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# THE SECRET OF BERTRAND DE SAINT GENIÈS



## The Fortress of the Occult

The train on its way out of the capital rattled along the tracks, accompanying Heinrich and Erwin towards a future full of unknowns.

On the side scrolled the images of the houses in the residential quarters, innocent places, where real history was being made, the kind you don't read in books, the hard life of humble families, made even more difficult by the wartime economy, but who, like the government offices, without distinction or guilt, would soon suffer the scourge of wartime devastation.

All this so intrigued the two friends that they observed each other in silence, words would be useless, their thoughts coincided.

Even the occasional travellers stopping in the compartment were of few words, all locked in sullen. The ascent of a young lady with lively twins, dressed like little soldiers, made the rest of the journey more pleasant, so much so that Heinrich started playing with them under the watchful eye of his mother.

The train proceeded inexorably, passing through green regions partially covered in snow, where the panorama offered images of villages nestled during orderly countryside.

The rural environment recalled visions of the country of her birth. There, as if by magic, it seemed that time had stood still, sparing the insults of war, and this was beneficial to the mood of the two travelling Germans.

The arrival was announced by a man in uniform, with a martial air he scanned the destination.

As soon as they stepped off the train, they were greeted by a violent gust of wind mixed with rain and snow.

They turned in both directions of the tracks and noticed the approach of a soldier and two SS officers, all armed.

Preceded by an impeccable Nazi salute, the older of the two stepped forward "Major Von Schuster?"

"Yes!"

"We have orders to escort you to Wewelsburg Castle."

Heinrich shifted his gaze to the two suitcases, so that the diligent soldier, having slung the machine gun he carried over his shoulder on his back, picked them up, lining up behind them all, then the troop walked towards the only car parked in the square in front of the station.

The vehemence of the snow flurry had whitened their coats, covering their insignia and rank, levelling the roles, making them look more like ghosts than martial warriors.

Heinrich gave himself a quick brush over his shoulders, took his cap in hand and went inside, settling himself in a corner so that Erwin could sit close, because even physical contact with a Waffen-SS uniform would have annoyed him.

After stowing the suitcases in the trunk, the soldier took control of the car. The two officers, having summarily wiped off the snow that had entered every crevice of their uniforms, silently settled themselves inside the car.

The car drove off determinedly towards the manor house, jolting at times, given the state of the road.

The spring snow, wet and heavy, had whitened everything, but the vehicle proceeded roaring and fast, heedless of the slippery underlay, it almost seemed as if the car was biting the road, impatient to reach its destination.

Heinrich looked out of the fogged-up window; the bystanders did not interest him, except Erwin, but the presence of the three soldiers prevented any somewhat intimate conversation.

On either side of the road were majestic trees, the last witnesses to an ancient forest.

From time to time he would catch his friend's eye, a little intrigued, a little worried, probably with good reason, an urgent summons from Himmler could only be a source of future trouble.

Heinrich had no sense of how much time had passed, he had relaxed with the torpor created inside the vehicle, but the jolts of the car woke him abruptly. A quick glance ahead allowed him to catch a glimpse of the manor house, Wewelsburg, in the distance.

As they approached, the castle manifested all its grim grandeur, so that a growing lump in his throat seized him.

The fortress loomed high above the surrounding forests.

Its triangular shape, so atypical, with the north tower standing out from the other two, seemed so unnatural there that it looked as if a creature had come out of the underworld, and that up there, motionless, was scrutinising it.

The car slowed down to cautiously cross the bridge over the river Alme, still partially covered in snow. Heinrich shifted his gaze to the slow-flowing water, then the decisive roar of the engine, which effortlessly tackled the ascent of the castle, made him turn his attention back to the manor house.

He was not the type to be influenced, but Himmler, with that body of fanatics, caught up in unbridled esotericism, in a confused mixture of myths and legends, assumed the role of a damned figure in his imagination.

From what the chatter in the palaces of power reported, the north tower was the centrepiece of the castle, the sacred place that hosted the mysterious rituals celebrated by Himmler.

Despite the inclement weather, everything around the castle looked like a building site in full ferment, but that energy, a mixture of chaos and elevation, typical of human work did not shine through, a sign that, deep down, nothing good was being built with that work.

There were many workers, probably Himmler was in a hurry to complete the renovation of the manor.

