians who protected some Jews and denounced others. See László Borhi, *Survival Under Dictatorships: Life and Death in Nazi and Communist Regimes* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2024).

CHAPTER 9: NAME, RANK, AND SERIAL NUMBER

1. new khaki uniforms with red markings: “Soviet Yugoslavs Get a Tito Banner,” *New York Times,* March 15, 1944.
2. “The Gestapo told me I’d better”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 73.
3. *This is Major Sykes:* Nunn didn’t give Sykes’s first name. It is possible that it was a nom de guerre.
4. *Prevent any suicide attempt:* Guy T. Nunn, “Live the Freedom!” *Collier’s Weekly,* December 15, 1945.
5. “All three of you will be shot”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 74.
6. When he refused to tell: The interrogation notes apparently do not survive, and Duke’s memoirs indicated only his overall strategy, but these are the kinds of things Duke would have said, given that he knew of the real—but shelved—1943 plans for a D-Day invasion in southeast Europe.
7. “Did you send a message?”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 76.

CHAPTER 10: ESCAPE FROM AUSCHWITZ

1. It was 2 p.m.: Alan Twigg, “Rudolf Vrba,” accessed February 6, 2026, https://rudolfvrba.com.
2. “They’re toying with us”: Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), 230.
3. “The stupid bastards”: Vrba and Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive,* 231.
4. “No. We’ll sit tight”: Vrba and Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive,* 233.
5. “Thanks be to God”: Vrba and Bestic, *I Cannot Forgive,* 234.
6. And yet here it was: In May, two more Slovakians escaped from Auschwitz using a similar route, and they confirmed Vrba and Wetzler’s account.

CHAPTER 11: THE BLUE BIRD

1. "the rising sun": Luisa von Richthofen, "Auf den Spuren von Ungarns Diva Katalin Karády," *Deutsche Welle,* February 2, 2018.
2. If they had met: It is possible, of course, that Duke and Karády did meet in 1944, and that is what Duke told Swaart tocut out of *Name, Rank, and Serial Number* after Duke's trip to New York in the 1960s. While there is no known written evidence for such a meeting, it is also the case that top spies don't write everything down. The possibility that they met is suggested less by Nazi paranoia and more by the number of pages about the female spy that Swaart unhappily took out of their book at Duke's insistence. See: Charles M. Swaart, "A Hero Who Didn't Want to Appear One: How the Florimond Duke Book About a Secret World War II OSS Mission Got Written," *Arizona Republic,* September 7, 1969.

CHAPTER 12: THE CONSTRICTOR

1. “What’s the matter, Colonel?”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 80.
2. “I’m an old man”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 81.

CHAPTER 13: MADISON AVENUE, BUDAPEST

1. Gerhard Clages: Clages is sometimes spelled Klages.
2. "There is no use kidding each other": NARA 226/92A/27.
3. It made Clages hungry for more: This is inferred in the light of the strategic disposition of German forces in the southeast on the days and weeks around D-Day. Clages's own interrogation reports of Duke do not appear to have survived.
4. Nunn and Suarez subtly nodded: NARA 226/92A/27. Duke told the story differently decades later in his book, making it look as if Nunn and Suarez spontaneously thought of the plan on their own. I am following his original intelligence report from 1945 because it was much closer to the original events.
5. Clages studied the interrogation reports: This conclusion draws on the strategic positioning of Wehrmacht forces in the Balkans around D-Day, as Germany's intelligence interrogation reports from the Sparrows apparently did not survive the war.
6. "All warfare is based on deception": Sun Tzu, *The Art of War,* trans. Samuel B. Griffith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 66.
7. Clages lifted the phone: Clages's report to Berlin apparently does not survive, but Ultra decryptions and German troop dispositions at the time of D-Day indicate the advice. The Germans planned for a southeastern Allied invasion.
8. already begun in Italy: see Lee A. Windsor, "Overlord's Long Right Flank: The Battles for Cassino and Anzio, January–June 1944," in *Canada and the Second World War: Essays in Honour of Terry Copp,* ed. Geoffrey Hayes (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013).
9. "slaughtered to the last man": International Military Tribunal, *Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal,* vol. 1 (Nuremberg: IMT, 1947), 228.

CHAPTER 14: GASLIGHT

1. the film *Gaslight*: Directed by the Hungarian American George Cukor.
2. Allied special effects crews: Hesketh, *Fortitude: The D-Day Deception Campaign;* David Mure, *Master of Deception: Tangled Webs in London and the Middle East* (London: William Kimber, 1980).
3. Nazi intelligence estimates: Terry Crowdy, *Deceiving Hitler: Double Cross and Deception in World War II* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2008); J.C. Masterman, *The Double-Cross System in the War of 1939 to 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).
4. "Where is a diversion": Thaddeus Holt, *The Deceivers: Allied Military Deception in the Second World War* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 574.
5. Commanders reinforced southeastern sectors: Holt, *The Deceivers,* 487–89.
6. *Freiwillige,* German for "volunteers": Valdis O. Lumans, "Recruiting Volksdeutsche for the Waffen-SS: From Skimming the Cream to Scraping the Dregs," in *Scraping the Barrel: The Military Use of Substandard Manpower, 1860–1960,* ed. Sanders Marble (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2012), 197–224.
7. "You must want to speak English": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 89.
8. In the long run: St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q66, A7; "In cases of need all things are common property, so that there would seem to be no sin in taking another's property, for need has made it common."
9. the German army expected an attack: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 90.

CHAPTER 15: OLD FRIENDS

1. May 18, 1944—Budapest: Decades later, Duke wrote that this meeting happened in April, but according to his 1945 mission debriefing, this was incorrect. At that time, Duke counted in weeks, so the date of the May meeting with Captain Ramspecht might have been a few days in either direction.
2. Duke's newest interrogator: German military records have no information matching the name provided by Duke in his memoirs. It might have been that Duke created a pseudonym to protect the real source.
3. "You are close friends?" Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 91.
4. "more enthusiastic than expert": *Montreal Star,* March 4, 1944.
5. "spending all his time": L.S.B. Shapiro, *North American Newspaper Alliance,* March 15, 1944.
6. "high with the soldiers": *The Fargo Forum,* March 14, 1944.
7. "Any day now": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 92.
8. "We have all the hardware": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 92.
9. "A landing *could* only be made": Holt, *The Deceivers,* 573.
10. "open the way to Hungary": Dulles, *From Hitler's Doorstep,* 293.
11. "Two qualities are indispensable": Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* eds. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 102.
12. "Oh, yes I know": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 95.
13. "study and make reports": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 96.
14. the OSS did employ scholars: See Elyse Graham, *Book and Dagger: How Scholars and Librarians Became Unlikely Spies of World War II* (New York: HarperCollins, 2024).
15. the authorities had sent away 217,236 deportees: Randolph L. Braham, *Politics of Genocide: The Holocaust in Hungary* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 137.
16. "It's no use that everybody says": Éva Heyman, *The Diary of Éva Heyman: Child of the Holocaust,* trans. Moshe M. Kohn, ed. Judah Marton (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1974).
17. Behind the statistics: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Holocaust in Hungary," *Holocaust Encyclopedia,* https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-in-hungary.

CHAPTER 16: THE FACTORY OF DEATH

1. “What you say about the Geneva Convention”: Nunn, “Live the Freedom!,” 24.
2. “That is an illegal order!”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 101.
3. “All prisoners must wear these”: This account is combined with Nunn’s in “Live the Freedom!” They are clearly referring to the same incident, but their details sometimes differ.
4. “I’m as near to the prison Kommandant”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 99.
5. “Just try it.” Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 101.
6. “Damned efficient”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 104.
7. “neither sound nor movement”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 104.

CHAPTER 17: THE SECRET TELEPHONE

1. “Be more overbearing”: Nunn, “Live the Freedom!”
2. “the best defense”: Jack Dempsey, *Championship Fighting: Explosive Punching and Aggressive Defense* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950).
3. Gerhardt Lange: Lange is possibly a nom de guerre.
4. “secret prisoner telephone system,”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 104.
5. Owing to an error: The Austrians are apparently not mentioned in the UK and US National Archives. They might have been working with the Russians.
6. Erich Launer: Launer may be a nom de guerre.

