

Perimetr

Part One

The jagged rim of dark brown hills in the distance set a menacing frame to the ochre wasteland only a few hundred feet below the wing of his Cessna Super Cargomaster. Unbroken, the contrast between the yellowish landscape and the gleaming blue sky would have been picturesque, but it seemed almost as if a hole had been torn into the desert only to reveal an even greater expanse of sky. A modern engineering mishap, the Salton Sea extended for miles, seemingly portraying an irony of nature: Amidst this absolutely horrifying wasteland one found one of the largest inland bodies of water in the southern United States. Looking out of his left window, he could barely make out the grey line that made up the gravel airstrip of Salton Lake, cutting a thin line of human protest through the heat. After having made a quick judgement of the angle he formed with the runway, he decided to line himself up for the final approach. The airfield was not equipped with lights, or, for that matter, a bad weather landing system. Such expenses had proven unnecessary: The worst weather phenomenon of these parts was the heat, and daylight was in abundance. He could see his airspeed indicator's needle slowly creeping toward the white arc on the face of the instrument, displaying a fact he was already aware of due to the changes in pressure on his control column: His airspeed was slowly diminishing as expected, and he was ready to put down his final notch of flaps. His hand rested on the handle. He silently wondered what for exactly his boss had required him to perform an empty flight to this godforsaken corner of the southern deserts, but he owed him, so he had agreed. He was sure he would see what it was about shortly. Then, he observed his VSI twitching, and he dropped the flaps, releasing some back pressure off of his stick. He peered ahead, wondering if anyone had come to meet him. For a brief second he wondered if *Thomas* would just leave him to die of thirst. He was ten minutes early though, he thought, half smiling. Maybe his boss would manage to be punctual just this once.

Even though he saw no sense, he called out over the Unicom frequency, announcing his approach to the airfield. Now everyone within the next one hundred miles knew what his intentions were. That is, if there was anyone within the next 100 Miles. He watched his instruments intently for a few more seconds, then switched to visual flying. His eyes now almost entirely focused on the exterior view, he admired a patchwork of dried shrubs, small gullies and almost dune like structures growing ever closer as they slowly passed beneath him.

Gliding over the runway threshold, he cut his power and slowly drew the stick back. In the unmoving, warm air making a smooth touchdown was simple. Even though the main runway was rather short, he did not worry about not coming to a stop before the runway ended. Beyond the far end there was nothing but flat dirt for several tens of thousands of feet before the Salton Sea began. It reminded him somewhat of the long dry lakebed runways at Edward's Air Force Base. He had always found these places to be eerie. They were utterly devoid of life, and the absolute stillness and sweltering heat was only broken by the occasional aircraft that attempted a landing on the longest runways in the world, having been marked out centuries ago. Nonetheless, it had had a fitting atmosphere, with futuristic experimental aircraft being tested in such an otherworldly atmosphere.

With a reflexious movement he easily lowered the nose gear on to the rough gravel, flicking the throttles into reverse and retracting his flaps. Only moments later he was slow enough to return his throttles to idle, and turned off the runway onto the dusty flattened ground next to the runway.

Just as his engine stopped turning slowly and he cracked open his door, popping a mint into his mouth almost simultaneously, he could hear several vehicles rapidly approaching.

Seconds later, three large black SUV's kicked up dirt as they roared over the edge of a smaller dip at the airports perimeter.

Since when had Thomas adopted a look that reminded him of a hitman?

"So, looking like a hitman is cool now, huh?"

He scoffed at the short, sturdy man exiting the middle SUV, wearing his usual Ray Ban Aviators, a white button-down shirt that he purposefully did not tuck in to his trousers.

"Also, you are aware of the fact that aviators do not wear polarized sunglasses, thus making the Ray Bans disaccording with their name?"

"That is the whole Idea behind the joke, my friend!" The other, apparently Thomas, replied. "You want to drive us in to town?" He added.

"You know full well that I lack a driver's license." The pilot replied drily, opening the passenger door of the SUV, which he noted with a slight feeling of satisfaction, was still dwarfed by the large Cessna Super Cargomaster next to it. Thomas slumped into the driver's seat, and started the car.

