

ACHTUNG! Cthulhu



Dark Tales from the Secret War

Edited by John Houlihan

Dark Tales from the Secret War

Thirteen World War Two Tales
by Modern Mythos Masters

Edited by John Houlihan
Modiphius Entertainment

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Introduction

WELCOME to *Dark Tales from the Secret War*, the first volume of fiction set in Modiphuis' Achtung! Cthulhu universe, a world which combines the terrors of HP Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos with the setting of mankind's darkest yet finest hour, the second world war.

The idea for *Dark Tales* originally came about in late 2013. I'd completed *The Trellborg Monstrosities* novella and game design for Modiphuis the previous year. After finishing another couple of fictional works in my *Tales of the White Witchman* series, I came back to the A!C universe, looking for a fresh challenge and started to kick a few ideas around.

I was keen to do more fiction, but one of the downsides of writing novels and novellas is that they always take an inordinate amount of time (that and they will slowly consume your every waking thought and eventually your very soul, of course). Even the shortest of novellas will probably take three months from start to finish, so perhaps short stories might be a better way to approach the problem?

That was it: a collection of short stories, now we were talking! Not only would that break up the usual gruelling writing marathon, but it would also mean many different stories, from many different parts of the war, different characters, diverse organisations, providing variety and interest in a way that a single, longer story, no matter how compelling, would find difficult to achieve.

Then the laziness of the long distance writer also whispered 'And maybe you could inveigle... I mean invite other writers to get involved to help spread the load. Lots of different contributors, would mean lots of different ideas, different voices and... you'd only have to write one of them!'

Enthused, I discussed this initial idea with Chris Birch, Modiphuis' splendid

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publishing director over a beer and with his enthusiastic support, Dark Tales was conceived, its remit to explore, expand and expound the Achtung! Cthulhu universe in bold new narrative-led ways.

So, some solid foundations had been laid, but now I'd have to recruit some actual writers to execute my cunning plan. To help in this daunting task, I tried to picture myself as Takashi Shimura or Yul Brynner, recruiting a magnificent seven fictional samurai of wordslingers to power this volume. Perhaps that analogy didn't really hold up in the cold cruel light of day, but any start is a good start as they say, and whatever you need to tell yourself...

Naturally, on any such undertaking you start closest to home and good friend, fellow Cthulhu fanatic and acclaimed Yellow Dawn writer David J Rodger was one of the first to come on board, followed swiftly by Paul Cunliffe and Jonnie Bryant, friends and colleagues from the gaming world, who also indicated they'd be interested in contributing. Chris also promised a contribution in the form of Mick Gall's Heart of the Sea and suddenly we were up and running with four potential tales.

I held up four fingers in the glinting (imaginary) sunlight, tilted my virtual cowboy hat and adjusted the equally imaginary katana on my hip. Progress.

A few weeks later, David's Shadow of the Black Sun, the very first original tale arrived and suddenly Dark Tales became even more real. Through a cunning campaign of persuasion, intimidation, bribery, blackmail and in at least once case, holding the soul of the victim to ransom, more followed.

Colleagues from the golden gaming generation all stepped up. Funamublist's Dan Griliopoulos, Martin Korda, writer of Destiny The Taken King, Fable and the Journey video games and a BAFTA winner to boot hopped on board the Dark Tales train. The legendary Patrick Garratt publisher of VG247.com and a master of the macabre followed suit, swiftly joined by the luminous Richard Dansky of Splinter Cell fame.

Word spread, momentum gathered, chickens came home to roost and now Dark Tales was attracting serious overseas talents like Josh Vogt and Jason Brick, as well as home grown genii like SFX's Will Salmon and the Belvedere Writing Project's Jake Webb.

More and more Tales began to arrive and I began to read them with supreme interest and it has to be confessed, some growing alarm. These gentlemen were setting a damn high standard and I'd have to seriously up my game and contribute some decent words of my own just to merit a place in this august company. My own short "Servant of the Dark" was one of the final Tales to fall into place.

So my cunning plan was concluded and its original design bought to fruition. Thirteen of the finest Dark Tales from the Secret War await within this collection's unhallowed covers, covering a range of times, places and characters from that fateful conflict. Inside, you'll be transported to theatres as diverse as Norway,

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the Pacific, occupied Europe east and west, the Black Forest, Amsterdam, London, Germany and Cairo and many points in between, from the outer realms to the wildest depths of inner space and beyond. You'll meet daring heroes, dastardly villains, strange and unusual beings and creatures, horrors and artefacts that have never seen the light of day before, and possibly never should again.

Dark Tales actually debuted at Dragonmeet 2014, where five of horror's finest joined me to read excerpts and teasers from their stories—and you can find the results in the *Dark Tales* podcast. We'll also be taking Dark Tales on the road again throughout this year and next, so watch out for readings and appearances at a horror, sci-fi or fantasy convention near you.

Players of the *Acthung! Cthulhu* game should find plenty of inspiration herein with some intriguing inventions like the Allies' doddering but magnificent Met Office, original artefacts like *Der Alptraum* or discovering more about the sinister machinations of the sinister Black Sun, which can be enjoyed on their own or adapted to your games in whatever way you see fit.

But primarily this is a collection of fiction to be read and enjoyed: with rip-roaring tales of horror and high adventure, by turns sinister, poignant, amusing and unsettling and I hope you'll derive as much enjoyment, delight and delicious thrills from reading this first volume, as I have had from commissioning and editing it.

After all, these are the darkest of tales from the most secret of wars—so you should expect nothing less.

John Houlihan—Watford, November 2015





Shadow of the Black Sun

By David J Rodger

IT was only approaching eight o'clock in the evening and the sun was setting already. Every day, it sank lower faster and got darker earlier. The approaching winter made *Oberleutnant* Erich Steinmann uneasy, because he knew his small squad of men were scared.

In three days it would be dark by thirty past seven, by the end of the month it would be dark at thirty past six. By the end of November it would be dark by lunchtime and the sun would not rise again until after breakfast, only two hours of light a day. And then December. In December it would stay dark until the first week of January.

Erich stubbed out the Eckstein he'd been smoking and immediately sparked up another one, inhaling the tobacco with a grimace—he preferred the Lucky Strikes he had traded for in Narvik, but they were all gone now. The stench of gasoline from the American Zippo lighter flooded his nostrils. The flame fluttered in the chilly breeze blowing into the bunker through the long, thin observation gallery. He snapped the Zippo shut. His eyes, small, triangular and grey, nervously raked the jagged black rocks hemming in the treacherous entrance to the harbour.

This was the tiny fishing settlement of Svolvær, on the east coast of the rough jumble of islands making up the Vesterålen and Lofoten archipelago, hanging off the mainland of Norway. Bleak but beautiful, the surrounding landscape was entirely mountainous, towns and villages strung out along the Strandflaten.

Nearly half a mile from Svolvær itself, the isolated bunker faced the open sea of the Vestfjorden. The ethereal colours of sunrise and sunset were often trapped in the mirror-like surface of the water; but today, the sea was black and brooding, surging across the broken shoreline with fretted waves and a sticky white foam.

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Sunset was but a band of tarnished gold in a grey sky, heavy with low cloud, spilling an uneasy glow across the rocks and the red painted wooden *rorbuer*.

Because the harbour was so deep and could accommodate large transport ships, it was important to the strategic needs of the Fatherland. There were rumours the British Commandos were planning a raid because Svolvær is an important centre for the production of fish oil and glycerine, used in the German war effort.

The clusters of serrated rocks that jutted out from the water formed a good natural defence, but he did not like those rocks—they suggested strange shapes and outlines in certain light.

The British would be angry. The Luftwaffe had just begun bombing London. It would either motivate them or crush their “bulldog” spirit. Erich sadly suspected the former; he liked London, he liked the British—if only they would have joined the German people in this drive towards victory as allies. It had been several months since Norway surrendered, one of many territories to fall under the remarkable might of their combined fighting teams: units using *Heer* and *Luftwaffe* assets together. Coupled with advanced operational and tactical methods, Erich had heard of the world media’s shock and awe at the scale and speed of German victories. *Blitzkrieg* they called it.

A lightning war.

Appropriate, in some ways, for the raw and primal energies he suspected were being tapped (or simply still explored) by some elements outside of the *Wehrmacht*. Only rumours, of course. More rumours. But these were backed-up by claims from one of his squad, Torben Bruhn, who had a brother in the Waffen-SS and liked to boast about it. Men and woman, Aryan brothers and sisters, who were plunging into... what did Bruhn call it? Into the “Abyss between the cosmos and the stars”, to seek a secret weapon, a Great Advantage for Germany. Bruhn also liked to ridicule him about being a Christian. He would have to discipline Bruhn, eventually; right now he needed all of his men and all of them on his side. Besides it may not even be necessary because Bruhn’s brother had sent a communiqué to have him reassigned to Oslo.

And tonight, a sense of...what?

Menace in the sky? Foreboding? Erich hated it. The impression had only grown since they first arrived to take over the bunker. It was as if there was tragedy woven into the fabric of the mountains that surrounded them.

Something bad was going to happen soon. He could feel it in his blood.

The smell of cooking caught his senses and distracted him from his gloomy thoughts. Turning away, he barked an order at Schenck who was sitting on a balcony below the observation deck, cleaning the bolt-action mechanism of his K98.

“Take over the night watch, Schenck.”

Seppel Schenck, a reptile of a man, tall and gangly with a high steeply sloping forehead and a greasy mop of brown hair. He had the black, lacklustre eyes of

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a predatory creature and was the only soldier Erich had commanded who actually took pleasure in killing. As Erich trotted down the concrete steps, Schenck pushed himself wearily from the chair and slouched past without acknowledgment. Another candidate for discipline, Erich mused wearily.

“I’ll come back to relieve you once I eat, Schenck.” Erich called over his shoulder as he climbed the wooden staircase from the balcony down into the concrete bowels of the bunker. This place, Svolvær, had gnawed away at the confidence of his men; it had eroded their discipline and made them only half the soldiers he knew they were.

Two men occupied the ground floor mess. Corbinian Sturm, who was cooking a fish stew on his portable stove; large, bald and sweaty, he was reliable and trustworthy. Winfried Dirchs, a giant with the harsh features of a philosopher, sat nearby, sharpening a paratrooper knife he had traded in Oslo, and doing little to help with the cooking. Erich noted with silent disdain that Dirchs had modified his M40 tunic (against regulations!) with a bottle-green collar salvaged from an older M36, covering up the *feldgrau*—field grey—which had become the new standard issue. Dirchs worked on the knife and looked like a man concentrating on not going insane. Yes, Bruhn had got inside his head.

Torbin Bruhn was out with the young and impressionable Quirin Siekert—both had been commandeered by *Hauptmann* Raske, to look for the missing cadet, *Oberjäger* Henning Krebs.

Whatever Krebs had been up to, it wasn’t sanctioned by the chain of command and now rumours (more damned rumours) were flying around that the Order of the Black Sun were operating in the area—and that Krebs was one of them. An acolyte hunting the origins of Germanic supremacy in the bloodlines of the Old Race. It was why his men were scared. Not because of the risk of British Commandos raiding Svolvær, but because Torbin Bruhn had filled their silly heads with stories about the Black Sun and what they could do.

“It smells good, Sturm.” Erich complimented his cook, pausing as he walked to inspect the contents of the pan.

Sturm grinned, wiped a flabby hand across the sweat covering his forehead and glanced over at the giant, Dirchs. “Thank him. He caught them this afternoon. So fresh I think they will make our bellies glow in delight.”

Erich acknowledged this with a curt nod and then walked over to a table where plates, bowls and cutlery were stacked up. He stopped and placed his hands just above the table. His fingers were trembling.

God damn this war.

He lowered his palms to the table and made his fingers still.

Torbin Bruhn hero worshipped his SS brother and by association seemed to worship the Black Sun units who were known to ride alongside SS *Sonderkommando* and the *Waffen-SS*. If the Black Sun were here, it might explain why Krebs had

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gone missing: the cadet was aloof and mysterious with hollow eyes and gaunt features, but he had an inner strength that far outshone his fragile physical form. Yet this did not make sense. Why would they not present themselves in the settlement? At least make their presence known? All this secrecy....

Erich was deeply suspicious of their motives. Torbin talked proudly about the Advantage the Black Sun would bring to Germany, but Erich had asked questions and heard other things—from officers at the whaling station in Andenes and at the industrial wharfs at Narvik. Some people did not believe the motives of the Order of the Black Sun were entirely aligned with the supremacy of German blood over Europe. Listening to these stories, Erich considered that Himmler had been blinded by greed for more power; by a desire to accelerate his plans for a master race to form a true home for the Aryan descendants. Hyperborea and the Thule Society. Erich shook his head sadly, stubbed out the remains of the cigarette and picked up a battered tin bowl and steel spoon. All he cared about was getting back to Munich to see his wife and three children, once Germany had re-established its rightful place at the heart of Europe and the centre of the global political court. Once the fighting stopped, he would put away his knife and gun, and temper his war spirit with carpentry at his grandfather's factory.

Erich held the bowl like he might hold a weapon. The Black Sun...

The way their reputation was weaving its way into the fantastical parts of the imagination of the German fighters, it bothered him. Reinhardt Weissler bothered him. Erich knew that Alfred Rosenberg disliked him too, which didn't make sense as Rosenberg was the Party's chief racial theorist.

Weissler was too close to Himmler. What had they found in Karelia, Finland? The mission was supposedly undertaken by the Ahnenerbe but Erich knew it was a cover for the Black Sun's first expedition. And later the same year, '36, in Bohuslän, Sweden; they found something there that caused acute excitement—something that was taken back to Wewelsburg Castle...where apparently Reinhardt Weissler now had his own private laboratory complex. Built hurriedly in '34...a little over a year after the Reichstag burned down. Not recent history but the speculation had grown from hushed whispers to the boastful talk of drunken soldiers in that time.

That bothered him!

A commotion sounded outside the steel door to the bunker, and a moment later Bruhn and Siekert crashed through, wrestling with a savage looking woman with dark hair, dressed in rags and blankets. Erich spun round dismayed. Sturm and Dirchs leapt to their feet and hurried over to help restrain her. Sturm took a heavy punch to the face from the woman, which caused him to drop to his knees, stunned, clutching a bleeding nose. Dirchs didn't take such risks, he swiftly kicked the woman in the groin and pistoned a fierce fist to the side of her skull as she doubled over.

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“Enough!” Erich yelled, sensing Dirchs’ desire to continue the violence.

The giant Dirchs stepped back, responding to the order but casting a sullen glance towards his commanding officer.

Erich returned the bowl and spoon to the table and strode across.

The woman hung limply between both soldiers but as he approached, her shoulders and head began shaking, slow, triumphant laughter bubbling from her lips. She angled her head to peer at him through a curtain of lank greasy hair; brown skinned, her face was young but creased like a leathery hag. Her eyes were strange, small, black, glinting. That was when he noticed the blood coating her hands, sticky, not fresh, and the smears of it on her filthy clothing.

“Woman! Where did this blood come from?” Erich demanded.

Bruhn shook his head—all jaw, cheekbones, blue eyes and blonde hair—and told him: “She does not speak German. She raves in some Norwegian dialect. I can understand her, but only just.”

Erich didn’t show his irritation at Bruhn’s tone, or the fact they had brought the woman here rather than to *Hauptmann* Raske who was responsible for the military hold on Svolvær and the dozen or so squads of *Heer* within it. “Can you talk to her? Why is she covered in blood?”

Bruhn reinforced his brutal grip on her arms, using his strength to force a jolt of pain through her joints that made the laughter stop momentarily. “We heard her on patrol. Up behind the slopes here, behind the Fløyfjellet.” He sneered, and jerked his head at the bunker’s open door—indicating the mountain that dominated the edge of the settlement. “She was howling. Like a Valkyrie! We found her by a small altar of stone, blood everywhere.”

The overweight form of Sturm clambered to his feet, holding a hand over his nose, mumbling something about her being a witch. Bruhn grinned at this suggestion, pleased by it, and nodded, “Yes, a witch. Where did the blood come from? She is not wounded. No animals were there. And where is Krebs? Nobody has seen him. Why was she there? Overlooking our position...”

The naïve Quirin Siekert glanced from Bruhn to Erich and found his gaze, imploring him to do something that would make them proud. “See her eyes. I think she is one of the Sami people. Why else would she be here but to put a curse on us?”

Cold air was swirling in through the open door. Sturm shuffled over to close it but Erich hurled words at him: “*Nein, noch nicht!*”

Everyone stopped and stared at him. Erich sighed, gathering his patience. “The Sami are nothing to do with the war and they are not witches or warlocks. This woman looks like she is crazy. Take her to Raske and leave him to deal with it.”

It was not the right thing to say, of course. But Erich had not reached his rank by always pleasing his men. But then the woman caught his eye with her gaze—which was smiling, mocking him. She spoke to him. At him!

“*Du er kristen?*”

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Erich sensed he knew what statement she had made. He replied in German. “I am a Christian. Yes.”

“Du er ikke som de andre. Blind av frykt. Du må høre.”

Erich bunched his cheeks beneath his eyes in a grimace, he looked at Bruhn. “What did she say?”

“She wants you to listen. Says you’re not blinded by fear like we are. Is that right, eh?” Bruhn gave her a harsh shake between him and Siekert; barked a quick laugh in contempt.

The woman held Erich’s attention like a snake might a mouse. She continued, relentless. *“De kommer. Menn som trenger veien åpen. Jeg har åpnet den. Veien er åpen.”*

Bruhn started to translate, his words hurriedly overlapping hers as he rushed to catch up. “Men are coming. Men who need the way to be open. She has opened the way. The way is open.”

“Tell her to shut up!” Dirchs shouted, his titanic frame hunched over as he shuffled away from her. Her eyes didn’t waver from Erich.

“Stjernene er i posisjon i Tomheta. Han som hører, har hørt mitt kall. Til og med nå, beveger den seg, den faller gjennom Tomheta mot oss. Du kan ikke stoppe det. Veien er åpen.”

Bruhn’s lips rolled back to expose bared teeth, his eyes alive with wild fire as he translated: “The stars are aligned beyond the Void. The One who listens has heard her Call. Even now, it moves, falling through the Void towards us. You cannot stop this. The way is open.”

Sturm grabbed his wood-handled boot knife and edged forward, seemingly intent on using it. Dirchs stopped retreating and surged forwards to join in.

“HALT!” Erich boomed the word. Causing everyone to freeze in their tracks. Even the Sami woman with her damnable raving fell silent, watching him.

Erich inhaled slowly through his nose, diaphragm trembling in the core of his chest. The woman had unsettled him. He vividly recalled the sense of doom that had sprung upon him earlier. All a trick of the mind, a defect caused by the power of suggestion—the cognitive legacy of hundreds of thousands of years living as primitives. Placing hands on hips, he puffed his chest up, pushed his jaw forward. “Take her to Raske. She is his problem. If she is a witch, then I doubt she will have much luck with a man so ignorant of the subtle ways of nature.”

It was true. Raske would rather burn a tree than enjoy its shape or the colour of its canopy.

Sturm clasped his free hand to the bald dome of his skull, smearing his own blood across it, and shuffled away. Dirchs seemed unable to move. He glared at the woman, but she kept her eyes on Erich. Even as Bruhn and Siekert dragged her away, she twisted her head at a painful angle and held him in her gaze.

And then they were gone from the bunker.

“Close that damned door...” he ordered Sturm gruffly. Then softened his tone a little to add, “Go clean your face. And then come and finish cooking this fish

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stew. It smells too good to wait much longer.”

Sturm did as he was told and walked to the latrine to wash the blood away.

Erich glanced upwards and saw the reptilian figure of Schenck, standing at the wooden rail that stopped soldiers falling onto the balcony below. “That was a mistake, *Oberleutnant*.”

Arching his spine to tilt backwards, he called back up, “Yes, thank you for your opinion *Gefreiter*. I am sure your option would have been to gut her open on the floor here and see if her innards turned to smoke. Get back to your watch. I will relieve you when I have eaten.”

The massive Dirchs muttered something and then strode to the door. Erich whirled round and called after him, but Dirchs either didn’t hear or didn’t care—hauling the steel door open and closing it after him like it was part of a child’s toy.

Erich finally got to eat, which was pleasant even if he sat alone at the table. Sturm did not want to engage with him and remained by the stove, stirring the food.

It had been a mistake to send the woman away with them, of course.

Erich climbed up the wooden steps to the balcony and then up the concrete steps to the observation gallery. He took over from Schenck and lit another cigarette as he stared into the darkness beyond the wide aperture; chilly night air pushed through and swirled around him.

It was a little later when Bruhn, Siekert and Dirchs all returned together, furtive and silent. Siekert seemed shaken and appalled by something. Bruhn led him into the latrine. Dirchs slumped down in front of the oil-burning heater and appeared to collapse in on himself, sobbing.

Erich wrestled with the surge of panic and anger that welled up from his stomach. It took him nearly an hour before he felt capable of going down to ask what had taken place.

He learned the truth easily. Nobody could deny it. None of them wanted to deny it—they were proud of what they had done, even if they were also upset by it.

Bruhn, Siekert and Dirchs had killed the woman. They beat her with their fists and then Siekert, his youth forever spoiled from this point forward, had strangled the life out of her. They had wrapped rocks in her rags, carried her and dumped her body in the sea overlooking the island of Høggøya.

That was it then. That was the end of it. The witch was dead.

No.

Not the end. Erich sensed a trap had been sprung and the only way of closing it had died with the woman’s last grinning breath.

Erich resumed the night watch. Bruhn, Siekert, Dirchs and Schenck slept in their cots near to the radiating heat of the oil-burner. Sturm had come to take over at some point but Erich waved him away. He couldn’t sleep. He didn’t want to take his eyes off the sky or the sea. Something was coming. That’s what she had said. What was coming? What couldn’t they stop?

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The air flooding through the open gallery numbed his face and hands. Burrowed through his coat and uniform. Impaled shards of ice in his bones. He gritted his teeth and stood through it. He was a German soldier. He could suffer with honour.

He smoked the last of his Ecksteins at four o'clock in the morning. His eyes roamed the empty space ahead of him—the Void, eh?—but nothing broke the darkness. He thought of the Sami woman... where was her body now? Had it sunk or had it tumbled free of the rags and their rocks to float up and drift?

It was nearly thirty past six when the dawn finally arrived. With some relief Erich saw that the heavy clouds had retreated to the horizon, allowing a pale blue with streaks of cerise and new gold to sweep across the heavens. Then the fiery blister of the sun rolled above the horizon spilling furnace light across the sea towards him. Yet his rising mood crashed like a wrecked ship on a perilous shore when he saw the black silhouette of a figure, a shadow of a man, step out onto the rocks.

Only one hundred metres away, perhaps less, the figure was dressed in a uniform and seemed to be staring intently—directly at the bunker!

Erich span away to the wooden railing and hollered at the top of his voice, yelled until his throat was raw. The men leapt from their cots, dressed and responded to his orders—more out of sleepy instinct than any sense of loyalty or respect. Dirchs was to guard the entrance with an M34 machine gun; recoil-operated and air-cooled, Dirchs was big enough to handle the 800 rounds per minute of 7.92×57mm Mauser cartridge it could tear into a fire zone. Erich turned back to the observation gallery window whilst Bruhn, Siekert and Schenck dashed down to the rowing boat, moored at the foundations of the bunker. The silhouetted figure, Erich was certain it was an officer, stepped from one shallow ridge of black rock to another, surrounded by the lapping swells of the open sea. Perhaps it was a British spy?

Then the figure waved an arm, as if it knew it had his attention... as if trying to warn him. And then it vanished, perhaps stepping behind a larger rock; Erich wasn't certain, he had only blinked and then the figure was gone.

A few moments later, the tiny boat appeared below his position, and began to approach the rocks as instructed. Bruhn and Siekert rowed, whilst Schenck crouched at the bow with his Karabiner 98 Kurz aimed and ready. Erich dry-swallowed several times, watching their progress. He was worried that the silhouette would appear suddenly and shoot his men. He was worried the silhouette wouldn't be there at all.

They reached the rocks. Schenck leapt from the tiny boat and searched every nook and cranny. But it rapidly became clear nobody was there.

When the three soldiers returned, derision was stencilled across the smug grins of their faces. No doubt Bruhn had made some comments whilst rowing back. Dirchs muttered something under his breath and went back to his cot with the machine gun.

Sturm politely suggested Erich had spent too much time away staring out the window.

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Erich politely advised Sturm he was close to being hurled into the stockade for questioning his ability to perform a simple role. He grabbed Sturm's packet of Lucky Strikes from the soldier's tunic pocket and walked away.

The mood within the bunker continued to deteriorate from that point.

Erich remained in the observation gallery, smoking, whilst Bruhn, Sturm, and Schenck talked quietly at the mess table. Bruhn — looking like a Teutonic lord; Sturm — nursing his bruised nose; and Schenck — the snake.

Siekert sat by the radio set with headphones on, a thousand yard stare, looking like a boy who had lost all innocence. Returning to his watch, Erich squinted as the rising sun sparkled and glinted off the sea. Were the British coming? He wondered. Maybe the silhouette had been waving at his co-conspirators seeking rescue before the rowboat reached him? That was plausible. Perhaps there was a U-Boat under the surface in preparation for the attack — a botched attempt at landing a spy. Yes, it made sense. Yet Erich resisted the urge to inform *Hauptmann* Raske in case there really was something wrong with him, a malfunction within his mind.

The men started to behave strangely. And Erich, standing on his perch above the bowels of the bunker, realised he was trapped by them; no way out except through the steel door below. It started with Schenck, standing up from the table clutching his strange-shaped head and stumbling silently to the door. Sturm called after him but Bruhn grabbed his arm where they sat and held him back. Bruhn's attitude was to watch as Schenck whirled around, away from the door, his eyes bulging, hands like rigid claws against his skull, mouth parts working to utter some sound that never came. Then he stopped, slowly lowered his hands and stood motionless, staring at a wall... muttering. Sturm slapped both hands across the top of his bald dome and began to drag his fingers down his face, making baby-sounds and rolling out his fat lips. Bruhn eased himself up from the chair, the mask of arrogant confidence now cracking as he began to perceive something pressing down upon them.

Erich felt it too. Above them. A weight, or force...

It ended with Siekert, crying out and leaping away from the radio set; the headphones tumbled to the concrete floor, the cable snapped. He claimed he had heard the woman's voice — whispering through the chatter of German officers... the mountain! It was the mountain!

Schenck snapped out of his daze, grabbed him roughly and demanded to know what the woman could have said when she was dead. Bruhn expounded, succumbing to the babbling madness: it was the *Svolværgeita*! The *Svolvær* Goat! The tall pinnacle at the southwest face of the *Fløyfjellet* mountain. It had a two pronged rock-formation that made it look like a troll's molar tooth — or a radio antennae beaming into the Void!

Or the horns of the Devil, Sturm pointed out.

Erich stood silently observing from above as Sturm and Bruhn closed in on

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Siekert, who was helpless in Schenck's vice-like grip. What had the woman said? They wanted to know. What was the mountain doing? Was it broadcasting her message from the horns?

None of what they were saying made any sense.

And then Dirchs woke up. Rising from his cot like a nightmare, a giant demon wrapped in the field grey uniform and bottle-green collars — the fabric stretched as his muscles worked, shoving the butt-stock into his hip and swinging right to left and back again, finger pressed hard on the trigger unleashing fire and an unholy cacophony of noise in the enclosed space. So much noise Erich mercifully did not hear the screams of the four men he gunned down.

The noise stopped. Great clouds of shattered concrete dust and cordite boiled upwards from the belly of the bunker.

Dirchs would have to be dealt with. Erich upholstered the Walther P38 from his side and quickly marched down the concrete steps to the balcony. The stench of cordite grew stronger but didn't obscure the reek of human excrement from below. He coughed as the clouds of dust rolled up over him. Visibility dropped to almost nothing. Erich chambered a round, using the de-cocking lever to safely lower the hammer without firing, allowing him to carry the weapon primed. As he carefully approached the wooden steps leading down into the maelstrom, he heard the sounds of a struggle, happening somewhere unseen below him: a grunt, a scream that withered into a gurgling heaving wheeze.

When he initially reached the bottom, Erich stood by the steps, holding on as if they were a lifeline to some pathetic notion of escape. The dust and smoke began to clear and revealed a scene of horror not unfamiliar to him; the bodies of men he had known lying dead or dying amongst the carnage of machine gun fire. Uniforms tattered and stained in blood. The scene was made more eerie by the golden light streaming in through the observation gallery high above, causing some of the shadows down here to deepen in contrast to the beams of light.

He found Bruhn alive...barely. Beside him lay the gargantuan corpse of Dirchs, speared through the neck with his paratrooper knife.

"My brother..." Bruhn gasped.

Erich frowned, squatted down beside him and deftly examined half a dozen bullet wounds puncturing Bruhn's left bicep, thorax, abdomen and thigh. He was leaking blood too fast to be saved. "Your brother? Is that who is out there?"

Bruhn's face twisted with pain; he shook his head, gulping air, struggling to talk. "Mountain... Black Sun. Up there. The woman... Krebs... sacrifice."

Ice water seeped into his veins. Erich's features formed the visage of snarl: "You know this?"

Sweat was pouring down Bruhn's face, mixing with the coating of white dust that made him look crazy. He glanced briefly at his own wounds and could see he was done for. "No.... guessing. Makes sense."

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“Pah! Rubbish. What about us? What about you? Would the Black Sun sacrifice us too for whatever this woman claims to have done?”

Bruhn’s blue eyes were half-lidded now, they stared back into Erich’s with a horrible certainty. Yes, the Black Sun would allow anything to happen—even to good German soldiers.

The life ebbed from Bruhn in the next few moments. The harsh final breath came with a rattle that Erich had heard from dying men dozens of times before.

Something interrupted the gilded light streaming in from above. Erich twisted round and stood, staring up at the wide slit of the observation gallery. The sky was different. It was changing. He went to the steel door, hurled it open and dashed outside. Sucking in great breaths of the fresh sea air, clouds of dust billowing from his uniform, he scrambled down the rocky path to the shore line. And nearly fell over in shock at what he saw.

The sunlight was buckling. A vast dome-like shape was forming in the sky ahead of him... like the noise of a rocket made of fire, trailing tendrils of heat that were distorting the air around them. But there was nothing there. Just sunlight being forced back by—Erich span round and angled his head upwards into the cobalt blue firmament of dawn and saw... a hole. Or something. He couldn’t describe it. His brain couldn’t fathom it. Something was there. And growing larger. His eyes tracked downwards and saw the pinnacle of Svolværgeita with its two prongs, Storhorn and Lillehorn, separated by just 1.5 metres. Soldiers had climbed up there and leapt from one horn to the other, with a 300 metre fall below them.

It wasn’t the cause of this.

He turned back to the open sea. The surface of the water was frothing in the heat coming down from above. He needed a better view of the hole in the sky, he needed to see what was beyond! What was coming through? The notion was as insane as him jumping into the rowing boat, untying the rope and grabbing the oars to power himself across to the shallow ridge of black rocks where he had seen the silhouette. It wasn’t rational. It was a compulsion. He had to do this. It was what was needed, for him to be there.

The witness.

All the time he kept his eyes on the sky above the bunker where the hole continued to expand. Shouts of alarm were coming from the settlement. Erich pictured the squads of men mobilising under Raske’s command. What would they think when they came to the bunker?

The furious blister of compressed and repelled sunlight flexed violently. A concussion wave detonated like thunder and echoed off the mountains.

The air became like a furnace around him, and then hotter still. The sea started to heave, as if it were a giant beast trying to wriggle and turn away from the heat. The paintwork on the rowboat began to bubble and peel. Erich gritted his teeth around a howl of pain streaming from his throat. His hands... his face... burning!

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He rowed on, relentless, eyes fixed on what was now taking shape above.

The boat nearly smashed apart as it struck the rocks. The impact jarred him, knocked the oars from his hands which were red and blistering. He managed to stop himself from falling backwards. Getting to his feet he stumbled out of the smoking shell of wood and clambered onto the rocks. Heat haze filled the horizon around him. A large wave crashed against the rocks and showered him in a spray of water and foam. It was wonderful! He laughed and staggered up a serrated mound of the black, irregular islet and found a vantage point to observe from.

The air was becoming cooler. He turned and cast his gaze back towards the shore. The bunker was baking in the furnace heat. The bulging crown of repelled sunlight had shifted forwards, and was now searing the landscape in waterfalls and tendrils of fire. Erich could hear the screams of the men and woman in Svolvær. Soldiers and locals, burning alive. The Order of the Black Sun were not here. The Sami woman had opened the way—she had fulfilled a vast sacrifice for them...

His eyes were drawn upwards, towards the rim of a shape—it was a sound, a colour, a mass of substance that was not material but... a swirling vortex of the Outer Chaos that smashed against his senses and shattered all his understanding of logic, and perception, and reality.

The bulk of it was spreading outwards to reveal an inner core...

The fabric of light and time was shredding apart.

Something was showing itself. Something was coming through!

For an unknown reason, he dropped his gaze back to the bunker. A feeling of being watched...

NO!

The word screamed from his heat-seared throat and cracked his charred lips.

NO!

He stepped to another rock, raised his arm in agony and waved it, warning the figure who stood at the wide slit of the observation gallery. Run! Save yourself!

The figure just stood there, staring, as if transfixed. The uniform, the modified peak of the field cap... in a singular moment of paralysing horror, Erich realised the figure he was looking at was him.

He had seen his own smouldering form through the warped lens of time and space. A parody of annihilation, a mockery of insanity. He had witnessed his own fate before it happened.

Erich stood there as a curtain of darkness swept the sky away, leaving a burning hole of brilliant dazzling light—whiter than white. And he knew that this was the Black Sun. The air boiled but his lungs did not wither. The sea collapsed and then rose up in a heaving wave, but his body was not washed away.

As the Black Sun peered through the weird hole caused by this cosmic alignment, all light was sucked to the edges—so that every building, and form of landscape appeared to be black framed in dazzling, burning penumbra. Erich stared

Shadow of the Black Sun

into the primordial darkness even as his eyes melted in their sockets and the optic nerves fused with the alien energy pouring through them directly into his brain.

Abruptly as it began, it ended. The stars were no longer in alignment. The way that had been opened now closed.

His vision remained, despite the lack of eyes. His awareness came through other senses.

Erich found the boat flung upon the rocks, scorched and encrusted in soot, like his hands, but it was sea worthy. He rowed back. In the bunker there was nothing left. Where there had been the bodies of five men were now smears of a dusty carbon blackness streaked with grease and emanating an acidic smell. Vaguely humanoid forms... burnt onto the floor like shadows. The same would be found in the settlement. But Erich could not go there to look. His situation was tragic.

Everything is wrapped in silence. The sea crashes against the rocks without noise. The seagulls wheel overhead with voiceless cries. Looking at his hands, shimmering and drifting like smoke held together by some clever conjuring trick, Erich understands. He is out of time, outside of time, existing in a shattered fragment of the world he was once in, neither here nor there. Locked between a gap in time and space. A shadow bound to exist forever. A shadow of the Black Sun. ✖





Bloodborn in Sarandë

By Patrick Garratt

WHILE the sand pressed against Alexio Davies' cheek was wet, the hand of Lieutenant-Commander Jones had been wetter. Davies fluttered his eyelids as waves lapped at the soles of his boots. The tightening sensation of the officer's slimy palm on his forearm had faded, as had the pain of sucker welts left on his skin, but neither had been entirely washed away by days rocking in clear Aegean water. Green and black belching screams took him and he found his naked back crushed against olive bark. He wiped pieces of vomit from the papers scrunched at his feet and remained seated as he reeled under blows of recall. Saltwater stains marked the edges of his papers, which he'd unsealed in his skiff as the British cruiser retreated south to brave the Italian cape. Sail east to Sarandë, Albania. Rendezvous with Greek pilot Aristeidis Marinos. Scupper a Yugoslav destroyer before it falls into Italian hands. All wrong. The same paranoia that had guided him to a sand spar three miles north of the intended meeting point pushed him to his feet. He staggered through the dunes lining Albania's bald coast and away from the sea.

His plan, as best he could understand it between the blurry fits that forced him into dry ditches to hide, had been to circle back to avoid approaching the target from the beach. His teeth splintered a stick as his limbs shook the scrub. Visions of past glories flitted behind the whites of rolled eyes, the work of Italian frogmen in the Med undone and ships saved. Months ago now.

His Greek parentage had made him perfect for operating in the region. Once HMS Ajax's darling diver, Davies had suffered ignominious side-lining thanks to increasingly regular blackouts, and any aspirations of rising through the officer ranks had been locked away with him in quarters. Lieutenant-Commander Jones's

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suggestions that Davies should become more involved in covert operations away from the water seemed an obvious solution, but in the days before leaving the ship the diver's condition had worsened, so much so that Jones himself was the only crew member allowed to enter his cabin.

Davies removed the stick from his mouth and ran the end of a grimy finger around the circular wounds on his wrists. He waited for darkness and the opportunity to move onto a bluff overlooking the beach without risk of being spotted.



“What’s he saying?”

Tobacco-yellow spit arched from the communist guerrilla’s blistered lips as he glanced over at Davies. The sleeping Brit writhed over the roots of an ancient, man-shaped olive tree at the edge of the camp, his grey woollen blanket wet with sweat. A scout had nearly shot Davies after happening upon him in a ditch, and was stunned to find the Englishman could speak fluent Greek. Clearly sick and virtually defenceless, Davies repelled the commandos with his white skin and loose pink lips, but his papers checked out. The communist unit’s leader, Aris Zachariadis, paused when Davies told him he was to meet Marinos, then said he believed the Englishman had been deceived. Marinos was rumoured to be working with Germans in the area and couldn’t be trusted. The Greeks exchanged puzzled looks while Davies vomited into the sand. That was half a day ago, and Davies had been asleep in the safety of the camp since sundown.

“I don’t know what it means.” Zachariadis pulled spiralled hairs from this heavy beard. “I think it’s English.”

Davies’s twisted syllables dampened the flames of the communists’ campfire and darkened the pupils of the smoking soldiers.

“What’s wrong with him? Do the English want him dead?”

Zachariadis flicked the end of his cigarette into the fire, dusting off his puttees as he stood.

“I don’t know. But we can’t let him meet Marinos and we can’t kill him.”

“Then what? Leave him here?”

“No. We’ll take him to the front at Sarandë and hand him over to the British there. They have spies with I Corps. I have a contact who’ll be able to help.”

Davies kept his bloody eyes turned away from the fire’s light and pulled the edge of the soaked blanket over the blackened, cracking skin above his wrists.



Sarandë lay dark against the soundless sea through Davies’s binoculars. A moss of palm fronds smudged the town’s beach, fuzzy against the rigid lines of two

Bloodyborn in Sarandë

small, moon-picked Allied sub-hunters brooding in the bay. The Greek army had occupied the clutch of white boxed Albanian buildings and donkey carts the previous winter, beating back the Italians after their failed attempt to invade Greece. Coastal support from the British navy had been in vain: the Greeks had failed to press their advantage on land and the Italians had formed a new front. Greece's I Corps camped to the north of the city, thrusting a wedge of artillery between the port and the Italian placements to the northeast.

Zachariadis whispered to Davies without taking his eyes from the glasses.

"We need to go down into the town. I'll take you to meet my contact and you'll be taken to a British ship."

Davies licked his fraying lips. "No," he said.

"What? By God, man, I'll kill you here."

"You will take me around the Greek patrols to the I Corps encampment."

Zachariadis swivelled in the dust and reached for his dagger before freezing at Davies's wet touch. The communist dropped the binoculars. Twenty feet down the hill one of the band's officers glanced up at the commotion before shrugging and returning to his cigarette.

"Do as you are bid," hissed Davies, his fingers sucking up the communist's crawling skin.



"There."

Davies pointed ahead towards a ruined tavern on the edge of the semi-permanent collection of barracks and fires. Thousands of Greek soldiers cluttered the bleached, lunar landscape north of Sarandë. Dusk melted into the netted barrels of Schneider howitzers and field guns, and the scent of grilling meat drifted out over the sounds of complacency, of rattling glasses and card game arguments. The building to which Davies had signalled was set apart from the camp, its roof collapsed and its walls white. Now he looked closely through the binoculars, Zachariadis caught the flicking of coloured lights, as dim as stars, through the tavern's black windows.

"What are we doing here?" The communist commander's face shone with sweat in the moonlight.

"I don't know," said Davies, tears tracing his cheekbones. "I'm sorry."

Davies was up and over the escarpment before the soldier was able to reply, the camp's distant din easily dulling the scuffing of his boots through the dirt. The communists' number two appeared, flat on his chest in the sand.

"We must leave," he said. "If I Corps finds us here we could be shot."

"We go nowhere," said the commander. "Something's happening. Just make sure you're ready."

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Davies used the tavern to shield his approach from the encamped Greek soldiers. Faint streamers of green and red leaked from the roof, more obvious as he whimpered across the final feet to the doorknob. A Greek air force officer grabbed him before he fell. Davies swayed on the dusty road, gelatinous liquid dripping from his exposed finger bones. The pilot's leather face. The cracks in the prison. The black light. Infant screams filled the nursery as his father held him forward as the desperate rays sought their exit, sought their baby key. Snapped shut. His mother told him his father had died testing aircraft over Naxos, that they had immigrated to Britain to escape a past which now reached out and touched Davies on a crumpled shoulder.

"My son," said Aristeidis Marinos. "We've been waiting for some time. You should have met me on the beach. It would have been easier."

The tavern's main room, wide to the galaxy-scarred Albanian sky and ringing with crickets, proved to Davies an incomprehensible scene. Masked faces and uniforms stretched and collided as he fell to one knee, only prevented from falling to the bar's creamy Albanian flagstones by his pilot father. A greying man, vampirish in features and dressed in SS uniform bearing mixed, unofficial insignia, hissed at the couple in German then switched to Greek.

"Get up, Alexio," he said. "We need you now."

Hairless women near the lightless fireplace rocked back and forth, their hands to their bandaged eyes. Davies attempted to rise but found himself glued to the tavern's floor as if in a dream. Tendrils of glowing red vapours rushing from the women's mouths to wrap around Davies's head and neck.

"Get up," Marinos said, his hand dragging at Davies's ruined fatigues. "They're Norms. They've been controlling your dreams for months. They brought you here. You aren't asleep. Get up now."

Davies held up his hands to find them bubbling, their meat falling away to the tavern floor. He turned to flee, but his feet were fixed and he risked snapping his legs. An SS officer, a young senior assault leader, pushed Marinos aside and shouldered Davies's weight. He spat at the older German in odd uniform.

"Do it now, Lohmann," he said, his face taut with disgust. "He's changing. You nearly killed us all by waiting for his blood, so take it."

Lohmann stepped forward and grabbed Davies by the neck, pushing his stinking breath into his melting eyes.

"My name is Albrecht Lohmann, Alexio Davies," he said, keeping his grunting voice low to avoid any chance of detection. "I am a devotee of the Black Sun, and you are very special to me."

Pleading fingers of black light. Childish screams echoing from the nursery's white walls.

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“His blood, Lohmann.” The SS *Einsatzgruppen* officer slapped his hand on the butt of his holstered Walther P38. Lohmann bared his teeth before tearing away an apple-sized piece of Davies’ rotting throat with ragged nails. Black drops splattered the assault leader, causing him to drop back, flapping at his face. Lohmann shrieked with laughter.

“It can’t hurt you, Müller,” he said. “Your *Totenkopfring* protects you.”

Müller flashed Lohmann hate from the floor as he rubbed the silver ring on his finger and wiped the greenish blood from his mouth. Davies grasped at his neck, his world expanding and retracting into the corners of the room, from which leaked six black figures, silk masks dripping down from their crusher caps. They began to groan. Müller screamed from the floor as the blood on his face lurched to life. A chattering red humanoid, a demonic humming bird emitting a bass buzz, hovered before Davies and Lohmann on membranous wings. The SS officer, his face stretched with terror, held up his ring to the imp. The devil’s tiny face chirped in mocking.

“Is that the bloodborn?” Müller’s voice quavered.

“Yes,” screeched Lohmann, now unconcerned by the I Corps tents near to the tavern. “And it’s time to free this child.” He pushed Davies to the floor.

The bloodborn sped into Marinos’s eye, razor wings peeling the area of his skull leading to his hairline like an over-ripe banana. Jets of blood pissed from the Greek’s face as he collapsed, too shocked to scream. He squirmed in a splashing slick as the imp clattered against his bones, eggs leaping from the tiny monster’s body into his blood to erupt into new demons until a swarm chattered in the tavern’s air above Marinos’s shuddering corpse. When the blood pool was exhausted, a solid mass of bloody evil whirled before Lohmann’s cackling grey mouth. Davies’s whined, his hands now jellified and fingerless, and began to fit on the floor in a pool of slime. Müller drew on his SS officer training and regained composure, arming his pistol as he clambered to his feet.

“Now, Lohmann,” he said. “Send them to the Greeks.”

The Black Sun sorcerer used his palms as demonic magnets to push the swarm’s opposite pole through the open roof and into the black sky. The stars and moon were visible no longer.

Within seconds screaming erupted at the edge of the I Corps encampment. Müller strained as he pulled open the trapdoor to the tavern’s cellar, releasing a dozen SS rank and file. They lined themselves against the glassless windows facing the Greeks with two MG 34 machine guns and a bristle of Karabiner 98k rifles. The room exploded in gunfire, German lead cutting into the line of tents, the nearest of which now stood under a cloud of buzzing red.

Lohmann grabbed Davies and pushed him flat on his back, his Greek diver’s misshapen skull smacking into the bar’s stone floor. Oblivious to anything other than the destruction of the Greeks, Müller ordered the SS advance under cover of

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the machine guns. Chaos engulfed the Greek encampment. Tents burned as flesh stripped from bone and automatic weapons blazed wildly at the sky.

“Now,” screamed Lohmann, barely audible over the endless stutter of the MG 34s.

The silk faces gathered around Davies, joining a circle with Lohmann’s greying temples, and they began a low, gruelling chant.



Müller could barely have seen anything more gratifying when his unit reached the edge of the Greek encampment. A sea of gore had washed the sand. The bloodborns were tearing through the Greek troops with terrific speed, shredding skin and muscle from the terrified army as flamethrower units laced the red sky with fire. The German’s pressed rifle shots into the back of the panicked Greeks, a unit of ten SS against thousands of enemies. Such glory. The bloodborn imps tore through Greek offal, the flamethrower fire only able to contain a fraction of the bursting eggs as the Greeks’ composure broke completely and rifle crews routed in the direction of Sarandë, only to dissolve in a withering wave of German MG 34 fire.

Such glory.

Müller turned his boyish joy back to the tavern and the burning roses of the MG 34 muzzles, but perplexity clouded his happiness as crackling lightning bristled the tavern’s roof. His unit was under no threat from the Greeks. He swapped the magazine on his pistol as he charged back across the sand towards the tavern, careful to avoid being mistaken for a Greek deserter by the German machine gunners.



“What’s happening?”

“Shut up and target the canisters on the backs of the flamethrowers,” ordered the communist commander. The sniper looked sideways at him over his scope.

“I will not.”

Zachariadis seized the collar of his donkey jacket.

“Do it, or there will be none of them left to save and the Italians will be able to walk into Greece. Use your eyes, man. The Germans are using some devilry. We must burn it.”

The sniper looked at the commander’s calloused fingers on his collar, paused, then returned his eye to the rifle’s scope. The first shot missed. Zachariadis soothed him with words of encouragement. The second round tore through the base of one of the Greek flamethrower tanks. The explosion thudded over the relentless gunfire and emitted wheeling, burning Greek men. Like some satanic Zeppelin, the bloodborn cloud began to burn in the air. A second explosion of cooking gas canisters engulfed a patch of tents large enough to house several

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hundred men: innumerable bloodborn flashed into nothingness.

Zachariadis grabbed the sniper again and pointed down to Müller's rifle unit on the edge of the camp. The sniper didn't hesitate this time, smashing a round into the ear of one of the SS soldiers. The commander frantically signalled the rest of his communists, some twenty men, to open fire on the Germans while they struggled to rework cover to guard their flank. Zachariadis grinned as more of the Greek army made good their escape. The Germans' situation switched in seconds from dominance to certain death as the bloodborns screeched in the flames and the Greeks began to regroup.



While Lohmann had judged Müller nothing but an idiot, this was only partially true. The SS squad leader had been diligent when assigned to shepherding the Black Sun unit deep into enemy territory, and had immersed himself in several weeks of research before the team left Germany. He was well aware of Lohmann's status as the most powerful sorcerer in the Black Sun order, second only to founder Reinhardt Weissler himself, and was under no illusion as to the severity of the situation when he halted at the smashed tavern door. The machine guns hadn't fired for some minutes and now Müller saw why: the gunners, despite wearing protective rings, had been replaced with a pool of gore and some twisted metal. White light fizzed all about the group of floating sorcerers, a rotating black mass around Lohmann and something Müller assumed used to be Davies. The Greek diver had transformed into a bubbling slug-like creature with a purple, gelatinous skirt. His antenna wept a fluid not dissimilar to molten ice cream onto Lohmann's juddering hands as the sorcerers chanted the rites of a spell Müller recognised instantly as the Dread Equinox, or at least some darker chaotic variant of it. While the details of the incantation itself were kept secret from those outside the Black Sun and it was only the most powerful groups able to cast it or even have intimate knowledge of its working, Müller had read several accounts of it being put into practice on the battlefield by Black Sun operatives. The white lightning and hovering circle of Canons left the SS officer with no alternative: if he didn't interrupt the casting he'd be consumed with everything else in the immediate vicinity as the Black Sun peeked out from its loathsome forbidden valley.

Lohmann flitted under the whirling Canons, pushing his thumbs through the glue at the top of the slug's antennae. His teeth dripped slime.

"You were shown the Sun as a child and you were touched." The Black Sun leader's voice cracked and halted, breaking syllables. "You are the key. Your innocence shall free the ebony globe from its valley. You will purge this disgusting planet for good!"

Ephemeral spheres of electric light shifted over the spell's central figures. Müller lurched into the bar and aimed a shot at Lohmann's head. The round

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singed the edge of the sorcery's glimmering energies and bent upwards away from its target and out into the night sky. The light flickered and two of the Canons fell to the floor. Lohmann broke from the ruined spell and leapt at Müller as the slug tilted upwards and beginning to revolve inside the wobbling gyroscope of yelling Canons. He knocked the SS officer to the ground before a second shot could be fired from the jammed pistol. Wells of blood splashed the flagstones as he forced a dagger into Müller's throat. Leaving him to die, Lohmann burst for the door.

The disrupted spell spiralled out of the control. Fingers of black light crawled up the Canons' feet, rupturing their toes and exploding their bones. The sorcerers' screams bounced from tornadoes of lightning as the Black Sun sucked the flags downwards. Lohmann's legs pumped against the night, his head making subconscious calculations about distance. His muscles tore under his uniform, the hate for Müller offset for the time being by his need to escape the spell's radius and live for another chance to complete his mission and free his god.

The Dread Equinox activated.

A globe of black light rumbled from the stone floor, dark fingers bursting the slug, showering the dry walls in a thick, infected mucus streaked with blood and snot. Skin peeled away from the whirling Canon's faces. They cursed Lohmann to a man as they died, the spell crashing to disaster. The Black Sun escaped its prison for a fraction of a second before the spell's failure relocked the gate to humankind's dimension. A vortex of hate expanded with hurricane speed out over the tavern walls and the sand surrounding them, the black and purple sphere consuming Greeks and Germans ... bloodborns and Norns ... smashed faces and triple arms ... fields of eyes turning in the black light likes corpses in a tarry river.

It blinked and vanished.

A crater smoked in the sand. The final bloodborns burned away in the cooling desert air and the Greeks skidded to a stop as officers fired shots into the air and yelled orders to halt or be executed. Lohmann crouched in an olive grove. Streams of dribble fell from his nose and mouth onto his bare chest as he hurriedly dressed in the uniform of a dead Greek soldier.

Zachariadis touched the sniper's shoulder, and then patted him on the back of the neck when he saw tears streaming down his cheeks.

"Come on," he said. The communists, shaking and silent, their thoughts laced with black fingers and warped bones, skidded from the dunes and melted into the olive forest.



"Müller was a traitor, *Mein Führer*. He was a Greek spy. He murdered the covering gunners and blew our munitions. I was lucky to escape with my life."

The man sitting at the desk stared out of the window at the Bavarian spring.

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The Black Sun's audacious plan had failed. The Greeks remained a force at Sarandë and the Italians would never be able to break through alone. He had already signed the orders for a German invasion of Greece. He couldn't afford to leave an enemy on his flank as he pushed east, and that idiot Mussolini couldn't be trusted. The *Wehrmacht* would solve the Greek problem.

He touched his moustache as he considered the fate of the wizard occupying his office. He could wait for the invasion of Russia: he only hoped the Russian winter would oblige and wait with him. ✘





Der Albtraum

By JE Bryant

To Christian's left there was nothing but chaos. An incomprehensible kaleidoscope of outlandish colours seething within the cage that he had helped construct. *Oberst* Eckhart was silhouetted against this stomach churning display of pyrotechnics, his discarded monocle bouncing and glinting in the ferocious, unnatural wind. He held one hand aloft in an approximation of a Nazi salute but the fingers were held in an odd formation. His other hand lay flat against his breast, almost as if protecting his heart, his face upraised, his eyes closed in... Rapture.

Christian felt himself sinking into a state of shock. Everything in his lithe frame was screaming at him to fight or escape. Instead, he experienced the strangest sensation, as if he were mentally withdrawing from what was occurring around him. He tried to look away but a perverse segment of his mind drew his attention towards the nearest of Eckhart's elite guards.

The imposing figure was bracing himself, defiant against the fury of the display which played out in front of him. His head wrapped in what looked like a bizarre set of flying goggles, magnetic coils framing the eye pieces and wires stretching down to a belt pack. The guard's teeth were gritted, not so much against what was happening in the cage, but against the effort he was applying to the chain leash gripped in both hands. Again the perversity of Christian's gaze followed the line of the leash, but he simply couldn't register what was at the end of it. The guard's pose, the chain's angle all indicated that some kind of canine was straining towards the cage, but Christian's mind could only find something similar in size to a dog within the translucent morass of folding sinew and bone.

Nausea flooded his chest and throat forcing him to look at the ground, but still

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he retreated somehow, the conflagration fading towards the edges of his perception. He scanned the scene again, desperate for any sense of familiarity, and found Cosmina standing to one side of the pulsing enclosure, her black tresses flowing behind her like willow branches in a storm. Her eyes, like Eckhart's, were closed, but on her brown brow were delicate lines of concentration rather than zealous ardour. Her full lips vibrated with the murmured incantation she was repeating, the delicate movements of her chin and throat bizarrely pushing Christian still further away from the maelstrom around him. Back. Back to a time when...



The sun was already high and the cafe on the outskirts of Hauingen was as quiet as it could be with a small unit of troops stationed at almost every table. An elderly waiter had just delivered the bill to where Christian and his good friend, Ernst Schmitt, sat taking in the morning. They held their own counsel amid the subdued chit chat of the men around them. At first light they had requisitioned every available horse in the area and laden them with the inventory that had been shipped in by rail from Munich overnight. The ragtag herd stood in two loose circles tied to nearby lamp posts.

“What do you think Ernst? Is it me, or is this war getting stranger by the minute?” Christian scratched the back of his close-cropped head and stretched, his eyes watering with the effort of yet another yawn.

Ernst grinned through a collection of pastry crumbs and shrugged. He moved a large hand to indicate the breakfast they had just eaten and reached towards his coffee.

“This, my dear *Lieutenant* Gruber, is perfectly normal. That, however... “ He thrust a thick thumb over his broad shoulder indicating the horses. “Now that *is* bizarre. We’re engineers, not cowboys.”

It was Christian’s turn to shrug, “The mission is in the heart of the forest. So how else do you propose we transport the materials?”

Ernst laughed and dropped his share of the bill onto a plate then wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “And what of these materials, eh? And the plans? You’ve studied them, yes?”

“Naturally.” Christian tried to sound relaxed, but he already knew where his friend’s questions were heading.

“And?”

“They are strange, I admit. A barbed wire...” Christian struggled to find an adequate description.

“A cage, Christian. But not a cage like any other I’ve ever seen. Even animal enclosures have a certain structure to them. This, with its recesses, those spire-like protrusions...” Ernst laughed again, knowing that he was playing on the concerns

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Christian had already voiced to Organisation Todt.

“You make fun of me my friend. But it still doesn’t make any sense.”

“Exactly. So why waste your time worrying? The sun is shining and there are no Russians shooting at us. Who cares that we’re also carrying enough silk thread to reach to Berlin and back.” Ernst stood with a loud scrape of his chair, the noise and sheer bulk of him galvanising nearby troops into also calling for their bills. Christian held his hands up in mock submission to his friend’s needling. He was right. Who cared how odd the mission was? At this point in the war, it was just good to be back in Germany.

The day had turned by the time Christian and his men left the town. Low, scudding cloud had spirited away the promise of the morning as they traipsed north, the soldiers leading their reluctant beasts of burden behind their *lieutenant* and *feldwebel*. Dense residential avenues were replaced by crop-heavy fields as they joined the road that ran adjacent to the river Sormattbach. Within an hour the line of the forest loomed in front of them, formidable despite its verdant prospect and there, astride an impressive mount, was *Oberst* Eckhart.

Christian had no idea why the commander had decided to join the unit here rather than in the more sociable environs of the town but, upon inspection of the figure stationed before them, he sensed that Eckhart wasn’t the type to go drinking with his men.

He was an experienced horseman, that much was self-evident from the attentive behaviour of the chestnut stallion and the way he held himself in the saddle. Proud, naturally familiar with authority and probably as mentally sharp as the cut of his black uniform.

As the unit neared, Christian was able to make out finer details; the strong jaw line, the small duelling scar next to one of his keen blue eyes, the cultivated look of general disinterest. There was a strange Black Sun insignia on his left shoulder and, in his gloved left hand, Eckhart held an additional rein.

The supple leather looped away to the far side of mount, seeming to lead to another, smaller creature. Christian puzzled over this, wondering if this was why Eckhart had chosen to meet them here rather than in town.

He looked to the stallion’s fetlocks and saw that two human legs were stationed beyond, the hemline of a plain skirt giving an indication of the owner’s sex. It seemed that Eckhart’s contribution to mission personnel was a woman on a tether. Christian groaned to himself. Ernst was going to have a field-day with this latest addition to the growing strangeness of the operation.

Calling the unit to a halt, Christian saluted to the *oberst*. He did his best to concentrate on what was effectively his commanding officer, but the half-hearted acknowledgement by his superior did little to detract from the odd beauty of the now fully visible woman who stood next to his mount.

“Gruber.” Eckhart leant forward in his saddle and passed the trailing rein to

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Christian. “Do your best to look after *Fräulein* Stafie. Her skills are vital to the mission.”

“Absolutely. About the mission sir...”

Eckhart glanced at Christian briefly and then addressed his response to the treeline as he surveyed it.

“You have all the necessary supplies?”

“We do. It took some time...”

Eckhart cut him off. “The chainsaws? The lifting gear?”

“Yes *oberst*, everything.”

“Plus all the necessary materials for the enclosure?”

“Everything sir. But the plans for the structure, they...”

“What of them? You have them? You have the skill to build it to the specifications?”

“I do. But...”

“Good. Ensure that no harm comes to *Fräulein* Stafie.” Urging the horse forward, Eckhart moved to the front of the column of troops and indicated that they should move out. Ernst shot Christian a look, half rolled his eyes and then barked an order to the men. They diligently fell into single file and began to follow their newly appointed leader up the trail and into the forest.

Christian, under the impression that he now had some measure of Eckhart, turned his attention to the lady standing next to him and noticed that she seemed distant and unfocused. Her head was tipped slightly to one side, a bronzed hand darting to tuck dark hair away from her ear.

With some embarrassment Christian looked down at the rein he held and saw that *Fräulein* Stafie wasn't actually bound as a prisoner might be, rather a large loop of leather hung loosely around the wrist not occupied with managing her hair. He also registered that her clothing was careworn and drab, an unfashionable blouse tucked neatly behind a shapeless pinafore dress. She also wore some kind of cloth satchel slung over one shoulder and a pair of sturdy but scuffed shoes.

Christian turned to look at the end of the troop and horse line that was rapidly approaching, and decided not to delay things any longer.

“This way *Fräulein*, if you please,” he indicated the track, and was surprised when the woman looked directly towards him but still failed to make eye contact. Immediately he realised his blunder.

“Cosmina please, though you'll have to lead, *Lieutenant* Gruber. That is your name, isn't it? Your commander is such a taciturn man. I have to concentrate very closely on what little he says. Quite a novel solution to avoid riding with one of the lesser races, don't you think?” She indicated the rein she clutched. “But it's safer and quicker to hold than the shoulder of a guide.”

Christian stared at the searching of her sightless eyes, the deep hazel shot through with flashes of yellow, her pupils wide in perpetual dilation. Small white

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freckles appeared at the corner of each eye compelling his attention, or perhaps that was just a by-product of the fact that she could not return his gaze.

“My apologies,” he bowed, and realised the pointlessness of the gesture. Sighing he reached out and removed the rein from her wrist and guided her hand to his shoulder. “If you’d like to follow me.”

They fell into place at the rear of the column and moved with the others past the dense scrub and under the canopy of the trees.

The ambient sounds altered almost as soon as they passed the forest’s boundary. There was a deadness to the air that gave every rustle of the undergrowth added import. Patchy sunlight filtered through the leaves and brought something of a school trip feel to the whole expedition, emphasised by Eckhart’s slow and relaxed pace at the front of the line. Under such convivial influences, the unit soon dropped back into comfortable conversation.

It was only Christian and Cosmina who found the going hard. The track was well worn and had the spongy quality that only earth and leaves compacted over centuries could achieve. It was generally clear of brambles and branches, and Christian was already thinking of himself as a good and considerate guide, but still Cosmina struggled.

“It’s all so unfamiliar,” she exclaimed. “You have to realise, *Lieutenant*, that until last week my world was a much smaller place. The confines of the bunk house and work yard at the camp. And yet, here I am now in this forest with you.”

“You raise a good point *Fräulein* Stafie. Why are you here? I wasn’t informed that we’d have civilians accompanying us.” Maybe, Christian thought, this was finally an opportunity learn more about the mission.

“The same reason as you *Lieutenant*. I have made a deal with the devil.”

Christian laughed, “I’ve made no such deal. I’m just following orders and trying to get through this war in one piece.”

“But you made a choice at some point. You decided to wear that uniform just as I have made a deal with the men that Eckhart represents.”

Christian stopped and Cosmina faltered behind him. He looked over his shoulder at her. “And what does that deal entail exactly?”

“Safe passage of my family back to their homeland in exchange for my... I think Eckhart calls them my ‘unique abilities’. How about you *Lieutenant*? What are your unique abilities?”

“I build things. I tell others how best to blow things up. I’m an engineer by trade *Fräulein* Stafie.” He began walking again, looking to the end of the troop line and thinking that he would have to rearrange Cosmina’s travel arrangements. He could hardly lead his men stuck here at the back playing chaperone to this woman.

“When we halt,” Christian called over his shoulder, “I’ll get the men to redistribute some equipment and we’ll see if we can make a mount available for you.”

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“I don’t want to be any bother,” Cosmina said, her grip tightening slightly on Christian’s shoulder. He glanced back.

“It’s not a problem,” he said but wondered, once again, just what kind of trouble they might be heading into.

The group rested in a natural glade a few miles further up the track; the horses nuzzling the ground in search of food as the heat of the day began to take hold. A young *unterfeldwebel* called Kuster asked whether tunics could be unbuttoned. Christian looked to Eckhart to see if he had any thoughts about the request, but the *oberst* remained lost in contemplation of his surroundings, as equally uncaring about the heat of the day as he appeared to be towards the men’s discomfort. If he has an opinion, Christian thought as he allowed the men to relax their dress code, let him countermand this order and at least we’ll all have a better idea of what he wants from us. He wandered over to where he had left Cosmina and found Ernst squatting next to her. His friend looked up as soon as Christian approached, but this wordless contact was lost on their female companion.

“It’s good to keep the men relaxed,” Ernst gave a wry grin. “Especially when none of us have any idea why we’re here.”

“I can tell you why I’m here,” the flat delivery in Cosmina’s voice made Ernst raise his eyebrows.

“Tell us then,” the big man said. “We’re obviously going to get nothing from our new leader and mysteries have always given me indigestion.”

Cosmina smirked at Ernst’s oafish bravado. “I know the form of words in my people’s tongue. My mother was versed in the old ways, and I have some skill at lifting curses, the binding or breaking of wards, divination... Elements of the esoteric arts.”

Incredulous confusion passed silently between Ernst and Christian. “The old ways?” Christian tried to keep the derision out of his voice.

“Yes. Your modern world is so very young *Lieutenant*, and so very arrogant and violent. Why shouldn’t...”

“Wait a minute,” Ernst was grinning and shaking his head. “I need to make sure I’ve got this right. You’re here because you’re some kind of mystic? A mind reader? A fortune teller?” Cosmina’s face grew hard at Ernst’s tone. “I’m sorry *Fräulein*, and no disrespect to you, but this is starting to sound like a bad joke.”

“And what do you mean by that?” There was a cool, controlled anger in Cosmina’s voice and Christian was unnerved by it.

“I mean... Two engineers, a mystic and a member of Nazi high command walk into a forest one day. Doesn’t that sound like the opening of a joke to you?”

“Haha,” Christian feigned a laugh hoping to dissipate the tension that was apparent between these two. “Now you come to mention it...”

“Move out!” Eckhart’s call carried easily in the dull air between the trees.

