

AETHER BOOK 1

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Prologue: Nacht

An abandoned German airfield

Sgt. John Raine

June 4th, 1945

"Status?"

Unbroken silence within utter blackness.

"Is anyone with me? God damn it, is anyone out there?!"

Sergeant Raine felt around the dark cockpit, searching for a recognizable element of the plane's interior to orient himself, or better yet, any sign of life.

As he felt around, broken shards of glass from the cockpit window and coarse gravel grazed against his palms. Raine could now be sure that the plane had flipped prior to the crash, with the ceiling lying below him. He was now sure how the plane was arranged; Maybe now he could see a way out.

This was not how the mission was supposed to go. Following Germany's surrender, the OSS had enlisted Raine and four other men in his squad to ensure the safety of a spy by the name of Peter McCain as he was escorted into the country. Their primary objective was ensuring McCain infiltrates Group 935, a scientific research organization partnered with the Germans in the war, without arousing any suspicion that he was stealing their secrets.

As Raine crawled towards a source of light, he began to remember the moments leading to the crash. All the systems aboard had malfunctioned and the engines gave out, seemingly at random. With the German military now defunct, it is unlikely this was sabotage on their part. If this truly was a freak accident, American forces will be back to recover Raine and any survivors of the crash soon.

McCain must be one hell of a spy for the US to send three escort planes with four squads of marines, Raine thought. With the treaty signed, Germany's Wehrmacht was no longer protecting their facilities, but the US could not legally take over Group 935's holdings, given their swift denouncement of the Nazi Party after the treaty was signed. With Peter on the inside, the US could have eyes and ears on 935's scientific advancements and leadership. Details on the target were kept out of reach from everyone but McCain himself, but there were rumors in the lower levels of the OSS that the Group had been responsible for numerous war crimes and had been manufacturing super weapons.

Raine could now see faint moonlight seeping in where the plane had crumpled upon crashing. Cautious, the Sergeant drew his Colt and crawled towards the hole. His ankle had been badly twisted after being tossed around the plane. He eyed the moonlit landscape through the breach in the hull: No one in sight. He waited another few moments for any sign of life. Radio silence.

Raine crawled out from the debris onto the harsh gravel outside, and a sudden odor wafted towards Raine's nostrils. He was so taken aback by the scent his arms crumpled beneath him and his eyes watered profusely. It was the stench of rotting human flesh, reminding him of

Guadalcanal. Balance regained, Raine raised himself up, eyeing his surroundings. No Germans, but none of his fellow soldiers either.

On the other side of the plane was a seemingly abandoned bunker, worn and rusted from many hard fought battles of the past, but now lying still in this foggy airfield. The thick fog prevented Raine from seeing anything in any direction besides the bunker and a couple of power lines. On closer inspection, the bunker was caved in and heavily damaged due to falling debris from the plane, but the structure was still standing, lying dormant and silent midst the fog.

Surrounding the small bunker were rusty metal barrels and a few German army trucks, their beds full of cargo. Upon a closer inspection, the crates in these trucks were marked with the insignia of the German Wehrmacht as well as another symbol: It looked like a gear with a hand in the middle and neurons spinning around the center; The arm of the hand was made up of the Waffen SS logo, and the center was marked with the numbers 9-3-5.

At the nose of the plane, a similar truck was seen destroyed by the crash, its cargo spread out along the flat ground around the plane. One such crate had been flung several yards near where Raine had emerged. From a large hole bashed into the side of the crate, strange, glowing red rocks could be seen inside.

Raine waited a few moments before attempting to get back to his feet. The pain was nigh unbearable, yet Raine stood up, deciding to take a chance to find the others in his squad.

"Rook!"

Only the wind.

"Philips, are you with me?!"

Waning light.

"McCree! Come on, anybody?!"

Rolling fog.

For what seemed like an eternity, there was only silence. Then, faintly, a voice called out to Sergeant Raine.

"Sarge! Come quick!"

The voice was coming from the bunker, and Raine could not quite catch whom the voice matched. He lifted himself up on his good leg and began limping towards fellow life but stopped dead in his tracks from the sound that came next.

It erupted like a long, drawn-out boom. Groans and yelps from far off, but loud and clear as day. A group of yellow-orange lights appeared in pairs deep in the fog. They started small and grew ever larger until the outline of the bodies became clear. Several dozen, around the size of grown men, with piercing orange eyes and a hellish moan stumbled across the field towards Raine. Distinguishing features could now be seen: Flailing arms, flapping jaws, and grey skin. As they came closer, the monsters' intent became clear: They were heading straight for Raine.

Raine dived into the plane to find a gun with more ammunition for the ambush, but the shambling bodies had transitioned into a full sprint, shoving each other away to try and reach his position. Raine dropped his Colt in the darkness, and was forced deeper and deeper into the plane as the beasts piled into the tiny, cramped hole in the side of the wreckage. There was no route of escape as they pushed even further inward like a wall of flesh. Raine ran his hand along the walls to find what he was looking for. Finally, the compartment where rations were held was before

him. Raine desperately scooped the week's and week's worth of rations out and stuffed himself inside the tiny compartment. He could barely fit his head in, being forced into the fetal position with his head in his lap. Raine shut the door in a panic, and wedged the interior handle to keep the door closed.

The sound of banging, crashing, groaning, and clawing were heard outside the compartment for the next hour. Raine had begun to panic from his claustrophobia, but his fear of the beasts that wished to reach him inside was far greater. Sweat and tears soaked the shaking man within the plane, trapped by an unknown force.

From within his prison the soldier heard the faint sounds of gunfire outside. Surely that was his squad-mates coming to his rescue. They would kill the things outside, and finally this Hell could be over.

But the banging and screaming continued. Sergeant Raine stayed within the plane's rations compartment for four days before finding peace in death. He had water on his person which lasted a short time, but the rations, only inches away from him, were beneath the boots of the creatures. No one came back for Raine, and his squad's screams of terror were heard by no one else but the undead.

Part I – In The Beginning

14 Years Earlier...

Chapter 1: Induction

Auditorium, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

May 10th, 1931

Ludvig Maxis stood behind the stage, enveloped by complete silence, as he sipped his tea one last time. He began to make his way towards the stage before his benefactors: The soon-to-be first wave of Group 935 scientists. He approached the podium and adjusted his microphone to his own greater-than-average height. The recruits grew silent, eager to hear whatever he had to say. Doctor Maxis motioned to the audio technician to begin recording the induction ceremony, and he initiated the speech towards his dazzled, child-like admirers.

"Gentlemen, allow me to take this opportunity to welcome you to Group 935."

Younger members of the crowd perked up, chatting softly with each other, eagerly anticipating their careers in scientific research under Doctor Maxis. The older, more experienced scientists sat silent out of respect, awaiting Maxis' official instruction.

"This is a prestigious moment in the history of our race. You represent the future of technological advancement. You are the pioneers of human discovery. In your hands lies the destiny of mankind. In our hands is a great power and with that power comes a price. You have volunteered to be part of this great experiment and with that decision comes the responsibility of

absolute secrecy.”

Younger scientists ended their chatter as the esteemed Doctor Maxis spoke of secrecy. Like before, the older, more senile scientists sat quietly. Maxis paused and his tone changed to a more strict form.

"No one is to know what you do, where you work, what our research has uncovered, or what our purpose will be. You will have no further contact with your governments or with your families. Your decision to fully dedicate your lives to Group 935 is absolute. In your lockers you will find your field ops manual which will direct you should our manifesto get compromised. We cannot afford to let this power fall into the wrong hands and therefore the field ops manual should be considered your bible. Make your preparations now. A new dawn is beginning for mankind."

Ludvig Maxis stepped down from the podium, the audience clapping uproariously, and he found his way off the stage to meet with the new recruits. For the next ten minutes he shook the hands of humanity's greatest scientists from every corner of the globe. These great men all held a fiery passion for scientific advancement in their eyes. Many naive, youthful scientists nervously approached Doctor Maxis, asking for signatures on distributed copies of his work. One young man hailed from Russia, leaving the Soviet Union to pursue his dream of becoming a great Physicist and working under the esteemed Ludvig Maxis. Another had arrived just last week from the rural United States. He was the first of his family to receive a full education and had never left his home country before arriving in Germany.

Most interesting were the words of older scientists invited personally by Doctor Maxis.

Maxis was greatly honored to be in the presence of those he considered his peers, and conversation regarding science felt more in-line with his expectations for Group 935. A long time partner in science, Doctor Porter, greeted Maxis from the crowd.

"Doctor Maxis! I am ecstatic this day has finally come. I know you have been dreaming of this collaboration for so long, my friend, and I am honored to be a part of it."

"Thank you, Doctor Porter. It will be a long journey, but I see light at the end of the tunnel! Der Riese is more than a money pit, as you can see around you, Doctor!"

"Oh, Doctor, you know I only meant such comments in jest. This place, and this organization, are something to be proud of."

Nearby sat a table covered with refreshments, fresh fruit, and sandwiches for the crowd of scientists. Doctor Maxis poured two glasses of wine, handing one to his colleague, Doctor Porter.

"To 'Improving the human condition'."

Maxis and Porter both raised their glasses, tapping them together and downing a portion of the wine.

Doctor Porter took another sip of his wine, finishing the glass before handing it to an attendant at the table. "I should begin getting acquainted with my new laboratory. Again I must thank you for this opportunity. I will begin studying this new element. You said you discovered the element near Breslau?"

"Indeed, on the grounds of this very site. My team has begun tests on Element 115. It has unprecedented potential."

"I foresee Group 935 making great strides in the field of science. Future generations will be inspired by what we accomplish here, Doctor. Anyhow, I will see you throughout the week, Doctor Maxis. Say *hallo* to Hilda for me. *Auf Wiedersehen*, my friend."

Doctor Porter returned to the crowd, leaving Maxis to his own thoughts at the concessions table. His one reservation regarding Group 935 was Hilda. When Ludvig met her, they both desired a family built to last forever. Ludvig dreamed of owning a house in the countryside without need for any other earthly desire. His wife, Hilda, at his side to love until they reach their deathbeds, and two children, a girl and a boy, to pass their love onto. However, Maxis feared this love may soon be overshadowed by his passion for science. Group 935 presented an incredible opportunity to make a change for the better in the world, but with Maxis at the helm, his own future family may be neglected in the process. His life must be fully dedicated to Group 935's ambitious goals if they are to succeed. For now, Doctor Maxis pushed these growing fears to the back of his mind. Hilda must understand the great importance of his work at Der Riese.

Maxis extended his empty glass to the event attendant, hoping more wine could drown his woes. At the other end of the table was a middle-aged man, his head balding; The man was leaned in closely to the sandwich tray, examining its contents before he noticed Doctor Maxis staring at his peculiar mannerisms. The man raised up, a smile coming to his face, as he extended his hand for a handshake.

"Doctor Maxis, I am such an admirer of your work. I must say, I am beyond pleased you have invited me to join Group 935. Trust me in saying that I am fully dedicated to the

organization's goals. I expect many wondrous things to surface from our collaboration, Doctor.”

Doctor Maxis shook the German scientist's shaky hands, feeling anxious due to the man's tight grip and peculiar, darting eye movements.

"Yes, it is... marvelous that a scientist such as yourself should accept my humble invitation, Doctor..." He paused for a moment, unsure of the scientist's name.

"Oh! Mein Gott, I have been foolish! I am Doctor Groph!"

"Ah, Doctor Groph. I am pleased to have your expertise here at The Giant, erm, Der Riese. Now... I believe I also sent an invitation to your partner as well. Has he given any thought-"

"Albert und I had many, many, **many** disagreements regarding Electrodynamics. I would not consider us partners, hardly even acquaintances! The last I heard he was looking into leaving for the United States. I say, if their women are any indication, the Americans are hopeless! Trust me, Doctor Maxis, his work was not worth your time. But I possess the skills you will need to better the human condition."

"Excellent, Doctor Groph."

"Are you familiar with the Vrill-Ya, Doctor Maxis?"

Maxis spat some of the wine back into the glass as he physically recoiled at the odd question.

"I have read *The Coming Race* if that is what you are asking."

"*Nein, nein*, there is much more to be learned from the Vrill-Ya than Lytton's work, though it is a fine start."

"You will have to tell me more once we've settled in here. Right now I have other business to attend to."

Doctor Maxis promptly handed his glass to the table attendant and made his way towards the exit of the auditorium, away from the babbling nutcase.

"Absolutely, Doctor, absolutely. Thank you for the opportunity! I look forward to the numerous discoveries we will make together!"

Doctor Maxis nodded back to the distant Doctor Groph, and exited through the doors of the auditorium outside. The night air warmed Maxis' skin as he passed through the construction area that would one day be the courtyard of the facility. Doctor Maxis passed several scientists wandering towards the central building housing Group 935's administrative offices, before entering the brand new building himself. Maxis entered the room at the end of the hallway, his own personal office space, before settling into his leather desk chair.

This first wave of recruits would prove a strong base for the organization, but Group 935 must always be searching for more minds to assist in its goals. One scientist in particular had been making a name for himself in the scientific community by the name Doctor Edward Richtofen. Richtofen had published several books with his findings in physics and biology along with his partner in science, Doctor Schuster. Both being based in Germany and being exceptionally skilled in their field, the two may prove valuable assets in the future, and Doctor Maxis sought to watch their careers closely. With such great minds at its disposal and the power of the new Element 115, Group 935 could be an unstoppable force of change for humanity.

For weeks prior, Doctor Maxis had been keeping correspondence with Doctor Richtofen,

exchanging ideas for potential projects if the two were to collaborate. Though he respected his work, Doctor Maxis did not see Richtofen as the head of any sustainable project. For what he held in intuition he lacked in humility and professionalism. Letters from the doctor read like a child's frantic attempts to impress an indifferent father; For a man in his thirties, Doctor Richtofen lacked the attention to detail and formality in his communications one would expect with his experience. Nevertheless, Doctor Richtofen's proposal for projects utilizing Element 115 fascinated Maxis. Doctor Richtofen had acquired an article published by Maxis on the discovery of the new element and privately mailed him an idea relating to the element's potential properties. The bizarre concepts jotted out on the paper read like those of a madman, yet they intrigued Maxis nonetheless, and upon looking further into their current knowledge of Element 115, Maxis determined that Richtofen's ideas may hold merit. Just a tiny sample of the element has shown to have an excess amount of radiation and massive potential energy output to fuel Richtofen's unique concept.

Doctor Richtofen had done prior research with a process dubbed "teleportation", the transfer of an object or living being from one location to another through the conversion of their atoms into a steady stream, which is then sent via a massive wire to the intended location before reassembly.

Though he initially scoffed at the suggestion, Doctor Maxis continued to read the letter further and examined the readout with Richtofen's proposal for tests and even blueprints for a potential prototype he lovingly christened the Matter Transference Device, or MTD as it was referred to thereafter. As insane as it may be, Doctor Richtofen held much clout and credibility as

a scientist in the field of physics and had clearly put in the effort and research for this passion project. It was for this reason that Doctor Maxis latched on to the idea of a "teleporter". Such a technology could be a massive success for Group 935.

Chapter 2: Abracadavre

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

August 5th, 1939

"Begin Matter Transference Device test...one-"

An impatient voice interrupted, "One-six-two!"

Doctor Maxis sighed, preparing to pull the switch on the large, bell-shaped device at the center of the lab. "Yes, 162. Doctor Richtofen, note the weight of the test subject at the center of the pad, and the approximate amount of element 115 being used up."

"Yes, Doctor. The test subject is a rat weighing approximately 0.2 grams, and the amount of 115 being used for Test 162 will be one microgram. Please, insert your earplugs... again."

Doctor Maxis and Doctor Richtofen each held pairs of red-orange earplugs, worn from a multitude of previous tests from the past month. Placing the plugs into his ears, Doctor Maxis pulled the switch on the rudimentary control panel, powering on the bell-shaped device at the center of the room. A sliding door brandishing Group 935's insignia closed around the large central pad inside. Restrained by a thick rope, the rat scurried around the edge of the circular pad, desperately attempting to find a route of escape inside the spacious device. After a few moments, the coils surrounding the head of the device began to spark and chain electricity, and the interior

of the device created a light growing ever more and more blinding as seconds passed. Even with protective goggles, the two scientists were forced to look away from the blinding whiteness shining through the MTD's view-port. The hanging light at the center of the room began to flicker as power was routed into the device.

After roughly a minute, the test came to an end and the device was opened once more, dispelling smoke throughout the laboratory from inside. Doctor Richtofen eagerly approached the pad, waving the smoke from his vision. Doctor Maxis stayed behind, his mind being held hostage elsewhere. As the clouds dissipated, Richtofen crouched close to the pad. There sat the rat, still tied via the rope to a weight. It appeared dead, its eyes hollow and its body inert. Yet, like the many other living subjects before it, this subject was merely in a catatonic state, one that it would never leave. Its body had changed composition as well, becoming bloated and burned.

Doctor Richtofen kicked over a wooden chair near the pad before returning to the lab table. Doctor Richtofen approached the recording device, leaning in closely and uttering a final statement.

"Test 162 is a failure."

Richtofen sharply pressed the button to end the recording, removing his goggles, and turned his gaze towards Doctor Maxis, whose eyes were still blank and the plugs still in his ears. On noticing Richtofen's disappointed demeanor, Doctor Maxis removed the plugs from his ears.

Edward began to pace around the room, dabbing his forehead with a towel. "Must the room temperature be so high during the tests?"

"Edward, it is more cost effective to work under these conditions during the Summer

heat. I apologize, again.”

"Ah yes, I almost forgot we were doing all of this for the money.” Edward tossed the towel aside, leaning onto the lab table and thinking to himself for a moment. "I'm sorry, Doctor Maxis. I've lost my composure. Both of us have, really.”

"Have I?”

"Will all due respect, Doctor Maxis, I've noticed you are not as attentive to your duties as you once were when you invited me to join Group 935.”

"My duties? Edward, you should know your place. You are a revered scientist, regardless of what organization you fall under, but I invited you into Group 935, and I have authority here.”

"Of course, of course, Doctor. I'm just concerned... with our work that is.”

"Again, I apologize for the lack of resources, Edward. If you were in my position, you would understand the stress I have been forced to endure.”

"Is Hilda the reason you are so forlorn, Doctor?”

Doctor Maxis looked into Richtofen's cold, distant eyes, first vexed by Edward's question, before seeing its profound truth.

"Her loss... has added to my anxiety, yes.”

"Und Samantha?”

"She's almost five years old now. Soon, I will have to tell her what really happened to her mother when she was born. I don't know... if I am strong enough.”

Doctor Maxis looked to Richtofen, whose attention had been turned towards his lunch: Canned bratwurst. Edward pried the can open with his teeth before reaching in and taking a bite

from one of the sausages and mumbling through the chewing, "So, is that all that has you depressed, then?"

"For someone so concerned with my mental health, it seems you could not care less about my family."

