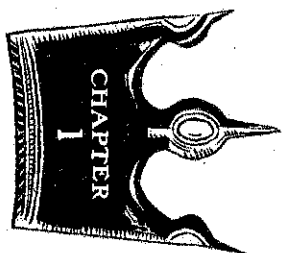




Also by Ally Sherrick

Black Powder



Berlin, Germany - Early July 1940

SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Adler sat in the marble-tiled hallway waiting to be called. An hour had passed since he'd first arrived and still the pair of great ebony doors in front of him stayed firmly shut.

He stared up at the steely-blue gaze of the man in the portrait hanging above them.

He hadn't been told exactly why the *Führer* wanted to see him – though it would be about the mission, of course. Top secret; the orders for it had come from the man himself. A flush of pride swept through him. It was a supreme honour to have been chosen to lead it and he would make a success of it – or die in the attempt.

He glanced at the fair-haired young private sitting next to him. He was dressed in the uniform of the regular army, not SS. A pale-checked bookish type who looked like he'd be more at home in a library than on the battlefield; probably waiting to deliver a message when the secretary came back.

The clock on the wall behind the desk chimed the hour. One . . . two . . . three. Adler's stomach tightened. It couldn't be long now, surely? He shot another look at the private. He had taken his cap off and was picking with nervous fingers at the silver-winged eagle badge sewn on the front of it. Adler clicked his tongue against his teeth. If he was the man's commanding officer, he'd give him a piece of his mind.

A barked order behind the doors, followed by the sound of hurrying footsteps, jolted him out of his thoughts. A few moments later, the right-hand door swung open and a small rat-faced man wearing the brown jacket and swastika armband of the Nazi party stepped out into the hall.

Adler stiffened and sat to attention. The young soldier beside him did the same.

The rat-faced man mopped a handkerchief across his sweaty forehead, then straightened his back and fixed Adler with a pair of quick, black eyes. 'Hauptsturmführer Adler?'

Adler jumped to his feet and gave a quick salute. 'Yes, sir.' He made to step forwards, but the rat-faced man's attention had turned to the other man.

'And you are Schütze Hans Ritter?'

The private blinked and stood up, what little colour there was draining from his face. 'Yes, I—'

Adler gave him a sharp jab in the ribs. 'Your cap, man!' Ritter fumbled the cap back on and arrowed his hand to the side of his head.

The rat-faced man looked them both up and down then motioned to them with a flick of his fingers. 'This way, and look sharp. His Excellency can only spare a few minutes. He is due at a medal-giving ceremony in half an hour.'

Adler frowned. What could the *Führer* possibly want with someone like Ritter? He gave a small cough. 'Surely there has been some mistake. This man here, he is not with me, he's—'

The rat-faced man narrowed his eyes. 'Are you questioning the *Führer*?'

Adler felt his cheeks grow warm. 'No, sir.'

'Good, because if you are, it will be the last thing you do.' He threw Adler a warning look and gestured for them to enter.

Ritter made to go first, but Adler pushed him aside. 'You should remember your place, Schütze Ritter. I am the superior officer here.'

As Adler stepped through the door, he blinked and stared about him. The room was in semi-darkness, a set of black blinds drawn low across the row of long oblong windows to his left. A line of red flags hung in the spaces between, the familiar white circle and swastika emblem on each of them glowing dimly in the half-light. To the right of the two soldiers stood a great marble fireplace, a pair of

carved gilt chairs and a table set in front of it. But it was the green glow at the far end of the room which drew Adler's attention the most.

It came from a lamp set on a black polished desk. As he peered past it, trying to make out what lay beyond, a dark shape shifted in the shadows.

'Approach.'

Adler stepped smartly forwards, his boots clicking against the marble floor tiles. The younger man held back for a moment, then followed suit.

'Halt!' The word ripped through the air like a pistol crack.

The two soldiers jerked to a stop. Adler snapped his heels together, threw back his shoulders and forked his arm in the Nazi salute.

'*Heil, Mein Führer!* SS-Hauptsturmführer Kurt Adler, and er... Schütze Hans Ritter, reporting for duty!'

There was a creak of leather and a pale palm shot into view. It hung there for a moment then slid back into the shadows.

Adler dropped his arm to his side and waited. Silence, except for the low ticking of a clock and Ritter's hurried breathing. He frowned. Did the *Führer* expect him to say something? He cleared his throat. 'It is an honour to meet you, *Mein Führer*. I—'

'Silence!'

A man's face appeared suddenly out of the gloom. He had the same oiled hair, nearly clipped black moustache and hard-set jaw as the portrait. But the eyes... A cold

shiver slid across the back of Adler's neck. The eyes were different. Fiercer; more penetrating. Eyes that could light a fire in you. Or freeze your blood to ice.

Adler swallowed and forced himself to meet their gaze.

'You know why you are here?'

Adler gave a dipped nod. 'Yes, *Mein Führer*.'

