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The Black Sun

James Twining

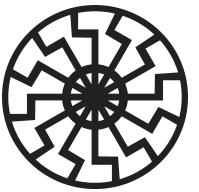
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Extract

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PROLOGUE

The broad mass of a nation . . . will more easily fall victim to a big lie than to a small one.

Adolf Hitler, Mein Kampf

St Thomas' Hospital, London
27th December – 2.59 a.m.

Ash cash.

That's what medical students call it. Every cremation or burial release form requires a doctor's signature, and every signature earns its donor a small fee. Death could be good business for a doctor who happened to be in the right place at the wrong time.

To Dr John Bennett, however, shouldering the icy rain as he walked briskly over to the main hospital building from the ugly hulk of the accommodation block, the prospect of a few extra quid was small compensation for being paged at three a.m. Very small. As if to emphasise the hour, Big Ben, its face suspended in the air like a small moon on the other side of the river, chose that moment to chime, each heavy, deadened strike shaking Bennett a little further awake.

He stepped out of the cold into the warm blast of the heaters positioned in the entrance vestibule, the sudden change in temperature making his glasses fog. He took them off and wiped them clean on his shirt, the moisture streaking across the lens.

A red LED display glowed into life overhead as the lift made its way down to him, the declining numbers scrolling rhythmically across the panel. Eventually, there was a muffled sound of machinery as the lift slowed and the door opened. He stepped inside, noting as the lift lurched upwards that the bronzed mirrors made him look healthier than he felt.

A few moments later, he walked out on to the ward, the wet soles of his shoes faintly marking the scarlet lino. The corridor ahead of him was dark, the lights dimmed apart from the emergency exit signs that glared green above the doors at either end.

'Doctor?' A woman's voice rang out through the gloom. He slipped his glasses back on to identify the approaching figure.

'Morning, Laura,' Bennett greeted her with a warm smile. 'Don't tell me you've killed another one of my patients?'

She shrugged helplessly.

'I've had a bad week.'

'Who was it this time?'

'Mr Hammon.'

'Hammon? Well, I can't say I'm surprised. He was in a pretty bad way.'

'He was fine when I came on duty. But when I looked in . . .'

'People get old,' Bennett said gently, sensing she was upset. 'There's nothing you could have done.' She smiled at him gratefully. 'Anyway, I'd better take a look. Have you got the paperwork ready?'

'It's in the office.'

The windowless room was positioned about halfway down the ward, the only light coming from the glow of two surveillance monitors and the LED display of the video recorder beneath them. One monitor showed the corridor where they had just been standing, the other flicked between the patients' rooms, pausing a few seconds in each. The rooms were identical, a single narrow bed dominating the space with a few chairs drawn up under the window and a TV set fixed high up on the facing wall. The only variation was in the quantity of flowers and get-well cards on one side of the bed and monitoring and resuscitation equipment on the other. Unsurprisingly, there seemed to be a direct correlation between the two.

Laura rummaged around on the desk for the file, the blue glow from the monitors staining her red nails purple.

'Do you want the light on?'

'Please,' she replied, without looking up.

Bennett reached for the switch, when suddenly something caught his eye. The roving camera had settled momentarily in one of the patients' rooms. Two dark figures were silhouetted against the open doorway, one slight, the other improbably tall.

'Who's that?' Bennett said with a frown. The picture jumped on to the next room. 'Quick, get it back.'

Laura switched the system to manual and scanned the rooms one by one until she found the men.

'It's Mr Weissman's room,' she said in a low, uncertain voice.

The two figures were now standing on either side of the bed looking down at the sleeping patient. Even on the monitor he looked thin and frail, his skin pinched, his cheeks hollowed by age. Various wires and tubes emerged from under the bedclothes and led to a heart-rate monitor and some sort of drip.

'What the hell are they playing at?' Bennett's surprise had given way to irritation. 'You can't just come in here whenever you feel like it. What do people think we have visiting hours for? I'm calling security.'

As Bennett reached for the phone, the tall man on the left snatched a pillow out from under the sleeping man's head. He awoke immediately, his eyes wide with surprise and then, as he blinked

at the two men looming above him, fear. His mouth moved to speak but whatever sound he might have been trying to make was smothered as the pillow was roughly pushed down on to his face. Helpless, his arms and legs flapped limply like a goldfish that had leapt out of its bowl.

'Jesus Christ!' Bennett gasped, his voice now a whisper. He jammed the phone to his ear, the white plastic slippery against his sweaty skin. Hearing nothing, he tapped the hook switch a few times, before locking eyes with Laura. 'It's dead.'

