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On a raw and stormy night at Juvincourt Airfield in northern France, hard up against the barren fields of Picardy, a number of Nazi airmen were hard at work, preparing a Heinkel He 177 bomber for flight. Lined up around the massive plane, a few dozen well-armed SS soldiers were standing guard and doing their best to stay warm and dry in the driving rain. The storm had blown up with gale force winds over the North Sea earlier that afternoon and had then raced across the three hundred miles of Belgium and Netherland lowlands as if none of it were there, those winds now bellowing all over the tarmac in wild, blustery gusts and lashing at the bare faces and hands of every man out there with a force so fierce, everyone felt it stinging right through their heavy coats and long underwear.

The airmen, all too aware that flying in such conditions was a fool's errand, had been whispering among themselves from the moment they first learned of this mission and continuously stole furtive glances at the soldiers in the course of their work. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong and all of them knew it.

When a Bauer fuel truck came lumbering to a stop alongside the Heinkel He, all the airmen glanced as one at the two men climbing out of it. Franz, the usually happy-go-lucky one of the two operators went about uncoiling the hose with several apprehensive looks of his own at the SS soldiers. Concerned, and careful to make certain none of them were paying attention to him, Gustav leaned in closer to his partner and whispered above the roar of the wind.

“Something goddamned odd is going on out here tonight.”

Gustav looked at Franz and quickly over his shoulder and went back to work without saying a word. Not satisfied, Franz whispered again over the wind.

“Gustav. Look. They've completely stripped away all of the usual armaments from under the wings. Doesn't that alone seem odd to you?”

When Gustav failed to respond, Franz leaned in closer.

“And these engines. I have never seen the likes of them before.”

“What!?” Gustav said over the stinging wind.

Seeing several of the SS soldiers look his way, Franz resumed his duties until they had looked away, then whispered again into Gustav’s ear.

“Look, the Fuhrer himself made a surprise visit to the base just last month so perhaps he’s coming again to oversee this mission. My god, what else can you make of all this security out here tonight? Something very strange is going on, I can assure you of that much.”

Franz had another look at the soldiers and leaned back into Gustav’s ear.

“I’ve also heard talk of a secret bomb they are developing. Blows up the entire goddamned world at once. Maybe that’s it. They are planning to send all those Russian bastards to kingdom come tonight. Moscow gone. Poof. Just like that.”

Franz snapped his fingers to emphasize his point and waited for Gustav’s response but Gustav went on working without a word and Franz went back to his own duties, dissatisfied with his dolt of a partner and everything else he did not like about the world and this situation.

The two men had been working there in the bitter rain and wind for several minutes when a Mercedes-Benz staff car came careening around the corner of a nearby concrete bunker and raced across the tarmac at breakneck speed, spraying a rooster tail of water as it did. A Bundesarchiv Bild enclosed transport truck appeared a moment later and lumbered along behind the staff car, spraying its own, more modest rooster tail.

By the time the two vehicles had come to a halt alongside the plane, every SS soldier out there was standing at attention, as well as every airman, Franz and Gustav among them. Franz, playing the part of a dutiful soldier, looked straight ahead but kept glancing sidelong at the staff car, dying to see who would step out of it. When General Meinhard Schmitz did a moment later, Franz’ heart froze. A supreme commander in the SS. My god. He fully expected to see the Fuhrer disembarking next.

Instead, two Luftwaffe pilots Franz had seen around Juvincourt climbed out behind the general, a Major Heinrich and his copilot, Konrad, both handsome fellows, Heinrich middle aged and stoic in face with gray eyes and a cleft chin, Konrad younger and more delicate in appearance, with a face that looked better suited to playing Liszt at a concert than flying Nazi bombers. In utter contrast to the two pilots, General Schmitz had a long, narrow face, a hawk nose and closely set eyes that displayed the usual bloodlessness of a Nazi general.

As the three officers approached the plane in the driving rain, everyone out there saluted, a gesture of deference that General Schmitz dismissed with an arrogant flip of his hand. The SS soldiers remained standing at attention while the airmen returned to their work, albeit a bit more apprehensively than before.

Having offered his own salute, the driver of the transport truck hurried around back, undid the canvas flap and lowered the gate, over which four airmen jumped out, two of them, Christian and Steffen, appearing to take this suspect mission in good humor, the other two, Horst and Wilhelm, looking to be deeply troubled about being called out in this weather.

With dramatic flair, Christian and Steffen stopped and saluted for the three officers. Heinrich frowned in response and gestured furtively with his head. Get onboard, you two idiots. General Schmitz, suspecting the salute had been a display of insolence, but in no mood for further delays, watched the two crewmen icily as they made their way towards a ladder leaning against a wing of the bomber. Up they went to the top of the wing, and from there onto the fuselage, with Christian and Steffen in the lead and the other two crewmen following them. When Christian opened the hatch, the other three men hurriedly climbed inside and Christian offered a final salute to the officers below before climbing inside and closing the hatch.

General Schmitz turned to face the two pilots and shouted over the storm.

“I needn’t tell you the importance the Fuhrer has placed upon this mission!”

“We understand, Herr General!” Heinrich shouted back.

Konrad nodded.

“Then do not fail!”

Schmitz let that soak in for a moment.

“And if you do, perhaps it would be best if you did not come back at all!”

After another long stare, he produced an odd looking black box with a golden lid from under his overcoat. The box was clearly very old and had a strange and ominous aura about it.

“Here it is!” he shouted.

Heinrich took the black box and placed it under his leather jacket. Schmitz patted both men on their shoulders.

“Good luck! I am confident in your success!”

As the two pilots went up the ladder to climb onboard, General Schmitz walked over to where Franz and Gustav were refueling the plane. Both of them stood at attention again and saluted. Schmitz reviewed them and the refueling truck without emotion.

“We are done, yes?” he shouted over the wind.

“Ja, Herr Commandant!”

“Then go!”

Go!” the general added when the two men failed to respond swiftly enough for his liking.

They again saluted and furiously went about winding the fuel hose back into the truck. The general stood overseeing their progress. Meanwhile, first one, then the other of the plane’s two engines coughed to life, so that the wild, whipping rain was made all the more furious by the turning of the enormous propellers.

It being standard protocol, Franz commenced to jot down the amount of fuel he had pumped in his log book but General Schmitz ripped the book from his hands and nodded at a nearby group of soldiers. They rushed over and herded the now confused Franz and Gustav into their own fuel truck. One of these soldiers got behind the wheel. The other airmen and mechanics who had been working on the bomber were herded separately into the back of the Bundesarchiv Bild transport truck. Several of the armed SS soldiers joined them. Another one closed the rear gate and canvas.

General Schmitz leaned in to the captain in charge of the squadron.

“These men are never to be seen again.”

“Ja, Herr General.”

Schmitz grabbed him by the arm.

“And remember, you were never here. You never saw this plane. It doesn't exist.”

“Ja, Herr General.”

“All right, go!”

The captain climbed in behind the wheel of the Bundesarchiv Bild and waved for the driver of the refueling truck to follow him towards a forested area at the north end of the airfield. General Schmitz returned to his Mercedes staff car and stood alongside it, waiting for the plane to take off.

Inside the cockpit, Heinrich watched until the crewmen in back were completely distracted before placing the black box into a secret compartment under the instrument panel. A moment later, Christian popped his head in through the cockpit door, his usually mirthful countenance somewhat darkened.

“What is it?” Heinrich said with a look over his shoulder.

“The men were wondering why we have all those crates in back instead of a payload of bombs, sir.”

“And?”

“Well, I was wondering too, sir?”

“And?”

Christian stared for a long moment.

“Your instruments, sir. They’re nothing like what I’ve ever seen before. The same with those engines outside. The men could not help but notice on their way in.”

“And?”

“And, well, we’re wondering what it all means, sir?”

“We’re going to the moon.”

Heinrich stared until Christian finally cracked a smile.

“None of my business, is it, sir?”

“Probably not.”

“Very well. You’ve always gotten us there and back safely before.”

“Best to get our checklist ready for takeoff,” Heinrich said. “And make sure those crates are properly secured.”

“Very well, sir.”

Christian hesitated until Heinrich glanced back.

“What is it now?”

“It will be Christmas soon, you know. 1943.”

“Of course I know it will be Christmas soon.”

“Let’s hope it’s a good one,” Christian said with a smile and disappeared in back.

Konrad, who had been watching the Bundesarchiv Bild and the Bauer fuel trucks disappear into the forest, looked away from the glass bubble front of the cockpit and over at Heinrich. Heinrich, becoming aware of Konrad’s stare, glanced up from his instruments. Konrad shook his head.

