

A WWII THRILLER

A glowing sword with a netted helmet and a pilot's cap. The sword is the central focus, emitting a bright golden light. To its left is a dark pilot's cap with a white winged pilot emblem and a circular insignia. To its right is a military helmet covered in a tan netting, with a red and blue circular emblem on the side. The background is a fiery, orange-hued scene of a battlefield at night, with silhouettes of soldiers on a bridge and burning structures.

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Chapter 1

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The Anschluss

STRICTLY SPEAKING, HE WAS an unimpressive-looking man. Of average height and build, with a pale, pinched face adorned with a small triangular mustache above thin, colorless lips, he would not stand out in a crowd, nor was he likely to attract a feminine eye. His thinning hair was cropped tight around the sides and back, in the style of the day, and his rat-like blue-gray eyes maintained their focus with the help of old-fashioned pince-nez lenses.

What made this man stand out was the way he dressed: a pure black uniform jacket accentuated with silver piping, black riding breeches, and gleaming black jackboots. His peaked cap bore the silver death-head skull of the Schutzstaffel or SS, the security apparatus of the German Nazi Party. The pièce de résistance was the embroidered rank bullion on the collar of his jacket that identified him as the leader of the SS, Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler.

Two guards standing at the entrance to the Hofburg Palace in Vienna were also dressed in black, with twin lightning bolt runes on their collars showing they were members of Himmler's SS. They both snapped to attention as soon as they saw Himmler step from his staff car. As he approached the door to the museum, they swung the doors open as one, then stood back with stiff right arms held in salute. "Heil Hitler!" they said in unison.

Himmler ignored them. Carrying a large, black leather briefcase, he entered the museum and, without asking directions, marched straight to the Imperial Treasury room. There was only one guard there, also SS, and he greeted the reichsführer in the same manner

as the first two. His attention focused on the only display in the room, Himmler returned the salute with a distracted wave of his right hand and a muttered, "Heil Hitler."

Inside the massive glass case stood a bejeweled cross, glistening with every known gem. Beside it sat a bejeweled crown and a golden orb topped with a cross, also encrusted with gems. A sword in a golden sheath lay in front of these, as if guarding the others. These were the Holy Roman Relics, the royal artifacts that for centuries represented the Holy Roman Empire's Christian sovereignty over much of Europe, from its beginning under Charlemagne until its collapse as the Hapsburg dynasty in the 1800s at the hands of Napoleon Bonaparte of France.

As magnificent as these items were, they held little interest for Himmler. The sight of another relic in the case arrested his attention—the head of a spear about a foot and a half long, and four inches at its widest. Embedded in its dark gray blade was an ancient nail, held in place with wire and a sheath of gold. Stamped into the golden jacket were the Latin words *Lancea et clavus Domini*, or Lance and Nail of Our Lord. This, according to the museum's curators, was the Holy Lance, the spear of a Roman centurion named Longinus, who used it to stab Jesus Christ as he hung lifeless from the cross to determine if he were truly dead. Since the days of Constantine, every Holy Roman emperor carried the spear into battle, earning it the more popular name, the Spear of Destiny.

"You are the only guard on duty here," Himmler said, a statement, not a question.

"Yes, Herr Reichsführer," the guard replied.

"Good. Now leave me."

The guard broke his stiff-back stance to look at Himmler. "Herr Reichsführer?"

"You heard me," Himmler said. He sniffed and added, "I can smell tobacco on your uniform. Go indulge in your filthy habit. I need a few minutes to myself to ... contemplate these treasures."

“But Herr Reichsführer,” the guard protested. “My hauptmann ordered me to not allow anyone in the treasure room unescorted.”

“And who does your hauptmann take his orders from?”

“You, mein Herr,” the guard said.

“Exactly,” Himmler said. He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “Now go.”

The guard turned to leave, but Himmler barked, “Stop!”

The guard turned and again snapped to attention.

“You have the key to the display case?”

“Yes, Herr Reichsführer,” the guard said.

Himmler held out his hand. When the guard didn’t respond, he snapped his fingers. “The key.” The guard dug the key from his pocket and placed it in Himmler’s palm. “Now go.”

The guard executed an about face and quick marched out of the room.

