

The
Outlaws
of
Kratzenfels

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To E and Y
as ever

and

To Jason
with thanks for support and encouragement

Prologue



NCE UPON A TIME, there was a Kingdom at war.

This was a war of ideas, of magic against machine, and it knew no borders or boundaries. It swept across all the lands from the Eismeer in the north to the Mittelsee in the south, and like every war that has ever been fought, it brought strife and suffering with it.

The Kingdom of Kratzenfels long opposed the war. King Sigmund, whose wife had been the witch-queen Raggana, pleaded for tolerance and reconciliation. His words went unheard, and one by one his allies fell.

Then one dark day, the Kingdom of Kratzenfels teetered on the brink of defeat. The armies of the Count von Falkenhorst and his New Iron Knights stood ready to enter the capital, Krasny Karlsbad, and of King Sigmund there was no word...

Chapter 1

BULLETS WHISTLED AND WHINED around the courtyard, and the Princess Helda considered her position carefully. Beyond the castle walls, red bellied palls of smoke billowed, blazing with sparks where the fires fed them. The city of Krasny Karlsbad had fought long and valiantly against the forces besieging it, but its final defeat had come. Helda had not wanted to leave until the end was in sight, and now the end was staring her in the face with a disagreeable look in its eyes. More to the point, a sniper had made the dangerous climb up into the bell-tower, and her escape route had been cut off.

“Perhaps,” said the Lady Edelfrith at her elbow, “it is time to discard your disguise, Your Highness.”

“And be captured? I’d rather be shot,” Helda replied. “Although...”

She peered out beyond the edge of the wall, and a sniper’s bullet put a hole in the hood of her cloak.

“Pass me the Fischler Flint-free Fusilier,” Helda reached back without looking, and the Lady Edelfrith pressed a long-barrelled rifle into her grip.

“Here you go,” Edelfrith said.

“And your bonnet.”

“My best bonnet? From Madame Décolleté’s salon in the Prachtgasse?”

“You would insist on wearing it. Now, Edelfrith.”

“Really, Helda...” Edelfrith removed her headgear and watched with dismay as it was balanced on the end of the rifle.

Princess Helda set the rifle against her shoulder and edged the bonnet out the merest hint of an inch beyond the wall. Two shots came almost simultaneously, one from the sniper, one from Helda, and she gave a little grunt of satisfaction.

“Got him!”

Helda passed the bonnet back to Edelfrith, who examined the neat pair of bullet holes, one in and one out, before replacing the bonnet on her head.

“Come on,” Helda said, and with the rifle hanging from its strap across her back, she and Edelfrith ran across the cobbles and into hiding beneath the bell-tower.

Just then the ground shook, and from everywhere at once came the shout:

“Breached! The walls are breached!”

Helda looked at Edelfrith. This was it: the end. The castle’s defences had been overcome. They glanced quickly right and left, and made another dash into the Royal Stables. There, standing glittering and gloriously polished despite the mayhem all around it, was a luxurious traction carriage.

“Help me start it,” Helda said, climbing up into the driver’s seat.

“I have no idea how to,” Edelfrith replied, with some pride. She took her duties as Lady-in-Waiting to the Princess very seriously, but while she had long ago accustomed herself to lugging around all manner of loaded weapons, she drew the line at anything to do with horseless carriages.

Helda descended from the driver’s perch with a tut of her tongue.

“Climb up, then. When I tell you to, depress the foot pedal and engage the drivewheel.”

“Which is what, exactly?” Edelfrith asked, passing the Princess on the way up.

“The lever on the left.”

“As getaway vehicles go, it’s not very discreet, is it?” Edelfrith nodded down at the Royal Crest of Kratzenfels which emblazoned the carriage doors as only Royal Crests can.

“That’s the point, Edelfrith dear. Right. Ready?”

“Yes. I think so.”

Helda adjusted something beneath the engine flap.

“Now!”

There was a chugging splutter, and as Edelfrith pushed down on the foot pedal, the splutter became a steady rumble. She moved the lever on the left, and the drivewheel bit. The whole carriage shook with its eagerness to be off.