He walked past some of them, all dressed in light rags, now soaked with snow, and shuddered at the thought that those miserable clothes would certainly not protect and warm those bodies.

One of them turned towards the passing car and looked up, so for a moment he met Heinrich's gaze.

The man, thin and emaciated, did not look like a worker, but like a prisoner forced to do hard labour, "He's probably a Jew," he deduced, accompanying the thought with a movement of sadness.

It was said that in Heinrich Himmler's imagination, that fortress was the Camelot of the SS, with himself at the head, in the role of a modern Arthur.

He would have liked to shout his thoughts loudly, so much so that he would have stunned the three SS men in the car, but such an action would have resulted in his arrest, and being a Von Schuster would not have been enough to avoid much worse trouble, the outburst would have been interpreted as an attack on the established order.

Even the subsequent assessment remained confined to his thoughts: 'A country of great culture like Germany does not deserve to have a bunch of inveterate politicians at its head'.

At the entrance to the castle, a guard approached the car, ducking down to peer inside and check the occupants; recognising the officers, he moved to the side to let the vehicle pass, not before professing the usual Nazi salute.

Inside the courtyard the flurry of snow seemed to subside, as if the forces of nature had bowed before that earthly power.

The two guests were immediately accommodated in adjoining rooms.

Heinrich's room was spacious, neat, the bed perfect, the sheets neat and lined up with millimetric precision, even the stove, lit in good time, reverberated warmth throughout the room, but the feeling he felt was not that of being in a cosy place.

He threw himself onto the bed still dressed and fell asleep instantly, exhausted. The journey had taken its toll on him.

The decisive knock on the door brought him back to a waking state.

Despite the still wintry weather, he was all sweaty. The light sleep, plagued by nightmares, and the persistent knocking at the door had induced a rude awakening.

Still reeling, he staggered towards the annoying noise that would not stop.

He buttoned up his uniform, then opened the door to find himself confronted by an SS officer.

"SS-Reichführer Heinrich Himmler is waiting for you in the *Obergruppenführersaal*.<sup>5</sup>»

Heinrich silently stepped back until he stood in front of the mirror, there he adjusted his uniform and ruffled hair, just to look presentable.

The officer, on the other hand, waited impassively in the doorway.

As soon as they left the room, and without another word, the SS walked briskly down an interminable corridor, Heinrich behind, a few metres behind.

He felt a chill, the cold of the hall contrasted with the warmth of the room.

Their gait was punctuated by the dry sound of boots marking their steps on the polished marble floor.

Heinrich looked at the ceilings and walls, some stained with damp, a sign that the renovation work on the manor was far from complete.

They crossed the length of the castle to arrive in front of a hall, there two-armed SS men barred the way.

The three of them stiffened in greeting, and after they had consummated the useless ritual, they opened the doors and stepped to the side.

"The *Obergruppenführersaal*!" commented Heinrich to himself.

Until that moment he had thought it was one of the usual stories that hovered around Himmler's followers, now those tales were confirmed, that hall really existed.

From the entrance he could glimpse a uniformed figure standing against the light in front of a window.

"Come in, Professor Von Schuster," he uttered without turning around.

That tiny, insignificant looking being was the most powerful man in the Reich, after Adolf Hitler.

Heinrich entered the hall, Himmler instead stood still with his hands clasped behind his back watching the view beyond the castle.

He looked around, on the marble floor in the centre of the great hall stood a drawing, "The *Schwarze Sonne*"<sup>6</sup>.

"Then what is told about this fortress is true!" he considered.

The scholar looked around the rest of the room and saw a large round table with twelve chairs around it, while coats of arms stood along all the walls.

He was seized with disquiet, sensing the strong esoteric symbolism of that room.

In the meantime, the hierarch had turned around and looked straight into his eyes.

If she had met him on a tram, dressed in bourgeois clothes, she would have mistaken him for a common bank accountant, but instead he was Heinrich Himmler.

The build, the anonymous features of his face, the straight hair, the light frames of his glasses and the barely noticeable moustache, certainly did not make him resemble a Templar or the Teutonic knights to whom he himself referred. Only the gaze, from those icy eyes shone authority, but Heinrich tried to convince himself that this feeling stemmed only from the aura the Reich 's number two had skilfully built around him.

Himmler stood in profile at the window, leaving part of the view to Heinrich's view, then stretched out his hand to point to a spot in the woods surrounding the manor.

