

THE
FULLER MEMORANDUM



CHARLES STROSS



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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SINGULARITY SKY
IRON SUNRISE
ACCELERANDO
THE ATROCITY ARCHIVES
GLASSHOUSE
HALTING STATE
SATURN'S CHILDREN
THE JENNIFER MORGUE
WIRELESS
THE FULLER MEMORANDUM

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**IN MEMORY OF
CHARLES N . BROWN AND JOHN M. FORD.
WE MISS YOU BOTH.**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writers build on the shoulders of others. In particular, I'd like to single out three other writers without whose work this book would not be as it is: Ferdinand Ossendowski, for his memoirs of events during the Russian civil war; James Palmer, for his portrait of the Bloody White Baron; and Anthony Price, who gave this book a skeleton.

Prologue

LOSING MY RELIGION



THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE TRUE RELIGION. ARE YOU FEELING lucky, believer?

Like the majority of ordinary British citizens, I used to be a good old-fashioned atheist, secure in my conviction that folks who believed—in angels and demons, supernatural manifestations and demiurges, snake-fondling and babbling in tongues and the world being only a few thousand years old—were all superstitious idiots. It was a conviction encouraged by every crazy news item from the Middle East, every ludicrous White House prayer breakfast on the TV. But then I was recruited by the Laundry, and learned better.

I wish I could go back to the comforting certainties of atheism; it's so much less unpleasant than the One True Religion.

The truth won't make your Baby Jesus cry because, sad to say, there ain't no such Son of God. Moses may have taken two tablets before breakfast, but there was nobody home to listen to the prayers of the victims of the Shoah. The guardians of the Kaaba have got the world's best tourism racket running, the Dalai Lama isn't anybody's reincarnation, Zeus is out to lunch, and you *really* don't want me to start on the neo-pagans.

However, there *is* a God out there—vast and ancient and infinitely powerful—and I know the name of this God. I know the path you have to walk down to be one with this God. I know his secret rituals and the correct form of prayer and his portents and signs. I have studied the ancient writings of his prophets and followers in person, not simply relying on the classified digests in the CODICIL BLACK SKULL files and the background briefings for CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN.

I'm a believer. And like I said, I wish I was still an atheist. Believing I was born into a harsh and uncaring cosmos—in which my existence was a random roll of the dice and I was destined to die and rot and then be gone forever—was infinitely more comforting than the truth.

Because the truth is that my God is coming back.

When he arrives I'll be waiting for him with a shotgun.

And I'm keeping the last shell for myself.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, ANGLETON SUGGESTED I START WRITING my memoirs. It seemed a pretty weird idea at the time—a thirty-year-old occult intelligence officer should take time off on the job to work on his autobiography?—but he had a point. “Bob,” he said, in his usually frighteningly avuncular tones, with a voice like dry sheets of parchment rubbing, “like it or not, the thick little skull of yours contains valuable institutional knowledge that has been acquired over years of service for H. M. Government. If you don't start now, you may never catch up with the job. And if you don't catch up with the job, part of the Laundry's institutional memory might vanish for good

He gave a curious little chuckle, as if he regretted having had to admit that there was any value to my meager contribution. “~~You might die on your next field assignment, or be turned by the enemy. And that’d be nearly ten years of work down the drain.~~”

Then he pointed me at the rule book that explained how all officers above OC2 rank are required to either keep a classified journal or to periodically update their memoirs, which would be stored under lock and key—automatically classified under the various keywords they’d been cleared for during the time period covered—the books to be opened only in event of their author’s death, retirement, or permanent disablement in the line of duty.

You know something? I *hate* writing. I keep having to distract myself, hence all the little jokes. It’s actually not as if the job is all that funny, when you get down to it. Especially as I have to write everything either in longhand or on a 1962 Triumph Adler 66 manual typewriter, and burn the ribbon and carbon papers afterwards in the Security Office incinerator in front of two witnesses with high security clearances. I’m not allowed to use rubber bands or paper clips to hold the papers together (although string and, ye horrors, traditional red sealing wax—and *don’t* get me started on how difficult it is to melt the stuff in a smoke-free building with fire detectors in every office—permitted). My fingers are hardwired for the Emacs programmers’ editor and a laptop; this historical office reenactment stuff gets old real fast. But I digress.

This is the story of how I lost my atheism, and why I wish I could regain it. This is the story of the people who lost their lives in an alien desert bathed by the hideous radiance of a dead sun, and the love that was lost and the terror that wakes me up in a cold sweat about once a week, clawing at the sheets with cramping fingers and drool on my chin. It’s why Mo and I aren’t living together right now, why my right arm doesn’t work properly, and I’m toiling late into the night, trying to bury the smoking wreckage of my life beneath a heap of work.

It’s the story of what happened to the Fuller Memorandum, and the beginning of the end of the world.

Are you sure you want to carry on?

GOING TO SEE THE ELEPHANT



Summer in England

THOSE WORDS ARE SUPPOSED TO CONJURE UP HALCYON SUNNY afternoons; the smell of new-mown hay, little old ladies on bicycles pedaling past the village green on their way to the church jumble sale, the vicar's tea party, the crunching sound of a fast-bowled cricket ball fracturing the batsman's skull, and so on.