"Forgive my ignorance, Doctor, I lack the experience as a family man, myself. What did you bring for lunch, by the way?"

Unfazed, Doctor Maxis continued to stare down Doctor Richtofen as he shoveled the bratwurst into his maw, barely exerting any effort to chew.

"I admire your perseverance, Edward. Even after all of our failures over the years you are not pulled down by the weight of the world."

"The 'world' has no bearing on my decision-making, Doctor Maxis. The only thing that drives me is success, and the road to success is paved with failure, as they say, *ja*? Besides, I know that in the end, I will always succeed. Always. With that knowledge, I can endure just about anything."

Though his work ethic seemed commendable, Edward Richtofen's tendency for outbursts caused Doctor Maxis to question his reliability as a scientist. Despite Richtofen's lack of caring, airing woes must have felt almost therapeutic for Doctor Maxis.

"Family is not the only factor in my distress. I was foolish to once think Group 935 would lead the world of science unopposed. With Japan discovering Element 115, I fear we will be competing in technological progress against their new 'Division 9'. The Americans have found a deposit as well, and I have no earthly idea what they are capable of."

"Doctor, isn't science meant to be collaborative, rather than competitive?"

"While that is true, Edward, the issue of funding arises in my administrative position, and for funding we must set ourselves apart from our rivals."

"A pity. This world we live in, it is so driven by conquest and fear. With any luck, there should hopefully be change in our future. Surely you've heard the stirrings of war approaching?"

"I have heard talk. But I am not concerned. Hitler only desires Poland. I don't see him sending us into another global war, no matter what he says otherwise."

"I must disagree with you for once, Doctor, there will be severe consequences for his actions. Everything that he says and that the National Socialists do is driven by fear, and fear motivates people to do the unthinkable."

"I suppose we will see in the coming months."

"Yes, I suppose we will."

Edward finished his meal before tossing the empty can into the trash bin, and returned to the table alongside Maxis.

"Edward, shall we begin testing again?"

"*Ja*, but I have a few alterations to our methods I would like to suggest."

"What kind of alterations?"

"I believe we must begin testing on human-"

"That is out of the question, Richtofen, and you should know better."

"Of course it is, Doctor, you didn't let me finish. We should begin human testing, starting with cadavers, obviously. If the MTD is meant to revolutionize human transportation, then we

should be accounting for a human-sized occupant, ja?"

"I suppose you are correct, Edward."

"Und since you are so frugal-minded, Doctor Maxis, we may still use *approximately* the same amount of the element und power in teleporting the subject."

"Excellent, then fetch a cadaver from storage."

"Yes, Doctor."

As Edward left the room, Maxis stared directly into a coil atop the MTD captivated by the electricity is passed between the other coils around the bell-shaped device. Time seemed to slow as he gazed into the coil; His thoughts shifted to the thought of his daughter in the care of an *Au Pair* while her father toiled away in the lab, test after test after test...

Irritated, Richtofen exited the room out into the hallways of the laboratories building, passing several others on his journey to the storage area. In one such room was his old friend Doctor Schuster, along with another scientist. They were mixing a fluorescent blue vial of liquefied Element 115 with various other chemicals in the lab. Though Maxis had bestowed upon Edward the duty of a lowly errand-boy, the job gave Richtofen a chance to see Group 935's current projects: Something his overseers in the Order would deem valuable.

Inside the room the other scientist was looking over a data sheet plastered on the nearby wall, running his finger along the calculations as he spoke to Doctor Schuster. Schuster and Richtofen had a great personal relationship, though Schuster knew not of Richtofen's involvement with the Illuminati. Though both Schuster and Richtofen desired to make the world

better through science, the methods of the Order would frighten the timid Doctor Schuster, Edward felt, and for that reason he kept it a secret.

Within the room Schuster was measuring out a brownish liquid within a beaker, and by the label it must have been amphetamine. Nearby were several other measured compounds as well as the previously observed Element 115. Doctor Richtofen would have to inquire to Schuster what exactly their purpose was. Edward knew Schuster was an expert in Chemistry, and had been dying to utilize Element 115 in his favorite branch of science. Edward could tell Schuster was visibly excited as he instructed his assistant in his methodology. Edward was looking forward to regaling his experiences with Doctor Maxis at lunch. Then, Richtofen remembered his purpose being there and he hurried to the freezer to avoid suspicions from Doctor Maxis who was surely waiting in the test area.

Richtofen retrieved a male cadaver from the shelves, before placing it onto a cart and wheeling it through the halls towards the testing area. Upon entering the room with Maxis, Doctor Richtofen noticed he had not moved from his position at the table, his gaze again drawn away towards the wall. The testing area had not been cleaned and the MTD had not been re-loaded with a fragment of Element 115. Doctor Maxis had done nothing of worth while Richtofen was away.

Edward approached the MTD, placing the chemically distorted rodent into a bag with gloved hands before loading the device with a microgram of Element 115 and placing the dead human subject onto the MTD's pad. He returned to the table, donning his goggles and waiting for a moment before looking to Maxis, still staring at the wall with the recorder deactivated below

him.

Frustrated, Doctor Richtofen reached across the table, activating the recording device and reverting Doctor Maxis' attention back to the test at hand.

"Begin Matter Transference Device test 1-6-3. The subject is a human cadaver of approximately 72.8 kilograms, and a micro-gram of Element 115 has been placed into the device. Doctor Maxis, please insert your earplugs."

Maxis turned to face Richtofen, awakened from his comatose state, then looked back to the cadaver, now aware of his situation.

"Yes... we will begin the test, now."

Both men inserted their ear plugs, and Doctor Maxis pulled the lever to activate the MTD once again. The door of the device sealed and it lit up, filling the room with a blinding light and sending waves of tingling electricity into the air. Strangely, the light lasted longer than before, and the power surge was so strong the lights went completely out for a few moments before returning to normal. Through the deafening sound of the device, Maxis called out to Richtofen.

"You said there would not be an influx in power usage, Edward!"

"I believe my word choice was, '*approximately*', Doctor!"

Finally the noise and the light faded as quickly as they had appeared, and the sliding door on the device re-opened, releasing smoke into the room.

Within the smoke was the silhouette of the cadaver just as Edward had left it. Defeated, Richtofen tossed his goggles aside and came closer to the body.

"Und so we've failed once again..."

However, the body did something very peculiar for a corpse: Its fingers began to twitch. Despite its preservation by the scientists, its skin was horribly burned and lacerated by the experiment, yet it seemed to be... alive. It pulled itself up on two legs, wobbling as it did so. For a moment its blank, rotten eyes were black, but soon lit up with a bright, orange glow. As it seemed to come into being, the monster vomited a pint of blood onto the pad before looking to the scientists.

Richtofen stood still, frightened by the sight of the creature. "*Mein gott.*"

"Edward... it's... alive."

"Impossible."

The creature's vocal folds still functioned as it began to lightly groan. Then, it put its right leg forward, and next its left. It began a small shambling towards Edward, barely able to stand on its stiff muscles.

As it came too close, Richtofen cried out, "Stop!"

And so the beast stopped. The mindless cadaver seemed almost obedient to Richtofen's command, as if it had heard such a command before.

Doctor Maxis walked forward to Richtofen's side. "Look at me."

The dead man cocked its head towards Maxis, letting its mouth gape and drool ooze out from the corner of its dried lips.

"We've... brought a dead man back to life."

Richtofen was still in shock from the ordeal. While a discovery of incredible proportions,

what they had created was a monster.

Dr. Maxis attempted to give the walking husk another task.

"Walk... forward."

The zombie paced towards Doctor Maxis slowly to start, but began to pick up its pace and drool onto the floor more excessively. One arm dangled at its side, while the other was lifted and held out in the direction of the scientists.

"Now stop!"

The beast continued to walk forward, its bright, other-worldly eyes locked with those of Maxis, picking its pace up even further and groaning louder. It extended its other limp arm outwards towards Doctor Maxis, prepared to grab him with both of its grimy hands.

Doctor Richtofen pulled Maxis aside by the coat collar, away from the cadaver. "Maxis!"

"Why won't you stop?! Stop! Halt!"

The beast did not waver as it began to lumber towards Maxis directly, clamping its jaws together repeatedly as lurched forward.

Doctor Richtofen acted swiftly, looking to the mounted emergency fire axe on the wall and taking it in his hands. The beast leapt through the air towards the distressed Doctor Maxis cowering in the corner of the room. Richtofen cut it down with an axe swing to the abdomen.

The creature fell to the ground, turning its attention towards Richtofen as it waved its arms at him and screamed in anger. Richtofen lifted the axe into the air again, bringing it down on the abdomen and severing the top half of its body. Blood and intestines spilled out onto the floor between the two halves, yet the upper half continued to hunger. It crawled with its weak

arms towards Richtofen, howling and groaning like before.

Again, Richtofen brought the axe down, this time severing the head from its putrid neck. The body spurted blood at the jugular and the arms trembled before finally laying to rest, while the head continued to gnaw at the air until the light drained from its eyes.

For a moment, there was only silence as Maxis recollected himself and Richtofen questioned his very sanity. The two met eyes as Richtofen dropped the bloody axe and headed for the door.

"I... will inform the cleaning crew."

Fearful, Doctor Maxis approached the corpse carefully on his hands and knees, afraid one of the three sections may return to life at any passing moment. Doctor Maxis questioned how a creature of such horrid design could have come into being. For a moment in the previous encounter, Maxis felt hope. The body responded to his requests... as if it were alive again. He was now God; He had the power to bring the dead back to life. The possibilities flowed through Maxis' mind; Thoughts of those that could be saved from death: World leaders, soldiers, pets, loved ones... Hilda.

Chapter 3: Revelations

Cafeteria, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Edward Richtofen

November 23rd, 1939

Leberwurst again; They called it a 'specialty', but Edward knew it was the only edible dish these chefs-for-hire could create. Cutting budgets is nothing new in the field of science, but times are desperate for the organization. As long as Edward could continue his science, his passion, he could suffer this insufferable meal.

Edward plucked a handful of walnuts from a woven basket at the end of the cafeteria line before exiting into the larger seating area with his colleagues. Richtofen could see Doctor Porter eating alone at one table, with Doctor Maxis nowhere in sight. As of late, Doctor Maxis had been skipping lunch to seclude himself in his office for hours on end. Edward could not understand Doctor Maxis' melancholic demeanor since Hilda's death. Following the contentious Test 163, Maxis deferred his place in matter transference research to Doctor Schuster. Edward did not mind this change, however; Toiling away in the labs by Schuster's side reminded Richtofen of simpler days at Heidelberg, sneaking into the campus laboratories after-hours and performing unorthodox dissections. Schuster never quite approved of their actions, yet he always followed Edward through, even in the face of suspension.

From across the cafeteria, Richtofen met eyes with Schuster, who was waving his hands and appearing apprehensive. When the scientist across the table from Schuster turned to face Richtofen, he came to understand why.

Doctor Groph grinned as Richtofen approached: He had another victim to subject to his opinions on underwater cities and ancient astronauts.

"Doctor Richtofen! Come sit with us, I was just discussing my Vrill research with Doctor Schuster."

Doctor Schuster looked to his brother in science, "I would not say it was a discussion."

"You were free to chime in anytime, Doctor."

Dr. Schuster mumbled and he pressed his fork into his leberwurst, "If I could get a word in--"

"Anyhow, so nice of you to join us Edward. Schuster and I thought you would not be coming at all."

Edward took a seat across from Schuster, also ensuring there was nearly a foot in distance between himself and Groph on the bench. "I was adding a few minor touches to the *Wunderwaffe* prototype before I begin tests tomorrow morning."

"Still working on *Die Glocke*? I thought you began work in September, and you have not even tested the device yet? When do you suppose the second iteration will be complete then, 1950?"

Cross with Groph's rude line of questioning, Schuster interjected, "Doctor Richtofen does not have the luxury of time that you have Doctor Groph. Between our work on the MTD and

Maxis' budget cuts there is little time nor resources for pet projects without personal investment.

How about your research on Vrill, Doctor Groph? What has that produced?"

"Vrill has not been utilized by any human before. Only the ancient Vrill-Ya knew of its true healing properties. Recreating its power could elevate the human race to a higher plane! Think of the power we would hold if we wielded the power of the ancients! Vrill is infinitely more complex than the weapon Doctor Richtofen is creating."

Doctor Richtofen placed his fork back onto the plate, turning to Groph and looking intensely into his eyes. "The *Die Glocke* project is not simply for weapons like the Wunderwaffe. It is partly a defense infrastructure, or it will be when it is perfected. After the incident with MTD test 163 und the other... creatures created as a by-product of 115 testing, I have taken it upon myself to design a defense system should these beings ever outnumber us; That is its purpose. I do not understand Maxis' fascination with controlling these monsters; What purpose do they serve? They are only a liability."

The table sat silent for but a few moments, Groph's expression turning from vexation to a smug grin. "I know exactly what he intends."

Schuster did not look from his tray, taking a bite of the cold *fleisch*. "I am sure this will be enlightening."

Ignoring the snide remarks, Groph continued, "Doctor Maxis has a deal in the works which could increase Group 935's budget exponentially, and he has been keeping it from us for longer than we may ever know. Doctor Maxis seeks for Group 935 to collaborate with the Nazi Party. The writing has been on the wall, you two."

Schuster's face became a disgusted grimace. Richtofen put his fork down to try and comprehend what he had just been told.

"Do you know how ridiculous you sound at times, Doctor Groph? We have some of the greatest scientists in the world at our disposal, and have you forgotten our maxim? *'To improve the human condition.'* Not to assist some political idealists and their war-mongering *Führer*. In my time working with Doctor Maxis these past years, he has never seemed to be a man to stoop so low. There is no way Group 935 will ever associate with the Nazi Party. End of discussion."

"I sound ridiculous? Believe it or not, Doctor Richtofen, I have evidence. Do either of you have any idea where Doctor Maxis is right now?"

Doctor Groph looked to Schuster and Richtofen, who both had nothing to say. He continued, "Neither does Doctor Porter, one of his closest friends; But, I know where he is. He is en route to Berlin to discuss the deal as we speak."

Doctor Schuster questioned Doctor Groph, "And how did you come to that conclusion?"

"I found Doctor Maxis in his office before he left Der Riese. I wanted to discuss today's findings as I do every day before lunch, but he seemed to be in a hurry as I let myself in. He was reading a peculiar letter before he sent me away. After he departed, I entered his office and-"

Schuster cut him off, "You raided his office and looked through his belongings. Is that what I am hearing?"

Richtofen added, "Und how did you enter his office? Maxis keeps all administrative offices and laboratories behind an electronic lock, does he not?"

"All of the pass-codes are the same, his daughter's birthday. 0-5-1-1-3-4. It was simple

guess-work.”

Schuster sat shocked at Groph's actions, while Richtofen appeared interested, his hand gripping his chin. "Hm... clever. Continue, Doctor Groph.”

"On his desk I found the opened letter and accompanying envelope. It bears a symbol you two may recognize.”

Doctor Groph removed the controversial envelope and letter from his coat pocket, placing it on the table. The envelope was addressed to Doctor Ludvig Maxis, and came directly from the Reichstag building. Doctor Schuster unfolded the letter, marked at the top with a symbol of an eagle carrying a swastika; *The Parteiadler*.

Shocked, Schuster muttered, "This is...impossible. Edward, this is an official seal.”

Edward examined the envelope, reading the German text through.

Dr. Ludvig Maxis,

Reichstag High Command has observed Group 935's scientific achievements at Der Riese since its inception. There is no doubt that Group 935's success is primarily due to your outstanding leadership and personal investment. Your actions have caught the attention of the Führer and members of the Party, and we humbly present an opportunity for your organization.

We will fund all of Group 935's future endeavors to ensure it stands as the crown jewel of scientific advancement in Germany, under the condition that Group 935 defers authority over projects to the National Socialist German Workers' Party during this time of world unrest. When military research is no longer required, Group 935 may return to independent research under the supervision and funding of the Party. We hold and will soon acquire many more valuable pieces

of land which Group 935 may utilize to create research stations across the world. In addition, our alignment with the Empire of Japan will allow unprecedented opportunity for expansion and collaboration with Division 9.

The Party has a particular vested interest in weapons for our military. Your use of Element 115 could prove a valuable asset to Germany's goals. We have also examined the results of your testing with Element 115's ability of reanimation. If these reanimated beings can be directed, they could prove to be a great asset to our army in some capacity.

On the 23rd of November, a meeting will be held at the Kroll Opera House in Berlin to discuss Germany's goals and the protection of our people. We would be honored if you would join the meeting, as a revered scientist and member of the Aryan German community. When you arrive, General Lehmkuhl will inform you of what Group 935 can do to assist Germany's efforts.

Signed,

Martin Bormann, Secretary to the Deputy Führer

The letter was indeed official. This collaboration could change everything the entire organization stood for, and worse yet it may interfere with the motives of the Illuminati. Edward could not have predicted this sudden change in Group 935's leadership; With the eyes of the *Partei* scrutinizing Richtofen's every move, he may never be able to satisfy the Order and their desire for Group 935's research. A world power in possession of this research may slow the Illuminati's efforts in creating a new, peaceful world order of their own design. Richtofen must inform the others as soon as possible.

Groph spoke, smug with righteousness, "You see, I was correct in my suspicions. You

will come to find that I am right about a great many things. Perhaps you see now Maxis is not the great leader Group 935 deserves.”

Schuster began to panic, "We will lose so many scientists from around the world if this deal goes through. The *Partei* is deceptive; They only seek power, and they will twist our research for their own goals. Can you believe Maxis would do such a thing, Edward?"

"I... cannot. Our research should not be controlled by any government. It appears Doctor Maxis has become desperate; This changes everything. Doctor Schuster? We must perfect our research on the Matter Transference Device as soon as possible, before Maxis diverts what little funding we have left into weapons for the *Wehrmacht*.”

"Agreed, Doctor Richtofen, we should finish our lunch in the lab and begin testing immediately.”

Doctor Richtofen and Doctor Schuster rose from their seats and headed towards the labs, leaving Doctor Groph to finish his meal alone.

As the two exited into the courtyard towards the laboratories, Richtofen turned to Schuster, asking, "Doctor Schuster, do you remember where your research on... oh, what were they called... Perky-Per-”

"Perk-a-Colas?"

"Yes, eh-heh, those. Do you remember where you kept that research last?"

"I believe we stored them in one of the cabinets in laboratory A6 on the second floor. Why do you ask?"

"We should know where your hard work was last seen in the event Maxis decides to

pawn it off to the *Partei*, should we not?"

"Surely Maxis would not do such a thing?"

"These are uncertain times, my friend. I'm afraid Maxis has changed over the past year. We should be expecting the unexpected. About those Perk-a-what's-its, did that young scientist you were working with come up with the ridiculous name?"

"Oh, well, actually it was me. I believe the concoctions could be mass-produced for the general public to drink some day, once the 115's adverse side effects are stifled of course."

