

Beyond Belief

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I was only a few years shy of enlistment age and thinking I'd just about convinced my folks to let me join up a little early when my brother Bill's letters started to sound different. Bill was a fighter pilot – an Ace – with two years service under his belt, fighting to keep Japan from expanding its empire and Germany from annihilating an entire race and conquering the world in the process.

Bill was out in the world. Where I wanted to be. Where I *would* be in two years – less if I had my way. Instead of sitting here cross-legged on my bed, I'd be out patrolling the skies with my big brother.

The Remington 16 gauge shotgun I'd gotten as an early Christmas present sat heavy in my lap. I lifted it to the light, admiring the sheen on the barrel. I'd taken the Remington out behind the barn today. Blown the hell out of two bales of hay. My parents thought the shotgun would keep my mind off the enlisting issue. They couldn't have been more wrong. I was born to be a pilot just like my brother Bill.

Bill was proud to be in the air serving his country and his letters always reflected that. Sometimes he sounded a little boastful, sometimes a little homesick, especially around Christmas.

But Bill never ever sounded scared.

The way Bill wrote now, you'd think the devil himself was chasing him.

Though he didn't use the word "devil." Far as my big brother was concerned he was being chased by aliens, pure and simple.

The sky outside my bedroom window sparkled silver against black, like someone sprinkled glitter on a velvet curtain. Two days before Christmas and the mountains of northern California were finally blanketed with snow that seemed to glow in the dark. White and black. Light and dark.

Good and evil, as in Evil Aliens out to conquer the world.

Not exactly the kind of thoughts that made for a peaceful night's sleep.

I nestled the shotgun butt against my shoulder, sited in on a suspicious-looking star, and pretended to pull the trigger. “Blam!”

The star winked out of existence. For a minute. And then it was back. I sighed and climbed out of bed. Might as well put the shotgun away and try to get some sleep. I tucked the gun into its case and shoved it behind the hanging clothes, then headed back to bed.

My steps slowed as I passed the old dresser that doubled as my desk. I hesitated, then pulled Bill’s last letter out of the drawer. I’d read the letter so many times, the edges were starting to tear. I woulda, coulda, shoulda been able to recite the words by heart.

But I froze every time I read them. Not because I’d taken to leaving the window open at night, sleeping only in sweat pants with no top to acclimatize myself to the frigid temperatures a pilot could expect to encounter during high altitude flights.

I froze because Bill’s fear reached out through his letter and grabbed me by the throat.

“We are fighting the wrong battle,” Bill wrote. “While we engage our human enemy in the sky and on land, another enemy is at hand, watching us, studying our moves, determining our weaknesses.”

The stars outside my window twinkled as stars tend to do on cold, clear nights. I shivered and climbed back into bed, carrying Bill’s letter with me, and breathing deep of air so crisp it tickled the hairs in my nose.

I tugged the covers up over my bare chest and kept reading. Bill went on to describe things he called “foo fighters,” strange balls of colored light that appeared in the night sky, objects that were more than just lights.

They were alive. According to Bill. And he wasn’t the only one who’d seen them. In fact, foo fighters were the scapegoat of the day among ace pilots, interrupting concentration at crucial moments. Funny I hadn’t heard anything about them until two months ago when Bill mentioned them in one of his letters. I’d let it slide, thinking my big brother was pulling my leg, but his delusions had only gotten worse.

“They followed me today,” he wrote in his last letter. “I did my damndest to outmaneuver them, but they stuck to my tail like a burr on a dog’s ass. No matter which way I turned, there was one of those damned lights. Could be some kind of enemy spy craft, but I doubt it. In my estimation, no machine could be that smart.”

A thought kept circulating through my brain: Bill’s lost it. He’s gone over the edge. He

only thinks other pilots are seeing the same thing.

I'd always been the practical brother, scoffing at Bill's Ouija board obsession and repeated attempts to communicate with the dead. This could be just another one of Bill's delusions, created by the stress of flying alone for hours on end, never knowing when the enemy might attack. I'd done more than just read Bill's letters while I was waiting to enlist. I'd read every article, every book, every manual about flying I could get my hands on. All kinds of things could happen to a pilot in the air, both physically and mentally.

Sounded like Bill had gone off the mental deep end.

I'd talk to Mom and Dad in the morning. Tell them the waiting was over. I needed to enlist now. Bill needed me. He couldn't stand up to the strain. I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat, crumpled the letter in my hand, then smoothed it back out and started reading again.

"They're not from this world, Leroy. I'm as sure of that fact as I am sure that Aunt Matty puts rum in her pumpkin pie. You mark my words. There is a shadowy line between believing in something and knowing it's so. And I know we've got a full-scale invasion on our hands that has nothing to do with Germans and Japs.

And nobody's paying attention.

Lord help us when the foo fighters decide to do more'n just look."