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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

FACILITY 47 – A NOVEL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

James N. Elens

2012

To: Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by James N. Elens, and entitled Facility 47 – A Novel, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Les Standiford

Bruce Harvey

John Dufresne, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 7, 2012

The thesis of James N. Elens is approved.

Dean Kenneth Furton
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2012

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, who have always believed in me. Without their love and support, this novel would never have been written.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my committee for their excellent guidance and support. I have taken courses with each of them and their knowledge and passion for teaching has been of great help to me as I have traveled the long road of writing a novel. They have been there for me every step of the way.

The coursework and mentoring I have received at this program have enabled me to improve as a writer, a scholar, and a person. The decision to attend the Creative Writing Master of Fine Arts Program at Florida International University has been one of the best decisions of my life.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

FACILITY 47 – A NOVEL

by

James N. Elens

Florida International University, 2012

Miami, Florida

Professor John Dufresne, Major Professor

FACILITY 47 is a psychological horror novel set in Germany just after the end of World War II. The novel is written in a naturalistic style that seeks to ground paranormal genre elements in a believable world. The story follows a group of Americans, led by Michael Powell, as they seek out and become trapped within an abandoned Nazi research facility in the Harz Mountains that contains a very dangerous secret; an unknown force capable of controlling people's actions and forcing them to destroy themselves. FACILITY 47 focuses on a character driven by greed, moral outrage at dubious American postwar policy, and a desire to create a world for himself where he is in control. In the end of the novel, Michael learns that the obsessive quest for control can have catastrophic consequences, but this discovery is made too late to save himself or his friends from the mysterious power inside the facility.

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Part One

Alone in the Woods

I

A Big Foul-Up

September, 1945

Southern Bavaria

Michael Powell had planned it simply enough. He and his three team members stormed an estate down in a shallow valley within the northern Bavarian forests to steal diamonds from a rich German couple, former Nazis during the war, intellectual types, the husband a banker and the wife a scientist from the university in Munich. Michael got the diamonds from them without much protest, and everything was staying quiet. But then John shot the wife. The wife went for a pistol and John fired. With the shotgun, no less. The noise brought a truck-full of German locals, well armed with hunting rifles and a few military MP40s, and they opened fire on Michael and his team as they scrambled across the field between the estate and the forest's edge. The team split up and ran deep into the trees toward the motorcycles they'd stowed away on old horse trails, and they kept their weapons silent once they made it into the dark of the woods.

A bullet struck the oak to Michael's right as he removed the brush from his bike. A small splinter cut into his cheek and he wiped a hand over his face and saw the dark of blood in the moonlight, but he kept his focus and tossed the large branches in such a way as to obscure the part of the trail that led west. He climbed on the bike and got the engine started. A few more bullets sliced through the trees above him but the shots were from far away. They'd seen him flee into the forest, but Michael was sure they couldn't see him now. Just random shots into the night hoping for a lucky hit. Michael got the bike running

and drove up the trail leading north. Another bullet hit a poplar trunk just ahead of him to the left. Way too close, but he drove away from the valley into the dark and formidable foliage of the hill forests, and after a while he heard no yells or shots behind him.

He rode all the way to an asphalt road that curved between a pair of the larger hills. He turned onto it and drove as fast as the bike could handle. The road had been built a few years before the war to move German tanks into Czechoslovakia, and the surface was still smooth. He soon found another narrow off-road trail that would take him to a cabin that served as their hideout in the area. The other three men had their own routes to get there, but this was his. There were no vehicles on the main road, no lights of any kind, but he felt relief when he made it onto that next dark trail without incident.

But the motorcycle broke down a quarter mile from the cabin. Michael sat still on the seat for a brief moment, tapped his index finger on the handle, and strained to calm himself. He was practiced in steadying his nerves. He used his breathing to bring the stress through his chest and out his nostrils, and he closed his eyes for a while to avoid thinking about bad fortune. He got off and pushed.

The dense northeastern reaches of the Black Forest loomed over him, a deep sea of strong oaks and ash trees whose wispy branches swayed in a breeze that made the air cool even on summer nights. He could look up and see swaths of clustered stars, the bright orb of a lost quarter moon hovering amongst them. The trees blocked most of the moonlight from reaching the ground, but some of the blue hue got through to the dirt floor of the old horse trail that slithered through these wooded hills, a path cut into the wilderness barely wide enough for a single-seat motorcycle to drive through, and certainly too small for any four-wheeled vehicle that might try to search for him.

His eyes had been conditioned to the night. Four years of war, much of it spent hunting things in the dark, illuminated the shadows to a greater extent than most others could manage, but it was too hard to examine the engine in this light, and he knew better than to click on a flashlight. The sounds had indicated a bad fuel injector, so after running a hand along the engine and finding no other apparent damage, he accepted that diagnosis and decided to push the bike onward to the cabin. It wasn't far. Even broken, he'd feel better having it nearby once he got there. He knew he could fix it.

A small grey owl dropped from an overhanging oak and raced down the trail ahead of Michael, making a hard turn down near where the trail bent, disappearing back into the trees. Michael drew his .45 and almost shot the damn thing, but he closed his eyes again for a moment and composed himself. The forest still unnerved him at night, no matter how many nights he'd spent in German woods. While in the Office of Strategic Services–he and his small team's employer until their recent voluntary severance from the armed forces of the United States–he had often been sent into the more forbidding forests of Europe. Capturing Vichy information brokers in France's mystic Paimpont woods. Taking out radio bunkers in the dense Ardennes under a tree canopy shredded by artillery, from both this war and the one before it. But the German forests felt different. These dark woodlands seemed to keep just enough space between the trees for things both real and imagined to hide, to appear and disappear as the mist slowed the travel of sound. These were very old forests. Men had ventured into them for thousands of years, and yet Michael felt that nobody, not even the locals, truly understood them or intended to. They filled them with legends and let those legends be, at least until recently. The wilds of Germany were in no need of imagined horrors anymore, nor was Michael. He

kept pushing the motorcycle over bumps in the dirt and kept his eyes ahead of him, focused on the trail, straining to hear voices or engines.

He saw the cabin as he made the bend. It sat in a clearing cloaked in shadow, surrounded by tall oaks with a few beech trees rising behind it. It wasn't a large cabin, just a square old wood structure with one large room inside, two windows, one at the front and one at the back. Built a few decades before with no electricity and no telephones. A short stack chimney popped up at the rear of the angled roof. No smoke came from it, and Michael intended to keep it that way for as long as they used this place as a retreat.

Michael pushed the bike around to the rear and when he got it to a spot he liked he propped up against the trunk of a young beech tree. He felt struck by the stillness. The short bushes by the nearby tool shed did not move and every branch above him stayed in its place. Crickets made their sounds in short staccato bursts and a few of the owls murmured high up in the trees but aside from the subtle music of the forest he heard nothing. That's what he was hoping for.

There was no sign of the others. They were coming by different routes out of the valley, all ending up at the same trail, but they were supposed to park and hide their bikes at various points while Michael drove his all the way to the cabin. If they were to be followed here, it was best not to have all the bikes parked in one spot.

Michael hustled around to the front door and got a better look back down the trail. There were no lights and no sounds of approaching engines. No voices. The thick wood door opened with little resistance. He unhooked the flashlight from his belt and turned it on and closed the door behind him. The beam searched inside, panning over chair tops

and a table littered with some empty cans and a quiet radio. Satisfied that he was alone, Michael found the small glass lamp by the table and lit the space with a faint glow and then clicked off the flashlight and set it on the table. There was a larger wicker lamp on a wood stool by the fireplace, but he wouldn't turn that one on just yet.

The inside of the cabin was a single large room, barely furnished, no drapes or carpets or any decorations outside of a hand-carved cherry wood clock on the wall and a few flowerless vases left behind by the previous owners. Michael had come by the place a few months before, and the people he'd asked the family had left for France before the war, and they wouldn't be coming back. A few drawings were etched in the wall over near an empty bookshelf at the back of the room, pictures of big cats with sharp teeth and fat bears with smiles. Different artistic styles. Two different children.

The weight around his waist got heavier as he stood there and he took the pistol from his belt and placed it on the table next to the flashlight. The .44 caliber automatic had been with him for nearly three years, since he and his group first arrived in Europe. It was a bulky sidearm, but he liked the weight. Next he loosened the straps on his pack and let it slide off one shoulder. He slung it around the other and dumped it on the table. He felt lighter then, and a little calmer.

Footsteps sounded outside and got louder as they neared the door. Michael picked up the pistol and held it at his side, but he recognized the steps. Brisk, but with a patterned precision resulting from a strange affinity for marching drill.

Charlie Bair opened the door and didn't even look at or acknowledge Michael before he dumped his own gear onto the table. He ran a hand through his thick black hair, which was tousled and damp with sweat.

“Anyone else here?” he asked, his English accent, like always, subdued but ever present.

“No,” said Michael. Having someone else there made him feel like it was okay to sit, and he pulled out one of the unpolished wood chairs and collapsed into it. “I just got here.”

“I know,” said Charlie. Michael didn’t need to see the confident smirk to hear it in his voice. “I had you made for a ways and kept tabs. I just figured that John might have gotten here first. Awfully dark in here.”

“We’re not lighting any more lamps yet.”

“Of course,” said Charlie. “Are you hurt? Did you hear anyone around?”

Michael shook his head. “No, I’m all right. I heard a few trucks on the main road, had to pull off, but they were heading south. Berchtesgarten is my guess.”

“Right. I just thought that with his route, John would have arrived first.”

“Well, he didn’t,” said Michael.“I’m wondering myself.”

“He did take the hill trails out of the valley, if he stuck to the route,” said Charlie, thinking through it as he spoke. “Patrols out that way most nights. He’s probably being cautious.”

Michael placed the pistol back on the table. “Late for him to be cautious on this one.”

Charlie went over the window and looked out, half his face lit by the moon, which had risen to its highest point in the sky. “He acted. Quickly. No shame in that.”

“I said no shots were to be fired.”

Charlie turned back to Michael and rested his hands on his hips. “The woman made a move.”

“It wasn’t necessary.”

“Maybe not.”

“Definitely not,” said Michael.

A light came into the cabin in splintered rays through the wood curtains covering the windows behind us at the rear of the cabin. Michael and Charlie went for their pistols. The two of them waited on either side of the front door as the light reappeared through the front windows. Footsteps hit the porch, and Michael recognized these as well.

“Cap’?” a voice whispered from outside. “Cap’, you in there yet? John?”

Charlie rolled his eyes and opened the door. The large man standing out there lifted his .38 but lowered it just as quickly when he saw the two men waiting for him.

“Get inside,” said Michael. “And turn that damn flashlight off.”

Ben Perini came into the cabin and Michael shut the door behind him. “Sorry, Cap’,” he said. “Got real dark all of a sudden. Couldn’t find the door handle.”

“Clouds came out,” said Charlie. “Covered up the moon, I’m afraid. That’s what they do.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” said Michael.

Ben paced over to look out the back window. Finally he turned and walked back to the others. “Where’s John?” he asked. “I figured he’d a gotten here first.”

“So did we,” said Charlie.

“He’s taking his time,” said Michael, sitting back down. “He knew he’d need the two of you here to keep me from knocking out a few of his teeth.”

Charlie grinned. “No need for any of that.”

“He did fuck up back there,” said Ben. “Fucked up bad.”

Charlie shrugged. “We got what we wanted.”

“Doesn’t matter,” said Michael.

“It’s all that matters,” said Charlie.

“I had everything under control,” said Michael.

Charlie nodded. “Of course.”

Ben undid his utility belt and dropped it on the table, sidearm and all. Michael saw a few dark red stains on the leather and on ammo pouch, and some red flecks also dotted the right side of Ben’s shirt. But the blood wasn’t his. “Well let’s just hope he gets back soon so we can tally up and get out of here,” said Ben.

Charlie stepped up to the table and reached toward Michael’s pack. He stopped before touching it, looking to Michael for approval.

“In a manila envelope at the bottom,” Michael told him.

Charlie nodded and rummaged through the pack before bringing the envelope out and setting it on the table near the pistols. The edges had been crinkled some and there were a couple dots of faded red near the top left corner, but that was fine. The diamonds were safe inside the purple velvet pouch that Charlie lifted with two fingers and then held in his palm. He used a pinkie to open the pouch a little, and he grinned as he touched the contents for a few moments and then closed the bag and dropped it back into the envelope.

“That should put us close,” said Charlie as he returned the envelope to my pack.

Michael nodded. “It’s a little more than I expected.”

“How much more?” asked Ben.

“Maybe five thousand away from where we wanna be. Charlie’s right. We’re close.”

“But not there yet,” added Charlie.

“No,” said Michael. “Not there yet.”

No one said anything for a while, and the cherry wood clock on the wall ticked a few times. It only ticked on the minutes. Michael thought about taking out the envelope and looking through the contents again, but he kept himself from it. He’d already checked it a few times on the journey to the cabin, and it was always a fight to resist rechecking things. He knew that they were close now. Very close. Maybe two more hits on high level targets before they met the agreed upon amount they would leave Europe with. But it didn’t matter anymore. John had killed the wrong woman, and so the calendar was cut short. They had to leave Europe as soon as possible. The O.S.S. had numerous lists of high-priority assets, Germans deemed valuable to the gathering of Nazi intelligence and research, but the most noted list belonged to a Colonel Carl Hannigan, a man Michael and the others had once saluted before striking out on their own. The woman John had unloaded his shotgun into was inked into that inventory. Hannigan and the O.S.S. had threatened Michael and his team before, but they’d stayed at arm’s length so long as their priorities weren’t harmed.

Michael didn’t mind being called a pirate. He believed that too many Nazis had escaped arrest, too few rotting away in holding cells waiting for tribunals. He’d even been ordered to retrieve and protect some of them before refusing those orders and leaving the O.S.S. So he had no qualms about taking from them as they had taken from so

many others. But this also meant that his list of desired targets sometimes overlapped with those of people like Hannigan. He tried to avoid those targets, but this couple had too many diamonds, and they hadn't seemed like a threat.

John had killed the wrong woman.

The clock ticked off another minute, and Charlie walked over to the rear window and peered out into the dark.

"He'll get here when he gets here," said Ben, leaning against the wall near the empty brick fireplace, seeming unconcerned. "You won't see or hear him coming anyway."

"John is not as stealthy as he thinks he is," said Charlie.

"Ben, you can turn another lamp on if you like," said Michael.

Ben nodded and took an oil lamp that they'd left here from atop the fireplace mantle and after removing the glass he used his silver Zippo lighter to light the wick. He put the glass on and set the lamp back on the mantle where it lit up a small golden area with little strength but made it possible to at least see around the rest of the cabin. And it wouldn't look too bright from the outside. Michael felt certain that no one of any consequence knew they were there, and when he came upon such feelings of certainty he always went with them.

There was a knock on the door, a quick but sharp set of taps on the wood. Charlie looked over from his spot at the rear window, frowning, and Ben went to see who it was.

"John?" he said, his voice low but more than a whisper. No point in whispering.

"I'm coming in," said the familiar voice from outside. The door opened and John Bordeaux came inside with heavy steps, his boots kicking dirt and tiny rocks all over the

floor. The guilty shotgun was slung over his back. Ben took a quick look outside and closed the door behind him.

"Could have wiped your feet," said Charlie.

John glanced down at the boots and noted the climbed mud and bits of green summer leaves sticking to the rubber soles. He looked back up and Charlie and grinned, his expression boyish and devoid of guilt. Michael didn't believe he could have made it look different if he tried to. There were a few snapped twigs in his curly disheveled brown hair, and they fell on the floor as he ran a hand through the locks and shook his head like an animal trying to get clean.

"Don't think we're trying to keep all this so neat, are we there, Charlie?" he said, and straining not to look at where Michael sat with my hands pressed against his knees.

"What held you up?" Michael asked him.

John snapped his head to face him like he had just realized Michael was there and he grinned the same grin, though Michael didn't return it. "I took the trail running down the creek," John said, pointing in a generally northward direction at the wall behind him. "The one that runs between the two low hills. There was a patrol. I got off the road before they saw me and waited. But the bastards just parked for a while and leaned on their hoods and finished some smokes. Took 'em a little while."

"G.I. patrol?" asked Ben.

"Limey patrol," said John, making sure to smile over at Charlie. "About four of them. Routine, most likely. Like I said, they didn't seem like they were looking for anything."

"And they didn't see you?" Michael asked.

“’Course not, Mike,” said John. “I left the bike for a bit and hid down by the creek, just to be safe.”

“That explains the mud,” said Charlie.

“Sure, I guess it does,” said John with a smirk. “No sign of those Krauts either. I think we gave them the slip.”

Charlie and Ben seemed stiff in the way they stood, bracing themselves for the anger they assumed Michael was about to let loose. John stood much more at ease, immune to the tension, his hands resting on his belt and his pistol hanging quietly in his holster at his left hip.

“So, are we sticking to the plan, same as before?” John asked to no one in particular, though the others looked at Michael for the answer.

“Even sooner,” said Michael, keeping his voice level. “We’re leaving here and splitting up for a couple days.”

“It’s still at least five hours until dawn,” said Charlie. “Traveling north or west is actually safer by daylight.”

“No, I mean we’re leaving Germany,” said Michael. “We split up and meet in Austria two days from now. This area’s gonna buzz like a hornet’s nest.”

“It would have anyway if no one up and got shot,” said Ben. John’s eyes found the floor after the remark.

“I agree,” said Charlie. “Why leave now? We were going to get attention with the original plan too. Just got jumped by some Krauts is all.”

“Not attention like this,” said Michael.

Charlie took a step forward and placed a hand on the table. “Now I may come off as paranoid but that sounds like we haven’t been told something.”

“Something about that couple seemed high-priority, right?” added Ben.

“A lot of the folks we go after are high-priority,” said Michael. “They’re the ones who deserve it.”

“How high?” asked Charlie.

“How high what?” said Michael, though of course he knew what Charlie was getting at.

“How high-priority were they?” said Charlie, stressing every word.

The other two looked at Michael and waited for the answer. John did so out of the corners of his eyes with his head bent downward. Michael could feel Charlie looming over him, a strong presence in spite of his smaller stature, and he refused to look back at him.

“The woman might have shown up on Hannigan’s list,” Michael said finally.

Ben turned and wiped his face with his hand. “Son of a bitch,” he said. Charlie didn’t say anything.

“That guy was really on Hannigan’s list?” said John, more surprised than angry, but Michael still took his question as an attack.

“No,” he said, rising out of the chair. “His wife was.”

John took an unconscious step backward. “How the hell is that?” he asked.

“You had no right to keep that from us, Cap’,” said Ben.

“I found out a couple days ago,” said Michael, feeling his tone get more hostile. “Of course it would have been nice if it had shown up in Charlie’s research.”

Charlie puffed out his chest at that. “Wait a minute…” he protested.

“But that shouldn’t have made any difference,” Michael continued, taking a step across the room toward John, “because Hannigan and the O.S.S. don’t give a damn if their marks lose some diamonds. But they do care if they’re in the fucking ground!”

“She made a move first, Mike,” said John.

Michael grabbed another chair by the table and slung it at the door, where one of its legs broke off. “It doesn’t matter who moves first!” he shouted, bringing his hand up and jabbing a finger in the air at John’s face. “This was your responsibility! Your job to keep level when things get fucked!”

“She made a move!” John countered, not moving back any further, even with Michael’s finger in his face.

“This is not a goddamn pride battle!” Michael yelled back at him. “It was unnecessary! Half of what you’ve done lately is un-fucking-necessary!”

Charlie walked up to the two of them. “That’s enough,” he said flatly. “It’s done. It’s the risk on any of these, a bigger risk when you target someone that connected.”

Michael didn’t take his eyes off John until the other looked away and that took a few moments. John wouldn’t blink first for many people, but Michael knew he was one of the select few.

“Got a little hairy back there,” said John, his New Orleans drawl carrying the last word a ways.

Michael nodded and went back to the chair, one that hadn’t broken into a few pieces. He wiped a hand over his face and the amount of sweat surprised him. It dripped off his hand and formed a tiny puddle on the wood floor. The September nights were

humid. He could always feel that. But sometimes on nights like these he lost feel of his own skin, failed to feel heat or cold or wetness. When quiet came, the sense of his skin always startled him.

Ben took a few loud steps over to the rear window, and like he so often did, stood more as architecture than a participant, a statue in the corner watching quietly as others quarreled before him. Charlie sat on the table, facing away from Michael, and took it upon himself to keep his opinions hushed for more than a moment. John stayed standing, his head down but aimed toward Michael. His left hand found a pocket in his olive drab pants and his filthy boots faced apart.

"So just how close are we?" asked John, lifting his head and looking Michael in the eyes.

Michael returned his stare and made himself think about the question instead of all that had happened. Whoever John looked upon, his bright green eyes had a way of making one forget any preceding conflict, any reason to dislike him or be angry with him. Michael was aware of the effect but he let it work anyway.

"Like I said, it doesn't matter," said Michael. "Hannigan's gonna come down on us. We have to get out of Europe as soon as possible. We leave with what we've got."

"Might not be wise to rush it," said Charlie, still facing away from Michael.

"Not rushed," Michael said. "But fast. We split up, like we discussed. Meet at the boathouse by the river in two days."

Everyone in the room nodded.

John took the hand from his pocket and flicked some dirt from his fingertips to the floor, then rubbed his hands together. "I am sorry, Mike," he said.

Michael nodded. “I know.”

He thought about what Charlie had said, about it being safer to travel the region in daylight, and he was right. The patrols, American, British, and otherwise, were more frequent at night, and all the authority in southern Germany tended to be more alert. In the day people could see the new lay of the country, the damaged buildings, the scars in the roads and the grass carved there by the progression of the war, a progression that titled hard and fast against the local residents’ side in it. And in seeing this, both they and their new conquerors were calmed, either in submission or in the placation of dominance. The realities of daylight kept many content in the war’s end, and in the night they looked harder for threats to that end they couldn’t see. It was much safer to travel in the day.

“Get out there and stick to the forest trails,” said Michael. “Stay away from the roads until daylight.” Charlie turned and looked at him expectantly. “Like Charlie suggested,” Michael added. That soothed him for the moment. “All right then,” continued Michael, getting up out of the chair. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

The men gathered their equipment and checked their weapons and left through the front door. Michael turned out the lamps and came outside last, closing the door behind him. He scanned the night and heard the owls making restless noises in their high perches.

Charlie turned to him. “So where are you off to, Cap’?”

“Stop with the “Captain” bit,” said John.

“Oh?” said Charlie, raising an eyebrow.

“Enough,” said Michael. “It’s best if we don’t know exactly where each other will be.”

Charlie chuckled and walked down the trail and kicked a few stones into the brush before he disappeared into the night.

John turned to Michael. “So where are you going, Mike?”

“Right now I’m going to try and get the damn bike working,” Michael replied. “It’s got a problem.”

John stood rigid like an expectant child. Ben leaned against the cabin near the door, looking out into the forest, the blue moonlight bathing his face except for where the shadow a branch colored his cheek.

“I can handle it by myself,” said Michael as he tightened his belt. “You two get moving. And keep sharp. Things are changing out here very quickly.”

A breeze came through the forest and caused the thick birches to sway back and forth in tandem, their silhouettes dancing against the deep blue of the sky. Michael watched them move, averting his gaze only when the air blew a few dark brown bangs in front of his eyes. His hair was getting a bit too long, he thought. He’d had it cut just after the war in Europe ended, and he’d neglected it since, content to slick a few fingers with pomade in the morning and force the wavy length of it back over his head. The pomade wasn’t hard to come by. The Germans were quite fond of it, and he would often pocket a full silver canister while rummaging through the many abandoned homes, and a few that weren’t abandoned.

The breeze stopped and an owl took off from an especially tall birch tree and glided over the cabin, making a soft repetitive cooing sound as it flew away. Michael

knelt down next to the motorcycle. He reached into a pocket and grabbed a small square piece of cloth and extended his hand into the chassis.

It was a German bike and used to have a sidecar but Michael had ditched it when he took the vehicle from a former Nazi weapons broker, an opportunistic and stubborn man who wouldn't need the bike anymore. The sidecar added too much weight and slowed the whole thing down. Michael preferred agility in the things he used, from the powerful elegance of his pistol to the simple swiftness of a single-seat motorcycle. John had a natural agility to him, an instinctive ease to his body movements, and had for as long as Michael had known him. Charlie had little use for subtlety or lightness of foot beyond what was called for, but there was a precision and beauty to his explosives. Ben kept his agility mental for the most part and streamlined things inside in a way Michael could not often see. But Michael found his in machines, assortments of parts combined to create something as perfect as possible.

He ran the cloth over the exhaust pipe and removed some black from the metal and when his hand moved up to the seat he felt a coarse groove, a scar on the machine where a rifle bullet had come and scraped the edge from behind.

Someone walked up the road toward the cabin. Michael grabbed his pistol and cocked it but it didn't take him long to see that it was John. The moonlight found him gliding over the dirt path and Michael holstered the pistol and waited for him to come closer before calling out. When he felt like using them, John had the quietest steps Michael had ever heard. Occasionally people would question why John had been recruited to the O.S.S., and why Michael had kept him for so long. Michael always referenced the stealth. It was an easy answer, though only a part of the whole story.

“You didn’t make it very far,” said Michael.

John kept walking and nodded his head. “Yeah, I guess not,” he said. He stopped a few yards from the Michael and stood with both hands in his pockets. His back arched some against the weight of his pack and the shotgun slung over his shoulder. “Mike, I just wanted to say…”

Michael waved him off. “Doesn’t make any difference,” he said. “I’m not going to say we’re good, because we’re not.”

John nodded. “I know,” he said. “This whole thing is just…”

“Is just what?” said Michael. He stood up and wiped his hands with the cloth. “It isn’t just anything. You fucked up and we’re cashing out. That’s it.”

“So you think we can do it?” said John.

“Do what?” said Michael.

“Everything we talked about.”

Michael knew he talked about a lot of things, and he always tried to avoid talking about more than he could deliver. He had been the one to convince the others to leave the O.S.S., and he’d started with John. The seeds had already been planted. One too many assignments to shelter known war criminals had rotted through their patriotism in those postwar days. But he knew it disingenuous to claim that as the sole reason they detached themselves and struck out on their own.

They had done their part. Michael certainly believed that, and he convinced himself the others believed it just as strongly. And what he sold them was what was often promised to those angry and disenchanted souls that had a way of clawing from the debris left by something as horrible as war. It was a promise of their better future. But

even more than that, it was a promise of control in that future. With their riches they would strike out and claim their own piece of the world. Michael had told the others stories of the South Pacific, of deserted islands his family had taken him to as a boy while his stepfather was in the shipping business. Islands where any man strong and with enough vision could build his own place in the world. He didn't remember much of those places, but he described them in grand and forceful terms and seeing as they were all without strong ties to the world back home for various reasons, the others tied their tethers to him as they had during the most dangerous times. John tied his tether first, and he tied it most securely.

Rulers of their own kingdom, they said. Free and honest masters of their own universe.

John lowered his head and Michael could tell he was considering an explanation, but he didn't deliver one. "I think maybe I've always been a fuck-up," he said. "I don't wanna be the one that derails all this."

"Nothing is derailed," said Michael. "Not if I have anything to say about it."

"What do you have to say about it?" said John.

Michael titled his head to the side and took a hard step toward him. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

John took a step back. "Nothing," he mumbled. "I just want to make sure we're not going home."

Michael turned and tossed the rag onto the seat of the motorcycle. "We're not going home," he said. "We're just leaving here."

John had spoken to Michael only vaguely about matters back in the States. Back on the waterfront of the Mississippi River where a young John had spent his boyhood stealing pocketbooks from the well-to-do on the riverboats that came down from St. Louis, before he was sent to a reform school and pressured to join the Army. Things had gone sour there and his family didn't want him around. Beyond that, John had been secretive. He had pictures of his sister, a beautiful girl with curly brown hair who had married a promising young man in the canned goods business. John didn't talk about her, but he carried that picture everywhere in his pant pocket. He never spoke of his parents either, but he carried no pictures of them.

"I've been thinking," said John. "You know, about those islands we've been talking about. They have mail on those islands?"

Michael nodded. "They got ships that come in and out," he said. He looked out into the dark of the forest. "I think it's best that we don't contact anyone for a while though, once we're there. Maybe a year or so. Just to be safe."

John nodded. "Yeah, sure, of course." He looked at the ground for a moment and kicked the dirt and then looked up at Michael and grinned a bit and his white teeth glinted some in the moonlight. "It's gonna be real nice, huh, Mike?" he said.

Michael and smiled. "It will be if you just take care of yourself."

"I can take of myself," said John, a little defensive.

In certain situations, Michael knew that to be true. It was during the times when there were no bullets and no one to sneak past and no alarms to be avoided that Michael was skeptical of his friend's abilities. He almost asked him to stay with him until the rest of them met up by the river. But he doubted John wanted that.

Michael walked to the motorcycle and tucked the cloth into his pocket and climbed onto it. He wheeled it around so that it faced down the road and John took a couple steps out of the way. “You’re not ready to leave all this yet, right?” he asked. He titled his head toward the forest, toward Germany, toward all they had done together. “Just keep yourself out of trouble. Relax a little bit. We’ll be all right.”

John grinned and Michael could see that he believed him. He wanted to say something else, something to absolve John of guilt for what had happened at the country house. He thought maybe that would ease John’s mind and let him head out on his own with some degree of calm. Calm was hard enough to come by. But he could think of nothing to say. He just glanced at John and nodded and started the motorcycle’s engine.

He drove away down the road and didn’t look back to see what direction John walked in. The others trusted Michael despite Charlie’s occasional snide remarks and Ben’s subtle sighs and silent doubts. Michael decided to extend John some of that same trust. John had done nothing to deserve it that night. But if they were all going to stay together, moving forward was something on which they all needed to stay sharp.

II

Lying Low

Michael traveled the smaller country roads into morning. The sky was clear and his face warmed under the September sun as he drove the motorcycle between hills. He had to go off-road and push his bike along a rocky forest path in order to avoid an American Army checkpoint at an intersection, one arm of which led northeast to the town of Straubing. From what he could see, the G.I.s tasked with watching the checkpoint were smoking under the shade of nearby beech trees and they seemed less than alert. Michael still had O.S.S. papers, along with a fake identification. He could probably get past them with little trouble. But there was no reason to risk it when he had the time. He liked to think he wasn't that reckless. He got back on the road and headed into a dairy farming valley where cows lounged under awnings overgrown with weeds and strayed into the road behind broken fences that had gone many months without repair.

It was midday when he arrived at a rural estate nestled against one of the higher hills surrounding the valley. He parked the motorcycle in a tool shed under a birch tree and made sure not to close the door all the way. He had come to believe long before then that partially open doors were much less inviting than closed ones, at least to the kind of people he would be concerned with, and especially in a rural stretch of overgrown yard on the outskirts of town. He kept the diamonds on his person and his pack slung over his shoulders and walked across the property.

The large country home across from the shed had been ransacked months before and anything valuable had been plucked from the cabinets and walls before he found the

place and made it into an occasional stopping point. Those who had cleaned the estate of its meager riches had left the Mercedes staff car parked behind the house near a collection of birdfeeders that hung from the corner of the gray shingle roof. Michael looked into the car as he always did while passing by. In the driver's seat there was the body of man, slumped only slightly with his head tilted back and his decayed eyes looking up into the ceiling of his tomb. He was dressed in full officer's regalia with medals of valor blotting his chest, some from this war but most from the war long before when he still dug in with other soldiers and not in offices or government posts. A splash of dark brown came down over the decorations from a hole in his chin and in his lap laid a pistol, a pristine special-issue Luger with a black rubber grip. He had worn a cap in his last moments, but the shot had lifted it off his head and onto the back seat. So much effort to put some semblance of ceremony into his end, some degree of respectability. Every time Michael passed him and saw him sitting there in his car, he let disgust come over him in a way he rarely allowed. The man had died a coward.

Michael completed a lap around the house, past the weed-strangled garden in the back and the horse stable where only rats made their beds. When he got back to the front of the house he saw a pair of people out on the road. It was an old man and a young boy, both pushing bicycles, and they had stopped near the estate's entrance and stared at Michael from under the brims of matching wool worker caps. The old man leaned over and said something to the boy and the two of them continued pushing their bicycles down the road and didn't look back.

Michael went inside and set his pack by an empty umbrella stand near the door. The thud echoed off the wood floor through the empty house. He went to the dining room

and spread the diamonds out over the large table that had been stripped of everything except its fine oak finish. He sat there alone in the quiet for hours and counted the stones dozens of times. He took a long Fairbairn-Sykes fighting knife from his boot, a British weapon given to him a friend in the Strategic Air Service, and used the blade to separate them into little piles according to size and clarity. Twenty-three diamonds of varying sizes up to a few carats. He counted them over and over until he convinced himself that they were worth it. He stuck the knife into the tabletop and watched the dwindling outside light glint off the steel.

As nightfall came the exhaustion of two days without sleep almost caused him to pass out in the chair with the diamonds still set on the table. But he put them back in the pouch and pulled the knife from the wood and tucked it back in his boot. He grabbed his pack and walked upstairs. He passed the bedroom where the Nazi officer and his spouse had made their bed. He wouldn't sleep in there. But there was a study with dusty bookshelves filled with literature that looters had apparently been content to leave in place. A couch sat by a window that overlooked the back grounds of the estate, but Michael found it hard to sleep anywhere but on the floor. He couldn't pinpoint for sure when that had happened. Sometime during the war. He closed the door and turned the old iron lock and threw a wood blanket on the creaky wood floor.

The last of the day's sunlight died outside as he laid his head down, replaced by the glow of the moon that colored Michael's face as he looked out the window up at the stars. The previous night's events repeated themselves in his head, remembered sounds and words filling the silence inside the room. But he was too tired to let them keep him

from sleep. It was a short rest, too short for dreams, and when it ended it did so because of a footstep inside the room that jolted him awake.

The man by the door stood still, his left arm and pant leg caught in the soft blue moonlight. He had managed to unlock the door and come inside before Michael woke and trained a pistol on his head. Michael took a moment to simmer in frustration and he steadied his breathing so as to zero his aim in on where the center point between the man's eyes would be. Despite the shadows and the nondescript khakis, Michael knew who it was almost as soon as his mind leapt awake. Colonel Linus Hannigan wasn't a large man. In fact he was rather small in stature. His posture was straight and practiced and when he titled his head down, the moonlight caught the lens of his glasses as he looked down upon Michael, his gaze neither menacing nor comforting.

Michael didn't blink as he let the darkness soften and got a better look at the intruder. "How many are with you?" he asked. He saw the edge of a slight smile from the man.

"Only two in a car outside," said Hannigan. "In here, it's only me." Michael kept still, and his pistol didn't move. Hannigan eyed him for a few moments, reading his disposition, and then took a few steps over to the bed and sat down on the edge of the mattress. Michael followed him with the pistol, but Hannigan looked past the weapon, ignoring it. "If I was trying to take you," he said, "it wouldn't matter how many I brought. If you believed there was no way out, no way in hell would we take you alive." He paused and took a pewter cigarette case from his pant pocket, flipped it open, and put one of the stalks in his mouth. "Correct?"

Michael sat up on the floor, and though he kept the pistol aimed at Hannigan, his shooting arm relaxed a little and rested on his knee. “How did you find me?”

Hannigan took a Zippo from his shirt breast pocket and lit the cigarette. “Does it matter?” he said. “Could have been locals, eager to lend a helping hand.”

Michael shook his head. “Not likely.”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” said Hannigan with a grin. “People would rather their lands possess fewer dangerous things.” He took a long drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke into the moonlight. “And you, Michael, are a very dangerous man.” He paused for a moment, trying to read Michael’s reaction, but Michael didn’t give one to him. “Or,” Hannigan said, “”it could have been your friend, Mister Bordeaux.”

Michael blinked for a split second in disappointment. “Where is he?” he asked. He didn’t have the pieces and he didn’t know why Hannigan had shown up, but he’d been a part of too many shake-downs not to know when he was involved in one.

“Back with us,” said Hannigan. “Though not of his own accord.”

“Where is he?”

“He’s unharmed.”

“You’re full of shit.”

“Sometimes,” said Hannigan. “That’s an aspect of our business, as you know.” He grinned again. “But not tonight.” He reached into his pants pocket again but this time instead of cigarettes he brought out a gold watch with a wide glass face. A watch Michael had first seen on the vanity in the bedroom of a Nazi chemical engineer’s lake house a month earlier. A watch John had asked for and received as part of his haul. Hannigan held it in the light and pretended to examine it. “He’s been throwing around things like

this," he said. "Not enough to keep him out of trouble at those Kraut card tables, I suppose."

"Where is he?" Michael asked again.

"I'd love to keep hold of that little Cajun shit," said Hannigan. "But I'm willing to part with him."

"What do you want?"

"Many things, Michael. But tonight? Tonight I just want to chat you up a bit. Those old cowboy days are drifting behind us, my old friend. Now we do a lot more talking."

Michael grinned this time, unable to help himself. He thought of all the talk that had forced him and his comrades away from the O.S.S. The pardons given Nazi war criminals. The agreements and handshakes given to them in exchange for ill-gotten gains and ill-gotten knowledge. "Yeah, I'm aware of that."

Hannigan nodded and tossed the watch across the room, and Michael caught it with his left hand. "Like I said, two men outside," said Hannigan as he stood up. "They're armed but they won't shoot." He glanced at Michael's pistol for the first time during their conversation. "You can keep your weapon if it makes you feels better." He strolled over the door and walked out, tapping his fingers on the wall as he walked down the hallway. "Just words tonight, Michael," he said, his voice faint through the wall. "Just words."

III

A Proposition

Michael got in the back of the car, and he did keep his weapon on him. The two men Hannigan mentioned didn't speak to him. Michael thought they might try and blindfold him for the drive. He wouldn't have let them, but he thought they would try. They didn't.

Once Hannigan got inside, they left the country estate behind. Dawn was beginning to creep over the mountainous horizon as the four of them drove past neglected farms and over empty roads to Straubing. It was a large town settled along the mighty Danube River. Michael looked out the window at the large stone buildings, the tall black-topped spire of the Basilica of St. Jacob that rose high above them near the center of town. The weak morning sunlight touched the tops of these structures and the scars of wartime American bombing raids could be seen as dark absences in a sea of red-brown roofs and church towers. The streets all looked empty. Not surprising. It was very early, and many of these occupied towns had curfews in place that kept civilians inside all night until morning work hours.

The car kept to the outskirts of town as it continued along. They passed several Fachwerk homes, or "half-timbered," strong structures from the previous centuries built on wood frames with walls filled in by brick and hard clay. Many of them were painted white and kept clean by the town's absence of modern industry. They reminded Michael of the fairy tale homes he'd seen in illustrated books his mother had read to him when he was a child, old and tattered tomes she had procured from the local Kansas library before

they were thrown away. They seemed frozen in time, relics from a distant past. At least the ones that hadn't been wounded or leveled in the last few years.

There was a rough bump as the car drove over an unfilled hole in the road left by an Allied bomb, and Michael stopped gazing out at Straubing and glanced at the man sitting next to him with the pistol resting in his left hand. He leaned forward toward Hannigan.

"How much farther?" he asked.

"You have time," said Hannigan. "And it's not much farther."

They drove to a large two-story building about a mile outside of town. It had been a lumber company headquarters before and during the war. Now it served as an O.S.S. field office, one Hannigan had staffed entirely with his own people. That left most of the offices vacant even when everyone was present. The car was parked by the aluminum-walled security shack next to an empty loading yard. Michael waited for the others to get out, and then he took a deep breath and joined them as Hannigan led him inside and upstairs.

The mounted head of a German brown bear protruding from a strong slab of polished tree sat on a small couch in the corner of Hannigan's makeshift office. Its eyes glinted in the light of the lamp Hannigan turned on near his desk, though it still remained in the darker part of the room, and the teeth of the beast glowed a strange off-white.

"Nice set-up," said Michael, glancing around at the rest of the room, which aside from the desk and couch with the dead bear's head on it consisted only a single window with linen drapes and a tin pot near the door where one may put an umbrella or something of a similar shape.

Hannigan walked around behind the desk, placing the case atop it, and pulled the chair out. “It suits me down here,” he said. “Simpler. That’s the best way to be in times of transition like this.” He sat down and leaned back and placed a hand on the desktop. “Simple. Easy to pick up and move.”

Michael stood by the doorway, hesitant to move any further into the room. “I agree,” he said. “I also like to keep myself mobile.”

“Yes, but you’re not the mobile rogue you think you are. You have a habit of collecting things that anchor you.” Hannigan’s eyes picked up the glint as well, and in it Michael could see reference to the money, the diamonds, his comrades, the girl. The list grew in his mind, much too long, and it didn’t sit easy.

“What’s with the bear?” Michael asked.

“I told them to get rid of the damn thing,” said Hannigan, looking over at the mounted head. “Pitiful monument to barbarism. Some well-to-do kraut hunting such an animal with his daddy’s big gun. So how are the other two?”

Michael grinned at Hannigan’s ability to address and change topics so quickly. “Taking care of themselves.”

Hannigan nodded and reached over to the case, pulling it toward him. “No second thoughts?” he asked with a cocked eyebrow. “No regrets? Not even from Mr. Perini. Always thought that big fellow the more cautious type.”

Michael said nothing.

“And Mr. Bair? Although I’ve always known you never can trust the Harvard types.” He flashed the smug smirk of an Ivy man, one who’d gone to school a bit south of Harvard, in New Jersey.

Again, Michael said nothing.

Hannigan opened the case and took out a manila folder. He undid a string clasp and flipped the folder open. “Well, the four of you have inconvenienced me, hmm? Do you know how?”

“That wasn’t our intention,” said Michael.

“No, your intention is that of a pirate. And no, your deluded brand of piracy was not so much of an inconvenience to me. Indeed, your actions up until recently have probably helped our efforts. Intimidation makes the Krauts more eager to accept the protection of those of us still wearing uniforms.”

“Protection?” said Michael. “For war criminals?”

Hannigan started sorting through documents inside the folder. “Necessary lapses in justice.”

“For mass murderers?”

Hannigan slammed a fist down on the table. Michael didn’t flinch on the outside, but inside he was surprised to see the man lose his composure.

“Like you?” said Hannigan. “Plenty of blood on those hands. Some more deserving than the rest. Certainly not clean enough for your righteous walk-out on your own country.”

“I walked out on the O.S.S.”

“I could have you tried for treason and shot.”

“And yet you need me for something.” Michael tried to stop the smile, but he couldn’t help it, and he was curious to see if it brought more than a slammed fist from the

man across the table. But Hannigan didn't express himself that way again. He just leaned back in the chair and tapped his fingers on the folder.

"I want you for something, perhaps," he said. "And you have few cards to play, which is a few more than poor Mr. Bordeaux."

Michael lost the smile. "What do you want, Hannigan?"

"I want you out of Europe."

"Then we want the same thing."

Hannigan leaned forward again and clasped his hands together on the desk. "But I have many wants. And not enough skilled people to get them for me." He paused. "I trust you are familiar with the Nazi X-Projects?"

Michael took another step into the room, toward the bear head. "Hitler's little ghost hunts?" he asked.

"A trite definition," Hannigan replied.

"Research into all manner of nonsense," said Michael, turning to face Hannigan directly. "The kind of stuff few are taking seriously aside from, as I hear it, a few of the more gullible colonels of the O.S.S."

"Many people see it differently," said Hannigan. "Including the woman Mr. Bordeaux killed."

Michael looked down for a moment. Hannigan searched his eyes, trying to find guilt or shock or something else he could use.

"That's right," Hannigan continued. "Little Miss Albrecht was a researcher for the Reichsprojeks. Mr. Bair slipping on the homework again, I suspect?"

"Again," said Michael, "that was not our intent."

“And again, your intent is none of my fucking concern. But this project, which Frau Albrecht was so closely attached to, is.” He examined the contents of the folder, some dossier documents and black and white photographs, and tapped his fingers on the table again. “This is an information retrieval assignment. Will you do it?”

Michael gave the man credit for the direct question. Hannigan used those sparingly. “What kind of assignment?”

“An information retrieval assignment,” Hannigan repeated. “You’ll get more details once you agree to do it. And before you ask, I offer it to you for two reasons. One, those above me do not have the vision to recognize the importance of these facilities, as our, for the moment, allies in Moscow most certainly do.” He paused. “Two, you remain the best person to carry out this task.”

“I know it’s hard for you to say that,” said Michael.

“No it isn’t,” said Hannigan. “And I mean it when I say you are free to walk out of this building.” He waved at hand at the window, through which Michael could see the moon hanging low in the early morning sky as it prepared to give way to the sun. The hills and distant mountains rising up in the horizon appeared bluer than usual, touched by both nightlight and the approaching dawn. Hannigan tapped on the table again. “But I don’t think you will. Especially because it is to you and only you I am offering that opportunity to at the moment.”

Michael lowered his head. “If this one assignment is completed, you’ll release John?”

Hannigan nodded. “I’ll release him beforehand,” he said. “I want your team intact for this. And if the assignment is completed, you have my word that I will not go about reacquiring him. Or you.”

