

SCREECHERS

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Antwerp, 1944

Captain Kosherick led me up the uncarpeted stairs of this narrow, unlit building on Markgravestraat, in the northwest part of the city. Two small children with grubby faces were standing in a doorway on the second landing, a girl and a boy, and Captain Kosherick said to them, "You're going to be okay, you understand? We're going to arrange for somebody to take care of you."

Behind them, in the gloom of her sitting-room, an old woman was sitting in a sagging brocade armchair. Underneath her black lace widow's cap, her hair was white and wild, and her face looked like a shriveled cooking-apple.

"Somebody from the children's services will be calling around later!" Captain Kosherick shouted at her. Then he turned to me and said, "Deaf as a fucking doorpost."

"*Mevrouw!*" I called out., "*Iemand zal binnenkort de kinderen komen halen!*"

The woman flapped her hand dismissively. "*Hoe vroeger hoe beter! Deze familie is verloekt! Niet verbazend dat hij de mensen van de nacht heft gestuurd om het mee te brengen!*"

"What did she say?" asked Captain Kosherick.

"Something about the family being cursed."

"Well, I think she was right on the money about that. Come take a look for yourself."

He led me along the corridor and up another flight of stairs. I could smell boiled cabbage and another smell much stronger and more distinctive: the smell of blood. Although it was mid-October it was unseasonably warm, and the stairwell was alive with glittering green blowflies.

At the top of the stairs there was a much smaller landing, and then a door with two frosted-glass panels in it. The door was half-ajar and even before we opened it I could see a woman's leg lying on the floor with a worn-out brown brogue lying close by.

Captain Kosherick pushed the door wide so that I could take in a full view of the room. It was a one-room apartment, with a large iron-framed bed in one corner, a fraying beige couch and a wooden wheelback chair. There was a small high window over the sink, which had a view of a light gray sky and the dark 13th-century spires of the Vrouwekathedrall. Beside the sink there was a small home-made shelf with a red-and-white packet of tea, a blue pottery flour jar, a glass dish with a tiny square of butter in it, and three potatoes that were already starting to sprout.

A picture of the Virgin Mary hung on the wall beside the shelf. Both of her eyes had been burned out with lighted cigarettes.

I looked down at the young woman lying face-down on the streaky green linoleum. She must have been twenty-seven or twenty-eight, with wavy brown hair which she had obviously tried to color with henna. She was wearing nothing except a reddish wool skirt which had been dragged halfway down her thighs. Her skin was very white and dotted with moles.

There were spots and sprays of blood all around her, and several footprints, some whole and some partial, including some smaller bare footprints which must have been those of her children. But considering what had been done to her, there was remarkably little blood.

“Want me to turn her over for you?” asked Captain Kosherick.

I nodded. I was sweating, and the air was clogged with the brown stench of blood, but I had to make sure.

Captain Kosherick hunkered down beside the young woman and gently rolled her onto her back. She was quite pretty, in a puffy Flemish way, with bright blue eyes. Her breasts were small, with pale nipples. She had been split wide open with some very sharp implement from her breastbone to her navel. Her heart had been forcibly pulled out from under her ribcage and her aorta cut about three inches from her left ventricle. It looked like a pale, saggy hosepipe.

“You seen this kind of thing before?” said Captain Kosherick. “The MPs told me to call you in as soon as they found her.”

I lifted my khaki canvas bag off my shoulder, unbuckled it, and took out my Kodak. I took about fifteen or sixteen pictures from different angles, while Captain Kosherick went out onto the landing for a smoke.

After I had finished taking pictures I searched the young woman's room.

Captain Kosherick came back in again. "What are you looking for, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Oh, you know. Evidence."

He was very young, even though he had a streak of gray hair and a bristly little moustache. But I guess we were all very young in those days, even me.

I lifted up the thin threadbare mat beside the bed. There were signs that one of the floorboards had been lifted, so I went to the sink and took out a knife to pry them up. Underneath, in the floor space, I found a rusty can of cooked ham, two cans of Altmecklenburg sausages, three cans of condensed milk, a box of cocoa powder and a box of powdered eggs, as well as three packs of Jasmatzi cigarettes.

"Quite a hoard," said Captain Kosherick, peering over my shoulder. "All German, too. Where do you suppose she got these from? Fraternizing with the enemy?"

"Something like that."

"So somebody found from the resistance found out and they punished her?"

"That's one possibility."

"Listen...I know this is all supposed to be top secret and like that, but who do you think might have done this?"

I looked down at the young woman lying on the floor. A blowfly was jerkily walking across her slightly-parted lips

"Oh, I know who did it. What I don't know yet is why."

The Night People

I went downstairs again and knocked on the old widow's door. The two children were kneeling on the window-seat looking down at the street below. A ray of sunlight was shining through the boy's ears, so that they glowed scarlet.

The old widow lifted her head so that she could see me through the lower half of her bifocals, and made a kind of silent snarl as she did so.

“Did you see anything?” I asked her, in Flemish.

“No. But I heard it. Bumping, and loud talking, and footsteps. They were Germans.”

“The Germans aren’t here any more. The Germans have been driven back to the other side of the Albert Canal.”

“These were Germans. No question.”

I looked at the children. I guessed that the girl was about six and the boy wasn’t much older than four. In those days, though, European children were much smaller and thinner than American children, after years of rationing.