“They won’t be returning any time soon, will they, major?”

Heinrich looked off in the direction of the forest without saying a word.

“We won’t be coming back any time soon either, will we, major?”

Heinrich’s face snapped around, his eyes focused unflinchingly on Konrad as he shouted back to Christian.

“Coordinates!”

“25° 44' 47.1264" N... 32° 36' 19.1124" E!”

“Set our course,” Heinrich said to Konrad.

Christian popped his face back into the cockpit.

“I’ve just checked the maps, sir. That’s the Mediterranean. Off the coast of Egypt.”

Heinrich glanced at him.

“Are we off on an archeological expedition, sir? On our way to visit the pyramids?”

“Strap yourselves in, all of you,” Heinrich said without emotion. “This is going to be a hell of a ride until we get above these clouds.”

Before pulling back on the throttle and easing the plane forward, Heinrich looked down at General Schmitz and saluted. Schmitz saluted in return and stood watching the bomber taxi slowly up to far end of the landing strip. Once there, Heinrich hesitated a brief moment before pulling back all the way on the throttle. The engines roared to life, the plane shuddered and steadily picked up speed on its way down the runway. General Schmitz lingered in the whipping rain just long enough to see the bomber disappear into the clouds and climbed into his car. The driver turned the car around and headed back the way they had come.

Onboard the plane, Heinrich was battling the yoke in the violent weather, the bomber climbing firmly in one moment, then seeming to plummet out of the sky in the next. With his feet working furiously at the rudder pedals, he called back to Christian and Steffen.

“Do you have a reading on this cloud height yet!”

“A bit over 12,000 feet!” Steffen called back.

Heinrich glanced down at his altimeter. They were nearing 8,000 feet.

“How much longer until we clear this mess!?” Christian called out from in back. “I’d like to brew up some coffee!”

Heinrich did not bother to answer him. There was no point. Christian did not really want an answer. Everything was cause for a joke with him.

“By the way, sir!” Christian called out again. “If you really plan on visiting the pyramids, you’re going the wrong way!”

Heinrich glanced over at Konrad. They both shook their heads. There was no dealing with Christian, or Steffen, and there was no turning the plane away from the direction of the wind, not until they had cleared the clouds. A plane was like a ship when landing and taking off. You always steered into the swells.

The battle for control of the plane went on for another ten minutes. Then, without warning, the plane broke through the clouds and the tops of them flew by like wisps of fog. Looking up through the cockpit’s bubble canopy, Heinrich now saw a black night filled with stars. He slowly turned the lumbering bomber towards the east, and around a bit more until they were heading southeast.

Christian popped his face into the cockpit.

“Lovely, isn’t it, sir?”

“Yes,” Heinrich said without looking at Christian. “Coordinates.”

Christian disappeared and returned a moment later.

“50°51'0"N 4°21'0"E, sir. Right over Brussels, more or less. Didn’t you say you once had a little strudel down in Brussels?”

“Helga, yes.”

Heinrich glanced back at Christian after saying this.

“Auburn hair and skin like rose petals. But that was long, long ago, Christian. When there wasn’t a war and everyone had a gal in Brussels.”

He smiled sadly at Christian.

“That coffee?”

“Yes, sir. Coming right up.”

Heinrich glanced over at Konrad.

“Let’s plot a course.”

“Yes, sir. Which way do you like? Over Italy or the Balkans?”

“The Balkans. I don’t trust that bastard, Mussolini.”

“It’s a bit longer, then.”

“I know. Estimated time of arrival?”

Konrad calculated for a moment.

“At current air speed, roughly four-thirty, sir.”

“Just before dawn.”

“Thereabouts, sir.”

“Would you like to take a rest, Konrad?”

“I’m fine, sir. If you don’t mind, though, I would like to relieve myself.”

Heinrich nodded and looked straight ahead.

As soon as Konrad had disappeared in back, Heinrich checked over his shoulder and pulled the black box back out of the compartment, along with a worn booklet. Heinrich flipped through the old pages, slowly shaking his head. When he came to the prescribed instructions, he brought the black box closer to his face and examined the lid carefully. There was a dial on top with an ancient looking inscription etched into it, written in a script that Heinrich did not understand. Glancing at the old booklet one more time, Heinrich took hold of the dial and carefully turned it clockwise until he heard a click, then he promptly placed the box back inside the compartment and locked the door. The booklet went into his flight jacket. Heinrich found himself staring in the direction of the compartment, as if a strange new force was now emanating from the box inside it. His eyes were still locked in that direction when Christian reappeared behind him.

“Coffee, sir.”

“Ah, thank you, Christian.”

Heinrich sipped at the hot brew before setting it down into a holder. Christian remained there, staring over his shoulder. Heinrich glanced at him once.

“What is it, Christian?”

Their eyes met and Heinrich looked forward again.

“Well, sir. Horst and Wilhelm are in a state over where we’re going and the purpose of our mission.”

“They’re always in a state, Christian.”

“That is true, sir. But more so than usual tonight.”

The two men glanced at each other.

“I suppose I’m still wondering, too, sir.”

“Would it ease your concerns if I told you that I had no idea either?”

Christian smiled.

“Not greatly, sir.”

“Well, there you have it. Now try to keep the spirits up back there and don’t make things any worse than they already are.”

“That bad, sir?”

“I have no idea. We’re expecting a transmission off the coast of Libya with further instructions. That’s all I know.”

“I understand, sir. Rommel and the boys are battling it out down there right now, but it’s a hell of a long way to fly, especially since we’re not carrying any weapons.”

“You’re thinking too much, Christian.”

“I know, sir, but there’s been talk, you know.”

“No, I don’t know. What kind of talk?”

“About a bomb, sir. A very nasty bomb and the word is that whoever drops it isn’t likely to survive the explosion. Perhaps that’s what’s in the crates?”

“It’s a lousy time to abandon your usual cheerfulness, Christian.”

Christian smiled.

“When I heard about the mission, I had a really good one with a little French girl I know in Reims.”

“Well, why don’t you think of that and get back to your station.”

“Yes, sir.”

Konrad came back right then and squeezed past Christian.

“Coffee, sir,” Christian said to him.

“Yes, thank you.”

Christian went off. Konrad glanced at Heinrich.

“What was that all about?”

“About a girl he knows in Reims.”

“Ah, I knew a girl in Reims once, too.”

“We all knew a girl in Reims once, Konrad.”

The night wore on with much coffee and yawns and trips to the restroom. Having cleared the storm, the men eventually had a view of the lights along both the Italian and Balkan coast. Heinrich was slicing down the Adriatic Sea, but quite a bit closer to the Balkan side than the Italian.

“I could do with a bowl of spaghetti right now,” Christian said as they cleared the boot of Italy.

Heinrich did not bother to respond.

An hour later they were nearing the Libyan coast. There were scant lights save for those back up at Alexandria. Heinrich nodded to Konrad who took the controls. Heinrich squeezed through to Horsts' radio station and pulled the instruction booklet out of his flight jacket.

"Send this signal," he told Horst, showing him the opened page.

Horst sent the brief signal and waited. A moment later, a signal returned. The message repeated three times and ceased.

Heinrich placed the booklet back into his flight jacket.

"What is it supposed to mean, sir?" Horst said.

"Nothing, Horst. Nothing."

"I'll tell you what it means," Wilhelm said. "We're headed for the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, which is in British hands."

"Shut up," Heinrich said.

"But it is, sir, and going there makes no sense. We have maybe one flight hour left before we need to refuel and the closest friendly airstrip is in Tripoli. I'm not so sure we can make it there as things are now but we certainly won't make it to the Valley of the Kings like this."

"Don't worry yourself about things that don't concern you, Wilhelm!" Heinrich said sharply.

A look of remorse immediately passed over Heinrich's face.

"All four of you. Please do your job and leave the worrying to me."

Heinrich went forward and explained what he had learned to Konrad.

"I told you, sir. I knew it in my gut. We were never coming back from this mission."

"Please, let's not fret over things. I already have two men getting hysterical in back."

Konrad nodded and looked forward. Heinrich turned the plane to the southeast. An hour passed with nothing but the featureless water passing beneath them. Heinrich heard Horst and Wilhelm still grumbling among themselves in back.

As the hour neared five-thirty, Christian popped his head into the cockpit. Most of the mirth was gone from his face.

"Sir, Horst says he's picking up some very strange signals."

"What sort of signals?"

"I don't know but he claims they're coming from inside this plane."

Heinrich darted a look over his shoulder.

"A short in the wiring, perhaps."