“That’s all I have to go by?”

“We deal in a great deal of deception here, as you know, but please give me one instance where I’ve lied to you.”

Michael thought it over, and was shaken when he couldn’t come up with an instance. But that wasn’t the point, wasn’t the reason he and the others had left.

“And I’ll do you one better,” said Hannigan. “I will facilitate your departure from Europe. No worries about border crossings, passports. The dogs will be called off, on all of you.”

“Downgrade the discharge?” asked Michael.

“I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can.”

“Let me rephrase,” said Hannigan. “I *won’t* do that. Dishonorable discharge is a downgrade from treason, yes? What does it matter? You probably don’t plan on returning stateside anyway.”

“Not me,” said Michael.

Hannigan grinned this time. “Everyone not on the same page?” he said.

Michael said nothing.

“Well,” Hannigan continued, “if this is done, and you bring me back something I can use, then all will be forgiven.”

Michael tried to look closer at the contents of that folder, but they were obscured by Hannigan's right hand, his fingers tapping gently on a photograph. The options just weren't there.

"I accept," said Michael.

Hannigan smiled. "Good."

"But I'm not doing this for the O.S.S."

"The O.S.S. knows nothing about it," said Hannigan.

"What do you mean?" asked Michael, though he'd figured this was an unauthorized assignment. Michael had what he considered a keen self-perception, and though it was true he and his team had a case for being the best the O.S.S. had during the war when it came to retrieval, he believed it wasn't by so wide a margin.

"What do you know about the Harz Mountains?" asked Hannigan, ignoring the question.

Michael decided to let it be as well, keep it in his pocket. "I know they're in the dead center of Germany. Treacherous terrain."

Hannigan raised his eyebrows and nodded.

"I also know they run between the occupation zones."

"That's part of the rub, yes." Hannigan took a map from the folder and handed it to Michael. The map showed the occupation zones, American in red and Russian in green, as well as the areas controlled by the British and the French. "As you know, these lines aren't exactly etched in stone. More like lines in the sand, really. And they've changed nearly every week since the surrender. That marker in the Harz is the facility in question, or as close to its actual location as we could get. German maps of the area do

not all match up. But as of right now, it is on the Russian side of river, so to speak." He pushed the whole folder toward Michael and sat back in his chair and folded his hands. "It wasn't part of the rocket testing labs. There were a few of those in the Harz."

Michael opened the folder and flipped through the contents. There wasn't much than a couple shipping manifests with banal industrial inventories, some transcribed interrogations that were all no more than a paragraph or two, and a series of black and white photographs. Most of the photographs were aerial, looking down on the slope of a steep and craggy mountain where a large block of concrete sat nestled in the earth with antennae sprouting from its top and rising above the high mountain trees.

"Those photographs were taken by U.S. recon planes before the fly zones were settled," said Hannigan. "We have not been able to obtain any German photographs of the place. Some intelligence suggests the facility had a substantial crew, at least sixty, which was a lot for these places. They liked to keep their staffs small and easy to monitor. But we haven't been able to obtain any of them. We fear the Russians may have done so first."

Michael looked closer at the photographs. There was a road leading up the mountain to the mouth of the concrete structure, but down the mountain the road and earth around it had been bombarded and left with large craters and broken trees. Michael looked up at Hannigan. "Looks like we hit this place. Us or the Russians."

Hannigan shook his head. "Neither," he said. "The Germans hit it."

Michael raised an eyebrow.

"They weren't trying to destroy it," said Hannigan. "Just the easiest means of getting to it."

Michael held in the hand the photograph where the bombardment was most clear. "Or getting out of it," he said.

Hannigan shrugged. "They cared a lot for this place," he said. "The contact that Mr. Bordeaux shot cared for it too. She was a chemist assigned there for a month but left just one week before the place was shut down. She was going to tell us everything she knew, and lead us to more. What we did get from her without formal immunity was that Facility 47 was one of the experimental testing facilities. *Not* dedicated to mechanic research. I guess you would say it's a mystery." He tapped nervously on his desk. "A mystery I'm sure the Russians are eager to solve."

"How do you know the Russians haven't gotten there already?"

"They found a rocket lab farther to the east," said Hannigan. "We have three of those. But our intelligence suggests they haven't found this place yet. We would not have either if not for our now-deceased contact."

Michael kept shuffling through the folder. At the bottom of the pile was yet another shipping manifest, but this one was handwritten, not typed and formal like the others. The handwriting was crude but the term "Reich's Reserve" was very legible. It was a term Michael had seen many times before, a term he and his group had searched for in recent months whenever they got a hold of any Germany manifest. Simply put, it meant valuable cargo. Reserve currency, precious metals, diamonds.

Hannigan grinned across the table. "I thought that bit might interest you," he said. "Eichmann liked to store his ill-gotten gains in these kind of facilities. Secure, off the public grid." He leaned forward in his seat. "I only want the intelligence. Research

documents. Any and all that can tell us what the Germans achieved in this place. Any extra material you find is yours."

Michael read the handwritten manifest again and then set it back in the folder underneath the other papers and the photographs. He looked at the top photograph again, at the drab and windowless concrete block jutting out of the harsh slope of the mountainside. The background was dense wilderness stretching back toward the horizon at the top of the frame. Far away from cities or population centers. Michael liked that. He closed the folder and held it in his lap and looked back at Hannigan. "I would have done it just for John," he said.

Hannigan smiled. "Of course you would have." He stood up and extended an open hand across the table. "If I have my way, I will only see you once more before we go about our separate lives."

Michael stood for a moment and hesitated then accepted Hannigan's hand with a smirk. "That would work for me too," he said.

Hannigan released the handshake and sat back down in his chair. "Mind you that if I had my way in its entirety, you would also be shot for treason."

Michael nodded and stepped toward the door. "Try to go fuck yourself while I'm away," he said.

Hannigan chuckled. "And remember, Michael," he said. "I do nothing in this business based on trust alone. I'll give you one week. If you do not return by then, I will track you down and I will bring every single man in your group to a court marshal. And I will push for the greatest penalty we have." His eyes narrowed. "I will make it my life's work. You don't want me chasing you."

Michael stood by the door and looked back at Hannigan and made sure to look him right in the eyes. “I’ll pick that place clean of paper for you,” he said.

Hannigan nodded. “I have a truck you can use with no Army markings on it. Should allow you to roam between affiliations. It’s in a barn about a mile west of town. The location is in your folder, along with some travel papers in you should need them.”

Michael thought twice about accepting the vehicle from Hannigan, but this sounded like a trip that needed extra supplies and a reliable engine. A truck would make things easier. He nodded his acceptance.

“Good then,” said Hannigan. “My people downstairs will take you to Mr. Bordeaux. Let him know how much you care for him.”

Michael clutched the folder in his left hand and opened the door and left Hannigan’s office.

As it turned out he didn’t have to travel far to get to John. They had him in the underground portion of the lumber company building where a secure money room had been converted into a jail cell. The stairs into the basement level were dark and the only light on was the one just outside of John’s cell at the far end where a single light bulb hung down from the wood ceiling suspended by a thin cord.

Michael recognized John’s whistling. The slow tune of “Farmer in the Dell” echoed through the dark and spare hallway and drifted up the stairs. The two men who had accompanied Michael stopped at the stairway. One of them handed him a key and nodded downward.

“There’s a door at the far end past the cell that leads outside,” he said. “Just leave the key in the cell on the table. And be quiet when you leave.” There was no emotion in his words. Just simple instructions.

The other man lifted a shotgun up by the barrel and handed it to Michael. It was John’s weapon. The pewter trigger glinted in the light. “The Colonel said he could have this back,” said the man. “It’s got nothing in the chamber but it’s still in good condition.” He and the other man left back toward the front door of the building and Michael clutched the shotgun and went down the stairs into the dimly lit hallway.

The whistling continued until Michael got close and he saw a metal door on the left flanked by a low wood wall with steel bars extending from its top up to the ceiling. Michael looked through the bars and saw John lying on a plain cot with his legs crossed staring up at the ceiling. There was a large open safe in the far corner of the little room where the light became faint but it was open and clearly empty. A small writing table sat at the right side near the cot and it had some yellow papers scattered on it noting business expenditures long since ceased.

John turned his head and squinted to see who had come. “I told you, I’m fucking hungry,” he said. “I ain’t a P.O.W. There are rules to this.”

Michael smirked. “We’ll get some food as soon we’re outta here,” he said.

John sat up in his bed. “Holy shit,” he said. ‘Mike?”

Michael stuck the key in the door and opened it and walked inside the makeshift cell. “Get up. We’re leaving.”

John turned so that his legs dangled off the side of the bed. “Are you serious? How’s that? You pay them off?”

Michael leaned against the wall near the door and crossed his arms. “Since when do you question how I do what I do?”

John stood up and grinned and reached down and grabbed a small green satchel near the foot of the cot. “Goddamn, you’re my guardian angel,” he said. “I thought this was it. I really did. Big boat back home to a cell in Leavenworth. How did you…”

“What did you do?” asked Michael.

John tried to maintain the grin for a moment but then frowned and shrugged. “I didn’t start anything, Mike,” he said. “I was just lying low, like you said. Went to that basement tavern out by the cargo depot. You remember that one?”

“What did you do?” Michael asked again.

John looked down at the old sawdust on the floor. “Some G.I. tried to cheat me,” he said. “He was sleeving cards, Mike, I swear. All I did was call him on it. He and his buddies took swings at me.”

“Hitting the card tables is not lying low.”

“Yeah, but I’m telling you, they took swings at me. I knocked one of them out and the other jumped me and took my shotgun.” He waved a hand at the weapon that Michael held down by his waist. “They held me there and I offered to buy them out for it but a while later some guys came and brought me here.” He looked up at Michael. “So how’d you hear about it?”

“I told you not to ask how I work my magic,” said Michael.

“I’m a real fuck-up, Mike. I know. I’m trying. I really am. But this is starting to wear on me I think.” He rested his head in his hands. “I know that’s no excuse. I fucked up.”

Michael shook his head grunted and then lifted the shotgun by the barrel and handed it to John. John stared at the weapon for a moment then looked up at John and grinned. He grabbed his shotgun and ran a hand over the barrel and chuckled a bit.

"Where we're going, there won't be card tables," said Michael, trying to force his voice to sound more upbeat. "I got us a job that will put us over the top."

John got a gleam in his eyes but it seemed ignited more by Michael's apparent forgiveness than any new job. He scrambled up off the bed and stood up straight. "What is it?" he asked.

Michael walked out the door and into the hallway underneath the hanging light bulb. John had done it again. That thing where he gave someone all the reason in the world to yell at him, or hit him, or leave him in a dusty cell to rot, and then found some unwitting way to stay the person's hand. Maybe it wasn't so unwitting. Michael had never completely got a read on that. He turned back to John who remained standing in the middle of the cell. "You think I was gonna leave you in there?"

John shrugged and didn't answer right away. "No," he said finally. "No, I didn't think that, Mike."

Michael nodded and tilted his head toward the exit down the hall. "We're out this door," he said. "I'll tell you what you need to know once we have everyone together."

John grabbed his things and the two of them left the basement and went out into the night. They left the outskirts of Straubing and encountered barely anyone on their way out. Only a patrol jeep off to the side of the road where G.I. slept with his feet on the wheel and a helmet over his eyes. A few cats roamed the sidewalks and stone stoops and

their plaintive meows were the only sound until a church bell in the distance marked an early morning hour.

They journeyed to the country house by foot and took the long way over limestone hills and through swathes of tall grass fields that were moist from a brief night rain. Once there, John found a jar of pickled sausages in the pantry inside the house and served it as their lunch and they ate and rested as best they could without saying much to each other. John asked about the dead officer in the Mercedes out front and Michael told him what he knew and it wasn't much. He assured John that he would mention nothing of the arrest to the others.

From there they ventured to the cabin by the Danube, where the group had agreed to meet. It wasn't a cabin so much as a fishing shack with an abandoned canoe tied to a narrow wood pier. Charlie and Ben were already there and Michael figured they were eager for the next move. They sat around a small stove where John prepared a potato soup and Michael cobbled together his pitch as best he could.

"So we aren't leaving?" asked Charlie between aggressive gulps of his soup.

"Well, this is all our call," said Michael.

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "Is it?"

Ben pulled a cigarette from his pack of Camels and lit the tip. He hated the ubiquitous Lucky Strikes and paid a hefty price for those Camels, often buying them from independent sellers operating out the back window of Army supply depots. He said they reminded him of Texas. "You think that's a good idea, Cap'?" he asked.

Michael rested his elbows on his knees and folded his hands together and nodded. He wouldn't let them see him as under anyone else's authority. "Like I said, I found Hannigan and made him an offer."

Charlie shook his head and laughed. "That is some bit of crazy right there," he said.

"You want that bastard's cloud over us the rest of our lives?" Michael snapped.

Charlie shrugged and took another gulp from his bowl of soup.

"Should've run that by us, Cap'," said Ben.

Michael nodded. "Yeah, probably. But I got a bead on where the man was and I made a play. *I* made the play. And I think this works out damn well for us."

"How so?" asked Charlie.

Michael cleared his throat. "Truth is, Hannigan was eager to put all this behind him. He needed something and we needed something."

"What do we need?" asked Ben.

"Come on!" said John. "This is great stuff here. We take a drive up and check this place out and go get ourselves that island. Right? I mean, the war's over, fellas."

"It's in the Russian zone," said Ben.

"For now," said Michael. "But those Harz border are shifting fast. Hannigan just wants to get intel, like we did so many times before. One last assignment to make good. That's all."

Charlie finished his soup and tossed the wood bowl onto a nearby fish-cleaning table. He leaned his chair back and folded his hands behind his head. "And what if we refuse?" he said. "Did he threaten us?"

Michael hesitated and then shrugged. “Not directly,” he said. “But if we leave now we leave short of where we wanted to be. Money can run out fast. Plus maybe Hannigan keeps after us. I just don’t want that cloud over me. Over us.”

Ben leaned forward in his chair. “We’re scared of a cloud?” he asked.

Michael stood up and knocked his chair over in frustration. “Seems like we’re scared of an easy grab at an abandoned lab,” he said. “When would something like this scare us? The place is abandoned, for Christ’s sake.” He set his hands on his hips and looked the others over. “Are you all scared of that?”

They sat in silence for a few moments and the soup began to boil a little above the heat of the cooking fire. Then Charlie eyed Michael and grinned. “No,” he said. “I’m not. How much do you believe is in there?”

Michael smiled. “Could be a hell of a lot,” he said. “Hitler loved to store his best in these kind of places.”

“And they just left it there?” asked Ben.

John leaned forward. “The war ended fast for them,” he said. “I hear they’ve been finding stuff like that all over this fucked-up country.”

Michael took a step across the small room toward Charlie and Ben and stretched his hands out. “Are we really ready to call it quits just yet?” he asked them. “Leave it up there for some Reds to find or some G.I. teenagers to stumble on by accident?” He saw the fire light up in Charlie’s eyes, but he expected that. The little Brit was always a sucker for a new game. The real challenge might be getting him to leave the new wilds of Europe when his was over. But Ben sat stoic for a while and looked over at the fire. It flickered in his eyes as he thought things over.

He nodded and looked up at Michael. “I can do one more go-round,” he said. “Simple snatch job.”

Michael grinned. “Nothing we can’t handle,” he said. He pointed at Charlie. “Is there anything in this whole fucking country we can’t handle?”

Charlie cackled. “The ghost of Adolph Hitler himself would mess his pants at the sight of us,” he said.

Michael pointed over at John. “What say you?” He looked John in the eyes and suggested without words that this was the best way forward from what had happened.

John nodded and grinned. “I’ve never been scared of an empty house,” he said.

Michael clapped his hands. “So that’s it then,” he said. He reached over and picked up his cup of water from a small wood bench and raised it in the air. “To the last European adventure.”

The others nodded and Charlie clapped his hands as well. “We’re going to need toys,” he said.

“Yeah,” said Michael. “You and Ben go see the Greek tomorrow morning and get everything we need. I know you already have your favorites.”

Charlie grinned and lifted the satchel that contained his home-made explosives.

Michael sat down and took a sip from his cup. He watched the bubbles rise in the soup as the fire continued to burn and he quickly lost the feeling of success at getting everyone onboard. Now they had to follow through, and while that had never been a problem for them during the war, it didn’t feel the same this time. He felt someone else pulling strings in his back, guiding him toward a place he wasn’t sure he wanted to go. He’d felt that way before in the war’s waning days, assigned to retrieve and provide

safety to people he'd much sooner see shot. A helpless feeling he thought he'd ridden himself of. And he hated to see it return.

Part Two

Getting There

IV

The North Road

Michael went out into the field to take a piss. A storm had come through in the morning and the grass smelled like rain. For the past couple hours he'd been in the barn with John working on the engine of the beat-up supply truck Hannigan had given them, a twenty-feet-long grey vehicle with a thick vinyl tarp covering the back. They'd tightened old gaskets and checked the wear on the tires and made sure the fuel tank wouldn't leak. Michael needed some fresh air away from the stale smell of rusted tools and decomposed turnips. He walked to a small hill in the grass where a pair of tress stood mangled and stripped of most of their upper branches. Their bark was charred black and no new buds or leaves grew.

Beyond them near the top of the hill, at the end of a trail of churned up soil and scattered metal debris, lay the hulk of a downed Messerschmitt FW-190 fighter plane, the kind the Germans had sent up against the waves of Allied bombers. Its left wing had been blown off and was nowhere to be seen, falling somewhere in the dense expanse of the Black Forest. The nose had only one of the original three propellers still attached and a line of bullets holes snaked down the fuselage to the shattered canopy, through which could be seen the remains of the pilot, his respirator hanging from the chinstraps and his eyes closed. There were .50 caliber holes in his chest, delivered high in the sky during one of dozens of futile battles to fend off the Allied bombers. The man had lived long enough to bring his aircraft to a landing slope, but he didn't survive the final return to Earth.

Michael stepped up to one of the burned trees and relieved himself on the trunk. The afternoon sun brought a golden sheen to the metal husk and the tall grasses that had sprung up through the wreck in the months since its demise. Michael smiled and thought it beautiful, the remains of the defeated being slowly and unceremoniously molded back into the landscape, perhaps to be found hundreds of years hence as the spears and shields of Germanic tribes and Roman legions could also be found buried in this ancient country.

He zipped up his fly and turned around to see a dark grey Kettenkrad come off the main highway in the distance and continue down the dirt road to the barn. From far off Michael could tell it was Ben driving it, his hulking frame leering over the handlebar, while Charlie sat in the back, his tussled black hair bouncing along with the bumps in the road. They'd ridden to see a less-than-clean Army supply officer known as the Greek, who had provided with gear and ordinance since they'd left the O.S.S. He knew of the protection offered German war criminals after the war, and he understood why Michael and his team had left. He could overlook the piracy aspect once some extra American greenbacks were safely in his pocket.

The Kettenkrad came closer. It was a strange-looking vehicle, a hybrid blend of a motorcycle and a small tractor with a single steering wheel ahead of a set of treads under a cargo compartment in the rear. The Wermacht used them as small support vehicles during the war to ferry supplies or men quickly over roads and light off-road terrain or to pull aircraft around airstrips. But since they were hard to maintain and of little use to townspeople, they could now be found abandoned by roadsides all over the country, waiting for new owners.

Ben pulled up near the barn and parked the Kettenkrad by a red silo that stood empty and neglected beside the main building. The vehicle's engine coughed and spat before Ben turned it off. He and Charlie joined the others in the barn and Michael showed them the special compartments in the truck he had installed by cutting away spaces in the truck bed to sink in metal tool chests where they could store weapons and supplies. Ben and Charlie had brought plenty of those. Three wood crates stamped with a U.S. Army eagle, stocked with a pair of scoped M-1 Garand rifles and a pair of the harder-to-find Thompson submachine guns. The Thompsons were well-oiled and looked like they'd never been fired. The crates also contained a few Colt .45 pistols, a healthy serving of C-Rations, a box of shiny new tin canteens, and several carefully wrapped and stored bricks that Michael knew were Charlie's favorite plastic explosive. Special Nobel 808 composite, green plasticine that smelled a lot like almonds. The Brit would accept nothing else.

"What about the deployment maps?" asked Michael.

Charlie looked off to the side and scratched the back on his head. "The Greek didn't have them," he said. "He mentioned them changing quite often. Said those occupation zones up north are changing almost every day. There's a lot of noise about the Harz, Captain. Might be hard to tell who owns what up there."

"Yeah, I know that," said Michael. He'd really wanted those troop deployment maps. He preferred to stay away from large concentration of soldiers whenever possible.

Ben stood with a hand on his left hip. "That a problem, Cap'?" he asked.

Michael shrugged. “We’re persona non grata in every zone,” he said. “Doesn’t make a difference.” He glanced around at the others and they looked as if they expected more. “It’s all under control.”

“And our next stop?” asked Charlie.

“We can make it about a hundred miles up today,” said Michael. “So I’m thinking we can stop in Erschetz. Good food and some rest, right?”

The others seemed content with that idea.

“Then I think we should go see Mr. K.G.B.,” said Michael, referring to a Russian intelligence officer he and John had been in contact with during the war. A named Andrei Petrolov.

“And Mr. K.G.B. is on the way?” asked Charlie.

John shook his head. “I hate that fucking Russian,” he said.

“Is that an objection?” asked Michael.

“No, just a fact.”

“Well, some are immune to the man’s charms,” Michael said with a grin. “And yes, he is on the way. Last I heard he set himself up in a town at the south edge of the Harz. If there’s useful information to be had going in there, he’ll have it. And he owes me one.”

“Owes you one?” balked Charlie.

“This is postwar,” said Michael. “Everybody owes everybody something. But a man needs to collect. A couple stones thrown his way wouldn’t hurt. Besides, you never met the man. If there’s one thing Mr. Andrei Petrolov loves more than Mother Russia, it’s his own damn self.”

John nodded his consent, and Michael took some offense at the notion that John's consent was needed. The others had never met Andrei, so they had no issue with making an information stop. They both just looked ready to get on with the trip. Michael felt the same way.

They all finished loading the supplies and climbed into the truck. The vehicle doors creaked as Michael and John got into the front seats, and Charlie and Ben struggled to balance themselves as the metal truck bed underneath them swayed as they stood atop it. They managed to sit down and Ben pulled the tarp all the way down over the rear.

"Going dark already?" Charlie asked.

"Not too soon," said Ben.

Michael banged on the ceiling of the driver's cabin to get everyone's attention. "Pulling out," he said. "Let's keep her sealed until we get to Erschetz."

He backed the truck out of the barn and into the midday sun, careful to avoid the Kittenkrad abandoned near the roadside wall of tall grass, left there like so many other vehicles with lost owners of a lost war. The Messerschmitt on the hill cast a longer shadow as the sun changed positions in the sky, and several small-winged red birds flew out from behind the steel corpse and glided around the twin trees near the barn and then continued out toward the road, racing ahead of the truck as Michael turned it around and headed the same way. The sounds of those birds were all that greeted them as they pulled onto the road and drove north, and at that moment the German countryside, despite its scars and its littered wartime wrecks, appeared so accepting.

The road became broken and ragged the closer they got to Erschetz. Throughout the midday journey, the northward highway from Munich all the way toward Berlin had been a smooth drive, even with the old and weathered truck. The German highway system had been one of Hitler's grand works before the war started, a massive civic undertaking popularized as a great linkage of the German people, but undertaken primarily as a means of moving troops and supplies quickly through the country when the war finally came. And so the roads that had not been severed by bombardments during the war's waning days were impressive feats of civil engineering, well-paved and easy to traverse.

But it wasn't bombardments that had injured this road they now drove upon. Large chunks of grey asphalt had been carved out and lifted from the road and taken someplace. The removals appeared haphazard. A long rectangular slab taken here. A smaller square chunk removed a dozen yards further up. There was no apparent rhyme or reason to it and it lasted for over half a mile, and the bumps and jolts that shook the truck as Michael drove began to put the others on edge.

"Be better off driving on the grass," said John from the passenger's seat.

"I agree with Mr. Bordeaux, for once," said Charlie from the back as he shoved a cracker into his mouth. "This is not good for one's digestion."

"We're almost there," said Michael. The wood and stone steeple of Ershaetz's large Lutheran church rose up ahead over a slight rise in the earth. The cross atop it remained intact but some of the granite stone that formed the steeple base had been removed and the cross hovered in the air, supported by a skeletal mess of metal rods and wood beams.

Much of the rest of Erschetz appeared in the same state once it came into view. It was a small town, known afar only for a small shop at its center that made elaborate sculptures out of a malleable nut paste called marzipan. Half of the homes that lined the road at the entrance to the town were damaged, but like the road they were not burned or blasted but rather picked apart with their pieces carried off to an unknown place for an unknown reason. Large portions of brick wall were removed and covered with sheets, though not enough to completely hide the tranquil furnishings inside that existed as they would in most other peaceful, intact homes. The stones from chimneys atop the half-werk homes had been dismantled, leaving only makeshift cylinders made from aluminum sheet to funnel smoke from the fireplaces inside. The bases of old stone mailboxes sat out in the overgrown grass in front of other homes. As they drove the truck further into town, they saw that famous marzipan shop. Its front wall had been mostly stripped away and the display shelves inside were empty.

Ben peeked out through a separation between the back tarp and the main truck cabin. He took a drag from a lit cigarette he pinched between his large fingers. “No one around,” he said. “Strange for it being four in the afternoon.”

“There’s some around,” said Michael. He looked ahead and saw a group of people sitting on folding chairs next to the road near an old stone well that now had a mere one-foot-high wall around it. They wore American khaki uniforms that looked clean and pressed and they held Lucky Strike packs in their hands and took drags from their cigarettes that looked almost synchronized. They watched the truck as it rolled toward them, but they didn’t seem bothered by it. They laughed as one of the older ones, an

Italian-looking man with a salt-and-pepper mustache, told a story that needed heavy use of his hands to tell.

Michael drove up to them and stopped and put the truck in park. He had papers ready if anyone asked for them. But none of them looked as if they were going to.

Michael leaned an arm out the window and smiled at the men. “This is Erschetz, correct?” he asked.

The older one, a sergeant, stopped his story and lowered his hands and grinned while the others looked back at Michael with expressions that were suddenly humorless. “Yes, it is,” he said with hint of Brooklyn in his voice. “You new through here?”

Michael shook his head. “Been a while is all,” he said. “Didn’t recognize the place.”

“Been a while?” said the sergeant. He looked hard at Michael for a moment, a strange unsettling stare, then he laughed loudly and the others joined him. “How long ago could you have come through here? Three months ago?” He shook his head. “I guess the place has gotten a bit of a renovation, huh?”

“Yeah, it has,” said Michael as he looked at the half-deconstructed houses and the stripped down storefronts. “We were just coming through looking for something good to eat.”

The sergeant shook his head again. “Well, buddy, you’re better off to keep drivin’. They closed the good eats around here. We’re stuck with the C’s.” He jerked a thumb back toward a pile of Army C-Rations stacked near the well.

John leaned forward in his seat so he could see the sergeant. “Hey, where is everyone?” he asked.

The sergeant leaned back in his chair and held out his hands and shrugged. “How ‘bout it, boys?” he asked the others. “Where did all the Krauts go?” One of them started chuckling and the others joined in.

All except one, a lanky man with a close-cropped haircut who bent his head down then looked up at Michael with a wry smirk on his face. “Are you looking for any particular Kraut?” he asked.

The others stopped laughing and they seemed uncomfortable with the lanky man talking.

Michael shook his head. “No,” he said. “Like I said, we’re just passing through.”

The lanky man nodded and took a drag to finish off his cigarette and flicked the butt into the road near the truck’s front tire. “Well, they’re out at work now,” he said. “About a week ago, some G.I.s found a few mass graves outside of town in the forest.”

“They had a camp here?” asked Michael. Concentration camps were still being found all over Germany, some in remote country and others near quant towns like this one.

The lanky man shook his head. “No,” he said. “The locals said a bunch of trucks stopped here a few years ago and needed gasoline. So the locals gave it to them. Then the Nazis in those trucks thought it would be convenient to unload their cargo out in the forest and put a bunch of bullets in them. Some undesirables from over east. This was a few years ago. They weren’t as worried about wasting bullets then.” The others were quiet while he talked, though the sergeant still wore a slight grin. “Anyway,” said the lanky man. “Captain Miller is in charge out here. He got the idea to build a proper

graveyard with real fancy headstones and a big mausoleum to honor the dead. Figured the locals ought to build it, and figured they ought to build it with their own stuff."

Michael saw an empty wheelbarrow with an inside coated in grey stone dust behind the well near one of the wounded homes. "Seems fair enough, right?" he said.

The lanky man shrugged and didn't smile. "I dunno," he said. "But that's where everyone is. They'll be back in a couple hours if you want to wait around."

Michael studied the lanky man for a few moments and felt something strange about it. Nothing threatening, but a strange knowing in his eyes that Michael found uncomfortable. "I think we're gonna keep heading down the road. Thanks for the information." He put the truck in first gear and got ready to drive.

"Nothing like the information game," said the lanky man. "Lines are changing up in those border zones. Towns trading one flag for another. You keep to the right roads, all right, Captain Powell?"

Michael jerked his head to look at the lanky man, who stared back at him while he took out another Lucky Strike and put it between his lips. But the two men had nothing more to say to one another, and Michael tried to avoid looking shaken by the fact that Hannigan clearly had eyes on the highways. He should never have thought differently, but somehow he had maintained hope that the postwar terrain was still wild enough that it wouldn't be so easy.

He turned his eyes ahead and drove away. The group of Americans continued their previous conversation and in the side-view mirror Michael could see the sergeant moving his hands through the air again as he resumed whatever story he had been telling.

Charlie leaned in close to the driver's cabin. "An old friend?" he asked through the open window to the truck's cargo hold.

John looked over at Michael, also waiting for an answer.

"No," said Michael. "If he wanted to cause trouble for us, he would have. That wasn't one of Hannigan's guys."

"Guy was all O.S.S.," said Ben.

"Only missing a bright sign hanging from his neck," said Charlie.

John turned back to them. "You heard him, yeah?" he said. "Not one of Hannigan's. Guy probably just had a good memory. Not like none of us have had people recognize us before."

That was true. They had been recognized numerous times before. Charlie had a Harvard classmate recognize him in a tavern in Munich while they were scouting out a Nazi jewel merchant. John had gambling buddy from a base in Britain come up to him on train just after the four of them had departed the O.S.S. Americans had flooded into occupied Germany and the world now had a way of feeling a lot smaller than it had during the war.

And Michael was content to let that possibility of chance stay with the others as he drove away from the depleted township of Erschetz. The roads became less ragged and soon smoothed out into flat asphalt again. Suddenly he welcomed the cross into Russian territory. Or territory that had been Russian just a few days ago. The lines were indeed changing quickly out here on these quiet roads. Hopefully his old friend from the K.G.B. was as conscious of that as Michael believed himself to be.

V

Your Own Corner of the World

The winds stopped when they neared Mertz. The town lay in the foothills that rolled along the southern fringes of the Harz Mountains, and the green tree-covered peaks Michael saw in the distance blocked much of the northern winds from reaching this area. Warm air tended to nestle in the small valleys, inside the grooves in the earth between long rocky crags. This made the air mild but somewhat stale, as if it had rested there for ages.

They came to stone bridge that crossed the Sehr River. The waters below were dark and murky in the evening light as they rushed along to the east. The buildings of Mertz stood across the water, a few lit inside but most of them dark with vines growing over their roofs and their outer walls. There were two old iron lamps at the entrance to the bridge, one perched on each of the two posts on either side. They were oil-lit, the flames trapped within old and cracked glass cases. Nailed to the stone post under the left side lamp was a flag, limp in the absence of wind, faded red with the white hammer and sickle visible between wrinkles.

Michael drove onto the bridge, and as the inner roads of Mertz became more visible, he and the others noticed the complete absence of any human activity. The old wood signs that hung outside shops and offices did so without a sound. Some of the buildings were marked by red graffiti, written in Russian that Michael could read, phrases such as "*New Border of the Motherland*" and "*The Nazi Dog Lies Dead Here.*" Russian flags, red banners, and even strips of red clothing were attached to points all around town,

pinned to doors and tied to dark lampposts and wrapped around high chimneys. A few structures further up the road had suffered fires, their charred upper halves opened up like wounds to the valley air. The only living thing that could be seen was an old black dog that trotted out from behind a wood cottage, dragging its back left leg as it walked.

John craned his neck around to get a better look in several directions. “What the hell happened to this place?” he asked.

Charlie and Ben had both peeked in from the truck bed, lowering their heads and squinting their eyes to see ahead through the windshield. “Reds sure put their stamp on this place, didn’t they?” said Charlie.

“The Reds didn’t do this,” said Michael. “This was done by Andrei.”

“And he ain’t a Red?” asked Ben.

Michael watched the dog hobble past as he slowed the pace of the truck. The animal looked up at him, then looked at the truck, studied them all for a moment, then continued down the road, apparently deciding the new visitors weren’t worth his attention. “Andrei is for whatever works in his favor,” Michael said.

“Well where is everyone?” asked Charlie.

“I’m thinking this place livens up some at night,” said Michael, and he slowed the truck even more to get a good look into the smashed window of a dress shop that had been gutted inside, relieved of all its merchandise. “Short days and long nights. That’s the way with Andrei.”

“Got that right,” said John.

Michael grinned. “Johnnie here doesn’t have much of a soft spot for the Russian.”

“I’d say that goes for any Red bastard, eh?” said Charlie.

John shook his head. “Not like this one.”

Ben jutted his head a little further into the driver’s cabin. “What’s with this Red, John?” he asked.

John shook his head again. “I don’t like him.”

A man appeared from behind one of the charred houses. He was tall and thin with a dark brown beard and dark features, likely from the Urals, and around his shoulders he wore a bearskin that draped over his Russian Army green uniform that he’d further modified with German military boots and a pair of ivory handled revolvers that were holstered on either of his hips. On his head he had a German Navy cap with the insignia removed, his scraggly brown hair coming from underneath it to hide one of his eyes. He held a hand up near his face and exposed his palm and Michael heeded the gesture and stopped the truck.

“Might be our welcoming party,” said Michael.

“This our man?” asked Charlie.

Michael shook his head.

“A rather stout looking fellow,” said Charlie. “I admire that about the Reds. Man should watch his guns, in any case.”

Michael leaned toward Charlie but kept his eyes on the approaching Russian. “And you should watch yours,” he said. “You and Ben sit tight in the back.”

Charlie rolled his eyes and he and Ben tucked their heads back out of the driver’s cabin and sat in the shadows of the truck’s rear.

The Russian walked up to the driver's side window and flicked his finger downward, motioning for Michael to lower the glass. Michael did so, and the Russian spoke while looking away down toward the bridge.

"*Your business?*" asked the Russian in his language.

"*My business is with Andrei Petrolov*," Michael replied in kind.

The Russian shook his head and looked Michael in the eyes. "*Then you are in the wrong town, American*," he said.

"*Of course*," said Michael. "*You tell Andrei that Michael Powell is at his door. See what he says.*"

The Russian stood still for a few moments. He looked up the road, the back toward the bridge, then back at Michael. "*You stay parked here*," he said, nodding his head downward. "*And you wait for me. If you do not like that, then you can leave the way you came. But you go no farther.*"

Michael nodded, and the Russian walked away and disappeared around the charred building.

Charlie leaned toward Michael from his spot in the rear. "Reds aren't much for conversation," he said.

John let out a wry chuckle. "Another point where Andrei ain't a normal Red."

"Let's just wait for the word," said Michael.

"You sound confident," said Charlie.

"When does the Captain not sound confident?" said Ben.

Michael looked out through the windshield at the shell of a town that Andrei now occupied, and he debated just how confident he was.

He'd met Andrei Petrolov twice. The first time he alone met the Russian briefly at an information exchange in Norway in 1942, when Andrei was still a junior K.G.B. officer, and they got along well and exchanged some useful intelligence about the way Germans used electronic locking systems. The second time, Michael and John together ran into Andrei in Greece as the Germans were being driven out. Andrei led a KGB strike team much similar to the O.S.S. team Michael had commanded, and had set up shop in a little coastal hamlet south of Athens to do interrogations of captured German officers.

There was a Greek country house the Russians occupied and behind it was a goat pen with a swinging door where Andrei would carry out his interrogations. In the house he would often treat the Germans to lunch with local cheeses and hard breads and some lowland wine accompanied by a heavy dose of conversation from the ebullient Russian. Michael and John ate there with them one summer day in 1943, and a young blonde German lieutenant left the table smiling with a full belly and walked with Andrei out to the goat pen with Andrei laughing and patting him on the back. They were in the pen for an hour, more than half of that comprised of screaming. Andrei came back out wearing the same smile he'd gone in with, and he went over to a well pump to clean as much blood from his hands and pant legs as he could. The young German lieutenant never came out.

Andrei then supplied Michael and John with more good wine and excellent information and arranged a convenient ship across the Adriatic to American-held territory in Italy where Ben and Charlie waited to rejoin him. But on his way out, Michael learned that a Greek resistance group planned to ambush the country house. The Greeks enjoyed neither the Germans nor the Russian being in their country, nor the Americans for that

matter. And the local representative of the K.G.B. had acquired quite the reputation amongst the locals. Michael informed Andrei of the attack by phone and Andrei was ready for it. As Michael heard it told in a personal communiqué sent to him a month later, the few Greeks guerillas unlucky enough to be caught alive took a very long time to die. And that was the last time Michael heard from Andrei.

And eventually, through some exercise in influence, Andrei Petrolov had ended up here.

The Russian guard appeared again from around the charred house, taking a short drag from a cigarette and flicking the butt out onto the road. He strolled up to Michael's window and scratched his beard.

"*You can get out*," he said. "*We will search the truck.*"

Michael shook his head. "*Go see if Andrei wants to search the truck that badly. And we're bringing our side arms."*

The guard stared Michael down for a few moments, his hands folded behind his back. Michael kept his right hand close to the .45 he had situated just beside the seat and waited.

"*Follow me*," said the guard, turning away from the truck.

"*Two of my men are staying here*," said Michael.

The guard looked back into the truck, his hard eyes betraying a mild surprise that there were that many men inside. But he drifted his gaze back to Michael, stared him down for another moment, and nodded. He adjusted the bearskin on his shoulders and walked over to the corner of the charred building where he waited.

"Ben and I are mothering the truck while you're gone, I suppose?" said Charlie.

“He’s never met you,” said Michael. “Andrei can be somewhat skittish. That a problem?”

“Not with me, Cap’,” said Ben. “Whatever gets us out of here faster.”

“Night’s coming quickly,” said Charlie. “We’re not camping here?”

John shook his head, looking out the window at the gutted dress shop.

Michael noted his opinion and grinned. “We’ll see,” he said.

He opened his door and climbed out onto the cobblestone road and looked around. The dog had stopped down near the bridge, where it was backlit by the fire of the oil lamps. It took a few steps toward the bridge, sniffed the air, and then turned around and headed back into town, shrouded by the evening shadows cast by the buildings and trees.

John got out of the truck as well and lifted his legs up one at a time to stretch them as Michael tucked the .45 into his pants at the small of his back. The Russian didn’t look at either of them as he waited. He just slid another thin cigarette from his shirt pocket and stuck it in his lips while he pulled out a paper matchbook. He lit the cigarette and tossed the match out onto the road where its flame lived on for a while longer before dying. Michael and John walked toward him and he turned and went around the corner of the charred house to the left without saying anything. They followed him.

There were people on this new road. A pair of old men sat at a small wood table near what looked to be an old two-story building, the bottom floor a darkened shoe repair shop and the upper floor illuminated by a light that glowed behind a lone window. The men did not appear to be in conversation. They sat on low chairs, both facing the road, and their gazes toward Michael and John and the Russian spoke to no discernible emotion. They just watched, eyes straining some in the dark of the coming night.

A few of the buildings down the road, mostly homes from the look of their build, had lights on. They weren't electric though. The inside lights ebbed and bloomed with an inconsistent power that suggested candles. Michael looked up at a high window to his right and saw the candlelit figure of a woman who stood still with her hands clasped down at her waist and he could tell she was looking down at him. She didn't move. She stayed there without life, much like the men at the table, and once Michael and the others had passed her home she closed the blinds and extinguished the candle. Michael turned to his left in time to see a dark splatter stain on a stone wall, roughly at the head level of a full-grown man, left there to dry at least a few weeks before, with blackish crimson tendrils that reached all the way to the ground where they gathered into another dry and soiled pool. There was no other sign of whoever had left the mess there.

"I don't want to be walked across the whole damn town by this guy," said John.

Michael nodded. "How much farther?" he said to the Russian.

The Russian said nothing. He walked on past another two buildings, and then abruptly stopped in front of a big display window that looked out onto the road. Dust had collected on the inside of the glass and on a cherry wood counter that served as the display. Small paper signs lay across the counter, some tipped over, and they had German cake names written on them in black calligraphy. But the pastries that had once welcomed those who passed this place were all gone. The Russian took a step back and nodded toward the door. Michael opened it and went inside.

In the large room there were other usual trappings of a bakery to go along with the empty cake display at the window. A big mixing bowl sat on a long thin table behind a sales counter where wooden trays lay barren, devoid of the muffins and breads and

scones that would likely have adorned them if the store were active. But there was something dishonest about the place. The counter seemed to have been brought in from outside, with fairly recent scuff marks on the wood floor where it had been dragged across. In fact, the trays and the mixing bowl were the only real markers of a pastry shop, save for a few empty flour sacks piled in the back right corner. On the wall near the bowl a broken water pipe protruded out a few inches, and there was a mark on the counter where it seemed a four-port beer tap might have once been installed. Painted engravings were posted high on the walls and they surrounded the room except at random places where they'd been removed for whatever reason. A wide and open cupboard also sat behind the counter, the sort of which you'd find clean beer steins waiting to be filled. Across the room at least a dozen chairs were stacked against the wall, collecting dust. This place had only recently become a cake shop, if it ever truly was.

Noise came from below their feet. Muffled talk and a hum of music and occasional bouts of laughter. At the back left corner of the room was a heavy door with a red 'X' painted on it in two broad slashes. The Russian guard pushed past Michael and went to open it, and when he did the sounds of conversation and a joy that clashed violently with the air outside came spilling out into the false shop. A passageway lit by a flickering torch led down into an underground space.

"*They tried to make it look like a store for cakes*," said the guard.

Michael was surprised that he spoke. "*Who did?*"

"*The Germans,*" replied the guard. "*They are sometimes smart.*"

Michael nodded and looked back at John, who had his eyes on the guard. Letting his nose fill with stale air coming from below, Michael composed himself and walked into the passageway.

It was a cellar, a very large underground chamber with old wood floors, a square central space, and a small table room carved into the far side. Torches stuck out from the walls, some with small red flags or pieces of red cloth tied to them. All were lit and their flames illuminated the fringes of the room and left the middle a mix of dancing light and shadow. On the right side was a long and plain wood counter with wine casks stacked at its far end, some with moldy casing but other looking brand new. There were crates stacked along the left wall, large unmarked containers that could have carried anything, but a few were open and looked to have empty boxes and cartridges and replacement rifle stocks. Grey drums of gasoline sat in the far left corner, one of them tapped with a plastic hose that lay dry on the wood floor. It was a place originally meant to hide things, likely from those who now owned them.

A pair of bench tables took up the center of the room, and a dozen Russians, most wearing their military garments, sat watching a very short man with a shaved head and several missing teeth play an accordion by a stone fireplace near the entrance to the room. They ate handfuls of hard-looking bread and drank from pewter steins. One man splashed some wine at the amateur musician as he attempted to play, and another splashed in the direction of an upright figure on the other side of the fireplace. It was a wood mannequin, a store display wearing a tattered German officer's ceremonial coat with an Iron Cross commendation medal draped around its neck and its original head removed and replaced with a boiled and polished white skull topped by a German Wermacht helmet.

A few women wearing unclean dresses and forced smiles sat on the benches with these Russians, and to Michael's right he saw a narrow passage to small hallway partially hidden by a red wool sheet that served as a curtain. The sounds of sex came from back there and created a sickening mix with the bad accordion music. A half-naked girl, her cheeks pink and her eyes sullen and wary, peeked out from this low and dark hallway, looked out at Michael, but she didn't regard him as anyone special. No one in the room did, except one.

A tall man of strong build came from the little table in the wall across the room, his hair a tousled black mess that contrasted with his finely trimmed goatee and a smile much whiter and broader than any of the other Russians. He wore his green Soviet uniform with a grey German overcoat, and he stopped outside his little wall enclave and clapped his hands together.

Michael turned to John. "Just take a seat for a while," he said.

John looked around the room and pretended to ignore the approaching Russian. "Why?" he asked. "You talking alone?"

Michael turned his head to look John in the eyes. "It's fine," he told him. "Just keep an eye on the place, yeah?"

John shook his head and pulled out a tall wood stool from the makeshift bar and sat down. The guard leaned against the bar next to him, and the two of them remained there, joined by mutual quiet, as Michael went to greet the Russian grinning at him from across the room.