“Do you think they saw anything?”

“I pray to God that they didn’t. It was three o’clock in the morning and it was very dark.”

“You want a cigarette?” I asked her.

She sniffed and nodded. I shook out a Camel for her, and lit it. She breathed in so deeply that I thought that she was never going to breathe out again. While I waited, I lit a cigarette for myself, too.

“You mentioned the night people,” I told her. *Mensen van de nacht*. I hadn’t told Captain Kosherick about that.

“That’s what they were, weren’t they? You know that. That’s why you’re here.”

I blew out smoke and pointed to the ceiling. “What was her name? Had she been living here long?”

“Ann. Ann De Wouters. She came here last April, I think it was. She was very quiet, and her children were very quiet, too. But I saw her once talking to Leo Coopman and I know they weren’t discussing the price of sausages.”

“Leo Coopman?”

“From the White Brigade.”

The White Brigade were the Belgian resistance. Even now they were helping the British and the Canadians to keep their hold on the Antwerp docks. Antwerp was a weird place in the fall of ’44. The whole city was filled with liberation fever, almost a hysteria, even though the Germans were still occupying many of the northern suburbs. Some

Belgians were even cycling from the Allied part of the city into the German part of the city to go to work, and then cycling back again in the evening.

I gave the old woman my last five cigarettes. “Do you mind if I talk to the children?”

“Do what you like. You can’t make things any worse for them than they already are.”

I went over to the window-seat. The boy was peering down at three Canadian Jeeps in the street below, while the girl was picking the thread from one of the old brown seat-cushions. The boy glanced at me, but said nothing; while the girl didn’t look up at all.

“What’s your name?” I asked the girl. My cigarette-smoke drifted across the window and the boy furiously waved it away.

“Agnes,” the girl told me, in a whisper.

“And your brother?”

“Martin.”

“Mrs Toeput says that Mommy was sick so she’s gone to Hummel,” Martin announced, brightly. The Flemish word for “heaven” is “hemel” so he must have misunderstood what the old woman had told him. The girl looked up at me then, and the appeal in her eyes was almost physically painful. He doesn’t know his mommy’s been killed. Don’t tell him, please.

“Our uncle Pieter lives in Hummel,” she whispered.

I nodded, and turned my head so that I wouldn’t blow smoke in her face.

“Did you see anything?” I asked her.

She shook her head. “It was dark. But they came into the room and pulled Mommy out of bed. I heard her say, ‘please don’t – what’s going to happen to my children?’ Then I heard lots of horrible noises and Mommy was kicking on the floor.

Her eyes filled up with tears. “I was too frightened to help her.”

“It’s good for you that you didn’t try. They would have done the same to you. How many of them were there?”

“I think three.”

Three. That would figure. They always came in threes.

The little girl wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her frayed red cardigan. “I saw something shining. It was like a necklace thing.”

“A necklace?”

“Like a cross only it wasn’t a cross.”

“Those are the *good* men,” interrupted the little boy, pointing down at the Canadians.
“They came and chased all the Germans away.”

“You’re right, *hombre*,” I told him. Then I turned back to the little girl and said, “This cross thing. Do you think you could draw it?”

She thought for a moment and then she nodded. I took a pencil out of my jacket pocket and handed her my notebook. Very carefully, she drew a symbol that looked like a wheel with four spokes. She gave it back to me with a very serious look on her face. “It was shining, like silver.”

I gave her a roll of fruit-flavored Life Savers, and touched the top of her dry, unwashed hair. Not much compensation for losing her mother, but there was nothing else I could offer her. I still think about them, even now, those two little children, and wonder what happened to them. They’d be in their sixties now.

The old widow said, “You see? I was right, wasn’t I? It was the night people.”

I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t allowed to tell anybody what my specific duties were, not even my fellow officers in the 101 Counterintelligence Detachment.

Captain Kosherick came back in. “You done here?” he asked me. “I got two corpsmen downstairs ready to take the body away.”

The little boy frowned at him. You don’t know how glad I was that he couldn’t understand English.

Frank Takes A Drink

Frank was sitting on the cobbles when I came out of the house, his purple tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth.

Frank was a four-year-old black-and-tan bloodhound who had been specially trained for me in Tangipahoa parish, Louisiana, by the mantrailing expert Roger Du Croix. Actually Frank’s saddle spread so far over his body that he was almost entirely black, but Roger had explained to me that he was still officially a black-and-tan.

In Belgium, they called him a “St Hubert hound”, after the monk who had first trained bloodhounds in the 7th century, the patron saint of hunters. Frank’s real name was Pride

of Ponchatoula but I had re-christened him in honor of Frank Sinatra, who happened to be my hero at the time. When I walked along De Keyserlei, with my greatcoat collar turned up, I liked to think that I looked as cool and edgy as Frank Sinatra did.

“How’s it going, Frank?” I asked him. “Hope you’ve been conducting yourself with decorum.”

Frank was a pretty obedient dog but now and again he had a fit of the loonies, which Roger Du Croix said was brought on by him picking up the smell of dead rats.

Corporal Little said, “He’s been fine, sir. I fed him those marrowbones and then he took a dump around the corner.”

“Well, thanks so much for the update,” I said. “Listen -- we’ll be going out tonight, soon as it gets dark.”

Corporal Little looked up at the flat, narrow front of No.5 Markgravestraat and said, “Screechers?”

