



"Justin Richards brings all his skills as a leading Doctor Who writer to this tale of wartime intelligence at odds with some of H. P. Lovecraft's worst nightmares." —Michael Moorcock

THE SUICIDE EXHIBITION

THE NEVER WAR:
BOOK ONE



JUSTIN RICHARDS

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EXHIBITION**

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JUSTIN RICHARDS

THOMAS DUNNE BOOKS

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For Toby—who loves this sort of thing

SHINGLE BAY

REPORT INTO INCIDENT ON 30TH AUGUST 1940

DOCUMENTS ENCLOSED:

Official Statement (Ministry of War, 1940)
OS Map of Shingle Bay and Environs (September 1940)
Report of Colonel Brinkman (September 1940)
Memo from Prime Minister (September 1940)
Classification Review Minutes (February 1957)
Ditto (July 1973)
Ditto (December 1998)
Request for file disclosure under Freedom of Information (2001) - DENIED
Ditto (2005) - DENIED
Ditto (2011) - DENIED

THIS FILE IS CLASSIFIED

Level Z

NOT TO BE OPENED UNTIL

1 September 2040

BY ORDER



(Original signed by Winston S. Churchill)

CHAPTER 1

Officially, on 30 August 1940, nothing happened at Shingle Bay. The government records that prove nothing happened were classified for the next hundred years.

It was a day of heavy air raids on the south east of Britain. The sky was filled with noise and death. If there had been anyone to see Sergeant Green and his troops at Shingle Bay, the chances are their eyes would have been turned instead to the heavens. Their attention would have been drawn by the distinctive grumble of the Rolls-Royce Merlin engines that powered RAF Hurricanes and Spitfires fighting against the might of the Luftwaffe.

As the evening drew in, so the skies emptied. Britain held her breath, not knowing that the next day would bring RAF Fighter Command her heaviest losses of the war so far. Unaware of what would happen that night.

“You sure about this, Sarge?” Private Goodall asked.

“This is war, son,” Sergeant Green told him. “No one’s sure about anything.”

“You got the shivers?” Private Wood asked, grinning.

“I ain’t got nothing.”

Wood’s grin widened. “That’s true enough.”

“Shut it, both of you,” Green said. *He* had the shivers even if the other two hadn’t.

They made their way back up the steep cliff path, and took up position behind a screen of bushes and grass, sheltered by the bulk of the nearby church.

“We really going to stop an invasion?” Wood asked.

Green stared out through the curtain of vegetation, binoculars clamped to his eyes. “If we have to

“Just us, Sarge?”

“You’ve got the radio. If it gets hairy, call it in.”

“How will I know?” Wood wondered.

Goodall had been at Dunkirk. “You’ll know,” he said.

“Just you be ready at that valve,” Green warned.

The pipeline was like a huge, dark snake curling past their position and down the side of the cliff. It split into smaller pipes on the beach below, spreading out like a black spider’s web across the shingle before disappearing under the water.

The three soldiers settled down to wait. It could be a long night. For now the only sound was the waves dragging back over the pebbles on the beach below.

Dusk was drawing in before anything happened.

“What’s that?” Wood hissed.

“Can’t see anything,” Green told him.

“Nor me. But I can hear it.”

“Me too,” Goodall agreed. “Plane I think.”

Green scanned the sky. Finally he spotted it—flying high and approaching along the coast from the south.

“Got it. It’s all right—it’s one of ours.”

It was a large transport plane, lumbering its way on some logistical mission under the cover of approaching darkness.

The note of the aircraft seemed to change as it approached. It became deeper, discordant, and then resolved into two different sounds. Green scanned the sea, peering out as far as he could into the gathering dusk. There they were—he just hoped the aircraft didn’t spook them ...

“Ready, lad?” Green was whispering, though there was no way the men in the approaching boat could hear him. “Do it now.”

Wood nodded nervously, reaching for the metal wheel jutting from the side of the pipeline. It squeaked as it turned. Beside him, Goodall shouldered his rifle, scanning the beach below.

Holding the binoculars steady with one hand, Green scrabbled for the flare pistol with the other. “Not a moment too soon,” he breathed.

There were three boats, each containing half a dozen men. He could make out the individual soldiers now. He could see their grim, determined faces, their field gray uniforms and their rifles. At the prow of the last boat, one man stood staring toward the beach. His pale, hollow features and his wispy blond hair were clear in the binoculars despite the fading light. He seemed to be staring back at Green through dark, sunken eyes—challenging him to do his worst.

Well, thought Green, that was a challenge he was happy to accept. With gallons of fuel flowing rapidly down the pipeline and bubbling up into the bay, Green raised the flare pistol.

* * *

In a stone-built room lit only by the flickering light of burning oil, Number Five was drawing, oblivious to his surroundings and the two men watching. His pencil scratched frantically across the paper, sketching outlines, impressions rather than details. As soon as the drawing was finished, he pushed it across the stone desk, and started on the blank sheet of paper beneath.

The sound of pencil on paper mingled with the guttering of the lamps. One of the two men standing beside the desk lifted the latest drawing and angled it toward the nearest wall sconce.

“They are almost there.”

The other, shorter man, nodded, taking the drawing. The light glinted on his small, round spectacles as he examined the picture. Two boats, heading toward a curving beach. Pale cliffs rose up above banks of shingle. The men in the boats were barely more than silhouettes, guns at the ready. The scene was pictured as if from a third boat, just behind the first two.