On screen, the tall man nodded to his companion, who lifted a black bag on to the bed and reached in. The teeth of what Bennett instantly recognised as a surgical bone-saw sparkled in the light. Deftly, the figure slid back the man's left pyjama sleeve and placed the blade on his arm, just below the elbow. The man jerked his arm but to no avail, what little strength he had left clearly ebbing away in his attacker's strong grasp.

Bennett glanced at Laura. She was standing with her back to the door, her hand over her mouth, her eyes glued to the monitor.

'Don't make a sound.' His voice was thin and choked. 'We'll be fine as long as they don't know we're here. Just stay calm.'

The saw sliced through the skin and muscle in a few easy strokes before it struck bone, the main artery gushing darkly as it was severed and the blood pressure released. In a few minutes the arm

had come free, the limb expertly amputated at the elbow. The stump oozed blood. Abruptly, the struggling stopped.

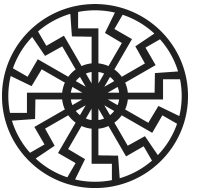
Working quickly, the figure wiped the saw on the bedclothes then returned it to his bag. The arm, meticulously wrapped in a towel snatched from the foot of the bed, soon joined it. The victim's face was still masked by the pillow, the bedclothes knotted around his legs like rope where he'd kicked out and got himself tangled up. The heart-rate monitor showed only a flat line, an alarm sounding belatedly in the empty nurses' station down the corridor.

The two men moved away from the bed, across the room, careful not to touch anything. But as he was about to shut the door, the tall man suddenly looked up into the far corner, into the camera lens, straight into Bennett's eyes, and smiled.

'Oh my God,' Bennett breathed in slow realisation. 'They're coming for the tapes.'

He jerked his head towards the other monitor. The thin man was walking slowly up the corridor towards them, the blade of the knife in his hand glinting like a scythe in the sun.

Laura began to scream, a low, desperate, strangled call that grew louder and louder as the image on the screen drew closer.



PART I

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

Edmund Burke

ONE

Pinkas Synagogue, Prague, Czech Republic
2nd January – 10.04 a.m.

The shattered glass crunched under the leather soles of Tom Kirk's Lobb shoes like fresh snow. Instinctively, he glanced up to see where it had come from. High in the wall above him white sheeting had been taped across a window frame's jagged carcase, the plastic bulging every so often like a sail as it trapped the biting winter wind. He lowered his gaze to the man opposite him.

'Is that how they got in?'

'No.'

Rabbi Spiegel shook his head, his sidelocks bumping against his cheeks. Although smartly dressed in a dark suit and white shirt, he was thin and frail and the material seemed to hang off him like loose skin. A faded black silk yarmulke covered the top of his head, firmly clipped to a fierce growth of wiry grey hair. His face was hiding

behind a wide spade of a beard, his watery eyes peering through small gold-framed glasses. Eyes that burned, Tom could see now, with anger.

'They came in through the back. Broke the lock. The window . . . that was just for fun.'

Tom's face set into a grim frown. In his mid-thirties and about six feet tall, he had the lithe, sinewy physique of a squash player or a cross-country runner – supple yet strong. Clean-shaven and wearing a dark blue cashmere overcoat with a black velvet collar over a single-breasted grey woollen Huntsman suit, his short, normally scruffy brown hair had been combed into place. His coral-blue eyes were set into a handsome, angular face.

'And then they did this?' he asked, indicating the devastation around them. Rabbi Spiegel nodded and a single tear ran down his right cheek.

There were eighty thousand names in all – Holocaust victims from Bohemia and Moravia, each painstakingly painted on the synagogue's walls in the 1950s with family names and capital letters picked out in blood red. It was a moving sight; an unrelenting tapestry of death recording the annihilation of a whole people.

The bright yellow graffiti that had been sprayed over the walls served only to deepen the unspoken weight of individual suffering that each name represented. On the left-hand wall, a large Star of David had been painted, obscuring the

text underneath it. It was pierced by a crudely rendered dagger from which several large drops of yellow blood trickled towards the floor.

Tom walked towards it, his footsteps echoing in the synagogue's icy stillness. Up close he could see the ghostly imprint of the names that had been concealed under the paint, fighting to remain visible lest they be forgotten. He lifted a small digital camera to his face and took a picture, a loud electronic shutter-click echoing across the room's ashen stillness.