“Well, sir, I hate to tell you this but all my navigation went completely haywire a moment ago, precisely when Horst started picking up these strange signals.”

Heinrich darted another look over his shoulder.

“What are you trying to say, Christian?”

“I’m saying that I no longer know where we are or where we’re heading. As best I can tell, we’ve been going around in circles for the past hour.”

“Nonsense,” Heinrich said. “Now tell everyone to buckle in.”

Sunrise was about to pierce the sky to the east and Christian paused to watch it for a moment before disappearing in back. The booklet had said something about steering into the rising sun but Heinrich had no idea what to make of those instructions anymore. Instead he turned due south, in the direction of the Valley of the Kings, their ostensible destination, troubled over the idea that he was letting his men down.

In a brilliant flash of gold, the sun finally broke the horizon and infused the cockpit with a blinding light. Then Heinrich heard the sounds of a struggle in the back and Horst burst into the cockpit with Christian at his back, attempting to restrain him.

“It’s madness!” Horst screamed. “It’s all madness.”

With that struggle ongoing, Heinrich felt as if he no longer had control of the plane. It seemed the very fabric of universe was warping around him. As if time had stood still.

Then, in another flash of light, so brilliant that everyone in the cockpit reflexively held up their hands, the sky opened up and the plane completely vanished from this world.

2

Professor Harrison Standish was standing inside a dimly lit Egyptian burial chamber, surrounded by a group of his anthropology students from Brandeis University and dabbing at his face with an old handkerchief. Outside, the desert was baking in one hundred degree heat and inside, the whole lot of them were wilting from the airless and sweltering atmosphere.

Though barely a decade older than some of his students, Professor Standish already had a PhD in linguistic anthropology and had been excavating in the Valley of the Kings for nearly fifteen years. Standish's PhD had led him through the typical range of courses, including but not limited to ancient and classical civilizations, art, theology, architecture, history, and various languages, ancient Greek and Latin among them, along with modern German and French. Naturally, his dream as a young man had been to stumble across his own undiscovered ancient ruin, but archaeological work of that sort was just one of the four sub-disciplines within a contemporary anthropology department, the others being physical, cultural and linguistic anthropology. His students were just as likely to be living among indigenous tribes or working in a lab as digging around among rocks and it was in fact Standish's renown as an expert in ancient etymology that had granted him exclusive access to one of Egypt's most astonishing archaeological finds in recent decades.

"As you already know," Dr. Standish said, turning to admire the vaulted and pillared tomb behind him. "What you are beholding is the largest burial chamber ever discovered in the Valley of the Kings. For that matter, the tomb here together with all its chambers is the largest of its kind ever discovered in world."

Dr. Standish looked back from the chamber to find three female students in the front row swooning over his every word. He cleared his throat and turned back towards the vaulted chamber. Standish and all of his students were wearing hard hats with a miner's light attached, so as they collectively turned

their heads, shadows from the pillars shifted eerily against the hieroglyphics on the towering walls.

“Truly astonishing, isn’t it?” Dr. Standish said. “This find certainly rivals that of Tutankhamun’s burial tomb. Try to imagine, if you will, having been one of the workers constructing this temple over 5000 years ago.”

Turning back, Standish found the same three women staring with dreamy eyes. He cleared his throat and looked back at the hieroglyphics.

“To place that in perspective,” he said. “Think of when you received your first bicycle, or the first day you attended school, or perhaps the first time you fell down and scraped your knee. Imagine all the little inconveniences and pinpricks you might experience in course of one hundred years of life on this planet, the adventures, the romances, the...”

The professor turned back to find those same three female students now nodding their heads emphatically. He cleared his throat and continued.

“...the countless hours and days and experiences of a single lifetime. Then imagine doing all that over again fifty times and you begin to have some perspective of how long ago this tomb was constructed.”

With his three admirers now smiling dreamily at him, Dr. Standish waved at the vaulted chamber, doing his best to maintain a professional demeanor.

“If nothing else today, I would like you to keep in mind how little we know about a chamber like this one. Consider that it took decades before anyone realized how vast the tomb of Ramesses II actually was. And here we have already discovered some 130 assorted tombs of this sort. Imagine that this might only represent the tip of the iceberg.”

Aware again of the three women staring at him, Dr. Standish pointed towards the long tunnel at the far end of the main chamber.

“What do you say we go ahead and proceed with our exploration?”

As he started across the pillared room, the three female students rushed to fall in beside him. Whispered voices and the footsteps of the other students echoed through the chamber and all around them as they moved forward.

“Do you really think we could find some kind of treasure today?” one the three female students asked Dr. Standish.

Dr. Standish looked into her eyes and back forward again.

“That is impossible to say.”

He glanced over at her a second time.

I suppose we can be assured that there is always another great discovery to be had somewhere in this valley, but...”

“But wouldn’t that be exciting?” she said, interrupting him. “Making history today? I would just love to be able to say that I had been here with Dr. Harrison Standish when he discovered one of antiquity’s long held secrets.”

Lost momentarily in her beauty, the professor looked up to find that he and his students had arrived to a long, narrow and dimly lit tunnel at the far end of the chamber. The tunnel led downward and disappeared into darkness far ahead of them.

“Shall we?” Dr. Standish said with a wave of his hand and attempted to move ahead of the three women but they remained glued to his side as everyone marched deeper underground.

Several hundred feet down the tunnel, the openings to small chambers appeared on either side of them, each chamber dimly lit, each of them empty save for a single sarcophagus and hieroglyphics inscribed on the walls. These were the known burial chambers of a pharaoh’s many children.

Continuing along the tunnel, they eventually came upon chambers that had yet to be excavated, their interiors still piled with rubble. Another hundred yards forward and they arrived at an intersecting tunnel, which also disappeared into darkness in both directions and showed signs of more unexcavated chambers. Dr. Standish looked over his shoulder.

“Robert,” he said.

A tall, gangly student with dark hair and peach fuzz on his chin came forward.

“Why don’t you prepare your GPR equipment and we’ll set it up against this wall here. Start from this center point and move left ten feet, then right ten feet. Back and forth in equal increments and let’s see what we can uncover.”

While Robert worked, Rebecca, one of Dr. Standish’s prized undergraduate students, muscled her way past the professor’s three female admirers and offered each of them a testy look.

“Oh, good, Rebecca” Dr. Standish said. “Have you a hammer handy?”

“If I had a hammer,” one of the students said to laughter.

Rebecca, who was always prepared, handed Dr. Standish the tool and offered his three admirers another testy look. The professor, meanwhile, had already begun to tap cautiously against the opposite wall and had gone but a few feet to his left when a hollow sound caught everyone’s attention and what had been a stone façade totally collapsed, revealing a grotesque looking half dog/half human figure carved into the hidden alcove. At the sight of this beast, one of Dr. Standish’s three female suitors screamed and appeared to faint. And thinking she might actually hit the stone floor, Dr. Standish caught her in his arms. When he looked up, he found Rebecca staring at them.

“Useless,” she said.

Robert, who had been setting up his equipment on the chamber floor, relieved Dr. Standish of his admirer and guided her over to a safe place against the wall.

“What is that the figure?” one of the students said as all of them crowded in to have a better look.

“And what is that symbol above it?” another one of the students said.

“It’s the Grand Pentacle,” Rebecca said. “The Key of Solomon.”

Dr. Standish stood there shaking his head.

“What, sir?” one of the other students said. “Are you saying it’s not?”

“No, no,” he said, coming back from his trance. “Rebecca’s absolutely right but it makes no sense. The symbol of Baphomet being here.”

“What do you mean, sir?”

“And what’s a Baphomet?”

“The Goat of Mendes,” Rebecca said. “The Black Goat. The Goat of a Thousand Young. It represents the Powers of Darkness.”

Dr. Standish stepped forward and cautiously touched the Grand Pentacle etched into the wall.

“The Judas Goat,” he said absently. “It was used by the Knights of Templar to represent Satan but I have never seen it associated with the Key of Solomon. Nor does it make any sense for either of these symbols to be here. These burial chambers are at a minimum five thousand years old and Solomon’s reign ended at most three thousand years ago.”

“So, these burial chambers were probably raided during Solomon’s time,” Rebecca said.

“Or maybe Solomon lived much earlier than we had thought,” another student said.

There were snickers from the back.

“Hey,” someone else said. “Maybe he’s onto something. You know, they used to live to be a thousand years old in the Old Testament.”

There were more snickers.

Entranced, Dr. Standish continued exploring the symbol with his fingers, very slowly, very cautiously.

“So, what does the symbolism mean all by itself?” one of the students said from the back.