Himmler strode up and down in front of the glass case, waiting until he was certain no one else would disturb him. He used the key to unlock the case and withdrew the spear head. Holding it up to the light, he examined its details, ran his finger over the golden Latin words, pressed his finger against the nail embedded in its blade, and gently touched the tip. After all the centuries, it was still sharp. He had hoped it would be.

The reichsführer had made a study of the Holy Lance. He was convinced the story of its power to lead men to fulfill their destinies was true. So convinced he was of its authenticity, he had a replica made of the spear to display in his office at Wewelsburg Castle, the sacred citadel of the SS. Another he had made to present to Hitler. He had told the Führer that when the time came, he would present the True Spear to Hitler.

Himmler also believed the spear still held the blood of Christ on its tip, however little there may still be left of it. And that was the reason he came to Hofburg Palace as soon as the Anschluss, the German invasion and takeover of Austria, was accomplished. He saw no reason to waste the spear and its powers on Hitler. The

Führer held no beliefs in the church and its legends, or in the mysticism Himmler embraced. He, the reichsführer, was far better prepared to employ its powers.

Himmler pressed his left thumb against the spear's point until it pierced the skin. His hand recoiled from the prick. He set the spear down, removed the pince-nez glasses he wore for his nearsightedness, and studied his thumb as a small bubble of blood formed. Carefully placing the spectacles into a pocket, he picked up the Holy Lance again and examined its tip. A small amount of blood smeared the tip, his blood mingling with the blood of Jesus Christ. He looked at his thumb again. Christ's blood mixing with his *inside his veins*.

A curious sensation came over him, a lightheadedness, almost giddiness. He sensed an energy, a power surge inside him. He hadn't expected this. All his life, Himmler felt inadequate. His size, his looks, his poor eyesight, his lack of experience with women. And despite having enlisted in the German Army during the last war, he remained in a reserve unit that never saw action, unlike the Führer, or Göring, or even that scar-faced sybarite Ernst Röhm, head of the Brown Shirts.

But now he sensed a confidence. *He* was the new man of destiny—he felt that now in his heart, felt it in his veins where the blood of Christ flowed with his own. His destiny was now foretold, and he knew he would stand among the other greats who held the spear—Constantine, Charlemagne, and others.

Himmler broke from his revelry and glanced at his pocket watch. It was time to go. He opened his briefcase and removed the twin of the Holy Lance, one of the replicas he had ordered manufactured. He placed it in the case where the True Spear had lain and picked up the real spear. With all the reverence it deserved, Himmler placed the Spear of Destiny into his briefcase and closed it. Then he locked the display case.

With the briefcase gripped tightly, he strode through the museum to the entrance and opened the door. The two outside guards and

the guard from inside the Treasury Room snapped to attention. Himmler glanced at his watch again, then addressed the guards.

“The Führer will be here within the hour to examine the Holy Roman Relics,” he said. “When he is finished, the relics will be packed—carefully packed, mind you—and transported to Germany. Do you understand?”

“Jawohl, Herr Reichsführer,” the three men answered.

“Good,” Himmler said. He handed the display case key back to the inside guard and, sniffing the air, added, “I recommend you men refrain from your use of tobacco. The Führer hates that habit more than I do.”



After the reichsführer left, the third guard returned to his post in the Treasury Room. He paced the room for several minutes, occasionally opening his tunic and flapping its lapels, hoping to reduce the smell of cigarette smoke. Outside, he heard the arrival of several vehicles and realized the Führer’s caravan had arrived.

Quickly buttoning and adjusting his tunic, he took his post next to the display when he noticed a small blotch of red inside the case frame that he was sure wasn’t there before. He unlocked the case and studied the blotch. Blood? He turned at a commotion outside the palace door. *The Fuhrer!* Yanking a handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the blood and locked the case, stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket, and snapped to attention.

He waited, but no one entered the room. Curiosity plagued his mind, and he turned to examine the relics. *Did the reichsführer hurt himself on one of the relics?* He looked at the sword, but he was certain it hadn’t been moved. His eyes went to the spear head and focused on its tip. *Was that a minute drop of blood on its tip?*

Footsteps echoed outside the room. The guard resumed his rigid posture. Doors burst open and Adolf Hitler entered the room.