"Hm, how quaint. Anyhow, I must send a quick telegram out before we begin work on the MTD. Set up the test chamber and work station, would you kindly?"

"Yes, Doctor. Who is the telegram for?"

"Just a little... book club I'm in. I have to let them know I won't be attending the meeting this week. They must know."

Chapter 4: Success

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Edward Richtofen

December 4th, 1939

"You know what to do, Doctor Schuster!"

"Initiate Test 149. Subject is a swine weighing approximately forty-four kilograms. We have one microgram of element 115, which, as always, will be used up entirely during the test."

"Right, right, commence the test, Doctor Schuster."

"Yes, Doctor. Please insert your earplugs"

"Earplugs, yes. Begin the test."

Lights around the spacious laboratory began to flicker as the MTD prototype pulled in power. The sliding door of the device shut, enclosing the miniature pig within the chamber. It began to panic, running the circumference of the MTD's interior in a vain attempt to escape. The bulbs around the head of the bell-shaped device lit up and the view inside the device became a pure, blinding white. After a few moments, a similar blinding light erupted from the uncovered receiving pad just three feet away. As both ends of the device came to rest, and smoke dispelled from the interior of the teleporter chamber, Doctor Richtofen noted the subject did indeed teleport, or at least a portion of it did.

What remained of the pig inside the MTD's chamber was a small lump of flesh lying on the blood-soaked floor, and an assortment of organs and flesh coating the walls and ceiling. The end of the pig which was successfully teleported was not in significantly better condition; The flesh and bones which passed through the device were charred and partially turned to ash.

Doctor Schuster hung his head and reached for the mop and a hose, anticipating Richtofen's reaction. Richtofen stood idle, running his hands through his hair and worn down by his failures. For days the two of them had focused their efforts entirely on the MTD with no fruit to bear, and to add, the day was almost over. Every day they toil away in the lab without progress is another day closer to Doctor Maxis potentially announcing Group 935's alignment with the Nazi Party, and another day closer to their funds being diverted to other projects. The Order demands that Richtofen perfect teleportation and deliver its power to them rather than the Nazi Party. The project has such incredible potential to change the world in the right hands.

Richtofen turned to Schuster, who was pulling away the chunks of flesh hanging from the hanging bulb at the center of the MTD. For the sake of time, Edward remained composed, slipping on disposable gloves and bagging the singed mess on the receiving pad. Edward could not help but smile to himself as the clumps of ash slipped between his fingers and he was forced to sweep them into the bag.

"Doctor Schuster, does this remind you of our little... incident in the school's laboratory."

"Indeed, it does. If I remember correctly, we burned the Biology department's entire supply of animal bodies."

"Well, that's not entirely true. I don't believe the fire spread to the larger mammals. By

then the entire school was there to find the two guilty parties responsible.”

"I may also be remembering this incorrectly, but, I believe you were the one with the idea to sneak in and make the compound you were devising.”

"It was meant to be an explosive gel. All in good fun, of course. Things got **really** out of hand, however.”

"Quite the understatement. We were nearly killed, Edward. But, I admit, the experience was fun... up until the clean up.”

"Und paying for the damages.”

"Not to mention the servitude to the University for a year after.”

Edward chuckled, tossing the bag into a large trash bin along with his gloves before raising his goggles up to his forehead to look at Schuster.

"Do you remember what they said to us? After the flames were put out? They said they should expel us, and that we were no scientists. They said that if not for your father's influence in the administration, we would have been imprisoned.”

"I remember, Edward.”

"They said we were a disgrace to science.”

"What is it you are getting at, Doctor?”

"The key point in this story is that none of them believed in our ability to succeed. We proved them wrong when we graduated, ja?”

"We have, and on numerous occasions in the past we have made great strides in science.”

"But we have done nothing to cement our legacy, Doctor Schuster, until now. The MTD

is our chance to prove them all wrong; To rub it in their fat, pompous faces, finally. The world will remember our names in one hundred years, Doctor Schuster, not theirs.”

Doctor Schuster seemed to take to the idea for a moment with positivity, before returning to his task.

"Indeed, Edward. Should we look over the previous test?"

"Yes, of course. We will succeed, no matter the time or the cost.”

Aside the MTD's control panel was an ink printer, which ejected a detailed analysis of the subject's weight before and after teleportation, the amount of power used during the test, the amount of Element 115 used up, as well as other minor statistics such as temperature and humidity. Doctor Schuster laid the document out on the table before Richtofen and leaned in closely.

"Like the last dozen or so tests, the subject has been split into two sections. There does not seem to be a correlation for what parts of the body will and will not go through; It is seemingly random. As with every test, the subject's chemical composition is changed, presumably by Element 115's radiation, especially the sections which do successfully teleport. Both living and non-living subjects suffer the same fate, as well as all shapes and sizes. We have avoided tests with living things now dead and preserved due to the potential side effect of 115 reanimating dead cells. Perhaps we could try again with something dead, Doctor Richtofen? Our stock of living subjects is finite after all.”

"*Nein*, that is Maxis' department, reanimating the dead. You were not there, Doctor Schuster, when one of those things came back to life. Doctor Maxis should be more concerned

with halting the creation of those beasts rather than controlling them. Perhaps I will propose the *Wunderwaffe* prototype to Maxis. Anyway, as it stands, Doctor Schuster, we must continue using living, breathing test subjects or inanimate objects.”

The two pondered for a moment, looking over the printed statistics carefully. Doctor Schuster looked to his tray from the cafeteria, the meal not much colder than it was six hours ago. Peckish, he took a walnut, cracking it open and eating the insides.

"Have we met the MTD's maximum power capacity, Doctor Richtofen?"

"With maximum power, we have the potential to blackout Der Riese in its entirety. Doctor Maxis cannot know what we are doing here just yet. We are meant to be working on his projects.”

"If not maximum, can we raise the device's power capacity?"

Richtofen stroked his chin for a moment, "It is possible. We should reduce the subject's mass as well to reduce strain on the capacitors. We will try it, Doctor, though we must be cautious not to drain too much power and alert everyone of our experiment. Fetch the smallest living subject we have in inventory.”

"Yes, doctor.”

Doctor Richtofen prepared the testing area, allowing the MTD to cool down and reset to the ready position. He set up a recording device in the center of the room with microphones for he and Schuster to speak into. As he awaited Schuster's arrival, he cracked open another walnut from Schuster's lunch tray, snacking on the insides.

After a minute passed, Doctor Schuster returned with a small cage and inside was a rat

with dark brown fur. Schuster had placed a pill within the rat's small helping of food and fed the rat. Mere moments after feeding, the rat became docile and could hardly move on its own. Being sure the rat would not retaliate, Schuster opened the cage, carefully lifting the rodent and placing it within the test chamber before joining Richtofen at the table, looking at the recorder then to Richtofen.

"We are recording the tests? What if Maxis finds these recordings?"

"Not to worry, Doctor Schuster, I feel we are close to a breakthrough. We must record this historical moment, whenever it does come. It will be a fine addition to my log of achievements."

"I understand. Are we ready to begin?"

"Absolutely. Let us begin Test 150."

Doctor Richtofen pressed down on the button, initiating the recording, and he began his log entry.

"Log entry 38. Date: December 4, 1939. The matter transference prototype is prepared for test run number 150. We have adjusted the power levels und decreased the mass of the test subject to prove teleportation is indeed possible. Doctor Schuster, would you kindly give an overview?"

"Yes, Doctor Richtofen. We have the new test subject, a rodent, weighing approximately 0.21 kilograms. The target platform is now approximately one meter away without any-"

"Ooh, Doctor Schuster. Could you use feet rather than meters? As you know, I prefer feet in my log entries und want to be consistent."

"Uh, yes, Doctor. The platform is... three feet away without any obstructions. We have one microgram of Element 115 which should be entirely used up during the test."

"*Wunderbar*. Doctor Schuster, commence test number 150."

"Yes, Doctor. Please insert your earplugs."

As the rat on the platform began to open its weak eyes, the two doctors had inserted their ear protection and commenced the test, shutting the sliding door to the test chamber and powering up the device. Doctor Schuster increased the power levels significantly, causing the lights hanging from the ceiling to flicker while the machine whirred and buzzed. Strangely, the blinding light did not last nearly as long; The device's door came open automatically, dispelling the smoke and revealing a third of the rat's body still lying on the floor. Even more out of the ordinary, it was completely intact, apart from the two-thirds which had disappeared. Dumbfounded, Doctor Richtofen approached the receiving pad, where the front two-thirds of the rat lay.

Doctor Richtofen raised his arms into the air in celebration before bringing them back down and returning to the table to end the recording.

"Doctor Schuster, the rat was perfectly intact! Well, almost. Without enough power, the subjects must have become exposed to the concentrated Element 115 for too long. If we can reduce the subject's mass even further, and use the same power levels, the subject should go through in its entirety, unharmed. Clear the test area, I will make the calculations."

"Yes, Doctor."

Doctor Richtofen initiated the cool-down for the MTD prototype before taking to paper

with his pencil and calculating the approximate weight of a potential test subject to prove teleportation's potential. Accounting for the portion of the rat that teleported, the power levels of the previous test, and the possibility for human error in measurement, Doctor Richtofen formed a threshold which the potential test subject should weigh.

Doctor Schuster returned, looking over Richtofen's shoulder as he wrote. "Doctor, I don't believe we have a living subject that weighs so little. That rat was the smallest we have. Now I do believe we have a pygmy frog on ice-"

"Doctor Schuster, bring me the scale."

"Yes, Doctor."

Doctor Schuster hurried to the adjacent table, lifting the scale and placing it before Richtofen. "What is your idea, Edward?"

Richtofen reached for the lunch tray picking out a couple of walnuts and examining them closely, finding one in particular he wished to represent his grand achievement. He placed the walnut on the scale, allowing it to weigh in for a moment. The walnut weighed ten grams, fitting into the weight threshold with plenty of room for error.

"An inanimate walnut will do just fine, Doctor Schuster, as a proof of concept. Shall we begin?"

"Yes, doctor."

"I will erase the previous log entry und we will do it again. I am sure this test will succeed."

Doctor Richtofen cleared the previous recording, preparing for a new one as Doctor

Schuster placed the walnut in the center of the pad. He searched the stash of equipment and recovered a metal tin, then placed it onto the receiving pad where the walnut will appear should the test succeed. While he wanted the test to be a success, Schuster felt exhausted by the recurring tests, just hoping they would be finished soon for his own sanity.

Doctor Richtofen adjusted the microphone and looked to his brother in science, "Are you ready to triumph, Doctor Schuster?"

"I am ready, Doctor. I am confident in your calculations."

"Excellent."

Doctor Richtofen initiated the recording. "Log entry 38. Date: December 4, 1939. The matter transference prototype is prepared for test run number 151. We have now reduced our test subject's mass to prove that this is possible. Doctor Schuster, please give an overview."

"Yes, Doctor Richtofen. We have the new test subject, a walnut, weighing in at 10 grams. The target platform is now at three feet with no obstructions. We have one microgram of the element which, according to our calculations, will be entirely used up during tests."

"Excellent, Dr. Schuster. Commence test number 151."

"Yes, Doctor. Please, insert your earplugs."

Doctor Schuster initiated the test, shutting the sliding door around the walnut and powering up the machine. It buzzed and whirred, filling the interior chamber with smoke. Doctor Richtofen wrung his hands together, his excitement palpable. After a few moments, the buzzing and clanging came to a stop, and next came a light *clink* as the walnut, the exact same walnut, dropped into the metal tray placed on the receiving pad. The walnut was unaltered, appearing

just as it had before the experiment.

Doctor Richtofen marveled at the sight, "Good God, we've done it!"

Doctor Schuster appeared just as stunned. "We have powered up the prototype, and it moved a walnut directly from the prototype device into the receiving device. It moved instantly. It... it-"

"Teleported... get me Doctor Maxis immediately!"

Doctor Richtofen shut off the recording, his chest flurried from the achievement, as Doctor Schuster hurried out of the room. Richtofen approached the receiving pad, lifting the walnut from the metal tray and examining it closer. To Richtofen, the walnut symbolized determination, and his own drive for success. Nothing could have broken Richtofen's resolve to achieve.

Richtofen placed the walnut with his belongings, planning to treasure it forever, before picking another walnut and setting up the test area for Maxis upon his arrival. With his financial support, the MTD could be perfected and would be of great use to the Order.

The door to the laboratory came flying open, the middle-aged Doctor Schuster panting from a lack of breath.

"Doctor Maxis... he's not here!"

"What? Where could he be at a time like this?"

"He's spending the day with his daughter."

Chapter 5: Failure

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

December 5th, 1939

"At the current rate, I will not be seeing my daughter again for another month to come. Get the subject into position, and **begin the test!**"

The two lab assistants assigned to aid Doctor Maxis hurriedly placed the corpse onto the elevated platform bed of the test area. After an injection of pure Element 115 into the unused veins of the cadaver, the lab assistants exited the test area. What was once a pile of bones and organs began to rise up, and shifted its gaze towards the pane of glass separating the scientists from the creature.

"Stand up."

The beast did not flinch at Maxis' simple command.

"STAND UP!"

The decaying corpse of the elderly man rose up from the table and let forth a groan as it came to its legs in the operating room.

"Good. Look at me."

For a moment it did not take notice of Doctor Maxis nor his command. In retort, Doctor

Maxis snapped his fingers twice, calling out again, "Over here!"

It lifted its dangling head up to face the Doctor. The corpse's blank, soulless gaze turned to a more focused sneer.

"Good. Now walk forward."

It began to dribble at the mouth and shuffle towards him across the concrete floor, dragging its feet as it did so.

"Excellent. Further. Keep coming."

The awoken body lost its balance and fell to the ground, shattering its jaw and staining the floor with its blood. It groaned louder as it became more enraged, attempting to return to its feet.

"It's all right. Stay there."

Now on its legs again it began a faster pace towards the pane of glass protecting Dr. Maxis from the interior of the operating room.

"Calm down! I order you..."

The zombie now began to swing violently as it approached the glass. Its mouth was now fully agape ready to take on the Doctor.

"Kill it!"

Before it could reach the glass, a lab assistant unloaded two handgun rounds into the creature's head before settling his fearful, shaken hands back to his side. The bloated corpse yelped before sliding to the ground and draining of all life.

"Bring me another."

Two assistants, one of which being the young man who shot the walking corpse moments before, left the spacious laboratory in search of another subject. Through their many tests over the past few weeks, Group 935's supply of cadavers had been cut short and they had been forced to resort to locally donated corpses to perform the tests Doctor Maxis demanded.

Deeply troubled and perplexed at the purpose of these tests, Doctor Porter inquired, "Doctor, what are you hoping these creatures will do once they are under your command? If I am being honest with you, these tests on the dead are depraved, sinful even."

"Nonsense, Doctor Porter. Think of what can be accomplished if we can return these beings back to the way they were before death."

"With all due respect, Doctor, is it worth it?"

Maxis stopped his reading of previous test overviews and statistics, thinking for a moment of the question.

"What are you proposing, Doctor Porter?"

"Life is finite for a reason Doctor. These things we are creating today... they are not the people they once were. They are like monsters. They are past their time."

Doctor Maxis continued his train of thought, ruminating on the loss in his own life. He almost agreed with Doctor Porter; Life is precious and beautiful, but everything that is beautiful must end.

"Perhaps you are correct, Doctor Porter. But there is more I hope to accomplish with these tests."

"Yes?"

"I will share this with you Doctor Porter, before anyone else, because I can trust you. I have been given an opportunity to align Group 935 with the Nazi Party in exchange for funding. When Richtofen and I created the first 'zombie' using Element 115... I will admit I was intrigued by the possibility of eternal life, spiting nature. But as I performed more tests and published more findings, I have caught the attention of the Party. I can utilize the dead as an army for Germany's war effort."

Doctor Porter pondered the horrific thought for a moment, being interrupted as the metal door opened on its hinges and the two lab assistants had returned holding a new test subject. This one was younger than any of the previous, seemingly a young boy, killed in some brutal accident that left him with but one arm still attached to his battered and scarred body.

Doctor Maxis called the assistants sternly, "Take it to the operating room and begin the injection!"

In unison, the two young men replied, "Yes, Doctor." They entered the sealed operating room, placing the corpse onto the operating table on its back.

Maxis continued his previous conversation with Porter, "Think of the potential, Doctor Porter. An army that does not grow tired!"

One of the men shone a hanging light into the body's face as the other searched for a vein, injecting it with liquefied Element 115.

"An army that does not need weapons!"

The body's limbs began to tense up as the lab assistants threw out their gloves and exited the test room before closing it once more.

"An army that feels no remorse!"

The boy's eyes opened for likely the first time in weeks. It did not breathe and its heart beat variably, without a pattern. At first the lights in its eyes frightened it but the sight of the many scientists in the lab drew its attention.

"Stand up. Please."

The body raised itself up with its one arm, but lost its balance, falling shoulder first onto the floor. A fall to the concrete test chamber which would have surely injured the average human did nothing to impair the thing; It was no human. It began pulling itself towards the thick bullet-proof window with its singular arm.

"Stop!"

As Doctor Maxis said it, the beast was stunned. It did not move for a few moments. It began to drool an oozy mix of saliva and blood from its mouth onto the concrete floor, releasing a putrid odor that could be sensed through the locked metal door. Doctor Porter began to vomit into the nearby bin, while the two assistants averted their eyes in disgust. Doctor Maxis had an expression of success; His bushy eyebrow raised, intrigued by the sudden cooperation of the monster.

"Good! Yes! Now... walk- er... crawl towards me, slowly."

He snapped his fingers and the crawler continued to try and grip the flat ground, dragging its mutilated, naked body across the concrete towards the glass. It reached the wall and raised itself up on a shaky leg, then onto the other, finally standing again for the first time. Now leaning on the glass, it peered inside the laboratory at those that had awoken it from eternal rest, and it

began to breathe rapidly leaving condensation on the window. Ravenous and angered, it started to slam on the glass with its arm.

"I ORDER you to-"

It began to scream progressively louder as the glass cracked along the entire pane. Finally the beast's enormous strength caused the glass to shatter onto the floor and it vaulted into the room with Doctor Maxis.

"KILL IT! KILL THE DAMN THING, NOW!"

Panicked and untrained, the two lab assistants raised their civilian-grade handguns, firing wildly in the direction of the beast. Twelve shots were fired in total, with seven entering the walking husk and disfiguring it further. The entire floor was blood-soaked and concerned nearby members of Group 935 were racing towards the lab to investigate the loud screams and gunshots.

"It's alright... It's alright everyone. Someone get the cleaning crew, right now! Men, we are relocating to a new lab for further tests while this pane of glass is being repaired."

The two assistants looked to each other with shock and fear, before doing as Maxis instructed, "Yes, Doctor."

The body was crumpled and unrecognizable from the holes born into its head and chest. The young boy's face was rendered essentially non-existent. Doctor Porter felt sick, looking for any excuse to delay any further tests.

"Doctor... perhaps we should return to testing tomorrow."