“Well, you see how the pentagram is inverted?” the professor said with a look over his shoulder. “This was done to represent a denial of man’s spirituality. The horns of the Goat here, thrust upward speak of defiance. These other three points, inverted, were believed to deny the trinity.”

“So it’s somehow related to Christianity?”

“Yes, which is precisely my point. In order to accept any of this, you have to place this symbol and this rendering of a beast sometime after Christ. And with this Judas Goat, more likely towards the end of the middle ages, when the Knights of Templar first came into existence.”

“Wow, this is so far out,” a male student said from the back. “It’s like we’re on our own Raiders of the Lost Ark adventure here.”

Dr. Standish was still exploring the figure, his mind racing.

“What is it, Dr. Standish?” one of his female admirers said with a grab of his arm. “Are you all right?”

Rebecca pretended to mimic her.

“Does anyone have some water,” the female student who had nearly fainted said from her spot sitting against the wall.

Rebecca also mimicked her.

“Does anyone have a bucket to throw on her?”

Several students laughed. Meanwhile a buzz of voices continued around the professor as he continued to explore the grotesque figure.

“Dr. Standish,” the female admirer who had hold of his arm said. “What is it? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“I’ll tell you what it is,” Rebecca said. “This is the complete opposite of the Lost Ark. The Lost Ark was supposed to be a power for good. This symbolism suggests that someone was trying to summon the Devil. At the very least, those involved believed that it was possible to do so.”

“Ooooooo,” one of the students said amidst the increased buzz. “Then maybe it’s standing guard over something really evil behind that alcove.”

While students jostled with each other in laughter, Rebecca glanced over at Robert, who was still fussing with his radar unit on the tunnel floor.

“Hey, Robert,” she said. “What are you looking for? Hidden petroleum deposits?”

That was met with snickers from the other students. Unfazed, Robert continued on with what he was doing.

“Seriously, Robert,” Rebecca said. “Why don’t you rearrange your efforts ninety degrees in a vertical direction? I believe Dr. Standish wanted to know what’s behind this alcove.”

Dr. Standish came back from his own distracted gaze and looked over at Robert.

“What is it?” he said.

“Well, sir, in calibrating the unit I...um...”

Always the impatient one, Rebecca went over to look for herself.

“Go ahead. Spit it out, Robert.”

“Well, were you aware of there being another hidden chamber beneath this location, Dr. Standish?”

“No,” he said, coming over to have a look for himself. The other students again crowded in around him. The gray toned screen looked something like an ultrasound, only stationary.

“Wow, it’s like there’s another huge chamber right below us,” someone said.

“Robert,” Dr. Standish said. “Please switch to a 3D cross section.”

When Robert did, they were suddenly looking at the outlines of dozens of figures standing guard over a huge sarcophagus. Hundreds of smaller figures and other items could be seen scattered all over the floor.

“Oh wow, Dr. Standish,” one of his female admirers said. “We’ve discovered a tomb filled with gold and jewels, just like you said.”

Rebecca looked to the heavens.

“All right,” Dr. Standish said as the other students crowded in closer around him. “I’m afraid we’ll all have to head back now. According to Egyptian law, we’re required to notify the authorities the minute we make a new discovery.”

“Come on, Dr. Standish,” a student said. “Why don’t we go break in and see what’s inside there right now?”

There were more jokes about breaking into the tomb but Dr. Standish herded his students back up the long, darkened tunnel, even though he was inclined to do as they had asked.

3

At a few minutes before five o'clock on Sunday morning, Dr. James Zachary was startled awake by the sound of his phone ringing. Out of habit, he reached over to reassure his wife Rita, forgetting again that he was a separated man. The movie of their failed relationship flashed through his head as he fumbled for the receiver. College sweethearts. Twenty-five years of marriage. Two children raised and off to college and Rita up and leaves James for a younger man.

We stuck together for the kids had been their ongoing mantra.

James had to laugh over that one. The purported glue of enduring marriages had become more like a filet knife with the passing of time, slowly gutting all intimacy out of their romance. Until, with the kids finally gone and all illusions stripped from their lives, their meals together were characterized mostly by the sound of silverware scraping against plates.

In response to this growing chasm, James had immersed himself ever more deeply in his work as the head of NASA's pet interplanetary exploration mission, Revelation.

For her part, Rita had gone to work as a Pilate's instructor, her heart searching in every fleeting smile and passing look for what she no longer could find at home.

Until one day, she made an announcement in the kitchen.

"I've found someone new."

In fumbling for the receiver, James remembered those words with a sick feeling. How did you process the grief and dispense with the old affections once and for all? James had yet to figure that out.

"Yes," he said with the receiver finally to his ear.

"Sir, it's Donald Bell. Down at NASA."

Dr. Zachary sighed and looked at the time.

“I know who you are, Don, and I know where you work. Where we both work. So, please explain why you’re calling me at five o’clock on a Sunday morning.”

“Well, I was thinking you’d better get down here right away, sir.”

“And why would that be?”

“Well, Revelation just relayed a signal to us a few minutes ago.”

“And isn’t that what Revelation was designed to do, Don?”

“Yes sir, but this signal came from deep space.”

Dr. Zachary sat up.

“What kind of signal?”

“Well, we’re still seeing what we can do to decode the language but it definitely has the signature of intelligence about it.”

“And where exactly in deep space?”

“From Tau Ceti. At least that’s what we’ve been able to determine from Revelation’s tracking system.”

“Look, do a recalculation. The last time this came up, we were picking up chatter from a ham radio operator who had bounced a signal off of Triton.”

“Sir, we did do a recalculation and I have no doubt this one’s coming from Tau Ceti.”

“All right. I’ll be down there as soon as I can shower and have a bite to eat.”

“There’s something else, sir.”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Well, a few minutes ago, we picked up on a radio signal from Earth that appears to have been a response to the signal from Tau Ceti.”

James stood up, filled with curiosity now. Revelation had just passed Uranus, hurtling towards Neptune and they had been picking up all kinds of chatter over the past few weeks, but an exchange of signals? Something didn’t smell right.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll be down there as soon as I can.”

Tau Ceti, James thought as he shaved. Right place, but someone on Earth responding? Sounded like an ET hoax to him at first blush.

Looking into the mirror as he shaved, James became aware of his thinning, short cropped hair and the salt and pepper beard. Have to do something about that someday soon. A few hair transplants and a bit of Grecian formula. I could easily look ten years younger.

Concern over being in his fifties and all alone in this world quickly transitioned back into a memory of Rita. She was always one to snuggle up close in the morning and James could not help but picture her snuggling up to her young Adonis right then.

In response, James's mind started constructing a résumé of his self-worth. A doctorate degree in Geological Sciences from Brown University. Teaching abroad, mostly recently at Oxford. Directing the Revelation project for NASA and going to work each day with the excitement of a kid on the first day of summer. He was distinguished in his field with a wide range of experience and personal successes and most of his boyhood dreams had been realized. He possessed everything but a happy romance.

We'll definitely have to do something about that too, James thought as he climbed into the shower. If he had learned anything from the failure of his marriage to Rita, it was that women required a lot of attention. A lot more than he had previously been willing to offer. Also, being a workaholic turned into a very lonely enterprise every Friday night about seven o'clock.

4

Raynard made his living as a fisherman in the small town of Sète, on the southern coast of France, and one afternoon each week, usually on Sundays, before he and his wife Jacqueline sat down for an evening meal, Raynard and his teenage son Gaston would go out for a bit of father and son bonding on his trawler. The boat, as rusty as it was in places and smelling of the sea, had a spacious steerage cabin up front and galley below, along with plenty of room in back for the father and son to stretch out on their beach chairs and cast their fishing lines.

That Sunday, as the day grew late, Raynard and Gaston were anchored about a half mile beyond the harbor breakwater, immersed in conversation. The water was navy-blue and the buildings along the harbor docks were mustard, curry and raspberry colored and growing burnished in the fading light. Every so often, the laughter of sailors and townsfolk could be heard wafting up from the waterfront bars.

Raynard loved the sea and hardly needed an excuse to be out in his boat, but these moments of being alone with his son were some of his favorites. There had not been many bites that day but it hardly mattered to him. Raynard and his son had a bottle of Chinon sitting in a bucket of ice and were pleasantly gabbing away. Mostly, Gaston was gabbing away. He was always going on about how he planned to visit Paris and see the world someday and Raynard always listened patiently, knowing a young man had to do these things. If the world called to your heart, there was no ignoring it. A young man had to go and do these things.

“You’d better hurry,” Raynard warned Gaston, remembering what the old sorcière had said outside the bait shop that morning. “A great evil is coming tonight.”

