

An excerpt from:

STRIKE ZONE

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A wispy plume of brown smoke spiraled up from the distant volcano as a young man in gray coveralls and a wide brimmed field hat entered the tent and stood before Klaus Heinkel's desk. The persistent whine of the oil rig had stopped some moments before. It was the kind of sound the crew eventually did not hear, but when it stopped the silence caught their attention. When he heard the whine cease Heinkel had been expecting this visit. He looked up from a stack of field reports and put down his fountain pen.

"What is it, Knipfel? Not an equipment problem again, I hope? Tell me you have only paused to have some of the excellent Méxican coffee." He looked at his watch, but he knew they wouldn't have stopped the rig for this.

"Worse, Captain. We've found something in the core drilling in the third sector. It looks like bones and pottery fragments. I ordered the others to stop the bore pending your inspection. It could be another possible archaeological site, sir. Sorry."

Heinkel leaned forward on the desk and looked at Knipfel gravely. "What is the depth at this point?" He slid the cap over the end of the pen and pushed the report aside.

"Just over two meters, sir. We'd hardly begun."

Cursing silently to himself, Heinkel rose, pulled on a gray coverall and led Knipfel out of the tent. The wind came from the direction of the Popocatepetl volcano, kicking up dust devils that scurried off toward the double row of pyramids at Teotihuacan, just out of sight to the north, and as always, carrying the acrid scent of sulfur and ash. Another delay. So far sectors one and two had yielded nothing, and now the third was off to a problematical start.

By the time Heinkel and Knipfel got back to the rig, the other two crewmembers had spread out the core sample over a three-meter long tabletop with shallow raised edges. Here and there, but mostly toward the two meter mark of the sample, various fragments and shards had been pulled out to one side without altering their sequence in the core. Heinkel began fingering the fragments. The first to catch his eye was a possibly human piece of mandible shorter than his little finger. Attached to one end was a single tooth that looked like a molar. Several other chalky light colored pieces resembled rib sections. He turned his attention to the pottery.

All the shards were small, but the best one bore part of a painted human head in a feather headdress.

“OK,” he said. “It certainly looks Aztec. Bring up the gravel screen and we’ll dig down a bit more with shovels and see what we come up with. Maybe if we’re lucky it’s just a garbage dump, although I’m concerned about the bone fragments. Go carefully. If there’s anything else down there I want to be able to turn it over intact to the experts before we move on.” Heinkel knew that intact in this case did not mean untouched, only that they had gone far enough to understand what they had. He scratched the short graying hair over his left ear as he headed back to the tent, hating the thought of re-erecting the rig at another spot. If the local archaeologists were called, his crew would have to knock down the rig and clear out of the entire sector. Like each of the other fourteen German oil exploration teams, Heinkel’s had a quota to reach, and they were running behind.

By noon the team had cleared an area about two meters square and one and a half meters deep. Screening the dirt as they went had yielded nothing from the same period as the pottery.

Back in his tent, Heinkel tapped a pencil slowly on the desktop. His mission, indeed his passion, was to find oil; his was one of fifteen exploration crews operating throughout México with an eye to increasing oil production by developing new fields for export. In the event of war in Europe, the Führer wanted a secondary source of supply should problems develop with the Romanian oil fields. He was not going to repeat the strategic mistake of the First World War. Germany had no crude oil of its own, and its synthetic oil manufacturing process yielded only about twenty percent of its potential military needs.

Exploration aid from Adolf Hitler had been eagerly accepted by the government of Mexican Presidente Lázaro Cárdenas, for whom increased oil revenues meant increased funding for his agenda of social reform and land redistribution. However, certain niceties had to be maintained with the Ministry of Culture, an underfunded, but often vocal, branch of government, charged with protection of the nation’s archaeological heritage. The past glories of the Aztec and Maya civilizations were still a strong part of México’s national pride. Heinkel sometimes felt like he was walking a fine line when he made decisions without consultation about the merits and potential of a given site. The conflict of interest was constant.

The sound of sudden yelling reached him from sector three. Klaus Heinkel groaned as he threw down his pencil and went back through the tent flap. Being a successful archaeologist making important finds was the last thing he wanted. His first

piece of piece of bad luck was to draw the archaeological zone, where every bore had to be preceded by a core sample.

As he stood at the edge of the square excavation the site had a chaotic look to him. At the end the crew had rushed to reach the two-meter level around the track left by the core drill, and in the dirt Heinkel could see more pottery, with two vessels nearly intact, more bones and what appeared to be textile fragments. At the edge of the dig two of the crewmembers struggled with an object wrapped in layers of rotting fabric, about the size of a human head. How odd, thought Heinkel, that they would have mummified a head separate from the body. And why would it be so heavy?

When they lifted the object to the surface they set it on the core tray and began roughly pulling off the wrappings. They had already gone far past the point where they should have called in archaeologists from the Ministry of Culture. The sun was high in the sky, and when the last frayed layer of ancient fabric came away, the surface gleamed like fire. The men jumped back a moment and then cleared the rest of the wrappings from the sides. They were staring at a human skull cast from solid gold.