With his gaze lost beyond the horizon, he asked "Professor, do you know why I chose this very castle as the location for my Schutzstaffeln?"

Taken aback, the archaeologist tried to formulate a generic answer, "This is the heart of Germany!"

"Yes, Von Schuster, this is the heart of Germany, nearby lies Externsteine, the cradle of an ancient and refined civilisation that has now disappeared."

After a pause, Himmler fiercely resumed his speech, raising the tone of his voice "In front of us is the Teutoburg Forest, here he was stopped the Roman empire!"<sup>7</sup>»

Suddenly the hierarch turned sharply towards his interlocutor, staring at him again and increasing the intensity of his expression "At the sight of our ancestors the Roman centurions were seized with terror!"

Himmler stiffened to continue even more emphatically "Terror..." he stated looking out "Our enemies, at the sight of the Waffen-SS, must feel the same dismay as the Roman legionaries!"

"Arminius had no mercy on the enemy, and neither will we, the whole world will kneel before the might of the Third Reich!" The hierarch finished with conviction.

Heinrich became more and more distraught and turned his thoughts back to his studies of the battle. "If the ferocity of the Cherusian King were to be repeated, Europe would be turned into a huge slaughterhouse," he thought, a shiver running down his spine.

"Von Schuster, do you now understand why I chose this sacred place? A new civilisation will be born here!"

"This is mad!" considered the archaeologist.

Himmler, abruptly changed his tone, turning to Heinrich obsequiously "Have they placed you in suitable accommodation professor?"

"Yes, yes. The rooms are comfortable," he hastened to reply, though still upset.

"Well, you obviously can't imagine the reason I had you come here."

"No, Standartenführer Gottling only hinted at the usefulness of my professional expertise."

"Indeed, you, Professor, are the Reich's most distinguished archaeologist, and the greatest expert on the history of the Roman Empire."

After a short pause he continued vehemently.

"You have no equal in the world, Von Schuster!"

"Your Excellency, I thank you for the praise, but perhaps more merit is being attributed to me than I really possess."

"Come now, don't be modest, I expect great things from you!"

Himmler moved confidently towards the large table.



In the centre was resting an object, he took it and turned it over in his hands, then turned to Heinrich, handing it to him.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

Heinrich looked at it carefully, with his fingers he gently followed the shape of the object, recognised it and said confidently "It is the spear of Longinus!<sup>8</sup>»

«Ho fatto bene a riporre fiducia in lei, l'ha subito riconosciuta.»

"But... shouldn't it be in the Schatzkammer of the Hofburg in Vienna?"

"There it was my men picked it up and brought it here!"

Himmler reached out his hand to take the relic back, so Heinrich, after one last look, returned it.

"You see professor, this spear has been carried into battle by the greatest commanders in history."

"Yes, as far as I know it was used by Constantine the Great against Maxentius, Flavius Aetius against Attila, the emperor Theodosius, Charles Martel when he defeated the Arabs at Poitiers, and then Charlemagne, Frederick Barbarossa, and finally ended up in the hands of the Habsburgs," the scholar confirmed.

"You are well informed Von Schuster!" affirmed the hierarch, but suddenly his tone of voice changed.

"But this is a fake!" he shouted, then brandished the spear, hurling it into the middle of the room. The object, touching the marble floor, broke into three pieces.

"What, a fake?" asked the archaeologist puzzled.

"Yes, a fake, a copy!"

"The Sacred Spear, the real one, made invincible all the leaders who carried it into battle, we did, but we were defeated, therefore this is just a vulgar copy."

Himmler, heedless of the scattered pieces on the floor, headed back to the window looking out, as if to receive inspiration, finally resuming the word "We, and by we I mean the Führer and I, are firmly convinced that the Spear of Longinus really exists, and that its powers are immense, and whoever possesses it will rule the world!" he finished, turning sharply towards Heinrich.

The small, grey-haired man's eyes had become two blazing slits and were scrutinising him, trying to grasp his emotions and thoughts.

That gaze was piercing him, at that moment Heinrich felt completely naked, so he tried to conceal the sensations by blocking the muscles of his face.

Himmler spoke again "What do you think Professor?"

He did not know what to answer, but he understood that his interview and relationship with the hierarch would be conditioned by the answer he gave at that moment.

