

## Delicacy Required

*Toulon, France, 1943*

The street was shining under the lights. Reflected light glanced off the red leather chairs of the open-air restaurants, pooled beneath the trees, washed down the gutters and into the jet-black drains. The street was silent. Empty - it would not be the fashionable dinner hour for another fifteen minutes. It had the ominous feeling of an empty moor before a lightning storm. In which case, he reflected grimly, he was probably the tallest thing in miles.

Walking over to the nearest restaurant, he took a table at the edge of the street, looking out over the entire area. He scanned the street labouriously, looking for the marks that might indicate a dead drop. But there was nothing. He supposed this was explainable. Technically, his orders only said he was to receive the message, and not in what way, but no agent worth his cyanide salts would arrange a meeting in this situation.

"Your drink, sir." He glanced up at the bartender. A short, compact Corsican, the bartender held a glass of clear liquid.

"I didn't order one," he replied.

"Just take a sip, sir. It will explain everything." The Corsican walked back into the bar.

Cautiously, he took a sip, remaining ready to spit it out at any second. After a reflective moment, he suddenly broke into a grin and stood.

The interior of the bar was built in the style of a fisherman's house - long, low, full of wood and memorabilia. One wall was taken up by worn brown wine barrels, the insignias of the maker barely visible. Shelves covered with jars of foie gras and sun-dried tomatoes clad another. Use-smoothed stools pushed for space at a white-tiled bar.

He stepped through a beaded curtain in the wall, nearly concealed by jars of truffle paté and young de-boned quail in oil. Stepping through, he found the bartender hungrily devouring a bowl of *moules*. The Corsican beamed. "\_\_\_\_\_! I never thought I would see you again! You remembered the sake, non?"

"You remembered the sake," he replied. "Nobody else but you knows that that's my favourite drink... I didn't think even you would remember."

"I am a bartender now. I know all the favourite drinks," the Corsican shrugged.

"I like the place," he replied. "How's business?"

"C'est mal," the Corsican shrugged. It was a favourite gesture of his. "The Nazis have demanded more troops for the conquest of Russia. Half my customers are fighting on the Eastern front. The other half are hiding in their cellars. Or mine, for that matter. And 1942 was a bad year for wine. I was depending on some new Riesling..."

The Corsican scrutinized him. "But what are you doing here? You could be shot. The Germans have a new spy catcher here in Toulon. Straight from Berlin. There have been twelve public executions in the last eight days."

"I'm here to pick up a special package which could supposedly end the war in one fell swoop. Some kind of chemical weapon. A Polish agent was supposed to leave it for me, but I parachuted into some kind of mud geyser in Brittany and the part of my orders that tells me how he is to do it is obscured. Or was, seeing as I ate what was left of the paper. All I could discern was something about Yugoslavia."

The Corsican blinked at the flood of words, then shrugged. "There's a Yugoslavian restaurant down the street," he offered.

"I'll check it" the other said.

Then he slid out through the beaded curtain, and was walking down the cobbled street. The Yugoslavian restaurant was crowded with the onset of dinner hour. Front windows showed a packed dining room with rough red tiles and matching brick walls. Scratched wooden tables were pushed into the tiniest possible space, with equally beaten-up benches along the sides. Steaming plates of kebab, pea stew and sausage were being carried out. A sign proudly identified it as Prepuna Boca or The Overflowing Bottle. It was certainly overflowing with people - double lines stretched out the doorway.

He took a deep breath, then plunged into the crowd, at turns ramming, twisting, punching, dodging, tackling, and, in a regrettable incident, biting his way through. Reaching the doorway, he tripped a burly-looking Lithuanian to claim a tiny table near the bathroom door. The stink of a blocked toilet and sweet rye mash combined to create an overwhelming odour which recalled to mind a combination of manure and corpses.

An overworked-looking waitress arrived, and he pointed to the shortest word on the all-Yugoslav menu and then began searching the room for a likely-looking person. A haze of evaporating sweat and flying beer made it difficult to see, but he spotted one other person sitting alone by the front window. Uniquely, they had enough space to swing a stunted terrier, so he stood up and began to fight his way over towards them. He

was prevented by the waitress, who pulled him back to his seat and placed in front of him a plate. Upon this plate rested a vast heap of mashed grain piled with dozens of what seemed to be a cross between unborn pigs, sheep intestines, octopus excrement, and assorted scrap metal. This was topped with some type of sauce with a colour of burning tyres and a scent to match. Waving off the server, he made his way toward the table at which the mysterious figure sat.

His plan was to walk past, pretend to slip and fall onto the table and, in the resulting chaos, discreetly reveal his British Intelligence badge, presently sewn into his jacket. A Polish spy would recognize it, the average Yugoslav immigrant would not. Foolproof. Stumbling forward, he tipped drunkenly downward onto the table, simultaneously ripping his badge from its hiding spot and dropping it into the man's lap. A masterpiece of seemingly accidental choreography. It was as he hit the table that he recognized the Iron Cross pinned to the man's German Uniform jacket.

The table buckled under his weight, hurling him to the floor. The Nazi glanced down into his lap, recognizing the thing the supposedly drunk customer had dropped into his lap was in fact a British Intelligence badge. Which meant the customer was in fact a British spy. With a German oath, he went for the pistol holstered at his side, only to catch a table leg full in

the face from the spy himself, who promptly bolted out the door. The Nazi officer's command of six elite Waffen SS soldiers promptly followed along with a pair of enraged Yugoslav restaurant staff, shouting "Payez! Payez!"

One of these was promptly run over by a German staff on a motorcycle, which pin wheeled through the window of a nearby butcher shop. Vaulting onto a bicycle standing against a nearby tree, the spy started peddling as fast as his legs would carry him.

The bicycle shot into a delicacy shop, followed by a screaming Yugoslav chef wielding a kielbasa of three feet in length, six Nazi soldiers, and the rest of the crowd. A grenade blew out the window, cascading jars of sardines in lemon oil, Polynesian coconut salt, Japanese Wagyu beef tails and Chinese birds nests onto the sidewalk. Apparently enraged by the scent of a rival bird species, a vast flock of swallows descended onto the street and started attacking everything in sight. Its rope ripped apart, the bell of the cathedral above broke free, plunging directly onto a tank with a jarring explosion. This knocked over all the shelves in the shop, hurling wild boar sausage, Basque lemon brandy, dried lychees, fugu and Provençal clover honey onto the German soldiers. This was followed by a wave of Sichuan pepper which knocked the soldiers back onto the street into the path of the vengeful swallows, who had know been

joined by a horde of crows, ravens, sparrows, gulls and swifts. A six-foot-tall crane grabbed one angrily by the head, pecking maniacally. Sneezing and sticky, the German soldiers had no way to defend themselves. The spy had been shielded from this by the bulk of the Yugoslav chef, who had been stunned by a flying sweet-plum-and-allspice-smoked-mahi-mahi. Leaping onto the bike, the spy shot out the shop's back door, pedalling as fast as he could.

Only once he was in the next county did he dare stop, sitting on a bench by the roadside. He looked moodily at the bicycle. Failure had never come easily to him. Then he noticed the label on the side of the bike - Made in Yugoslavia. Feeling taunted, he kicked the bike angrily, knocking off a wheel. Something fell from the resultant hole. He knelt down to look. It was a small, paper wrapped package, labelled rather blithely with: *his name*. So this was where the package had been, all that time. Standing with renewed determination, he began the long walk east to neutral Spain. He had been successful after all.