

REDEMPTION SONG

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MID-WORLD ARTS
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CHAPTER FIVE

The helicopter set down just long enough to release its two passengers, then clawed its way back into the overcast German sky. Gary took in his surroundings, a survival habit built over the last year and a half. The chopper had dropped them in the middle of a field, dangerously close to what looked to Gary like a ski lift. Short grass spread in all directions, the closest trees at least fifty yards away. In the snow.

Snow in June, even if just in the shadow of those trees. The rendezvous must be pretty high up, quite a change from sea level just three hours before.

A good distance beyond the trees stood buildings, at least he could make out the red tiles of their rooftops. In the opposite direction from the buildings yawned a great vista of forest, red-roofed towns, and the patchwork quilt of family farms. He wasn't just high up, he stood on the slope of a mountain.

You're a long way from Indy, bro.

Carlisle grabbed Gary by the arm and dragged him toward the three Range Rovers waiting a few feet away. Ten or so men stood about the trucks, all in either wool overcoats or trench coats covering full battle gear.

"*Guten Tag, Fraulein* Carlisle," one of the men called, and waved. He wasn't the most noticeable guy if you discounted the field gear and slung sub-machine gun. Average of stature, forgettable

STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY

face, his balding head reflecting dully in the diffused light. But he greeted Carlisle by name, so that made him the local tac officer.

"Tomas!" Carlisle answered, "It's been so long! *Es geht gut, ya?*" She shook the balding man's hand.

"*Auszeichnet.*" The man looked at Gary. Everyone else did, too. "*Und er es?*"

"This is Gary LaMonte, an American. You should trust him as you would the boss." Then she looked Gary up and down and shrugged. "*Obwohl, er ist kein Soldat, verstehen?*"

Some of the men laughed.

"Hey," Gary said. "I'm standing right here."

That made them laugh all the harder. The tac officer -- Tomas -- waved everyone over to the lead Range Rover, where a large geodetic survey map lay spread over the hood in a plastic map case.

"Here is Rhon Kaserne," Tomas said in English, probably for Gary's benefit. He pointed to a half circle of buildings, several deep, on what looked like a wooded, low mountaintop. "On a clear day, you can see it from here on Wasserkuppe, eleven kilometers as a bird flies, *ya?* My men watch from the town below, here, and from the trees part way up the slope. They observed one van, French make, enter the base two hours ago. We think it went here, an airfield near the peak, at the back of the installation."

"Hold it." Gary reached out and tapped the map in no particular place. "I thought we were going someplace called Wildflecken."

Tomas slid into an explanation as if he had expected the question. "Rhon Kaserne is Wildflecken. Until the Americans left the installation in the nineties, the post had no official name except that borrowed from the town at the base of the mountain. When the *Bundeswehr* -- the German army -- moved in, they named it Rhon Kaserne. This place has a long history, *Herr* LaMonte. It began as a training base for the Waffen-SS. After the war, it was used as a refugee camp for the displaced Polish. The American army moved in, then left when the Soviet Union collapsed. It is now the German, ahh, warfighting school, is that clear?"

"Okay, sure."

"*Gut.* The *Gefechtssimulationszentrum* takes up only a small part of the base. The rest stands empty except when NATO units come in to train. I do not know how these people we are after gained unchallenged access to an active military base, but they are there."

REDEMPTION SONG

"We'll work out the why later," Carlisle said. "Where are they keeping our girl and how do we get in?"

"We are working out the first answer now, but our best guess is this small building just off the helicopter pad. We are sending a team up to an abandoned Army outpost straight across the valley. The view to our expected target should be clear and unobstructed through a one-thousand millimeter camera lens."

"And the second question?" Gary grew impatient with all the paramilitary talk. "How do we get to Sally?"

"Two approaches. One up the road from the village. This has the least probability of success. We could be spotted by lookouts or stopped by the *Bundeswehr*. The second approach is dangerous, but with a greater chance of both success and surprise."

"And that would be?" Carlisle prompted him.

"A forced march up the northwest slope, through the presently inactive tank gunnery range."

That sounded ominous to Gary. "Tank gunnery range?"

"There is a high probability of encountering unexploded ordinance, but the route brings us right up behind our kidnapper friends, and they would certainly never expect us."

Until then, all attention had focused on the map. Now every face turned to Carlisle, who alone continued to study the green and white sprawl of paper. Gary knew the decision was hers, but he also knew where he stood. If he must trudge through exploding bombs and missiles to get to Sally and keep her safe, so be it.

"Well," Carlisle said, straightening her spine in that characteristic stick-up-the-ass British manner. "We'll only live forever standing around the bonnet of this car. Let's set it up and move it out, Tomas. I want to begin the climb within the hour. I want eyes on target in forty-five minutes. Commo all around, English first, then German."

Acknowledgements. Carlisle reached beneath her Kevlar and extracted a crumpled photograph, the one Gary had given her.

"Everyone, take a look. This is our girl, Sally Reiser, American, blonde, speaks English and no other languages. Anyone who isn't her, shoot them."

"This Sally Reiser." Tomas looked from man to man, then back to Carlisle. Clearly, the name disturbed them. "This girl, she is the one we've heard of?"

STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY

"The one and only," Gary said, nodding.

Another overall exchange of looks. "Then we dawdle," Tomas said, and the men broke to their vehicles. Tomas leaned close to Carlisle. "For you, we fight." He nodded to Gary. "For her, we die."

"Damned straight," Gary agreed.

Two minutes later, the field stood empty.