Raynard pretended to gaze at his watch.

“I’m guessing you have two or three hours at most.”

He chuckled to himself.

“Do you think she’s crazy, Papa?”

“Eh, who knows? Maybe we’re all crazy. You have to be little crazy to keep on living in this crazy world.”

“She scares me sometimes, Papa.”

“Eh, you don’t know what being scared is. Imagine if she was your wife and you had to go home to her every night.”

Raynard had a good laugh over that one and Gaston chuckled a bit too.

“Oh, look, Papa,” Gaston said. “The full moon is starting to rise.”

Raynard looked to the east, in the direction of Marseille and could see a diffused white light glowing all along the distant horizon. Closer in, the green hills behind Sète were growing dark. The street lights had started to sparkle along the waterfront.

Having sat there in silence for some minutes, Raynard was about to suggest that they head back in to port but noticed his son had fallen asleep.

Still young, he thought and cannot handle his wine. Eh, we have yet to catch a damned thing today. Let’s give it another half hour before I wake him. It will give the boy a chance to sleep.

Raynard checked the anchor and made sure his navigation lights were on before sitting back in his chair. It was a lovely summer evening with a warm breeze blowing down from the hills. The lights of Sète were dancing on the harbor water.

Unthinking, Raynard fell asleep too and bolted awake a short while later, knocking over the bottle of wine in the process.

“Sacré bleu,” he said and scrambled to minimize the damage.

Gaston, who had been awakened by the commotion, was rubbing his sleepy eyes and looking around in all directions.

“Papa?” he said.

“Yes son, what is it?”

“Where are the lights of town?”

“Oh mon dieu,” Raynard said. “I put the anchor down. I’m sure I did. Yes, you see. It’s down, so how are we drifting?”

“Papa, the moon is gone.”

“Merde. What the hell is going on?”

“Maybe the sorcière was right.”

Still muddled from his sleep, and filled with ominous feelings now, Raynard took a slug from the bottle of wine and tried to gather his thoughts. The sorcière. Raynard remembered years ago when she had put a curse on a young man in town, this after he had taken advantage of a young girl. Next thing you

knew, the young man had what looked like leprosy on his genitals. Within a few years he had gone mad and had thrown himself under a train.

Mon dieu. You did not mess with that sorcière, all right.

Lost in these thoughts, Raynard heard a low, rumbling noise approaching from the distance and looked around in all directions.

“What in hell now,” he said. “Quick, Gaston, grab the green glow stick. Let’s see if we can tell where this noise is coming from.”

As Gaston ran off, the VHF radio crackled to life and the boy froze in his tracks. So did Raynard. The sound coming out it was a repetitive scratching noise, like that of an old LP when it has come to the end of the record, that sound overlaid by a jumble of whispered voices and screams, as if they had picked up an audio track from hell.

That burst of noise stopped as suddenly as it had started, which left Raynard and Gaston staring at the northern sky. The moon had set and all was dark but the low rumbling sound continued to grow in that direction.

Finally, an enormous plane of some kind burst into view above the hills behind town. A red light flashed from its wings. A trail of black smoke poured out of the rear fuselage. Reflexively, Gaston gripped at his father and the two of them watched as it barreled out over the sea. When it passed over the boat at a few hundred feet, both of them ducked. Once it had passed by, they saw flames licking at the tail section and heard the engines sputtering.

“Oh mon, dieu! Oh mon dieu!” Raynard said raced to make a call on his VHF radio. “For sure she is going down!”

As he attempted to reach shore, the plane crash a mile further out into the sea. Raynard was calling frantically now.

“Mayday! Mayday! A plane has gone down at sea! Mayday! Mayday! It is a very big plane and it looks like she’s sinking! Someone please respond!”

At one in the morning, Inspector Jacques Mitterand of the Préfet Maritime did not appear to be a happy man. Then Jacques never did seem to be a happy man. With his swarthy, Corsican face and five o’clock shadow, he forever seemed to be filled with suspicion about the world and everything in it.

As the first government official to arrive at the scene of the plane crash, he had followed Raynard’s boat out to where the fisherman believed the plane went down, and finding nothing, moored Raynard’s fishing boat to his harbor vessel and questioned both father and son for most of an hour, after which Jacques felt no clearer about the plane crash than when he had started.

Seeing both the father and son shivering, Jacques called to one of his assistants, who came over to the rail of the harbor vessel.

“Bring me two blankets.”

Jacques waved to indicate that Raynard and Gaston were in need of them.

“Yes sir,” the assistant said and started off in a hurry.

“And two coffees, if you have them!” Jacques called out.

The assistant stopped and looked back.

“Anything else, sir?”

When Inspector Mitterand waved him off, the assistant turned to leave again, only to be called back again.

“Make it three coffees.”

The assistant acknowledged this request and disappeared into the galley of the harbor vessel. The inspector watched him, as he watched everyone, then turned his gaze back out towards the frenzied activity on the water. The Société Nationale de Sauvetage en Mer had directed one of their Class I lifeboats to search the area with sonar. The SNSM had stationed several smaller boats there to provide transport to shore and first aid, if either became necessary and the Gendarmerie Maritime had sent out several of their vessels, including two speedboats, which were searching an area further out to sea, on the chance that this downed plane had been involved in some kind of drug activity. And in addition to everything else, several rescue divers stood onboard the Société Nationale de Sauvetage en Mer vessel, ready to dive in the minute something was spotted.

Jacques stood there at the boat rail, watching the search in progress, all the while stealing furtive glances at Raynard and Gaston.

“Ah, here are the blankets and coffee,” he said when his assistant reappeared.

Jacques grabbed the two blankets and personally wrapped one around both the son and father. Then Jacques reached up and took the three coffees.

“Anything else, sir?”

“No. There is nothing to do now but wait.”

He handed the father and son their coffees and took a sip of his own.

“So, I am sorry to trouble you repeatedly on this point,” Jacques said. “But please describe the plane for me again.”

Raynard threw up his hands.

“Oh mon dieu, this big. As wide as a football field. Eh, son?”

“Yes, Poppa. The wing span was very wide.”

“And two props,” Raynard added. “And I remember the front seemed to be all glass. I tell you, I have never seen anything like it in all my life.”

“And the markings. You still insist there was a cross of some kind.”

“Oui, monsieur, I am certain of that, eh son?”

Gaston nodded in agreement, in response to which the inspector shook his head. He had already sent in a description of the plane for identification, and

no one anywhere, not in the Navy or Air Force or anywhere else had been able to come up with a modern plane fitting this description, leaving Jacques with no choice but to question the accuracy of their description. Both the father and son had admitted to indulging in wine for several hours, so their observations might well have been swilling about in too much Bordeaux.

“And you’re absolutely certain you saw nothing drop out of the plane.”

Raynard looked to his son, who shook his head. Raynard looked back, likewise shaking his head.

“Eh, with complete certainty? I cannot swear to that, sir. We heard the low rumbling of the plane for some minutes, of course not knowing then what it was. Then suddenly, there it was, coming right at us and barreling over our heads so close, we both thought to duck. It was all we could do to keep from jumping overboard. Then, like that.”

Raynard snapped his fingers.

“She is gone way out here over the water and I was on the VHS, calling for help. But in all that, no, I never saw anything come out of the plane.”

“And you’re sure you saw nothing,” Jacques said to Gaston.

“No, sir.”

“No, sir, you’re not sure, or no sir, you’re sure you saw nothing?”

“No, sir. I am sure I saw nothing come out of the plane.”

Jacques nodded and looked back out over the water, his right hand nervously tapping his thigh.

“So,” Raynard said. “You think maybe this was one of those big drug deals that did not work out so well?”

Jacques’ head snapped around with suspicion. After thirty years in police work, he had come to view everything and everyone with suspicion. Jacques questioned his own wife when she went to the store.

Jacques nodded at the fisherman and looked back out to sea.

“Who knows? The plane usually gives it away. These smugglers are partial to certain types, but no one can identify your plane, so who knows?”

Jacques shrugged and sipped at his coffee.

“The fact is, we have no reports of missing planes and no flight plans logged that suggest a plane should be anywhere near this area, so naturally we start to suspect that a drug deal is involved.”

Jacques sipped his coffee again and nodded at the SNSM search vessel.

“You can be sure, if a plane has crashed and sunk to the bottom around here, they will find it.”

The night dragged on, with the various vessels and small craft crisscrossing the sea. Jacques was close to nodding out when he heard a “pop” and looked

up to see a flare in the sky. The Préfet Maritime VHS radio crackled to life in the darkness. Then Inspector Mitterand's aide appeared over the ship rail.