'They are evil, the people who did this. Evil.' Rabbi Spiegel's voice came from over his left shoulder and Tom turned to see him pointing at another piece of graffiti on the opposite wall. Tom recognised it as the deceivingly optimistic motto set above the gates of all Nazi concentration camps: *Arbeit macht frei* – work sets you free.

'Why have you asked me here, Rabbi?' Tom asked gently, not wanting to appear unfeeling, but conscious that anything useful that the rabbi might have to tell him could soon be lost in the emotion of the moment.

'I understand that you recover stolen artefacts?'

'We try to help where we can, yes.'

'Paintings?'

'Amongst other things.'

Tom sensed that his voice still had an edge of uncertainty to it. Not enough for the rabbi to pick up on, perhaps, but there all the same. He wasn't

surprised. It was only just over six months since he had gone into business with Archie Connolly. The idea was simple – they helped museums, collectors, governments even, recover stolen or lost art. What made their partnership unusual was that, after turning his back on the CIA, Tom had spent ten years as a high-end art thief – the best in the business, many said. Archie had been his long-term fence and front man, finding the buyers, identifying the targets, researching the security set-up. For both of them, therefore, this new venture represented a fresh start on the right side of the law that they were still coming to terms with. Archie especially.

'Then come upstairs. Please.' The rabbi pointed towards a narrow staircase in the far corner of the room. 'I have something to show you.'

The staircase emerged into a vaulted room, the pale morning light filtering in from windows set high in the white walls. Here there were no graffiti, just a series of shattered wooden display cases and a tiled floor strewn with drawings and watercolours, some torn into pieces, others screwed up into loose balls, still more covered in dirty black bootprints.

'This was a permanent exhibition of children's drawings from Terezin, a transit camp not far from here. Whole families were held there before being shipped east,' the rabbi explained in a half whisper. 'You see, there is a certain

awful innocence about war when seen through the eyes of a child.'

Tom shifted his weight on to his other foot but said nothing, knowing that anything he might mumble in response would be inadequate.

Rabbi Spiegel gave a sad smile. 'Still, we will recover from this as we have recovered from much worse before. Come,' he said, crossing to the far wall, 'here's what I wanted to show you.'

A gilt frame, perhaps two feet across and a foot wide, hung empty on the wall, only whitewashed stonework visible where the painting should have been. Tom edged towards it.

'What was there?'

'An oil painting of this synagogue completed in the early thirties.'

'It's been cut out,' Tom said thoughtfully, running his finger along the rippled canvas edge where the painting had been sliced from the frame.

'That's why I asked you to come,' the rabbi said excitedly. 'They could have left it in its frame if all they wanted to do was damage or destroy it. Do you think maybe they took it with them?'

'I doubt it,' Tom said with a frown. 'The people who did this don't strike me as art lovers.'

'Especially not a painting by this artist,' the rabbi agreed grudgingly.

'Why, who was it by?'

'A Jewish artist. Not well known, but dear to

us because he lived here in Prague – until the Nazis murdered him. He was called Karel Bellak.'

'Bellak?' Tom drilled him with a questioning look.

'You've heard of him?' the rabbi asked, clearly surprised.

'I've heard the name,' Tom said slowly. 'I'm just not sure where. I'll need to speak to my colleague back in London to be sure I'm thinking of the same person. Do you have a photo of the painting?'

'Of course.' Rabbi Spiegel produced a photograph from his pocket and handed it to Tom. 'We made a few copies of this one a few years ago for the insurance company. They told us the painting wasn't worth much, but to us it was priceless.'

'May I?' Tom asked.

'Keep it. Please.'

Tom slipped the photograph into his overcoat.

'From what I remember of Bellak . . .' Tom began, pausing as two Czech policemen stepped into the room and peered around at the damage.

'Go on.'

'Is there anywhere a little more private we can go?'

'Why?'

Tom tilted his head towards the policemen.

'Oh.' The rabbi sounded disappointed. 'Very well. Come with me.'

He led Tom back down the stairs and across the

main body of the synagogue to a thick wooden door that he unbolted. It gave on to a small open space, the oppressive cinder-grey walls of the surrounding apartment blocks looming down on all sides. A few trees reached into the small window of grey sky overhead, their leafless branches creaking in the wind and occasionally scraping their skeletal fingers against the stifling walls. Ahead of them, the ground undulated in a series of unexpected mounds and dips and was peppered with dark shapes.

'What is this place?' Tom asked in a whisper.

'The old Jewish cemetery,' the rabbi answered.

