

OTTO PLACE

A FILL IN THE _____ STORY

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Candlemark & Gleam

ALSO IN THE FILL IN THE _____ SERIES:

**MR BLANK
GET BLANK**

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"PUT THE GUN DOWN, HITLER," I SIGHED.

Don't worry, I wasn't talking to *that* Hitler. He's dead. No, I was talking to Gary Hitler, who was an okay guy once you got over the fact that he was a clone of pure evil. He really lent a lot of credence to the idea that getting rejected from art school was what made the original Hitler all Hitlery. Gary got into Cal Arts, so he was a pretty well-adjusted person.

Didn't explain why he was holding a broomhandle Mauser on me, though. Especially because Gary was pretty sensitive, all told. Despite being one of the Goys from Brazil, he wasn't keen on the whole Nazi thing—yet he'd picked a gun so Nazi that it should have been throwing a brick through a deli window. Maybe it was a genetic thing.

"Johann?" he asked, squinting in the darkness. "Is that you?"

"Uh... yeah, about that."

Johann Schulmann was the name I used with the Goys. They were fond of Germans, go figure. I hadn't yet come out to them in my new identity as Bob Blank, Fixer to the Insane. Fascists don't take disappointment very well. Still, if anyone in the Goys was safe to come out to, it was Gary Hitler. Besides, he looked like he could use my help.

"What are you doing here?" he whispered.

It was a legitimate question. You don't just end up in one of the Thule Society's Huntington Beach warehouses by accident. The fact that I was dressed as a security guard kind of pointed to the fact that I was up to no good. Lucky for me, I was already on the way out. This was a black bag job, and the black bag—actually a blue bag I got free at Dodger Stadium on Duffel Night—was empty. The Thules and the Goys might be different organizations, but they were both Nazis, so I wasn't going to tell Gary I'd just planted a keystroke tracker, camera, and listening device in the foreman's office.

Foreman. Right. That's all he was.

"Oh, you know. Half-hour walk in the evening. Helps you digest." In a bit of irony, my body chose that moment to burp the chili dog I'd had for dinner. Tasted better going the other way.

Gary winced and waved it away. "Do you have any idea where you are?"

"This isn't Dollywood?"

"This is a warehouse owned by some very bad people!"

I wondered what a Nazi, even a relatively nice one like Gary, thought of as "bad people." Also, if this hinted at some kind of falling out between Thule and Brazil, it would go a long way to explaining what Gary was doing creeping around with a gun.

"Is that what the gun is for?"

"As long as you're here, you can help me out."

"Help you do what, exactly?" This might sound strange, but of all the people I knew, Gary Hitler was near the bottom of those I thought would eventually involve me in a premeditated murder.

"It's for the cause," he said, though I could tell his heart wasn't in it. I was about to tell him to shove it, in the politest way possible, when he said, "Just come with me to the foreman's office."

Call me superstitious, but that was just where I had been, and I had been the target of so many mistaken-identity assassination attempts it was beginning to qualify as my vocation. If Gary was here to shoot me, or one of my aliases, I thought it best that I know about it now.

"Sure. You know I'm not armed, right?"

"You got pepper spray on that belt?"

I glanced down at the security guard belt I'd totally forgotten I was wearing. In point of fact, I did have some pepper spray. I guess Gary didn't care if I felt like an idiot or not. "Sure, Gare. Let's just go on up there."

I comforted myself that whoever he was there to kill wasn't there. If he wanted to wait, well, I'd figure out what to do then. Trying to solve problems before they're actually problems is one of the great time wasters. Plus, I'm a little lazy.

Back at the foreman's office, Gary asked, "Can you pick a lock?" I resisted giving him my best annoyed cocky look and got to work. I'd just picked this thing open a few minutes earlier and I knew where the tumblers were. I could have opened it with a flick of my wrist, but I made it look like it was giving me trouble. Never let a Nazi know just how good you are at breaking locks. There's a tip for the day.