The spectacled man placed the drawing on a stone table beside him, aligning it carefully and exactly with the stack of pictures beneath.

Number Five stared into the distance, not seeing the men standing in front of him. Not seeing the drawing evolve on the paper. Intent only on the images in his mind’s eye.

The new drawing was similar. The boats closer to the beach now. Perhaps a hint of restlessness in the posture of the men. And high in the sky, a point of light like a blossoming star.

The shorter man frowned. “What is that?”

The flare lit up the sky like an elongated burst of lightning. Green had aimed long, so that it was still burning incandescently as it fell toward the sea. As it reached the water in front of the boats. As it touched the film of oil slicked across the sea.

The single point of brilliant light burst into a fireball spreading out over the water. A wave of flames, crashing down on the shoreline and rushing out toward the approaching boats. In a moment, they engulfed them.

It was like a painting of hell. The whole sea was ablaze. Green could hear the shouts and screams of the men in the boats. Between the sheets of flame, he caught confused glimpses. Burning men diving into the water. The skeletal carcasses of the fire-eaten boats. The man in the prow of the third boat—still standing staring toward the shore. Unmoving even as the flames licked at his smoldering uniform ...

Goodall's rifle tracked back and forth as he waited for a target. If any of them made it to the beach they'd be easy pickings. But Green could tell that none of them would.

"You can shut off that valve now," he told Wood.

The man's face was shining with sweat as he turned the wheel. They could all feel the heat coming off the sea. Slowly, the flames died down, the smoke thinned, and the screaming faded into the cries of the frightened seagulls.

* * *

It was a drawing of hell. Number Five's hand jerked painfully across the page, the pencil almost ripping the paper. The heavy metal bracelet round his wrist scraping against the stone desktop. Jagged spikes of flame. Shaded smoke. The distorted suggestion of men's agony.

And through it all, Number Five was screaming. Mouth open, head back, screaming in pain.

His skin seemed to shrink back from his cheekbones, blackened and dry. Blistering, peeling, smoking from the heat of the fire. His hand was a mess of charred bone, pushing the paper aside and starting on the next sheet. By the time he slumped forward in a smoking heap, all he had drawn was a mass of flames.

But still he was screaming. The last skin was seared from his skull. Eyeballs ran with tears of their own molten flesh. His body convulsed. Number Five clawed at the table. There were blackened score marks across the surface where his fingers had gripped it. The pencil clattered to the floor.

The two men watching said nothing. The shorter man snatched up the final drawing—a pencil drawing of a mass of flame and smoke. He stared at it for a moment, the fire from the nearest wall sconce reflecting in his glasses. Then Reichsfuhrer Heinrich Himmler screwed the paper into an angry ball and threw it across the room.

The paper hit the wall, and dropped into the sconce below. It rested intact for a moment in the pool of burning oil, then burst into smoky flame.

CHAPTER 2

By late April 1941, the Battle of Britain was over. The price of the Allies' first victory was high. Nazi Germany had suffered its first defeat.

But in the mind of Standartenfuhrer Hans Streicher of the SS the war was practically won. How long could a tiny island continue to hold out against the might of the Reich? Some of Streicher's men were afraid Britain would surrender before they saw action. Streicher knew that Hauptsturmfuhrer Klaas in particular resented not being at the forefront of the struggle.

"When the Wehrmacht marched into Poland, we were excavating in the Austrian Alps," Klaas said. "When Paris fell, we were digging through Roman ruins in Northern Italy. Now, we're stuck here in France when the battle's over and we should be fighting the British."

Streicher sympathized. But he had no such reservations himself about their work. "You've been with me since '34, Gerhardt," he said quietly, glancing across at the third man with them. "You know how important our work is to the Reich. For us, the front line is here."

Klaas looked round, peering into the gloom. "An ancient chamber hidden beneath a churned-up field in the middle of nowhere?" He sighed and nodded. "I'm sorry, sir. I know you are right of course. It's just ... frustrating. Everything takes so long."

"Check on the progress," Streicher ordered. "And remember, however long it takes, however frustrated we might get, the work we are doing here could determine the future not just of Europe but of the entire world."

Streicher took pride in that. He was a man who took pride in everything he did, never giving less than total dedication, commitment, and loyalty. Even the tiniest things were important to him—like the fact that his own English was more precise and grammatical than that of the American standing beside him.

Together they watched Klaas talking to the soldiers tunnelling through the unforgiving ground. It had taken three weeks to dig their way this deep. Three weeks of unrelenting, backbreaking work. Anything less sensitive, less important, and Streicher would have rounded up able-bodied men from Oulon and the surrounding villages and used them as slave labor. But not for this ... Two years of research had led Streicher here. The imminent results were for the eyes of a select few within the SS only.

And the American. He was useful, and just as the United States as a whole maintained a studied neutrality, so the American seemed supremely unconcerned about what happened in Europe. Just so long as it did not interfere with his own researches or with sites of historic interest.

The American certainly agreed that this site was of historic interest. *Pre-historic*, possibly. Despite his lazy drawl, and the scraggy beard, Professor Carlton Smith evidently knew his subject.

Streicher was wary. America might be neutral but she was no ally. That said, Smith did seem genuinely immune to the increasing tide of pro-British feeling that was flowing over the United States.

“Hell,” he’d told Streicher when they first met, “you guys can blow each other to Kingdom Come as far as I’m concerned, just so long as you leave me to my digging and notes.”