The reality is, of course, utterly different.

It's an early summer afternoon in June, and I'm sharing an overcrowded train carriage with a assortment of tired commuters heading back to their dormitory suburbs, and a couple of angry wasps trying to drill their way out through the toughened glass. The hamster-powered air conditioning wheezing on the edge of a nervous breakdown, it's twenty-eight degrees and ninety percent relative humidity out there, and the asshole behind me is playing something very loud on a pair of tinny headphones.

I'm having second thoughts about having paid fifty pounds to sit on this train, expenses or no expenses. But I don't see what alternatives there are. I need to get from London to RAF Cosford, just outside Wolverhampton, and I don't have a car and the Laundry certainly isn't going to hire me a helicopter for a job that isn't time-critical. They won't even pay for me to take a taxi the whole way. So I'm stuck with a choice: train or coach. At least this way I get to avoid the M6 motorway . . .

And at least I've got a seat with a table. I reread my instructions as the train shudders and lurches through the parched countryside. It's a low-priority field job: to investigate reports of eerie manifestations of a disturbing nature from one of the airframes stored in the hangar annex to the Royal Air Force Museum. The museum houses a lot of historic war-birds. Violent death tends to go with the territory, and a few ghosts—echoes in the informational substrate of reality—wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. My job is to dispel any annoying manifestations, reassure the local community, close out the case, etcetera. It's sufficiently routine and predictable that I'd normally send the office junior, but for some reason, Angleton pulled me into his office this morning. "Bob, I'd like you to deal with this one yourself," he said, handing me the brief. "It'll get you out of the office for a day."

"But I'm busy!" I protested, a tad limply—the lack of aircon was getting to me, and I'm not good standing up to Angleton at the best of times. "I've got to respond to the RFP on structured cabling requirements for the new subbasement extension in D Block"—don't call it a crypt, *the government* doesn't do crypts, *the Spanish Inquisition* does crypts—"and go over Claire's training budget. Can Peter-Fred do it? He's finished Exorcism 101, it's about time he had a field trip . . ."

"Nonsense!" Angleton said crisply. "You can take the paperwork with you, but I specifically want *you* to go and look at this one."

There's a warning gleam in his eyes: I've seen it before. "Oh no you don't," I replied. "Not so fast"

I raised an eyebrow and waited for the explosion.

Angleton is old school—so old school that I’m pretty sure I’ve seen his face in a departmental photo taken during the war, back when the Laundry was an obscure department of SOE, the Special Operations Executive, tasked with occult intelligence gathering and counter-demonology. He doesn’t look a day older today than he did back then, sixty-five years ago—dress him in a bandage and he could star in a remake of *The Mummy*. Ice-blue eyes with slightly yellowish scleras, skin like parchment left out for too long in a desert sandstorm, dry as bone and twice as chilly as ice. And I never want to hear his laugh again. But I digress. The thing about Angleton is that, despite (or in addition to) being the honorary departmental monster, he has a sense of humor. It bears about the same relationship to mirth that his cadaverous exterior does to Paris Hilton’s—but it’s there. (He has the heart of a young boy: keeps it in a reliquary under the coffin he sleeps in.) And right then, I figured he was winding me up for the punch line.

But: no. He shook his head slowly. “Not this time, Bob.” The gleam in his eye guttered out, replaced by dead-cold sobriety: “While you’re up there to do the business, I want you to take a look at one of the other museum exhibits—one that’s not on public display. I’ll explain it later, when you get back. Take your warrant card. When you’re through with the job on the worksheet, tell Warrant Officer Hastings that I sent you to take a look at the white elephant in Hangar 12B.”

Huh? I blinked a couple of times, then sneezed. “You’re setting me up for another working group, aren’t you?”

“You know better than to ask that, boy,” he grated, and I jumped back: Angleton is nobody you want to stand too close to when he’s even mildly irritated. “I’ll give you the background when you’re ready for it. Meanwhile, get moving!”

“Whatever.” I sketched a sarcastic salute and marched off back to my office, lost in thought. It was a familiar setup, obviously: Angleton was softening me up for something new. Probably a new game of bureaucratic pass-the-parcel, seeing if some poor schmuck—I was already in charge of departmental IT services, for my sins—could be mugged into taking on responsibility for exorcising hovercraft or something.

Back to the here-and-now. The carriage is slowing. A minute later I realize it’s pulling into a mainline station—Wolverhampton, where I get to change trains. I shove my reading matter back into my messenger bag (it’s a novel about a private magician for hire in Chicago—your taxpayer pounds your work) and go to stand in the doorway.

The air in the station hits me like a hot flannel, damp and clingy and smelling slightly of diesel fumes. I take a breath, step down onto the concrete, and try to minimize my movements as I go looking for the Cosford service. I find the platform it stops at: a crumbling concrete strip opposite a peeling wooden fence. The rails are rusty and overgrown, and a couple of young trees are trying to colonize the tracks; but the TV screen overhead is lit up and predicting a train will be along in ten minutes. I take a shallow breath and sit down, hunching instinctively towards the nearest shadow. Fifteen minutes later, the TV screen is still predicting a train will be along in ten minutes; then my mobile rings. It’s Mo.