The door swung open. I would have gasped, but Gary did enough for the both of us. Guess the foreman had gotten back between now and then, because there he was, sitting behind his desk, most of the contents of his head on the wall behind him. The rest was falling out in little plops on the floor. Now, and I cannot emphasize this enough, he was *not* there when I'd left less

than five minutes earlier. I even did a quick mental inventory. Nope, no scary gory dead guy when I left.

If you were going to kill a guy in the warehouse, it'd be him. His name was Jake Glass, and he, in the words of a Texas jurist, needed killing. I wasn't the man to do it, but he was a wild card even by crazy fringe group standards. That's why I had just filled his office with monitoring equipment.

See, there are certain beefs in the Information Underground that pay the bills. These are beefs that never go away. The Inquisition and the Satanists. The Assassins and the Templar. The Discordians and the Discordians. And, in this case, the Nazis and the Communists.

Not that I was pinning this on the Commies. As far as I knew, I was the only Red in that warehouse, and that was just because, ironically, they paid well.

"Okay, stupid question," I said, getting closer to the dead guy than I would've liked. Darn my professionalism. "Is this who you were trying to kill?"

It was, but I wanted to give Gary a chance to lie. It's called consideration.

"I'm not trying to kill anyone!"

Right on cue. Thanks, Gare.

"Keep your voice down, please. Now, just look at his face. The good news is, it's in pretty good shape." It was. The bullet went in just to the left of his nose, leaving what looked like a syphilitic sore, or maybe just a gross mole. It was the back of his head that had turned into a Steve Dillon drawing. Rest in peace, Jake Glass. You were an anti-Semitic asshole and you will not be missed in the slightest. Especially once you don't start that war with El Niño like you were planning.

"Uh... yeah, yeah, that's him."

Who the hell sends Gary Hitler to kill anyone? That wasn't a joke. I once saw him get physically ill over an abstract art piece that had too much red in it.

"Well, apparently the killing was double-booked." I wish that meant something, but the truth was, if you stepped out of line in the Information Underground, there was generally a disorderly queue of people ready to collect your head. I could think of half a dozen other Communist or left-wing groups who could have done it, and just as many fascists on the right. Jake really was that much of an asshole. "What's his name?"

See, there's me giving Gary a chance to lie.

"John Smith."

You can take the man out of Hitler, but you can't take... actually, let me stop myself right there.

"Okay, great. You should probably get out of here."

"What about you?"

Well, I wasn't too thrilled that a place I'd just wired for surveillance now had a brand spanking new murder in it. Either the LAPD or internal Thule security was going to be crawling all over the place, and the chances of finding what I'd planted were a little high.

"Well, I was planning to—"

I would've finished the sentence, but the alarm cut me off. The entire place was wailing like a school fire drill. I was about to suggest Gary run when Thule security showed up. They only looked like SS officers if you were really paying attention, although there was at least one website out there with a paranoid and entirely correct deconstruction of their uniforms, pointing out this secret Nazi group in our midst. The main problem was that I knew the commander, a vicious thug whose handle was Kirk Shelley. Whatever you're picturing in your head as the typical clandestine neo-Nazi thug, I am comfortable saying, yep, that's Kirk.

I turned and pepper-sprayed Gary. He dropped to the ground, wailing incoherently. "Thank god you're here!" I said to Kirk. I've found that yelling "Thank god you're here" at someone when they arrive is a good way to head off unpleasant questions like, "Why are you hanging around my dead boss," and "Are you smuggling herring in your rectum?"

He squinted at me. "Otto?"

Otto Maddock, that was me. Shut up, I was going through a Repo Man phase, and I was forced to come up with it on the spot. "Yeah! Good thing I was here, or you never would have caught this guy."

"What are you doing here?"

I noticed that Kirk and his two goons were pointing their guns—a couple shotguns for the goons and a pistol for Kirk—in my general direction. I have a good eye for when people are vaguely threatening me.