Ernst slapped his knees and rose, “Well, let’s hope the punch line’s a funny one,

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eh?” He said and then moved off to cajole the unit into action. Christian, reached down and took Cosmina’s arm, helping her to her feet.

“I’m not sure your friend is taking this as seriously as he should,” she said. “Eckhart is a driven man, driven by a high command that has a lot resting on the success of this mission.” Christian found her sombre assessment unsettling.

“Ernst is Ernst. Forgive him. You do get used to his ways and, to be fair, this operation is already beyond anything we’ve experienced in this war so far.”

“When it’s run its course,” she said. “It may well be beyond anything you’ve ever experienced in your life *Lieutenant*.”



The density of the trees increased as they ventured further into the forest, not just in their placement adjacent to each other, but also in the girth of their trunks. Every child learned to measure the age of a tree by counting its growth rings when cut, but Christian was unprepared for the sheer weight of organic history that loomed about him. Breaks in the canopy grew fewer and the march had decayed into a trudge through an oppressive and over-oxygenated atmosphere. Among the mulch-deadened footsteps, voices too had dropped to weary murmurs.

They felt, rather than sensed that the day was drawing to a close, that the gloom amid the trees was as much to do with an obscured sunset as the entwined foliage. Christian passed the reins of the dappled mare that Cosmina now rode to Ernst and moved up the column to fall into step next to Eckhart’s mount.

“*Oberst*. We should camp and let the men rest,” Christian checked his watch. “It’ll be dark within the hour.”

Eckhart sneered as if the request irritated him intensely. “Did you include the battery torches in the inventory?”

“Of course. As I said before, all of the supplies...”

“Then bring one to me to distribute the others to the men. My deadline isn’t up for discussion Gruber.” His attention returned to the meandering track. It seemed that this particular conversation was at an end.

“As you wish,” Christian nodded. He stopped and let the group move to a position where he could issue the necessary orders.

The trees lit up around them as twilight fell, and only the cooling of the air could alleviate the pervasive fatigue and unease. Multi-limbed shadows danced wherever the bouncing torch beams alighted, a flickering silent movie the Surrealists would approve of. Conversation had also stopped, and didn’t have the required energy to start again when the occasional pause arrived as Eckhart fumbled with his monocle in order to consult his map. Everyone was exhausted, but there was still no order to halt and make camp.

Finally, the group broke away from the main track and followed what was

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little more than an animal trail. Both men and horses became cautious, their feet seeking and finding tentative purchase under the erratic lights. The pace, already slowed by fatigue, descended to a crawl and the men's heads dropped to their chests, so much so that no one, with the possible exception of Eckhart, noticed the low stone walls that began to emerge on either side of their route. They passed more of these huddled structures, just a few square metres in size and each festooned with so much moss and lichen that they almost appeared natural.

A little further and the trees thinned allowing the shadow of an angular structure to become manifest against a patchy, star-strewn sky. It was against this backdrop that Eckhart finally brought the march to a halt.

The camp was established in befuddled haste, and Christian was too tired to care about setting a watch. Tents were pitched in a haphazard formation around a small central fire that Ernst had built. A bit more attention was paid to both Eckhart's and Cosmina's sleeping arrangements but, after they were organised, the last acts of the long day were a tumble of bed rolls and a racket of snores.

Ernst dropped some logs around the fire to keep it contained overnight and Christian dragged himself to join his friend before exhaustion finally claimed him. They crouched beside the meagre flames and looked to the *oberst's* tent. The bright glare of one of the torches spilled through the gaps in the canvas and there was restlessness about its occupant.

"I suppose I'd struggle to sleep if I had been sat in a saddle all day," Ernst's implicit criticism made Christian raise a weary finger to his lips.

"It's too quiet. Especially for such comments," he admonished. Ernst listened, as if suddenly realising the lack of sound beyond the camp, and then shrugged.

"The animals are more sensible than us. Even they know that there's no reason to be in this forsaken place far from good food. But if it's the quiet you're worried about, don't be. We're engineers. There'll be enough noise for everyone tomorrow."

Christian nodded at the sense in this and considered the stack of supplies hastily taken from the backs of the exhausted horses. Noise aplenty hidden within that collection of tools and materials, he thought.

"Perhaps the quiet will make for a deep sleep," he said and slapped Ernst on the back as he stood. "Don't stay up all night pondering my friend."

Swaying on tired feet, Christian half acknowledged the grunted negative from the other man and then sagged towards his tent in search of rest.



He woke early despite his fatigue and was gripped by the sudden sensation that he was suffocating, struggling to breathe in the stagnant air around him. A breath,

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and then another calmed his nerves but he still couldn't shake the eerie sensation that everything was distant to him. Laying there, straining his ears to pick up any sound, he began to shift himself, almost as if to test his own ability to hear. The blanket made a comforting rasp as it slid away and Christian sat up, the camp bed giving a series of welcome creaks as he did so. Fears of a mysterious deafness fell away as he struggled to get his boots on, but he still couldn't free himself of the disquiet this cloistered atmosphere produced.

Thinking back to the night before didn't help. Usually a prolific and vivid dreamer, he found everything a blank from the point he had collapsed into his tent until this morning. It was an absence that left him more unsettled than refreshed.

He shook his head and placed a hand around his throat, the panic about his inability to properly catch his breath still lingered there. It was as if the forest was holding its breath around them as well. A gasp, or perhaps a deep inhalation before a call, or even a scream.

Pushing up into a stoop, Christian strapped on his Luger and stumbled out through the tent's entrance, choosing to translate such useless and circular thinking into something immediate and useful—like emptying his bladder or seeking out something hot to drink. His intentions, however, were forgotten as soon as he saw the chapel.

What remained of the structure was hardly more than the height of three tall men, the low spire or belfry taking up almost a quarter of that elevation. This part of the building had survived, Christian surmised, as a result of the over-engineering of its supporting foundations and walls. The remainder of the low structure had tumbled to the ground to be claimed by the ravages of time.

Unlike the crumbling walls, the floor appeared to be intact with irregular but smooth flagstones. These, dotted as they were with tussocks and detritus from the nearby trees, stretched towards the base of the low pinnacle where, beneath the only remaining arched window frame, sat an altar.

Unable to hold on any longer, Christian ducked behind a tree to relieve himself and peered back at the chapel, sensing that there was something odd about its design. Then he noticed that the alignment of the centre piece appeared to be incorrect. Instead of the usual cross apse formation, it sat in line with the aisle, looking more like a mortuary slab than a place dedicated to prayer.

He shook himself and realised that curiosity had replaced his earlier disquiet. His contemplation of the chapel's layout seemed more real than his shortness of breath or any abstract fears. Perhaps Cosmina's words of the day before had disturbed him more than he was aware of? He squinted at her closed tent and made a mental note to talk to her further whenever she emerged.

The gnawing, churning cacophony of chainsaws became the only sound in the whole forest. Eckhart had paced a perimeter with Christian and one detail

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was clearing a circular expanse around the chapel. Others were re-pitching tents, turning one into a serviceable canteen, while yet another group had transferred lifting gear to the foot of the misaligned altar. Industrious activity gave everyone a renewed sense of purpose and the trial of the previous night was soon forgotten. Regardless of Eckhart's vagaries, there was a job to do here and his men would do it to the best of their ability.

Christian stood next to a group of screw jacks and looked back at a camp that was rapidly becoming a work site. The ground wasn't overly contoured, which was useful as Eckhart had thrown the additional need for a level platform into the already hectic schedule. Its inclusion hadn't over-stretched resources, as Ernst had come up with the practical solution of using tree stumps as foundations layered with logs made from the fallen timber. No one would be able to dance on the finished surface, but it did meet with Eckhart's approval. There was even enough wood remaining to set up a tying post for the horses. With resources amply covered, division of labour was now the main issue that Christian faced.

He had a small team working on the tubular sections of the enclosure and would move men over to this project as they completed other tasks. It meant that there could be no slacking off anywhere, but he wasn't sure how long the men could sustain their current pace. For the moment, though, everyone appeared to be fully engaged with their allotted tasks.

Christian had left Ernst in charge of checking and rechecking the odd dimensions of the enclosure, but the man's sheer physical prowess was needed at the altar. He called his friend over to him and together they considered the slab that Eckhart wanted raised. The collected dirt of centuries had been exhumed from the tight seams, and all that was needed was some leverage to make room for the screw jacks.

"Have you sent for Eckhart?" Ernst asked, picking up a long crowbar and wedging it down into one exposed crack.

Christian nodded his head indicating the direction the *oberst* was already approaching from. They watched as the man's purposeful strides made short work of the distance to the altar.

"You did right to wait for me," it wasn't exactly a compliment, but it was the first obliquely positive thing Eckhart had said to either of them. "Begin lifting the stone," he continued. "And send for *Fräulein* Stafie too. She should be here for this."

A runner was sent out and then Christian and Ernst set to work on the slab, creeping and wedging it in miniscule shifts until a slice of blackness became visible beneath a good six inches of moist stone. A chunk of freshly cut wood was wedged into the gap and the two men shifted around to the opposite side to repeat the operation. It wasn't long before the slab sat on a fulcrum made by the propping blocks. From that point it was relatively easy to slide it to one side using

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a combination of screw jacks and a grapple line.

Some way into the operation, Cosmina arrived and was led to the altar. She leant against it in an attempt to orientate herself.

“What is this place?” Her shift to open nervousness undermined any bravado she had shown to Christian yesterday. This woman didn’t trust any of them.

“You’re standing at the altar of a derelict chapel,” Christian took pity on her predicament as he moved towards the hole. Eckhart and Ernst were already peering into the exposed cavity.

The space below was designed like a shallow well, circular stonework surrounding a short central column. On top of it sat a large bundle of besmirched and decrepit cloth that Eckhart reached for and lifted as if it were a treasured child. The slight strain on his face told Christian that something important sat within the wrappings.

“There’s something all bound up in cloth. It’s about the size of a car tyre. The *oberst* is carrying it over to the altar. To you.” Cosmina smiled her thanks to Christian.

“Yes,” Eckhart’s excitement was palpable to all, although Ernst seemed more preoccupied with seeing if anything remained in the hole. “*Der Albtraum, Fräulein Stafie*. Are you aware of the legend?”

“A mischievous spirit said to torment anyone who sleeps. My people have another name for it, but I recognise the German term.”

“In classical literature it’s akin to the incubus or the succubus but, yes, a creature of dreams. However, with one very important regional difference.”

There was something manic about Eckhart’s grin as he placed the bundle at the end of the altar and began to carefully unwrap it.

“So our pleasant walk through the woods was all for a spot of amateur archaeology?” Eckhart seemed oblivious to Ernst’s barely disguised sarcasm which only fed the big man’s disrespect for authority. “Well, I’m glad you found whatever it is. Does this mean we can go back to somewhere that has cafés?”

Eckhart had finished unpicking the binding and folded the cloth back to reveal what looked like a knight’s helmet made of silver. The visor was worked to resemble the muzzle of some feral animal, the eye slits recessed into a disturbing level of blackness. Two horns or wings sat proud on either side, but it was the size of the thing that seemed most incredible. It seemed like it was fashioned for a giant.

“To answer your question,” Eckhart’s eyes remained on the helm, “You cannot go back to your cafés. We are not finished here and this particular treasure may well hold the key to shortening this war.”

“How is a knight’s... a giant’s helmet going to do that?” Christian shook his head as much in wonderment as disagreement. “I doubt its owner is still alive.”

Ernst coughed to stifle his laugh bringing Eckhart’s glower to bear.

“Ah, so you want this war to continue? All this time scrabbling around in the

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dirt and snow and sand, hiding from real and imagined enemies? All of it, all the operations and the missions and the battles are a means to an end, and that end is the Reich's dreams made manifest." He returned his attention to the helmet. "*Der Albtraum* is said to wear a magical cap that renders it invisible. What damage do you think one invisible tank could inflict? Or even one invisible soldier?" Eckhart fixed Ernst with the same penetrating stare. "The enclosure needs to be complete by midday tomorrow. See that it is ready *Feldwebel*. Dismissed."

Ernst narrowed his eyes and seemed ready to respond when Eckhart continued seamlessly, pressing his monocle into his scarred eye and addressing his comments directly to Cosmina.

"There is a lengthy inscription that runs around the lip of the helmet," he said. "If my research is correct, these may well be the words of binding. I can read them phonetically, but I leave you to weave them together." He held his hands up in mock defeat.

Ernst's lips drew into a tight line, the muscles bunching in his jaw. He shot Christian a look that said the incident wouldn't be finished or forgotten any time soon, and then turned on his heels and marched off towards the men working on the tubular metal panels.

"Read them out please." Cosmina's request drew Christian's attention back to the strange helmet. He half expected Eckhart to dismiss him as well, but the *oberst* merely began to recite words in a language Christian didn't understand. Considering Cosmina's heritage, it was probably Romanian. She listened intently, her mouth framing the odd word here and there as Eckhart rotated the helm, reading the inscription in its entirety.

"Yes. I know most of it," she said, "It's a variation on a bind or fetter incantation, but there are some parts I do not recognise."

"Not to worry *Fräulein*. Come to my tent and we'll work through the nuances so that your recital is word perfect by tomorrow evening."

"And what will be happening then *oberst*?" Concerns about Ernst's anger were instantly forgotten as, once again, Christian's curiosity got the better of him.

"With luck, my young *Lieutenant*, we will capture the secret of invisibility. But we will need one more element in order to complete this. Tell me, when will the platform be finished?"

Christian looked across to the jigsaw of logs that was being jointed together and pursed his lips. "We are already ahead of schedule. It should be ready by this evening. Tomorrow morning at the latest."

"Good. I had anticipated setbacks and here we are, as you say, ahead of schedule. Excellent. Guide *Fräulein* Stafie for me." Eckhart picked up the over-sized helmet and strode, as best he could, back to his tent.



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Night had fallen and a few of the men had grouped around the camp's fire. The dull, red glow illuminated their tired faces as their talk drifted across tree stumps to Cosmina's tent. Christian, trying to keep some semblance of distance between himself and this beguiling civilian—at least in the imagined eyes of his men—squatted next to the blind girl. She herself was much more relaxed. All of her earlier nervousness had dissipated and she rested back on her extended arms, her legs stretched out in front of her.

A tirade of expletives came from the ruined chapel and they both turned in the direction of the noise. It was typical of Ernst to throw himself into the job rather than festering with open resentment towards Eckhart. To Christian, though, the dogged determination of his friend to work into the night spoke of just how much the *oberst* had affected him. He sighed and turned back to Cosmina.

"Explain to me again what Eckhart's intending to do?" he asked.

"He plans to summon this creature and then capture its essence within the helm."

Christian rubbed at his eyes, a headache forming deep within his skull. "Doesn't any of this strike you as insane?"

Cosmina laughed, "What part of this war would you consider sane, *Lieutenant*? That is before we pick apart Eckhart's faith in my abilities—although I'm sure that platform you're building is some form of insurance."

Christian fell silent. The presence of the platform was beginning to disturb him as much as the weird geometry of the enclosure.

"I have also," Cosmina went on to say, "placed my faith in a ranking member of the SS that my family will be spared. What does that make me? A collaborator? A fool? I have no idea. All I can hope is that he is an honourable man. Hope, *Lieutenant*. That's all I have while there's still breath in me."

He had no answer to that, his only personal hope being the trivial and physical one of a better night's sleep. Just the thought of it made fatigue creep into every aching joint.

Bidding Cosmina goodnight, he walked over to where Ernst struggled with encasing a wall of the enclosure in barbed wire. It was a bleak scene. A crestfallen *gefreiter* held one of the powerful electrical torches and, in the pool of white light, a gloved and aproned Ernst struggled with the hellish bindings.

"Call it a night my friend. That's not an order but advice, in case you were wondering." The big man looked briefly up from the motions of his wire cutters and shook his head.

"Our esteemed *oberst* wants this finished by tomorrow and that's what he'll get. He most certainly will, the arrogant idiot."

"Shhh," Christian admonished, scowling at the torch-bearing *gefreiter* and indicating that this conversation should go no further on pain of some awful punishment detail yet to be invented.

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“Pfft, I care not,” said Ernst. “Anyway, this is the last of the five panels. We still need to thread the silk through the whole thing once it’s up—who knows how the hell we’ll do that. Silk and barbed wire, eh?”

Christian waved an exhausted hand, indicating that he had no energy left to enter into another discussion about the absence of logic in the whole situation.

“Go to bed Ernst and dream a little dream for me will you? Dream that we’ll be away from all of this soon enough.” The big man’s shoulders sunk at his friend’s attempt at humour and he gave a defeated nod. It was enough to assuage Christian’s own guilt at being too tired to do anything more and, for the second night in a row, he shambled away towards his tent.



The dead space of night. A hiatus. A vacuum without form, and another gasping plunge from its clutches as Christian awoke with a horrid foreboding, a sense of wanting to be free. Free of his vest, this tent, the crowding presence of the trees around and, most of all, free of Eckhart.

He sat in the dim light of dawn and tried to find some kind of composure with his breathing, a reassurance in the ever present rhythms of his body instead of the wracking pain and panic that sent spasms through his chest.

The feeling still hadn’t departed by mid-morning and Christian didn’t know whether the dirty edge to the day was the result of yet another disturbed night’s sleep, or a natural phenomenon. True, they had exposed more of the sky with their cutting, but that didn’t appear to have cleared the air. The only tangible result was that the newly revealed light brought a slate grey tinge to the fully erect structures.

Christian found that he couldn’t let his eyes rest too long on the asymmetrical shapes of the enclosure, such was their lack of any kind of cohesion. In the centre of the twisted mass of metal, the still aproned Ernst braced a ladder for a younger man who was cautiously threading the knotted silk thread along every pipe.

This was wrong, Christian realised in observing the perverse scene, and the whole mission seemed dead set on a course away from the rational. Breathing deep, he decided to confront Eckhart.

He wasn’t sure how he reached the *oberst’s* tent, such was the muddle of his mind. Stooping, he prepared to step inside and then recoiled as Eckert threw back one of the flaps and pressed past him. He appeared to have some kind of firearm clutched in one hand.

“Everything is almost ready Gruber!” he called over his shoulder.

Christian began to follow the man and then glanced into the tent. A portable radio terminal was set up on a flimsy field desk, the wrapped helmet placed on the floor beside it. Again he thought of the giant that must have worn such a

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monstrosity and balked at the image. His repulsion was a physical reaction, one that seemed to push him away from the tent. He span and witnessed Eckhart standing near the platform. His face was turned up towards the ashen sky, a couple of stubby cans held in one hand, the wide muzzled gun in the other. It was then that Christian realised a sound was registering on the edges of his hearing. He moved closer to Eckhart and, as he did so, the noise increased from the chopping buzz of some large insect to a thudding barrage of air. There was no doubting that it was a motor of some sort, but there was also the deep boom of a field gun within its tone —albeit a field gun firing at a rate that no human gun crew could ever achieve.

“A *Focke-Achgelis* Gruber!” Eckhart had to raise his voice over the increasing din. “You’ll be most impressed, I can assure you.”

The noise had become a physical thing, a pounding in Christian’s diaphragm that created an odd combination of excitement and nausea. There was a fainter, but still audible, ping next to him and he looked to see Eckhart pulling the pin out of one of the canisters. A massive plume of red smoke leapt from the small device as the *oberst* laid it on the corner of the platform. He moved to the opposite side of the structure and placed a second spewing smoke grenade. He then pushed a shell into what Christian could now see was a flare gun and held it aloft. The muted detonation produced another trail of vapour that arched into the sky, a bright effervescent ball of light shining at the apex of the parabola it described. Its release pushed the sound to an almost unbearable level.

“What the hell is it?” Christian yelled, but his words were buffeted into obscurity.

The vehicle appeared above the treeline. It had the cabin and fuselage of a light bomber, but its propellers were massive and positioned vertically upon each wing. Christian had read about helicopters at the beginning of the war, but had no idea that the technology had become so advanced in just five short years. The machine’s twin rotors boomed as it rose and advanced making the tops of the surrounding trees cower under the force of its down draft.

A large crate dangled in a net slung beneath the craft, and positioned on each corner of the four pick up points was a heavily goggled SS soldier, arms and legs expertly linked through the large holes in the heavy weave, apparently totally at ease with this outlandish form of transport.

He felt a hand on his chest and found that Eckhart was pushing him away from the intended drop zone.

The dark, cigar-shaped vessel dipped down and the men on the netted crate floated through the camp towards the platform as if this bizarre show was a routine matter. On the ground the horses neighed and whinnied as they pulled at their tethers in distress.

The noise changed yet again as the helicopter hovered in place above the platform and slowly lowered the crate to the surface. As it dropped, Christian was

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able to see one of the flight crew leaning from a hatch as he closely observed the descent, his face half obscured by a radio mask. The vehicle dipped marginally and the men clinging to the cargo net quickly detached the bulky delivery. There was one final shift in tone as the wind around the camp rose to storm force, and then the helicopter powered away, passing beyond the treeline, taking its infernal engines with it.

Eckhart was more animated than Christian had ever seen him. Jumping onto the platform he greeted the arriving men with uncharacteristic warmth, shaking hands with one of them. They all wore the same dark uniform of the SS, and all bore the identical Black Sun insignia on their shoulders. A quartet of rucksacks were nestled alongside the crates and the men reclaimed these, stepping down from the platform and walking with Eckhart towards his tent. There was no introduction for Christian, only a curt comment from the *oberst* as he passed.

“Double bunk some of your men Gruber and re-pitch a tent for our guests.”

Your men, Christian thought. Them, and us. Eckhart couldn't have been more divisive if he'd tried. Beckoning an engineer over, he issued the order and then inspected the large crate still nestled in the cargo net. The stencils were all vaguely familiar, a collection of swastikas, eagles and serial numbers. But there, again, the Black Sun, its angular snaking solar flares seeming to animate against the coarse wood. There was no warmth, no humanity in its design just a sense of universal power. Power at the expense of something, but what? Christian, suddenly aware that the *Albtraum* was the prize and that he, and all of his men, were expendable, hurried to find Ernst.

“Station the men by the horses. The first sign of trouble, go.” Christian stood in the triangular opening that served as a door to the enclosure, the chapel now resembling an intricate stage set positioned within the larger theatre of interconnected pipes.

“We should stop them,” Ernst's tone was flat. “This wouldn't take much to sabotage.” He indicated the structure around him. “I usually take a sense of pride in what I construct, but not this.”

“We can't,” Christian said. “Let's say Eckhart's plan works.”

“You really think that he's going to resurrect some medieval, invisible giant? Ha.” Ernst's laugh was devoid of any humour.

Christian shook his head, “I doubt it, but I don't know. There are stories, I know you've heard them too. If whatever happens here does, indeed, shorten the war what then? Would you rather go back to Africa? To Norway?” Ernst broke eye contact and looked at one of the barbed wire walls.

“Perhaps we could choose to sabotage this,” Christian continued. “Or perhaps we could just walk away, desert. Do you think Eckhart and those he represents will be forgiving? However, if we're prepared to escape at the first sign of trouble...”

“Then we haven't disobeyed any orders,” Ernst's tone was grudging.

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“Exactly. So will you organise the men? Stand ready with them?” Ernst pushed his tongue into his cheek and nodded. “Good. Be ready, but without drawing attention to yourself.”

“And what about you my friend?” Ernst asked.

“I’ll keep an eye on the *oberst* and his guests while we wait.”

The sense of vacuous anticipation that Christian had been struggling with since his arrival at the chapel, now transformed into a tangible thing as the first shadows of night fell.

Eckhart had ordered the fire to be built up, and the crackling fury of it could now be heard as well as felt. Rough edges of a path had been marked with stakes cut from branches, and this clear way ran from the platform towards the monstrosity that was the enclosure. No, Christian thought, Ernst was right. This warped and brutal structure was no enclosure, it was a cage. He had hoped the twilight gloom would hide some of its deformity, but the roaring fire and the electrical torches stationed at intervals around its boundary only added to its freakishness.

Eckhart was busy within, carefully placing the helmet at the centre and then examining the interior with Ernst. Christian knew what it was taking out of his friend to keep up the obsequious charade with the *oberst*, but it was an act that would not have to last much longer.

Of the visiting SS guards, little had been seen. Christian, during the requested relocation of the tent, found nothing to distinguish the four men when he inspected them. Clean shaven, square jaws, intense stares, he had encountered the SS and the military stock they were chosen from before. Holed up in their tent, they were little more than silhouettes smoking and drinking in the lamp light.

Eckhart emerged from the metal structure and began to scan the campsite, his view alighting upon Christian. He waved the *lieutenant* over.

“It is almost time Gruber,” the *oberst* called as the younger man approached. “Fetch *Fräulein* Stafie and position her here.” He indicated the side of the structure where an open space had been left around a single strand of knotted material. “Tell her to hold the silk and begin her recital on my word. Is that understood?”

Christian nodded, not to Eckhart but to Ernst who was also leaving the structure. His friend nodded back and moved off towards the nearest group of soldiers.

“Good,” said Eckhart, and all three men went their separate ways.

Christian found Cosmina stood in the centre of her tent, her hands clutched in front of her hips, a grim set to her mouth.

“It’s time, isn’t it?” she said.

“It’s Christian,” he said for her benefit. “And, yes, it is time.”

She smiled at this. “I know it’s you *Lieutenant*. Tents don’t allow for the politeness of knocking, but your approach speaks of a man who would follow such civilities if he could.”

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“He, Eckhart, wants you to be in position for your... um, recital.”

“I know. Such faith in me. It’s enough to make a girl blush.”

Christian took her hand and placed it on his shoulder before turning to leave. “Do you have any idea what might happen tonight?” He asked.

“None whatsoever. If our luck holds nothing will happen, just two foolish people chanting in a clearing.”

“And if it doesn’t hold?”

“Well, if I were you *Lieutenant* I’d be ready to run. But, then again, running has never been my strong point.”

What did she mean, he wondered? That he was more familiar with running from situations? That she wasn’t? Or that it would be hazardous for her to move anywhere at speed without a guide? It didn’t really matter he realised, the sentiment was clear. This night held danger for them all.

The contempt that the SS held for Cosmina as the two groups passed each other on the path made Christian cringe. The way they eyed her with open hostility was distasteful at best, but fortunately they held their tongues. One flicked a smouldering cigarette butt into the fire and then spat on the ground. A juvenile gesture, but one that offered Christian an excellent view of the strange contraption he wore around his neck. The darkly tinted flying goggles bumped against the buttons on his tunic. He also seemed to be carrying a short but heavy chain in one hand. Christian walked on, puzzling over this combination of equipment.

He led Cosmina past Eckhart—the man radiating expectancy as he stood in front of the triangular entrance to the cage—and then guided her to her allotted position against the spiked structure. Christian took her hand and looked towards the horses’ tying post.

Seeing his men stationed there he said, “Don’t worry, I’ll stay close.” Then he moved her fingers past the vicious prongs until they could grasp the exposed silken thread.

“Bring the hounds!” Eckhart shouted and there was a responding crack of wood.

Hounds? Christian wondered if he had heard correctly. He saw the SS team, their eyes hidden behind their strange goggles as they used crow bars to lever open the crate.

Hounds? That didn’t make sense. There had been no indication that anything living was housed inside that box.

“Commence *Fräulein* Stafie!” Eckhart called again, and soft words in a weird, melodic tongue issued forth from Cosmina. Hearing them gave Christian some solace, but this was soon dashed by the nightmarish visions that were emerging from the ruptured crate. He could register the presence of the men with their chain leashes, but the creatures they led...

There was no way such monstrosities could be called hounds. They were dog-like in size but horrifically fluid within his comprehension. A dizziness swept over

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him, compounded by the deep chanting baritone of Eckhart's voice that now boomed over the whole proceedings. Christian reeled and began to feel the world slipping away from him. Back. Back to a time when...



A sharp stinging sensation tingled across his left cheek and brought him back to a drowsy reality. He blinked his eyes, trying to focus and felt the same burning spark followed by a throbbing in his jaw. He realised that someone was slapping him, and that someone was Ernst. His burly friend hauled him to his feet, leaving Christian to wonder how and why he had ended up on his knees.

"Christian! Christian!" Ernst was shouting and shaking his shoulders, rousing him, bringing him back to the present, and the reality of...

"My God! What do we do Ernst?" Christian had to shout over the hurricane that was blasting through the clearing.

"We stop them!" Ernst's eyes were wide, but there was determination in them too, keeping the panic in check. "Get *Fräulein* Stafie to safety. I'll deal with Eckhart."

Christian looked wildly about him, saw the cage aglow with a kaleidoscope of beautiful yet terrifying light. Something scintillated at the heart of the structure, something bright and shiny that danced through the air under its own volition. The helmet. Just as Christian felt himself slipping away again, a hefty hand clasped the side of his face and turned his view aside.

"Don't look! Get *Fräulein* Stafie, then run!"

With a strong shove, Ernst pushed Christian towards where Cosmina still stood. Her hair was a living thing, all tendrils lashing about in the turbulent air. He staggered towards her then turned to see what his friend was planning. There was Ernst, running in a tight arc, quickly positioning himself behind the rapturous Eckhart so that...

"No!" Christian bellowed. He was hardly able to hear the word in his own head. It was futile to think it had the power to stop his friend as he sprinted at the *oberst* and threw himself, and his target, through the swirling, triangular maw of the cage.

A confusion of images flowed past Christian's eyes. Angry reds and yellows dominating the spectrum emanating from the cage, one of the SS guards struggling to quickly release a collared monstrosity, the flash of the helmet as it jumped in fits and starts.

Somehow Christian managed to turn his face away once more and saw Cosmina, still dutiful in her actions. He drew courage from that image and moved towards her. Gently, he plucked her hand from the silken cord and then, throwing decorum to the wind, slung her over his shoulder and ran.

As soon as she was detached from the structure, the sound of metal being

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stretched and twisted beyond its stress threshold snapped and ground in the air behind them. There was a cry, more a wail, and thoughts of Ernst made Christian look back.

One of the SS guards was being flailed about by an invisible force, his clothing and flesh falling away in effortless ribbons against the barbed surface of the cage. Sickened, Christian struggled towards the treeline. A powerful thump of air caught him on his right side, and a huge indentation suddenly appeared in the forest floor, as if some mighty, invisible trunk had been flung to the ground. Pure adrenaline allowed him not to dwell upon this and he sped on until a frantic horse suddenly blocked their path. Eckhart's stallion must have broken free of the group, and now it proved a formidable obstacle. Its eyes were bulging, foam flowing from its mouth and flanks. It reared and Christian had a split second to read its intention. It leapt straight into a crazed gallop in one direction while he wrenched Cosmina in another.

He could hear her, yelling something behind him but there was no time to talk, no time to guide her. They reached the standing trees and moved rapidly between the illuminated trunks.

The going became harder, low ferns brushing against his legs as he ran, the weight of her punishing his shoulder. The thwack of their motion through the brush cut above the noise from the clearing, but the echo of it behind them alerted Christian that they weren't alone. They were being pursued.

He pressed through some denser foliage, placed Cosmina with her back to a tree and pressed a hand across her mouth. The clatter of twigs and leaves increased until a low, thick-set figure burst into view. Christian reached for his Luger and then the breathless figure spoke.

"Why aren't you running?" Ernst gasped.

"Why are you chasing us?" Christian replied in a flood of relief.

Ernst barked an unhinged laugh at that and grabbed Cosmina's hand.

Together they ran—sometimes three abreast, sometimes in single file. They ran until the unearthly conflagration behind them no longer lit their path, and then they ran in shared, soothing darkness. They ran until the snarling and the howls could no longer be heard, and the only noises around them was the fear of the forest animals they disturbed. Animals, like themselves, which knew the value of flight.✘



Terror of Tribeč

By Martin Korda

As I lay here, death rasping through me with every breath, I must finally record that which I have spoken of only once; a macabre secret carried in silence since I divulged it to two British agents forty years ago while I lay in a hospital bed much like the one I lie in now. I write these words in the hope they will survive me, perhaps find their way to men better equipped than I to discover the mysteries behind what I witnessed.

I was still a young man caught in the limbo betwixt adolescence and manhood when the Nazis began their occupation of my country in March of 1939. In those days, my brother and I would spend our days working on our father's pig farm in the heart of the Tribeč Mountains and our evenings adventuring through the forest that encircled our home. Soon after the invasion, word reached us of soldiers clad in black uniforms bearing a Black Sun insignia taking children from surrounding villages, but such was our farm's remoteness that we placed little credence in what we perceived as hearsay and half-truths from passing travellers.

After the Nazis arrived, my father's malaise, already entrenched by my mother's death the previous summer, deepened; fuelled by a newfound weakness for *Slivovica* and a simmering anger at the fragile liberty wrenched from our nation's hands. Ondrej and I would increasingly spy father holding furtive conversations with strangers, but we dared not enquire who they were.

It was around this time that the storms began; violent elemental outbursts that tore ebony chasms in the sky and spewed electrical talons that rasped in the direction of the distant battlements of Castle Čierna Brána where Ondrej and I had spent summers re-enacting the heroism of the child lord Milos the Brave, fabled vanquisher of a Mongol incursion six centuries ago. Ondrej, younger than me

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by four years, became increasingly obsessed with investigating the stronghold as each night we watched lightning spike twelve times towards the ancient ramparts. Despite my protests, my fraternal caution soon acquiesced to Ondrej's youthful enthusiasm. It is a regret that I carry now to my grave.

One morning when father had taken to a particularly black mood, we resolved to finally reconnoitre the castle. Winter's heavy air had relented to spring's fresh optimism and with each step our reverie rose; a levity curtailed only by the discovery of a mauled rabbit that sent Ondrej into a fit of sobs and beseeching pleas that we should bury the creature before moving on. Even surrounded by the inevitability of death on the farm, Ondrej had never been able to stomach it. And so with bent knee and clawed hands I scraped back the soil and placed the creature into the crude grave while Ondrej wept with averted eyes, begging me to promise that each time we came to this spot we'd whisper a prayer for the deceased animal.

The sun was at its apex by the time we'd meandered to the periphery of the mountain fortress that had stood sentinel for centuries above a valley cleaved by the patient grind of ancient glaciers. Less than a year had passed since our last visit, yet the castle seemed different to us now, as though shrouded by a gloom that quelled the light. On the battlements men clad in dark uniforms stood rod straight to attention, the sight of the crooked crosses and baleful Black Sun insignia emblazoned on their uniforms sending our bobbing heads ducking for the sanctuary of the rock spur that concealed our presence.

We should have turned back then, but fuelled by adolescent foolhardiness we began scuttling between points of crude cover to attain a better view of the fortress' new inhabitants, and before long our movements had drawn the attentions of nearby soldiers whose barked alerts sent us scampering in panicked flight into the mass of trees at our backs.

Running on dread-driven legs I blundered into the forest until my blood soured to vinegar and I stumbled to a leaden-legged halt, hissing Ondrej's name amidst the looming barks of our pursuers. But no reply came.

Day yielded to night. Denial morphed into panic as I searched for him, ambling through the thicket in a directionless daze. Desperation drove me on. Behind every tree, inside every bush, there was hope. I pictured him now sitting with father sipping soup and awaiting my return ready to gloat how he'd outrun me. But I knew such frail hope would dissipate the moment I passed through the door.

I can still picture my father's face as I told him; his methodical movement to an old carved box on the mantelpiece from which he drew an archaic revolver and without a glance at me, how the gloom swallowed him as he ventured outside. We spent the night searching for Ondrej, our desperate calls dulled by the din of a storm that raged with Herculean fury. When we returned the next morning the sun was still obfuscated by the roiling clouds, and soaked and sore from a night of trudging through tar-like terrain, we fell to our beds without sharing a word.

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For two days and nights we repeated the routine. In my shame I had taken to sleeping in the barn, but slumber eluded me as minutes stretched like an abyss into the silence of night.

It was on the third day that an event occurred that would forever alter the way I perceived our place within this infinite universe. Returning from another futile search I was suddenly struck by a compulsion to speak with father; even the most egregious lambasting would be preferable to the silent torture he'd subjected me to since Ondrej's disappearance. As I neared the farmhouse, unfamiliar voices rose from within, and creeping to a window I peered in to see father speaking with a group of six men dressed in military uniforms. Terror took me as I ducked from view, listening intently for the Teutonic bite that typified Hitler's henchmen, but to my surprise the strangers spoke with the elongated plummy syllables of the British drawl.

"All we're asking, old boy is for food and shelter tonight and that you lead us to the castle in the morning," implored a moustachioed man who stood with a poise that implied authority.

My father, sat in a rocking chair and smoking a pipe with his now customary distant stare, remained silent.

"Look, we were informed by the Three Kings that you know a lesser trodden path to Čierna Brána that circumvents the patrol routes. It's a matter of great military importance that we find out what is happening within those walls. It affects us all."

"Us?" rumbled my father.

"We've already covered this, Chamberlain's decision regarding the Sudetenland was regrettable, but..."

"These are dark times, gentlemen. Your nation needs a leader of strength not a man who gives away that which is not his to give. I cannot help soldiers who serve such a man."

"This is absurd!" snapped the moustachioed soldier.

In the silence that followed I scanned the remaining men. One of them, a sliver of a man with deep, care-worn rivulets running above bushy brows and battered circular spectacles stepped forward, hands held upwards in a gesture intent on conveying trust but which even to my inexperienced eyes, smacked of desperation.

"Mr. Rastlinka," the man began in Slovak. My father sat up, surprised as I to hear the man speaking our mother tongue. "My name is Doctor Josef Straka. For the past year I have worked for the British government to investigate phenomena that science has been unable to explain. Some months ago during a raid on Castle Kammerstein in Prague our agents acquired a text called The Book of Shadows, a book that the Nazis had gone to great lengths to attain. It seems that Hitler has become hell bent on finding ways to exploit powers not of this world for the

advancement of the Third Reich.”

My father’s expression remained unmoved. Straka’s desperation deepened. “We believe that before we captured the tome it came into the possession of a high ranking Nazi officer and known occultist Doctor Schultz Nagle von Asberg, a close associate of SS-head Heinrich Himmler. COMINT intercepted communications that suggest he’s attempting to use an ancient ritual outlined in the text to open a portal called a Black Gate between our world and another to muster powers against our forces. The storms you spoke of to the Three Kings, they bear striking similarities to the ones outlined in the Book of Shadows. If we do not act, we could face a time of darkness unlike any the world has ever known.”

My father observed Straka coldly and relit his pipe as the first grumble of thunder announced itself from the night sky. “Trenčín. Your accent, it is from Trenčín,” came my father’s reply. Straka nodded, confused. “A man from my country who works for those who sold us to the Nazis is no countryman of mine.” My father nodded towards the British soldiers around him.

“But...” stammered Straka.

This time my father spoke in English. “Good night, gentlemen. I regret I can be of no assistance to your mission.”

“Mr. Rastlinka, be reasonable! Surely you must see that if our mission to stop von Asberg fails our nation may never see independence again, not if the Nazi war machine achieves its goals.” Straka’s words hung like a final challenge to my father’s conscience, the two men holding each other’s stares, but I already knew father’s reason would not yield to his pride, and turning his back on the soldiers he relit his smouldering pipe and gazed into the fire.

Straka and the soldiers exchanged defeated glances as they filed towards the exit. Alert to the threat of being discovered, I bolted towards the barn just as the sky unleashed a torrent which flooded in cascades of bulbous drops that blinded me as I stumbled on. Once within the sanctuary of the outhouse I stood panting for breath, only for my attention to be drawn to raised voices outside.

“That’s just bloody great. What the hell do we do now?” came the grunted Cockney complaint from one of the soldiers as the group passed by the barn. “We can’t stay out in this Captain, it’s stair rods out here,” exclaimed another soldier. Peering from a crack in the barn doors I spied the men outside, and whether moved by their plight or a vain hope that my brother still lived within Čierna Brána, I beckoned them in.

Introductions were scant, merely grunted thanks as I shared my sole source of sustenance; a hunk of hardening bread. Only Straka refused to eat, standing apart from the soldiers and staring at the abyssal sky as it spewed bolts of cobalt that shattered into innumerable violet shards and plummeted in the direction of Čierna Brána with staccato descents; like a shoal of squid swimming towards the shore.

“Fascinating,” he whispered.

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“I’ve never seen anything like that,” I mused, pointing towards the descending azure mass.

“The storm is different tonight?” Straka enquired, his eyes betraying ill-masked fear.

Straka and the moustachioed man—who’d introduced himself as Captain Norris—exchanged concerned glances. “Tell me, lad, what have you heard about children disappearing from around here?” enquired the captain. The words spilled from me as I explained about Ondrej.

“We had heard of children being taken, but the reports were unconfirmed,” mused Straka. “If what we are witnessing is what I fear it could be, then we may already be too late to stop von Asberg.”

“But we shall try nevertheless, Doctor” chimed Norris—to the approving nods of his men.

“What exactly are you doing here?” I enquired in as innocent a tone as I could muster.

“You know damn well what we’re doing here, boy,” growled a soldier named Penn—the one whose Cockney twang I’d heard outside the barn earlier—his jackal-like countenance and self-assuredness knocking me off guard. “You think we didn’t see you outside your father’s window eavesdropping, that melon head of yours bobbing like a jack in a box? No wonder the Nazis got your brother if that’s what you call hiding.” The barn’s darkness masked the flushing of my cheeks as I turned from his unwavering gaze.

“The route to Čierna Brána your father spoke of. Do you know it?” whispered Straka, placing his hands on my shoulders.

“I do, but if he found out I’d helped you he’d throw me out for good. He’s the only family I have left,” I replied thinly, ashamed of my weakness. “If he knew I’d even let you in here...” Straka nodded, his expression a mixture of sympathy and disappointment. “Even if there is a chance we could save your brother if he still lives?” Straka, seeing the conflict within me, retreated, allowing his words to ferment.

As night deepened the storm intensified, roaring with the ferocity of warring titans above us. The soldiers seemed ill at ease for men trained for conflict, gnawing at their rations while casting nervous glances at the elemental barrage outside. One, a short, big nosed man named Private Hall sporting a mop of wispy hair, lips perennially pursed around a smouldering cigarette, suddenly darted from his spot at the corner of the barn screeching, “Bleedin’ rats!” as he backpedalled from a rodent that had taken particular interest in his dinner. “If there’s one thing I can’t stand it’s bleedin’ rats.”

He continued to observe the critter with a distant disdain much to Penn’s chagrin. “Sit down you bleeding berk,” he barked.

“For me, it is spiders,” came the calm response from Straka as he perched on

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a hay bale, his composed tone instantly bringing calm to the jittery atmosphere caused by Hall's outburst. "The way they entrap their prey and liquefy their innards to more easily devour them, it the most calculating of murders in nature's great tapestry of death."

"You what?" scoffed Hall. "Once we get into that castle there's only gonna be one type of death that'll matter." His hand moved to his Bren which he pointed towards Straka, "Not a bunch of mumbo jumbo from an old book you stole from some mad Czech priest."

"The Book of Shadows is a very important..." Penn's victorious gloat halted Straka mid-sentence.

"Settle down, Penn," came a snapped admonishment from the group's final member, Corporal Smith, his face like crumpled papyrus that possessed an emotional control absent from his compatriots. Penn paused briefly as he held his superior's gaze, then lowered his rifle with a barely concealed sneer, "Only having a bit of banter, Corporal."

It was then that a din from outside drew our attention to the windows, and darting to the streaked panes we watched as a barbarous wind lifted the roof from the pig pens on the far side of the farm, the gale toying with each slat like an invisible claw. Moments later a figure stumbled from the farmhouse, running with the familiar laboured limp that had dominated my father's movements in recent years, his staggering hampered further by a night's worth of self-pitying *Slivovica* consumption. The din of the swines rose banshee-like from the pig pens; the animals' wails carried to our ears by whips of wind that buffeted my father as he hobbled to save his livelihood. Seeing him then, so frail and cumbersome awoke something primal within me, the unshakable love of a son towards his father and before the soldiers could stop me I was racing outside into the maelstrom.

A boom of wind spun me as it bowed trees like blades of grass, ripping roots from their century-long footholds. Peering up I spied two giant beeches pulverise the pig pen my father had entered just seconds earlier, but my cries were whisked away by the wind before they reached even my own ears. Then two pairs of hands were pulling me up, dragging me back to the barn as I kicked out in grief and rage and finally broke loose to battle on through the gale to the obliterated shed.

I clambered over splintered beams and slats calling to my father, until finally I found him, impaled by a branch and wheezing a fountain of blood. I cradled his head, aching for a final moment of tenderness to absolve me of his hatred for Ondrej's abduction. But none came. "It should have been you; he was just a boy" he croaked. And then he was gone.



As the final spade of dirt scattered atop my father's grave which rested beside

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my mothers', I uttered a hushed prayer in the unsettling silence that hung over the remnants of my home. Night was still at its zenith and Straka and the soldiers were preparing to embark on their mission irrespective of the dangers they faced; planning to risk an approach to Čierna Brána based on their own crude maps of the area.

I stared at the tombs with the numb detachment only shock can imbue. "I am sorry for your loss," the words heralding Straka's appearance beside me. "I know what it is to lose a father."

"When I was little he seemed indestructible, like the heroes in the stories he'd tell me when I couldn't sleep."

"Did he ever tell you of Lord Milos the Brave?"

"Every boy around here knows that story; how Milos defeated two thousand Mongols at the Battle of Čierna Brána." I replied.

"What people think they know and the truth are rarely the same thing," Straka replied cryptically.

"Are you saying the battle never happened?"

"No, Lord Milos did indeed succeed where many great commanders had failed, but at a great cost. The story speaks of a heroic victory but in truth no one knows for sure what transpired that night at the castle. Written accounts from the thirteenth century monk Hronar speak of a violent storm that raged above Čierna Brána where two tumen of Mongolian horsemen laid their siege, of the sky splitting and lightning striking the battlements twelve times while azure shards fell like sapphires from the sky."

"But last night..." Straka's dire nod cut me off.

"In the morning when the tempest had passed, the Mongol soldiers lay dead outside the battlements. From the castle stumbled Milos, eyes feral with fear and babbling of nightmares made flesh that had killed both his men and the invaders. The locals thought him crazy and he spent his remaining days in a mad house muttering of a darkness that festered within him and of portals in the sky that would spell the end of days. Hardly a fitting end for a story to tell children, don't you think?"

"It's just a legend," I murmured as I met Straka's resolute gaze.

"I hope you're right, I really do," he said. "For if such a power were to fall into the hands of the Nazis, then the devastation brought about by the Mongols would be but a footnote in history compared to the atrocities our world would face." He placed his hand on my shoulder, and with a final meaningful nod, turned to his companions and headed north towards Čierna Brána.

As the men departed I surveyed the wasteland of memories around me, Straka's words repeating through my mind as the doctor's steps receded. "Wait," I cried. The footsteps halted. I pointed north-east. "The best route to the castle is this way."



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The waxing moon seeped through the bunched forest canopy as we made our circuitous trek towards Čierna Brána, weaving through an alien maze of felled trees. We were moving now in five metre intervals, Penn spearheading the formation while Coombs hung back scanning for signs of enemy presence. As the castle's battlements began flickering between cracks in the treeline, the gloom of the night intensified like an amorphous veil that twisted the familiar forest into macabre apparitions, contorted faces and gnarled claw-like branches. Such was the grip of dread that held me I almost missed the little grave where Ondrej and I had buried the rabbit, and kneeling quickly beside it I whispered a prayer for the creature's soul, though my thoughts remained firmly fixed on Ondrej.

As we moved on the soldiers seemed ill at ease in the surroundings, intermittently bringing their weapons to bear on imagined dangers, only to be greeted by the contemptuous hiss of the wind as it caressed the forest.

An hour later we'd reached the castle's outskirts, keeping low as we followed a steeply descending trail that skirted a cliff face housing the ancient battlements, before the slope rose rapidly, causing us to clamber on all fours. As we scrambled up the escarpment, sure footing became elusive and loose pockets of stone suddenly gave way in cascading torrents, causing us to freeze and cling limpet-like to the rock face lest the enemy be alerted. Finally, we reached a winding pathway hewn by time into the mountain and scurried up a steeply banked ridge to take shelter behind an obelisk-shaped rock a quarter of a mile from the castle's gatehouse.

Extracting a pair of binoculars from a pouch, Norris began scanning the crumbling battlements that gaped at the sky like a cackling witch. "Where the devil are they all?" he mused as his head bobbed in harmony with the movements of the binoculars. "Sir?" enquired Smith. "It's the damndest thing, Corporal," stammered Norris, handing him the field glasses.

"You're right Captain. No sign of enemy presence... Wait a minute, I've got one transport truck to the north west, engine still running."

"Could be a trap, sir," interjected Hall.

"If it were a trap it'd be less bleedin' obvious, dummy!" snapped Coombs as he scrutinised the crumbling walls through his sights.

"We need to get a closer look at the situation," ordered Norris with the speed of a seasoned commander. "Hall, Penn!"

With a clipped, "Sir," the duo broke cover and with rapid crouched movements scuttled between cover wherever it jutted from the mountain, closing on the vehicle like phantoms. At the truck, Hall's hand extended towards the driver's door, twisting the handle, then with fluid force he opened it with a yank as Penn swung his weapon in line with the driver's seat. From the dark interior lurched a Nazi soldier, arms clawing towards Penn who backpedalled, feet slipping on the uneven ground and his Bren chattered, a cacophony of bullets that cut through the assailant.

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“Damn it, Penn!” cursed Norris as the squad tensed for the inevitable alarm, yet to our collective astonishment the night remained silent save for the muttering of the distant engine. Emboldened by their good fortune, Hall and Penn pressed on to the battlements, guns scanning every conceivable angle until finally the dark maw of the stronghold’s entrance devoured them.

We sat silently, seconds stretching like hours into the darkness. Then two shadowy figures emerged, moving at speed as though driven by a Kraken’s breath on their backs. Norris, Coombs and Smith took aim, but Norris urged them to hold fire with gravelly, unwavering authority as the mens’ fingers tightened on their triggers. “Sir! Sir!” boomed Hall as he and Coombs skidded to a halt next to where the rest of us lay hidden.

“Are you mad!” admonished Norris, “If the enemy didn’t know we’re here before, they will now!”

Hall shook his head, gulping air. “No, sir, they won’t.”

“How the devil can you be so sure?” Norris demanded.

“Because they’re dead, sir,” Coombs stuttered between glugged breaths.

“Who? Who’s dead Private?” barked Norris. Coombs just stared, shaking his head.

“Private! Coombs!” barked Norris. The man’s gaze was wild but it was Penn who finally spoke.

“All of them.”



Double timing towards the castle gates, a rush of euphoria energised me as I kept pace with the soldiers, the group moving in tight rhythmic formation. Only Straka’s laboured breaths belied our noiseless progress towards the dark veil that lurked at Čierna Brána’s entrance. Ten metres out Norris held a fist aloft, and as one we halted, squatting in the murk awaiting his orders. He beckoned us forward and we moved in unison with deliberate paces, eking our way into the bowels of the ancient stone edifice.

I had been no stranger to death that past year, yet nothing could have prepared me for what I witnessed as we entered the castle’s courtyard; a sight that no war, atrocity, pestilence or famine could have conceived. Men hung like ham from taut nooses in the ancient rafters above open graves gaping with cadavers parted from their innards; guts stacked in crude mounds beside flayed carcasses. Wherever the eye fell lay a new horror, a different mode of death, each more gruesome than the last. My mind begged for respite but it was only when the retching began that I at last tore my eyes from the necropolis, my stomach emptying in heaving syncopated breaths.

“This is butchery,” blurted Hall, as he rubbed his thin tuft with unconscious

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strokes before clumsily extracting another cigarette and fumbling it to his lips.

“Doctor, you may want to take a look at this.” The voice rose from deeper within the enclave where Smith stood dangling the strangest creature I’ve ever seen from his rifle’s muzzle. Although death had curled its appendages it was clear to see its form; an elongated conical body with six eyes equidistantly positioned around the circumference of its flat, circular face, six crab-like legs bunched by *rigor mortis* and two sets of large, thin, opaque wings upon its back. A single coiled proboscis akin to that of a hummingbird moth’s protruded from a central point on the creature’s face.

“What in the bloody hell is that?” spat Penn in disgust.

“I’ve never seen anything like it before,” mused Straka.

“I’m so glad you came, or we’d have no idea what we’re dealing with,” spat Penn.

“Shut up, Private!” snapped Norris, examining the creature more closely as the doctor uncoiled its proboscis under torchlight.

“Hey doc, come take a gander, I’ve found another one.” We turned to find Coombs holding a second identical dead creature at arm’s length.

“Another one here!” cried Hall, and soon we were checking the other dead soldiers. Adjacent to each corpse lay one of the dead alien entities. Straka began leafing through a book he’d extracted from his pack.

“Here,” he said, jabbing at a page. “The information is scant but it describes a species much like this named the Saldroth, a creature capable of infecting the minds of men with psychic assaults, then feasting on their deepest fears and turning their nightmares into reality.”

“And if you believe that you’ll believe anything,” scoffed Penn. “My money’s on some Nazi experiment gone FUBAR.”

“Look around,” came Coombs’ numb reply as he lifted another Saldroth from the floor with his rifle. “This look like anything from around these parts to you?”

“The book speaks of an occult ritual dating to pre-Roman times in which the creatures can be summoned from their world,” explained Straka as he read. “Von Asberg must have discovered it. It is imperative we find him. If he returns to Berlin with this knowledge the war could be over before it’s even begun.” He turned to me with urgency. “Where is the castle’s chapel?”

Wiping the remnants of my insides from my mouth I stabbed a finger towards an easterly tower and soon we were ascending a circular stairway in silent single file, each man battling the asphyxiating dread that gripped him as we passed two embracing Nazis; daggers plunged into one another’s hearts.

Outside the chapel the soldiers assumed formation, then in pairs, entered with mechanical movements, fanning out, guns scanning for signs of Saldroth and Nazi alike. Inside the chapel lay two bodies prone on jagged Cyclopean altars that looked alien amidst the pomp of the arching stonework adorned with fading images of biblical martyrs. On the floor lay two men in grey garb stained crimson

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by puddles of blood seeping from inhuman lacerations across their chests and faces. In a moment of unconscious recognition, I rushed forward towards one of the altars, and there to my disbelief, lay Ondrej. Clutching his body to mine I convulsed with sobs that masked the small twitching movements that betrayed life where I'd assumed only death was present, and with a dreamy, dazed emergence from the slumber that held him, Ondrej's eyes opened. I clutched him close in an embrace of unspoken joy and begged his forgiveness.

As I held my brother, Straka and the soldiers searched the room. "Von Asberg!" exclaimed the doctor rushing to the altar beside us, my brother's body stiffened at the mention of his captor's name. Lying next to Ondrej was the corpse of a short, balding man dressed in high ranking military regalia. Straka checked for a pulse. "We have been very lucky, gentlemen; it appears as though the General's lust for power has been his undoing."

"So how did the nipper survive?" enquired Penn, his tone rippling with aggression as he stepped towards us. Instinctively I rose to block his path. "Leave him alone!" I demanded but it was Norris' admonishment that finally made the soldier relent. Straka sat beside Ondrej taking his hands into his own. "I know you have been through a great ordeal, but it is important that you tell us everything that happened here."

Ondrej's responses came slowly, like he was attempting to recall a dream slipping away with each waking moment. Despite Straka's efforts, Ondrej was able to remember little of what had transpired that night, recounting details only of his capture and imprisonment; how each night von Asberg would walk the row of cells selecting a new child victim for his rituals until only Ondrej remained. He spoke of the storms that raged every night and that when his turn had finally come, men dressed in black uniforms bearing Black Sun insignia had led him to the chapel and robed clerics had tied him to the altar.

"Doc?" muttered Coombs, "I ain't no boffin but I'm guessing these men weren't killed by those things we found out there."

"Why do you say that, Private?"

"Do you see any of them dead Saldroth in here?"

The party instinctively perused the room. Coombs had been right. The chapel was indeed bereft of Saldroth, living or dead. "Most vexing," mused Straka, his mood darkening as he traced a row of runes chiselled onto the altars. "Perhaps these will provide the answers we seek," he mused as he began leafing through the ancient tome he'd consulted earlier.

"The dialect is very old." He began to translate the runes aloud, "The soul... of the... three... shall become... one... and the Saldroth... shall have... dominion of the earth." His expression darkened as his gaze rose from the runes as he uttered those final fateful words.

"What does that mean?" enquired my brother in a fearful whisper.

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Straka stared at the tome without answering. “Captain, a word in private.” With a nod, Norris joined Straka as they headed towards the annexe. We watched the men intently, Straka bending his face close to Norris, about to speak, only to suddenly pull away, gaze darting in panicked jerks. He spun suddenly, tumbling backwards as though faced with Gugalanna himself, baying as though at an unseen assailant before scrabbling to his feet and racing from the room amidst a torrent of terrified babbling that halted abruptly with a macabre cry that resonated against the stone walls.

We raced after him, halting at the bottom of the circular stairs we’d ascended earlier and squinting into shadows that harboured a slumped form. Approaching with readied guns the blackness relented with each step, slowly revealing Straka, his features shrivelled, skin misshapen and flaccid and two large fang marks on his face, the resultant gore streaking his chest.

“Straka! Straka!” bellowed Hall, who was already fumbling for his med kit. Corporal Smith pulled Straka’s body into the room’s half-light, the moonbeams shining like spotlights through the fractured walls and revealing skin that rippled like jelly over the doctor’s bones; as though Straka’s innards had been liquefied by some internal chemical reaction.

“What was he saying about spiders earlier?” Smith enquired as his fingers traced the circular wounds on Straka’s face.

“Still think this is some Nazi experiment?” Came Coombs’ challenge to Penn, whose silence was ample reply.

“Some of those creatures must still be alive in here!” growled Norris as the men scanned for movements in the shadows. “Fan out, I want them found, I want them dead. Now!” For the ensuing minutes the soldiers searched, working in pairs through the tower as they hunted Saldroth, but none could be found.

“We still have a job to do,” barked Norris as the men reconvened at the Chapel. This is what we’ve trained for!”

“If we stay here, these things’ll pick us off like they did the Nazis,” stammered Hall, his eyes darting from one wall to the next.

“At ease Private!” barked Smith.

“Do you hear that Captain?” gasped Hall, suddenly petrified as though he’d spied Medusa.

We all listened but heard nothing.

“Hear what?” hissed Penn.

“There it is again!” Hall was beginning to hyperventilate.

“You’re just imagining it, you daft bastard!”

“Pull yourself together, man,” shouted Norris amidst a cacophony of voices as the squad’s discipline began to erode. “There!” shrieked Hall, pointing at the wall opposite. “Scratching! From in there! It’s coming from... everywhere!” he yelled, then in one fluid motion perfected by years of repetitious training, opened fire,

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machine gun chattering indiscriminately.

Bullets thudded into the ancient walls sending shards of granite splintering in random arcs. I dived for Ondrej, knocking him to the floor and protecting him with my body as a sliver of stone bit into my temple. "Rats! In the bloody walls, shoot 'em, lads, shoot 'em! They're coming for us!" screamed Hall as I hauled Ondrej towards the sanctuary of the stairs, but he resisted, instead turning to watch Hall's antics just as a stray bullet hammered through Coombs' temple, sending him crashing to the floor like meat on a butcher's slab.

"Cease fire! Bellowed Norris as a torrent of bullets cut into the wall inches above his head.

"Cease fire!" screamed the others but Hall would not relent until his magazine clicked empty. Then, throwing his machine gun at the wall he screamed "Here they come! Run lads!" as he charged towards a nearby opening in the stonework. Smith accelerated after him, grabbing Coombs' ankle as the private defenestrated himself. "Get out of here, Corporal, they'll have us all!" bellowed Coombs as Smith's grip failed and the dangling man plummeted.



We sat stunned in what seemed like an endless silence, each man battling to reconcile what he'd witnessed. "I've fought in many wars but I've never seen anything like this." Smith's voice was deep and dire. "We have to bury this place."

Norris nodded and slowly we willed ourselves upright as the captain issued his orders. "Penn. Smith. I want you on the east side of the castle. I want dynamite on each major column of the foundations. Set the timers for thirty minutes from my mark, then get clear. Synchronising watches in three, two, one, mark." The men adjusted their time pieces, then Penn and Smith raced out of the chapel as Norris jabbed a thumb in our direction. "You two, with me."

Drained by the earlier tumult Ondrej had once again slumped into semi-consciousness and so draping his arms around us, we hauled him down the winding descent into the catacombs that housed Čierna Brána's western foundations. Darkness closed its grip with every step and the stench of centuries-old damp rose from its stone innards. Finally, we reached a narrow passageway, tracing its meandering path to a gargantuan cave hewn over centuries by rivulets of water cutting patient paths through slabs of limestone. Before us we saw the towered triple pillars that held the castle's western battlements aloft.

I set Ondrej down while Norris busied himself placing explosives on the columns.

"We'll have at least twenty minutes to get to safety. Should be plenty of time," came Norris' assurance as he extracted the first batch of dynamite from his backpack. Ondrej sat up, eyes struggling to focus. "We should leave now," he pleaded.

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Indeed, every part of me yearned to flee, but I knew I could never return home in the knowledge I'd abandoned my new-found friends.

"Hurry Captain," I urged, but Norris wasn't listening, suddenly distracted by something protruding from his backpack that lay partly shaded in a lip of shadow. "Shhh!" he hissed as he stalked towards the bag, his expression betraying a sense of victory as though discovering something previously hidden.

"Captain?" Norris hushed me again as his hand reached towards his holstered pistol. I strained to see what he was looking at; a protrusion from the backpack my eyes could not quite give shape to, forcing me to shift my position to attain a better view.

"Thought you could hide in there, did you?" Norris gloated with unaccustomed bravado as he cocked the pistol's hammer. "Stay clear, lads, I've got this little Saldroth blighter!" He began to squeeze the trigger just as I acquired a clear line of sight at the pack; draw string pulled open and brimming with dynamite. "Captain! Stop, it's..!" The sound of thunder drowned my words as Norris' pistol shot rang out; a prelude to a deafening crack that heralded a tsunami of cascading stone from above and then only darkness.

I do not know how long I lay unconscious, but I awoke some time later choking on dust, my head railing from several brutal blows. Above, fragments of light filtered through the fractured floor, illuminating the two remaining columns that protested under their newly acquired burden.

Ondrej lay beside me, staring at the crimson stains spattered across the rubble. "Did you see his body explode?" he coughed weakly, a thin smile colouring his ashen face as he teetered once more on the brink of unconsciousness. I sat up, shocked. Had Ondrej's ordeal changed him so severely that he could now revel in death? It was then that it struck me. Whether through fear or unconscious denial I had missed a truth that had been gazing at me since we entered the chapel; Ondrej's nervousness at the mention of von Asberg's name; his keenness to witness the demise of the soldiers; his sudden weakness after every death, the altars, the rituals 'The soul of the three will become one and the Saldroth shall have dominion of the earth'. I yearned for my suspicions to be wrong, to gather Ondrej up and carry him to the sanctuary of home, leaving this place behind forever. But I had to discover the truth. Cradling Ondrej's head in my arm I whispered in his ear. "Let's go home, mother has not slept since you disappeared." Silence hung in the air for a moment before he replied weakly.

"Yes. She must be sick with worry."

To this day I do not know whether he sensed the leadenness that overcame me or the speed with which my heart hammered at the discovery that the boy I held was not my brother, but merely the physical vessel that once harboured his soul, but now channelled a newfound malevolence. As his echoing response receded into the blackness I saw for the first time a façade that had hitherto eluded me;

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the fawn-like innocence of my sibling absent from the mischievous calculating eyes that stared at me now.

A talon of fear pierced my resolve to run as dark chimerical shapes began manifesting before me, coalescing into demonic forms slaving with rapacious intent. For a moment I thought I would yield to madness, and had it not been for the sudden frenzied screams and clacking of machine-gun fire from somewhere within the castle, I venture I would not be committing these words to paper now.

But as the echo of bullets rang through the great hallway I somehow tore myself from Ondrej and rose, muzzy headed and weak, stumbling with desperate strides towards the still open passageway we'd navigated earlier. I saw him trying to rise, then falling, still weakened, and then I ran, through winding corridors and spiral stairs, drawing strength from the sound of distant gunfire and from the hope that Penn and Smith could still be rescued before Ondrej regained his strength.



Castle Čierna Brána had saved its most grotesque horror for last. Save for the dark piercing eyes, Corporal Smith's mutilated body was unrecognisable as it sat in a pool of crimson that had seeped from hundreds of lacerations cut into every appendage. I retched again but my stomach had nothing left to expel, leaving me heaving dry convulsions on the floor.

Fear drove me now and I knew what had to be done. Scanning for signs of Penn, I stumbled on an unseen obstacle and fell amidst a mass of limbs severed from a torso, and lifting my head I met Penn's horrified stare, captured at the very moment of decapitation. Scrabbling upright I discovered three sets of explosives planted on the main columns that held the western foundations aloft, but whatever had flayed Smith and dismembered Penn had done so before they could set the timers. In a blur of adrenaline, I set the countdown to two minutes. The timers began to tick.

"Two minutes, are you sure that will give you enough time to escape, brother?" Ondrej's voice rose from the darkness like a ghoul from the netherworld, his tone cruel and laden with a sarcasm. He sauntered towards me with feline confidence until we stood facing each other.

"Your mother. She's dead, isn't she, boy?" came his cruel challenge.

I nodded before finally gathering the courage to speak. "You're von Asberg aren't you?" my retort rang from my lips with a boldness I did not feel.

"Bingo, as your British friends would say. Although that is perhaps not strictly the truth of the matter. You see binding with the soul of a Saldroth is not a simple matter, as your Milos the Brave found to his great detriment six hundred years ago. Yes, the mind of a child is the only one receptive enough to bind with this entity but a boy's brain is also too weak to withstand such a union, and madness

ensues. Which is where I come in.” He flashed a fleeting grin.