CHAPTER 18: DEATH DAY

1. At the appointed moment: David Kenyon Webster, *Parachute Infantry: An American Paratrooper's Memoir of D-Day and the Fall of the Third Reich* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994).
2. "good old times": Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000), 639.
3. "Don't make a big production": Holt, *The Deceivers,* 579.
4. he be allowed to sleep in: Stephen E. Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944: The Climactic Battle of World War II* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 480–81.
5. "the only officer to fantasize": Holt, *The Deceivers,* 101.
6. Canadian soldiers knew: Marc Milner, *Stopping the Panzers: The Untold Story of D-Day* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014). As Milner shows, the crucial Canadian role in winning the opening stage of D-Day was once virtually ignored by history books that focused on the American and British perspectives. Those accounts neglected to consider what would have happened to the American and British flanks if the Panzers had succeeded in their counteroffensive. See also: Mark Zuehlke, Holding Juno: Canada's Heroic Defence of the D-Day Beaches, June 7–12, 1944 (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 2006).
7. "Strips of white beach": Ross Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord: The Story of the Canadian Army* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1946), 55.
8. "the rhythmic beating": Munro, *Gauntlet to Overlord,* 58.
9. in the thick of it: Franz Gockel, "Omaha Beach, June 6, 1944," in *Voices of D-Day: The Story of the Allied Invasion Told by Those Who Were There,* ed. Ronald J. Drez (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 169–70.
10. Inland from the beach: As cited in "Sword of Fire," *War Chronicle,* accessed August 23, 2025, https://warchronicle.com/sword-beach-attack/.
11. At his cozy Bavarian retreat: Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944,* 481.
12. "It's begun at last!": Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944,* 281.
13. "Just where we expected them!": Ambrose, *D-Day, June 6, 1944,* 281.
14. German defences sat uselessly: Operation Sparrow was now supported by Operation Zeppelin, which told Germany that the enemy would land by sea at Pola, Croatia; Durazzo on the Adriatic Sea; and Thrace on the Aegean Sea. German intelligence thought the Allies had major forces in North Africa ready to strike across the vast southeastern frontier.
15. Avenge us!: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 106. This account combines Duke's description with Nunn's from "Live the Freedom!"
16. "This morning the Allies have landed": Nunn, "Live the Freedom!" Following Duke, I have corrected the quote—Nunn's original indicates the Allies *will* land this morning, but it is all but impossible that the prisoners could have known of the invasion in advance of the landing.
17. four-hour gramophone concert: Cornelius Ryan, *The Longest Day: June 6, 1944* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1959).

CHAPTER 19: HANNAH'S CHOICE

1. "drive the enemy into the sea": Milner, *Stopping the Panzers,* 162.
2. Hannah Senesh: The name is Szenes in Hungarian, but it's often written Senesh in English.
3. Yugoslavia's anti-Nazi National Liberation Army: Britannica Editors, "Partisan," *Encyclopædia Britannica,* February 1, 2025, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Partisan-Yugoslavian-military-force. "By the end of 1943 the PLA had grown to an estimated 300,000 troops and had diverted a significant number of enemy forces from other Allied fronts." The Allies significantly contributed to their efforts with supplies and commandos.
4. "a young man in the bushes": Yoel Palgi, *Into the Inferno: The Memoir of a Jewish Paratrooper Behind Nazi Lines* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 163. All Senesh quotes in this chapter are from this book.
5. "two souls hovering in space": Palgi, *Into the Inferno,* 167.
6. "I'm sorry I resorted to extreme methods": Palgi, *Into the Inferno,* 168.
7. "No, I could not turn traitor": Palgi, *Into the Inferno,* 170.
8. "Blessed is the match": Hannah Senesh, *Hannah Senesh: Her Life and Diary, the First Complete Edition* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004).

CHAPTER 20: THEATRE OF DECEPTION

1. Hungary's new prime minister, General Döme Sztójay: As András Joó writes (personal correspondence, March 23, 2025): "Sztójay was . . . somebody deeply convinced that the Nazis were right in almost everything. He as a military officer was, meanwhile, bound by his oath. He was an old pro-Nazi, who earlier climbed up the military ladder relatively quickly, and wanted to be respected in the higher elites . . . Sztójay had neither the talent nor the will to become prime minister. It was Horthy's wish, as the lesser of two evils. Also, it was said by many that Sztójay spent most of his premiership in bed as a sickly person. Still, when the regent had some strong wish (like probably the intervention in favour of the officers involved in Sparrow), he simply saluted and observed."
2. "in time to influence": Mark Lloyd, *The Art of Military Deception* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword, 2020).
3. "The Jews aren't defenceless": Andreas Hillgruber, *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler: Zweiter Teil, 1942–1944* (Frankfurt: Bernard & Graefe Verlag, 1970), 460–68.
4. "our peoples will be exterminated": Hillgruber, *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler.*
5. "I don't need your gratitude": Hillgruber, *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler,* 467.
6. "the Jew is absent in times of crisis": Hillgruber, *Staatsmänner und Diplomaten bei Hitler,* 467.
7. "world plague": Milan Hauner, *Hitler: A Chronology of His Life and Time,* 2nd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 49.
8. a food package from Canada: Edmund F. Davies, *Illyrian Venture* (London: The Bodley Head, 1952), 205–6.

CHAPTER 21: THE PROTECTING POWER

1. a long private talk: Davies, *Illyrian Venture,* 205.
2. “I found Davies and Duke”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 109.
3. “front seat for the fireworks”: Davies, *Illyrian Venture,* 207–8.
4. “silver strips of paper”: Davies, *Illyrian Venture,* 207–8.
5. “thoroughly degrading”: Davies, *Illyrian Venture,* 211.

CHAPTER 22: ESCAPE INTO THE CASTLE

1. “Colditz . . . home for the ones”: Davies, *Illyrian Venture,* 214.
2. “All kinds of clothes”: Michael Booker, *Collecting Colditz and Its Secrets* (London: Grub Street, 2005), 18.
3. Other captured Allied commandos: Harold A. Skaarup, *Out of Darkness—Light,* vol. 1 (iUniverse, 2005).
4. “highly secret and special mission”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* x.
5. “brushed-up moustache”: Davies, *Illyrian Venture,* 204.
6. Old British hands regaled: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 118.

CHAPTER 23: PROFESSOR BLOKEY AND THE CANADIAN

1. It was perfect late-summer weather: See Joseph J. Gelleny, *Almost* (Port Perry, ON: Gath, 2000).
2. "what they did to the likes of us": Bernd Horn, *Now Set Europe Aflame: The Canadian Connection to the Special Operations Executive* (Ottawa: Canadian Special Operations Forces Command, 2019), 82.
3. "Throw down your weapons": All first-hand quotes in this chapter are from Gelleny, *Almost,* 135.
4. "Where is your radio?": Gelleny, *Almost,* 141.
5. "in Indefinite Detention": For Gelleny's history of Beaulieu, see *Almost,* 75ff.
6. "I make use of voice training": Gelleny, *Almost,* 78.
7. "I live by my wits, lad": Gelleny, *Almost,* 80.
8. "Time to talk": Gelleny, *Almost,* 142.
9. "Do anything to avoid staring": Gelleny, *Almost,* 152.
10. "I can release you": Gelleny, *Almost,* 163.
11. "God damn America!": Gelleny, *Almost,* 171.
12. "Our country is almost certainly pulling out": Gelleny, *Almost,* 185.
13. "wishes acknowledgment": Gelleny, *Almost,* 190.
14. "Message received": Gelleny, *Almost.*

CHAPTER 24: THE LAST WINTER

1. "getting jumpy": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* x.
2. "Suddenly a big black car": János Gömöri survivor testimony, quoted in "Karády Katalin Világ Igaza kitüntetése #64," Hungarian National Film Institute, originally published in *Veszprémi Napló,* November 28, 2004.
3. two hundred pounds sterling: Pat Reid, *Colditz: The Full Story* (London: Macmillan, 1984), citing Padre Platt, 254.
4. "Smoke, dead west!": Guy T. Nunn, "Freedom Came Slowly," *Collier's Weekly,* April 13, 1946.

CHAPTER 25: HIDE-AND-SEEK

1. “Now they will understand”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”
2. “There are 800 SS troops in the village”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”
3. “It might be a winning gamble”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”
4. “I guess I’ll go down”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”
5. “This is like a bad novel”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”

CHAPTER 26: COLONEL DEATH

1. the starvation death march: See Endre György, *Das große Abenteuer: Geschichte einer Deportation,* Museum der Stadt Colditz, German translation of a Hungarian report. The 273rd Infantry Regiment historian Elbert Duncan reports that the SS murdered four hundred Jews at the Colditz concentration camp; four survived by hiding underneath dead prisoners. Elbert H. Duncan, *Steadily Advance: History of the 273rd Infantry Regiment.* The number of Jews who died at Colditz and in the death march that followed is difficult to determine precisely because Germany stopped keeping records late in the war. See also *Encylopedia of Camps and Ghettos, 1933–1945,* vol. 1, ed. Geoffrey P. Megargee (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 322–24.
2. "These men are half-starved": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 134.
3. "With freedom only hours away": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 135.
4. "You're suggesting": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 135.

CHAPTER 27: FIGHT FOR THE FORTRESS

1. “Where is the Luftwaffe?”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 141.
2. “the most important football game”: “Allied Prisoners Taken to Hitler Hideout as Hostages,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram,* April 18, 1945.
3. “The situation is terrible”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 138–39.
4. “They bogged it!”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”
5. “Your Americans will be here”: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 141.