“Bob!” She sounds so cheerful when she says my name: I don’t know how she does it, but it cheers me up.

“Mo!” *Pause*. “Where are you?”

“I’m back in the office! I spent most of the morning in the stacks, I only just got your text . . .” The one telling her I was off on a day trip to Cosford. The Laundry’s deep archives are in a formidably underground tunnel, way down where the sun doesn’t shine, and neither do the cellular networks.

“Right. I’m on a railway platform waiting for an overdue train. It’s about two hundred degrees in the shade, the pigeons are falling out of the sky from heatstroke, and nobody will sell me a beer.” (Well, they might if I’d asked for one, but . . .)

“Oh, good! When are you going to be back?”

“Sometime late this evening,” I say doubtfully. “I’m due to arrive in Cosford at”—I check the lying timetable—“two thirty, and I don’t think I’ll get away before six. Then it’ll take me about three hours to get home.”

“Angleton did this? He did, didn’t he!” Suddenly Mo switches from warm and cuddly to spiky as a porcupine: “Didn’t you tell him you couldn’t? We’re supposed to be having dinner with Pete and Sandy tonight!”

I do a mental backflip, re-engage my short-term memory, and realize she’s right. Dinner for four is booked at a new Kurdish restaurant in Fulham. Pete was at university with Mo years ago, and is either a priest or a witch doctor or something; Sandy is blonde and teaches comparative religion to secondary school kids. Mo insists we stay in touch with them: having friends with ordinary jobs who don’t know anything about the Laundry provides a normative dose of sanity for the two of us, to keep us from drifting too far out of the mainstream. “Shit.” I’m more mortified for having landed Mo in it than for anything else . . . “You’re right. Listen, do you want to go on your own, tell them I’ll turn up later— I’ll come straight from the station—or do you want to cancel?”

There’s silence for a second, then she sighs. “Sandy doesn’t have flexitime, Bob, she’s got classes to teach. *You* cancel.”

“But I don’t have their mobile numbers—”

I’m bluffing, and Mo knows it. “I’ll text them to you, Bob. Maybe it’ll help you remember, next time?”

Bollocks. She’s right: it’s my fault. “Okay.” It’s my turn to sigh. “I’ll be claiming some hours back from the Laundry. Maybe we can use them for something together—” The tracks begin to vibrate and squeal and I look up. “It’s my train! See you later? Bye . . .”

The train to Cosford is about as old as Angleton: slam doors, wooden partitions, and high-backed seats, powered by a villainously rusted diesel engine slung under its single carriage. Air conditioning is provided by the open louvered windows. I swelter in its oven-like interior for about forty minutes before it rattles and burbles through the countryside, spewing blue smoke and engine oil behind it. Along the way I furtively leave my apologies on Pete and Sandy’s voice mail. Finally, the train wheezes and coughs asthmatically to a halt beside a station overlooking a Royal Air Force base, with a cluster of hangars outside the gate and some enormous airliners and transport aircraft gently gathering moss on the lawns outside. Breathing a sigh of relief, I walk up the path to the museum annex and head for the main exhibit hall.

It’s time to go to work . . .

* * *

PAY ATTENTION NOW: THIS BRIEFING WILL SELF-DESTRUCT IN fifteen minutes.

My name is Bob, Bob Howard. At least, that’s the name I use in these memoirs. (True names have power: even if it’s only the power to attract the supernatural equivalent of a Make Money Fast spammer, I’d rather not put myself in their sights, thank you very much.) And I work for the Laundry.

The Laundry is the British Government’s secret agency for dealing with “magic.” The use of scare quotes is deliberate; as Sir Arthur C. Clarke said, “Any sufficiently advanced technology

indistinguishable from magic,” so “magic” is what we deal with. Note that this does not involve potions, pentacles, prayers, eldritch chanting, dressing up in robes and pointy hats, or most (but not all) of the stuff associated with the term in the public mind. No, our magic is computational. The realm of pure mathematics is very real indeed, and the . . . *things* . . . that cast shadows on the walls of Plato’s cave can sometimes be made to listen and pay attention if you point a loaded theorem at them. This is, however, a very dangerous process, because most of the shadow-casters are unclear on the distinction between *pay attention* and *free buffet lunch here*. My job—applied computation demonologist—comes with a very generous pension scheme, because most of us don’t survive to claim it.

Magic being a branch of pure mathematics, and computers being machines that can be used to perform lots of mathematical tasks very fast, it follows that most real practicing magicians start out as computer science graduates. The Laundry, the government agency for handling this stuff, started out as a by-blow of the Second World War code-breakers at Bletchley Park, the people who built the first working programmable computers. And the domestic side of our work—preventing accidental incursions by incomprehensible horrors from beyond spacetime—has been growing rapidly in recent decades. You may have noticed there are more computers around these days, and more computer programmers. Guess what? That means more work for the Laundry!