“Once I had discovered the ritual, all I required was a Black Gate to open a portal to the world of the Saldroth and a steady supply of children to experiment on; Tribeč provided me with both. It took many weeks for us to perfect the ritual but last night we at last found the formula to link our world to their dimension. The clerics, the dead ones you saw in the chapel, were convinced I would die like the Saldroth after I had infected the mind of a man, but I always knew I could withstand it. Mine is the mind of a superior race after all.” He paused dramatically before continuing, all the while the detonators continued their countdown. “With each death my strength renews more quickly. I’ve had such a jolly time watching your friends look for the Saldroth while all the while I carried the creatures’ powers inside me, picking them off one by one, playing on their deepest innermost fears. You will never truly know a man until you’ve gazed upon his nightmares.”

He sauntered to one of the explosives. “You are privileged, boy, an eye witness to history being made. One day when the armies of our enemies have fallen to my will and the *Führer* has his victory, they will write stories of this day. You, however, will be little more than a footnote.” With that he flicked the switch on the nearest detonator, halting its rhythmic hands as they reached the minute marker.

I knew I only had one chance to save myself. Von Asberg was already approaching the second explosive. Perhaps there was a chance that somewhere within this fiend my brother’s soul still existed, subdued within the subconscious in some internal purgatory. If he still lived, I had to find a way to draw him out. “On the way to the castle tonight, I passed your rabbit’s grave.” My words echoed through the room. Von Asberg paused momentarily, teetered briefly before regaining his composure.

“Save your pathetic stories for the afterlife, boy,” scoffed von Asberg as he defused the second explosive and reached for the final detonator. “Your brother is no longer alive to hear them.” As his index finger extended towards the switch, I spoke once more, “I whispered a prayer.”

Von Asberg’s hand froze. He grunted with effort, but his arm remained still. Then he lurched sideways as though caught by an invisible blow to the head, his arms suddenly caught in spasms of some strange delirium before his head impacted against the stone pillar and he began to scream, clawing at his face until channels of blood flowed down his cheeks. And then, for the briefest moment I saw Ondrej, a fleeting innocence that flashed in the boy’s eyes. “Run brother, don’t let the truth die with us. I cannot hold out for long.”

“I’ll never forget you, brother,” I replied, battling the tears that pooled against my eyelids. A weak, fleeting smile brightened his face then the expression morphed once more to von Asberg’s sneer. I smashed a fist into the face of my brother’s usurper, sending him toppling down a steep escarpment and splashing into a

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puddle below.

And then I sprinted, not knowing what time remained before the dynamite unleashed its fury and praying its force would be sufficient to bury the castle, the general and the horrors within. As I reached the top of the stairs, dark images began assailing me once more, demonic figures that lashed with claws, talons, teeth and tails, one clipping my heel and sending me sprawling on my back, robbing my lungs of breath. As I gasped, a dark miasma of a storm formed above me, drawing back to reveal an army of Saldroth mustered at the periphery of a black chasm roiling with cerulean energy and a voice grating like crashing mountains that bellowed, "*Kumpala, somorg fun plakera dom, Saldrothi kum ti da!*"

I dragged myself up again, staggering with stupefied strides towards the way out as the floor sagged behind me as though concussed by *Mjöltnir* itself, and gargantuan stones cascaded all around. The floor gave way as I stumbled into the light of morning, throwing myself down the slope on which the castle had stood for centuries but which now swallowed the stone walls as they sank into their hilltop grave.



The nurses told me I'd been in a coma for two months, found by chance by a superstitious shepherd. Each night I would wake baying of dark terrors, and at dawn sink into a malaise I could not escape. Within days of awakening, two British men arrived dressed in trench coats and bowler hats and claiming to be from the same clandestine department as Straka and his men and began probing me for every detail of what had transpired, and uttering dire warnings lest I ever repeat my confession again.

I never divulged the truth to another living soul, but the curiosity that it engendered set me on a most unexpected journey. After leaving hospital I sold father's farm and dedicated my life to searching for the truth behind the mysteries I'd witnessed: travelling, learning, always questioning. But not in the furthest reaches of the earth, nor in the depths of the oceans or the vastness of the skies, not in the works of Socrates, Einstein, Aristotle or Milton, not in the holy text of Christendom, Islam or the Hebrews, nor the Kalachakra Tantra, not in Theravada or the mystical secrets of the pharaohs, not at Zorats Karer or Stonehenge could I find the answers I sought.

And so I leave this record, the one true account of what transpired that night in Tribeč so that others may continue my quest to discover the truth behind the unknown secrets beyond our frail world, so young, so ignorant, so blind to the terrors that live at the periphery of this infinitesimal realm, terrors known only to men who would hide the truth from us all. ✠





In the Shadows of the 603rd

By Richard Dansky

CAPTAIN Rifkin was holding a tank over his head when the jeep rolled up, which made saluting awkward. Carefully, he put the inflatable armour down in line with the dozens of others he and his men had carefully constructed, then wiped his hands surreptitiously on his pants leg. Some of the paint had felt a little wet, and if he was going to be shaking hands with the brass, it wouldn't do to turn their fingers green.

The brass, he saw, had already gotten out of their vehicle and started walking over. One he recognized, the second he didn't, and that sent a current of worry slithering down his spine.

"Captain," said the gangly, moon-faced man in the lead, "I thought I told you no more of that crap. One picture gets out and the Krauts figure out half the tanks they think they're up against are grade school art projects."

"Colonel Harasty, sir." Rifkin snapped off a quick and largely paint-free salute. "With all due respect, these are professional art projects." He liked Harasty; the colonel might not have a sense of humour, but he understood how to put Rifkin and his men to good use. And after spending most of the war on the sidelines, that was all they wanted.

"We'll hang 'em in the Louvre after the war's over, if that makes you happy, but we can talk about that later. Right now, we need to discuss your new orders, which means I get to introduce you to Major Schiller."

The second man stepped forward, and the little shock of worry Rifkin had felt previously amped itself tenfold. Schiller was hawk-faced and pale, with a nose sharp enough to cut cheese on, and unsettlingly blue eyes. He wore a uniform that Rifkin didn't recognize, cap tucked under his arm, and his hair was an almost

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translucent white. He extended a hand, and, after a second's hesitation, Rifkin took it.

"Major Schiller, allow me to present Captain Henry Rifkin of the 603rd Camouflage Engineers, D Company. His men are very good at what they do despite the man leading them, and what they do is exactly what you're going to need. Captain, this is Major Heinrich Schiller, and you're going to be taking orders from him for the near future."

Schiller clasped Rifkin's hand with cool pressure. "A pleasure to meet you, Captain. Your company's work has won my admiration."

"Thank you, Major." With some difficulty, he broke the handshake. "Schiller—is that a German name?"

"Swiss."

Rifkin frowned. "I thought you guys were sitting this one out."

Schiller smiled thinly. "There are some evils, in the face of which one cannot remain neutral." He opened his mouth as if to say more, and Harasty stepped in.

"Plenty of time for that sort of thing later. Right now, we need to talk nit-gritty." He walked over to the jeep and pulled out a briefcase.

"If you please, Colonel," Schiller said, and took the case from him. He opened it up and pulled out a series of sketches, while Harasty turned and motioned Rifkin over.

"The good news is that the bulk of their forces pulled away from the river crossing at Wesel before the Brits started their boys forward. Thanks, I might add, in large part to what you and your people did here; looks like they moved two tank divisions upstream to deal with your plywood *panzers* over there, which let us take the bridges last night."

Rifkin smiled. Waging war with paintbrush and saw was not something that every GI understood. His men actually getting credit for what they'd done was rare and encouraging.

Schiller spread the sketches on the hood of the vehicle as Harasty kept talking. "The other good news is that you've got some fans at HQ, people who understand the value of what you do. They've got a special assignment for D Company, working under Major Schiller here. Top secret, top priority, whatever resources you need. You're also going to get a little help; part of the 3302nd SSSC will be working with you."

Rifkin nodded. "Sounds good, sir. What are we going to be doing?"

Harasty glanced over at the cadaverous figure by the jeep. "That's for Major Schiller to tell you. This one's strictly need to know, and in about two minutes, you'll know more than I do. Major?"

Schiller nodded, very slightly. "Thank you, Colonel. Captain, if you'd step over here for a moment?"

Harasty backed away as Rifkin closed in, glancing at the sheets of paper on the

hood of the jeep. What he saw on the paper didn't look like tanks. It didn't look like anything he'd ever seen.

"What the..."

The major held up a thin hand. "Please. Allow me to explain. Your company, it is not constituted of what one would consider 'traditional' soldiers, correct?"

"No. We've got artists, carpenters, set designers—not a lot of dogfaces, no. But if the war gets to the point where we're doing the shooting, we're in trouble."

"We are in a great deal of trouble already, Captain," said Schiller, his tone so matter of fact that Rifkin shivered. "Which is why I am here, and why I need your men. You build decoys, yes? Replicas designed to fool reconnaissance and intelligence. Fake tanks to make scouts think your American armour is in position ten miles away from where it should be. In short, fakes and frauds."

"That's a cheap way of putting it, Major. What we do saves lives, it helps win fights, it—"

Schiller waved him off. "You misunderstand. What I said, I meant with the greatest respect for your craft and skill. To fool the greatest war machine Europe has seen since the days of Genghis Khan with painted wood and balloons, now that, that is art. And that is why I am here for you and your men. Because I need you to build this." A bony finger jabbed down at the pages on the hood. "Exactly this, and quickly."

The American leaned in to take a closer look. What he saw looked more like a set design than anything else, a series of shapes and forms that screamed "Grand Guignol" more than "armoured division". If he'd gotten something similar back in New York while putting together the set dressing for an opera—something from Wagner, maybe, before Hitler had put Wagner out of style—it would have made sense, though he would have pushed back against a few of the details as too dark, too disturbing. But to see something like this in-field, it made no sense. The arches in the background belonged on a stage or in a tomb, not in the forests of the Rhineland. And the writing on them seemed somehow obscene. He felt his head starting to spin and closed his eyes, willing away the images.

"Can your men build that, Captain Rifkin?" Schiller's voice cut through the murk in his brain.

"My boys can build anything," he replied, willing himself to stand tall, to ignore the nausea seeping into his gut. "Why the hell do you want them to build that?"

Schiller stepped in and bundled up the papers. He handed them to Rifkin, who took them in nerveless hands. "That is exactly why, Captain. Colonel?"

A plainly relieved Harasty lumped himself back into the jeep. "Let's get out of here, Major." He turned to Rifkin. "Captain, we'll be sending transport for your people at 1800 hours. Don't worry about the tanks; someone will be along to deflate them and put 'em in crates. Just get your men and their tools ready, and prep a list of everything you're going to need to do that. Major?"

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Schiller climbed into the jeep as well, as the driver gunned the engine. “Captain. I look forward to working with you.” And then the vehicle roared off, leaving Rifkin standing in the makeshift road with a fistful of papers and a knot in his gut.

“Do you, you spooky bastard? Do you really?” He stared after the departing jeep for a long minute, then turned and started the trudge back to camp.



The new campsite was further from the river, which was good, and on the far side of a hill from the location where Schiller wanted the thing, whatever it was, set up and ready to go. The move had been accomplished with a minimum of fuss or questions. Instead, the questions started after they’d settled in, and Rifkin had started explaining what they were doing.

“This doesn’t look anything like what we’ve been doing over here Captain.” The speaker was a lanky sergeant named Kelly whom the 603rd had plucked out of the New York gallery scene. Before the war, he’d been an up-and-coming painter; now his main focus was teaching the other men how to imitate camouflage patterns more precisely. “You ask me, that’s a stage set. Aerial recon sees that, they’re going to pee themselves laughing.”

“Doesn’t make any sense to be doing it out here, either,” chimed in another one of the men, a short, wiry fabricator named Gleeson. “Why not build it someplace closer to the materials instead of hauling them all the way out here?”

“Because your painting belongs in the woods where no one can see it,” came a response from the back of the tent.

“Screw you,” replied Gleeson, and chaos erupted as the various men weighed in with their opinions of the project, why they were doing it, the quality of each other’s work, and anything else they could think of.

Rifkin let them go at it for a couple of minutes—good for them to blow off steam, he thought—then stood up and shouted for quiet. Within a few seconds, the tent had quieted down except for a few final grumbles from Gleeson, and most of the men were looking at him.

“Look,” he said. “I know this one’s nothing like anything we’ve done since we’ve gotten here. I know it’s a helluva strange thing to be putting together on the battlefield, and I know it’s pretty creepy, too. But none of that matters. We all spent years wanting to know when we’d be getting over here and telling each other we’d do anything to be in the field instead of twiddling our thumbs back in training. Well, now we’re in the field, and this is what they’re asking us to do. I don’t know why, but why isn’t my job, and it isn’t yours either. Our job—yours and mine—is to make this thing they’re asking us to make, and to make it right. Everything else is details. You got a problem with that, you come see me after.

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Right now, I need you to start getting ready, 'cause the supplies will be here in a couple of hours and we need to be ready to hit the ground running. Dismissed!"

The men rose as several, breaking into small knots of discussion or argument and drifting out of the tent. Kelly remained behind as they went, waiting until he and Rifkin were alone before strolling over to the sketches of the work Rifkin had set up on easels.

"So what do you really think, Cap'n?" he asked, staring at each sketch in turn.

"Deadline's tight. You think we can pull this off?"

Rifkin ambled over to join him. "We put 700 inflatable tanks in the field in under a month from concept to deployment. We can do this in our sleep."

Kelly pursed his lips before responding. "All right then, let me ask the real question: should we be doing this?"

"It's orders," Rifkin said.

"Yeah, it's orders, but should be we following those orders? There's something about what they're asking that doesn't quite sit right. Something in this," and he tapped one of the sketches with his finger, "is trouble."

"Trouble," said Rifkin, "is doing set building for a George S. Kaufman play and screwing it up. This Schiller guy and what he's asking for? A piece of cake."

"I hope you're right," said Kelly, and left Rifkin in the tent alone.



It was Kelly who made the first complaint, or at least the first one brought to Rifkin's attention. "Captain," he said. "We've got a problem."

"Do tell," said Rifkin, as Kelly stepped down from the scaffolding where he'd been working. Progress on the site had been steady, though not as fast as Schiller wanted, and the main elements of the proposed architecture had risen steadily from the forest floor. Brawny engineers had brought in actual boulders for the borders of the central circle once the wooden ones Rifkin's people were making had been deemed insufficiently authentic, and a gigantic web of netting stretched across the roof of the dell where the entire operation was set up, to hide it from prying aerial eyes.

"It's this writing, captain. I can't work on it for more than a half an hour at a time, tops, before I get dizzy. And if I'm working up there—" he leaned back and pointed at the top of the scaffold, which loomed 30 feet into the air—"I'm sure to go ass over teakettle sooner rather than later."

Rifkin frowned. "How many other men are working on the inscriptions?"

"Three. They're all complaining of the same thing, but..." his voice trailed off.

"But what?"

"None of them wanted to complain. Didn't want to look soft, didn't want to mess up the schedule. So it was up to me."

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“Huh.” Rifkin thought for a minute, arms crossed. “Schiller’s already breathing down my neck about getting this done in time.”

Kelly shrugged. “The way I see it, I fall off this thing and break my arm, it’s gonna put a way bigger wrench in the works than if I bitch to you about it.”

“Alright. Here’s what we’re going to do.” He spat into the dirt, pissed off and impotent to do anything about it. “From now, anyone working on that crap does it in fifteen minute shifts. I don’t care what you’re working on, I don’t care if you’re in the middle of something, fifteen minutes on and you swap out with a man on the ground. You understand what I’m saying?”

Kelly nodded. “Sure, Captain, but are you sure? I mean, Schiller might—”

“You let me handle Major Schiller, you understand? You paint. Now go tell the boys.”

“Roger that.” Kelly loped off, shouting. Rifkin turned the other way and walked toward the edge of the clearing. It was unseasonably hot, and the sun punched down even through the protective netting. Half the men were working shirtless, sweat pouring off them as they laboured to make Schiller’s vision real. Schiller’s vision, that was getting in his mens’ heads and making them dizzy and afraid.

He crossed the edge of the clearing, passing under the canopy of trees and into the cool of the woods. They’d cleared out the bowl first thing, of course, chopping down everything and pulling out the stumps, but now he noticed that the trees on the edge of the site were looking sickly. A ring of yellow leaves had drifted down, and here and there the contagion had spread deeper into what had been a healthy-looking forest. He wondered if it were a coincidence.

Somehow, he didn’t think so.



Two nights later, Schiller came to talk to him.

It was well after midnight when the major arrived. Apart from the guards on the perimeter—widely spaced and not terribly alert, as the nearest hostile units were well on the other side of the river and going backwards every day, the entire unit was asleep.

“Was wondering when you were going to show up,” Rifkin said. “Cigarette?”

“I do not indulge,” said Schiller, as he stepped out from the shadows between two of the trucks the 3302nd boys were using to haul their massive speakers into position. “And neither should you. They blacken the lungs and invite disease. Fire is meant to be breathed out, not in.”

“Whatever the hell that means.” The captain stood, unravelling himself from the chair at the base of one of the plywood monoliths. “What can I do for you, Major?”

“You can do your job. This,” he waved at the ongoing construction, “is not progressing fast enough. We have a deadline, Captain, one we dare not miss. And

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now you, you are slowing the work.”

“It’ll get done when it gets done, Major. My men are working as fast as they can. They—”

“They are working in fifteen minute shifts!”

Rifkin blinked. “How the hell did you know that?”

“It does not matter how I know it. Nothing matters except you and your men following my orders and creating this work exactly as I have described.” He jabbed Rifkin’s chest. “If that means they get dizzy, they get dizzy. If that means they fall, they fall and you find men to replace them. But you will not stop, and you will not slow the work down, and you will not question me again. Do you understand?”

Slowly, Rifkin looked down at the finger planted in his sternum. “Are you going to remove that, or am I?”

“You’re not listening, Captain.” Schiller tilted his hand back, wagging the offending finger in Rifkin’s face. “You are important. You are not essential. None of your men are. They are merely convenient for the task at hand.”

“You son of a bitch, I ought to—”

“Shh!” Schiller suddenly whirled, faster than should have been possible. “Listen”.

“I don’t hear anything.”

“That’s because you are talking! Shut up!” And with that, Schiller plunged into the woods. Rifkin tried to follow him and found his legs impossibly heavy, his arms locked by his sides. He tried to reach for his pistol, but the movements simply would not come. He tried to call out—for help or for Schiller, he wasn’t sure—but his jaw stayed resolutely locked in place, his rasping breath the only noise he could hear.

And then there was shouting in German, and the sound of pistols firing in the woods so very close. Then more shouting, and running feet on dead leaves, and then one last, final shot.

Two minutes later, Schiller came trotting back out of the woods, a Luger P08 in his hand and a slim grin on his face. “Apologies for the interruption, Captain, but it was best I take care of that before we continued our discussion.”

Which is when the forces holding Rifkin in place suddenly evaporated, and he tumbled forward onto the ground at Schiller’s feet. “You...what the hell?”

“That was for your safety. You are not equipped to deal with the servants of the Black Sun, and as I said, while you are not essential, it would be inconvenient to lose you.”

“The Black who?”

“The men holding the leashes on the dogs of the *Sonderkommando* H. Searchers after *Wunderwaffe* for the *Führer*, and worse.”

Rifkin climbed to his feet, a hundred questions on his lips, but Schiller hushed him. “Double your guards. Finish the work. Ask no questions, and you will hear

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no answers that will haunt your dreams. Now, go to bed. If the Black Sun is aware of our little project, you'll need to work faster." He stared at one of the fake monoliths, a brooding monstrosity on the near side of the clearing. "And fix that one. There's a bullet hole in it now, and that simply will not do."

Satisfied, he turned and walked away. Rifkin stared after him until he vanished into the woods once again, the shadows swallowing him up with swift hunger.

"What the hell just happened?" Kelly came out from behind one of the plywood structures, scratching his head. "I half-thought he was going to bite your neck."

"That might come later. How much did you hear?"

"Enough."

"You don't repeat a word of it, you hear? And you don't go anywhere alone anymore. Nobody does. Whatever the hell this Black Sun thing is he's talking about, I don't want to lose anyone to it."

Kelly pursed his lips. "Seems sensible. What're you going to do?"

"Look for the bodies, though I don't think I'll find any. Keep things going. And pull every string I've got to find out more about what the hell we're doing here."

"Good luck with that," Kelly said mournfully, and loped away.



Rifkin found no bodies when he combed the woods, though he did find several small piles of fine grey ash. He thought about Schiller's comments about *Wunderwaffe* or wonder weapons, and shuddered, and had the guards on the site doubled.

Work continued. Men fell, and were replaced. Schiller visited with increasing frequency, demanding more and faster work until Rifkin nearly threw him off the site. Men complained of seeing and hearing things — dead-eyed ghosts in SS uniforms with strange insignia staring out from the trees, whispering voices that spoke neither English nor German but filled listeners with unspeakable dread, and a bone-chilling cold that settled over the entire operation, even when it was fifteen degrees warmer on the other side of the hill.

Rifkin, once he'd calmed down, mentioned these to Schiller. Schiller responded by telling him it would be nothing to worry about if he finished the damned project — less complaining, more construction.

And so it rose. An outer ring of fake stones, towering thirty feet in the air and covered in delicate, unreadable script. An inner ring of smaller ones, unadorned but aligned precisely according to Schiller's directions so that the setting sun lit a peculiar path through the ring. A central fire pit, a dozen feet across and ten feet deep, ringed with a circle of precisely laid out black sand. Next was the final piece of the puzzle, a mock up of a titanic stone table, grooved around the edges with iron rings set into the corners.

It made Rifkin feel uneasy just to look at it.

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When it was finished—the last coat of paint dried and the last fake rock artfully arranged, he sent word to Schiller that it was done. A half an hour later, the man himself was standing next to him, inspecting the site.

“It will do, I suppose,” were the first words Schiller said. “The third stone in the inner ring is two centimetres to the left of where it should be. The grooves down the centre of the table should be straighter. And the—no, never mind. It will have to do.”

“We’re halfway up a hill and fifty feet away,” Rifkin said incredulously. “You mean to tell me you can pick those details out from here? A lot of men I know back home would call that hooey, the sort of thing you say to keep from paying a man once he’s done a job for you.”

“A lot of men you know back home are idiots, Captain,” Schiller retorted. “I had not thought you were one as well.”

Rifkin opened his mouth to reply, but Schiller waved him off. “No, no, better you do not speak. Now listen to me. You and your men are now barred from this place. It is off limits. My own people will guard it. Stay on your side of the hill, no matter what you see or hear, and do not return unless I call for you.”

“Which you won’t, I’m guessing.”

Schiller cocked his head. “And once again the Captain makes me think he is clever. We are done here, you and I. Go back to your tent. Play your American records loud and harbour no dreams of heroics. Your work here is done.”

“Major, I—”

“Dismissed, Captain. That will be all.”

Snapping off a salute, Rifkin turned and marched away. Behind him, he could hear Schiller muttering things under his breath. And if he were honest, he could hear something answering.



It was raining when Kelly woke him, a hard, heavy rain shot through with lightning that was a little too thick and a little too red to feel quite natural. “Captain,” Kelly said, as he shook him awake. “You’ve got to hear this, Cap.”

“Wha..?” Rifkin sat up, the t-shirt he’d been sleeping in damp with sweat. He hadn’t been more than half asleep to begin with, the rock in his gut and the thunder in his ears conspiring to keep him from dropping off for more than a few minutes at a time. “Kelly. What’s the scoop?”

Kelly put his finger to his lips, shushing him. “Just listen for a minute.”

Rubbing his eyes, Rifkin listened. At first there was nothing but the steady thrum of the rain, with the gurgle of water running down through the camp as a sodden counterpoint. Occasional rumbles of thunder, distressingly close, cut through the water sounds with deafening impact.

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But after a moment, he picked up on something else, something low and ugly underneath the sounds of the rain. Something that sounded like chanting.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, though from the look on Kelly’s face, he didn’t know, either. “It’s not English, it’s not French, it’s not German, I’m pretty damn sure it’s not Japanese.”

“Hell if I know, Cap. I’m not sure it’s even human.” Kelly ducked out the front of the tent, out into the rain. A flash of lightning illuminated his face, showing lines of worry and fatigue that hadn’t been there when they’d started this damned project. “But I do know where it’s coming from.”

Rifkin knew the answer before he asked it. “Where?”

“The work site.”

“Son of a —” He shrugged into his shirt, slid feet into his boots and secured his sidearm in his holster. “Maybe we should go down there and see what the hell’s going on?”

Before Kelly could respond, another bolt of lightning stabbed down from the clouds. A blast of thunder powerful enough to knock Rifkin off his feet followed a millisecond later as the bolt smashed into the ground on the other side of the hill.

“Did it hit?” Rifkin shouted as he staggered back to his feet.

“It hit the site, yeah!” Kelly bellowed like a newly deaf man in a bar fight. “Went right for it, past the trees and the hill and everything!”

Rifkin threw on a rain slicker and ducked out of the tent. “We should see if there’s anything left. C’mon!” With that, he took off into the night. After a second’s hesitation, Kelly followed.

It wasn’t until they reached the top of the hill that Kelly caught up to the captain, and then only because Rifkin had stopped dead in his tracks. From where he stood, a natural break in the trees showed the scene in the valley below. What he saw there chilled him to the core.

There was a fire in the fire pit his men had built. He could see that now, great tongues of flame reaching up in defiance of the rain. A ring of chanting, hooded figures stood around the central firepit, casting long shadows across the inner ring of ‘stones’ Rifkin’s men had so laboriously created. The long, low slab next to the flames that had been joking called the altar was being used as exactly that. A woman in a tattered white robe lay upon it, bound hand and foot and screaming in German. Shadows danced against the edge of the clearing, not always in time with the leaping of the flames. And at the centre of it all, dressed in robes as red as blood and holding an ancient-looking dagger, stood Schiller. He held the blade up to the heavens, chanting something in harsh gutturals which cut through the rain and howling wind. As he shouted, bolts of lightning leapt up from the dagger into the sky, where they traced outlines of unspeakable faces into the roiling clouds. In the distance, across the river, similar bolts arced from ground to sky and back again, a matched set of impossibilities.

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“Holy shit,” said Kelly. “You seeing what I’m seeing, Cap’n?”

“I’m more worried about what we’re going to see next,” Rifkin replied. “The way our buddy Schiller’s waving that thing around, I don’t like that lady’s chances.”

Kelly shook his head. “I’ve seen things like this before. Some of the more decadent buyers back in New York liked to dabble in pretend occult nonsense. Summon the spirits to make an opening go well, crap like that. But this? I’m hinking it’s the real deal. Which means that fräulein down there’s not set dressing.”

Rifkin nodded. “She’s a sacrifice. Or will be, if we don’t stop them.”

Kelly gave a grin, a small one. “Been waiting for you to say that since we started working with Major Schiller there. He never rubbed me the right way, and seeing what he had us do? Making us a part of this? I’m all for putting a wrench in his gears.”

The captain answered Kelly’s smile with a tight one of his own. “I’m not thrilled with having ordered you to put this little slice of hell together. Whatever’s supposed to happen here, I want no part of it on my conscience. So let’s go make sure it doesn’t happen.”

Kelly pulled his sidearm, tucking it under his body to protect it from the rain. “Captain, I thought you’d never ask.”

Side by side, the two crept from under the shadow of the trees. Schiller was still chanting, his acolytes interrupting him now and then to echo his words or bellow out a response. The blade of the dagger was reversed now, pointing down at the woman spread-eagled on the sacrificial stone. She’d gone past words now and was simply screaming, pure wordless terror as she strained against her bonds.

Rifkin reached the base of the largest of the fake monoliths his men had built and tucked himself inside its shadow. A second later, Kelly emerged beside him, grim-faced.

“What’s the plan, Cap’n?”

“Around the outside until we’re closest to Schiller. Then we fire a few rounds, which should scatter those jokers in the bathrobes. None of ‘em look like they’re armed.”

“Except Schiller.”

“Gun beats knife.”

“Yeah, but does gun beat knife that shoots lightning?”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Still crouched, Rifkin headed to his right, timing his advances in the dark between lightning strikes. Kelly followed a few feet behind, until they stood at the head of the circle. Schiller’s back was to them as he concentrated on his task, while the hooded men chanted in frenzied rhythm, none looking away from the altar.

“Now?” asked Kelly.

“As good a time as any,” said Rifkin, and fired his pistol into the air as he charged into the ring. “Alright Major, show’s over. Put the knife down and step

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away from the girl.”

Schiller whirled, dagger still in hand. Past him, the other hooded figures turned as well, faltering mid-chant as they did so. On the altar, the victim twisted and contorted against the ropes. “Thank God, thank God,” she said in a thick German accent. “They’re going to kill me!”

“No they’re not,” Rifkin stepped forward, the pistol levelled at Schiller’s head. “You. Major. You’re gonna use that fancy knife of yours and cut her loose, or I’m going to introduce your guts to some high-velocity lead.”

“Idiot,” Schiller hissed. “You have no idea what’s going on here. What you are risking by interrupting.”

“Seems pretty obvious to me. Kelly. Since the Major here’s not interested in cooperating, go grab his pigsticker.”

“Roger that Cap’n.” Kelly stepped out from behind him and took two long strides toward where Schiller stood.

“Captain, you do not understand! If you stop us now, the war is lost!” Schiller’s face was ashen, whether from fury or fear Rifkin couldn’t tell. What he could see was the dagger, gleaming ever brighter in the ruddy light from the fire. And behind him in the long distance, the lightning was still pouring down in time with the ragged chanting of the few hooded men still on point.

The rest, the ones who weren’t muttering ancient nonsense syllables, were edging toward Schiller, and, by extension, Kelly.

“I don’t see us losing the war by taking a slice out of some local dame, Major,” Kelly said as he got close. “Tell your boys to stay back and put your hands in the air, or a bunch of folks’ll get perforated.” His pistol was in his fist, and he bumped Schiller’s belly with the muzzle to emphasize his point.

And that’s when Rifkin saw the thing that froze his blood cold.

Schiller smiled. “If that is what you wish,” he said, and raised his hands to the heavens in a mockery of the pose of surrender.

“Kelly!” Rifkin screamed, but it was too late. Even as Schiller stretched upward, the clouds reached down to him. A spiky rope of lightning punched down, homing in on the outstretched dagger before redirecting into a blast of pure energy that punched Kelly backwards a dozen yards. He skidded to a stop, unmoving, at the base of one of the fake menhirs.

Rifkin fired.

The woman on the altar screamed.

And the bullet hit the tip of the dagger and was vaporized by another burst of blue-white light.

“This is too important to waste time trying to convince you, Captain. Put down your gun and run. Or deal with the consequences. But you will not, you cannot stop what is happening here tonight.”

“Like hell I can’t,” Rifkin shouted, and fired again.

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Somehow, he missed.

Schiller did not, whirling and bringing the dagger down into the chest of the captive. Her dying shriek was lost in the roar of the suddenly surging fire, which rose in a bloody pillar towards the electrified clouds. A bellow of thunder exploded directly overhead, so loud the hooded chanters fell to their knees, clutching their heads and moaning. Fountains of blood jetted up from the altar, scribing impossible lines in the air, symbols that made Rifkin's head throb just to see them.

He squeezed the trigger again.
And the lightning came for him.



The first thing Rifkin discovered when he woke up was that it had stopped raining. The second was that he had apparently been tied to a tree, and the third was that his head hurt like hell. He blinked a few times, and realized he was bound to one of the trees on the edge of the clearing where he'd witnessed... whatever the hell he'd witnessed the night before. With that, everything came flooding back—the storm, the knife, the blood—and he found himself bellowing. “Schiller! Where are you, you bastard!?”

“There is no need to shout,” came a voice from behind him, and then Schiller stepped out of the shadows. In his left hand was a knife; not the one Rifkin had seen him with before, but a short, utilitarian blade that gleamed in the morning's weak light.

Rifkin lunged for him, completely forgetting that he was tied up, and succeeded only in rubbing his arms raw against the bark of the tree. “What did you do? Where's Kelly? Let me go, you son of a bitch!”

“Which first?” Schiller cocked his head for a moment, as if he were hearing a sound beyond human range. “Would you like answers or your freedom? I suspect if I give you the latter, you won't stay around long enough for the former.”

“Fine. Tell me what happened and then why I shouldn't call the MPs and get your skinny butt arrested?”

Schiller smiled, showing all of his very white teeth. “I do not think your military policemen would be able to get here in time to arrest me, or to help you if I chose to do you harm. Which I did not, despite your blundering into the middle of things last night.”

“You killed that girl!”

“She was an informant for the Gestapo, used to infiltrate resistance groups and betray them to the gun or the gas chamber. Will you weep for her, or for the many she betrayed to muddy unmarked graves?”

“Nobody deserves to die like that,” Rifkin growled. “Not even a spy.”

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Schiller sighed. “In the midst of the greatest slaughter the world has ever known, you rage over the sacrifice of one woman, though her death helped save millions? Are you truly that noble or just a fool?”

Rifkin gaped. “Millions?”

“Millions. What you saw last night—what little you saw—was part of something much, much greater. The Order of the Black Sun, they have studied more than just science. They have followed paths of dark power, walking with open eyes into places of horror that they might turn and bring that nightmare to us all. The second light across the valley—you remember it, yes?”

Grudgingly, Rifkin nodded. “That was, for lack of a better word, a ritual. An invitation, sealed in blood, to a thing from outside of space and time. Calling it to our world so that it might feast on the weak flesh of the Allied armies and halt their advance.”

“That’s insane.” Rifkin spat on the ground, tasting blood and rainwater. “First of all, a summoning? What is this, a Murnau flick? Second, even if you’re not lying about that, a few rounds from a Pershing and—”

“And nothing. There is no power on earth that could stop such a thing once it was loosed, a terror that walks from world to world sowing madness and reaping death. The only way to defeat it was to prevent it from ever setting foot—if such a thing can be said to have a foot—here in the first place.”

“Is that why you had us build...this? Whatever this is?”

Schiller nodded, elegantly trimming his nails with the knife as he spoke. “Indeed. The plans you worked from? Stolen, at great cost, from the heart of Wewelsburg Castle, in order to create a precise replica of their summoning circle. The site, the ritual, the sacrifice—all had to be identical and simultaneous, to confuse the great beast and trap it between portals. Had you stopped us, or even delayed the stroke of the knife—”

Despite himself, Rifkin shuddered. “Or damaged one of the props? Jesus.” It was impossible of course, and completely insane, but there was something terrifying in the way Schiller casually discussed monsters from outer space that chilled Rifkin’s blood. Because it was very clear that Schiller believed, and that he would have done anything—anything at all—to protect his mission.

“Or damaged one of the pieces of the set, yes. Your men did masterful work, Captain. They helped save the world, not that the world will ever know. You should be proud.”

“My men...where’s Kelly? What did you do to Kelly?”

“He is back at your camp, largely unharmed. I simply felt that this was a talk we should have alone.” Schiller coughed, twice. “It really is magnificent, what your men did. Such a shame it will have to be destroyed.”

“Destroyed?” Rifkin thought for a moment. “To keep anyone else from using it to summon this...thing?”

In the Shadows of the 603rd

Ever so slightly, Schiller smiled. “Ach, you begin to understand. Everything here has been touched by what you might call a great evil. It would not take much to draw it forth again, and so this must all be destroyed utterly. No pictures. No souvenirs. No remembrances and no pilgrimages here after the war is over. Do you understand me, Captain Rifkin?”

Rifkin met his eyes. “It’ll burn today.”

“Good. Then our...collaboration is at its end. Pray there is never cause for another.”

And with that, Schiller spun on his heel as if to depart.

“Hey. Hey!”

Schiller stopped, mid-turn, and looked back over his shoulder. “Yes, Captain?”

“Aren’t you going to cut me loose?”

Schiller thought for a moment. “No,” he said, and walked away. ✖





The King in Waiting

By Dan Griliopoulos

A young lady stepped lightly down from a hansom cab in the new suburbs of Barnet, in far North London. She was slight, with bobbed brown hair, oval glasses, a round hat, and a two-piece tweed suit that made her look much older than her years. The only dissonant element was at her waist and at her wrists, where clusters of gewgaws, gimcracks and fetishes dangled and clashed as she moved.

The cab had deposited her in the middle of a building site and she looked around for a moment. She was standing at the end of a row of ugly new houses, where they faded into construction equipment. Up the road was a suburban scene, with topiary-heavy gardens and red-tiled roofs topped by small birds lazing in the summer sun. Here, rubble and cranes dominated, with a long Nissen hut acting as a site office. As she took it in, a suntanned man in overalls and a builder's helmet jumped up from his desk in the hut and hurried over.

He smiled ingenuously. "Can I 'elp you, Miss?" he said. "Do you need directions somewhere? This building work is rather dangerous." He gestured widely around at the deserted dig site and made to escort her away.

"My name is Emily Confort, of the Met Office," she said, pulling her elbow out of his grasp. "George is expecting me. He said to say 'Chrome Yellow'."

The man's chummy demeanour changed to respectfully dour. "Oh! Oh." He frowned and then turned back towards the site office. "You'd better come down."

There was a moist warmth and sharp actinic smell inside the corrugated steel hut. A pair of huge ventilation shafts loomed over both the foreman's cheap desk and a steep spiral staircase going down. He handed her a tin helmet. "You'd best wear this, miss." Emily shook her head at the proffered helmet, and peered down

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into the banister-less depths. “Well then. Watch your head and your step. Come this way.”



Deep beneath the suburban streets, Emily was led through fresh-laid concrete corridors, already rich with damp. Through reinforced doors and concrete window frames, she saw cramped rooms, wireless stations, blackboards, soldiers, pipes and cables, cables, cables everywhere. One room was even crammed with an entire BBC radio studio, complete with scurrying technicians and a familiar Brilliantined presenter.

Finally, her escort stopped at a door at the dead end of a corridor, guarded by a tall corporal carrying a carbine. “Hallo Sid.” said her escort. “This is the last of them for, uh. George.” The corporal looked at a clipboard, then stooped to open the door. Emily went in.

“Ah, Miss Confort! We’re finally all here. Good. Call me George. Please take a seat.”

Inside, the room was bare-walled, small and low, but it made ‘George’ seem perfectly to scale. He was slight and dapper, with the perfectly forgettable features that suited people in old, anonymous professions. His slim fingers drummed on the desk, with the animation of a restless mind, but his eyes were ancient, cold and flat behind his wide glasses. Even as he smiled and crooned an amiable thanks to the departing guard, his dispassionate, shielded calculation never quite thawed.

Emily looked around at the other three occupants of the room. A worn-looking man in an unfamiliar uniform was staring absently at his hands, while an RAF officer lounged languidly across a row of chairs. On the front row, a florid, balding giant sat stiffly in obvious discomfort in tight civilian clothes. The RAF man glanced up and patted the seat next to him invitingly. Emily smiled tightly, and moved across to sit quickly next to the unknown soldier, snapping him out of his reverie. “Schweik” he said thickly, extending a workman’s hand, its nails close-bitten. Emily shook it.

George closed the bunker door and walked to a blackboard. “Now we can get on—yes, Mr Hartington. You have a question?”

The sweating giant lowered his hand and pulled nervously at the restrictive collar of his Sunday Best jacket. “Mr George, sir. Though it’s an honour being here, I’m just a bobby. I don’t think I should be seeing this secret stuff. The bunker and the radios and Mr Churchill’s office and all that. It’ll be awfully hard not to tell the missus. Are you sure I should be here?”

“Now, Mr Hartington—you are crucial to this mission, along with Lieutenant Smythe.” He nodded a smile at the sprawled dapper man. “Miss Confort and Captain Schweik are just here in case of problems, really. For example, Mr

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Hartington, I assume you know of Sir Oswald Mosley?

The bald pate reddened and the great face grimaced. “Yes, sir. We had to deal with his lot at the battle of Cable Street, round by Wiltons. Nasty bunch, those Blackshirts. And the government ordered us to protect *them*. A few thousand police against a hundred thousand locals! Idiocy. I must admit, I was glad when they got the boot.”

George nodded. “Well, you may recall that after the banning of the BUF, Mosley was interned. Locked up because he’s too much of a threat to the na—”

A squawk of laughter interrupted George. “What, Tom Mosley, ‘a threat to the nation’? Pshaw!” Smythe guffawed and slouched more in his smart uniform. “That socialism rot he babbles might have disordered his old brainbox a little, and he always had a problem with the Yids—who doesn’t—but he loves this country. Tom, a threat? Ha!” He squawked again, contemptuously.

George looked over his glasses, his face still. “Ah, yes. This is Flight Lieutenant Smythe. As you can tell from his familiarities and politics, he’s an old school friend of Mosley’s from Winchester.” Smythe nodded avuncularly. George continued. “It is true that Sir Oswald was once a socialist, a very progressive one at that. His proposals for a national unemployment benefit alone are thirty years ahead of their time. But since his reform agenda was rejected and he was expelled from the Labour party, he is now very much a *national* socialist, indeed the senior fascist on these shores.”

George frowned. “The key point is that Mosley, rightly or wrongly, was interned as a threat to the establishment. The man is a personal friend of both Hitler and Goebbels, and related to much of our aristocracy, including the royal family. If the Axis ever conquered these shores, you may rest assured that Mosley would be the head of their government, as Prime Minister or perhaps even as King.”

Smythe started to interject, but a hand movement from George silenced him. “From this point on everything you hear is top secret. You are to repeat this to no-one—you hear me, Mr Smythe, no-one. We will hear of it if you do.”

“The crucial fact.” He held up a photo of a handsome lean man with short dark hair and an incongruous moustache. “Sir Oswald Mosley disappeared from his internment house in Holloway two days ago. We suspect he had aid from either Blackshirt elements or Nazi agents or both, given the guards we’d placed about him. Our reports now put him back in the East End.”

“That’s your stomping ground, Mr Hartington, your beat. The task is to track him down and we’re told that you’re the best man for the job.” Hartington nodded. “And once Hartington finds him, you take over Mr Smythe. You know him of old, so your job is to persuade him to come quietly—say whatever it takes. Captain Schweik will be running security, in case you can’t persuade him. And Miss Confort will be in charge of the mission.”

“Oh, balderdash,” interjected Smythe’s blather. “Come now. I’m sure she’s

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lovely, but this gal looks like my maiden aunt. What's her rank? She—"

George's soft voice cut through his blather surgically. "Mr Smythe. If I have to silence you again or if I have reason to suspect your commitment to this mission, you'll be sent back to your squadron under a very heavy cloud. Firstly, Captain Schweik outranks you. Secondly, you do not know and will not know Miss Confort's rank, but she outranks him. She is an acting member of MI18, and you will do what she says, by order of your superiors. Clear?"

Smythe's face purpled, his protruding eyes bulging a little more. He stared round at Em. She looked coolly back. He cleared his throat nervously. "Right," he muttered. "Right, sorry, yes. Clear. Necessities of war, and all that, right? Right."

"Good. Mr Hartington. What are the most likely places Mosley could have gone to ground? Where shall we start?"



It was a grey, rainy dawn as Hartington led the team out of Whitechapel underground station, joining the crowds flocking out from a bad night's sleep on the tube platforms. Every class of London life was represented here. Harried-looking bankers heading off to the city, housewives rushing to see if their houses had survived the night's bombing, barrow-boys and spivs recovering their wares from lock-ups in anticipation of a day of legal and illegal trading, and the many staggering homeless. The only element absent was men of fighting age.

Where Hartington had been quiet and out of place in the surroundings of the bunker, here he, in his dark blue uniform and custodian helmet, amongst people who knew and respected him, he was very much in charge. Even amongst these packed crowds, he was given a respectful space, with the occasional accidental jostle resulting in profuse apologies.

The team regrouped on the corner of Commercial Street. "I'm just happy we made it out of there. I've not used the underground since that bomb hit Balham. And the smell!" said Smythe, clutching a bright hanky to his face. Schweik looked anonymous as ever, in a synthetic double-breasted suit, dingy Mac and carrying a cardboard suitcase, and Confort's drab outfit hadn't changed, but Smythe was dressed to impress, in a cornflower blue tweed suit, lemon fedora and snappy shoes.

"Hmm." said Confort, looking Smythe up and down critically. "Smythe, you look like a pimp. Don't you know there's a war on? Schweik, give me your overcoat and go with Hartington. Smythe, put this on and stay with me—you'll draw too much attention dressed like that. And try to not make your face that colour, it doesn't go with your shoes." Smythe's face purpled more, but he stayed quiet and put on Schweik's old overcoat, though not without a grimace of distaste.

They spent the morning trawling the markets of the East End. Even this early on a Sunday, the markets were buzzing with shoppers and hawkers. Whilst

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Harrington and Schweik glad-handed the traders and questioned them openly about anything unusual, Confort and Smythe trailed in their wake. With their incongruous clothing, they looked the part of a middle-class couple slumming it, whilst they listened in for tidbits from the shouted conversations of the traders. Though the locals knew Mosley from the Cable Street riots, the team had to be cautious. After all, the man was still meant to be interned in Holloway, as far as the people here knew.

Around mid-morning, they'd walked as far as Petticoat Lane market and started to hear their first rumours. "A tall dark posh chap?" said one Indian trader, smiling at Schweik. Her stall was full of damaged bric-a-brac 'recovered' from bombed-out houses. "We've seen a few of those down Limehouse way. Peabody would know."

On Columbia Road market, an old Jewish man greeted Harrington effusively, trying to give him a black market orange that the big policemen turned down guiltily, before telling them tall tales of giant rats in the sewers.

Sitting in a crammed wooden booth of a flower-tiled pie and mash shop for an early lunch, the team listened in to the traders and fishwives gossiping over their eels, pies and tea.

"...Somefink off in the sewers. Not talking 'baht the rats, though they're hee-o-oj. Somefink big dahn there, eating all the fat..."

"...and that Peabody said he saw a chap who looked just like Sir wossisname, skulking down by Wapping..."

"...I wonder where Mr Minze gets the meat for these pies, with the rationing? Never seems to be a shortage..."

"...isn't that Constable Harrington? I remember when he used to box. Now, *he* could have been a contender..."

"...and then I sing '*Oh, when I am dead and forgotten as I shall be, and sleep in dull, cold marble with...* these lovely utility towels, ten bob a pair.' It's a good patter for selling knickers, innit?"

"...Nah. Can't be him. That slimy bastard is under lock and key up at Holloway. And he wouldn't dare show his face round here again. Not after we showed him what for at Cable Street..."

"*Men ken lebn nor men lost nisht!* And I'll say it again."

"...a hunchback and a giant?...Peabody's usual tripe... Was very Blitzzy last night, wasn't it..?"

The team put their heads together as lunch ended and the traders sloped back to their stalls. Confort looked inquisitively at Harrington, as he tucked into his third pie and liquor.

"This Peabody seems to be our man. Who is he?" Harrington put his fork and spoon down with a clatter and wiped his moustache on a napkin before responding.

"A local spiv. Don't think Peabody's his real name, as he looks Irish or Jewish.

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He works out of those squats in Brick Lane. Absolutely fearless little lifter. If it wasn't nailed down, he's already sold it. And he's got a knack for machines—he can fix anything. Speaks absolute rot, mind. But, yes, he's probably our best lead.”

Even amid the bustle of Brick Lane, Peabody was easy to find. From a distance Hartington pointed him out, skulking outside the Spitalfields Great Synagogue. He was a short, indeterminately-shaped figure, bundled in ill-fitting clothes. As soon as he saw Hartington approaching, Peabody turned to run—smack into the solid grip of Schweik. A surprisingly young face, dark with grime, looked up at the Easterner.

As the group approached, he turned his breathless spiel directly on Hartington. “Morning officer and isn't it a lovely morning now I know what you're here for you must be confusing me with someone else you're looking well I used to love it when you boxed by the way those lights were always loose and I said that they were a hazard you had a lovely right hook and sure someone took them down for rep—”

Hartington interposed his heavy voice into the flow. “Peabody, I'm not here for the Synagogue lights. But, incidentally, if you know where they are, it would be good if they were returned and sharpish. I wanted to ask if you've seen anyone or anything odd around the area recently?”

The small figure visibly relaxed, and hung his head. “Well, there's the bloody Nazis in St George in the East, which no-one will believe me about. Apart from them, no.” Schweik drew a sharp breath and Hartington froze. Peabody glanced up, smiling. “Ha! I knew it! I knew it. Wait until my mum hears—”

Emily stepped forward. “Mr Peabody. We'll need you to show us where they are. And from this moment forth you're enlisted. And covered by the Official Secrets Act, 1920. You can't talk about this to anyone, ever. Loose lips sink ships.”

“Especially not your mum.” said Hartington. “Mrs Peabody could sink the *Graf Spee* all by herself.”



Peabody was talking incessantly as he led Confort's crew over the rubble of East End homes, some still smoking from the previous night's raids. Holes in the lines of buildings let Emily see the Thames and the South Bank beyond. Whilst the industrial east of London was gap-toothed with burnt-out homes, south of the river was simply a wasteland, obliterated by carefully-misdirected carpet bombing. The peak of the raids had already passed in September 1940, two months of continuous raining death that destroyed a million homes and killed over 20,000 people in the city. Everywhere they walked, squatters sat in the wrecks of their homes. Underfoot, the city was just a mass of burned clay bricks, in various stages of disintegration. Whilst the others walked in stunned, respectful silence, this devastation was home to Peabody, so he chattered on.

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"I thought there was something up. You know, when the Lea caught fire and then the Thames at the end of last year, they said it was from the hit on the gin factory and the sugar stores. So I was wondering what was burning and, honestly, whether I could sell it. But when I went in there to have a recce both places were cleaned out. And that's when I saw the Nazis. I still don't know what the fire was from, bright blue like —"

"Hush!" said Schweik, breaking his silence and motioning them into the cover of a half-fallen wall. The strange pepperpot towers of St George's were silhouetted against the low afternoon sun and, for a moment, no-one else understood the reason for caution. Then, they saw it. Throughout the churchyard, figures were walking through the worn gravestones towards the church doors. There was a skulking camaraderie about them, as they greeted each other. "Just the fascists." hissed Peabody. "Must be something important on. Not normally this many of them."

They waited until the churchyard was clear and Hartington led them down to the church doors. Confort briefed them. "Now, gentlemen. We're going to go in there and get Mosley. Mr Smythe, I want you to talk to Mosley—he knows you so your job is to persuade him to come quietly. Promise him anything it takes to keep him quiet while we clear the room, then bring him in. If he doesn't come quietly, we have the authority to use force."

"I hope he listens to sense" said Smythe, shaking his head. "But Tom was very good at doing the opposite of what he was told."

"Well, try. Now Mr Hartington, Mr Smythe. None of those men looked armed but, for safety, Captain Schweik will give you pistols now. Do not use them unless you have to, but keep them visible." Schweik opened the battered suitcase and started handing out Webley revolvers to the team, reserving a more formidable-looking automatic for himself.

"Are these loaded?" asked Hartington, bristling. "I'm sorry, but I'm not going to kill anyone, especially not one of Her Majesty's subjects. I prefer to get up close. Not exactly a fair fight with a gun anyw —"

"It's quiet." Schweik interrupted. "Where's Peabody?" They looked around, but the little spiv had vanished. Emily groaned.

"Right, he must have run. Damn, I needed him to call the police. We'll find him later. Hartington, I know all about your objections, don't worry—but you might be grateful of that gun later." The giant policeman looked bashful. "Smythe, Schweik, take the Rectory door. We'll go in the front."

Inside the old church, the stained glass gave only a dim light. It was a magnificent shrine, more saintly inside than the strange, demonic exterior built by Hawksmoor after the Great Fire three hundred years before. A couple of dozen figures were scattered, clustered amongst the wooden pews and the ancient rood screens. Above them, an organ gallery stood eerie and empty. Most of the men were in civvies, but a braver few wore the banned uniforms of the Blackshirts

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beneath trenchcoats. All were lowering their arms from the fascist salute.

Ahead of them at the pulpit, lit in many colours by the main window, stood Sir Oswald Mosley. He was tall and lean, with a heavy leather belt cinching a black turtleneck and black slacks together at his waist. As he spoke, his right arm punctuated each phrase, whilst his left hung at his side. An unusually-large blue jewel glittered on a ring on his finger.

“...the government wanted me to create something for them. Something unholy. It consumed my dear Cimmie, and I refused to do it again. My friends, I have been offered sanctuary by our friend Chancellor Hitler, and I cannot risk staying here. This country rejected socialism! It rejected reason! Now I reject it. But I will return at the head of an army of liberation and free the people of this country from their benighted, ignorant leadership!” The small congregation applauded as Mosley’s oration continued.

From their vantage point at the rear, Schweik and Confort could see Smythe and Hartington had moved into position in the shadows on either side of the stage. She signalled to Smythe. He stepped forward from the Rectory door into the light, pistol raised, to startled murmurs from the crowd. Mosley, sensing their hesitancy, paused, looked around.

“Tom! It’s Reggie. Reggie Smythe. I’m sorry to interrupt, old boy, but I’m afraid you’re caught. And quite surrounded to boot. Will you please send your chaps away and come quietly?”

The Blackshirts seemed panicked. A few moved towards the church porch, whilst others moved towards Smythe. Yet Mosley suddenly looked weary and sagged, his bombast fading. “Reggie? Bother. I was almost away from this immigrant-riddled city.” He turned to the audience. “You chaps had better scarper. I expect the police will be here soon. Stay free!” A couple of the men stepped forward, growling dissent but then Hartington and Schweik moved out of the shadows, their guns on display. The Blackshirts’ resolve melted like summer snow and they backed away.

As the last of his followers hurried out, Mosley turned back to Smythe, his anger returning. “Reggie, you idiot. Why are you working for these pigs? Don’t you know what they got me to do? They wanted a moonchild. To be born into the damned—”

“Mosley!” Schweik had stepped forward, gun raised. “Don’t say another word. Come back to Holloway.”

“Oh, the good Doctor Schweik too? What a reunion. If I can’t tell them about the moonchild, why don’t you? Why don’t you tell them about what happened to my wife, my Cimmie? You know, I rather fancy telling them all about it.”

“Mosley. You have my word you will be left alone in Holloway. But I will shoot you if I have to.” Schweik lifted the gun.

“Try.” Mosley raised his arms. “Try.” There was something unholy about the

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broken black clad figure posing Christ-like in front of the ancient altar, something otherworldly about his confidence. Or perhaps it was just the multicoloured light coming through the glass. Hartington muttered a prayer under his breath. Smythe was more forthright. "What's this all about, Schweik? A moonchild?" Schweik hesitated, lowering his gun, and suddenly looked ten years older.

As they stood there, like a tableau from a stained window, the silence was broken by the sound of sirens. Distantly at first, but getting louder and closer, the wail resounded inside the thick walls. "Is that the police?" said Schweik? "No, blast." said Confort. "That's another air raid. Look, enough machismo. We've got to get to a shelter immediately."

Yet, even as she spoke another noise began beneath the cover of the sirens, a growing hum like a hive of bees trapped in a tin can. Schweik frowned, and lowered his gun completely.

"What is that? I know that sound." he said.

"It sets my fillings on edge, it does, Captain," said Hartington. "Where's it coming from? There shouldn't be any machinery in the church. Especially not if Peabody's lot have been here."

The noise increased abruptly, from a hum to a whine and then a roar. Smythe turned, back towards the old rectory door. "Oh! I think it's—"

He didn't finish the sentence. The iron-banded rectory door creaked once then flew in one piece towards him, picking up his body and throwing it like a ragdoll into the gallery, where it landed with a savage crunch. The same blast of force disintegrated the church's roof beams on impact and toppled them, vanishing Hartington in a cloud of wood dust and shingles. Another giant roof timber started to fall towards Mosley, only to be intercepted by something glistening, which folded away as soon as it appeared.

The whole interior of the church was still reverberating with the blast, as two figures stalked through the doorway, obscured by the dust.

The one at the front was of average height, in a gray coat and matched fedora, with what looked like a hunchback beneath his coat. In his hands he was clutching a pair of studded metal discs that were buzzing louder by the moment. He barked an order in German and his companion, a giant in a dark coat and hat, made for Mosley, grabbing him from the podium as if he was a child and running back to the rectory. Schweik was the first to recover, firing a snap shot at the great figure, which pinged off the old stone above his head. The figure in grey angled the plates towards him and Schweik stopped firing immediately.

The sound of the black-clad giant's footsteps faded into the distance, cut off by the booming slam of the outside door. There was a moment of quiet. Hartington's dusty hand extended from under the rubble in the centre of the room, and he could be heard faintly groaning. There was no noise from where Smythe's body had landed. In the distance, air-raid sirens still wailed, accompanied now by the

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distant duelling crumps of AA guns and bombs. Flames from the toppled candles started to spread across the podium.

The remaining figure advanced out from under the gallery towards Schweik. He spoke English with a subtle German accent.

“Herr Mosley will have the Atlanteans to thank for his escape. Such a miracle of ancient technology, these devices. Drop your gun and kick it over.”

“You would be working for *Nachtwölfe*, then?” said Schweik, bending to place the gun on the ground. He glanced at the rubble. Hartington’s large hand was working its way towards a lump of brick. Schweik carefully placed his gun by his foot and kicked it as near to the hand as was subtle.

The German ignored his question and the gun, and waved one of the plates at Confort, standing stunned in the main entrance. “Excuse me, Madam. You should comfort the groaning one. He may be injured. I am certain that your other friend is dead. Very dead.”

“Stay where you are, Miss Confort.” said Schweik. “He just wants us closer together. The plates can’t hit us both at once otherwise.” Confort shook her head and hurried forward to Hartington.

“Ah, you know the device’s limitations. You must be Doctor Schweik, then? I have been briefed on you too. Well, *Herr Doctor*, you must know then that they are almost fully charged. Fortuitously, you are the only one still armed and standing so I will deal with you first...” He swung both his plates towards Schweik and the buzzing again rose to a crescendo.

At that moment, a small figure dropped from the balcony onto his head. Peabody’s impact sent the German’s arms skyward, releasing the plates’ charged blast into the three hundred-year-old roof. There was a sound like thunder, sending timbers and tiles flying into the sky, and Schweik diving for cover.

On the floor, miraculously unharmed amongst the falling debris, there was a one-sided struggle between the two men, the strength of a trained soldier just outweighing the vicious tricks of the East End urchin. The German went for a combat knife, but Peabody bit down hard on his wrist, forcing him to drop it. The German wrestled back, narrowly avoiding a knee to the crotch, before knocking Peabody flat with a depleted force plate. Standing, the Nazi dropped the plates, reached for his pistol and aimed quickly at the stunned urchin. Shots rang out.

The German looked confused for a moment, glanced at his gun, and toppled forward, onto the writhing spiv. A hard-faced Confort dropped Schweik’s pistol and urgently turned to Hartington.

Schweik looked down at the scrawny figure of Peabody, trapped writhing under the heavy body of the dead German. “Mr Peabody, I think you may be something of—how do you say—a diamond in the rough. Let me help you up.”



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In the Finchley bunker, the atmosphere was grim but George was businesslike as ever. Peabody, Confort and Smyth stood and the heavily-bandaged Hartington sat as George debriefed them. “We’ll be sending condolences to Smythe’s family naturally. He was an ass, but he died in service to his country.”

“What the hell was that about, George?” said Confort, “This should have been a simple recovery mission. First, Nazis, then that device.”

Schweik shook his head. “The hubris, to bring Nazis over here and *Nachtwölfe* at that. Hitler must want Mosley very much.”

“Yes, with good reason.” George looked at the reports on his desk. “We’ve not been able to find the plates you described—

“The brave Mr Peabody might be able to help you there.” said Schweik.

“You won’t see them until I’m convinced you’re on the right side.” Peabody shifted from foot to foot. “Government’s never done much for me yet—and especially nothing good.” George looked irritated and amused in equal measure.

“Sir.” Hartington lurched up, his bandaged bulk looming over George. “We have questions. What is the moonchild? What did Mosley do? And what was that protecting him? Was that another device?”

“Ah. He talked about that, did he? Well, I suppose Captain, Doctor Schweik is better placed to talk about that. Doctor?”

Schweik walked to the front of the room, and George made room for him behind the desk. The Easterner coughed and spoke in a monotone. “The moonchild is a concept. A white magician called Cyril Grey came up with it before the First World War. It... There are things almost beyond human comprehension. They are creatures, not merely alien, but of fundamental otherness to us. Colossal in scale or intangible or made of pure power.”

“Sound like fairy tales to me.” said Peabody.

“They are, mostly. So thinly-bound to our world, that they may as well be. Yet there are ways in which their existence crosses over with ours. And Grey realised that there are means by which we can enforce that crossing over, bind them and their power to us. I have studied these ways. The moonchild is one such way.”

“This does not sound very Christian.” said Hartington. “I am not sure you are a good man, Captain Schweik.”

“And what army are you a captain in, anyway, Schweik?” asked Confort.

“Why, an army that doesn’t exist any more. My country is gone, swallowed by the Nazi war machine. Now I am just a scientist who made decisions he regrets. Shall I continue? Mosley was almost royalty—his cousin is the King, you know? We wished to repeat Grey’s experiments, and Mosley ensured that we had support from on high. I believe his plan was to offer this power to the government, if it succeeded, in return for movement on his socialist programme. He volunteered his wife Cimmie to be, a—uh—a vessel. For the moonchild. It was very noble of him. More so of her.”

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“I will not detail the many ways it did not work. At first, all seemed well. But it wasn’t. We passed her death off as peritonitis. But the dreadful stink and swelling and the thing that we ...killed... I regret it all. I wrote a report damning the experiment completely, begging for it never to be repeated.”

Schweik looked down again, chewing at his fingernails. “It touched Mosley, somehow, the thing that came through, though it didn’t survive the transition. It broke him, broke his faith. Not that there wasn’t darkness and hate there before. But there is something else, something dark that protects him now. You saw the way that he was shielded in the church—something that can snatch away bullets, knives, a falling mountain.” His voice became guttural. “It is the gatekeeper and the opener of the gate and the gate itself.”

The room dimmed and felt colder as he spoke. The policeman and the spiv glanced at each other, mute with incomprehension. “After my report, the government would have no part of it, no time for Mosley. Thank you, but no thank you. With his wife’s death, and social and political rejection, Mosley turned. He founded his own political party, which merged with the fascists. He remarried—but instead of royalty attending his wedding, this time it was in Goebbels’ Berlin apartment, with Hitler as principal guest.”

George spoke from the corner. “He is not ours now. He thinks if he goes over there, they will raise him high for the invasion, that they will make him king. But the *Nachtwölfe* know what he has, what he can offer, and that is more valuable to them. They will take that first, then they will see if they can still make use of him. After all, anyone who rules these islands in Hitler’s name will certainly need more than human protection.”

Behind the desk, Schweik hissed, hunched with self-loathing. “And these creatures, they are inhuman. To call the unthinking consumption of the Old One’s creations immoral or evil is missing the point. Concepts themselves are alien to many of them, let alone right or wrong, and even if they had that ability, we are so far below them to not figure in their thinking as relevant moral actors.”

“But the Germans, they are human. They grew up in this world, they know what evil is. And they know that what they’re doing is monstrous. They think they use these things as tools for their own advancement, little aware that they themselves are part of some inhuman, otherworldly agenda. With Mosley’s knowledge, they can make more of these creatures—perhaps birth them successfully—and perhaps invoke the same protection for their leaders as Mosley has now. They must be stopped.”

The room was silent. Schweik walked back to his seat and sat down again, staring at his hands, avoiding everyone’s eyes.

George strolled back behind this desk. “Now, to business. Miss Confort—you had a message. From Gladys at the Met Office. She just wanted to know how you were doing, and if you needed any help?” Confort, mutely shook her head. “Well,

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until we get a break, we investigate and play the waiting game.”



The waiting game was hard. They sat around that office for weeks, passing the time by playing card games and getting on each other's nerves. Even George's impenetrable calm started to seem slightly frayed. He scheduled training for them, and the civilians were taught to use more advanced weapons—rifles and Sten guns.

Smythe's funeral was at a damp cemetery in Kensal Green, on the outskirts of London. It passed awkwardly, the group standing unnoticed amidst the grieving great and good.

For a fortnight Mosley evaded capture and the team feared he'd escaped to the continent, to reveal his secrets, which would allow the Nazis to perfect his creatures. The eyes of the M organisation around the country were village postmasters and harbour masters too old for war or gossiping parish priests too suited to one uniform to swap it for another. They were put on alert for figures matching the escapee's description.

With so many eyes watching, false alarms blossomed around the country. Local MI18 operatives were dispatched to the heights of the Peak District, to the fells of Dartmoor, to fens and hills and bomb-blasted cities and farms. Each alert petered out and time passed slowly.

Late on a Tuesday, a report came from North Wales. The local eyes of Llandudno, a retired colonel and birdwatcher, had been out looking for kittiwakes and peregrines in the cable car. Through his binoculars, he'd spotted two figures matching the description tramping down the saddle of the Great Orme. The nearest M operative arrived on the Wednesday morning and confirmed the descriptions, and called urgently for back-up.

And so the team found themselves waiting at Llandudno Junction in the rainy dawn of a Thursday morning. A hastily-arranged connecting service to the resort proper was coming down the track, with the view over the Conwy river to the old castle muggy in the dawn mist.

As the Victorian steam engine chugged in, a chubby man with a dark suit jumped out and shook the team's hands hurriedly. "It's Owen, my name." he said in a lilting Welsh accent.

"Now come in the train before you catch your death. It's pissing down!" He helped them with the heavy army radios and rifle cases, and ushered them aboard.