Doctor Maxis shooed the curious scientists back into the hallway outside, assuring no one else was listening in to what he had to say.

"Porter, I'm afraid it is of utmost importance to the organization that we continue our research with the undead."

"Yes, but, Doctor..."

"We are in need of funding if we are to improve the human condition together. It is unfortunate our work is not free, but it is the reality of things."

"What I mean, Doctor, is there may be other business that needs attending to. Doctor Richtofen and Doctor Schuster have been trying to contact you since yesterday. They say it is a remarkable breakthrough."

"They can wait, Porter."

"They've been working on this project for you, Doctor Maxis. They would not share the details with me. I don't think they will be working on the projects you've demanded until you concede."

Maxis frowned, looking to the gaping window pane and the bloody mess laid out on the floor reeking of rot. The blood had soaked his boots and splattered on his lab coat without him even noticing. Doctor Porter adjusted his glasses before joining Maxis' side and gripping his shoulder.

"You need a break from all this death, Ludvig. Go see what Richtofen is up to. I will have the lab set up when you are ready to return."

From the doorway to the lab came three men wearing protective masks and air-tight suits followed by the two lab assistants. The suited men gathered around the lump of flesh and began cleaning the remains off of the floor. Doctor Maxis called the assistants, "Follow Doctor Porter's

words closely. He will be instructing you on preparing for the next set of tests.”

In unison, "Yes, Doctor.”

Maxis leaned in to Doctor Porter, saying, "Thank you.”

"It's a matter of efficiency, Doctor. Oh, I forgot to ask, how was your outing yesterday?”

"It was wonderful spending time with Samantha. I had not seen her since her birthday just last month. She's so full of words now, always asking for things the other children have. I thought a teddy bear would be enough but now she wants a dog.... Hm, it's a wonder how she's grown so curious, like her mother, I suppose. She's begun asking about her, and where she is. I will have to tell her the truth soon.”

"I do not envy your situation, Doctor.”

"Yes, well... she is worth all of it.”

Chapter 6: House Divided

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

December 5th, 1939

Doctor Maxis wondered if the excursion to find Richtofen was even worth the trouble, though he seemed to enjoy the walk away from the cramped laboratory. For a brief time, the edging sense of dread for Group 935's future had ceased, leaving Doctor Maxis almost cathartic as he wandered through the crowded halls of Der Riese's many buildings. Scientists once under Maxis' own tutelage shuffled about, nodding their heads in respect to the Doctor in hopes of a returned acknowledgment. Maxis smiled, nodding his head back to his peers; With such respectable young scientists under his wing, Maxis wondered just what there was to worry about.

The dread permeated his mind once more as he arrived at his destination, where Doctor Richtofen and Doctor Schuster have been holed up the past twenty-four hours in the hopes that he, Doctor Maxis, would approve of whatever it is that they had done. While he respected Doctor Richtofen as a man, he could not find it in himself to see Edward as a scientist of equal measure. Much like many men of science before his time, Doctor Richtofen was fueled by his own ego and a desire to be above his peers. Such an attitude could never meld with Group 935's goals and Maxis' leadership. Maxis begrudged any interactions with Richtofen, preferring to keep them to a minimum ever since the initial test which brought a dead subject back to life. It was a wonder

how Schuster could keep sane working under Richtofen, though he always struck Doctor Maxis as the submissive type.

The metal door to the laboratory was locked electronically from the inside. Despite his mistrust of Doctor Richtofen as of late, Doctor Maxis had given him authority to create lock pass-codes and access to the facility's administrative systems, due to his tenure in Group 935.

Doctor Maxis knocked on the door with his left hand with enough force to be heard through the thick metal that the door was comprised of. A moment passed, as Doctor Maxis stared at the Group 935 insignia painted out on the door. It was as if the symbol mocked him for being locked out of his own lab; By his own staff.

Eventually, a rectangular view-port on the door slid open, revealing the weary eyes of Doctor Richtofen who yelled out through the port, "Go away, *dummkopf*, for the last time we are not opening this door... Oh, Doctor Maxis!"

"Enough games, Richtofen. Open the door."

"Of coooooouurse, Doctor Maxis. Finally, you've arrived to witness this modern marvel of science!"

The sliding port slid closed once again as the sound of the electronic keypad beeping could be heard. The door opened on its hinges with haste as Doctor Maxis entered the laboratory, stone-faced.

"If you ever lock me out of the lab without telling me the pass code again, Doctor Richtofen, you will lose all the privileges you have earned these past few years."

"It was my mistake, Doctor Maxis. It will never happen again! But this project is for your

eyes to see first! Doctor Schuster und I have been working tirelessly-”

"The point. Get to it, Doctor Richtofen. By the setup, I am assuming this has something to do with the matter transference prototype.”

"An astute observation, Doctor. Indeed, we have achieved something extraordinary with the MTD prototype.”

"And I would assume this was all in place of the research I instructed you undergo?”

"You would be correct, Doctor, but this is on a whole new level! If you approve our funding, this could change the world for the better. We will show you. Doctor Schuster, prepare the test area!”

"Yes, Doctor Richtofen. Please, Doctor Maxis, insert these earplugs. There is a pair of protective goggles on the table there.”

Doctor Schuster handed Doctor Maxis a pair of bright orange ear plugs, and pointed to the table at the center of the room. Against the far wall was the tall and spacious MTD prototype, the gears turning as it sucked in power from the main generator. To its right connected through a thick cord was the receiving pad, and at its center a metal tin sat alone, visibly out of place on the pulsating, circular void as it appeared within the pad. The room was in disarray, with papers scrawled out on the floors and dust on every utensil the defiant duo did not employ in their time working on the MTD without Maxis' knowing. The center table held more unsorted papers, a bulbous and awkward recording device along with stacks of tapes, stained and food-encrusted trays, as well as an assortment of walnuts lined up in order of size.

As Maxis scolded Doctor Richtofen, he smiled and cleared the table before him, setting

the trays into one large stack at the corner of the table.

"We were planning on returning those to the cafeteria, today actually."

Richtofen looked to the line of walnuts, running his index finger along the line from smallest to largest, stopping and grabbing a modestly large walnut and raising it in the air.

"Here I have the test subject: A walnut."

Doctor Maxis rolled his eyes as Richtofen rolled the walnut in the palm of his hand for a moment before waving the other hand horizontally as if he were unsure of his estimations.

"Weighing in at, erm, roughly 10 to 11 grams. Give or take a little."

He handed the walnut to Doctor Schuster, who placed it at the center of the MTD. The rather large nut was dwarfed by the device which reached up to the ceiling with a chamber able to hold nearly a dozen men.

Doctor Richtofen and Doctor Schuster donned their protective eye and ear wear as Doctor Maxis followed. After a moment, Doctor Richtofen gave the ready signal to Doctor Schuster, making a fist, placing his arm vertically, and pulling downwards.

Like the multitude of tests before, Doctor Schuster activated the MTD via the control panel at the face of the device. The lights dimmed as power fluctuated and funneled into the MTD. The chamber doors slid closed with a loud thud and the interior lit up like a firework. The coils at the head of the device spewing a discharge of electricity into the air which tickled Doctor Maxis' nerves from across the room. After the air became calm again, an orb of light shone through the cord connecting the MTD to the receiving pad, zooming through until it reached the other end. The receiving pad shone a blinding light and emitted a turbulent sound before diluting

then dissipating. A light *clang* could be heard as the walnut landed into the tin at the center of the receiving pad, and then all was silent for a moment.

Through the fog released from the MTD's chamber, a silhouetted Doctor Schuster approached Doctor Richtofen, offering a hug to his close friend and colleague. The two embraced and rejoiced for their triumph, audibly laughing and exclaiming.

"We've done it Doctor Schuster!"

"I knew we could. I knew you were right, all along!"

Meanwhile, Doctor Maxis' attitude had not changed despite recent events. He tossed his goggles onto the table without care, exposing the rings around his cold eyes due to the small amount of radiation from the tests. He removed his earplugs as well, tossing them into the trash.

Puzzled, Doctor Richtofen turned to his superior, "Doctor Maxis, is there something wrong? What do you think of the device? We intend to make further adjustments to increase the size of test subjects that can be sent through. Surely you see the benefits to a device that can give humanity the ability to teleport!"

"But this is not the crucial experiments that you were supposed to be working on!"

"With all due respect, Doctor Maxis, this is a breakthrough of unimaginable proportions."

Doctor Schuster looked to his feet then to Richtofen, knowing truly how much the experiment meant to him. Doctor Maxis scoffed, shaking his head.

"What? That you moved a walnut a few feet? Yes, Edward, we will improve the human condition by revolutionizing the walnut industry. I can see it now: '**Edward's Walnut Delivery!**'"

"Don't be obtuse."

Further vexed, Doctor Maxis pointed his index finger to Richtofen, edging closer to him and shouting in his face.

"How **dare** you call me that! We are at **war**, Edward! I will admit that there is promise here, but until this war is won-"

"Correct me if I'm wrong, Doctor Maxis, but Group 935 is a research organization. What was the motto? '*To improve the human condition.*' What business of ours is this war?"

"Fine, Doctor Richtofen, I will let you in on a little administrative secret. We are finalizing a deal with the Nazi party. We need funding, we need equipment, they need new weapons. Chances are this war will end soon with a treaty or two and we will be in a much better position to help the world."

"Are you certain this won't cause massive defections? We have scientists from all over the world working with us."

"That is why it is with the utmost confidence that I share this with **you**. No one will know of this. This is simply the breaking of an egg to make an omelette."

Searching his feelings, Edward postulated reasons for Maxis to allow their teleportation experiments to continue. His plans to impress the Order relied entirely on Maxis' decision.

"Think of the tactical advantage we would have!"

"Think of the cost, think of the time! We can provide the Nazis tactical expertise in various areas without putting all our eggs in your walnut basket. Good day, Edward, and get back to your real work." Leaving Richtofen and Schuster to their thoughts, Maxis stormed into the

outside hallway, slamming the door tight as he left the vicinity.

Doctor Schuster broke the silence with a piercing statement.

"Bloody *jerk*."

Shaken but unfettered, Doctor Richtofen formulated his own ideas for the future. "I think Doctor Maxis has lost his perspective. No matter... we will do this on our own and publish the findings before he has a chance to-"

"You're not suggesting that Dr. Maxis would steal this technology and perfect it without us, are you?"

"I would by no means discourage that thought. Great scientists must stick together and achieve great science."

Without Maxis' financial support, they would be on their own in perfecting teleportation technology. Doctor Schuster would prove useful as a loyal underling and a source of funding with his family's wealth, but such support would not hold forever. For now, they should worry about perfecting the teleportation of a living, breathing human being. Then, Richtofen could plot his intentions with the Illuminati and take control of Group 935 away from Maxis, the old fool.

Chapter 7: Extraterrestrial

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Edward Richtofen

January 4th, 1940

Looking and feeling foolish in his protective body gear and eye goggles, Doctor Richtofen stood in the center of the MTD signaling Doctor Schuster that he was ready and activating the handheld recording device in his hand.

"Entry 42. Date: January 4th, 1940. Doctor Schuster und I, despite mounting pressure from Dr. Maxis, have continued working on the matter transference prototype. We have made great strides in the last thirty days and are ready for our first human subject. If our calculations are correct, we will send a test subject to the receptacle station sitting thirty yards away and behind a cinder-block wall."

"Are you certain you want to do this, Doctor Richtofen?"

"*Nein*, Doctor Schuster, this must be done. Quickly, put in your earplugs and power up the machine."

Edward's hands shook vigorously with sweat gathering at his palms. He had many nights' worth of calculations and previous testing to show the test should indeed be a success, but regardless, the Order had been pressuring Richtofen to perfect the MTD by the end of the month.

Doctor Schuster placed his earplugs in, placing his hand upon the control panel, and giving Doctor Richtofen the all-clear signal. Richtofen hesitated, before reluctantly offering his own. Edward shut his eyes tightly as Doctor Schuster activated the MTD, entrapping him within the test chamber. Edward opened one eye involuntarily, noting how cramped the walls of the device felt from the inside. For Richtofen, whirring and buzzing of the machine was so much louder than expected. He could not even hear himself think.

All that he could see was a bright, white light seemingly more intense than the sun itself. Then, sudden darkness and utter silence: Unexpected. What was once the sweltering heat of the MTD was now a bitter cold upon Richtofen's exposed skin. As Doctor Richtofen reached for his belt to be sure the recording device he had activated minutes before was intact, his arm movement felt off, with much less force being required than normal, leading to his arm making an exaggerated motion to his side, slapping the recording device and bruising his smallest finger. Though, Richtofen failed to notice the feeling in his hand due to the low temperature numbing his sense of pain.

"Is there a power outage? Why is it so dark? I feel almost... weightless. How very unexpected. Doctor Schuster? Hello?"

No answer. Perhaps the teleportation process had taken longer in real time than it felt in Edward's head. The power must have gone out following the test. Doctor Schuster had surely left to try to find a new power supply and calm the storm heading their way. Edward would likely lose his position in the organization after this. No matter. He was now far beyond the capabilities of Maxis or any two-bit replacements that would come after him. The Illuminati would be

pleased with the successful test, and perhaps this could mean a higher position of power for Edward. Only when he is upon the highest council would Edward be able to enact the changes the world so desperately needed.

Edward began to feel around for anything solid to grip. What was around him did not feel like the metal inside the MTD, but more like rock. Bumpy and coarse, completely uneven: Odd.

Edward reached in his pocket for a lighter to hopefully illuminate the area. *Click.*

"Ah, I can see now."

The lighter revealed a small space around the Doctor as a flame burst to life. Before him was a rocky wall, like that of a cave within a mountain. The ground was similarly rocky and coarse. Looking upwards, there was a large metallic structure, its walls lined with strange, yet somewhat familiar symbols. Edward could hear machinations from within the metallic structure, and a low hum. He noted several vent-like markings spread across the metallic walls. Edward searched his memories, hoping to grasp the meaning of the symbols, and then he remembered a book Doctor Groph had shown to him many months ago detailing the ancient Vril-Ya's devices. By the vents, Doctor Richtofen recalled Groph's ramblings, remembering mention of a device able to generate breathable oxygen with the use of Vril for power. Groph said this device was how many Vril were able to leave Earth's atmosphere to explore the cosmos in their advanced space-craft.

Even more peculiar than the walls was the device at the center of the cave, beneath the metallic dome. It was a pyramid with a black finish so dark it appeared like a void, with Richtofen only realizing it was a three-dimensional object by placing the light close to it. The

corners appeared to blend in with the mass of blackness, creating something totally otherworldly to Richtofen's senses. The base of the pyramid was metallic much like the device surrounding it, with similar symbols inscribed into its surface. The front face of the pyramid's base held a large dial-like panel, with a protruding circle in the center and strange markings and grooves surrounding the circle.

"Oh my god. I am standing in a circular cave, surrounded by some kind of machine, like... it's like nothing I've ever seen before. It looks almost alien in nature. There's a pyramid structure at the center of the room. I'm going to try and carefully touch it."

Edward reached for one of the edges of the pyramid, hoping to get a feel for the material. As his index finger and thumb attempted to grip the structure, it sent out a sharp electric shock which numbed Edward's hand and jolted through his spine, startling Richtofen.

"Ahhh! Static electricity. It's sharp to the touch. Very cold. Not a speck of dust."

Edward turned his other hand into a fist and began to lightly bang on the strange structure.

"Hmm, might be hollow. The chamber's quite large. I see what looks like capacitors at the ceiling of the chamber. There are no obvious connections to anything electrical. What is this place?"

Breaking the silence of the secluded cave came a voice, whispering as if from nowhere.

"Edward."

"Doctor Schuster, is that you? Doctor Schuster!"

He re-centered his focus away from the voice and back towards the peculiar pyramid

device. Edward looked to the front panel, carefully placing his gloved hand onto the bumpy surface and studying the symbols present.

"Look at this. It appears to be covered in some kind of hieroglyphic language. I've not seen anything like it before."

The voice came back, clearer than before and yet still a whisper, as though it were coming from someone right next to Edward.

"Please, you must help me."

Frightened by the closeness and the tingling in his ear, Richtofen cringed and turned his head to face Doctor Schuster, but there was no one in the cave with him.

"Why are you whispering to me? There's no need for that."

In his frightened state, Richtofen had leaned back onto the pyramid's front-facing panel, causing the grooves to spark and the dial to turn.

"Was ist los? Do you hear that? It sounds like..."

The sound of static filled Edward's ears and a similar light to the MTD appeared then faded soon after from the spinning center panel. What was once an eerie, void silence became running water and buzzing insects. The air felt hot and muggy. Edward was not appropriately dressed for this occasion.

The ground below was grassy and moist, and the skies were clear and bright as the sun beat down on Edward as well as the abundance of vegetation and flora surrounding the area. On the horizon, Doctor Richtofen spotted a tall, man-made stone structure. Behind him was a similar, yet smaller structure.

"My god, what happened? I seem to be in some kind of jungle. I can't be certain of where I am."

As Doctor Richtofen regained his bearings, he dusted off his lab coat and looked towards the tall man-made structure in the distance, before looking closer to the ground and spotting a congregation of men wielding spears and assorted clubs approaching from the underbrush to his immediate left. A man at the head of the group pointed towards Edward, bellowing a cry of anger as his followers did the same, charging towards him.

"OH NO!"

Edward went into a full sprint towards the man-made tower up a hill, dropping his recorder to the ground to be trampled by Edward's attackers. His arrival through teleportation must have drawn their attention, and the place he arrived at may have been sacred ground to them.

Edward dashed past architecture made from stone, and with each structure came more natives to give him chase. There were stone temples and staircases to homes made by the people, as well as artwork and statues Edward would have loved to admire had it not been for the current situation. Edward panted from the running as he brushed aside leaves and ferns, nearly tripping on a vine in his path. Edward ducked into a thick collection of plant life, hoping he could find some safety behind a fallen tree. He reached for his pockets searching for anything to defend himself, finding only his lighter and gripping it tightly hoping to formulate a plan. Mere moments later a spear came flying from the sky above, piercing the dirt at Richtofen's feet. Edward looked above the log to see the natives had spotted him, and he returned to sprinting

away towards the tower.

After emerging from the underbrush, Edward ascended the stone stair-case leading up the tower. Richtofen tripped as a flying rock slammed into his lower leg, and his face hit one of the stone steps, causing his nose to bleed. Persistent, Richtofen continued climbing before halting as two towering figures atop the temple brandished stone knives and came down towards him. Looking back at the wave of natives chasing him and then to the two defenders of the temple, adorned with tattoos and piercings, Richtofen panicked, holding the lighter towards the guardsmen and flipping it open. The two men halted their approach, backing away. Taking the opportunity, Richtofen pointed the lighter towards those giving him chase at the base of the steps and stood his ground. The lead of the charge, wearing an ornamental headdress, called out to his followers to halt, stopping just before his spear pierced Richtofen's abdomen. All stood silent for a moment, before Richtofen clicked the lighter, igniting a small flame. The natives all gasped, many howling and shouting at Richtofen, before silencing as Richtofen waved the flame around.