"Sir, you'd best get up here. They've found something and according to the captain of the search boat, it's very strange."

Jacques got to his feet wearily.

"Please wait here," he said to the father and son. "I will return soon."

Back up on the Préfet Maritime vessel, the inspector grabbed the radio receiver.

"Yes, this is Inspector Mitterand. What is it you've found?"

"Sir, we have located a plane on the sea bed that fits the general description and dimensions that your two witnesses described. It's in about 50 meters of water."

"Very well, send your divers down and get back to me once they've had a closer look."

Jacques had started to hang up but heard a voice coming through the receiver.

"Yes, what is it?"

"Sir, there is more."

"There is more what?"

"The plane appears to be balancing on a deep ocean trench."

"And your point is?"

"Sir, there is no deep ocean trench in this area. At least there should not be. I have worked the waters off this coast for many years and have never heard of such a thing. I can assure you it doesn't exist on any of the ocean charts we have."

The inspector sighed deeply and massaged his forehead.

"Captain, I am losing my patience with the supernatural right now. I already have a fisherman and his son, both of whom probably had a bit too much Bordeaux this evening, claiming they saw a plane fly overhead with what can only be described as Nazi insignias on it. Now you're telling me we have the seabed opening up beneath us, leading to god knows where. You haven't been drinking Bordeaux as well, have you?"

"Sir, I am only relating what the sonar is showing us."

Jacques sighed deeply again.

"What is next on the agenda this evening? Sea monsters?"

"Sir, we are sending divers down right now to have a look."

"Very well, we'll cut loose from the fishing boat and come out to have a closer look."

The inspector returned the receiver to its place and walked over the edge of the vessel.

“Monsieur, I must ask you to cut the lines loose. And also request that you and your son to remain here. It appears they have found your plane, so I am off to have a look. We will be back as soon as we can.”

Jacques had a look at the boy, who was obviously growing weary and miserable.

“Please feel free to lie down in your cabin and rest and as soon as I’ve made sure about this plane, we’ll have someone accompany you back to shore.”

Raynard set his blanket down and untied the rope lines. The inspector’s assistant swiftly hoisted them up to the Préfet Maritime vessel deck and wound them into a circle. Once the two boats had drifted apart far enough, the captain of the Préfet Maritime vessel started his engines and motored off toward the cluster of boats and lights further out at sea.

A few minutes later, they had arrived to the general search area and the captain of the Préfet Maritime vessel pulled up alongside the SNSM search vessel. Seamen from both boats helped hold them stationary long enough for Jacques to jump from one to the next. As the captain came out to greet Jacques, the seamen let the two vessels drift apart again.

“Ah,” the captain said to Jacques, pointing at two divers just then surfacing on the water. “Here we are. Perhaps now we will have some answers. So, what do you know?!” he called out to the divers.

They looked at each other and up towards the search vessel with a shake of their heads.

The captain allowed the divers to climb back onboard before questioning them further.

“So, what is it?” he asked.

The two divers again looked at each other before one of them spoke.

“The plane is there but it did not crash and sink down to the bottom this evening.”

“What are you saying?” Jacques asked, stepping in front of the captain.

“I’m saying it’s been down there for a very long time. The plane is entirely overgrown with moss and barnacles.”

After exchanging looks again, the other diver spoke.

“By the Nazi swastika on the tail, I’d say that plane has been down there for 70 years.”

“More of the supernatural,” Jacques said with a shake of his head.

“So, you don’t believe us?” the one diver said.

“I don’t know what to believe but it concurs with what the fisherman and his son have told me. That they had seen a Nazi cross on the plane.”

Jacques looked at the captain and back at the divers.

“So, what of the plane itself. Were you able to identify it?”

“No,” the first diver said. “But here, we took photos.”

He thumbed through them in the underwater camera’s memory until he came to one of the plane.

“There it is.”

Jacques shook his head and handed the camera to the ship’s captain.

“Please have one of your men forward these photos immediately to our liaison in the military for identification.”

One of his seamen ran off with the camera and the two men were back to staring at the divers.

“And what about the inside of this plane?” Jacques said. “Did you explore it?”

“Partly, yes.”

“And what did you find.”

“Empty crates.”

“Empty crates.”

Both divers shrugged. One of them spoke.

“The entire fuselage was filled with them but we only broke into one.”

“So you don’t know if they were all empty.”

Again, the divers shrugged and the second one spoke now.

“We jostled most of them and by the feel, I would say they were all empty.”

Jacques shook his head.

“And no bodies of any kind.”

“None.”

Jacques shook his head again.

“And this so-called deep ocean trench. Could someone please explain to me what that means?”

“We took sonar readings,” the captain said, “and it appears to be bottomless.”

“Bottomless. And where is this plane resting in relationship to this bottomless chasm?”

“With the fuselage partly hanging over one edge,” one of the divers said.

“And would you consider it stable at this point?”

“Yes.” He glanced at his partner and back at Jacques. “For now. Barring the unexpected, of course.”

“Then let’s attach some cables to it before the unexpected happens and I’ll call for a salvage barge out of Marseille.”

The two divers looked to their own captain.

“Yes, go ahead. Do as he asks.”

As the divers prepared for a second dive to the bottom, the inspector and captain went off to the ship’s radio cabin.

“You don’t mind,” the inspector said.

“Of course not,” the captain said.

Jacques quickly had the assistant director of the Préfet Maritime on the line and explained the situation.

“Yes, yes,” Jacques said. “I do not fault you for your skepticism, sir. I feel the same. I came to this with abundant skepticism of my own but how are we going to argue with pictures?...Very well, sir, but we are back to where we had started. Can you send out a barge to raise the plane or no?”

The assistant director finally agreed that he would instruct the harbor service to send one out from Marseille in the morning. Jacques asked if it was not possible to send one out sooner. The assistant director noted that, even if they did send one out at this instant, it could not possibly arrive until tomorrow sometime so they left it at that. Jacques asked the assistant director to do whatever he could to expedite things and switched off the radio.

“Do you mind leaving your boat anchored to the plane overnight, captain?”

The captain stared, considering the request.

“Perhaps. I will see how the divers feel about the plane’s stability when they come back to the surface.”

The two men went out to lean over the deck rail and watch. The night dragged on.

Jacques began to worry about the fisherman and his son and was about to send his captain back to check on them when the signal finally came to snug up the cables. With the engines on idle, the winches slowly reeled in all the cable until you could see it running straight down into depths at the stern of the vessel.

“Then she’s right underneath us now,” the inspector said.

“I should think,” the captain said.

The inspector waited until the two divers had resurfaced and had been assured that all was well before he called for his own boat. Having jumped down from the search vessel, Jacques looked back up at the captain.

“I’m going to accompany the fisherman and his son back to shore, and to see about finding a room for the night, but I will be here in town and ready the minute the barge arrives. Call our boat if anything happens. My captain will know where to find me.”

The captain waved and the Préfet Maritime boat pulled away.

Back at the Raynard’s boat, Jacques found both the father and son sleeping, though the father quickly appeared at the sound of the boat pulling up. Jacques had his captain pull up alongside the fishing boat and cut the engines.

“We are ready to head in to shore,” the inspector said.

“At last,” Raynard said. “My son has been ready for the past four hours.”

Jacques gestured as if to say he was sorry for the inconvenience, but that's the way it was. He had a police investigation to conduct.

Back in the harbor, Raynard pulled up to his usual berth, reversed the boat and back up into his dock. Jacques' captain went by and found a spot along the seawall, where old tires hung over the edge for cushion. The captain nursed the big vessel up against a row of them and Jacques jumped down to the dock. A cobblestone promenade ran along the seawall, bordered by the row of tall, narrow buildings, their white and mustard and curry and raspberry colors looking more like shades of grey than bright colors in the darkness of night. Raynard and his son came up from the wharf a moment later.

"How will I find you?" Jacques asked Raynard.

"I am right here," Raynard said, pointing to one of the mustard colored buildings. "We have the top floor. The boy sleeps up there in the little apartment on the roof."

Jacques nodded.

"Do you know where can I find a place to sleep at this hour?"

Raynard stared for a moment.

"You can sleep in the boy's room tonight. He will sleep in the house with us."

"Are you sure? I was looking to rent a room, that's all."

"It's fine. Come. We'll get you settled."

"You are fine on the boat?" Jacques called out quietly to his captain.

He and his men waved to say, yes. Jacques turned and followed Raynard and his son through a door and up three flights of stairs. Try as the might to be quiet, their footsteps echoed up the stairwell and before Raynard could open the door, his wife had done it for him. She reached out to hug her son, then her husband.