CHAPTER 28: THE NEW SLANG

1. “In an hour or two”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”
2. “Open the gate”: David Walker didn’t realize that Nunn had left the castle while he was sleeping. See David Walker, *Lean, Wind, Lean* (London: Collins, 1984), 169–72.
3. bordering the bridge’s west bank: Michael Booker, *Collecting Colditz* (London: Grub Street, 2005).
4. German infantry regiment: See also “Fighting 69th Infantry Association,” vol. 48, no. 2 (1991); “Fighting 69th Infantry Division,” vol. 44, no. 2 (1991); Third Battalion 273rd Infantry Regiment Unit History, http://www.69th-infantry-division.org/histories/3rdbn273.html.
5. Safe behind a stone wall: Booker, *Collecting Colditz.*
6. “This is a Yank”: Nunn, “Freedom Came Slowly.”

CHAPTER 29: THE LAST BATTLE

1. They're coming right away: The David Walker quotes are from his memoir, *Lean, Wind, Lean,* but for the most part in this chapter, I have used Nunn's account from "Freedom Came Slowly" because it was published closer to the original events, in 1946, and because Nunn was awake for the whole show.
2. "Nobody in here": Nunn, "Freedom Came Slowly."
3. "We had civilians firin'": Nunn, "Freedom Came Slowly."
4. Giegnas's boot: I have mainly followed Nunn's description of the destruction of Hitler's portrait.
5. "I got me a hit": Nunn, "Freedom Came Slowly."
6. "We could see everything": *Fort Worth Star-Telegram,* April 18, 1945.
7. "Dis is de Foist": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 148.
8. Outside the castle walls: David Walker fonds, University of New Brunswick Archives.
9. "handpicked infantrymen": "A Hostage Trick," *The Kansas City Star, April 17, 1945.*
10. "They always handcuffed us": "Yanks Release 'Special Enemies,'" *Springfield Daily Republican,* April 18, 1945.
11. "Get meat, potatoes": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 146.
12. Allen Dulles, architect of the Sparrow mission: Duke referenced an OSS dinner and meeting with Dulles. It is likely but not certain that Dulles was at the Claridge's dinner.

EPILOGUE: THE SANE REPUBLICAN

1. Duke to full-bird Colonel: Duke assumed he already was a colonel throughout his Sparrow mission, because the promotion paperwork was already in the works when he flew to Hungary from Brindisi. But a snafu back in D.C. held things up and the promotion wasn't awarded until after he was released from prison.
2. The general's letter acknowledged: NARA 226/92A/27.
3. "By their ingenuity": NARA 226/92A/27.
4. "You are a disgrace": See Florimond Duke, NARA RG 226/A1/224.
5. "where the officer": NARA RG 226/A1/224.
6. "into a rage": *Daily News,* August 1, 1945.
7. Savoy's newspaper story: "Wartime Enemies Close Friends," *Arizona Republic,* December 1, 1963. See also Horst Krüger, Collection number 825, Bundesarchiv, Abteilung Militärarchiv, Freiburg.
8. the concept of inner leadership: The official translation of *Innere Führung* in English is "leadership development and civic education." See Christian Göbel, "New Era, New Ethics? A German Perspective on Just War and Just Peace," *Small Wars Journal,* January 6, 2025, https://smallwars-journal.com/2025/01/06/new-era-new-ethics-a-german-perspective/and Christian Göbel, "Strategic Sergeants or Soul-Beings? On Military Virtues and the Moral Education of Soldiers," in *The Human Soul,* ed. P. Cicovacki (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2021), 167–84.
9. "One serves the ideas": Savoy, "Wartime Enemies Close Friends."
10. the courage of anti-Nazis: Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 153.
11. Approximately 250,000 Hungarian Jews: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, "The Holocaust in Hungary," *Holocaust Encyclopedia,* accessed January 2, 2026. https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-holocaust-in-hungary. The exact

number of deaths is unknown because many Jews were killed by the Arrow Cross, which didn't keep careful records.

12. "a hero who didn't want": Swaart, "A Hero Who Didn't Want to Appear One."
13. "to help shorten and win": Duke and Swaart, *Name, Rank, and Serial Number,* 3.
14. "I can just see Colonel Duke": Swaart, "A Hero Who Didn't Want to Appear One."
15. connecting with his Spanish heritage: "Alfred M. 'Fred' Suarez," obituary, accessed February 5, 2026, https://www.heafeyheafey.com/obituaries/Alfred-M-Fred-Suarez?obId=46442873.
16. in Hawaii on a calm day: Guy Nunn was living in Hawaii at the time of Suarez's death there. This raises the question of a connection between the two, but there is no known documentary evidence about it.
17. the leftist Alfred Suarez: this is inferred from Suarez's career fighting with the democratic socialists in Spain. But unlike Duke and Nunn, who were vocal about their loyalties to the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively, Suarez did not publicly advertise his political beliefs.

Index

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1st Aero Squadron (US). *See* First Aero Squadron (US)
1st Army (US). *See* First US Army Group
2nd Battalion (UK), 144
3rd Infantry Division (UK), 143
6th Airborne Division (UK), 140
15th Air Force (US). *See* Fifteenth Air Force (US)
50th Infantry Division (UK), 143, 144
69th Infantry Division (US), 224–31
82nd Airborne Division (US), 140
88mm anti-tank guns, 204, 218
101st Airborne Division (US), 140

Air Force Signals, 105

Aisne offensive (1917), 21
Allies. *See* individual operations by name
Aquinas, Thomas, Saint, 259n114(1)
Arabel. *See* García, Juan Pujol
Arrow Cross, 197–98
Atlantic Wall, 141
Augustus II, King of Poland, 176
Auschwitz, 84–89, 91–92, 122
Austrian parachutists, 4, 135–36
Austrian resistance, 31, 135, 146
Austrian sergeant (English learner), 112–15
Axis. *See* D-Day; Germany; Hungary; Nazis

B Mark II radio, 190
Bader, Douglas, 177, 195–96, 215–16, 230
Balkans
  Duke's fake D-Day plan, 76, 80–81, 116–20, 147
  heavy Allied bombing, 106–7
  Hitler obsessed with, 5
  and Operation Bodyguard, 7, 9, 67, 110, 114

real crisis, 197
Battle of the Bulge, 199
Bela (Hungarian guard), 187
Belgrade, 71–82
Gestapo interrogations, 1–2, 72–74, 77–82
and Krüger, 74–77
Sparrows' cells, 71–72
taken by Tito's forces, 196
Berlin, 82–83, 98–99, 234
Birkenau, 84–90
Bitchin' Bivouacking Bastards, 224–31
Black, the (*der Schwarze*), 135
Blokey (Professor), 184–85, 187
Blue Bird. *See* Karády, Katalin
Blutbank (blood bank), 130–31, 136
Bodo, Gustav, 181
Bodyguard. *See* Operation Bodyguard
Bottornya. *See* Podturen
Braun, Eva, 140
Britain and British forces, 23, 140, 147–48, 177, 253n30. *See also* Operation Chicken
British Sandy mission, 253n30
Bronx. *See* Chaudoir, Elvira de la Fuente
Brooke, William, 24
Brown (British camp leader), 166
Budapest. *See also* German invasion of Hungary; Karády, Katalin; Ujszászy, István
Austrian sergeant and English lessons, 112–15
blackout and peacefulness, 47–48
Duke's 1968 visit, 241–43
Duke's knowledge of, 10–11
falls to Soviets, 200–201
German putsch, 197
rail yards bombed, 111
Sparrows interrogated, 102–8, 115–21
Sparrows paraded by Wehrmacht, 64–68
Sparrows returned to, 100–101
Sparrows' shared cell, 107–9, 111, 120
Budapest city jail, 100–101
Bulgaria, 178–79
Burrows, Walter, 224–29

Campbell, William Wilfred: "Indian Summer," 191
Canadian soldiers, at Juno Beach, 142–43, 147–48, 149
Canaris, Wilhelm, 25
Carson, Lee, 231–32
Chalupka (Lieutenant), 194, 195, 200
Channel (English), 5
Chaudoir, Elvira de la Fuente, 132
Child, Julia, 24
Churchill, Winston, 5, 92, 233
Clages, Gerhard, 103–8, 197

Claridge's, 233–34
Clausewitz, Carl von, 121
Coates, John, 180, 188
Colditz Castle
  Allied advance, 215–20
  celebration meal, 232
  Christmas at, 199–200
  and Eggers, 174–75, 205, 207–8, 210
  escape planning, 177–78, 213
  evacuation orders, 210–13
  fall at, 193–96
  and First US Army, 209–10, 221–22, 230–31
  Nunn saves the day, 220–24, 225–31
  population and history, 173, 175–77, 210–11
  reporters swarm, 231–32
  secret surrender, 213–14
  Sparrows moved to, 170–74
  war approaches, 200–201
  war arrives and Prominents moved, 202–8
  war news, 178–79, 209
Colditz village, 172–73, 195, 203, 218
Csongor, Ferenc, 182–83, 185–86, 187–88, 189–90
Cytryn (prisoner), 87
Czechoslovakia, 50
Czerniawski, Roman, 132