"Yes...Yes, okay, uh, hello. My name is Doctor Edward Richtofen. Erm, I'm not quite sure if you understand me, but I hold great power in the form of knowledge! I can make you whatever you may want. Just back away with your weapons..."

No one in the crowd moved or responded. Edward took that as a sign they were not looking to kill him just yet. He ascended the staircase further, pointing the lighter towards the two guards as he did so. The two inevitably dropped their spears and fell to their knees as Richtofen stood atop the platform overlooking the village. Everyone below had spread out and looked to each other expectantly, fearing what he might do next.

"I'm trapped here."

A voice called out to Richtofen, but it spoke in English, not some native tongue. It was not coming from someone in the crowd, but from Richtofen's own head.

"Erm, okay, here is what I will do-"

"Only together can we prevent the destruction of your world."

"Gott... okay, I will provide for you in exchange-"

"When I am free, you will be rewarded beyond your imagination."

"Shush! Please!"

"You're not listening to me Edward, don't you want to help me?"

"SHUT UP!"

Frightened by the outburst, all of the natives dropped their weapons and lowered to their knees, even the village elder at the forefront of the mob.

"Well, that's one way of doing it. Now, everyone, gather around."

Edward lifted the lighter into the air for all to see.

"Every journey begins with a single step. This is step one."

Chapter 8: Paradise Lost

Unknown Mountain Range

Dr. Edward Richtofen

January 5th, 1940

"Und how exactly did I end up here? This is one of my many, many questions regarding yesterday's events. Hopefully my experience with these villagers will illuminate the answers to said questions. My power over them is so strong they have provided shelter for me over the night; They have even thrown some type of banquet in my honor. It's quite fascinating. I'm no anthropologist, but their lack of experience with any outsiders and apparent disdain for clothing is quite the topic of interest. I'm sure Doctor Schuster would love to meet them. Oh, how I do hope he is alright. There is no telling what sort of commotion this ordeal has caused at Der Riese. I can only hope he will be able to- "

"It's how we'll all end up."

"NO! Shhh! Sh!"

Edward's hands clenched around the dirtied recording device he had recovered at the site of his arrival in the jungle, shutting it off completely. The voices had continued to call out to Richtofen throughout the feast provided to him the night before and into his dreams. That night, Edward dreamed of a city engulfed in flames, near a river. There was someone, a woman, crying

out for help before disappearing in a flash. The voice took many accents and in some instances many languages, and it always seemed to ask for help. It would interrupt Edward in the worst of times, like a mosquito buzzing near his ears. Though, there was no shortage of actual mosquitoes in this tucked-away jungle.

Edward swatted at the little pest preparing to land on his face, then pushed open the hand-crafted wooden door to his hut to reveal what seemed like the whole village anticipating his awakening. They all began to kneel upon noticing him, led by their leader from the night before. Wary of the attention, Edward nervously approached the head of the village, offering him his hand.

The elder did not seem to understand the gesture, looking visibly confused and frightened.

Edward spoke up, "Take me to the *temple*." He made a hand motion indicating the shape of the temple he had seen when he arrived, then pointed in the direction he had seen it the day before.

The leader seemed to understand this command, standing on his two feet and motioning the others in the village to step aside. It seemed the entire village was subservient to him and only him. Despite the fear Edward had instilled, it was he whom they respected and followed. So long as Edward stayed in his good graces, the village would follow suit.

The elder stopped for a moment as he led Edward on, approaching a woman with a baby in her arms. He rubbed his right hand on the child's forehead, before placing his arms onto the woman's shoulders and muttering something as he placed his head against hers. By Richtofen's

hypothesis, this was the elder's son and possible heir.

The center of the village was at the top of a steep hill. Interestingly, the path upwards was marked with bamboo shoots entrenched into the ground with space between them. They seemed to hold no purpose, until Richtofen looked back from the top of the hill to see the older, weaker members of the village using them for support when traversing the hill. Despite their violent attack at Edward's arrival, the natives were quite closely bonded and supportive of one another, especially the eldest members of the village.

As he passed through the village square, Richtofen took note of much of the peoples' primitive, yet, impressive technology. They had created an irrigation system and structurally sound platforms for their huts to stand high on above the nearby river. Most impressive of all seemed to be a boat on the river with a bamboo crank to churn the water and propel the vessel.

Yet, all of these achievements paled in comparison to the wondrous stone structures built on the site just outside the village. They scaled high into the sky, blotting out the sun in many places. With the sheer amount of man-power required to build this architecture using no machinery, Edward hypothesized these people may have been here for centuries. Given his limited knowledge of the region, Edward could only deduce it was somewhere in East Asia, due to the fauna and some of the markings within the walls of several huts.

Though he initially believed the people to have been uncontacted, Edward's belief was shaken as he entered one of the temples. Near the entrance were two ceremonial gongs, gold in color, and most definitely made of a type of metal, be it actual gold, brass, or something undiscovered in the West. Throughout the village he had passed, there had been no signs of metal

work or blacksmithing; All of their architecture was crafted from stone, and yet before Richtofen's eyes were massive, circular gongs suspended in the air, marked with precise script in what he believed to be their written language. Perhaps Edward was not the first outsider to arrive at this village, and he was intrigued to find what else this precursor may have left behind.

Past the gongs was a vast inner space occupying the structure, its walls lined with engravings etched into stone, as well as animal skulls native to this jungle.

The head of the village barked out of the entryway towards a grouping of his people. On his orders, they scrambled with a club made of bundled bamboo, lighting it aflame using flint, before a single member of the congregation approached the leader, bowing his head as he offered the torch.

Returning the bow, the leader looked into Edward's eyes to assure he was watching his actions, before he illuminated the nearby wall by lighting another torch held tightly in the stone. Above the torch was a fair-sized illustration. It appeared crude, but Edward could understand the message it conveyed. It depicted a gathering of humans surrounding one in the center who appeared larger than the rest; This center leader wore a headdress very similar to the one worn by the man before Richtofen.

He lit another torch, guiding Richtofen along the wall as it told the story of their people. The next etching showed three humans in various situations: One hunted a jungle cat, another appeared to be constructing a hut, and another held a spear.

Continuing along the wall, Edward viewed an etched piece depicting a group of villagers and their leader kneeling before a large object that appeared to be emitting something outward.

The next etching was very similar, however now, there were more figures, their outlines marked in red. These figures were attacking the villagers without weapons, simply pouncing on them.

The next panels showed what seemed to be a war with the mysterious figures from before, with much violence and death on both sides. It soon became clear, however, that the others were attempting to devour the villagers. These monsters continued to terrorize the people of the village, until Edward reached another panel, portraying some larger figure before the villagers. The large figure looked very similar to the less-detailed humans, but held many odd features, including an elongated skull, large teeth, and it seemed to float above them. They were praying before the creature, the leader even offering his headdress.

All through this demonstration, the leader of the village was narrating in his own tongue to Richtofen. As he approached this etching, the leader's voice seemed to elevate in urgency. The small humans in the etching stood dwarfed behind the massive, angular figure as it rained down lightning onto the red monsters that had been attacking the village.

Further down, Edward witnessed the arrival of more of the tall figures as they appeared to conjure up tools and assist in the construction of temples for the villagers. This collaboration culminated in a pyramidal structure betwixt three of the floating forerunners, its tip emanating some type of radiation. The final etchings chronicled the gift of one of the creatures' heads to the people, and their eventual leaving of the village. In one last panel, the villagers were depicted worshipping an altar holding the elongated head of their gods as the sun appeared solid black above them.

As Richtofen admired the stories and the statues of monkeys and elephants surrounding

him, the head of the village motioned to him towards the center of the room. Illuminated by his torch, the altar from the story was there before Richtofen, and atop its perfectly flat surface was the strange skull he had seen in wall etchings.

"This is... unbelievable."

The head of the village pointed his unwavering finger to a handcrafted bowl full of black rocks sitting nearby the skull on the altar. He spoke to Richtofen in a pleading manner, but with no method of understanding, Richtofen was simply confused.

The head of the village then placed both of his cupped hands around the bowl, then pulling them outward as if an explosion were emanating from the bowl. Just then, Richtofen noticed a crowd had gathered before him at the altar. Daring not to disappoint, Edward reached for his pocket, pulling out his lighter. Some in the crowd began to cheer as he did so, before silencing once again. Edward then lit the flame, and ignited the bowl of rocks creating a lasting fire on the altar. The spectacle had created an uproar in the crowd as they chanted in delight of the event. Through their cacophonous jubilation, however, Edward heard the soft, yet, striking voices once again, their sudden arrival raising Edward's heart rate.

"Certain events have come to pass just as they were foretold. They love you, Edward. They will do anything you say."

Edward slapped his right ear with his palm hoping to stop the voice in his head, before noticing another set of etchings in the side of the altar. The style, however, was very different from those on the wall. The figures were more detailed and finely precise, bordering on impossible to create with the stone tools available to the village.

From left to right, the illustrated story showed a being appearing from above wielding the power of fire from his hands. The members of the village were shown giving the gift of food to the god-like being. The next panel showed the fire-wielding figure before the rock shown in previous etchings that created the monsters. The figure was blasting the rock with a power emanating from his hands, destroying it as the villagers surrounded him, worshiping him.

“You’ve got them eating out of your hands, now. Haven’t you always wanted to help, Edward? To make a change? Use them, Edward.”

“Leave me alone!”

Not understanding of his frustration, the members of the village mimicked his speech, seeming to believe it was the chant of their gods.

“Leave me alone! Leave me alone! Leave me alone!”

Overwhelmed and sweating from a combination of the fire and his fear of the voices in his head, Edward stood dumbstruck as he was lauded by the people.

“Your name. Give it to them. Show them who will bring them salvation!”

Trembling, Richtofen stood in place, whispering to himself.

"No... stop it. Stop, stop, stop! I won't!"

"Do it, Edward. NOW!"

Shaken, Edward unhooked the name tag of his white lab coat, on it was marked his last name, ‘RICHTOFEN’. With his quivering hand he tossed it onto the altar, backing away from it as the villagers examined it. The leader picked up the harmless plastic, gazing upon the Roman lettering before understanding what he must do. He called out to the crowd, and a single male

villager approached, kneeling as he arrived. After a command from the leader, he took a chisel beside the altar and began to etch a design into the opposite side of the altar. The leader of the village pointed the tag at Edward, saying something in his own language, awaiting his rebuttal.

"Tell them, Edward. Tell them who their new king is! Do it!"

With hesitation, Edward spoke softly, looking to the stone floor.

"Richtofen..."

The crowd began to mutter, still looking to Edward.

"Again!"

"... I am... "

"Yes... "

"Richtofen!"

The village leader said in his own foreign accent, "Richtofen."

"Yes, I am Richtofen!"

"Richtofen! Richtofen! Richtofen!"

The crowd chanted his name with a candor Edward had never heard before.

"You've made a brave new step, Edward. Use them to find a way home. You will make the change that you want to make. But you must help us. "

Dazed and mentally exhausted, Edward replied. "Und what is it you want? How will I leave?"

"Exit their temple through the path ahead and all of your questions will be answered."

The wall closest to the altar appeared to be a large, movable slab. Edward approached it,

sweeping his hand along the symbolic, bumpy surface. The head of the village let out a cry, and several men came to the right side of the slab, as they slowly shoved it aside to reveal the sunlit outdoors. The sight just outside this side of the temple was beautiful to Richtofen's worn eyes.

Stepping out of the temple, Richtofen could see the lush, green trees of the surrounding jungle paradise for miles, their many branches populated with vines and birds. In his ears were the sounds of flowing water from a nearby waterfall, and the howling of monkeys in the distance. The air was warm with very little wind, and the rays of the sun obscured just slightly by the cloudy morning skies. Below Edward was a series of stone steps leading to stone with grass and dirt sifting between the man-made floor. At the center of this area were the ruins of what looked to be an ancient stone-brick temple. It was overgrown with flora and the structure was barely standing with over half of the bricks seeming to be missing. Aside from the bottom of the staircase were two stone-carved lizard-like creatures with sails on their heads. A monkey could be seen resting in the crevice behind one of the dragons, scratching at its head with one hand. Most interesting of all were two possibly wooden stands atop the ruins in the distance to Richtofen's immediate right and the left of the central ruins. High up in what would be the treeline, these stands held peculiar crystal orbs, larger than even the tires of an automobile in circumference, the beautiful, spotless crystals intrigued Richtofen greatly, who desired a closer look when he had the time.

"Beautiful isn't it? A true, secluded cornucopia of harmony. Your purpose here will soon become evident. It was not by accident you found this place."

Pacing further out into the open air, Edward marveled at the gargantuan mountain range

appearing through the fog to the immediate right of the temple.

"In just what area of the world am I?"

"Its location has been sought after for all of mankind's existence. You are in the mythic Shangri-La. There are men who would kill to find a home in this paradise. Follow them, and you will know why you are here."

Edward searched his feelings, unsure if the voice was to be trusted, and unsure if this voice could feel the conflict in his heart or the thoughts running through his head. He felt as if he were taking advantage of the friendly natives of Shangri-La, promising them some form of heroism and leadership. Edward only wanted to find home, yet he was still tantalized by what this place may bestow upon him if he continued.

He took a few steps out, placing his feet just above the next step down the stairs. The steps were muddy, appearing to have been unused in a fair amount of time, and in his best interest, he was careful in his footing. The members of the village followed suit and looking back it appeared as if even more of the village had joined than he had thought.

Now at the base of the steps, Richtofen stepped forward into the stone-brick ruins before him. Entire sections of the structure were completely missing, leaving it entirely exposed to the sky. At the center on the floor was a large slab pushed into the ground with large bags of dirt on each corner of the square stone. There was a design engraved on the slab: An eight-pointed star filled with small squares, and at the center a large skull. It was eerie in appearance, but even more unsettling was statue just out of the corner of Richtofen's left eye, in the corner of the small area. The statue was of a monkey, divided into four sections from top to bottom. To the right of

the monkey statue was a circular stone sticking out of the wall, with a skull engraving similar in design to the slab at the center of the floor. Looking around him, Edward also noted the same circular stone sticking out of the other three corners of the structure, and another at the center of the back wall, just above head-level. Nervous there would be some sort of strange ritual, Edward looked towards the villagers, who were now fanning in all directions towards other areas of the ruins as they were directed by their leader. The leader approached Edward, bowing his head, and directing him to step away from the center slab.

After following his instructions, Edward watched as the villagers lifted the bags of dirt off of the stone slab. With no pressure on it any longer, the slab began to rise out of the earth slowly, scraping the inner stone wall as it did. The monkey statue in the corner began to clatter, and the head section began to spin in circles continuously, revealing the same head on both sides. As he continued to wait, Richtofen watched as the other sections of the statue began to spin from some sort of mechanism underneath their feet. Then, as villagers previously unseen returned to the group, they all looked towards the staircase leading up to the temple, and that is when Richtofen noticed two eight-point star-shaped stones descending down the sides of the staircase slowly, as if on a timer. As Edward mentally counted roughly a half a minute, the stones had reached the bottom of the staircase, and an entire section of it sank into the ground near the base. To follow, a surge of water gushed out of the head of the temple, falling to the steps, like a waterfall, flowing to the very bottom via gravity, before collecting in a small trench where the bottom steps had been. After a short amount of time, the two dragons at each side of the steps began to stream water from their mouths, frightening the monkey previously sat atop one. The

water then drained into a hole in the ground until the water stopped gushing from the temple.

The villagers began to chant in revelry as the leader approached Edward and kneeled before him, directing his attention to the head of the temple. He then directed four villagers at each corner of the small structure to press the circular skull tablets into the walls. After a few moments, Edward's sight became blurry, and he covered his eyes attempting to re-center his vision. He felt a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, with a hint of altitude sickness and a similar weightlessness felt during teleportation, only this time it felt more sustained. Upon opening his eyes once more, it became completely and utterly apparent just what he was meant to do in Shangri-La.

Atop the temple, where a large chunk of the stone had appeared to be missing, there was now a massive, pulsating red meteorite of Element 115. It matched exactly the rocks he had been testing with at Der Riese, and the deposit found there by Doctor Maxis was not even this large.

"So you see, Edward, it was destiny that we met. Think of the possibilities with this meteorite. These people, they have no use for it; But you are a genius, and you know what must be done. There is more here, just below ground, ready to be mined by your loyal subjects. Do the right thing, Edward, for humanity's sake. You will find a way to return to the pyramid where we met, and there we will acquire more power than you could possibly imagine."

"Power... that's what this is, is it? This... can't be right. You aren't real. I've just spent too long in this jungle."

"Don't be foolish, Edward. We are real. We only want what's best for you and your race. I promise you that there is a great reward for you, but you only need to listen."

"I won't!"

"In time, Edward, you will see what you are capable of, and we will ensure that you do."

"Stop it!"

"Celebrate with the village; Make a spectacle of how you will destroy the meteor that has terrorized them for generations. They will show you the ways of the ancient Vril-Ya, and the powers they held, and what they left behind here in this land for us to find."

"Vril? No, no, no... those are just Groph's ramblings... they can't-"

"There are many secrets to find here. Only time will tell what awaits us. When the time is right, return home, and bring back the tools to harness the power that Shangri-La holds!"

"I can't! These people and this land have been untouched for-"

"They've been waiting for you, Edward. You are their hero. Don't disappoint them. Don't disappoint us."

Chapter 9: Novus Ordo Seclorum

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Baron Schuster

January 23rd, 1940

Doctor Schuster was all out of hope, and his disappointment in himself for failing his friend was immeasurable. In the eighteen days since Edward Richtofen's disappearance during the matter transference testing, Doctor Schuster had failed to discover any trace of his colleague anywhere at Der Riese. As the test had commenced, the receiving pad failed to activate, causing Edward's body to disappear completely with only smoke in his place. Upon investigation, Schuster discovered not a failure in the design of the receiving pad, but a loose connection in the outlet connecting the receiving pad to the transference device. His initial reaction was to blame an unseen saboteur, after all, Schuster was positively sure he had correctly the device correctly as Edward had specified. However, Schuster came to feel he was shirking the responsibility of his actions, and he bared a painful guilt as he decided that he, alone, was the one who failed to take necessary safety precautions, and as such, Schuster was wholly liable for this failure.

In these passing days, Schuster had spent many agonizing, sleepless days and nights searching for Edward and researching into a method of reversing his grave mistake. Alas, there would be no respite as Schuster made no such breakthrough. Other scientists of Group 935 had

begun to ask where Richtofen had been and being his closest associate, Schuster had received a majority of the questioning. Schuster stayed isolated in the lab that was host to his greatest failure, toiling away with the research he and Edward had conducted in their time on the project. With no receiving area for the MTD, it was not inherently clear where a test subject would be allocated in the event of activation. Schuster's initial theory was that without a clear pathway for Edward to be transported through, he would be held, or 'stored', within the device itself at some smaller, cosmic level, and upon re-connection with an ample receiving pad, Edward would be sent completely through. Unfortunately, through a series of tests, this theory was deemed to be untrue as no trace of him seemed to appear through the device no matter Schuster's method.

