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The Saltire flag was fluttering among the stars above Schloss Bernstein in Austria's Burgenland because Count Janos Almasy had a Scottish guest on Burns Night. The Jewish cook had had no difficulty preparing the haggis because it was similar to kishke, a chicken or cow's intestine stuffed with flour, meal, onion and fat. Though he had phoned around Vienna, Janos hadn't been able to locate a Scottish piper, but the haggis was borne in to the accompaniment of a gypsy band playing cymbalos, the elaborate dulcimers hung round their necks, the thrilling strings struck by small spoon-shaped wooden hammers.

Niall Macdonald of Invernevis rose to address the haggis. He was in his thirties, well built, with the fine features of his lineage, in kilt with the scarlet mess jacket with yellow facings of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. He drew his cairngorm-hilted *sgian dhu* from his hose and plunged it into the haggis with the invocation:

Trenching your gushing entrails bright,
Like onie ditch;
And then, O what a glorious sight,
Warm-reekin, rich!

The Almasys' relatives and friends round the Bernstein table that evening in 1938 were the *Almanach de Gotha* incarnate: Prince Paul Esterhazy; Countesses Francesca Erdödy, known as Baby, and her sister Johanna (Jimmy) from nearby Kohfidisch. They toasted Burns with Black & White whisky instead of aromatic Tokay.

Only one person remained seated. Janos's wife, Princess Marie Esterhazy, sister of Prince Paul, had been crippled by a horse-riding accident in her childhood. Her wheelchair was pushed up against the long table as she manipulated the ancestral silver with weakened hands. However, she raised her glass, touching it against their Scottish guest's. Janos, handsome in a raffish way, had married her for her money, most of which he had squandered. Several of Europe's most alluring women shared his bed, and he had already exercised droit de seigneur over the seventeen-year-old gypsy belle whose bust supported a cymbalo at this very moment.

The castle, thought to be at least a thousand years old, originally held by the Archbishop of Salzburg, had belonged to the Almasys for less than forty years, but as he presided at the head of the candle-lit table Janos behaved as if they had been there for centuries. The host and his paying guests were sophisticated and much travelled. When they were bored with the Burgenland they took the train to Vienna, and an express, or even a plane, to Paris and London, with Berlin a favourite destination. Some of the women were wearing jewels that had had to be reset several times because of their antiquity, but on the wrist of Princess Carmencita von Wrede, raising the toast to Scotland's national bard, there was a cuff bracelet of silver with coral, made to commission for her Argentinian mother by Josef Hoffmann in the Wiener Werkstätte in Vienna. An identical bracelet graced the wrist of her twin Edda across the table. There were Cubist earrings, an art deco pendant,

and, on a dress by Elsa Schiaparelli, the buttons were in the shape of bees. Under the table, shoes handcrafted by Salvatore Ferragamo in his Florence workshop had been kicked off by a beauty from Sicily.

Less fashion-conscious than the women, the older men round the Bernstein table wore evening suits that had been fitted by Knize of Vienna or Gieves & Hawkes of London when they were younger and less indulgent with regard to food and drink. But there was a tuxedo, bought off-the-peg on a trip to New York by a younger member of this mobile set.

Over his haggis Janos talked about Tam o' Shanter.

'We have a ghost here at Bernstein, but not a naked witch as in Burns's poem. She's a properly attired White Lady who runs along the corridor, making her supplication to the Virgin on the wall outside Marie's room.'

'I've seen her once, when I was going down the passage,' the hostess revealed to the company. 'I almost regained the power of my legs, I was so frightened.'

'We've got a resident ghost,' Niall Macdonald informed the diners as they forked the haggis with various expressions of appreciation. 'He only appears at the death of an Invernevis chieftain. He was a harper we took with us to Flodden, to sing our praises, because we believed that we would defeat the English, but he was killed alongside our chieftain. He appears in hodden grey when the chieftain's going to die. My grandfather is supposed to have seen him.'

After the Burns Supper they went through to the salon, where wall lamps shed their mellowness on waxed wood, and on a spinet that Haydn had entertained on.

'Are you going to dance for us?' Janos urged his Scottish guest.

Niall Macdonald had so many requests to dance in the houses and castles he stayed in during his progress along the Danube

that he had brought his own music in his luggage. When he came downstairs he had a specially made wooden box with him which contained a record of the Highland Fling played by Pipe Major Willie Ross of the Scots Guards. Janos opened a cabinet to reveal a gramophone, and slipped the well-worn disc from its sleeve.

'I don't have swords,' the dancer pointed out.

'There are plenty of swords here,' Janos said as he went out. 'Not Scottish ones, but good old Hungarian ones with cut-throat blades.'

He returned with two swords, placed them on the carpet and went across to the gramophone. Niall was dancing, fists on his hips, his buckled shoes avoiding the crossed blades – when the door was thrown open. A windswept young woman stood there, looking around as if she were in the wrong house.