Daine, Albert, 211
Dannatt, Richard, 251n5(1)
Dartmouth, 19–20
Davies, Edmund "Trotsky"
  admiration of Duke, 177
  and Denzler, 166–67
  front seat for fireworks, 168
  moved in with Duke, 169
  and Prominents, 204–5
  role, nickname, and Albania mission, 166
  and transfer to Colditz, 170–71
Dawes (mission), 176
D-Day, 139–48
  Canadians at Juno, 142–43
  Duke plants fake plan for, 76, 80–81, 116–20, 147, 159
  fate sealed for, 108
  Gold Beach, 144
  and Hitler, 140–41, 142, 144–45, 146–47, 148
  late, 125
  Normandy underdefended, 233
  Nunn learns of, 146
  Omaha Beach, 143–44
  paratroopers' arrival, 139–40
  plans and stakes, 4, 5–7

Dempsey, Jack, 134
Dénes, George, 95
Denzler, Rudolf, 166–68
der Schwarze (the Black), 135
Deutschfeindlich (anti-German) officers, 177
Devers, Jacob, 13
Dobson, Kenny, 219–20
Donovan, William "Wild Bill," 10, 23, 26, 236
Dorette. *See* Chaudoir, Elvira de la Fuente
Double Cross, 131–32
Drava River, 149, 151
Dresden, 200
Duke, Florimond. *See also* Operation Sparrow
  after Sparrow, 234–35, 236, 239–44
  background and earlier career, 10, 19–26
  in Berlin, 82–83, 98–99
  in Budapest (*see* Budapest)
  at Colditz Castle (*see* Duke at Colditz)
  D-Day fake plan planted by, 76, 80–81, 116–20, 147, 159
  flight and jump, 14–19, 26
  and Geneva Convention (*see* Geneva Convention)
  and German invasion of Hungary (*see* German invasion of Hungary)
  interrogations (*see* interrogations of Duke)
  and Karády, 243–44, 257n96
  knowledge of Hungary, 10–11
  and Krüger, 69–70, 74–77, 81, 239–41
  at Landesgericht, 126–31, 138
  at Nagykanizsa, 41–45
  Name, Rank, and Serial Number, 241–44
  at Podturen (*see* Podturen)
  political views, 120
  and Roosevelt's message for Horthy, 12, 49
  and Sparrow's compromisation, 12–13
  at Stalag 17, 165–66, 167, 169, 170–71
  and Suarez, 29, 67–68, 238–39
  and Ujszászy (*see* Ujszászy, István)
Duke and OSS
  debriefing meal, 233–34
  Duke's description under interrogation, 121
  Duke's role in OSS, 7, 10, 23–26, 105, 117
  and Hungary, 8
Duke at Colditz
  arrival, 173
  at Colditz's formal surrender, 231
  and Eggers, 174–75
  evacuation orders, 211–14
  and German security staff captain, 217
  hobby, 194
  maintaining discipline, 201
  and Prawitt, 204–6, 211–14, 220

and Prominents, 204–7
war arrives at Colditz, 202, 209–10
Dulles, Allen
carefully limited mandate, 49
and Karády, 93
and Operation Bodyguard, 120
parts of story declassified by, 244
Sparrow's cancellation prevented by, 12
Sparrow's planning, 8–10
and Sparrows' return, 233
Duncan, Elbert, 265n211
DuSossoit, Florimond. *See* Duke, Florimond
DuSossoit, Marie and Octave, 19

Eggers, Reinhold, 174–75, 205, 207–8, 210
Egyed, Zoltán, 93
Eichmann, Adolf, 54, 102
88mm anti-tank guns, 204, 218
82nd Airborne Division (US), 140
Eisenhower, Dwight, 116–17
English Channel, 5
Excelsior Hotel, 83

Fairbairn, William "Shanghai Buster," 24
Fifteenth Air Force (US), 67
50th Infantry Division (UK), 143, 144
First Aero Squadron (US), 21
First Hussars, 143
First US Army Group, 111
First World War, 20–21
Fleischmann (Chicken operative), 150, 151, 152, 153
France, 21, 80–81, 147, 169–70, 178, 197. *See also* D-Day
Frankfurt, 70
"Freedom Came Slowly" (Nunn), 266n229(1)
Freiwillige (volunteers), 112
Fuchs (German private), 141–42

Gabor, Zsa Zsa, 243
García, Juan Pujol, 132
Garzuly, József, 189
Gaslight, 109, 194
Gelleny, Joseph, 180–92
capture, 180–83
commando school, 183–84
interrogations, 182–87
later career and death, 246
meeting with Horthy's envoy, 189–90
poems recited by, 191–92
train car, 187–89

Geneva Convention
at Colditz, 195, 205
and fake Ujszászy confession, 103
invoked to Gestapo, 78–79, 99
invoked to Hungarian Army, 39
invoked to Wehrmacht, 63, 64–65, 68
and Luftwaffe, 69, 76
and SS, 124–25, 127, 130
and Stalag 17, 163, 165–66
German invasion of Hungary
arrival of troops, 53–54
costs and silent resistance, 65–67
Duke's decision to stay in Budapest, 55–58
Horthy upset at, 160
Hungary's fighting spirit, 58
impact on Operation Sparrow, 71
and Király, 59–61
Sparrows collected by Wehrmacht officers, 62–69
Germany, 32, 49–51, 82–83, 98–99, 189, 234. *See also* Colditz Castle; Hitler, Adolf; Nazis
Geschke, Hans-Ulrich, 106
Gestapo. *See also* Belgrade; Berlin; Budapest; Stalag 17
and Austrian sergeant, 112
Hungary wanting out, 161
hunting for Sparrows, 57, 59–60
and Karády, 93–97, 198
versus Luftwaffe, 75–76
scoops, 137
Sparrows taken by, 70
Sparrows tell reporters about, 232
versus SS, 124
versus Wehrmacht, 11–12, 117, 148, 167
Gibson, John, 143
Giegnas, Frank "Blacky," 224–29
Gockel, Franz, 143–44
Goebbels, Joseph, 111–12, 140
Gold Beach, 144
Goldberg, Arthur, 245
Gordon, Joseph. *See* Gelleny, Joseph
Göring, Hermann, 142, 145
Grand Hotel, 83
Greek War Relief, 234–35
green policemen, 170–71
Gustaf V, King of Sweden, 92

Habsburg, Otto von, 247
Hatz, Otto, 9
"Hero Who Didn't Want to Appear One, A" (Swaart), 257n96
Hess, Ellen, 239
Heyman, Éva, 122
Himmler, Heinrich, 107, 170

Hincks, Mary, 22, 23
Hitler, Adolf
anger at Hungary's happiness, 47
and Canaris, 25
captured enemy execution order, 79, 101, 108, 164, 166, 167
and crisis in Balkans, 197
day after D-Day, 158–62
and D-Day, 140–41, 142, 144–45, 146–47, 148
death, 236
diverted by southeast, 191
early victories and Fortress Europe, 5
and German invasion of Hungary, 54, 57–58, 59
hoping for Allied-Soviet war, 196
and Horthy, 43–45, 52, 53, 162
and Hungary's Jews, 8, 51, 159–61, 162
Mein Kampf, 161
and Operation Bagration, 206
and Operation Bodyguard, 5–6, 9, 80–81, 110–12, 118–19, 169–70
and Prominents, 175–76
retreat from Normandy ordered, 169
and Sparrows, 33, 107, 109, 145, 161
and Treaty of Trianon, 50–51, 161
Holocaust. *See also* Jews
and Allies' dislike of Nazis, 196
Auschwitz, 84–89, 91–92, 122
and Himmler, 170
reports not exaggerated, 231
truth of hidden by Hitler, 45, 161
Veesenmayer chosen for Hungary's, 61
Holt, Thaddeus, 142
Horthy, Miklós
blundered Hungarian play, 234
and Clages, 104
envoy meets with Gelleny, 189–90
fears of Nazis and Soviets, 8
and German invasion of Hungary, 160
and Hitler, 43–45, 52, 53, 162
and Hungary's surrender, 190–91, 196–97
and Jews, 8, 45, 92, 104, 197–98
and Kállay, 43–44, 60–61
and Roosevelt, 12, 49, 92
secret contact with Soviets, 243–44
and Sztójay, 158, 160
Hotel Moskva, 71–72
101st Airborne Division (US), 140
Hungarian army, 39–41. *See also* Colditz Castle
Hungary
after Second World War, 241–43, 247
Budapest (*see* Budapest)
and Gelleny (*see* Gelleny, Joseph)

German invasion of (*see* German invasion of Hungary)
and Horthy (*see* Horthy, Miklós)
Jews (*see* Jews)
and Krüger (*see* Krüger, Horst)
Nazi recruitment campaigns, 112
and Operation Sparrow, 7–9, 11–12, 15–16, 25, 49, 51
Podturen (*see* Podturen)
relationship to English-speaking nations, 36
relationship to Hitler/Germany, 8, 10–11, 32, 36, 49–51, 189
and Senesh, 150–57, 246
Sparrows at Nagykanizsa, 41–45
stepping up secret negotiations with Allies, 179
surrender, 190–91, 196–97
and Sztójay, 158–62
and Ujszászy (*see* Ujszászy, István)