"My god, where have you been?" the wife said, eyeing Jacques and her husband. "What is going on? Half the town was up until a few hours ago. What did you find?"

"This is the inspector with the Préfet Maritime. He is staying with us tonight."

"Jacques," the inspector said, bowing his head.

"Marie," the wife said. "So, is anyone going to answer me?"

"I am sorry, madam. This is a police investigation. A plane went down. That is all I can say for now."

"Come, come, let's all go in," Raynard said.

"Well, you must be hungry," Marie said.

"I am sure we're all famished," Raynard said, hanging up his coat. "Here," he said, taking the inspector's coat.

“Yes?” Marie said, looking at Jacques.

He shrugged, not wanting to inconvenience her.

“It’s nothing,” Marie said. “Come, all of you, sit down.”

“I’m tired,” Gaston said and went to lie on the couch. Raynard had quickly covered him with a blanket and went to uncork a bottle of red wine in the kitchen.

Marie took a dish of pasta and what was left of a chicken cooked Coq au vin out of the refrigerator. She warmed both in the microwave, cut some hard crust bread and the two men sat eating while she watched.

“So, you cannot explain to me what is going on?” she said after a few minutes of watching.

Raynard looked at the inspector, who shook his head.

“This is just incredible,” Marie said to her husband. “And that’s it? You can’t even tell me where the plane is now?”

Both Raynard and Marie looked at the inspector.

“In 50 meters of water. We expect to have it on a barge sometime tomorrow. Then we will see.”

Jacques had told neither of them about the Nazi insignias, or what the divers had said, about the plane appearing to have been on the bottom for 70 years. He expected all that to explain itself in the morning. No doubt some very creative smugglers had painted the plane up to look a restored Nazi bomber. Who knew about the moss, but Jacques wasn’t the type to leap to conclusions or become hysterical. There was always a logical explanation.

“That was delicious,” he said, wiping up the last of his plate with a chunk of bread. “Thank you.”

“Come,” Raynard said, grabbing the wine bottle. “I will show you the room and we can have a final glass of wine before going to bed.”

The two men went out a side door and up a set of stone steps. Having shown Jacques the room tucked along the back of the roof, he left him to use the bathroom and went out to wait on the deck. The morning wind was already starting to stir and felt fine on Raynard’s face. He enjoyed it. He enjoyed his life along the sea, but this plane business, it was something else.

When Jacques came back out, he found a glass of wine waiting for him. He sat next to Raynard on a bench and toasted to him.

“My apologies.”

“For what?” Raynard said.

“For keeping you up so late.”

Raynard gestured to say, it was nothing.

“For not believing you.”

Raynard made the same gesture.

“If someone had been fishing at night and drinking wine, I would have thought the same thing.”

Jacques held up his glass in a gesture of solidarity and the two men drank.

“This whole thing is a son of a bitch,” Jacques said. “Certainly not your usual smuggling business, if that’s what it is.”

“It’s more excitement than we have seen here in many years.”

The two men sat in thought, sipping their wine for a spell.

“Well,” Raynard said, standing up. “I suppose we’ll both want to sleep a few hours before dawn. You will find everything you need inside the room. Please, make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you.”

He stood up with Raynard and was preparing to turn towards the room when they both heard the sound of a great commotion out among the cluster of boats at sea. Spotlights came on and a flare shot up into the sky.

Before Jacques could curse, his phone rang and he answered it.

“Yes, what the hell is going on out there?”

Having listened for only a brief moment, Jacques cursed.

“All right. I’ll be right there.”

“Excuse me, I must hurry,” Jacques said.

“What is it?” Raynard said.

Jacques stared for a moment.

“I am sorry, monsieur but I am not at liberty to explain.”

5

JW Hansen ran a few hundred head of cattle on a small ranch up off of Geysers Creek Trail, a stone's throw away from the small town of Dubois, Wyoming, roughly halfway between Bald and Windy Mountains and fully in view of the Grand Teton Range. State Highway 287 ran nearby. They also referred to it as State Highway 26, but for all the years JW had lived in the area, he had never heard anyone offer a reasonable explanation for why that was.

Whatever you called the highway, it wasn't much more than an old country road as it drew near and passed through Dubois, which didn't take much more than twelve bars of a country western song. The highway became known as West Rams Horn Street in town, then South 1st Street, then off it went through the Wind River Valley, weaving in and over and along the Wind River as it headed south.

Dubois could name Butch Cassidy as one of its alumni. He had run a ranch up north of there back in the 1890s. Dubois had originally been called No Sweat, after the warm, dry winds that blew down through the valley. Then some folks decided that No Sweat was unfit for the town and changed it to Dubois, after a state senator, but that brought on a whole new form of rebellion. The locals, unwilling to embrace anything that reeked of French, took to pronouncing the new name, Du-Bvoice, as in voice, and to this day that was what everyone around the area called it.

Leave it to a bunch of hicks.

If folks in Dubois wanted some kind of excitement, they found it necessary to drive sixty miles south to the town of Riverton. They had it all down there—a Walmart, a hospital, the Riverton Country Club, even a My Cutie Apparel shop. If folks really wanted a thrill, they could take the tortuous drive the other way over the Grand Tetons and down to Jackson Hole. Maybe rub elbows with all those fancy, out of state folks and see how the other half lived. JW didn't much care how the other half lived, though, and really wasn't all that

big on taking the hour and a half drive down to Riverton but usually did once a month, if only to stock up on feed for the cattle and supplies for the house. His wife Annie usually tagged alone, and sometimes his daughter Kelley too. And as much as Annie was a simple woman and Kelley a tomboy, it never failed. If JW got those two women down to Riverton, the lady in them came out and you'd find them somewhere in front of a mirror.

That late summer afternoon, JW was just sitting down at the kitchen table with the books and did not much like what he saw. Raising cattle was already a struggle for a small operation like his, so when that big corporation had moved into Dubois a few years back, buying up leases like there was no tomorrow, JW found himself struggling all the more to compete. Half the time these days, he felt ready to sell and move on. The problem being, he was too young to retire and in no financial position to do so. Plus, what the hell would he do otherwise? JW had no idea.

"How do things look?" Annie asked as she fussed over her cooking.

"Not good."

JW was never one to lie to his wife, or to anyone else, for that matter. Annie came over with a spatula in one hand and rubbed his back.

"We'll be all right, hon. We've always pulled through somehow before."

JW smiled, albeit bleakly. When you had a woman like that behind you, it was hard to let the world get you down all the way.

With evening settling in, a coyote let out a howl and Annie looked up towards the wooded flank of Windy Mountain with a shudder.

"You still think Sasquatch has moved in up there?" JW said, trying to make light of his wife's concerns but she went back to her cooking without saying a word. JW stared after Annie, worried about his wife. For the past few months, she had been acting edgy every time she looked up at that forest, though she never could quite put a finger on what it was that was bothering her.

"Something about it just gives me the chills," she would tell JW whenever he asked her to be specific, and what the hell was a man going to do with a statement like that?

With Kelley off visiting her friends down at Torrey Lake, Annie and JW ate alone and retired to the living room after dinner, with Annie knitting and JW reading the local paper. A bit of country western music played low in the background. Before nine o'clock, the two of them hit the hay.

Sometime after midnight, JW was awakened by sound of his three Australian Cattle Dogs barking away in a frenzy. Annie, who slept like a log, reached out her hand to touch JW as he crawled out of bed. Pulling on his pants, JW looked back and saw his wife was already fast asleep again.

With a glance out the window, JW noticed the cattle weren't in the top paddock as usual, and that was enough for him to grab a rifle on his way out the front door. Without a word, JW dropped the rear gate of his pickup and the three dogs jumped in. JW shut the gate, jumped into the cab, jammed the 4wd into gear and went racing off down towards the bottom paddock. The dogs were pacing around the truck bed and still in a state as he did.

Shit, he thought, braking to a stop in a cloud of dust. The paddock fence was down and the cattle were nowhere in sight. It was a moonless night, but even with it pitch black, JW could see there were no cattle in the valley sloping down towards Dubois.

Assuming the cattle had stampeded off into the forest, JW grabbed his rifle and headed that way on foot, the dogs with their noses in a scent and leading the charge.

At a little past 11:00 o'clock the next morning, Rachael Burns was sitting graveside at her father's funeral in Helena, Montana, wearing a white blouse, a black pant suit and dabbing away tears. With auburn hair and pale skin, most any color looked good on Rachael but she definitely looked fetching in black.

The skies had been brilliantly blue earlier that morning but a summer storm was rolling across the land and you could see it overrunning the next county. Blustery winds began to rustle about the cemetery. Rachael found herself staring off at the charcoal clouds in the distance.