Andrei Petrolov shook his head. “To think that in such a war,” he said in English, “two men like us survive.” He put his hands on Michael’s shoulders. “And to think that after such a war is won, two men like us find each other again.”

“I stood much less of a chance than you,” said Michael.

Andrei smiled. “Surely true. Welcome to Mertz.” He kept a hand on Michael’s left shoulder and guided him over to the round dark wood table in the carved out enclave. “I apologize for the waiting time,” he said. “You were treated well by Vasily?”

Michael glanced back at the Russian guard who stood near John by the bar. “He was hospitable.”

“Well, you know, you have – what are they? – bulldogs? Well, Vasily here, my bulldog. Not the best, eh, conversation person, but he is a good man to have.”

Michael nodded. “I don’t doubt it.”

Andrei waved a hand toward one of the small chairs at the table. “Sit, please.”

Michael sat down and Andrei came around to the other side, near the wall, and sat as well. Michael put both his hands on the tabletop and tried to look comfortable. “So how are you, Andrei?” he asked.

“Enjoying the peace,” Andrei replied. He let out a loud laugh that echoed throughout the basement, catching Michael a bit off-guard. “I trust you do the same?”

Michael shook his head and grinned. “I haven’t really gotten to the peace yet.”

“It is hard, yes?” said Andrei. “For men like us. Fighting men. Our only hope? To carve out our little corner of the world.” He picked a few chestnuts from a small wood bowl and tossed them into his mouth. "To call it ours.”

“I am trying that,” said Michael. “Exactly that.”

Andrei raised a finger in the air and his eyes narrowed on Michael, though he kept the smile. “But,” he said, “It is easier to accomplish this if you have that mighty flag above your head. Yes? A man without a flag is a dangerous sort of man to be.” He leaned forward and folded his hands on the table. “So, Michael Powell. Where is your flag?”

Michael looked down at the table. He should have assumed Andrei of his current status with regards to the American military. “We had to part ways for a while,” he said.

“Had to?” said Andrei.

“Yes.”

Andrei chuckled. “Differences were, um, irreconcilable?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“I could,” said Andrei. He stretched out his arms, gesturing at the entirety of the cellar. “Well, then what brings you here?”

The accordion music grew louder behind and Michael leaned forward over the table. He looked up at Andrei, right into his eyes. “What do you know about the German X-Facilities?”

Andrei’s smile got a little broader. “I know much about these places,” he said. “But how much of what I know is true and how much is not, is difficult to say.”

“What about Facility 47?”

Andrei’s jovial expression remained the same, but he paused a moment before answering. “What would a man without a flag want with such a place?”

“So you know of it?”

“Of course I do,” said Andrei. “You are at the gateway to the Harz. And everyone in the Harz knows about Facility number 47, or believes they do.”

Michael leaned forward even more in his chair. Torchlight flickered against one side of his side and the other was left in shadow. “What is it? What is Facility 47?”

Andrei shrugged. “One of the German laboratories. X-Facilities, like you call them. There are a few others in the Harz, mostly for the rocket testing, but this was not one of those.”

“So what is it?” Michael pressed.

“What it was, or what it was rumored to be?”

Michael had to grin at the Russian’s evasiveness. He sensed Andrei’s apprehension, so he reached into the jacket pocket where he had placed a single one-carat diamond. He pulled it out and placed it in the middle of the table where it glinted gold in the torchlight. “A bit of thanks. On top of the owed favor from Greece.”

Andrei nudged the diamond with his finger and smiled but left it on the table for the time being. “So many favors owed in times like these,” he said. He ate a few more chestnuts. “This facility, I believe it was built not to create something, like the rockets, but to find something. The mountain, these Germans believe it has some, uh, special powers.” He smirked. “They have legends of witches and devils and such things. They say the mountain, it makes you not like you. It does things to you.”

“The mountain?” said Michael. “And you believe that?”

Andrei shrugged and opened his palms on the table. The light from the torches bathed his face in gold and shadow, and it caught all the marks of years of fighting, years Michael believed the Russian truly hoped were over. “I am a simple man, Michael,” said Andrei. “A child of the Urals. The town I grew up, much like this one. Not as nice as this, but…” He picked up a silver-handled dinner knife and scratched the surface of the wood

table. “We had legends there too. Giant demon bears in the forest that ate bad little boys, boys who stole bread and defied their parents. Our parents told us this, about a boy named Uri, long ago, who was eaten by them. And as boys we believed this.

“As I grew older, I doubted there was ever a boy named Uri who was eaten by giant devil bears. But I never went too far into the forest. It was a very dangerous forest, maybe not because of giant bears, but that was beside the point. These stories, they may not be true. But they are there for a reason.”

Michael leaned even further over the table and clasped his hands tightly together. “I need to get there,” he said.

Andrei sat back in his chair. He shook his head and scratched his chin. “They were doing experiments there,” he said. “The Germans. I do not know what they were for, but people went there and did not come back.” He grinned. “It may be too late for you, anyway.”

“Why would it be too late?” asked Michael.

Andrei forward, leaned so that only a few feet separated their faces. “Are we friends, Michael?” he asked. “This war, it is over, and our nations may collide before winter. I know this. But do you call yourself my friend?”

Michael thought for a moment and gave a slight nod. “We help each other,” he said. “I guess that makes us friends.”

Andrei smiled. “A Russian team was sent to this Facility 47 two weeks ago,” he said.

“You could have started with that before your bear story,” Michael grumbled, pushing back from the table.

“From what I know, they did not come back,” said Andrei. He stared at Michael for a while, tried to read him. “Let me propose something to you. You were very good at finding things. Destroying things for your flag, yes?”

Michael nodded. It was the simplest answer he could give.

“Perhaps…” Andrei considered his words for a moment. “Perhaps this new way of things does not suit you. This running around, no flag to call your own. Why do you need this place? Find a town like this one. Make your own little corner of the world.”

“I intend to,” said Michael. Hannigan’s one-week deadline pushed to the front of his mind. He felt the other Russians watching him as they enjoyed the twisted bacchanalia, keeping tabs on him while he stood inside their strange sanctuary. Eyes watching him from both close by and far away. “But I need to get there soon. Whatever’s there, it’s got to be valuable, yes?”

“For some people, it must be,” said Andrei. “I believe a lot of people have died for it. Valuable for you?” He shrugged. “I cannot say.”

Michael knew that even though he faced away from the torches, Andrei could see the fire in his eyes. The involuntary excitement at the risk of it, and of course the potential reward. And as much as Andrei talked about enjoying the peace and finding his own pathetic little corner of the world to treat like a fiefdom, he knew the Russian appreciated that hunger. He’d possessed it in Norway. He’d possessed it in Greece. And Michael was sure he possessed it now, though perhaps he had some form of control over it, a decreased interest after those standing in his way had dwindled from millions to perhaps a few dozen in a dead quiet hole of a town in the middle of a conquered country.

Andrei tapped his fingers on the table. “The pass is the fastest way,” he said. “It runs to the north of here all the way to a steep gorge, beyond which, so I hear, you can find this mountain. There are less patrols the deeper you get, Russian and American, but there may be Werewolves.”

“Werewolves?” said Michael.

“German resistance,” replied Andrei. He smiled. “Some are stubborn to the last.”

“I know what they are,” said Michael. “They’re another one of your legends. Used by both our peoples to round up whoever they want for whatever reason.”

Andrei didn’t respond. He just kept smiling, and picked the diamond up from the table and pinched it between two large fingers.

“Well, I do thank you, Andrei,” Michael said. He got up from the table and took a step back toward the open area of the cellar, where the bald soldier continued to try his best at the accordion while the others continued to laugh at him. John was still at the bar, scanning the room with Vasily at his side, both saying nothing. Before Michael went to him, he turned back to Andrei. “So we are friends, then,” he said.

Andrei nodded. “We help each other out.”

“How long did you expect you could keep this up?” asked Michael.

“Keep what up?” said Andrei.

Michael waved a hand out at the commotion. “All this. I won’t judge you, Andrei. It was a long war for you and yours. I know that. But this…” He shook his head. “You think they’ll just let you keep it?”

“The war is won,” said Andrei. “It is a new world, Michael. You select your place in it, and force the world to accept you.”

“It’ll change again,” said Michael.

Andrei opened his hands and shrugged. “If you are strong enough, you’ll find a way to change with it. These Germans did not. And now I am here.”

Michael nodded. He looked over at John, who responded with a stare that made it clear how badly he wanted to get out of there. Michael nodded at him and walked back to the table. He placed his hands on the wood and loomed over Andrei, bringing his shadow over the Russian. “The borders are shifting again,” he said. “I couldn’t get a hold of the maps, but I’m thinking they are likely going to change in this area.” He looked down hard at Andrei and saw a glint of the torchlight in the Russian’s eyes. “Make sure your flag is keeping you informed.”

Andrei didn’t say anything. He kept the smile, but in his eyes he sank. Michael turned and began walking back to John. Andrei stood up at the table behind him.

“When is this?” Andrei asked.

“I don’t know,” said Michael.

Andrei nodded. “You may stay in Mertz tonight,” he said, straining to sound jovial again. “The roads into the pass are dangerous at night. Trust me with this, but it is up to you.” He paused, and stood up straight and squared his shoulders, looking more like a soldier there in the torchlight than Michael had ever seen him. “And I thank you as well,” he said.

Michael tried to think of something to say, but he couldn’t, and simply nodded. He went to John and patted him on the shoulder. “Let’s go,” he said.

“We’re not staying here, are we?” asked John.

Michael looked at Vasily, who stood still, his eyes cast slightly downward as he quietly waited for someone to give him orders again.

"Not in here," said Michael. "In the truck. And then we're going double-time to the facility. It seems we may have been beaten to the punch."

John's expression seemed almost begging, though he didn't speak. One of the German women, stocky and surely younger than she looked, appeared across the room from behind the red sheet and a Russian shouted at her and pushed her back into those dimly lit rooms and struck her with a piece of wood.

Michael patted John's shoulder again and grinned, trying to reassure his friend. "It'll be all right," he said. "I'm thinking we shouldn't try the pass at night if we can avoid it."

"I'd rather take my chances with the pass," said John.

Michael saw Andrei sit back at the table and rest his chin on one of his fists. The Russian stared at the wall, lost in his own head, and before long he seemed like a statue or a piece of furniture carved to fit only this place.

"Yeah," Michael said to John. "I hear you. But we stay tonight."

When they got back outside the night had descended completely. As they walked back the way they came, they noticed Vasily following, staying a good ten yards or so behind them. Everyone else had gone inside since then. The old men at the outdoor table were gone, and the woman's blinds up on that second floor of that house were still closed. Torches had been lit though, by whom Michael did not know. They were lit at the street corners all the way to the end of town, and when Michael and John made the turn

around the charred house they saw that they extended down to the bridge as well. The town looked nicer at night, its scars mostly hidden and the roads marked by quiet light.

Two Russians stood near the truck. But before he got too nervous, Michael saw that Charlie and Ben were out with them, sitting on the back of the truck and chatting with the new rulers of Mertz. Charlie, who knew some Russian, finished what sounded like a dirty joke, and the Russians laughed loudly while Ben, who didn't speak much Russian at all, grinned just to join in.

"The Captain returns!" Charlie shouted, raising a hand into the air. "Captain, these boys were in Greece in '43! In Amarros. Same as you, correct?"

Michael nodded. "That's right," he said. He and John walked up to the little conversation circle and stood between the Russians and the truck. The Russians looked young, mid-twenties at the most, one with a patch covering a lost eye and the other with a scar running from his temple to his ear.

"These Reds don't believe in the A-Bomb," said Charlie. "I know, it's absurd, but they think we made it all up in Hollywood. Thick-headed people, but tough. Very tough. I respect that. I merely suggest that they respect American technological power in the same manner."

Ben shook his head at the way Charlie tended to eventually end up in conversations with himself. He turned to Michael. "How'd it go?" he asked, tipping his end of the truck a little underneath his weight.

John looked at Michael, curious as well.

Michael rubbed his hands together. “Got some info on where we’re going,” he said, glancing at the Russians. “The rest I’ll get into later, but we’re camping here tonight.”

“You see?” said Charlie, grinning and elbowing Ben in his side. “I knew this was a right place to lay our heads.”

“We’re sleeping in the truck,” Michael added.

Charlie’s grin vanished. “In the blasted truck? Seems there has got to plenty of beds in this place.”

Michael shook his head and stared hard at Charlie, hoping he didn’t need to explain further.

Charlie nodded. “Right, well, I’ve got the front of the bed,” he said, lifting his feet into the truck. “And the good blanket.” He titled his head at each other Russians. “*Gentleman, I bid you goodnight*,” he said in their tongue. “And to the rest of you, I’ll oblige you to keep your snoring to a minimum.”

The Russians tossed their cigarettes out onto the road and walked back up the road. Michael looked down at the bridge, beyond which he saw only night and the dark silhouettes of trees. “I’m going to bring the truck down near the bridge,” he said. He got into the driver’s seat and started the engine and the noise of it bellowed loudly in the quiet of the night. John got into the front seat beside him as Michael drove down the road to the entrance to the bride.

“I don’t think we should stay here,” said John.

“What the hell are you so afraid of?” Michael snapped. “A bunch of stumbling Russians?” He turned to the right and brought the truck to a stop along road that ran alongside the river at the town’s edge.

“I just think maybe we should cover more ground tonight,” said John.

Michael put the truck in park and looked over at him. “Maybe you should shut up,” he said. He turned the engine off. “You sleeping here or in the back?”

John didn’t say anything.

“Good,” said Michael. “Stoic for once in your fucking life.” He opened the door and climbed out. “I’m laying down in back. You’re on point up here. Keep watch for four hours then Ben’ll come up.” He closed the door and went around to the rear and climbed in with Charlie and Ben. It was dark but some light from a nearby torch helped him see. Ben was sitting up, polishing one of the .38 pistols they’d packed that he seemed so fond of. Charlie was already lying down and covering his face with one of the small Army-issue olive green blankets.

“Captain’s going to lay his head with us rear jockeys,” said Charlie, his voice muffled some underneath the blanket.

“Always got to say something,” said Ben.

Charlie laughed.

Michael climbed in with them and found a narrow space next to Charlie to lie down. “Ben, you’re on point up front in four,” he said. “Try and get some sleep.”

“All right, Cap,” said Ben, his voice a gentle whisper.

With the tarp closed it was impossible to see. Charlie again found some way to fall right to sleep, his breathing slow and heavy but short of a snore. Michael dosed off to

the sounds of metal clinking against metal, the low and sharp chorus of Ben prepping his weapon in the dark.

"Cap'."

Michael opened his eyes at the word, but it was still dark and he couldn't see.

"Cap', wake up," said Ben in a whisper, poking Michael in the side with a finger. "There's something."

Michael kept his eyes open and focused his hearing, but he stayed on the floor of the truck. "What is it?" he asked.

"I dunno," said Ben. "Across the river. The frogs stopped making noise." He paused. "Maybe something else. Close."

Michael sat up.

"Careful, Captain," said Charlie, still lying down beside him. "I think our boy might be right."

"I am," said Ben.

Michael scooted to the back of the truck, and with one hand he grabbed the left side of the tarp and gently pulled it away.

The first thing he saw was the barrel of a Luger, glinting in the torchlight. Behind it with his fingers tight on the grip with a thumb at the cock-ready stood Andrei, flanked by two more Russians holding German MP-40 submachine guns. Michael froze.

"You crossed me," said Andrei, the usual smile gone from his face, his eyes alert and focused and angry and perhaps a little bit scared.

Michael shook his head. "I didn't," he said in a low voice.

Andrei glanced across the river and then looked back at Michael and cocked the pistol.

"Why would I have warned you then?" asked Michael.

Andrei remained still. "Then you knew they would come."

Michael felt Charlie moving behind him and he gave him a silent kick in the leg to let him know to stop, keeping his eyes on Andrei as he did so. "I didn't," he said. "I don't even know who's out there."

"Americans," said Andrei. "Like you."

"Not like me," said Michael. "You must have been burned. Andrei, if I were your people, I would have burned you."

Andrei said nothing.

"Andrei, look at me," said Michael. "They probably want me too."

Andrei kept the Luger trainer on Michael's face for a few more moments. The two men with him looked out across the river and strained to see something without success. Charlie and Ben kept still in the back and Michael heard nothing from John up front. He just hoped John stayed quiet and in his seat.

A smile then crossed Andrei's face, as if greeting Michael again, and he lowered the Luger to his hip. "Then get out of here," he said. The other Russians seemed surprised at this, and one of them looked angry.

Michael let his muscles relax a little and he sat up straight. "You're staying?" he asked.

Andrei nodded, keeping the smile. "To defend what is mine," he said in a whisper. Then he made a turn back toward town and walked a few paces and waved the

Russians to follow him. He raised the Luger in the air and when he spoke again he did so loud enough so that anyone waiting in the dark across the river could surely hear it. "*Back to the fort, my friends!*" he shouted in Russian. "*They will find me there in the street, waiting for them!*" He fired the Luger, two shots sent straight into the night sky, and he turned back to the river and shouted in English, "Come down into the streets with Andrei Ivyllich Petrolov!" He fired another shot and then went with his men back up the road, guided by the torches.

Across the river, perhaps a hundred yards away, Michael heard the ignition of a very large engine. A faint snapping of branches sounded a little closer, followed by another engine farther down the river to the right, but this seemed already across the water on the west fringe of town. Michael climbed out the back of the truck and grabbed his .45 in its holster that he'd set by one of the supply compartments and attached them to his belt.

Charlie opened a container and pulled out one of the scoped M-1s. "Shall we play, Captain?" he asked.

Michael made sure the holster was tied on his belt. "Not tonight," he said. He went around to the driver's seat and got inside. John sat with the pistol in his lap and his eyes turned toward the river. "You didn't fall asleep, did you?" Michael asked him.

John ignored him and cocked the pistol. "Let's get the fuck out of here," he said.

Michael started the truck and backed it up to the bridge where he turned it north into town. As he did so, three flares went up from across the river, bright red orbs that floated in the sky, casting their hue over the rooftops of Mertz. In the rearview mirror, an American Army half-track rolled out from the trees, its armor glinting with a mix of red

flare and golden torchlight. A loudspeaker came alive on the vehicle and a steady voice speaking American-accented Russian bellowed over the water.

"*Attention!*" said the voice. "*Attention! This is United States Military. This operation has been approved by the head Commisar of the Soviet Army.*"

Michael stepped on the gas and drove up the road, and in the mirror he saw a line of men hustling across the bridge wearing U.S. olive drab and carrying M-1 rifles and Thompson submachine guns.

"*Andrei Petrolov and all associates are to lay down their weapons and accept United States occupation of the township of Mertz.*"

The half-track rolled forward onto the bridge, its top-mounted .50 caliber machine gun scanning streets and darkened alleyways.

Michael brought the truck to the corner with the charred house. A pair of Andrei's Russians, one of them the man with eye-patch Charlie had joked with earlier, huddled at the edge of the house, armed with German weapons, and peeked around the corner at the Americans that spilled across the bridge and into town. Michael took another look in the mirror. There had to be at least twenty G.I.s plus the half-track. And that was just the number coming in over the bridge. They'd surely arranged other angles of approach. Another flare went up. Andrei's time as overlord of Mertz was over. Now the Russian had to decide whether or not to accept it.

"Which way, Mike?" asked John.

Michael looked to the left, toward the false cake shop that covered Andrei's underground throne room. A half dozen more Russians milled around outside the door, tipping tables in the street and stacking wood planks and cement bricks around them to

create modest barricades. He couldn't see Andrei. He might have gone underground to hide, but Michael doubted it. If there were to be a fight, Andrei would be on the street to meet it on his terms.

"We're going right," said Michael. He turned the truck to the right.

"There a road north that way?" asked John.

"I saw a couple on the map," said Michael as he drove them away from the Russians preparing their defense. The road ahead had torches for only a block and there were three more blocks before they reached the turn that led north out of town. Behind them the first gunshots rang out. Rapid fire, probably from one of the German MP-40s. Michael accelerated, but as the truck passed the last of the torches a small tree that marked the entry to a wide alleyway between two houses, straight ahead where the road ended, shook violently and crashed onto the street. A half-track roared out of the alleyway and several dark figures scurried out onto the sidewalk on both sides.

"Shit!" exclaimed Michael. He slammed his foot hard on the brake and the truck groaned. He swerved to the left and circled back the way they came, nearly hitting a brick house with the back of the truck, and as he began driving down the road toward the Russian barricades a pair of muzzle flashes bloomed behind them near the new half-track. The first bullet flew just above the driver's side mirror, and the other struck the rear cover and exited through the top tarp.

"Goddamn!" Charlie shouted from the back. "I believe I felt that one! Going to give them something in return."

"Do not do that!" shouted Michael. He kept driving past the charred house where the Russian with the eye-patch fired his weapon down toward the bridge, and as he

passed the false cake shop he saw Andrei directing his men and gripping an old custom-made hunting rifle. Michael felt Andrei watching the truck as they drove by, but he kept his eyes forward and found a right turn up ahead that should lead north.

Around that bend, from behind a corner store with a shattered wall, yet another American half-track rolled into the street. Its machinegun swiveled first toward the Russians, but then set its sights on the truck.

"Jesus Christ!" shouted John.

Michael slammed on the brakes again, and this time he put the truck in reverse instead of trying to turn. He backed them up all the way to Andrei's makeshift fortifications, a portion of which the Russians had now set ablaze. Using John's side mirror, Michael saw a wide alley across the street from the false cake shop and he backed them into it. The machinegun on this new half-track let loose a volley and one of the rounds smashed through the truck's windshield and barely missed Michael's left ear. He backed up some more and hit the side of a building. A female voice screamed from above.

"Charlie!" he shouted. "Ben! Is there a way out if I back up?"

"It's a ditch, Cap'," Ben shouted back. "Just a ditch if you keep going!"

In the street Russians ducked behind the burning barricades that flanked the entrance to Andrei's headquarters. They fired down the road in both directions. The Americans fired back. One of the Russians got hit in the neck and fell back onto the street and kicked and slapped the ground with one hand as blood spurted from his wound. Andrei stood by the door. He raised his hunting rifle, waited a few moments while he lined up a shot, and fired.

“There’s no way out back here!” shouted Charlie. “You won’t drive out of that ditch.”

They were trapped if they stayed with the truck. Michael put it in the park and grabbed his .45. “Everybody out!” he said. He opened his door but it wouldn’t open all the way before it hit the building beside it. He squeezed out and instructively ducked while a few more machinegun rounds struck the brick above him and sent a rain of debris onto his hair. One of the windows broke upstairs, and a pistol cracked. A woman shouted in German and her next shot hit one of the Russians in the shoulder and he lost his balance and fell into the burning barricade. He jumped away, clutching his shoulder, but the flames had already caught his clothes and he stumbled a few paces with fire climbing his back until a bullet from the Americans caught him in the chest. He dropped to his knees and fell back onto his heels and slumped over into a burning pile.

Michael found himself frozen for a moment as he watched the Russian die, but he snapped out of it. He turned to the others who were huddled behind him in the alley behind the truck. “Get everything out,” he said. They looked at him, puzzled, and didn’t move right away. “I said get everything you can out of the truck now!”

Ben nodded and tore the tarp from the back of the truck and tossed it on the ground. He climbed in and grabbed two packs, one in each hand, and tossed them to John and Charlie. He then got Michael’s and tossed it out to him as well.

Charlie got his arms through the straps of his bag and gestured for more. “Where are my babies?” he said.

Ben grimaced and opened up the storage compartments and tossed Charlie's special sack to him, as well as the Thompson. He gave the other Thompson to Michael, and he took the pair of scoped M-1s for himself and John.

Gunfire continued to rage in the street. Russians shouted and civilians screamed from the top floors of their homes and the Americans down either end appeared to have settled into position as their fire ceased getting closer for the time being.

Michael tucked the .45 into his belt and armed the Thompson. "All right, let's get the fuck out of here."

"We're on foot now?" said John.

"What the fuck do you think?" Michael snapped. "Ben, what in God's name are you doing in there? Let's go!"

Ben rummaged around more in the supply compartments and emerged with a bag of flashlight batteries and hopped down from the truck. Behind him, by the barricades, one of the Russians ducking for cover shouted something in their direction, but Michael couldn't make out what it was. Then the Russian aimed his pistol at him and emptied the clip.

"Down!" Michael cried. The bullets missed, sending plumes of powdered brick out from the wall.

"Oh, the Reds are playing now!" shouted Charlie, slinging the Thompson over his shoulder and opening his special sack.

Michael rushed past him, running low to the ground, and he slapped Ben and John on their arms for them to follow him. "Charlie, come on!" he shouted. He ran into the ditch, beyond which was a large pond, not quite a lake, that shimmered in both pale blue

moonlight and the hellish red glow of another American flare fired up over town. John and Ben hustled into the ditch alongside him but when he looked back Charlie was still standing near the truck, screaming in the direction of the street.

"Charlie!" Michael shouted.

Charlie had one of his personally designed explosives in his hand. He pulled the detonator pin from the charge and tossed it under the truck. He then ran behind the rear corner of the building and a finger in one ear. The explosion lifted the truck three feet in the air before bringing it back to earth as a burning wreck, its tires blown from their axles against the walls and out into the street. Charlie stepped back into the alley and stood in front of the smoldering cauldron and then let out a high scream and danced a strange jig. He kicked his feet back and forth and hopped one on foot as he backed up toward the ditch.

Michael didn't shout to him again. He looked on for a moment in an odd trance, then turned and ran around the pond toward the forest that waited behind town, trusting the others to follow him. John and Ben did so right away, but amidst the din of the battle groaning toward its inevitable conclusion, Charlie could still be heard cackling, his laughs carrying in the air and blending with the gunshots and explosions. Charlie skipped a few steps away from the truck he'd set ablaze and then ran out to join the others.

No one seemed to be firing out at them, and Michael stopped again to look back. In the street, through a small gap between the truck and the adjacent building that offered a narrow line of sight, he believed he saw Andrei. Furious flames engulfed the false cake shop, set by Russians or the Americans, Michael could not tell. But the man standing in the firelight, gripping a large hunting rifle, crouched low to the ground like a wild

predator and screamed down the road in both directions, but from this distance and amongst such commotion he appeared to Michael to be mute, screaming without being heard. And then the figure jerked in unnatural ways before falling to the ground, his silhouette replaced by fire.

Michael tightened the straps on his pack, took one last look at the besieged town of Mertz, and led his men into the hills.

VI

Strange Wilderness

They ran into the forest until the weight on their backs wore them down. The night draped heavily onto the hills, not quite mountains, and as the hour grew later and the trees grew taller the moon had a more and more difficult time lighting the way. There was an endless sea of dark pillars rising out of the ground and large rocks that sometimes seemed invisible and often caused the men to lose their footing and stumble before finding their balance again. The owls in this forest were noisier than those in the Danube valleys. They spoke in high and short shrieks and glided down from the trees low over the men's heads, taunting them, and then returned to their posts to observe.

The group rested only for minutes at a time. They walked north the rest of the night until the sun came up over a long western ridge that flanked them to the left. Shards of harsh orange came through the forest in gradual horizontal waves and when dawn gave way to morning they came down at a diagonal angle from the treetops and caught insects and birds in their splintered light.

The men came to a creek. It flowed along a jagged path down from the north, over a five-foot drop and into a pool that narrowed again and continued south back toward Mertz. They thought maybe it led to the pond they had escaped around at the edge of town. In the night, after how far they'd walked, none of them could tell. But they knew they needed rest, and for the first time since what happened back in Mertz they felt safe in doing so. The little pool made for a clearing in the trees, and more of the early sunlight

came through as squirrels and grey highland sparrows scurried in the branches and sent leaves fluttering down into the crystal clear water.

Michael walked to the water's edge and sat down on the hard dirt and slipped the straps of his pack from his sore shoulders. John and Ben did the same, while Charlie rested his Thompson on a nearby stump and went over to the miniature water fall. He stuck his hands in and washed them and cupped them to gather water and splashed it over his head, slapping drops from his wet black hair back into the pool.

Ben took off one of his boots off and pulled the sock off as well and was about to soak it before Michael raised a hand to stop him.

"We're not gonna be here long enough for them to dry," said Michael.

Ben frowned and nodded and put the sock back on. He took a Camel from his shirt pocket and lit it. "A turn for the surreal," he said.

"What's that?" said John as he used a knife to spring pieces of glass from his boot soles.

"This thing's taken a turn for the surreal," said Ben, putting his foot back in the boot. "Maybe it's a sign."

John smirked. "Maybe we just up and picked the wrong pit stop. So what'd the Russian say, Mike? Before he went all Alamo on the G.I.s."

Michael dipped his fingers in the water. It was cold. "He said it's on the other side of the gorge," he said. "Roads won't get us there."

John raised an eyebrow. "And about what's in it?"

“He didn’t know,” said Michael. “But a some people consider it pretty damn valuable.” He dipped his fingers in the water again to feel the cold. “It’s abandoned now. No one there.”

“Well, that’s some good news,” said John. “You see, Ben? There’s light on the other end of the tunnel.”

Ben brought his knees close to his chest and looked out at the forest. He blew a cloud of smoke into the clearing and watched it rise into the tree branches above him. A squirrel came out from a gathering a bushes and stopped within a few yards of him. Ben stared back at it and kept quiet, and then he reached a hand out. The squirrel came forward a few more paces and examined Ben’s hand. It titled its head, got a good look, then after it apparently saw that there was nothing in the hand, it turned and bounded back into the bushes. Ben frowned in mild disappointment and glanced over at Charlie, who seemed to be ignoring everyone else while he stood by the waterfall with his hands on his hips staring up into the treetops. “A bit weird with Charlie back there,” said Ben softly.

“Yeah, well, Charlie’s a bit weird,” said John.

Michael sat in silence for a while, and the others followed his example. He pushed his feet to the edge of the pool and tried to see deeper into the forest but the dense army of trees made it difficult. He faced the east, down the hill and into the gap between the rises in the earth. To the northeast a large mountain loomed over the tree line, its broad peak a bald crust where the green stopped growing and the clouds nearly touched the rock. More peaks stood tall in the distance, but the early morning haze kept them vague shadows on the horizon. The lowlands lay behind them. The terrain would only get less

hospitable the further they went. He convinced himself that seeing Andrei was worth it, that the information was worth losing their truck and their supplies and any remaining notion that this mission would be as clean as Michael had claimed it would be. No direction now but forward. He refused to consider otherwise.

"Gear up," Michael said abruptly. He slid his arms back through the straps of his pack. "We're almost there."

John fell back onto the dirt and gazed up at the sky. "Aw, come on, Mike," he pleaded, half serious. "I was getting to enjoy this place. This is where they wrote those fairy tales, isn't it? Could just stay here."

"Oh yeah?" said Michael, raising an eyebrow as he stood up. "You just gonna build a cabin out of gingerbread and bake cookies for fairies the rest of your life?"

Ben chuckled. "Yeah, and lure little kids into your oven," he said with a broad smile such as he hadn't worn in a while. But there was worry behind that smile, buried but simmering.

"Fuck ya'll," said John.

"Fairy Russians and fairy Krauts and fairy goddamn G.I.s," said Michael. "No, fuck this place." He looked over and saw that Charlie had taken his shirt off and was pulling it out of the pool and wringing the water out of it. "What the hell are you doing? You gonna dry that thing while you wear it? We're outta here."

"Yes, yes," said Charlie, his pale chest glowing in the sun that came through the trees. "Fuck this place, and so forth. I'm ready to go." He snapped the wet shirt in the air a couple times and put it back on. It stuck to his narrow shoulders and dripping cold water onto his pants, but he didn't seem to mind.

They all packed up and left the clearing. The sun finally made it over the mountains peaks that lay ahead of them and it lit up the spaces in the forest with greater intensity, casting a warm glow on the occasional clouds of tiny insects that flittered about. The diminutive swarms bounced off tree trunks and rose toward the clear blue sky before lowering again once they rose too high.

They hiked into the afternoon, and the forest became hot. The hills they walked over began to all look the same and the higher mountains they saw ahead didn't seem to get any closer. An ocean of dark green ferns and thick underbrush covered the ground around them and made it hard to find paths. They eventually came by an old horse trail that ran down the groove between two of the hills, but that was the only sign of humanity they had encountered since escaping Mertz. The terrain carried an ancient air, that of a land that wore time without being savaged by it. Brown pine needles coated large swaths of the forest floor and appeared untouched, save for a small puncture here or there where one of the mountain deer may have wandered by.

It was just short of four o'clock when they arrived at a high jagged ridge that extended to the north. The top of the ridge was littered with boulders and sharp rocks and dense brush and to the right of it was a steep hill that scaled up to where it joined the first major mountain of the Harz. Between these two rises in the land, a narrow valley appeared passable. There was no road or manmade trail but the lay of the ground seemed merciful to travelers. Michael suggested they take the route to where it ended at a large valley that lay before the gorge, according to their map.

Ben took point as they walked down the center of the valley, with Michael behind him and then John with Charlie bringing up the rear. Ben walked in a slight crouch and

turned his head back and forth to scan the route ahead without pause. The trees began to close in on them a little more than before, and large rocks covered in green mosses lay around the ground as if they had been dropped there from the sky centuries before.

Charlie swayed his body as he walked and his metal canteen clanged against whatever metal he had in his pant pocket. He had always been the fondest of marching drill, ever since he joined Michael's team, and just the sound of his odd new march made Michael uneasy.

"Charlie, how's it back there?" Michael called back to him.

Charlie whistled a low tune. "Oh, just wonderful, Captain," he said. "Cannot say you picked a nature walk devoid of scenery. A fine tour of the Fatherland's splendid wood, adorned with all manner of…"

"Jesus Christ," said John. "Would you shut the fuck up?"

Charlie laughed and his canteen continued to clang. The four of them walked on past trees and rocks and came to a point where the slope to their right became steeper. Ben suddenly stopped walking and the others followed suit.

"Cap'," said Ben.

"What is it?" said Michael.

"The birds are all headed west."

Blackbirds and grey jays took off from the trees atop the right slope and headed across the valley over the ridge to the left.

John hung back from the others and gazed to his left up at the top of the ridge, dipping his head as he sought a better view through the trees. "Mike, you got a good view of that ridge?" he asked.

Michael kept walking but noticed how hard it was becoming to see far up. “Not good enough,” he said.

“Pull off,” said Ben.

Michael shot him a look. “What?”

“We gotta pull off to the right,” Ben said, looking to his right, his voice quiet but stressed.

Michael shook his head. “We got a mile left before the gorge,” he said. “We’ll get there.”

Ben crouched and began walking to the right. John did the same, mostly out of instinct after he saw Ben do it. Charlie seemed caught in a moment in his own head and stared up at the treetops at the birds that continued to leave the hill.

“Cap!” said Ben. “I’m tellin’ you, pull off to the right, now!”

The shots came from their right, high up on the hill from behind trees and a large log that lay near the about halfway to the top. Ben and John each made it behind a spruce tree at the foot of the hill just as the first volley sounded, while Michael felt rounds kick up dirt around him as he dove behind a thorn bush and rolled to take cover behind a tree. Charlie took a moment too long to move, and he grunted as a bullet hit him in the right thigh. Another struck his canteen and ricocheted into the ground as the water spilled out onto the soil.

“Goddamn it!” said Charlie, grimacing as he scrambled to the others. Two more shots hit right behind him, but he managed to make it to cover with Michael behind the tree.

“What the fuck, Mike!” said John.

Michael put a finger to his lips for John to be quiet as he listened to the shots and tried to ascertain where they were coming from. The spectrum of fire was no more than thirty yards or so, halfway up the hill. The shots sounded like they came from German G-41 rifles, with maybe a more recent G-43 on the left side of the firing line. Nothing heavier than that. They weren't packing more than small arms unless they were holding something back.

Someone up the hill shouted something in German and a couple others tried to run a few yards to Michael's right for a new position behind a spruce tree. Michael heard their footsteps on the ground and in one swift movement he turned and fired six shots from his Thompson. The first German made it to the tree but the second one, a young man with disheveled blonde hair and a filthy Wermacht uniform, collapsed as one round hit his knee and another caught him underneath the armpit. Another volley came from the hill and Michael ducked back behind the tree as bullets stripped bark from the tree. The young blonde German whimpered and coughed liquid. Michael waited a moment until he heard the one behind the spruce try to reach for his wounded comrade, then he turned and fire three more shots. One hit the second German in the side of the head and he dropped face-first to the ground.

Charlie had bled some onto the pine needles. He kept his back to the tree beside Michael and felt the jagged metal where his canteen had busted open. He cursed, more concerned with the canteen than the hole in his leg.

Michael tapped his shoulder and Charlie waved him off.

"It's all right," said Charlie. "In and out."

"Keep down," said Michael.

John and Ben were penned behind their spruce tree, and when John tried to peek around to get a better look up the hill he was quickly sent back to cover when a bullet hit the tree and blew a small cloud of splinters into the air. “I don’t see a play over here!” shouted John. More rifle shots hit the ground near him and he tightened his body into a smaller frame by bringing his knees closer to his chest and his feet right up to his rear.

Michael didn’t see a play either. He’d taken out the two on the right side, but the Germans above wouldn’t try that again. There were at least four left, and they had the high ground and the view. He could send John and Ben to flank from the left. Or he could flank and have Charlie cover. Either option would probably lose someone. He clenched his teeth so tight that he nearly cracked one of them. He should have sensed this. He’d sensed it many times before. He figured he had fifteen rounds left in the Thompson and he reached to his belt and grabbed another clip.

Then it became quiet. The Germans muttered things to each other, then one of them shouted and dove out from behind the log they used as their barricade. An explosion sent dirt and rocks soaring toward the treetops and back down to earth. A grenade from the sound of it. More of the Germans shouted and another grenade went off on the far left side of their firing line.

“What the hell?” said Charlie

“Stay down,” said Michael.

Another volley of shots came down the hill but these came from higher up and from a wider variety of weapons. A submachine gun, maybe an MP44, a couple of the G-41s, and some loud older rifles, maybe hunting models. Michael heard one of the

Germans moaning nearing the grenade blast. More shouts from around the log but only from a couple people. One was in front of the log now, out in the open.

"John, Ben, lay on some fire!"

They wasted no time doing exactly as they were ordered. Ben peeled out to the left of the spruce and John from the right, both aiming and firing their weapons as they did so. Michael ducked out to his left and in his sights he found one of the Germans kneeling before the log, an even younger man, a boy really, crying with blood coming down his face from a wound on his temple. Michael paused, just for a split second, but the hesitation felt like so much longer. John fired his shotgun into the boy's chest and he fell forward and rolled down the hill so far that when he stopped, Michael could see a tiny silver pendant draped around his neck and the fine engravings on the Hitler Youth badge attached to his tattered grey uniform's right pocket. A coat of grey ash covered his face, smeared by finger marks.

Another German tried to stand on the left side of the log but he stumbled and reached down to feel that most of his left calf was gone. Ben lined up a shot on him, but before he could take it there was fire from a thick grouping of trees at the top of the hill and the German's head came apart and he slumped to the ground where he lay still.

"Back! Back!" shouted Michael.

He and the others returned to their cover. There was an unknown party on the top of that hill, with a mutual enemy though there was no knowing more than that at the moment. There were at least five of them judging from the sound of the shots fired before.

Michael heard footsteps on pine needles near the log, behind a smaller tree.

"*Americans?*" said a half-whispered voice in German. "*Americans?*"

Michael looked over John and Ben. John peeked around his cover and shook his head, indicating he couldn't see the owner of the voice. Michael turned to Charlie, who pressed a cloth from his pack onto his wound and seemed to have the bleeding under control. Charlie looked back at him and shrugged.

"*Americans, I wish to surrender to you,*" said the voice, its tone pleading. "*Please, Americans.*"

"*Who is up there?*" asked Michael.

"*I am throwing away my weapon,*" said the voice behind the small spruce. "*I am coming to you. Please, Americans.*"

A rusted and scratched G-41 was thrown from behind the spruce and it landed in front of John and Ben's position. Then a man wearing a rumpled officer's cap stood and walked out into the open, his face caught in the harsh late afternoon sun, and he stumbled down the hill and dragged his left foot behind him. His uniform was filthy and torn and much of his face hid under a coat of ash. John leaned out and aimed his rifle at the man and his own fingers shook against the metal around the trigger. Michael waved him not to fire.

"*Stop*," said Michael to the German once he was only a few yards from the base of the hill. He did as he was told and held his hands up beside his ears. "*Who is up there?*" Michael asked again.

"*I am surrendering to you,*" said the German, sweat coming down from his thick brown hair. "*Please*."

Footsteps came from the top of the hill and descended. Michael peeked around the tree. There were eight of them, hunched and alert as they walked, and in the middle was a woman with long black hair tied up behind her head. Her clothes were of the mountains, with worn grey hiking pants and thick leather boots. She slung a G-43 rifle over her shoulder and drew a Luger pistol from a holster on her right hip.

"Americans?" she said with only a slight German accent.

"Who are you?" Michael shouted up the hill.

"We are not your enemy," said the woman, her voice strong and direct. "We will lower our weapons if you do the same and come out." She took a few more steps down the hill. "But we want the prisoner."

Michael cricked his neck and glanced at the surrendered German. He stood weak-kneed with his eyes closed and his breathing had slowed.

"What in the hell," said Charlie.

Michael agreed with his sentiment. But he knew they had no choice but to try and talk with these people, whoever they were. He gripped the Thompson in his lap and took a breath.

"I'm going to stand up and talk to you," he shouted to the woman. "But my men are staying behind cover until I tell them otherwise. And I will lower my weapon, but I'm keeping it in my hands."

For a moment all that could be heard were the faint chirps of birds and the slow and heavy breathing of the terrified German.

"That is acceptable," said the woman, flanked by her people.

Michael patted Charlie on the arm and gave the others what he hoped was a reassuring nod and came out from behind the tree. The prisoner still stood with his hands raised and he looked at Michael, his eyes afraid and hopeful. Michael looked past him to the woman, who had one foot raised onto the log where the guerillas had fired from. She was a tall woman, one Michael could say was attractive under different circumstances. Her face was assertive angles and large eyes and she held the Luger in a loose grip by her side. A dead German lay a few feet away from her, the one with the gored calf and now a half-broken skull.

"The prisoner belongs to us," she said.

Michael tried not to look at the surrendered German, who begged without words. "We can't take prisoners," he said

The woman reached down and took a rifle with a leather sling from the grip from the dead German near her. She nodded to Michael. "You are entitled to your share of the weapons," she said.

Michael kept his finger on the trigger of the Thompson and took a step toward her. "Who are you?" he asked.

John still had his shotgun lowered, but he was shaking. "Mike, I'm itchy here," he said.

"It's all right," Michael said to him. "You guys come out. Just everyone keep your weapons low." John and Ben stood up behind the spruce and Charlie grunted as he got on his feet and held his weapon a little higher than the others. Two of the Germans with the woman, rugged men in drab mountain clothes with hands covered in dirt and faces with hard lines, came down and grabbed the prisoner and took him near an tree to

tie him up. The prisoner whimpered a little then regained his composure, holding his head up as he strained to maintain arrogance. Michael questioned the woman again. “Who are you?”

The woman checked the condition of the German’s rifle and seemed to approve and she slung it over her shoulder. “My name is Eliza Gephardt,” she said.

Charlie shook his head as he reached down and tightened the cloth around his leg. “Is that supposed to mean something?” he asked.

“No,” Eliza replied. “But I was asked.”

“You’re German,” said Michael, almost to himself.

“Yes,” said Eliza, searching the ground for more useful items. “There are many types of Germans.”

Michael heard the whimpering of a wounded man on the ground, the one he had shot in the armpit. The man mumbled something incoherent and blinked his eyes in a quiet frenzy. One of the Germans, a broad-shouldered man, walked over and shot the wounded man in the head with a hunting rifle.

Eliza concluded her search for the moment and walked over to the prisoner, who knelt by the tree with his hands tied behind his back, watched over by a large man with a full red beard. She got down on a knee in front of the prisoner. “*Where are the others?*” she asked him.

The prisoner didn’t look at her, and he said nothing.

“*Where?*” she asked again.

Still no response. Michael and the others watched in silence.

Eliza gave the prisoner a light slap on the cheek, the kind someone might use to wake another up. "*You could have gotten at least one of the Americans*," she said. "*Pathetic. But you know who I am, don't you? I know you do.*"

The prisoner spoke, but he didn't look her in the eyes. "*You are traitors and Jews,*" he said, choking out the words, trying to keep them defiant.

Eliza smiled at him. She reached out and brushed the hair from his eyes, to which he jerked his head away. She grabbed him by the chin and forced him to look her, held onto him for a moment, then let go and stood back up. She looked away deep into the forest for a few moments as if considering options, and then turned to the man with the red beard. "Landsmann," she said, and nodded.

The bearded man stepped forward and aimed his pistol at the side of the prisoner's head and fired. A spurt of blood came out the ear on the other side of the prisoner's head and shot out six feet over the bed of pine needles. The man collapsed into a heap, dead before he hit the ground.