Smith could see for himself, he told Streicher, that the Reich was by no means the all-conquering monster that the warmonger Churchill and his cronies made it out to be. In fact, Smith’s politics, on the rare occasions when he ventured an opinion or betrayed a belief, seemed refreshingly in line with Streicher’s own.

Of course, Streicher had checked as soon as he met him that Carlton Smith really was a professor of Archaeology at Harvard University. His credentials, it was confirmed through the Reich’s sources in New York, were impeccable. His political leanings were indeed slanted in the right direction.

For all his arrogance and brash tone, Smith had offered invaluable advice on the dig and useful insight to some of the finds. It was a lucky coincidence that he had been touring the area making notes on local churches and chateaus for a proposed book. Especially lucky for the men who would have died with Sturmman Hagen if Carlton Smith hadn’t seen the iron spike set in the ground under the wall and shouted a warning.

It was a simple enough mechanism, little more than a lever primed to bring down a ton of rubble on anyone digging through the entrance of the burial mound. Perhaps the most surprising thing was that it still worked, even after thousands of years.

They tunnelled in from the other side after that. Smith’s advice had been to abandon trying to go through the tomb’s entrance. “Who knows what other traps the cunning old bastards laid? But you can find your way in from the back, and it’s a whole different ball game.”

Now they were digging deep underground, their work lit by electric lamps on metal tripods and bare bulbs strung from cables fastened to the walls that ran back to the generators at the edge of the dig. Makeshift wooden props shored up the tunnels. The soldiers had worked their way through three caverns, each littered with artifacts all of which were catalogued and crated up ready for later shipment.

Two more men had been killed by hidden traps getting this far. One fell through a thin flagstone that shattered under his weight, the second was crushed by a slab that swung down from the roof. Several others had lucky escapes.

Now, finally, they had reached what seemed to be the final chamber. Streicher’s men were scraping the mud and dirt from the last wall. Once through that, the long hard work would be justified ...

The project was overrunning. Streicher was under pressure to get into the chamber and recover what he was sure was inside. He was cautious, wary of making rash promises, but everything pointed to this being the place. He tried not to raise the expectations of his superiors. Even so, they asked daily for the impossible. He was aware of one of the Enigma operators pushing through the narrow tunnel behind him and into the cavern where they stood. He could guess what the message said. It would be from Reichsfuhrer Himmler, or possibly his lackey Hoffman. The wording would be clear and short and direct.

Streicher took the flimsy message paper without looking at the operator. Glanced at it. “No reply. Just acknowledge receipt.”

“More words of wisdom and encouragement from the Fatherland?” Smith asked, his smile masked by the beard.

“Something of the sort,” Streicher said in English. The American spoke no German, and hardly any French. It was a miracle he’d survived in France at all before meeting Streicher.

So the Standartenfuhrer made no effort to conceal the message slip as he handed it back to the operator. If Carlton Smith had bothered to look, he’d have seen a single line of text:

HAVE + YOU + SECURED + THE + UBERMENSCH

In fact, Carlton Smith did understand some German and his French was more than passable. But he knew that the less he seemed to know about what was really going on, the more likely Streicher was to keep him involved. He was under no illusions that he was dealing with the SS. If they thought he’d found out something he shouldn’t, they’d shoot him. So he smiled and nodded and feigned complete ignorance, and offered as much help and advice as he thought would be well received.

He played a similar game with his politics—venturing only rare opinions or thoughts, and always carefully clouding what he really thought of the Third Reich and what was happening in Europe.

As well as the historical interest of the site, Smith was fascinated by Streicher’s involvement. The Standartenfuhrer’s men, while no doubt efficient and brutal soldiers, were evidently also veterans of previous archaeological digs. They worked with care and diligence, and at least some appreciation for the past they were unearthing.

Klaas returned, raising his arm in an abrupt *Heil* which Streicher reciprocated. The wall was clear—they were ready to break into the tomb.

Smith kept his expression neutral. The beard helped. He saved his excited enthusiasm for Streicher’s translation.

Armed with heavy flashlights, the two of them followed Klaas across the cavern to the exposed wall. Two more soldiers, stripped to the waist, stood ready with pickaxes.

“Let me see, let me see.” Smith pushed past. He ran his hand over the rough stone surface of the wall, nodding. “Yeah—this is absolutely typical of the ninth century. See the way the stones have been interlaced? Looks like you’ve got yourselves the tomb of an ancient chieftain.”

“Much more than that,” Streicher murmured in German. He nodded for the men to start work on the wall.

The stone was brittle with age. There was no mortar to hold the wall together, and in minutes the soldiers had torn a ragged hole large enough for a man to get through. Streicher stepped forward, determined to be the first to see what lay beyond the wall.

But Smith caught Streicher’s arm. “Be a bit careful there.”

It was sensible advice. Streicher stepped cautiously through, testing the ground on the other side before he committed his full weight to it. It seemed firm enough. Once through, he waited for Smith to join him, several of the SS soldiers clambering after the academic. Two of them still carried the pickaxes.

The flashlights illuminated a narrow passageway sloping downward ahead of them.

“So, not quite at the main chamber yet,” Smith noted. “Can’t be far, though.”

Streicher’s impatience got the better of him and he set off along the passage. If they didn’t find the chamber soon, the messages he received daily from Wewelsburg would become more insistent. He knew only too well that in the Third Reich in general and in the SS in particular you could be transformed from hero to pariah in a matter of hours.