'Good!' The *Führer* swept a hand across his forehead and gave a sharp cough. 'The English and their so-called allies thought they could stop us from taking France. But they were *wrong*! He hammered the desk with his fist as he spoke the last word.

Ritter jumped, but Adler gritted his teeth and stood his ground.

The *Führer* pulled back his chair and got to his feet. 'Now we will take the war to them.' He stalked round the desk and came to stand in front of them, shoulders back, arms thrust behind him. He fixed them with an ice-cold stare. 'This mission will deal them a fatal blow. A blow from which they will never recover. Then they will be forced to recognize the truth: that our glorious Third Reich reigns supreme.'

Adler drew himself to attention again. 'Yes, *Mein Führer*! But...? He licked his lips. 'But if I may be so bold, what is this man doing here?' He shot Ritter a look of contempt.

The *Führer* frowned. 'You and your men have been hand-picked for your skills operating undercover in the field. But Schütze Ritter has been selected for quite another reason.' He threw the private a grim smile.

The younger man swallowed and shifted nervously under the *Führer's* steely gaze.

The *Führer's* eyes swivelled back to Adler. 'As you may know, since I became Chancellor of our beloved Fatherland, I have made it my business to collect treasures. Treasures to glorify the Reich.'

Adler gave a quick nod. He had heard about the *Führer's* love of precious artefacts – how he had assigned a special force of men to track them down from the monasteries, museums and castles of the occupied territories and deliver them to a secret bunker to which only he and his most trusted ministers had the key.

The *Führer's* harsh tones snapped him back to the room. 'My collection is almost complete. But there is one treasure not yet in it. One I desire above all others. And I am told that Ritter here knows all about it. Isn't that so, Ritter?' He turned and locked his eyes back on the younger man's face.

Ritter blinked and took a step backwards. 'You mean . . . the dragon-headed crown? But . . . but how do you—'

The *Führer's* expression darkened. 'Remember who I am, soldier!' He jabbed a finger at the shadowy outline of a giant eagle hanging on the wall behind him. 'Like the emblem of our great nation, I have eyes and ears everywhere.'

Adler gave Ritter a haughty stare. 'I apologize, *Mein Führer*. Schütze Ritter should know better than to interrupt. But forgive me, I don't quite see what this crown has to do with our mission?'

The *Führer's* eyes shrank to two cold blue chips. He took a step forwards and jerked up a hand as if to strike him. Adler flinched. The *Führer* snorted. Lowering it again, he flicked his gaze back to Ritter.

'You have heard of the legend attached to it, Schütze Ritter?'

Ritter's face paled. 'Yes, *Mein Führer*. That . . . that whoever has the crown will rule the kingdom.'

The *Führer's* eyes glittered with a fiery blue light. 'Precisely!'

Adler raised his eyebrows. Surely the *Führer* didn't believe in such things?

The *Führer's* jaw tightened. 'Is something troubling you, Hauptsturmführer?'

'Well . . . I . . . er . . .?' Adler cleared his throat. 'If I may be so bold, *Mein Führer*. Such legends . . . aren't they just stories?'

Two red spots of anger appeared on the *Führer's* pale fleshy cheeks. 'Not this one.'

Adler curled up his fingers, bracing himself for the tongue-lashing that would surely follow.

But it didn't come.

Instead, the *Führer's* face had taken on a mysterious, faraway look. He drew in a breath and began to pace up and down in front of them.

'The crown belongs to a great line of ancient kings. The original kings of England. Once it is mine' – he stopped and turned to face them, eyes sparking with fresh blue fire – 'England will become mine too, and the Third Reich

will control the greatest empire in the world. That is our destiny.' He let his last words hang in the air. Then, taking a quick breath, he focused his gaze back on Adler. 'Do you understand now why I must have the crown, Hauptsturmführer?'

Adler straightened his back and clicked his heels together. 'Yes, *Mein Führer*. Of course, *Mein Führer*.'

The *Führer* tilted his head a fraction as if satisfied by Adler's answer, then frowned and narrowed his eyes. 'But it must be our secret. Your mission's original objective still stands. The crown is what the English might call "the icing on the cake."

'Yes, *Mein Führer*.' Adler nudged his comrade. The two soldiers drew themselves to their full height and gave another salute.

'Now, go and prepare. You have two months. And remember, the future of the German Reich depends on your success.' The *Führer's* lips pressed into a thin white line.

A bead of sweat trickled down the side of Adler's left cheek. He clenched his jaw and jerked back his head. 'We won't fail you, *Mein Führer*. Of that you can be assured.'

'Good. Because if you do, I need not remind you of the consequences . . .'. The *Führer* shot them both one last skewering look, then swung round and strode back to his desk.

The two men saluted. Spinning on their heels, they marched back past the fireplace towards the doors.

As they reached them, Adler glanced quickly over his

shoulder. But the *Führer* had melted into the shadows and the only thing visible now was the eagle: black eyes glittering; wings and claws outstretched.

Watching. Waiting. Preparing to strike.