“Now what?” Edelfrith asked, hunched up under a frown of concern.

“Now get down from there. I need your help.”

Helda and Edelfrith crept back out into the tumbledown ruins of what only hours before had been a pleasant garden. Lying among the stones were the battered bodies of the castle guards. Some of them were barely recognisable, just faceless flesh, such had been the violence of the assault.

“We need one that looks... well, ‘fresh’,” Helda said.

“Here. Beneath this bush.”

Helda joined Edelfrith and stared down at the figure of a young man in uniform. He looked unharmed, and could almost be sleeping, but his skin was as cold as the stones that he was lying upon, and his breast was still.

“ ‘Guardsmen Hermann Kranich’,” Helda read off the name on the uniform. She slipped her hand inside his tunic and found a pendant around his neck. Inside it was a ghostly grey *Lichtbild* of a young woman.

Helda bit back her anger. Here was some mother’s son, some young lass’s lover, who would not be returning home to the fireside. He had given his life protecting Helda; not just her, but the peace

and stability that she represented. He had died defending the city and everyone in it, the entire Kingdom of Kratzenfels.

“Poor young man,” Edelfrith said as she picked up his legs.

Carefully, they manoeuvred Guardsman Kranich into the Royal Stables and up into the driver’s seat of the traction carriage.

Helda placed the dead guardsman’s hands gently upon the steering levers and looked up into his staring face.

“I will not forget you or those you loved, Guardsman Kranich. I must ask of you one last duty which may yet offer hope to those left behind.”

She turned away from the carriage and pushed back the double doors of the Royal Stables until they stood wide open. Edelfrith joined her, and with a loop of material tied off around another lever in the traction carriage, the two of them stepped into safety at one side.

“Keep out of the way when I pull this,” Helda said. “I really have no idea where the carriage will go...”

She gave the loop of material a tug, and the brakes were off. The traction carriage started to roll, getting faster as it left the Royal Stables and went careening through the cobbled alleyways towards the castle gate.

Helda and Edelfrith watched the speeding carriage as it passed unharmed through all the fighting. Nobody on either side was willing to risk shooting the Princess of the Royal House of Krasny Karlsbad.

“With any luck they’ll think we’re in there,” Helda said.

“Perhaps we should have been,” Edelfrith sighed as the carriage vanished from view. “So. What now?”

“We leave a different way. Take a rail-runner if there are any to Hexenholm, walk if there aren’t. That’s where my father will come to if... If he...”

The words trailed off to terror and dark thoughts. There had been no word of King Sigmund since noon of the day before.

Edelfrith hated to ask Helda, but ask she must – it was her place to protect her mistress when nobody else could. And it seemed like there really was nobody else left to take on that task.

“And what if the King does not come, Helda?”

Edelfrith needed no reply. She could see the clouds gathering like a mountain storm in Helda’s face. Dark haired and grey eyed as her mother Queen Raggana had been, Helda possessed a proud and stubborn streak that would have made a dwarf chieftain hang up his boots. Edelfrith could see exactly what Helda had in mind.

“The people won’t follow you, Helda.”

“They follow my father.”

“Because he is *king*. And a warrior-king, veteran of a dozen battles, protecting his kingdom. They won’t follow an unproven girl into certain death.”

“Then I’ll die on my own if I need to!”

“You won’t need to,” Edelfrith took up Helda’s hand. “Why do you think I brought my best bonnet?”

The thought of Edelfrith lying dead like Guardsman Kranich among the roses in her best bonnet seemed to jolt Helda back to her senses. She would willingly throw away her life in a desperate attempt at revenge, but she could not ask Edelfrith to do the same.

“Or... Or we could wait,” Helda said. “See if my father sends word. If he is... If not, from Hexenholm we cross the River Sarva, make our way through the patchwork lands of the Handelstadt Hundreds and up the Amber Coast. Then north to the shores of the Eismeer and my mother’s people. My grandfather Guthvis will protect us.”

It could hardly be said that the Lady Edelfrith was having a particularly good day, and the thought of going into exile at the court of Helda’s grandfather did nothing to brighten her spirits.