I have a somewhat embarrassing relationship with Wolverhampton. Back when I was at university in Birmingham I nearly landscaped it by accident. I was trying to develop a new graphics algorithm for Planar homogeneous matrix transformations into dimensions dominated by gibbering horrors tend to attract the Laundry’s attention: they got to me just in time—just before the nameless horrors I was about to unintentionally summon into this world—and made me a job offer I wasn’t allowed to refuse.

(Mo’s history is similar—indeed, I was involved not only in recruiting her, but in keeping her alive until she could be recruited. That was some years ago. Mo and I have been together for, oh, about six years; we tied the knot nearly three years ago, using the urgent need to break a behavioral gear as an excuse to do something we both wanted to do anyway.)

So, I’m here at RAF Cosford, an active air force base which is also home to the Royal Air Force Museum annex, where they keep the stuff that’s too big to fit in their North London site at Duxford. Ostensibly I’m here to examine an aircraft that has been the locus of some disturbing incidents (and to stop those incidents recurring). Also, thanks to Angleton, I’m supposed to take a look at something in Hangar Six.

One of the things you learn fairly fast in the Laundry is that most people in the British civil service and armed forces don’t know you exist. You—your organization, your job, the field you work in—are classified so deeply that the mere knowledge that such a classification level exists is itself a state secret. So, to help me do my job, I carry something that we laughably call a “warrant card.” It’s a form of identification. It comes with certain Powers attached. When you present your warrant card for inspection, in the course of official business, the recipients tend to believe you are who and what you say you are, for the duration of that business. Not only that: you can bind them to silence. Of course, trying to use your card *outside* official business tends to attract the attention of the Auditors. After having attracted their attention once or twice, I’ve never been too keen on finding out what happens next . . .

The RAF Museum is fronted by a shiny new glass-and-steel aircraft hangar of an exhibit hall. I march right up to the front desk (there’s no queue), present my warrant card, and say: “Bob Howard. I’m here to see Mr. Hastings.”

The woolly headed volunteer behind the cash register puts down her knitting and peers up at me over

the rim of her bifocals. "Admission is five pounds," she chirps.

"I'm here to see *Mr. Hastings*." I force a smile and adjust my grip on the warrant card.

"Is that a season pass?" She looks confused.

What? I shove the card under her nose. "I have an appointment with Warrant Officer Hastings," repeat, trying to keep a note of impatience out of my voice. "I'm from the Department Administrative Affairs." It's a thin bluff—jeans and tee shirt aren't normal office attire for the civil service, even in this weather—but I'm crossing the fingers of my free hand and trusting my card untangle enough of her neurons to get the message across. "A meeting to discuss the, ah, business Hangar Six."

She blinks rapidly. "Ooh, Hangar Six! That's a bad job, it hasn't been the same since Norman had his Health and Safety inspection . . . They used to keep the Whirlwind in there, did you know? You're wanting Geoffrey, aren't you?"

"Would that be Warrant Officer Hastings?" I ask, hopefully.

"Oh yes." She pushes her knitting aside with one liver-spotted hand and picks up the telephone with another. "Geoffrey? Geoffrey? There's a man here to see you! Who did you say you were? A Mr. Howarth! Yes, to see you now! He's out front!" She puts the phone down. "Geoffrey will be here in a couple of minutes," she confides, "he needs to scrub up first."

I tap my toes and whistle tunelessly as I look around the entrance hall. There's something casting a weird shadow overhead; I look up, and find myself staring at the bulging ventral fuel tank of an English Electric Lightning interceptor, dangling from the ceiling like a demented model-maker's pride and joy. It's enough to stop the foot tapping for a moment—if the cable fails, I'll be squashed like a bug—but a moment's consideration tells me that it's highly unlikely. So I stare wistfully at the Lightning for a couple of minutes. Two missiles, sharply raked razor-thin wings, a huge, pregnant belly full of fuel, and the two screamingly powerful engines that once rammed it from a cold start to a thousand miles per hour in under a minute. Life would be so much simpler if our adversaries could be dealt with by supersonic death on the wing—but alas, Human Resources aren't so easily defeated.

"Mr. Hogarth?"

I turn round. There's a bluff-looking middle-aged man in blue overalls standing by the front desk with sandy receding hair, a gingery regulation mustache, and a face creased with questions. I hold up my warrant card. "Mr. *Howard*," I say. "Capital Laundry Services. I believe you asked for a visit."

He does a visible double take. "Eh, yes, I did—" He's clocking the jeans, tee shirt, and casual lined jacket, and I can see the gears whirring in his head as he wonders if I'm some kind of impostor. Then his eyes reach my warrant card and something clicks behind them and he's slightly less human than he was a moment before—"sir."

"I was told your problem is in Hangar Six. Why don't you take me there? You can explain along the way."

I put the warrant card back in my pocket. No point in frying him.

"If you'd follow me, please, sir." He has a pronounced borders accent. He turns and opens a door marked AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY. "Sorry about Helen on the front desk," he murmurs. "She's a little slow, but she means well. Only see you, she's been helping out here since forever, and we run on volunteers." He shrugs. "I suppose it's better for her than sitting around an old-age home waiting to die—" He lets the door close behind us before he says anything more. "Bloody rubbish business, Hangar Six."