Heinkel held his hand up, stunned, and everyone took a step back. “Well, this is very bad,” he said to no one in particular. He could never have any conversations in the field with anyone on his own level anyway. “Bring the skull into my tent and put it on the desk, then collect all the pieces of the fabric and put them in a box and seal it. When you’re finished break down the derrick without disturbing the site any further and set it up in sector four. And throw some of the screened dirt back over that pottery.” He went back into the tent and cleared a space on his desk for the find. His first instinct had been to rebury it, but he knew it wouldn’t stay in the excavation long if he did. Now he was in the business of providing security as well as oil. Maybe he could do better at that.

Heinkel’s scientific knowledge was centered chiefly in petroleum geology, with a smattering of chemistry. History was foreign terrain, and art was incomprehensible, something he left to Hermann Goering, the great collector. Heinkel had done perfunctory reviews of several books on Aztec antiquities before coming to Mexico. He could recognize things of value, but he had no interest in the material beyond that. To him, the Indians of México were dark-skinned primitives, unworthy of any serious interest, even though the native cultures there had reached a high state of civilization when his own ancestors had been living in caves on the North Sea, pounding rocks and wearing fur suits.

He knew from the incised decoration that the skull must date from the Aztec period, and was therefore more than 400 years old, but he hadn’t come across mention of any similar find. In spite of himself, he found it fascinating, touching the shallow

engraving around the eyes and teeth. It had an undeniable presence and had to be of immense value. Involuntarily he was impressed by the knowledge that no one else had seen or touched it since at least the early sixteenth century, or even before.

Sitting across from the skull, which he had finally and somewhat superstitiously turned away from him so as not to be eye to hollow eye, he decided to call the embassy first, knowing they would want to deal with the Mexican government over the damage to the burial site. Using his field phone, he was not able to reach anyone from the higher levels until after four o'clock. When he connected, the junior attaché was not pleased, but said he would inform the Mexican Culture Ministry and smooth things over as well as he could. When the attaché passed along the information to the Culture Minister, he said nothing about the skull, merely describing the find as "being of some potential importance." After all, it was possible the drilling crew might want to return it to the dig and cover it up again. He understood the Führer's priority, to keep the drilling underway at all costs. For the first time in centuries, culture was no longer a priority in Berlin.

After dinner, Klaus Heinkel informed his crew of three that archaeologists would be arriving in the morning, and that he would need two men in shifts to mount security for his tent as he slept. The third would watch the site. Heinkel threw a windbreaker over the skull and read a book until just past eleven o'clock, then retired to his cot with troublesome, repetitive dreams, none of which concerned oil.

It was a few minutes after ten in the morning when the two Ministry of Culture archaeologists arrived on the scene. They first made a general survey of the pit, dismayed to see no guard on duty, and then approached Heinkel's tent. There they found one man lying on his back at the entrance, his throat cut nearly all the way through. Klaus Heinkel, the site supervisor, was found dead in his cot, stabbed through the heart, and, oddly, his windbreaker thrown over his face. A third man was found in the crew quarters, his throat cut similarly to the man at Heinkel's tent flap. The final crewmember, whose name was given in the records as Johann Thaler, was never located.

Knowing nothing about the skull, the archaeologists gave no opinion as to whether anything might be missing, although the sealed and boxed textile remnants gave them pause. Since there was no other record in the literature of a skull of this kind that might have suggested some explanation for the fabric remnants, the motive for the murders remained unknown. Police bulletins were issued for the apprehension of Johann Thaler, but no photographs of him were available, and he disappeared easily over the border into Guatemala, where he was waved through driving a 1935 Mercedes sedan with German diplomatic plates. A search of the trunk would have caused an international incident, but as a courtesy, none was made.

The ambassador of the Third Reich had given orders to the junior attaché to reveal nothing about the find, but by then it was already too late. The discovery of the skull had become an urban legend, with its untraceable origin in a small but comfortable cantina two blocks from the embassy, where the local beer was nearly as good as in Munich. In the German view, it was one of the few things the Méxicans did reasonably well.

By the time the site was cleared nearly a month later, it had been recorded in the official record as nothing more than a late period burial of no great significance, possibly of about the same period as the Conquest. Two nearly intact clay vessels and a box full of shards were turned over to the curator of ceramics at the Museum of Anthropology. The rotted fabric that had encased the skull came to rest in a small wooden box on a high shelf in the storage room of the textile division. After all, it was an inferior weave with no decoration. Three archaeology students managed a twenty-five percent reconstruction of the skeleton, which was then photographed for the archive and repacked for storage. This was the sum of official activity from the discovery in sector three.

Unofficially, the golden skull found its way overland from Guatemala to Panama, and without publicity to Berlin via the safe in the captain's quarters of a Nazi naval cruiser, ending in the locked display case of a prominent collector, soon to be the most eminent collector in Europe since Napoleon.

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