Eliza did not watch as he died and did look at his body. Instead she glanced over at Michael. "You can tell if they'll talk," she said. "In the eyes." She looked hard at Michael's face. "But you already know that."

Michael heard Charlie laugh behind him.

Eliza walked over to a log and pushed some leaves from it and sat down. She faced away from the remains of the battle and stared to the north, toward the high mountains of the Harz. The late afternoon sun burned over the rocky ridge to the west and cast a long shadow of her up the hill. The thin branches of the high pines swayed

over her head, and as Michael focused on her and not the carnage just to the side of her, the scene appeared almost peaceful.

Almost, and yet nowhere close.

He looked down at the body still leaking blood from the head. He had come to believe that, while he and his team's dealing were disruptive and sometimes necessitated violence, they occurred in front of a backdrop of peace, of the "after." He felt it in Paris, in the Bavarian forests, even at the homes of those he and the others preyed upon. But here, in the air between these trees and the jagged hillsides and the looming mountains, he sensed no peace to play against. No peace existed here, and there amidst the remains of battle, it felt like it never had.

Eliza rubbed her palms on her face, breathed into them, and for a moment it looked like she might be praying. She took a deep breath and looked over at Michael. "We can't afford to take prisoners," she said, almost apologetic.

Michael looked hard at her, tried to read her, but her eyes betrayed next to nothing. "I can understand," he said. He hoped she could read him enough to know this was true.

She stood back from the log. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

Michael shook his head. "Not just yet."

"You were going toward the gorge," said Eliza. "Yes?"

Michael didn't answer.

"Your supplies will be safe in my camp," she added. She grinned, recognizing an oversight in language. "And you will be safe as well. You have my word."

"And whose word is that?" Michael asked. "I still don't know who you are."

“As I said, my name is Eliza Gephardt.” She pushed some hair from her eyes. “And until it is clean, this forest belongs to me. I’ve been fighting the Nazis for much longer than you, Captain. In one way or another.”

Charlie had come down the hill a bit, and he managed to walk all right on his injured leg. “War’s over,” he said. Eliza glanced over at him, and he looked down. “If you people out here didn’t hear the news.”

Eliza smiled and looked back to Michael. “With me, you are safe,” she said. “On your own?” She shrugged and began walking to the north, along the base of the hill, and her men finished scavenging the corpses and followed her.

John got his arms through the straps of his pack. “What are we doing, Mike?” he asked.

“We’re gonna need to camp,” said Michael without looking at him.

Ben stepped up. “Is it on our way?” he asked. “Might be out of the way. Stay on our goal, maybe?”

Michael exhaled in frustration. “Our goal is to find Facility Forty-Seven,” he said. “She knows how to get there.”

John smirked. “Among other things.”

Charlie steadied his injured leg as he tightened the straps on his pack. “Oh, I don’t know,” he said with a grin. “I think I’m developing a bit of a soft spot for their style. A bit refreshing, if you ask me.”

“Nobody asked you,” said John.

“Oh?” replied Charlie. “And who’s the gentleman with a purple heart in the post thanks to this blasted little hike, eh?”

Michael leaned toward John. '"You want to find this place, right?" he asked, but it didn't sound much like a question than a statement.

John's gaze flittered from Michael to the Germans gathering themselves then to the heights of the trees and back to Michael. "Yeah, sure, of course," he said.

"They can help," said Michael, taking a step forward, easing his tone some. "Hell, if they wanted to kill us and steal our gear, I'd say they had ample opportunity."

John glanced at the dead prisoner. "Seem like a hard sort," he said.

Ben, standing apart from the others, looked down at the ground and nodded.

Michael glanced at the prisoner as well and then out at the other bodies left in these people's wake. "I'm thinking only if you got a swastika to your name do you need to worry about something like that," he said. "We know something about that, don't we?"

"I see kindred spirits," said Charlie, walking with a limp past the others and toward the Germans.

"Then let's grab all our gear and move," said Michael. "How's that leg, Charlie?"

"It puts the foot forward," said Charlie, not looking back. "Onward and upward, gentleman. Onward and upward."

Michael managed a smile and said to John, "We're almost there. Stop thinking so much, yeah?" He looked to Ben. "Both of you. Eyes on the prize."

John ran a hand through his hair. "Masters of the universe," he said.

Up ahead, Landsmann and Eliza stopped and argued, but Michael couldn't quite hear what they were saying. Landsmann waved a hand in the air in frustration and walked away to join the others. Eliza walked back to Michael and grinned.

"What's his problem?" Michael asked.

“He doesn’t want me to take you to our camp,” said Eliza.

“Seems like a decent concern.”

Eliza nodded. “I told him that the time for hiding is over,” she said. “And that you are no threat to us.” She gazed over John and Charlie and Ben, all standing ready with their gear on their backs and their weapons in hand, and she then looked back to Michael. “Come, it will be dark soon. The night finds its way into these mountains early.”

The sun still shone over the peaks in the west as the group climbed to the top of a smaller, craggy mountain that marked the north end of the ridge, but the light was beginning to fade. Charlie made the climb without complaint but Michael kept an eye on him. Ben seemed to be paying even closer attention, often offering to help Charlie around boulders or over ditches, efforts that Charlie rebuked with a laugh every time.

The camp seemed to come upon them near the summit, rising from the landscape with no early signs of its existence, no roads or trails or markers in the forest. Brown and green tents appeared behind lines of trees, low to the ground with a further three feet or so of space dug into the earth beneath them. The camp extended up near the peak and around to the north slope. At least a dozen tents, with defensive barricades at points around the perimeter made from sharpened wood stakes hammered into the ground in ten-foot rows just behind large rocks that had been carried there and placed as obstacles, signals of a place meant to be somewhat permanent. There was a central supply area near one of the bigger tents, with open produce crates and some stacked boxes of small-caliber ammunition.

In addition to the eight fighters returning, there were a dozen more people who stood around the camp and watched their companions return home. A pair of middle-aged

women, both with brown hair streaked with stressed grey strands, tended a large cast-iron pot suspended over a cooking fire, and near them a pair of children came from inside a tent. A boy and a girl, seven and nine years old, with dirty blond hair and wide smiles, and they ran down toward Eliza around open food crates and hugged her with sun-kissed arms and dirty hands. Eliza snapped her fingers and the children released their grip and ran away.

"Well all right," said John. "This is a pretty sturdy camp here, huh?"

Ben nodded.

Charlie chuckled. "When considering the circumstances, I'm inclined to agree," he said. "Quite well constructed."

The other Germans in the camp eyed their visitors with wary eyes and most just peeked out of their tents and then dipped back inside. Landsmann shouted for a couple teenage boys to come to him and they carried the weapons retrieved from the dead Werewolves back to the storage tent. Eliza lead the way to the center of camp near at the cooking fire and waved a hand out over a collection of logs situated as makeshift benches.

"Spend some time off your feet," she said. Her own people did so without hesitation and they dropped their gear onto the ground with heavy thuds and groaned as they rubbed their sore legs. Charlie did the same thing as he sat on the largest log near the fire. John and Ben looked to Michael before they did anything.

Yeah, go ahead," said Michael. "We need the rest."

Eliza stood against a strong spruce and plucked some leaves from her shoulders. "It has been a long time since anyone new came here," she said. "We used to hide. We

would run and we would hide. Run and hide. They sent a regiment into the mountains to find us, when we fought back. But the war was ending for them by then." She gazed to the west, toward the sliver of sun still glowing over the peaks. "Now we hunt, and they hide."

Michael came up and stood next to her. "So you do know that the war is over?" he asked. He had heard stories from the Pacific where Marines were still finding Japanese soldiers holed up in the caverns of volcanoes who refused to believe their empire had surrendered and their fight was over.

Eliza smiled. "I know of the surrender, yes," she said. "But wars can take a long time to end. Sometimes they never do." She turned her head to look at Michael. "So who are you?" she asked.

Michael nodded, feeling it was a fair question. "My name is Michael Powell," he said.

"And you were in the Army?"

Her use of the word *were* did not escape him. "Yeah," he said. "I was in the O.S.S."

Eliza grinned. "The Office of Strategic Services," she said.

"You're awfully well informed," said Michael. "And you're English is pretty damn good."

"I studied for two years at Yale," she said.

Michael almost gasped. "You're kidding." He chuckled to himself, working to wrap his head around it. "Small world."

Eliza removed a leaf from her hair. "Too small," she said.

Michael pointed toward where Charlie sat on the ground near the campfire. “You know, Charlie over there is a Harvard man.”

Eliza shook her head. “Harvard men,” she said, and left it at that.

Michael started to speak, but stopped himself and tried to put more thought into it.

“So, you are American,” said Eliza. “You were in the O.S.S., but not anymore. So what are you?”

Michael stood a little taller. “I’m looking for something,” he said. “A place.”

“A place,” said Eliza.

“Yeah,” said Michael. “It’s –“

“We can discuss it later,” said Eliza. “For now, we must eat.”

She walked to the campfire and Michael followed behind her. The people of the camp sat and stood around the flames and the children sat on the ground and drew pictures of smiling bears in the dirt with sticks. The little boy broke his stick by pressing to hard into the ground, but Ben stood nearby and picked up a strong-looking stick and handed it to the boy with a grin. The boy strained to look up at him and seemed hesitant at first but then grinned, revealing a couple lost baby teeth, and took the stick and continued drawing.

Charlie whistled at Ben from where he saw near the fire. “Quite the father figure,” he said.

Ben shook his head and smirked. “How’s the leg?” he asked.

Charlie shrugged and patted the bloody spot on his pant leg. “Pains me some,” he said.

Landsmann, the large German with the red beard, walked over the Charlie and sat down on a log beside him and handed him some white gauze and a dirty unmarked glass bottle with a clear liquid inside. He nodded at Charlie's wound and gestured for him to take the bottle. Charlie laughed and did both.

"You Krauts are fine fellows, I can tell you," he said. He took the medical supplies and began removing his old and bloodied piece of cloth and applying a new bandage.

Michael stood back from the fire with Eliza as the others, both German and American, began dipping into the large cooking pot and serving themselves a stew of turnips and chopped roots in small wooden bowls. "Can you spare the supplies?" he asked her.

She cocked an eyebrow. "You should place to welfare of your own men first," she said, "before you worry about our supply situation."

Michael nodded. "All right," he said.

Most of the Germans went off to tents to eat and talk with each other but a few remained near the fire as Charlie addressed them in a semicircle while Ben stood back and John sat on the ground and ate in silence.

Charlie finished his soup in one long gulp and lifted his Thompson barrel-up in front of Landsmann and removed the magazine and ejected a round from the chamber. "*It's a clean action,*" he said. "*You see, the German submachine guns are harder to maintain. I saw one of them jam on a man in Greece. It got the man killed.*"

Landsmann examined the weapon and scratched his beard. "*It is not such a different construction*," he said. He lifted his own German MP-40 and held it like a trophy.

"*It's completely different,*" countered Charlie. "*Look*." He turned the weapon so Landsmann could see inside the open chamber.

John shook his head and leaned on his elbows and took in the warmth of the fire. "Jesus Christ, Charlie," he said. "Let the man keep his favorites. Like a goddamn Thompson salesman."

Landsmann set aside his weapon. A tinge of disappointment on his face suggested he might agree with Charlie's assessment of it. He leaned forward. "*You do not sound American*," he said.

Charlie did not smile at that. "*How does one sound American?*" he said.

Landsmann shrugged. "*You just sound like the Englishmen in the movies*," he said.

Charlie cackled and snapped his mouth shut and tried to contain his outburst. "The Englishmen in the…" He ran a hand through his hair. "*My parents were English. I was born in Yorkshire. Are you familiar with Yorkshire?*"

Landsmann nodded and grinned. He seemed pleased with himself for getting a rise out of Charlie, unaware of just how easy that could be.

"*So*," continued Charlie, "*I came to American as a young boy and went to American preparatory schools and went to the very best American university. I fought in the American Army against the Nazi bastards that came out of your country. I believe this all allows me to call myself American, yes?*"

Landsmann stopped grinning. "*Yes*," he said. "*Maybe not the right to be rude*."

Charlie grinned this time. "*The British Empire is a dead animal*," he said. "*It became bloated and complacent and even though they join the Americans in victory now, their empire will perish just like the false German empire they just defeated. And do you know why? Because the waves of history are moving*."

Ben listened to Charlie from his seat nearby but he looked away as if to distance himself from his friend's words. Michael looked on and grinned along with Charlie.

Charlie got on his feet and hunched over so he could keep speaking to Landsmann eye to eye. "*The Romans had their time and the Hapsburgs in Austria had their time and now the Americans, we have our time. We have bombs that can destroy entire cities and we have more planes and tanks and ships than the rest of the world combined and it is our destiny to become to the next great empire. That's what it is. It's destiny. And I've had a front row seat for it. I throw my lot behind the ascension. It just took a sick false empire to give us something worth fighting for, something to crush*."

"Charlie," said Michael. "That's probably all he cares to hear."

Charlie glanced over at Michael and chuckled. "Of course, Captain," he said. He looked back at Landsmann, who stared back at him not with anger but with an expression that made it clear he possessed no fear. Michael watched carefully and was unsure as to whether or not a punch was coming, but none did. Charlie grinned again. "*But I applaud your efforts in defeating that false empire,"* he said to Landsmann. "*You have my undying respect and admiration."*

Landsmann smirked and looked around at the other Germans standing and sitting nearby. They waited for his reaction to Charlie's rant, and Landsmann just nodded and shrugged. "*Enjoy all of that*," he said. "*Right now, I only wish to have supper*."

Charlie laughed and sat back down.

Michael walked behind and John and stood with hands on his hips as Hermann began filling wood bowls with turnip soup. "You boys eat up?" asked Michael.

Charlie looked up at him. "Of course," he said. "So just who are our fine hosts, Captain?" he asked. "I can't get the slightest bit of valuable intel from them. Wonderful fighters, though, Captain. Wonderful. In need of resupply, of course, but – "

"They live up here," said Michael. "And they kill Nazis. That's all we need to know right now." He saw Ben sitting on his haunches, breaking pieces of chocolate from an unwrapped bar and giving them to the two children, who stuffed them in their faces and licked their fingers clean. "Ben, where the hell did that chocolate come from?" Michael asked.

Ben grinned at the children. "I bought it in Straubing, Cap'," he said. "A while back. Packed it."

Michael shook his head. Eliza stepped up beside him with a bowl of soup in each hand. She handed one to him. "There will be questions and answers in the morning," she said. She looked out at the evening landscape, over the hills toward far off peaks. "The Werewolves that remain will be looking for their friends. I can predict which one they will find first. We will have extra watchmen tonight. Decide amongst your men."

Michael nodded his assent and waved a finger over towards Ben and John.

“Ben, then John,” he said. “Three-hours shifts. I’ll take the last one. I want us to get some decent sleep tonight. It’s been a long few days.”

Ben and John nodded. Charlie got on his feet, careful to avoid putting too much pressure on his wounded leg, and walked over to Michael. “I’m all for a go on the watch, Captain,” he said. “Ready and willing.”

“I know you are,” said Michael. He titled his head toward the wound, which looked clean and well-bandaged. “But I want you well rested.”

“Oh, it’s really not that—”

“Charlie,” said Michael. “You’re resting.”

Charlie rolled his eyes and went back to the fire and sat down by his Thompson. He pushed the magazine back up into the stock and sat with the weapon in his lap as he grinned and stared at the fire.

Eliza stood back from the crowd, where she watched Michael command his people with her arms crossed over her chest. Michael turned to her and summoned the strength to show appreciation. “Thank you,” he said.

She nodded and grinned. “Use the shelter over there,” she said, pointing at a larger brown tent that overlooked the western slope of the mountain. “It belonged to someone we lost.” With that she turned and headed away from the firelight, into the dark toward her modest green tent.

Michael felt exhaustion come upon him, exhaustion he’d managed to forestall throughout the day until this moment. He leaned his back against a spruce near his assigned housing and took a moment to appreciate the view, the rise and fall of the earth as it stretched out toward the departed sun over the horizon, the mountain peaks crowned

by vivid white constellations of stars. He could see lights in the distance where towns were nestled, soft glows against the dark of the land. Some towns like Berchtesgaden that tried to regain some sense of normalcy after the storm. Perhaps some others like Mertz, towns that had failed to weather and floundered. He wasn't quite sure of the kind of place he stood at present. Perhaps a bit of both. He heard the children laughing as their father played a simple tune by tapping pipes against a log, and watched the banal bustle of people readying their humble residences for night. A place manufacturing a kind of civility, and yet still latched to a history from which these ancient mountains had a hard time releasing themselves.

A kicked can woke him up. Someone outside.

Michael opened his eyes and for a moment felt unsure of where he was. The low ceiling of the tent filled his vision with a blank darkness, and when he turned his head and noticed the faint hue of moonlight coming in through the flaps of the tent door, he could see a figure standing out there. He remembered the night watch assignments and assumed it was John coming to exchange the shift. But a more slender figure than John crawled into his tent and took a seat in the corner right of the door and the flaps fell closed again. Michael saw dark long hair in the edge of what light managed to come in from outside.

Eliza sat there for a long time with her ankles crossed without saying anything, and Michael spent that time trying to guess what she wanted. At first his ego led his mind to the notion that she desired to share his company inside the tent, under his not-so-comfortable blanket. But he quickly lost that notion and sensed it was something else.

"I did use you as bait," she said finally, in English. "For that, I apologize."

She came into better focus in the dark, but Michael still couldn't see her face very well. "I would have done the same thing," he said. "How many of them are out there, do you think?"

"Not many more now," she said. "We have hunted most of them and now there are too many scared boys. They will soon give up." There was no boasting or pride in her words. Just a simple answer to the question. "Most of them came from the Harz Fortress in Blankenburg in the north."

"Yeah," said Michael. "The Americans smashed that place back in April."

Eliza nodded. "They did. But many of the Nazis fled into the mountains. And now they are here, still fighting."

She was silent for a while, and he could see that her head faced out the door of the tent, toward the slope leading out into the west.

"For three years I've been here," she said. "The first two by myself, mostly. I had a man with me for a while, but he didn't last long." She picked a small piece of wood up from the ground, squeezed it between her fingers, then flicked it back onto the earth . "Most of the others escaped from the Dora work camp in the south almost two years ago. I found them here in the mountains, hiding in caves. They almost killed me when I found them. The children, the ones your large friend plays with, they belong to Hermann. He will still not say where the mother is. They came from a little hamlet in the south called Mertz last winter, when the Russians got close."

Michael kept his familiarity with Mertz to himself.

"We found them near the gorge," Eliza continued. "Nearly frozen." Her head turned toward him again. "You can take care of yourselves. You and your men."

Michael shook his head. “I should have sensed it,” he said. “Back there by the ridge.”

“I expected you to lose at least one of your party,” she said. She pulled her knees closer to her chest. “I grew up in these mountains. These Werewolves, whatever they choose to call themselves, they know these mountains far better than you. And you survived.”

Michael finally sat up, pushing his palms against the dirt behind him. “How much longer will you keep this up?” he asked her.

“I forgot what peace feels like,” she said. “But if I ever found it, if I could live at peace in these mountains, I would be happy.”

Michael had trouble believing her, but he convinced himself that he did.

“And where is your family?” asked Eliza.

Michael sat up straighter. “Don’t have much of one anymore,” he said. He nodded toward the camp outside. “I have those three men out there, and they don’t have much back home either. My father died when I was very young. Mother more recently.”

“Do you have a woman?”

Michael grinned and shook his head. “No,” he said. “I thought to try, but the world right now doesn’t lend itself to that sort of thing.”

“Not for people like you,” said Eliza. “Or me.”

“People like us?”

Eliza used a finger to draw lines in the dirt. “We are married to the fight.”

“My fight is over,” said Michael.

“Hmm,” said Eliza.

The skeptical response touched a nerve. Michael thought about debating that point but with this person he thought it of little use. He leaned forward some and lowered his voice. “I need your help finding a place,” he said.

Eliza nodded but waited a moment to speak. “You seek the laboratory at the other end of the gorge,” she said, her words a declaration and not a question.

“You know of it,” said Michael.

Another nod. “I knew that is what you came here for the moment I saw you walking north in the forest.”

Michael leaned forward even more, so that some of the moonlight coming into through tent door caught the left side of his face. “Can you take us there?” he asked.

Eliza remained still. “I have no reason to go to that place,” she said, her voice becoming quieter.

“What is it?” Michael asked. “What is Facility 47?”

“You don’t even know what it is?” She shook her head. “And yet you seek it.”

“I want to know what it is,” said Michael. “I think you owe me that if you do know.” He grinned. “As your bait.”

Eliza didn’t return the grin. “The Harz have superstitions,” she said. “The Brocken, that great mountain to the west, Mussorgsky composed *Night on Bald Mountain* about it. The legends say witches used to conjure spells on its peak. There are ghosts that wander the south ridges. Werewolves, those of the fairy tales, in the east hills. Such is the way of old, strange places.” She pushed some hair from her face and draped it over her ear and sighed. “The laboratory you want, it is inside a mountain at the north end of the

gorge. The mountain, it was avoided. Its legends tell of the mountain itself. How it causes people to change what they do."

"Lose their minds?" asked Michael, perturbed to hear the same aged legends and not something more feasible.

"Makes them do things they do not want to do," said Eliza. "People who camped there, explored its deep caves, over time it would affect them."

"So the Nazis built an entire facility in a mountain, spent tons of money, for a mountain legend?"

Eliza grinned this time, the edge of her lips visible in the moonlight. "Hitler was a superstitious man," she said. "He built many facilities, in many places, to try and find strange things."

"And you?" said Michael. "Are you superstitious?"

"I know that nobody goes near that mountain," she said. "Nobody from my town. Nobody from any town I knew growing up out here. And I know that the Nazis, when the end came, they made it so no one could get out either. Not even their own." She sat in silence for a few moments and looked out through the tent door to the west again, out toward the mighty Brocken, and then looked back at Michael. "Do not go there," she said. "Go back the way you came."

Michael shook his head. "My mission is to find out what's in there."

"Your mission from who?" asked Eliza.

Michael ran a hand through his hair and wiped sweat from the back of his neck. "I need to settle some accounts," he said. "For some people who want to know what's there." Taking a moment to think it over, he knew that wasn't a satisfactory answer, for

himself or anyone else. The reasons seemed to change by the day. By the hour. But he knew that what the mission was and he could feel the goal getting closer. The rush of that approaching end ran through his blood, and he could not accept turning back. It was almost over. Then he and the others would be free. "*I* want to know what's there," he said. "And I'm going. With or without your help." He thought of Hannigan's deadline, looming over him, and he clenched his teeth. "And I need to get there quickly."

Eliza took in a long, slow breath. "I have helped you already," she said. She got back on her feet and crouched under the low ceiling of the tent until she got outside, where she stretched her shoulders and turned back to see Michael gazing up at her, his hand holding the tent door open, assuming she had said her piece. "I will guide you over the gorge in the morning," she said. "Just me. The others will not go, so do not even ask them."

VII

The Approach

The last hours of the night watch drifted by slowly. Michael passed the time by making many gradual circles around the perimeter of the camp with the two others on patrol, with whom he shared not a word. He was on the top of the east slope when the sun came up, and from this height the whole of Germany seemed to be draped with a golden sheet, except for the higher points of the eastern Harz which remained stubborn in their darkness. He detached his binoculars from his belt and explored the farther reaches. The collected wood roofs of those small towns that had twinkled in the night now sat as manmade oases in the endless forest. Near the summit of one of the high hills, no more than a few miles away near the bend of a river, Michael could see the tall towers and strong base of a castle, a German *schloss* from the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The kind built by insecure princes to make their mark on the imposing grandeur of the land.

To the north he could see down the gorge, over the great gash in the landscape that hid from the light in these early hours, and when he rotated to the north slope he saw the large mountains that marked its end, including a steep ascent with a peak that pointed out over the treacherous valley like the rounded horn of a beast. Michael took a close look with the binoculars, and he believed he saw spires on the peak, not trees or anything natural. They seemed to give off a metallic sheen in the glare of the morning sun. And below that, he thought he saw the edge of a structure, something large enough to be seen from this far away. It was only partially visible outside the mountain, facing the gorge, and its harsh concrete corners and seeming lack of windows recalled the photographs

Hannigan had given him. He almost went back to the tent for his pack, but he decided that he was certain. There it was, on the other side of the gorge. Facility 47.

The others awoke and they looked refreshed with color again in their faces and a renewed resolve about them, especially Charlie, who still suffered a limp yet managed rather strong strides past Michael with only a nod as a morning greeting.

Eliza came from her tent and walked to the edge of camp and stared down into the forest and then closed her eyes for a while. Whatever her thoughts, she kept them to herself, and when she walked back up to Michael's assembled team she managed a grin and pointed north. "Let's go," she said. Her comrades in camp watched them all go, but made no talk of it.

The group descended the mountain and continued over a flatter range of land along the west side of the gorge. The mountain on which Facility 47 rested loomed in the distance, behind a series of high hills. The men were oddly quiet through the early portion of their journey. They ceded the forest the sounds of morning birds and the crack of the underbrush they broke with their footsteps. Eliza walked out in front, a half dozen paces from the rest, and would occasional stop and look about at the trees, at which point the others would stop as well. But then she faced ahead again and kept walking and the others followed suit.

They had to edge close to the gorge to get around a swatch of terrain too laden with rocks and rough scales to pass. The gorge was perhaps a quarter-mile across, surrounded by rough cliffs and vertical drops up to three hundred feet. John walked to the brink of a drop and kicked a fallen tree branch into the expanse below and no one heard it

land. He laughed to himself at the act and returned to the others, who all grinned except Eliza.

Their route came to a pinch in the gorge, where the edge came closest to the other side. A few hundred yards. Michael came a few feet from the edge and stopped to look across. John came up beside him. “Careful of your footing there, Mike,” he said with a smile. “It’s quite a sight though, ain’t it?”

Michael looked down at the lake of green foliage that filled the gorge and saw a stream cutting through the middle, heading south. A flock of blackbirds lifted off from the treetops below near the water and rose higher than the cliffs and took off to the east away from the group, and in watching them Michael thought he saw something else across the way. He took the binoculars from his belt and brought them to his eyes.

About a dozen men walked in a single line along the far edge, much the same way Michael’s group walked, only in the opposite direction. They climbed over rocks and fallen trees and took careful steps over brush and one of them stopped and took a few steps toward the edge. Michael noted the green uniforms of the Soviet Army, and he saw the man raise his own binoculars and look out across the gorge toward him.

“What is it, Cap’?” asked Ben. He came up behind Michael and squinted. “Looks like people.”

Michael kept looking through the binoculars. “Russians,” he said.

“Reds?” said Charlie. “Well I’ll be damned.”

The Russian across the gorge looked through his own lenses for a few moments longer, then lowered them and Michael could see he was looking straight back at him.

The Russian nodded, a silent gesture across distance, then turned and joined his men and kept walking south.

Michael lowered his binoculars.

"What'd you see?" asked Ben, his voice hushed and curious.

Michael shook his head. "I don't know." He clipped the binoculars back onto his belt and turned to Eliza, who stood ahead of the others and looked out across the gorge toward the Russians. "You see Soviets around here much?" he asked her.

She shook her head. "Not until recently," she said. "Patrols. They see us and we see them and everyone keeps moving. They likely know of us."

"You don't shoot the Commies?" said John with a raised eyebrow.

"It's a mistake to take on too many fights at once," said Eliza.

"So you think they're just patrolling?" Ben asked Michael.

Michael remembered what Andrei had told him. About the Russians heading out to Facility 47 two weeks prior. Could these be those Russians? Perhaps on their way back? They looked like regulars, a routine patrol unit, but something about that nod seemed knowing, as if the Russian knew where they were going and decided not to make trouble of it. Of course it was likely merely a gesture of respectful mutual existence, of one party seeing its mirror and letting peace settle in the space between them. Michael and the others surely looked like an American patrol surveying the borderlands. He pushed the more troubling thoughts from his mind.

"They're not going to bother us," he said. "That's all that matters."

"But what if they guess where we're headed?" asked John.

Michael turned and began walking along the gorge again. “Then they guess where we’re headed,” he said. “Doesn’t make any difference. We’ve gotta be alert anyway.”

Eliza walked on ahead again with Michael behind her, and the others got in line and followed. They traversed the low hills over the next few hours, taking regular stops to take drinks of water and rest their legs. The others shared their water with Charlie, who had no replacement for his busted canteen, though he kept it as a badge of honor. Michael kept a close eye on Charlie’s leg. Charlie never complained of pain and seemed to be walking well but it still warranted observation. Even a flesh wound was very dangerous if not properly cared for, and Michael made himself trust that the medicine the partisans had provided would keep the wound clean. They sat on the ground and exchanged some conversation and took in the nature of the lower Harz, the ease of the forest with the mountain air and the summer sun filling the spaces between trees.

It was a few hours after midday when they came to the first of the craters in the earth. Trees lay felled on the forest floor, charred and splintered, and large underground rocks had been unearthed and were scattered over the ground. Up ahead there was a paved road to led to the left and then curved north, but it too had been bombarded and the asphalt was churned and crumbled and marked by more craters. Vehicles sat in smashed and burned heaps by the roadside, a Kubelwagon ripped in half, a transport truck missing most of its cargo hold and with all its glass shattered and lying about the ground glinting in the sunlight. There was a larger vehicle up the road to the left. It came into better view as the group approached and was revealed to be a massive King Tiger, one of the latest and most advanced German tanks. Its long turret, the devastating eighty-eight millimeter

model, jutted out over the road and one side of its treads had been blown loose and lay in a limp metal clump by the main chassis.

John hustled out to where Eliza had stopped by the roadside and he took a few steps out onto the destroyed road toward the King Tiger. “Goddamn!” he exclaimed. “I’ve never seen one of these!”

None of them had. The Germans built only a few hundred of them before the war ended, and few saw the field in the final battles. One of them had surprised a column of seven Soviet T-34s in Poland, so the story went, and took out every single one of them, the Russian shells bouncing off the King Tiger’s armor in a futile effort to fight back. It was one of the most dangerous land machines ever created, and here one sat rusted and mangled by its own creators, left to lie in a violently abandoned nook in the heart of its own country.

Around the tank were three bodies they could see, all with missing limbs and flesh subjected to months of decay. The uniforms were scorched and torn, but it could be seen that they were not standard Wermacht. They were the black and silver trimmings of a special S.S. unit.

“Was it shells or planes that did this?” Michael asked Eliza.

“It sounded like both,” she said. “We were farther to the south than our current camp when they did it. But we could still hear the thunder.”

Charlie walked out into the broken road and turned in a circle to survey the scene. He grinned. “I must say, there’s a great resoluteness to what happened here,” he said. “A willingness to do what one believes needs to be done.”

Eliza ignored him. She looked up the mountain and pointed at the tops of a trio of antennas barely visible above the treetops. “There is where you are going,” she said to Michael. “But this is as far as I go.”

Michael stood with his hands on his hips. “I thank you,” he said. “For what you’ve done.”

The others didn’t add anything, though Ben nodded in agreement.

Michael turned to John. “John, why don’t you take Ben and Charlie and go scout behind that tank. See what else is up the road.”

John glanced at Eliza and then at Michael and nodded his consent. “All right,” he said. “Let’s not take too long. These summer days last a while, but they don’t last forever.”

“Noted,” said Michael. He took a few steps closer to Eliza and stood with her as they both looked out over the road, at the men taking careful steps through black asphalt chunks and bits of vanquished machinery. “You sure there’s nothing more you can add before we keep going?”

“Assuming there is nothing to stop you from going?” she said. “No.” Her eyes returned to those antennas, those signal callers that had fallen silent at the close of the facility. “But there is something personal I did not tell you. A favor to ask you.”

Michael looked at her. “What is it?”

She kept gazing up the mountain. “My son was taken there,” she said.

Michael looked up with her and then tried to look her in the eyes. “Your son was taken to that place?”

She nodded. “I’m not a fool, Michael,” she said. “And I don’t want you to search for him. He is dead now.”

“Well, are you sure?” asked Michael. “I mean, you’re his mother. Don’t you want to look for him?”

Eliza looked back into his eyes. “It is because I am his mother that I know he is dead,” she said. “They did experiments. Subjects taken and never returned. My curiosity is not enough to bring me there. That is his tomb, and he must stay. If you find anything in there that tells what happened…” She paused. “I want you to destroy it.”

Michael started to speak but didn’t. The Nazi research facilities often used human subjects, and it sickened him to realize that the thought of one trucking in children for such purposes did not shock him. He looked down at the ground and then managed to look Eliza in the eyes again. “Will I be able to find you? To tell you?”

She stared up the mountain and thought about that to herself. “No,” she said. “Just destroy it.”

Michael nodded, but he did not say anything. He had long hated making promises, and his years during the war–when real promises were too easy to make and then far too impossible to keep–made him almost resolute on that front. But he nodded again and extended his hand toward her, and she hesitated for a moment and then shook it with a firm grip. “Thank you, again,” he said.

And then he turned and walked away up the road to rejoin the others. He didn’t look back, but he felt her still standing there by the roadside, watching them go.

He walked past the King Tiger and caught up with Charlie, who showed strain on the incline and walked behind the others.

“What did the lady have to say?” asked Charlie.

“I just thanked her,” said Michael.

“Tough bird, that one,” Charlie replied.

Michael left it at that.

The road returned to normal as it continued up the mountain in winding curves. The signals of violence disappeared behind them and the golden late afternoon sun made the higher elevations more welcoming. They passed an abandoned Mercedes with both its doors open, and it was intact. But after that the signs of chaotic escape ended and the road led on empty and unmarked.

A yellow butterfly fluttered from behind them and bobbed in front of Charlie’s face. It seemed to have come from lower heights to join them. It moved in graceful slides in the air and showed no fear of Charlie as it danced around him.

“So let me arrange this in my mind,” said Charlie to the others, waving the butterfly from his face. “The Krauts bomb their own roads, their own people, to seal this place in, and yet have next to no records on what went on in there beforehand.”

“I’m sure they had records,” said Michael. “It’s just a matter of what happened to them.”

“It had to have been for the Russians,” said Charlie. “To keep them from whatever they had holed up inside. Hoping they could get it later if they beat the Russians back. Has to be something quite valuable, I’d imagine.”

Michael found a lot to agree with in that line of thinking. Legends were useful. Andrei had been right about that. But they were often most useful in keeping people away from things, a means of capitalizing on fear to hide the truth when that truth could not

harm anyone, though its wider knowledge could conflict with the interests of a powerful party. People in this dark and remote center of Europe seemed eager to believe the crazier explanations and latch onto the old stories. “Strategic obfuscation,” said Michael. He meant to say it to himself but the words came out loud.

John hustled up to walk side by side with Michael. “What do you mean by that, Mike?”

Charlie slapped the air with his hand as the butterfly came back to dance in the air around his head. “What the Captain means,” he said, “is that the Germans may well have been using preconceived notions to deceive.”

Ben spoke up from his position at point. “Use a story to hide the truth,” he said.

Charlie grinned and nodded at him. “Precisely.”

“Well, whatever they were trying to do,” said John, “the people around here seem awfully spooked by this place. Hey, Mike, was Andrei spooked?”

Michael remembered the bear story. And he recalled the look on Andrei’s face when he’d told it, devoid of the humor that tended to infiltrate everything the Russian said. Spooked may not have been the right word for it. But he had conveyed the kind of caution in discussing Facility 47 of which he did not take well enough advantage when he made his postwar plans. Michael turned to John. “Andrei didn’t spook easily enough for his own good,” he said.

The road ahead disappeared around a bend, hidden by trees, but they were getting close. The metal spires that loomed up mountain were coming into clearer view. He wanted to make it before the sun got too low in the sky. They still had a few hours until

night but the eastern slope would not give them light for that long before giving itself to shadow. He wanted as much time as possible for finding a way inside.

"Gotta piss, Mike," said John.

"Hold it," said Michael.

"What the hell for? I can piss now or piss in Goering's private toilet once we're in the place. But I won't be making it that long."

Charlie stopped and crouched, favoring his healthy leg. "To be perfectly honest, I could use a short rest as well," he said.

Michael could see that although he hid it quite well, Charlie's leg was getting to him after the hike. "All right, fine," he said. "Everybody take a few minutes and piss or get their legs back under you." He looked to his left and saw a flower bush covered in a violet blooms. "I'm gonna take the opportunity myself."

He walked to the bush and pulled down his zipper, but when he got close he saw what appeared to be a narrow trail leading into the forest. It could have been just a long gap in the foliage, but the ground was clear and a bit trampled and there were none of the branches and rocks that cluttered the rest of the forest floor. He looked back and saw the others tending to their business, John and Ben walking off the other side of the road to relieve themselves, Charlie sitting in the middle of the road scratching his scalp and playing with his compass. Michael relieved himself closed his pants and decided to walk a few yards down the trail to get a better look.

The trees cast long shadows in the forest, shadows that crept uphill toward the mountain's peak, and the land seemed cut by hundreds a black lines that draped against the rocky crags higher up the slope like prison bars. He slung his Thompson over his

shoulder and looked it all over and then, after taking in the sounds of the mountain for a few peaceful moments, he noticed that there were no animals. The slope had none of the bird calls that lent their music to the rest of the Harz over which they'd traveled. And the haphazard running of the highland squirrels was replaced by an odd absence of movement. Even the leaves were motionless in their places as a light breeze drifted through the forest. The butterfly had stayed with them this far up, but it had followed from the base of the mountain and was perhaps a stranger to these heights.

Even the tree roots appeared strange. The roots of the lean spruces and birch trees that managed to take hold in such terrain sprouted out from the ground at odd angles, snaking around on the surface before coiling and retuning underground. Some of the roots seemed not even to belong to trees. They burst from the rocks in the crags and from amongst the twists of other roots, and they were pale and almost translucent in places. Michael thought they might be sick, that whatever the Nazis had done up here perhaps resulted in side effects to the flora. But he would never claim himself to be a botanist. He searched a few more paces and found that the trail ended next to earth that appeared churned, like a hole had been dug and then refilled. He looked out again in the strange quiet of the forest and turned back to join the others.

Charlie remained seated on the road and rubbed his forehead as the butterfly flapped about in the air not far from him.

"How's your friend?" asked Michael.

Charlie stopped rubbing and squinted his eyes to see the butterfly. The insect flew in a chaotic pattern, jerking from side to side and drifting without moving its wings for a moment before again engaging in rapid flaps to lift itself higher. "Acting like a mental

patient," said Charlie, and he brought his hand back to his head and looking down at the ground. "Dammit, my head hurts."

"You probably didn't get enough sleep," said Michael, standing over him.

"Eight bloody hours," said Charlie, irritated but able to maintain a joking edge. "When's the last time you got eight hours?" A trickle of bright red came down from his nose and dripped onto his shirt, a tiny stream at first, then it began to pour forth such that it coated his lips and ran over his chin.

"Charlie…" said Ben.

Charlie spat blood out onto the asphalt. He wiped his nose with his hand but the blood kept coming. Michael reached to the side pocket of his pack and pulled out a beige cloth and handed it to him. Charlie pressed it hard up into his nostrils and sniffled. "Ah, goddamnit," he said.

"Got a busted pipe in your nose there?" asked John with chuckle.

"Fuck off," Charlie snapped. He took the cloth away to see it was almost completely red, but he pressed it back onto his face anyway and worked to keep his balance as he stood up. "Appreciate the assistance, Captain," he said, winking at Michael and forcing a grin.

"What's wrong?" asked Michael. He'd seen nose bleeds from explosive concussions before but not from anything Charlie had suffered.

"Oh, must just be the mountain air," said Charlie. "Nothing I can't conquer." He removed the cloth again and the bleeding seemed to have stopped. He used a small clean section of the cloth to wipe as much of the smeared blood as he could from his face and tossed it to the ground.

Michael watched him out of the corner of his eye, careful not to hover so much that Charlie would object. The blood had spilled all the way down to Charlie's belt with a few drops on his pants to go along with the dried marks from the previous day's wound now covered in the white bandage and hopefully healing. The man looked far too haggard for peacetime.

"Got ourselves a new friend, Mike," said John.

"Huh?" said Michael.

He turned to John and saw what he was talking about. A deer had wandered to the edge of the road on his right, and it stood still just past the tree line and watched them. Its head jerked to look at each man individually, and its ears flicked up and down. It was a young buck, not large, with a dark brown coat and deep, empty eyes. John took the shotgun from over his shoulder and cradled it with both hands. "Haven't been hunting in a while," he said.

Ben shook his head and took a careful step toward the deer. "Nah, leave it alone," he said. He reached a hand out and rubbed his fingers together, and the deer stared back at him but stood its ground. Then it picked up a front leg, held it up for a moment, and jammed it into the ground. It did this again with a back leg. The men backed away some. The deer lowered its head to the edge of the road, picked it up, and lowered it again, its eyes glowing black obsidians in the evening sunlight that gave away no intention.

"Odd littler bugger, isn't he?" said Charlie.

The deer lifted its nose into the air and waved it back and forth, as if searching for a scent. Then without even facing its head toward John, it charged him. John fired the shotgun but the deer so surprised him that he missed the head and shattered one of the

animal's front legs instead. The deer continued its charge and crashed head-first into John's stomach and knocked him over onto his back. Michael drew his .45 and aimed, careful not to further endanger John, and he fired two rounds into the deer's side. The deer wobbled back on three legs and made a wailing sound such as a deer should not have been able to make, and then Michael shot it again, this time in the head with one squeeze of the trigger, and it keeled over and died on the road in a mess of its own blood.

The men said nothing for a while. Ben knelt down to help John get back on his feet, and Charlie laid his drawn Thompson down on the asphalt and again sat down and rubbed his palms on his forehead.

"You all right, John?" asked Michael.

John's eyes were wide and he pressed his lips together and whistled. "Anyone here ever seen a deer do that before?"

"He might have been scared," said Ben.

The deer's blood flowed downhill from its corpse, down the road toward the base of the mountain from where the men had come. No flies came to land on it, and no beetles crawled onto the asphalt to join it. Michael didn't much have much experience with deer. As a child growing up on the plains, he had never once gone hunting. He didn't know what the far reaches were of the animal's behavior, and he doubted even John, who possessed relevant experience, knew those extremes either.

"Well, it's dead now," said John.

Ben walked over to the deer and examined it and shook his head.

Charlie sat without saying a word for a while and then laughed. Not a low chuckle, but a loud cackling that echoed against the forest. He looked toward the sky as

he continued rubbing his head and he lay back on the road. The others looked at him in various degrees of confusion.

"What the fuck is so goddamn funny?" said John.

Charlie laughed even harder. The deer's blood flowed just past his boots.

Michael couldn't help but grin at the sight of Charlie lying there amusing himself, but Ben seemed concerned, looking at Charlie like he would a childhood friend who had grown older and done something terribly wrong. "Cut it out," said Ben.

Charlie kept laughing. Now Michael became concerned. He took a step toward Charlie but John went out ahead of him.

"I said what the fuck are you laughing about, you Limey prick!" shouted John. He was about to rush Charlie but the man doing all the laughing jerked himself upright and pointed up the road. "Up there is where we need to be," he said, his tone suddenly serious. He stood up and brushed off his pants and tightened the straps on his packs and patted where he kept the explosives. "Wasting too much time on this nonsense." He walked past the others, his limp more noticeable now, and continued up the mountain.

John looked bewildered, the anger built within himself with nowhere to take it, and he looked to Michael for some sort of explanation, to which Michael could give him only a shrug and a tilt of the head to keep walking. Which John did, and Ben as well, once Michael took the first step.

After a hard climb of curves and upward slopes, they reached a flatter stretch of road that hemmed along the crags of the eastern side of the mountain. The sound of crashing water rose up from the lower elevation and they got to a point where they see a waterfall a few hundred feet down the mountain through a sparser gauntlet of trees.

White water rushed over a piece of the cliff face nearly thirty feet across and cascaded down into the gorge to feed the river flowing south. They could see blackbirds gliding through the mists thrown into the air. The birds flew low and edged near the drop and then backed out into the gorge again, as if daring themselves to plunge headfirst into the waterfall and test the consequences.

And then, looming ahead almost straight up the slope, was the eastern face of Facility 47. It was a wide fortress of concrete that jutted at least forty feet from the side of the mountain. They could only see the grey top of the structure at first, and the antenna array that rose almost to the mountain's peak fifty feet up. As they walked closer they got a view of what looked be a huge garage. A dented silver slide-down door stretched thirty feet across and at least twelve feet high, and to the right of it was a large circuit box and a two-sided personnel door. Some of structure's concrete walls came out from the earth under support beams, but that was all that was visible of the facility outside the face of the mountain. Up the slope there were mangled trees and churned soil and burned rocks that testified to some kind of bombardment this high up, but it hadn't done apparent damage to the facility itself. To the left of the garage there was a mineshaft that seemed to have been sealed with concrete. A Daimler dump truck sat near the mineshaft with its head parked in a group of birch trees. Its tires were covered in mud and flakes of dried grey rock and its windows were fogged such that one couldn't see inside.