"Tell me about it. In your own words," I add.

"It's another of the Lightnings—hull number XR727." He glances over his shoulder. "It's been

sitting in Hangar Six for years while we were waiting for funding to come through—plan was restore it for static display in Hall Four when it's ready. It's an F. Mark 3, upgraded from F.2A like the one over the front desk." I'll take his word for it: I'm not au fait with the model numbers. "We've had a few odd incidents."

Odd incidents? "Define odd."

"Frosty patches on the hangar floor, mysterious oil leaks—under hydraulic pipes that were drained more than twenty years ago when it was taken out of service—nothing really unusual, seeing where it came from, if you follow my drift. But then there was the business with Marcia and the instrument panel, and I thought it might be a good idea to call you chappies directly."

Clunk. A domino slips into place in my mental map. This enquiry didn't come through the RAF, this came direct from Hastings. "You've worked with us before."

"Not exactly . . ." He pauses beside an anonymous door, and extracts a fat key chain: "But I was with the Squadron, on ground crew. Once you're in, you never really leave." *Click.* "They like to stay in touch."

What squadron? I wonder, annoyed but afraid to display my ignorance. "Tell me about Marcia," I prompt, as he opens the door to reveal another prefab tunnel between buildings, this one windowless and stifling.

"Volunteer airframe conservator Marcia Moran. Age twenty-nine, completed her short service enlistment, then signed up with BAE Systems maintenance division when the defense review came down—she's solid. *Was solid.*"

He took a deep breath. "She should never have been allowed to work on XR727's cockpit instruments. We had them round the back, under padlock and warded by a class two repulsion gear. She shouldn't even have been able to see them. She'd have twigged straight off that it wasn't a normal F.3 integrated flight system and weapons control board. She wasn't qualified to work on it."

He falls silent as he trudges along the passage.

"What happened to her?" I repeat.

Hastings shook his head. "You'd have to ask the doctors. I'm not sure they know; they say she might be safe to release next month, but they said that last month too."

Another domino. "XR727 was one of the, uh, Squadron's planes. Yes?"

"They didn't brief you?" He doesn't sound surprised. "In here, Mr. Houghton." I don't bother to correct him as he shoves open a side door and steps into an echoing, gloomy cavern of a room. "See for yourself."

The room we're in resembles an aircraft hangar the way a mausoleum in a graveyard resembles a bedroom. It's dimly lit, daylight filtering through high windows, and the light reveals the mummified skeletons of half a dozen fast jets littering the oil-stained concrete floor. Their severed limbs are stacked in jigs and frames, their viscera embalmed in the canopic jars of parts bins—patients awaiting resurrection, or at least reassembly into the semblance of life. There's junk everywhere: toolboxes, rodent control traps, workbenches piled high with parts. Closest to the door hulks the fuselage of a Lightning. Its tail is missing, as are its outboard wing segments and the conical spike of its nose radar, but it's substantially intact. Close up, the size of the thing is apparent: a pit bull to the chihuahua of an old Russian MiG—squat, brutal, built for raw speed. It's big, too—the wing root high enough overhead to walk under without stooping.

Something about it makes me feel profoundly uneasy, as if a black cat has walked half the length of my grave, paused furtively, taken a crap, and been about its business before anyone noticed.

"This is Airframe XR727. According to the official records it was scrapped in 1983. Unofficially . . ."

it ended up here, because of its history: it's a ringer, it was on the books with 23 squadron and 1 squadron, but they never saw it. It was working for you people. In the Squadron." I shiver. The hangar's weirdly, incongruously cold, given the bright summer afternoon outside. "It logged 28 hours on the other side, escorting the white elephants."

Angleton mentioned a white elephant, didn't he? I glance at the shadows under XR727's belly. The concrete is stained and greasy with fluid, whorls and lines and disconnected nodes that swim before my eyes. *Clonk*. The final domino slides into place.

"Jesus, Angleton," I mutter, and pull out my PDA. *Tap-click-boing* and I pull up the thaumographic utility running on the rather nonstandard card in its second expansion slot. I point it at the swirling directed graph that the phantom hydraulic leak has dribbled across the concrete apron and the display flashes amber.

I take a slow step back from the airframe, and motion Hastings over. "I don't want to alarm you," I murmur. "But did you know your airframe is hot?"

Hastings shakes his head sadly. "Figures." He shrugs. "Do you want to look at the cockpit instrumentation?"

I nod. "Just point me at it. Is it still where Marcia had her incident?"

"I haven't moved it." He gestures towards a canvas screen, surrounded by a circle of traffic cones with hazard tape strung between them. "Do you need any help?"

"I'm afraid I'm probably beyond help . . ." I advance on the traffic cones, PDA held in front of me. It begins to bleep and warble immediately. Edging sideways, I look round the canvas screen. There's a workbench bearing a stack of black metal boxes, wires dangling, needles and dials glowing eerie blue—*blue? Glowing?* I check my PDA and swear under my breath. If this was a radiation leak I'd be backing away and reaching for the lead-lined underwear right now: but it's not, it's just thaumographic resonance, albeit at levels you don't usually see outside of a summoning grid—what the ignorant persist in calling a pentacle. "Scratch that. Do you have any conductive tape? A soldering iron? Some blue chalk?"

