

Excerpt from Chapter 4

*A Lion in the Grass* by Mark Zvonkovic

By noon the sky was completely clear and the swells had lengthened. *Plava Guska* sliced through the sea at a good pace, like the relaxed canter of a Thoroughbred horse, and the warm sun had hoodwinked the crew, except for Sanders. He insisted that Raymond make regular scans of the horizon with the binoculars, looking for a Luftwaffe patrol plane.

For a while, Raymond enjoyed the cloud of danger hanging over them. Then he made himself be serious. He hadn't experienced an actual life-threatening episode before, and he thought it was immature not to accord the situation respect. *Plava Guska* was a ketch, much bigger than a sloop that pleasure sailors would use. And she was low in the water on account of the supplies in her hold. A smart German pilot who knew his boats would be suspicious.

About an hour out from Vis, Raymond spotted an airplane. It was flying northbound a good distance to the east of them. For a while he thought the pilot hadn't seen them, but then the plane banked left and headed directly for the boat. With her sails up, *Plava Guska* was hard to miss. Sanders yelled a warning to the crew to get below and barked an order to Raymond: "Just lean back and act like a diplomat's son who doesn't have a care in the world."

"I should be able to do that," Raymond responded.

The pilot took a westerly course that brought him about a quarter of a mile south of *Plava Guska* before making a wide turn to the north. Raymond guessed that

gave him a good view of the boat from a safe distance. The plane passed them about a quarter mile off their port side. Raymond thought they were clear until he saw, through the binoculars, the aircraft make a sharp turn back to the south and head straight for them.

“He’s coming back directly on our bow,” he said grimly.

“Everyone get on the floor under something,” Sanders yelled. “You too, Raymond.”

At that moment, Vera came charging up the companionway with two cushions under her arm. She sprinted along the port side of the boat toward the bow until she was on the open deck between the mainmast and the jib, where she put down the cushions. With a single easy motion she took off her overalls and her shirt. Clad only in a red brassiere and panties, she reclined on the cushions in a sunbathing position.

Raymond felt paralyzed, not caring at all that he might soon be gunned down where he stood. Sanders adjusted course a bit to the east and let out a small length of the jib to broaden the viewing area for the pilot. That tipped Raymond off to what was happening. With her red garments, Vera shone up from the deck like a beacon.

“Close your mouth and sit down,” Sanders said to Raymond.

When the noise of the aircraft’s engine came, Vera raised herself on her elbow and used her hand to shade her eyes. The plane was lower now, probably at strafing altitude. Vera waved casually. The aircraft went by with a roar, no bullets fired.

Sanders held his course. Raymond had not waved at the plane, lest the pilot think the scene was being staged. Vera had made it appear that they had nothing to

hide. But Raymond figured the pilot would probably come back for another look; he certainly would if he were the pilot. He stretched out near the stern on the port side, his back propped against a railing stanchion, a book in his hand: *Mein Kampf*. He pictured how they looked from above. It was so absurd, he laughed.

“You’re a bit overboard with your reading choice, no?” Sanders remarked.

“Perhaps,” Raymond said, his gaze fixed on Vera, who had gone back to reclining with her hands behind her head. He was perspiring, and he knew it was on account of her, and not the danger from the plane. A cool jump into the ocean sounded pretty good.

The plane’s engine, straining behind them, became audible again. The pilot had flown about a half mile south before turning back. Raymond watched him slow his speed, decrease his altitude, and head for the port gunwale of the sailboat. When the plane was just behind them, Raymond held his breath. He was sure Vera knew that the pilot’s attention was centered on her. She sat up in a cross-legged position, with one hand on a hip and the other waving at the plane, which banked slightly to enhance the pilot’s view as it roared by them. When he was just past the bow, the airman swiveled his wings right and left several times, banked to the northeast, and headed for Yugoslavia.

Raymond expected a cheer from the crew, but none came. Everyone was now on deck, quiet and completely mesmerized by Vera. When she saw them all looking at her rather than the retreating plane, her composure fell away and she blushed as

red as her underwear. She deftly slid her arms into her shirt and her legs into her overalls.

“Really, Vera. Red!” Raymond quipped in Croatian when she approached the companionway. He wanted her green eyes to look at him.

She stopped to stand tall and direct a commanding look first at him and then at the rest of the crew. *How can she be so poised?* She reached behind her head and flipped her curls with her fingers.

“I am a communist. What did you expect?” she said in perfect English, then disappeared below.