In front of the main structure, a large lot of fresh flat asphalt stretched out a hundred feet to the edge of the trees. Parked on the far right side of the lot were three cargo trucks, all still with materials in their holds. A pair of motorcycles lay on their sides near a large spruce that grew near the edge of the asphalt, the small vehicles coated in

months of rust and some patches of green mold. A pair of filthy long pants and a lone boot lay by the forest, and a tattered white shirt hung from a branch at the tree line.

Nothing living moved. No people. No birds. No ground animals. Even insects seemed to have left this place to its quiet rest.

The men stood in a line side by side and looked over the scene, bent over and taking heavy breaths from the climb with their packs hanging slanted to one side of their backs.

"Doesn't look like much," said Ben.

Michael shook his head. "Nah, it sure doesn't," he said. He looked past the mountain into the reddening sky. "Dammit, I wanted to do this in the morning. We've got a few hours before dark."

"Well, we could always camp out," said John. "We get some rest and go inside in the morning. What do you think, Mike?"

"I think," said Charlie, "that it's going to be dark in there either way." He pushed his bangs from his face and inhaled sharply. "Since when does it take us three hours for a retrieval? We go in and we come out. Doesn't matter how strong the light is out here."

Michael thought that over for a few moments then nodded. It had been too hard a journey to simply set up a campfire outside the sleeping facility and wait for morning. "I agree," he said. "I want to get inside." He turned to John. "Don't you want to get inside?"

John looked back at the facility and then at the ground, and then up at Michael to see him looking hard on him, pressing him for an affirmative answer. "Yeah, Mike," he said. "Of course."

Michael began walking closer to the great concrete face of the structure. “Good then. Let’s crack her open.”

Charlie ran out ahead of the others, the straps on his pack nearly pulling loose as he hobbled over to the garage door. As he got closer he took more careful steps, and he put his ear to the metal and tapped the door with the knuckles of both outstretched fists. He stood still for moment, moved a few yards to the right, then leaned his ear to the metal and tapped again. He had his own magic, an animalistic sense of where and how a barrier could be blown apart. He tapped once more on the same spot then stood back from the door.

“I dare say we won’t blasting our way through that,” he said with only a hint of disappointment. He walked over to the personnel door on the right and examined it, dipping his head down and then raising it and moving it from side to side. He walked close to the door and pressed his ear to it as high as he could and tapped with one hand. Then he knelt low and did the same thing, then stood up and stepped back. He turned to the others and grinned. “This one should be more hospitable,” he said. Then he undid the straps of his pack and let it fall to the ground and began rummaging around inside.

Ben walked over toward the parked cargo trucks. “Gonna go ahead and get behind something,” he said.

Michael and John followed him and stood behind the truck farthest from the door.

Charlie took five of his custom-made charges - six-inch Twinkie-shaped bricks - from inside the pack and removed the protected padding. He sought out five points in a sort of semicircle along the edge of the door and carefully placed one charge on each point, removing the wax paper cover and sticking them to the metal. He took an electric

fuse line from the pack and unspooled it so there was enough to connect all five charges, checked the connections delicately with his fingers, then took a small ignition box with a single switch out of his supplies and slung the pack back over his shoulders. He did a strange skip backwards toward the others by the truck, the box in one hand and the length of line unspooling from the other. He knelt down, careful with his bad leg, and attached the end of the fuse line to the ignition switch.

The other scooted further behind the truck. Ben and John tried to get their heads around to see, but Michael kept his back to one of the large truck tires and faced the forest. He always hated this part. His ears didn't take the blast well and he always plugged them with his fingers and looked away.

"Keep your heads down, my boys," said Charlie,

"You sure your little toys aren't gonna blow up this whole damn mountain?" asked John.

Charlie cackled. "Watch your tongue," he said.

"Just do it," said Michael as he stuck an index finger in each ear and closed his eyes.

Charlie connected the line to the box and pushed himself just a little farther behind the truck. "Here goes," he said. And he pressed down on the button.

Nothing happened.

Michael opened one eye. "What happened?"

John laughed. "Plastic little toys," he said. "Whatever happened to good ole TNT?"

Charlie pressed down on the button over and over. “TNT demolishes all, you simpleton,” he snapped. “Best to face the explosion inward as much as possible.” He turned the box upside down and pressed the button again. “I affixed the bloody box to the—”

The charges went off and a storm of smoke and powdered concrete rushed out from the doorway. Pieces of rock skittered out over the asphalt and rained down onto the trucks and landed near the men’s feet. The thunderous noise carried up the mountain and into the trees. Even Charlie’s inward-directed, electric-layered charges made a big mess.

Charlie had his out from behind the truck the explosion happened, and he spat rock dust from his mouth and ran a hand through his hair and over his face. He looked at the others with streaks of powdered grey on his cheeks and nose and forehead and wore a big grin. “That sounded correct,” he said. He got on his feet and went over to the doorway. The others stood up and came out from behind their cover.

When the smoke and dust began to settle over the asphalt lot they could see that had come completely off and fallen to the ground outside. Large portions of the concrete surrounding the doorway had been blown out but not very far, as the biggest chunks lay just outside the greater structure. And as the smoke and dust cleared further, they got their first glimpse inside the facility. But aside from a portion of grey painted floor and a sliver of railing on the left side lit by the declining sunlight outside, they could see only black.

Ben reached over and with his large hand he patted Charlie on the shoulder. “Good work,” he said.

Charlie was still grinning as he examined his handiwork. “That door structure was a healthy foot thick,” he said, pointing. “Not quite a lower bunker on the Maginot, but not bad.”

Michael nodded his head and couldn’t help but grin along with Charlie. He drew his .45 and took a few steps toward the door. He tried to see further inside, but he couldn’t. The darkness was unbroken past the first several feet. He could hear nothing within the facility. Air escaped from inside and it was stale with faint whiffs of wood and steel. The place had likely lacked circulation for at least a few months. But he noticed another faint scent in the air. It wasn’t exactly the scent of death, a scent he knew too well, but it was related in some way, a slightly sweet air tinged with something like that of an opened tree root. Natural yet unlike anything natural he’d ever smelled.

John waved a hand in front of his nose. “A little ripe in there,” he said, coming close to Michael. “Not too bad though.”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, not too bad.” He turned to the others. “Keep your weapons handy.”

Ben nodded and got both hands on his rifle and Charlie held his Thompson in one hand by the stock. John brought the shotgun around and held with a grip far up the barrel. “Now my partner’s in her natural habitat,” he said, and he petted the barrel as if it were a small animal.

“Cap’, look,” said Ben.

He was looking back at the forest. The day was quickly being usurped by nightfall and the ground below the trees was dark and the moss and lichen attained a strange glow. But what Ben remarked upon was the fireflies. They rose from the dark of the forest

floor, hundreds of them, and they bounced up and down amongst each other in the air and formed a long row that came forward almost as one entity to the tree line. The formation came over the asphalt lot a few feet but then drifted back to the trees and remained there in a vibrant phalanx of tiny flickering lights.

"Krauts sure do have some weird wilderness," said John.

Ben walked out toward the fireflies but as soon as he moved the row of insects drifted back a further few paces into the trees. They came forward once more, only slightly, then drifted so far into the darkening forest that they became sole points of light in the space between flora. And then they dimmed their lights and vanished.

Michael turned and looked back into the wrecked doorway to Facility 47, and he took the flashlight from his belt with his free hand and clicked the beam on and aimed it inside. "Let's do this," he said.

And they went inside.

Part Three

Facility 47

VIII

Dead Spaces

"The damn light doesn't go far enough."

John tapped his flashlight on the railing to his left, as if that would make the beam any stronger. The first interior space the group encountered was cavernous, with the door they'd blown past leading onto a raised walkway sided by the strong steel railing.

Ben shined his light onto the lower floor some fifteen feet below and his beam crossed up to find down ramp from the long steel door and the back portion of a cargo truck like the ones outside. "Found the garage," he said.

"Keep to the railing," said Michael. He kept his left hand on the rail as he went forward and shined his light straight ahead where he saw the faint outline of another doorway at the end of the walkway.

John whistled and his noise carried into the wide space and bounced off the far walls back to him. "Like they hollowed out the whole damn mountain."

"It's a garage," Ben corrected him. "Sure it gets smaller the deeper we go."

"Nice whistle," Charlie said to John. He still hadn't turned on his flashlight. "Wake up the whole goddamn place."

John turned and shined his light in Charlie's face. "Am I mistaken, or did you just blow a fucking hole in the wall?"

"Knock it off," Michael snapped. "You'd think you were G.I.s. Keep alert."

Ben and John shined their beams over the rest of the garage, illuminating a black Mercedes staff car with a dust-covered windshield and a stack of three large crates with

German markings not quite distinguishable in the dim light. A few rifles had been left on the smooth grey painted floor, along with a several spent shell casings and a handful of five-round gun magazines. There was also a pair of dark areas on the floor with smears that made it seem as though they had been vigorously scrubbed. Ben put his light on the staff car again which faced directly away from him, and he noticed a rope tied to the silver hitch that led all the way below him, where it was tied to one of the thin steel walkway supports.

"The hell?" said Ben.

Michael saw him looking straight down from the walkway and walked over to find out what had his attention. He looked at the rope and traced it back to the staff car. Someone trying to pull the support from under the walkway, but for what purpose any of them could only guess at. "I dunno," said Michael.

"Left in a hurry, huh?" said John, discovering more stacks of large crates near what looked like the entrance to a tunnel on the far right side adjacent to the next door that waited at the end of the walkway. One of the crates had been tipped on its side and opened and its innards of metal pipe fittings were spilled out onto the garage floor.

Michael nodded. "Left in a hurry," he agreed. "John, get on point and keep a light forward on that door up ahead."

"You got it, Mike." John walked ahead and faced his light in that direction.

Michael scanned the nearby walls by any electrical fixtures. "Everyone keep an eye out for a light switch," he said.

They continued down the walkway to the door, which had a long window to its left so as to give those inside a view of the garage. Charlie hustled up ahead of the others

and began reaching into his bag, but Michael reached out the door latch and pulled it and the door came open. Charlie grimaced in disappointment. Michael grinned but stayed focused with his .45 held out and shined a light inside the door.

It was a small control room, with an electronic switchboard and two chairs in front of a radio console that had three different inputs, the same number as the antennas they had seen rising out of the outer structure. There was a hook board near the window with some keys and clipboards hanging on it. Michael got a closer look at them while the others filed into the room.

There were two shipping manifests and a general personnel roster. The manifests seemed to list nothing out of the ordinary. Food stuffs, water tanks, electrical equipment, those pipe fittings that were spilling on the garage floor. But down the list there were several entries concerning rather large shipments of aluminum plating, the kind often used in airplane manufacturing but which had little use in underground laboratory construction, at least so far as Michael knew.

The personnel roster had last been updated on April 22 and it had around fifty names, all in neatly ordered groups that labeled them as military, maintenance, research personnel, with a few listings for special officers. A commanding officer was noted at the top of the roster by the name of Colonel Heimar Rutgen.

"Anything catch your eye there, Mike?" asked John.

Michael shook his head. The roster told him nothing. The aluminum on the manifest he logged in the back of his mind, but he had no way of knowing what it meant. "Not a really big crew here," he said. "A tad over fifty on the roster."

"Cap'," Ben whispered.

“I’m not sure you need to whisper, Ben,” said Michael. “I thinking we’re the only ones here.”

In the corner of the small room, Ben pushed a small lever up and the ceiling hummed. There were grinding noises above that carried down behind the concrete walls and then the light fixture in the center of the room’s ceiling flickered to life and cast hard white light on everything inside.

John smiled and clapped his hands. “Mister Ben with the magic switch!” he said.

Charlie leaned against a desk topped by a wooden collection of small mail cubbies, some with envelopes and papers still stuffed inside. “The man just lifted a lever,” he said.

Ben grinned.

“Well, if this one works then I’m thinking others will too,” said Michael. He clicked off his flashlight to save the battery as the others did the same and he walked across the room past John to a map he saw posted on the wall. “Here we go,” he said.

It was the facility’s basic floor plan. There three diagrams depicting three levels, and this garage level appeared to be at the top, listed as “Fussboden Einer,” or “Floor One.” According to the diagram, beyond the inventory room was a large mess hall and a kitchen, and then the crew and officer quarters. But that was all on the first level. Below that, Floor Two looked to be much larger. There was a tunnel on the right side of the diagram, likely coming down from the entrance they’d spotted at the back of the garage, and it led to a great central chamber that took up most of the level space. There were a series of rooms adjacent to this chamber, which were likely right under their feet and were marked as Labors, or laboratories. On the left side, connected to the entrance tunnel,

was a long corridor with several storage rooms and an elevator shaft that led directly underneath to the much smaller Floor Three, which seemed reserved for an auxiliary power station and utility controls.

But back on Floor Two, in the middle of the large central chamber surrounded by a drawn square, was a space marked "*Grabungsaufstellungsort*," a long German term essentially meaning "Excavation."

John stepped up behind Michael and looked at the map. "So we got three levels to work with?" he asked.

Michael nodded. "Looks that way."

Charlie and Ben also came over to get a look. Charlie pushed John to the side a little, causing John to sneer at him. Charlie squinted his eyes and looked closely at the maps. "That's a strange word in the middle there," he said. His German was strong conversationally, but he wasn't as well read in the language as Michael. "Is that a dig site?"

"More or less," said Michael. "Means excavation."

"Excavation?" said John. "Like a mine?"

Ben stepped back from the map and looked out the small window of the next door to the pitch black chamber that lay beyond. "They were digging," he said.

Michael nodded. "Andrei suspected as much."

John snorted. "What else did the Russian suspect?"

Michael said nothing as he continued studying the map.

Ben turned away from the door window and the dark on the other side and stood tall. "Maybe tell us a little more, Cap'," he said. "Before we head on any further."

The other two kept quiet but their eyes requested the same.

"Honestly," said Michael, "he didn't know a whole lot. Certainly less than Eliza. He said he didn't think the Nazis were building this place to hide, like a lot of the other labs. They built it to find something."

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest. "Any idea what that might be?" he asked.

Michael shook his head. "No," he said. "Might have been Hitler chasing his legends. But whatever he was after, he invested a lot of resources in this place. Valuable resources. And I'm thinking they're still here."

Charlie grinned. "My thoughts precisely," he said, and he tilted his head toward the map. "I've got my eye on those storage rooms."

Ben made sure his rifle was slung tightly over his back and pulled out his pistol to go along with the flashlight. "What we came here for, right?" he said.

Michael held his Thompson in one hand and tucked the stock into his elbow and raised it so the barrel was aimed upward. "Mess hall and crew quarters are out this way," he said, gesturing with the weapon toward the door. "Let's check them out."

"Come on, Mike," said John. "You don't wanna head right down the storage units?"

Michael shook his head. "We need to secure those quarters," he said, gripping the flashlight in his left hand and walking to the door. "It won't take long. We just need to make sure we're alone here."

He reached out and tore the map from the wall and used two fingers to hold it in the same hand as the flashlight. He clicked the light on and opened the door to a dark corridor, and they followed him into it.

The light from the inventory room carried a ways into the hall past the open door and hit against a bend in the wall that marked a fork in the passageway, one way leading ahead to the left and the other to the right at a gradual angle. The four beams of light from the men's flashlights bounced down each direction and on the right side was nothing but more corridor, and on the left they could see the edge of a large door around the bend.

"That should be the mess hall," said Michael, shining his light to the left. He then pointed to the right. "And down that way should be the crew quarters. Charlie, Ben, you want the mess hall?"

Ben nodded and Charlie thumped a fist against his chest and held his hand in the air. "I accept," said Charlie.

"Good," said Michael. "John, let's check out the quarters. Check for light switches. They obviously have a generator system somewhere. Remember, note anything of interest, anything that could tell us more about this place, and what the hell happened here."

"It's dark," said Charlie. "We'll need to find out more than that before we're done."

He strolled down the left passageway while he whistled a slow tune, cradling his Thompson in a relaxed position in his left arm and panning his light back and forth out across the grey floor. Ben followed, his pistol locked in a tight grip and aimed straight ahead.

Michael looked over at John, and the light coming out from the inventory room revealed most of his face as he smiled and patted John on the shoulder. "Let's see what we can find," he said.

The two men walked to the right and the passageway seemed to snake along, taking slight curves but maintaining a generally straight direction until it suddenly turned left a few yards ahead. The walls were painted concrete without decoration or much written marking, only thin water pipes and power cables that slithered along the middle of the round arched ceiling where dormant rectangular light fixtures hung overhead. At the turn the corridor forked again, one way leading straight ahead and the other making another left and leading to the mess hall. Michael looked down at the way and through the thin windows in the closed door he saw the Charlie and Ben's flashlight beams and heard Charlie whistle wafting through the empty spaces. At the fork there two marking on the grey walls; a white arrow pointing left to the mess hall and in white lettering labeled in German "*Verwirrunghalle*," and a white arrow pointing ahead toward the corridor that stretched on and became very dark, labeled "*Kasernen*," or "Barracks."

They kept going in that direction.

Twin doors marked the entrance to this section of the facility. Michael pushed one open and shined his light inside and made out a wide corridor that ended about twenty yards ahead, with two passageways leading from it to the left, one at the far end and the other just a few yards ahead. Like the rest of the floors he'd seen since they'd gotten past the garage, these were clean with no stains or debris or anything suggesting chaos or violence. They walked to where the first passageway led left and went that way.

John opened a door on the left side. "Pretty standard bunks," he said. He scanned the inside and draped his light over a row of ten double-stacked bunks, metal framed with thin mattresses covered by dark green sheets. The beds all looked made and the

footlockers at the base of each bunk were all closed, many sealed with key locks. There were no bodies in the room, nothing even to suggest anyone had ever lived there.

Michael went into the room and saw racks lining the walls with many pressed and ironed uniforms and work clothes suspended from their wooden hang poles. Each rack was topped by a long shelf and on these shelves were helmets and gas masks and some closed metal containers. Below the racks were footwear, work boots and some boots with some kind of special green film around the leather that made look like candied replicas. The boots were not as numerous as the uniforms or the helmets and gas masks.

Michael walked amongst the empty bunks. “This room alone could hold a couple dozen,” he said. “That’s gotta be the bulk of the enlisted personnel.”

“Goddamnm, Mike, a lot of this stuff looks people weren’t even dressed for morning muster,” said John. “Uni’s pressed. Most everything in its place. They wouldn’t have that many extras, would they?”

Michael found a half-eaten chocolate bar on the shelf by one of the gas masks, and thought it odd that in all that time insects hadn’t gotten to it. He shook his head. “I don’t know.” He found a light switch by the door and flicked it, but this time nothing happened. He frowned. “Damn.”

They left the bunks and went to the officer’s rooms, of which there were eight, but they found more of the same. The spaces were wider, and the beds were larger, but they were perfectly tucked and made like the others and the closets appeared full. These rooms all had plain wood writing desks and most had framed pictures of family and wives and military group photos filled with smiles from older days when these men

looked to be on the winning side of things. But there were still no bodies, and no evidence of what had brought this place to buried silence.

"I wanna see where the head man slept," said Michael. He lifted his map and shined the light on it and saw at the top right corner of the diagram a label for the commanding officer's quarters, at the end of the barracks' main corridor.

The door to this room was locked. The stenciling on the window read "*Colonel Rutgen, Facility Commandant.*"

John tucked his flashlight in his belt and aimed his shotgun at the door handle. Michael grabbed the barrel and shoved it away.

"Think straight, dammit," said Michael. He slung the Thompson over his shoulder and produced a small metal pick from his shirt pocket and stuck it in the narrow keyhole under the handle. It took a few moments but the simple lock gave up its hold and the door came open.

This room was square with the same plain grey walls as the others but it was spacious and it contained many more furnishings. It had its own adjacent washroom and had a high wide bed with large pillows and an antique brass lamp on a stand by its side. There was light switch by the doorway, but it too did nothing. Just inside to the left there was a large heavy desk with paper documents collected in neat stacks. Two white ivory inkwells sat to the side and a lamp sat at the back and loomed over the writing surface.

John went to the bed and ran a hand over the fine Burmese silk. "No sign of the big man either," he said.

Michael saw a picture frame on the desk and lifted it to get a closer look. It held a photograph – professionally taken - of a large man in a Wermacht field uniform with no

decorations hoisting a small boy into the air by his arms, both of them smiling. The sharp white peaks of the Alps rose in the background. But even though the picture frame sat very neatly and propped up in the corner of the workspace, the glass surface was cracked and had some small red stains in its lower corners that looked like dried blood. Michael put it back on the table where'd he picked it up.

Nearby, also marked by dark specks, was a book, a children's book judging from the faded yellow cover and the nineteenth-century-style illustrations of a long-haired prince with a small and plain crown sitting before a tree in a dark space that looked to be a cavern. Michael read the title written in finely painted letters: *The Prince and the Cave of Secrets*. He flipped through the book and saw pictures of a castle and cave and a glowing tree, and though he couldn't say exactly why if someone had asked, the book felt important. He loosened the straps on his pack and brought it to his side and stuffed the book inside.

John opened the drawers of a dresser near the bed and rummaged through the contents and dropped his flashlight. "Shit," he muttered. He picked it up and in doing so he shined the light under the bed. "Hey, Mike, he's got something stored away!"

"What is it?"

John pulled out a thin chest made of darkened oak and adorned with a gold key lock. He put his flashlight on the bed and lifted the chest up onto the mattress. Michael kept a light on it so John could see what he was doing. John held the lock in one hand and shook it some. "Simple little thing," he said. He looked up at Michael. "Couldn't hurt to see what's inside, don't ya think?"

Michael nodded. “Use the snips,” he said. “Don’t try to shoot any more locks with that damn shotgun.”

John smirked and reached into his bag and brought a pair of long-handled steel snips. He jostled it into position around the thin clasp of the lock and in one try severed it and the gold device came loose and fell onto the floor with a metallic thud. He opened the chest and shined his flashlight inside. “Just a bunch of torn-up paper,” he said. “What kind of asshole puts a bunch of torn up paper in a locked chest?”

“Help me with your light,” said Michael, and he set his flashlight on the bed while John picked his up and made it so Michael could see the contents while he picked through them. Indeed it was a bunch of torn-up papers, some half-sheets of standard document paper was many other small than that. They all had handwritten words on them, some in messy quill ink and some in fine pen and others in a streaked dark red. Michael rubbed the red writing on one small shred of paper with his hand and it smear just a little, enough that Michael saw the specks and color variation of blood that must have been shed a few months before, but not much earlier than that.

The messages were all short, and all were written in practiced handwriting that suggested educated German aristocracy, except the ones written in blood, which had the chaotic strokes and inelegant shapes of a child’s hand. One inked messaged read, *This is over.* Another read, *My head aches.* Another read, *Into the rabbit hole.* Another read, *They won’t let us leave.*

And then one the small scraps paper marked with blood read *We won’t let us leave.*

“Goddamn,” said John, reading the papers over Michael’s shoulder. “Must have been spending too much time by himself.”

Michael nodded. “A post like this one could do that to a man,” he said. He closed the chest, satisfied that it wouldn’t tell him anything more. “Places like this - ” He looked around the dark room with its minor luxuries brought down into the depths of a mountain.

“Oh, I’m sure you could do it,” said John. “Can’t think of much you couldn’t manage.” He opened the last drawers in the dresser and found only folded clothes and socks and shoved the drawers closed again and grunted. “Not a fucking thing in this place.” He stood up straight ran a hand down his face to wipe sweat away. They were all badly in need of showers as it was, but the stale air inside these corridors and rooms made their skin clammy and agitated their eyes.

“Captain!” shouted a voice from far away, through the thin doors of the barracks from near the mess hall. “Captain, we have ourselves a small find!” It was Charlie.

“Fuckin’ limey shouting like that,” said John.

Michael hurried out the door and John followed behind him. They jogged down the corridor and turned the corner toward the mess hall and saw Charlie standing in front of the rows of dining tables inside the large room. Charlie skipped backwards and waved to them and jerked his head back towards the kitchen, which was partially bathed in a cool white light from a room further back. Ben stood back there by the light and shook his head.

Charlie skipped backward another step as Michael and John came into the dining hall. “We found something a bit odd,” he said.

“Does it call for shouting and skipping like a goddamn Atlantic City showgirl?” asked Michael.

Charlie shrugged. “Probably not. Follow me.”

They all went back to where Ben stood in the kitchen amongst stainless steel storage cabinets and clean preparation tables. “I told him not to shout like that,” Ben said to Michael, and Michael saw the pistol gripped in the large man’s hand. “I did, Cap’. Don’t know what his problem is.” He cast a hard eye on Charlie such as he rarely did.

“It’s all right,” said Michael. He gave Ben a pat on the shoulder and walked past him to see where the light was coming from. To the left at the rear of the kitchen was a short corridor leading to a walk-in freezer, and the bright white light came from a high-watt bulb in the freezer ceiling. During the war, Germany had developed some of the most advanced refrigeration systems in the world, and this one looked state of the art. A large cooling unit protruded from the back wall and was decorated with an electric adjustment dial and a large thermostat, and wafts of cold white vapor flowed from its sides and settled on the floor in a ghostly fog that spilled out into the kitchen corridor until it disappeared in the warm air. There were both open shelves and closed storage compartments fixed on both walls, and they were still fairly well stocked with wrapped meats and rectangular bricks of cheese and large cartons of eggs.

But on the floor amidst the frigid fog, Michael saw what Charlie must have been shouting about. There were weapons, dozens of them, piled on the floor in the back of the freezer. Rifles, several MP-40 submachine guns, even a Panzershrek anti-tank rocket launcher with a loaded round. It was enough arms to equip an entire platoon.

Ben walked up behind Michael. His breathing was slow. “We do you think, Cap’?” he asked.

Michael tried to imagine reasons for using a freezer as an armory. That kind of temperature and moisture would kill the weapons over time. They probably already were defunct. He looked up at the lights in the ceiling. “You try the kitchen lights and the ones in the mess hall?” he asked.

Ben nodded. “We found some switches,” he said. “None of them worked. This was on when we got here.” He pointed down. “Saw the light coming underneath the door a bit.”

Charlie pushed past them and walked into the freezer and picked up an MP-40 and admired it for a moment. He looked back at the others and grinned. “I do believe we may have entered some strange wilderness,” he said.

Michael couldn’t disagree with that. “Let’s get the rest of this place scouted,” he said. “I’m thinking we find everything we need in the lower level.”

“Find anything in the quarters?” Ben asked.

Michael looked back at John, who was sitting up on one of the steel preparation tables. John shrugged.

“Not much,” said Michael.

“No bodies?” asked Ben.

Michael and John both shook their heads. John exhaled. “Nothing,” he said.

Charlie dropped the MP-40 and it clanged loudly on the floor of the freezer. “Shall we continue on down?” he said.

Ben nodded before Michael this time. The men gathered their gear again and clicked on their flashlights and Ben closed the door to the freezer and thus shut the cool blue light back into its chamber. They walked back to the garage at the main entrance, and went down the tramway that led down to the lower level, to where the dig site for whatever had been sought in this place awaited them.

IX

Lower Levels

"Strange smells down here, Cap'." Ben carefully stepped over the steel tram line that went down the middle of the dark corridor. He walked in front of the others and scanned ahead with his flashlight, but all they saw were more concave concrete walls and more tram lines.

He was right about the smells. Starting at the corner of the garage and continuing down into the corridor, the air had an odd organic tinge to it that did not mix well with a stale scent of cool metal and lead paint. It was akin to the odor one encountered when splitting open a tree, the scent of plant flesh wounded and exposed but still alive. It hung high in the air, and when they ducked low to the ground the smell lost strength.

The tram corridor bent to the right and opened up into a great space. Their flashlights could not carry all the way over it, and the beams faltered some thirty yards out, but that was far enough to see a parked cargo tram at the end of the rail to the right of a raised viewing platform that seemed to be near the center of this large chamber.

Michael took a look at the facility's layout. "This must be the big one," he said.

"The big one?" said John. "As in where they were doing all that digging?"

"Think so," Michael replied. He walked out in front and shined his light on the cargo tram, and the first insects they'd seen since fled the brightness, cave beetles with round backs that glowed white in the light as they scurried back to the dark. And there Michael found the first sure sign of carnage.

The tram had a cab for a driver and spots for up to six people to ride on the sides, and in back there was a flat cargo bed. On the cargo bed were arrayed tools, a hammer and a pair of forceps and a few pick axes. They were all covered in dried blood, some with dark encrusted globs of decayed remains stuck to the metal, and they were all set neatly in a semi-circular pattern.

"What the fuck?" said John when he saw what Michael had illuminated.

Michael took a few steps closer. A round pile of mush sat next to the forceps, and a closer look showed it to be an eye. Michael shook his head.

Behind them, Charlie tapped the steel toe of his boot on the hard floor. "It's the damndest thing," he said.

"I'll agree to that," said Michael, still looking at the bloody tools.

"No," said Charlie. "My hand."

Michael tuned around shined his light at Charlie and saw him looking down at his free hand. Charlie held the hand close to this chest, but it jerked out in sharp, sudden motions. Three times it would do this, then it would be still for a few moments, then three more times. Charlie looked up at Michael and grinned but his eyes were confused and even appeared frantic. "I'm not doing that, Captain," he said.

"What do you mean, you're not doing it?" asked Michael.

Charlie looked down at his hand, watched it jerk out from his body three times, and hurriedly stuffed it in his pant pocket. "It's the damndest thing, is all," he said.

Michael stared Charlie down, but Ben called out to him from the other side of the chamber entrance. "How do you guys not smell this?" he asked.

John waved a hand in front of his face, and he looked at Michael knowingly. “That smell I know,” he said.

Michael caught it in his nostrils too, but it was faint until he stepped over to where Ben and John had their noses attuned. The smell was sickly sweet, mixed with dust and the scent of earth but there was no mistaking the smell of the dead. Ben shined his light off in that direction, down a long concrete wall to a set of large double doors that had been sealed shut by one of the sheets of aluminum referenced in the manifest. It was stamped to both doors with large iron nails. Drawn in white paint over the doors in violent strokes was a single word: *Hausa*. Or *Home*.

Michael tried to pull on the aluminum sheet but it was nailed in tight. “Ben, you have those short shears?” he asked.

Ben stood away from the door and held the hand gripping his pistol close to his nose. “Why go in there?” he asked.

John shrugged. “I’m with Ben on that one, Mike,” he said.

Michael slammed a fist on the aluminum and the bang echoed through the dark and cavernous facility behind them. He turned from the doors and took aggressive steps toward John, who back away. “Did I fucking ask you what you thought?” he said. “I asked Ben if he had the fucking short shears on him.” He turned to Ben, who stood still and quiet. “So, big guy, do you have them?”

Ben looked at Charlie, who leaned against the wall by the doors and aimed his flashlight down at his feet and clicked it on and off in a slow strobe. Ben looked back to Michael and nodded. “Yeah, I got ‘em,” he said. “In my pack.”

Michael holstered his pistol and went behind Ben and opened his pack. He cursed as he shuffled through the contents and then brought out a pair of wood-handled short shears meant for cutting metal wire. If the aluminum sheet wasn't too thick, they should be able to slice through it. He cut the air with them a couple times, and then went over to the double doors.

"I don't know about the rest of you," he said, "but I'm not trying to stay down here any longer than I fucking have to." He got the lower blade of the shears up under the aluminum sheet, and with a powerful press cut through the metal. He rose the shears and did the same thing. "And these, if you remember, according to the map, are the storage units. And I'm thinking if we're going to find the good stuff, we're going to find it in here." He cut all the way through the center of the sheet and tossed the shears back to Ben, who caught them with one hand. Michael grabbed one of the door handles and pulled it open, and when he did, the smell hit him in the face like a jet of soiled water. The others coughed and covered their faces with hands or sleeves and stepped away from the doors, even Charlie, who took a break from his private light show to skip backwards a ways toward the tram corridor.

John gathered saliva in his mouth and spat it out onto the floor. "My sweet Mary," he said. "Maybe everybody's home after all."

Michael stuck his flashlight out like a sword to light up the dark inside the storage chamber. The light did not get past the wall that waited just six feet past the door, a wall painted with a crude white arrow pointing down, a line of dried white paint leading down to the bare floor. Both left and right were halls leading away from the doors, and the powerful smell came from somewhere down the left hall. It wasn't just the smell of

death. The men had all come against that before. It was a smell of death with a soaking of chemicals, like floor cleaner or disinfectant and even a hint of soap. As if whatever had died inside or been brought there after death, others had attempted to make the site clean.

Michael took one look back toward the great darkness behind them, and his flashlight still didn't make it past the raised platform that stood near what the map suggested was the dig. He felt a pulse in his forehead. Not so much pain, but a pressure that moved from side of his skull to his other. He shook his head and believed he numbed the sensation away, or convinced himself he had, and he turned back to the dark hall and stepped up to the door.

"I don't know," he said softly to himself, staring down the hallway's abyss to his left.

Above him, the sound of electricity surged down the ceiling of the storage chamber. The thin top lights buzzed and flickered to life and draped faint bluish white over the grey walls and floors and lit the way down to a room at the far end of the hall that kept its darkness. Michael looked around for a power switch and then looked back at the others who stood just as confused as he was. The walls seemed to edge closer to him, but after he blinked they returned to their original place. His head throbbed for a moment, but he ignored the pain and it subsided.

"Anyone hit a switch?" Michael asked.

Ben and John shook their heads. Michael couldn't see Charlie right away and when he searched with his flashlight back toward the tramway he saw him sitting on the ground, his back to the outer wall of the storage chamber, eyes fixed on his hand as it jerked in intervals of three.

“Charlie?” he said.

Charlie looked back at him and grinned and stood back up. “Have some light, do we?” he said.

Michael nodded, and tried to keep Charlie’s new oddness from his mind for the time being. “Yeah,” he said. He looked at the ceiling inside and then shined his light above the doorway, scanning metal beams set against mountain stone that made up a portion of the great chamber’s sloped wall. He saw no cables, no circuit breakers. They could have been set inside the walls, but he could think of nothing enabling the power to turn itself on. He took his .45 from its holster and made sure it was cocked.

“Everyone keep your weapons good, yeah?” he said. He looked at the ceiling lights again and found himself getting lost in the soft flicker of the faint blue. He spoke to himself again, “What the hell is powering this place?” He turned to the others. “Might wanna tie some rags around your face.”

And they did. They took pieces of cloth stained with gun oil from their packs and tied them so they covered their mouths and noses, and when Michael had done the same he went inside past the white down arrow and took the hallway to the left. The others followed. He looked back once to make sure Charlie was with them, and he was, taking strange half-steps and looking mostly at the floor.

The lights flickered more intensely for a moment but settled into a steady hum. The smell got stronger the farther they walked. It was surely the right direction. Michael got to the end of the hall where a door sat open and he shined his light inside and the first thing he saw were hands.

The fingers reached down toward the floor, where a dark pool of blood had dried and turned nearly black, and as Michael raised the beam upward he saw that the corpse was hung from the ceiling by industrial-use metal cable. A steel hook had been drilled into the ceiling strongly enough to support the weight. The man had socks on his feet but no shoes, and there were no visible wounds on his body. Then Michael reached out with a timid hand and turned the man around, and though the skin on the face had decayed and turned a wrinkled grey, it was clear the eyes had been gouged from their holes.

John and Ben stood on either side of Michael and shined their lights into other corners of the room. Two more bodies, both hung from the ceiling, both with grey skin and missing eyes. The three men said nothing as they examined the corpses. The uniforms of the dead men were all still tucked into their pants and there appeared to be no blood stains on their clothes. They had been strung up like that before their eyes had been removed.

Michael noted the black clothing of the men their insignias, which included white-trimmed S.S. rank patches on their shoulders and silver skull-and-crossbones emblems on their chests known as "*totenkopfs*," or "death's heads."

"Damn, got some S.S.," said John.

"Not just S.S.," said Michael. He noted the Roman numeral IV on the emblems. "These guys were from a special outfit in Berlin. Hitler's own boys." He tried to focus on the uniforms and not the rotting flesh. "I doubt they were regular staff here. Someone clearly didn't want them around."

Charlie came into the room last and leaned his back against the wall just past the door. "I assume we will find no gold in this room," he said.

“I gotta tell you, Fish n’ Chips,” said John, “I’m getting pretty tired of what you call a sense of humor.”

Charlie took a step toward John. “Well I’ve been growing tired of what you call a qualified skill set.”

Michael snapped his fingers. “What the fuck?” he said, turned to the two of them. “Get your goddamn heads right.” He addressed both of them, though he sided with John, who stood looking at the ground, noticeably shaken.

Ben just shook his head. He shined his light past the hanging corpses to a row of large metal safe-storage lockers lining the back wall of the room. They were secured by padlocks, a new model that none of them had seen before. They were rectangular with two small knobs on each side and a single clasp. Probably a more recent and more advanced German design, but they looked quite breakable. “Something to look into,” said Ben.

Michael holstered his pistol and walked past the corpses to the lockers. The others hung back, surprised to see their leader walk so quickly past that scene and into the dark. “Charlie, if you’d like to make yourself useful, bring your lock charges over here and get to work,” he said.

Charlie followed him to the storage lockers. “Oh, order and I shall obey, Captain,” he said. “Onward into the new breach.”

There were blood trails on the floor leading there. Charlie saw them before Michael, and he waved flicked his light over them in a zigzag pattern. He chuckled some. The blood was mostly scattered drops and some light dried spatter, as if someone had carried something dripping.

Michael noted the trail and kept going, and he strode up to the far left locker in the far corner of the room and grabbed its lock with one hand.

"Might be a double," he said, referring the number of locking mechanisms inside the device. "You've got more experience than I do with those. You think you can pick it?"

Charlie leaned forward and he sniffed the lock in Michael's hand. He grinned. "No need to pick," he said, and he reached into his bag. He pulled out a box wrapped in a satin sleeve and using his flashlight hand he pulled the sleeve off and tucked it in between two fingers. He knelt down and sat the thin metal box on the floor and removed the top to reveal ten long thin charges.

"I don't think I've seen those before," said Michael.

Charlie bit the satin sleeve between his teeth so as to get a better grip on his flashlight and looked up at Michael and grinned. "Special ones, these are," he said. He picked up and held it between his thumb and index finger so Michael could see it in the light. It was a rectangular block surrounded on all but one side by grey steel with an imprinted number on the metal. The exposed end was coated with a sheet of wax paper but the sliver of white plastic explosive could be seen inside. Charlie tilted it in his fingers. "Blows right into the lock and affects nothing else. Not even so loud, as I've tested it."

John kicked the floor with his boot. "Yeah, like those dandies you used to blow the door were so quiet," he said.

Charlie looked down and laughed to himself and seemed desperate to contain anger. He looked back up at Michael. “I’d love to try them on some doubles,” he said. “The principle, as it pertains, is essentially the same.”

“I don’t want to set off explosives,” said Michael. “Too tight in here. Can’t you just pick them?”

Charlie thought about that for a fleeting moment and shook his head. “No,” he said. “I cannot just pick them.”

Michael nodded. He looked down the row at seven other storage lockers, and found himself angry at the gall they had to be even be sealed in the first place. It was irrational, he knew, but even the simplest barriers had a way of infuriating him, touching some kind of nerve deep in his mind that he could not numb. He patted Charlie on the shoulder. “Blow them all,” he said. “Get these fuckers open.”

Charlie clapped his hands and almost dropped the charge he held in the process. He turned to the others. “A fireworks show to liven up this blasted place!” he shouted.

John spat onto the floor. “Goddamnit,” he grumbled.

Michael backed to him and Ben. “We came down here for a fucking reason,” he said. He sidestepped one of the hanging corpses without looked at it. “I don’t know about you, but this little fun house tour is not worth the trip.” He shouted back, “Charlie, set your toys and blow these fucking things open! I want to get the hell out of here.”

Charlie performed a half-assed salute and attached charges to each of the locks, all the way down the wall, and then took out a role of fuse line and connected it to each charge. He took out his switch box and attached the fuse line and skipped backwards to the others and bumped into one of the corpses as he did so and barely retained his

balance. “Back, back, and back some more,” he said to the others. They walked back into the lit hallway a ways, then went back even further when Charlie kept skipping backward all the way to the door that had been sealed with the aluminum sheet. Charlie knelt down by the door while John and Ben kept their flashlight facing upward so as to bounce light of the ceiling and the walls. Michael looked out into the dark where the dig site lay beyond his sight, and he felt his head hurt again. He shook it off and tuned to Charlie.

“Not so loud, you said?” he asked.

Charlie shrugged. “As loud as it needs to be,” he said. “Advised to cover your ears though.” But he didn’t even give them to time to do that before he pressed down on the switch box and blew the charges.

The blast sounded down the hall and spilled out into the dark of the main chamber and echoed off the high sloped walls of rock and metal and carried down a deep chasm that must have been the dig. John lost his footing and fell onto his back and Ben closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. Michael slapped the side of his head in an effort to stop the ringing but it didn’t work. He exhaled for a moment as the last echoes of the place faded to silence.

“What the hell,” he said.

John scrambled up off the ground and rushed toward Charlie but Ben stopped him with one outstretched arm. “You Limey fuck!” John shouted at Charlie. “You did that on purpose!”

Charlie sat down on the floor and buried his head in his hands. “I didn’t,” he said, though the others could barely hear his words.

“Yeah, bullshit!” said John.

“Take it easy,” said Michael. “Everyone all right?”

“I didn’t do it,” said Charlie, his face still hidden in his hands.

“Fine, it was an accident,” said Michael.

“Accident, my ass,” said John.

“No,” said Charlie, and he looked up at Michael. There was water in his eyes. “I mean I didn’t do it.”

Michael leaned in toward him. “What the hell are you talking about?” he asked him.

Charlie wiped his nose with his sleeve and blinked his eyes to dry them.

John smirked. “Are you kidding me?” he said. “Are you fucking crying?”

“Enough,” said Michael.

Charlie looked up again. “I’m saying I didn’t mean to press the switch. I…” His left hand jerked out three times and he pressed it against the floor so hard that it turned purple. “I didn’t mean to, Captain.”

For the first time in quite a while, Charlie’s evocation of Michael’s rank sounded sincere. Michael looked back at toward the dig. When he looked back at the Charlie he realized that Ben was no longer standing with them. He heard heavy footsteps heading back down the hallway to the storage room. “Ben?” he called.

There was no answer, but a moment later Michael heard heavy metal clanging onto the floor. Then again. He patted Charlie on the shoulder as he passed, more softly this time, and went to find Ben.

When he got to the room the corpses were swinging back and forth. In the limited light coming in from the hall they seemed to drift in mid air, swaying in quiet moments,

disturbed from their rest. Ben grabbed another blown lock, yanked it from the door of a storage locker, and tossed it onto the floor where it slid almost to Michael's feet. Michael looked down and saw the gnarled wound where Charlie's charge had ripped through the metal and exposed and singed the lock's inner gears. Ben went down the line until he'd removed all eight locks from their sealed lockers. He wiped a hand on his shirt and walked back to Michael.

"Let's get through this, Cap'," he said with a weary voice.

Michael nodded and stepped past him and went to open the first locker on the far left. The handle was heavy and seemed stuck at first but he got it loose and opened the door and shined his light inside. Maybe it was because he had rushed to open it without readying himself. Maybe it was because the thing with Charlie had thrown him off balance a little more. But when he saw what was inside the lockers bent down and dry heaved and then spit bitter saliva onto the floor.

The locker had three shelves inside. The large bottom space was empty, as was the slimmer shelf at the top. But on the middle shelf were a dozen severed hands, some neatly cut at the wrists with a sharp blade and others seemingly pulled off, with cracked bone and strings of rotted flesh clinging to the stumps. They had been thrown onto the shelf haphazardly, as one might toss dirty clothes onto an empty washboard. Stowed and locked away for some unfathomable reason. There was nothing else in the locker, though there was a word painted on the interior side of the door with the same white paint that marked the hall just outside. The translated word was *Relief*.

Ben stepped closer to get a better look. "This ain't the normal shit we're in," he said.

Michael slammed the locker shut. He went over to the next one and opened it. There was nothing inside, but on the inside of the door in white paint was the word *Peace*. He slammed it and went to the next. Nothing inside but the word *Penance*. He slammed that door and continued on.

Rapture.

Escape.

Cost.

Acceptance.

They were all empty except for the insane nonsensical words that drilled their way into Michael's head and led him to slam the doors so hard it was as if he were trying to bring down the entire facility around him. He opened the last locker on the far right. This one had no word on it, but it did have at least a dozen bloodied pieces of cloth piled on the bottom shelf, rags used for a cleaning that had happened months ago and which had done nothing to wipe the hell from this place. Michael kicked the last locker door shut and spit onto the floor again. "What the fuck is this shit!" he shouted. The others had gathered at the doorway and were watching him. Charlie peeked in, revealing only his head outside the hallway. Michael put his back against the nearest wall and wiped sweat from his face. The heat was getting to him by then. Stale heat that hung in the air and draped itself like a spider web over anyone who passed through it.