Before Edward's disappearance, he had discussed the possibility of a 'wireless' connection between the MTD and receiving pad, as the next logical step following the 'wired' version. He proposed that with Element 115's immense power, the MTD could be used in conjunction with a beacon-like signal connecting it to other MTDs around the world, forming a network of intercontinental transportation. Schuster had always admired Edward's forward thinking and motivation to succeed, and he acted no different in modifying the MTD to test these capabilities later.

While it was wired, the modifications Edward had made to the prototype were meant to be compatible with other MTDs once production of more had gone underway. For a time, the theory that Edward had been sent somewhere else ran through Schuster's mind, however he felt foolish, as there were no other devices like the MTD in existence, and thus no connection could have been made.

It struck Schuster today, finally: Edward must be dead, worse yet, vaporized and dispelled into the air following the fateful test. In the pit of his empty stomach, Schuster's guilt and pain swelled until Schuster was but a hollow mess of crushing defeat and restlessness. Not fit to leave Edward's legacy behind, Schuster strode to Edward's locker inside the lab, its door hinge still open just as he had left it weeks before. In life, Schuster would never have invaded Edward's privacy in such a manner, but he felt a need for connection with the departed unlike any other time in his life.

He reached inside, pulling out Richtofen's hand-written diary. For a moment, he hesitated, and in an uncharacteristic act of boldness he opened the pages, skimming through some of Richtofen's first few weeks working for Group 935. The weathered little book held many minute quirks of Richtofen's. There were little jottings of ideas, and sketches of said ideas with descriptions and details of their functions. Also, any instance of recording length or mass had small conversions between paragraphs converting between imperial and metric units, as Edward held a strange, obsessive preference towards imperial, writing stoichiometric equations on the margins of the page.

On the entry marked the 2nd of September, 1939, Schuster discovered the day Richtofen had epiphanized the idea for his next project, the *Wunderwaffe*, a project Edward had kept close in hand in life.

"In my time working with Maxis on the Die Glocke project, now being shortened to M.T.D. for ambiguous reasons, I have become increasingly disillusioned to the unsightly image of corpses rising from the dead. I do not want to discredit Doctor Maxis, but I fear his interest in

these foul creatures is misguided; I suppose that is what a dead wife und a little Mädchen will do to your focus. He has allowed me to establish a defense system throughout Der Riese in the event of some sort of outbreak; Lord help us if these abominations ever escape the laboratories. I created the electro-shock defense system to fry them with over 200,000 amps of electricity, more than the electric chair. An undignified and inhumane death for Maxis' unholy resurrections: How fitting. In the event the alarm system is sounded, which I have dubbed The Shield, these defenses can be activated in major doorways of Der Riese to block entry from the undead, others are blocked by electronic, steel gates.

Today in the news, we discovered that Hitler sent German forces into Poland just yesterday. I fear what this will mean for our international scientists in Group 935, however, Maxis appeared indifferent, and perhaps a little too eager. He said in times like these, creating weaponry may be a beneficial pursuit should this conflict escalate. I do not know what he meant by this; We are scientists, not warmongers. It did, however, lead me to a conceptual device utilizing elements of my electroshock system and the Die Glocke project thus far. I call it the Wunderwaffe, which I believe will be the first of many defensive weapons that could use the power of 115. I fear what this idea could lead to in the wrong hands, however. I will keep this idea a secret from anyone, apart from my superiors in the Order."

Schuster stopped reading there, thinking to himself, puzzled by Edward's reference to an 'Order'. He could not think of anyone Edward might be referencing and concluded there must be something being kept from him. He read on, continuing to find mentions of this 'Order' but little in the ways of context or explanation into the meaning. He searched through the most recent

entries in an attempt to find some hint of where Richtofen could have ended up, but there was no hope to be found.

Schuster placed the diary back into its place, leaving the locker ajar as it was. He looked around the trashed, disorganized laboratory once more, fearing the worst as he would have to face his own superior, Doctor Maxis, and present him with the fact that Edward was gone, forever, because of Schuster's failure with the project Maxis had insisted they discontinue. Set in his path and ready to face the end of his career, Doctor Schuster decided to initiate one last diary entry to bookend the creation, testing, and failure of the MTD. He dusted off a recording device set upon the nearby table and activated the recorder.

"Log Entry 43. Date: January 23rd, 1940. I cannot be certain what happened to Doctor Richtofen. Once the test was commenced, he just disappeared from the machine into thin air. I have searched the area for days and have no evidence that he is anywhere. I am afraid I might have to scrap the-"

The receiving pad of the MTD began to flash and buzz like it had not in weeks prior. Out came the full-bodied, but evidently disheveled Doctor Richtofen, his white lab coat soaked with sweat, and in his hands the audio recorder once on his person during the test, jogging towards a dumbfounded and relieved Doctor Schuster.

"Don't scrap anything! We have done something, something wondrous."

Edward cocked his head towards the wall as if a noise caught his attention.

"Shhh. Do you hear them?"

Unperturbed by the strangeness but relieved all the same, Schuster approached Edward,

his arms reaching to Edward's shoulders. Surprised and jittery, Edward flinched as Schuster touched him and exclaimed.

"Doctor Richtofen, you're alive!"

"I'm more than alive, mister Schuster. Is the device still intact?"

Though he was satisfied in seeing Edward alive again, Schuster noticed the bemusing differences Richtofen possessed from himself on the test day. Richtofen seemed almost manic in his speech, stuttering as if being constantly interrupted, and his gait was much less professional, instead he slouched and paced as he walked, and seemed to be restless, unable to stand still as he spoke with Schuster.

"Yes, but, what happened to you?"

"Aaah, something *wunderbar*! That chamber was incredible, the wonders we could learn!"

"What are you talking about? Are you alright?"

"Get in the matter transference prototype, Doctor Schuster. We have work to do."

Doctor Richtofen grabbed two pairs of earplugs and walked with Doctor Schuster towards the MTD, passing a pair of the plugs to him.

"You will need these. They don't block out *everything*, but it helps. Sh, sh, sh..."

The MTD once again activated, and Doctor Schuster experienced a strange, unprecedented feeling as his vision clouded with smoke and then blinding light. The stimulation finally came to an end, and Schuster could finally see, though it was very little. Curiously, he felt light on his feet, apparently experiencing low gravity. For a moment he thought he had gone

blind, as there was utter blackness, then, a light from Doctor Richtofen's lighter flickered to life, and Schuster could see his surroundings. They had been sent to a dark, spacious, rocky cave, its gray, coarse walls combined with an alien, metal device spanning throughout the whole cave and into a solid-black void in the shape of a pyramid at the center of the room.

"Why am I... weightless? And what is that... that pyramid? Excuse my language, but where in the hell are we?"

"Doctor Schuster, if my theory is correct, I believe we are on the Moon, and this device is a gateway: A gateway... to another dimension."

"Another dimension? Is Doctor Groph here too feeding you this lunacy?"

"*Nein*, but I'm beginning to think much of what he says is truer than we'd ever imagined. He was right about 935 partnering with the Nazi Party, was he not?"

"What are you suggesting are the origins of this pyramid-gateway... device?"

"Doctor Groph, in his study of the Vrilya and similar mythology, mentioned something about three flying pyramids, gateways to the Aether, a dimension beyond our understanding. These pyramids could fly through space and time. The ancient Vrilya built these devices to travel between dimensions at will. Though Doctor Groph believed in the existence of the Vrilya, and their space-traveling technology, he did not fully believe that they could travel between dimensions. He saw this as creative liberties taken by those who publish books on them, but this pyramid fit the description perfectly from the stories told."

"I'm not sure what to say... it all sounds a bit mad."

"You must believe me, Doctor Schuster, I couldn't believe it either. After so much time

away, I have seen things you couldn't even imagine.”

“What could we do with such a discovery? Should we tell the others at Group 935?”

"Certainly not everyone, especially not Maxis, that... that fool! But I know of several members of Group 935 who have lately shown a distaste for Doctor Maxis' new policies. They could help us build a station here, and we can discover the power this device holds, and use it to change the world, just as we have always wanted.”

"Okay, my other concern is... how did you arrive back on... well... Earth?”

"In my tampering with the device when I initially arrived and after a painful, irritating, aggravating, grievous **shock...** ahem, the front panel of the pyramid began to spark, and it teleported me to some god-forsaken jungle where I was chased down by its native people. From my time there, I made some more new discoveries.”

"Do tell.”

"After a brief quarrel with the natives, I took advantage of their primitive nature, and have them convinced I am their god. You see, their people had met the Vril-Ya generations ago, and to keep the story simple, they showed me what has been causing trouble for them ever since: Something that caused terror for their ancestors and serves to still wipe them out today.”

"What? What is it?”

"A meteor made up of 115 embedded into one of their ruined temples and still radiating its majestic power today. They showed me nearby where more of the rock had split apart before it landed and became buried underground over the years, and killing the grass attempting to grow over it. They avoided any traces of the meteor due to its effects on their dead.”

"My God, that's horrible."

"What's horrible is the power held within those rocks going unused for so long. I do not care how our test has *appeared* to fail. This was truly a success, Doctor Schuster, and you are, in part, responsible. We must return to my kingdom in the jungle, where the natives will do the heavy lifting in recovering the element for our work on this base.

"How will we acquire the resources to mine it exactly?"

"I know for a fact many of the members from the excavation team would jump at the chance to undermine Maxis... " Richtofen chuckled to himself, before continuing, "Any-who, they will have the tools we need."

"This plan is ingenious Edward! So much potential for what can be done here. Think of it: We are the first men on the Moon, and soon the first to enter into another dimension!"

"I'm glad we can see eye-to-eye, Doctor Schuster. Now, we must return and find others to join us. We should avoid bringing up what exactly this device can do until we are sure everyone on the team is on board with our plan and we are able to trust them. Doctor Maxis can never find out what we will do here."

"Absolutely. Now, Edward, how were you able to return to the MTD receiving pad all the way from the jungle?"

"Well, Doctor Schuster, if my theory and Doctor Groph's stories are correct, then there are three pyramids such as the one before you in existence, and another one is in the jungle, hidden within the crumbling temple. I have not discovered a third location, yet, but the MTD at its current calibration formed a connection with these pyramids, and in my time I was able to

program them to send me between the them and the MTD. *Mein gott*, Doctor Schuster, there were many strange, cosmic happenings in their temples, and I am eager to discover just what their significance is. Destiny appears to have connected our MTD with these pyramid devices, und with this discovery in mind, I believe I can begin full construction of the ‘wireless’ matter transference devices we discussed to aid our travel to this base.”

"This is such great news, Doctor Richtofen, but, you have no idea how it feels to see you again after so long.”

"There is little time for sentimental dawdling, Doctor Schuster, we should begin our work once more. I will introduce you to the village.”

"Oh, yes. Perhaps I could get some sleep when we arrive, if that’s alright. I have not slept since, well, I cannot really-”

"That’s quite alright, Doctor Schuster, I need you at full attention for our plan to succeed.”

"Thank you, Edward. I... actually have a question for you. Well, a confession as well.”

Richtofen began to twitch and blink repeatedly, looking irritated as he spoke.

"Yes, what, **SH**, I am talking to my friend!”

"Oh, uh, who?”

"No, no, you! I am talking to you, Doctor Schuster, go on, please! Speak a little louder!”

"Well, after the test, I searched for you for days and days, and today I came to face the probability you were... dead. And so, I, regretfully... skimmed through your diary.”

"Oh?”

"Simply as an attempt to reconnect with a dear friend who I thought had passed. I hope you can forgive me for my moment of weakness. But, I read through some of your entries and, I saw you mentioned many times some type of 'Order'. I've never heard you mention these people you wrote about, and perhaps I am prying too much in asking, but I am ever so curious who these people are that you are reporting to with all of your discoveries before Group 935."

"Hm... I can forgive you Schuster, I understand my absence must have been troubling, and I thank you for continuing to have faith in the MTD for so long. To answer your question, the Order is, well, an old group of, ahem, friends. They, as well as I do, want to make the world a better place. They live their lives in secret just as we in Group 935 do, but they have greater power und greater motivation, or at least, I thought they did."

"What do you mean?"

"Doctor Schuster, I would not worry about them anymore. Lately, the Illuminati have failed to assist me in my ventures and so I have kept things from them. I no longer need them nor the power they possess. They have become too preoccupied with this damned war. I will change the world myself. Without them."

"I still do not quite understand... "

"Oh, naive, innocent Doctor Schuster, I kept this from you because I was afraid you might think less of me. Also, by their mandate, I would have probably had to silence you by killing you or getting you involved. But that is over now. I will wash my hands of them forever when we arrive back at Der Riese. From this point forward, it is you and I who will do the right thing in this- **SH!** Do you hear that too?!"

"Hear what, Edward? Are you alright?"

"No, I won't make him do that! Stop! **Sh! Ach!**"

Edward cupped his ears, bobbing his head back and forth with a face of intense agony as sweat dripped from his forehead.

Don't worry, Doctor Schuster... I'm alright. Together we will endure!" Edward let out a nervous chuckle.

Edward adjusted the panel at the forefront of the Moon pyramid device, causing it to spark and begin to distort Schuster's view. He felt the weightlessness of teleportation once again, as the light shone bright. Being sure Edward was still close nearby, Schuster shut his eyes and anticipated an uncertain future waiting for him in the jungle. Schuster was concerned for Richtofen's mind, as it appeared to be permanently frazzled from his isolation from civilization. Schuster could only hope that with Richtofen's plan and the Element 115 in the jungle, he would do the right thing.

Chapter 10: Facade

Courtyard, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Edward Richtofen

March 13th, 1940

With a new-found eagerness to return to his post at Group 935, new ideas flowed through Edward's head as he contemplated the future. Though Maxis would be an obstacle in his research, returning to Group 935 was simply the right thing to do. It would be morally wrong for Richtofen to stifle his genius while the Moon base is under construction.

The previous week, Richtofen had made a telephone call to Doctor Maxis informing him of his return from his sabbatical and that he would like to establish a meeting to discuss the *Wunderwaffe*, a device Richtofen had been perfecting in his free time. What Maxis did not know, however, was Richtofen had also been spending his time away planning the construction of Griffin Station, an operation on the Moon that Maxis must know nothing about. It would be untouched by any world government, but unintentionally funded by Maxis and his Nazi friends. Richtofen had also spent his time making lists of those in Group 935 he could trust and those he could not. He had already contacted several members of the excavation team at Der Riese to begin building a framework for the station, supplied with custom suits designed to allow for survival in the vacuum of space just outside of the structure housing the mysterious pyramid

device. Richtofen and Schuster had learned a great deal studying the pyramid during this time, and were now able to directly teleport between Der Riese, the Moon, and the temple, which would be the next location he would build a research station.

Times are good, truly.

With great effervescence, Richtofen entered the lively courtyard of Der Riese, surrounded by the hurly-burly shuffling of scientists and factory workers moving betwixt Der Riese's many campus buildings. Edward approached the center of the courtyard, looking out towards the direction of the laboratories. Behind the metal fence and on the catwalk above stood Doctor Maxis, leaning against the railing and speaking to Doctor Porter.

Richtofen clenched his right hand around the handle of the *Wunderwaffe's* case he was carrying, feeling a twinge of frustration as the voices returned.

"Edward, my boy, keep the facade. Bear a smile and the old fool will bend to your will."

"Ja, ja... let me think for myself for a moment!"

The busy scientists around Edward paid him no mind, preoccupied with whatever projects they were assigned.

Doctor Maxis turned his attention to Richtofen standing awkwardly among the crowd down below. Maxis seemed pleased at first, but uneasy, as after all, the last time he had seen Edward he had shot down his success with the MTD.

Richtofen put on his best smile, waving his left hand in the air to affirm Maxis' attention. Maxis looked upward towards the giant clock looming over the courtyard, noting the time, then nodded to Doctor Porter before going the opposite direction of him. Their meeting was

scheduled for 0815 hours, just forty-five minutes from now. With Maxis now on his way to his office, Richtofen strode in that direction as well.

Taking a shortcut through a nearby laboratory building, Richtofen passed many closed off doors, inside holding many scientists performing experiments using loud machinery. Richtofen had nearly reached the rear entrance leading towards the building where Maxis' office would be when he was suddenly grabbed by the shoulder and twisted around by a familiar, animated scientist.

Doctor Groph panted as he spoke, apparently out of breath, "Doctor Richtofen! I received your telegram- with- with all the details! This is incredible! Vril-Ya technology! On the Moon no less-"

"Shhhh! Have you lost your mind, Herr Groph?!"

"Yes, yes, I know, this is to remain a secret from Maxis!"

"Not just Maxis, Doctor Groph, but everyone in his inner circle. Until we know who we can trust, this is to remain between us."

"I understand, Doctor Richtofen... But you must tell me, were you able to determine how the structure was able to provide oxygen? I have a theory myself."

"All in due time. Go to the site where that unsightly fly-trap-thingy is being built. Ask for Herr Sauers, and he will put you through to Doctor Schuster, who will answer all of your questions... eh, well, probably."

Doctor Groph bounded away with excitement back towards the courtyard area, his arms raised to his head.

"Direct communication between here and... *Mein gott!*"

Richtofen's muscles relaxed and he finally felt the ability to breath in peace, looking back towards the exit, muttering to himself.

"Groph is not quite right in the head..."

"Indubitably."

Richtofen pushed open the exit leading him to a street between rows of laboratory buildings. German military vehicles and transport trucks lined the sidewalks as scientists unloaded materials. It seems the alliance with Germany had brought new spoils for Group 935. Perhaps it was wrong of Edward to have doubted their usefulness.

Edward approached an office building at the end of the street, passing the desk attendant heading towards Maxis' office.

"Doctor, wait! Do you have an appointment?"

Richtofen scoffed, looking back towards the female desk attendant, who had stood up from her desk in trying to get his attention.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes, Doctor Richtofen, but Doctor Maxis asked that all visitors must wait for him to call-"

"Doctor Maxis will understand. We go back a long, long time!"

Richtofen continued down the hall, stopping at Doctor Maxis' office, the door marked with a plaque reading '*Ludvig Maxis M.D.*' He straightened his jacket and twisted the knob on the door to reveal a young woman with blonde hair and a short dress sitting on a desk, and Doctor

Maxis in his chair, now gazing angrily towards Doctor Richtofen.

"Is this a bad time, Doctor Maxis?"

"Thirty-two minutes before schedule is as good a time as any, I suppose. Check in with the receptionist next time, would you, Edward?"

"Of course! *Danke schoen und guten morgen* to you Doctor Maxis! I assume this fine young *Fräulein* is your new assistant... My my, Doctor, a little young, don't you think?"