“No question about it. They split her open like a herring.”

“Holy Christ. Did you find out who she was?”

“Ann De Wouters, aged twenty-eight or thereabouts. I don’t know why they specifically came looking for *her*, but her landlady seemed to think that she might have had some connection to the White Brigade. Could have been a revenge killing, who knows? Maybe they were just thirsty.”

Corporal Little looked around, his eyes narrowed against the bright gray October light. “Think they’ve gotten far?”

“I don’t think so. By the time they finished with her it must have been nearly daylight, and this whole area was heaving with Canucks by oh-four-thirty. My guess is that they’ve gone to ground someplace close by.”

Corporal Little reached down and tugged Frank’s ears. “Hear that, boy? We’re going to go Screecher-hunting!”

Corporal Henry Little was an amiable, wide-shouldered young man with a red crewcut and a face covered in mustard-colored freckles. He had a snub nose and bright blue eyes that looked permanently surprised, although I had never yet known him to be surprised by anything. Even when it was first explained to him what his duties would be, he did nothing but nod and say “okay, sure,” as if hunting vampires through the shattered cities

of France and Belgium was no more unusual than chasing rabbits through the underbrush. Corporal Little's family had bred pedigree tracking dogs in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, which was why the detachment had enlisted him to help me. If Bloodhoundese had been a language, Corporal Little would have been word-perfect. Frank had only to lift up his head and stare at Corporal Little with those mournful, hung-over eyes, and Corporal Little would know exactly what he wanted. "Cookie, Frank?" Frank had a thing for *speculoos*, those ginger-and-spice cookies they bake in Belgium, preferably dipped into Corporal Little's coffee, to make them soft.

We climbed into my Jeep and Corporal Little drove us back through the narrow sewage-smelling streets, jolting over the cobbles until I felt that my teeth were going to shatter. We passed a dead horse lying on the sidewalk. A German shell had landed in the square two days ago and torn open a big triangular flap in its stomach, so a passer-by had killed it with a hammer.

Somewhere off to the north-west, from the direction of the Walcheren peninsula, I could hear artillery-fire, like somebody banging encyclopedias shut.

We turned into Keizerstraat and stopped outside De Witte Lelie Hotel. It was a small, old-style building with a 16th-century façade. The lobby had oak-paneled walls and a brown marble floor and it was milling with officers from the British 11th Armored Division, as well as an argumentative crowd of Belgian politicians, waving their arms and pushing each other and shouting in French. The British officers looked too tired to care. One of them was sleeping in an armchair with his mouth wide open.

Corporal Little and I went up in the rickety elevator to the fourth floor. Frank sat staring up at us and panting.

"Ann De Wouter's children were in the room when they killed her," I said. "Lucky for the boy he didn't wake up, but the girl did." I could see myself in the elevator mirror. I hadn't realized I looked so haggard. My hair was greasy and flopping over my forehead, and the mottled glass made it appear as if I had some kind of skin disease.

"She give you any idea what they looked like?"

"No. Too dark. But she was pretty sure that there were three of them, and she saw that one of them was wearing the wheel."

We walked along the long blue-carpeted corridor until we reached 413. Considering there was a war on, my room was surprisingly sumptuous, with a huge four-poster bed covered in a gold-and-cream bedspread, and gilded armchairs upholstered to match. On the walls hung several somber landscapes of Ghent and Louvain, with clouds and canals. A pair of gray riding-britches hung from the hook on the back of the door, with dangling suspenders still attached. These had belonged to the German officer who had occupied this room only days before we had arrived. Corporal Little unclipped Frank's leash and let him trot into the bathroom to lap water out of the toilet.

I went to the windows and closed them. The maid had opened them every morning since we had arrived here last week, even though there was no heat. I opened a fresh pack of cigarettes, lit one, and blew smoke out of my nose. Then I unfolded my street map of Antwerp and spread it out over the glass-topped table.

"Here's Markgravestraat, where Ann De Wouters was killed, and this is the way the Canadian division was coming in, so it's pretty unlikely that the Screechers would have tried to escape along Martenstraat. I reckon they left the building by the back entrance, which would have taken them out *here*, onto Kipdorp. That means they had only two options. Either turn left, and head north-west toward the Scheldt; or turn right, and make their way across Kipdorpbrug toward the Centraal Station."

Corporal Little studied the map carefully. "I don't reckon they would have headed for the river, sir. Where would they go from there?"

I agreed with him. They couldn't have escaped north because the Germans had blown all the bridges over the Albert Canal. Besides, the Brits were holding the waterfront area and most of the Brits were untrained conscripts -- waiters and bank clerks and greengrocers -- and they were even more trigger-happy than the Poles. They would let loose a wild fusillade of poorly-aimed rifle-fire and then shout "'oo goes there?' afterward.

I circled a five-block area with my pencil. "We'll start in this streets around Kipdorp and work our way eastward along Sant Jacobs Markt."

Corporal Little massaged the back of his prickly neck. "That's going to be one hell of a job, sir, with respect. Think of all them hundreds of cellars they could be lying low in. Think of all of them hundreds of attics, and all of them hundreds of closets and linen-

chests and steamer-trunks. It could easy take us *days* before Frank picks up a sniff of them, and by that time they could be halfway back to wherever they're headed."

"We'll find them, Henry, I promise you. I have a hunch about these particular Screechers."