"What is the security entail about?"

"DoD requirements"

"Huh"

The rest of the ride was spent in silence. Trying not to look too awed, the Pilot observed the landscape outside the tinted windows, an interplay of dark lilac shadows and glinting light grey spaces, with the earth's curvature giving only a hint at the deep blue masses of water that calmly undulated through the history of their destiny. The light blue of the earlier sky had been turned in to a glaring white inferno above the dark jagged line created by the high sierra on the horizon.

Blinded by the light, he turned to his partner. The short man looked even more dwarfisch when slumped into the high seat of the SUV. He had a hard time peering over the instruments to observe the narrow dirt road that they were following by now. The steering wheel looked somewhat weird in the small hands of Thomas. Sweat was already glistening his balding head even though he had only exited the air-conditioned car for a few seconds.

Only a few seconds later a slight bump indicated the change on to the highway. However, there was no one else on the highway even though it was close to 10:00 AM. Apparently no one was really interested in Salton City.

"Salton City was expanded a few years after the engineering failure that led to the creation of the Salton Sea. People quickly came up with building resorts, and trying to expand in order to accommodate the Tourists they all hoped for. However, as the Salton Sea lost some of its Water quality, the tourist numbers started dwindling, and no one was really interested in financing the dying resorts, hotels and clubs in the area. Finally, people stopped coming altogether, and most of the buildings were abandoned, except for a very small amount of people who had always scrounged together a living in these harsh desert conditions. Due to the proximity of the facilities to the Nevada Test and Training site, the U.S Government quickly purchased a few of the places using different cover companies, and installed different nuclear control facilities here. One of these facilities was named as the headquarters for a very special operation. Recently this operation came to find the requirement for a ferry pilot. After you ran the other Job in Alaska for me, I asked you to quickly come over and have a look at it. Obviously it is super classified and all, so I would need your word that none of this goes beyond this car!"

"I will not say knock, you know that I always despised telling"

"Okay. So I am sure you are aware that the United States lost quite a few nuclear weapons in the decades since World War II. Most of those are either almost surely lost in places where recovery is a near impossibility, for example, in the polar oceans. We have several nuclear weapons of which the whereabouts are currently unknown. These weapons are to be located by my program, and, if possible, recovered."

"Makes sense"

"Well, we were working on a rather high profile case for the last few years, until recently we were capable of restoring two nuclear bombs similar to the ones dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They are currently situated in central Africa, and we need someone to recover them."

After a short pause, he continued: "You are probably asking yourself: Why would we decide to ask you? The answer is fairly simple: We needed a ferry pilot, who was experienced in ferrying aircraft of various types, to a far away location. Because, you see, these nukes are located on an airplane, on a Lockheed C-69 to be precise."

"A military constellation, so to say?"

"Exactly! And you were the pilot who ferried the Breitling Constellation, correct?"

"Yes."

"That makes you perfectly qualified to fly a Constellation transatlantic! All we require from you is that you take the short time to fly from Central Africa to the USA, and we will ensure you tax exclusion forever, and substantial amount of money! Think about that for a second?"

"I do not care about taxes. Can I keep the Connie?"

"If you want to! We are required to extract the nukes, I'm afraid."

"You can keep your Bombs! You are aware of what a Constellation needs, in terms of crew and supplies? How big is the risk for me?"

"We would find the most qualified crew we possibly could. There would be minimal risk. In case anything happened we would get to you almost instantly! We do have a pact with the regions warlords, and we have several Nato Bases surrounding the area. What could possibly go wrong?"

// "What could possibly go wrong?" These words had played over and over again as he had been stumbling across the vast ocean of seemingly equidistant dunes undulating into the sky, dominated by a white-hot sun.

The faceless, brainless man spoke: "What was your answer?"

"No! I won't aid you in your little nuke-games!"

“Well, then I suppose I am required by the DoD to do this!” Thomas said.

He drew the silenced gun, shooting him in the head.

Oblivion. It would have been the correct answer, he saw that now.

“Do not lie to me!” The faceless, brainless man half-screamed. “Try again: What did you say?”//_

“Ok. What do I have to do for now? I will help you, as long as you promise me to never use those nukes, and I get to keep the Constellation!”