"In Flanders Fields" (McCrae), 191
"Indian Summer" (Campbell), 191
interrogations
at Belgrade, 1–2, 72–74, 77–82
of Duke (*see* interrogations of Duke)
of Gelleny, 182–87
of Karády, 93–97, 242
of Nunn, 77, 106
of Senesh, 152–57
Sparrows' plans and rehearsals, 60–62, 73, 105–6
of Suarez, 72, 106
interrogations of Duke
at Belgrade, 1–2, 73–74, 78–82
by Clages, 103–5, 107–8
by German colonel, 120–21
by Krüger, 69, 74–77
by Ramspecht, 116–20

János (Jewish child), 198
JCS (Joint Chiefs of Staff), 105, 106, 117
Jews. *See also* Holocaust
Austrian sergeant on, 113–14
and German invasion of Hungary, 54, 66–67
and Hitler, 8, 51, 159–61, 162
and Horthy, 8, 45, 92, 104, 197–98
Hungary's mass deportations, 122
and Karády, 48, 94, 95, 96, 97
murdered in Holocaust, 179
at Nazi slave labour camp, 231
and Panzerfaust bazooka, 211
Senesh, 150–57, 246
Sparrows see, 100
survival rate, 242–43
used as human shields, 102–3

Jodl, Alfred, 142
Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), 105, 106, 117
Joó, András, 262n158
Juno Beach, 142–43, 147–48, 149

Kádár, Gyula, 162
Kállay, Miklós
  Duke's knowledge of, 10
  fears of Nazis and Soviets, 8
  and German invasion of Hungary, 53
  and Horthy, 43–44, 60–61
  Sparrows' secrets kept by, 242
  and Ujszászy, 55
Kallos (Chicken operative), 150, 151, 152
Karády, Katalin
  children saved by, 198–99
  and Duke, 243–44, 257n96
  Gestapo interrogations, 93–97, 242
  and Ujszászy, 48, 95, 103
Keitel, Wilhelm, 44
Kern, Károly, 162
King's Shropshire Light Infantry, 144
Király, Cornel, 40–42, 45, 59–60, 69, 236, 246
Klages, Gerhard. *See* Clages, Gerhard
Kommandant (Berlin), 99
Kommandant (Colditz). *See* Prawitt, Gerhard
Kommandant (Gelleny's prison), 186
Kommandant (Stalag 17), 166–67
Krasniansky, Oskar, 91
Krüger, Horst, 69–70, 74–77, 81, 239–41

Landesgericht
  cells at, 129–31, 132
  on D-Day, 139, 145–46, 148
  secret telephone, 133–38
  Sparrows taken to, 123–26
  Sparrows' uniforms, 126–29
Lange, Gerhardt, 134–37
Launer, Erich, 137–38
Lloyd, Mark, 159
Luftwaffe, 69–70, 75–76, 81, 141–42. *See also* Krüger, Horst

Majestic building, 102
Masterman, John Cecil, 131
McCrae, John: "In Flanders Fields," 191
Mein Kampf (Hitler), 161
MI9, 177
Michael I, King of Romania, 178
Miller, Robert, 224–29

Millward, Norman, 144
Milner, Marc: *Stopping the Panzers,* 261n142(3)
Mindszenty, József, 241–42
Mirabell apartment building, 102
Miskovic, Emil, 224–25
Monsieur Paris, 34–39
Moskva hotel, 71–72
Munro, Ross, 142–43
Murphey, Alan, 224–29
musical warfare, 168
Mussolini, Benito, 234

Nagykanizsa, 41–45
Name, Rank, and Serial Number (Duke and Swaart), 241–44, 257n96
National Liberation Army (Yugoslavia), 150
Nazis. *See also* Gestapo; Hitler, Adolf; Holocaust; Luftwaffe; SS (Schutzstaffel); Wehrmacht
  and American newspapers, 61
  bickering over end of war, 196
  brutal counterintelligence, 11
  and Colditz Castle, 176–77
  flying to mountains, 203
  and Operation Bodyguard, 110
  propaganda, 194, 196
  and radios, 31
  and Sparrow leak, 12–13
New York Giants, 22
Nieuport fighter, 21
Normandy, 110, 119, 169. *See also* D-Day
Nunn, Guy. *See also* Operation Sparrow
  after Sparrow, 236, 244–45
  and Austrian sergeant, 112–14
  background and career, 15, 26–27
  at Colditz Castle (*see* Nunn at Colditz)
  collected by Wehrmacht officers, 63
  "Freedom Came Slowly," 266n229(1)
  and interrogations, 62, 77, 105–6
  at Landesgericht, 129–30, 132, 133–38, 145–46
  and OSS, 9, 27
  and Podturen, 30–34, 37–38, 39
  political views, 120
  role in Sparrow, 9, 16
  at Stalag 17, 168
  and Suarez, 237, 268n246
  suggestion to steal a car, 57
  and Sykes, 77, 125, 171
  taken to Vienna, 125, 126
  before Ujszászy meeting, 48
  White Shadows, 245
Nunn, Lyn, 245
Nunn at Colditz

Czech teacher, 195
hobby at Colditz, 194
impressed by civilian militia, 203
saving the day, 220–24, 225–31
watching Allied advance, 219
and Winant/Prominents, 205–7

Office of Strategic Services (OSS). *See also* Duke and OSS
concludes Sparrows dead, 64
German colonel obsessed with, 120–21
and Nunn, 9, 27
and Operation Bodyguard, 7–8
and Operation Sparrow, 8–13, 15, 27–29, 120
Sparrows promoted and praised, 236–37
Omaha Beach, 143–44
Operation Bagration, 206
Operation Bodyguard. *See also* D-Day
dividends paying for months, 168, 169–70
Double Cross, 131–32
and German invasion of Hungary, 54, 58
and Hitler, 5–6, 9, 80–81, 110–12, 118–19, 169–70
and Operation Sparrow, 5–7, 8–9, 107, 118–20
origin of name, 5
overview, 6, 16
props built by, 109–10
secret until 1970s, 244
stakes, 4
Operation Chicken, 149–57
Operation Dibbler, 180–81, 187. *See also* Gelleny, Joseph
Operation Heavy Industry, 178, 213, 231
Operation Mincemeat, 6
Operation Sparrow
aftermath, 234–37
attempts to cancel, 12
in Berlin, 82–83, 98–99
and Budapest (*see* Budapest)
and Colditz Castle (*see* Colditz Castle)
Duke's 1968 thoughts on, 242–43
effects on Sparrows, 235
flight and jump, 14–18
and German invasion of Hungary (*see* German invasion of Hungary)
and Hitler, 145
initial planning and compromisation, 8–9, 12–13
interrogations (*see* interrogations)
and Landesgericht (*see* Landesgericht)
Name, Rank, and Serial Number (Duke and Swaart), 241–44, 257n96
Operation Chicken compared to, 150
overview, 1, 3–4, 6–7, 11–12, 15–16
parts declassifed by Dulles, 244
and Podturen (*see* Podturen)

return and debriefing, 233–34
significance and secrecy, ix–x
and Stalag 17 (*see* Stalag 17)
surrender to Hungarian army, 39–41
takeoff at Brindisi, 3–4, 7, 13
team selected, 9–10, 15, 25–26, 28–29, 120
and Ujszászy (*see* Ujszászy, István)
waiting at Nagykanizsa, 41–45
Operation Zeppelin, 261n145(3)
Ordnungspolizei (Order Police), 170–71
Ōshima, Hiroshi, 160
OSS. *See* Office of Strategic Services (OSS)

Palgi, Yoel, 155
Pančevo, 62–70
Pan-European Picnic, 247
Patton, George, 117
Pestvidék, 95
Pius XII, Pope, 92
Podturen
chosen as location, 15
landing near, 30–33
location, 4
Monsieur Paris, 34–39
name, 251n4(1)
Popov, Duško, 132
Pozsgay, Imre, 247
Prawitt, Gerhard
and bureaucracy, 194
and Duke, 204–6, 211–14, 220
and evacuation orders, 210–13
formal surrender, 231
and Nunn, 221–22
and Prominents, 203, 204–6
Prominents, 176, 203–8, 210

radios
capability of Sparrows', 31
Duke's one-time code book found, 81
and Gelleny, 181–83, 189–91
and Operation Chicken, 150, 153
OSS listens to silence, 64
Sparrows denied permission to use, 42, 52
Sparrows' found in Karády's piano, 93
Sparrows' taken by Király, 60
and Ujszászy, 56
Rajk, László, 244
Rakos rail complex, 111
Ramspecht (interrogator), 116–20
Red Cross packages, 177, 195–96, 199

Regina Rifles, 143
Reid, Pat, 178
resistance members, 136–37
Ribbentrop, Joachim von, 44, 159
Rodgers, Ira, 20
Romani, 38
Romania, 50
Romilly, Giles, 207–8
Rommel, Erwin, 141, 142
Roosevelt, Franklin, 12, 23, 49, 92, 204
Rosenberg, Walter. *See* Vrba, Rudolf
Rozsa (secret policeman), 154, 156
Rundstedt, Karl von, 119, 142