"With respect, sir, you had a hunch about those Screechers in Rouen; and you had another hunch about those Screechers in Brionne."

"I know. But those Screechers we caught in France, they were like cornered rats, weren't they? They were running and hiding and it took everything we could do to catch up with them."

"Well, sure. But what makes these guys any different?"

"Think about it. They must have been keeping themselves holed up someplace in the city center for the past five weeks. Either that, or they've had the brass *cojones* to make their way back in. They wanted to have their revenge on Ann De Wouters, and they obviously didn't care what chances they took. They were German-speaking, right? But they walked through a city crowded with British and Canadian troops, and they cut a woman open in front of her children, and they stayed there long enough to drink ninety percent of her blood."

Corporal Little looked impressed but still slightly mystified. "So what does this specifically lead you to conclude, sir?"

"Don't you get it, Henry? *They're not scared of us.* They're not frightened to come out in the open. That's why I think that we'll find them. The only trouble is, when we *do* find them, they're not going to go down without one hell of a fight."

Corporal Little gave me a smile of growing understanding. "In that case, sir -- we'd better double the watch on our rear ends, wouldn't you say?"

"Go get the kit, will you?" I told him. Most of the time I couldn't work out if he was a genius or an *idiot savant*.

The Kit

The Kit was contained in a khaki tin box about the size of a briefcase. It was scratched and dented, but then we had been carrying it with us ever since we had landed in Normandy in August, and we had used it five times since then.

Corporal Little opened it up and together we inspected the contents. A large Bible, with a polished cover carved out of ash-wood and a silver crucifix mounted on the front. A large glass flask of holy oil, from St Basil's Romanian Orthodox church in New York. A pair of silver thumbscrews and a pair of silver toescrews. A silver compass, about five inches across, with a base that was filled with the dried petals of wild roses. A thirty-foot whip made of braided silver wire. A surgical saw. A small silver pot filled with black mustard seeds. Two small pots of paint, one white and one black.

I lifted out a roll of greasy chamois leather and unwrapped it. Inside were three iron nails, about eight inches long. They were black and corroded and each had been fashioned by hand. I had no proof that they were genuine, but if the price that the detachment had paid for them was anything to go by, they should have been. These were supposed to be the nails that had been pulled out of Christ's wrists and ankles when he was taken down from the cross.

At the bottom of the tin box there was a circular mirror, made of highly-polished silver, a large pair of dental forceps and a sculptor's mallet. Hunting Screechers was always a combination of science, religion, commonsense and magic, so you needed the apparatus that went with each. You also needed a willingness to believe that a human being can defy gravity.

"Running kind of low on garlic," said Corporal Little, lifting up a bunch of papery-covered cloves. Frank came sniffing around, his pendulous jowls swaying. "See?" said Corporal Little. "Frank knows that we're going out tonight, don't you, boy?"

Frank gave one of those barks that can deafen you in one ear.

Mantrailing

We left the hotel just as the pregnant-looking long-case clock in the lobby chimed eight. Frank was straining so hard on his leash that he sounded like a Cajun squeezebox. It hadn't rained hard, but a fine wet mist had descended over the city, and the cobbles were all slippery and shiny. I could hear heavy bombers somewhere in the distance, but they were very far away. *Drone, drone, drone.* Then that *crumpity-bump-crackle* sound of anti-aircraft fire.

Corporal Little said, "Thirty-six of them, sir...Jesus. Do you know how far this could have spread? Half the city could be Screechers by now."

"I don't want to think about it. Let's just concentrate on picking up the scent from Markgravestraat."

We jolted our way back to Ann De Wouters' apartment building. Somebody had taken the dead horse away. We were flagged down three times on the way by Canadian troops who wanted to check our papers, so it took us almost twenty minutes before we arrived there. "US Counterintelligence?" they asked, half-respectfully and half-disdainfully. Some of them were so young that their cheeks were still pink.

We were admitted to No. 5 by an old man in a saggy beige cardigan with a face the color of liver-sausage. Frank snapped furiously at the old man's worn-out slippers so that he almost had to dance upstairs to get away from him.

"He won't hurt you," I reassured him. "I promise you, he's a friend to everyone."

"I don't have any friends who try to bite my feet," the old man retorted.

"It's not your feet, sir, it's your slippers. He thinks they're dead rats."

We allowed Frank to have a good snuffle around Ann De Wouters' room. We said nothing while he crossed from one side of the linoleum to the other, thrusting his head underneath the bed, and into the curtained-off space where Ann De Wouters had hung her clothes. He spent a long time licking the dried blood that was spattered over the floor. Bloodhounds don't identify scents with their noses, but with their tongues. I was hoping that the Screechers had left plenty of traces of saliva for him to pick up on.

When he was finished, Frank sat up straight and made a whining sound in the back of his throat.

"You ready, Frank?" Corporal Little asked him.

"*Urf,*" said Frank.

We went back down the narrow staircase. There was a light shining underneath Vrouw Toeput's door but I didn't want to disturb her. The old man with the dead rat slippers was nowhere to be seen. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Frank ignored the front door and turned sharp right, heading toward the back of the building. He led us past an alcove crammed with mops and brooms and strong-smelling bleaches, and up to a heavy oak door. I pulled back the bolts and unlocked it, and we stepped out into the fairy-fine mist.