“Wonderful! I always knew that you loved a good excitement! You shall stay in a Hotel here for the next few weeks, and then a Private Jet will come to pick you up for a place called Castell Rosso. We shall notify you accordingly.”

Just as they had finished talking, the first desolate houses had started popping up on both sides of the road. Clearly once-grand liquor stores, malls and resorts, they had fallen into disrepair and desolation before ever having been given the chance to reach their peaks. Even through the heavily tinted windows of the vehicle it was easy to discern that the buildings were covered in dust, and the heavy roofs were sagging on top of an interior that stared back at them, a dark hole, stretching its black fingers out through the shutter less window-holes. As they continued along the road, the orange bands of dust that were slowly swallowing the shoulder and the road started growing smaller, and they reached the populated area of Salton City. He had anticipated with excitement his new adventure: It had been ages since he had been on a good ferry flight. Finally, Thomas turned on to a small parking lot. As if signaling its presence as the modern sagebush, a plastic bag floated across the space, tumbling and striking the ground in the lot. The thin coating of the asphalt in dust apparently did not greatly affect the temperature of the artificial stone, as the small distance to the porch was covered almost entirely in heat hazes. He tried to see if someone was situated on the porch, but the shadow was in such stark contrast to the brilliant white lite reflected by the distant peaks and the red hot swimming air reverberating off any close structure that it could have been packed with people, although the pilot strongly suspected it was empty, and not one of them would have been visible

from the outside. Just as they pulled over, he could see the rear SUV passing, and the security entourage quickly howling down the road. "They won't follow us into the hotel?" He asked. "Oh no, they will stay close by. Here is the number we decided to book upon. If there are any difficulties, you will find a pager among these papers" Thomas handed him a rather heavy folder containing what appeared to be several documents and a small black plastic pager stuck in between them.

"I see you are not repeating the Tarantino-Error." The pilot noted, motioning towards the name of the accommodation with his head. "Titty Twister II: A Quentin Tarantino Flair Holiday".

"Oh no", Thomas replied with a grin, "Previously, this was the Beach-Fun Love Family Hostel! It had to err...how does one say...change marketing strategies after the depression following the declining water quality. We have, however, extensively tested the facility and found it to suit our needs.

"From Family Hostel to brothel. This place seems to have come a long way." The pilot sneered. "By the way, what are you guys going to do about the Cargomaster I have left at the airport?"

"I knew you would ask. If you hand me the keys, we shall transfer it, without flying it of course, to a safe storage facility, awaiting your return." Thomas replied, sticking out his arm in an asking gesture, requiring the keys. The Pilot handed them to him. "I want that Airplane back exactly the way I parked it today." "Don't worry, we have qualified people for that." "Are those the same guys that lose your nukes?" The pilot said, waving a quick goodbye, exiting the car and heading for the hotel. The moment he left the car, he was greeted by a wave of heat evaporating from the sweltering asphalt below his feet. He almost believed he felt it stick to his feet as he tried to cross the lot with a few short strides. Even in the few seconds he required to reach the porch, he felt utterly exhausted, blown away by the winds of fire.

He entered the building and felt only marginal relief. A whole set of old air conditioning systems was slowly creating a set of miniature dust tornadoes that swept the room, doing little more than spreading warm, stale air over the set of old, round tables. If he had not known that this was not a movie set, he would have felt exactly as if he was the main character of a B-Movie Horror strip. With

a sigh, he made his way toward the counter at the far end of the room, where a receptionist was lazily polishing glasses.

//No dust tornadoes swept the whitened brick hallways of the deep bunker he was being dragged through. He should have stayed far away from this business, he should have taken his next chance and declined the offer as the privat jet had landed. He suddenly found himself going through a list in his head: All The Grandly Useless Deaths My Decisions Caused. As his feet started to grow warm from the friction of the grey rubber floor, he felt himself slowly passing out, slipping into darkness from the constant pain he had endured the past few weeks. However, his heart leapt with fear, for it was never a dreamless silent black, but always filled with terror and despair. He knew not which world he despised more, the reality he had thrown himself into so desperately back in Salton City, or the dreams that haunted him ever since.//_

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