Sabadosh, Kiril, 194
Sabourin, Roméo, 176
Salmuth, Hans von, 142
Savoy, Maggie, 239–40
Schaeffer, H.W., 193–94
Schutzstaffel. *See* SS (Schutzstaffel)
2nd Battalion (UK), 144
Second World War, 5, 23–25, 236. *See also* Auschwitz; D-Day; Hitler, Adolf; Hungary; individual operations by name
secret telephone, 133–38
Selbstmord (self-murder rate), 130
Senesh, Hannah, 150–57, 246
Senesh, Katherine, 154–55, 156, 246
Shaughnessey, Leo, 231, 232
Shepardson, Whitney, 237
6th Airborne Division (UK), 140
69th Infantry Division (US), 224–31
Slovakia, 90–91, 178
Snow White, 200
Soviets
  advance through Carpathians, 169
  Budapest falls to, 200–201
  Duke argues against giving Eastern Europe to, 239
  final assault on Berlin, 234
  Hitler's fears about, 6
  Horthy and Kállay fear takeover by, 8
  Horthy's secret contact with, 244
  and Hungary after Second World War, 241–42, 247
  and Operation Bagration, 206
  and Ujszászy, 49, 51
Spaatz, Carl, 117
Spain, Suarez in, 28, 29
Sparrows. *See* Operation Sparrow; individual Sparrows by name
Speidel, Hans, 142
SS (Schutzstaffel). *See also* Landesgericht
  and Colditz, 204–8, 209, 211–12, 213, 218–19, 225

and German invasion of Hungary, 54
versus Gestapo, 124
recruitment campaigns in Hungary, 112
Stalag 17
Sparrows at, 165–71
Sparrows taken to, 162–63
as a trap, 163–64
State Department, 105, 106, 117
Stopping the Panzers (Milner), 261n142(3)
Strehlitz (SS sergeant), 123, 129
Suarez, Alfred. *See also* Operation Sparrow
after Sparrow, 236, 237–39
background and career, 14–15, 28–29
hobby at Colditz, 194
and interrogations, 61–62, 72, 105–6
at Landesgericht, 130
landing near Podturen, 30–34
later career and death, 245–46
meal before Ujszászy meeting, 48
and Nunn, 237, 268n246
and OSS, 9, 28–29
political views, 120
role in Sparrow, 9, 16, 31
smiling at actress, 67–68
and Spanish Civil War veterans, 178
suggestion to escape from Budapest, 57
waiting at Nagykanizsa, 42
Suarez, Alfred, Jr., 246
Sun Tzu, 107
supply canisters, 31–32, 40
Sváb Hill, 95, 96, 102
Swaart, Betty, 244
Swaart, Charles M.
"Hero Who Didn't Want to Appear One, A," 257n96
Name, Rank, and Serial Number, 241–44
Switzerland, 165, 166–67
Sykes (Major), 77, 125, 171
Szálasi, Ferenc, 197
Sztójay, Döme, 158–62

3rd Infantry Division (UK), 143
Thomas Aquinas, Saint, 259n114(1)
Thorpe, Jim, 22
Time Inc., 22–23
Tito, Josip, 7, 73–74, 79, 196
Tod, William
at Colditz's formal surrender, 231
escapes forbidden by, 177
and evacuation orders, 210, 211–13
and Prominents, 204–5

role at Colditz, 195
Walker appointed by, 223
and war's arrival at Colditz, 201
Tony (Chicken operative), 150, 151–52, 153
Transport Militaire Unis, 21
Treaty of Trianon, 50–51, 161
Trianon, Treaty of, 50–51, 161
Turk, Mike, 180, 188

Ujszászy, István
death, 246
faked confession, 103–5, 106, 242
and Horthy, 43, 243–44
intended role in Sparrow, 11, 15, 38
and Karády, 48, 95, 103
meetings with Sparrows, 48–52, 54–57
Sparrows travel to meet, 45–48
Sztójay pushes for release of, 162
US First Army, 209, 221–22, 230–31

Veesenmayer, Edmund, 45, 61
Vienna, 126. *See also* Landesgericht
Vienna East Station, 126
Vietnam War, 239
volunteers (*Freiwillige),* 112
von Roenne, Alexis Baron, 142
Vonnegut, Kurt, 200
Vrba, Rudolf, 84–92, 246

Wachtmeister (Landesgericht), 127–29
Walker, David, 223–24, 228–29, 231
Wallenberg, Raoul, 246
Wardle, Hank, 178
Webster, David Kenyon, 140
Wehrmacht. *See also* German invasion of Hungary; Prawitt, Gerhard
and battle at Colditz, 216–18
and Geneva Convention, 76
versus Gestapo, 11–12, 117, 148, 167
Ramspecht, 116–20
Sparrows collected by, 62–69
Wernicke, Irmgard, 195
Westhoff, Adolf, 167
Wetzler, Alfred, 84–92
White Shadows (Nunn), 245
Wilkins, Jim, 143
Wilson, Woodrow, 20
Winant, John, 204–7
World War I. *See* First World War
World War II. *See* Second World War

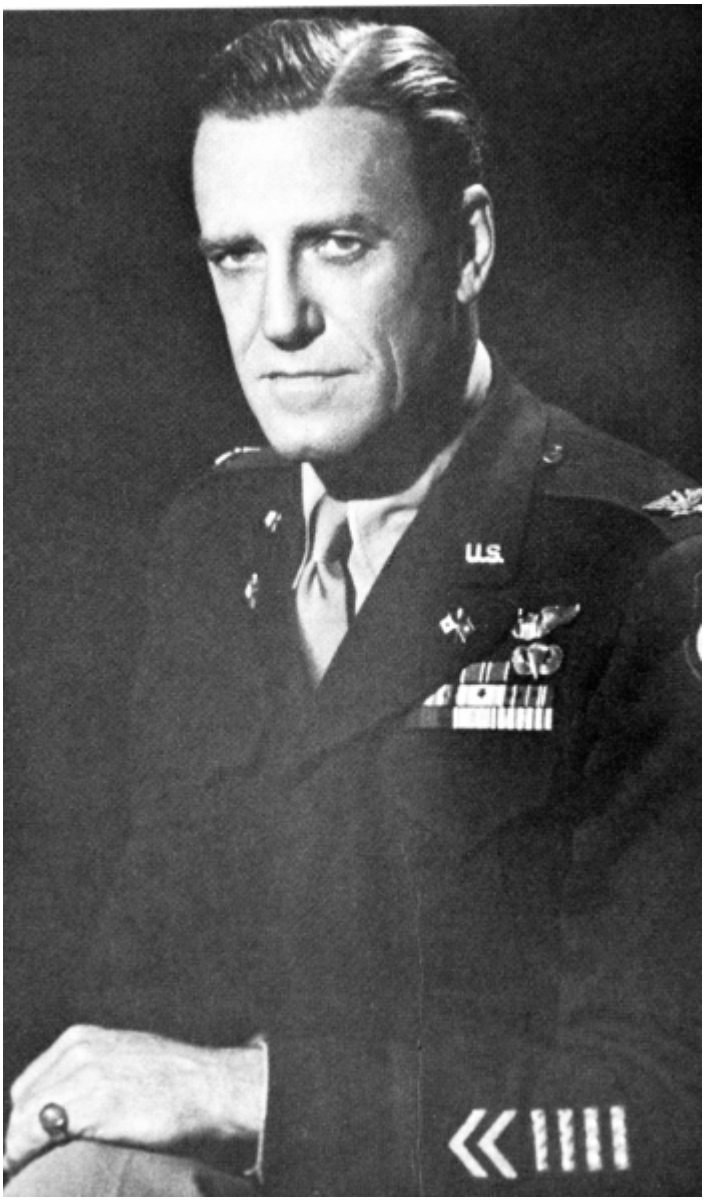
Yugoslavia, 50, 150, 196–97. *See also* Belgrade
Žilina, 91–92

Photo Section



The Sparrows' aircraft was a Halifax B.II Series I, modified for the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) with nose armament and dorsal turret removed, and the nose faired over to reduce drag and detection. Inside, the roar of four Rolls-Royce engines made conversation impossible in anything less than a shout. These stripped-down bombers supported resistance movements across occupied Europe by dropping commandos into enemy territory at night.