"Just running security for Henderson. He wanted to make sure this place was up to snuff. No offense, but it's apparently not." Gunnar Henderson was the local head of the Thule Society, and this might sound weird, but a much nicer person than poor, dead Jake. Granted, this wasn't hard. I was hanging out with a clone of Hitler who was nicer, so you do the math.

"What the hell, Johann?" Gary squealed from the floor.

"Shut up!" I gave Gary a swift kick and hoped he got the hint. Whatever I did to him was nothing compared to what Kirk and his goons could do.

"Who is this guy?" Kirk asked.

"Search me." *What, you can't recognize a clone of your beloved Führer? Sure, he doesn't have the mustache, he's rocking some bedhead, and maybe the Doctor Who t-shirt is throwing you off, but come on.*

Kirk peered into the office and I had an involuntary jolt as I imagined him finding the webcam hidden in the upper left corner of the room, or maybe the listening device under the desk. He shook his head. "Goddamn mess." He turned to his goons. "Lock this asshole in the breakroom. We'll decide what to do with him in the morning." They obeyed.

“So, Kirk, I was thinking—”

“You help me clean this up.”

“Right, yeah, or we could do that.” I wanted to get out of there. All I had to do was get back to my car’s computer, steal some wi-fi, and rewind the time stamp. I figured the killer was probably long gone by now, but at least, you know, mystery solved. I didn’t like the idea of Gary in Thule custody, either. Assuming he hadn’t done it. I’m a softie, I guess.

Of course Kirk gave me the task of scrubbing the wall with bleach while he rolled the body up in plastic. The bulletin board behind Glass was ruined, and we ended up burning it in a trash bag.

“I assume you drove,” Kirk said when we were finished.

In point of fact, I had. My alien-built Cadillac Eldorado, parked about a block away. I didn’t like the idea of Kirk knowing it was my ride. It’s fairly distinctive. About as distinctive as you’d imagine an alien-built Caddy to be.

“I rode. My bike. You know, for the environment.”

Kirk glared at me. I did my best not to wither. “Fine.” He shouted over his shoulder. “Hunter!”

One of the goons jogged up. “Give Otto here your keys.”

“C’mon, boss...”

“Do it.”

Hunter directed me to look for a green Camaro, and advised me that if the paint should get scuffed, I was going to have to pass a nightstick through my urethra. I dragged Jake out of the warehouse to the secluded parking lot. The wind off the Pacific was cool, even if the night wasn’t. I was covered in the clammiest sweat I’d had in a while, and I’m ashamed to say it wasn’t because I had to dump a body. This was pretty far from my first corpse disposal, and I wish that didn’t sound quite so braggy.

I wrestled the body into Hunter’s trunk, which was filled with old tools, even older pornography, and a spare tire that smelled like gasoline, then drove his car a few blocks and parked it. Then I headed back to mine and opened up the onboard computer. Like I said, aliens built the thing, and like any computer worth its salt, it has a web browser. I punched up the hidden site I had keyed to the cam in the office.

I was doing this bit for El Niño. When they’re not making it rain, they’re a crypto-communist conspiracy with the usual baggage. In principle, I love doing surveillance jobs for the various groups. The more they watch each other, the more they can stop each other, and the less time they have to bother your standard busload of nuns. It’s really in everyone’s best interests.

I found the feed without any trouble and saw Kirk Shelley pacing through the office, looking mostly at where Jake had painted the walls. I had a momentary chill as I imagined Kirk finding the camera, but I decided that it was already a bad situation and I wasn’t in the room anymore

anyway. Might as well see what I could see. I backed up the video and found a nice shot of my face as I turned the webcam on, then a static shot of the office.