Rachael's father had died from a sudden heart attack three days earlier and Rachael was still trying to wrap her head around that fact. He had just turned 60 and appeared to be in the peak of good health. How did something like this happen?

As an investigative journalist for Newsweek magazine, Rachael's immediate instinct was to get to the bottom of her father's death, but the fact was, he was dead and there was little anyone could do about it now.

After the funeral, she attended the obligatory reception at her mother's house but every bit of her being kept screaming, get the hell out of here. Ever since her parents had divorced and her mother had married another man, the two of them had ceased to be close. Plus Rachael's brother was a campaign consultant for the Republican party and Rachael's politics could not have been more at odds with that worldview.

Having put on what she felt was the necessary show of grief at the reception, Rachael shared some final condolences with friends and family members, excused herself by saying she had a pressing assignment and headed out the door. On her way back to the airport in a rented car a few minutes later, Rachael felt an impulse to drive by it and just keep going. Head down

through the Wasatch Range and into Utah, if nothing else. Her connecting flight passed through Salt Lake City anyway, so little would be lost, beyond a bit of her time.

Nearing the turnoff to the airport in Helena, Rachael received a call and saw it was her editor Michael in New York.

“Worried I might have gotten carried off by a wolf pack,” Rachael said in answering.

“No, just worried,” Michael said.

“If you’re really concerned, give me an assignment.”

“Rachael, why don’t you take some time off?”

“That’s exactly what I don’t need right now. Time to dwell on things.”

There was silence.

“Better make up your mind quickly,” Rachael said. “I’m coming up on the turnoff to the Helena Regional Airport. It’s either turn in here or who knows? I might head north to Alaska and you’ll never hear from me again.”

“All right,” Michael said, sighing. “Come back into the office on Monday and I’ll see if I can find something laid back for you to get into.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s just what I need, Michael. Some puffball piece to keep me out of trouble. Make sure it involves quilting, a bridge club and a bake sale if possible.”

Michael laughed.

“It is...not...fucking...funny...all right?”

“All right, all right. Just catch your flight and I’ll see you in the office on Monday morning.”

Still with half a mind to disappear up into the wilderness somewhere, Rachael made the turn into the airport and was soon seated in the terminal, waiting for her flight with a carry on valise next to her. Surrounded by all the architectural glory of a Ramada Inn and fearing boredom, she had purchased the local paper and a handful of magazines in the terminal gift shop, her thought being to start in on the magazines first but something about the allure of small town news made her open the newspaper instead. She had been flipping through the pages, looking for something of interest when an article about a serial killer named John Kendall caught her attention. Kendall had rampaged through Montana and Wyoming ten years earlier and was now sitting on death row in the Wyoming State Penitentiary, out of appeals, facing the three stage death cocktail in less than a week and suddenly eager to tell everything he knew, if only the right person would come along to interview him. From reading the article and what little Rachael already knew about the man, she fairly certain the man was partial to women, whether it came to killing them, seducing them or just having one come around for an interview.

Rachael jumped out of her seat and made a beeline over to the arrival and departure board. The next flight out to Rawlins, Wyoming was in forty minutes. Rachael was quickly back on the phone with Michael in New York.

“Whoa, slow down, kid,” Michael said in response to Rachael’s rapid fire explanation of her plans. “You have no idea if this guy will even talk to you.”

“Yes I do. Now you get on that phone to the warden and have him get word through to Kendall. And make sure that bastard sees a picture of me. He’ll take the interview, or I don’t know my lace bras and high heels.”

“Jesus, Rachael. This isn’t a fucking call girl assignment.”

“Michael, please. Just do it. The departure’s in about a half an hour. The flight’s an hour and a half. With renting a car and everything, I can be there by three o’clock. Whatever you have to do to clear it, do it, but I want to see that bastard, and I’m hoping today.”

“All right, Rachael. I can’t guarantee anything but a door slammed in your face once you’re down there, but I’ll do what I can.”

“Hey, this is a scoop to die for and you know it.”

“Yeah, if you can get it, it would be.”

“I’ll get it. That man’s a sucker for a silky hair and good looks.”

“Jesus, Rachael. You’re really starting to scare me. Your father just died and you’re stalking a serial killer.”

“I’m just trying to move forward, Michael. The only time I fall apart is when I start to look back.”

“All right. I’ll call you back as soon as I know anything. If you’re in flight, I’ll leave a message. Just call me as soon as you touch ground and I’ll fill you in.”

“Oh, hey!” Rachael said, hoping to catch Michael before he hung up.

“Yeah, what now?”

“See if they’ll allow us to film the interview.”

“You don’t ask for much, do you?”

“Hey, it will make a great Frontline piece. Depending on what we learn, we can follow up with some footage of the victim’s families or whatever.”

“You really do have me worried, Rachael.”

“Please. Just ask.”

“I’ll try.”

“And line up some local camera people anyway. I might be able to use them, even if they won’t let us film the actual interview.”

“You’d better go change your flight or we won’t be talking about anything.”

“I’m off right now.”

Hanging up, Rachael ran in high heels from the boarding zone back to the check in area, cancelled her flight to New York, booked a new one to Rawlins

and raced back to the boarding area. In the time it took her, the flight was ready to go. Per the old days of aviation, Rachael was guided out a door and onto the tarmac, where a portable jetway had been rolled into place aside the jet.

Downing a couple of drinks on the hour and a half flight south, Rachael busied herself with working up a list of questions for the potential interview. Had there been Internet access on these regional flights, she could have done some proper homework on Kendall, but that was not in the cards.

Back on the ground but still on the plane, she immediately got through to Michael again.

“So, what did they say?”

“Well, let’s just say I had to pull some strings, and you still haven’t received clearance from the warden for your interview, but I guess you were right about Kendall and good looking women. He knew of you and your work and agreed the minute the FBI mentioned your name.”

“Yesssssssssss,” Rachael said.

“Now, wait a minute. The FBI is still working with the warden about arranging the interview today but...”

“Did you get clearance for the camera crew?”

“I’ve got a camera crew lined up from a local CBS affiliate but I wouldn’t hold your breath on that end of things.”

“Shit. Well keep trying.”

“Hey, we’ll be lucky to get you past the warden, sweetheart. Kendall hasn’t exactly ingratiated himself with the prison personnel. He nearly killed a guard a few years back.”

“But you got the film crew lined up anyway, right? Just in case?”

“Yeah, yeah, and like I was trying to tell you, you should find a couple of local FBI field agents waiting for you out at the curb.”

“Oh wonderful, Michael. You’re my hero. I’ve got a great big kiss for you the minute I get back.”

“Well, it’s a scoop, no doubt about it but I should think you’d want to temper your enthusiasm a bit. This is going to be a bit like sitting down to a meet and greet with Hannibal Lector.”

“You know, Michael. That’s always been one of my dreams.”

“You’re sick.”

“I know, but thank you so much again. Oh, the passengers are starting to move now so let me call you as soon as I’ve met with the FBI agents.”

“Sure, keep me posted but don’t stress about it. I’m basically out of the loop now, other than running the story.”

“Okay, I’ll get back to you soon.”

Rachael hung up, still mentally pumping her fists.

Hustling from the boarding area down to the luggage pickup, Rachael kept her eyes open and waved tentatively when she saw what appeared to be a couple of men-in-black types by the terminal entrance. One was shorter, of Hispanic or Italian blood and real buffed out—maybe overly so—with a military cut on the sides and oiled locks up top. The other one was tall, not so buffed out, with a light brown butch and looking as if maybe the men-in-black thing had not been his first option in life.

Both of them were wearing dark shades and after staring Rachael's way for a moment, they started over.

"Rachael Burns?" the tall, lankier one said.

"That's me."

She shifted the valise to her left shoulder, held out her right hand and snatched her suitcase off of the luggage carousel with the other.

"Field Agent Harper. This is Field Agent Rocco. Is that it?" Harper said, referring to Rachael's luggage.

"That's it," she said and extended the handle. "So, did we get the interview today?"

"Yeah but..."

"Oh, great, and so did the warden approve us filming it?"

"I wouldn't press your luck."

Rachael stood there, very much wanting to press her luck, and Agent Harper stood there staring back, liking what he saw in Rachael but not liking that she had interrupted him.

"Like I was trying to say, we need to brief you so first thing, let's get settled into the hotel. There's a Hampton Inn right across Airport Road here."

"Sounds like me."

Agent Harper gestured to say, ladies first and fell in alongside Rachael as she headed for the exit. Agent Rocco fell in on the other side.