He took a few seconds to reflect, then replied, trying to conceal the disquiet that had now completely enveloped him "The history of this artefact is quite well documented, especially the changes of hand that come down to the present day. If I remember correctly, there were no long periods or eras in which it was not known who owned the Spear of Longinus."

However, there is nothing to stop us from thinking that the original was kept hidden precisely because of the powers vested in it, replaced publicly with a perfectly identical copy, and then used as needed."

"Bravo! That's exactly what we think happened too!" confirmed Himmler in a solemn tone.

Approaching the archaeologist, he changed his tone again, this time assuming a friendly air.

"And here we come to the reason for your coming to Wewelsburg."

He dropped the echo of the words to resume immediately, "Professor, you are now commissioned to recover the Spear of Longinus."

Heinrich, astonished, remained silent, but Himmler pressed him again "You will surely understand that the finding of the relic will determine the course of history, decreeing the victory and dominance of the Third Reich over the entire world."

Heinrich, everything he would have expected from that interview, except such an assignment, but his interlocutor continued to stare him in the eye, waiting for his assent.

He could not refuse the assignment, it was too dangerous, Himmler would have taken it as an insult, with all the consequences that would follow.

After all, he thought that indulging the utopias of that visionary would lead him to travel halfway across Europe, to consult the oldest and most secret archives, and in fact, to return to his profession, that of the detective of history, the archaeologist.

He thus gave some emphasis to the words "Your Excellency, I accept the assignment!"

"I had no doubt, the Von Schuster have been servants of Germany for centuries, and your words confirm it, you are a true German!" was the SS chief's satisfied reply.

Heinrich felt a surge of embarrassment, because if Himmler had been able to read his thoughts, he would have said something quite different.

"I would be pleased to have you as my guest for one more day, if that pleases you," said the hierarch courteously.

"Yes, of course!" he replied, lying again, for his spirit would have led him to flee immediately.

Himmler walked towards the exit to say goodbye, followed by Heinrich. After placing his hand on the doorknob, he stopped the action, turning around "Where do you plan to start your research professor?"

He had expected that question, so he answered without hesitation "From the last certain place, the Hofburg in Vienna."

"I also agree that you should start backwards from the last abode of the Holy Lance, I will personally prepare your travel documents, and should you need them, the Schutzstaffeln deployed in Europe will be at your command."

Himmler, refreshed by the conversation, warmly shook his hand before letting him out, saying, "Professor, I expect you this evening for dinner."

"Thank you, I will certainly be there."

Outside he found the same SS who had accompanied him, probably that would be his shadow throughout his stay in Wewelsburg.

Back in his room, he lay clothed on the bed, his hands crossed behind the nape of his neck, staring at the ceiling.

Although focused on the interview that had just concluded, his thoughts were light. Despite the gloomy image Himmler inspired, the idea of leaving Berlin to wander Europe in a mad search for the Reich's mythical Grail amused him greatly.

He had no time to elaborate further, that he heard a knock at the door, the touch unmistakable.

"Erwin, come in," was the reply.

The friend came in and sat on the edge of the bed, waiting. Erwin expected a meticulous account of the conversation, and Heinrich did not disappoint him by explaining the contents of his meeting with the powerful hierarch.

The attendant immediately interrupted him, asking for clarification on the origin of the legend.

Patiently, Heinrich briefed him.

"The Spear of Longinus is first mentioned in the Gospel according to John, which describes the moments of the crucifixion. The Roman soldiers, as was customary, should have practised the "*crurifragium*"<sup>9</sup> to hasten his end, but they realised that Jesus was already dead, so it would have been useless but, to make sure he was really dead, the centurion in charge struck him with a spear."

He paused for a moment and then continued, "The name of the Roman soldier appears in the Gospel of Nicodemus, and the story of Longinus is interesting, it also ties in intimately with the subsequent events, because it seems that he also commanded the soldiers guarding Jesus' tomb, while there are conflicting versions about his fate."

Finally, after listening without missing a single comma, Erwin commented "But are you really convinced that the Spear exists, and that it has all these powers?"

"Of course not, but we are going to tour Europe at Himmler's expense, and you can bet our search will last a long time!" finished Heinrich, accompanying the sentence with a silvery laugh. This also

brought good humour back to Erwin's face, who, satisfied in his curiosity, retired to his room.

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