Inside the train was warm and smelled of coal and smoke. Owen lit a cigarette and led them up to the Second Class carriages. "Come on up, it's nicer than third. Don't put your feet on the seats in here though, the inspector will boil my head." They sat down as the engine started backing up, pushing them back along the

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coastal railway. “Now your man is booked into a guesthouse by the pier—not the nicest, but not cheap either. I think it’s definitely the Mosley fella. He has that big friend with him, though he’s not come out of his room since he arrived.

“What’s he doing all the way up here?” asked Confort.

“We don’t know. There’s only fishing boats and yachts docked and I’ve put the word out with the coastguard not to let any of them leave. I’d say he was just hiding out but...”

“But what?”

“...but the landlady says he’s due to check out today.”

“Why would he move on if he was safely hidden here? Damn. Hartington, any word on back-up?”

“Yes, I got the strangest message from HQ. Miss Confort, apparently your friends at the Met Office will be joining us as soon as possible. Apparently, they’re having difficulty with a wheelchair.”

“Weathermen? With a wheelchair? Confort, what’s going on?” Owen looked perturbed.

“Ah, that’s our back-up. It’s need-to-know only, sorry.” She smiled sweetly.

Dawn was coming over the humped headline of the Great Orme as their train pulled into Llandudno. The town was small, with a pier stretching out from the deep bay, and rows of whitewashed Victorian guesthouses curving up to the Little Orme in the distance. “Llandudno”, said Owen, “‘*Hardd, hafan, hedd.*’ That means ‘beautiful, haven, peace’. It’s a lovely little town.”

The train pulled in and they hurried off, with Owen shouting thanks to the train driver. Walking briskly down the promenade, he led them to a guesthouse near the pier and hurried up the steps to knock quietly on the front door. An elderly lady, with her hair in curlers, poked her head out through the front door, blinking into the early sun. Owen leaned up against the door and greeted her quietly in Welsh, smiling, but after a few words from her his affability soon changed to worry.

A whispered conversation in Welsh broke out, rising in pitch and volume, as Owen’s arms started waving increasingly frantically.

He turned away, sharply. “*Mae hi’n siarad trwy ei het!* Sorry, sorry, I mean, she’s talking through her hat. Mosley’s gone, not ten minutes ago. She says ‘that nice Mr Osbert paid up and was going for a walk on the pier, before going onto Rhyl’. That’s the only lead we have. I’ll go back to the station and phone for the local police to search the trains at Llandudno Junction—that’s the only way out except over the Orme by foot. You check out the pier.” He turned and started running back to the station.

The pier stretched nearly half a mile into the sea. It was a typical Imperial pier, built in an Indian Gothic style, and covered in coconut shies, candy floss stalls and a mid-sized pavilion at the end. It was deserted, save for a pair of figures halfway along, walking with purpose towards the end.

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Confort peered through a pair of binoculars. “That’s got to be them.” she said. “Schweik, radio the back-up to come here. Hartington, help me unpack the guns.” She handed them out, giving Hartington a Sten, Schweik a M1 Garand and retaining a small silenced Welrod for herself. Reluctantly, she offered Peabody a Webley, but he waved it away.

The team walked cautiously to the end. The closer they got, the slower they went—but there was still no sign of the figures. At the end, there was a wide open deck with a stage protruding over the water. “What the hell is that?” hissed Confort. “Is that a landing stage? How deep is the water here? Why weren’t we briefed about this?” She peered cautiously over the pier’s edge and recoiled in shock.

Part way down a long ladder, Sir Oswald Mosley was climbing fast. That wasn’t what had prompted Confort’s shock though. At the bottom of the landing stage, which had presumably been built for pleasure cruises, was docked something else entirely—a small, dark U-boat. Its crew scurrying to make it ready, every hatch open to take on air and frantic minor repairs being made.

At that moment, a crewman spotted them and a general alarm was sounded. Schweik opened fire, aiming for the crew near the AA guns first, taking them down one after another. An officer started to return fire, sending bullets ripping into the wooden boards, sending Schweik ducking. Mosley hung to the ladder, desperately avoiding the battle above his head and the flying splinters. “It’s a type II, I think. Up to 20 crew.” said Schweik. He stood and fired a round of shots, and there was a cry from below before he ducked again. “About 17 right now.” he grinned.

Peabody, meanwhile was struggling with his equipment bag. Hartington pushed him aside and opened it to discover the force plates that had caused such devastation in the church. “I bloody hope you know what you’re doing with those.”

Peabody grinned. “Well, even if I wasn’t going to give them to the government, I wasn’t going to miss the chance to have a play with them, right? I’ve practised a little.”

Strapping on the heavy pack and turning it on, he waited for the humming to rise in volume until it was that same mind-numbing thrum that they’d heard in the moments before Smythe had died. Out on the water, the submarine was starting to descend, prompting panic from the crew on the surface, who frantically flung hatches shut.

Peabody strode to the edge and aimed the twin plates at the submarine, and leaned back, straining. Bullets whistled up past him, their paths distorted by the strange force. Mosley had reached the dock then shied back in alarm, when the submarine groaned and then, impossibly, started to rise out of the water. Peabody grinned through gritted, yellowed teeth at Hartington. “They’re not going anywhere.”

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As he spoke, a great hand came over the end of the pier and grabbed his ankle. He had a chance for a startled yell, before he was yanked off his feet, and flung, tumbling, fifty feet into the sea. With the heavy pack on his back, he hit the waves hard and sank like a stone. The submarine fell back to the water, hard, scattering crewmen into the waves.

Confort backed off as the great figure of the *Nachtwölfe* giant hauled himself onto the wooden deck. He towered over the team, even over Hartington. Schweik prone on the deck, turned to fire, and was knocked sprawling by a powerful kick. "Oi!" Hartington shouted. The German turned to see him pointing the Sten at him. Hartington aimed then lowered the gun.

"Not fair." he muttered. He put the gun down, raised his fists up and gestured at the giant. "Come on."

"ARE YOU INSANE?" Confort yelled. "He's at least SEVEN feet tall! He just THREW Peabody to his death." She fired her pistol at the German and the bullet ricocheted with a blue spark off his chest. "AND HE'S ARMoured."

Hartington frowned. The German grinned, stepped forward and swung a haymaker. Hartington ducked, and aimed a punch for the German's ribs. His hand cracked against the breastplate and he sobbed a little, dancing back. The German swung again, smacking against Hartington's guard, sending him reeling with the impact. Ripostes were out of the question, as the German used his greater size and reach to keep Hartington at bay.

Confort gawped, then looked at the U-boat. It was nearly ready to move off, now that Schweik's fire had stopped. Mosley was standing in the conning tower, as the ship started to pull away from the dock, into the bright sunny day. He waved at her.

"Damn" she said. She glanced back at the fight. Already, a battered Hartington was having trouble keeping his hands up, as the German pummelled him blow after blow. The German paused, sighted and threw an almighty punch that sent Hartington flying onto his back.

Confort sighed. "Damn, damn, damn. I didn't want to do this." she muttered, as she pulled one of the dried geegaws from her wrist, bit her thumb hard, and spat blood and saliva on it. The desiccated thing started writhing in her hand, slowly at first, but faster and faster all the time, sprouting tentacles, teeth and other less familiar appendages. She yelled at the German who glanced around stupidly, as she threw it in his face. The thing latched on, wriggling and cutting, and he screamed, tearing chunks of it away even as it grew.

Confort took her time to aim her Welrod at his head, through the thing's centre. She fired. Both the German and the thing stopped struggling, and the entangled bodies fell off the edge, following Peabody into the depths.

Confort looked around. Schweik was out cold and Hartington was a battered, sobbing mess. "You can't get the staff these days." she said to herself.

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She looked out to the bay. The sub was moving off to deeper water, picking up speed. As she looked after it, she became aware of a growing murmur behind her. “Miss Confort! I brought your back-up, but I think there’s been some—Gods, what happened! ” Behind Owen a cluster of geriatric gentlemen and ladies were tutting at the scene, or cooing at the view.

“Check on those two,” she said to Owen “See if you can rouse them—and see if you can see Peabody. He fell off the pier.” Owen gaped, frozen. “NOW, Owen.” He came around, and got to work on Hartington. She turned to the cluster of old folk. “Ladies and Gentlemen of the Met Office! Can I have your attention please?”

An older lady rolled her wheelchair forward, gingerly across the boards. She was erect in the chair, with several old blankets on her lap despite the sun’s warmth.

“Oh, hello Gladys!” said Confort. “Sorry to drag you away from your bridge. I really need to stop that boat. It’s something of a national emergency. Can you do it?”

The old lady shuffled forward in her chair, and squinted at the U-boat through a pair of antiquated *pince-nez*. “Not a problem, Em. I keep losing anyway. Yes, we can do it. Though it does seem a dreadful shame to spoil such a lovely day. Can we change it back afterwards?”

“As long as that U-boat is stopped, yes.”

“Happy to oblige.” The old lady rolled back to the group and engaged them in conversation that prompted much mumbling and waving of ear-trumpets. Soon, she had them arranged in a circle at the pier’s end. They began to chant.

Owen sidled up. “They’ll both be fine. Is that Peabody on the landing deck below? I can’t tell if he’s alive from here. Who are these old people?” The chant rose around their ears and the sky darkened. Clouds gathered rapidly.

Through a rising wind, Em shouted back. “They’re the Met Office. It’s an MI18 nickname really. A bunch of old weather makers from the Severn area. They only know one spell, but they know it very well. It looks like they’re just doing the wind this time!” Owen’s incredulous retort was lost in the gale.

The wind continued to rise, rapidly, quickly turning into a full blown storm. The pier’s iron substructure creaked and cracked alarmingly beneath them, but held. After another minute, something akin to a hurricane was lashing the sea off the Great Orme, pushing the submarine sideways. Mosley hung onto the locked conning tower for dear life, his unearthly protection keeping him alive, but not dry, amidst the tumult.

The submarine moved nearer and nearer to the Orme, and the rocks beneath, whilst Gladys looked on benignly, her hands conducting slight changes to the group’s chanting, directing the storm. A round of bass chanting coincided with the stern of the submarine lifting for a second over a wicked-looking crag. She chopped her palm sharply, the storm died, and the sub dropped, impaled on the

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rock. Immediately, its hull ruptured, it started to sink.

Thirty minutes later, the sky was clear again. From the head of the pier, Confort looked around. She could see Owen, the local constabulary and an armed Home Guard detachment heading out to the wreck of the submarine, to pick up Mosley, still clinging bedraggled to the wrecked conning tower and to see if anyone else had survived from the U-boat's crew. An ambulance crew had rounded up Hartington, Schweik and a soaking Peabody and were carting them off to hospital. And local divers were kitting themselves out on the beach to look for the lost *Nachtwölfe* plates. Gladys rolled her wheelchair up.

"Are we all done Em?"

"Yes, thank you. Now, I'm going to call George and tell him the good news."

"After that, how's about we have a nice day out on the promenade? I'll chance my arm on the coconut shy."

"Sounds lovely. As long as you promise not to cheat again."

Gladys acted crestfallen. "It's not cheating, it's just using my natural gifts."

"Hmm. We'll see. I'm not sure a miniature tornado counts as natural."



Deep in the suburban bunker it was always twilight, but even so most people operated according to the external clock. So at this time of the evening, it was quiet, devoid of the chatter of tickertape telegrams or the clack of Morse code. Down one long corridor, though, in a single window, a light was showing—and a tired guardsman stood an endless watch.

In his office, George put down the Bakelite phone after the last of many, many calls and steepled his hands tiredly. After a quiet moment, he reached into his pocket, and pulled out a long manila envelope. He tipped a key out of it, and unlocked his desk drawer. Inside was a large blue stone, and a single dossier, with the words 'Project Moonchild' handwritten on the cover. Stamps on it proclaimed that the documents it contained were quite, quite secret. George opened it, and for half an hour he smilingly browsed the photos and pages, until he was disturbed by his phone ringing.

"George speaking. Oh, hallo Cecil! Yes, we've recovered Mosley... I know... I know! Confort's team worked out after all. So. How would you feel about a second bash at the project, hmm..? Good. If we can iron out the problems for the next generation, Britain might very well become truly great again. We might even have a King to be proud of. Divine Right and all that, eh?" ✕



Servant of the Dark

By John Houlihan

HE held the gemstone up to the light between forefinger and thumb. It had a slight blue tinge, the otherwise flawless depths contaminated by perhaps just a few stray molecules of boron. He sighed, a most exquisite object, he never tired of such perfect geometry, nature's poetry; order, in a world of chaos.

He sighed again, returned the stone to the small heap of its fellows and regarded the gallery of faces turned toward him. Huddled around the fireplace were the *Juden*, resentment, perhaps even a little hate leaking from their faces, but most of all apprehension, fear, though they did their best to conceal it. No doubt they had heard the stories, the tales of what would happen if they resisted. Word circulated quickly amongst their kind.

"You have done well to give up your treasures willingly. The Fatherland thanks you for it. These diamonds will be transformed from empty treasures to become useful tools, helping fashion the machines which assist our brave soldiers. In your own small way you are helping shorten the war, bringing about peace under the Reich's rule. You should be proud."

He saw surprise slowly infect their faces. Praise? For *Juden*? From an SS officer? They could hardly believe it, yet there it was. All except for that one, the headscarfed, rather plain-looking daughter who muttered something incomprehensible under her breath, not in Dutch, but in that secret Hebrew tongue they favoured. That one would never believe, not even the smoothest of his lies.

But that was unwise, Himmel had already broken away from the rest of the stormtroopers ransacking the apartment, was already raising his rifle ready to slam the stock into her face, crush even this tiny act of defiance.

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“Stand easy *Feldbewel!*”

The fat Friedlander paused mid-stride and stared dumbly at him, not quite comprehending. Himmel was an oaf, occasionally a useful one, but he didn't like being restrained.

“Easy *Feldwebel*, these people are not our enemies, they have proven their loyalty, given up their treasures willingly. There is no need for... unpleasantness.”

“*Obersturmführer!*” Himmel's bovine face regarded him with a mixture of confusion and consternation but he chose not to look directly at the sergeant.

“Here.” He began writing out a receipt, finishing with the usual illegibly scrawled signature which he handed over to the bearded patriarch. The old man regarded it dumbfounded, as if not quite comprehending what he held. The others crowded in to look closer.

“Keep that safe, when this war is over you will be compensated for your loss. Now, you must prepare yourselves,” he said, though not unkindly. “One small suitcase each, that is all, you have five minutes. Do not spend a second longer, or the *Feldwebel* here will be forced to assist you.”

For a moment they looked at him dumbly, hardly daring to move. Then the plain-looking daughter said,

“But where will we go?”

“You are to be resettled, with your own people. You know of the refugee camp at Westerbork? You will be taken there.”

“But we have heard such stories...”

“Ach, fairy tales, old wives' gossip.” He smiled benevolently. “Why would the *Führer* want any harm to come to you? Why would Germany? You are amongst the most productive, the most useful members of Dutch society, your contribution today proves it.

“We merely seek to harness your talents efficiently and where better to employ them, than amongst your own kind? You will be taken to new quarters, better ones, amongst your own folk, where you will be safe. Hurry now.” He clapped his hands then checked his watch purposefully.

They scurried to do his bidding, scarcely, it seemed, able to believe their luck.

“Why are you so lenient with these *untermensch Obersturmführer!*” Himmel had sloped over to his corner and the sergeant's fleshy face hissed at him, amid the bustle and noise as the family folded away its life into single suitcases. He doubted the *Führer* had this blotchy, sweat-stained ball of lard in mind when he conceived of the master race and he resented Himmel's presumption: *questioning me? Imbecile, I should execute you on the spot and spare myself and the Fatherland a great deal of trouble.* Yet instead, he stifled a weary inward sigh and began to explain again, as patiently as he could.

“Lenient *Feldwebel!* Hardly, practical rather. Think, man. Would you rather have to fight and wrestle them down the stairs, their wailing and screaming

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alerting the whole block so that we are here until midnight ferreting the rest out of their hiding holes?"

"Wouldn't you rather have them go meekly and be in the *bierkeller* with a tall glass and a nice willing Dutch girl by eight o'clock? Cattle, sergeant, are far more easily led to the slaughter when they go willingly. They are also much more likely to give up the hiding place of their treasures if they think they can bribe their way out." He tapped the envelope where the gemstones now resided. "If you take away their hope, you take away any reason to cooperate with us."

"I suppose so... sir." Himmel hastily added the honorific. "But it goes against the grain, pandering to these low lives like this. If I have to stomach their stupid *untermensch* faces for much longer, I think I'll..."

"Hold that thought *Feldwebel* and remember, you are being well compensated for your... understandable frustrations."

Himmel's piggy eyes narrowed and then he gave a grunt of acknowledgement and began to harass the family in an over familiar way.

"Come on! Move along, move along now little *Juden!* This way to the promised land, that's right, down the stairs, don't run, we don't want you breaking your little Hebrew necks now do we?"

As the stormtroopers ushered them out, he slipped the stones into the top pocket of his uniform where they nestled just beneath his medal ribbons. The proceeds would have to be shared with his idiot *Feldwebel* and the rest of the unit later, he resented it, but there was no other option. Even an SS officer could not conduct this kind of business without giving his men their cut—to hold out on them would have been tantamount to suicide.

The plain-looking daughter was the last to leave, her dark brown eyes full of mistrust and secret despair. There was no fooling that one, though why she had not screamed and shouted, attempted to tear down his smooth veil of comforting lies, he could not guess. To protect them—the rest of her family—from the coming horror? Perhaps. Much good would it do her, much good would it do any of them.

The SS hustled the family down the stairs and then he was alone in the empty apartment. He walked to the window and lit a contemplative cigarette, looking out over the roof tops and canals of old Amsterdam. There were worse places to spend the war he supposed, the front line for one. Thankfully he had been spared that particular *honour*.

He breathed smoke cones from his nostrils, blew an idle smoke ring and then caught his reflection in the window: the black uniform, the lightning-flashed SS-*Runen* insignia on his collar, the distinctive Death's Head badge on his cap. He certainly looked the part and it suited him he supposed, elegant, sinister, menacing, the very embodiment of a loyal Aryan soldier, his blond hair and ice-blue eyes a testament of much-coveted racial perfection.

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In some ways he wished he believed even some small part of it, it might make it easier, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not summon the conviction of the true National Socialist zealot. Some, friends, family, colleagues, threw themselves wholeheartedly into this great fiction of racial supremacy, Aryan destiny, German dominance, because they utterly believed it; a great truth that they had been waiting all their lives for the party to uncover.

Not he. From the very beginning the basis of National Socialism had seemed flawed, broken, totally ridiculous. Even now, years after the *Führer's* rise to power and over a year since the war itself had properly begun, he was waiting for his fellow countryman to wake up, come to their senses, denounce it all as some bad collective dream. It was so absurd, he sometimes wondered just how Germany had managed to come to this pass.

But yet...yet. He was a practical man he told himself and a fellow would be a fool if he did not take advantage of the hand life had dealt him. By the time he was of age, the wind had already well and truly blown and his looks, bearing and immaculate parentage had practically guaranteed him a place in the SS. He had taken to it too, bending rather than breaking before the wind which had scoured the Fatherland. What good would it have done to raise his lone voice anyway, swim against the prevailing tide? None. The juggernaut would have simply rolled over him and rolled on. He had witnessed the fate of those who dissented: torture, liquidation, bodies tumbling into mass graves.

So he had concealed himself within their ranks: on the outside and to all appearances the perfect soldier, if perhaps lacking the fanaticism of the true believer. But on the inside? Well, who knew anymore? All the things he had done—or rather had ordered to be done for only on the rarest of occasions would he sully his own hands—what of them?

He crushed the cigarette directly onto the window sill, and an acrid odour rose as the paint smouldered. Ach, this was useless introspection, it did no good and it served no purpose. A man did what he had to, to survive, it was as simple as that and at this place, at this time, this was what was required. Goodness? Rightness? Morality? Luxuries that only certain men could afford, and he was not one of them. Far better to leave questions of philosophy and morality to those who fully understood them.

Indeed, better to concentrate on the task in hand which was to enrich himself sufficiently so that one day, or perhaps one dark night, he could simply shed this uniform as a reptile sheds its skin and slip away to a nice neutral country, where one could live quietly and where the wealthy weren't asked any awkward questions. Switzerland or perhaps further afield, South America possibly, where he could finally wash his hands of this madness and live in anonymous retirement.

But any such dream requires funding and although he abhorred this dirty work, this filthy war, at least he had found a way to make it pay. The Jews and the other

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enemies of the state readily gave up their secrets, their wealth, sometimes even their daughters' virtue, if they thought it might buy him off. Occasionally he indulged himself, but it was the stones he really craved and here in Amsterdam, there was a plentiful supply. Delightful, permanent and portable in a way that gold or cash never were, they were the true objects of his desire, the building blocks paving the diamond-encrusted road to liberty.

As darkness began to bleed into the sullen grey sky, he lit another cigarette and took the clipboard from the document case, consigning the family with a stroke of his fountain pen. Reading down the list of names, he could see there was just one more apartment left to investigate, number 13, on the top floor. The Dutch authorities kept such immaculate civil accounts with full records of racial, ethnic and religious origin that it had made his task almost laughably easy. What would a visit to this Mr Rosenstein yield? he wondered idly, then became aware he was not alone.

Himmel's ridiculous face hovered by the door frame, the fleshy lips already forming some pointless idiocy.

"Well, what is it *Feldwebel*?"

"The Jews, they're ready, although they're starting to squeal. Some of the lads had to use their..."

"Spare me the details Himmel." He struggled to keep the impatience out of his voice. "Anything else?"

"No... sir."

"Then take them to the holding area immediately. After that you may return to quarters, disport yourselves as you see fit and consider your duty to the Fatherland over for another day."

"Very good *Obersturmführer*... and the merchandise?"

"We will divide the proceeds as usual tonight."

"Yes sir. Will there be anything else?"

His eyes briefly flickered down at the name on the document. It wasn't wise to go fishing alone, but then he'd have to share the spoils and his irritation with Himmel won out. Surely he wouldn't need any help with one simple old man?

"No, that will be all. Dismissed." He continued to look out of the window, exhaling smoke as Himmel's plodding footsteps receded.



The corridor lay at the end of a flight of creaking wooden stairs right at the very top of the building. There was a little natural light from the sky light, but it hardly penetrated here and the shabby looking door seemed to lie at the end of a long shadowed tunnel. An involuntary shiver ran up his spine and he chided himself for his foolishness, hardly becoming in a grown man let alone a full blown

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officer of the Reich. His jackboots echoed on the old floorboards and he raised his fist, ready to deliver the knock that was always dreaded, but the door swung open of its own accord and suddenly he was looking into a narrow hall, piled high with books and manuscripts crammed onto its rickety shelves.

Some parlour trick? He brushed aside the door and strode down the corridor, sudden fury masking his fear and he raised his foot to kick in the door at the far end, surprising himself with this sudden urge for violence. But it too yielded without a struggle, opening before him as if manipulated by invisible servants.

He found himself in a large attic room, darkness had fallen quickly outside and the low flicker of oil lamps sent patches of light scurrying across its walls. These too were crammed with more books, ancient texts, scrolls, piled high almost everywhere the eye could see. A large black one-eyed cat sprawling across a vast leather-bound tome tilted its head to regard him, its body still, but its tail coiling in agitation. Dust and darkness clung to the fabric of the place like a living web and when the voice came, he almost jumped.

“My apologies if I startled you, sir, I heard your steps on the stair and thought I had better let you in directly.”

The words belonged to an ancient, huddled creature who perched over a large table at the far end of the apartment. The creased skin and straggly yellowing hair were framed beneath a skull cap. Long, loose robes marked with unusual symbols wrapped themselves around its spindly frame.

“My apologies again, sir, old Jacob is not able to rise to greet visitors as easily as he used to.” A clawed hand tapped a rope and now he could see the rather ingenious system of pulleys which connected the table to the doors leading into the apartment. Foolish, the half light and oppressive atmosphere had almost made him believe some supernatural force was at work, but now he saw the rather more prosaic explanation. He unsheathed his records and tersely held them up like an accusation.

“You are Jacob Rosenstein?”

“Yes sir, please forgive the disorder, a bookseller and dealer in antiquities naturally collects such detritus as other men collect wives and family.”

“You live alone here?”

“Yes sir.”

“Papers.” The old man shuffled the documents across a desk that was worn and pockmarked, strewn with strange instruments and apparatus. He scanned the documentation quickly, barely registering the details other than the prominent stamped J, although all seemed in order. He began, not as unkindly as before, but as he spoke he scanned the apartment looking for likely places of concealment. Books and manuscripts were no use to him, scarcely worth the trouble of burning them, but there was always somewhere, somewhere where the treasure was hidden and he was an expert at ferreting it out.

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"So Herr Rosenstein, you are half Jewish?"

"On my mother's side, sir."

"I see, well Herr Rosenstein my purpose for visiting you here today is to determine how you may best serve the Fatherland, the new order which has swept the old certainties aside."

The man looked blankly at him.

"Do you understand me?" He looked to see if the real meaning of his words had been comprehended.

"I know little of worldly events I'm afraid," said the figure in the chair. "People come and go, the uniforms change, but all that is important to me remains timeless." The old man avoided his eye. Perhaps he needed to be more explicit?

"That does not matter, what *does* matter is the nature of the contribution you are able to make."

"Contribution sir? I am just a broken, tired old man. I have few worldly treasures, only my books, my memories, little Victor," he nodded at the cat. "Virtually nothing that other men might value." He smiled, a sad snaggle-toothed grin that was, he supposed, designed to elicit sympathy. Clearly this one would require additional persuasion.

"Everyone contributes in the end Herr Rosenstein, one way or another. I have considerable experience in finding and extracting the most important contributions from people, even when they apparently believe they have nothing to give." He let that hang in the air for a moment, but the old man remained unperturbed.

"I have nothing you'd want sir. Nothing at all."

"Ah, but you do have something, don't you Herr Rosenstein? Something squirreled away? Something valuable perhaps, something that you thought you should put aside for a rainy day? All men do, it is just a matter of making them realise it. Well Herr Rosenstein," he slammed his fist onto the desk, causing the cat to hiss and dive into the shadowy recesses. "That rainy day has arrived!"

"Believe me, sir, I have nothing that honest men would desire."

"Let me be the judge of that. If you wish to remain here with your precious books, your precious memories, your precious creature, we had best see what this thing is that you are so keen to conceal."

"It is nothing, sir, nothing that anyone would want. Believe me I have..." Now the old man was starting to respond, panic edging his voice, tears forming in the corner of those rheumy eyes.

"You have what? What were you going to say? Answer me now Herr Rosenstein or there will be consequences..."

"I..."

"Speak, speak quickly now for night falls and my patience begins to thin."

"Nothing I have... I have taken a vow. I can tell you nothing more."

"Nothing Herr Rosenstein?"

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“Nothing, except that I see you now for what you truly are *Obersturmführer*—and what you want. Let old Jacob tell you, avarice is a cage, a prison for fools and the unwary!” The old man’s voice was surprisingly defiant, his eyes blazing with indignation.

“I see, well perhaps we shall see how susceptible you are to persuasion, how important this vow remains when it is put to the test.” He took out the handcuffs and drew his dagger, the one which he had received at the ceremony in the *Feldhermhalle* a small lifetime ago. It was supposed to be a sign of his heritage, his descent from the long line of Teutonic knights. The curved cross guard and *signune* gleamed in the lantern light.



It had taken less than ten minutes. One had to be more careful with the elderly for they were likely to expire from sheer terror as much as the pain. He wiped the blade clean on the old man’s sleeve. It was regrettable, he did not relish this kind of work as brutes like Himmel did, but it was, he had to admit, remarkably effective as a means of persuasion. As he had foretold, they all gave up their secrets in the end.

For some, the sight of the blade alone was enough, they squawked like parrots before it even touched their flesh, but this Rosenstein was made of sterner stuff and had proved remarkably resilient. Yet, every man had his tipping point, every man succumbed when you discovered the exact pressure point to apply. Rosenstein had remained stoic, imperturbable, barely even crying out, grunting as the edge had cut his flesh, grimacing as he endured the pain. Disappointed, he had cast around for inspiration and found it in the form of the cat, grabbing it by the scruff of its neck and holding its hissing, spitting form up before those troubled old eyes. Then and only then had he given in: sentimentality, love for an inconsequential animal had proved this ancient’s undoing.

“Now Herr Rosenstein, I believe you wished to show me something?” The old man was seized by a coughing fit and so he held up the blade again, as if examining it, but further motivation proved unnecessary.

“Behind me... the centre bookshelf... third row from the top. There is a large book at the end... bound in black leather *The Malleus Maleficarum*... pull the top of its spine toward you.”

He stepped behind the old man, located the tome, barely pausing to read the title, words, just words. His finger lingered and then he pulled it back decisively toward him. For a moment nothing happened, then a sound, something grinding, something shifting and he sprung back suddenly wary of a booby trap, but the shelf merely sprung forward and then glided smoothly to one side.

It revealed a hidden alcove, perhaps a couple of metres deep, it was difficult to

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say for it seemed to shift and move in the half light, but that was soon forgotten for there, there, set on a dark velvet cushion, topping a supporting cluster of lesser jewels and lit by a bank of tallow candles, was perfection. A diamond, but no ordinary stone this, but a paragon, a black emperor amongst jewels, its dark multifaceted surface glinting with candlelight and its depths gleaming with a strange inner light. Unconsciously he sucked in a breath of appreciation, this was beyond hope, beyond expectation, this was no mere stone, but his new life underwritten.

"It is magnificent," he whispered utterly entranced and without taking his eyes off of it, he said, "So this is what you have been hiding Herr Rosenstein, I see now why you were so reluctant to give up this treasure."

"Much good will it do you," said the old man weakly.

"Much good it *will* do me, I assure you." He replied, taking a step, ignoring or perhaps simply failing to see the intricate inscriptions inset upon the floor and around the lintels, so captivated was he by the stone which seemed to float before him now, haunting, vivacious, utterly desirable. It seemed to pull him toward it, a gravitational presence, filling his vision, drawing him in.

He took another step, fully inside now and stretched his fingers out to reach the paragon, touch it, feel its unyielding surface. But he found it was like trying to push his hand through dense liquid, everything seemed to slow, the alcove stretched crazily, its walls bending and contorting like some vivid waking dream. But he would not be denied and he willed himself toward it, his focus entirely on the black diamond, his fingers stretched closing the final few centimetres. Ah, such beauty, such desire, such longing, he felt the pleasure of anticipation thrill his brain. So close now, its pull so strong, it was like a physical thing and then his elongated finger tips brushed its surface.

"Beautiful isn't it?" He heard the old man's voice again but now it was not weak or frail, but powerful, patrician. He found he could not turn his head, could not move his body and now his fingertips penetrated beneath the diamond's surface, a strange sensation like a stellar cold began to creep up his arm.

"Patience *Obersturmführer*, we have a little time now. Don't attempt to struggle, it will only make matters worse," said the old man.

He tried to open his mouth, but the muscles would not obey, his face contorted with the effort. The jewel seemed to have hold of him, was beginning to draw him in beneath its glimmering surface.

He tried to pull away, but he was held fast.

"It is a carbonado," said the old man. "An extremely rare black diamond, not of this earth, but formed in the depths of interstellar space, perhaps even the heart of a star, our mystics are uncertain. Many eons ago it fell to earth near one of our holy places, the living heart of a meteor, the surrounding rock burnt away by its passage through the heavens."

He felt his skin begin to warp and buckle, flesh flowing, melding through the

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surface, he tried to resist, pull away, but his body rippled gelatinously, helpless before its overwhelming gravitational influence.

“Be still I say!” The old man’s voice rang with notes of power now. “Yet for all that, for all its passage across the infinite depths, this thing of wonder contained an even more wondrous thing. For when our holy men examined it, they discovered that inside was a creature, a being of the void, a cruel, savage, alien intelligence: hungry, voracious, a feaster upon men’s souls.”

Panic seized him, as his flesh was swallowed up in great streams, it had subsumed nearly all of him now, but with one last supreme effort of will he tried to break free, pull himself away from its crystalline embrace. But it continued to swallow him whole and now he could feel a presence, a malevolent intelligence rising from its depths, coming straight for him.

“We bound this nameless thing with powerful magics, ancient enchantments, imprisoning it forever inside this vessel before it could escape and wreak havoc upon our world. Yet we also believe that *Yahweh* makes everything with a purpose, nothing is superfluous in his creation. So we found a role for it: as a punishment, a scourge for the unholy, an instrument delivered to us by *God himself* to punish the wicked and iniquitous, the worst of mankind, those who prey upon their fellow man, those without pity or remorse.

“I told you I possessed nothing that honest men would crave,” said the old man. “And now you begin to discover the truth of my words.”

The thing was almost upon him now, a vast, nameless, shapeless, formless dread that accelerated sinuously up from the scintillating depths. He tried to scream, but found he no longer had a mouth to do so.

“I see into your mind *Obersturmführer*, see all you have done. Some men do great evil for a cause, but you? You are worse, the very personification of the banality of evil. You accept it, practice it for no greater cause than yourself.

“You will be in good company *Obersturmführer*, when you join your fellow murderers, torturers and thieves from down the long centuries. The creature is most adept, most inventive I believe in extracting retribution, precisely fitting the punishment to each crime, it actually delights in it. Reflect on that *Obersturmführer*, as you suffer for all eternity and know that you will be in good company when you finally meet your fellow servant of the dark.” ✘



The Heart of the Sea

by Mick Gall

LIEUTENANT Spencer Calvert paddled more quickly once he saw the *M/V Copperhead*. It was difficult to make out in the gloom; Calvert saw only a vague dark patch on the otherwise star-filled horizon. As they approached, the familiar contours of the 25-metre ship coalesced, and Calvert lifted his oar and let the canoe coast for a few seconds.

“We made it.”

Private Henry Austen, the young soldier sharing his canoe, kept rowing. “Yes, sir. You paddled so fast, I can’t believe we made it before the mines—”

He was cut off by the loud crump of a distant explosion, accompanied by a flash of light just over the horizon. The men in the trailing canoes let out a cheer, but Calvert cut them off.

“Hush!” he barked, grinning even as he said it. “Pay attention, and count!”

The first explosion was followed by another, and another. A moment of silence followed, then three more blasts in quick succession. Everyone held still. The trailing canoes stopped paddling, and the men in the canoes and the sailors aboard the *M/V Copperhead* all cocked their heads to look in the direction of the port they had just left.

“Come on, number seven,” Private Austen whispered.

Seconds ticked by, and no other sounds came. Calvert looked at the soldier, concerned now. “Did you set the timers like I instructed? They should have all gone off at the same time.”

The soldier avoided eye contact, casting his eyes down. “I may have set it for a little longer than—”

“Damn it, Private! I told you to set them all for the same amount of time!”

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“Sir, I know, but the last one was on that ship on the pier. Sailors are all rushing to their battle stations now, and when it goes off, it’s going to take a lot more of them down.”

“If it’s not discovered and disarmed first! The point of the mission was to destroy ships. Killing enemy sailors wasn’t a concern. Sailors cannot do much if they don’t have any—”

He was cut off by another loud crump. The men in the other canoes whispered excitedly, and resumed paddling. Calvert caught the private grinning.

“Austen, don’t do that again. If I tell you to set the timers for three hours, you set the timers for three hours. Not three hours and one minute. Understand?”

Austen had the good grace to look ashamed. “Yes, sir,” he said, and resumed paddling.

The men were talking more openly now, congratulating each other and comparing notes on mine placement, close calls with sentries and the like as they drew up to the *Copperhead*. Another series of explosions echoed, followed by a crackling noise.

“Secondary explosions, sir,” Austen said. “I told you I’d hit the magazine on that big cruiser.” He was grinning again, and Calvert couldn’t help but smile also. Private Austen had that particular American self confidence about him. Infuriating at times, it also came with an infectious optimism that permeated everything he did. He was certainly optimistic now; it sounded like they had just sunk seven ships of the Imperial Japanese Navy, including a heavy cruiser.

Calvert’s smile faded, though, as he heaved himself aboard the *Copperhead*. It was a success, yes, but the mission wasn’t over until he and his crew were back in Australian waters. He knew the Japanese would send out patrols to find those responsible. He pulled Austen up, and together they were lifting their canoes on board when Rapata approached him. Broad shouldered and muscular, with skin the colour of oiled teak, the Maori warrior used one hand to yank the canoe over the gunwale.

“Chief,” Rapata said in greeting. Calvert had tried to get the Maori to address him as ‘lieutenant’ like the rest of the men, but Rapata had insisted on calling him ‘Chief’ saying only that Calvert was the chief, and Rapata was a warrior in his war band. “A little man fell from the sky. Said he has important message for you.”

“Fell from the sky?” Calvert asked. Rapata was a strong and fierce fighter, a natural woodsmen and an excellent seaman, but the tribal spiritualism and superstition that coloured his language made communication difficult sometimes.

“Fell from sky,” Rapata confirmed. “Man is small. Said Mother Sea too cold, too wet. I think this man weak. But he says he has message for you, and waits below.”

Heading aft, Calvert saw a sailor arranging and folding a sopping wet parachute on the deck, and Rapata’s comments suddenly made more sense. Someone had airdropped to their location, and landed in the drink before being fished out.

Must be one hell of a message, Calvert thought.

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Calvert would never describe the man as ‘small’ owing to his height. Most men were small next to the muscular Rapata. But he was skinny, scrawny even, all arms and legs with elbows so sharp they threatened to cut through his sleeves. The lanky man lorded over the galley’s entire table, eating soup and poring over maps and notebooks spread out before him. He looked up when Calvert arrived in the small galley. The man was dry except for his hair, and had discarded his wet utilities on the floor. He had changed into dry clothes from his kit—sturdy khakis like Calvert wore—but atop that a collared shirt, bow tie and herringbone jacket.

“Lieutenant Calvert?” he asked with an aristocratic English accent. He squinted and pulled on a pair of tortoise-shell glasses. “Yes, you *are* Lieutenant Calvert. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir. I’m Professor Raymond Blackburn.” He grasped Calvert’s hand and pumped it twice. “I’ve been sent by operations. I’ve seen your resume, very impressive work. And congratulations on your recent commission,” Calvert grunted at that last remark. He’d been an enlisted man with the commandos for some time, until his bold actions during a raid and the untimely death of another officer inspired command to promote him into the role. He was unused to praise, as he was frequently reminded that as a commando his accomplishments would go unheralded.

He was not sure how to respond to this lanky man and his dramatic entrance into their midst, dressed like he was going to a faculty meeting at Oxford. Everything about him was strange, and amongst commandos, that was saying something. Calvert had carried out a number of unconventional raids before, and even had additional assets parachuted to him while a mission was underway. But those men were invariably hardened soldiers or seasoned commandos. This man looked as though he belonged teaching ancient history. Not that there weren’t bookish types in the service; command just tended to keep them in intelligence and logistics, in the rear with the gear. Never in the field. The professor took no notice of Calvert’s curious stare, and rummaged through the papers and journal that occupied most of the galley’s table. He smoothed down a nautical chart.

“Right then,” he began. “We’re approximately *here* on the map but we’re going to divert from your planned course. Rather than heading west-southwest toward Australia, we shall head over here.” He pointed to an area of open sea on the chart. An “X” with a circle around it had been drawn in charcoal. “I’ve given your helmsman a new course. As soon as your men are aboard, we’ll be underway.”

Calvert didn’t mind late changes to orders. He didn’t mind being assigned additional objectives in the middle of delicate missions. He also didn’t mind ferrying around some VIP when necessary. It was the nature of special operations that change was the only constant. But when he ran operations, *he* ran the operations, and no one else.

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He leaned over the table, stabbing a finger into the professor's chest. "I don't know who you are, and—"

"I told you, sir, I'm Professor Blackburn, and—"

Calvert pushed harder, heedless of the professor's objections. "Like I said, I don't know who you are or what you're talking about. No one comes on board my ship and gives orders to my sailors, or my soldiers. The orders come from me. I don't know whose authority you're acting on, but this is my mission. Now, unless you give me a damn good reason, we're going to continue west-southwest until we arrive in Australia."

He eased the pressure on the wide-eyed professor, who leaned back to make some space between the two of them, removed his glasses, and began cleaning them with a handkerchief. "My apologies, Lieutenant. Sometimes I do get ahead of myself. There's been some rather unusual seismic activity, and it appears to be triangulated right here—" he tapped the charcoal X again, "...and command feels it should be investigated, because of its anomalous nature."

"We've been dodging Japanese naval patrols for several weeks," said Lieutenant Calvert. "After the hit on the harbour, there are going to be more ships out looking for us."

"I'm afraid this effort is critical to the war, and cannot wait," Blackburn parried.

"We're running low on fresh supplies, and that's even supplementing them with any fish and rain water we can catch. This ship is little more than a fishing vessel. I need to get my men back for a rest and refit before taking on another mission. And you're telling me to divert because of an earthquake?"

"It's more than just an earthquake," Blackburn said evenly. "This could be a very important development. We've been seeing this activity at other isolated areas, and every survey has revealed volcanic activity. They are literally growing mountains under the sea. It's vital we get to this location and survey it further."

Calvert didn't know what that meant, or what the implications were, but was not about to admit that to the professor.

"We have just sank several Japanese ships. They're going to be out for blood, and heading toward Allied waters is our best chance of escaping them."

"I'm afraid I must insist. This comes from the highest levels."

"What levels are those?"

"The Old Bird sanctioned it personally."

That gave Calvert pause. Only once before had he been involved in a mission directly ordered by the 'Old Bird'. An especially messy situation had required that mission, and the outcome had been nearly as messy. However, it drove home to Calvert the depth and breadth of special assets the Old Bird had access to, and his willingness to employ unconventional methods to achieve his goals. But the Old Bird seldom involved himself directly, and Calvert had known others to throw around the Old Bird's name to enhance their own authority.

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“Professor, you look like a pretty smart bloke, so I’m sure you’re being honest with me when you say the Old Bird ordered this.”

The professor’s eyebrows arched up in alarm. “Lieutenant, of course I’m being honest with you. Why would I lie about such a critical issue? But you’re right; we must be thorough in ensuring the proper protocols are followed.”

He shuffled papers around the galley table again, plucked out a letter, and offered it to Calvert. The signature was genuine. The words ‘all assets deemed necessary by Professor Raymond Blackburn shall be made available to him’, and ‘immediately cease all other operations to accomplish this objective’, told Calvert all he needed to know. He grunted.

Seeing the look on his face, Blackburn pushed on. “Right, then. We’ll set course for the survey area as soon as possible.”

“We’ll need to be careful of Japanese patrols.”

“If we’re fast enough, it’s doubtful we’ll encounter any. Before I jumped in, the plane had to search for your boat for some time. Before we found you, we saw only one other craft, a patrol boat coming from the east.”

A woman’s voice interjected. “After the fireworks went off, I’d say it’s probably engaged in rescue and recovery efforts. Right, Spencer?” Both men turned towards the speaker who appeared in the doorway. Shorter than the two men and slender and lithe, her sophisticated class and beauty looked out of place in the rough, functional galley of a fishing vessel. She had dark auburn hair, fine, aristocratic features and wore high-quality—and extremely flattering—safari gear from a high-end outfitter. The professor was struck speechless for a moment—Calvert merely grunted again.

“Probably,” Calvert conceded. “But the Japanese are pretty thorough, and they’ll search a wide swathe of the sea. And if caught... well, they aren’t known for their humanitarian tendencies.”

Professor Blackburn chimed in. “True, but we can plan on at least a few hour’s grace while they figure out what happened. Then we can be on our way. An astute observation, Miss—?”

“Van Garrett. Doctor van Garrett, actually.”

“I wasn’t aware you had a woman on board, Lieutenant,” said Professor Blackburn. “She’s not on any of the rosters.”

The woman looked annoyed. Calvert knew she was sick of the sailors remarking that a woman on board was bad luck. *So, he’s seen the mission roster, in addition to packing a letter from the Old Bird. He is well connected*, Calvert thought.

“Professor, meet our team’s surgeon. She’s been serving in a volunteer capacity, and yes, she isn’t on any of the books.”

“Yes,” Van Garrett chimed in smoothly. “God save the Queen, and all that.” The professor nodded and smiled, noting her distinctive New England accent.

“Doc,” Calvert began, “the Professor here was sent with a task for us... what

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are we surveying exactly, Professor?”

Professor Blackburn pointed to a charcoal ‘X’ marked on the map. A chain of islands was nearby, but the ‘X’ itself sat in an area of open, featureless ocean. “Seismic activity has been detected in these areas, and it’s been pushing up large amounts of the sea floor. Each event in the past three months has been bigger than the previous one. More and more land is being pushed up each time. We cannot determine why they’re happening there. There’s no major fault line that we know of. It’s as if dozens of undersea volcanoes that we didn’t know existed suddenly burst into life. The indigenous people have either flocked to them or fled from them, and once-fallow fishing grounds nearby have sprung to life. The land thrust up by these events extends above the water, and some islands have collapsed and sunk back to the ocean floor. Some stick around for weeks or even months, while others collapse within a few days.”

Doctor van Garrett looked at the maps. “Interesting, but what have they got to do with the war effort?”

Professor Blackburn fidgeted. “We do know that the Japanese have been keenly interested in them. There’s been significant activity in recent months. We just don’t know what they’re up to. We haven’t yet had an opportunity to launch a large, dedicated operation to seize one. We’ve tried to get a closer look with observation planes and ships, but everything we send anywhere near them is immediately chased off. I’m not sure why,” he confessed, sounding truly perplexed.

“The newly fertile fishing grounds draw indigenous people to the area, but they flee shortly after their arrival. We’ve been searching for them, but have been unable to locate any. We suspect the Japanese have been taking them away. We’ve also heard at least one report that a Japanese survey crew took some *Kriegsmarine* advisers with them to the new islands.”

Calvert waved that last bit away. “That’s just a rumour. Any time the Japanese pull off any half-competent action, the Jerries get their fair share of the credit. If every report of German collaboration I’d heard was true, there’d be more Jerries in the Pacific than Japanese.”

Van Garrett’s brow furrowed. “How much land are they pushing up?”

“We’ve not been able to get close enough to measure exactly, but the first one was small. Just 20 feet of rock jutting out of the sea.”

“But they’re getting bigger?” she asked.

“Yes. The last one we got a good look at was, judging from the photographs, about an acre across. Jagged rock and coral, with oddly-shaped boulders near the middle. The seismic activity indicates they may be getting bigger.”

Van Garrett snapped her fingers. “Runways.”

The men looked at her, and Calvert let out a bark of laughter. “Good luck with that.”

“I’m afraid I don’t get the joke,” Blackburn said.

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“Think strategically,” Calvert explained, happy to be ahead of the professor for once. “This war is all about reach. If the ocean is spitting up new islands, the Japanese have an opportunity to build new runways. If they had runways at all these places marked on the big map, some of their bombers could threaten Australia. Even if the runway stayed in place for just a few months, they could wreak havoc.”

“And the punch line?” Blackburn prompted.

The lieutenant shrugged. “The Japanese will do anything they’re told, no matter how crazy it might seem. Tell a Japanese soldier to water the flowers, and he’ll do it even if it’s raining out. The thought of the Japanese building runways on unstable islands that then collapse back into the sea is funny, from a certain point of view.”

“Well, then,” the professor said, “this is our chance to see what exactly is going on, and how stable such a runway might be, or if there’s any other use for the islands. For once, we’ll have first crack at one of these sites.”



As the sun rose, the *M/V Copperhead* continued its inexorable crawl toward the point marked on the map. The crew slept and ate on deck as the professor had taken over the galley, where he had passed the rest of the night poring over his books and notes. A cry of “Land, ho!” jerked his attention from his reading, and he made his way to the bridge. The sea was calm, and Blackburn could not see anything other than early morning fog hovering over the water.

“Why did he call out?” Blackburn complained. “You can’t see a blasted thing through this fog.”

“Don’t get frustrated, Professor,” van Garrett chirped over her mug of coffee. “They can see quite a bit further than we can from up in the crow’s nest.”

Blackburn craned his neck to look up at the small platform on the mast, some distance over the deck. The sailor manning it saw him looking, but promptly ignored him and went back to scanning the horizon. The professor kept staring into the distance, and soon enough he saw the outline of a small mountain coalesce. As they drew nearer, he could see more detail, and determined it was less a mountain than a high hill on the far side of a considerable land mass.

“It’s enormous,” he gasped.

“Yes, it is,” Calvert agreed. “Quite a bit larger than the others you told us about. At least a mile across, maybe more.”

The hill thrust up at the back of the new island, and then sloped down to what looked like a rocky beach. Two headlands protruded from each side of the beach, seeming to make a natural harbour.

“Right, then,” Blackburn said. “Let’s put ashore on the beach, and see what

else we can find out.”

Calvert glared at him. “I’ll give the orders here, Professor.”

The helmsman looked from the professor to the lieutenant, then asked carefully, “Your orders, sir?”

“Make for that harbour. We’ll put ashore in canoes.”

The shore party set out in three canoes, Calvert paddling the professor in one, Private Austen paddling the doctor in another. The Maori sailor, Rapata, paddled the third alone, loaded with the professor’s equipment. The beach was a mix of rocky sand and broken coral, and once they pulled the canoes up and disembarked, they saw that the rest of the island looked just as desolate.

“This is very exciting!” Blackburn exclaimed. He immediately strode forward through the surf, making straight for the high hill at the back of the island.

Rapata laid a hand on the professor’s shoulder, and forced him down onto his knees.

“Quiet, little man. Security first.”

Calvert and Austen were both on their knees, weapons up, surveying the island before them. The doctor casually leaned against a canoe, watchful, but making no move to hurry ashore.

Austen hoisted his rifle, a US-made M1 Garand. It looked as if the heavy rifle would topple the slight young man over, but he handled it confidently enough. Calvert carried a shortened commando version of the venerable British Lee-Enfield.

Blackburn sighed. “Is all that really necessary, Lieutenant? No one’s here.”

“Security is my area of responsibility, Professor. We’re setting foot on an uncharted island that we know the Japanese are interested in, and I’m going to make sure it’s safe. Rapata, Private Austen and I will take the lead. You and the doctor will follow us. We’ll get you your survey, but not before we decide it’s safe.”

Rapata did not appear equipped for security detail. He was dressed in the traditional garb of his people, which was to say not much at all. He wore little more than a loincloth, which revealed well-toned muscles and tattoos of swirling waves and sea creatures on his left shoulder and arm. He wore a large knife on his belt, and carried a short, sturdy spear with a leaf-shaped blade the size of his hand. The two more conventionally armed soldiers finished their scan of the area, and at a nod from Calvert, Rapata sprang up and sprinted forward. The beach was littered with large stones and small boulders, which grew in size further inland. Rapata slipped in amongst them, and Blackburn watched him gradually disappear from view as he dodged between the larger rocks, spear at the ready. Blackburn fidgeted as the two soldiers, weapons ready, continued scanning inland whilst van Garrett sat coolly surveying the men.

“Professor of what, exactly?” she asked him, never taking her eyes off the island.

“Anthropology. But also history and linguistics,” he said. He glanced at her,

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but his impatient gaze was drawn back to the hill at the back of the island as he cleaned his spectacles.

“Professor,” the doctor said, “the boys take our safety very seriously. Let them do their job.”

“I suppose you’re right. I’ve not been in the field on many missions like this. I’m used to getting to a site and getting right to work. Might I ask how you ended up here, doctor?”

She shrugged. “Harvard Medical School. Marriage. Divorce. An unwillingness on the part of hospitals to hire female doctors, let alone divorced female doctors. The Australians have proven quite practical. They’ve always been grateful for my skills, and unconcerned about my past.”

“I suppose Australians would be. Unconcerned about a person’s past, I mean. It was founded as a penal colony, you know.”

She smiled, but wasn’t sure if it he was pointing out an interesting fact or simply engaging in dry British humour.

Rapata reappeared, spear aloft, and waved the others on. The soldiers sprinted toward him as Blackburn stumbled to keep up.

“Lieutenant, my equipment!”

Calvert ignored him, eyes and weapon scanning for potential threats.

The doctor answered. “We’ll come back for it after an initial survey of the island. Let’s move up and see this hill.”

The group advanced, Rapata scouting ahead, the soldiers leapfrogging past each other as one provided cover and the other moved, and the doctor following at a more leisurely pace. Blackburn brought up the rear, skittering back and forth between rocks, peering at them very closely.

The doctor smiled at him. “Keep up, Professor. Let the soldiers do their job, and then they’ll let you do yours.”

“It’s not that,” he said, eyes firmly on the rock he was studying. “These rocks all seem... wrong.”

He opened his mouth to say more, then saw the doctor staring at the heart of the island, mouth agape. The professor followed her gaze. There, on this island recently thrust up from the sea, a place no humans had ever touched, stood a building.

Calvert crouched by a boulder, Private Austen a few feet away, weapons trained on the building. It was made of a dense, grey stone, and they could see seams where the stones had been stacked uniformly. An entrance was carved in the side. While it was clear the structure was a building, and the entrance in the side was some sort of doorway, it looked like no building any of them had ever seen before.

Calvert turned to the professor, who stood gawking at the structure, and yanked him down.

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“I thought we were the first ones here?!” he hissed.

“I thought so, too,” said the professor. “I didn’t imagine the stories were true.”

“Professor, I’ll do what the Old Bird said, but if you’re holding out on me, I cannot do my job. You have to tell me what’s going on.”

Blackburn rubbed his jaw. “I wasn’t being entirely accurate when I said that indigenous people were going missing. Many have gone missing, but we’ve managed to spot a handful. They’ve been on the move recently, trying to resettle their people on different islands away from these events. They say the islands bring bad luck, and bad magic. They say these islands make people sick. And they say that, after a while, the ones who use these temples—” he pointed to the building, “—come back.”

“We thought it was a mix of tribal superstition and exaggerated tales of the Japanese military. Many of these tribes on these small islands have had little or no contact with the modern world, so to them, a patrol boat or airplane must seem like something sent by the gods. But we’ve seen other things too. Some natives tried to move onto the new islands on a temporary basis, then used them to expand their fishing grounds. They’ve been getting sick, losing hair, teeth falling out, that sort of thing. And we’ve heard reports of the Japanese suffering the same things on their surveys.”

“Good Lord!” Calvert’s gaze snapped onto the professor. “Is this place radioactive?”

“There’s no indication it’s radioactive. But we don’t know what’s causing these incidents, and we must try to find out. If there’s something here that’s dangerous, we need to know about it. Command fears that whatever it is, the Japanese are trying to make a weapon of it. We need to know what we’re facing.”

Calvert glared at the professor. “I thought this was about runways.”

“That was your conclusion, Lieutenant, not mine.”

With that, Blackburn stood up and suddenly sprinted towards the temple, Calvert’s curses following him. The rest of the party followed, surprised at the intellectual’s burst of speed. They all stopped at the doorway.

The temple was rounded, with a single portal opening on the shadowy interior. It sat on a plain of rock still holding puddles of seawater, and awash with shells, starfish and anemones. The professor paused by the entrance, and began tracing a series of grooves on the walls with his hands. The grooves were a series of wavy lines, as if they had been carved with a rake that had four closely spaced tines. They were uniform, and set in a clear pattern with some of the smaller patterns repeating themselves.

“My God,” Blackburn gasped, wonder filling his voice. “It’s writing!”

“Not like any I’ve ever seen,” van Garrett said.

“Children of the sea,” Rapata said softly.

Professor Blackburn started at that. “Witnesses have described these places as

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belonging to the 'children of the sea' before. Why did you use those particular words?"

Rapata shrugged. "My people tell many stories of the children of the sea. They moved among my people long ago, and they taught us many things. And then they left, leaving nothing behind."

Blackburn shifted his gaze to the Maori's arm, and his eyes widened. "Your tattoo! Tell me about it."

Calvert looked closely at the tattoo, and saw what had prompted Blackburn's exclamation. The swirling waves were drawn in the same manner as the marks on the temple wall, and some of the patterns even repeated in exactly the same manner. Others were similar, and still others bore no resemblance at all. But overall the similarities were striking. It was as if one person had taught another to write words in a language he did not know, and he had reproduced it many years later, managing to keep the strokes and style of the characters.

"My grandfather tattooed me on my day of manhood," Rapata explained. "He said the waves were the voice of the sea, and he tattooed them on me so I would always have the voice of the sea with me. He said the sea would always recognize me because I spoke with that same voice."

"Had you seen this pattern before?" the professor asked.

"No. My grandfather said he had seen it once on an island far away, when he was a young man."

"Rapata, is it possible your grandfather visited an island, like this one, that came out of the sea?" Blackburn asked.

"He said it was so. My grandfather roamed the ocean, and many thought him mad and accused him of telling lies. But I believed him when he said he had visited the house of the children of the sea."

Calvert spoke. "Professor, it seems these 'children of the sea' are not Japanese at all in origin. Is there anything else you know that can help us?"

Blackburn shrugged. "Not really. The tales of these children of the sea are jumbled up with tribal mythology and tales of ancient war chiefs. They could describe a technologically advanced race the tribe had encountered, or a god, or any number of phenomena."

"I'm more concerned about getting sick and dying if I go in this temple," Calvert said.

"I shouldn't think so. The people get sick only if they are on the island for an extended period of time. Days and weeks. Shorter exposure seems to have no effect."

Without waiting for further conversation, Blackburn lit his torch and darted inside, once again surprising the others with his speed and forcing them to hurry to keep up.

Upon entering, a short stairwell took them down into the structure. It soon

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became obvious the whole building was composed of one room—a single great hall. Slender pillars ran along either side. The ground was featureless stone, worn smooth, but still holding some puddles of seawater. The walls were overgrown with plants and coral, and appeared all the more lush after the barrenness of the island's surface. The coral grew in a riot of shapes, sizes and textures. Some patches were so soft and delicate-looking they could have been feathers, whilst others appeared dense and rigid as stone. As the party's eyes strained to make sense of the byzantine patchwork, they saw that some corals were even emitting soft, bioluminescent light. Delicate blues and teals dominated, but some corners had soft purples and cold, Arctic greens. Amongst the glowing corals, various undersea plants and vines filled yet more space.

Private Austen held his weapon at the ready, but a look of wonder covered his face as he peered around. "Why isn't anything growing on the ground?" he asked. "Or on the surface of this island? Why just on the walls in here?"

"I don't know," Blackburn conceded. "It's certainly curious, isn't it? It actually reminds me of something... ah, yes! Gardens! It almost looks like it's been cultivated as an undersea garden! It's amazing, isn't it? And the implications! My God, think of the intelligence that must have put this together!"

A sharp intake of breath drew their gaze to Doctor van Garrett, who stood at the far end of the chamber.

"It's a garden, all right," she said. "Come and look from over here."

Crossing the room, they saw it immediately. The different textures, colours and plants all appeared to have been arranged with the utmost care. The entire amalgamation was one large mural, with corals and plants used as texture and shading, to chronicle all manner of stories the party could hardly comprehend. From a great blue circle in the centre of the ceiling poured forth the now-familiar four-lined waves, and a multitude of fish and animals. Whales and giant squid fought, sharks pursued game fish, and other sharks in turn were eaten by larger, stranger creatures the like of which they had never seen. But the main panel showed stories of men: Their rise from apes, their wars with each other, and a series of maddeningly vague panels that seemed to show men entwined with strange creatures.

Rapata pointed; those strange creatures were formed of the swirling pattern on the door and his tattoos. "Children of the sea," he said reverently.

"Indeed," Blackburn said. "But the picture is hard to interpret."

"They're fighting," Calvert said matter-of-factly.

"Are they?" Blackburn asked. "Or are they mating?"

Van Garrett laughed. "Why can't it be both? That kind of describes my first marriage."

Calvert laughed too. "I can relate to that. So, Doctor, which one are you? The human or the... child of the sea?"

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She opened her mouth to answer when a cry of ‘Sir!’ drew their attention. Private Austen stood at the very back of the hall, shining his torch into what appeared to be another small chamber. The space was too small to fit them all, but a pedestal of coral sat with a slowly undulating form hovering over it. Like an amoeba, its outline was transparent, shifting and indistinct, and at its heart was a perfect, azure sphere that glowed enticingly.

What the strange globe was made of, they couldn’t say. It had the dark blue-purple hue of the ocean as viewed from an airplane, and it was hard to tell if it was solid or liquid. An iridescent quality, similar to that of a pearl, made it look solid, but a slight ripple on its surface indicated a liquid. Or was that a result of the odd light in this place, which seemed to subtly shift on its own?

“What in the blazes is that?” Calvert whispered.

“I’m not sure,” Blackburn said. “Though whatever it is, you probably don’t need to point your rifle at it. Neither do you, Private Austen.”

Both men reluctantly lowered their weapons. Van Garrett turned to study the mural again.

“Is it just me, or is that the same blue thing on the mural that shows everything coming out of it?” she asked.

Before anyone could answer, and to their great surprise, the professor reached out and grabbed the blue sphere. It pulsed with light and, as they watched, its clear body seemed to break away from the pedestal and collect in Blackburn’s hand. He sucked in a breath, and when he exhaled, a cold fog wafted from his mouth.

“Oh, my — the Heart of the Sea,” he gasped, collapsing.

As the doctor dashed forward to help him, Calvert heard the unmistakable chattering rattle of machine gun fire followed by explosions.



Lieutenant Calvert swore, and began barking orders.

“Doctor, take care of the Professor. Rapata, help her move him, and then join us. Private Austen, on me.”

The two soldiers ran for the entrance of the temple as Rapata effortlessly hoisted the professor over his shoulder. The group spilled out of the building, the soldiers’ weapons raised and pointed toward the beach. They saw smoke rising from that direction and a lone sailor from the *M/V Copperhead* appeared from between the boulders.

“Hold fire!” Calvert shouted, waving the man over. “What’s happened?”

“A patrol boat, sir,” the sailor gasped. “We couldn’t see it because of the fog. It was on us and firing before we even knew it was there.”

“How bad is the damage?” Lieutenant Calvert asked.

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“They didn’t sink her, but they tore her up pretty bad. I was on shore and came to find you.”

“How many soldiers on the patrol boat?”

“I didn’t stick around to find out. It’s a big ship.”

Calvert advanced with Austen following. They reached the boulder-strewn field at the edge of the beach, and took up defensive positions. They had just settled in behind smaller boulders that provided good cover, when a shore party from the patrol boat pulled up on the beach in rowboats. Calvert could hear them barking orders as they moved over the sand. There was no mistaking it—the voices were German.

“Professor, wake up!” van Garrett cried, as Rapata laid Blackburn on his back beside the temple. He still had the strange grapefruit-sized sphere clutched in his hand. The flowing, iridescent protoplasm that surrounded it encased his arm halfway to the elbow. Her brow furrowed as she studied the orb. She didn’t know how to treat the man because she didn’t know what was wrong with him. His vital signs were all steady and strong, and he just appeared to be unconscious. But the alien thing stuck to him—was it some sort of parasite?

Rapata turned toward the shaken sailor. “Remain here and help her. I must help the War Chief.”

The sailor nodded dumbly and Rapata ran toward the beach, spear in hand.

Looking at the professor’s arm, the sailor asked, “What is that thing? It’s... beautiful.”

Van Garret shook her head. “I’m not sure. The professor picked it up and immediately passed out.”

Then, with a lurch, Blackburn sprang up and gasped, blinking rapidly in the sunlight. The sailor staggered back in alarm, and the doctor yelped in surprise.

“My God, the sea is deep,” Blackburn said dazedly.

“Professor, are you all right?” asked van Garrett. “What happened?”

“Amazing, Doctor. I feel amazing. When I touched this, it was as though I became part of the sea, and the sea became part of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think it controls water. I had visions of beings using it. It looked like they were either chiefs or priests, or both, but they used it to bend the sea to their will.”

“Professor, that’s insane. What do you mean ‘beings’? That thing can’t really control water, can it?”

“Well, let’s test it.”

Blackburn headed for the nearest large puddle of seawater. As he dipped the sphere into it, the water drained out of the puddle and into the orb. The unearthly ball darkened slightly, but did not change in size at all. It was as if it had drunk all the water. The doctor was mystified. “I don’t understand. Is it... organic? Alive, even?”

“I’m not sure,” the professor said. “I think it might be, but I also think it might

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be more than that too.”

Finding another puddle, he stood over it, extending the blue orb, and concentrated. A moment passed. Then the water began streaming up into the sphere as if from a faucet, but going up instead of down. The sphere continued to absorb the water until the puddle was dry. Van Garrett’s mouth dropped open in amazement again.

The professor grinned. “Fascinating. Like calls to like, as they say. Let’s try one more.”

He went to another puddle and focused again. This time, instead of streaming upwards, the water formed an amorphous blob and moved out of the small crater in the rock. Concentrating, the professor began coaxing the water around. White crystals began dropping out of the blob like tiny eggs. After a few moments, the professor bent down and touched his lips to the blob of water. He slurped at it a few times and stood up, a boyish grin on his wizened face.

“Not very dignified, I know, but this is incredible! Did you see? I just pulled all the salt out of that seawater! It’s regular, fresh water now!”

“How does—” van Garrett began, but was interrupted by a burst of gunfire. The doctor dropped to the ground, pulling the professor down beside her. They exchanged glances then moved towards the beach where the gunfire was coming from.

Lieutenant Calvert saw smoke rising from the *M/V Copperhead*, and noticed that much of the superstructure was pockmarked where it had been raked with cannon fire. As it was a converted fishing vessel, selected for stealth rather than combat, he wasn’t surprised a cannon could cause that much damage. He thought she might be listing to one side, but couldn’t tell for sure.

His attention was drawn to a small boat pulling up to the beach. It was clear the occupants didn’t see Calvert or Austen, who were keeping a low profile behind the boulders. The two commandos were close enough they could talk to each other in low voices and be masked by the sound of the surf. Austen took aim just as the first two men jumped into the surf to pull the boat up onto the sand, but Calvert told him to hold his fire. Calvert watched intently. He needed to know exactly who he and Austen were facing.