Ben spoke up first. "Maybe we should just leave," he said.

John shook his head. "There are other rooms," he said. "Lots of them. Right, Mike? You have that map."

Michael felt an odd pull in his fingers. His joints tightened up and he found himself cracking his knuckles without intending to but figured it was just nerves. He looked up at the others. “We can’t leave yet,” he said.

“Why not?” asked Ben.

Michael caught a sense of unfamiliar defiance in Ben’s tone, and he tilted his head to the side and cocked an eyebrow and took a step forward. “What the hell do you mean, ‘why not?’” he asked. “Since when are there a bunch of fucking ‘why not’s’ floating around this group? We came all this to find something and before we leave we’re going to fucking find something.”

Ben looked Michael back in the eye for a few moments then tilted his head ever so slightly downward and nodded. “All right,” he said. “Sorry, Cap’.”

John ran a hand through his hair and flicked beads of sweat onto the floor. “So yeah, where do we go now?”

Michael took out the floor plans and looked them over again. He saw where they were on the western side of Level Two, then found the dig site in the center of the level and then the labs in the southern chambers near the tramway they’d come down to get here. “The labs,” he said with forced certainty. “Out there on the other side of the excavation. We go there and see what we can find. Find whatever documents we can. Maybe they can tell us what the hell happened here.”

John shook his head. “Not sure I wanna know, Mike,” he said.

Charlie laughed from the doorway, but his noise softened once the others looked his way. “One must always seek to know,” he said; then he managed a grin.

Michael folded the floor plans and put them away. “Right,” he said. “Let’s go see.”

Once again they skirted the excavation site at the center of the large main chamber. Their flashlight beams graced the edges of a twenty-foot crane and then came against the darkness above the dig itself, a great hole in the earth at least thirty feet wide. The beams did not make it all the way across the chamber, but the wall at the other side could be felt in the shadows and it rose high where it became domed, supported by concrete and steel girders.

Michael stopped on their way past and he turned toward the dig. The others stopped as well, including Charlie after he walked a few extra paces before realizing he was alone out in the front.

John took a step toward Michael and looked over the dig. “That’s a big hole, huh?” he said.

“Let me into your pack,” said Michael, motioning for John to turn around.

John took a moment to get what Michael was asking for, then turned and gripped both straps of his pack so it remained steady. Michael reached in and searched a while then came out with a flare. He tore some of the brown paper off the end to get a better view of the fuse and then took out a lighter. The others backed away without being asked, and Michael snapped a small flame into being.

“How many more of these you got?” Michael asked John.

“Four,” said John.

“I have five myself,” said Ben.

Charlie didn’t say anything.

“All right then,” said Michael. He put the lighter to the end of the flare and a red flame bloomed from the stick. He looked around and was struck by how the sloped walls of the domed chamber took on a blood-red hue, with shadows of beams and loose cables dancing in chaotic motions on the rock. From where he was, the hole looked even larger and darker than before, but when he walked up onto the platform and to the edge of the dig the red light descended down far into the earth until it gave more to more darkness.

“Now that’s a deep fucking hole,” said Michael.

The others walked up behind him and looked down into the hole as well. Charlie whistled and the noise carried down along with the flickering light.

“How deep do you think it is?” asked John.

Michael squinted to see down as far as he could. The light went down at least a fifty or sixty feet, and there was an unknown extent of dark beyond that. He gripped the flare and reached his hand out over the hole, then dropped the flame. It fell down into the earth and lit the way for many more feet until it fell so far that the light disappeared. The men all leaned forward to watch it fall.

“Long way down,” said Ben.

A groan came up from the hole. It sounded like nothing Michael had ever heard, like the grind of large machinery but with an odd echo of something animal. He looked around at the others and they didn’t seem affected by any noise, and he looked back into the dark abyss and wondered if he’d heard anything at all. He found himself questioning fresh memories, and as he gazed into the earth he thought he even saw the red light flare back up at the bottom then die again. But he blinked his eyes and believed it was leftover glare.

The smell that greeted them when they entered facility returned. It wafted up from below, that odd plant-like aroma that blended sickly with the stale metallic air inside the chamber. Michael tried to second-guess the smell as well, to see if it too was an illusion. He held his breath for a moment, but when he resumed the scent was still there.

"What is that smell?" said John.

"Something different," said Ben.

Michael head began to hurt again. A soft throb in behind his eyes.

John aimed his flashlight upward. "What do you think the Krauts used that for?"

Suspended from the top of the crane lift right above the hole was a metal cube with open walls on two sides and steel mesh screen on the others. It hung by a thick cable that ran down the arm of the crane to a large spindle beside the control console. The cube was empty, but Michael felt sure it hadn't always been that way.

"I'd say that thing could go down quite a ways," said Michael. "But for what reason, I have no idea." He looked hard at the metal box above. There were handles near the open sides, and hanging from those handles were wrist restraints. "Some folks that went down there probably didn't want to." He stepped back from the dig and looked around at the others. "Let's find the labs and gather what we can."

"Paperwork wasn't that high on my priority list," grumbled Charlie.

"Mine either," said Ben.

"We'll search the rest of the place for the good stuff," said Michael. "But before we do it might be a good idea to find out what the hell this place was used for. That a problem?"

The others waited a moment but they all nodded in the agreement as Michael stared each of them down. They didn't make eye contact with him, not even John, who titled his head to take another look down into the hole that seemed to reach all the way down into the center of the earth.

The labs smelled like burned paper. Not burning presently, but charred a while ago and left there when everyone had gone. The smell lingered in the air as the group entered the first room through a pair of large double-doors like those leading to the storage lockers. The map showed a series of three connected laboratory rooms on the south side of the facility, directly underneath the barracks. This room was the one to the left of the center lab, where there was no outer door.

Michael's flashlight first found a knocked over chair, and then came upon a pair of metal filing cabinets with their drawers open and papers and folders sticking out as if rummaged through in careless haste. Papers littered the floor, as well as a large flat metal table that filled much of the room's inner space.

"Is there a light to try, Ben?" asked Michael. He noticed that Ben was already searching the wall for a switch, and the man found one and when he clicked it a bluish light came on in the ceiling so bright that it caused everyone to pause of rub their eyes to adjust their sight.

"Jesus, that's bright," said John.

"Laboratory lights," said Charlie, pronouncing the word in the British manner. "Krauts know they need top-notch light to do quality work."

Michael was glad to see Charlie still dispensing with the educated small talk. "Still have no idea what's powering this place," he said, kneeling down to sift through a

collection of crumpled paper. They looked to be standard daily logs, marked by dates and numbers he need a good while to figure out. But he saw that much of the opened drawers were empty, and the papers on the floor seemed to lead to a smaller door on the adjacent wall, the one leading to the center room. “John, take up a position. I’m gonna open up this door.”

John seemed surprised that they were still keeping weapons on guard, but he stood beside the door and kept his shotgun ready in both hands.

Michael could see nothing through the small glass pane as the next room was dark. He grabbed the handle and shook it and it wasn’t locked, and then he pushed it open.

“Anything good?” said John.

Michael’s shined his flashlight inside and saw a metal table just like the first one, but on top of this table was some kind of black pile of ashes with pieces of white mixed in. He motioned for the others to come behind him and they went inside. The smell of burned paper got stronger.

The pile was composed of documents and folders and books, all stacked together in the exact center of the table where someone had lit them on fire. The char was all over the pile and suggested the use of some kind of lighter fluid, and when Michael focused his nose he picked up a faint scent of gasoline on the table and on the floor. He poked the edges of the pile with his finger, searching through the pieces of intact paper, but there didn’t look to be any pieces large enough to tell him anything.

“Well, it seems someone had themselves quite the little bonfire,” said Charlie. He stayed near the door and watched Michael prod the debris.

“Goddamn,” said Ben under his breath.

Michael closed his eyes and thought he knew what this was. Before the end of the war, many Nazi offices and facilities had destroyed documents, logs, any evidence of whatever it was they had been doing prior to the end. He’d come upon garbage bins filled with torched papers, fancy fireplaces in luxurious buildings stuffed with the charred debris of things people had wanted unfound. But this scene was different. It looked almost ceremonial, the pile carefully constructed on the table with the highest ashen peak at the exact center.

John went over to a wall-mounted bookshelf where a few volumes remained intact, lying down on the shelf at odd angles. “Didn’t get everything,” said John.

Michael looked through the books that had remained unburned. They lay there as if accidentally left behind, spared the burn due to haste or oversight. One of the books was entitled *Neue Psychologie*, or “New Psychology.” Another was called *Steuertechniken*, or “Control Techniques.”

“Looks like mind stuff,” said Ben, reading over Michael’s shoulder. Michael moved his shoulder to block the titles from his view, but resisted the impulse. There wasn’t much use hiding everything.

“Mike, what the hell do you think they were doing here?” said John, his words now afraid in a way that sounded almost childlike.

Michael turned away from the bookshelf and looked back at the pile of burned papers on the table. “How the fuck should I know?” he said. “We’ve come on stuff like this how many times? They were running some experiments and the war ended and they

bailed out. Same as the other places. They burned what they couldn't take with them and then they bailed out."

Charlie chuckled over by the door. "All save for those fellows missing their hands," he said. "Or perhaps they just left them as consolation gifts for those of us foolish enough to search this place looking for something valuable."

Michael widened one eye and leered at Charlie, and he was actually surprised by how quickly Charlie gave ground and looked down at the floor.

"Just seems rather different from other scenes," said Charlie in less assertive words.

Ben nodded in agreement and poked the pile with the barrel of his pistol.

"Mike," said John, and he took a moment to think before he continued. "I don't mean this to be, you know, confrontational, but I think we'd all like to know what you were told."

Michael bristled at the question but he knew it was coming, and though his whole body tensed, he did not feel angry at John. In fact, he was glad it was John who had pressed the issue. "Told by who?" he asked.

"Anyone," said John. "That Kraut woman. The Russian. Anybody."

Michael put his hands on the table with the burned paper and leaned against it. "I heard they were doing experiments here," he said.

"Seems obvious," said Ben.

"Yeah, well, these were supposedly the stranger kind," said Michael. "We've all heard of that stuff. Hitler had his little pet projects and they produced nothing."

"Like the nuclear stuff?" asked John.

Charlie cleared his throat, and the others all looked back to where he leaned half-hidden by the doorway. “An X-Facility,” he said, and his voice sounded knowing. He grinned and scratched his nose. “I do believe we are standing inside a German X-Facility.”

John seemed confused. “Like the ones where they made the rockets?” he asked.

Charlie laughed. “No, not exactly,” he said. “You know, after the surrender, when I was off by myself in Vienna, I listened to a doctor tell me of a place in the northern Italian Alps. In this place, he said, the Germans took children they suspected might be able to read the future. They took them there, away from their parents, and performed everything they could think of to test their abilities. Shock them, inject them with hallucinogens, drown them in water tanks. And once they proved of no use, they were killed and delivered back to their parents for burial in the local cemetery.” For a moment, Charlie’s eyes went wild, as if he suddenly had no idea where he was or what he was talking about. But then he settled, and his expression returned somewhere close to normal. “The doctor told me this,” he said, “before the night when I rigged his car to explode.”

He paused and the others kept listening.

“Hitler believed in those things,” Charlie continued. “He spent a great deal of resources and sacrificed many lives chasing after the things people tell their children stories about.” He looked around the room at Ben and John and then settled his sights on Michael. “What story do you believe he was chasing here?”

Michael backed away from the table found it hard to look the others in the eyes, but when he did he focused most of John. “The woman, Eliza, she said something about mind control experiments. Andrei heard things too.”

“Mind control?” John guffawed.

Ben crossed his arms. “Why here?” he asked.

Michael shrugged. “Legends about the mountain,” he said. “Children’s stories, like Charlie said. Useless stuff the Germans spent way too much money and time on.”

“Spent more than money and time here, seems like,” said Ben, ever more noticeably perturbed.

Michael remembered the hands in the lockers, the strange smells coming from the dig, and he felt the pain return to his forehead. But again he pushed it away, telling himself it wasn’t there. “Guys were stationed here for who knows how long,” he said. “Isolation does weird things to people.”

Ben shook his head. “Wasn’t right not to tell us, Mike,” he said.

“Tell you what?” snapped Michael. “All these little Hitler side projects did nothing. They were a waste of fucking time!”

“I don’t like it,” said John.

“Well, we’re not fucking done,” said Michael. He walked over to the pile of burned paper and began rummaging through it with his bare hands, tossing charred scraps on the floor and slapping a cloud of ash into the air toward the center of the ceiling. “We came here for a reason, and we’re not leaving until we get something.”

“Get what?” said Charlie.

Michael raised a finger in his direction and stared him down hard, then resumed his crude search of the pile.

Charlie shrugged and tilted his head toward a door at the back on the room, one leading to what the map had shown as some kind of antechamber at the rear of the laboratories. “Perhaps it’s in there,” he said.

Michael looked at the door. The single small window at its high center was dark, and white letters spelled out one word that read the same in German and English; *Holding*.

Ben took a step toward the table and leaned closer to Michael, who had his face almost in the pile of ash and paper. “What are we here for, Cap’?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

Michael thought of how to put it, how to tell them about what Hannigan had proposed back in Berchtesgaden. About what had happened with John in the underground cell. He then felt touched by anger, and had the feeling that he didn’t really need to say anything, that he had his reasons and those following him should accept them, as they had when they all wore uniforms and answered to rank.

“We’re here to find something worth hiking all the way here,” said Michael. “And we haven’t found it yet.”

A loud rumble sounded from above them, in the direction of the garage on the upper level. The floor vibrated and the lights flickered on and off a few times before settling back into illumination. Then rumble stopped, and the men exchanged alarmed glances before they all hustled out of the laboratories and rushed to the tramway that to where they’d entered the facility.

They ran up the corridor and tried to keep from tripping over the tram rail. When they arrived in the garage, the blown open door appeared to be still intact, and the soft evening light still managed to make it inside where it colored the beginning of the raised walkway on the left side of the space.

"So what the hell was that noise?" asked John.

Michael tried to block out any chatter and focus on the area above the doorway. He felt small vibrations through the floor, and the high wall over the door started the groan. He looked again at the light coming through, sensed the wall become weaker, and then took off running toward the ladder leading up to the walkway.

"Get to the door!" he shouted.

But before he even got to the ladder, the metal and rock above the doorway collapsed down into a new slab of wall that blocked out the evening light and sent debris skittering out all over the room. The chalky dust rushed past the men's feet like a shallow tide and rose up their bodies into the air where it floated and froze in a thick haze. They all walked toward the blast with their hands held before their faces and they had to cough several times before any man could speak.

"I can't see shit," said John.

The dust gave way a bit, and Michael was saw a jagged wall of broken concrete ahead of them with no light or any outlet to the outside in sight. He let his mind digest what he saw and felt like throwing up. He dry-heaved once, hands on his knees, then stood back up and closed his eyes for a moment then slapped himself awake again. "The whole damn wall caved in," he said. He turned around and looked for Charlie. He saw

him standing behind the others, halfway back to the corridor. “Did you hear what I fucking said?” he asked him. “The whole goddamn wall is caved in!”

Charlie seemed in a daze, eyes wide without blinking. “I didn’t do that,” he choked out.

Michael took a few steps toward him and the others backed out of his way and said nothing for the time being.

“You did,” said Michael, managing a strained calm in his voice. He tried to think past it all, to jump to the next phase. He wanted to berate Charlie, to make him feel like the foolish child he could so often be, but he held back. “How much do you have left?” he asked.

Charlie shook his head. “How much left of what, precisely?”

“Explosives, Charlie,” Michael sighed. “Fucking explosives. We can blow our way out.”

Charlie titled his head down toward the ground. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” he said in soft words.

“Yeah, no shit,” said John.

Ben leered at John. “Enough of that crap,” he said.

Then Charlie backed up in slow half-steps and he hugged his Thompson against his chest like an infant child. He muttered to himself. Michael saw a look in his eyes that he did not recognize, a strange bewilderment and an irrational fear. The man did not seem to be inhabiting the same space as the others, at least not in his mind. He seemed apart, elsewhere, and conscious of that fact.

Michael took a careful step toward Charlie, as one might step toward a cat in danger of running off. “Charlie?” he said.

Charlie shook his head again and looked Michael in the eyes, and it was obvious that it pained him to do so. “I really don’t know what’s going on,” he said. A trickle of blood came down from his nose and curved around his mouth and trickled off his chin.

“Jesus,” John said to himself.

“It’s all right, Charlie,” said Michael. He raised a hand in air to show that he meant the other man no harm. He got a feeling as though he longer knew who he was speaking to. His forehead throbbed a little, and a faint smell of something bitter and organic again filled his nostrils. “Charlie, we’ll get out, but you’ve gotta calm down.”

“I can’t,” said Charlie, taking more steps back.

“Can’t what?” asked Ben as he came up beside Michael.

Charlie’s hand kept twitching away from his body like an animal trying to get loose of a leash. “I can’t even do what I want to do,” he said. And then he dropped his flashlight, turned, and ran.

“Charlie!” Michael shouted. The name echoed through the garage and settled into the air with the chalky dust. Charlie ran into the darkened corridor leading down into the second level. Michael and Ben ran after him but John stayed behind. Michael could hear Charlie’s footsteps as they thudded down the corridor but they quickly reached the massive expanse of excavation chamber and were then silent.

Michael and Ben jogged with their flashlights on and their packs bouncing up and down on their backs such that the straps began tearing into their shoulders. Their flashlight beams crossed over the tramway on the floor and intersected each other as they

searched the walls and then the great room ahead, but they didn't see Charlie. Only the same dusty grey floors and unmarked walls and looming support beams they had come to earlier.

Michael stopped at the end of the corridor once his flashlight caught the base of the dig site. "What the hell," he said, out of breath.

Ben ran out ahead and waved his beam around the chamber. There were no sounds, no footsteps or opened doors or breathing. Charlie had vanished into the depths of facility. Ben turned back to Michael. "What just happened?" he asked.

Michael shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

John walked down the corridor behind them and his flashlight caught the side of Michael's eye. "He has all the charges," he said. "All of the explosives. Right?"

Ben gave John a perturbed look, seemingly annoyed at John displaying concern only for the bombs, but then nodded at the question.

Michael felt the weight of the situation and the pressure in his head became even greater, a stressed abscess that throbbed near eyes. He loosened the straps on his pack so that his shoulders burned less and then sat down on the floor and looked out at the darkness of the chamber.

"So what's the play, Cap'?" asked Ben. His tone was much harsher than he usually used with Michael.

"What fucking play?" Michael snapped. "We need to get out of here. That's the play." He cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted into the dark. "CHARLIE!"

Silence.

John came and sat down next to him. Ben turned his flashlight off and put it away and leaned over to rest his hands on his knees for a while. The three of them looked out into the darkness of excavation chamber, where the dark shadow of the dig crane stood tall in the center of the empty earthen space. As their breathing slowed and no one spoke, the facility became deathly quiet. It held the air of a mausoleum, a buried tomb with the only known way out now erased from existence.

X

Empty Rooms

Michael spread the map out onto the table. Ben turned on an extra light and John pulled up an aluminum stool and sat down to get a closer look at the layout. The lights had stayed on in the library room of the research laboratories, still fueled by whatever power source allowed parts of the facility to keep running as before.

"The garage had the only doors," said Michael.

Ben came to the table and leaned over the map. He pointed to a mine shaft illustrated to the left the garage. "Where does that shaft come from?" he asked.

John shook his head. "It was caved in," he said. "Saw it when we came up the mountain."

Ben grimaced and nodded. "Krauts had this place locked up pretty tight," he said. "Anything easy is solid rock now. Need those charges."

"Even if he gets them, where would we put them?" asked John.

Michael shrugged. "Underground place like this, any explosion is dangerous," he said. "Case in point, the door Charlie blew open."

"Still need Charlie," said Ben. "He'd know where we could try."

Michael looked at Ben and made sure he looked back. "I don't plan to leave him here," said Michael.

Ben looked back at the map and nodded but Michael knew he wasn't entirely convinced. Ben changed the subject and pointed at some drawings on the map that looked like pipes leading upward. "What are these?" he asked.

Michael examined the map for a moment. “That’s good, Ben,” he said. “That’s really good. I think those are ventilation shafts.”

“To where?” asked John.

“To the surface,” said Michael. “You think they meant to keep the same air in here forever?”

John shrugged. “Sure does smell like it.”

Ben shook his head. “Still need to look for Charlie,” he said.

Michael couldn’t think of a reason to disagree. He had to keep the group together, but what had happened with Charlie had left him strangely disconnected. He caught himself not even caring whether Charlie was safe or not, and the thought disturbed him. He felt how much the others wanted to find him, especially Ben, and he used that to force himself to care, to suppress the very real and very powerful sensation deep inside that told him to get out that place, even if no others got out with him. He shuddered again at the feeling, but tried to keep the shudder unnoticeable. It seemed to be getting harder and harder for him to keep things unnoticeable.

“So where do you think he ran off to?” asked John.

Ben shrugged. “I just...” he began. “I dunno.” He tried to concentrate on the map, and Michael could feel as strange new anxiety that Ben rarely showed, even under fire. “I dunno,” he said again, quieter.

There were only so many places Charlie could go, and as Michael studied the map they began to stand out to him as if highlighted by design. He had run off into the lower levels. Maybe he had gone back to the lockers, maybe down the hallway that led to the auxiliary stations at the far side of the central chamber. But the layout seemed to

reference new places, with broken up lines that suggested new structures planned but perhaps not yet built. Sunken chambers near the power room, shafts leading deeper into the mountain. But he didn't want to go deeper. He wanted to get higher, but before they did he knew they had to look for Charlie.

"We need to split up," Michael said. "For whatever reason, he ran from us. If we track him down in a group he may keep hiding, keep running."

"What the fuck was that all about, anyway?" said John.

"Doesn't matter right now," said Michael. "We need to find him, and we need to find those charges."

Ben shot Michael a stare that felt accusatory, as if levying the claim that to Michael, the charges were the main concern. Michael thought that may well be the case, but he couldn't think that out loud.

"I'm sure he's all right," said Michael, mostly to Ben. "It's been a rough trip, I know that. These things happen."

"Weird thing here," said John.

Michael nodded. "Yeah, well, like I said, let's split up. John, go check out the storage lockers."

"What?" exclaimed John. "I get the severed hands?"

"Severed hands can't hurt you," said Michael. "Ben. Check out the auxiliary rooms."

"With the power supply?" asked Ben.

"Yeah, seemed quiet enough," said Michael. "Just be careful."

"Where are you going?" asked John.

Michael looked down at the map. “I’m gonna reconnoiter upstairs,” he said. “Make sure he didn’t slip back up there. Garage, barracks, mess hall, all that. We’ll meet up here in less than an hour and hopefully start finding a way out of here. Got that?”

Both the others looked at each other and nodded their assent.

“All right,” said Michael. “And keep testing the lights. We need all the light in here we can get.”

The scent of powdered concrete had joined the air in the tram corridor and became even stronger once Michael made it back to the garage. White dust coated the back tarps of the trucks parked along the area’s edge, and had turned the blood stains on the floor into chalky dried pools. The only light besides that of his flashlight came from the inventory room above to his left, through the door he and the others had left open before descending to the lower level.

The whole scene felt so different than when they had first entered Facility 47. It wasn’t just the smell or the fresh coat of dust. It now had the unsettling feel of unwelcome familiarity, a place he had been and a place he hoped never to return. And the shadow-clad edges of the new wall that had collapsed over their only known escape lent no comfort to a space with which he felt himself too acquainted, too linked.

His steps on the floor were the only sounds he heard. His boots on the painted concrete. Clop, clop, clop. The sound began to seem not of his own making, an auditory specter following him as he made his way up the ladder and through the inventory room and into the hall leading to the barracks. But every time he looked down, the movement of his feet matched the sounds. There was no one else walking with him down this hallway. Only him.

The double doors to the barracks area stood tall and still ahead of him. He shined his flashlight on the handles and the left door appeared to be just a little bit open. He tried to remember if they had shut completely when he and John left through them earlier. Charlie had shouted about the weapons in the freezer, and he'd come running. He remembered that. He tried to remember glimpse of those moments, a sideways glance that proved the door had shut completely, and thus someone had opened it since. But in his mind he felt no such confirmation. Only haze. And the more he tried to remember, the hazier it became.

This happens all the time, he told himself. People get caught up in moments, forget little things. They slip through the web of memory, out the eyes and into the air, and they vanish. It happens all the time.

But this time, as he tried to remember those moments - Charlie's cries from the kitchen, the hustle of footsteps on the floor, the opening of the doors - the pressure returned and the pain bloomed in his head. It felt as if it drifted up to the front his mind, and pulled him toward those doors.

Maybe he had left them shut. Perhaps someone had come and opened them. He gripped his flashlight and walked into the barracks and listened to the doors close behind him.

The halls looked the same as his light scanned over them, empty walls with opened doors that looked inside at crew quarters where quaint personal belongings adorned dressers and writings desks. He performed a rather quick walk past the rooms and shined his light inside each one. He and John had left most of the doors open during their previous inspection, and he searched inside the few that were still closed. There was

nothing new. Just empty beds and a standard arrangement of things that belied the nature of whatever happened here. He heard no sound except the clop of his own feet.

Charlie wasn't here.

He looked inside the commanding officer's room at the strange incoherent papers left scattered on the bed sheets. He walked inside and decided to sit down on the strong cherry wood chair. He stared at the bed a while, and thought about the book he'd found here. It had struck him when he'd first seen it, and the desire to read it had become stuck in the front of his mind. Maybe the Colonel had kept it for a reason. Maybe it could tell him something, *anything* about this place. He looked up at ceiling and focused his hearing and made sure he was alone. Then he brought his pack around and rummaged through it until he found the book and set it on his lap. He looked around the room for the dresser and saw that it had a mirror atop it, and he set his flashlight on the desk so that it shined across the room into the mirror glass and the space illuminated more than enough for him to read.

"*Der Prinz und die Höhle des Flüsterns*"

The Prince and the Cave of Whispers.

The cover held a drawing of a lone figure with a crown on his ahead, curled over his knees as if praying before a single bush that glowed in white space between charcoal-etched shadows.

Michael glanced around the room again, at the dark in its corners and the looming closeness of its ceiling. Then he opened the book and read its story.

Once Upon a Time,

A young prince walked into the wilderness to survey his lands. His guards offered to join him, but the prince refused, proclaiming that all true princes must be brave enough to wander their lands alone.

He walked high into the mountains and came upon a cave. Not wanting to leave any parcel of his lands unexplored, he went into the cave and followed it until it became very dark and very cold. His torch went out, and he was afraid.

There came a strange glow inside the cave and the prince saw a small tree, and it whispered to him. "Why are you here alone, young prince?" the tree inquired.

"I am lord of these lands," said the prince. "And I need no aide in my own lands."

"And yet you are lost," whispered the tree, and it spoke with dark music. "Your guards should have helped you. They betrayed their prince."

"Yes," said the prince. "They betrayed me."

The tree whispered again. "You must bring them here to this cave, and you must kill them. I will light the way for you."

And the young prince did this. He brought the guards to the cave, all with torches, and he led them to the tree and then drew his sword and killed them all.

"It is done," said the prince. But the torches all went out, and again he became cold and afraid in the dark.

Then the little tree glowed for him and whispered with more dark music. "You are lost again," it said. "Have you no family?"

"I do," said the prince. "A lovely wife and a strong young son."

The tree whispered, "And yet they allowed you to become lost and alone again. They betrayed you."

"Yes," said the prince, lonely and cold and afraid. "They betrayed me."

"You must bring them here," said the tree. "And you must kill them. I will light the way."

And the prince did this. He returned to his castle and retrieved his family and brought them to the cave. They all lit torches and went to the tree, and the young prince killed his lovely wife and his strong young son.

But the torches went out, and the prince was again alone and afraid in the dark.

"Please," said the prince to the tree. "Make light for me. I am lost."

The tree did not glow for him, but it whispered with more dark music. "It is your own fault," said the tree. "There will be no more light for you."

The prince wept. "But I did as you commanded!" he said.

The tree whispered, "You had no will to do otherwise. And a man with no will has no place on this earth." The tree whispered very softly now. "You will take your sword, and you will plunge it into your heart. You will die here, prince."

And the young prince did this. He fell on his sword and he died alone in the dark. The tree fell silent and waited through the ages for another prince eager to listen to its whispers and hear its dark music.

Michael sat with his hand on the last page for a minute or so. He looked closely at the engraving of the rumpled form of the dead prince before the dark small tree. Then he closed the book, and thought for a moment about how the schools in the United States must lighten up these German fairy tales a bit. But then he had to ponder why such a

book would be in the quarters of this place's commanding officer. Why it was important enough to keep out in the open while no other books were so visible. And why the story made him feel so uneasy, touched him at the core of his senses in a way no other book ever had. A children's book. A silly fable. He looked at the ceiling again, and it somehow seemed lower. He got up out of the chair and ducked as though his head would hit, but then rose to his full stature and hit nothing. He looked at the book again and stuffed it back in his pack. A part of him said to leave it in the room where it had been. But he took it anyway.

He stood in the doorway, and in the silence felt compelled to look to his left, down the hallway to a room at the other end with a closed door. As he stared down the hall toward it the walls seemed to stretch and narrow, and when he walked he kept his flashlight belt-high, as if he held a pistol, and kept it that way until he opened the door.

It didn't appear to be a special room, though it was for a single person. Just a small cramped space with a simple cot to the right and a plain light brown dresser on the left like the other rooms of junior officers. The writing desk sat before him, and Michael saw the usual lamp and pen holders and stack of plain unmarked paper like on the other desks. But in the center of the writing surface there was a crumpled sheet of paper that had dark moist spots, and it seemed to be covering something. Michael stepped forward and as he did so his flashlight beam caught dark drops on the floor near the legs of the desk chair, and they led to the door and a few feet out into hallway before they stopped. He turned back to the desk and saw words written on the paper. He shined his light directly down on them, and they were scribbled in large childlike letters.

"Sie gehen nie hier."

You will never leave here.

And the man had signed his name under this message, *Lieutenant Ernst Mueller*.

Michael reached out and touched the edge of the paper with his fingers. He didn't want to lift it, and tried to tell himself he would perfectly content not to know what it hid. But his head throbbed again, and he grabbed the paper and moved it to the side.

Two eyeballs were side by side on the desktop, angled as if looking up at him. They were dried and somewhat decayed but still intact and seemed as though they hadn't been there more than a couple weeks, maybe three considering the staleness of the air. Their whites were not badly damaged and the connecting red strings of blood vessels extended a few inches behind each organ. Whoever had removed them had done so with some surgical skill, but more importantly with a steady hand. A great deal of calm.

Michael picked up the sheet of paper and placed it back over the eyes as if lying down a funeral shroud. He looked up at the ceiling as if into the whole of the mountain.

"What is this place?" he said.

The ceiling didn't answer. Nothing made a sound. He turned and left the room and walked in brisk strides until he was gone from the barracks. His footsteps echoed louder through the halls and carried into the empty rooms.

The mess hall and the kitchen revealed nothing more. No more evidence, no new traces of the German crew. No Charlie. He pulled out drawers of utensils and picked up wood boxes and flipped them so their contents spilled onto the floor. There was nothing here. He hadn't searched everywhere, but he felt it. Nothing but death and empty rooms. He shouted at the air in the mess hall and grabbed one of the chairs and hurled it across the room until it crashed against a wall. The noise was so loud and so singular that the

pain of it nearly brought him to his knees. He dropped his flashlight and it rolled for a while and then stopped. Its beam stayed on, cast out across the mess hall floor, barely catching Michael in its white aura as he rubbed his eyes and tried to keep from crying.

The hour limit for the search came and went.

Michael arrived back at the labs first after taking a while to compose himself and dry his eyes. John came in later and shook his head and with defeat in his voice admitted he had not found Charlie or anything else of importance, and that he would be thankful if he never had to go into those storage rooms again. He had looked through them all and had spent several minutes sitting in the darkened halls praying. Michael often forgot that despite his recurring faults, John considered himself a good Cajun Catholic boy.

And so they waited for Ben, not saying much at all to each other, but Ben did not show up on time. John sat on the floor in the corner of the room with his knees up against his chest. He stared out at the floor in front of him, and twisted the tip of his knife against the callus on his index finger. He took slow breaths but made no other noise.

Michael picked up a few of the papers that lie scattered on the floor and sat on top of the metal table and looked over them. He translated the words in silence, and tried to link them together in his mind to make sense of what they had recorded, what the men who had written them had seen. But every time he looked back and forth between sheets of paper, even between lines and boxes on the same sheet, he felt prevented from linking words. He would get information from one sentence, something about subject isolation, or cranial bleeding, and when he tried to combine it with an idea from somewhere else, his forehead began to pulse again, as if being shocked in a testing room for an incorrect an answer. He read more, and the feeling got worse. Then he dropped the papers onto the

floor in frustration and stared straight ahead and the pale blue paint on the wall and felt relieved. And he had no idea why.

"Where is Ben?" asked John, breaking the quiet.

Michael looked through the door at all that dark, toward the other side of the dig where a faint light could be seen inside the entrance to the auxiliary rooms. He had waited fifteen minutes after their agreed upon time, and he would have waited more if John hadn't spoken up. Not out of courtesy or caution. Just so he wouldn't have to confront the fact that another man in their group might be missing.

"I know he's pissing me off," said Michael. He looked away from the dark expanse outside and stared back at the blankness of the wall. He focused on the pale blue paint, on the dimples and bumps in the surface, and tried to get that relief again.

"How long until we look for him?" asked John.

"This place is pretty big, but it's not that big," said Michael. "He'll make his way back."

"Ben was the never really the late type," said John.

"Yeah, well, he also wasn't the uppity type he's been lately, either."

John cocked an eyebrow. "Uppity?" he said. "Why the hell would you call Ben uppity?"

Michael shook his head. "Forget it," he said. "He'll make his way back."

"And what if he didn't find Charlie?" asked John.

Michael didn't know how to answer that. Yet again, he felt a part of himself hoping Charlie would remain unfound, in spite of how cold and impractical that seemed. He felt the throb return to his forehead, and remembered Charlie complaining of the same

thing. Bad air, Michael told himself again. And wherever Charlie had gotten off to, he hoped be had found better air than this.

"Mike," said John, almost in a whisper.

"Yeah, what is it?" said Michael, eyes on the wall.

"We're gonna be sleeping in here tonight, right?"

The hour escaped Michael for a moment, and it took far too long for him to think back through events and get a bead on what time it was. Deep into the night; he knew that much. He looked down at the papers, and his head hurt. He looked back at the wall, blank color and no words, and the pain ebbed. Close to midnight, he thought. Probably close to midnight.

"Mike?" John said again.

"Yeah," said Michael. "Maybe we do. I don't think any of us besides maybe Charlie got decent sleep last night." He glanced out at the dark. "But we've slept in worse places."

John looked out at the dark as well, then brought his knees closer to his chest and said nothing.

An explosion sounded from across the main chamber, powerful but somewhat muffled as if deeper underground. Michael jumped down off the table and crouched out of instinct and kicked some papers across the floor. John stood up and grabbed his pistol and held it up near his shoulders.

"What the holy hell?" exclaimed John.

"Leave your pack," said Michael. He took out his own .45 pistol and gripped it in his right hand.

“Huh?” said John,

“I said leave your fucking pack. Just keep your weapon and let’s go. Need to be quick.”

John nodded. The two of them ran out of the room and hustled down the stairway and lit out for the far side of the chamber, past the dig side and under the cage raised above it, away from the sliver of light the shone out through the laboratory door. The explosion had come from the auxiliary rooms. Michael was sure of that. But the map he had seen had shown the rooms to be few and not extending very deep into the mountain. The blast sounded farther inside.

“You hear where it came from?” said John as he ran alongside Michael.

“Sort of,” said Michael. “But I’m thinking wherever it was, we should find Charlie close by. Sounded like one of his toys.”

“In one piece?” said John.

Michael ignored that comment and climbed up the short stairway to the large double doors leading into the auxiliary rooms. Once inside he caught the pungent scent of burned magnesium and believed even more strongly that the explosion was caused by one of Charlie’s homemade charges. A hallway stretched back past a few small utility closets and a water valve control station on the right. Michael crouched he made his way down toward a leftward curve in the hall. He listened for more sounds, but heard nothing more yet. John stayed a few paces behind him. They both held their pistols ready just below their waists and aimed their flashlights straight ahead.

“What’d your map say is down this way?” asked John.

Michael tried to remember. “Waste station,” he said. He tried to seem certain, but he wasn’t sure. The map had referenced a hub of water pipes in this area of Level Two, and to the left was the main power station. Maybe the sound had carried all the way from there, but his experience with hearing explosions made him doubt it. The waste station should be up ahead just to the left. That’s where it came from. And besides, the power hadn’t gone out in the labs when the boom came.

“I don’t smell anything like that,” said John. “Should be smelling shit or something, right?”

“Hold on,” said Michael. He raised his hand and the two of them stopped before they reached the curve in the hall. He sensed someone ahead, just around the bend. And he also saw the faint light coming from far down the hall to the left, maybe from the power station, but it cast the soft shadow of a prostate man across the grey painted floor. A large shadow, too big to be Charlie.

“Ben?” said Michael.

Some jangling of belt equipment and the scuff of boots. “I know I’m late, Cap’,” said a voice that sounded like Ben’s.

Michael took a few steps closer and John followed behind him. Ben didn’t sound injured, but there was certainly distress in his voice, an odd and delirious distress that Ben had never shown before, at least not so long as Michael had known him.

“That’s all right,” said Michael. “Are you hurt?”

“No, sir,” said Ben.

“Can we come over to you?” said Michael.

There was a long pause. “Yeah, that’s okay,” said Ben. “Might be safe now.”

Michael and John walked around the bend and Ben sat on the left side of the hall with his back against the wall and his legs stretched out in front of him toward an open door. Inside the room there was only darkness, and an even more noxious smell of a blown magnesium charge. Ben looked into the dark as Michael came up to him and crouched down so as to get close to eye level. He set his flashlight on the floor and the light reflected off the paint gave him a clear enough look at Ben's face. Singed bangs over wide eyes that didn't blink.

"What the hell happened?" Michael asked.

Ben didn't respond.

Michael slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Ben, what the fuck blew up down here?"

Ben looked back at him as if just now realizing he was there. He shook his head and collected his thoughts. "I saw him," he said.

"Saw who, Charlie?" asked John, standing a few yards away, wary in his stance as though afraid to get too close to Ben.

Ben nodded. "Yeah. There are more rooms."

"What rooms?" asked Michael.

"Under here," said Ben. "Didn't see them on your map. Like they were building more of them. Didn't finish."

Michael looked down at the hallway at the power station with the light on inside. He tried to hear the sound of generators or the buzz of conductors, but he heard nothing. He looked back at Ben. "Where did you see Charlie?"

“Down there,” said Ben. “In the lower rooms.” He lowered his head. “I don’t even know why I went down there.”

Michael shrugged. “You were scouting,” he said. He wanted to give the man some comfort, get him back on his feet. “Doing a damn good job of it, too.”

Ben shook his head vigorously and stared hard back at Michael. “No,” he said. “Not like that.” He took a moment to gather the words. “It’s like I didn’t go down there myself. I mean, I did. I saw myself walking, climbing. But I didn’t want to. My feet, it’s like they moved without me.”

John snorted. “Just what the fuck are you talking about?” he said.

Ben lowered his head again, and appeared embarrassed. “I dunno,” he said softly. “But I found Charlie down there.”

Michael looked down at Ben’s right hand. It gripped a .38 pistol, and after a moment it jerked toward Ben’s leg. Not a big movement, more a slight twitch. But it happened again a few moments later. Michael thought back to Charlie, to the way his hands danced and the way he seemed so horrified at their doing so. “Ben,” he said. “Charlie did set off that charge, right?”

Ben closed his eyes and hard shadow came over his eyelids. “Yeah,” he said. “But I don’t think he wanted to.”

John took a step forward. “What did he blow up?” he said. “Come on, Ben, what the hell?”

A trickle of dark liquid came down from Ben’s nose. Ben didn’t wipe it, just let drop down over his lips and onto his shirt. Michael thought to wipe it for him, but kept himself from doing so. He felt his head hurt again. A pulse at the front of his mind.

“Where is Charlie now?” asked Michael.

Ben shook his head. “I dunno,” he said, “But he ain’t dead.”

“He keeps throwing his toys around like a goddamn maniac, maybe he should be,” said John.

Ben shot John an angry glance, and then looked back Michael. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” he said, almost pleading. “Charlie, he ain’t right. Just threw a charge in the room. I was chasing him. Then it blew.”

Michael nodded, as if he really understood what was going on. He patted Ben on the leg and reached his arms out to pick the large man up off the floor. Ben waited a moment then grabbed Michael’s arms and the two of them stood up. Ben swayed back and forth a little, but he kept his balance.

“Should check this room out,” said John. He wagged his flashlight toward the room that smelled of burned magnesium and charred steel. There were large holding tanks inside and above them a cloud cover of grey smoke that drifted out the door and crawled along the ceiling around electric wires and water pipes and darkened light fixtures. Michael picked up his own flashlight and aimed it inside. He saw he markings on the tanks, and they weren’t for waste as he had thought. They were water tanks with large white-painted valves coming up from the ground and affixed to them like steel leeches. At the back of them burned and twisted debris lay on the floor, chunks of concrete and pieces of special insulating brick. Pipes on the walls had been damaged and stuck out like long gnarled fingers.

Michael went inside the room and felt walls of darkness to his right and his left. He focused ahead on the site of the explosion, and as he got closer he saw a wide metal

duct that had been blown apart all the way up until near where it ascended into the ceiling and higher into the facility. The sheet metal was shredded and looked like a massive collection of razor sharp teeth. It was an air duct. Michael was sure of it.

Charlie had destroyed one of the air ducts.

John came up behind him while Ben stayed behind in the hall. “So this is one of those air shafts,” said John.

Michael shined his flashlight up at the highest visible part of the structure. The way up was severed and it would take quite a bit of work to get up at it and see if there was still a way out. This was far underground. They’d placed the water tanks here to get them safe from bombardment on the outside, and they’d placed them deep. This was not an escape route. It was a useless avenue, destroyed by one of their own as if to eliminate the temptation. Charlie had many more charges where that came from. They had to find him soon. Intentionally or not, he had been doing diligent work keeping them inside this place. The man had seemed on the edge for a long time, and Michael tormented himself for ignoring it. That must have been what happened. Had to have been what happened. The war had broken many men these past four years, turned their minds against them, set them on the path toward self-ruin even after they had avoided ruin at enemy hands. But Michael and his group had been too strong for that, or so he believed. Nothing against those other men morally, but they had been weak in their minds, where strength counted most. He had always just deemed Charlie as eccentric, but even he had succumbed. It just took him longer than some of the others.

He thought about the stories. What Andrei had told him, how Eliza had warned him. Even how eager Hannigan was to get at the crazed Nazi notions built into this

mountain. Andrei had been right; legends did exist for a reason. They were to crystallize the mental weaknesses of men, their fantasies and their fears. It was Charlie who had used too big a charge to blow the door. Charlie had run off into the dark and attacked their escape routes for no apparent reason. No one else. Charlie had broken. Michael wouldn't break. He would get them out of this place.

Then he focused his hearing, listened back into the hallway down toward the power room, and heard nothing. Lights were on, but he heard nothing.

He turned around. "Ben, you went into the power station right?" he asked.

Ben stood in the middle of the hall, half-clad in shadow. "Yeah," he said. "Two of them. Two stations."

Michael took a few steps toward Michael and looked him hard in the eyes, tried to get a bead on whether the man was well enough to be believed. "Were they running? Are the generators running?"

The large man decreased a bit in size, shrinking from the question. He clenched his eyes shut and shook his head, then looked back at Michael. "No," he said. "None of them are on."

Michael stepped out into the hallway and looked down at the doors to the power station, at the soft light coming from inside.

"What does that mean, Mike?" asked John.

Michael didn't answer. He just looked down at the light. The pain returned to his forehead, and he found himself possessed by the notion that he needed to descend further. Down into the bowels of the facility the existence of which the map had not even acknowledged.

“Something else, Cap’,” said Ben, his voice weak.

“What is it?” said Michael.

“There’s a smell down there, Cap’.”

John chucked, but his humor was painted with fear. “There’s a lot of smells down here,” he said.

Ben shook his head. “Not like this,” he said. He then spoke directly to Michael and his eyes had regained a clarity that had seemed departed while he was sitting alone there on the cold floor. “I think I may have found the rest of the crew.”

XI

Lost Souls

The power stations were undamaged and looked cleaned and rather sterile. There were rows of tall conductors with wires connected to liquid fuels tanks and backup generators, which themselves had pipes leading both toward the water center for cooling purposes and up toward the higher parts of the facility, presumably to a port where liquid fuel could be pumped from trucks coming in through the main doors.