King Guthvis was little more than a tribal chieftain, albeit one who ruled over thousands of miles of forests. Mostly empty forests. King Guthvis’ castle was hardly better than a tent in the woods. Everything was damp and smelt of dog. Nobody used forks and

there were no roads. And if that was not bad enough, there were the endless freezing winter nights that ruled for months of the year, balanced by the equally endless summer days when the attentions of midges and the midnight sun made sleep impossible.

“Could we not go south instead?” Edelfrith suggested. “Prince Petros of the Pentanese really liked you when he came to visit.”

“Prince Prancing Peacock, you mean? I think not. No, we shall go to Grandfather Guthvis. Nobody will follow us there.”

Edelfrith nodded glumly. “I wonder why...”

Any further decision was cut short – the noise of engines and cannon fire was suddenly over their shoulders.

With the sound of falling forests, the scything talons of a giant metal hand came sweeping through the wall opposite the Royal Stables. The bell-tower broke at its touch as if it were made of gingerbread. Stones spilt everywhere, tumbling and foaming like waves breaking upon a seashore. Striding through the dust came the jointed legs of an armoured war-walker, forty feet high and resembling an upended rail-runner on stilts. Thudding steps crushed soldiers underfoot, and sparks dazzled like raindrops on a sunny day from the hail of gunfire that met the metal monster. Pistons puffing, drivewheels spinning, the war-walker crashed on unperturbed. And behind it came a dozen more.

“*Panzerläufer!* Fall back! Fall back!”

The war-walkers took no prisoners. Flames flickered out of hidden nozzles, searing sheets fed by the furnaces that drove the engines. The flames licked between the stones, chasing any who hid there to a burning death, or to fall to gunfire from the narrow slits in the war-walkers’ armoured bodies.

“This way, Helda!” Edelfrith clutched at the Princess’ arm and tried to drag her away.

Helda could not move. She was caught in a trap, part-way between terror and an anger that burnt as brightly as the war-walkers’ flame guns.

“Come ON!” Edelfrith cried, pulling Helda into the shadow of a fallen wall.

The two of them crouched low as the war-walkers hunted among the stones.

“The sewers,” Helda said. “It’s our best chance.”

“There – a manhole.”

Together, using the Fischler Flint-free Fusilier as a lever, the two of them heaved up the manhole cover. They peered down into the hungry throat of darkness which gaped beneath it. Vapours wafted upwards, stifling them and bringing the tears to their eyes.

Helda and Edelfrith wrapped scarves around their mouths and noses and slipped inside. There was a ladder, rude and rusted metal rungs bolted to the brickwork. Standing on it side by side, they shuffled the manhole cover back into place, and the darkness swallowed them whole. Dim grey light filtered in somehow, and careful of their footing, the two of them descended into the sewers.

At the base of the ladder was a narrow walkway, all mossy and slippery with slime. Beside the walkway, churning brown and stinking, a river of effluent.

They peered up and down the walkway in both directions.

“Rivers flow downhill,” Helda remarked, pointing at the sewer-water. “We follow it.”

And so she and Edelfrith walked on into the dripping darkness. There were steep sections where steps had been built into the brickwork, and others where the path merely went downhill at an angle, but always in such places there was a handrail to help them. Also a help were the candles set in sockets at regular intervals.

The candles burnt with a lazy, smoky orange flame, dispensing a meagre light and an eye-smarting fug in equal measure. In truth, the illumination they gave out was too feeble to see much by, but the candles did at least mark out the distance that Helda and Edelfrith had travelled; that gave them hope in the endless tunnels.

“Who keeps these candles alight?” Edelfrith asked. She remembered with a shudder hearing nursery tales of the rat-men who lived down in the dark.

“Whoever it is, they know the ways down here. Let’s hope we bump into them. They’ll show us the quickest way to a safe exit.”

But although Helda and Edelfrith walked the tunnels for almost an hour beneath the stricken city, they saw and heard no-one.

“Maybe they fled the city like everyone else,” Edelfrith said, as much in hope as in anything; the rat-men would not leave her mind.