'You're too late, Unity! The haggis has been consumed,' Janos called to her.

Niall already knew the Honourable Unity Mitford, having met her in Munich two years before.

'I had lunch with the Führer yesterday in the Osteria Bavaria,' she announced to the company as she shed her driving gauntlets. 'I was twice blessed. He asked me to meet him in the Regina Hotel later. There was only one piece of chocolate cake left, but he insisted on having it.'

'Bad manners, I'd say,' Janos said.

'Oh, no!' Unity reacted earnestly. 'The Führer takes precedence over anyone else in the world.'

'Surely not over priests!' the devout Marie came in.

'Priests have no power compared with the Führer,' Unity said contemptuously. She turned to Niall. 'You've heard him speak. Don't you think he's inspirational?'

'I certainly think he can carry the crowds,' Niall conceded, having heard him ranting in the Sportpalast in Berlin.

'National Socialism is far greater than Christianity,' Unity intoned, as if she had been rehearsing the slogan on her reckless drive to the Burgenland. 'The Führer will conquer Europe.'

Then she started to laugh. It was eerie, the way the high-pitched sound seemed to leave the salon and roam through the castle, like a distraught ghost that no longer recognized its surroundings. The laughter rang down the stone corridor to the kitchen, where the Jewish cook was sampling the remains of her improvised haggis.

Count Tassilo Almasy had been imprisoned by the Communist regime of Bela Kun in 1919, and he and his host were in earnest conversation about Bolshevik torture, with both men and women suffering the glove-and-stocking treatment, their hands and feet immersed in boiling water, the skin stripped off completely. Janos was explaining how he always gave new guests to Bernstein a tour of the dungeons, to see the whipping bench, rack and cells, when Unity shouted:

'Hitler will deal with the Marxists!' drawing her hand across her throat. 'The same way he'll deal with these stinking Jews.'

One of the guests asked Unity about the gold swastika badge on her bust.

'It's the *Goldenes Abzeichen*,' she explained. 'The Führer gave it to me personally. His signature's on the back,' she revealed as she unpinned it. 'Touch it – it will bring you luck.' And she encouraged the company to pass it round.

'I must say, I'm impressed by Hitler,' Janos told them as he fingered the gift. 'I've been to a couple of the rallies at Nuremberg, and if they can arrange Germany the way they arrange those rallies, everything will be all right.'

'Last week in Munich I met an old Jewish woman bent double with a bundle,' Unity said. 'She asked me the way to the railway station and I sent her twice the distance,' and she laughed again, inanely.

‘I’ve nothing against Jews,’ Janos said, shrugging. ‘Now, Unity, will you sing us a Burns song? How about “My Love is Like a Red Red Rose”? We heard it sung when we were on our honeymoon in Scotland, didn’t we, Marie?’ he turned to his wife.

The English beauty stood beside the piano, but it wasn’t a Burns song she was giving them. Her eyes shone as she sang the *Horst Wessel Leid*.

A servant came in and whispered to Janos.

‘Apparently the Lights are spectacular tonight,’ he told the company.

‘They’re called *Fir Chlis* in Gaelic,’ Niall explained as they stood on the terrace, watching the Northern Lights. ‘Don’t they look like leaping men?’

They seemed to weave about the sky in their flowing ethereal garments, like ghosts struggling to come back to life. By their lumination Niall could see Unity’s enraptured face, her mind back in Nuremberg watching the paraded banners of her beloved Nazis.

Afterwards Janos took his Scottish guest into his study for a whisky nightcap, unlocking a cabinet to show him a collection of rare occult books.

‘It’s interesting what you were saying about the supernatural over dinner,’ he told Niall as he showed him Papus’s *Traité élémentaire de science occulte*. He opened a drawer and extracted a folder. ‘Herr Hitler’s horoscope,’ he said.

‘What do you predict?’ Niall asked.

‘Oh, catastrophe! Death by his own hand,’ Janos said casually.

‘Yet you support him?’ his guest asked, incredulous.

‘I fear the Communists much more than I fear the Nazis. Don’t forget that we had a Communist government in Hungary for a short time after the war, under Bela Kun, and many of us expected to lose our estates. And don’t forget something else: the Treaty

of Trianon after the war was extremely harsh on Hungary. I still consider myself to be a Hungarian, though the Burgenland is now part of Austria.' He went to an old wall map. 'This is what we had before the treaty, but we lost two-thirds of our territory, and half of our total population. And there were huge losses of natural resources, such as industry and railways.'

He was giving his Scottish guest a lecture on modern Hungarian history as they stood by the superseded map.

'The French were the most vindictive. They wanted to weaken the former Austria-Hungary, and they also wanted to reward those who had supported them in the war – with large slices of territory. You in the west created out of old Hungary and the Austrian empire the so-called nations of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. You also doubled the size of Romania, a country that had only been in existence for sixty years.