"You're going to exorcise it," states Hastings. "Right?"

"Right—"

"Got a field exorcism kit in the mess hut. Squadron issue, rev three, and I keep everything in date. Want me to fetch it?"

"I think that would be a very good idea," I say with feeling, thinking, *Field exorcism kit? Squadron issue?* "By the way, what was the Squadron's unit number?"

Hastings stares at me. "Triple-six. Didn't they tell you *anything?*"

HERE IS HOW YOU GO ABOUT EXORCISING A HAUNTED JET fighter, latterly operated by the more-than-somewhat-secret 666 Squadron, RAF:

- You can explosively disassemble the airframe, if it's in the middle of a desert and there are no neighbors within a couple of miles.
- You can violate any number of HSE directives and outrage public opinion by dumping it at sea—shallow waters only, we don't want to annoy the owners by violating the Benthic Treaties—allow time (and electrolytes) to wash the memories away.
- You can truck it to a special hazardous waste certified recycling site in Wales, where they have a very special degaussing coil for exactly this purpose.

- Or, if you believe in living dangerously, you can do it with a soldering iron, a stopwatch, a grounding strap, and a good pair of running shoes in case you screw up.

Guess what Muggins here does?

Look, it's a *museum piece*. They don't exactly grow on trees: blowing it up and drowning it aren't on the menu; shipping it to Wales would cost . . . Well, it wouldn't fit on my discretionary expenses worksheet: too many zeros (more than two). That leaves the grounding strap and the running shoes. So if you were in my place, what would *you* do?

I approach the anti-static point beside the nosewheel bay very cautiously: holding one end of the grounding strap at arm's length in front of me, the other fist clutching the stopwatch behind my back, legs tensed, ready to run. The grounding strap is basically a long conductive wire; the other end is attached to a villainous black signal generator Hastings pulled from the field exorcism kit—a bakelite and flickering needles on dials, like something out of a 1950s Hammer Horror flick. There's a small but bizarre diorama occupying the middle of the hastily cleared workbench it sits on: a model airplane from the souvenir shop, a rabbit's foot, a key-ring fob skull pendant, and a diagram carefully sketched in conductive ink.

Look, this isn't quite as spontaneously suicidal as it sounds. I don't go anywhere these days without a defensive ward on a chain round my neck that'll short out a class three offensive invocation, and Hastings is safely tucked away inside a grounded pentacle with Thoth-Lieberman geometry—he's safe as houses, at least houses that aren't sitting on top of a fault line wound up to let rip with a Richter 6 earthquake. As it happens, I do this kind of thing regularly, every week or so. It's about as safe as a well-equipped fireman going into a smoldering inflammables store to spray cooling water across the overheating propane tank in the corner next to the mains power distribution board. Piece of cake, really—as long as somebody's shut off the power.

“Are you centered?” I call over my shoulder to Hastings. “In the safety zone?”

“Yes.” He sounds bored. “How about you?”

“I'll be okay.” I keep my eyes peeled as I shove the plug on the end of the strap into the anti-static point, and twist. I've plonked my PDA down on the floor a couple of meters away and set it to audio, beeping like a Geiger counter in the thaum field. It ticks every few seconds, like a cooling kettle. The airframe itself is probably safe, unlike the blue-glowing instrument panel on the workbench, but it's the bigger physical hazard, which is why I'm tackling it first.

I take a couple of steps back, then straighten up and walk over to the signal generator. *Where was I?* Ah, yes. I flip a couple of switches and there's a loud chime, almost like a bell ringing, except slightly off-key. It sets my teeth on edge. “Degaussing resonator on,” I say aloud. Continuing the checklist from memory: “Exclusion field engaged.” I pick up my PDA, fire up the ebook reader, and shuffle around the airframe slowly, reading aloud as I go: words in an alien tongue not suited for human lips. The signal generator chimes periodically. There's your exorcism in a nut-shell: *bell, book, and candle*—although the candle is strictly optional if you're reading from a backlit screen, and the bell is a synthesized tone.

Finally, after squeezing between the Lightning and a tarp-shrouded jet engine on a trolley I fetch up where I started from, back by the workbench. “Last words.” I pick up the microphone that's plugged into the signal generator, flip the switch, and say, “Piss off.”

There's a bang and a blue flash from the grounding point on the airframe, and my PDA makes a ominous crackling noise. Then the thaum field dies. “You nailed it,” says Hastings.

“Looks that way,” I agree, turning to face him.

He looks past me. “What about the—*Hey, what are you—*”

Now here's where things go wrong.

Muggins here didn't bother to set up a ward around the workbench with the contaminated cockpit console before he sorted out the airframe, because he thought that he could do the two jobs separately. But they're not separate, are they? The law of contagion applies: the cockpit instruments had been physically bolted to the airframe for a number of years, and things that form a unitary identity for a long time tend to respond as one.