Again, Smith caught Streicher's shoulder.

"Take it easy. There could still be surprises."

As he spoke, something moved in the shadows ahead of them. A trick of the wandering flashlight beam, perhaps. But it seemed like a patch of darkness scuttled back from the edge of the shadows and buried itself deeper against the wall. Streicher moved his flashlight, following the motion. But there was nothing. Just a dark, narrow gap where the stone-flagged floor of the passage didn't quite meet the rough, crumbling brickwork of the wall.

"Is that the end of the tunnel?" Smith wondered. "We must be nearly there."

Streicher nodded. It was a shame—the American had saved lives and helped them get this far. But depending on what they found at the end of this passage, Smith might become a liability. Streicher would do it himself. He owed the man that.

"Wait!"

Smith's warning shocked Streicher out of his thoughts. He froze—one foot raised. Smith gently helped him step back.

"What is it?"

"Not sure."

Professor Smith stooped down, shining his flashlight at the stone slab where Streicher had been about to put his foot. The edges seemed darker than the slabs around it.

"Pickaxe." Smith held his hand out behind him, not turning to look.

Streicher repeated the instruction in German to the nearest soldier, who handed Smith the short-handled pickaxe he was carrying.

Smith positioned the handle of the upright pickaxe on the slab of stone, and pressed down hard. There was a grinding sound—stone on stone. The ground shuddered, and Smith pitched suddenly forward as the slab dropped away. Smith stumbled as he fought to keep his balance. In front of him the whole section of floor had disappeared.

The soldier who had carried the pickaxe staggered, and fell. He pitched sideways with a crash. Another soldier made to grab him, but was too late. His hand closed on empty air. The falling soldier disappeared over the edge and into the darkness. His shout echoed round the passageway—the sound of hopeless terror.

Streicher had firm hold of Smith's arm, pulling him up and back from the brink.

Ahead of them was a gaping hole, about ten feet across. The section of floor had pivoted on the far side, tilting away. Below was darkness. The cries of the falling soldier faded into the distance.

Smith handed the pickaxe to another soldier and took a deep breath. "A bit more extreme than I was expecting," he admitted. "Sorry about that poor fellow. But thanks for the helping hand."

"My pleasure." Streicher smiled grimly. It might have saved a problem later if Smith had fallen. There again, it looked like they might still need the man's help. The loss of another soldier was regrettable, but Streicher was used to death.

The jump was made more difficult by knowing the consequences of not making it. No one asked if the ground on the other side would be secure, but everyone was wondering. Streicher went first.

He took a short run up, and leaped across the abyss, landing heavily on the other side. The ground was firm. Smith followed, taking a longer run up, moving clumsily, arms flailing in the air as he made his ungainly journey across. He landed close to Streicher with a loud sigh of relief followed by a nervous laugh. The others crossed without incident.

"I think this could be it," Smith announced, aiming his flashlight down the passage.

A short way ahead, what Streicher had taken for more shadows and the continuing passage was

now visible as a huge barrier. It was caked in mud and grime. Smith rubbed his hand over it.

“Metal,” he announced with surprise. “Bronze, perhaps? Or iron. Difficult to tell in this light. Not what I was expecting, though, whatever it is.”

The door—and there was soon no doubt that it was a door—was embossed with a series of circles and lines. It was hinged on one side. A heavy latch slid into a socket on the other side. It took two of the soldiers to slide the latch back out of the socket. It finally gave in a shower of dirt and rust. The door creaked on its hinges as if it too was sighing with relief.

The two soldiers leaned back, using their whole weight to drag the door open. It moved slowly at first, the metal screeching in protest. Once it was free of the frame, it swung ponderously outward. Then it jammed on the uneven floor leaving a gap just wide enough for a man to squeeze through. Behind it was a gaping maw of darkness.

Streicher stepped toward the darkness, Smith at his side. The flashlight beams disappeared into the void, as if it was swallowing up their light.

“Best send one of your men first,” Smith said quietly. “I mean, hell, I’m guessing they’re more expendable.”

Streicher did not reply, but motioned for one of the soldiers to lead the way. The man took a flashlight from one of his colleagues, and struggled through the opening, almost immediately calling back that it was safe.

* * *

Smith squeezed through the gap after Streicher, the other SS men following behind. He was fascinated, but wary. Most of them had been lucky—he himself had been very lucky—with the collapsing floor. But they couldn’t rely on luck forever. Smith, more than most, understood the importance of proper planning and meticulous research. This place, by its very nature, denied the possibility of that.

Beyond the door was a small, empty antechamber. Ahead of them was another wall. The stonework was more regular, tighter fitting than the other walls they had breached getting this far. Smith glanced back past the door behind him, out into the passageway beyond. The small chamber they had just entered made no sense. It was like a watertight compartment before a vital section of a ship or submarine. Watertight and airtight.

Airtight.

The first man through raised his pickaxe. Streicher and the others stepped back to allow him room to swing at the wall.

“No—stop him!”

But Smith’s cry was too late. The pickaxe bit into the wall. Nothing happened.

Not until the man levered it out again.

There was a sudden, loud hissing sound. A white mist, like smoke, curled from the hole in the wall. Smith pulled his handkerchief from his top pocket and jammed it over his nose and mouth. He pulled Streicher away, struggling to get him back through the doorway.