The men from the boat were a mix of German stormtroopers in the standard green wool utility uniforms of the SS, and Japanese marines in khaki tropical uniforms. As they drew closer, Calvert saw that those in the SS uniforms were indeed Caucasian. There had been no credible reports of these two Axis powers working together directly in theatre, but here was absolute proof.

This information could be more valuable than that blue trinket we found.

His mind turned to the fight ahead. Between the stormtroopers and the Japanese soldiers, there were eleven of them. He didn’t fancy those odds, but if they could whittle their numbers down while they were exposed on the beach,

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they'd stand a much better chance of defeating them.

That thought fell aside when he saw the last figure climb from the boat. His dress was similar to that of the stormtroopers, but far more elegant. He wore tall black leather riding boots, and his uniform was a perfectly-starched light grey, setting himself off from the green—and khaki-clad men with him. A number of ribbons adorned his chest, and an iron cross hung from a red ribbon around his neck. He was large, fit and handsome, and any knowledgeable observer would correctly guess he came from an aristocratic, military family. A sturdy cavalry sabre hung from his left hip, and a Luger pistol from his right. He looked like a knight with his immaculate uniform and sword, and strode confidently through the water.

Calvert had a reputation for cold steadiness, for waiting until the appropriate moment to strike, and for not letting his nerves get the best of him. This was why high command had taken the unusual step of granting an officer's commission to an enlisted man.

It was also why it was such a shock to Private Austen when Lieutenant Calvert whispered, in a voice tinged with panic, "Wipe them out!" before throwing a grenade.

It bounced between a stormtrooper and a marine, who both struggled to get away through the wet sand. They were too slow, and the deafening explosion ripped them apart as the others either dived into the sand or sprinted for cover behind boulders.

Austen began shooting, making full use of the Garand's semi-automatic fire. A handful of Japanese marines and stormtroopers fell under the sudden hail. The empty clip ejected, clanging off a nearby stone. Those not struck by the initial salvo reacted immediately, returning fire as they dashed for cover. The knight, for that is what Austen thought of the mysterious German officer as, ran with them. He moved with the loose, graceful gait of an athlete, his Luger in his right hand as his left steadied the hilt of his sabre, preventing it from slapping against his thigh.

The Axis soldiers darted into a field of rocks on Austen's flank, forcing him to crawl halfway around his own boulder to maintain line of sight on them. He was rewarded, dropping two more of them before they got off the expanse of beach and disappeared from view. He turned to Lieutenant Calvert. The open beach had given them a great advantage, and they had used it well to whittle down their enemy's numbers, but their foes had gained the high ground and still outnumbered them.

Austen was about to ask for orders when he heard a high-pitched scream, and saw Rapata dance backwards from a boulder, his spear red and dripping.

Not as outnumbered as we were a moment ago, Austen thought.

Dashing forward, Austen joined Rapata and fired a volley at the remaining Japanese marines, who had revealed themselves in chasing down the Maori who had brutally speared their comrade. The Japanese retreated behind some rocks.

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Calvert called his men back, and, keeping an eye on their enemies' hiding place, Austen withdrew to the boulders. There he found Calvert conferring with the doctor and professor, who now looked hale and hearty, the shimmering blue sphere in his hand.

"Lieutenant Calvert! This artefact, whatever it is, represents an amazing technology that must be delivered to High Command as soon as possible."

"What does it do?"

"Spencer," van Garrett said, shaking her head, "It's amazing, I still don't quite believe it."

The professor pointed the sphere at a puddle. The water immediately defied gravity and streamed toward it, seemingly absorbed into the protoplasm. The blue sphere darkened slightly in colour.

"And that's just for starters," beamed the professor. "I can tell it does more than that, but I'm not yet sure what other capabilities it possesses."

Calvert grunted. "A neat toy. I'm all for getting back to Australia, but we have a problem. There are at least six assorted Jerries and Japs left on the beach and, even if we get past them, we have that Jap patrol boat to contend with."

"I think I can do something about the patrol boat, Lieutenant," the professor said. "If you and your men can clear the beach, I'll handle the rest."

Without waiting for a reply, Blackburn moved down the beach, keeping well clear of where the German and Japanese soldiers were taking cover.

Van Garrett moved to catch up to him. "What are you going to do? We don't have any weapons!"

"We have this," he replied, lifting his arm. "And it's more than just a weapon. It's the sea itself. The whole bloody thing. Watch."

He pointed the sphere at a nearby puddle, and as van Garrett watched, the water rippled, then parted in the middle, a crease appearing that ran all the way down to the ground.

"It will take more strength to manipulate something that much bigger than this puddle, but I think I can do it," he grinned. "Just like Moses."

"How do you know how to use this?" van Garrett asked.

"It's hard to describe. It felt like all the secrets of the deep were poured into my brain when I touched it."

The professor climbed atop a boulder, and could see the outlines of the patrol craft as the morning fog began to burn off in the sun. The boat sat further out from the *M/V Copperhead* in deeper water. He stretched his arms out in front of him, and pantomimed a pushing motion. A small wave appeared where the sand met the water, and rippled out to the patrol boat. The craft bobbed in the water, and almost immediately its main heavy cannon began to turn ponderously towards their position.

"Hmph," he said as he bent his knees, squatted and pushed harder, as if he was

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trying to move an invisible truck in front of him. This time, the wave was considerably bigger. Taller than a man, it rolled out towards the patrol boat, gathering height and mass.

The cannon fired. Van Garrett flinched, and a huge explosion of mist burst up as the shell impacted with the wave, but did not penetrate through.

Then the wave struck the boat like a broadside, pushing it far over to its starboard side. It was almost completely swamped, but then the sturdy craft began rolling upright again. Its momentum carried it through the roll, and it slid down the back side of the wave into the trough left behind. The professor pushed another wave into it. The impact was accompanied by the splintering of wood, the screeching of rent steel, and the hiss of cold seawater hitting hot engines. The boat sank quickly.

Blackburn was gazing in wonderment at the blue sphere when a rifle shot came off the boulder he was on. Jerking away from the spray of rock splinters, he lost his footing and fell onto the stony surface of the beach. He heard answering cracks from the Allied commandos' weapons. A moment later, four German soldiers appeared from around a boulder. Two grabbed the doctor, who swore and clawed at her attackers. Another pinned Blackburn to the ground whilst the last reached for the sphere with both hands. With a cry, Blackburn began to pull the orb away, but the soldier caught hold of it and tried to wrench it from the professor's hands.

The soldier suddenly hissed in pain, and the professor watched in horror as his cheeks caved and his skin withered on dry, desiccated muscles. The soldier's uniform collapsed on his shrunken corpse. The German pinning the professor tried to immobilize his arm, but Blackburn pressed the sphere into him and in seconds he also shrank and collapsed into what looked like a bundle of petrified wood in a military uniform.

Doctor van Garrett watched, her mouth forming a horrified 'O', before she resumed wrestling with her captors. Appearing as if from nowhere, the sailor from the *Copperhead* stepped in, swinging fists at the Germans who held her. He connected twice before two sharp cracks from a pistol tore holes in his chest, knocking him over backwards.

A chill voice rang out, thick with vile humour. "A magnificent toy, is it not?"

Before the doctor could react, strong hands gripped her, and against her back she felt the muzzle of a pistol, still hot from killing the sailor now dead at her feet. She stumbled as she was dragged away from the professor, and away from the lieutenant and his men now emerging from cover. Their weapons were raised.

"Lieutenant Calvert, a pleasure to see you again."

Calvert's eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. The German officer stood, holding his hostage with one hand, his pistol pressed painfully into her back. He was flanked by two stormtroopers with Mauser rifles raised.

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Across several yards of sand stood Lieutenant Calvert and Private Austen, their weapons trained on the Germans. Rapata loomed nearby with his spear poised, and Professor Blackburn still held the shimmering blue sphere. The seconds ticked by and neither side moved.

The professor broke the silence. "Lieutenant Calvert, an old friend of yours?"

"Johann Klampt," Calvert said through gritted teeth.

"Lieutenant, where are your military courtesies?" the German officer asked. "That would be *Hauptsturmführer* Johann Klampt, would it not?"

Calvert said nothing, and several more seconds stretched on in silence.

The professor broke the silence again. "*Hauptsturmführer*, it seems we are at a bit of an impasse. I'm guessing you came here for the artefact?"

Klampt shrugged. "That, or something like it."

"So it's not what you were expecting?"

"I'm a soldier, Professor, I have no expectations. I have orders. They were to recover anything interesting. And that—" he inclined his head toward the sphere, "—is interesting, wouldn't you agree? I must admit that was a fascinating trick with the wave. Unfortunately, we'll have to sink your ship when we leave with it, since you sank ours."

"If you sink the *Copperhead*, no one's getting out of here," Calvert said. "Unless you're going to brave the open sea in that rowboat."

"The *Copperhead*, you call it? Naming your ship after a poisonous snake?" he shook his head. "You Australians are almost as brash as Americans."

Calvert ignored the remark. "And why would we let you leave?"

"To protect your charming Doctor. And to protect yourself. A Japanese cruiser is coming here, bigger, more heavily armed, and with more men. Let me go, and I'll sail out, intercept them, and order them back to port. Otherwise, if they find you here, you'll certainly be killed."

"You're bluffing," Calvert scoffed.

Klampt gestured towards the east. "Look for yourself."

Careful to keep one eye on the German captain, the lieutenant turned to see a hulking silhouette beginning to take shape on the horizon.

"That can't be Japanese," Austen said. "We sank all the ships in the harbour. Including the cruiser."

"That was you?" said Klampt with a smile. "Impressive work. You've been busy, between the harbour and here. But that ship was not in the harbour."

"So the Japanese and the Nazis are working together?" Calvert asked.

"I'm no Nazi," *Hauptsturmführer* Klampt hissed.

"I thought you had to be a good little Nationalist Socialist to join the SS, captain," Calvert said drily.

"Goading me will not work, Lieutenant. I do not have the fiery temper you do," said the German, though the redness creeping into his cheeks gave

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away the lie.

Calvert pressed on. "Who are you working for, *Hauptsturmführer*? Freelancing for the Japanese, or still running errands for the *Schwarze Sonne*?"

The German officer turned even redder. "If someone here could be accused of being a mercenary, Lieutenant, it's you. Working for the British, the Americans, even the Canadians. No, Lieutenant, I love my country and I work for it. And the rumours of *Schwarze Sonne*'s power are greatly exaggerated. Now, enough talk. Hand over the sphere, and you can have the Doctor."

"You'd have us believe you'll just leave us here, take the sphere, and go?"

"Why not? I'll have what I came for."

Calvert was not convinced. "We'd be stuck on a deserted, uncharted island. How would we get off?"

"That is not my concern. And I know how resourceful you can be, Lieutenant."

"This device is dangerous, *Hauptsturmführer*," the professor said, gesturing with the orb. "Didn't you see what it did? It sucked all the water from the bodies of these men." He toed one of the mummified corpses at his feet to emphasize the point.

"I saw," Klampt confirmed. "Funny that it affected him and not you, Professor. Tell me, how is it that this is the case? Perhaps you've encountered this technology before?" The *Hauptsturmführer* grinned knowingly. He turned to Calvert. "Your man here has done some other explorations himself, Lieutenant. Has he told you about the other surveys of these islands that have been popping up?"

"This is the first island we've explored," Calvert said.

"True for you," Klampt replied. "But not for him. Tell me, Professor, what else can the sphere do?"

"I've not seen its like before, *Hauptsturmführer*," the professor answered. "Release the Doctor."

Klampt ignored his demand. "A lie, Professor. Even if you haven't seen anything exactly like it, I know for a fact you've seen similar items. Don't you remember that ruined temple in Malaya? Hand over the sphere."

Calvert glared at the professor. "Malaya?" he demanded.

The professor pointedly ignored him.

"It seems we're at an impasse, as I stated before," the professor said.

"Indeed it does," answered Klampt "Let's change that." Klampt suddenly raised his pistol and aimed it at Lieutenant Calvert. Seeing her chance, van Garret dug her feet into the ground and flung herself sideways, pushing Klampt's gun arm wide. The Luger boomed, the shot ricocheting off a nearby boulder. Austen immediately shot the stormtrooper his weapon was trained on, dropping him in a heap on the stony shore. The other stormtrooper hesitated, unsure on his choice of target, and Rapata was on him with his short, brutal spear. The German batted at the spear with his rifle, but Rapata had the physical advantage and soon had

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him on his knees, yielding.

Meanwhile, Klampt struggled with van Garrett, his greater strength quickly granting him the edge. She was still struggling as he dragged her backwards, determined not to let anyone at his exposed back.

Austen aimed his weapon at Klampt.

“Hold fire! We don’t have a clear shot!” Calvert called.

Klampt spun the doctor around, securing her neck in a strong choke hold. Still pulling her backward, he again trained his pistol on the advancing men. He steadied himself and adjusted his grip on van Garrett so she could not throw off his aim. Calvert and Austen moved behind the cover of the rocks and took aim, waiting for a clear shot.

The professor stood holding the sphere with both hands in front of him. He closed the distance between himself and Klampt, his features pinched in intense concentration. The sphere pulsed and shot forth a stream of water, which struck both Klampt and the doctor, pushing them back. Klampt quickly regained his balance, aimed and snapped two quick shots at the professor. The few metres between them made it hard to miss. The shots struck the sphere, which flashed an angry red before splitting apart and dropping from the professor’s hands. Hammered by the force of the shot, the professor fell heavily onto his back.

“The sphere!” Klampt cried and pushed the doctor forward, sending her sprawling on the ground. He knelt down and scooped up one piece of the sphere that lay gleaming on the ground, all the while keeping his pistol trained on the commandos. He rose and snapped off several shots at Calvert, forcing him back behind cover. Continuing to fire evenly spaced shots, he kept Calvert and Austen pinned and moved back methodically, putting cover between himself and the commandos.

The commandos ran to the professor, who lay on his back, groaning in pain and struggling to sit up.

Van Garrett looked at him, quickly surveying him for gunshot wounds. “Are you hurt, Professor?”

He shook his head. “No, just had the wind knocked out of me. The bullets were stopped.”

Sitting up, the professor heard rifle shots ring out as Japanese sailors from the shore party drove the commandos back amongst the boulders. He watched helplessly as *Hauptsturmführer* Klampt boarded the craft, which withdrew to the newly-arrived cruiser.

“Professor,” said the doctor. “You should take a look at this.”



Clearing his head, Blackburn looked around and saw a dull fragment of the

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sphere that had flown aside. It had been violently torn apart, leaving a ragged centre that contrasted with the smooth outer surface. Its deep blue colour had gone, and grains of sand stuck to it, making it look more like a beached jellyfish than the vibrant living organism it had recently been. The professor quickly scooped it up, and ran down to the beach, plunging it into the water. It shimmered, and the healthy whole parts of it rolled over the ragged tears. It slowly knit itself back together, forming a sphere that was much smaller than before. Its blue colour began to return, though not as dark or rich as it had been previously.

The professor sighed in relief. "It survived! I didn't think it would, but we have enough to—" his speech was cut off as a heavy fist cracked across his jaw, knocking him into the surf.

"What did I tell you, Professor?" Calvert roared, grabbing the man and pulling him from the water. "I told you I needed to know everything that was going on, and you lied to me. You lied about what you knew about this mission!"

He punched the professor again as he tried to rise.

"What you knew about the enemy!"

A third blow drew blood from Blackburn's nose.

"What you knew about what we were looking for, and I'm pretty damn sure you lied about where you got your intel from. You were on those surveys you were talking about, weren't you?"

"No, you don't understand! It—" the professor gurgled as Calvert thrust his head under the water.

Pulling him back up, Calvert snarled. "You put me at risk. And my men. And the Doctor. You killed the sailors on the *Copperhead*. How can you justify that?"

The professor coughed and sputtered, but answered evenly. "Mission first, Lieutenant. You know that. Logic dictates gaining this prize was worth your lives."

"You should have come clean. Told us the risks. We had no choice in the matter, anyway."

"You've ordered men to their deaths before, Lieutenant, and you've done it when you knew the reasons and they didn't. I did no different."

"We're not your men! You're not in my chain of command!" Calvert yelled.

"I am today. The Old Bird said so himself."

"Whose idea was that?"

"Mine, I assure you."

That admission earned the professor another punch. He groaned, and thankfully the lieutenant held his head above the water, though his grip made it clear he was ready to push Blackburn's head under again at any moment.

"You actively lied, Professor," said Calvert. "What about the runways? You were hunting for those *doodads* all along, right? I don't like being played like that."

"Then you picked the wrong profession, Lieutenant."

Calvert bristled. "True enough, Professor. But when I get played, I find out

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why.”

“That’s not how it works. And you—” Blackburn was unceremoniously dunked again. He pushed and kicked, trying to break the lieutenant’s grip, but with his relative lack of strength and Calvert’s weight pushing down, there was no escape for the professor. However, he did succeed in churning up sand from the sea floor as he thrashed. After a few seconds, he was pulled back up.

Calvert leaned close. “If you drown here, it’ll be reported as a casualty. And my people will back me up when asked about it. I’ll just take this—”

He reached for the sphere, and the professor lunged away from him, keeping it as far away from the lieutenant as possible.

“Fool! Don’t touch it! It’ll suck all the water from your body if you’re not careful.”

“More lies. You’re fine.”

“I’m protected,” the professor said, gasping. The lieutenant allowed him to struggle to his knees. From under his sodden shirt Blackburn drew out a necklace with a pendant on it. Strange curves and wavy lines covered it on the front and the back.

“We found these at some of the sites,” he explained.

“Who’s ‘we’?”

The professor licked his lips nervously before speaking.

“We’ve been watching, with growing concern, as groups amongst the Nazis, and others, have sought certain knowledge to help their war effort. Before things exploded between our nations, I worked with them on some of these expeditions. I was able to acquire some smaller artefacts, like this pendant, and my notes. They’ve sent parties to all corners of the world seeking out this forbidden knowledge. We’ve been trying to match them, but we’re behind and playing catch up.

“None of what I told you was an outright lie. They’re out there looking for these technologies, or magicks, or whatever you want to call them, and they’re ahead of us. And they’re trying to use these new islands for strategic purposes. I’m trying to even the score.”

Calvert looked at the alien thing in the professor’s hand. “What is that sphere?”

The professor shrugged. “I have my theories about where it came from, but it’s too early to say exactly. We don’t really have the vocabulary for it. Rapata’s people might say ‘gods’. A Christian might say ‘demons’. Others would say just another race that was here before mankind. Atlantis, maybe, or Hyperborea. In any case, they left behind some other artefacts like this. I don’t know what they used it for, but it appears to be a tool for the manipulation of water. They’re powerful, and dangerous, and the Nazis and the Japanese are working closely together to collect them. We had to beat them to at least one.”

He held the sphere up, smaller than when they found it, and glowing weakly, but it still appeared to be viable. “And now we have something they don’t.”

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Calvert stared at the sphere. “Klampt grabbed the other piece. How do you know that one isn’t working?”

The professor frowned. “It may be. In either case, we have to study this to understand it.”

“You also lied about the *Hauptsturmführer*,” said the lieutenant. “You’ve met him.” It was a statement, not a question, and brooked no argument.

“Yes. In the past. When I worked with some of their expeditions before the war broke out. He was along as a military adviser. It seems you have met him, too.”

Calvert nodded as he prepared to help the professor to the shore. “Like you said, in the past. He’s cunning and resourceful. I had some dealings with an organization he worked with, the *Schwarze Sonne*.”

“A dangerous group,” the professor said. “And they’re known to us as pursuers of this type of knowledge. Klampt lied when he said he wasn’t working with them.”

“I’m not so sure,” Calvert said thoughtfully. He loosened his grip on the professor, who was still contending with the surf battering him. The slight man struggled to his feet and fought through the breakers, trying to keep up with the lieutenant.

Calvert continued. “It sounds odd, but Klampt never lied before. He sees himself as honourable, which probably explains why they didn’t bombard us once he withdrew. That cruiser’s heavy guns could have sunk this whole island. He wants to defeat us, but fairly, on the field of battle. Or at least, in a way that he perceives as fair.”

The professor was not convinced. “Moments ago, he was shooting at us, and would have happily killed you and your whole team.”

“True. But that would have been straight and clean. Man-to-man, and he would have been the one to claim victory personally. Not some naval officer.”

As the two men reached the shore, Rapata, Austen and Van Garrett regarded the professor darkly. They had heard everything. *The lieutenant had the right of it*, the professor thought. *If he’d drowned me, they would have backed him up.*

He eyed each of them individually, then spoke.

“I know you feel betrayed because I didn’t tell you everything I knew up front. But with the things we’re dealing with... well, we don’t exactly know what we’re dealing with. All we do know is that the old rules of warfare, anthropology... just don’t apply any more. Not the way they did. Although it appears the enemy escaped with a part of the Heart of the Sea, we have a viable sample of it ourselves. This is what our goal was here.

“You four have proven extremely resourceful and capable, and I’m looking for people to help me with other missions of this nature in the future. You have experience doing commando work, and I can put those skills to even greater use. It’s not as simple as sinking ships or blowing up bridges, though you may be called upon to do those things, too. We have to look at the world—the whole world, not just the parts where we’re fighting—in a new light, and relearn things we

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thought we knew before. And we'll likely have to contend with Germans and Japanese who want to learn the same things, and keep us from learning them. There are other enemies, too, that we don't understand, and some we don't yet know about, I'm sure.

"If you want a job, you have it. All I can promise is you'll help the war effort, and no two missions will be the same. Help me, and you'll have an impact that few men can ever fathom."

"Why should we join you, Professor?" asked Doctor van Garrett. "You lied to us from the beginning."

"This is important," said Blackburn. "There are much larger forces at work in the world than you know. I've learned so much in the last few years, and now know just enough to realise how much there is that we don't know. And every bit of that knowledge could be dangerous if our enemies get it first. I'm working to prevent that, and to harness those forces for our own defence. You know about the Old Bird. I have his ear, and I have access to other resources as well. Sign on with me, and you'll help the war far more than if you sank a hundred cruisers."

The group all returned his gaze, and the professor could tell they were weighing his words.

"Why us?" Austen asked. "You must have access to plenty of other commandos."

"I do," the professor agreed. "These things we deal with, some of them cause a man to question everything he knows. We saw something like that today, and each of you kept doing your jobs. That's a rare quality, even among commandos."

Calvert spoke first. "If we join you, no more hiding the ball, Professor. If I find out you've lied to me about anything again, I'll drown you for real."

The professor smiled. "Join my organization, and that will never be an issue."

"And if we don't?"

"No hard feelings, and I can get you whatever follow-on assignment you'd like. You're highly capable and I have no reservations about recommending you for any post. I got the Old Bird to authorize this mission, and I can get him to sign off on whatever you request."

"I'll want to speak to him, to get assurances," Calvert said. "And if I like what I hear, then I'll join."

Rapata quickly spoke up. "I'm sworn to follow my war chief, and I will do so in this matter as well."

"I'll join, too, on two conditions," Private Austen put in. "First, I want a promotion."

The professor nodded slowly. "I think we can arrange for that ... Corporal, rank will look good on you. And the second?"

"I work for the Lieutenant directly."

The professor blinked at that, hesitated, and finally said, "Agreed."

The men all turned to look at the doctor.

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“Well, Doctor, we have the brawn,” said the professor. “We could always use more brains. What do you say?”

An angry look passed over the mens' faces and van Garrett barely contained a laugh. “I've been volunteering. I need a paid position. And I need employment, once the war is over, at a university or major hospital. It's difficult for a female Doctor to be hired as anything other than a nurse.”

Blackburn nodded. “Done.”

He looked at the group. “Right, then. It appears we're all on board. If I had some champagne, I'd propose a toast. But here's to our little cell of wonder seekers. Once we return to Australia, I promise you, the world you know now will start to seem very small, and the world I'll show you will look very large, very large indeed.” ✕



Danger Nazi U.K.O.

By Will Salmon

OLD NED

DAWN rose on the city. A legion of bleary-eyed Londoners made their way out of the shelters, bent-backed and exhausted. Another day began. Mothers led their children home, hoping with quiet desperation and muttered prayers that their homes had been spared. Men scabbled amongst the rubble and detritus of fallen buildings, singing songs and telling jokes, despite the grizzly sights that awaited them.

There were the bodies, of course — and parts of bodies. The unfortunates who had somehow missed the shelters, or those who had remained in their homes despite everything. That was the grimmest, most painful part of life now, thought Ned as he hobbled slowly through the streets, his thoughts hazy from another sleepless night. Not the brave boys putting their lives on the line overseas, but the grim reality of the war striking at the heart of the nation. The city of his father and his father's father — East End boys all — reduced to an abattoir. No matter what happened now, even if the war ended tomorrow, he'd never be able to look at London the same way again.

"Now then Ned," Mrs Ashton nodded, hurrying by with little Jenny at her side. He nodded sadly, but didn't say anything. He'd already passed Kingsland Road where they lived. He knew that they were heading home to nothing. They would not be the only ones.

There was a commotion at the end of the street. Three men in uniform were pushing through the crowd, running towards him. "Look out, granddad!" the youngest shouted, flashing him a grin — all teeth and youthful arrogance. The

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bloody cheek of it!

“Oi, what’s the rush?” he yelled after them, in truth more intrigued than angry.

“Unexploded rocket!” They turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

Ned sighed and carried on home. The street was still standing, then. He supposed he ought to feel grateful. Instead, he opened the door to his house and plonked himself down painfully in his chair. He closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.



Frank couldn’t get Lily out of his mind. He’d had his eye on The Hare & Hounds’ youngest barmaid for months now and, last night, they’d finally kissed. It had been brief but intense, a gentle, comforting embrace that had turned into something more as she pressed herself into his arms. Now he just had to get through the day and he could see her again...

They turned the corner onto Mulberry Road and there it was—the Nazi rocket, it’s enormous fin emerging from the ruins of the house it had levelled on impact. “It’s bloody huge!” Neville gasped beside him.

He was right. It was much bigger than any rocket Frank had encountered before. He’d seen unexploded Doodlebugs and the newer V-2s, but this was something else entirely. They’d have to let HQ know and take their time disarming it.

It wasn’t just the size of the thing that was strange—it had a peculiar bulbous shape, too. A circular silver hatch studded its otherwise smooth fuselage. Frank imagined a German pilot sitting inside, then chastised himself for being so foolish.

“Come off it, it’s just another rocket.” That was Michael. Frank rolled his eyes. He loathed every moment he had to spend with his youngest, cockiest colleague. Michael was already striding boldly up to its silver hull, whistling, for Pete’s sake, while Frank and Neville held back cautiously.

“Do you think we should get help?” Neville asked. “Get a couple more of the lads down here?”

“No... no, it’s okay,” Frank said, with more confidence than he felt. “No point in risking anyone else’s neck. Anyway, we can manage this. Michael’s right, it’s just another rocket. Come on chaps, let’s get to it.”

There was a sudden, loud bang, following by a mechanical whirring. Frank caught Neville’s look of shock and they shared a moment of wordless panic. “Get back!” he yelled to Michael. For once the kid did as he was told.

The rocket didn’t explode. Instead, the hatch irised open. Frank tried to see what was inside, but all he could make out was something moving in the darkness. And then he started to scream.



Ned had been dozing a while when shouting from outside roused him. He ignored it for as long as he could, but the noise grew louder and closer. Yawning, he shuffled to his feet. He made his way to the window and drew back the tattered curtains. There was no glass—the bombs had made sure of that—and nothing worth stealing so he'd left them un-boarded.

Something was blocking his view—he couldn't work out precisely what. It was black and ruffling in the wind. His first thought was that somebody had hung another curtain on the outside of the house. It reeked! Some unpleasant combination of mould and rotten fish. He reached out through the window, but couldn't quite bring himself to touch the fibrous material.

Suddenly, it moved, shooting away from the house in the direction of Sidney Street. Gasping with surprise, Ned popped his head out of the window.

What he saw confused him. It was still again—a shifting, indefinable form, hovering a few feet above ground. Thin tendrils hung limp from its amorphous form, trailing the ground, twitching rapidly. "What the bloody hell?" he gasped.

The thing moved, slowly this time, and Ned had the oddest feeling that whatever it was, it was turning to face him. A hole seemed to form in the dark mass, revealing glittering silver pinpricks. In a rush of uncomprehending terror, Ned realised that he was looking into a mouth.

One of the tendrils lashed out. A younger man may have been able to dodge in time, but Ned was slow and old. It coiled around his arm like a whip, rattlesnake tight and disconcertingly warm. It yanked him hard through the window, where he flailed, caught halfway in and halfway out of his house. It pulled again, and this time he tumbled to the floor, cracking his head on the hard ground. He looked up and saw the thing drifting languidly towards him. Terrified and uncomprehending, Ned began to cry. Then, in a rush of tentacles and teeth, he felt no more.

LOCKWOOD AND SNAITH

It was beautiful. The car was unlike anything Timmy had ever seen before—a gleaming silver Rolls-Royce. He'd read about cars like this, but never dreamed that he'd actually get to see one in real life. He drifted over, hypnotised, as it purred to a halt.

The driver's door opened and a man stepped out. He was tall—taller than Timmy's dad, at any rate, and old, with a thin scraping of grey hair. He was dressed in an immaculate charcoal suit. He looked important, and not a little frightening too. He carried himself in a way that Timmy had never seen before, but would one day think of as "haughty".

He wasn't alone. His partner was a woman, shorter, with bright auburn hair in a tight bun. She gave Timmy a cool smile and the pair went on their way, heading towards the crowd of military policemen and gossiping onlookers.

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Intrigued, Timmy started to follow, but the woman stopped sharply. Turning on her heel, she raised a hand. He stood stock still and she laughed, before tossing a coin to him. “Clear off, lad” she said in an incongruous Yorkshire accent. “And keep your mitts off the car!”

Timmy looked at the coin in his hand and gasped. Half a crown! He did as he was told. If he couldn’t follow these interesting strangers, he could at least spend some more time with the beautiful car. He plonked himself down on a crumbling red brick wall, and gazed at it, enraptured.



“Magnificent, isn’t it?”

Lockwood’s eyes were alight with excitement. “Incredible engineering, just look at it!” He rested his hands on the still warm hull of the rocket. One of the MPs who had let them into the crash site started to say something, but Cordelia hushed him quickly. It was important not to interrupt Lockwood at times like this, not for fear of losing vital insights, but because he would gripe and moan on the way back to HQ about his concentration being broken.

Her colleague circled the missile eagerly, getting down on his hands and knees at one point to look at it from below, muddying his suit in the process. Cordelia took measurements and made notes in her journal. Of particular interest was the hatch — it was slicked with a viscous ooze.

Withdrawing a container from her bag, she set about scraping a sample of the slime into it.

“This is different to any rocket I have ever seen before,” Lockwood announced, leaping back to his feet.

“That’s it?” said Cordelia. “We’ve been here 20 minutes and that’s your big insight?”

Lockwood curled his lip in mock indignity and thumbed his nose at her.

“Come on pal, it’s a V-2 rocket!” the MP declared, unable to contain himself any longer. “You chaps must have seen hundreds of them!”

Lockwood turned and eyeballed him malevolently. “This, *pal*, is not a V-2,” he snarled. “Look at it!” he gestured grandly. “The shape... it’s all wrong. Much too large! No this... this isn’t a rocket at all — at least not of the type that we’re used to. This was carrying something.”

The MP scratched his chin in puzzlement, considered responding, but settled for muttering to himself instead.

“Can you show us where the bodies are?” Cordelia asked, resting a gentle hand on his arm. There was no point in alienating the locals, after all. He nodded and led them through the rubble to a small clearing, where the corpses lay beneath a dusty tarpaulin.

“Such a shame. Good lads, all of them. Poor Mickey Sanders. He was only 19. Bit cocksure, y’know, but he had a decent heart.”

“And you saw it, did you?” Lockwood knelt down and pulling the sheet away from the men. “The thing that killed them?”

“Not me pal, Millie Taylor and Mr Parker. Probably half a dozen more too. They said it was horrible! This big black monster that ate the lads clean up!”

“Well that’s evidently nonsense,” said Lockwood, irritably. “Given that their bodies are right in front of us.”

“Well anyway. They reckon old Ned Fletcher was killed by it too. He was found a few streets away. But he was pushing 80.”

“Interesting. You have their addresses?” Lockwood passed his pen and journal over to the MP and turned to face Cordelia. “And what do you think killed them?”

She stepped back from the cadavers and looked at him thoughtfully. “Truthfully, I don’t have the faintest idea. It’s not killing for hunger — at least not solely.” She gestured towards one of the uniformed bodies. “It’s partially devoured this one and simply killed the others. We have to assume it came from that rocket.”

“*Obviously.*”

“Alright then, Lockwood. What do *you* think?” she sighed.

“I think that whatever did this is still on the loose in London — and bound to kill again!”

“You could try and sound a little less excited.”

He beamed. The effect on his sallow features was slightly unnerving. “But I have been so very bored, of late, Mrs Snaith.”

She shook her head in exasperation. “Come on. Let’s go and talk to the gawpers.”



Two hours later, and Cordelia was driving out of the city. She was enjoying herself, despite the morning’s events and the now miserable weather. In the countryside, she could almost forget that there was a war on. It just seemed absurd. Passing through tiny villages, unchanged for decades, the horrors of the city felt like images from another life. Only the occasional roar of Spitfires overhead served to remind her of the truth.

They had returned to HQ shortly after interviewing the witnesses. That had proved to be, in Cordelia’s opinion, a complete waste of time, full of pointless local gossip about one of the dead sappers ‘carrying on with the lass from the Hare and Hounds’. The only potentially useful information they’d gleaned was that both the witnesses described hearing a peculiar ‘whistling’ just before they’d seen the creature — and promptly fled.

Still, in contrast to most of his mornings — which were usually defined by

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surliness due to his erratic sleep patterns—Lockwood had been fully animated and eager to talk over the case. She had sat back and let him get it out of his system.

Cordelia had expected to spend the rest of the day typing up her findings and organising the clean up of the crash site. It was imperative that the rocket—whatever it turned out to be—was taken into safekeeping as quickly as possible. Things were bad enough with this creature on the loose without whispers of a new Nazi super-weapon dragging the city's already shaky morale down even further. Instead, Lockwood had surprised her. After a lengthy phone call to goodness knows who, he had handed her a slip of paper with a name and address scrawled on it in his crabby, near unreadable, handwriting.

The name was Rupert Carstairs. Lockwood had been vague on who Carstairs was, or why he was relevant to their investigation, simply saying that he 'may have some interesting insights'. But then that was one of his many annoying habits. Even after working closely with him for the last three years, she still hadn't quite decided if he was abrupt and difficult by nature, or if he took a perverse pleasure in making life as difficult for her as possible.

The address was a manor house, about forty miles out of London. The Rolls pulled up next to a small stone gatehouse. Inside, an elderly man gave her a cheerful wave before beginning the slow process of opening the iron gates. Evidently she was expected.

The house was breathtaking—an imposing 18th century manor, it reeked of inherited wealth. A man—Carstairs, she presumed—stood waiting by the front door, leaning on a walking stick.

He was tall, but his hunched posture diminished that. His gaze was cast downwards, looking up only briefly as she approached. He was clean shaven, somewhere in his late thirties. Handsome too, she thought, absently—and felt a flush of muted guilt. He greeted her with a brisk shake of the hand. "Miss Snaith, I take it?"

"Mrs, actually," she said.

He nodded. "My apologies. Do come on in."

He led her inside in silence. The house was eerily quiet. Cordelia had anticipated a wife and children, perhaps more servants, but as Carstairs led her through myriad empty rooms, she realised that he lived alone. The furniture was covered in thick layers of dust. Cobwebs clutched at lamps and windows. The building had a sense of slightly gothic decrepitude. She half expected to find Miss Havisham lurking in some darkened attic. She wondered if Carstairs was a widower.

Journey's end was a beautifully ornate lounge and a red leather couch. Like the rest of the house it was musty and unloved. The only sign that it was used more regularly than the rest of the building was a pile of recent newspapers stacked high on a small table.

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Carstairs gestured for her to sit and walked over to a drinks cabinet. Clicking it open, he pulled out a weighty-looking decanter and two glasses. Cordelia shook her head. “Mr Carstai—”

“How is the city?” he interrupted.

“As you might expect. In ruins. People are still dying every night. They’re calling this ‘the baby Blitz’.”

“Tragic,” he nodded, pouring himself a large brandy. His hands, she noticed, were shaking. “I sometimes look out from one of the balconies and watch the flames on the horizon. Such a shame. A historic city. I do hope there is something left of it when all of this ends.”

“I’m more worried about the people, Mr Carstairs.”

“Of course,” he nodded. “I’m sorry, that must have sounded terribly callous. It has been a... *difficult* few months.”

“For us all,” Cordelia replied, curtly.

“Yes, yes.” He rubbed his hands together, anxiously. “Again, my apologies. I haven’t spoken to anyone aside from Gregory and the bloody doctors since my debriefing. I’m afraid my manners are perhaps a little rough.”

She felt a pang of empathy then. Whoever Carstairs was, he was clearly damaged. She sensed an opportunity to move the conversation in a more productive direction. “Yes, you were serving behind enemy lines?”

He nodded. “Indeed, for many years. Since before the war, in fact. Readjusting to life in this country has been difficult. I grew rather attached to the people there.”

“Not too attached, I trust? They are the enemy after all.”

He laughed bitterly. “Is it such a surprise? They have suffered because of the Nazi regime almost as much as we have.” He lapsed into silence again and studied his hands.

“My partner tells me that you had a unique experience over there.”

He nodded. “You might say that. I wondered if I was going mad, to tell you the truth.”

Cordelia nodded. “That’s common with these kind of events.”

He looked up at that. “These kind of events?”

“You might be surprised by the number of peculiar occurrences of late. The enemy has been employing some *unusual* methods in their attempts to win the war.”

“Indeed? That is very worrying.”

Cordelia drew out her notebook and pen. “Can you talk me through it?”

He gave her a slightly pained smile. “Straight to the point. I had hoped there would be time for more pleasantries...”

“I’m afraid more lives are at risk with every moment we wait,” she said. “Please...”

“Yes. Yes, of course,” he said. “Very well Mrs Snaith. Very well. But we should start at the beginning. The first thing you need to know is that my name is *not* Rupert Carstairs.”

THE SPY'S STORY

“My name — my *birth* name, that is — is Oswald Hirsch. I was born in Stuttgart, but my family emigrated to England in 1909 when I was two years old. Being a German living in this country — especially one with wealth — has never been easy, so I changed my name. I am an only child and my parents both passed away when I was young. They endured the same prejudice that I have. They would not care that I have shaken off my old identity.

“I was recruited by the Intelligence Service when I was 18. A German who is loyal to the King must be very valuable, though I doubt I will be of much use to anyone anymore. In 1935, I was dispatched to Jena and told to wait for my orders. During that time I infiltrated the party, but I did not fight. I am a rather talented artist, if I do say so myself, and made a good living as a propagandist. I am not up to the skills of the great *Mjölnir*, but I was treated with respect and admiration, for the most part. And then new orders came though and it was time to shed that skin.

“I was, of course, aware of the V-2 programme and the construction site — a terrible place known as ‘Mittelwerk’, near Nordhausen. One man would not be enough to deal with all of the horrors there — though I would have dearly loved to try. Still, those were not my orders. Instead, I was required to head to a second location, 24 miles south of Mittelwerk. It was referred to as a “black site”. Nobody knew what was being developed there, except that it was connected in some way to Von Braun’s rocket programme. The speculation was that it was some kind of experimental division. My job was to locate the site, infiltrate it and report my findings back. This would be near impossible for most agents but — if I do flatter myself — I am not most agents.

“Still, Nazi patrols are not to be trifled with. I took the slow route to my destination in the Thuringian mountains, spending days alone in the wilderness. I let my hair and beard grow out. I dressed in cheap, badly fitting clothes and didn’t wash. Soon I had cultivated my desired image: that of a filthy vagrant.

“The region is so beautiful, it was not an arduous trek. I slept wild, making my bed in bushes and trees and earthen holloways. I mentally took myself back to my childhood days camping in the grounds of this very house. I quickly came to enjoy it.

“For the most part I avoided people — though of course that wasn’t always possible. On the few times that I did interact with others, I was treated with suspicion and a degree of fear — quite the contrast to my previous life. It was a

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risk, of course — if I was caught then I faced being rounded up and marched into one of the Nazi's hellish camps. Thankfully most people were content to let me aimlessly drift on my way.

"I was a day out from the black site when I ran into trouble. I was refilling my canteen with water. I think, perhaps, I'd become a little too accustomed to my own company. In recent days I'd been dreaming more and more about coming home. About the estate and whether it was still intact. I was lost in my reverie, when I heard the sudden crack of branches nearby. I reacted quickly, grabbing my kit and ducking into the nearest cover.

"Footsteps drew close. I was confident in my camouflage, though now less so in my own competence. Six pairs of booted feet marched by. I waited, alert, hardly daring to breathe.

"The footsteps stopped and I heard muttered voices. I risked a glance and swore — the patrol had paused by the stream. The men were fishing out cigarettes and talking quietly amongst themselves. For just a moment I saw them not as a Nazi patrol, but as the ordinary young men they were, and I felt terribly sad for the country of my birth. Still, I would kill them if I had to.

"It was then, to my horror, that I noticed the glint of sunlight on metal. My knife! I had left it by the stream. If the soldiers spotted it...

"Sure enough, the nearest of the patrol pointed and shouted "*da drüben!*" He scrambled down the river bank to grab it. There was nothing remarkable or incriminating about the blade, but finding something like that this close to the enemy camp might raise suspicion. The squad huddled together and I sank back into hiding. Seconds passed, turning into long, agonising minutes.

"I couldn't make out what they were saying, but the group separated out and began searching the area — one of them heading my way. I had but seconds to decide what to do. I chose to hold my ground and stick to my hiding place.

"It was a tense few minutes. My opponent drew close — so close I could smell his stale sweat. He poked about in the greenery, but seemed more interested in the cigarette that still hung limp between his lips. I primed myself, ready for action, but he passed by. Eventually the soldiers regrouped and moved on, taking my knife with them. I was far more cautious after that."



"I reached the base before dawn the next day and circled the perimeter, peering through the dark, watching for patrols. All was curiously silent and even the guard towers were unlit. That was troubling. I sat back in the shadows and waited.

"After some time, I decided that I needed to make my move. Having located what seemed to be the safest entry point, I cut a discreet hole in the first of the ranks of fences that ringed the complex.

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“I expected that, as with the camp at Mittelwerk, most of the actual work would be carried out underground. I would need to locate the entrance. I could see the shadowy bulk of a few small buildings and made my way towards them.

“It was a drab, desolate place. As the sun cast its first rays over the dank, dirty scrubland, I felt a shiver of disquiet. We have been brutalised by war, Mrs Snaith. There was no beauty or grace here — just the industry of death. And the silence was eerie. There should have been armed patrols; guard dogs. But there was nothing. It appeared to be entirely deserted. I knew then that something was very wrong.

“The base was not large — just six buildings in total — the largest of which was a concrete dome, half submerged into the earth. I approached it cautiously, scampering between whatever patches of cover I could find, unwilling to accept that it could really be this easy. I navigated the perimeter of the building, quickly finding the doorway. It was, unsurprisingly, locked.

“It was then that I heard it. A whistling sound, high and shrill. I froze up momentarily — surprised and alarmed. My first instinct was to look for cover. But then I heard a second, similar call, this time coming from my left, as if in answer. The sun was up by now, but I couldn’t see anything. I sunk into the shadows and waited to see what would happen next.

“Nothing did. After ten minutes, I decided that it was safe to continue my exploration, staying as close to cover as possible. After a few moments, I found what I was looking for: the entrance to the mine.

“This, no doubt, was where the real work took place. I dreaded to think what terrible things the poor souls who laboured down here endured every day. Two vast iron gates stood ajar at the entrance and I was struck again by the lack of guards. I soon discovered why...

“There were bodies — too many to count. The majority were in dirty rags — Jews, Slavs and cripples from Buchenwald, no doubt, but there were uniformed guards amongst them too. Whatever had killed them, it had done so indiscriminately. They lay scattered throughout the mine. Although the bodies were in a state of decay, I could see that many of them had suffered the most terrible wounds. Others appeared almost untouched. In some ways they were the worst — I could still recognise their expressions. I almost vomited at the stench. It was almost unbearable, Mrs Snaith, but I forced myself to press on.

“Deeper into the mine I went, switching on my torch only when I was absolutely certain that there was no one around. I cast the beam about, hoping to discover exactly what was being manufactured in this pit. I knew the answers must be here somewhere.

“Five minutes later, I found them.

“There was a large room with a long conveyor belt stretching into the darkness. On it lay an array of components. Some I recognised as rocket parts, others were a mystery to me. I made my notes and took photographs. The click and flash of

my camera was unsettling in the deathly quiet. In another room I found plans and papers. I studied them in the torchlight. They showed designs for a rocket, but one I didn't recognise, much larger than a V-2. One word stood out on them: "*Fracht*". Cargo. I gathered up all the paperwork I could find and stowed it away.

"Again, there were bodies. Men lay scattered throughout the mine, discarded like rags. I have a strong stomach, Mrs Snaith and an unflinching attitude to death. *Sang froid*, I believe the French call it, but even I found this a sickening waste of life.

"It was then that I heard the noise again—that strange whistling. It echoed down the corridors of the mine and I felt my blood freeze. It had a quality unlike anything I have ever heard before or since. And it was getting closer...

"I switched off my flashlight and shrunk down behind the conveyor belt, straining to see in the darkness. At first there was nothing—but then, at last, I saw it!

"It moved through the darkness, shapeless and vast. I felt something pass above me and I looked up to see its enormous black body, oily and sinuous. It whistled again and I caught a glimpse of its terrible maw. The sound was piercingly loud. I wanted to look away, but I dared not.

"Almost as soon as it had appeared, it vanished, disappearing into the depths of the mine. I wasted no time. Getting to my feet, I ran back the way I had come, stumbling over the fallen men but not caring. At that moment I would have done anything just to be away from that thing.

"I emerged into the light of the early morning and collapsed sobbing in the rough grass. I don't remember precisely when I began to cry—it is not something that I am accustomed to doing—but clearly my nerve had broken. I lay there a while, probably only seconds, but it felt like minutes. I was almost physically unable to move. Eventually, however, I came to my senses. The old resolve kicked back in and I dragged my sorry carcass into cover while I considered my next move.

"I was at the very edge of the camp when I heard the dreadful noise again. I looked up in fear—and there it was, drifting aimlessly, lazily over the dome—a black wound against the blue sky. I started to run and it saw me. It swept down towards me and I felt something strike me with the force of a hurricane. I was lifted off my feet into the air and just as quickly dashed against the earth. I lost consciousness then, for how long I don't know."

THE SCRIVEN STREET HORROR

"But you survived..."

Carstairs nodded. "Yes. When I awoke, I was alone. I don't know why it spared my life—a sheer fluke I must assume. Whatever the case, I was badly injured. I dragged myself away from the site and made my way back towards civilization. It

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is, quite frankly, a miracle that I made it.”

“And so you returned to England?”

“I did, sustaining further injury along the way.” He tapped his leg. “Bullet wound. I was not so cautious on my way back to Jena. I knew that I had to return as quickly as possible. And I fared better than *he* did.”

Cordelia sat back and steepled her fingers—before realising with a shudder that this was one of Lockwood’s traits. Sitting forward again, she flicked through the pages of her notebook. “That word you used, “*fracht*”, the cargo...”

“Yes,” Carstairs said, cutting her off. I believe it can only refer to one thing—whatever those creatures were.”

“The Nazis were planning to deploy these creatures over here,” Cordelia mused. “But whatever they are, they broke loose and slaughtered them all.”

“More fool them.”

“Yes,” said Cordelia. “But it does leave us with a problem. There was an attack this morning. Something that sounds a lot like your monster.”

“In London? Then God help us all. I wish you the very best of luck, Mrs Snaith, but I will be remaining here!”

Cordelia nodded. “That’s alright, Mr Carstairs. You’ve done your bit. Now it is time for me to do mine...”



“Very interesting,” Lockwood mused through steepled hands.

The pair were sat in Lockwood’s cramped office in Section M’s North London headquarters—one of several facilities hidden throughout the city.

Cordelia had hurried back from Carstairs’ estate, eager to see what Lockwood had dredged up from Section M’s vast library of occult books—and keen to share her own findings.

“And?”

“And what?” He smirked. “You don’t expect me to know the details of all the arcane mysteries the Nazis have been meddling with, do you? There are quite a lot of them.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Lockwood,” she snapped. “Of course I do. That is why we keep you, is it not?”

A pause. Lockwood’s smile dropped and—just for a second—she caught a glimmer of... what? Anger? Surprise?

“Please remember that I *am* your superior, Mrs Snaith,” he said quietly. He looked away. “As it happens, I do have a few ideas...”

He gestured towards an enormous stack of ancient, yellowing tomes precariously piled on a chair. “While you were being entertained by the heroic Mr Carstairs—or is it Hirsch?—I put together a shortlist of books to research. We’ve

got a long night ahead of us.”

Her heart sank. “Oh well, forewarned is forearmed and all that, I suppose.” She stood up. “Fancy a cuppa before we get down to it?”



The first rocket struck at 6.23am. Over the river, Helen thought, anxiously. There were bound to be more soon, and closer. Shuddering, she hurried along behind Arthur as they made their way to the shelter. They were late, but hopefully Mr O'Neill would make an exception for them. If not, it would be a long and frightening night in the cold.

It didn't help that Arthur was in an almighty stink. He'd barely said a word to her all day, not since he'd found out what she'd done with their food coupons. It was very frustrating trying to talk with him when he was like this. He was striding ahead now, while she struggled to keep up. She was about to say something, when he suddenly stopped.

“Did you see that, Hel?”

“See what?”

He paused, then shook his head in irritation. “Could have sworn I saw something moving. Something big, right in front of me.”

“Probably just a cat. Whole city's riddled with the bloody fleabags. Drown the lot of them, I say!”

Arthur looked at her exasperatedly. “Come on you daft bat, let's get a move on.” Helen was relieved. At least he was talking to her again.

Something swept down fast above them then and Helen shrieked with fright.

“See!” Arthur snapped, triumphantly. “I told you! Come on, it's nothing. Just a tarpaulin.” Smiling, rather more kindly now, he extended her hand and helped her to her feet. She was just straightening up when Arthur yanked her arm hard. She started to protest, but his hand slipped from her grip and she watched in horror as her husband was lifted up into the black night sky, kicking and yelling until he disappeared from view.

“Arthur!”

Her husband didn't respond. Helen stood, frozen in shock, unsure of what to do next, unable to process what had just happened. A sudden pattering of what sounded like rain shook her out of her stasis. It was followed by a loud, wet thump. She looked down to see her husband's head staring up at her, his eyes open, wide with fright.

She ran, screaming and slipping on the wet stones, unable to make sense of what had just happened. The shelter. It was only a couple of streets away. She had to get to the shelter. Mr O'Neill would know what to do. She'd be safe at the shelter.

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She almost made it.



Cordelia woke around five, with a start. She sat up, her neck stiff and aching. She yawned and stretched—then yelped with fright. Lockwood was standing a few feet away staring straight at her, a book open in one hand.

“You scared the living daylight out of me, Lockwood!”

He gave her a thin-lipped smile. “You dozed off around two o’clock. I thought I’d be better off leaving you to it.”

“You made a wise choice.” She rubbed her eyes, tiredly. “Any joy?”

He put his book down, fished for a piece of paper that lay on a nearby table and passed it over to her. “As it happens, yes.”

It was a sketchy, impressionistic pencil drawing of what looked like a vast amorphous slug with eyes-dotted seemingly randomly across its body. It had a circular maw filled with teeth and wispy tentacles budded from its mid section. Cordelia shuddered. She’d seen unearthly horrors before, but the shock never quite wore off.

“My artistic skills are not what they once were.” Lockwood lifted his right hand and wiggled it. Cordelia winced, remembering the night he had sustained that injury. Several months before, the pair had been chasing down Morton Jones—a cultist who had invoked and become possessed by an entity that claimed to be *Mictlantecuhtli*, the Aztec god of the dead. He had stalked and killed his victims in the London Underground. Section M eventually caught him, but not before Jones had bitten off two of Lockwood’s fingers.

“You’ve identified it, then?”

“Indeed. There were a few likely suspects, but Carstairs’ experience narrows it down to just the one species.”

“And?”

“And I believe that we are dealing with an ancient being from beyond the stars,” Lockwood said, raising his arms grandly. “Extra-terrestrials, Mrs Snaith. They’re referred to in some of the texts as the ‘polypous race’ and they originally came to Earth, ooh... hundreds of millions of years ago at the very least.”

“Well it matches Carstairs’ description,” Cordelia mused, squinting at the drawing. “And it looks similar to the witness descriptions. Do we have anything else to go on?”

“Carstairs talked about a whistling. And, do you remember, one of the witnesses at the crash site mentioned an eerie sound? No, I believe that the Nazis managed to contain at least one of these creatures and that is what we’re dealing with.”

He rifled through his books, pulling out another slim tome, its cover inscribed with various arcane glyphs.

“There have been sporadic sightings during the last four centuries. One cropped up in Ashanti back in 1855. That didn’t go too well. The most recent encounter was in Scotland in 1923. You would still have been in that dreadful northern school, no doubt. A rather foolish magus by the name of Timothy Vaughan located a site of mystical energy and summoned one of these creatures.”

“What happened?”

“To Vaughan? He died in agony, rather unsurprisingly, but one of his protégés survived—a man called Dallen. And he gave us some rather useful information. Their little ritual took place in a subterranean cavern. The rites took days to perform, so the cult had rigged up an electrical lighting system. It was damaged when the polyp got loose. This Dallen claims that an electrical charge struck the creature, causing it to flee.”

“And... what? You plan to zap it with light bulbs?” Cordelia raised an eyebrow.

“With an electrical charge!” Lockwood bellowed.

“Do you have a plan, Lockwood?” Cordelia asked, tiredly. “A decent one?”

“I do,” he replied. “But we’re going to need a lot of luck. I’m preparing a binding spell.”

“You know where it is then?”

Lockwood looked suddenly guilty. “No... not as such.”

It wasn’t even breakfast time and Cordelia was already exasperated with her colleague’s evasiveness. This must be some kind of a record, she thought to herself. “Then how are we going to find it?”

“It will undoubtedly kill again,” he replied. “All we have to do is wait—and follow the trail of bodies.”



As it happened, they didn’t have to wait very long at all. At around ten o’clock, Lockwood received a telephone call. Cordelia could tell from his sudden mad grin that the creature had struck again. It was frankly disturbing how excited he got when dealing with the unholy and terrifying. He scribbled a note down furiously and passed it to her. She struggled to read his handwriting, but eventually made out four words:

Six dead. Scriven Street.

“It’s staying close to the crash site.” Lockwood mused after, pouring two cups of tea. “It’s like an animal protecting its den.”

“Then we need to evacuate the area.”

Lockwood winced. “No. It’s a hunter. If we take away its prey then it will move on and look for more elsewhere.”

“For god’s sake, Lockwood! We can’t just leave it to eat half of the East End.”

“We’re risking lives, but how many more will die if we lose track of it in the

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city?”

“There has to be another way.”

“Not if we’re going to move quickly,” he said, shaking his head. “This needs to be dealt with tonight.”

She had to admit, he had a point, awful though it was. London was a sprawling metropolis, teeming with life. It was very easy to get lost in. They knew roughly where the creature was now. If they waited for it to move on, who knew how many more would die?

“I take it we’ll have army support?”

“Not as such,” Lockwood said, staring into his mug. “Price and Riby will be with us.”

“Two men? That’s it?”

“Correct. I believe Riby is an old friend of yours, is he not?”

“*Two men*, Lockwood?” She repeated. “How the hell are we supposed to kill it if with just two men?”

“We’re not supposed to kill it,” he replied, meeting her gaze. “This is a capture, not a kill mission.”

She choked on her tea. “What?!”

“This is a remarkable opportunity for study,” he said blankly. “We’d be mad not to take it.”

“No Lockwood,” she said, shaking her head, trying to keep her tone level. “You’d be mad to try it. You said so yourself—these polyps are deadly! It will kill us all.”

“Those are my orders, Mrs Snaith,” he said.

“But Lockwood! Jonathan, please—”

“*Those are my orders!*”

She wanted to slam her cup down and scream in his face. Wanted to drag him down to the morgue where the bodies of the dead sappers currently lay. Wanted to hurl insults at the unfeeling bastard. Instead, she took a deep breath and a moment to compose herself. Like it or not, he held rank.

“So how are we supposed to do this?”



The crates had arrived by lunchtime. Lockwood crowbarred the first one open gleefully in the yard, revealing a bulky tangle of olive green metal curves. “It’s a portable generator,” he explained. “Though it didn’t feel very portable when we were carrying it in here.”

Cordelia stood a few feet away, sheltering from the rain. “Alright. Now what?”

“This works in conjunction with a metal cage. With a little bit of adaptation I’ll be able to run a current through it. We get the polyp in there and it won’t be

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able to get out again. Well, at least I hope not.”

She eyed him doubtfully. “Don’t worry,” he said. “The binding will immobilise the creature temporarily. It’ll be fine.”



Five hours later, she stood once more in the cold at Scriven Street, watching as Price and Lockwood finished assembling the enormous cage.

“Nice night for it,” Riby said cheerfully, passing her a cigarette. She didn’t say anything, but accepted his offer.

“Cities shouldn’t be this quiet,” she said, sadly, sparking up.

He shrugged. “A lot of things shouldn’t be the way they are. That’s just life.”

Cordelia had been friends with Riby for several years now. Joining Section M had been an intimidating experience and he had been one of the few to have welcomed her and treated her with respect rather than suspicion.

“What do you think of all this, Peter?”

He shrugged. “Well, I’d rather be down the pub, but it beats sitting around underground all night.”

She laughed. “I suppose.”

“It’ll be alright, love. Lockwood knows what he’s doing.”

“Do you think? I’m really not so sure any more.”

Riby turned to look at her. “There’s only one thing that’s going to get us through this war. And that’s trust. I know he’s a difficult bastard, but he’s smart too. If he reckons this will work out, then we’ve got to take his word for it.”

“I just hope we’re still standing at the end of it.”

“That’s never a certainty,” he said, stubbing out his cigarette. “Not in war time. You know that as well as anyone.”

There was a triumphant cry from behind them. Lockwood had yanked the starter cord of the generator and the contraption juddered loudly into life. He hopped back, warily. After a few moments sparks began to fizz and pop up and down the metal bars as drops of rain struck it. The cage was live. Now they just had to lure the polyp inside.



Price, Riby and Cordelia spread out, a few yards apart. They carried Stirling submachine guns—almost certainly not enough to do any lasting harm to the creature, but perhaps enough to give it pause for thought if it attacked them. Cordelia felt moderately safer clutching hers tight to her chest. Their torches remained off. The hope was that this would give them the advantage of seeing the creature before it saw them...

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It wasn't long before they found signs of its presence. Price called to them and Riby and Cordelia jogged over to find him crouching over something.

"What is it?"

"Guess," Price said, standing up and flicking on his torch. The beam illuminated a pale white face, staring up at them. He moved the torch beam, revealing the lack of a body. "Pretty tasty, eh?"

Cordelia panned her torch around until the beam picked out a malnourished dog, gnawing hungrily at something. It scurried away from the torchlight, leaving its prize behind—the rest of the cadaver. "Well at least we know it's still here," Cordelia said. "Be on your guard."

As if in answer, a low, keening whistle echoed around the empty street. Riby swore and caught her eye. "It's not always nice to be right, is it?"

Cordelia felt, rather than saw, something rush at them out of the dark. Instinctively, she threw herself to the side, hitting the ground hard. She rolled onto her back, weapon and torch raised, but there was nothing there. She sat back up and looked around.

It took her a second to work out what was happening.

Riby's mouth was hanging open in terror. She followed his line of sight and saw Price, shaking and gagging, with what looked like a long black rope wrapped tightly around his throat. She followed the line of the noose and soon saw it for what it really was—a tentacle.

It was impossible to determine the shape of the monster—it was a constantly-shifting mass that seemed to expand and contract, while a clutch of tendrils twitched in the air.

Cordelia scrambled to her feet and aimed the Stirling, trying to find a clear shot at the writhing black mass. Before she could fire, the creature lifted Price into a crushing embrace, enveloping him completely.

Riby fired, his bullets riddling the polyp's flesh. The creature gave a high-pitched snarl. In a single, fluid motion, the creature tossed Price's remains towards them, forcing Cordelia and Riby to scatter. The crushed, bloody remnants of their colleague hit the ground with a loud, wet crunch. When Cordelia turned back, the polyp was gone.

"Did we scare it?" Riby wondered aloud, visibly shaken.

"I doubt it," she said. "I think we made it angry. Come on, we've got to draw it back to Lockwood."

The pair turned and ran back the way they had come. The monster's whistle—loud, almost hooting now—seemed to follow above and behind them. Cordelia resisted the urge to turn and look; pushed the images of cold, wet tentacles wrapping themselves around her body out of her mind. They had to get back to the cage.

Lockwood was waiting for them as they arrived, his grimoire open. Cordelia

could hear the crackle of electricity from the cage. It was oddly reassuring.

“Price?”

“He’s gone,” Riby said, breathlessly. “That bastard thing killed him.”

Lockwood nodded. “But we’re still here. Keep it together, it’s coming for us next.”

“You’re a cold-hearted bastard, you know that?” snapped Riby.

“It has been mentioned. When the polyp comes, open fire. Distract it while I begin the incantations.”

Cordelia nodded. “This had better work, Lockwood.”

“It will,” he said. “This spell is ancient and powerful—almost as old as mankind. If anything can hold it, this ca—”

There was a moment of intense heat and Cordelia was tossed to the ground. She cried out in pain, but couldn’t hear anything above the sudden, deafening roar. She lay there awhile, deafened and disorientated, until a sudden surge of adrenaline forced her back to reality.

As the rumbling faded, it was replaced with the sounds of tumbling masonry. Gradually, her senses began to reassert themselves.

“LOCKWOOD?”

There was no answer. Struggling to her feet, she gazed through a wall of smoke and fire. The V-2 had detonated at the end of the street, about 200 feet from them. She choked and gagged on the dust and smoke in the air. She called out for Riby, but he was silent too. Her ears were ringing and she felt dizzy and nauseous. She scabbled around, hopelessly lost in the choking smoke and dust.

Eventually her hands landed on something soft and wet. She knew immediately that it was a body. Riby. The right side of his head had been crushed completely by debris. She turned away in shock, fighting back the urge to scream. Instead, she allowed herself a precious few moments with her old friend, her hands resting on his shoulders, tears stinging her eyes, before forcing herself to move on.

She found Lockwood a few minutes later—dead or unconscious, she couldn’t tell. She leaned down to check his pulse. As she did so, she felt something whip passed her. She dropped and hugged the ground, hoping that the polyp hadn’t seen her, that it too was struggling in this murk.

After a few moments, she risked a look. There was nothing there, so she turned back to Lockwood, pressing an ear to his chest. It took a moment to make it out, but there was a heartbeat—faint, but definitely there. She could have wept with joy. She shook him hard. “Come on you old bastard, wake up and help me!” Her partner steadfastly refused to comply. “On my own then.”

The grimoire lay nearby. She grabbed for it and leafed through the pages. It was written in some indecipherable language. Even if she could read it, she had no idea which of the charms was the binding spell. It was useless.

There was still the cage, at least. Perhaps she could lure the beast inside...

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She switched her torch back on and searched the ruined street—and all hope evaporated.

The cage lay several feet away, in several twisted and buckled parts.

They were without hope. Her only option now was to get back to Section M. Come back with more men and more weapons. And if she wanted to make it back alive, that would mean leaving Lockwood. Dragging his unconscious body through the streets would leave her open to attack. She had to give him up.

Except...

She could hear something. Her ears were still ringing, but this was definitely something else, a clunky, rattling, juddering. It took her a few moments to realise that it was the generator. She ran towards the sound, slipping and stumbling on the wet stones.

The cable that had been previously connected to the cage lay severed on the ground, fizzing and popping. She steered well clear and went to check the device itself, unsure of exactly what she was looking for. Nothing obvious presented itself.

What would Lockwood do in this situation?

She hated herself for wondering that. It was Lockwood who had landed them in this mess, after all. If they'd come armed with some serious artillery, then Price and Riby might still be alive. His arrogance had caused their deaths. After a few minutes of fiddling with the machinery she decided that this too was a dead end. Escape was now the only option.

She would have to leave Lockwood to his fate. It was not a pleasant thought, but she knew he would do the same in her position. And besides, the jeep was just a few yards away. With a bit of luck she could make it. Get back to headquarters. Bring reinforcements... It wasn't impossible that he would survive.

The polyp swept down towards her, lashing out with a flurry of tendrils. One caught her hard across the face, knocking her backwards. Ignoring the pain and the blood, she fired into the dark, the sound of her Stirling rattling loudly around the empty streets. The creature had gone, for the moment, but she knew it would be back soon. A moment later she heard it whistling again, almost taunting this time. She spun her torch left and right, trying to locate it.

There! It seemed to leap out of the darkness towards her. Cordelia fired again, riddling its amorphous hide with holes. She saw the bullets strike home, watched as several of those pitiless, alien eyes burst in fountains of black ichor. It shrieked, but kept on coming. She fired until the gun was empty, then tossed it aside. She snatched up the cable, and jabbed at it, electrical sparks bursting from the frayed filaments.