More importantly, nobody had thought to tell Muggins precisely *what* Squadron 666, Royal Air Force, did with its planes. *Escorting the white elephants*. Muggins here still thought he was dealing with a simple spontaneous haunting—bad memories, terrified pilot in near-death experience, that sort of thing—rather than secondary activation caused by overexposure to gibbering unearthly horrors; the necromantic equivalent of collecting fallout samples by flying through mushroom clouds.

But I'm second-guessing the enquiry now, so I'll shut up.

Warrant Officer Hastings survives the explosion because he is still inside his protective pentacle.

Muggins here survives the explosion because he is wearing a heavy-duty defensive ward around his neck and, in response to Hastings's call, has turned to look at the open doorway where little old Helen with her tightly curled white hair is standing, clutching a tea tray.

Her mouth is open as if she's about to say something, and her eyebrows are raised.

I will remember the expression on her face for a very long time.

Beauty may be skin-deep, but horror goes all the way down to the desiccated bone beneath, as the eerie purple flashbulb glow rises and her eyes melt in their sockets and her hair and clothes turn to dust, falling down and down as I begin to turn back towards the airframe and reach for the small pouch around my neck, which is scalding hot against my skin as the air heats up—

There's a dissonant chime from the signal generator on the bench, unattended, then a continuous shrill ringing alarm as its safeties trip.

The hideous light goes out with a bang like a balloon bursting, a balloon the size of the Hindenburg.

"*Shit,*" I hear someone say as I grab the ward and feel a sharp pain in my hand. I blink furiously as the ward yank, breaking the fine chain. There's a clicking in my ears and I blink again, see white powder everywhere—like snow or heavy dust on the floor, a patina of corrosion on the aircraft wings stacked in their jigs around me, white on the workbenches—

"Helen!" shouts Warrant Officer Hastings, stepping over the boundary of his protective perimeter.

I don't need to look round to know it's too late for her but I still cringe. I drop the ward and gasp as the air touches the palm of my hand and the spot on my sternum that's beginning to sting like a kicked wasps' nest. My ears are ringing.

I turn back to the bench with the signal generator to check my PDA for the thaum field. Unwelcome surprises come in threes: Number one is, the bench is a centimeter deep in white dusty powder. Surprise number two is, my PDA has gone to meet its maker—it's actually scorched and blackened, the case melted around one edge. And surprise number three—

A thin, wispy trickle of smoke is rising from behind the (scorched, naturally) canvas screens around the Lightning's cockpit instruments—ground zero for the pulse of necromantic energy that has just seared through the hangar like a boiling propane vapor explosion.

Here's Hastings, kneeling and clutching a dented steel teapot that looks as if it's been sandblasted, sobbing over a pile of—

The ringing in my ears is louder, and louder still, and the big hangar doors crack open to admit a ray of daylight to the crypt and the howl of the airfield fire tender's siren, but they're too late.

I GET HOME LATE, REALLY LATE: SO LATE I END UP EXPENSING a taxi to take me in Birmingham to catch the last train, and another taxi home at the other end. Iris will probably give me a chewing out over it but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it. The emergency response team kept me at the first aid post for a couple of hours, under observation, but I'm okay, really: just scooped out and full of a numinous sense of dread, looping on the bright purple flash as I looked round and saw the door opening, Helen standing there for a moment as the thaum field on the instrument console collapsed, sucking out the life from anything within a fifty-meter radius that wasn't locked down and shielded.

(Hangar Six isn't going to have a rat problem for a while.)

The unshielded instrument console entangled with the shielded airframe I'd just exorcised. And the seventy-something lady in the pink slippers, shuffling forward with a tea tray and two mugs she carefully poured for us—

Too clever by half.

As I open the front door, I can feel the house sulking. I switch on the lights and hang up my coat in the hall, fighting the urge to hunch my shoulders defensively. It's Mo, of course. This is her house as much as it's mine—okay, it's our maisonette, two civil servants can't possibly afford a house in London even if they're both management track—and it reflects her mood. I canceled Pete and Sandra but I can't cancel Mo. She's got a snit on, perfectly justifiable. I really ought to go upstairs and apologize, but as I bend down to untie my shoelaces I find my hands are shaking.

An indeterminate time later I open my eyes. I'm sitting at the kitchen table with an empty glass in my hand. The quality of the light just changed.

"Bob?" It's Mo, wearing a dressing gown, rubbing her eyes. "Shit. Bob"—her tone of voice changes, softening slightly—"what's wrong?"

"I—" I clear my throat, force air through my larynx: "I screwed up."

The bottle of Talisker sitting beside my left hand is half-empty. Mo peers at it, then takes a step closer and peers at me. Then she picks up the bottle, pops the cork, and pours a generous two fingers into my glass, bless her.

"Drink up." She pauses with a hand on the back of the other kitchen chair. "Am I going to need one too?"

"Dunno. Maybe."

She goes to the cupboard and takes out another glass before she sits down. I blink at her, red-eyed and confused.

"Talk." She pours a shot into her own glass. "In your own time."

I glance at the kitchen clock. "It's one a.m."

"And it'll be one a.m. again, at least once a day for the rest of your life. So talk, if you want. Or drink up and come to bed."

I sip my whisky. "I screwed up."