The man was coughing and spluttering—choking on the pale mist. The whole antechamber was full of it. Through the thickening fog, Smith saw men staggering into each other, clutching their throats. Falling. Their faces blotched with bursting pustules.

One of them blundered in front of Smith. The whole side of the man’s face was peeling away, like it was drenched in acid.

Smith shouldered the poor man aside, and with a final effort he dragged Streicher back through

the passageway. He pushed at the door, but it was jammed open. The deadly mist curled out after them, like a smoky finger stabbing toward Smith as he half dragged, half carried Streicher away. Something brushed against his leg, and Smith almost fell. He caught a glimpse of a dark shape lingering for a moment against Streicher, then scuttling into the shadows, like a huge spider. A trick of the light. An artifact of the drifting mist that swirled toward him ...

There was barely room for them both as Smith staggered back along the tunnel, holding his breath for as long as he could, lungs bursting with the effort. He had to breathe through his handkerchief, hoping the air out here wasn't poisoned. Streicher was a dead weight against him.

In the panic and the swirling mist, he almost stumbled over the edge where the floor had dropped away. Smith teetered for a moment on the brink, staring down into the blackness in front of him. He managed to take a step backward. But what now? Streicher was in no fit state to jump. The man was practically unconscious, and retching and choking as Smith supported his weight.

Deciding this was no time for playacting, Smith unceremoniously hoisted the SS officer onto his shoulders in a fireman's lift, taking care not to drop his flashlight. He backed down the passageway, straightening up as he bore the other man's weight. In the gloom of the tunnel he seemed taller, more confident.

The flashlight beam juddered, cutting through the mist and dancing over the walls and floor. Smith ran toward the abyss. Despite the near-dead weight over his shoulders, there was none of the awkwardness of his earlier jump. But it was a hell of a distance for a man carrying another.

The darkness rushed past below. The far side of the pit flew toward him. Before he was halfway Smith knew he wasn't going to make it.

He fell short, his chest slamming into the top edge of the abyss. Streicher's body was jolted from his grasp. Somehow Smith managed to heave it over the lip and onto the floor of the passage. The SS officer rolled away, groaning.

The flashlight skidded after Streicher, its beam pointing straight back at Smith. Dazzling. Then it was falling, dropping into the bottomless pit.

He scrambled desperately, arms stretched out along the tunnel floor, fingers searching for the slightest purchase. Smith's nails ripped as he tried to force them into the tiny gaps between the slabs. Finally, with an excruciating jolt, he caught hold with his right hand. He worked his fingers deep into the crevice he'd found, scraping with his left hand to find a similar grip.

It was a slow and painful process, but somehow Smith managed to haul himself back up. He was holding his breath, his lungs bursting, though all the air must have been knocked out of him by the impact on the side of the pit.

He gathered up the flashlight and his handkerchief from the ground, then heaved Streicher over his shoulders again. The man grunted, but there was no other sign that he was even alive.

Aching and exhausted, Smith stumbled down the passageway toward the broken wall into the next chamber. The heavy mist drifted after him.

* * *

At last they were out of the tunnel, through the final chamber and into the warm afternoon sunshine. Smith let Streicher fall on the grass beside the trench leading down into the mound. He gasped in great lungfuls of fresh air, before yelling for help.

He grabbed the first soldier to arrive, miming putting on a gas mask. The soldier glanced at Streicher, and understood, shouting to the others.

"We'll be OK," Smith told them in rasping, painful English. "You go help the others."

They seemed to understand, and soon Smith and Streicher were alone. Smith felt for a heartbeat. Weak and erratic, but Streicher was still alive. Smith looked round, checking again that none of the remaining soldiers were within sight. Certain that they were alone, he undid Streicher's tunic and emptied the man's pockets. Carefully and neatly, he laid out everything. He unfolded letters and papers, placing them so they caught the brightest sunlight.

Then he took out a packet of cigarettes. The packet seemed full, but that was because most of the space inside was taken up with a miniature camera. Smith slid back the hidden cover to expose the lens then quickly but systematically photographed Streicher's possessions, including the letters and orders. When he was done, he replaced everything exactly as he had found it in the SS officer's pockets.

Finally, he took a cigarette from the pack and lit it.

"I may live to regret saving you," Smith said quietly, his accent now more Eton than Harvard. "But we all have our iron cross to bear."

CHAPTER 3

Major Guy Pentecross dived to one side as the bullets raked through the sea where he had been. His arm exploded with pain. His mouth filled with blood and saltwater. His nostrils absorbed the stench of fuel oil and death. Someone was screaming.

The scream was the blast of the engine's whistle as the train entered a tunnel. The windows were suddenly opaque, and Guy found himself staring at his own pale, haunted face. Over his trembling shoulder, another face watched with unfocused concern.

"Are you all right, young man?"

He forced a smile, and turned to reassure the elderly woman. "Bad dream. Sorry if I..."

She waved away his apology. "We all have bad dreams these days. It's the bombing." She hesitated before adding: "You're not in uniform, I see." There was just a hint of accusation.

"I work at the Foreign Office."

"Oh." More than a hint this time. "Well, I'm sure that's very ... useful."

"I'm sure it is," Guy agreed. "Though I'd rather be back in uniform, I have to admit. I made the mistake of getting shot up at Dunkirk."