“Like we’re doing,” Helda’s spirits sank. Had she done the right thing? What if the Kratzenfelser forces rallied? Should she not be there with them, on the front-line, driving back their foes? Would her father return? Perhaps he had flown east in his battle-zeppelin to gather reinforcements from the Marches as some had said.

“Listen!” Edelfrith stopped suddenly. “Can you hear it?”

Helda listened, straining her ears against the background rush of the stinking brown sludge.

“Boots,” Edelfrith said. “Men marching.”

“Perhaps it is the sewer-keepers. The tunnel plays tricks with the sound,” Helda’s eyes wandered along the walkway. There were no exit-ladders in sight directly ahead of them, and the last one that they had passed was by now a half-mile distant.

Edelfrith was not convinced either. She started to retreat.

“Maybe we should get out of the way. Just in case.”

“No time,” Helda could hear the marching boots more clearly now. If they were Kratzenfelser boots, they had nothing to fear. And if not...

The soldiers came around the curve of the tunnel up ahead. A dozen of them, all wearing the silver and black of the Count von Falkenhorst’s army, the New Iron Knights. The soldiers carried lanterns, and the light flickered off the blades of their bayonets.

“There!” shouted the leader.

“Run!” shouted Helda, and she and Edelfrith started to sprint as fast as they could back along the walkway.

That was not very fast. The walkway was treacherous with slime, and it was never more than two feet wide. The stinking river foamed at their side, drawing them hungrily towards it.

With a shrill shriek of terror, Edelfrith stopped short, and Helda bumped into her from behind. Over Edelfrith's shoulder, the Princess could see what had struck such fear into her friend.

A silver spider was heaving itself up and out of the river. It strutted on long jointed legs, dripping with scum, and finding its way along the tunnel with four of its legs raised to touch the roof. There was no driver as such, but then Helda saw him – or what was left of him. It was little more than half a man, and he looked more dead than alive. His limbless torso was bolted seamlessly into the ironwork beneath the monster that he controlled. Cables snaked from the empty orbits of his eyes to a cluster of stalk-lenses, and his black lips were drawn back from even blacker teeth and the shrivelled slug-curl of the tongue, a hollow gape of a scream that had been frozen forever.

The spider-wight's stalk-eyes twitched at the sight of Helda and Edelfrith, and it clattered towards them.

Helda turned on the spot and stared along the walkway. The soldiers were not far behind, and of the two evils, she preferred those who were wholly flesh and blood. She felt Edelfrith close at her back, trembling with the terror of the spider-wight.

Just then, a stabbing silver beam pierced the gloom, and the spider-wight reared up above them. The light was blindingly bright, and Helda raised an arm to shield her eyes. The spider-wight clacked and clicked, and two of its jointed legs swung their pincer-claws towards Helda and Edelfrith.

Magic, if only I had magic, Helda thought to herself. Queen Raggana had died before she had been able to teach her daughter any of her arts, infernal or otherwise. But while magic may have been lacking to her, Helda did have a rotary pistol.

Crack! with a shot from her pistol, Helda shattered one of the spider-wight's eye-lenses. Then another. And another.

The creature writhed and drew back, if not with pain then with anger. The silver-white beam of light splintered across its forest of legs and it swung around to focus its remaining eye-stalks on Helda and Edelfrith.

But they were no longer there.

Ducking beneath the searching metal legs, Helda and Edelfrith ran back along the walkway, back in the direction they had come and the nearest exit-ladder.

Behind them there were more clicking sounds as the spider-wight gathered itself.

More torch-beams showed up ahead, the same silver-white webs that the spider-wight cast as it pursued them. Huge shadows stalked the glare that crept across the walls, the bloated bodies and stabbing spear-legs of more spider-wights, horribly magnified.

Helda fired again and again at them until she had spent all the bullets from her rotary pistol. The shots did nothing to chase away the jointed metal monsters, but they did slow down the spider-wights' advance.

Before they expected it, Helda and Edelfrith reached a ladder leading up to another manhole cover.

"Whatever is at the top, it can't be worse than what's down here," Helda said.

She and Edelfrith ascended the ladder two at a time and pushed up the manhole cover. It clanged and rattled on the cobbles to one side, and they emerged into the fire-flicker light of the burning city.