The polyp rose up into the air. Cordelia dodged another tentacle strike, still clutching the cable, and waited, keeping her eyes on the night's sky, trying to determine where it would strike next. Moments later it plummeted down towards her, and again she lashed out, missing its flesh by inches. It swept back up around, ready for its next attack.

She heard a voice then in the odd moment of calm between attacks. She couldn't make out the words. At the same time as she saw the tornado of black un-flesh tumbling back towards her, she realised that it was Lockwood speaking. He lay in a broken heap, his grimoire open in one hand, chanting and muttering in some weird tongue. Still trying, she thought sadly. Still trying right till the bitter end.

The polyp descended, whistling quietly. Its tendrils reached out for her and she felt an overwhelming tide of helplessness. She closed her eyes tightly as one wrapped around her waist. It was gentler than she had anticipated. She waited for it to crush her, inhaled its rank, dead scent and felt tears roll down her cheeks. This was it.

Nothing happened.

She opened her eyes, nervously. The polyp hung suspended in mid-air, as if snared on some invisible hook. It's constantly shifting form was frozen for the moment, its hideous maw rigid with rage. To her right, Lockwood continued chanting through ragged breaths. She caught his gaze and he gave her a brief nod. Pulling herself free from the tentacles. Cordelia picked up the sparking cable and lunged forward, plunging it into the mouth of the creature. She felt the current pulsing through the cable. The polyp's whistle became an intense animal howl. Its flesh caught fire, the blazing heat scorching Cordelia's face. She held fast, allowing herself to scream when the pain became too much. And then, finally, the polyp disintegrated, it's weird matter erupting into nothing but black ash and burning embers.

AFTER

Cordelia stood alone by the cemetery gates, watching from a distance. She didn't feel comfortable around families at the best of times, and this was certainly not the best of times.

The funeral was short. No one had the luxury of long goodbyes these days. Still, it was a good turnout with far more people than she had thought would come.

Inevitably, she thought back to the day of Mark's funeral and felt the familiar sting of tears. "Not here," she muttered. Not while there was a chance of being seen.

She still ached. The medic had told her that her injuries would heal soon, but that the burns would take longer. She'd wear some of those scars for the rest of her life.

"You're really very lucky," he'd said. The doctor was an irritatingly cheerful young man who clearly hadn't been serving long enough to have developed the right level of cynicism. She didn't feel very lucky today.

Eventually, the mourners left. Cordelia waited until she was certain that they

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had gone before making her way to the grave stone and laid the orchids that she had brought next to the roses and peonies.

A figure stepped out from behind a tree, causing her to start. She turned quickly, sighing when she saw who it was.

“Quite the turnout.”

“They deserved it,” she said. “How are you, Lockwood?”

“Oh, you know,” he tapped his walking stick. “Surviving.”

“I didn’t think you’d come.”

“I respected those men as much as you did,” he said quietly. “And I am not unaware of the part I played in their deaths.”

Silence hung between them. It was the first time she had seen Lockwood since that night. She had thought a lot about what she wanted to say to him, but now that she had the opportunity, she didn’t feel like saying anything at all. He looked gaunter than before. She knew he’d also suffered from burns and shrapnel wounds during the explosion. It was a minor miracle that he was here with her now.

“There’s another one,” Lockwood said, eventually. “In Germany. Your friend Carstairs—his report implied that there might be a second creature out there. And we’ve heard reports of a creature attacking villages in the Alps. I’m taking a team to investigate.”

“You? You’re in no fit state to travel, let alone fight.”

He glowered at her, a hint of the old fire returning. “Everyone else is busy. I appear to have cornered the market in marauding supernatural entities.”

“And then what?” Cordelia snapped. “Are you going to bring it back here? Teach it new tricks? Train it to kill Nazis?”

He paused. And then, turning to face the graves of Price and Riby, Lockwood shook his head. “Not this time, Mrs Snaith. Not this time.”

They stood a while together, then Lockwood turned and started to make his way slowly, painfully towards the cemetery gates. He was almost through them when Cordelia called out to him. “So... when do we leave?”✘



In the Flesh

By Josh Vogt

THE winter wind pried through the gap in the window and nipped Elwood's face like a many-mouthed thing, each tiny, invisible bite snatching away another fragment of body heat he struggled to contain within his uniformed disguise. Frozen mud crunched beneath the supply truck's wheels, sounding to him like bones popping and shattering as the caravan neared the camp gates. He could just make out the concrete and barbed wire of the walls through the rime-covered trees that arched over the road. Peaked guard towers jutted up every couple of hundred feet, poor imitations of Wurmberg Mountain just to the north.

Four trucks ahead, three behind, each with a driver and guard or two. His squatted right in the middle, about to drive straight down into the heart of an enemy camp. He licked cracked lips, trying to swallow sour spittle. He needed clearer focus if they wanted to survive this operation.

Elwood startled as a hand reached through a slit in the canvas separating the cab from the bed and thumped his shoulder. Sergeant Perkins rumbled in the gap.

"You holding steady? Danston says you were looking rather peaky back at the pass. Don't like the bloody work, even when it runs smooth?"

Elwood glanced at the hand, so thickly scarred the sergeant might as well have been wearing gloves. "Tell him I'm less worried about the corpses we've left behind and more about the ones we may still have to make. You sure your girl's got word we're coming? Otherwise we're heading in for a whole different welcoming party."

"She'll be there," Perkins murmured. "Molly's never let me down before."

"Hell, that's no comfort. Not even the Mother Mary stayed a virgin forever."

A raspy chuckle. "Rather odd thing for a preacher to say."

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“Chaplain.” Elwood gritted his teeth. “Ex-chaplain. Not that it matters anymore. Now, keep down and out of sight. My ability works better when there’s less looking out of the ordinary.”

The sergeant withdrew. Heavy thumps vibrated the truck as the two men adjusted the cargo, securing their hiding spots. Elwood slowed the truck to match the rest of the caravan as it lurched to a stop before the massive steel gates. The truck in front of him was twice as large as the one he drove, and through the gaps of its barred and slatted sides, fingers poked out, wrapped in rags or nothing at all, flesh gone white and blue and black.

Elwood ground his molars until they squeaked. Had to be at least thirty prisoners packed into the load in front of him, and there were two other such trucks in the caravan. Mostly Jews, he knew, culled from Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, Greece... though American and British POWs were possibly in the mix as well, according to his intelligence reports.

If he’d still been a praying man, he might’ve sent one up for their poor, damned souls. Pointless, now. However many souls languished behind the walls of the base, the team had only come to liberate one.

He craned his neck to look past the idling truck to the base. Teufelsstein, they called it. Barely a blip in their records among the other countless imprisonment facilities the Germans had established. Nothing worthy of attention or action... until a couple months ago.

He refocused as the line shifted forward, bringing him within sight of the soldiers guarding the checkpoint. Steel helmets cast hard faces in shadows. Grey-green wool overcoats contrasted with the matte black assault rifles they carried. So many things could go wrong right there and then. The guards might already be touchy about the convoy’s delay—a manufactured avalanche that blocked the road, stalling the convoy long enough for the team to eliminate and replace the truck’s original driver and occupants under cover of darkness.

The line rumbled forward and a guard appeared at his door, leaning in and glancing over the cab. Elwood met the man’s eyes and braced himself. He opened up the dark channel in his mind and let a trickle of foul power seep out from him and into the soldier’s mind.

The Nazi’s eyes glazed over as his free will was temporarily subdued. As the spell set in place, Elwood winced against—

An overcast night at the Army camp in Italy, down near Cassino. Barely dug in and already freezing their asses off. Nothing gave them a moment’s warning before the first electric-blue explosions tore through the trees. The first screams tore the air wide and the first bodies dropped, engulfed in flames as the Nazis charged from the darkness.

—the jarring visions always accompanying the spellcasting. Visions of the night

In the Flesh

when he'd first acquired his horrid ability. It left brief spasms cracking against his temples and a sickening roil in his gut that would've had him spewing if he'd eaten anything all day.

The soldier remained staring at him, face slack. "Ja?"

Elwood cleared his throat. "*Lassen Sie mich ohne Frage eingeben und merken nichts von Misstrauen.*" His rough German never would've passed muster for a native, but with the Nazi's mind now under his sway, the man only had to understand him to obey.

He passed the appropriate orders over, indicating the truck held a wide array of mechanical supplies. Fortunately, Danston's sharp eyes and sharper shooting had kept the previous owner's blood from marring the documents.

Elwood kept his gaze front as a pair of guards took a dog snuffling around to the back of the truck. As the back tarp flapped open, he tensed, waiting for gunfire to erupt. For their mission to end violently before it truly began. But a boot kicked the back bumper and the first guard returned the orders and waved them on.

With a curt nod, Elwood drove through the gates and into a bleak hell.

Teufelsstein. It was one of the more recent facilities the Nazis had built, yet it looked like it had been standing for decades, entrenched in a winter wilderness. Chewed-up roads split off from the gate, and he took the one the guards directed him down. The truck rattled and bumped its way past endless rows of red brick buildings, grey barracks, and concrete yards. Blanketed by snow, the place seemed colourless except for brief snatches of black and crimson and shit-brown. All metal and stone and ice, with wisps of smoke rising above it all from a trio of smokestack chimneys on the far side of the base.

Harsh voices cracked through the bitter air, and German soldiers marched by in their clockwork formation, every face as hard and cold as the land they guarded. Half a dozen SS officers, their strict black uniforms making them look like midnight shadows come to life as they strode between buildings, their clipped pace and squared shoulders showing their dedication to one important task or another.

Elwood kept an eye out for anything looking like prisoner bunking or pen areas. That'd be the likeliest place to start searching for their target—and they had a single night in which to act. The supply caravan was scheduled to offload, refuel, and head out the next day; if the driver and guards of a particular truck failed to show, such a discrepancy would no doubt put the base on alert. If they weren't gone by then...

A turn brought them in sight of two warehouses, corrugated walls smothered by rows of icicles as thick as his thighs. Past the storage units stood the largest building he'd seen yet, a four-storey affair with dozens of windows, lit from within. Officer quarters? A hospital? Labs?

They shuttled into the cavernous warehouses, shifting from the growing evening gloom to a false sunrise of fluorescent spotlights. Elwood parked in the proper

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loading bay and cut the engine. His huff of resignation feathered white. They sat in the belly of the beast. Nothing for it but to move forward.

He hopped out of the cab—and found himself face-to-face with a woman whose face could've doubled as a butcher's block. With slabs for cheeks and chin and a mashed nose, she would never be anyone's pin-up. Light blonde hair had been tucked up tight under her brimmed, flat-topped hat with an eagle crest, and her black jacket collar displayed a silver skull pin. Her pale lips almost disappeared as she glared at him with blatant disapproval.

Sweat beading his back, Elwood stiffened and saluted. The woman just kept staring, her scrunched, hard eyes making him think of buckshot pellets. He knew the SS had women within its ranks, but he had no idea if he'd already violated any protocol.

He cringed inwardly at the thought of repeating the spell so soon, but that was why he'd been picked for this mission, wasn't it? To clear their path in and out. She remained unwavering. His fingers itched to go for his Luger, but any shot fired in here would send the whole camp running.

Then Sergeant Perkins and Danston rounded the truck corner. Each man wore a steel helmet and thick, knee-length jacket to blend in with the German troops. The sergeant's face—as heavily scarred as his hand—peered out under the brim of his helmet while Danston halted, uncertain. The woman turned to them with the same dispassionate gaze. After a moment, the sergeant chucked his chin at her and whispered.

“Where to, Mol?”

The women spun and marched off toward a dark corner of the warehouse. Exchanging silent looks, the three men followed, Elwood and Danston trailing.

“That's Molly?” Elwood whispered.

“Guessing so,” the sharpshooter replied. “Way the Sarge talked 'bout her, I figured a Valkyrie was comin' to our rescue.”

They stopped talking as they came within earshot of warehouse workers. Engineers and soldiers rushed around the warehouse, hauling crates and sleds piled high with newly arrived goods. Where the prisoner carts had trundled off to, Elwood hadn't seen.

With Molly in the lead, the band looked like just another cluster of soldiers striding in their superior's wake, off to do the devil's own business. Molly took them back out into the bone-cutting wind for a short march across a vehicle yard and to a squat, bland building. When the door clapped shut behind them, the sudden silence made Elwood think he'd gone deaf for a moment.

Blocky electronics panels crammed with knobs and dials lined one wall, a low desk and several chairs set up in front of the array. Taller machines stood in the far corners, silent and still guardians. A radio room, Elwood guessed, though one not currently in use.

In the Flesh

Perkins grunted as he surveyed the place. “Backup communications in case their main rig malfunctions. We should have a few minutes to get oriented in here.”

Molly drew out a sheaf of papers covered in scrawling handwriting and sketches. She handed this to Sergeant Perkins. As he studied the notes, the sergeant and Molly proceeded to have the oddest conversation Elwood had ever seen. Perkins muttered questions which Molly answered but without words. Instead she rolled her eyes, gesticulated wildly, and tilted her head back and forth. Her eyelids fluttered and her face twitched in ways Elwood found vaguely disturbing—as if the muscles under the skin didn’t quite match the expression she made.

Once they had finished and she returned to her former glower, Elwood tilted his head her way. “What’s with the pantomime?”

“Mol doesn’t speak much these days,” Perkins said, not taking his eyes off the map. “She was just filling me in on what she’s learned since she slipped over the walls.”

“How long has she been here?” Elwood asked.

Molly gestured again.

“A week.”

Danston spluttered. “A week? And the Jerries ain’t shined to her shuckin’ one of their suits yet?”

The white scars around Perkins’ lips twisted into a grimace. “When Mol doesn’t wish to be noticed, she’s isn’t noticed. Now then, gentlemen, can we see to the matter at hand or must we continue to pester the lady in our midst?”

He laid out the notes and Elwood leaned in to get a look. Molly’s sketches detailed the base layout well enough. She’d marked the bigger building as a hospital, the barracks, mess halls, kennels...

“What’re these spots?” Elwood pointed to a couple of long rows over on the north side.

“Weapons testing yards, apparently.”

“Weapons testin’?” Danston echoed. “Thought this here’s a prison camp?”

Perkins eyed him sidelong. “Who do you think they’re testing the weapons on?”

Danston scowled and drew his gun. He began checking it over, slim fingers working smoothly. “I’d like to return the favour soon enough.”

“Any sign of our target?” Elwood asked.

The sergeant frowned. “Not since he was spotted on the transport bound for here. Mol says Dr. Wesselton isn’t being held or employed at the hospital complex or the administrative buildings. She’s at least confirmed his presence on base by eavesdropping on command conversations and radio chatter, but his precise whereabouts are unknown, neither is what the Nazis are doing with him.”

Elwood glanced at Molly, who remained impassive. “You got all that from a few shrugs and waves?”

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“Know someone long enough and after a while, the words don’t matter. The issue, unfortunately, is already becoming more complicated as we speak.”

Perkins slid the top sheet aside, revealing the one he’d laid below it. It too had a rough outline of the base. Unlike the first sheet, though, the rest was blank but for a single X to the east noting: *Access Ramp*.

“There’s a whole complex that’s been built below ground,” he said. “That’s where all the prisoners are being taken. Apart from those brought out to the weapon yards, the rest never resurface.”

Danston leaned in. Molly had sketched the rough image of a wolf’s head. Below it was the word *Nachtwölfe*.

“Thought this place was called Teufelsstein.”

“It is.” Bumps rose across Elwood’s skin that had nothing to do with the freezing temperatures. “You’ve been with Majestic for several years now and you haven’t heard the name?”

“I ain’t an intel boy like you. I just go where the brass point and shoot who they put in my sights.”

“They —” Elwood groaned as another vision burst into his mind.

Madness ruled the night and the camp seemed to dissolve under the Nachtwölfe attack. Nazis in heavy armour tramped about, spewing blue-green flames from strange packs with sparking metal rods sticking out all over. They lifted gloved hands and wherever they pointed tents blew apart, wood turned to ash, and flesh and bones sizzled and melted.

Elwood blinked the images away and he steadied himself on the table. Perkins tilted his helmet back to get a closer look at him, but Elwood waved him off.

“They’re a nasty bunch,” he said, still hearing screams and seeing flashes of blue-green light in the darkest slices of his memory. “My former platoon had a run-in with a lone *Nachtwölfe* squad out in Italy. I was the only survivor, and that by luck. Majestic recruited me soon after. Once I manifested my particular talent.”

Danston squinted one eye. “They why you gave up bein’ a preacher man?”

Elwood scowled. “That and I had trouble believing in a God who’d create a world where men were so monstrous and free will could be destroyed.” He refocused on the map. “What’re they doing down there?”

“We have no idea.” Perkins tapped the blank space thoughtfully. “If we discover that along the way and can report back to HQ, excellent. Otherwise we stay focused on our target. Is that clear? Nothing is to distract from getting Dr. Wesselton out of their hands.”

Elwood nodded. Both the sergeant and Molly were with Section M, Majestic’s British counterpart. While this was technically a joint venture between the agencies, Perkins had made it clear he headed up the operation from the start. Elwood

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didn't doubt he had his own set of orders to be enacted if they couldn't physically liberate Dr. Wesselton. No one wanted to leave such a genius working for the Axis war machine—even if it meant destroying that genius mind with a well-placed bullet.

“One way in, one way out,” Elwood said. “What’s the plan?”

Danston winked. “It’s called a diversion, preacher man. Make a mess they’ve got to go clean up.”

“No,” said Perkins. “The instant we cause any disruption, this place will become busier than a stirred-up hornets’ nest.”

“And I can’t handle more than one person at once. It’ll be obvious if I do it in public.”

The sergeant clapped Elwood on the shoulder. “We’ll stick to the original strategy. Walk up and let you convince them to let us in nicely. We just keep quiet along the way and none will be the wiser before we’re gone.”

The four of them stilled as footsteps thumped by outside. Elwood put a hand to his forehead, feeling the large vein there throbbing. Any second now and they could all go up in sprays of bullets and blood. They’d been fortunate so far, but a single slip could send them all headfirst into the shit. Every mission went there, eventually.

When the silence resumed, a thought crept into it. Elwood turned to Molly. “You said all prisoners are taken down below, yeah?”

She nodded.

“But you’ve also seen them trotted out to be used as living targets?”

Another nod, confusion glinting in her slate-coloured eyes.

He circled a fingertip around the X-marked ramp. “Are they brought back out through the same entrance?”

She started to shake her head and then froze, still as a rabbit spotting a snake. Her eyes widened ever so slightly.

Sergeant Perkins clapped again. “Good girl. Now all we’ve got to do is find this second entrance and hope it’s tucked away somewhere quiet where you can get to work.”

It took them an hour to make their way across the grounds. Whatever odd behaviour Molly exhibited, Elwood had to admit she sure knew how to skulk. She knew where shadows gathered deep and dark among the spotlights and flashlights spearing throughout the base. She knew the patrol routes and timings, leading their team through brief gaps between soldiers, dogs, cars, and the sweeping gaze of the sentries in their towers.

They reached the weapon testing fields, and despite the darkness hiding large swathes of it, Elwood still froze at seeing the area. He’d seen ground like this before. The aftermath of his regiment’s encounter with *Nachtwölfe* had left the earth equally charred, bubbled, shattered and churned up. Portions were bullet-riddled

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or cratered, but other places looked slagged to a glassy sheen, torched by dragon's breath, or withered to patches of ash. Not even the lightly falling snow clung to those spots. Several pillboxes, raised platforms, and trenches dotted the area.

Elwood scrambled for cover, praying to God above to keep him safe and end this nightmare. A energy blast scorched the earth just to his right, and the explosion sent him tumbling. An armoured Nazi thumped into view, aiming to fire again. Then an Allied grunt popped up behind the German and fired a shotgun into the man's back—and the pack the soldier wore. The Nazi spun. Staggered. The sparks and arcs along the pack's metal framework erupted in a rapidly growing lightning storm.

Elwood swayed, clutching his stomach and groaning until the nausea passed. What had caused this vision? Up until then, they'd only occurred directly after he took another person's mind. Something about the weapons field? Breathing hard, he joined the others, ignoring their worried looks.

Five minutes of scouting let them spot the second access point—an unassuming shack next to an observation post on the northwest corner of the fields. Elwood caught the first glint of moonlight on metal, and the four of them clustered by a concrete embankment five hundred feet across the way.

Two guards stood at ease before the shack's metal door. By the dim outlines he could make out, Elwood didn't doubt these men wore silver wolf's head pins on their collars. He also noted the blocky goggles both men wore, which caught the starlight with a dark blue glint.

"Those goggles they're wearing aren't normal glass," he said. "I'm guessing they'll spot us quick enough if we try to walk up and chat. I need one drawn away so I have time to work."

Sergeant Perkins drew a path in the air. "Save your strength this time. Molly and I will work around to the far side and signal when we're in position. Danston, can you hit them from here and give us an opening?"

The gunner grinned. "Sure as I can write my name in yellow snow."

Perkins and Molly melted into the shadows, leaving the Majestic agents to wait.

Danston secured a silencer on his stolen Luger. "Think if we find a few folks down there while lookin' for the doc, we can slip 'em out too?"

Elwood scanned the area, tensed for another unexpected vision. "Not likely. Any time we take freeing others is more opportunity to get caught. We have to focus on Wesselton, and it'll be a slog enough bundling him off to the rendezvous."

Danston scowled. "Ain't right. Ain't right leavin' anyone here to suffer. Why's this egghead worth so much trouble?"

"The doctor already had a number of breakthroughs in neurophysiology and robotics before the war broke out—discoveries and developments that could be weaponised rather easily if they fell into the wrong hands. HQ figures that's why

In the Flesh

he was kidnapped in the first place. We got lucky spotting him before he was tucked away here. *Nachtwölfe* is dangerous enough on their own without having a mind like Wesselton's working for them."

Danston sighed and sighted over at the guards. "What's so scary about these *Nachtwölfe* bastards, anyhow?"

"Can you make out the discs that one guard is carrying? The ones strapped to his waist? And that bulge on his back?"

"Yup. He got explosives in his backpack or somethin'?"

"It's not a backpack. It's a power source of a sort. Not the exact same as they used on us before, but intel reports their troops using similar weapons to shatter men's bones and flip tanks through the air without touching them. And that's not the worst trick they've got up their sleeves. Not by half."

Danston grunted. "Gimme a good clean bullet to the brain over a buncha showy gimmicks any day."

"Speaking of which, I'm thinking that's our signal."

They looked to shack, where the sergeant's arm had thrust out and made a fist.

Quicker than Elwood could follow, Danston sighted across the field and fired off four shots, two for each target. Even with the silencer, the hits sounded horribly loud, and Elwood cringed, waiting for the base to erupt in sirens and shouts.

The soldier on the left went down without fanfare. The second just staggered back and shook himself as if shrugging off a haymaker in a bar brawl. He grabbed the discs off his belt and held them up like shields.

Danston cocked to fire again, but Elwood yanked his arm down as Perkins and Molly raced around from opposite sides of the shack. Elwood gritted his teeth as he pulled Danston into a run, though he knew they'd never make it in time.

The disc-wielding soldier turned, raising one arm. A harsh thrumming vibrated Elwood's teeth and he felt more than saw an invisible pulse clip the sergeant and send him spinning to the earth.

"Shit!" Danston jerked free and raised his gun.

"Wait—"

At Danston's third shot, the soldier's pack erupted in a crackle of blue flame and sparks. The man screamed and dropped the discs, trying to spin and beat at the fire strapped to his back.

Screaming, Elwood writhed on the ground as the strange lightning engulfed him. A moment later, an explosion shook the area. Hot metal slag ripped into his arm and chewed up the dirt right by his head. Hellish green light blinded him, and then the night went black again.

Ignoring the electrical discharges, Molly ran in and grabbed the flailing man's head. A sharp twist silenced his cries and dropped him limp to the snow, where

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the vile flames continued to eat away at his clothes.

Elwood and Danston ran up just as Sergeant Perkins rose on wobbly legs. Elwood stared at the man, having expected to find a corpse with skull and ribs caved in. The sergeant just shook off his daze and Molly's concerned fumbblings and herded them toward the door the dead soldiers had guarded.

"Inside. Our timeline just tightened."

Even as he spoke, dogs barked in the distance and flashlights swept the far border of the weapons field. The dead man's energy pack continued to sizzle and spark, acting like a beacon in the night.

The team slipped into the shed and down a flight of concrete stairs to a locked door. Molly drew out a lock pick and went to work on the latch while the others trained their guns on the upper level, waiting for the inevitable.

Then the door opened and the team hustled into a long, bland corridor. The door latched behind them and they surveyed their new surroundings.

Sergeant Perkins and Danston led the way, Elwood and Molly keeping an eye on the way they'd come. They tracked muddy snow along the hall as they prowled deeper into the complex, following a series of twisting walkways that intersected, sloped, and cut off into oddly angled side tunnels lit by naked bulbs behind wire mesh. Few doors offered themselves in this section, and Danston checked each doorknob they came to.

The fourth door opened... and then flung wide, leaving them staring at the surprised face of a lab-coated young man with a shock of platinum white hair and bright green eyes.

"*Vas ist*—" the man began.

Danston cracked him up under the chin with the butt of his gun. The man stumbled back and the four of them barged into the small office and slammed the door behind. The doctor—as Elwood assumed he was—boggled up at them from where he'd fallen beside a desk, one hand pressed to stem the blood dribbling from his gashed jaw.

While the others kept their weapons trained on both their unexpected captive and the door in turn, Elwood crouched and braced wrists on his knees. The doctor's gaze met his and that provided all the opening he needed.

He woke in the same way as he'd fallen unconscious—crying out in agony and fright. The nurses at the makeshift medical tent had to sedate him twice before he finally got his bearings and stopped fighting them off. After two weeks of listening to other soldiers die in their cots, after accidentally casting that first spell to make a persistent doctor leave him alone and being paralyzed by the first visions... he received a visitor. He didn't need much convincing to train and employ his new "gift" to help Majestic fight their secret war.

The German doctor gazed up at Elwood in total submission. Elwood tried to

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stop retching as quickly as possible. He only had a few minutes before the spell wore off.

“Do you speak English?”

The doctor nodded. “Ja. A little.”

“Dr. Wesselton. You know where he is?”

“Wesselton. Yes. *Herr Doktor*. Second level. Surgery lab.”

“Don’t like the sound of that,” Danston said.

Elwood shushed him, remaining fixed on the doctor. “You will believe one of the prisoners tried to attack you. We subdued him and are now escorting you down to surgery to fix the wound. You will take us to Dr. Wesselton and then leave without question.”

“Ja. I can take you. Please, follow.” He rose, using a corner of his lab coat to soak up the blood.

They trailed after him, and Elwood’s unease grew with each step. They passed a couple of labs that looked more like machine shops than any sort of medical facility, with racks of metal-smithing equipment alongside massive benches crowded with tools. In one room, scientists conferred over mechanical blueprints and x-rays of human skeletons.

He wanted to have the doctor explain what sort of work they did, but pressing the man too much could snap him out of the spell. The more routine and simple the implanted commands, the less resistance the victim demonstrated.

He kept checking behind them, willing the doctor to hurry up. But running would only draw unwanted attention. They passed through two guarded doors, but were admitted without question. No shouts or shots from back the way they came...yet. By now the dead soldiers had to have been found.

They trekked down several flights of stairs and out into a wider corridor lined with windows from floor to ceiling. Danston made a choking noise and Elwood had to stop himself from blurting out in dismay.

Rows of steel surgery tables stretched off into the distance, most populated by strapped-down prisoners in various states of dress and dissection. Bodies lay drained of blood, arms and legs and torsos cut wide to allow the insertion of metal frameworks and wiring. Other prisoners yet breathed, but only because of inflating and deflating plastic bladders pumping their chests. Yet more had portions of skin and bone removed and replaced with steel panelling, or had whole arms and legs swapped out for crude mechanical limbs.

Each table held a new horror. Half-a-dozen other doctors bustled about, pumping fluids, carving with scalpels, removing body parts with great care. Even with the massive windows, the corridor stank of dried blood muddled with a harsh antiseptic reek.

Elwood and his companions glanced at each other, and even Molly looked as if she fought to rein in her disgust. Perkins signed for her and Danston to take

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up sentry posts at the main entrance. Neither looked happy about it, but obeyed.

Then Elwood kept his breathing as steady as possible as the doctor escorted him and the sergeant to the far end of the chamber and waved for them to enter. A sliding curtain concealed the back half of the room; Elwood morbidly wondered why some of the prisoners were given a modicum of privacy as they were taken apart.

The door shut behind them, soundproofing the room.

“Yes?” came an English voice from behind the curtain. “I am busy.”

Elwood strode over and pulled the curtain aside, revealing a grey-haired man in a bloodstained lab coat bent over another prisoner. He recognized Dr. Wesselton from the pre-mission briefing—and also noted his patient was somehow still alive, evidenced by his twitching fingers and fluttering eyelids. Part of his scalp had been carved away, revealing glistening brain matter.

“Dr. Wesselton.” Perkins stepped up and nodded. “Sergeant Perkins of the British Army. We’re here to get you out, sir.”

Dr. Wesselton didn’t look up from inserting an electrical probe into the patient’s skull. “Yes, I sensed you coming.”

The two men exchanged confused looks.

“Sensed us?” echoed Elwood.

Dr. Wesselton pointed straight to Elwood without looking. “Him. I sensed a new vessel when you used your power to gain entry. I gave orders to let you come to me so your flesh would not be damaged. Those soldiers who fell to you on the way in have been proven unworthy.”

“Orders?” The sergeant’s frown deepened. “Doctor, are you saying you’ve allied yourself with your captors?”

The doctor straightened and went to wash his hands in a corner sink. “My time here has been enlightening. I have everything I need to reach my goal. Why should it matter where I do so? Transporting me would simply waste time.”

“What goal?” Elwood asked.

In answer, the doctor went to a small metal box set off to one side, engraved with sharp-angled designs that hurt Elwood’s eyes. The doctor opened it, revealing a jagged chunk of blue crystal the size of a man’s palm. He held it up on his fingertips and a subtle background humming grew louder to Elwood’s ears.

Dr. Wesselton whispered in reverence. “This is essence of a god. One to whom whole eons pass like a mere moment. I am but a temporary vessel and his presence within me has a cost. I will not live much longer, but I have prepared the way by pursuing the perfection of the human form.”

Elwood stared aghast at the macabre subjects on display. “You and I have very different ideas of perfection.”

Wesselton’s eyes locked on Elwood, a fell light gleaming in them. “I have been probing your memories the closer you came. You contain much potential. With

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Daoloth coming to dwell in your evolved mind and the enhancements I can give to your body, you will become immortal.”

A cold chill prickled up Elwood’s spine and he took an instinctive step back. This man was somehow responsible for the extra visions he’d had? Perkins caught him by the elbow.

“What do you think is going on here?”

Elwood lowered his voice for a quick, quiet conference. “Either his time as a prisoner has broken his sanity or he’s telling the truth and we’ve walked into a trap. Could be both.”

Perkins looked out to Molly and Danston and made the sign for impending danger. As they went tense, guns drawn, the sergeant then waved Elwood over to the doctor. “Make him comply. The knowledge he has could be valuable if we make him see reason.”

Dr. Wesselton cocked an eyebrow at Elwood. “That would not be wise.”

“Sorry, Doctor,” said Elwood. “But we’re on a tight schedule as it is.”

The doctor smiled sadly. “Time means nothing to one who will never die.” Just as Elwood concentrated on the spell, Wesselton raised the crystal higher and a ray of unholy light shot out from it.

The light struck Elwood and flung him back against the plate window hard enough to crack it. His head smashed into the glass. His vision flickered grey and he struggled not to slump to the floor. By the time he recovered, Perkins had his sidearm trained on Wesselton.

“Put the gem down, Doctor! This is your only warning!”

Wesselton wore a look of rapture as the crystal brightened. Countless rays of cerulean light exploded out, gaining substance. They shattered glass and smoked the walls and floor where they struck. None came anywhere near Elwood, however.

Perkins bellowed and fired an instant before a shaft of energy hit him in the chest. Both he and the doctor staggered and dropped simultaneously. The crystal rolled from Wesselton’s hand, but the light at its core intensified.

Elwood fell to his knees, half-blinded by the impossible star-like flare. He somehow knew if it reached an unknown culmination, it would trigger a catastrophic event. He crawled on all fours past the unmoving Perkins and snatched up the crystal. The instant he clutched it, the blaze winked out.

A slithering murmur awoke in his mind and a renewed sense of energy coursed through him. He lurched to his feet and turned to Perkins just as Danston and Molly raced in.

“What the hell happened?” Danston cried. “Did he have a bomb?”

A keening wail drew his attention to Molly, who’d fallen over Perkins’ body. The woman sobbed wordlessly. It was only then that Elwood noticed the six-inch wide hole charred straight through the man’s chest.

Danston’s face fell. “Aw, damn...” He glanced back up to the hall. “Aw,

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dammit!”

A squad of eight Nazis raced into the corridor, assault rifles readied. Other scientists fled past them, pointing to the trio of agents. The soldiers eased down the corridor, barking orders.

Danston sighed and reached for his guns. “Well, it’s been a right fun time. Howsabout we take a few of these bastards down with us?”

Elwood thrust an arm out, stopping him from launching a suicidal final assault. He displayed the crystal. “We can’t let them keep this.”

“Don’t look like they’re just gonna let us saunter out.”

Elwood looked at him sidelong. “They may just.”

He strode out into the hall. The crystal vibrated in his hand, whispers rising from the shadows of his mind, telling him such sweet and horrible secrets. The soldiers shouted for him to kneel, and he now understood the German as if he’d been born to it. He knew he would be understood in return. He raised his hands and stared at their faces, opening the channel in his mind and latching onto each of theirs in one psychic sweep of control.

“Ready.”

They lowered their rifles from him and came to attention.

“Aim.”

Pointed them at one another.

“Fire.”

A brief swell of rebellion rippled back against his influence, but the crystal’s power eroded it an instant later. The soldiers pulled their triggers in unison and eight bodies crashed to the floor in a thunder of rifle fire.

“Holy hells.” Danston appeared beside him, slack jawed.

The lack of visions after casting the spell didn’t reassure Elwood, for he sensed his old terrors were being shoved aside in lieu of a new nightmare oozing its way into his mind and soul. Who knew how long he had before his thoughts twisted like Wesselton’s?

They followed him out, and he stopped any soldiers they encountered so Danston could peg them with a headshot. The man didn’t look all too thrilled at it, though. Each time Elwood took control, it became a tiny bit harder to reel his influence back in, to not scour every mind bare and leave the person a gibbering wreck for no other reason than he possessed the power to do so.

Or that it now possessed him.

After they secured a truck, Danston also got his create-a-diversion wish and pumped a few rounds into the fuel tanks as they drove away. The resulting explosions and raging fire ensured no eyes were around to track them as they smashed out of a side gate. Elwood drove a few miles down the road and then pulled off to the side, at the mouth of a slim gully that headed up into the mountains. He hopped out, but then realized they were minus one.

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“Where’d Molly go?”

Danston got out and looked around in bewilderment. “Huh. Dunno. Must’ve slipped off when we weren’t lookin’.” He hunched against the bitter wind. “But I got a feelin’ that girl knows how to make her own way out. You just takin’ one last look at the scenery before we head to the rendezvous point?”

Elwood shook his head. “Danston, you’re a good man. I know I can trust you.”
“With what?”

Elwood touched the crystal tucked into his jacket. “I can’t return with you. I have to go find a way to destroy this or hide it forever. But...” He met the man’s eyes, feeling the growing desire to strip Danston’s sanity simply for the pleasure of it. He resisted. Barely. “...if you ever see me again, shoot me on sight. No hesitation, no questions.”

The gunman squinted at him. “You sure that’s the right decision?”

“Possibly the last one I’ll ever make.”

Danston studied him a long minute before giving a respectful nod. “I’ll make a full report.”

Then it was just him, the mountain, and the crystal. He took out the stone and stared into its depths at the faceless, inhuman presence burning there.

“So, you wanted a new vessel and you’ve got one. Problem is, I’ve already abandoned one god.” He re-pocketed the crystal and walked into the night. “Let’s see if I can abandon another.” ✘





Amid the Sands of Deepest Time

By Jason Brick

CAIRO made Abel Roxa nervous. In the years of the second Great War, he'd grown accustomed to blackouts at night. London, Berlin, even San Francisco, were dark as the bottom of a coal mine once the sun went down. But Cairo...even with the tanks of four nations within miles of her, the City of the Pharaohs was fully lit all night long. People still moved about in packed crowds, potential witnesses.

It was like that in Rio, where he had grown up, and in Argentina where he had misspent much of his youth. The lights and crowds should not have bothered him so. He had pulled countless heists in those towns, plenty of jobs before the war brought dark nights and preoccupied marks.

How quickly we grow accustomed to luxury, he thought. These days, boosting stuff with the streetlights on felt like unnecessary hardship.

But hey, hadn't you heard? There was a war on.

A growling engine broke Abel from his reverie: Devon, starting up the truck. The load of fresh bread inside would be worth a lot of money. The teeming throngs of Cairo might go about their business in the middle of the war, but they were on thin rations. Even local government functionaries were feeling the pinch. The bread would fetch a pretty pound on the black market, maybe more than they would get for the truck.

The engine stuttered and died. Devon cursed in his Australian accent. Abel had met him in Cairo during a poker game where they had both been cleaned out by a Syrian card shark. When the knives came out, both men had fled in the same direction carrying just less than half the money each. It had made them laugh together, then drink together, then spend the next few years as business partners.

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Together they robbed stores, graves, tombs, soldiers, and civilians from both sides of the war. Equal opportunity opportunists, Devon would say.

Not that Devon said much. In a year of working together, Abel had learned his first name, that he had at least five brothers, that he was probably from Australia and that he was definitely a deserter. They worked together, drank together and shared a one-room apartment in the city's worst slum, but when it came to talking, Abel worked mostly alone.

The truck sputtered back to life, then died in a series of rolling belches. Devon cursed louder, in two languages Abel recognized and one he didn't. In the quiet that followed, Abel heard a sharp, rhythmic clicking. In Cairo, only one thing sounded like that: the hard-soled shoes of the *shorta*, the Egyptian police. No civilian could afford them, and all the soldiers wore boots. He gave a short warning whistle that echoed off the stone walls of the alley.

The *shorta* rounded the corner just as Devon got to the cobblestone street beside Abel. He took in the pair, kept to a safe distance and said "Good evening."

"Good morning, officer," Abel responded, glancing up at the moon. Judging by its position amongst the stars, the time was well past midnight.

"So it is. So it is. Can I ask what you're doing out and about at this time?"

"Mostly being drunk, sir," Devon mumbled. He staggered closer and leaned on Abel for support.

"On what?" the *shorta* looked them over carefully, and Abel saw him notice that neither he nor Devon carried any kind of bottle or flask.

"A gentleman never tells," Abel responded, slurring his voice.

"Then the likes of you won't mind telling me all I want to know," the *shorta's* face was a remote mask.

Devon hiccupped and leaned closer into Abel. From outside, they looked like two drunks holding on to one another for support, but in reality their feet were planted firmly. Both were ready to move at an instant's opportunity.

"I only know I want some more wine. Officer, can you help us find more wine?" Abel asked. He punctuated the sentence with a rolling belch.

The *shorta* scanned the open truck, then his eyes darted to Devon's grease-stained hands. The eyes were set in a young face, but one already wise to the narrow streets of Egypt's greatest and most criminal city.

"How about you share some of your wine with me? Or perhaps enough coin to buy some of my own?"

"It's like that, is it?" Abel asked. He didn't really need to, but he wanted to make the *shorta* answer.

"Boy, tell me when it was any other way," the man's accent was deeply, richly Egyptian but his English was as familiar and weary as a London pickpocket's.

Neither of them carried any cash on a job, but Abel reached into his hip pocket as he shouldered Devon to the side. The *shorta* relaxed visibly, ready to

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receive his payoff. Devon stumbled forward, caught himself on the wall with one hand, and doubled over. He began to make heaving, retching noises. When the *shorta* leapt back to avoid the coming splatter, both Abel and Devon ran for it.

Devon dodged past the *shorta* and into the main street, while Abel ran back toward the bread truck and the labyrinth of narrow passages behind. They always split up when they ran, since most police would hesitate for precious seconds deciding which of them to chase.

As he sprinted deeper into the alleys, Abel heard the running footsteps of the *shorta's* hard-soled shoes. If he had hesitated, it had not been for long.

"Why do they always follow me?" Abel muttered to nobody in particular as he leapt to catch the top of a low building. He ran across the rooftops with the *shorta* closer than he'd like, then tried to lose his pursuer by balancing along a narrow wall and leaping mid-stride to the top of a parked car.

But the *shorta* stayed right behind. He was young, and strong, and filled with a holy indignation at having been denied the bribe which was rightfully his.

Abel ran along the car, then leapt to the canvas top of a troop truck with American markings. It was either empty or full of soldiers tired beyond caring, because the hue and cry such an act would normally cause was completely absent. The *shorta* stayed on the ancient road, gaining as he paced Abel along the more reliable surface. As Abel leapt to the ground and sprinted into a small city garden, the *shorta* made a final rush and grabbed him by the collar.

Capoeira is the national martial art of Brazil, originally developed by slaves in chains brought across the Atlantic from Africa. It relies on deception. A practitioner moves his body to the right only to strike from the left. He appears to advance only to retreat, then reverses again to deliver a killing blow when the enemy begins to chase. *Capoeira* had been illegal to teach or practice in Brazil for over a century, but when the National Socialist Party took power they began looking for something uniquely Brazilian to be proud of as a nation. They found *capoeira*, and they liked it.

Suddenly *capoeira* schools were everywhere. Abel didn't have much use for National Socialists, or for any kind of nation or socialist, but he did have use for a martial art based on tricking people into making mistakes. He found a teacher, a *mestre*, named Bimba, and had studied until circumstances required he leave Brazil abruptly.

When the *shorta* grabbed his collar, Abel bent backward at the waist and planted his hands on the ground. He twisted his body so his legs whipped around and scythed the *shorta's* feet out from under him. One barrel roll later Abel was up and the *shorta* was down, his journey to the ground interrupted by a nasty crack of his head against a nearby date palm.

Abel ran through the garden, and stepped into a *souk* bustling even in the middle of the night. He saw alligator-skin shoes, indigo linens and racks of dried fish,

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smelled sweat and spice and camel droppings, as he breathed the air of sweet freedom into his heaving lungs. As his breath returned to normal, he allowed himself a smile. Few things invigorated him like a foot race against the local constabulary.

So long as he won.

An hour of random wandering through alley and market convinced Abel he was being followed by neither legitimate authority nor ambitious local robber. He meandered at last to *El Khef*, a coffee bar open all hours where he found Devon sitting at a tile-topped table, sipping from a tiny cup.

He took in Devon's unruffled white shirt and perfectly creased brown dungaree pants, his face devoid of sweat. "Why do they always chase me?"

His partner shrugged in response, and paid the cheque. The two walked through good neighbourhoods to poor neighbourhoods and into the winding slums of Cairo, taking a winding route designed to lead anyone but themselves away from the flophouse they called home.

Devon said nothing on the trip back. As a partner, he talked little and asked less. Abel wished he would ask something, if only so he could tell the story of his chase across the truck roof and his defeat of the police officer, but a criminal partner who talked too little was far preferable to a criminal partner who talked too much. Abel was satisfied, if not always entirely happy.

They climbed a flight of narrow stairs barely attached to the outside of the building where they kept their one-room apartment. Every tread creaked, and for the top half they had to keep close to the building lest the entire structure come unmoored from the wall. It was a terrible, unsafe arrangement but provided an excellent warning should police or rival criminals attempt a stealthy approach.

At the top of the steps, Abel paused to examine the layer of dusty sand he had spread on the wood. There was nothing to indicate the passage of unwanted visitors. Next he checked the length of hair he had affixed to the top of the door, bridging the gap between portal and wall. It was still in position.

Satisfied, Abel produced his key and opened the door. Devon slipped inside. Abel followed, closing and latching the door behind him. As it clicked shut, a match flared inside the tiny apartment. Its glow showed a man sitting in Abel's favourite chair. As he put the match to an oil lamp, the man spoke in a tone that was half-warning, half-chiding.

"Think carefully, gents. A man who could navigate those stairs and bypass your telltales without leaving a sign is probably a man who could reach his weapon faster than you could...but I'd prefer you didn't find out."

"Who? How?" Abel sputtered. Even Devon grunted in surprise.

"None of that matters, but as to who, you can call me Springbok. If you look at the table beside you — nice table by the way. Early 16th century? Should be worth a thousand pounds or more to the right buyer. But that's not important. What's important is what's there on the table."

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Abel didn't like it, but he knew when he was beaten. The art of *capoeira* and life as a criminal both taught the same lesson. Go with the flow until there's a chance to divert the stream.

He looked at the table, and the manila folder Springbok had indicated. He opened it to find a dozen enlarged photographs. Photos of Abel stealing supplies from a truck with British markings, photos of Devon driving a German army *Kübelwagen*. A copy of the AWOL notice on Devon from a post in Singapore. They were high-quality photos, some of the best Abel had seen. *Shortas* didn't have the budget for work that good, and independent criminals rarely had the equipment. Whoever Springbok was, he worked for the military or in intelligence.

For which side, he couldn't tell. The man's accent sounded German, but could just as easily been Jewish. He could work for one side, or neither, or both, but that didn't really matter at the moment.

"Blackmail, then?" Abel said, though it wasn't really a question.

"Got it in one, chum. Devon Braithwaite, contemptible deserter though you are, at least you keep smart company."

Devon just stared.

Abel said, "We don't have any money."

"That's a lie. Even if it wasn't, I rather fancy your table. But I don't want money."

Abel took a page from Devon's book and waited. He had met men like Springbok before. They always wanted to control the conversation, let the mark know who was in charge. If he kept interrupting, the man would never get to the point. Abel could play along and wait for his opportunity. If it didn't come during this conversation, there would be others. There were always others.

"You are going to steal some supplies for me, and a truck. You don't really need the truck, but it will make the theft easier."

"Whose supplies?" Abel asked.

"The Allies, friend, though you don't mind stealing from anyone, I see," Springbok gestured to the folder on the antique table.

"What supplies?"

The man produced a second folder and slid it along the carpeted floor. Devon picked it up and began scanning the contents.

Springbok said, "The details are in there. Truck number, approximate weight, and a general description of the cargo. You'll find it in the rear camp at the coordinates on that map. It's nothing you haven't done before, sport, only now you're doing it for me."

"Will we get paid?"

"Ten percent of value, on delivery."

"Ten percent?!"

"You *are* being blackmailed. Do try to understand your role in proceedings."

Abel looked at Devon. Devon gave a shrug, the one that meant he didn't like

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a situation but saw no alternative but to see it through.

“Okay,” Abel said. “But we want the money and the negatives on delivery.”

“That’s all I ever wanted to hear, sport. I will leave you now. Big day tomorrow, best you get some sleep.”

Springbok stood and walked between Abel and Devon, all three felt the briefest moment of tension as he brushed past the two criminals. Springbok might be at their mercy now, but they knew he was not working alone. The moment passed and Springbok exited, making not the slightest sound as he went down the stairs.



Sleep came easily enough, but at some point in the deep of the night, Devon woke with a start and a gasp that roused Abel. He tossed and mumbled and turned as if gripped by a violent nightmare, an unusual departure from his usual dreamless repose. After what felt like many hours, Abel covered his ears with his pillow and managed to doze again. It felt like seconds before the light and noise of the wakening city woke him again. When he opened his eyes, Devon was sitting at the table staring at a week-old newspaper.

Abel groaned and stumbled the four steps to their shared kitchen. He rinsed his face in their washbowl, then made himself a breakfast of coffee and dates. He sat across from his friend at their thousand-pound, 16th-century table.

“So,” Devon said, “what’s the plan?”

Abel stared. Devon knew the plan. This wasn’t the first time they’d stolen supplies from one of the armies scattered haphazardly across the North African desert. Armies were good targets. They had all the good stuff, and in such quantities that weeks might pass before somebody noticed it was missing.

More than that, Devon had spoken, had used up his usual allotment of words in the first few moments of the morning. Abel expected silence for the rest of the day, but that expectation was not forthcoming.

When they stole a car, Devon made Abel break open and hotwire the ignition even though Devon was by far the better car thief. He asked questions the entire time, questions he knew the answer to, like he was quizzing Abel for some sort of qualification.

When they scammed fuel from a depot using requisition coupons Devon had forged, he looked at them as if for the first time. He seemed ready to ask questions, but Abel gave him such a glare when the quartermaster walked toward them that he shut his mouth and instead stared at the Pyramids like some kind of tourist.

Abel drove them along the packed-dirt highway toward the back end of the front line. As the morning progressed, the harsh sun stopped spearing his eyes and began to beat down on the top of the truck, baking them in an oven on four wheels. From the passenger seat, Devon asked so many questions about the war

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and the desert that Abel pulled to a stop.

He looked Devon over. His rough Aussie face showed nothing but the raw-boned handsomeness that gave him a distinct advantage when it came time to scam a woman. His eyes were different somehow, deeper and very old, like the man had made some kind of hallucinogenic discovery during his troubled dreams.

“Did you smoke hashish last night? It must have been some really potent stuff. It’s like I don’t even *know* you today. It’s like *you* don’t even know you.”

“Hashish?”

“Are you serious?”

“What is hashish?”

“Whatever. If you don’t want to share, don’t share. Just try not to get killed, and if one of us is chased today, make sure it’s you.”

Devon nodded, though Abel couldn’t tell if he was agreeing or just giving up the argument. Still, when Abel pulled back onto the road, he asked no more questions.

It was two hours after dusk when they reached the camp. Abel knew the sort of place well, though he had never operated in this particular one before: a cluster of tents and temporary shops packed with people trying to scam a buck or a baby out of soldiers temporarily relieved of their front line duties.

They left the car parked at the side of the road, far enough off not to disrupt traffic but not so far that every thief in the camp wouldn’t know it before the top of the hour. Somebody would steal it soon enough, which was fine by Abel. They would soon have a truck to get them back to Cairo. They wandered through the hookers, bootblacks, food stands, fixers and black marketeers, blending in like they always did in that kind of neighbourhood. It was just like the *souk* in Cairo, the *favela* in Bahia, the Tenderloin in San Francisco. This kind of neighbourhood was timeless, and the same everywhere in the world. It was where the dispossessed went to live and die. Abel was home.

Devon was not so much at home. He gazed with frank, open interest at every person and everything that crossed their path. Four prostitutes mistook his scrutiny for interest before Abel wrapped an arm around him and snarled into his ear.

“You are going to get us noticed, then killed. I don’t care how good that shit was last night. You have to get it together.”

“Okay. I’m sorry. But don’t you think this is interesting?” Devon gestured to the flow of humanity in the camp all around them, the commerce and warring and whoring that bustled like an anthill.

“Interesting?”

Devon looked dismayed. “It’s not interesting?”

“Man, you are entirely too high. Save some for me next time.”

Devon looked at his feet, and Abel just knew he was going to make some kind of damn fool comment about being high. Abel cut him off and pointed to an

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olive drab cargo truck with canvas stretched in a half-cylinder over the bed. The markings matched the photo Springbok had provided.

It was their truck. Abel motioned Devon to stand in the crowd and watch the camp, looking for the man he knew he would find.

Abel had robbed military outfits from both sides since the war had started. He knew that every single squad had at least one of the right kind of man for the job he was doing. The kind of man who doesn't cut it. The kind of man who, in civilian life, would have been a mediocre clerk in a mediocre office doing mediocre work. The man who doesn't want to be in the army, and wouldn't be if there wasn't a draft. Those men never go to the front, because real officers and soldiers knew that would get people killed. Instead, they end up behind the lines minding trucks full of supplies miles away from any real danger.

This particular man was wearing lieutenant's insignia and drinking greedily out of a field canteen. He looked about as comfortable as a pregnant whore in a Catholic church.

"Okay. I'll talk to him. You steal the truck," Abel said. He was careful not to stare at the lieutenant, but Devon looked at the man with frank interest.

"Do what you did before, with the car?" Devon asked, still standing.

"Seriously? You're asking me how to hotwire a vehicle? Man, I need you to straighten up and fly right or we're gonna get nicked."

"Okay. I will do what you did before, with this truck. Then what?"

"You have got to be kidding me. We drive like hell right back to Cairo, okay?"

"Okay."

Abel slapped Devon on the back and walked toward the lieutenant at the brisk pace military types used. Without a uniform, he knew he would have to make every other part of his story look exactly right if he wanted to confuse the officer long enough to get away with the cargo.

"Hey, Lieutenant..." Abel checked the nameplate on the man's wrinkled uniform shirt. "Smith. You the man in charge of this truck?"

"That's right," said Lieutenant Smith.

"I have orders to requisition it for the front. There's another wave coming in and the top brass wants it up there pronto."

"Why didn't I hear anything about this?"

"When does the brass tell us anything besides when to jump and how high?"

"Situation Normal..."

"Got that right. So I can take her?"

The lieutenant's face kept smiling, but Abel saw an officious cruelty in the man's eyes. "Sure thing. You got your papers in order?"

"Man, I lost them somewhere on the road. It's hours back to Cairo to get new orders and there are guys counting on that gear. I need the truck and I need it right now."

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"I can't help you. I need to see your paperwork."

"I'm telling you I need to get this truck to the front or men are going to die."

"No paper, no truck. I don't know how else to explain it."

"I told you I lost it. Help a fella out, there's a war on or haven't you heard?"

The truck coughed into life. Abel shoved Lieutenant Smith in the chest, knocking him backward and over a knot of Arab food vendors. While the officer struggled and cursed, Abel ran forward and leapt into the back of the truck. He struggled through the cargo compartment, between piles of supply crates threatening to topple over on him with every bump and turn. He wrestled his way to the front and slid through the window into the cab.

"Where am I driving this to?" Devon shouted over the noise of the engine.

"Back to Cairo!"

"How?"

"That road! Go east!"

They were followed by plenty of sound, but little fury, as Abel had learned to expect. During war time, anybody who is competent and motivated is at the front. Rear-echelon men had little authority or the initiative to use it. By the time an organized chase could be mounted, the truck would be on the other side of the camp and barreling down the sandy road looking like any of a thousand other trucks running supplies and men to and from the front lines.

Daylight was seeping over the horizon by the time Devon drove them into Cairo. It painted everything with a warm pink that threatened the heat of the day even as the dawn held onto the chill of the night. Abel gave directions from the map Springbok had provided, and they drove from a slum, through some industrial buildings, past a row of abandoned warehouses to a single warehouse standing alone in a desiccated field.

As they pulled off the road, the warehouse doors opened and a man in civilian clothes motioned them inside. Abel wasn't fooled by the hula shirt and khaki shorts. The man moved like a soldier, like a man who had fought and killed and had done it more than once in his time.

You can always tell, Abel thought. *Some things leave a stain that never washes out.*

Two more soldiers waved him forward to park at the centre of the empty warehouse. As Abel climbed out he noticed that it was completely, meticulously bare. Even the corners had been swept clear of cobwebs. There was absolutely nowhere to hide. He climbed out and down from the truck's cab.

On any other day, they would have walked in the same direction, counter-clockwise around the vehicle, staying on opposite sides for the cover it provides and staying out of any line of fire. This time, Devon came clockwise and met Abel standing at the front of the truck.

Four of the soldier types formed a rough semicircle around them. They didn't point the Sten submachine guns they wore on slings, but stood in a way that

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suggested they wouldn't hesitate to do so if the situation demanded it. Abel heard movement and footsteps at the back of the truck. When he saw Springbok come around the rear corner, he knew the sounds were for his benefit. Judging by the way he handled the stairs, Springbok could have approached in absolute silence if he had wanted to.

"This all looks right," he said.

"Happy to be of service," Devon responded. Abel and Springbok both looked at the man quizzically.

Abel said "Don't mind him. He had a little too much last night."

"A little too much of what?"

"That, I'm not sure about. Where's our payment?"

Another man came around the truck. He was tall and pale, dressed in a faded yellow suit whose colour seemed to bleed into his skin. The demeanour of the soldiers, even of Springbok, changed. This Yellow Man was in charge, the one everybody was afraid of. He handed a leather satchel to Springbok, who slung it underhand to Abel.

"That bag once belonged to Thomas Edward Lawrence. It's worth five hundred pounds if it's worth a shekel. Consider it a bonus, a gift from one lover of antiquities to another."

Abel untied the leather strap holding the satchel closed, peeked inside to see a stack of wrinkled notes and a sealed envelope.

"The photos, the negatives, and a little to cover your expenses," Springbok said. "Isaac will drive you home." He pointed to an older passenger car parked just outside of the warehouse door. Abel led Devon to it before any of the men surrounding them got it in their minds to lend a helping hand.

Devon sat beside him, gazing out the window at the crowds and buildings that rolled past. After a while, he opened the leather satchel. His face screwed up in a look so confused it might have been funny under other circumstances.

"You think it's not enough money?" Abel growled, "Screw you. They would have shot us dead."

"Would they have?"

"That or given us to the army, who would have shot us dead."

"Would they have?"

"Oh for *amor de deus*."

The car slowed to a stop at the foot of their building. The driver somehow motioned without moving that they were to get out.

"*Obregado, ilho da puta cavalo*," Abel swore.

"*Obregado, ilho da puta cavalo*," Devon repeated. Devon spoke no Portuguese, and showed no sign that he knew how badly Abel had just insulted the driver.

Fortunately, the driver didn't speak Portuguese either. He gazed straight ahead as the pair climbed out of the car and ascended the creaking stairs at the side of

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their apartment home.

Exhausted and filthy, Abel poured water from a gallon jug into his washbasin. He scrubbed his face and arms, pulled off his shirt and collapsed onto his mattress in the corner of the room. It was thin, little more than a quilt, but on top of the layers of carpets he and Devon had collected, it was like lying on a cloud.

After more than a day of continuous movement, his body was ready for a deep and dreamless sleep, but Devon was busy in the small room. He moved around, spoke to himself, and explored the corners of the apartment like he had never really been there before. The noise and motion in the tiny place kept rousing Abel from his doze. He thought to ask for some of whatever his friend had been smoking, but sleep at last overcame him before the words left his mouth.



He woke in total darkness, eyes open, unable to see even the ceiling above him. That was wrong. Of all the cities in the world, Cairo was the noisiest, it never slept. Now it was dark and silent but for a low humming. Cairo was never either of those things, not since the ancient Pharaohs worshipped their strange and terrible gods.

Abel tried to wave his hand in front of his face, but his arm did not respond. Neither did the other, and he could not feel his legs. A trickle of fear ran through his mind, paralyzed there in the dark. He had heard rumours about what black operators like Springbok and the Yellow Man did, about experiments the Nazis had run in Germany and Argentina. He tried to scream, but his nerve endings found no mouth with which to do so.

Real terror spiked through him, then. It ripped his breath until lungs that didn't feel like lungs palpitated in ragged gasps. It tore through a body that felt wrong, alien, unwholesome beyond its inability to move. The fear built and built within him until it had the weight of the pyramids themselves, crushing down on his mind, grinding at his sanity.

Then he heard Devon's voice from somewhere in the black saying "Relax, mate. It's all right." There was something different in the voice from the rambling speech of the past day. This voice, terse and Australian and mellow, was the Devon he had known and worked with. Devon, his only real friend.

His mind seized the voice like a drowning man grabbing at a ruined spar. He couldn't respond, still could not see, but he could hear his friend. Devon's voice was all of space, all of time. "It's all right, mate. Weird, but all right. Just breathe. Breathe."

Abel breathed. He knew from his training with *Mestre* Bimba that breathing formed the cadence of thought, the rhythm of life. Though he could barely feel his paralyzed lungs, he focused on the in and out motion, felt the pulse move

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through his body. Through habit of training and force of will, Abel calmed his breathing and through it, calmed his mind.

“All right. He’s all right,” came Devon’s voice. It was speaking to somebody else, and for the first time Abel realized he and Devon were not alone.

“Ready?” Devon asked.

For what? Abel wanted to say, but still he could not move.

“He’s ready,” Devon said from behind.

The humming ceased and Abel felt that he could move if he wanted. At the same time, dim light somewhere behind him grew in brightness to illuminate part of a blank, bare wall of stone perhaps ten feet in front of him. Something indefinable gave the sense of vast, subterranean spaces behind him.

A creature floated into his vision, conical in shape with the narrow end at the top. From this apex extended four thin, ropy appendages. One sported a globe of four eyes, one an organ that looked like the bell of a trumpet. The other two ended in large, yellow pincers like those on a scorpion. The entire monster was scaly and grey, with rounded pustules ringing its lowest edge.

It spoke with Devon’s voice, and Abel’s mind snapped.

He punched the thing in front of him. A thin part of his mind noticed that the limb he swung was not a proper arm, but a thin and ropy tentacle ending in a claw. It rocked the creature backward and he sprung away, though he couldn’t feel his feet hit the ground. Sparing a downward glance, he saw that he had no legs. His body moved forward despite this, driven by his mental impulse to run.

He glided forward, floating in a conical body identical to the one that had spoken with Devon’s voice, through the chamber and along an upward-slanting corridor. It ended too soon, at a blank wall Abel knew had to be a door but could not determine how to open. He was still striking it futilely with his alien claws when the creatures caught up with him.

Claws gripped his body and the ropy appendages wrapped around him from all sides. He struggled, tried to fight, but didn’t know how to use the body that had trapped his mind. Years of training and experience with two legs and two arms could do nothing for him. The creatures dragged him, screaming, back into the chamber.

Panic seized him then, fear dark as the ocean, twice as cold and as deep as time. He swam and sank and drowned in it, his mind thrashing in its depths. Only Devon’s voice, speaking more words than it had in the past year, brought him back to the surface. Slowly, slowly, his thoughts came back into order until he heard not just the sound of Devon’s voice but the meaning of the words.

“Calm down. Calm down. It’s weird, mate, but it’s not that bad, stay calm and you’ll get used to it.”

Abel’s senses expanded until he could take in the room around him, observe details instead of just assessing the best route of escape. He took in four of the strange creatures, not counting himself, all spaced about a stone-walled room

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with ceilings too low for its width. The walls were carved with patterns of warped triangles that seemed to twist and writhe even as he stared. Similar patterns descended from the ceiling in grotesque metal mobiles. He felt nauseated at the sight of them, even though he had no stomach.

“Mate, listen. I’d tell you to sit, but we don’t have legs,” Devon said.

Fear lurched forward in Abel’s consciousness again. It pushed away thought and reason for a moment, but he breathed again in long, slow writhings of his curtain-like body. The rhythm calmed him and he was able to hear what Devon had to say.

“This here is Tnoth.” One of the creatures drifted forward. “He’s one of the Yith...a Yithian...the blokes who own these bodies. Well, they don’t really own them. It’s...it’s confusing.”

Tnoth began to speak. The sounds emanating from its trumpet were more like cacophonous music than human language, but Abel understood perfectly. “Over 400 million years before your time we moved our minds from far distant stars to inhabit these bodies. Our race can move our minds through time and space. Thus we have explored the galaxy since before your sun began to glow.”

“They took our minds,” the being with Devon’s voice said. “Moved them to this time. Two of their minds are in our bodies now.”

“Okay,” Abel said, wondering how he was able to make his body conduct speech. “I see five of us. You and I are human, and Tnoth is a...Yithian...what about these two?”

“Knatt is one of us,” Tnoth gestured one pincer toward a Yithian with a dark purple body. He pointed at a greyish form, “Arlington Bowles is from some decades in your own future.”

“But here’s where it gets weird,” Devon broke in.

“Here?!” Abel somehow made the trumpet shout. “Here is where it gets weird is what you’re telling me?”

“Yes. What Tnoth has been telling you is how it was for a long time, but it’s different now.”

The purple Yithian, Knatt, spoke up. “For more than one billion years we have cast our minds forward to explore and understand. We could invade a species to continue our own existence, but we never sought destruction.

“But Lord Pnarria has changed that. He sends not scientists to explore, but agents to destroy. He seeks to end all life in the universe that is not Yithian. He has gone mad, and has turned much of our race mad with him.”

“These blokes,” Devon said, “they want to put a stop to it.”

Another body glided into the chamber in a way that suggested haste, even though the body was not capable of running. Clicking, hissing noises emanated from the trumpet appendage, and Abel still understood the language.

“They are coming. We have been found.”

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Even as the newcomer spoke, a pounding echoed through the chamber. It was not the sound of a hand rapping or a claw tapping, but a deep resounding boom.

Abel had heard that sound before. Even long eons past and far from Rio or Cairo he knew it for what it was: the solid, inexorable boom of the *shorta* hitting a door with a battering ram.

“This way,” Tnoth said.

Tnoth twisted one of the dangling mobiles, causing the shapes to twist in a way that made Abel’s mind shiver with nausea. As it turned, a section of the wall opened in a hidden door. Tnoth slid through the opening, followed by Knatt and the others.

The group fled through downward-sloping hallways until the sound of the police behind them faded to silence. They continued through the dimly lit labyrinth, following Tnoth down and down and further down.

Deep in the catacombs, they passed an enormous basalt door covered with symbols Abel had never seen before. As they passed, every Yithian pressed hard against the opposite wall and made not a sound. It might have been his imagination, but from the beyond the door, Abel believed he heard bubbling, phlegmatic words repeated over and over.

Tekeli-li...tekeli-li...tekeli-li...

At length they reached a spiral ramp leading up and up to a door in the raw stone, and they passed into a city so old the stones seemed weathered like the sides of mountains. The air outside felt hot and close, like Brazil compared to London. Abel followed Tnoth through narrow alleys, then wider boulevards. As they passed through an open gallery, he glanced at the night sky. The stars there were arranged in strangely familiar patterns, patterns that looked like they might one day drift into the constellations he knew on earth.