He left it at that, turning back to the window. They were soon out of the tunnel and rattling through the fields again. "All charging along like troops in a battle," he murmured, recalling a poem he learned at school. A lifetime ago. Before Cambridge, before joining the army back when a war seemed possible but not likely. Mother had expected him to follow his father into the Foreign Office and become a diplomat. He had tried—joining the staff of the FO straight from Cambridge.

But the military had always appealed more to Guy. He soon left the civil service and joined up, soon making the rank of captain. Even if his mother didn't, he knew how bored his father had become with the whole diplomatic round, with never knowing quite which part of the world he could end up in next year or even next month. When Guy was growing up, they never seemed to stay long in one place before moving on. "Each a glimpse, then gone forever."

The army meant travel and uncertainty too of course, but it was so much more invigorating. The thing that had kept Guy sane as he grew up was the challenge of learning the languages. He found he had an aptitude for it, a natural ability. Another reason why his mother thought he should become a diplomat. The irony was, of course, that the Foreign Office was exactly where he had ended up after being injured at Dunkirk. As soon as Guy was declared unfit for active service—even temporarily—the Foreign Office intervened. Someone had remembered his aptitude for languages, and he was seconded to the government offices he had been so keen to escape.

Guy was fit again now—fighting fit. But he was too good at his job. They'd let him go once, and they weren't about to do it again. His uniform had become a pinstriped suit, and Guy hated it. He'd rather face the nightmares every night than the mundane monotony of Whitehall every day.

Painted stations whistled by. Guy dozed, read the paper, stared out of the window. Planes passed high above, too distant to make out details, like houseflies against a pale blue ceiling. Clear weather was not a good thing.

It was sobering to walk through London from the station to the office. Some streets seemed perfectly normal, untouched by the bombing. Others had collapsed into a wasteland of devastation. Volunteers shoveled debris from the road. A fire engine charged past, bells ringing. It should have impressed on Guy how important his role was, how vital that he play his part. But instead it made him angry and impatient. He wanted to be out there *doing* something. Not sitting on his backside in an office sifting through reports, or traveling round the country interviewing people who invariably turned out not to be enemy spies.

As a linguist, he was a valuable resource. He understood that. He also appreciated that it was important that any foreigners arriving in Britain needed screening. He just didn't think it should be him doing it. The most cursory check by anyone with an ounce of common sense would have saved him the previous day's journey down to the south coast. The local police had three men in custody who'd arrived in a small boat. They spoke reasonable English, and claimed to have fled from Poland. But the police were convinced they were spies.

Guy had suggested he could talk to one of them on the telephone, but the police sergeant insisted he should come and see them in person on the grounds that "they look German to me."

So he had wasted the best part of a day. When he finally got to see the three men it took Guy less than a minute to verify that they were indeed Polish. They spoke the language—better than the hesitant English or halting German. They obviously had first-hand knowledge of Danzig, where they claimed to have come from. And when Guy asked them what they thought of the Germans, they all three displayed a knowledge of Polish slang that considerably expanded Guy's own rather meagre vocabulary.

"They're not German spies," he told the police sergeant with exaggerated patience.

The sergeant nodded. "But they could have been," he said.

And that was the problem—Guy had to admit the man was right. They *could* have been German spies. And while every "could have been" was a frustration, it was also a relief. Every wasted journey was in fact not a waste of time at all. His work was necessary, but it was boring and it was frustrating.

Talk at the office was of the evacuation of British forces from Greece following the Greek army's surrender. It reminded Guy of his own experiences at Dunkirk. The Greek government had already been taken by submarine to Crete and it was generally thought to be only a matter of days before the Germans marched into Athens. Another maddening reminder of his distance from the real action, especially as Guy knew Athens well from when his father worked at the embassy there.

By the afternoon, the Whitehall offices were stifling. The warmer weather that came with the transition from April to May seemed to suck the air out of the building. Combined with the paperwork and translations which had built up in the time he was away, this made Guy desperate for any excuse to leave. If the Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden had an urgent message to be handed to Air Vice Marshal Keith Park in person, and no one else was free to go, then Guy was happy to see that as an invitation.

"You sure you want to go all the way to Uxbridge?" Sir James Chivers asked for the third time. Chivers' tone implied that he thought his subordinate could be better employed.

“I’ve got nothing urgent this afternoon,” Guy assured him. “And I could do with a break from the paperwork.”

“You see this as a break, do you?”

Guy sighed. “Tell you what, I’ll stay late to make up the time. I just need some air, if I’m honest.”

“Not much of that if he’s down in the bunker, Guy. Rather you than me.”

If Chivers’ family had a motto, Guy suspected it was “Rather you than me.” Quite probably Latin.

* * *

The ministry car threaded its way between piles of rubble now cleared to the roadside from the previous night’s bombing. The gutted, broken facades of buildings made some areas of London seem like a ghost town.

The Air Vice Marshal was indeed down in the bunker. This housed the Operations Room for RAF Number 11 Group, responsible for defending London and the south east. Here, data from what was now called RADAR as well as other observation posts was recorded on a vast gridded map table. The color-coded counters that the girls of the Women’s Auxiliary Air Force moved round the map with magnetic rakes kept track of the position and timing of each enemy raid.

“The Dowding System,” named after Air Chief Marshal Dowding (retired the previous October) was hugely effective. It provided up-to-date information that could be absorbed at a glance, enabling the Fighter Controller to deploy his forces quickly, accurately and with devastating effect.