Michael remembered the photos Hannigan had showed him, in which he could see where the above-ground power cables had been severed when the Germans bombarded their own fortress, an extra measure to ensure the isolation of this place. They could have simply been cut with long-handled sheers or disabled by chopping down one or two of the raised wooden poles supporting them. But no, the Germans had chosen to blow them apart from the air and replace the foundations of their poles with craters. An act of dramatic haste and resolve. But not enough to keep electricity from flowing through the veins of the facility.

"Check the fuel levels on those generator tanks," said Michael as he gazed up at the grates in the high ceiling that led up into ventilation ducts.

"The crew isn't here," said Ben. "Farther down."

"I didn't ask about the crew," said Michael. "Someone please check the goddamn fuel levels." He didn't want to know about the crew yet. He tried to prevent possible images of them from ramming their way into his head, but they came anyway, as if they knew they could freeze him if he let them.

John walked past Ben to one of the ten-foot-high generator tanks and found a small utility box on its side at chest level. He opened the box and took a few moments to figure out the indicators. The lights above them flickered a bit but remained on.

"You touch something?" asked Michael.

John shook his head. "No," he said. He took another look at the indicators and seemed confused.

"What is it?" said Michael.

Ben stood off to the side and looked up at the ceiling into the lights.

John left the utility box open and let his arms drop to his sides. "Says here the tank is empty," he said.

"How the hell could it be empty?" asked Michael.

John shrugged. "The gauge says it's fucking empty."

Michael went over and edged John out of the way and looked into the utility box. A white vertical gauge with a red indicator told him how much liquid fuel was in the tank, and the indicator rested at the very bottom. He backed away from the tank and looked up at the ceiling at the lights that glowed in their off-blue hue. They flickered again and one went out for a moment then came back on and returned to its steady hum. He went to the five other tanks and opened their boxes and read their gauges and slammed each one shut as it gave him the same answer. He turned to Ben and waited for him to stop staring up at the ceiling and look back at him.

"Where is the crew?" he asked.

Ben bit his lip and tapped his fingers against his leg. "Lower," he said in soft voice. "In a room that ain't on your map."

“A large room?”

“Dunno,” said Ben. “I only saw the doors. They might let into a big room.” He looked down at the floor for a moment and then back at Michael and his eyes had tinges of red in them as if he had stayed awake for a week. “But I know that smell, Cap’,” he said. “I know that smell.”

Michael nodded. “We all do,” he said.

John had walked near the doors at the other side of the power station. He paced around some and then took a step closer to the doors, then turned back to the others. “I think I might smell it too, Mike,” he said.

Michael looked around at the quiet conductor towers and the empty fuel tanks and the generators that held nothing to power them. And he looked again at the lights that remained on like other lights throughout the facility and he began to see that lights seemed to come on at the gateways to important places, places where he and the others would want to look even though they were perhaps places where they shouldn’t. The inventory room to give them a map. The hallway leading to the storage lockers. The lights in the laboratory offices. Here in the power station.

Images invaded his mind again. Terrible images. And not all of them involved the Germans who had manned this place. He turned back to Ben.

“Take us to the crew.”

The stairwell leading down into the third level was much cruder than the fixtures above. The walls were coarse granite with steel beams for support and the stairs themselves were narrow and made from weaker metal. It led downward in zigs and zags that became filled by darkness once the light from the power station met its limit. The

men turned their flashlights back on to cut the dark and made it all the way down the stairs, at least twenty feet, until the stairs brought them to a corridor. The blasted rock gave way to smooth grey walls and a wider floor but it still seemed less ably constructed than those on the higher levels. The paint was a darker grey and the water pipes and power cables the snaked along the ceiling looked strung up loosely and held aloft by simple wire ties.

"You chased Charlie down here?" Michael asked Ben, and the thought of it made him look back to the stairs to make sure Charlie wasn't there crouched against the rock wall hidden by the dark.

Ben nodded but Michael couldn't hear that.

"Ben?" Michael pressed.

"Yeah," said Ben. "Seems a lot darker here."

"Should that matter?" said John. "This whole damn place is underground."

"Ben is right," said Michael. "It does seem darker down here." He couldn't explain to John why. It was more a sensation. They were now in the bowels of not only the facility but the mountain itself. Light had clever ways of creeping into deep spaces. It could survive far away from its source, bouncing off metal and liquid and smooth ground and giving dark places just a little bit of glow if your eyes adjusted to it. But Michael saw none of that down here. Even the light of their flashlights seemed to illuminate paths straight ahead and nothing more. No greater glow, no aura. This lower level devoured light.

"How did you manage to see anything down here?" John asked Ben.

“I dunno,” said Ben. “I didn’t. Just heard Charlie. He was rummaging around, knocking things over.”

The corridor stretched out ahead of them another twenty yards or so and ended at a pair of double doors. There was a service closet up ahead on the left with its door open. Ben gestured toward it with his flashlight.

“He was in there,” he said. “Rummaging.”

Michael stared ahead at the double doors. “And you got close to there?” He shined his light to the end of the corridor.

Ben nodded. “Yes,” he said. “Look down at the floor.”

Michael aimed his flashlight down and at first saw only the dark grey paint and a broken yellow line down the center of the floor. But as he moved the light around, he saw dark blotches. Crusted brown stains in drip patterns. He kept scanning the floor toward the doors. Drip patterns turned to streaks. They all led in one direction.

“Holy shit,” said John. His light joined Michael’s on the floor.

“Yeah,” said Ben. “I didn’t want to go in there.”

“It’s all right,” said Michael. “You had to keep after him.”

Ben seemed content to let that be his reason.

Michael took a few steps toward the open closet. “What was he looking for?”

Ben shrugged. “Dunno,” he said. “Nothing in there but coils of wire and paint cans. Couple brooms.”

“And he didn’t go through those doors?”

“Dunno,” said Ben.

“Well what the fuck do you know?” said John.

“If he did,” said Ben, “he did it before I got here. It don’t matter.”

Michael turned around to look Ben in the face. “It does matter,” he said.

Ben shrugged. “Don’t see how it does, Cap’.”

John walked ahead toward the double doors. “I know that smell, Mike. Sure as hell do.”

“We all do,” said Michael.

“Remember that wine cellar in Sevignon?” said John. “Inside the barrels.”

Michael remembered that wine cellar. The Germans had just been run out of a swath of fertile wine country in eastern France, and Michael’s group was searching for a French resistance agent who had been hiding in the area for a few months. The man’s family owned a winery and at this winery there was a large underground cellar for storing casks. The Germans had left in a hurry, but their work with the family was done in the weeks before. All of them strangled so as not to waste bullets and then stuffed whole into empty wine casks and left in the cellar to age with the grape spirits. Nine adults and five children. The smell was sweetly stale in the stairway leading down into their tomb. Decay but not rot.

The same smell met them now.

“Maybe some messed up last stand,” said Michael, though as soon as the words came out he knew they were nonsense.

The three men walked closer to the doors.

“A last stand against what?” said John. “Ain’t nothing to have a last stand against down here.”

Michael tried to sort through his thoughts but found it difficult. That barrier rose again in his mind and made it hard to string ideas together. “Maybe, I dunno, I’m thinking maybe they were guarding something down here. Seems like the right place.”

Ben shook his head. “No right place down here,” he said.

“You thinking like valuables?” said John.

Michael shrugged. He didn’t believe it but he felt compelled to make it appear like he did. “Yeah maybe,” he said.

All lights on the doors as they approached. The smell got stronger and was joined by an air of paint and paint thinner. John was out in front but Michael pushed ahead of him and used two fingers of the hand holding his gun to grip the right door handle. He tugged but the door wouldn’t move. He tried again, pushing this time, and the door creaked as though it hadn’t been opened in years and opened up into a sea of even deeper darkness.

“What do you see?” asked John.

“Nothing yet,” said Michael. “Calm down.”

Ben had held back a few yards behind the others. “We can turn back,” he said. “Go upstairs.”

Michael had no intention of doing that. He rarely had any intention of turning back, no matter what he might have the chose to turn back from. He gripped his .45 tighter in his hand as though it would protect him from whatever waited inside. He brought his flashlight up and the thing he saw was a silver crucifix bordered in gold dangling from a string. It gleamed like a bright shimmering orb and it took Michael a moment to adjust his vision and see into the rest of the room. The smell slammed him in

the face as he went inside. It was pungent outside but it permeated the air as if it had rested there for those weeks since the place went dead and the Germans severed it from their dying empire.

It was a strange church of some kind, with two rows of long wooden pews on both sides of the room facing the middle and tapestries on the walls decorated with strange nature drawings of trees and mountains and streams and large birds. At the far end was a high pulpit but in instead of a cross as its marker it had a strange pagan symbol that Michael was not familiar with. Two overlapping triangles with an open eye in the center of each one. Thin streaks of dried blood ran down over the symbol like dead vines reaching to the floor. A man's body rested over the pulpit with his arms hanging over the sides and his bald pate, grayed with decay, facing directly toward Michael as he scanned the pews with his flashlight.

And there was the crew of Facility 47.

Some sat upright on the pews while others lay prostrate or sat on the ground slumped over. Many of those properly seated had on their formal dress Wermacht uniforms replete with medals and ribbons of commendation worn over gray withered skin. Some also wore their dress caps over dried stalks of hair that had grown even after their deaths. And they had another thing in common; their eyes had all been removed from their sockets. In their laps and at their sides were switchblades and daggers and letter openers and scissors. Whatever each man had used. Dried blood covered their faces and their shirts and the laps of their pants. They had removed their own sight and sat there and waited for the loss of blood to kill them.

The other bodies in more haphazard death poses had grisly stab wounds or bullet holes and large pieces of skull bludgeoned out of their heads. The streaks leading out into the corridor seemed to come from them. Killed or captured elsewhere in the levels above and brought here to rest with the others.

"Oh, sweet Mary," said John as he walked in after Michael. "Look at all of 'em."

Michael scanned the whole of the room. "At least fifty in here," he said. "Fifty men."

"This is some new stuff, Mike," said John.

"Yeah, it is."

Michael walked up to the pulpit and took a closer look at man who straddled it. He saw the gold leaf insignia on the uniform's shoulder. Here was the Colonel in charge, presiding over the specter of this tomb where his men had killed each other and themselves. Where his facility had for all intents and purposed destroyed itself. There were no other doors in the room, no spaces beyond. This was as far as Facility 47 reached into the earth. For whatever reason and for whatever stresses Michael felt and had yet to understand, the Germans drilling their way into the mountain had stopped and surrendered here.

Michael turned around and saw John there with his mouth agape looking over the scene while Ben remained outside the double doors that had been left slightly ajar.

"Ben?" said Michael.

There was no answer.

"Ben, where are you?"

"Already seen it, Cap'," said Ben from the corridor.

“I thought you said you didn’t go in here?” said John.

“I didn’t,” said Ben. His voice was weak but there was honesty in it. Ben never seemed to speak without it. “I just, I saw it.”

John turned to Michael. “What the hell is the big man talking about?” he asked.

Michael tried not to look at either side of him toward the pews. “Doesn’t matter,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here. There’s nothing for us here.”

“Might be something,” said John. “Like maybe they hid the good stuff here. I mean, I know this is some hairy stuff, but…”

“We’re leaving,” said Michael as he walked past John and through the doors. John waited a moment and looked over the room again but turned and followed.

Ben stood outside but he faced back toward the staircase. Michael took a step past him but Ben grabbed his arm. “Cap’,” he said, his gaze still fixed down the corridor on the stairs.

Michael felt what Ben saw but he didn’t see it with his own eyes right away. He waited for Ben to take his hand off his arm and then stepped forward and aimed his flashlight down the corridor.

Someone sat on the steps near the bottom on the staircase, touched by the beam’s light but mostly cloaked in shadow. Michael walked slowly down the corridor. He holstered his .45 and held out an open hand as if to show that was unarmed. John followed just a few paces behind, but Ben hung back further than that.

“I didn’t,” said a voice from the shadows in the stairwell. Michael recognized Charlie’s accent, but it had changed, made more flat and without character.

Michael did not come closer to the stairs. He held back in the corridor and tried to use better sight to see the man in the dark. “Didn’t do what, Charlie?” he asked.

There was a long pause. John and Ben stood back on either side of Michael. John had his pistol aimed and ready just above hip-level. Ben edged close to the wall and hunched as he listened.

“I did not go inside that room,” said Charlie. “I didn’t need to.”

“You blew up that shaft in the water room,” said Michael. He knew it might not be a good idea to get accusatory so quickly, but in that moment he didn’t care. “What the fuck is wrong with you, Charlie?”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Charlie. “My hands move without me. So nothing much matters, does it?”

Michael clicked his flashlight back on and aimed the beam at Charlie. He didn’t care if he scared the man away. Charlie crouched low a few stairs from the bottom and was partially hidden by the center support beam. He had bad cuts around his eyes. Streaks of both wet and dried blood down his face. There were other streaks, clear, like tears.

“Jesus,” muttered John.

Michael felt his stomach tighten and his mind throb. He found himself completely unsure of what to say.

“I refused to do that,” said Charlie. He pointed a finger and stared right through the others to the double doors at the far end of the corridor. “I’m too strong for that. I want to see it.”

“See what?” Michael asked.

“My body,” said Charlie, and he choked up a little, “doing things without consent of my soul.” He looked up into the stairwell and around at the wall of rock. “It sings, this place. I don’t know why I heard it first.”

Michael thought it best to calm his tone a little, or at least try to. He took a step forward. “I need you to tell me what you’re talking about, Charlie,” he said in softer words. “I need you to tell me what happened here. What happened to you?”

“What makes you think he knows?” said John.

Michael kept his gaze on Charlie. “He knows.”

Charlie closed his eyes and looked down and shook his hand. “It does not matter,” he said. “I told you, it does not matter.” He looked back up at Michael and the others. “None of us will leave this place.”

Michael felt a surge of defiance within him. He bristled at those words and out of honed instinct immediately convinced himself of their falsehood. He became angry at Charlie for speaking them, angry at Charlie for breaking down. Angry at him for being weak.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” Michael shouted at Charlie. “What the fuck are you doing?!”

“Mike…” John started.

Michael waved him off. “No, enough of this crap. I want to know what his fucking problem is.” He took more steps forward. “Charlie, do you know why we’re stuck down here? Do you know why we’re crawling all over this fucking Kraut cave looking for a way up, ways like the one you blew to holy hell up there? Because your

fucking toys brought the goddamn house down on us! You did that, Charlie! You did that!"

Michael clinched his teeth as his head hurt again. That strange throb. He could feel it radiate through his limbs but he managed to keep himself still. He practiced his slow breathing, like his mother had shown as a child when he had panic attacks. His flashlight lost its focus under the stress of his anger but John kept his on target. Charlie was crying now and water streamed down his cheeks in glinting streams onto his shirt and the stairs and the floor beneath him. "I don't know what's happening," he said. "I see myself doing these things. Taking steps, grabbing things with my hands. And I try to stop, but the harder I try, the more it hurts." He opened his empty hands and let his tears fall into them. "My hands. They tried to do to me what happened to those men in there. But I stopped it. It took all of me, but I stopped it. I will not go down like that."

"Nobody needs to go down," said Michael. He tried to calm himself again as he got a better look at Charlie's tears, but his head stilled swelled with rage. Not so much at Charlie, but at everything he represented. Everything he carried there in the stairwell that Michael might have to shoulder before he could leave this place. "Charlie, listen to me. Nobody needs to go down."

Charlie nodded but then a strange grin stretched over his face. "I do," he said. "I do need to go down." He paused. "But not like this." He wiped his wet hands on his pant legs and shook his head. "A man should never go out like this."

Michael looked back at Ben for a moment and saw him still standing still by the wall watching the others. He thought Ben would want to add to all this, to try and get

something out of Charlie that Michael could not. But he just stood there. The big bastard just stood there.

Michael turned back to Charlie. “How can we help you?”

Charlie shook his head and started searching for something with his hands. Michael focused his flashlight to get a better look and he saw something in Charlie’s left hand, something shaped like a small thin brick.

John saw it too and walked backwards. “Holy shit,” he said.

Charlie shook his head again. “I want you fellows to know that it is not making me do this,” he said. His voice cracked some between his sobs. “I’m too smart for that.”

Michael almost started crying too but he kept himself from it. “Too smart for what?” he asked.

Charlie brought the little brick up to his chest. Michael saw the thin black band around the device, the strip that attached the detonator switch. “I could have done much more damage. It wanted me to. I could have blown everything. I dropped the rest of the explosives down, down, down into the hole.”

John kept backing up but Michael stayed where he was. He wasn’t even angry at Charlie about the explosives. Not in that moment. He choked on his words at first. “I know you could have,” he said. His words were much softer than he expected them to be. “I know.”

Charlie grinned, gave a slight nod of thanks, and pressed the switch.

The blast pushed Michael off his feet and onto his back and sent John rolling into the supply closet. Michael lay on the ground for a few moments and stared up into the dark ceiling. The flashlights were all on the floor and provided no glow but he could

smell the grey smoke as it rushed over his body and into his nostrils. A sharp ring filled his ears and when it subsided the only thing he could hear was a horrible wail from Ben who still stood by the wall. Ben was covering his ears and screaming a noise filled with more pain than Michael had ever heard from him. It was like a mother wolf shouting into the sky at the loss of a pup, and it only ended when Ben coughed on the smoke and sank to a seat against the wall.

Michael sat up and found his flashlight on the floor. The beam was still on, though obscured by the dense haze. He picked it up and shined it toward where Charlie had been, but there was no one there. The stairway was torn and bent but looked intact enough to climb. He reached up and wiped ash from his face and blood and bits of flesh came off his skin with it, but they weren't his. He looked behind him for John, who crawled out of the closet on his knees.

"What the hell just happened?" said John, and he too coughed on the smoke as he fumbled with his flashlight.

Michael shook his head and scooted over near Ben. He sat against the wall and tried to think of something to do. He reached out for Ben's leg with his hands but pulled back. He couldn't bring himself to touch the man, and he didn't know why. Ben coughed again and stared down at the floor.

"Is everyone alive?" asked Michael.

John crawled closer. "My head hurts," he said.

"Yeah," said Michael. He looked back at the stairwell and tried to see at least identifiable remnants of Charlie, but there was nothing. Just specks on the walls and the

ceiling and tiny scorched pieces of clothing that floated in the air and came to rest on the floor. “Mine too.”

John shined his flashlight at Ben. “You hurt, big guy?” he said.

“Take the light out of his face, for Christ’s sake,” said Michael.

“Sorry,” said John.

Ben stifled his sobs and looked up at the ceiling. His breathing grew steadier and it seemed as though he were straining to regain his strength, and Michael almost felt pity for seeing it.

“I don’t believe him,” said Ben.

“Ben,” said Michael, “there’s nothing we could…”

“He didn’t do that to himself,” said Ben.

John nodded and seemed genuinely sympathetic. He was shaken, but in the way he appeared shaken when others not familiar to him had died in front of him. Men he had killed himself, in some cases. “He was a tough guy,” he said. “I mean, who knows what…”

“I mean he wasn’t too strong for it,” said Ben, more forceful this time. “None of us are.”

Michael looked closely at Ben’s face and saw a dark streak coming from his nose again. Bright red in the limited light. Ben wiped it with his shirt sleeve, as if he noticed Michael staring.

“None of us are too strong,” Ben said again.

John looked at Michael but said nothing.

Michael tried to manage the soreness in his back and noticed the beam of his flashlight getting fainter.

"Ben," he said. "You have more of the batteries, right?"

Ben turned to look at him and appeared disgusted.

"Look, I'm as shook up as you are," said Michael. "But we need to get out of here. Where are the batteries?"

"You ain't shook up enough," said Ben. He stared hard at Michael. "I got one set of 'em left. Rest were in the truck. The truck you drove up here. The truck you left behind." He looked away from Michael and rested the back of his head against the wall. "Fuck you, Cap'."

Michael didn't have a retort. John seemed to expect one from him, some assertion of his authority, but there was not one to be had. He felt no authority in that moment, no control over what step came next. And that feeling terrified him. The smell of burned flesh reached him and coated the inside of his nose and settled on his tongue as he breathed with his mouth open. He tried to think of Charlie but again his mind felt blocked. He tried to remember what his eyes looked like as he sat there on the stairs just minutes before, what his laugh had sounded like on their journey up the mountain to get here, what his presence felt like at the night-long tavern outings after the Germans' surrender on VE Day.

But he couldn't remember it. The images faded in his mind just as they were about to come together. The harder he tried the faster they washed away from his memory. This wasn't shell shock or trauma-induced memory-loss or any of that crap. At least that's what he told himself. This was something actively thwarting his access to his

own history. He cared about Charlie. He knew he did. But without memory his emotions evaded him, and he felt helpless.

The three of them sat there shrouded by smoke and said nothing for a few minutes. The debris settled and silence again overtook the corridor.

John coughed again and spoke up first. “Mike, how the hell do we get out of here?” he said, sitting with his knees on the floor, his face mostly hidden in dark.

“Cap’ don’t know that,” said Ben.

“Hey keep your shit together,” said John.

“He’s right,” said Michael. He couldn’t bring himself to look at John as he spoke. “I don’t know how we’re gonna get out of here.”

He could feel John’s disappointment even if he couldn’t see it. The deflation, the erosion of his stubborn strength.

“Might know some other things, though,” said Ben.

“Like what?” said John.

Ben shrugged, and then grinned a little. “He knows an awful lot, don’t you, Cap’?”

Michael wanted to hit Ben in the face to make him shut up. His head throbbed at the thought of violence, as if acting on the impulse was the only thing to ease the pressure. But he didn’t strike him.

“What’s he talking about?” asked John.

Michael was quiet for a few moments. “Ben’s not in the best way,” he said finally. “None of us are.”

“Got that right,” said Ben. “But my way ain’t got nothin’ to do with it.”

John coughed. “Mike, what’s…”

“We can’t stay down here,” said Michael. He stood up and picked his flashlight and his .45 off the floor. His back ached and the back of his neck stung as he got upright.

John stood up as well, though his legs gave him some trouble. In the light Michael could see a few spots of blood where some pieces of shrapnel had cut into his left thigh. “Mike, how are we gettin’ out of here?” he asked.

“You asked that already,” said Michael.

“Yeah, well, I’m asking again.”

“The stairs are still good.”

“I don’t wanna walk past those stairs, Mike. For Christ’s sake, they got Charlie all over ‘em.”

“There’s no other way out,” said Michael.

“And I meant out of this whole goddamn place,” said John. “Not just down here.”

Ben stayed seated. “He doesn’t know,” he said with his eyes cast toward the floor.

Michael stared down at Ben and raised his finger and felt authority return to his voice. It felt like relief, like blood flowing back into his veins after hours of a heart gone quiet. “Why don’t you shut your mouth?” he snapped. “It’s safe to say you have no idea what I know and don’t know.”

Ben’s eyes opened fully and he stood up and his stature loomed over Michael by a few inches. Michael was put off by the size difference in a way he hadn’t been in a very long time, perhaps since they first joined together in ’42, but he was only put off for a moment. He stood his ground and didn’t back away.

Ben took a half-step toward him. “You knew there was nothing down here,” he said.

“Then why the hell would I come here?” said Michael.

“Nothing good for the rest of us, anyhow.”

“Since when do you want all the reasons? Listen, we came here because…”

Ben punched the air beside him and stamped his foot. “You brought us here, Cap’!” he shouted. This time Michael did step back. “You brought us here! Just you! You’re always bringin’ us places! Draggin’ us wherever you wanna go!”

“You never complained!” Michael retorted. “Never said a word.”

“Yeah, Cap’, well I’m talking now, ain’t I?” He froze in place and for a moment seemed to forget where he was. A new trickle of blood came down from his nose. Then he snapped back and spoke more softly. “I’m talking now, Captain.”

John stepped toward the space between the two men. “We can’t stay down here,” he said.

“You got orders to give now?” asked Ben.

John looked down at the floor. “No,” he said.

Michael and Ben stared at each for a little while longer and Michael blinked first. He walked down the corridor toward the stairwell where Charlie had disappeared forever. He turned and shined his flashlight at the others and the beam carried all the way back to the double doors.

“You want to know what I know?” he asked them. “All right. All right, I’ll tell you. But not down here.” He pointed toward the stairwell. “I’m gonna walk past what’s left of my man there, and I’m gonna go back to those labs.”

“Why the labs?” asked John.

“You aren’t the only ones looking for answers,” said Michael. “Maybe we can figure some out together.” He looked around at the walls and the ceiling where soot and pieces of Charlie stuck had become part of the architecture. He looked down at the double doors, closed now and hopefully closed forever. “But not here,” he said. “Not here.”

None of them said anything to each other as they went back up to the labs on Level Two. John almost threw up on the way up the stairwell where Charlie had died but swallowed it back down his throat. Michael walked out in front and guided them with his flashlight but the beam was getting dimmer. He clicked it off while they passed through the power station, still aglow with its ceiling lights still humming, but he quickly clicked his beam back on when they got to the long hallway leading past the water station to the main chamber.

The labs shined light through their windows and open doors like a beacon across the expanse. Their soft blue-white light crept out to the edges of the dig site and made the crane and the cubed cage suspended from it visible in silhouette. Michael skirted the wall as far away from the dig as he could and the others followed suit. A few times his feet seemed to move without him, taking steps toward the hole that seemed to have no end. But he forced his legs back into step and convinced himself that the involuntary moves were merely due to lack of concentration.

“We should have taken something of Charlie’s,” said John, walking right behind Michael.

“Like what?” Michael asked. “There wasn’t much left.”

“I just mean like something for his family,” said John. “Something to remember him. I dunno.”

Ben chuckled. “Don’t make sense, Johnnie,” he said with a new sarcastic cut to his voice. “Sound like you think we’re getting’ out of here to give it to someone.”

Michael tilted his head back but kept walking forward, more careful of his steps. “You can stay here, Ben,” he said. “John and me, we’re getting out.”

“Lead the way, Cap’,” said Ben.

They climbed the stairs to the laboratory doors and went inside and Michael and John placed their weapons on the table. Ben kept his pistol in hand. The ceiling lights still hummed as powerfully as before. Michael knelt down and picked up a bunch of the scattered documents on the floor and piled them onto the large metal table. He then went into the next room with the pile of burned papers and searched the shelves for any remaining books that looked relevant to what he thought might be going on in this place. The psychology books. A book about Harz history since 1650. He then went into the final lab room and grabbed the books on crypto-botany that he seen in the drawer earlier. He carried the stack back into the first room and dropped them on the table with a loud thud.

“I don’t really feel like reading, Mike,” said John.

“Yeah, well, you want to know what the hell is happening here, this is where we gotta start,” said Michael.

“No books yet,” said Ben. He leaned against one of the filing cabinets by the wall. His hand ticked against his thigh, but he kept the ticks subtle.

“What does that mean?” said Michael.

“Means you got things to say first.”

Michael looked to John as if John would declare that he didn't want to know anything. But John's expression was nervous and anticipating. And he clearly wanted Michael to talk. In over three years alongside each other, these men had never both looked at him and questioned him as they did right then. There was no back door, no order to give to keep everyone moving and keep words from having to be spoken. One of their group was gone. And they wanted to know what for. Over three years without losing one of their own. Nowhere to go now. And though the trapped feeling pained him, he actually felt some relief in having to talk. The throb in his head released just a little.

"Fine," he said. "What do you want to know?"

The two men glanced at each and took a long pause before anyone spoke up.

"What'd you know about this place?" asked Ben.

Michael felt the question coming, and he felt prepared to answer it right away. He was out of reasons not to. "Hannigan wanted it scouted," he said. "I told you that. He needed someone check it out."

"Yeah, but check it out for what?" asked John.

"He was gathering intel on these places," said Michael. "The Germans, they called them X-Facilities."

"No such thing," said John, shaking his head.

"Well, you're standing in one," said Michael.

"You said it was snatch-and-grab," said Ben.

"It was," said Michael.

"Bullshit." Ben's hand ticked a little harder against his thigh.

“Look, people wanted these places,” said Michael. “Some were rocket labs, things like that. The Russians were getting to them first. Hannigan wanted an elite group to get this one but he couldn’t have it on the books. ”

“Well why the hell did you accept?” said John.

Michael turned toward him and cocked an eyebrow. “Yeah?” he said. “You want to know why I took it, Johnnie boy? I’ll tell you. I took it because it was Hannigan who had you hauled in the night after you shot that woman.”

John gazed down toward the floor and took a half-step back. Michael stepped toward him.

“That’s right,” said Michael. “He was gonna throw your ass in a box for a couple decades. He gave me an op, an easy op.”

“Easy?” said Ben.

“It looked easy,” said Michael. “Abandoned Kraut facility in the border zone. No one home. Go in, see what I can find that Hannigan can use, and we keep everything else for ourselves.”

“There is nothing else,” said Ben.

“Yeah, well, I know that now, don’t I?”

John composed himself and stepped back toward Michael. “Hannigan told you that?” he said. “He told you he’d put me away like that?”

“John, for Christ’s sake, that woman you shot?” said Michael. “She was his intel on this place. His intel on a lot of things. So yeah, he was gonna put you away.”

“Then why not just tell me?” said John. His tone was less angry than disappointed, like a child looking to his father for truth after years of lies.

“Why not tell all of us?” said Ben.

“It was a threat,” said Michael. “He gave me a week. Then he was gonna make life awfully hard on all of us. But I knew we could do it. I had it under control.”

“But why not tell us?” Ben said again.

“I had it under control,” Michael repeated.

“Why?”

“Would you have done it?” said Michael, raising his voice.

Ben looked back and forth between Michael and John, who stood near the wall and waited for someone else to talk. “I dunno,” said Ben, and the anger rose his volume now. “But I would have told everyone.”

“Yeah, yeah, good old Texas boy,” said Michael. “I never heard you say a goddamn word. I never saw you giving back the diamonds or the watches or the gold or the…”

“I didn’t leave with you for any of that,” said Ben. His face became red and he bit his lower lip.

“Yeah, I know that,” said Michael. Ben rarely talked up, but he definitely had when Hannigan kept giving them orders to safely harbor Nazis. “The perfect fucking American, gone AWOL with the rest of us traitors.”

“You lied to me,” said Ben though clenched teeth.

Michael slammed his fist down on the metal table. “I never lied to any of you!” he shouted.

“Bullshit!” Ben took a step forward and then his right arm jerked out to the his side and rose in the air and slammed down on the table as someone would slam a piece of

wood. He looked at his arm like it was a creature chewing on his body and yanked it from the table but then it punched a nearby filing cabinet. Ben screamed as he punched the cabinet again and again. He grimaced at the strain as he pulled his own arm back from the metal and it looked incredibly difficult, like someone trying to pull a piece of steel from a powerful magnet. He pulled his arm back to his body and spun around until his back slammed against the wall and a framed photograph of Heinrich Himmler fell down and shattered its glass on the floor. Ben clutched his arm against his belly and closed his eyes as his breathing grew panicked and he shouted up at the ceiling.

"Jesus, what the hell's going on?" said John.

Michael did not run to Ben's aid. He wouldn't know what to do if he did. He stood back across the table from him and watched Ben hold his arm to his body so tightly that his fingernails cut into his skin and his arm began to bleed.

Ben slammed his back into the wall twice with such force that the whole room seemed to shake. He slid down until he was sitting on the floor with his arm clamped between his legs and his chest.

"Mike," said John, bewildered and afraid. "What's happening to him?"

"I don't know," said Michael.

That was true; he did not know what was happening. But he was starting to have an idea. All those stories, the ones Andrei had told him, the ones Eliza had grown up listening to, probably around fires in the small secluded hamlets of these mountains. The children's book with the engravings of the doomed prince. The stories came from somewhere, somewhere Michael and the others may have just walked into. That back part of his mind tried to cuts the legs out from under that notion, tried to assert the

insanity of it. But Michael didn't let it. He couldn't let it. He thought of the hole just outside in the main chamber and his mind drifted deep down into its darkness and he tried to imagine what was down there. Tried to think of something he could shoot or stab or light on fire but every thought seemed hopeless and too reliant on familiar dangers.

Faciliy 47 was no familiar danger.

Ben coughed and grimaced with his eyes closed. John walked toward him but stopped a few paces away, frozen and unsure, as if afraid to catch plague. He looked to Michael for some direction on what he should do as he had so often before, but all Michael could do was look back at him with the same uncertainty and fear.

"I ain't all right, Cap'," said Ben. He said it as an apology, as if not being all right was the worst thing a man could be.

"I know," said Michael. He walked around table and knelt down next to Ben and Ben didn't look him in eyes. He had always had problems looking people in the eye. "It's all right." Michael tapped his foot on the floor and gathered words he rarely said, even as a child. "I'm sorry, Ben," he said. He looked back at John. "I'm…I'm sorry to both of you." He paused. "And I'm sorry about Charlie."

It didn't happen right away, but over a few moments those words seemed to breathe new life into Ben. He gradually released the grip on his arm and after a minute or so he managed to stand up and rest his body against the wall. "What the hell is happening, Cap'?" he asked softly.

Michael rummaged through the documents on the table and began to flip through the books he'd gathered. The others came up to the table with him and looked down at the materials. Michael tried to gauge their eyes. John looked frightened and unsure but

held together, and Michael could certainly second that mental state. Ben looked weak, slumped even more than usual. But his eyes seemed to belong to him and he looked aware of where he was and what he was doing. He was holding on.

"You two ready to think through this?" Michael asked.

Nods but no words.

"All right then," Michael continued. "Now the Krauts destroyed most of whatever they found out here, but there's some left in all this. I know there is." He started sorting through the pile of papers on the table. "Now we need to try and find anything we can use to…"

"What do you think?" asked John.

Michael looked up and saw a familiar look in John's eyes. An anxious expression of desperate trust. He had shown it many times before, and if he ever took significant time to think about, Michael would surely think it much too many times John had placed all his faith in him. A flaw, he thought. One of many for John, but this was a flaw Michael had taken advantage of far too often. And he hoped it wasn't the flaw that finally broke the man.

John coughed to clear his throat. "What do *you* think is happening here, Mike?"

Michael glanced at Ben and his silence told him he too waited for an opinion. "I think the Krauts were looking for something really strange down here," he said. "And I think they found it."

"Strange, like what?" asked John.

Michael shrugged. "Something deep inside the mountain," he said. "Something they thought they could use. Andrei told me there were stories here, about this mountain.

That it made people do things they didn't want to do. Eliza said the same thing. Now Hitler ran all over the world looking for stuff like this. Legends, stories, stuff people talked about but nobody really believed." He shook his head. "I didn't believe them either."

"Like ghosts?" asked Ben. His tone suggested he had little difficulty believing in them.

Michael thought about that possibility for a moment, but he looked down at the books and shook his head. "I don't think so," he said. He glanced out the window at the massive drill sitting dormant near the hole in the main chamber. "I think there's something down in that dig. Something real. Maybe something they pissed off." He patted one of the books with his hand. "I think we need to look through as much of this as we can. John, you read the best German, right?"

"I dunno, Mike," said John. "I think we just need to get the hell out of here as fast as we…"

"If we don't figure out something about what's down here," said Michael, "we won't make it that far."

There was silence from the others for a few moments.

John looked back and forth between Ben and Michael and nodded. "Yeah, I think I read the best Kraut," he said.

"All right," said Michael. "You help me read through whatever we can find." He slid over closer to Ben leaned in to look at his face and see if he was still with them. He still seemed alert enough. Weak, but alert. "Ben, I need you to look through the maps. The whole schematic. Find anything that could be a way out of here."

Ben looked back at him and swallowed hard and then managed a nod. “All right, Cap’,” he said.

So they searched all the information they could find in the labs. The papers, the books. Most of the documents were prisoner information forms that listed the name and age and weight and ethnicity of every person brought in for experimentation. Every person that had likely been put in that cage that hung above the dig and lowered inside. The date recorded on the forms was sparse – anything more detailed was surely burned in the next room – but it listed duration of captivity and cause of the death. There were also notations about how deep the dig had gone into the mountain at the time of the tests. As the depth got greater, the length of captivity shortened, and the cause of death was always the same; self-inflicted injury. The Nazis had a way of making everything sound so clinical. So soulless.

Other forms left unscathed were a crew member break sheet – they weren’t allowed to stay in the lower levels for more than a few hours at a time and could go down via the tramway – and a few things about soil samples that didn’t make sense to either Michael or John. Michael thought Charlie might have been able to glean something from them. He could probably have made more headway with the psychology, botany, and geology books as well, but Michael and John flipped through them as best they could and occasionally exchanged findings but mostly read the literature in silence.

Ben remained at other end of the table and used a found pencil to make notations on the details schematic. A few times he asked for translation of more obscure German architectural terms, but aside from that he kept to himself and seemed strained to remain focused on the map.

Michael felt exhaustion tugging at him. He tried to stiffen his posture and infuse himself with energy, but every time he did so the pressure built in his head. He found his fingers tapping on pages without his consent and twice his hand drifted toward his hip holster before he realized it and grabbed one hand with the other. The second time he did this he dug his fingers so hard into his hand that it broke the skin and let drops of blood out onto the floor. He looked up to make sure the others didn't see. He closed the psychology book in front of him and pushed it away.

"They wanted mind control," he said.

The others stared at him and said nothing to argue with the idea.

John leaned forward and folded his arms on the desk and rested his head on them. "Well, maybe they got what they were looking for," he said.

Michael watched Ben closely to see how he was doing. Ben stared at the center of table and seemed deep in thought, but he looked calm even though his eyes were even more bloodshot and his skin had gotten pale.

"So what the hell could this thing be?" asked John.

Michael's mind drifted to the hole, down into the endless dark where not even a dropped flare could find the bottom. He found himself incapable of creating something down there, of imagining how a mountain could control the actions of people. He remembered the strange plant-like stink, the odd organics odor wafting up from the dark. He could imagine death. He could remember back to the times he had seen it and inflicted it, the bodies and the fire and the smoke and the smell. But he could not think of what could do this. He doubted the Germans could either. They believed stories and they dug and they dug until they found those stories buried in the earth. Michael had kept

digging too, in his own way. He became angry at himself, and his head ached and he felt his hand trying to move again without him and it only made him angrier. He had kept going on and on. Refused to go home. He felt guilt come over him. And his remaining self-awareness allowed him to realize that this guilt eased the pain and stayed his hand.

"Whatever this thing is, it uses our minds against us," he said.

Ben looked up at him with eager eyes. "What do you mean, Cap'?"

Michael tried to think it through some more. "I dunno," he said. "I'm thinking maybe it doesn't just make people do things. Maybe it takes feelings already there and makes them worse. Anger, fear, things like that. It enhances them, empowers them. Charlie, you know what he was like. What he was getting like, I mean."

John shook his head. "I dunno, Mike," he said. "Maybe Charlie just snapped, you know. He was getting really weird before we got here. Scary weird."

"Yeah, he might have snapped sometime down the road," said Michael. "But not here. You saw him. Whatever's down there, it turned him on himself."

"How?" asked John.

"How should I know?" said Michael. "The Germans sure as hell wanted to know, and if they did find out, it didn't save them."

"What happened to those Krauts?" said John. "Jesus Christ, all those fuckin' Krauts."

"Panic," said Michael. "All it takes is one to lose it. Like some disease. This whole place went insane."

Ben stayed very quiet across the table.

“So what does that mean?” asked John. “What the hell can we do? We gotta get out of here.”

“Yeah, we do,” said Michael. He looked over at Ben and waited for him to look back. “But maybe the best thing we can do while we find a way out of here is…calm ourselves down.”

John laughed out loud. “Calm ourselves down?” he said. “How the hell do we do that?”

“I believe the Captain,” said Ben across the table, and he sounded as though he hated saying that. Both Michael and John looked at him and waited for him to say more. Ben glanced up at each of them and folded his hands on the tables and looked at them as if they were live grenades. “Like one of them Chinese finger traps,” he said. “You know those little things. Gotta pull out easy or they tighten up.” He looked up at Michael and he looked completely drained of energy. “I felt it real tight. Can’t get much tighter.”

Michael returned his gaze and thought for a moment. He looked at John, how he slumped over the table and how his legs sagged from the chair down toward the floor. He felt the blur of fatigue in his vision and felt how hard it was becoming even to think.

“How about that map, Ben?” asked John.

Ben shrugged. “Lot of ducts in this place,” he said. “Don’t know which ones…”

“We’ll find a way out,” said Michael. “But if we keep on like this, there’s no way we last. I think we need to try and sleep.”

He expected protest, argument over how anyone could sleep down there after everything that had happened. John raised his head and looked ready to argue but he said nothing.

“Maybe,” said Michael, “if we get rest, rest our minds, we stand a better chance.” He closed an open psychology book on the table near him and pushed it aside. “I just don’t knowwhat choice we have.”

“Where?” asked Ben.

Michael looked over at the window into the dark of the main chamber where the dig waited in looming silence. “Not down here,” he said.

“Mike, I admit I’m about to pass out,” said John. “But no way I’m sleeping in those barracks. Damn those rooms gave me the creeps.”

Michael thought of the eyeballs left on the table. John hadn’t even seen that. “The inventory room,” he said. “It has lights.” He glanced up at the ceiling. “We’re bunking with the lights on tonight.”

They got their packs together and set up their blankets on the cold floor of the inventory room between the comforting confines of the communication stations and work desks. It felt safe in its own way. Closer to the outside, even if the outside was a thick rock wall away. Michael locked the doors as though what they were up against could open them, and he lay on his blanket and stared up at the single light left on in the ceiling and was amazed that he started to drift toward sleep with such illumination. The room was only partially lit, but it was more than he could usually sleep with. He felt as though his body was giving out on him, but he actually felt okay with that. His body wasn’t his greatest danger anymore.

John fell asleep almost immediately. Michael heard his slow breathing and very slight snore. He closed his eyes and began to follow suit. He felt relief in his mind. Just a little.

"Cap?" whispered Ben.

Michael opened his eyes and looked up at the ceiling. "Yeah?" he said.

Ben paused for a while. "I'm gonna be able to sleep," he said.

"That's good," said Michael.

"Can't help it," said Ben. "Like I'm shutting down. I'm scared to sleep, Cap'."

"It'll help," said Michael. "Just a few hours. Then we're gonna find a way out. We just can't do it yet. I want to, but I know we can't…"

"I know," said Ben. "I ain't arguing with you."

Another long pause.

"You seem all right," said Ben.

"All right?"

"Like it ain't hurting you."

Michael knew that wasn't true, but he also knew it wasn't getting to him as badly as it was Ben. At least not yet. Maybe it was because Ben had been down in the lower levels for longer than he and John. Charlie had been wounded, and perhaps that was why he became affected so soon. And like the others had said, Charlie had been losing it for quite some time. Or maybe whatever was doing this to them preyed on weaknesses they weren't aware of, aspects of themselves they could not see, or refused to see. Perhaps Michael was stronger than the others. Leaders had to be strong, had to have their minds right when other didn't.

"You had it bad down there," said Michael. "You went deep down there first."

“Maybe,” said Ben. He rolled around some on his blanket and sniffled and it sounded as though he was crying, but Michael didn’t look over. “What if we got nightmares? While we sleep?”

“Nightmares can’t hurt you,” said Michael.

Ben took a loud breath. “What are you afraid of, Cap’?” he asked.

This time Michael paused a while before answering. “I’m afraid of not getting you out of here,” he said.

Ben said nothing. Michael waited a while but after a few minutes he heard the breathing of sleep from both men. He tried not to let it, but his mind again went down to that hole, down into the dark. He believed what he said, about what he was afraid of. The pain returned to his head and he closed his eyes and tried to rid his mind of everything. He felt his hand move down by his side. He opened his eyes and looked at it. It jerked inward toward his hip, three jerks at a time between rests. He tried to ignore it. Maybe it was best to ignore it. But it jerked again. Only once this time. Inward toward his hip where his .45 rested in its holster.

He slowed his breath and his hand stopped moving. He waited a while to see if it moved again. It didn’t, at least not as long as he remained awake. His body gave out on him, and whether he wanted to or not – whether it was the best course of action or not – he surrendered to sleep.

XII

Waking

In his dream there were horses. Big Appaloosas with bold patterns like the ones that roamed the ranch near his childhood home. The kind he would sneak onto the property to sit in the sun and watch as they played with each other and stood up on their hind legs in grand displays of strength. They'd awed him and frightened him. In this dream they marched in rows of three across a great plain and kicked up dry earth with such power that a great brown cloud followed them backlit by harsh summer sun. They came toward him as if they were prepared to run him over. His view was low like that of a child. He braced for the collision. But at the last moment their column veered to his left and marched off in a different direction. The great brown cloud enveloped him and he could not see a thing.

He coughed and squinted and tried desperately to the find the horses. He could hear the thunder of their mighty hooves on the ground but the noise became distant. He ran through the haze but the sound only grew softer. He ran in several directions, unsure of where he going, and after what seemed like an eternity of searching he collapsed onto the ground amidst tall yellow grass and began to cry. He looked up and tried to see the sun but the dust had snuffed it out. He scanned the distance and saw only powdered earth clouding the air.