"Told you," I said. "Out the back of the building, and onto Kipdorp."

Frank hurried through a low archway on the opposite side of the yard, where six or seven bicycles were propped up, and then he hurried into the street, his claws clattering softly on the cobbles.

He hesitated for only a moment, and then he turned right, toward Sant Jacobs Markt, and Kipdorpbrug. Every now and then he paused, and looked around, to make sure that we were following him. I seriously believe that he thought we were like two stupid children, and it was his responsibility to take care of us.

Although the sidewalk was wet, the scent of Screechers must have been very strong, because Frank went straight along the north side of Kipdorp and there was none of his usual circling and sniffing and whuffling around.

"I think we've got these jokers, sir," said Corporal Little, triumphantly.

But when we reached Kipdorpbrug, Frank galloped straight up to the sandstone wall of the Maritime Bank and stopped. He looked upward, and barked, and then he turned back to us, whining in frustration.

We looked upward, too. The bank building was 17th century, five stories high, with a flat Flemish-style façade. Apart from the window-ledges, there wasn't a single hand-hold between the sidewalk and the roof.

I looked at Corporal Little and Corporal Little looked at me. We were both deeply impressed, and frightened, too. "They went straight up," I said. "At least one of them, anyhow."

We had known Screechers to run up twenty-foot walls, and jump from one sloping roof to another. We had seen one run across a ceiling. But we had never known one to climb up a sheer hundred-foot building.

Frank kept returning to the wall and jumping up and barking. “Good boy,” Corporal Little told him, pulling his ears. “Good boy, it’s not your fault you can’t climb walls.” It was difficult to know what to do next. We could have located the manager of the Maritime Bank and have him open up for us, so that we could follow the Screecher’s trail across the roof, but that could take us hours, and in any case the Screecher had probably climbed down the front of some other building and come back down to ground-level.

“My guess is, this was a dead one,” I said.

Corporal Little nodded. “He must of left a real strong trail behind him, the way Frank’s getting himself so excited. And if he could shimmy straight up a wall like that...”

“It’s worth checking, though. Maybe he only climbed up part of the way, and then jumped back down again.”

I hunkered down and opened up the Kit. I took out the compass and opened up its silver filigree lid. The needle immediately swung around and pointed to the front of the bank building. When I held it up vertically, it pointed directly upward. There was no question about it. Our Screecher had gone up all the way up to the roof, with no deviation.

“Like a rat up a drainpipe,” said Corporal Little, and Frank let out another expectant bark. I swear that dog would have talked if he’d had the larynx for it.

As I was fitting the compass back into the Kit, however, the needle started to creep back the other way, in the direction of Kipdorpbrug. It wasn’t an urgent swing, but the needle was trembling a little, the way it always did when Screechers weren’t too far away.

“Look at this,” I told Corporal Little, shining my flashlight on it. “I don’t think all three of them went up the wall. Maybe only one of them. I’m definitely picking up another trail in this direction.”

Corporal Little took hold of Frank’s collar and tugged him away from the bank. “Hear that boy? More Screechers! Go get ‘em, boy!”

In The Elephant House

Frank was much less certain about this secondary trail, and he kept stopping and snorting and going back on himself. Now and then he got distracted and started to investigate a lamp-post, and Corporal Little had to drag him away.

I kept the compass in my hand, and even though the needle was just as hesitant as Frank, and kept swinging from side to side, there was no question that it was pointing in the general direction of Centraal Station, and the Antwerpse Zoo.

“Maybe they thought they could get away by train,” Corporal Little suggested.

I shook my head. “There’s no civilian trains running. And even if they managed to ride a military train, where would they go? Mechelen? Brussels? There’d be a very strong risk of them being caught, if they tried to go south.”

All of a sudden, as he snuffled his way across the wide cobbled expanse of Koning Astridplein, Frank must have picked up a much more definite scent, because he started to run ahead of us with a curious lope, his head down and his ears swinging. By the time he had reached the steps of the Centraal Station, he was galloping so fast that Corporal Little and I could hardly keep up with him.

The Centraal Station was an extraordinary building, like a richly-decorated Renaissance palace, with a high glass dome which covered the platforms, and six elaborate spires. The square in front of it was jam-packed with Canadian and British trucks, as trainloads of troops were unloaded from Brussels. I can remember that night as if it were a dream: trying to follow Frank through all of those jostling soldiers and diesel-smelling trucks, all the lights and the shouting and the revving of engines. Some of the soldiers whistled at Frank and clapped their hands and called out, “Here, boy!” but Frank was mantrailing and he wasn’t going to be diverted by anything, not even lonely young Canadian soldiers who were missing their dogs from home.

He didn’t run into the station. Instead, he skirted around it, and headed toward the entrance to the Antwerpse Zoo. We left the noise of the Centraal Station behind us, and followed Frank to the Zoo’s main entrance. It was much quieter here, although I could still hear the distant grumbling of artillery fire. The Zoo was in darkness, but Frank ran straight through the turnstiles and disappeared.

“Frank!” shouted Corporal Little. “Frank, you’d better come to heel, boy, or else there’s no more marrow-bones for you!”

We heard him bark, but he didn't come back. Then we heard him bark again, even further away.

"He's found one, for sure," said Corporal Little.

"We'd better get after him, then."