But to Guy, it always just looked like a mess. A well-organized mess, but chaotic nonetheless.

Air Vice Marshal Park was in conference, so Guy had to wait at the side of the room. He could see Park on the gallery above the map table, staring down at it while engaged in a hushed and urgent conversation with a Wing Commander sporting a healthy mustache—the duty Fighter Controller.

While he waited, Guy too examined the map table. There were relatively few markers on it today—and all Allied flights. He had been here during a major raid a few months back, and watched the calm efficiency of the women as they moved counters over the board as if this was a vast, complicated game of chess. In a way, he supposed, it was.

Somewhere a telephone rang. The phones were ringing almost constantly, so there was no reason for Guy to remark this one. But he watched across the room as a WAAF lifted the receiver, cutting off the sound. Her face etched into a frown as she scribbled notes on a pad, then put the phone down.

“I have a sighting in Sector D,” she called across the room. The general noise faded. “Possible UDT.”

All noise stopped. The woman tore a sheet off her pad and handed it to another WAAF.

“What’s a UDT?” Guy asked a girl with dark bobbed hair standing close to him.

“Don’t ask.”

“You mean you don’t know what it is?” He meant it as a joke.

But she answered him seriously. “It’s an *Unknown Detected Trace*. None of us knows what it is.”

Park and the Fighter Controller he’d been talking to were rapt, looking down at the map as a new counter was swept into position. It was jet black, and right in the middle of the board. Guy wondered how a plane could have got there without being picked up sooner.

All eyes were on Park now. He nodded to the Fighter Controller. “It’s been a while. But you know what to do.”

The Fighter Controller cleared his throat. “All right, we have a possible UDT, so we track it as long as we can. McAuley—scramble the nearest fighters, for all the good it will do. All non-essenti-

personnel will please clear the Operations Room now.”

Guy found himself caught up in the general exodus. It looked like he'd have to wait a while long to deliver his message.

Behind him he heard the calm, efficient voices of the girls at the table and manning the phones.

“Three Hurricanes airborne from Hornchurch. Moving to intercept.”

“UDT now moving west at approximately 400 knots.”

“Sir—there's another plane already up there. Hornchurch is trying to establish radio contact. Looks like it's an Air Transport Auxiliary flight.”

“Then it probably doesn't have a radio,” another WAAF replied.

“Call Station Z,” Guy heard Park order. “They'd better send someone over.”

Then the door closed, and the sounds of the Operations Room were cut off.

* * *

There was nothing to do but wait. Most of the other personnel drifted away—perhaps to their offices or to find the canteen. But Guy needed to deliver his message. He felt duty-bound to wait. That was the story of his life, he thought—“duty-bound.” Maybe just once he should forget about “duty” and do what he thought was *right*. But he was past the point where he could just run away and re-join his regiment.

In fact, he didn't have to wait long.

As abruptly as everyone had been cleared out of the Operations Room, they were let back in. The black counter was gone from the map board. Park was talking urgently to someone on the gallery. The newcomer had his back to Guy, but he was surprised to see that the man wore the uniform of an army sergeant, not RAF.

Guy made his way over, waiting where Park could see him over the soldier's shoulder. All he needed to do was hand over an envelope and wait for any reply.

Park glanced across, acknowledging that he'd seen Guy, and gesturing for him to hand over the envelope he was brandishing.

He continued speaking as he opened it and scanned the brief letter inside.

“Only one other plane in the vicinity. I'll get you the details ... Is he serious?”

It took Guy a moment to realize this last remark was aimed at him.

“Er, I assume so, sir.”

Park refolded the letter and stuffed it back into the envelope. “I've barely enough aircraft to do the job here, and Eden wants me to back his request to divert new deliveries to North Africa?” Park's New Zealand accent was more pronounced when he was angry.

Guy felt he ought to say something. “I believe it's pretty urgent, sir. They've got just thirteen Hurricanes left to defend the whole of Egypt.”

“My heart bleeds.” Parks reached past the soldier to return the envelope. He sighed. “Tell him I'll do what I can. But I won't compromise on our own requirements. He should know that, after France.”

“Of course, sir. I'll pass that back.”

As Guy spoke, the soldier turned and glanced at him. For a moment, their eyes met. It took Guy a moment to place the man, though if the sergeant recognized him, he didn't show it but turned immediately back to Park.

“Don't worry,” Park said to the sergeant. “Colonel Brinkman will get the tracking data and report it. And good luck to him.”

Guy made his way out of the bunker and back toward daylight. The car was waiting where he'd left it.

it, and he climbed into the back.

~~On the way back to Whitehall, he stared out of the window. Rain was starting to fall, spattering across his view and running down the glass. But he didn't see it.~~

All he saw was the events of eight months ago playing out again in his memory, and one of his first tasks for the Foreign Office after recovering from his wounds.

CHAPTER 4

When Guy Pentecross had stepped off the train at Ipswich station eight months earlier, the weather was very different. Summer was fading but not yet gone as the September of 1940 arrived. It was a warm day, and rather than find a taxi he decided to walk to the hospital. From the directions he'd been given, it wasn't far.

It was a pleasant change to walk through streets that weren't strewn with rubble. Just that morning he'd seen the wardens and the firemen pulling broken twisted bodies from the remains of a house. Under the mid-afternoon sun, this place almost seemed normal. Except for the distant drone of bomb engines and the angry buzz of fighters heading out to intercept them.