Then a figure appeared in the haze. Far away at first, a darkened blur, but it came closer to him and he could tell it was a man. The figure stopped and stood with hands on its hips and Michael tried very hard to see who it was. At first he thought it was his

father. It had his shoulders, broad and flat. A large man with his hands on his hips was the last memory Michael had of his father. He had hugged Michael's mother outside their home and stood on the porch for a while. A neighbor with a car had waited in the driveway to take him to the train station. From there he had galloped off to the Great War, and he had never come back. Michael was six years old.

But in this dream, the harder he looked, the less like his father the figure seemed. He thought to get up off the ground and run to it, but he didn't. He did not know why, but he didn't. The next moment the figure looked more like Ben, square head sitting too low on those big shoulders, shoulders with too little of the confidence they should have. Then he felt it was Charlie, bangs blowing in the wind, irreverent hands clutching hips, but the body was too large to be Charlie. Then he felt it was John, the torso leaning forward, head bent toward him in expectation. But it felt too calm, too assured in its posture.

He looked down at the ground for a moment and wiped the dust from his eyes. He looked back at the figure standing in the haze and it now felt like someone else, but he couldn't figure who. He was struck by that odd familiarity, that sense of kinship with something he ought to feel no kinship with. Like the smell of gunpowder and spilled fuel. The sight of trees charred by fire. The still air that hung inside the bowels of Facility 47.

He tried to figure out who it was but couldn't. And so he pressed his hands against the ground and started to get up, ready to walk up to it and see.

And then he woke up.

He looked up at the ceiling of the inventory room and saw only black. The light had gone out. He sat up on the floor and blinked and tried to get his eyes adjusted to the dark. He didn't reach for a flashlight, as he didn't want to wake the others for no reason.

He could see remarkably well in the dark, after years of practice. The shapes and figures in the room slowly came into better focus and nothing seemed changed except for the absence of light. John and Ben slept on their thin mats perpendicular to each other and neither made a sound. The desks and control station remained dark black shadows in their slumber. The doors were still closed. Everything looked the same.

But he felt something different. Some new presence. Not that of a person. It wasn't that strong. But he had been in enough situations that demanded he feel every instance of life around him to know that they were not alone.

He looked up at the ceiling again. There was a ventilation grate up there that appeared to him as a black square against a matte of darkened grey. A soft scratching noise drifted down from inside the duct and touched his ears. Tiny short scratches like teeth against metal.

He felt one of the others stir.

"What is that?" whispered John.

Michael kept his eyes on the grate. "Stay still," he whispered back.

"I am staying still," said John.

The scratching grew a little louder and closer to the grate. The sounds became more numerous and Michael felt as if other presences of life had joined in the small commotion.

Ben rolled over on his mat. Michael glanced over at him and though he could see him well in the dark, he got the distinct feeling that Ben was very afraid.

"I might know," said Ben.

“Might know what?” said John, no longer keeping his voice at a whisper.

Ben paused a moment to listen to the scratching. “What it is,” he said.

“Well what the fuck is it, then?” said John.

Michael scooted back some on the floor and made sure his pack was close by. He gripped his .45, though he wasn’t sure what good the weapon would do him against whatever was making those sounds. John went for something bigger and gripped his shotgun by the barrel.

Ben didn’t go for a weapon. His head shrunk down between his shoulders where he lay and he never took his eyes off the ceiling grate.

“Ben,” said Michael, and he made sure his tone was level and unthreatening. “What do you think is up there?”

The scratching got even louder, and now it seemed as though dozens had joined the chorus. Ben made a few soft noises and looked down at the ground.

“Are you awake, Cap’?” he said.

Michael tried to understand the question. “Yeah, yeah, Ben, I’m awake,” he said. “Why?”

“Dunno,” said Ben, and it sounded as though he might be crying. “Just wasn’t sure I could tell the difference anymore.”

“We ain’t lost you, have we, big guy?” said John. He clicked the trigger ready on his shotgun.

“I dreamed it,” said Ben.

Michael took his eyes off the ceiling and faced Ben directly. “Dreamed what?”

Ben looked back up at the ceiling and he took a few moments before he answered. “What’s about to happen.”

A screw holding the ceiling grate in place came loose and fell down onto Michael’s mat. Then another came down and clanked off the hard floor and rolled underneath one of the office desks. The last two came out at once and the whole grate down and Michael had to roll to his left to avoid. It came down on top of his mat and clanged against the metal buckles of his pack. He gripped his .45 and fumbled around a moment looking for his flashlight. He found it and clicked it on and John’s came on at the same time and their beams found the loose grate just in time to see a rat fall down on top of it. It was large and dark grey and it landed on its back and its little legs flicked back and forth in frantic kicks. It soon righted itself as another fell down right next to it.

“What the fuck!” shouted Michael.

The others were already backed up against the rear door. John dropped his flashlight by his leg and gripped his shotgun and aimed it at the rats. Ben still did not go for a weapon. He pressed his back against the wall near the door and cringed in fear and held a hand over his face.

Michael crawled over near them and sat back down and aimed his flashlight back at the grate and the rats that sat atop it. The pair of them waited there for a moment and then set off together onto the mat as another rat fell onto the grate behind them. Then another. And another.

“Where the hell are they coming from?” said John.

“Keep your finger off that trigger!” said Michael.

“Fuck that,” said John. “If those things come at me, they’re getting sprayed on the wall!”

Michael heard scratching and squealing above the ceiling. Hundreds of little noises coming down the ducts toward the open hole into the room. More rats fell through the air onto the grate on Michael’s mat. His pack was still there, but he wouldn’t go near it. He had a gun and he had a light, and right then that was all he had a mind to keep hold of. The rats gathered on the mat but didn’t yet move from there. Their tiny eyes glowed white in the beams of the flashlights and their noses searched the air almost in unison, as if all smelling for the same thing.

“A move, Mike,” said John. His breathing sped up. “I need a move fast. I ain’t got a move for this shit.”

“Hold yourself together,” said Michael, but he could have been talking to himself. He trained the barrel of his .45 on the head on the nearest rat, a large fat one that hunched its shoulders and stared right back at him. There were at least thirty of them on the mat now and they jostled and crawled amongst each other like a single writhing mass. The noise continued up in the ducts and it grew even louder.

Michael heard Ben whimper. It was a boyish sound, a sound of both confused fear and knowing apprehension. “Ben, stay with us,” he said.

The noise swelled above the ceiling. All three men looked up and followed a disgusting warble of squeals and scratches all the way to the open grate. Then they all came down. Dozens and dozens of rats coming down into the room like water spilled from a high bucket. The flashlights caught their fall and the eyes shimmered in the dark

like hundreds of tiny jewels and their front teeth glistened white like splintered ivory. They piled onto the mat and spilled out onto the floor.

John screamed and lifted his shotgun and fired into the pile of them. The blast turned several of the rats into clouds of tattered flesh that splattered onto the wall. He pumped another shell into place and fired again and sent more rodent innards onto the outer borders of the room. The rats squealed and the sound became as one tortured cry. The noise knotted the stomach and Michael lost control and threw up onto the floor between his legs.

"Out of here!" shouted John. He grabbed his flashlight and stood up.

Michael got up as well and looked down to see Ben frozen on the floor staring at the rats. "Ben, get up," said Michael. Ben didn't move and in the light Michael could see his eyes were almost glazed over. "Ben, get up now!" He grabbed the man's arm and yanked him off the floor.

John got the rear door open and rushed out into the adjoining corridor that led to the mess hall and barracks, but took only a few steps before he stopped.

"What the…?" he exclaimed.

Michael pulled Ben along and came up behind John and saw what he saw. To their left coming from the direction of the mess hall were dozens more rats. They ran down the corridor in strange strides that seemed slowed down, but they all came forward toward the men stopped outside the door. Michael looked to his right and saw more coming from that direction, dozens of them.

"Jesus Christ," he said. "Back out the other door!"

"Past all those others?" said John.

“Yes, now!” Michael ran back into the inventory room where the rats that hadn’t been torn apart by shrapnel still huddled on the mat pushing amongst each other. He stayed as far away from them as he could in the cramped room and made it to the other door leading out to the garage. He grabbed the handle and noticed the sticky slime of rat entrails on it but opened the door anyway and ran through. Ben ran right after him and John made to the doorway before he turned around and fired another blast from his shotgun into the army of rats. The shot echoed through the cavernous expanse of the garage and bounced off the giant doors and thundered back at them.

“John, save your fucking shells!” Michael shouted.

“Plenty more where that came from, Mike,” John replied. He pumped another shell into position inside the shotgun.

Michael didn’t see any rats in the garage. The walkway leading to the caved-in door looked clean and he saw nothing moving down in the vehicle lot. Nothing was coming up from the tramway leading down to Level Two.

“Head for the corridor,” he said.

John slammed the door shut behind them. “Going back down there?” he said.

Michael didn’t even reply. He just headed for the ladder and started climbing down to the garage floor. John dropped the question and followed him and he slapped Ben’s shoulder to make sure he was on the same page. Ben stood still for a moment and stared out toward the cave-in, but the rising volume of the rats in the inventory room brought him back into the present and he climbed down the ladder with the others. They ran out into the middle of the garage near the dust-covered trucks.

“Where did they come from?” asked John.

Michael shook his head. “How the hell am I supposed to know?” he said.

“There’s gotta be hundreds of them,” said John.

Michael looked up at the inventory room and heard a chorus of tiny squeals gathering in force behind the door.

“So where do we go?” asked John. “I mean, I got shells, Mike. I can blow those little fuckers right to – “

“Ben,” said Michael. He saw Ben standing there with him but he wasn’t really there. He just started down at his hand as it twitched toward the Bowie knife sheathed on his right leg. His eyes were marked with little tendrils of red and blood came from his nose again. “Ben, you with us?”

Ben looked up at him as if he just joined them in the garage and was unfamiliar with the place. “I don’t…” he started. “Where’d they come from?”

“I just asked that,” said John.

“I don’t know,” said Michael. He remembered Ben talking about his dream when they woke up, before the grate fell. “You knew what was happening.”

Ben shook his head. “Didn’t know anything, Cap’,” he said. “I can’t even think right.”

“You said you knew what was going to happen,” said Michael. “Said you dreamed it. What did you dream, Ben?”

Ben bit his lip and whimpered and seemed as a child struggling to explain to a parent something horrible he had seen. Another trickle of red ran down from his nose and dripped onto the garage floor.

“Dream?” said John. “What are we talking about dreams for?”

There was a loud creak and the inventory room door came open and a swarm of squeals spilled into the garage. Michael aimed his flashlight up at the walkway and saw what looked to be a thousand rats scramble over the steel mesh and climbs down the ladder and the support beams. “Holy Christ,” he said.

“Fuck this!” John turned and ran toward the tram corridor and as he did so he hit Michael’s arm. Michael dropped the flashlight on the floor and the light went out. Michael knelt down and frantically searched for the flashlight. He heard it rolling and reached for the sound but every time he reached the sound got further away. He tripped over his feet and fell over and his cheek hit the cold floor and he heard several small objects skitter out around him. Diamonds from the pouch in his jacket. When he opened his eyes he could not find them in the dark. Not even a glint or a soft sparkle. He saw a flashlight beam down in the tram corridor bouncing across the walls and the ceiling as John ran toward the lower levels. He saw the dark shape of Ben running even farther down until he disappeared around the bend. John shouted as he tripped over the tram rail and fell to the corridor floor.

Michael heard the horrible sounds of a thousand tiny vermin voices and he looked up and saw them stampeding towards him in the last remaining glow from John’s light until everything went dark and all he heard were their sounds. The noise came to him like a screeching wall and he scrambled backward and his back struck the large tire of one of the trucks and he sat and braced for the rats to overtake him. He had cuts and bruises all over his body. He knew they could smell that. And he had done so much wrong and in his panic he knew they could smell that too. He closed his eyes and listened to their hideous

song and waited with his .45 in his hand. He tried to pull the trigger but his finger felt frozen. Stuck in place as if paralyzed.

But the swarm of rats turned away just a couple yards before they got to him. They moved in a column like an advancing army and headed for the tram corridor. The whole lot of them swerved away for him and their line seemed to go on for a full minute until all were past him except for a few stragglers that hopped along and made their own little squeals, weak and lonely echoes from the charge that had just gone by.

John screamed louder than Michael had ever heard him scream and the sound welled up from the corridor and filled the garage as it bounced off the walls and the high ceiling. He screamed over and over again, primal guttural shrieks, and Michael rose to his feet despite the throbbing pain in his legs and his back and his head, and though his legs didn't seem to want to run in that direction he forced himself down the corridor to John's aid. He was still strong, he told himself. He could still get up and move.

"John!" he shouted.

There was a little bit of light down the corridor, muzzled light, as though the beam had run up against a wall. Michael heard the rats as he ran and they sounded as though they had reached the entrance to the lower main chamber. John had stopped screaming but choked and whimpered as Michael found his shadow-clad form lying on the floor huddled in the fetal position. The flashlight had rolled against the tram rail and in its faint hue Michael could see the hundred tears in John's clothes and the streaks of blood from cuts on the back of his neck.

"John, are you all right?" said Michael as he knelt down next to him. "What happened?"

John was crying now and didn't look up at Michael. He just lay there with his knees tucked into his gut.

"John, I need to you talk to me," said Michael.

"They followed him," said John, choking out the words between sobs. "They followed Ben down there, Mike. All of them."

Michael picked up John's flashlight and held it high and he could see scratches and lacerations on John's face and his hair had been ripped and tussled. "Jesus," he said.

"They ran over me," said John. "Seemed like a million of 'em. They just kept coming. Rats, Mike. Fucking rats. Why were there all those fucking rats."

Michael laid a hand on John's shoulder and squeezed it gently and hoped that was enough to ease him some. "Did they bite you?" he asked.

John shook his head. 'They just ran me over, Mike. Like nothing I ever saw before."

Michael gazed up at the ceiling and the pipes and wires leading down to the end of the corridor.

"John, where did Ben go?" he asked.

John coughed and wiped a hand over his cheek and smeared blood from the cuts all over his face. Without looking he pointed down toward where the corridor gave way to dark abyss of the main chamber. "He ran down there."

Michael listened and heard the faint echo of squeals deep in the dark. There were no human words or shouts or screams, but there was a metallic groan like the moving of heavy machinery. It came from the direction of the dig. He squeezed John's arm as if to let him know he was still there with him. He imagined when it must have been like, to be

swarmed over with hundreds of the little monsters. John shivered and Michael could see a mark on his face that wasn't made by a scratch or a cut. It was a single streak running down from one nostril, a rivulet of blood dripping to the floor.

Michael felt his own face and tried to see if his nose was bleeding. He dapped his upper lips and held his hand in front of him to inspect it in the light, but he didn't see anything but dirt and dust smeared there some other time he couldn't possibly pinpoint. He looked down at his left hand, the same one that had reached on its own for his sidearm during the night, and though it shook some from the stress, it made no such move.

Michael looked again down the corridor into the main chamber. "The rats are quiet," he said.

John started to cry. Michael squeezed his arm again for a moment then jabbed him in the pack with his fist. "Knock it off," he said.

"Where's Ben?" asked John between sobs. "What's happening to us?"

Michael had a better idea of that now. What was happening to them. It was breaking them down, using their fears against them, even in sleep. But he was far from figuring out what was doing it or how to stop it. He remembered the deer on the mountain that had attacked them. It was as if the whole mountain, everything that lived here, sought to destroy them. Whatever it was had sent an army of rats to chase them into the darkness, an aggression he thought might be in response to the calm they had tried earlier. He moved his own hands and his walked with his own feet but he still felt that throb when he thought about that hole in the ground, that drop into the center of the world that lay shrouded in the dark up ahead. And yet he knew he had to go there. He told

himself it was he that made the decision, not anyone else, and he patted John on the side and stood and began walking toward the main chamber.

"Where are you going, Mike?" John asked.

"To find Ben," said Michael. "Just hold on, all right?"

John wiped tears from his eyes and blood from his face. "I'm fine, Mike," he said. "I really am."

Michael nodded though he didn't believe him. No way in hell any of them were fine.

He walked ahead with the flashlight and left John lying there on the floor in the dark to choke back his crying. He took careful steps down the corridor and scanned the floor ahead for rats but he didn't see a single one. There were thousands of tiny white scratch marks on the floor paint where their feet had skittered over the surface but the attackers themselves had vanished into the dark. He made it to the main chamber and cast the beam out into the vast space, first to the left toward the doors to the storage room, then to right to the right toward where light still carried out a ways from the laboratory windows. Then he aimed it toward the dig site. It looked deserted as well, except that the steel cage suspended above the hole swayed back and forth as if pushed by wind, though there was no wind.

He walked closer. All the way to the raised platform where the crane's control console was set. He heard John crying behind him in the tram corridor but he kept his focus from that. He couldn't help him right now. He aimed the flashlight up at the cage but the side facing him was solid steel and his light only grazed the mesh side adjacent to it and he couldn't see anything inside. But he felt something there. He tried hard not to

look at the hole but again he thought he heard a sigh from deep within it. It wasn't a sound that came from a certain source. It just emanated from the dig and echoed inside his mind. He caught the sickly sweet plantlike smell in his nose again. At the scent of it he immediately put a hand to his face to make sure he wasn't bleeding, and he wasn't.

He heard a series a short sharp squeals and jerked his flashlight to see a lone rat perched on the edge of the hole. It looked up at him and studied him for a moment, turned its nose up toward the swinging metal cage, then scurried down into the hole. Perhaps the last straggler. Had they all gone down there? Hundreds of them? He couldn't bring himself to look down into it. His feet wanted to. It felt as though a clamp caught each leg and tried to move them toward the edge, but he closed his eyes and tried to clear his head, to stop thinking about the rats and about John and about the hideous cuts and scratches all over his body.

He turned his flashlight to the crane. The crane's arm had moved some. He looked over the control console and examined the arm control stick, and there was blood. Fresh blood. Wet and glistening in the light.

A whimper from inside the cage above.

"Ben?" said Michael.

Another whimper but no answer.

The cage swung around a little bit and Michael could see the latched mesh door on the other side was slightly open.

"The rats are gone," said Michael.

"Down the hole," said Ben in soft words from inside the hanging cage. "Just like us."

“How’d you get up there, Ben?”

Ben started whimpering again like a small child. “I didn’t, Cap’,” he said. “I ran with John. My legs carried me off. I didn’t have a light, but my legs ran without me. Ran here.”

Michael swallowed dry air down his throat and took a step to the side. He could see Ben’s leg and part of his arm. “It’s all right, Ben,” he said. “Just do what we did last night. You remember, right?”

A pause.

“Not this time,” said Ben. “Won’t work this time.”

Michael glanced down at the hole very quickly and he felt his head hurt. Not throb, but hurt. He was so close to it and he couldn’t see why it didn’t attack him the way it attacked Ben. He couldn’t make sense of it and the more he tried the more he lost focus. For a split second he forgot where he was and when he again looked up at the cage it took him a moment to remember who he was talking to and why.

“Ben, you can beat it,” he said. “You got this. I’ll swing you back around and you can get down. John, he needs you.” He reached out toward the control console.

“Don’t touch that!” Ben shouted, and the shout boomed in the cavernous expanse.

Michael stopped cold then stepped away. “It’s all right,” he said. “It’s all right.”

“I admit it, Cap’,” said Ben. “I was angry at’cha.”

“That’s all right. Don’t you worry about that.” He could hear strained and fast breaths from the cage. “Ben, what are you doing?”

“I followed you everywhere. I never got out of line.”

“No, you didn’t,” said Michael. “You’re a good soldier. A good man. One of the best. I know you never…”

“I should’ve,” said Ben. “Should’ve a long time ago.”

The flashlight caught something in its beam, something dripping down from the cage into the hole. It glistened red in the light and came down in a long vertical streams and there was so much of it.

“Oh God,” Michael said to himself. He went to the control console and selected the stick with the blood on it and moved it to the left. The base of the crane rumbled to life and the arm swerved slowly to the left. The cage rocked back and forth with the motion and more blood flowed between the metal mesh on the both sides. Michael kept pressing the stick until the cage was above a square loading platform to the left of the hole.

A solid wall side of the cage still faced him and he walked around to the mesh door to see in. Ben cried inside but said nothing. The flashlight first caught his shoes and the red pooled around them glowed a bright red in the beam. Michael panned the flashlight upward toward Ben’s face and he couldn’t see it clearly behind the top of the cage door.

“Ben?” he said.

“Let me go, Cap’,” said Ben.

Michael reached out and grabbed the latch and pulled the door open. Inside he saw Ben with one large hand obscuring most of his face, and the other hand held his Bowie knife near the cheek, and the knife glinted red. His lower face and his shirt were covered in blood.

“What the hell, Ben?” said Michael as he took a step back. “What are you doing?”

Ben slowly lowered the hand without the knife, and Michael could see that both his eyes had been cut out. Perfect cuts around the sockets.

Michael felt his throat tighten and he felt cold flow through his limbs but he didn’t gasp or step away. He looked at his friend as if he were already dead and his eyes drifted away from those empty sockets and found the empty darkness of the hole below. He tried to gather the courage to look at Ben directly but there were no eyes to look into, only ears to hear.

“Ben, I’m sorry,” said Michael. “I did bring you here. I did.”

Ben shook his head slowly. His hand trembled with the knife it its grip, edging down to the floor of the cage as if to put the blade down but jerking back near his face. “There were always rats in the grain still,” he said. “My daddy made me sleep out there sometimes. Always the rats.”

Michael felt a presence behind him and looked back to see John standing at the entrance to the main chamber, his face and arm caught in the faint glow of the laboratory lights. John watched but did not come closer. Michael turned back to Ben. He started to reach his hand out, started to say he could help him back onto the ground. But there was no help to give now. His head throbbed at the mere idea of it. No help for the lost.

Ben wiped blood from his lips and spat more out onto the cage wall. “Whatever’s down there,” he said. “It didn’t call us here. We came on our own.” He turned his body that his head faced down into the hole as if he were looking down into but of course he could do no such thing. “Lemme down there, Cap’. At least lemme see what it is.”

“Ben, I…” Michael lost his words again and a tear ran down the edge of his nose.

“Just push it back out,” said Ben. He faced Michael again and though his arm seemed to force its way through the air as if through rock, he was able to set the knife down. “It’s done with me. Lemme go down to it. I at least gotta see it.”

Michael stiffened for a moment but nodded his consent. He went over to the control station and used the stick to take the cage back out over the hole. The crane groaned and veered to the right in a slow swing.

“Mike, what are you doing?” said John, still staying far away.

Michael ignored him and kept moving the cage until it was positioned right above the dig. He felt the pain in his own mind and the tension in his own hands let up as he did this and he looked up at the cage and waited for further instructions from Ben. Waited for orders in a way he had not done in a very long time.

A bright red light bloomed and hissed inside the cage followed by a crackling sound. Ben had lit a flare, as though he could see whatever its light could reveal.

“All the way down, Cap’,” said Ben, and he sounded so calm. The solid side of the cage faced the control console and Michael could not see him, but he sounded so calm. “All the way down.”

Michael nodded. He found a pull lever with a yellow down arrow on the console and pulled it. The crane’s suspension shuddered some as it woke from dormancy, and then the cage lowered down into the hole and brought Ben and his glowing flare down with it. Down and down it went and Michael stepped toward the edge of the hole to watch it descend until the glow became faint and the cage disappeared and his friend was gone.

He did not feel the pain in his head now, but his stomach knotted up and he dry heaved and no vomit came up. He turned from the hole and coughed out bad air from his lungs and spit onto the ground. He closed his eyes and knew that this was grief, not whatever lay at the bottom of that hole waiting for Ben, and for him as well. He looked up and saw John still standing there. John took a few steps back, his eyes still on the dig, his shotgun gripped in his hand. He turned and ran back up the tram corridor and vanished into the dark.

John was the only one left with him. He had left him on the floor with his body cut and desecrated. Left him there. He shouted after him. There was no response. He gave chase and ran from the dig as the sound of the steel suspension cable slipping more of its length into the abyss echoed softly throughout the main chamber.

XIII

Final Steps

Shotgun blasts echoed down the tram corridor, and Michael ran up to the garage wary of what John was shooting at. More rats perhaps, or at least he hoped that was the case. The guiding line of the tram rail was becoming too familiar to him as he ascended the corridor. The glint of its steel in the light of his flashlight. The ringlets of rust around the bolt heads holding it to the floor. He was beginning to recognize them too easily.

Another blast from the shotgun. Michael hurried his pace.

The corridor seemed to stretch out longer than before. He could see the burst of white in the garage at the end of the tunnel up ahead, but after he hustled for a few moments and saw the burst of white again, the end seemed to have gotten no closer than before.

Another shotgun blast.

Michael stopped in place and thought he heard another sound coming from behind him. A long and soft sigh. He looked behind him and saw only darkness tinged with a slight hue of light coming from the labs. The sound went on another few seconds and then faded. He looked in what he assumed was the direction of the dig. He tried to recall what it looked like, what it smelled like when he looked down into that hole, but he again felt his memory blocked. The sigh remained in his mind. It did not sound human or anything close to it, but it sounded like breath. An exhale, a call with no desire for an answer.

Another shotgun blast. Michael turned and ran up the corridor. He reached the garage in only a few strides. Apparently it had not grown longer after all. He scanned the cavernous room with his flashlight and caught the headlights and windows of the trucks in its glow and turned it to the left.

John stood up on the raised walkway facing the cave-in at the door. He held the butt of the shotgun against his shoulder and had the barrel aimed at nothing but rock ahead of him. He didn't turn or flinch when Michael's beam found him.

"John?" asked Michael.

John did not answer.

"What are you doing?"

John lowered his head for a moment and appeared to consider the question. Then he raised his weapon again and screamed in such a way that it roared past Michael and carried down the corridor. John walked toward the pile of broken rock and earth and fired his shotgun three more times. The shrapnel of the shells sent orange sparks off the rock in brief luminous displays. Then John dropped the shotgun and cried in pain and fell face-first to the walkway. He rolled around on the steel mesh and sobbed.

Michael ran to the ladder and climbed it as fast as he could. He remembered the rats, and his eyes and fingers searched for them on the metal but there were none. He got on the walkway and hustled over to John and saw him clutching his leg and rolling on the ground and whimpering as a child might do after scraping his knee. He focused his light and tried to see the leg, and he saw that it was bleeding through John's fingers. He rushed to his friend and got down on his knees by his side.

"Jesus, John," he said. He kept his flashlight on the leg. "What are you doing?"

John muttered unintelligible noises and clutched his leg even tighter. “It’s bad, isn’t it?” he said between clenched teeth. “Mike, come on, tell me it’s bad.”

Michael looked closer at the wound. Some ricochet had definitely got him and there was a decent amount of blood, but the wound was slight. “It’s fine,” he said.

“Goddamnit,” said John, disappointed.

Michael set the flashlight on the walkway so that it faced the nearby wall and bounced a little light off it. He reached over and grabbed John and pulled him so that he sat up. John winced some as he had to move his wounded leg but his breathing steadied and he gripped Michael’s arm and didn’t let go. Michael sat next to him with his back against the railing.

“I remember in O.S.S. training,” said John. “They had us get into a box and stay in it for hours. You remember that?”

Michael did remember.

“I mean, it had a little hole in it for air, but I didn’t know it was there until they let me out. Mike, that was the scariest thing I’d ever done in my life. I mean, I just stopped breathing for what seemed like forever. I thought they’d buried me. Got so bad I guess I thought maybe they weren’t really O.S.S. I thought they were Krauts. Krauts kidnapping people and burying them alive. You believe that?”

John looked out into the garage. The side windows of the trucks below caught a tinge of light, but aside from that the place was a dark abyss, as great and endless as the hole at the center of the dig site in the level below them. “I thought that was the worst way a guy could go,” John said. “Trapped like that. Can’t even shoot back.”

“You made it out of that box, right?” said Michael. He tried to sound uplifting but he knew it was a dishonest attempt.

“Mike, I’d take that box over this right here,” said John. He lowered his head and rubbed his leg. “This here ain’t right for guys like us. I mean, Charlie and Ben, they…” He trailed off for a moment. “Mike, this ain’t even right for those Krauts.”

They sat there together in silence for a while. The glow of the flashlight marked them as an island in the ocean of dark. Michael thought he heard the sigh again from below, but as soon as he focused his ears on it, the sound was gone. Perhaps the sigh was Ben, having reached the bottom. It would need to be a scream to sing so far.

Michael glanced at the pile of collapsed rock where the door used to be and imagined the outside. It must have been close to dawn out there with the morning sun rising over the peaks of the Harz and casting those long sharp shadows of the trees over the ground. He remembered how they had gotten up here, how they had forced their way in, blasted their way inside as they had blasted their way inside so many place these past few years. How he had ordered, *ordered* them to bludgeon their way in here.

He felt moisture on his upper lip. He touched his face with one finger and held it out and looked at it. The light caught the wetness, shadowed dark with one sliver shining red in the glow.

“We’re getting out of here,” he said.

John squeezed Michael’s arm. “Ain’t no way,” he said. “Not anymore. Just leave me here, Mike.” He paused. “I’m all right with it. Maybe it won’t hurt so bad.”

“Bullshit,” said Michael. He felt his head throb but he didn’t care. He wrapped his arm around John and hauled him to his feet and they both stood on the walkway and looked out over the garage. “Think you can walk?”

John pushed away from Michael and tested his balance. “Yeah, I think so,” he said. He knelt down to pick up his shotgun from the walkway.

“You don’t need that,” said Michael.

John shook his head and dry coughed and spat a little blood out onto the engravings of the shotgun where it lay on the walkway. “I need it,” he said, and he picked it up. “Don’t worry, Mike. It’s out of shells. I promise.”

Michael didn’t press the issue. He picked up his flashlight and looked back at the inventory room, now dark and cloaked in the memory of the rats.

“Come on,” said Michael. He grabbed John’s sleeve and the two of them ran to the door and went inside. Michael shined the light inside and looked for rats but they were all gone. Only thousands of tiny scratch marks in the paint that glinted on the floor. He found the square hole from the missing grate in the ceiling and grabbed the chair at one of the work desks.

“That’s crazy,” said John.

Michael stepped onto the chair one careful foot at a time. “Yeah, maybe,” he said. He reached up to the ceiling and grabbed the edges of the opening in the duct with his fingers and pulled to make sure it could hold his weight. The chair he stood on began to wobble. “John, for Christ’s sake, grab the chair.”

John reacted to the order as quickly as he would an order in a firefight and grabbed the chair with the hand not holding the shotgun.

Michael pulled on the edges of the duct again. It should hold him, but it wouldn't be by much. He took a breath and opened his mouth and barely fit the handle of the flashlight in his teeth. He hoisted himself up so that his head went inside the duct and the light bounced off the sheet metal. The frame round the grate opening groaned under the strain of his wait and he strived to see as much as could as quickly as he could. The duct stretched horizontally each way, and there was no telling when it ever turned upward. And to Michael's dismay, each line of duct narrowed a few feet from the grate opening to only a couple square feet. Not nearly enough for him or John to crawl through.

The sheet metal and the plaster of the ceiling crumbled around his hands. He muttered a curse past the flashlight clenched in his mouth and his hold gave way and he fell down onto the floor near the blanket he had slept on during the night. The flashlight crashed against the hard floor, and the lens and bulb shattered and the room went dark.

"Shit!" yelled John.

"Ahh," grunted Michael. "Dammit, where's your light?"

"Hold on."

After a few moments of lying on his back wincing at the pain of the fall Michael saw light once again bloom in the room. He felt John's hand grab his and he let John hoist him to his feet.

"You all right?" John asked.

Michael cricked his neck and nodded. He looked down at his broken flashlight. The shards of glass shined against the grey floor like raw diamonds.

"What'd you see, Mike?" asked John. "Is it a way? Is there a way out up there?"

"No," said Michael. "There's nothing."

“What do you mean nothing?!” cried John. Blood ran from his nose again. “There can’t be nothing! You said we were getting out of here!”

Michel grabbed both John’s shoulders. “We are. Keep it together.”

John looked down at the floor and tears from down his face and joined the blood around his lips.

Michael thought back through the facility. His mind drifted through the chambers and the corridors, through barricaded doors and into the empty barracks rooms and down into a lower mausoleum with the silver cross dangling in the air like a macabre ornament. All walls and dead end hallways and ladders that only led down. Then he thought of one place. One part of Facility 47 that might have a way up.

“The kitchen,” he said.

John wiped tears from his eyes and blood from his nose and smacked the hand holding the shotgun with his flashlight as it began to shake next to him without his consent. “The kitchen?”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, the back of the kitchen. Where they have the ovens.” He went over the other door in the inventory room and looked through the small square window into the corridor where the army of rats had come marching against them. But it too was again devoid of life. He turned back to John. “Let’s go. It’s right through here.”

John stood frozen for a moment but nodded and followed Michael out the door. They jogged through the corridor to the mess hall. The ceilings lights inside had never been on since they had entered the facility, but they flickered on and off now, sometimes so rapidly that they became strobes and Michael felt the pressure in his head getting even tighter. He tried to practice his breathing for a moment, tried do some of things he had

told himself and the others they had to do, but he saw the kitchen at the back of the mess hall and decided to fight through the pain instead. It bloomed in his brain such that he had to stop and grab a table. His hand flicked toward the holster at his hip again. He shouted at his own limb and grabbed the .45 from its holster and threw it across the room.

John watched him do this but expressed no surprise at it. “Mike, where would we get out from here?” he asked. “I don’t see anything.”

Michael clinched his teeth and stood up straight again and walked over by the metal preparation tables inside the kitchen. To his left he saw the freezer that had encountered before, the ones filled with weapons from a war fought within these corridors and these rooms. He felt cool air near the freezer unit. It was still on. He waved John and his flashlight over to him, and he looked up and scanned the ceiling. There were a few ventilation grates but they were much too small. He then edged around the tables near the ovens and squinted to see in the dark.

And he found what he was looking for.

Above the two large stainless steel ovens there were wide ventilation shafts leading straight up into the ceiling. At least three feet wide. It split into two ends that were each bolted into the tops of the ovens to let smoke exit the facility. This was as close to the top of this place as they could get. They had to lead to an opening.

“Here we are,” said Michael. “This is our best shot. We gotta get something to open them up with.”

John stood against the wall and hugged his blood-stained shotgun to his chest and held the flashlight so that it faced straight up into the ceiling.

Michael looked over at him and held out his hands as if to ask what he was waiting for.

"I could have handled the time," said John.

"What time?" asked Michael.

John snorted and cricked his neck. "Hannigan," he said. "I could have done the time. I would have."

"John, it doesn't matter," said Michael. "We can get out of here. Just help me find something to get them open. We can climb up."

"It does matter," said John. "I could have made that choice, Mike. Not you."

Michael shook his head and pressed his hands against his hips and tried to think of something calming to say. That's what he needed right now. Something calming. This could be it. They could be so close. "John, I'm sorry," he said.

"No you aren't," said John. He clenched his teeth and his breathing became harsh wheezes. His eyes became glazed, like Ben's had when the rats came.

"John…" said Michael.

"Couldn't stand to be apart from me," said John. He grinned. "Nice to have a fuck-up around. Always someone to save, right, Mike?"

Michael lost his composure and slammed his fist down on a preparation table and the bang echoed through the kitchen and the mess hall. "Dammit, John, knock it off!"

"You need me!" John shouted back. He lowered the shotgun and aimed it at Michael's chest and out of instinct Michael lunged and pushed the barrel aside just before John pulled the trigger. The weapon fired a blast into one of the ovens and a few of the tiny pellets ricocheted and struck Michael in his shoulder. Michael got around behind

John and wrestled the shotgun from his grasp and the weapon fell to the floor. John screamed and started crying and became limp in Michael's arms. Michael set his back against a wall and held John there until his breathing slowed. He held on tight to both John's arms, and after a few moments John grabbed Michael's arm as well. Not as if fighting back, but more in the manner of a hug.

"I can't…" John started. "I didn't want to…"

"It's all right," said Michael. "You could have done the time."

John nodded. "I could have done it, Mike."

"I know. But I couldn't let you do that."

"Let me…"

Michael felt John loosen up some and he released his grip and grabbed his friend's shoulder and pulled him around so they could look at each other. "We can get out of here," he said. "I can feel it."

John shook his head. "I won't make it up there. I'm done."

"You're not done," said Michael.

John looked down a few moments, then met Michael's eyes again and nodded. "What do we need to do?"

Michael smiled and looked over at the ovens. "Help me get that shaft open," he said.

John nodded. His eyes seem to lose some of their glaze and some color returned to his face between all the scratches and cuts. "How?"

Michael let go of John and began looking through the drawers for something that could cut through metal. In his distress he pulled the drawers from their fixtures and

emptied their contents onto the floor and rummaged through them. He found spoons and cleaning rags and metal whisks but nothing useful. He kicked one of the drawers against the wall and the crash echoed through the kitchen and into the mess hall. John stood by and watched.

Michael then went over to the freezer and opened it. The light was still on inside and it began to flicker. Amongst the pile of rifles and pistols and tools he found a long hacksaw, its serrated edge glinting in the bright and cold light. He looked for another, but he couldn't find one.

He had worked with sheet metal some before, as a teenager employed at a barn repair service. He went over to the ovens and managed to saw large sections out of the shafts leading up into the ceiling. Rectangular chunks of metal that he threw to the ground once he made the cuts required to remove them. As he worked his head throbbed, a rumble of pain with each push and pull of the saw. He felt the controlling vibrations in his hands but he steadied his breath, freed his mind of everything that had happened, everyone he'd lost, and focused on the task at hand.

John watched and kept the flashlight raised so that Michael could see as he worked.

"Hand me the light," said Michael.

John gave him the flashlight and he aimed up into the shafts, and to his pleasant surprise they didn't lead straight up. Once they extended above the ceiling they became diagonal, each veering off to the right toward the near slope of the mountain. The inside of the shafts were dark and grimy but the grease seemed to have hardened and would

make the climb much more slippery. Michael looked at John and smiled. “We can get out.”

John looked out at the flickering light in the mess hall and didn’t smile back. “Can you see the end?” he asked. “The outside?”

“No,” said Michael. “But it’s there. I know it’s there.”

John looked back at Michael and there was that familiar desperate trust in his bloodshot eyes. Weakened and doubting, but present. John nodded and managed as close to a grin as he could. “All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Michael got down from the oven went back to the freezer to find some knives. The angle didn’t look too steep, but crawling up would be a challenge, and there was no telling what turns or angles it took farther up the top. They could use knives to keep hold on their way up. This was their last try. He knew that much.

He found two good knives on the floor next the panzershreck rocket launcher. Short wide blades. He handed one to John and nodded at him and waited until their eyes met. “We’re going up,” he said.

John nodded and his words were weak. “Let’s get out of here.”

And they began their climb. John took the over on the left with the upper shaft and Michael took the one on the right. Michael told John to keep the flashlight for himself, to keep it in the neck of his shirt as he climbed. They each fit into the openings above the oven and the shafts were wide enough for them to use their arms to crawl but just tight enough to make falling back less of a possibility. Michael set the leather of his boots against the metal and pushed himself forward, the hardened grease smearing on his hands, and every ten feet or so he plunged his knife into the side. The first few times he

hit concrete outside the sheet metal, but a way into the diagonal crawl the knife went farther out, edging against rocks and hard earth. He could hear John doing the same in the next shaft. The routes stayed right together. Michael was thankful for that.

Up ahead he saw a grate in the top that he thought must connect to John's shaft. He heard John's movements more clearly then. He heard grunts of effort and plunges of the knife, and he smiled and pushed himself closer to the grate so he could speak to his friend. He knew they were close. He couldn't see light up ahead yet, but he could smell outside air. He felt hope. The tension in his head eased. It might be easing up. It might be letting him go.

"John!" he shouted. "We're almost there!"

Then he heard sobbing. Soft cries through the grate. He pushed himself closer to it.

"John?"

"It hurts, Mike," said John, almost in a whisper.

"Just keep pushing," said Michael. "It's close. John. We're so close." He pushed with his feet until he got to the grate and waited there. John pushed ahead as well and in a minute or so he was right above Michael, his back against the metal mesh of the grate. "See, you got it," said Michael. He laughed out loud. He actually laughed. "You're making it."

"I just wanted to make it this far," said John. "I'm done."

Michael couldn't tell what he meant. "What do you mean, you're done? We're not there yet. Keep pushing."

"I…" John started. "What then, Mike?"

“Don’t worry about that. Just keep going.”

“That island?” said John. “Way out there in the ocean. Other side of the world.”

“Yes,” said Michael. He couldn’t see his friend shake his head, but he sensed him doing it. “Keep going, John.”

John’s crying got louder. “You can’t save me,” he said. “Mike, you could never save me.” He sniffled. “I know how hard you tried.”

Michael heard a low cutting sound, the sound of a blade against bone.

“I know you tried, Mike.”

A trickle of blood came down through the grate and spilled onto Michael’s cheek. “No,” said Michael, a soft word. Then he shouted. “No! No, goddamnit!” He banged his hand against the metal and almost lost his place and slammed his boot to keep himself from slipping.

A whisper above him. “I’m all right.” Another pause. “It’s over now.”

More blood came down from the grate and covered Michael’s face. He started to imagine what John was doing, what the others had done before him. The pain returned to his head. He’d brought John here. He’d brought them all here. He knew that. He felt his hands shake and the blade in one hand came close to the wrist of the other. More of John’s blood came down onto his face. His thoughts drifted back down the shaft and into the kitchen and through the mess hall and through the dark corridors, to the dig where Ben had descended to the bowels of the earth, to the stairs where Charlie had turned himself into a million pieces of this place. The blood continued to come down from above him and in a few moments there was no more crying. Michael heard a sliding sound as John drifted slowly downward, back to the others.

But then Michael brought his mind elsewhere. He thought back to John sitting with him in a church tower in England watching *Casablanca* on an outdoor movie screen, marveling at how different that war was from theirs. John had smiled through the entire film, repeating lines after the actors had said them. It annoyed Michael then. He couldn't imagine now why it had annoyed him so much.

"Not so bad that he flies away at the end," John had said. "Not so bad to leave."

He had looked John in the eye then, and somehow he knew the man would not survive the war. But he got the sense even then that John was okay with that.

And then Michael let go. Not of his place inside the shaft. He stayed put there. But he let go of the rage. He stopped rethinking hours and days and months gone by and left them in their history, to be exhumed later and given meaning. There would be time for that, in this life or the next. But for now he let that all go and let grief wash in after it. He could deal with grief. Grief didn't need him to control anything, didn't need him to dig his nails into earth or flesh to keep everything in its place. It demanded only his acceptance. He felt the pressure give way. The blade in his hand moved away from his wrist. He left the blood on his face, and he kept pushing upward.

The journey seemed to lead on forever. He kept pushing through the shaft with his feet and the smell of grease was gradually overtaken by the scent of trees and morning air. The scraping of his knife against metal became softened by the calls of birds above. He closed his eyes after a while and just kept pushing forward as if it was the only thing he knew how to do. Perhaps he hadn't been able to pull the knife away. Perhaps the filthy shaft led on into infinity and no matter how long or how much he strived he would never reach the end. He imagined that he slipped, that he fell all the way back down the shaft

and through the floor and into the hole. Down into the heart of the mountain. To the center of the earth.

Then his head hit a wall. He opened his eyes and saw metal leading up a couple yards, and then above that he saw white. White that moved. He closed his eyes for a few moments and then looked up again. The white had moved away, replaced by blue tinged with orange. He didn't smile at the sight of the sky. He just breathed. It took all the strength he had left, but he crawled up out of the remaining yards of metal shaft and spilled out onto concrete ground.

Spruce trees surrounded him where he lay. He looked over at where the sun rose over the eastern peaks of the Harz. Morning. He felt his hand move without him and looked down at it and almost let himself panic, but the hand rested again. A highland sparrow landed a few yards away, where the concrete top of Facility 47 gave way to natural ground covered in leaves and twigs. The sparrow hopped over to him, studied him for a moment, then flew away and left him there.

He sat up and brought his knees to his chest and looked out over the vista. A part of him wanted to look back down into the ventilation shaft, down into the dark, but he didn't do it. He had nothing on him but his clothes, and the knife. He held the knife in his palm. It was covered in grease and blood. He reached back and threw it down the slope.

He thought he saw someone on a nearby ridge, lower than his altitude. He squinted in the intense sun and for a moment he believed it was Colonel Hannigan. The thought jolted him, but then he realized he wasn't afraid of that. Perhaps he should be, but he wasn't. And of course it wasn't Hannigan. He looked harder and thought he saw long dark hair dangling over shoulders, hands confidently placed against hips.

Eliza.

He told himself it was Eliza.

She watched him from her spot at the edge of the ridge and didn't move. He looked back out at her for what seemed like hours, sitting there on the concrete, too tired to stand. He would walk to her, he told himself. He would get up and descend the mountain and walk to her. She was the only person he could see. The only person he knew.

Then the figure on the ridge turned and walked back into the forest and vanished.

Michael stood up and felt the blood on his face. He wiped it off and smeared it on his shirt. The morning birds were loud in the trees. They called to him in sharp songs. He let the sun touch his face where the blood used to be.

Then he walked down the mountain.