I opened the stud of my holster and tugged out my Colt .45 automatic. This was only the third time since we had landed in Normandy that I had taken it out, and I had never fired it at anyone. It was loaded with bullets that had allegedly been cast from the pewter goblets from which the Disciples had drunk during the Last Supper, so it wasn't the kind of weapon that you would fire indiscriminately. But the Zoo grounds were impenetrably black and very extensive -- nearly twenty-five acres of parkland and trees and animal houses, and if there were Screechers here I didn't want to be caught by surprise.

Corporal Little and I climbed awkwardly over the turnstiles and made our way along the path to the mock-Egyptian square where the elephant-house stood. Our flashlights made shadows jump across the buildings like hopping hunchbacks, and a couple of times I was tempted to fire.

"*Frank!*" called Corporal Little, in a hoarse stage-whisper. "*Frank – where the hell are you, you disobedient mutt?*"

We heard him bark again, and this time his bark echoed, like somebody shouting in a swimming-pool.

"He's in there," said Corporal Little, shining his flashlight on the elephant-house.

There were no elephants in there, of course. When the Germans had first entered Antwerp, the zoo staff had shot all of the animals – elephants, tigers, gorillas, giraffes – in case they broke out of their cages and escaped. Apart from that, there was little enough food for the human population, let alone animals.

We entered the elephant-house cautiously, with our weapons raised. It was like walking into Tutankhanum's tomb. The columns were gilded and decorated with acanthus leaves, and Egyptian hieroglyphs had been painted all over the walls. It was also dark and smelly and the tiled floor was gritty and wet, so that our boots made a scrunching noise.

"Frank?" called Corporal Little.

Frank turned around, and we saw his yellow eyes reflected in our flashlights, like some kind of hound from hell.

“*There,*” said Corporal Little.

Cowering in the corner, one hand clinging onto the bars of an elephant pen, the other hand raised to shield his face from my flashlight, sat a Screecher. He was tall and emaciated, with thinning brown hair, and a pallid, bony face. He was wearing a dirty gray overcoat with a deluge of brown stains down the front of it, and a cheap brown business-suit, and his shoes had holes in the soles. Most people would have passed him on the street without a second glance, but Corporal Little and I had seen enough Screechers to recognize him immediately for what he was. It was the way he couldn’t look directly at the light, and the way that his eyeballs kept on darting from side to side, like cockroaches. He looked anxious and scheming, rather than terrified. Like most of the Screechers we’d encountered, he obviously believed that humans couldn’t kill him, no matter what we did to him, but he did know that we could hurt him. What he was looking for with his shifty little eyes was a way to escape.

“Well, well,” I said, walking right up to him. I sniffed, and I could smell the unmistakable odor of rotting poultry and dried dill. “Where are your friends, then?”

He said nothing, so I holstered my .45, knelt down on the floor, and opened up the Kit. I took out the shiny silver mirror and held it up at an angle so that I could see his face in it. Contrary to what you’ve seen in the movies or read about in *Dracula*, Screechers are clearly visible in mirrors. The only difference is that pure silver doesn’t reflect evil, so the mirror showed me the Screecher as he used to be, before he was infected.

Sometimes, of course, you can make a mistake, and a smelly, homely-looking character that you suspected of being a Screecher looks just as homely in the mirror. In that case you apologize and let him go on his way without banging nails into his eyes. But what I saw in the mirror that night at the Antwerpse Zoo was a good-looking young man in his mid-thirties with wide-apart eyes and a heavy jaw. He looked German, or Austrian, or maybe Swiss.

“*Wo sind deinen Freunden?*” I repeated, waving my flashlight from side to side to dazzle him. “If you tell me where your friends are, I might be able to save your life. If you don’t, then I won’t have any choice. I’ll have to kill you, here and now.”

The Screecher kept his hands held up in front of his face, and didn’t answer me. Frank barked at him, but even Frank was sensible enough not to go too close. The Screecher

may have looked like a down-and-out, but I knew from experience that he was quite capable of ripping Frank's head off with his bare hands.

"I'm giving you one last chance," I said, in German. I took out my pistol again, and pointed it directly at his heart. "We can save you...give you back the life you used to have before. Think of it, your family, your sweetheart. All you have to do is tell us where your friends are."

I was lying, of course. I didn't know if it was possible to return a Screecher to normality, even if we were to give him a massive blood transfusion. We had never tried. Every Screecher by his very nature had committed mass murder, so we had never had much incentive.

"Okay, then," I told him. I cocked my pistol and gripped it with both hands. Even if I hit him directly in the heart, it wouldn't kill him, but it would stop him long enough for us to put the thumbscrews on him, and prevent him from escaping.

I was just about to fire when the Screecher suddenly performed a backward somersault. Then he performed another, and another, right up the bars of the elephant cage, until he reached the ceiling, over thirty feet above our heads.

I fired two deafening shots, but the ceiling was vaulted and I was terrified of ricochets. The Screecher crawled quickly across it, clambering over the vaulting like a huge brown spider, heading for the entrance. Frank started barking again, and Corporal Little took out his pistol, too, but I shouted at him, "*No!*"

As the Screecher scuttled upside-down across the ceiling, I took the silver-wire whip out of the Kit and flicked it so that it unraveled. The whip was heavy and springy and jumped around with a tensile life of its own. I swung it back and lashed out with it, catching the Screecher just as he reached the architrave around the door. There was a small barbed grappling-hook on the end of the whip, and it snatched at his coat. I yanked the whip hard, but his coat tore and the hook came free.