Visibly annoyed, Doctor Maxis motioned for the young woman to shake Doctor Richtofen's hand.

"This is Sophia. She writes my memorandums, plans my day, and looks after Samantha while she is here."

"Ah, how wunderbar, Doctor Maxis, you certainly deserve the help for all that you've done for this organization. I'm sure Sophia here is *quite* helpful."

Richtofen kissed the young assistant's hand, before sending it aside and passing her to put his full attention towards the task at hand.

"Close the door on the way out, would you, Sophia? *Ja*, thank you."

Uncomfortable, Sophia left the office, shutting the door to leave Richtofen and Maxis alone. Richtofen lifted the case containing the *Wunderwaffe* onto Maxis' desk, causing it to creak under the enormous weight. In the process, a framed photo of Doctor Maxis and his late wife fell face down.

"Slow down, Edward, we have a lot more to discuss than the *Wunderwaffe*. You've been gone for quite some time and I need to get you back up to speed."

Maxis readjusted the photo on his desk as Richtofen took a seat, leaning forward towards the desk.

"Apologies, Doctor. You must understand how hard it is to contain my excitement. This device before you contains my life's work. I believe I have created the perfect weapon using Element 115."

"Be that as it may, Edward, you've been on a... two month surprise sabbatical that I had not even realized you had taken, that is until Doctor Schuster informed me weeks in and promptly resigned... If I didn't trust your judgment Edward, I'd have feared you too were leaving after my, frankly, harsh words regarding your work on the MTD. It is my error for not being truthful about our involvement with the Nazi Party from the start."

"How very humble of you, Doctor Maxis. I accept your apologies. All of them! I believe in my time away I have found a new appreciation for the decision you have made. Times are hard, and just outside I saw many men of science with the tools they need. I would assume this is a result of your leadership. It is a shame that some do not agree."

"Yes, we have lost some great minds. It is unfortunate about Doctor Schuster."

"Doctor Schuster is a great man with a faint heart... Such a pure soul for a scientist. I'm afraid he was unable to accept his work going towards a party with such a radical agenda."

"In any case, I promise you and every other scientist in Group 935 that our work will not be hindered by this alliance but rather enhanced!"

Doctor Maxis poured a cup of green tea and handed it to Doctor Richtofen before raising his cup.

"To improving the human condition," they said in unison.

The two men sipped from their cups, Richtofen placing the sub-par tea back onto the desk.

Maxis placed his tea aside, looking over a written document with bullet point notes before speaking, "Now, Doctor Richtofen, with Schuster gone you will need another lab assistant for your tests on the living dead."

"Oh, Doctor Maxis, don't worry about-"

"As you know, it is our policy that there are at least two scientists in every laboratory and many of our older staff are busy elsewhere. Your work on unlocking the mind and breaking the trust barrier will require a precise, younger touch. I'm assigning a recent graduate by the name Paul Wagner to assist you. He is a protege of mine whom I would trust with my life."

"Oh *wunderbar*..."

"He is ecstatic he will finally be able to meet you, Edward. He will be in your lab within the hour to begin."

"Joy."

"We are truly lucky to be living in these times, Edward. Everything just seems to be falling into place for good men like us. With the excess funds the Reichstag has provided, I do believe Group 935 is due for an expansion. The only issue I find is a lack of Element 115 in our possession. Word has trickled down to me from our agents that the Americans have a supply of it in Nevada. Surely the Reichstag could find us another supply for our needs. There must be more out there!"

"I haven't the faintest idea where they might be more, Doctor. But expansion of our operations is a *wunderbar* idea. You must let me know of any new developments. That will most likely be quite the burden of responsibility for you, no?"

"Yes, well, there is always more work to keep the good times from running short. Always so much to do... Perhaps it would be best if I found new helping hands to lead as we expand. I won't be around these halls forever, after all, and Samantha... she will soon start home-schooling."

Edward shifted in his chair, grinning as he leaned in and said, "You've made many sacrifices in the name of science, Ludvig. I would be honored if, someday, you decided to give me some responsibility."

Doctor Maxis leaned back in his chair, silent for a moment with a sullen face, and looking at the portrait of he and his wife.

"Believe me, Edward, when the work is too much for me, you will be the first I call."

Richtofen nodded, satisfied with the seeds he had planted.

"Now then, Doctor Richtofen, before you left, you were working with Doctor Schuster on the living dead experiments, yes?"

"Oh ja, I remember that. Completely."

Maxis pulled a folder with documents pertaining to the experiments from his drawer.

"I took the liberty of arranging the results from previous experiments, which were incredibly disorganized, but legible enough for Sophia and I, nonetheless. It seems positive results were minimal."

"Oh yes, I remember, the best thing I could teach one of those creatures to do was salivate on command."

"Something Pavlov executed with dogs decades ago. I believe it is time for a more direct approach. They do not seem to respond to stimuli like other observable living creatures. This may be a biological issue, which I believe is one of your specialties?"

"I have not practiced outside of the realm of Physics in years, but I would never turn down the challenge."

"Good. I believe working with the brain itself may be the key to unlocking the mind in the subjects. Perhaps decay in the frontal lobe is preventing them from responding to commands in a manner that is not only to attack. I've given a copy of these documents to Doctor Wagner and he should be up to date on the experiments by the time he arrives. You are to report the results to me as usual. Controlling the living dead may be the ticket to our permanent place in the scientific world. I am entrusting this massively important experiment with you, Edward."

"Then you must trust me when I say that the *Wunderwaffe* may **also** be one of those tickets!"

"Yes, yes, I did not forget, Edward. Go ahead."

Richtofen stood up swiftly, unlatching the case sat atop Maxis' desk, and revealing the device before Maxis' eyes. It sat cradled in a custom-shaped foam casing, and in the top half of the case was a folder containing test results. Richtofen handed Maxis the folder, before carefully lifting the *Wunderwaffe*, caressing it in his arms before taking a grip on both handles. The device's center had three outlets for Tesla bulbs which it used as ammunition, as well as a switch

to ready the weapon. It was a bulky and incredibly heavy piece of equipment, requiring two hands to hold. The under-barrel of the device was box-like, with exposed circuitry, and a wire connecting the box with a small power supply.

Maxis shifted his chair away from the desk, leaning towards the wall away from the end of the weapon. "Is the device active?"

"Nein, do not worry, Doctor Maxis. Without bulbs the firing mechanism should not activate. What you see before you is *mein* greatest work, the *Wunderwaffe* prototype. Harnessing the inherent power of electricity within Element 115, much like the electro-shock defenses, a concentrated bolt is sent directly at the target through the sights, electrocuting anything it comes into contact with and any nearby organic beings. In its current stage, it is absolutely lethal und accurate. You will find in the results that the maximum number of targets with one bolt is currently four before the effect begins to decrease in effectiveness. My goal is upwards of twenty four targets."

"Is it safe to use for the operator?"

"If the target is a safe distance away. If too close, however, there is the potential that the operator will become a part of the chain of victim... But from a distance it is perfectly safe apart from a little heat in the face. Due to its size und weight, it would be best brought into battle with two operators to carry the device und its power supply. It could also be mounted on gunships or tanks."

"You believe it would help the German war effort to invest further into the project?"

"To that I say indubitub... indutable... indubitably!"

Maxis pressed his back in his chair and peered down at the device inquisitively. "I see great potential in this weapon, Doctor. I will send a copy of these results to the Reichstag. If they have any right mind, they will want to see more from you. Excellent work, Edward."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxis. I was afraid you would take issue with how I've spent so much of my time on the *Wunderwaffe*. Do you see it going into production at our factories here at Der Riese?"

"I promise Edward, with the excellent results you've shown me today, the *Wunderwaffe* should see our production lines within the year. For now, we should focus on what the Reichstag has instructed us to do, and that is to pursue creating this army of the living dead. I will send your results as soon as it is opportune, Doctor Richtofen."

"Thank you, Doctor Maxis. This has been a lovely meeting of the minds. I bid you farewell."

Richtofen placed the device back into its case, latching it shut before hoisting it from the desk and heading towards the door, leaving behind his now cold cup of tea.

"And Edward."

"Yes, Doctor Maxis?"

"The Reichstag wants us to inform all Group 935 scientists that there will be mandatory background checks coming this month. You should have received a letter from them with the required documentation. I would suggest you look over it and clear out your box. I'm told you mail has been piling up since you've left."

"Danke. Goodbye, Doctor Maxis."

Doctor Richtofen shut the door behind him, marching towards the front entrance, smirking at the receptionist as he passed by. Opening the door to the street outside, he placed the case on the ground safely before pumping his fist into the air in exaltation. With Maxis firmly in the palm of his hands, Richtofen could begin his real work in unlocking the potential of the Moon pyramid device, which he would now shorten to M.P.D.

Arriving at the mailroom, Richtofen opened and peered into his mailbox among others next to the doorway. As Maxis had explained before, it was overflowing with letters. Edward took them in his hands, walking towards his laboratory where he would wait for this new little problem, Doctor Wagner.

The room had been cleaned heavily since his return from the Moon and Schuster's departure towards the construction of Griffin Station. Edward placed the letters on the central table, sorting through them to find any potentially urgent messages he may have missed. Most were letters from other scientists, which Edward presumed were most likely to praise and adore his work. But one in particular caught his eye. A letter from Hermann Becker, the chief Illuminati leader in Germany. Edward opened the letter to view its contents.

To our Faithful Servant, Doctor Edward Richtofen,

Since your resignation letter we received in January, the Order has reviewed your membership through due process. As you know, our code dictates that all members' resignation or acceptance into Brotherhood must be reviewed with extreme scrutiny and carefully approved or denied by all members of the Order. Your letter and the accompanying cloth bag of unwashed robes came with such short notice, many of us were stunned and frustrated with your decision.

You have proven yourself a worthy member of the Order and a loyal part of our plan, and as such we have unanimously agreed to allow your safe departure from the Order. You will, however, lose access to all Illuminati amenities and opportunities. This includes your former laboratory at Alcatraz Island, the Hanford Site, our facilities in Vienna, and our central hall in Ingolstadt. Agents of the Order will be keeping a watchful eye over your actions to ensure the safety of our secrets, but we are sure you are to be trusted as you have endured the trials of membership and taken your oath to the New Enlightenment. Attached to this letter are farewell messages from members who chose to send them with their vote to allow your resignation. As you surely know, this document and all attached documents are to be burned or shredded after reading.

Herr Becker, First Circle of the German Nations

Doctor Richtofen smirked for a moment, remembering he had sent his resignation to the Illuminati the day after he returned from the Moon, paying no mind to any potential repercussions. He knew the Order could do nothing to silence him with his level of notoriety. Amused, Doctor Richtofen looked into the attached letters from other members of the Order. One letter in particular, however, ruined his day.

Uncle Teddy,

It is with great sadness that this letter of resignation has arrived to my office today. Just this morning I thought of my father and his relationship with you as a member of the Order. The two of you never saw eye-to-eye on much. You were always very hard-headed in your ideals and very persuasive with the inner circle, and my father resented you for much of his life. I do,

however, believe he found a new respect for you shortly before his suicide. I share the sentiment with him for the most part.

It is unfortunate your laboratory under my prison will be turned over to another in the organization. I will miss your wacky antics and experiments that nearly exposed its location to the late night guardsmen under my employ. Perhaps I may sound bitter, but that I am not. It brings me great joy to see you moving on to other things that may enrich the world outside of the confines of the Order. Perhaps you and this Maxis have a better relationship than you and my father, and perhaps Group 935 will suit your needs just fine. I wish you all the best, Teddy.

Joseph Crawford, Warden of Alcatraz Prison, Second Circle of the Americas

Edward frowned, crumpling up the incessant letter and setting it aside to burn. He viewed another.

Doctor Richtofen,

I am indubitably disappointed by your actions, Doctor. You had so much potential to change the world for the better and you've squandered it by distancing yourself from the Order in the past year. We rarely received news of your discoveries and movements in Group 935's leadership, and now you have decided to resign from your position to do what exactly? "It is simply the right thing to do," is what you said, which is frankly puzzling to hear. I trust you will keep our secrets, however I do not understand your decision. When you first joined the Illuminati, you were so eager to make a change in this world for the better. You told us all that you would prefer to work in the shadows to improve humanity's overall happiness without them even knowing your name. Now you spend your time in this Group 935, run by that pompous,

self-absorbed man they call Ludvig Maxis. It seems now you only care for the glory and attention that comes with your genius. How could you abandon your obligation to the Order like this, Edward?

I do not expect an answer, as I'm sure you are continuing to distance yourself from the Order as I write this message. You would have proven such a valuable asset in taming this great war, and it is a shame to see you leave, old friend.

- Mr. P., Second Circle of the Americas

Edward scoffed at his old friend's use of code names like a child pretending to be a secret agent. No amount of shaming would make Edward regret his decision to leave on a new path. Edward only wished he had seen the letter sooner.

There Edward stood for a moment, the letter in hand, as he began to feel an aching feeling in his temples. He began to hear whispers behind him, and as he turned, there was no one, but the whispers continued to guide him out of the lab and into the hallway outside. He looked left and right, but the voices guided him left down a corridor to a laboratory two doors away, the letter still in hand. Edward knocked on the door and waited a moment as a young scientist approached, smiling before opening it.

"Doctor Richtofen! It's an honor to finally meet you."

The young doctor outstretched his hand for a handshake, but the whispers guided Richtofen elsewhere, to the older scientist in the corner, viewing something through a microscope. Richtofen approached this scientist, who raised his head to meet Doctor Richtofen's gaze. Getting closer, the scientist raised his whole body revealing a name tag, 'Dr. Novák'.

The two scientists stared at each other for a moment as the younger scientist who had opened the door backed away, returning to his work. As Edward looked into his eyes, the voices in his head grew louder before slowly silencing.

Richtofen pushed the letter from Mr. P. into the scientist's chest, who took it in his hands to look over. Richtofen leaned in, stating with his hands making air quotes, "*Mr. P.*" asked how I could abandon my obligation to the Order. Tell him and the others, "*Teddy was a liar.*"

The older scientist thought silently for a moment, placing the letter into his jacket pocket before asking, "How did you know-"

Edward cut him off as he walked out the door, saying, "*Auf Wiedersehen*, Doctor."

Attachment: Letter to the Reichstag

This letter has been translated from German to English for convenience. A scan of the original document recovered from the [LOCATION REDACTED] in Berlin, Germany on [DATE REDACTED] is attached. The original is currently in possession by the Soviet Union.

Gentlemen,

It is with the utmost urgency that I draw your attention to the lack of funding being injected into The Giant project. While I believe we are close to realizing the ultimate plan, we still have several years of development before it is ready. It would be folly to cut our expenditure so early in our development.

As you know, early tests on the DG-2 have easily outperformed expectations and we fully anticipate mass producing the Wunderwaffe within the next few years. Work on the matter transference has, however, come to a standstill. We simply do not have enough Element 115 to continue the experiments. The test subjects have survived teleportation but are currently unresponsive to commands and cannot be controlled. If we are to overcome this obstacle we need to increase the frequency and size of the experiment. To this end, I suggest we find not only a regular supply of 115, but that we also find a larger conduit to channel the energy. Our operatives in America have informed us that the US have a large supply of the element at the [LOCATION REDACTED], so time is of the essence if we are to stay ahead of them. This cannot be done if you cut the budget, nor can it be done if you insist on pressuring us into action before we are ready.

I am of course available for discussion of the matter, but in the meantime, I will continue with the work here and try to win this damned war.

Signed,

Founder and Chief Scientific Officer of Group 935, Dr. Maxis, M.D.

Chapter 11: Expansion

Town Square, Werfen, Salzburg, Austria

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

November 6th, 1940

"Doctor Richtofen is a close friend of mine."

As Doctor Maxis said these words he began to question their validity. For years, he had felt a sense of mutual admiration in their relationship, but ever since their disagreement over the MTD, things began to gradually change. Richtofen was initially put off by the idea of the German government dictating Group 935's research in exchange for funding. After his month-long hiatus and surprise return, however, he has been rather allured by the prospect of weapons research and meeting the German high command. Though Maxis was not, General Lehmkuhl seemed convinced by the statement.

"Then I am sure the two of you can coordinate control of this new facility."

The two men, dressed in heavy coats, were being escorted by armed German soldiers through the snow-trodden village. If not for the conversation keeping their minds, the cold would be nearly unbearable.

"Yes, well, perhaps I could delegate control. However, I'm not sure Richtofen could manage such an undertaking."

"You must loosen your grip in order for Group 935 to grow, Doktor Maxis. Besides, it is not quite time yet for Doktor Richtofen to take control of *Der Eisendrache*. He is needed in France while we establish a research station. The other Generals have taken quite a liking to his eh... 'üppig' personality.

Maxis grinned, "He has become quite the socialite, recently. I am sure he and your men will get along well."

The convoy trudged further through the village towards the gondola station near the mountainside. Beyond the secluded village, all that could be seen at this elevation was the beautiful, snow-capped Alps of the Austrian country, and amidst the mountains connected to the gondola station was *Der Eisendrache*: 'The Iron Dragon', a castle constructed in the 14th century that was under the control of the Austrian government and care of the down-wind village until the recent German occupation.

To their left and right were homes built to withstand the snowstorms, a majority of their occupants cozy inside. The stone homes were now plastered with German propaganda, and soldiers forcibly settled inside. The few villagers that were stood in the market square only watched silently with a grimace as the convoy passed by.

Maxis looked to each of their faces, their eyes fixated on him, as if ready to strike when the soldiers left. General Lehmkuhl took note of Maxis' unease.

"Pay them no mind, Doktor. Soon they will understand our arrival is for the best. The castle is quite far from them und heavily fortified. An uprising would not stand a chance against my men und their new ammunition, all thanks to you Doktor."

"Have the soldiers gotten used to the enhanced rounds? They've been sure to slow their rate of fire to avoid burns, yes?"

"Ja, Doktor Maxis. Training mit the rounds has proven successful. They love them. Watch. *Achtung, Müller!*"

The German soldier at the front of the escort halted, turning to the General before saluting, hand raised to the sky. "*Generaloberst!*"

"*Feuer an der Wand!*" The general pointed his finger towards the wall of a nearby church building. The soldier who received the orders smiled and raised his loaded MP-40.

Maxis yelled out. "Wait! *Halt! Halt!* Generaloberst Lehmkuhl, there could be civilians in there. The rounds will easily pierce-"

"Ja, you are correct. Stein! Peters! *Überprüfen Sie... auf Kollateralschäden.*"

The two soldiers ordered opened the door into the church and scanned for any living beings. There were none in sight.

"Now then, *fire!*"

The soldier with his MP-40 crouched into a battle stance to hold the weapon steady. He fired two short bursts of three rounds into the wall before lowering the weapon. The other soldiers in the group, Lehmkuhl, and Maxis approached the impact point, as villagers and other soldiers who heard the gunfire approached.