"How badly?"

"I killed a bystander."

"A by—" She freezes with her glass halfway to her lips. "Jesus, Bob." *Pause.* "How did you do that?"

She looks appalled, but probably much less appalled than *your* spouse would look if you confessed

to killing someone over the kitchen table. (Mo is made of stern stuff.)

~~“Angleton sent me to do a routine job. Only I missed something and fucked up my prep.”~~

“But you’re still—” She bites her lip, and now she looks shaken; my ears sketch in the missing word: *alive*.

“Oh, I *almost* got it right,” I explain, waving my glass. “Warrant Officer Hastings wasn’t hurt. And I’m here.” But then I remember the purple flash again, and the door opening, and the sight of Helen’s face aging a hundred years in a second right before my eyes. “Only the tea lady opened the door at the worst possible moment . . .”

Mo is silent for a while, so I take another sip.

“Fatal accidents never happen because of just one mistake,” I try to explain. “It takes a whole chain of stupid things lining up just so to put a full stop at the end of an epitaph.”

“So what did you do afterwards?” she asks quietly.

“Afterwards? It was too late to do anything.” I shrug. “I told ’em not to disturb the scene and called the Plumbers. Then I had to wait until they arrived and hang around while they logged the scene and filed a preliminary report and bagged the body, which took all evening. They had to use a Dyson—there wasn’t enough left of her to fill a teacup, never mind a reanimator’s workbench. It’s on the books as a level four excursion, incidental unintended fatality. The desk officer was very understanding but I’ve got a ten o’clock appointment with someone in Operational Oversight to file an R60.” An official incident report. “Then I suppose there’ll be an enquiry.”

And the juggernaut of an internal investigation will start to roll, bearing down on my ass like hell on my own lawn mower in search of an un-trimmed blade of grass, but it’s not as if I don’t deserve it. I take another sip of the whisky, wishing I could drown myself in it. This isn’t the first time I’ve killed someone, but it’s the first time I’ve killed a civilian bystander, and I lack the words to express how I feel.

“I was going to dump on you,” Mo tells me, “but . . . forget it.” She empties her glass and I realize that while I was seeing that purple light the whisky has evaporated from my tumbler. “Come to bed now.”

I push myself to my feet, neck drooping. “It won’t make things better.”

“No.”

“I feel like shit.”

“No, Bob, you need to get some sleep.”

“I am a shit.”

“You need to get some sleep. Come to bed.”

“If you say so.”

I follow her upstairs. Today’s been shit, and tomorrow is quite possibly going to be worse—but I can wait for a while.

POINTING THE FINGER



I GO TO WORK IN A NONDESCRIPT OFFICE IN CENTRAL LONDON, south of the river and east of the sun—I can't say precisely where—located above a row of shops. It's a temporary home for the department, and it's officially called the New Annexe, probably because it was thrown up in 1968. It consists of three floors of characterless sixties concrete piled up above a C&A and a couple of other boring high street stores like a bad perm on a grocer's granny; it used to belong to the Post Office back in the day. And nothing you can see through the windows from outside is really there.

The weather is just as unpleasant as yesterday, if not worse—muggy and humid, warm enough to be annoying but not hot enough to provoke businesses into paying for air conditioning—and there's a stale tang of vehicle exhausts and fermenting dog shit underlying every noisome breath I take. Wasps buzz around the overflowing litter bins on the street outside the office as I nip into the staff entrance to the store, then push through a plywood door labeled BUILDING MAINTENANCE ONLY and up a whitewashed stairwell with peeling linoleum treads. (A lot of people go through that door every day and they don't look much like store employees, but for some reason nobody seems to notice. Or more accurately, they *can't* notice.)

At the top of the stairs there's another door. This one's a bit more substantial. The wards make my skin crawl and send pins and needles singing up my arm as I push it open, but they recognize me as someone who belongs here, for which I am profoundly grateful. (A couple of years back a gang of thugs decided to ram-raid us and steal the office computers. Boy did they get an unpleasant surprise.)

I slouch over to reception. "Are there any messages for me today?" I ask Rita.

Rita, who is about a year younger than my mother and about as maternal as an iron maiden, stares at me in brassy-eyed surprise. "Iris said she wants to see you, if you showed up today!" she declares. "Are you signed off sick or something?"

"No, but I might be contagious."

"Be off with you." She turns back to her web browser, dismissing me, and I take a deep breath and head for Iris's office.

Iris is my (How to describe our relationship accurately? Person from Porlock? Morlock?) latest line manager. I seem to get through about one a year. It wasn't always so: but Andy got moved sideways into Research and Development, and before him, Harriet and Bridget are, ahem, long-term indisposed. They took on Angleton and lost, epic level. I actually work directly for Angleton these days, but Angleton isn't a manager according to our org chart; he's a DSS, and DSSs are too important a burden with boring administrative duties like overseeing staff performance appraisals. So although I work for him, I have to have an actual manager to report to, at least in theory, and that's where Iris comes into the frame. She handles my interface with Human Resources, Payroll, and general admin stuff. She doesn't know everything I do, but she knows I work for Angleton and it's her job to be m

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