Frank was hurling himself up and down, barking insanely. Corporal Little maneuvered himself until he was right beneath the doorway, his pistol raised. I lashed out again, and this time the grappling-hook caught the Screecher in the back of the head, burying itself in his scalp. He cried out, "*eh!*" in pain, and reached around with one hand, trying to pull

the hook loose. It was then that I gave another yank, and he lost his grip on the ceiling and slammed on his back onto the floor.

Immediately, while the Screecher was still concussed, Corporal Little and I seized his arms and wrenched off his overcoat. We pulled off his coat, his shirt, and his pants. I hated this part of the job. Live Screechers always stank of decay, like that chicken you should have cooked the day before yesterday, and their skin had a chilly greasiness about it which took carbolic soap and very hot water to wash off. Like all Screechers, this one was dead white, with a slightly bruised look across his abdomen and his inner thighs, the tell-tale sign of internal putrefaction.

Even before we had finished stripping him, he started to come to. His head lolled from side to side, and he coughed, and said something that sounded like German, although I couldn't understand what it was. Then he twisted his back, and tried to flap at Corporal Little with his right arm.

Without hesitation, I took the thumbscrews out of the Kit and fastened them tightly to his thumbs, so that his hands were forcibly held up in front of his bony chest. Then I pinioned his big toes together with the toescrews.

In English, he said, "What – what are you doing? *What are you doing?* I will kill you!"

"I gave you an eighteen-karat golden opportunity, didn't I?" I retorted. "All you had to do was tell us where your friends are hiding."

"Go to hell. My friends will hunt you down and they will cut you open like pigs!"

"Oink! Oink!" Corporal Little taunted him.

Between us, we dragged him across to one of the Egyptian-style pillars. He was wriggling and struggling and trying to bite us, and he was unnaturally strong, considering how wasted he looked. It took a whole lot of grunting and shoving to press him up against the pillar, but while Corporal Little held him in position, I wound the whip around him six or seven times and made it fast. The silver wire cut into his skin as if it were candle-wax.

"All right, then," I panted, "I'm going to ask you again. Where are your friends hiding?"

"You think that I will tell you anything?" he said, speaking in German again. He spat at me, although I was too far away, and the thick saliva ended up swinging from his chin.

“Listen,” I warned him, “I don’t want to hurt you, fellow, but if you won’t cooperate...”

“Go to hell.”

I went over to the Kit and took out the dental forceps. Then I came straight back to the Screecher and gripped his nose tightly in my left hand, so that he couldn’t breathe. He tried to waggle his head from side to side but I held him fast. “Mmmmmhfff!” he protested, trying to keep his mouth closed. “*Mmmmmhfff!*”

But he couldn’t keep his lips together for longer than a minute-and-a-half. When he opened them, gasping for breath, I immediately forced my thumb under his upper lip. Then I gripped his left front incisor with the dental forceps, and wrenched it, hard. His gum made a sharp cracking noise, and welled up with blood, but the tooth was reluctant to come out. I had to jerk the forceps backward and forward three or four more times before I managed to extract it altogether. Immediately I gripped his right front incisor, and started to tug that, too.

“*Aaaaggghhhh!*” he choked, as I pulled the tooth out by its roots. Without hesitating, I moved the forceps across to his canines.

“You want me to stop?” I asked him.

He said nothing, but coughed, so that a fine spray of blood covered his chest.

“Okay...maybe you need something more persuasive. What do you think, corporal, something more persuasive?”

“Sounds good to me. Think of all the innocent people he must of killed.”

“That’s right. Like Ann De Wouters. Now, why did you and your friends want to murder Ann De Wouters?”

“I told you to go to hell,” the Screecher spluttered.

“Well, yes, you did. But you and I have to talk first, and you have to tell me what I need to know.”

“You can’t kill me.”

“*What?* Is that what they told you?”

“You can hurt me as much as you like but you can never kill me. When you have been lying in the cemetery for a hundred years, I will still be alive to piss on your grave.”

“Sorry, pal,” I told him. “I hate to be the one to break this to you, but somebody’s been shooting you a line. Not only can I kill you, but I can kill you in such a way that you will wish you had never been born.”

The Screecher spat out more blood. “You’re lying.”

“I’ll prove it to you. That’s unless you tell me where your friends are.”

The Screecher struggled against the silver wire, but he succeeded only in cutting himself, so that blood ran down his skinny white thighs. When I think back on it now, I sometimes find it hard to believe that I could have treated anybody with such cruelty, even a Screecher. But then I remember all the times we broke into houses in France and Belgium and the Netherlands, and found heaps of men, women and children, massacred so that the Screechers could feed on them. When I remember that – the smell and the flies and the tangles of pitiful bodies -- what *I* was doing, by comparison, seems almost restrained.

I took the bottle of holy oil from the Kit, unstopped it, and held it up in front of the Screecher’s face. “With this oil, I thee anoint,” I told him.

“You think that scares me, you shitbag?”

“No, I don’t. In fact I don’t think your or your friends are scared of anything, which makes you very dangerous. And because you’re so dangerous, that makes me all the more determined to kill you.”

I poured about a tablespoonful of oil over the Screecher’s head, so that it ran down his face and dripped from the end of his nose. He shuddered, and took a deep snorting breath. To him, in his state of utter unholiness, consecrated oil would have felt scalding.