UK GOVERNMENT ARTISTIC WORKS



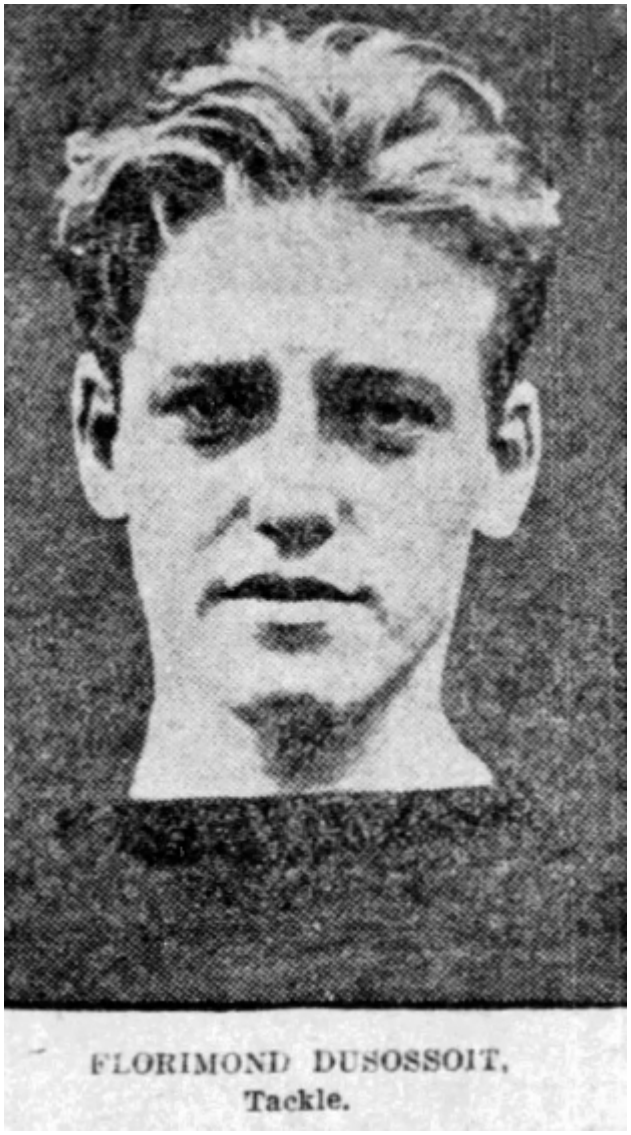
The Office of Strategic Services (OSS) background report on Colonel Florimond Duke described him as “a damn good fellow” with “lots of guts”—a scrapper who remained “calm in a fight.” The report emphasized that he wasn’t rash or looking for trouble, “but at the same time he is unwilling to lie down and take it.”

FLORIMOND DUKE COLLECTION



Major Florimond Duke (left) in Cairo, where he served as assistant military attache before joining the OSS, talking with an American colonel and two Egyptian officers.

FLORIMOND DUKE COLLECTION



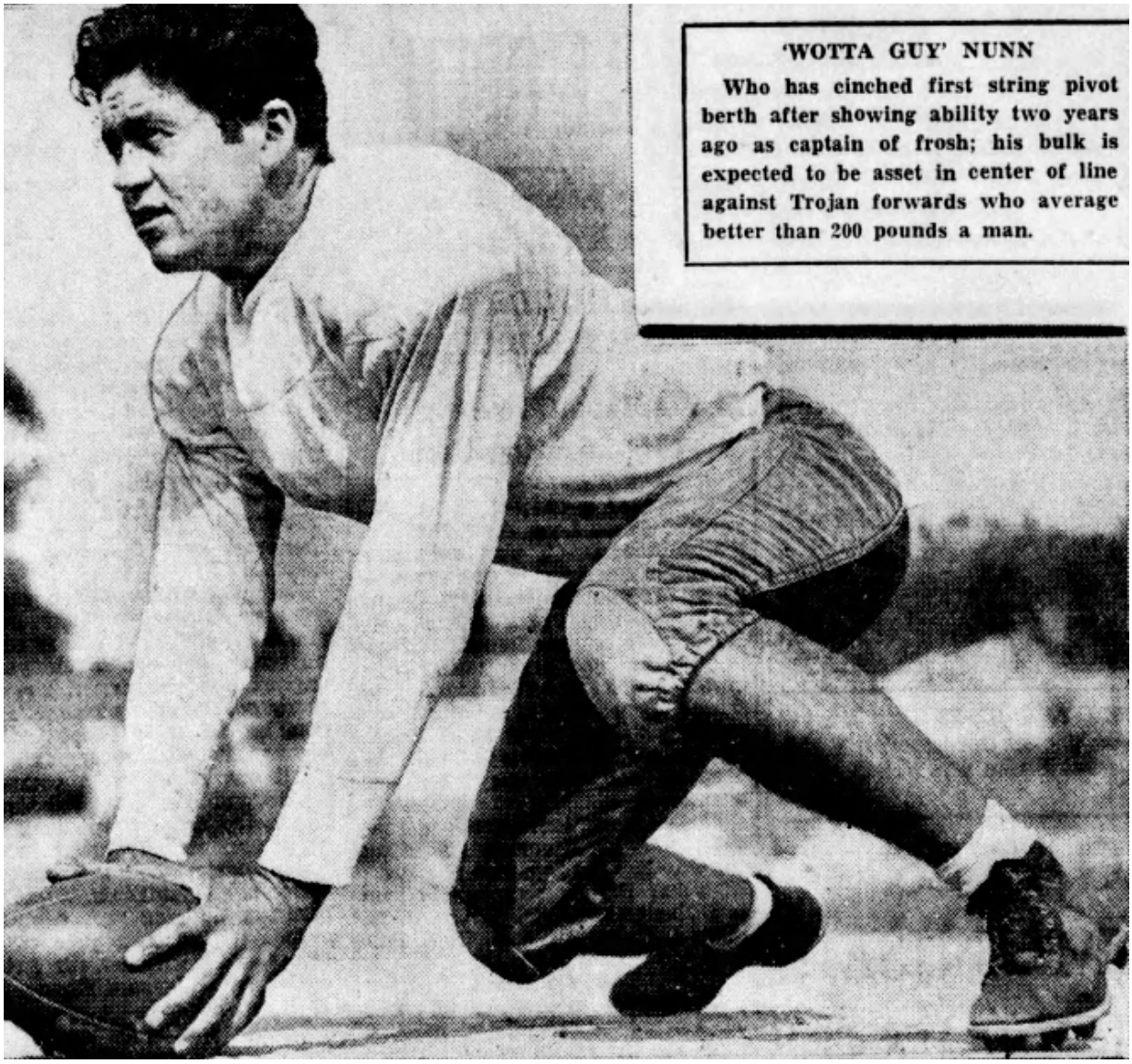
Florimond Duke, high school sports star, in 1913. By seventeen, his name filled *Boston Globe* sports pages as he dominated four sports while maintaining academic excellence. The dark circles under his eyes give a hint of the cost.

BOSTON GLOBE, 1913



In 1921, Duke was the starting end for the New York Giants (in stripes) in the new National Football League.

DAILY NEWS (NEW YORK, NEW YORK) 1921



Guy Nunn playing football in 1934. The Occidental College football captain nicknamed “Wotta Guy” was six feet tall and two hundred pounds of pure muscle. His mind was just as powerful: he was fluent in nine languages and a Rhodes Scholar with Oxford degrees in economics and politics.

PASADENA STAR NEWS, 1934



Guy Nunn (left) and labour leader Walter Reuther studying a special edition of *Force Ouvriére,* the newspaper of the anti-communist French socialist union. Nunn was an expert propagandist who worked with labour movements across Europe.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES (US)



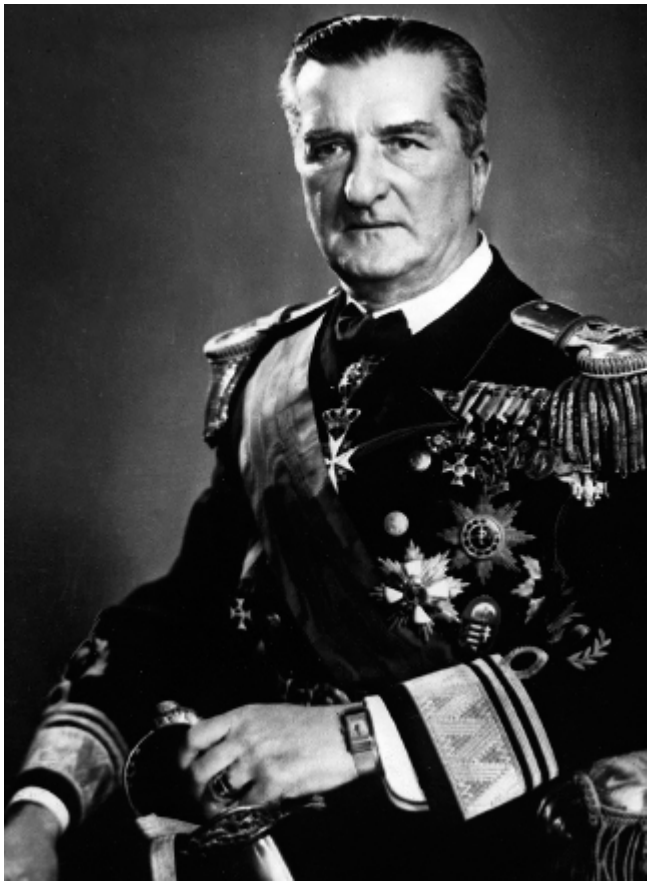
Major Alfred Suarez, radio and explosives expert, whose intense stare hints at the battles already fought. The Bronx-born engineer had spent a year in Spain, fighting fascists before the Republic fell.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES (US)



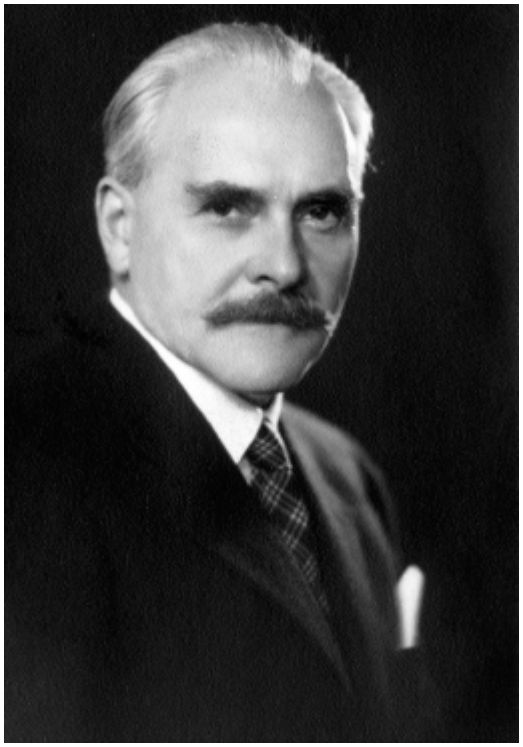
Budapest in 1943. The Pearl of the Danube was still intact while other Axis capitals lay in ruins. Hungary had managed a precarious balancing act: presenting itself as Hitler's ally while quietly protecting its Jewish population and engaging in anti-Nazi sabotage.