'You punished Germany, taking the Rhineland from them and creating the Polish Corridor. Hitler has now taken the Rhineland back. You don't need to be psychic to see that his next move will be to unite Germany and Austria. I've no time for him as a man, but it's worth our while to back him, to see if he can get us restored to Hungary in some kind of deal with Horthy. Don't look so worried, Niall! The Führer's not going to land in England – unless to take tea with the Honourable Unity Mitford.' He sat at his desk and uncapped a fountain pen. 'I want to cast your horoscope. Give me the details of your life.'

As he ascended the stairs Niall thought about the reasons, more than social, which had brought him to Bernstein. A brilliant modern languages scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, he had been elected to a Fellowship at All Souls. He loved the peace of Henry VI's foundation dedicated to the Faithful Departed who had fallen in the Hundred Years War, sitting at his desk writing during the day and then joining the other Fellows for dinner.

Two years previously he had mentioned to Braithwaite, a

staunch Churchill supporter, and a regular weekend visitor to All Souls as a Fellow, that he had met Unity Mitford in Munich.

'They're a family of traitors,' Braithwaite said as he helped himself to horseradish sauce.

'I think Unity's unbalanced,' Niall observed.

'Unbalanced people can do a great deal of damage,' the Domesday Book scholar warned. 'Look at the suffering Hitler is causing the Jews. When are you going back to Germany?'

'I hope to do be out there at Christmas, to do some research in the library in Berlin.'

'I've got a contact in London who would very much like to have a word with you,' Braithwaite said. 'I'll give you the telephone number at breakfast. Arrange to meet him. His name's Tom Hunter – a clever chap.'

'A scholar?' Niall asked.

'Let's say a keen student of human nature,' Braithwaite replied, lifting his replenished glass to his lips. 'We've got to stop these appeasers before they deliver us to the devil. How many times has Winston warned about letting Hitler re-arm? If we don't stop him now it will be too late in another year.'

The meeting with Hunter took place in his club in the Strand, in a discreet corner after lunch. He was in his early fifties, with acutely intelligent eyes.

'We're very interested in the Mitfords,' he began. 'Clearly they're close to Hitler, Unity especially so. One might say she's obsessed with him. I can't see that it can be sexual: she's a beautiful woman, and he's . . . well, you've seen him yourself.'

'It's not his looks, it's his personality,' Niall said. 'I've heard him speaking, and even I was drawn by his power.'

'He knows how to manipulate the crowd,' Hunter conceded. 'And Unity's at the forefront of the crowd, with her hand up in a salute. Who else have you come across?'

'I'm not sure where this questioning is taking us,' Niall said cautiously.

'If you're asking what I do, I work for Intelligence. It's vital that we know what's going on in Germany, and you're well placed to provide us with information on your visits. Scholarship's a wonderful cover, and besides, you do belong to the same class as the Mitfords and their associates. They'll accept you, when they wouldn't accept others. Who else have you met?'

'Count Janos Almasy from Bernstein. He's a close friend of Unity's, never away from Munich.'

'We know about him. It's not clear if he's Unity's lover – or one of them – because she seems to like SS officers in jackboots bedding her. Almasy will, in any case, support whoever will maintain the style of life he's become accustomed to.'

'I'd be spying on my friends,' Niall objected.

'Would you call these people friends?' Hunter pondered. 'I'd say that your first duty is to your country, Doctor Macdonald. Any information we could get would be very useful. It might even help to avert a war. In fact, we'll even pay for you to take Unity Mitford out to dinner. By her size she looks as if she enjoys her food, particularly the cream cakes Hitler feeds her.'

Niall had gone to Bayreuth for the 1937 Wagner festival as the guests of the von Wredes at Schloss Fantaisie. Unity Mitford was also staying there, having arrived for the Festival on Hitler's private train. Niall asked her to dine with him because he wanted to pump her for information that could be useful to Tom Hunter.

'I can't, Niall. Every evening after the opera we go to Wahnfried to have dinner with the Führer.'

'Perhaps you'll get me an invitation?' Niall said with a smile.

'I'd love to, Niall, darling. But Winifred isn't very friendly. She likes having the Führer to herself.'

'Do you talk about music?' Niall prompted her.

'We talk about many things. Art, architecture – and the music of Wagner, of course. The Führer's a very cultured man, very well read, an inspiring writer. Have you read *Mein Kampf* ?'

'I tried, but I couldn't get through it,' Niall told her truthfully.

'It's a masterpiece. But I must go now or I'll be late for the performance.'

'Before you dash off, Unity – do you think there'll be a war?'

'With Britain, you mean?'

'Yes.'

She looked shocked. 'Heavens, no. The Führer has a great deal of respect and affection for the British people.'

'Including British Jews?'

'Mosley will deal with them!' she shouted over her shoulder as she hurried away. 'Will you come riding with me in the Hortobágy in the autumn?'

But Niall had already decided that this beautiful woman had no sexual appeal for him. The pale face with its fixed expression rather frightened him.