It suddenly dawned on Tom that the dark shapes in front of him were in fact gravestones, thousands of them in all shapes and sizes, some leaning against others for support, some lying prostrate as if they had been sprinkled like seeds from a great height. They were jammed so close to each other that the ground, muddy and wet where the morning's frost had melted, was barely visible between them. Tom was certain that if he were to topple one, the rest would fall like a field of overgrown dominoes.

'For hundreds of years this was the only place the city allowed us to bury our dead. So each time it filled up we had no choice but to put down a layer of earth and start again. Some say there are eleven levels in all.'

Tom knelt down at the stone nearest to him.

A swastika had been etched on to the stone's peeling surface. He looked up at the rabbi, who gave a resigned shrug.

'The war may have ended long ago, but for some of us the struggle continues,' the rabbi said, shaking his head. 'Now, Mr Kirk, tell me – what do you know about Karel Bellak?'

TWO

National Cryptologic Museum, Fort Meade, Maryland
3rd January – 2.26 a.m.

It was a little game he played; something to pass the time on his rounds. As he came upon each exhibit he would test himself against the display's information cards to see how much he could remember. After twenty years he was pretty much word perfect.

First there was the Myer flag system, a line-of-sight communication tool devised in the Civil War by an army doctor who went on to form the Signal Corps. The glass cases held the original flags, battle-torn and stained with age.

Satisfied, he walked on, his rubber soles squeaking rhythmically on the floor like a metronome marking time, the polished toecaps of his boots glowing with a white sheen from the dimmed overhead lights.

Al Travis had been a guard at the National Cryptologic Museum since it had first opened. He liked it there. He'd finally found a place where he felt he was part of something special, something important. After all, technically he worked for the NSA, the agency responsible for protecting Uncle Sam's information systems and breaking the bad guys' codes. Hell, the NSA was right in the thick of things with this whole War on Terror.

He came upon the next exhibit – the Cipher Wheel. A series of rotating wooden discs, the wheel had been used by European governments for hundreds of years to encrypt sensitive communications. According to the card, it was designed to be used with French, the international language of diplomacy until the end of the First World War.

The Cipher Wheel's cylindrical shape nestled snugly in its display case, the wood polished by generations of anxious fingers. He paused, looked at it, and checked with the information card that he was right in believing this to be the oldest such device in the world.

And then of course there was his favourite exhibit – the big one, as he liked to say – the Enigma machine. The museum had several versions on display in two large glass-fronted cases and Travis never failed to pause when he walked past, running his eyes appreciatively over them. He found it incredible that, in 'breaking' the code generated by this oversized typewriter, Polish and

then British mathematicians had helped win the war for the Allies in Europe. But that's what the card said, and who was he to argue?

A sudden noise made Travis stop. He checked over his shoulder and then peered into the semi-darkness ahead of him.

'Anyone there?' he called out, wondering if someone had come to relieve him early. As he paused, waiting for an answer, a steel wire shaped into a noose was lowered from above him until it was hovering just over his head, glinting in the lights like a silver halo. Then, just as Travis was about to move on again, it snapped past his face, the wire tightening around his neck and pulling him three feet off the ground.

Travis's hands leapt to his throat as he scrabbled at the wire, his legs thrashing beneath him, his throat making an inhuman gurgling noise. Two dark shapes materialised out of the shadows as he struggled and a third man dropped down noiselessly from where he had hidden himself in the roof space above the ceiling tiles.

One of the men pulled a chair over from the wall and positioned it under Travis's flailing legs. Travis located the top of the chair with his feet and, wavering unsteadily, found that he was just about able to perch on tiptoe and relieve the choking pressure on his throat, his lungs gasping for air, blood on his collar where the noose had bitten into the soft folds of his neck.

Teetering, his mouth dry with fear, he watched as the three figures, each masked and dressed in black, approached the left-hand display cabinet. Working with well-drilled efficiency, they unscrewed the frame, levered the glass out and leant it against the wall. Then the man in the middle reached in, took out one of the Enigma machines, and placed it in his accomplice's backpack.

Travis tried to speak, tried to ask them what the hell they thought they were doing, to point out that there was no way they were ever going to make it off the base, but all that came was a series of choked grunts and whispered moans.

The noise, though, made the men turn. One broke away from the others and approached Travis.

'Did you say something, nigger?'

The voice was thin and mocking, the last word said slowly and deliberately. Travis shook his head, knowing that these were not people to be reasoned with, although his eyes burned with anger at the insult.

The man didn't seem to be expecting an answer. Instead he kicked out and knocked the chair from under Travis, who plunged towards the floor, the steel wire twanging under tension and snapping his neck.

For a few seconds Travis's feet drummed furiously, then twitched a few times, then were still.