Jake Glass walked in shortly after I left, wiggled his mouse, and started futzing around on the computer. I didn't have a shot of the monitor, but if I really cared, that keystroke tracker would tell me what I needed to know. A moment later, a figure came in, pulled a gun, and shot the surprised Glass directly in the face. The shooter was none other than Kirk Shelley.

Wonderful.

I clicked back over and there was Kirk, making sure I'd done a good job cleaning up after him. Then he picked up his cellphone and dialed. I keyed over to the bug and heard him loud and clear.

"LAPD, what is the nature of your emergency?"

"My friend's car was just stolen. It's a green Camaro," and then he rattled off the license number.

What. An. Asshole. Have me clean up his murder and feed me to the cops as a fall guy. Meanwhile, Gary was still sobbing with a face full of pepper spray and was likely going to get shot in the head for his trouble. Since that was pretty much my fault, it was also my responsibility to get Gary out of there. Sure, he'd wanted to kill Glass, or at least had theoretically gone there intending to kill him, but he didn't actually do it. And besides, I'd rather Kirk go down for it than Gary, even if old Gary had been the triggerman.

I moved as quick as I could. I found Hunter's car where I left it, wiped it down, and transferred the corpse from his trunk to mine, then moved my car. Okay, so bad news was I had a murdered man in my trunk. Good news was that the cops weren't looking for me, specifically. Kirk had underestimated me a bit, and I was going to make him pay.

Moving a dead body wrapped in plastic is never safe. It's also never fun, but that's not my point. My point is that while you can pretty much count on someone taking note of the unwieldy load and thinking, "Has Dexter moved into the neighborhood?" it gets exponentially worse when the cops are crawling around. They really don't like it when you move bodies. That's their thing.

I could hear a siren wailing a couple blocks over. Kirk was probably counting on them pulling me over, finding the corpse in the trunk, then calling for backup and greeting me in the manner for which the LAPD is famous.

I pulled past the chainlink fences that enclosed the warehouse complex on the land side and parked in the shadows one building over from the first. Process of elimination was next. There were three cars parked by the building, and I could reasonably assume one belonged to the remaining goon, one belonged to Glass, and one was Kirk's. Sadly, none of them had really obvious Nazi bumper stickers to tip me off.

I broke into each one and found Kirk's name on the registration of a late-model Charger. Out of curiosity, I popped the trunk to see what I could find. Now this is where you get to the silver lining of hate crimes.

I know, I know. Just stick with me a second and we'll get there.

No matter what the movies say, cars don't explode easily. They're sort of designed not to. So they tend to need a little help. I don't know what Kirk was planning to blow up, but the guy had some stuff in his trunk that would do the job nicely if it were mixed in the right quantities. His potential hate crime was going to hang him, and if that's not karma, I don't know what is. When I was done—and I had to time it with a makeshift fuse made out of a couple daisy-chained cigarettes I found in the pickup next to his car—and I had placed the body where it would be the most incriminating, I headed back into the warehouse.

This was the part of my plan I wasn't crazy about. The part where I got tuned up by a bunch of Nazis. I walked through the front door like I didn't know what was going on. I could tell I wasn't supposed to be back, because the first person I saw was Hunter, and he frowned at me like I was a platypus selling Amway.

"Hey! Listen, I'm really sorry about your car."

He didn't care what I had to say. He leaned over and spoke into his radio. "Uh, boss? Otto's back."

Kirk's voice was baffled. "Back? What do you mean?"

"I mean he's standing right here."

I waved helpfully.

"Keep him there," Kirk said.

Oh, this was going to suck.

Hunter nodded, like Kirk could see that over the radio, quick-walked to me, and rooted his fist right in my gut. I went over as quick as you please. I was going to get a beating, but it might not be quite as bad if I turtled up right away. You know, because Nazis are known far and wide for their restraint.

Hunter happily entertained himself by kicking my kidneys until Kirk showed up. "Good job," Kirk said without apparent irony.

"What's going on?" I gasped, when I knew damn well what was going on. "I stashed the car! I got away from the cops!"