The front of the hospital was insulated with sandbags. Guy presented his identity card to a flustered nurse and asked where he could find Doctor Hugginson.

"They're still bringing people in from Felixstowe," she said. "I don't know where we're going to put them." There were dark rings under her tired eyes. "Doctor Hugginson will be doing what he can for them. Try Ward Three."

He tried Ward Three, doing his best not to stare at the patients. Trying not to think back to his own time in hospital. It was only a couple of months since he had been discharged and assigned to the Foreign Office. More than anything else, the antiseptic smell of the place brought it back to him. Eventually Guy found Hugginson hurrying along a corridor. The doctor made no effort to slow down as they spoke.

"I haven't got time for you now." There was a trace of apology, but it was really a statement of fact.

"It's not you I came to see."

That earned a short laugh. "Good. So why are we talking?"

"I'm here to question the German."

There was a break in his step. "Then you'll have to be quick."

Hugginson grabbed a nurse who probably had better things to do. She led Guy to a small room that contained a single bed. There were bars across the window.

"Not that he's going anywhere. Not in this world, anyway," she said. "We have to keep him separate."

"Security?" Guy guessed.

"The other patients won't have a German in the same room. Not fair to ask them really. Most of them would rather we dumped him back in the sea. There's probably a few in the ward that his bomb

put there.”

“I doubt it,” Guy told her. “He’s not a flyer. That’s army uniform. What’s left of it.”

“We can’t take it off him, the skin would come too,” the nurse said, sounding sympathetic for the first time. “It’s melted right into his flesh.”

That went partway to explaining the different smell in here. Like burned meat. Guy forced himself to look closer at the man on the bed. One eye stared bloodshot at the ceiling. The other was gone, the whole of that side of the face a waxy mass of charred tissue.

“It wasn’t just a fire,” the nurse went on. “Doctor Hugginson says the man was covered in some sort of accelerant. Fuel, most likely. Maybe a burst fuel tank, something like that.”

“I wish I could say I’ve never seen anything like it,” Guy said.

“Me too.”

The only signs that the man was still alive were the shallow rise and fall of his shattered chest, and the dry rasp as he struggled to draw breath.

“If he’s army, how did he get here?” the nurse asked.

“Good question.” It was what Guy had been sent to find out.

“Was he a passenger on a plane?”

Guy shrugged. “Where was he found?”

“Washed up at Bawdsey.”

That meant nothing to him, but Guy nodded. He could look it up later. “Can he speak?”

“Only in German.” She smiled, and instantly looked younger. Probably just out of school. “I have to go, I’m sorry.”

He nodded, turning away before she was out of the room, attention focused on the blackened body.

“Who are you?” he asked gently in German. No response. “Where are you from?” Nothing indicated the man could even hear him. “Have they given you anything for the pain?”

That got a reaction. Just a blink of the single eye, and a breath that might have been: “Ja.” The man spoke slightly more clearly: “Danke.”

“How did you get here?”

The man’s head turned slightly. The skin of his neck stretched and tore, oily liquid leaking out.

“Why did you come?” Guy asked. His own voice was husky and raw.

The answer was barely a whisper. A single word that was almost lost in the sound of the door opening.

Guy spun round angrily. “What the hell are you doing?”

“I could ask you the same thing, sir.”

The man was tall and broad, with close-cropped dark hair and a nose that had been broken several times. He was wearing the uniform of an army sergeant, and had the gruff no-nonsense tone to go with it.

“Pentecross, Foreign Office,” Guy told him. “I’m here to speak to the patient.”

“Sergeant Green, sir. And I’m here to secure the prisoner. My orders are that no one is to have contact with him.”

Obviously some local officiousness, Guy thought. “I doubt that applies to me.”

“I doubt you’re an exception.” Then, almost as an afterthought: “Sir.”

Green’s assurance annoyed Guy. “What unit are you with? Who gave you these orders?”

If the sergeant was intending to answer, he was interrupted as the man on the bed struggled to sit up, hand clutching in the air in front of him. His whole body was shaking. His breath was a ghastly wheezing sound, ragged and desperate. Then he slumped back. The noise stopped. His body was

deathly still.

Guy and Sergeant Green stared down at the bed, united by another's death.

"Did he say anything?" Green asked.

"Not really."

"So what *did* he say?"

"It'll be in my report," Guy told him.

"There's no need for a report, sir. You can tell me." When Guy didn't answer, Green went on: "I'll make sure the Foreign Office knows the man was already dead when you got here."

"But that's not true."

"What did he say? Colonel Brinkman will want to know."

Guy had had enough. He'd wasted his time coming here, and now a sergeant was ordering him to report about. The sooner he got out of this stifling death-room the better.

"He only said one word, apart from 'yes' and 'thank you.' And it didn't make any sense."

Green nodded. "And the word was?"

"The word was 'Übermensch.' It means—"

"That's all right, sir." Green turned away, looking back at the body. "Someone else can worry about what it means."

"Like Colonel Brinkman?"

No reply.

"Who is Colonel Brinkman, anyway?"

Green turned, stepping closer to Guy. "If you need to ask, then you don't need to know. Sir."

Guy was seething as he left the hospital. He had several questions, and no hope of getting an answer to any of them. The first was who was Colonel Brinkman? Then, who was the German, and how had he died? Why had he come here, and how?

And when Sergeant Green stood close to Guy, why did the man's uniform smell of smoke and fuel?

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