He did not look up again.

They had outdistanced even the sound of pursuit for what felt like half an hour when they passed through another wide park space. Strange, mushroom-like plants grew in neat rows along pools of violet-glowing liquids. As they crossed, an arc of lightning shot from a rooftop. It speared through the knot at the top of Devon’s body and he fell gently to the earth.

Abel stopped and turned, gliding toward his friend even as more bolts of lightning fired from the rooftops. They had not lost their pursuers. They had been led into a trap.

“Don’t!” Knott shouted. He had paused ten lengths ahead, but only long enough to shout. “Your friend is not gone! His mind has returned to your time!”

Abel looked once more at the body, but there was no sorrow in him for the alien form burnt and blackened, deflating as he watched. This was not the open, easy face of his Australian friend, nor the hands that had stolen treasures and punched *shortas* at his side. It was easier than he would have thought to turn

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away and continue the floating run to which he was already growing accustomed.

He followed the others through tall, narrow alleys and through wide galleries where he dared not look again at the sky. Although this new body lacked muscles, Abel was feeling the signs of fatigue when the group slowed. A door in one sheer rock wall appeared as if on its own and a pincered appendage beckoned them inside. Tnoth led the group through, to a long, low chamber where two more of the aliens waited.

They appeared to be friends. One was armed, the other was not, but both were watchful as far as Abel could tell. They swarmed together, surrounding Abel, Tnoth and the rest of the party.

Abel pushed himself away. In his own body, he would have glared but he didn't know how these eyes worked. He settled for shouting as loudly as his trumpet mouth would allow. "Okay. I've followed you and run from the police with you and listened to a story that would sound crazy if it weren't for the fact that I'm yelling at you through a trumpet that is now part of my body! I've been a good sport! I've done what you asked! Now, if you want me to keep playing nice somebody has to tell me right now why my friend just died."

Tnoth answered. "We are trying to change the course of our future here. If we can find another time where we can start over, we can move the right minds *en masse* and flee this dark age. We must escape this regime. It has grown to hate all life that is different from its own. There was a time we searched the depths of time for curiosity, not for conquest. We were scientists, not soldiers."

"What now?" Abel asked.

"We wait," Tnoth said. "The alarm will pass in time, and we can move you to a safe location. You and Arlington Bowles will be with others from your time. When we have learned what we need to, we will return you. We are not monsters."

"Not all of us," Knatt said.

"You'll return me? And Devon is there already?"

"Yes. But we will erase your memories of this place. In our experience, few human minds are prepared to understand what you will learn while you are here."

"Were Devon's memories erased?"

"No."

"And if I die, my mind switches back to my real body? My home body? With all my memories intact?"

"As far as we know, yes."

"What happens to the original mind? The one that was in here before I was? The one that's borrowing me in my time?"

"We do not know. It might expire as if it were killed while in its host body. It might be trapped in between. Nobody has found an answer to that riddle though we have searched for eons."

Abel thought about that as the Yithians who were in their own bodies spoke in

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muted whispers. A mind forever in the space between sleep and wakefulness, fully aware but unable to act in any way, living without input or distraction forever.

Until that moment, he hadn't known that a Yithian body could shudder.

A hollow boom echoed through the chamber, the same battering as before. They had been found. Tnoth and Knatt glided toward the entrance, Knatt carrying a strange lighting rifle like the one that had killed Devon.

"Do we run?" Abel asked.

"Nowhere to run to," Knatt said.

The door exploded inward under a pressure wave that threw Abel tumbling backward. Lightning flashed through the room, then a bright light that froze his mind and his body. He could do nothing as he slammed first into a wall, then to the ground.

When he could move again, Abel's alien body lay on the floor next to Arlington Bowles'. He heard no sounds of combat, just the groans of Tnoth and the others and the shouted orders of who were evidently their captors. He shifted from a sharp pain beneath him and found Knatt's weapon. Knatt himself was in two pieces, one of them draped across the part of Arlington Bowles that would have been legs on a human being.

"Hey, Arlington," Abel whispered. The alien body spoke louder than he intended, but the sound faded beneath Tnoth's screams of pain. Whatever kind of opponent had broken in, they were torturing the prisoners.

"Yes?"

"You're from the future? From my future?"

"Yes."

"You might have heard, there's a war on. Do we win?"

"That depends. Which side were you on?"

"I'll have to think about that."

Arlington Bowles nodded his alien head once. Somewhere behind them, the screams of the wounded echoed in the long, low space. Abel gripped the trigger and lightning splashed across the floor to consume Arlington utterly. When the being was burned to ash, Abel rolled to his back and turned the weapon on himself.

It burned.



The burning vanished and Abel felt nothing. He saw nothing, heard nothing, smelled nothing, experienced nothing but his own thoughts. In their absence, he wondered if Tnoth had misunderstood. If minds moved at the speed of light, he would be *between* for four hundred million years before he once again experienced...anything. Without a body to starve or age, or to destroy on his own, he

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had no choice but to experience every instant. With no watch or clock, no cycle of night or day, he wouldn't even know how long he had drifted. For the second time in his life, he wanted to scream but had no means of doing so.

For the rest of his life, he would never know how long his mind moved, terrified, through the dark that was the utter absence of light and heat, but no experience that followed lasted a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of that time.

His eyes opened to find evening light slanting through the windows of his apartment. For long moments, Abel just lay in his bed revelling in his own senses. The comforting sounds of Cairo drifted up from the streets below, along with their familiar reek. Even the suffocating heat of the desert was a balm.

"Devon!" Abel shouted, desperate to see his friend after...after what? A dream? A hallucination? Had Devon stayed awake, filling the room with whatever he had smoked the night before?

Devon didn't answer. Above the buzz of the city outside, the only noise was a rhythmic creaking.

Abel rolled to his feet and saw immediately the source of the sound: Devon. The Aussie had looped his belt over the beam in the kitchen and hung by his neck. He was naked, and had scratched a web of triangles into the flesh of his belly and arms. The sight nauseated Abel just as it had when he saw them on the walls of the great city. Their antique table lay on its side below Devon's feet, one edge splintered from the impact of its fall.

"Not a dream," Abel whispered. His legs went weak and he collapsed to sit splay-legged on the soft rugs he and Devon had collected together.

The apartment felt quiet, insulated from the sounds of the living city surrounding it, as Abel sat staring at his dead friend. When a sound penetrated the silence, Abel had no idea how much time had passed.

Somebody knocked on the door. This wasn't a battering ram, or the quiet rap of a guest. It was the authoritative, insistent knock of a *shorta* who won't go away until the door is opened. Abel pushed himself onto shaking legs, crossed the small room and opened it.

Springbok stood on the other side. He pushed past Abel to stand at the centre of the room. A line of uniformed police filed in behind him.

"Abel, you and..." Springbok glanced at Devon, still swinging in the kitchen, "Ah, regrettably I see it's now just you who is under arrest for the theft of military goods from forward depot Isinglass." He grabbed Abel with one hand and swung him face-first into the nearest wall, pressing him there while using his free hand to pat him down.

With his chin resting on Abel's shoulder, Springbok whispered "Don't panic, Abel. Come quietly and everything will work out." He punctuated the statement with a sharp punch to Abel's kidney. "Sorry. Have to sell it."

The man stepped away from Abel and ran one finger along the splintered

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section of the table. "Pity," he said without a glance at the body swinging just above his head.

Abel felt the impulse to run, but he couldn't gather himself sufficiently to form any kind of escape plan. Instead, he stood and watched Devon swing from the ceiling. His eyes tracked the nauseating triangular patterns in his friend's flesh until a burlap sack pulled over his own head blocked them from view.

Rough hands led Abel blind down the creaking stairs and shoved him into a vehicle. This journey in the dark felt hours long, but was a blink of an eye compared to his time in the void. When it ended, more hands rushed him across sand, then concrete and then pushed him into a chair. Somebody pulled the hood off his head.

Abel blinked against a sudden, harsh light blazing directly into his face. He could make out a wide, meticulously clean space. A shadow approached him through the glare. When it passed in front of the light, Abel recognized the figure: the Yellow Man.

"Abel....Roxa..." the Yellow Man's voice was slow and deep, the words spaced as though he were remembering each with difficulty. "I...have...questions...for...you."

He leaned his face so close Abel could feel his breath. His eyes were deep and very old. ✘



Concerning Rudolf Hess, Mr. Buckle and the Book

By Paul Cunliffe

PART ONE

IN May 1941, on a full moon and with the conjunction of six planets in the constellation of Taurus, Hitler's Deputy *Führer*, Rudolf Hess, took off from an airfield in Augsburg-Haunstetten in his modified *Messerschmitt Bf 110*. He was a superstitious sort, believed the rare astrological alignment a good omen, but he was also a cautious fellow, so he took a twenty minute detour at the Frisian Islands to avoid British radar before beginning his trip across the North Sea. His ultimate destination was Scotland. His intention was to conduct peace talks with the 14th Duke of Hamilton, to avoid a war on two fronts via a ceasefire with the British. After parachuting down into a field, he was discovered by a ploughman who handed him to the Home Guard who then delivered him to the police. Arrested and interrogated by British Intelligence he was deemed unsound of mind, of no real use for information or propagandist purposes. He spent his days in a prison camp until, after two suicide attempts, he was transferred to a psychiatric hospital in Wales—the locals called him the Kaiser of Abbergavenny—and there he stayed until the end of the war when he was shipped off to Nuremburg and sentenced to life imprisonment for war-crimes.

That is what the history books will tell you about Hitler's Deputy *Führer*, Rudolf Hess. I am yet to come across one that so much as hints at the truth. None ever mentions his visit to the Savoy Hotel in the winter of 1942, for example, and they certainly don't recount how he met his end on the banks of a forgotten river beneath the streets of London.

Yet I know these things happened, for I witnessed them with my own eyes.



It began for me, not with that beetle-browed rogue Hess, but with a tall grey man by the name of Mr Buckle and that blasted book. I was interred myself at the time, a resident of HMP Pentonville in North London, held on charge of looting. Three months into my two year sentence, I was just about settling in at the 'Ville' when I was rudely awoken one morning, handcuffed and escorted from my cell to the Governor's office. The Governor was nowhere to be seen. A lean balding man wearing round spectacles and clad head to toe in grey was sitting in the Governor's chair, smoking a Dunhill cigarette. He had set his pristine, felt homburg on the desk and had a file of papers and a notepad in front of him. The guard unfastened my cuffs, ushered me inside and closed the door, leaving me alone with the grey man who looked up, though did not stand to greet me.

"Good morning," he said, his voice a charmless baritone with the monotonous delivery of a Tannoy announcement. "My name is Mr Buckle and I am with the War Office. I'd like to ask you some questions. Please take a seat. Smoke?" He opened his cigarette case and, although I did not smoke, I took three and put them in my shirt pocket. Tobacco was in short supply on C Wing.

"What sort of questions?" I asked, lowering myself into the chair opposite him. Buckle did not answer, instead he set his spectacles on the end of his nose, opened the file and peered down at the various papers disarranged in front of him.

"You are the one they call Worth, yes? The thief? Cracksman, pick-pocket, cat-burglar, con-man," he took a breath, then added, "Forger, black-marketeer, smuggler?"

"Amongst other things, yes," I said. I was trying to lighten the mood but the gloomy fellow did not seem to possess a sense of humour. He raised an impatient eyebrow at me.

"Yes," I confirmed. "I'm James Worth. You have your man."

"Good." He locked his pale eyes on to mine, trying to get the measure of me, and I returned the favour. He was an odd looking chap, a thinly drawn charcoal line of a man and a miserable looking one at that, with a too-thin face and a fine brittle blade of a nose. His overall greyness was underscored by his pallid complexion, faded white shirt and the narrow pinstripe of his woollen suit. He eyed me with the sort of vague disdain men of his type, the sort who are born into this world with a touch of hoarfrost about their hearts, reserve for those they think well beneath them.

"They say you're the best in the business," he said now, "that there is not a door on this earth that you can not open."

I felt a swell of pride, my reputation having preceded me. "Come now," I said. "Only an arrogant prig would claim such a thing. I'm sure there are many doors that I can not open. I'm yet to come across one, mind."

Concerning Rudolf Hess, Mr. Buckle and the Book

Buckle nodded, looked back down at his papers, scribbled in his notepad.

I knew precisely what he was thinking. If I were so capable, if there truly were no door that I could not open, why on earth was I wasting my days away locked up in Pentonville? Why not simply open my cell door and escape? The truth, as unlikely as it might sound, was that I had drawn the attention of some dangerous men on the outside and had decided to remove myself from their radar for a time, to let the dust settle. Prison was not so bad, and with rationing in full force, I ate almost as well as a resident of the 'Ville' as I had a free man.

I did not share this information with Buckle, would not give him the satisfaction of explaining myself, and he did not seem to care. He continued looking through his papers for a time then suddenly jerked his head up.

"Tell me about yourself, Worth," he said. "How did you end up here?"

I was enjoying being out of my cell, enjoying being sat in the airy Governor's office and did not wish it to come to an end too soon, so I thought to string him along with a good yarn.

"It is a most fascinating story," I said. "You see, my father was an American conjurer who travelled all over the world performing for the rich and famous. I could name him, I *could* name him, Mr Buckle, but I won't. It wouldn't be fair. He's an old man now and the shock of finding out he has a son so late in his life, well, it could finish him off. He's long since ceased performing, but back in the day he was one of the world's most famous entertainers and during one of his many tours of England he met my mother. She was a talented seamstress, employed backstage at the Hippodrome, and they say she was one of the most beautiful women in the whole of London. Well, as you might expect, she caught my father's eye and he soon took her on as his assistant and they quickly fell in love. Now, my father's signature trick was a spectacular feat of escapology. My mother would first fasten him into a straitjacket after which he'd be covered from head to toe in a canvas sack, hoisted upside down and suspended on a rope above the audience, as high as the theatre would allow. The rope would then be set on fire and he would have to escape from the straitjacket before the rope burnt through, else fall to his death. Of course, the trick would always proceed without issue and at the very point the rope broke the bottom of the sack would open, confetti would rain down on the audience below and my father would appear from some impossible location in the theatre, the upper balcony or the stalls, unharmed and triumphant to great applause and acclaim. At least, that was how it worked until one fateful night in 1904, at the Palace Theatre in Halifax, when something went wrong with the straitjacket. Mother always insisted a rival must have tampered with it, for whatever reason as soon as father was hoisted up into the air she knew instinctively something was wrong. The escape was not proceeding at the required pace. She hurried up to the balcony but it was too late to prevent the rope being set on fire and she had to watch him struggle and count the minutes, praying to God that

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he could escape before falling to his death. Then she had a sudden brainwave. She called out to him and told him to swing his body, to set himself in motion like a pendulum, so that she might grab hold of him and pull him safety. This he did, rocking his body back and forth while continuing his escape. At the crucial moment, just as the rope burnt through, he freed one arm from the straitjacket, swung his body towards the balcony and my mother reached out and caught his hand. She was not a big women, not especially strong, but her love for him gave her the strength she needed and she gripped his hand and held his entire weight just long enough for..."

"What nonsense," said Buckle, interrupting me before I had got to the real meat of the story.

"It is the truth I tell you, every word of it!"

Buckle sighed. "I'm not sure it is physically possible for you to tell the truth, Worth." He tapped the file in front of him. "Your early years are well documented. It says here you were born in a lodging house in Dorset Street. Father unknown. Mother... known to all and sundry."

I hated the man from thereon in. There was no humour to the fellow, no warmth.

"Drop the act," he told me. "I want to know about you stealing from the secret stores."

At this my throat closed, sweat sprouted across my shoulders and my heart began to hammer in my chest, for this was the last thing I had expected to hear from him.

You see, the Zeppelin raids of 1914–17 had shown air-combat to be the future of warfare. If another conflict broke out it would not just be fought on the front lines, but through bombs and rockets aimed at our cities, and this meant danger for Britain, for her people of course, but also her buildings and their contents. Plans were drawn up to ship the nation's art treasures away from the capital and at the outbreak of war there was no hesitation. The National Gallery, the V&A, the Tate, the National Archives, the British Museum; each packed their exhibits into crates and shipped them off under cover of darkness to salt-mines in Wales, to tube-stations deep under the city and to country houses in Northamptonshire, Somerset, Cumberland, Wiltshire.

How did I, a lowly criminal, come to know of this? It may have had something to do with a drunken curator from the National Gallery and a government report that went astray just long enough for a copy to be made. It hardly matters. What matters is that a man such as I, in possession of such knowledge, was only ever likely to do one thing.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're referring to," I said, though my voice cracked as I spoke, betraying me.

"Then let me remind you," said Buckle. "Multiple raids on the nation's art stores

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over a period of four months. Break-ins reported at country houses in Boughton, Drayton, Montacute, Mentmore. Items stolen include paintings, prints, tapestries, manuscripts, ceramics, sculptures, coins and silks. Most have already resurfaced on the continental black market, most likely lost to the country forever, never to be seen on these shores again.”

I had to hand it to the man, it was a fair summary. Nonetheless, I was puzzled. I had been quite certain my involvement in these crimes had gone undetected. I had not once set off an alarm nor disturbed a guard and I was most scrupulous when it came to leaving behind no evidence of my trespassing. My dealings with the black-market were the notable weak-spot. To move such works quickly it was necessary to maintain a wide range of unscrupulous contacts, some evidently more trustworthy than others.

Still, I had spent the last few months smugly satisfied with myself. I had a good amount of money and some unsold works well hidden on the outside and after a few years at the Ville, with the dust long settled, I would be released, safe to recover my fortune.

Now it seemed I was discovered. I foresaw my happy future crumbling down all around me. “You have proof?” I said, my voice as small as a child’s.

Unbelievably the man shook his head. “I hate to say it, but you can rest easy. There is no proof, only hearsay. Though who else could have done it? You said yourself, you’re the best there is.”

No proof! I could hardly believe what I was hearing. It was all I could do not to burst out laughing, for this man Buckle was obviously a mere amateur, here to try his luck and to trick me in to admitting my crimes. Well, he was about to leave disappointed.

“I’ll not be foolish enough to incriminate myself,” I said. “I have nothing more to say on the matter and nothing more to say to you. You can tell your superiors I’ll not play their games. Are we done here?” I moved to rise from my chair but Buckle held up his hand to stop me.

“Amongst the items you stole is a book,” he said. “And it is a book we need back.”

“And what sort of book are you accusing me of stealing?”

“A very old one, in a language you would not understand. It is bound in black leather with iron hasps and was previously held in the stores of the British Museum. It disappeared from Montacute House, in Somerset. Sound familiar?”

I knew immediately the item he was referring to. An ancient looking volume bound in dark leather with no title upon its front, the inside pages covered in an indecipherable scrawl. I had found it packed into a bomb-proof box in the Long Gallery room at Montacute after scaling a drainpipe and gaining access via a skylight in the roof. It had been an unremarkable job and an unimpressive haul given the risks involved.

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“It might sound familiar,” I said.

“And you have not sold this book on? It is still in your possession?”

“It might be.” It was. At least it was securely hidden on the outside. I had grown quite attached to it for some reason, had decided not to sell it, though for the life of me I could not now recall why I had decided to hold on to the dusty old thing.

“I thought as much.” Buckle finally got down to business. “Look, here is our offer. Tell us where the book is and once we have retrieved it you will receive a reduction in your sentence. We’ll halve it, perhaps more. You could be out in less than a year, free to go about your business. As for the other items in your possession, the other things you stole? Well, that’s between you and Scotland Yard and no concern of mine. I only care about the book. Have I made myself clear?”

“Quite,” I said. I eyed him over the Governor’s desk, studied that thin ashen face of his and watched a sheen of sweat appear on his upper lip. I knew then that Mr Buckle from the War Office would do just about anything to get his hands on that old book. A reduction in my sentence by a year? Why, it was a small thing compared to the longing I could see in his eyes.

“Tell me,” I said, “on whose authority do you act, that you can excuse the Governor of this prison from his own office, meet with an inmate and offer to halve his sentence?”

“My authority comes from the very top.”

The ‘very top’? Why, that could have meant almost anything. The head of the War Office? British Intelligence? Churchill himself?

“In that case I want a full pardon,” I announced. “I want to be a free man before the day is out. I want a new pair of shoes from Foster and Son off Jermyn Street, and a new suit from Poole and Locks on Saville Row. I want a room at the Savoy, for a week, specifically the east facing Luxury King’s Suite. And I want room service, at your expense. I get all that, and you get your book. I’ll hand the blasted thing over to you myself.”



I did not expect him to say yes, but six hours later the deal was done and Buckle was standing by the open window in the Luxury King Suite at the Savoy, puffing away on a Dunhill and blowing streams of pale smoke out into the twilight. It was his fifth in the last hour. He had been trying his best not to show his impatience but he was failing miserably at it. Now he looked out over the city, followed the path of the Thames as it wound its way beneath the barrage balloons grazing amidst the low cloud, watched the lights winking out either side of the bridges at Waterloo... Blackfriars... Southwark... He sighed loudly then shut the window and pulled the heavy blackout curtains closed.

Behind him I tried not to smile too broadly. I was at a table covered from end

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to end in empty bowls and plates, collectively holding the remnants of the many dishes I had ordered on room service. Bones and juices, smears of gravy and gristle lay everywhere. I hadn't eaten off ration in what felt like forever and I was making the most of it. I sucked the marrow from a pork-chop, dropped the remains on my plate. Buckle turned at the rattle of bone on china, his pale eyes wide and hopeful.

"Now?" he said.

"Soon." I pointed to the remainder of my meal and smirked my apology.

Upon my release I had offered to retrieve the book and deliver it to him later that day at a location of his choosing, but he had refused to let me out of his sight. He would be with me every step of the way until the book was in his hands, so I had decided to delay that moment for the sport of it, and because he had been mean about by mother and had denied my father was a great conjurer. I was delighting in how frustrated the wait was making him, and in having control over this thin grey man from the War Office. I had my suit, my new shoes, a very full stomach and my suite at one of London's finest hotels. Surrounded by the plush furnishings, the giant soft bed, the huge fitted wardrobe and the Regency chairs, I was beginning to feel like a free man again.

"Come on, Buckle," I said, as I watched him set his head in his hands. "It's not so bad is it? Here, have a pork-chop. It might cheer you up."

"No, thank you," he said. His shoulders slumped then he stalked over to the sideboard, poured himself a generous measure from an expensive looking decanter of brandy and swallowed the lot down in two gulps.

"War Office, eh?" I said. "Let me guess, not fit enough for active service? Sickly child, were you? Dodgy ticker, I bet."

He set the empty glass down, poured himself another. "I do important work, Worth," he said. "Unlike some draft-dodging thieves I could mention."

Like I said, there was no warmth or humour to the man.

"I'll have you know, I'm a pacifist," I told him. "I'm a C.O., category A, exempt from all military service."

"Conchie are you?" he said. "And who, I wonder, did you have to bribe for that privilege?"

"Bribe? I bribed no-one. I stood before a tribunal in Fulham. It was all official. You can check you files if you don't believe me. I don't agree with violence. And I especially don't agree with the working man fighting the wars of the upper classes. Always my sort first over the top, eh Buckle? Your sort tend to come a little later."

"Oh come now," he said. "You're a criminal, Worth. Violence and crime go hand in hand. You mean to tell me, in all the robberies you've been involved in, you've never knocked a security guard unconscious? Never fired a gun at a pursuing bobby?"

"Absolutely not. I'm an artist, Buckle, not some common thug."

It happened to be the truth, though a man like Buckle would never understand.

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I was a thief and I operated on the wrong side of the law, but I did not believe in committing violence against my fellow man. And while I had on occasion carried a pistol, it was only for show.

“What rot,” said Buckle. I shrugged, resumed eating and decided I would make him wait another half hour.

Once I had finished the last of the coffee and was beginning to relish the thought of sleeping in the great soft hotel bed, I wiped at the corners of my mouth with my napkin, brushed the crumbs off my new suit, stood-up and made my way to the tall fitted wardrobe in the corner. I opened the doors wide, pushed the hangers out of the way and stepped inside. I could hear Buckle protesting: “Worth, will you please stop messing around. It is time, I tell you. We can wait no longer. If we are going to get to this hiding place of yours tonight, then we must leave now...”

I examined the rear panel of the wardrobe, ran my fingers over the wood until I felt the faintest of ledges, whereupon I dug in my fingernails and pulled. A door, around a foot square in size, swung inwards on a set of hidden hinges.

“Worth, for God’s sake man. Come out of there!”

Reaching an arm through the little hatch I felt around in the darkness beyond, hoping to God that my hiding place had not been discovered. It had not. My fingertips grazed brown paper and a moment later I had hoisted the thing up from the depths.

“Worth, this is your last chance...”

I emerged triumphant from inside the wardrobe, threw the package down onto the bed where it bounced twice and flipped over on to its back.

“There’s your blasted book,” I said.



Buckle did not immediately approach the package, a large dark rectangle with one curved edge wrapped in brown paper. He eyed it fearfully, took a step forward, reached out to take it then stopped himself, stepped back.

“You’re quite certain this is it?” he said. He shot me a withering look, as if he had just remembered who he was dealing with.

“It is the book. The book I took from Montacute House. Look for yourself.”

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose I should.” Steeling himself, he strode over to the bed and picked up the package, plucked at the corner of the brown paper and tore off first a strip then the whole lot. The book tumbled out from within its wrapping and thumped down on to the blankets.

To me it looked completely innocuous; an old, rather large volume, bound in black and worn in all the expected places. It may not have looked out of place in a museum, but would also not have looked out of place on a dusty library shelf or

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in a second-hand bookshop. I could not for the life of me recall why I had not sold it on sooner, why I had grown attached to the dirty old thing and decided not to find a buyer for it, but to hide it so I could reclaim it at a later date. Buckle most certainly saw things differently, for he circled around the book as if he found it equally enticing and repellent. He bent down and peered closely at it, prodded it with his finger and withdrew quickly as if he feared the thing might bite.

Eventually he stood. "All right," he said. "Looks genuine enough."

He poured himself another brandy and headed over to the desk and picked up the telephone receiver, dialled a number, then spoke. "Yes, it's me. No... because it's here. Yes, it was in the bloody room the whole time. Because he's a bloody sneak, I expect.... Look, just bring him up will you." He replaced the receiver.

"Bring who up?" I asked, fearing that now Buckle had what he wanted he would go back on his word and I would be shipped back to Pentonville. I half expected the door to burst open and for the police to come charging in. I eyed the window as a possible escape route, tried to remember how many floors up we were.

"Calm yourself," he said. "We need to verify that it is not a fake. I have called in an expert and he will be with us in moments. We shan't keep you for much longer."

Shortly there came a knock at the door. Buckle answered it and ushered in three men. The two at the rear lingered there, falling back into guard positions either side of the doorway and standing sentinel, backs straight, greatcoats bulging with either billy clubs or small arms. One of them had an attaché case dangling by his side.

"This is Mr Heston," Buckle said, and the third man stepped forward. He was average looking in all respects, distinguished only by his heavy brow and his sad eyes with which he spared me the briefest of glances before heading straight for the book. He struck me as somehow familiar from the moment I laid eyes on him. I tried to place the name. Heston? Heston? Where had I heard that name before? Then as the fellow passed by me, I recognised him. Six months earlier his picture had been all over the newspapers. It was the Nazi who had fled Germany in the hope of arranging a peace with the British. His name wasn't Heston, it was Hess! Rudolf Hess, Hitler's Deputy, was standing right in front of me in my hotel room! So shocked was I that I was rendered lost for words. I stood watching him, aghast. Whatever was the War Office doing with Rudolf Hess in London, in the Savoy Hotel no less? And why on God's earth were they calling on him to authenticate an ancient book that belonged in the British Museum?

Questions strained at my throat. For the moment I merely watched, fascinated by the scene playing out before me. How to describe the expression that came upon Hess as he got his hands on that old book? It was relief, above all, his eyes half closing, his limbs growing loose in the manner of man who has just arrived on his holidays. He took a seat on the edge of the bed, set the book on his lap, opened the cover and began to turn through the fragile pages.

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He muttered under his breath in German: “*Endlich sind wir wieder zusammen.*” Lord knows what he was saying.

“It is the right one, yes?” said Buckle. “Mr Heston? It is the right one?”

Hess nodded and raised his hand as if to shush an annoying child. He had the book open, a V resting across his knees and as he turned through the pages he stopped here and there to trace along the lines of script spidering from right to left, or, on some pages, bottom to top, reading so quietly that I could barely make out a word at first. His accent came though strongly and I struggled to tell whether he was speaking in German or English, or some curious mixture of the two.

“*Yog-Sothoth iz... ze guardian und iz the key...*” he said. I turned my head so I could hear more clearly. “From all ov time. Ze distant past, ze present day, ze far future, all are *Yog-Sothoth*. He est ze von who knows vere de old ones come and ven dey come. He knows ven zey strode ze earth and that zey are striding the earth still and how ve shall see zem now.”

“Stop this,” said Buckle, caught unawares by this sudden performance. He stepped forward, shook Hess by the shoulders, hissed at him, “Do you hear me? You must stop this now.” Hess did not respond but continued reading at a pace, his volume increasing.

“Zey stride hidden und foul in ze low and ze empty places...”

It was gibberish, clearly. The Nazi really was mad. His hands had begun to shake and he seemed to be at war with himself, unable to stop reading aloud, unable to tear himself away from the text before him.

“Stop this right now!” cried Buckle. He reached down and snapped the book shut where it sat on Hess’s lap and only then did Hess fall silent after emitting a few desperate notes of protest. “...und ze rites howled und howled—*Nein, nein!*”

Buckle pulled on the book but Hess held fast and the two engaged in a curious game of push and shove, each with their arms wrapped around the prize, keen to wrench it from the other’s grasp without damaging it.

“Let go, damn you!” Buckle commanded, and with a heave he yanked the book free sending Hess tumbling backwards onto the bed. Even then the German barely took his eyes from the volume and he still seemed to be mouthing the nonsense words he had been reciting.

The guard clutching the attaché case came forward and together with Buckle they squirreled the book away out of sight. Only then did the spell seem to be broken. Hess slid from the bed, slumped to his knees on the plush carpet and buried his head in his hands. He was weeping gently, not out of any great distress, more out of sheer and overwhelming relief, as might a mother who has just been reunited with her missing child.

“Take him away,” said Buckle and the other guard stepped forward and hooked Hess under the arms and lifted him upright. Buckle held open the door and the two guards left, one carrying Hess and the other carrying the attaché case

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containing the book.

It had been an extraordinary few minutes. The moment they had gone Buckle poured himself another brandy and I found my voice.

“Well, well,” I said. “Hitler’s Deputy *Führer*, in the Savoy. The management would have a fit.”

He looked at me over the rim of his glass. Was he disappointed I had recognised Hess? If so, he did not seem to dwell on it for any great length of time.

“Yes, yes, well, you should be thankful we got to him before he got to you. And be thankful we took that book off your hands.”

“How so?” I could not see how Hess’s mission to forge a peace with the British had anything to do with me. Buckle looked over, debating whether or not to share any of the details. Perhaps the brandy had loosened his tongue for he came and sat on the edge of the bed and began to speak, secrets tumbling from him one after the other.

“Forget what you read in the papers,” he said. “Hess didn’t fly from Germany to arrange a ceasefire. He flew here to get his hands on that book. That was the sole purpose of his mission. You saw how the thing affected him. He’d have killed you for it if he’d have found you.”

It was an extraordinary claim, but after seeing Hess’s reaction, I had every reason to believe him.

“He certainly seemed fond of the bloody thing,” I said. “You had to yank it from his hands. But tell me this: he has been safely held by the authorities since the moment he parachuted down into a field. What possible danger is there now?”

“There will be others, charged with the same mission. And if we could find you, so could they. Now word will get out that the book is no longer in your possession and they’ll have no reason to pursue you. You’ll be safe.”

“You talk as if this were all for my benefit, Buckle.”

He tipped his head. “You might be a common criminal, Worth, but you’re still a British subject.”

I felt touched. Could it be that I had Buckle wrong? Could he really have been acting in my best interests? It was unlikely, but then there was no doubt the book had a strange effect on Hess and if one mad Nazi were so reluctant to give it up, might others be as determined to claim it for themselves? Not that I believed the streets of London to be swarming with Nazis—but fifth-columnists, spies, collaborators and sympathisers were another matter. Whatever the truth, at that exact moment I felt grateful to Buckle and glad to have that blasted book out of my life.

Buckle poured me a brandy and I took it from him and he sat on the other side of the bed. “There are but a handful of copies of that book in the entire world,” he said. “One was held by the British Museum, though never on display. There are two in American universities, another in Buenos Aires. A further was held in Paris at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*. It fell in to Nazi hands during the occupation.”

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“But it is just a book!” I protested. “I am sure they have their hands on thousands of books, and millions of more valuable items.”

“It is not *just* a book. It is a very ancient book. This particular edition dates back to the thirteenth century. A translation of the original *Al Azif*. It is a...” he paused, swallowed, then spoke. “It is a grimoire. Purported to be a book of... magic, for want of a better word.”

I could hardly believe what I was hearing. “Come now, Buckle. You don’t believe in all that nonsense, do you?”

“Of course not, but our enemies do. Top ranking Nazis have the most outrageous beliefs—hidden worlds inside our own, ancient civilizations deep beneath the earth capable of reading your mind and controlling your thoughts. Do you know what they have been trying to do? Tap in to these so-called ancient powers in order to raise the dead. Bring back their slaughtered soldiers. We have had reports of rituals being conducted on the battlefield, incantations over the corpses of the dead, attempts to summon up something ghastly from all that muck and filth. Imagine that. Imagine you could bring back an army of slaughtered soldiers, have them fight for you all over again.”

My head filled with frightful images of the dead rising from their muddy graves and being shot down only to rise again and again. I thought immediately of my father, not in truth a conjurer from America, but a man who had gone to fight at the Somme and never returned home. Better that than to be resurrected a ghoul.

“What a horrible thought.”

“Frightful isn’t it?” said Buckle. “Hess confessed everything, told us his mission. When their own copy of the book, the one they acquired when they occupied Paris, was destroyed by fire—he claims the thing combusted during a particularly fraught ritual—Hess was sent out to find another. Rumour had it the Duke of Hamilton was a Nazi sympathiser, hence the flight to Scotland in the hope the edition from the British Museum could be secured and taken back to Germany so these wicked experiments might resume. Other men were sent to America and Buenos Aires for the same purpose. They thought the book could help them win the war you see.”

“Bloody Nazis,” I said. “They’re insane.”

“Oh, they aren’t the only ones. These are strange times, wouldn’t you say?”

There was a comment I found it impossible to disagree with.

“Anyway,” he continued, “our intelligence service want the thing safely out of harm’s way. Whether there is an iota of truth in these things or not won’t matter one bit once we have the thing destroyed.”

It seemed drastic to me, to destroy an object of such age for the effect it had on one man, who was clearly mad, but if there was no curing someone like that, and if others were likely to have been sent with the same mission, I supposed there was little else that could be done.

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“Oh,” said Buckle, and he rubbed his chest as the brandy began to backfire on him. “I have said too much, far too much.”

“I hardly think it will matter, Buckle,” I said. “It is all bloody nonsense.” I burst out laughing, could not help myself and after a moment the thin grey man joined me.

“Here’s to that,” he said, and he raised his glass, and I mine, and we both drank.

PART TWO

By now you will no doubt have a clear picture of this War Office fellow, Mr Buckle, in your mind, with his neat hat resting on his head, his drab attire and monotonous tone, his fine long nose a perch for his round spectacles. A straight-laced type for certain, with the look of a tax-collector or bank manager about him. Well, scratch this from your mind. Picture a different Mr Buckle from the War Office, one with a thick roll of fat under his chin and a gut straining at the buttons of his shirt. See his filthy shoes, in such a state of disrepair they’re all but falling off his feet, and no homburg on his head but a brown felt porkpie with tufts of unruly hair poking out from under its crown. And his nose, not a long fine blade but a broad burst tomato threaded with veins sitting above a gigantic wiry ginger and silver moustache.

If you are confused now, imagine how I felt, four days after I had handed over the *Al Azif*—or whatever the blasted book was called—when this man shook my hand in his small spotlessly clean office down a series of winding corridors on the fourth floor of the War Office building, on Horse Guards Avenue in Whitehall.

“That’s right,” he said. “I’m Buckle.” He gestured for me to take a seat with one of his plump paws and positioned himself behind a desk that held little more than a daily tear-off calendar that told the wrong date—having been left unattended for a total of five days—and a half full ash-tray.

“I’m afraid you have met my impostor,” he explained. “He must have thought it best to use a real War Office employee’s name, in case anyone put a call in to check. I’m afraid he has been up to no good all about town, ruining my good name,” he paused for comic effect, then added, “that’s my privilege, yes?”

“So he is not from the War Office? Not called Buckle?” The real Buckle shook his head and he opened the desk draw immediately to his left, pulled out a thin folder with his papers inside it and I checked them over. Archibald Hamilton Buckle, Special Operations Department, War Office. Age forty-seven, with a height of five-foot and eight-inches and a weight of two-hundred-and-seventy-pounds. There was even a photograph of him paper-clipped to the top left corner.

I came over quite dizzy. Had I not just taken a seat, I would have certainly needed to.

“Mr Worth? Mr Worth, are you all right?” Buckle was shaking my arm. “Quite

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a shock, I understand. I was rather taken aback myself. The scoundrel has been at it for weeks.”

It was not finding out that the Buckle I had known was an impostor that had so unsettled me. I had not liked the man, had cared nought for him, but this was just the latest revelation of many, and the previous evening revelations had come one after the other, in quick succession, so quick that I had been brought to the very brink of madness. Now the real Buckle stepped outside of his office, returned with a glass of water, and once I had drank it down I felt more like myself, the world no longer canting this way and that, although my hands shook involuntarily and I was finding it tricky to take my eyes off the large man, could not quite take in the deception I had been victim to.

“I can only apologise,” he said. “I have been doing my utmost to track him down, without much luck to date.”

“You may not have to worry about him any longer,” I told him, and he all but gasped. “Do you at least know this other fellow’s true name?” I asked. “Only it might be confusing, with the two of you...”

“Ah, I’m afraid not,” Buckle said. “I suppose it might become... complicated. How about you call me Hamilton? It is my middle name and some call me by it anyway. The other fellow can go by Buckle, for the purposes of your story. Then you can curse him all you like without feeling awkward about it. Does that sound fair?”

If it appears this new Buckle was being overly kind, then you must bear in mind the state I was in. I was frantic, having arrived at the War Office that morning insisting I must be seen. I would not sit still, could not stop myself from shaking and when, after a three hour wait in the lobby, the desk-clerk had finally called my name to let me know someone would now see me, I had let out an involuntary cry and all but jumped out of my chair. I was grateful to this Buckle—Hamilton rather—for his gentle approach. Despite his heaviness, he had a lightness of touch about him. I watched him now as he moved slowly across the room, his footfalls prompting creaks of sympathy from the floorboards. He pulled out a chair nearer the window, as if to give me more room—room to think, room to talk.

I began my story with the abrupt awakening in my cell four days earlier. I recounted my meeting with the impostor Buckle in the Governor’s office back at the Ville, our arrival at the Savoy, the hand over of the book and that curious meeting with the mad Nazi, Rudolf Hess.

“And you’re quite sure it was him?” said Hamilton.

“I was fairly certain. His picture was all over the papers, after all. Besides which, Buckle admitted as much once the others had left. It was him all right.”

“Very well. And what happened next? You drank together, he told you about the origins of the book and then told you it was to be destroyed, and then what?”

I paused, wanting to preface the rest of my story with a disclaimer of sorts. *I’m not mad*, I wanted to say, *however it sounds, I am not mad*. Hamilton must have

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sensed my reluctance for he leaned forward in his chair and laced his fingers together and he gave me a kindly smile, a bravura show of patience.

“Just tell it how it was, old boy,” he said. “Look around you. It is just you and me here. I bet I could tell you a dozen things I have seen that would have you thinking me completely insane.” he spread his arms. “I just want to know the truth, as you see it, then I can get the details down in my report. And I want to help.”

Such kindness. I was pleased to find the real Buckle was nothing like his impostor and I was pleased to finally have someone to tell my story to.

I breathed in deeply, trying to calm myself, and began: “Buckle had one more drink, then he thanked me, put his neat hat back on his head and left. I was tired. I went straight to bed and the following morning, after a blissful night’s sleep between clean cotton sheets, I determined, as if no other option were open to me, that I would—that I *must*—take that blasted book back.”



You will now know me to be a thief and a rogue and I admit as much, so you may not be surprised to hear that I was determined to take back what I had just given up. The puzzle is why it became so crucial for me to do so. I had money, hidden in the city ready for me to reclaim, so it was not the value of the thing that had me intrigued, and it would be a difficult task. It was not as if I could simply break into an office and take it. I would first have to find it and to do that I would have to find Buckle. Added to this, there were dangerous men on the streets, black-market rogues with my name on their lips and flick-knives in their pockets. If I were seen, it would not end well. The whole thing sounded like rather a lot of effort to go to. I had my new suit, my new shoes and a full stomach. Why not just enjoy my week in comfort at the Savoy, then leave town? It was the common-sense thing to do. Would that I had any common sense, or that I had been a better man, an honest man.

It was not so much that I could not help go down the wrong path. You must understand, I have never paused to question the implications of my actions. I relished the challenge of breaking into one place or another, of working out how to take what is not mine. I considered my work my art, and where is the right and wrong when it comes to art? As I say, I awoke, and simply knew that I must take the book back. Where this certainty came from, I can not say. I had not given the blasted thing more than a second’s thought back at the Ville, but now I felt its absence keenly. It was as if... as if I had seen a former lover in the arms of someone new and had switched, in an instant, from not caring for her at all, to wanting her back in my arms more than I had ever wanted anything in my life.

There was another element here I did not like to dwell on, for my mind kept returning to Hess, his eyes wild with some sort of madness, reciting his odd little

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rhymes and looking for all the world as if he'd been hypnotised. Perhaps the book had started to have a similar effect on me? After all, according to Buckle, it was a magic book, or at least a book of magic.

"So," I told Hamilton. "I needed to track him down and retrieve the book before it could be destroyed. First I set about arming myself with the tools of my trade."

"And what tools might these be?"

"My lock-picks, my pistol, some money in case I needed to pay for information—the book was not the only package I had hidden around the city. Also, I changed out of my Saville Row suit into something less conspicuous. Then I turned myself to the matter of how to track down Mr Buckle."

I reasoned it should be just like finding anything else you have lost—your first step should be to return to the last place you saw it. Back at the Savoy I spoke to the receptionist, bemoaning some confusion or other as to whether the account had been settled in advance or not. She pulled out the paperwork and there was Buckle's name and the address of the War Office building in Whitehall. I went there right away and found myself a bench to sit on at a fair distance with a good view of the main entrance, and there I sat for hour upon hour. That evening my patience was rewarded. Buckle emerged, dressed in a charcoal greatcoat and his spotless homburg, carrying a little attaché case. I could hardly believe it had been so easy to find my man. I followed him to Charing Cross Underground Station, through the barriers and down the escalator and he took a turn for the Bakerloo Line. It was late evening, not yet dark, and there were plenty of people around, but Buckle was a tall fellow and I locked my eyes on his hat as he moved through the crowds.

"At the end of the escalator there is a short tunnel that terminates in a T-junction. You go left for the northbound Bakerloo Line and right for southbound." Hamilton nodded, no doubt the station was as familiar to him as it is to most Londoners. "I was but a short way behind Buckle, close enough to keep an eye on him but not so close that he might see me or feel my presence. I watched him turn left for the northbound platform. He was out of sight for barely ten seconds but when I reached the platform he was nowhere to be seen."

"The train had been and gone?"

I shook my head. "The train had not yet arrived. I reasoned my eyes had deceived me. Someone must have crossed my line of sight that looked similar—another tall fellow in a similar hat, perhaps. So, I backtracked, raced to the southbound platform to find it almost empty. He had given me the slip, and I could not for the life of me work out how he had done it. And what frustrated me most of all was that, the following day, exactly the same thing happened."

"Twice in a row? In the same manner?"

"The very same."

Both times I watched Buckle head down the escalator at Charing Cross and

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make for the Bakerloo Line and both times I followed quickly behind him only to find him vanished by the time I reached the platform. I went back to the Savoy each night and racked my brains. How could it have been that he was so easy to track down and yet now he was vanishing in a ten foot long tube tunnel, almost before my eyes?

“On the third day I was determined to solve the mystery. I arrived at the station with half an hour to spare, paid my way through the barrier. I had noticed on previous days a fellow in the Station vestibule collecting for the Auxiliary Fire Service with only an arm-band and a collecting tin to distinguish him. I had decked myself out in similar attire having paid a visit to a costumiers on Shaftsbury Avenue, and I'd also acquired a false moustache and beard while there. I began collecting at the bottom of the escalator with a good view of either direction of the tunnel, the southbound platform to my left and the north to the right.”

“And you were not worried he would recognise you?”

I shook my head. There is no better disguise to adopt than one of someone who is asking for money. Most people do not look them in the eye for fear of being made to feel guilty, and so it was with Buckle.

“At seven o'clock I was there with my collection tin and I saw him coming down the escalator in his coat and hat, carrying his little case. For the sport of it, I rattled the tin right under his nose but he passed on by without lifting his head. He walked a short way up the tunnel though he did not get as far as the platform. Instead he came to a stop at a door that had, for some reason thus far, entirely escaped my notice. He took a key from inside his trouser pocket, unlocked the door, slipped through it and was gone.”

“And why had you not noticed this door before?”

“There were various signs upon it. ‘No Entry’ read one, ‘Maintenance Only’ another, and a plaque in its centre declared it to be ‘Private’. It was the sort of door that goes unnoticed, simply out of habit. I assumed it was a storage cupboard or that it led to the workings of the escalator. Anyway, I removed my A.F.S. armband, pocketed the contents of my collection tin...” Hamilton shot me a look upon hearing this, but I could only shrug in reply. I am a thief, after all. “The door had locked behind him. I would have to pick my way through it. Fortunately, the lock was of a familiar make and model, a key-in-knob type from the Schlage Lock Co, first manufactured in 1928. It had been set into the door at roughly waist height. At heart it was a simple five pin tumbler. I took out my pick and wrench, secreted them in my hands and stood with my back to the door, arms folded behind me.

“To a passer by I probably looked like a bored commuter waiting for the next train, but behind my back I had inserted the pick and wrench into the lock's keyway and had begun the process of manipulating the mechanism to get the lock open. I was out of practice and it was not easy working blind in this way, but any

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lock-picker worth their salt will tell you that picking a lock is a matter of feel and instinct. Being able to see the lock you're trying to pick is rarely of any use once you have your tools in position. It took less than a minute to have everything just so. I lifted the final pin, turned the wrench and the lock's plug rotated freely within its hull. I held the knob still with one hand and turned around, pocketed my tools as I did so. I checked my surroundings, more to ensure no one from the Transport Board was watching, then I turned the knob fully, opened the door and stepped on through."



The first thing I saw on the other side of that door was an oil-lamp set down in the middle of the floor, smearing its amber light over the concrete. In the shadows I could make out another corridor, blocked by an iron gate, a stationary escalator, old signage, and posters from the Transport Board. I had moved from one part of the Underground to the other, and by the looks of it, it was a part that had not seen use in some time. Mice sat hunched here and there like misplaced punctuation marks and started as I approached, scattering in all directions.

"And where was Buckle?" asked Hamilton.

"Gone. There was no sign of him, at least at first. Then, from somewhere deeper in the station, I heard footsteps and someone let fly a curse. 'Damn and bloody blast!' It came from the bottom of the escalator, so I set off in pursuit."

"You aimed to confront him?"

It was a fair question, but I had no real answer. "I'm not sure. The more I think about it... the more I believe I was convinced he either had the book with him or was going to lead me to it. Madness, I know! That case he carried with him looked just like the one they had put the book in at the hotel, but there are a million cases just like it. He had told me the book was to be destroyed and yet I felt quite certain it was still intact. It defies logic, but it seemed to make perfect sense to me at the time."

"You talk as if the thing had some sort of hold on you."

I nodded, for as strange as it seemed the book seemed to have its own gravity about it. Back at the Ville I was free to forget all about it, but after yesterday its pull was strong and right at that moment it was pulling me in the direction of Buckle.

I continued: "I crept through the Underground, following him at some distance, and I soon saw a low light bloom from around a corner, heard the scuffing of feet, another curse, then fading footsteps. Fearing he would get away from me I picked up my pace and ran toward the light. I emerged on to a Tube platform, entirely vacant except for another oil-lamp set out in the open. Presumably Buckle was lighting the way for his return journey, or for someone due to follow him."

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“And he was not on the platform himself?”

“No, though it was not difficult to determine where he had gone. The platform being empty, I knew he must have dropped down onto the tracks, headed into the tunnel. The question was, in which direction? I paced up and down, walked the full length of the platform looking for a further clue, and found it. A light was coming from the eastbound tunnel. It was faint and distant, but most certainly a light. The trail continued. I sat myself down on the edge of the platform and dropped down onto the tracks.”

Recounting my story, it seemed clear to me now that I had been possessed by some kind of madness. Why else would I have climbed down onto the tracks, placed my feet either side of the rails, began a tentative walk towards the thin light? I barely thought twice about it. I moved through the darkness, looking for the next sign, listening for the next sound.

“I had been walking through the tunnel for three or four minutes, doing my damndest not to trip or fall over. Ahead of me somewhere was Buckle, and this source of light, most likely at the next platform along. A breeze suddenly stirred behind me. It felt like a warm hand gently pushing me onwards, and with it there came a gust of fetid air. A scurry of tube-mice ran ahead of me and I turned around, squinted into the dark. Suddenly there came this great banshee wail and two great yellow eyes blinked open. There was a bloody train coming.”

“My God, man!” said Hamilton. “What did you do?”

“What do you think I did? I ran. I ran for my life. I turned back to that pale light, knowing that my only chance was to reach it before the train reached me. I ran as fast and as hard as I ever have, my heart thumping in my chest, my ears ringing, my lungs burning. I thought my own shadow, cast ahead of me by the lights of the train, would be the last thing I ever saw, this shambling giant, arms flailing, legs pumping up and down. I thought I was a gonner for certain. And then, all at once, the light was there. It wasn't coming from the next platform at all, but from a gap in the tunnel wall. It was as if someone had taken a sledge hammer to the brickwork and knocked their way through to the other side, and in this ragged hole there sat an oil lamp. I dived for the space, felt the train barrel past me, all but clip my heels.”

Hamilton was sat with his mouth open. “Good Lord,” was all he could think to say.

“I lay there for a moment, on the ground, catching my breath. I had been but seconds from death. Of course, it was my own stupid fault, but in my head Buckle was to blame. He had taken my book from me, led me down into the Underground, all but tried to kill me. I picked myself up, dusted myself off and determined to catch up with him. I was in a ragged tunnel, could barely stand upright in the cramped space. There was a ladder ahead of me, leading into the depths and I lowered myself down it, found myself in a broad tunnel of red brick

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with a stinking stream running through its middle. The stench hit me right away. I was in the sewers.”

Hamilton looked puzzled. “And even then you did not think to turn back?” he said.

“Well, I was not keen to go crawling through the London sewers. Within seconds of being down there I had been hissed at by a rat as big as any tom-cat I have ever seen. But up ahead I could see a candle had been wedged into a crack in the brick work, so I knew I had not lost the trail. I had come that far and thought I might as well press on. Plus, I wanted my book. So, I set off through the sewers, trying to keep my feet as clear as possible of the sludgy stream that ran between my legs, praying to God that I could keep my footing. Let me tell you, after a few minutes you are so concerned about falling and getting a face full of muck, you almost forget the stench. I pressed on as quickly as I dared. Every fifty yards or so there’d be a candle wedged in the brickwork, flickering in the stinking breeze and guiding me onwards, and again at each junction, so that I was never entirely in the darkness and always knew which way to go next.

“How far under ground I had gone, how far I had travelled at all, I could not say. I knew that I had not long since left Charing Cross Station and yet at the same time I seemed to walk for hours. I suppose it was the effect of having no particular landmarks to judge my progress by, other than the lights, and every tunnel looked identical to the last. After a time, I thought about giving up, about turning back, but by then it seemed I was just as likely to find my exit around the next corner as back the way I had come, so I pressed on. And eventually, it came to an end. I turned the corner and was struck by a sight so surreal that I would never have believed it if I had not witnessed it with my own eyes.”

I came to a stop in my recounting of events, breathless. It was distressing to relive the previous night. I had bathed three times in the bathroom suite at the Savoy and had the clothes I had been wearing taken away to be burned, but still the stink of the sewers filled my nostrils and hung around me. It was as if the sewage had permeated my skin, got inside me somehow so that I might never get clean again.

“Can you go on?” said Hamilton.

“Yes,” I said. “Best to get it over with.” I drank the rest of my water to wet my lips and continued.

Directly ahead of me the tunnel I had been following had come to an end, ejecting its contents out into a broad pool of cloudy filth, a full fifteen or twenty foot across, that sat bubbling and gurgling some distance below me. I held my nose, moved forward to better view the strange structure I had arrived at. It was a large and well lit chamber, some sort of hub where multiple inlets came to dump their waste in waterfall after waterfall of sewage. I thought of arteries feeding into a heart, carrying filth rather than blood. What organism might be sustained by

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such a thing, other than perhaps the city itself?

Around the perimeter walls were many other tunnels of different sizes, some as tall as a man and some no more than a foot wide, though each was pouring its contents out into the main pool, some in thin gurgling streams and others in rushing torrents. From the broadest of these inlets there came a steady flow of relatively clear looking water.

Hamilton interjected. "One of the lost rivers of London perhaps? Paved over years ago. Some were incorporated into Bazalgette's sewer system."

Perhaps it was. I traced its passage, saw that across from me it divided into two separate streams and at this division, a sort of sandbank of foul matter had gathered and on this bank stood five figures, each dressed in a white robe. The bottom of their robes were caked in brown filth, but the upper parts were clean and they stood out well enough for behind them they had arranged a number of lanterns and candles so that their giant shadows were cast up on the brick walls. They had organised themselves in a rough semi-circle and the man stood closest to the water was holding a book in his hands—*my book*—and he held it high and began to read aloud. It was not easy to hear him over the noise of the flowing river and sewage but his words were carried to me on a stinking breeze. '... ze air resounds with zer voices und ze mountains rumble wiv zer consciousness und zey lie beneath ze seaz and ze cities. In ze cold vastes, in ze vrozen city zey shall know zem, in ze tower und beyond ze seal, below ze foulness ye shall know zem!'

I recognised his voice. There could be no doubt about it. It was Hess, reading from the book in the same way he had back at my room at the Savoy. Only this time Buckle was not attempting to stop him, instead the thin grey man was stood at his shoulder and as Hess read, Buckle and the others took up a chant, a rhythmic sort of chorus: 'Yog-Sothoth is the key... hail Yog-Sothoth... Yog-Sothoth is the key... hail Yog-Sothoth.'

"It was a most peculiar sight. I could not immediately piece together what I was seeing, for here was Buckle, the man from the War Office, who had secured my release and who had done all he could to get his hands on the book, and here was Hess, a Nazi who was supposed to be locked up. The two of them were beneath the streets of London, plainly engaged in some sort of ritual and plainly in league with each other. That display back at the Savoy had been a sham from start to finish. God knows who Buckle really was or what these men were trying to achieve but... it did not sit well with me."

"You were... frightened by what you were seeing?" asked Hamilton.

"Had I believed in superstition and nonsense I might well have been, but I did not believe. It was not the occult aspect of what I was witness to that concerned me. It was the fact that Hess was here, that he and Buckle where working together. They were spies, collaborators, fifth columnists—call them what you will. Hess was at their lead, and this could only be a bad thing. I knew I had to tell somebody,

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to alert the police or the Home Guard. And I turned around intending to just this, but at that moment events took... an unexpected turn. There came... a sound.”

“What sort of sound?”

“A rumble. A grunt. Felt as much as heard. Like the noise a stomach makes when it is hungry, only a million times louder. It was the deepest sound I have ever heard. My insides turned to water. My brain rattled within my skull, my knees gave way and I fell to all fours, only just managing to avoid plunging face first into the flowing sewage. A shower of dust fell from the tunnel roof onto my back and shoulders and from my elevated view of the chamber I watched the pool of filth begin to shift and move. I pulled myself to my feet, observed the scene more closely. The five men had been shaken into disarray but were regaining their footing. Hess, stood at the front, his feet sunk deep in the sewage, with a distinct look of triumph on his face. He resumed his reading, picked up the volume. ‘Man rules now where zey ruled vonce; zey shall soon rule vere man rules now!’ And behind him the men resumed their chanting. “*Yog-Sothoth is the key... Hail Yog-Sothoth!*” And the pool of sewage below began to move in response to their words, to turn and swirl. Eddies of filth spiralled at the edges then combined, moved to the centre until the whole mass was rotating in one awful giant whirlpool. A movement suddenly broke the surface of the water, a suggestion of something large and monstrous swimming beneath the surface. I stared on in amazement, but soon wished I had not for the spinning sewage seemed to draw me in, not physically you understand... more that my entire being seemed to be pulling away from me and travelling down into the never-ending whirl of foulness. I left myself momentarily, followed the spinning water down, down, down, and found that I was not floating in a pool beneath the city, but was orbiting above it, above everything. Hess’s words were no longer nonsense, there was meaning there, a great truth, long forgotten...

“And then came that noise again. I was brought back to myself by a shower of dust and brickwork that fell upon my open eyes and into my gaping mouth. I coughed and spluttered and my eyes streamed with tears. I must be grateful to our old sewers, for who knows what would have happened had that moment of pain not brought be back to myself? Below me, the chanting was reaching a crescendo and I knew for certain then that whatever was happening was going to bring down the roof at the very least, perhaps worse, perhaps the whole city was about to be pulled into that swirling pool.

“In all my life I have only ever acted for my own benefit, have never much cared for doing the right thing for the sake of it. Why, if I can not profit from a situation, I have no interest in it. And yet, stood witness to that scene, with the water rising and the men chanting, I knew I had to do something. What was occurring down in those tunnels, deep beneath the city streets, was not natural. Where it would lead to, I did not dare to think. I knew only that the one person

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who had a chance of stopping it was me. So I did the only thing I could think off. I drew my old pistol from inside my jacket, aimed it directly at Hess, said a brief prayer and pulled the trigger.”

“You meant to kill him?”

“I meant... I meant to stop what was happening, by any means. A great racket filled the chamber, the chanting ceased at once and the group of men tried to dive for cover and locate the origin of the gunshot at the same time. It was Buckle that found me, his eyes locking on to mine and his long arm extending. ‘There!’ he shouted. ‘He’s up there! Kill him!’ And I suppose they would have if they weren’t so rooted to the spot from having stood on that island of filth for too long. Hess and Buckle remained where they were but the others began to loosen themselves from the muck. Would that they were stuck faster, they might well be alive today. As it was, whatever was squirming in the lake of sewage had been agitated now, it seemed to reach maximum velocity and all at once bubble over. A tide of brown matter rose up and swatted at the sandbank like a giant hand. The men at the rear who had been climbing free were dashed against the tunnel walls and swept away in an instant. Buckle and Hess were still firmly rooted where they stood. They raised their hands to cover their faces and both screamed. I watched the book fly from Hess’s hands and disappear, lost beneath the sludge followed by Hess himself, there one moment, gone the next. Buckle was sent spinning into the whirlpool. I watched his body turn in a wide arc, his head go below the filthy waves then resurface, one arm poking into the air defiantly.

“He made two rotations in this fashion, passing near to me both times, a strangled ‘help!’ coming from his lips. I knew he was doomed to drown and in the worst way imaginable. As much as I disliked the man, I was not about to let him die if I could do something about it. I took off my jacket and lay myself down on the tunnel floor, the filth pouring beneath and over me, and I dangled the jacket sleeve out as far as I could. ‘Buckle!’ I shouted. ‘Grab on!’ and on the next rotation, as he passed by, he reached out and miraculously caught hold of the jacket’s sleeve. I braced myself against the tunnel wall, hoping to God the stitching would hold and I began to pull the man in, inch by inch. We were making progress. His body was gradually coming free from the pull of the spinning pool. I felt certain that I was going to save him, and I would have done it too, I would have saved him, had Hess not emerged from the mire, a dead-eyed ghoul right behind Buckle, wordlessly wrapping his arms around Buckle’s middle. Buckle began to panic, to scream: ‘Let me go, Hess! Let go of me!’ But Hess would not. And the weight of the two men was too much and Buckle’s grip loosened and all of a sudden he was gone, sent spinning off into the pool, the two whirling bodies dashed against one of the brick walls with a sickening wet thud before being dragged down into the swirling mass.”



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Back in the little room at the War Office building, the real Buckle added the final lines to his report, the only sound in the room the scratching of his fountain pen against paper. He stabbed a full-stop then set aside his pen and leaned back in his chair, mulling my story over. He stroked at his moustache with thumb and forefinger, pursed his lips and hummed a few notes of sympathetic concern.

“Hmmm... hmmm... hmmm. By the looks of things, you uncovered an enemy conspiracy, right below the streets of the capital. Who would have believed it? I knew my impostor had been up to no good, but this?”

“Then you do not think me mad?”

“Mad?” He turned his face to mine, eyes wide, mouth open, as if the idea were preposterous. “Most certainly not. Just by looking at you I can tell you have witnessed things no man should have to. Clearly you’re traumatised by these events. Now,” he held up one fat finger. “I wasn’t there with you. I can’t validate what you saw with your own eyes, but I am a man with an open mind, so I will not discount it either. I would be a fool to do so. Besides, despite your career history, you speak from the heart. I believe you, old boy. I believe you.”

It was a great relief simply to be believed. Throughout, Buckle had barely found cause to question my account, had seemed to take me at my word from the moment we met. For a thief, a dishonest man who mixes with similar dishonest men, this was something of a new experience. I was touched, could not express how grateful I was. In the end I settled for a brief, “thank you.”

“And how are you feeling now? I note your hands have stopped shaking,” the real Buckle said. I looked down and saw that he was right. My hands were still again.

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose just telling you my story has helped settle something inside of me.”

“A burden shared... yes? I’m glad, old boy. Glad we could help.”

The real Buckle took out a packet of Woodbines, offered me one first and after I had refused, took one himself, lit it and began to puff away.

“So, what happens now?” I said.

“First of all I shall report these events to my superiors at once, and I shall be sure to let them know the part you played in stopping this wicked conspiracy. You have done your duty. Your country owes you a great debt.”

I had not been referring to myself when I had asked my question, rather I had been thinking of the safety of my country and her people. I had interrupted one ritual beneath the city streets, but who was to say there were not others being planned, or in progress at that very moment? Who was to say the sewers were not crawling with Nazis and collaborators? Buckle had told me that other men had been dispatched to America and Argentina to locate the other copies of the book. America, of course, was an ally, and Argentina was officially neutral, but there was every chance the Nazis could get their hands on another copy of the

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Al-Azif eventually.

“There will be an investigation?” I asked. “Evidence will need collecting so my story can be verified, then others can be warned. You’ll send men down there, into the sewers? I should think a full sweep is in order. I will gladly show the way to the ritual site.”

Buckle flapped a hand. “No need,” he said. “I expect all evidence will be gone by now, flushed out into the Thames. No, I’ll put in my report and then we’ll make sure it’s thoroughly looked into. Don’t worry yourself. You have been through quite enough already.”

‘Thoroughly looked into’. How terribly vague, I thought, and I suddenly feared the man might merely be humouring me and that the moment I left the room he would throw the report he had written into the wastepaper bin. Yet there could be no denying he had shown me kindness, ever since I had turned up at the War Office to report one of their own a Nazi collaborator. And he *believed* me, or at least he said he did. The least I could do was explain my concerns to him.

“Mr Buckle,” I said. “Forgive me, but I worry the authorities will not move quickly enough on this. By the time your report arrives with the right person, something terrible might have happened.”

Buckle eased his bulk out from behind his desk to perch on its end and stand over me. He placed a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Let me worry about that, yes?” he said. “It might not seem like it sometimes, but we do know what we’re doing here. Trust me. We take this sort of thing very seriously.” A smile appeared beneath his moustache and I was immediately disarmed. “And what about you?” he continued. “Still aiming to leave the city?”

I had not given the matter much thought since those awful events down in the sewers. I could barely remember my journey back to the surface, had all but blocked it out, and I had only truly come back to myself whilst arguing with the doorman at the Savoy. I could hardly blame the fellow for not letting me in, seeing as I was covered from head to foot in stinking sewage. Once I had managed to get back to my room and once I had scrubbed myself raw and gotten the stench out of my nostrils I had begun to think about telling the authorities about what I had seen. Given my history with the police, I thought the War Office the best bet. So what now, now that the truth was out? It was a most curious thing. I felt a thrill in the pit of my stomach, a flock of hummingbirds taking flight, and it was the same thrill that I had felt many times before when successfully picking a pocket or escaping from the police, only this time I had done something good. I had acted in the interests of others, and it had pleased me to do so. Who would have thought it? As if to test this new way of thinking I realised at that very moment that my fist, buried deep in my pocket, had closed around a handful of coins meant for the Auxiliary Fire Service. I decided I would make it my first order of business, after leaving the War Office building, to hand it back to them.

Dark Tales from the Secret War

"I'm not entirely sure now," I said. "I feel... changed by everything that's happened."

"Changed? In what way, old boy?"

"I can't say for certain, but, do you know, Buckle, I might like to reverse some of the damage I have done in my... career. And most of that damage was caused in this very city."

"That is true," said Buckle, "but you would do more good having rested up for a while. This city, eh? All these bombed out houses. It's enough to depress a man for the rest of his life."