"Throw him in the breakroom with his partner," Kirk said.

They got in a couple more hits before hauling me off, of course. I was starting to feel like one massive bruise. I mostly let Hunter and his fellow goon carry me while I dragged my feet. I was beat pretty bad, but I'd had a lot worse. Still, tomorrow wouldn't be very much fun. They stopped, I felt them remove my belt, the one with the nightstick and pepper spray, and heard a door unlocked. Then they followed Kirk's instructions a bit more literally than I would have liked. I hit their breakroom table, which broke under my weight and fell to the floor.

“Hey!” I heard Gary shout at them. The door slammed.

I got up. Slowly.

“Johann? What the hell?” Gary looked like someone had spraypainted a bandito mask on his face in red. His eyes were still pissing tears.

“Sorry about that. I’m here to make it up to you.”

“You don’t look so good.”

“Don’t worry, I feel worse.”

I limped to the door and checked the lock. This really was just a breakroom. A table, now broken, a couch, some magazines, and a couple vending machines. Just what you’d think. The door had a pretty simple lock, too. I fished my picks out of my sleeve and cracked the lock in a second.

“What are you doing?” Gary hissed.

“Escaping. Why, what were you doing?”

He pointed vaguely at a hot rod magazine. “I was learning about the, uh, the benefits of a hemi engine.”

“Right. Now stay low and shut up.”

Kirk and his goons could not have been more cocky. Locked in the breakroom and they thought we were down for the count. I limped out of the warehouse, Gary behind me shaking like a leaf, and me wondering when the hammer would fall. Outside. Turned out that would be outside.

“Right on time,” Kirk said from behind us.

I turned. Kirk and his goons had guns on us. He was holding Gary’s broomhandle Mauser. Maybe as an insult, maybe as the ultimate Teutonic accessory.

I held my hands up. Gary dropped to his knees, sobbing.

Kirk leveled the gun.

“Ever hear the phrase ‘There’s never a cop around when you need one?’” I asked.

Kirk grinned. “Kind of appropriate.”

“Yeah. I mean, unless someone calls them in advance. And there’s a really loud noise that they can’t—”

It was good timing. What can I say? Sometimes, you just nail it. The cars exploded into pillars of flame and all of us hit the deck while our vision turned orange and our hearing tried to commit tinny suicide. I was mostly hearing that when I hauled Gary up and did my best to run. The first thing I heard at the edge was the thin wailing of that siren. The cop wouldn’t have to look far to find those cars blazing in the middle of the night.

I watched the cop car zip into the parking lot through the windshield of my Eldorado as my senses slowly stopped ringing at me. Gary sat shotgun, an utter emotional and physical wreck.

“What the hell was that?” he finally managed.

“That, Gary, is why you should never carry explosives in your trunk.”

I started the car. I was going to drive nice and slow out of this neighborhood. Get someplace with fewer Nazis and explosions, and when I did, the LAPD was going to get a nice video— anonymously—of Kirk committing murder.

“Where do you want me to drop you?” I asked Gary.

“Wait. You don’t care why I was sent to kill... uh... John Smith?”

“Nope.” I knew the broad strokes. Jake Glass was on borrowed time. As to why Brazil wanted him dead, maybe there was going to be a war between Brazil and Thule, or maybe the Goys were trying to stop one between them and one of the Commie groups. With Jake dead, it didn’t matter. Since I technically fulfilled my contract with El Niño, it also meant I was getting paid. I’d even managed to commit my good deed for the day by rescuing Gary. Nope. Don’t care. Feud away, guys. Just don’t waste me time by trying to set me up.

“But people like you always want to know why.”

“People like me? Trekkies?”

“No. Uh, hardboiled whatever.”

I had to laugh at that one. Eventually, I dropped Gary Hitler off at an IHOP and tried not to imagine him annexing any part of it. Just another day at the office, after all.