I took hold of his oily hair and twisted it up into a point, like the wick of a candle. Then Corporal Little stepped forward, and handed me his Zippo.

“Last chance,” I said, flipping back the lid. “You could save yourself a whole lot of pain here, believe me.”

The Screecher said nothing, so I snapped the lighter into flame. The Screecher stared at me with such venomous hatred that I wished that I had blindfolded him.

“I’m going to count to three,” I told him. “Then you’re going to burn like a church candle.”

“I’ll do the counting for you,” he said. “*Eins – zwei – drei* -- now do whatever you have to do!”

I lit his hair, and immediately the whole of his scalp caught fire. His hair shriveled and his skin blistered and even his ears were alight. He managed to bear it for nearly five seconds without moving and without crying out, and he even managed to keep his eyes open. But then the oil on his face burst into flame and he closed his eyes tight shut and screamed. I had never heard a man scream like that before. It sounded just like a French woman in Normandy whose legs had been crushed by a Sherman tank. Three soldiers had pulled her out but her legs had stayed where they were.

The Screecher tossed his head wildly from side to side, which only had the effect of fanning the flames and making them burn more fiercely. He screamed and screamed for nearly half a minute but then he stopped screaming, and let his head fall back against the pillar. The flames died down and he was left smoldering, his whole head blackened and raw, his lips enormously swollen and his nostrils clogged with blood.

I used the Zippo to light a cigarette. I waited for a while, smoking, and then the Screecher slowly opened his eyes.

“Now that *smarts*, doesn’t it?” I asked him.

“You can’t kill me,” he said, his voice thick with pain.

“Oh yes I can. Do you want to know how?”

“You can’t kill me, whatever you do.”

I reached into the Kit and produced the nails. “You see these? Do you know what these are? These are the same nails that the Romans used to nail Christ to the cross. And do you know what I’m going to do with them? I’m going to hammer them into your eyes, and right into your brain. That won’t kill you, I admit, but it will have the effect of paralyzing you, so that you won’t be able to stop me from doing what I’m going to do next.

“I’m going to cut your head off with this saw, and I’m going to take your body to the Calvary garden of Sint Paulus Kirk, and I’m going to bury it there, because I have special dispensation from the Dominican monks to do that. Then I’m going to take your head and I’m going to boil it until the flesh falls off and your brains turn into broth. And that is how I kill people like you.”

“Whatever you do, we will have our revenge on you. I can promise you that.”

I smoked my cigarette right down to the very last eighth of an inch, and then I stepped on it. “Corporal Little,” I said, “how about passing me that holy oil again?”

Corporal Little did what I asked him. I took the stopper off the oil and said, “This is what we call burning the candle at both ends. Just our little joke.”

With that, I poured oil between his legs, all over his scraggy pubic hair and his penis, and relit Corporal Little’s Zippo.

The Screecher stared at the flame out of his swollen, half-closed eyes.

“I want you to know that I am doing this simply for the pleasure of it,” I told him. “I don’t care whether you tell me where your friends are, or not. I’m going to kill you whatever. I just want to hurt you as much as I possibly can before I do.”

Corporal Little was holding his collar but Frank made a strangled whining noise and scabbled his claws on the floor, as if he wanted to get away. I don’t know if that was what convinced the Screecher that I was serious, but he suddenly said, “Seventy-one Schilderstraat, on the corner of Karel Rogierstraat. They’re hiding in the attic.”

“How many of them?”

“Two. A German called Pelz and a Romanian called Duca.”

“Is Duca the dead one?”

“Dead? What do you mean? He’s not dead.”

“What I’m asking you is – is Duca *strigoi vii* or *strigoi mort*?”

“I still don’t understand what you mean.”

Corporal Little said, “Sounds like this guy doesn’t even know half of what he was getting himself into.”

“Oh, I think he has the general idea. It’s just that they didn’t fill him in on all the gory details. They promised you that you’d live for ever, didn’t they? That’s what they said. They said you were going to be a hero, and turn back the tide of the war. I’ll bet they offered to pay your family a fortune, too. Take care of your folks and your girlfriend.”

“What are you going to do now?” asked the Screecher.

“What do you think I’m going to do now?”

“You said you could give me back the life I had before.”

“Did I? Did I really say that?”

“You promised me that if I told you where my friends were, you would let me go.”

“Well, that was very stupid of me, wouldn’t you say? Because I have no way of checking if your friends are really where you say they are, or not.”

“I swear that I am telling you the truth. Seventy-one Schilderstraat. Fourth floor, in the attic.”

“What’s your name?” I asked him.

“Ernst...Ernst...*Hauser*,” he said, almost as if he could barely remember.

“Where do you come from?”

“Drensteinfurt. It’s a village near Münster, in Westfalen. Why?”

“After the war, I want to write your family, and tell them where you died. I think they deserve that much. Not *how* you died, of course. They wouldn’t want to know that. But where.”

“You’re really going to kill me, aren’t you?”

I nodded. “It’s what I do, Ernst. It’s what I came here for.”

Corporal Little handed me the mallet and one of the nails. I positioned the nail so that the point was only a half-inch away from the Screecher’s eyeball.

“I can’t tell you that I regret doing this,” I told him. “The plain truth is that I don’t.”

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