He was right. People already spoke in self congratulatory fashion about the 'spirit of the Blitz', as if, amidst the ruined buildings, the bombed out streets like mouths with missing teeth, the still-standing chimney stacks pointing up to the passing bombers accusingly, there was great good to be found. It was a myth then—and still is now. It was a time when human nature stooped to its lowest, both on the front and at home. Crime was rife. Looting and forgery and fraud and draught-dodging and theft were everywhere. And this is why the smallest moments of kindness; an air-raid sing-a-long or a community working to pull a child from the rubble stood out. They're simply examples of decency from a time when half the world seemed to have forgotten what decency was. But still, in that room at the War Office, a stirring inside of me told me that it didn't have to be that way.

I could go straight for one. I could stop thieving. And I could help, for another.

"I just think, after all that has happened, that I should stay... that I could do some good, given the chance. If we got the word out, if we told people what to look out for and if people knew that the Nazis were operating underground, that they were trying to get hold of ancient books and they were getting into the sewers, then people could help. I could help spread the word. I could talk to people. I'd be happy to do it. The American's and the Argies... well, they'll need the whole thing explaining to them and I could be the right man for the job..."

It seemed to me like the most common sense thing in the world. I had seen what they were capable of first hand, and I had managed to stop them. I could travel the country telling people what to look out for and I could share this information with our allies.

I could do some good for once in my life.

Buckle did not seem to agree. "Listen here," he said. "I'm going to do you a big favour, perhaps the biggest anyone will ever do you in your whole life. Leave this matter alone. Walk away from it, do you understand me? Some things are best forgotten."

"But I can't just forget it," I told him. "After what I saw?"

Buckle shook his head. "Let me put it this way," he said. "You were released from Pentonville by a man impersonating a War Office official, a criminal no

Concerning Rudolf Hess, Mr. Buckle and the Book

less, using forged papers. Now, seeing as you have done the country a great favour we can work to overcome this, but if you start speaking out about what you have seen, if your name gets in the papers, if others start to know of what happened, why, you'll end up back in Pentonville for certain. Don't you see? Your whole story ties you to a series of art thefts on a scale never before seen in this country. All those great works, gone forever. If word of this gets out, you'll be made an example of. No matter what good you intend to do the country, I'll wager they'll want to see you hang for the bad you have done already. So, I say again, leave this matter alone."

Of course, seeing as the original Buckle had been an impostor I technically still belonged in the Ville. Whatever wish I now had to do some good would come to nought if I was sent back there.

"But, Hamilton..." I pleaded.

"Don't worry lad. I'll smooth things over here. Just get yourself away, don't wait around to get yourself in trouble. And as for being good, find some other way. Go somewhere new, contribute to society. Join the Red Cross, the A.F.S., the Home Guard."

I stood and the real Buckle enveloped my hand in his and slapped me on the back and directed me to the door. After so much plain speaking it felt like a rather hurried farewell, as if he was now keen to get rid of me, but it was not this that so disturbed me as I readied to leave. Instead it was the sight of a pristine grey homburg hanging from a hook behind the door that made me stop in my tracks.

"What is it old boy?" Buckle said behind me.

I turned, saw him lean over to snuff out his Woodbine in the half-full ashtray.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing Buckle. Thank you... for all your help."

"Think nothing of it," he said and he came over from his desk and escorted me through the door. "You can get the lift, right there," he said, pointing, and I headed down the long corridor and he watched from his doorway while I called the lift and he only retreated back into his office once I had stepped inside and the lift-doors had closed.



The moment I laid eyes on that homburg hanging behind the door a sense of unease blossomed in my belly and began to grow, to fill me up from the inside so that, by the time the lift was announcing its arrival at the ground-floor with a chime, I was full to the brim with doubt and disbelief.

I was beginning to question everything the 'real' Buckle had told me.

In the grand lobby of the War Office building I spied a water closet and headed for it, locked myself in a cubicle and sat on the lavatory with the seat down trying to gather my thoughts.

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Beyond the fact that the real Buckle had been wearing a tatty brown porkpie hat when I had met him—that homburg meant things were not quite as they seemed. The hat was clearly his impostor's headwear of choice. Coincidence? Maybe, but there was also the desk calendar, left unattended for five days while other parts of the office were spotlessly maintained. In fact, hadn't Buckle himself looked rather out of place in his own office? A gruff and slovenly fellow, with tatty shoes and a great beer belly, out of sorts in the pristine room? And just moments ago, as I was leaving, he had snuffed out his cigarette, a Woodbine, in an ash-tray all but brimming with the twisted butts of spent Dunhills. Another coincidence? Perhaps he was not fussy about which brand he smoked and he switched at whim—but hadn't the old Buckle smoked Dunhills? I was certain his cigarette case had been full of them back in the Governor's office at the Ville. I tried to reason out these matters, but as soon as I had dismissed one element as too trivial to be truly meaningful, another sprang up in its place. How convenient, for example, for Buckle to have papers proving his identity so near to hand at the very moment he needed them? There had not been so much as a second's delay before he had presented precisely the right documents to me—and who has such things to hand the moment they need them? And what of the fact that I had followed the old-Buckle and picked up his trail as he had exited this very building? If he were an impostor, how would he have gained access, and even if he could have, why on earth would he have risked doing so?

No, the 'real' Buckle's story did not add up.

A sinking feeling came over me, for I had come to like, and dare I say it, trust the man a great deal. He had believed me, seemed to care for me even, and now here I was doubting him. Was I being unfair? Had all my years mixing with dishonest men made it impossible for me to trust anyone? I did not think so. It was simply a matter of too many questions left unanswered.

I pondered the matter for a full fifteen minutes then made my decision.

The real Buckle was a decent and patient sort, he had already proven that much. So there were inconsistencies in his story, fine. I would simply ask him about them. I would tell him of my worries and he would undoubtedly explain them away. Might the hat, for example, have been left behind somewhere by his impostor and claimed as evidence? Or suppose the real Buckle had only just moved into his office, was yet to have all his belongings moved in with him? And he might have retrieved his identity papers from the files while I was sat in the building's lobby waiting to be seen.

I left the W.C., returned to the lift and rode it back up to the fourth floor. I wound my way through the dimly lit Whitehall corridors until I arrived back at the door to Buckle's office, and there I stopped, one fist raised ready to knock. The door had been left slightly ajar and there were voices coming from inside the room.

Concerning Rudolf Hess, Mr. Buckle and the Book

Had I only turned back then while I had the chance, I might well have saved myself from the nightmares that followed. As it was, my curiosity got the better of me. I closed one eye, pressed the other against the crack in the door.

There was Buckle, sat back behind his desk with another Woodbine on the go. He was leaning forward, grinning beneath his moustache. He had in his hand an upended bottle of Pol Roger which he was distributing into three glasses arranged in a neat triangle in the centre of the desk.

He finished pouring, picked up his glass and held it aloft.

“Cheers, Mr Buckle,” he said.

“Cheers to you, Mr Buckle,” came a familiar voice in reply.

There were two other men sat opposite him, and my restricted view would not allow me to see their faces directly as much as I tried, but I could make them out well enough by their reflections in the window behind the desk. It was the impostor who had spoken, the old Buckle, he of the grey suit and the fine long nose. He lifted his glass and knocked back the contents, and then from his left came another ‘Cheers’. Glasses were clinked, and the mad Nazi Rudolf Hess knocked back his drink too and he lifted a heavy item from his lap and set it upon the desk with a great thump.

It was but a fleeting glimpse of what was happening in that room, but it chilled me to my core and I did not wait a moment longer. I set off down the corridor at a run, did not take the lift, could not stand the thought of standing there waiting for it to arrive. I took the stairs two, sometimes three at a time, and it is a wonder I made it back to the lobby without breaking my neck. All the while I was shaking my head, trying to dislodge the awful thoughts that were now crowding my mind: there were *two* Buckles, not one; both worked for the War Office; both were in league with the Nazi, Hess. Whatever was going on deep down in the sewers was not for the benefit of the enemy, but for the Allies! And by far the worst of all, old Buckle and mad Hess, two men I had seen pulled down into a great pool of filth and slime, drowned in the worst way imaginable, were still alive, or, more accurately, were alive again. And the wicked book that had made all this possible? The book I had stolen from Montacute House, handed over to Buckle and subsequently watched vanish in that filthy underground river? Why, that book, the *Al Azif*, was back in their hands. And I came to understand, as I ran from under the portico of the War Office building and set my course for Euston, determined not to stop until I was seated on the first available train heading out of the city, that the *Al Azif*, that wicked book, was somehow alive as well. ✘





The Curse of Cthulhu

By Jake Webb

YOU probably won't believe me, reyt, if I tell you. You'll probably think I've gone proper mad, I need to get out more, make some friends, spent too long online, staying up late watching horror movies and smoking dope. I've never smoked dope in my life, pal. Makes you paranoid, that does. And there's enough to be paranoid about without making it worse for yersen. You know what I mean, right? Yeah. So... maybe you will believe me when I tell you what happened.

It were last winter, when it were proper raining all up and down the country, and they found that thing washed up on a riverside in America. Reckon there were things washed up on riversides here an all. It were raining that afternoon in Maths and it'd been raining all day and all day before. Proper solid rain, thick grey sheets of it, and a thick grey fog rolling down from off the moors too. Thick brown rivers rolling the gutters, the rivers in town all brown and boiling—no, I wouldn't be surprised if summat pink and clawed and grinning'd appeared on the high street first thing in morning.

So in Maths, I were doodling in my book like usual, and Mr Wilmarth were explaining summat at the board, and I were doodling, I dunno, like lightning bolts or a skull or a dagger, and like a muppet I got so involved in it I didn't realise Mr W had come over to my desk and were standing over me. He's okay, I suppose, for a teacher, but if he's mardy with you he lets you know about it. I were ready for the usual line about concentrating on my work and Mr W started giving it, but then he stopped, and then there were just a long pause, and I noticed one of the girls across the room staring over at where Mr W were stood behind me, staring as if she'd seen summat alien. I shifted and looked behind me at Mr W. He were

Dark Tales from the Secret War

froze on the spot, breathing carefully through his nose, fists clenched by his side. Teachers look a lot of things, you know, but I've never seen one look scared before.

"Yalreyt sir?" I said.

"That," he said, pointing at my book. "Jordan, what is that?"

I couldn't tell what he were looking at.

"Dunno sir," I said. "Just—er—a picture—"

He grabbed my book, tore out the page, folded it and put it inside his jacket. He glanced around the room, then went to the window and looked out. Still bouncing it down. Just the outside of the school, the road, the hills going down to town, hills other side of the city, distant moors of the peak—

"Stay after class Jordan," Mr W told me, and went back to the board. He's like the oldest teacher at the school. Reckon he must be sixty at least—he'll probably retire soon. Wears a grey tweed jacket and he's got a sharp grey beard and thin grey glasses. If you say summat daft he looks over the top of them at you and says nowt but makes you feel the size of summat on a pinhead. Year 7s are scared of him. Even the lads in my year, Year 11, don't backchat him. But like I say, now he looked scared, and I reckon that scared us, and when the bell went—end of lesson, end of day—everyone shuffled out, whispering, and glancing at Mr W. I stayed where I were. Mr W were sat at his desk, rubbing the front of his beard and gazing out the window. Then he glanced up. The door were open and he told me to close it. I did, and stood near his desk, waiting. Mr W got out the page of my book and spread it on the desk in front of him.

"Now," he said. "This here—this creature. What is it?"

Doodle of some alien or other, thing with wings and tentacles sitting on a rock—

"Dunno sir," I said. "Honest. Things just come into my head. You know I don't always get Maths—I drift off—I mean—"

He waved a hand. "That's not important. What's important is this. Are you telling me you don't know what it is, this thing you've drawn?"

"No sir. No idea. It's just a doodle."

"Have you ever drawn anything like it before?"

"Dunno. How—"

"Listen to me," he said, giving me that look. "Think. It's a fairly elaborate sketch, don't you think? More detailed than the usual nonsense. Look at it. Seems to me if you'd seen it before, you'd know. You're not stupid, Jordan."

"Suppose," I said, but really I didn't like his tone, and he were starting to freak me out.

"Suppose isn't good enough. Listen to me. I need you to look through your sketchbook—on your computer, too—do it tonight. Do you understand? As soon as you get home. Don't talk to anyone about this. If you find any more images like this one, bring it to me. Wait—"

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And he did summat I weren't expecting. He pulled the plastic liner out of the bin, grabbed the page off the desk, pulled a Zippo lighter from his jacket, and set light to the page. He let it burn—let the image of the alien burn—and dropped it in the bin, where it smouldered away. Did all this saying nowt. Then he looked up at me. He's gone mad, I were thinking. Proper mad. What the hell?

"That's what you need to do," he told me. "If you find any other images like that one, destroy it. Burn it. If it's on your computer—well, delete it, and then empty the recycle bin. Do you understand? This is important. That image is—well—it's—" He stopped, took a deep breath. "Never mind. You destroy any more like it, then see me tomorrow. See me anyway, even if you didn't find any more like it. This is important. Do you understand?"



I told him I did understand, just so I could get the hell out of there. Freaking me out, like I say. All way home I were thinking, Okay, do I see the principal about it? Mr Wilmarth's gone nuts, ranting about destroying images, setting fire to stuff in the classroom? It were proper strange. But the principal weren't a decent bloke—all us reckoned none of the teachers liked him. And I suppose what you need to know is there were no one at home I could ask about it.

Mum were in her chair as usual, yellow blanket over her knees, curtains drawn—well, it were still belting it down outside, but she'd've drawn the curtains even if it were dead sunny and nice. She were listening to her record as usual too, and the photo of her and dad were looking down on us from the shelf. I made mum her tea and washed the pots and then went to my room and sat at my desk thinking. Then I got my sketchbook—it were on the desk, ready for art in the morning—and flipped through it. Couldn't see any sketches of winged, tentacled creatures sat on rocks, rocks carved with weird hieroglyphics. But that weren't the only sketchbook I had.

There were a knock at the door then. I looked up. We hardly ever had visitors. And if we did, I knew they were coming.

I went downstairs. The door to the front room were open—I could hear the needle scratching at the end of mum's record—so I closed it, and went to the front door. Opened it, and there on the doorstep were two men. It were still raining, and the shoulders of their raincoats and the brims of their hats were damp, and there were a shiny black car on the road, third man at the wheel, watching. One of the men were taller and broader than the other, and he stood a little in front, and he said "Good afternoon," in this flat southern accent. "Jordan Turner?"

"Er—yeah," I said.

"Do you mind if we come in? It's a little wet out here."

"What's this?" I said. "Who are you?"

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He smiled, flashed some sort of ID badge at me. “LEA,” he said. “We’d just like to ask you a few questions—”

“What sort of questions?”

But he were bigger than me, and before I knew it, he were stepping past me, into the hall, the other bloke following.

“Wait a minute,” I said. The rain were coming in, and I closed the door. I turned and they were looking around, not that there’s much to see in our house.

“Hang on,” I said. “You can’t just—”

“A cup of tea would be fine,” the taller man said. “Black. My colleague will have his black, too.”

He smiled. It weren’t a friendly smile.

The smaller one hadn’t said anything. He were looking at the closed door to the front room. I didn’t want them disturbing mum, but in the end they showed themselves down to the kitchen. I followed, and put the kettle on. They were still looking around, as if for something in particular. The smaller one’s eyes fell on the single plate and pair of cutlery on the draining board. He glanced at the other one, nodded, and wrote something in a notebook.

I gave them the black tea, and they sipped it noisily, and the taller one made a satisfied noise—‘Aaah.’ He set the mug down carelessly and tea slopped out on the side. He ignored this, and took off his hat—thin sandy hair, which he raked through with a big hand, and ugly acne scars on his forehead—and looked right at me: “Now. Questions, as I said.”



They asked me a whole load of questions, like my date of birth, and where dad were, stuff about mum, where I went to school. I lied and fudged every one. I didn’t know who these men were, but I didn’t like them, and the only thing that stopped me calling the police were this uneasy sense that it somehow wouldn’t end well. They even went into the front room, where mum were asleep now, and I thought they’d wake her up and quiz her too, but they didn’t. The smaller one picked up the photo of mum and dad—it were from before I were born, when dad were still around—and looked at it for a long time, then set the photo down again.

Finally they left.

“Well, thanks for your cooperation,” the taller one said. “And for the black tea.”

The other one touched the brim of his hat.

I made double sure I’d locked all the doors and windows that night. I got mum settled down and pulled the yellow blanket over her, and went to bed mesen. But I couldn’t sleep. A slice of moonlight came in past the blind and outside somewhere in the neighbourhood a dog barked and barked.

The Curse of Cthulhu



In't morning it were still pelting it down, and I set off for school with my hood up and boots on. There were some lass hanging around end of the road, fit lass in tight jeans and boots like mine and a big yellow anorak. "Ayup," she said as I passed.

I glanced back. "Ayup."

"Keep walking," she said.

I did. Said nowt else.

"See you had some visitors last night," she said.

Now I stopped. "Eh?"

"I told you to keep walking."

We walked. "Goons in macs and trilbys?" she said. "Black car?"

As she said that, a black car passed on the other side of the road. I weren't sure if it were same one, mind—

"Jesus," the girl said. "Keep walking."

"Who are they?" I asked her.

"Don't know," she said. "But they've been to see me twice now, and they've been hanging round the whole city ever since this rain started. I went up to Firth Park, and they're round there too. Or others like them."

"Maybe there's a factory, makes creepy blokes in raincoats," I said.

She looked at me. "Don't joke."

I stopped again, and looked at her. "What you mean? What you saying?"

"What do you think I'm saying? You can't reckon they mean anything good, can you?"

I looked around me, at the murky rainwater rushing in the gutters—

"Wait a minute," I said. I got out my sketchbook and a pencil, and quickly drew out the winged creature, and held it in front of her—"You ever see anything like this?"

She didn't say anything. But I knew she recognised it.

"Give me that," she said, tearing out the page and ripping it up. She dropped the pieces into the gutter. The water carried them away.

"Who are you?" I said. "What's all this about?"

But she'd started walking off.

"We shouldn't be seen together," she were saying.



I were in it up to my neck by that point, only I didn't know it. I wonder if there were anything I could've done. Probably not. It went back decades, to the war, longer—

Dark Tales from the Secret War

We'd been reading about the Sheffield blitz in history. Two nights. December 1940. Full moon. Hell and fire raining down on the city—

I watched the lass go. I'd not seen her before. Didn't go to my school. But I were still thinking about her when I got to school mesen, and found my mate Kyle in art. I were a bit late—from hanging round on road talking to strange lasses in yellow anoraks, intit—and Kyle'd already got his clay out. I were so busy telling him about the two men, and the black car, and the lass in the yellow anorak, I weren't paying attention to what Kyle were doing. But when I did notice, I stopped and stared.

Wings. Tentacles. Perched on a rock. He'd got a sculpting tool, one with sharp hook on end, and were scratching words into the rock—

Cthulhu fhtagn

—now what the hell did that mean? Kyle noticed me staring and put down the tool. “Now then,” he said.

I pointed. “What's this?”

He looked. Shrugged. “Dunno,” he said. “Just an idea. Miss Giger said do what I like, just to shut us up—”

I didn't like any of this. What were this winged, tentacled creature that kept popping up? What did *Cthulhu fhtagn* mean? I got my phone and googled it—nowt. No matches. I were about to explain to Kyle, but Miss Giger said she'd split us if I didn't shut up and put my phone away, so that were that.

At lunch I went to find Mr Wilmarth, thinking reyt, he's gonna tell me what all this is about or I'm going to the principal. He looked relieved to see me. Then, when I told him about the men, the lass on the road, Kyle's clay sculpture, alarmed.

“This is serious Jordan,” he said, going to the door, looking out along the corridor, and closing it. He faced me. “Where is Kyle now?”

“Dunno sir. Canteen?”

“Call him.”

“Sir?”

“You've got your phone, haven't you? I said call him.”

I tried, but Kyle weren't answering. I looked at Mr W and shrugged. He stood, thinking. He looked at his watch. Then he looked directly at me.

“Jordan,” he said. “Can I trust you?”

“Sir?”

“Never mind. There's no time.”

He were reaching in his pocket again.

“Take this,” he said. “Read it.”

He were holding out some small book—like a notebook, or diary. A6, fat, swollen. I flipped through it. Apart from a wodge of photos and folded bits of papers stuffed into the back, it were filled with dense notes, tiny buckled handwriting

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in ancient fountain pen—

“I can’t read this sir,” I said. “I can’t read what it says.”

“Read it,” he repeated, as if he hadn’t heard me. “All—”

We were interrupted then. The door opened, and the principal came in. He glanced at me.

“Mr Wilhelm,” he said, business like. “A moment of your time, please. My office.”

Mr W gazed at him. “I’m with a student—”

“Turner can wait. *Now*, please, Mr Wilhelm—”

Mr W pursed his lips, raised his eyebrows at me. I followed the two teachers out into the corridor. Mr W locked his door behind him, murmured to me, “Wait here.”

I watched them go. The book were still in my hand. I opened it randomly, looked at the page—

12th December 1940 –late in the night—scared and alone—the bone—news of Father—Later—Organisation wives—Yellow alert 6.15pm—Purple alert 6.45pm—Red alert 7pm—bombing—fire—

That were about all I could make out, and that took me rest of lunch time. I looked up from the book to hear the bell going, and Year 7s crowding round Mr W’s room, asking me where’s Mr Wilhelm? I said I dunno pal. And then another teacher were approaching, grabbing her lanyard off her neck, looking irritable—

“Turner,” she said. “Haven’t you got somewhere to be?”

“Where’s Mr Wilhelm?”

“Go ask the principal,” she muttered. “Right!” she yelled at the Year 7 kids. “Line up you lot!”

“Turner,” she said to me. “Seriously. Move it.”



Double English that afternoon, which would drag normally, but that day took forever. I’d managed to send a text to Kyle, but he weren’t getting back to me, and I asked some of the other lads, but they hadn’t seen him. One of the girls said she reckoned she’d seen him go down to reception, but weren’t sure. I asked teacher if she knew where Mr Wilhelm were, but she just sighed and said if the principal needed to speak to a teacher about anything then it wasn’t anything for me to worry about and would I please get back to work?

Seriously, try getting anything useful out of a teacher pal.

I were wondering how I’d find that lass in the yellow anorak. Just hang around down by the crossroads where she’d left me. Even without all this stuff about men in black cars and the image of the alien and *Cthulhu fhtagn* and Mr W’s diary, it were hard to stop thinking about her. We shouldn’t be seen together, she’d said.

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Alright lass, so we'll just go back to my house, mum won't be seeing much of anything—

I wondered what sort of family she had. Why had the men in the black car visited her twice?

First, I wanted to find Kyle.

And leaving school, I saw a black car parked by the gates. The third man stood by it in a raincoat and hat, smoking and watching the school. He saw me looking at him, and looked back at me, and blew out smoke. He frowned and looked away, rubbing his forehead like there were an itch or summat. I'd stopped. *Keep walking.* I walked, and when I'd got round the corner, ran until it felt like my lungs were gonna burst out my chest.

I weren't far from Kyle's house. He'd still not responded to any calls or texts, and when I turned the corner onto his road I stopped.

There were a black car parked outside his house, and two men in coats and hats were leading Kyle away from his house and into the car. He were struggling a bit, but they were bigger and stronger than him, and they bundled him into the back head first. One of them got in too, closed the door. The other went back to the front door, where Kyle's dad were. He were crying, and the man in the coat and the hat stood saying summat, but what he were saying I still don't know. I backed away, around the corner, and legged it, towards the crossroads, Mr W's diary in my bag.



The lass were nowhere in sight and why would she be? Last thing she'd told me, she reckoned we shouldn't be seen together, so no reason why she'd be hanging around waiting for me. I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to go home. I were scared of what might be waiting for me there.

But then I started worrying about what the visitors would do if they went home and no one answered. Were mum safe? I dropped off the main road and into the neighbourhood, walked faster, then ran home.

Mum'd been ill for some time now, but it'd got worse ever since this rain started. She'd not said owt in all that time. I went in and kneeled in front of her. I'd made a sandwich, and I put it on the table next to her.

"Mum," I said. "I've got to go out. I need to find someone."

She looked at me. There were summat in the look of her eyes that made me reckon she'd heard, and understood. But she didn't move, and she said nowt.

"Don't answer the door," I told her. "Stay here. I'll be back soon."

But really I didn't know when I'd be back. I left, and ran back down to the road, and walked up and down it for half an hour in the teeming rain, looking for a lass in a yellow anorak. And after half an hour, first I saw a figure in yellow

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turn off and head down towards the supermarket next to the brook. And second I saw, cross the road, a car pull over. The driver got out and stood watching me. She were older than me, like Miss Giger's age maybe, and she were wearing a thick green parka, hood up against the rain. The car were some sort of jeep like they drive out in the country west of the city, and there were mud splattered up against the wheel arches.

The driver checked summat in her hand—a phone maybe—and leaned into the jeep. I walked away, in the direction the yellow-anoraked figure had gone, heard a door slam behind me. I glanced quickly behind to see the driver following me. Walked quicker. The road curved, I turned, dropped out of sight of the driver—and summat grabbed me from behind and pulled me off the road and into the bushes.



There were a hand clamped over my mouth, and a knee in my back, and I struggled, and a voice hissed “Quiet! Keep still.”

I recognised the voice, I thought. I were laid on the ground, inside a thick rhododendron bush, someone holding me from behind. I watched and listened as the driver passed three foot away, on the path outside the bush. Rain came through and fell on my cheek. I heard myself breathing. The voice said, “Right she's gone. But she might be back this way. Let's stay here for a minute.”

It took the hand away from my mouth, and pulled away, and I turned, and there were the lass from that morning.

“Nice to see you,” I said.

She grinned. “Yeah.”

“Who're those spooks in the jeep?”

“Don't know. They were outside my house earlier.”

I told her what had happened at school that day.

“Let's see this diary then,” she said.

I gave her it, and sat watching her while she flipped through it. She nodded. “I can read this,” she said. “But maybe not here. I need to go and check on my dad.”

“Your dad?”

“Yeah.” She kneeled, peered out of the bush. “Don't know what's out there,” she said, “but don't reckon we can stay here all night. You coming?”



Dom were her name, short for Dominika—
“My grandparents were Polish,” she said.
“Whoa.”

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“I never met them.”

—and she lived with her dad, no mum, no brothers or sisters, in one of the big houses further down the neighbourhood. There were open fireplaces in the big living rooms off the hallway, and bookshelves filled with books, and—bloody hell, great lumbering thing half the size of the room—a gigantic stuffed bison. And there were a fire in one fireplace, and next to it a wide leather chair, and in it her dad, quiet and staring at a chessboard in front of him.

“He’s eaten,” Dom said, lifting a plate from off the arm of the chair. “That’s good.”

She studied the chessboard and moved a piece. Then she kissed the top of her dad’s head. She noticed me staring at all this. “Yeah,” she said. “Come on.”

I followed her up to the second floor, through a door, and then up a final narrow staircase to the attic where her room were. She pulled the curtain across the little window set in the roof, and switched on a lamp—it were dark out now, rain coming on down—and found a towel on the radiator. She gave it me after she’d dried her hair, and I did the same. We’d left our boots and coats dripping in the hallway.

“How long’s your dad been ill?” I said.

“Long time,” she said. “But it’s got worse—”

“While this rain started.”

“Yeah. And your mate—”

“Lives alone with his dad.”

She bit her lip.

“Dom,” I said. “You got any idea about any of this?”

“Not much,” she said. She held up the diary. “Let’s see what we can find out.”

We sat on the floor, leaning against the bedposts, seeing what we could find out. Dom read aloud and pointed at certain bits. I don’t have the diary now. I don’t know what happened to it. This is what Dom can remember from it, or what seems important now. Starting with the letter she found taped up inside the back cover, the letter addressed to Mr Wilhelm.

2nd December 1964

To my son,

You may feel this letter is long overdue, for which I apologise. You may also feel that what I have to tell you may not seem coherent or true, and dismiss it as mere ravings. I only hope that you can find a way to believe me. Since finding your drawings, some of my worst fears have been confirmed. But this also suggests to me that there is some sort of natural order at work here, and that I am meant to write you this letter, and that you might be able to succeed where your father and I could not. Mostly, it suggests you will believe me.

Either way, it’s difficult, as a mother, to have to write a letter like this to her son.

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The truth, son, that I have to start with, is that we—you, me, your father, all of us—are not alone in this universe, and that we are not alone on this planet. For as long as there have been humans, other beings from other worlds have operated alongside us, and these beings have existed for longer. What they are, and where they come from, is difficult to say succinctly. But you should know that they come from far away, and that they are powerful, and intelligent, in ways we do not fully understand.

You may be asking yourself what their motives are. Are they hostile? Dangerous? Do they intend harm upon us?

Again, this is difficult to judge exactly. It is as if they do not want to be known and understood. Each generation that seeks to understand these beings seems only to succeed in passing down differing information and learning to the next. So rumours build upon rumours, whispers morph into new whispers, and so on.

What I can absolutely tell you with complete certainty, is that as long as these beings exist, there exist also evil men who wish to bend these visitors' powers to their own, to channel them somehow, in order to subjugate the wills of others, in order, ultimately, to gain power. Be aware, my son, that there are men in this world who wish for nothing but power. And they will stop at nothing to gain it, even turning their souls over to powers greater than them, as these visitors certainly are. We may, ultimately, be nothing more than a game to them, the evil men of this world simply toys. They may delight in the chaos and destruction that men wield on their behalf, in their name.

I must leave you now, my son. I do not have much time. I hope this letter finds you well. Be brave, be vigilant, be careful who you trust.

Love,
Your mother

I still don't understand how Sam remembers all this. How she can dictate it back. Maybe she read all them books in her house, and maybe what she's told me isn't what was in the diary at all, but just versions of it.

Anyway.

"How old's this teacher of yours?" Dom asked me.

"Not sure," I said. "Sixties?"

"1964... He'd've been about our age."

We kept reading, after we'd inspected the second item that fell out of the diary: a weathered black and white photograph of the tall man who'd visited us both. Thin sandy hair, pursed lips, icy stare. All that was missing was the acne scars. Someone had inked on the back of the photograph: *Küttner*, c. 1939. His grandfather, Dom guessed.

10th December 1940

Raid imminent. We have received word from colleagues in London, Paris and Berlin, which seem to correlate with official reports via the newspapers and radio. Father has

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of course reminded us to make sure we do not share any secret information at school. I have to be careful what I write here too.

Later

The city seems calm and prepared. We have been expecting this, after all. I wonder when the sirens will sound. Reconnaissance along the south coast, we are told. Also, have received word the bombers may approach over the moors from the west, which would again make sense. Father has left for the night; does not expect to return until the morning. Mother v. worried, naturally, especially considering events of the summer.

Later

Mother asleep now. Writing at three in the morning. Cold and icy out, but I did venture out the front door to check the city. Dark, except for the clear moon and star light. We may be safe for tonight. Would hardly seem credible to some, I suppose, that a quiet night such as this may soon be shattered. But I have seen the news from other cities. Basinful here soon. Hoping father is safe west of the city. Little news of the Visitors in recent weeks, so this call cannot be for nothing? Fear worst, should retire.

Dom and I looked at each other. Not all of this made sense. But—

“Look at this,” she said, pointing to the capital V.

“Right.”

She turned the page, and summat fell from the book—

URGENT + + MR D M WILHELM
DEEPLY REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT YOUR BROTHER
PILOT OFFICER JAMES FREDERICK WILHELM HAS BEEN
REPORTED TO HAVE LOST HIS LIFE IN ACTION ON 19TH
AUGUST 1940

So... Mr W's father and uncle? I didn't know. We kept reading.

11th December 1940

Father has not returned. Both v. worried. Mother left early this morning to seek information, reassurance etc. No official word as yet. Writing at school—under desk—want to keep up basic record of events. We have been warned to be prepared again tonight. Sadie's father missing too—though we dare not talk about it much further than that. Sadie suggests leaving the city, possibly tonight, but can't see what sort of good we can do ourselves? She claims to know the location of a house in the Peak, where the representatives of the Visitors may be based—I know the basic whereabouts, but again don't want to discuss too much here. Seems like events are afoot, at any rate; difficult to predict outcome.

Later

Father has not returned, nor Mother from town. Writing at home now, in bedroom. Twilight settling over city. Again anticipating the sound of the sirens at any moment.

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Sadie and I met at the end of the school day and walked home together. People hurrying to get back from town, get inside, though we did notice many of the pubs still full. There is news of some folk gathering at hotels in town—feeling safer there than in their own houses. I can understand it. I don't feel especially safe right now—cold, and hoping my parents return safely, and worried about the Germans and the Visitors.

12th December 1940

Morning—writing on the bus to school. Mother returned late in the night; I had considered going to Sadie's house, as I had been told I could do if scared and alone, but wanted to be at home if Mother or Father returned. Mother v. weary and chilled to the bone. She recovered after a little broth. She had to go to Rotherham for news of Father, who we are told is safe at one of the Organisation's houses in the Peak—

Later

Decided to stop writing on the bus for fear of watching eyes. At home now. We are told the raid will likely be this evening. Mother is considering going into town to meet other Organisation wives, perhaps at one of the hotels, though I feel we should stay here should Father return (no official word yet). Sadie has asked me to call for her and her mother should we leave the house.

Yellow alert 6.15pm—Purple alert 6.45pm—Red alert 7pm; as I write can hear noise of bombing and anti-aircraft fire. Mother and I are in the shelter. Writing by what little light comes in from the full moon. Will stop writing now.

13th December 1940

Writing in the toilets at school, lunchtime. The bombing went on for nine hours. They hit the city centre first—brick and glass all over the roads, fires everywhere, the Marples gone apparently. Mother and I left the shelter at around six in the morning—our area undamaged, thank goodness, though apparently we can't rule out a second raid within a week. Good news—found Father in the house, weary but unhurt. He did inform us what had been happening in the Peak, though forbade me to write it here, even in code. Father had been considering taking us away from the city due to the threat from the bombings, but apparently the Organisation's houses are not safe either—The entry stopped there, and the rest of the page was blank. The next page started with a different colour pen, and Dom couldn't read it—"I can make out the odd word," she said, "that's it." We searched the rest of the diary for more information. First, a greasy and folded clipping:

THE INTRODUCTION, SPREAD AND CURRENT
DISTRIBUTION OF RHODODENDRON PONTICUM
IN THE PEAK DISTRICT AND SHEFFIELD AREA

I.D. ROTHERHAM

Department of Botany, University of Sheffield

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INTRODUCTION

As an invasive alien, the status and spread of *Rhododendron ponticum* has been studied at a number of individual sites within the British Isles (Cross 1973, 1981; Robinson 1971, 1980; Fuller and Boorman 1977). Its spread over the country as a whole has been considered by Brown (1953a, 1953b), Elton (1958) and Cross (1975).

The introduction, spread and current distribution of the plant within the Peak District and surrounding areas has received little attention. *R. ponticum* was not mentioned in the floras of Lees (1888), Linton (1903) or Moss (1913)...

[we skimmed the next part]

A major difficulty in tracing the introduction and spread of *R. ponticum* is that because of its alien status, botanists have tended to neglect it—

Then summat written on very thin paper, in light grey pencil. I recognised the handwriting. Mr Wilhelm's. No date.

I have since managed to piece together the events that occurred in the Peak beginning the night of December 12th 1940, from speaking to my mother in the 1960s, shortly before she left us for good. As the Organisation had expected, The Old Ones' acolytes had once again conspired with the enemy, intending to bring chaos, disruption and fear to the people of the world, and siphon off great knowledge and learning, to their own nefarious ends. Enemy aircraft approached the city from the west, parachuting a small number of soldiers into the wild moorland around the city, who would then rendezvous with Visitors at stations in and around the reservoirs — namely Howden, Derwent and Ladybower (listed here in order of which the River Derwent runs through the three reservoirs, though at the time Ladybower had not yet been completed [however, it is understood plans for sabotage included the disruption of building]). The enemy would have been aware these reservoirs provided water for local cities and communities. Likewise, the Organisation were aware of Old Ones' activity in the area—the wild moorland, forests and valleys providing good cover, and the area being a rich source of a variety of rocks and minerals such as lead, copper, and calcite. Thanks to cooperation and collaboration with Allied forces, the Organisation was able to position agents among notable locations and intercept enemy activity. My grandfather and a number of his colleagues, I am told, entered one of the many grand houses of the area, with confidence the owners were acolytes of Cthulhu. Therein they found an array of dreadful evidence — written records, equipment, and, most chillingly, a subterranean room containing row upon row of glass cylinders, some seven foot in height and perhaps three foot in diameter. They concluded these cylinders were designed to hold human specimens; though none did, one contained the preserved body of an Old One, tentacles, wings and all, floating in some pale green liquid. One of my grandfather's younger colleagues broke down at this sight, it being the first physical evidence he had witnessed of Cthulhu's hordes since first experiencing those beastly visions at the age of sixteen.

Enemy soldiers were then heard to be entering the house, and my grandfather killed

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two of them, his colleagues more, in an exchange of gunfire that rang out at the same time the city, just ten miles away, was buckling under the might of enemy shelling—

But at that point we stopped reading. Footsteps and voices downstairs.



“It’s them,” Dom whispered from the bottom of the stairs leading up to her room. “That voice—”

“The tall one,” I whispered. “With the acne—”

“I don’t know how they got in—”

We stood tense by the door, listening, waiting.

“Okay,” said Dom. “I’m going to go out on the landing. I might be able to see what they’re doing.”

“Dom, wait—if they see you—”

“I have to—if they hurt my dad—” She stopped, thinking. She stared at me. “You can get out the back,” she said. “There’s just the fence—”

“Dom—”

“It’s either that or they get both of us.”

“I’ll go then—”

“Nope, because then they’ll know I’m here anyway.”

She smiled.

“Come find me,” she said brightly, then she slipped through the door and down the stairs, yelling “Dad! Dad! Are you okay?” and I heard a shout of alarm, a slamming door, and a voice—

“Two pairs of boots. The Turner boy must be here.”

“Of course. Upstairs. Find him.”

I stayed where I were. Feet thumped up the stairs, along the corridor—and into the bedroom opposite the door to Dom’s attic. I fell out onto the landing, ran down the hall, the stairs, shouts of alarm behind me, final flight of stairs, into the lobby, to see the taller man by the door to the front rooms, holding Dom, pinning her arms behind her back with one hand—where were her dad—she shouted “Jordan run!” and without thinking I ran, through the kitchen and into the back garden, over the back fence and into the alleyway—

It were dark now, and cold, and rain came down. I didn’t know if the smaller man had followed me out the back of Dom’s house. I were barefoot, coatless, my bag and the diary in Dom’s bedroom, and I stumbled down the alleyway and onto the road, thinking, I have to go back, I have to help Dom, her dad, get the diary—

I saw a vehicle slowing and pulling up alongside the road. A jeep. Mud splattered up against the wheel arches.

I hadn’t slept the night before, and it were late, I reckoned, no one out on the

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roads to help me as I stumbled and fell into the gutter. Flat on my front, rainwater bubbling at my face. Somewhere car doors opened. Feet, voices.

“Quick. Get him in.”

“The girl?”

“Later. Hopefully. If we at least get one of them—”

Green parkas, hoods up. A man and a woman. They bundled me into back of the jeep, and then we were away, just as a shiny black car turned the corner.



Reckon I must’ve passed out, or summat, cos I can’t rightly say what happened for a few minutes. Next I knew I were waking up, coming round, jeep banging along one of the back roads above the woods on top of the city, rain coming down and window wipers thumping and orange lights of the city blurry in the distance. I could hear the man and the woman talking in the front—

“We should get out of the city—”

“We can’t afford to lose Turner as well—”

“The radio. Try to get some news—”

And the radio came on in a burst of static, and the woman cursed, rolling the dial—flashes of adverts and talk and music, I heard a fragment of mum’s record—

“Nothing,” the woman was saying.

“Damn it.”

“Let’s get Turner back. He’s been through it.”

“Hey,” I said, leaning forward.

They turned, the man briefly before looking back to the road.

“You okay?” the woman said.

“Let me out of this car,” I said. “I gotta find Dom.”

“Your friend? They’ve got her.”

“Who are they?”

“How much do you know?”

“This isn’t the time,” the man said, like he was tired. “I need to get some kip too.”

“Stop this car and let me out,” I said.

The man did stop the car, but he turned to face me after, and summat in his face made me sit tight. “Listen pal,” he said. “You’ve not got shoes or coat. The city’s crawling with Visitors. Sadie’s right, they’ll have your friend, and maybe we can get her back, but for now you need to come with us. Or you could get out and walk back into town down that road in your socks. What do you reckon?”



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They were from the Organisation, obviously, and Sadie who'd pulled me out of the gutter were related to the Sadie in Mr W's diary, and the bloke, Joe, his great grandfather had been in the house with Mr W's grandfather the night of December 12th 1940, the night they'd found aliens in a Derbyshire cellar and killed several Nazi soldiers, others escaping into the hills—

But I hadn't quite put it all together at that point. Not sure that I still have, you want the truth. It's proper strange.

In the morning I sat with Joe and Sadie in the bar of the pub we'd slept at—the landlord Tony were in on it, I guessed, part of this Organisation—eating bacon and eggs and drinking tea and looking at the rain lashing the moors outside, and listening to Joe and Sadie telling me what they knew, what I needed to know—

Like Mr W's mother had written him in 1964, we were not alone in the universe, or this world. Like Joe and Sadie and others before me, and like Dom and Kyle, I'd gone sixteen years without knowing it. And then the visions come—

"Sometimes you just dream it," Sadie told me. "Sometimes you write about them. Sometimes you draw them—"

"They get you in the end," Joe said.

He hadn't seen his dad for years either. He didn't know if he were still alive or not. And Sadie's mum were catatonic in a nursing home in Mansfield. She'd grown up normal, she said. But every thirty years or so, the visions come, and then—

"It's happening again," Sadie said.

"This rain," Joe said. "I don't trust it."

"What do they want?" I said.

"Search me," Sadie said.

"This thing," Joe said, leaning forward. He hissed the word: *Cthulhu*.

"Steady Joe," the landlord Tony said, coming over and collecting the plates.

Joe watched him head back to the kitchen. "It's outside our knowledge," he told me. "Some say it's the devil... Hitler... Stalin... bin Laden... that it can split itself, divide into millions. That it was here before the world, before time—"

"Some say Cthulhu's not the enemy," Sadie added. "That the enemy is mad folk who try to make a pact with it."

"Have you seen it?" I asked them.

They shook their heads.

"Few have," Joe said.



They'd found me boots and a coat, and I'd got my socks dry, and had some kip, and after we'd eaten, Joe said him and Sadie were going back into Sheffield, scout

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around, see what they could find out. I wanted to go too. They shook their heads.

“Stay here,” they said. “It’s safer.”

“I need to check up on my mum,” I said. “And Sam’s dad—and Kyle’s—”

“Give us the addresses,” Joe said. “We’ll look into it.”

I walked out to the jeep with them. The rain had fallen off for now, but watery grey clouds rushed in the sky, and black birds flocked around the church tower over the road, and the English flag on the tower flapped in the wind.

“How does this end?” I asked.

They didn’t know. They were going to see what contacts they could make in the city. They might need to contact London. They guessed Dom and others—Mr W, Kyle—were being held at one of their houses somewhere in the Peak, but they couldn’t guess which.

“They move around,” Sadie explained. “Underground networks connecting the houses... who knows how long they go on for? Knock on the door, and a millionaire answers it.”

“Stay here,” Joe repeated. “Keep low. Don’t call us unless you have to. Any problems, find Tony.”

I watched the jeep pull away and leave the village. I were alone, no idea what to do, and the Visitors had my friends, my teacher, others like them. I spat, and went back inside, back to my room.



But there were nowt to do there except sit on the bed and watch telly, and there were nowt on the telly. I stood by the window looking out the window onto the street. Nowt going on there either.

I’d been keeping my phone off to save the battery, and trying not to keep checking it to see if I had messages from Kyle, cos there weren’t. And also thinking what if Dom managed to find me online and let me know where she were? Now I turned my phone on again, but the signal were crap out in the middle of nowhere. Keeping one eye on phone I wandered downstairs, into the bar area. The landlord Tony were behind the bar on the landline, and as I passed he glanced at me, turned, stood nodding and finally said reyt to whoever he were speaking to and hung up.

“Yalreyt lad?” he barked at me.

“Yeah,” I said. I held up my phone. “Just need to find some signal.”

“Aye,” he said. “Well, there’s good signal at the café up the road.”

He stared at me. I didn’t know what else to say so I nodded and left the pub and went down the road where finally some signal popped up. Nothing from Kyle, text or online. What were the chances Dom would find me? Did she even know my second name? Finally I wrote online mesen:

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kyle mate its jordan. where r u. worried mate. gimme a shout yeah. im not at home tho. im in the peak—

And used online maps to find out where I were.

And then thought, wait a minute, daft sod.

I stood. A dark car passed by, windows smoky dark too and water droplets collected on the dark bonnet, and for a second my stomach went all frozen and knotty.

Then I thought of summat else.

I went back to my message and finished off:

im staying at the kings head pub in ashton. room 16. come find me if u can mate.



If the city really were crawling with Visitors, and if they really did have houses all over the peak, I reckoned they wouldn't take long. And then maybe I'd have a chance of finding Dom. And Kyle. And Mr W.

I went back towards the pub to tell Tony what I'd done, and maybe he'd be able to contact Joe and Sadie, and maybe they'd all tell me I were brave but stupid, but what else were I gonna do?

The pub were closed, front doors barred and locked, windows dark.

Now what were going on here? It were lunchtime, place ought to be open and people coming in for butties and pints and that. I turned and looked back at the street. No one about. No lady walking the dog, no bloke in a suit running back to the office in the drizzle that'd started back up, nowt. There were a little newsagent type shop down the road. I jogged over to it and went in and a bell rang and the bloke behind the counter looked up at me from his paper.

"Ayup," he said.

"Ayup."

I stood there like a muppet.

"Help ye son?"

I shook my head. "Naw."

Long as there were someone int village—

The bloke stood staring at me.

I mumbled sorry, and went back out into the rain, thinking about what I'd put online, were I totally mad, or what? I were knackered even though I'd had some kip, and not thinking properly, and—

And then I saw her:

Figure getting out of a car down the road. Lass in a yellow anorak.



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“Dom!” I yelled, pegging it down the road. “Dom!”

She were closing the car door, and turning—

I tripped, stumbled or summat, and again fell and sprawled into the gutter and the rain. And then some mum in a yellow anorak were leaning over me, saying yalreyt love? and helping me up. It weren’t Dom after all. I felt like crying. Why’d Joe and Sadie bugged off and left me in this village on my own? I needed to get back to Sheffield, make sure mum were okay, and if the Visitors came snooping round again, well balls, I’d call the cops and—

The mum had helped me over to a bench and got me sitting down. My head banged. I’d hit it, falling. I put fingers to my forehead and inspected them. Blood.

“It looks nasty that,” the mum commented. “Come on. Let’s get you inside.”

I mumbled something even I couldn’t make out mesen. Inside. Bed and a blanket.

“Nice cup of tea and a bit of TCP on that,” the mum were saying.

A cup of tea would be reyt nice, I thought. I stood, wobbling. And then saw the woman’s car—black, shiny, smoky black windows, water droplets gathered on the black shiny bonnet—

“Okay then,” I said. “Let’s go.”

“Well my house is this way,” the mum said.

“Nah,” I said. “I don’t need to go to your house. Let’s go wherever you’ve got them.”

She blinked. “Got them—who? I don’t—”

She smiled, nervously. She’d taken a step backwards.

“Perhaps you should get on home love,” she said.



I had a couple of quid in my wallet, enough for a cup of tea. I pulled my hood up, trying to hide the cut on my forehead. Didn’t want anyone asking questions. But there were no one else in the café, and the lass behind the counter just chattered about the weather while she got my tea. I took it to a table at the back, and sat facing the door, and sipped my tea listening to the radio and watching steam mist up the windows.

And trying to make sense of what was happening, and trying to think what to do next.

There were nowt else, I reckoned, apart from looking back in at the pub and finding Tony and waiting for Joe and Sadie. Or, somehow finding my way back to Sheffield and going home and making sure mum were okay and getting to school like none of this had ever happened.

Maybe it hadn’t. Maybe this were all a dream and any minute I’d wake up in my own bed, under the blanket, and stretch and yawn and think about a bacon

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butty and then later on remember the weird dream about the monster with wings and tentacles—

I blinked. I had dreamed of that thing before, I knew it. Massive great demon the size of buildings, sleeping in dank green caves deep beneath the earth. And stone slabs inscribed with awful letters. And soldiers with eyes burning red. And ugly black towers hunched on the sides of mountains. And prisoners in glass tubes—

I stood up. Dom and the others.

I went to the bogs at the back of the café, and inspected my forehead. It were a graze, really, and the blood had stopped. Nowt else wrong with it. I took a deep breath. I needed to go and find my friends.

But when I went back into the café, one of them had already found me.



She were saying no time, no time, let's go, we have to go, and running off out of the village so I could barely keep up, along back roads looking over rivers and the edges of hills and past another pub where one yellow light shone in the evening, finally the road narrowing so there were no cars and no people and no houses. It were dark now and raining again and the rain spattered the leaves and a wind came and shook the trees too. Dom'd got a torch from somewhere, fat black thing size of her forearm, but she didn't switch it on—"Gotta be careful, they might see us—" and we stumbled on into the night for best part of an hour. I got that she'd managed to escape, and found my message online, and found her way to the village—but they had my friend and teacher, and her friend too, and she needed my help, and the Organisation were on their way—

"You've seen them? Joe and Sadie?"

"Yeah," she said, adjusting her hat again. She were wearing some beanie hat pulled low over her forehead and now and again she adjusted it and pulled at it and scratched under it. We'd stopped and stooped by a stone wall where the road rose up and overlooked a valley. "Okay look," she said, pointing. A reservoir, a pair of helicopters, dark shape of a house. "See that house there?"

"That's where they are?"

"Nope. That's where the tunnel is."

Over the wall, and down a damp ferny slope, past signs saying 'PRIVATE' and through barbed wire fencing.

The dam at the edge of the reservoir, turreted building marking the boundary, and onto the path. Keeping low we ran across. Weak light from somewhere hummed on the surface of the water and the water creaked in the rain and—

I stopped. I saw it. I had dreamt it. Great leathery beast rising mouth first from the deep, the suckered tips of tentacles next, emerging obscenely, curling their way into the night like blind animals, a pair of cruel eyes rolling open, black water

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rolling off them. Their eyes blank and empty but witness to millennia. To all of time. To a churning soup of bacteria and atoms. To the earth sloughed in ice. To the birth of Christ. To Europe on fire—

“We got to go,” Dom were saying. “Come on.”

“I can see it Dom.”

“There’s nothing here.”

“It’s like it’s down there. It’s everywhere.”

I were thinking, it’s like when we dream bad dreams, we dream of it, but it takes different shapes, and when our bellies knot in fear, it’s behind us, and when we think dark thoughts, it’s inside us—

Cthulhu fhtagn

I felt like I might sway and fall and fall beneath the water and sink to the bottom like I were made of stone. And then, a tentacle in the deep—

I shook my head. I stepped forward. Dom were staring at me.

“Let’s go,” she said.



The house were surrounded by rhododendrons, and Dom led me right into the centre of the deepest thicket.

“The house is locked,” she said. “This is the way in.”

“Dom, how—”

“Shush,” she said. “I need to find—”

Some sort of hatch buried in the ground. Twists of a wheel, and it were up, scrape of stone and steel, and Dom clicked the torch on, tucked it into the waist of her jeans, dropped into the hatch and onto some ladder sunk into the walls. “Follow me,” she called up, already moving. “Watch for the light. Close the hatch after you.”

I didn’t have a choice. I followed her, and found the wheel on the other side of the hatch, and swung it shut, and made my way down to where the light were. White beam coming up to get me. Dom in the shadows behind it. She held the torch right at my face as I approached—

“Bloody hell Dom—”

“This way,” she said.

“A tunnel?”

“Not yet. Okay. Wait.”

The light went out. Pitch oily black. I stood, stomach knotting—

“Dom!”

Another light, much dimmer, flickering—a cigarette lighter—Dom in a stone archway—

“This leads into the house,” she whispered. “There’ll be guards. Don’t say

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anything.”

“Dom—”

“Shush.”

I followed her along a dark passage, up an unlit flight of stone steps, until she clicked off the lighter as dim lamplight seeped around a corner. There were just one guard, a Visitor in a dark overcoat and a dark gun strapped under his arm. Nowhere to sit and he just stood by a door under one weak light fixed to the wall, engrossed in summat on his phone. But he heard us approach, and he slid the phone away and straightened up and regarded us.

Dom spoke before he could.

“I have Turner,” she said. “I am taking him to Mr Küttner.”

That name — it were like hearing a corner of a song in Maccie’s, and thinking reyt, what’s that tune now —

The Visitor stared at Dom. He said nothing, but took his phone out again and adjusted the screen and inspected it. He looked at Dom. Then me. Then he nodded.

“It is by the bison tonight,” he said as we passed.



We stood in some panelled study. Cold hearth and oil paintings and leather armchairs. And everywhere, stuffed animals. Goose and pheasant and dog. Bear and lion and bison. Bristles and feathers cold in the cold room. Glassy eyes stared down at me.

And then, a thump as if one of them had moved —

Dom shone the torch in that direction. One wall were taken up mostly by a tall aquarium, the depths of it green and murky, and right at our eye line a pike, malevolent and grinning. Its fins twitched and its black eye gleamed at us. Dom went right up and tapped the glass smartly and the bastard fish turned and swam off.

“Be good with chips,” she said.

I stood still. I turned and looked at the bison, and the panelling behind it —

“Dom—”

“Here,” she said, leaning over the stuffed creature and putting her palms on the panelling, sliding it back —

“If it’s by the bison tonight, where does this go other nights?” I said, looking at the dark steps leading away.

“Who knows?” she said. “Somewhere we don’t want to go.”

I followed her, under the bison and into the tunnel, onto a set of rails like them in London on the tube. What the? She clicked the lighter on and told me to stay by her. I weren’t about not to. I wouldn’t have come down here on my own

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for owt. But there were people I cared about down here. But what were we going to do, find them and walk out of there? But Joe and Sadie were coming. They'd know what to do. But it looked like Dom knew what to do. I thought about when we'd first met, not three days ago, her waiting on the road like she knew I were coming. What else did she know? Had she been here before? There were things I knew, things I'd seen in dreams or maybe in real life, some other life, but I didn't understand them, and again my guts started knotting—

Voices sounded down the tunnel ahead of us. Shouts and calls in some language I didn't know—

The light clicked out and Dom grabbed me. "Here," she hissed, and pulled me into some alcove in the wall, "Your hood," and her arms across my chest, "Don't move—"

Torchlight swung down the tunnel, and two Visitors passed, boots thumping the way we'd come, and urgent talk—

—*die Organisation*—

We waited until they'd passed.

"The Organisation," I said. "Dom, that's Joe and Sadie—are they behind us—"

She was watching the way the Visitors had gone, frowning.

"Don't know," she said. "Let's keep moving. It's not far."

She moved away from me, and stepped back into the main tunnel. Then she clicked the light back on and turned and looked at me.

"It's not nice either," she said.



It weren't, either. The tunnel led into a long, low room, all concrete and metal pipes and air shafts, like bowels of some remote factory. Grey and chilly and hard. In the middle of the room were some ancient wooden block, its surface scrubbed and pitted and grooved, the wood stained with something dark and purplish—

And the walls of the room lined with glass cylinders, seven foot high and three foot wide, each filled with a pale green liquid, at the foot of each a thin digital display—

There were a hundred, two hundred maybe. There were tiny versions of the beasts I saw in my nightmares, winged and tentacled and terrible. There were things I didn't recognise. There were humans. There were parts of humans—severed arms and severed legs and halved brains. Embryos and genitalia. A skeleton.

A man with a crowd of tentacles where his mouth once were—

None moving. Dead, or preserved, or in suspension—I didn't know.

My stomach knotted.

And then an idea appeared in me, barging out of the gloom—

"Dom," I said. "The torch—"

"Jordan—"

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“Give us it—”

I grabbed it off her, and switched it on, and ran along one side of the room, playing the torch up and down. Dom stood watching me. She put her hand under her hat to her forehead.

I found them. My friend and my teacher, naked and hung in green fluid. Their tubes labelled with their names in many languages. And then—a man labelled TURNER—

I turned. “Dom, what’s happening here— what—you said they were safe, didn’t you—”

But—

She were stood like her feet had put down roots, shaking, staring at me—

“Jordan,” she moaned.

Her hands at her forehead. Her whole face shaking. Her eyes glazed over. A pale liquid dribbling out of her mouth. She pulled one hand away from her forehead and part of it came with, molten and stringy like hot plastic—

And in the shadows behind her summit moved, and the loud crack of a gunshot sounded in the chamber, and Dom dropped to the floor.



He, the Visitor, were standing behind where she’d been, lowering a pistol and holstering it. He stepped forward, and leaned over her body slumped dead on the floor, nodding carefully. Then he looked up and regarded me.

“Apologies, boy. Your friend, I believe.”

I still had the torch. I aimed it at him. Thin sandy hair, ugly acne scars on his forehead. I thought he might come for me, but he didn’t. He stayed where he were. Then he took a phone out of his pocket, inspected it, nodding. “We have your other friends,” he told me. “My colleague will be here shortly.”

I swallowed and flicked the light to the tube I were near. “My father,” I said. “How long’s he been here?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Turner? Oh. Since before you were born, I believe. I forget such things. There are... so many.”

I moved the light back on him. “Why me?”

He blinked. “You, boy? There are millions like you. There always have been. Since you humans were able to comprehend abstract concepts.” He smiled. “You developed a consciousness... and there he was, the Great One. And there was the first of your kind. It is the way of such things. Lucifer and God. Do you see? This night, tonight, is merely a scene. A footnote. Your friend here? Your father? Molecules. Consider when a woman vacuum cleans a room. Dust collects in the bag of the vacuum cleaner. So much one could hold it in a fist, weigh it on a scale. But before she has finished, dust has begun to replace that dust. Do you see? You

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and I, boy, are nothing. There is nothing. Only the Great One.”

“Cthulhu,” I said.

He frowned, waved a hand. “Even that name is inadequate. Mere language. The Great One is beyond language. Do you see?”

“This,” I said. “All this—”

“Is for the Great One,” he finished. “All that we do. You and your friends and family, boy? Furnishing. Material. Fuel, until the great day when he returns at last.”

He were still holding the pistol.

“You’re going to kill me,” I said.

He smiled. “No, boy. If I killed you now, you would be of no use. No. You will join your friends and family soon—”

He gestured at the cylinders.

“...But first. Material, as I said. Clay.”

He smiled.

“Know me, boy,” he said. “Know that Küttner remade you.”

My guts knotting—

But summat moved behind him, summat yellow, and summat black and heavy swung in the light—



Dominika. Dom, standing over the body of Küttner and the body of herself, holding a torch like the one I were holding, summat pale and molten and stringy stuck to the handle. She frowned at it, dropped the torch, stepped away. The sound of the heavy torch hitting the hard floor echoed around the chamber. The light of it splayed across the floor, pointing to a doorway some steps behind where Dom were.

“Dom,” I said, running to her. I shone my torch at her body lying on the floor. Dark bullet hole in the back of her head. And then at her standing in front of me. She blinked. She looked scared.

“Is it you?” I said.

She gazed at me.

“I think so,” she said. “I can’t remember much.”

“What—”

Footsteps from the next chamber. I remembered: the Visitors who’d passed us in the tunnel. Or, passed me, and whatever it were lying on the floor at my feet.

Or passed me and Dom, and now the whatever were standing blinking in front of me.

Nah. Here she were, and suddenly I wanted to hold her and kiss her forehead.

But we were in the bowels of this place and we needed to get out.

And then Joe were in the room with us, saying “Jordan. Dom. Jesus. Ok. Let’s go.”

And we went, I followed Joe into the next chamber, a chamber like the one

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we'd left but all the cylinders here were empty, and the body of someone I didn't recognise were laid out on the block, laid out next to the body of some huge hairless dog, a rack of cold silvery instruments next to them. And Sadie stood in a doorway. And voices and the pounding of footsteps behind us—

—*die Organisation!*—

Sadie beckoning, calling us—“Here! Jordan, thank God you're safe!”

We rushed to meet her. “You first,” Joe said, nodding at her and the doorway and the passage beyond.

“Jordan and Dom first,” she said.

“Me first,” I said. I took Dom's hand. “Come on.”

“Keep moving,” Joe said. “Don't wait for us.”

“What?” I said, and realised he were going to close the door behind us, close him and Sadie in—

“Wait!” I shouted—

And turned, and called to Sadie to warn her, but it were too late, the Visitor, the smaller man, he'd appeared in the chamber and seized her, one arm gripping her waist and the other across her chest and hand at her neck and in the hand a cold gleaming blade.



“Do not move,” the smaller man told Joe. “I will slit the throat. You know I will.”

There we were. Dom and I just a few steps into the tunnel. Joe in the doorway. Sadie in the grip of the Visitor inside the chamber. Voices and footsteps—

“Dom,” Joe said. “Remember.”

“Yes,” she said.

He slammed the door behind him, and as he did I heard a scream, and gunshots, and—

“Run,” Dom said.

We ran. Along the tracks, the dark tunnel, away from that place. I expected to hear the door opening behind us, yelling and footsteps, Visitors coming to catch us and drag us back to the wooden block, the cylinders, but minutes passed and we were alone in the tunnel. Side by side we ran, torch in my hand, the light of it bouncing in front of us. The air cold and damp and in it a strong stink of petrol—

“Dom,” I said. “What do you remember?”

“I think we're nearly there,” she said. “Joe told me. They came in this way. They found me. They had to explain quickly. They've been plotting this for weeks. That's why they were in the city. And we just walked into it.”

She held up a lighter. The lighter. Heavy brass in her fingers.

“We have to be quick,” she said.

The way out were just ahead. The rungs leading up.

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“Go first,” she said.

“Dom—”

“I’ll light the trail and be right behind you.”

“Let me do it.”

“Get on those rungs Turner. I’m older than you.”

“How old are you?”

“I was seventeen last month.”

“Happy birthday.”

“Thanks. Now go on.”

I swallowed. I climbed the rungs, enough to leave Dom room to get on, and shone the torch down to her.

“I’m right here,” I called.

“Me too,” she said.

But then I saw: someone else were there, too.



The third man. The third Visitor. He’d crept up in the darkness behind Dom, and now he had her, hand clamped over her mouth, and pinning her hands behind her, and he shouted up at me: “Stay where you are, boy! Wait until I am out of sight! Then go home! You are too young for this!”

I froze on the ladder. He weren’t holding a knife to Dom’s throat like the other had with Sadie. He needed her for summat. And he didn’t need me. He’d already started backing down the tunnel, back towards Küttner and the chamber and the huge hairless dog and—

—blanket, bacon butty, cup of tea—

I jumped off the ladder to the floor of the tunnel and ran at the Visitor holding Dom, and did the only thing I could think to do: throw myself reyt at them, hope for a new idea if I managed to knock him over—

—he were shouting “Stay back boy!”

—and he grunted as Dom got an elbow somewhere painful—

—and she shouted “Jordan!”

Torch knocked somewhere paces away. The three of us sprawled on the floor of the tunnel. Stench of petrol. The lighter. The third man smoking outside school, and—

I pulled up and threw myself at the third man and plunged my fist into his forehead.



Like plunging my fist into glue. He howled, and my fingers knocked against something hard and bony, and I pulled my fist out, jumped back, summat on my hand molten and stringy like hot plastic. Dom were nearby. The two of us backed

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away, and looked at the Visitor prone and floored, shaking and screaming—

We looked at each other. She held up the lighter. I nodded. We both went to the ladder, and Dom kneeled, and clicked the lighter on, and lit a trail of petrol all the way back where we'd come.



Another pub. There'd be Visitors, we reckoned. We didn't know if we'd be any safer sat in a pub—I were thinking now that the landlord of the other place had betrayed us somehow—but it were better than running about in the rain and dark outside, and we both needed to sit down and get oursen together. Dom went to the bar. I sat in a corner, by the fire and the window, back to the wall, watching the room in front of me. Somewhere in the Peak, small village pub, just a few blokes gathered at the bar talking about the fire. There'd been another fire the year before, plastics factory out on the way to Manchester. Arson suspected. Drugs. Organised crime. And now this. Won't be any factories left soon.

Dom came back with pints. We sat and supped. Rain beat at the window.

"What now?" I said.

"We need to stick together," Dom said. "Your mum. We'll take her to my house."

"Yeah. The Organisation. We need to find them."

"Right."

The pub had the radio on, and I recognised the song, mum's song—

"Dom," I said. "Who—what's that girl that looks like you back there—"

She closed her eyes. She opened them and looked at me. "I don't know what they did to me," she said. "Do you know what I remember? I remember finding you. And a stuffed bison—"

"There's a stuffed bison in your house. And there were one in this place—"

"And I remember waking up on that wooden block, and Joe leaning over me—"

"Dom, how do I know it's you?"

She put her pint down. She looked at me and we both leaned forward and we kissed in the corner of that pub. It were like I'd been waiting since the world were still forming, before the first humans, before maybe even anything that knew anything, for that to happen. And now here we were.

And then Dom pulled away and said, "How do I know it's you?"

And a bloke at the bar yelled ere yare Tony, change the radio will ya, and a voice called rey, and the song cut out—

—and into it cut static and hiss and dead air and then—

—a voice—

—*Cthulhu fhtagn...*

... *Cthulhu fhtagn...*

... *Cthulhu fhtagn...* ✘



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