FORTEPAN. UNTITLED PHOTOGRAPH (FORTEPAN ID 8315). 1943.



Admiral Miklós Horthy, regent of Hungary, whose resistance to Nazi demands had kept his country's million Jews alive longer than any other large Jewish community in Hitler's sphere. Trapped between the Nazi anvil and the Soviet hammer, Horthy sought a secret alliance with the West—but then Hitler summoned him to Austria in March 1944.

KÉPES VASÁRNAP [JOURNAL], 05.12.1941 (VOLUME 63, ISSUE 49)



Prime Minister Miklós Kállay, Regent Horthy's handpicked point man for secret negotiations to bring Hungary over to the Allied side.

MNM MUSEUM ONLINE CATALOGUE, RECORD ID MNMMUSEUM 1198343, 1941



General István Ujszászy, head of Hungarian military intelligence and the Sparrows' secret contact, code-named Aramis. He was the man the Sparrows needed to meet as soon as they landed in enemy territory. The dapper intelligence chief risked everything to flip Hungary to the Allied side.

HUNGARIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM



Lissa, March 1944. Rumor placed Randolph Churchill, the prime minister's son, among the Allied forces invading the island. Meanwhile, Tito's Yugoslav offensive was timed to coincide with Operation Sparrow, while Allied operations across the Aegean Sea fed the deliberate fiction that southeastern Europe — not France — was D-Day's real target.

DAILY NEWS, MARCH 11, 1944



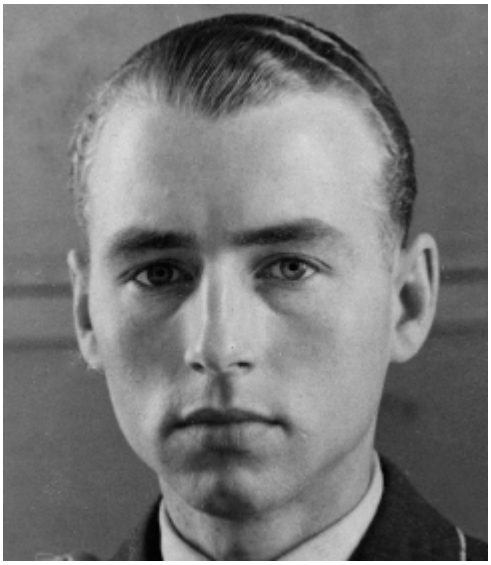
Katalin Karády and Pál Jávor, Hungary's reigning queen and king of cinema. Both stars were arrested by the Gestapo: Karády for her suspected meeting with the American commandos, and Jávor for his outspoken defence of Jewish colleagues. Karády was secretly engaged to Hungary's intelligence chief General István Ujszászy.

JÁNOS MANNINGER



Hannah Senesh at sixteen, a student in Hungary. Six years later, while working with the Yugoslav resistance, she would cross a heavily militarized border back into her homeland as the radio operator for a mission code-named Chicken, carrying codes the Nazis would do anything to obtain.

THE SENESH FAMILY AND THE BEIT HANNA SENESH ARCHIVES, SDOT YAM



Horst Krüger, as a young German officer, ca. 1943, unhappy that the Nazis are in charge. A year later, as head of the Luftwaffe's Southeastern Intelligence and Florimond Duke's first interrogator, he was in a position to save the Sparrows' lives from the Gestapo while sabotaging Nazi chances for success at D-Day.

BUNDESARCHIV, ABT. MILITÄRARCHIV.



Hitler meeting with Hungary's new Nazi-approved prime minister Döme Sztójay at Castle Klessheim on June 7, 1944—the day after D-Day. Hitler studies a battle map, confident that yesterday's invasion at Normandy is a feint, and the real attack will strike elsewhere. Left to right: Sztójay, Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, an unidentified man, Hitler, Air Force Chief Günther Korten, Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, General Alfred Jodl, General Walter Warlimont, and Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel.

ULLSTEIN BILD DTL.



German soldiers occupy Budapest, 1944. Within days of the March 19 invasion, the vibrant capital had transformed into a city of terror. The borders were sealed. Deportation lists were drawn up. The Nazis checked identity cards at every checkpoint. Within weeks, the cattle cars would begin rolling towards Auschwitz.

FORTEPAN



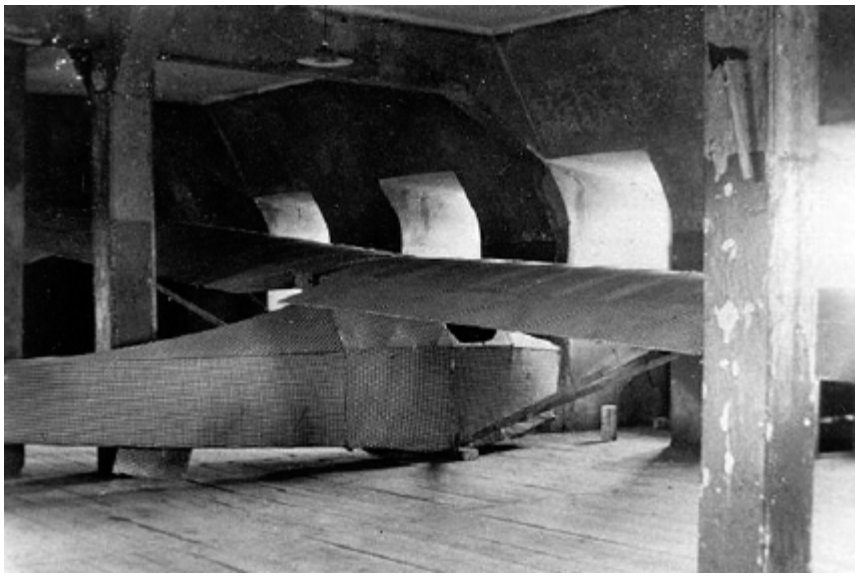
Colditz Castle—officially known as Oflag IV-C—was Germany's maximum-security prison for Allied officers who caused the most trouble or who were the most valuable as hostages. By April 1945, the prisoners at the medieval fortress included Churchill's nephew, King George VI's grandnephew, and three Americans who had parachuted into Hungary on a secret mission.

BRÜCK & SOHN KUNSTVERLAG



Florimond Duke at Oflag IV-C in Colditz, Germany. Duke began growing his moustache only after capture—commandos knew that they could cut off their facial hair as an easy disguise if they were able to escape.

L. TOM PERRY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, HAROLD B. LEE LIBRARY, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY



The Colditz glider, built by Allied prisoners in a hidden attic at Colditz Castle as part of Operation Heavy Industry. Crafted from bed slats, floorboards, wire, and bedsheets sealed with boiled porridge, the nineteen-foot-long glider was designed for a desperate gamble: if the SS came to massacre the prisoners, two men would fly it over the Mulde River to alert the advancing American army, while Duke unlocked a weapons cache to mount a last stand.

FLORIMOND DUKE COLLECTION, PHOTO BY LEE CARSON



Left to right: Colonel Schaefer, who came to Colditz Castle under a death sentence, and the Sparrow team of Major Suarez, Captain Nunn, and Colonel Duke, as they prepare to fly to England from Kölleda airfield.

FLORIMOND DUKE COLLECTION



Allen Dulles, OSS station chief in Bern, Switzerland, orchestrated covert operations from neutral territory throughout the Second World War. His missions included Operation Sparrow, which sought to turn Hungary against Nazi Germany and divert German forces from the Western Front.

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About the Author

JASON BELL, PhD, writes narrative histories uncovering intelligence secrets of the Second World War. A professor of philosophy at the University of New Brunswick, he has served as a Fulbright professor in Germany and taught at universities in the United States, Belgium and Canada. His first book, *Cracking the Nazi Code*, was a Canadian national bestseller.

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Operation Sparrow

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[*] Spaatz, from the German word for “sparrow”