The stone had been blown apart at each point with such speed and power that the edges of the holes were singed due to the microscopic amounts of element 115 molded into each bullet.

"And that is just stone. You should see what your inventions can do against armor

plating!"

General Lehmkuhl patted Maxis on the back, directing the attention of the bespectacled soldiers and frustrated Austrian citizens to him.

Maxis hesitantly replied, "Oh, thank you for the demonstration. It's really Doctor Porter you should be thanking: He has perfected the enhancement process."

"I send the man my regards! We should move before the cold kills us. *Lass uns gehen!*"

The men reformed their shape around Maxis and Lehmkuhl as they pushed forward towards the gondola station just a few blocks ahead.

"Your men are learning English as instructed, yes Generaloberst?"

"Of course, Doktor! They are slow learners and quite loyal to their Fatherland, however. Why is it this is necessary, Doktor Maxis?"

"When it comes to science, I find it is most important that everyone can clearly communicate in a universal language and set of metrics. English is an excellent language for communicating research, as I learned in my time studying in London. It is simply a matter of preference and formality. You men must know in case there is a problem only they can resolve and time for translation is short."

"That is fair, Doctor Maxis. But I would consider in the future moving towards using German if Group 935's relationship with the Reichstag is to flourish. There are predictions that German will be the most used language in the world given ten more years."

"I will consider it when the time comes. I wish to make the German people proud, any way that I can."

"Das ist gut to hear, Doktor Maxis."

Now at the Gondola station, the group entered the cramped platform before the operator closed the doors and sent them up towards the castle. Though it was a small interior, there were windows on all sides to give a view of the wondrous Austrian Alps. The rising sun seemed to be cradled between a set of white-covered mountains in the distance. At a nearer mountain, just below the castle were a set of man-made platforms extended from the rock. On them were metallic structures reaching high into the air. Beneath them were tracks leading to a massive door as large as the structure itself.

Lehmkuhl placed his index finger on the glass, pointing to each of the platforms.

"Those are the rocket test sites I mentioned. In 1938, once we found this place, we were hard at work trying to develop rocket technology, from this secluded, high-altitude facility. Tests have halted, recently as we have shifted our focus to weaponry. I am hoping when your scientists are settled in you may return those sites to full operation."

Maxis gazed out upon the platforms, now able to make out the frames of the rockets within the structures. "Remarkable. I would be overjoyed to begin working again with rockets. As a boy I dreamed, one day, that the German people would be the first to reach the Moon."

Lehmkuhl looked to Maxis, somewhat off-put, before returning his gaze to the rocket pads.

"How wonderful that would be, yes. But for now, we should focus on our problems here on Earth."

Now realizing he had made a fool of himself, Maxis returned to his former composure.

"Of course. That's just the musings of a child. My own daughter has them as well. But I am focused on the here and now, Generaloberst."

"That is *wunderbar* to hear. I'm sure you've heard of our man von Braun and his research on rockets. I would suggest you contact him for any inquiries and assistance in the future."

"Thank you. Today marks a historic day for not only Group 935 and Germany, but the world at large. I hope Der Eisendrache proves to be as valuable an asset to us as Der Riese. I am thankful you and the others in the Reichstag received my letter months ago and have agreed to assist Group 935 in expanding its horizons around the world."

"Yes, about your new facilities. I've been meaning to discuss with you a certain matter, privately. When we arrive, I will meet you in your living quarters to discuss when you are ready."

"Absolutely, Generaloberst."

As the gondola came to a stop at the top of the line, it began to rock back and forth due to the momentum before finally settling and the doors opening. The escort fanned out to allow the General and Maxis through. The rocky underbelly of the castle had been converted into a fully functioning Gondola station with power generators buzzing and sending power throughout the facility. Faintly, above on a scaffolding towards the interior of the castle, Doctor Maxis could hear the distinct choral sound of Anton Reicha's *Requiem*, as well as laughing from many different sources, including one cackle that was certainly from Edward Richtofen.

General Lehmkuhl led Maxis up a set of metal stairs towards the source of the sounds. Passing a large beam connected to the generators, they entered a rocky formation that led directly into the castle's undercroft, passing through a metal gate and passing a cot against the wall.

"Here is where the Gondola operator sleeps und... ah, there is Doktor Richtofen!"

The medieval design of the undercroft took Maxis' breath away, with the intricate tombs and markings along the walls signifying an era long past. Yet here to take his attention away was Edward Richtofen, wearing a light coat for the warmer temperature of the castle's undercroft, his right foot raised and resting on a wooden chair. To his right, a table with a gramophone playing the contemporary music, and several German men in military uniform toasting the new Group 935 facility.

Now taking note of Lehmkuhl and Maxis' arrival, Richtofen raised both his hands in the air, one holding a glass of champagne, before shaking hands and offering another glass to the General. The two exchanged a joke and a laugh as Maxis soaked in the glorious stone architecture around him. Again, he was pulled away from his wonder by Richtofen, who took his shoulder in his hand and pulled Maxis to turn towards him.

"Doctor Maxis, you've finally arrived!"

Looking back towards the crowd, then around the room, he turned back to Maxis.

Richtofen asked no one in particular, "Where is General Amsel?! Doctor Maxis you have to see this, it's like looking in a mirror!"

"That's alright, Edward. Where is Doctor Wagner?"

"Oh, yes, my little assistant is helping unload the shipment to the labs. He's probably scurrying around in those little squeaking boots of his! Oh how I hate those boots... "

"Edward, he is more than your assistant. I vouch for him as a valuable scientist. If you believe you should hold any sort of power in Group 935 you should be more amicable to its

members."

Edward paused for a moment, his eyes wandering as if listening for something. He began to cringe before refocusing his attention back to the conversation.

"Yes, amicable. That is just what I was being towards these men from the Reichstag. I'll tell you, I expected them to be much more, I suppose I could say, *obtuse*. But they are quite fun once you get to know them!"

"I can see that. This is a day for celebration, I suppose."

Edward patted Ludvig on the shoulder, "Don't fret, Doctor Maxis, I have not lost sight of what lies ahead for our research. We have a great future in this castle. I hope to make a home here once my work at the front is over with."

Doctor Richtofen grinned, handing Maxis a glass of champagne before raising his own for a toast.

"To improving the human condition!"

Maxis let his guard down, smirking and raising a glass himself.

"To improving the human condition!"

The two men drank from their glasses, before Maxis spoke up.

"How is Samantha taking the move? She must be very upset."

"Ah, your little girl. She's fitting in quite well. Her room is now filled with her belongings; Wagner saw to that while I was mingling. She asks so many questions, just one after the other, *yak yak yak yak yak yak!* No wonder you let Sophia take care of her all day! For her sake I hope Sam makes some new friends."

"Yes, well, Sophia will not be here for nearly a week as she gathers my belongings. We are visiting Japan to tour the Rising Sun Facility. The Reichstag was able to negotiate full control for Group 935 in exchange for a joint operation with Division 9 at another facility in Europe. The location is yet to be decided, but word is that they are interested in somewhere in Berlin."

"Ah, the Rising Sun Facility. What a wonderful... swamp. Will Division 9's scientists remain active there?"

"Many of its staff will stay behind while others relocate."

"Those Japanese are very protective of their work, I'm surprised they would even want to collaborate! Luckily for you, I know Doctor Okitsu very well. Say *hallo* to him for me!"

Richtofen downed the last of his champagne. "One last thing, Doctor Maxis... speak with Lehmkuhl about the *Wunderwaffe*. If he has any sense, it will see production immediately."

"I will discuss it with him, Edward."

Edward nodded to Maxis before returning to the crowd to further mingle.

Maxis turned to the wall behind him, with an intricate tomb leading up to the ceiling. Though cracked and worn, the stones making up the crevices were deliberately and efficiently aligned to form a beautiful monument to who could only be the King ahead of this castle.

From behind, the bellowing laugh of General Lehmkuhl took Maxis' attention as he wrapped his free arm around Maxis' neck, his other hand with a full glass of champagne.

"Ah-hah! Doktor Maxis, there is plenty more to stare at around this castle than a hole in the wall filled with old bones. Perhaps another time we can look at it all like two aging historians at *Museumsinsel*. But for now, Doctor Maxis, let us head to the living quarters to have our

discussion, *ja*?"

"Of course, lead the way, Generaloberst."

The two men rested their glasses on a nearby table, before departing to a nearby stone archway left of the tomb. As they were nearly gone, Doctor Richtofen called out to the two of them.

"Off to bed, you two?"

The crowd began to laugh heartily, one general even spilling his champagne as he leaned over to hold his chest. After a moment, General Lehmkuhl joined in the laughter as he and the stone-faced Doctor Maxis walked through the archway to a set of stairs, passing crates of ammunition and armor.

Now away from the crowd, Lehmkuhl leaned in towards Maxis, "I'm not sure what he actually meant by that, but by the way he said it, I am sure it was *sehr lustig*!"

They opened a wooden door leading out into the cold, trudging forward to another set of stairs.

Maxis sighed as he said it, "Yes, he is quite the character. At least you and the others in the Reichstag can find some value in your relationship to him."

"Ease up, Doktor. War is a dark time for all of us. We could all use a little joy."

"Perhaps. My assistant, Sophia, says I tend to be very... terse when I am frustrated."

"What you need is some time away. Not now, obviously. We need you to steer the ship, so to speak. But someday you should take that pretty *Frau* and your daughter somewhere not so cold."

"Sophia and I have a purely work-related relationship. I don't wish to pursue anything further."

At the top of the staircase that hugged a stone wall, they were now in a higher tower with a brick fireplace against the wall and some crates in need of unpacking.

Lehmkuhl smirked, tapping his fingers against Maxis' chest.

"Come now, old boy. I heard your phone call as soon as we arrived in Austria to check up on her. There is something there, or perhaps I am an old... cold fool."

The two men exited through another doorway to some wooden scaffolding connecting it to the center of the castle where the living quarters had been designated.

"She is beautiful and I enjoy her company, though Samantha does not feel the same way. There is no replacement for her mother, and I know this will always be so."

"Loss must be quite a strain on both of you. My condolences, Herr Doktor. Just give the thought some time. Time heals most scars."

Now they had finally arrived at the living quarters, guarded by a thick titanium door. Lehmkuhl knocked three times on the door, and rubbed his gloved hands together as two armed men let them in.

The entrance hall was a beautiful interior design like that of a quaint cabin on the countryside with a spot of wealthy amenities. Fine art lined the walls and flowers grew in pots on exquisite wooden drawers contrasting the bitterness outside, and the stained glass windows depicted knights in ornate armor.

"What a lovely living space. I am humbled by the craftsmanship of your men."

"Oh, this is none of our work, no. The former villager in charge of caring for the castle is the one who imported this artwork. All except the one at the end of the hall there."

"Oh my."

Near the end of the hall was a large, golden framed painting of a man in red armor wielding a sword and sat upon a throne. At his side were two wolves.

"A beautiful piece, is it not? Well, it is a recreation of the original placed here by the former owner. Before we arrived he sent the original and several others away, and we have been trying to track them down..."

"Where is the owner? I would love to compliment him myself for this wonderful arrangement."

Lehmkuhl looked off, distant.

"Well, he... is being held in captivity. You must understand, he was very aggressive when we took control of the castle, and it would not be safe for him to know what we are doing here. Unfortunately, it had to be this way."

"I... see."

"Speaking of safety on account of secrecy... I have been meaning to have this discussion with you, away from any of your scientists because it is for your ears only, for now."

"What is it?"

"After the letter you sent and the results from your tests on the, eh... what was it you called them again?"

"Undead. Brought back into living from their death."

"*Ja, ja*, very unsettling, that name. However, the prospect of an army of men previously thought lost? That sent ripples throughout the Reichstag. We came to a decision that this project must be pursued further. Much more than those eh..." Lehmkuhl placed his arms to his sides, moving them shortly back and forth, "Those gigantic, metal machines you sent designs for. Or, or that *Wunderwaffe*. 'Wonder Weapon' is a bit presumptuous, hm?"

"The *Wunderwaffe* DG-2. In person, Richtofen's invention is very impressive."

"I am sure, Doktor Maxis, but is it right for Germany? It does not seem cost-effective or a definitively powerful device against more than infantry. Perhaps with more tests, it will become more promising. If we are to fund the production of a new weapon for our army, it must be cost effective und able to be held by our ground troops. The *Wunderwaffe* is much too cumbersome. But this undead army idea, that may be the key to winning this damned war!"

"Thank you, Generaloberst."

"But it will not help us in the slightest if the Allies learn of the idea. As you have said before, the Americans have a supply of Element 115 at their base in Nevada. The Japanese have their own at the Rising Sun Facility. There is no doubt that there are more deposits we do not know about. When the Americans decide to end their support from the shadows and join this war, if we are not careful they will have an army of 'undead' of their own."

"This is true, but how can I help?"

"As you know, this castle, as well as the Rising Sun Facility are now under Group 935 control. But, the Reichstag has set aside three more new facilities."

"Three more new facilities!"

Maxis raised his voice, partly in excitement, but also in fear as the prospect of more stress began to rise into his vision.

"Sh, sh... These facilities are to remain secret from anyone whom you cannot trust completely. The first is an Asylum, Wittenau Sanatorium. In exchange for your control of the Rising Sun Facility, Division 9 will be partial owners of this Asylum. It is outside Berlin, somewhat, and with plenty of living patients to perform testing. Another will be in Siberia, near Tunguska. The Soviets have no idea the amount of 115 present there nor its potential. On the outside it will appear to be a dock and a lighthouse along an icy shoreline. Beneath the surface, however, your men will work."

Ideas and fears began racing and colliding with one another in Maxis' head as he contemplated the additional workload of new facilities.

Lehmkuhl continued, "The last and most secretive facility is in a theater within Berlin. Things must be kept very quiet there, but to the public, the theater appears to be closed and being permanently renovated. From this location, the men in charge at the Reichstag, and the Führer himself will be able to view your progress in unlocking the mind first-hand. As you will be working directly with the Reichstag, we will be funding all of Group 935's research for the foreseeable future."

Maxis rubbed his temples, looking side to side, thinking of the responsibility. "My god... thank you, Generaloberst. The others at the Reichstag and the Führer have by greatest thanks."

"It is not a problem, Doktor Maxis. But as I stated, it is imperative that you do not share this with anyone until we have a definitive list of trusted candidates to transfer to these facilities.

With such proximity to the Reichstag, the cinema in particular becoming exposed could be disastrous. When you are eventually transferred, you will not be able to bring your daughter, unfortunately. A child is prone to speaking out of school, as they say."

"I understand, but I trust all of my scientists. I have met them all, and what about the background checks your men have undertaken?"

"They have been successful, *ja*. But reconnaissance and espionage have changed drastically since our time, Herr Maxis. Anyone could be an agent of the enemy during war. A few of your men have stood out to me as strange. Perhaps I am wrong, but, I have an eye for these things. Novak, Sauers... as well as others. My point is, do not assume you can trust old friends."

From down the hall, Maxis could hear the pitter-patter of small feet on wood, and came face-to-face with his daughter, Samantha, as she approached him for a hug. The two embraced for a few moments, Lehmkuhl even joyed by the exchange.

Lehmkuhl leaned down to speak directly to her, "Samantha... it is very nice to meet you. How old are you now?"

"Six. Daddy missed my birthday yesterday..."

Maxis looked into her eyes, saddened that he could not have been there due to a meeting at Der Riese delaying his arrival.

"I'm sorry, Samantha. I... I promise we will celebrate. You and I... and Sophia... and Edward."

With each name, Samantha's face soured further, "Daddy, Eddie was very angry with

me."

"Why is that, honey?"

"I was looking for my Teddy, and I thought I found him in Eddie's room. But he yelled at me and said that was his Teddy and he wouldn't share."

General Lehmkuhl lost his composure, laughing with a wheeze as he decided to leave the room with the new-found information.

"And did you find Teddy?"

"Yes, he was under my bed."

"Good."

"Daddy?"

"Yes, honey?"

Maxis gently took Samantha's hand, walking her to her room.

"Where do dogs come from?"

"Dogs? Well, as puppies, they come from their mother."

"I like puppies."

"Me too, honey."

"Daddy?"

"Yes?"

"Can I have a dog?"

Part II – Descent Into Madness

14 Months Later...

Chapter 12: Faithful Servant

Approaching Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr Edward Richtofen

January 11th, 1942

"Und then he said he got her... wait for it... *a dog!*" Richtofen held his chest, the riotous laughter bellowing out. With his other hand he slapped his own knee, leaning forward then left and right from a combination of glee and the shaking vehicle. The military truck they were in had nearly reached the front gates of Der Riese, marked by the signature uneven gravel road that stretched across Lower Silesia.

Across from Doctor Richtofen was Doctor Wagner, his expression one of emptiness and indifference. This did not prevent Richtofen's uproar, however, just as it had not in the five hour ride up to this point.

"But it gets better, if you can believe it! Then, Doctor Maxis told me the dog he got for his daughter... was from the Animal Testing Lab!" Richtofen continued to guffaw, muttering as he did, "A lab mutt..."

Richtofen's face was now red with laughter, continuing well past the revelation's worth. Wagner continued to appear unamused, gazing out of the truck bed towards the road barely lit by the sunrise.

Once the cackling subsided, Doctor Wagner spoke up with his rebuttal, "Doctor Richtofen, Samantha has been asking her father for a dog for years. It seems like a very thoughtful gift to me... "

Edward wiped a tear that had formed in his eye. "Oh, Hans, children do not know what they really want! When I was a boy, all I ever wanted was to meet my parents."

Wagner's eyes lit up as he looked to Richtofen, now aware the man before him may have a human connection to be made after all.

"What a foolish pursuit that would have been! I did not get what I wanted, and look at me now! Everything is perfect... "

Hans Wagner again returned his gaze outside, with no further words to exchange.

The truck began to slow as the convoy approached the gates before stopping completely for inspection. During the lull, Richtofen would take an opportunity to pen a diary entry.

"January 11th, 1942

Dear diary,

Construction of Griffin Station has nearly reached completion, as I was informed just last week. Our plans seem to be advancing on schedule, due in large part to the efforts of my old friend, Doctor Schuster. I should ask him how he is doing; He seems rather stressed every time I hear from him. I admire his dedication to our cause, and I would only trust him with this task knowing he wants to make the world a better place just as much as I do. I have considered making him the head of the station, but I'm afraid he is not qualified to lead such an operation. Perhaps he will be heartbroken when I make the announcement, but as a friend, I only hope that

he will understand."

Voices began to creep into Edward's mind, gnawing at him to look up from his journal towards Doctor Wagner. Wagner was holding test data from their time together in France, his wretched little hand marking through and scribbling on the sides to make it more "presentable" for Doctor Maxis. Richtofen said nothing, for that would only mean a stern lecture from Maxis and suspicions of Edward's treachery.

"He's Maxis' puppet." "Kill him." "Just a slave to his will." "End his worthless life, Edward."

Edward rubbed his temples and returned his attention to the diary to stow his frustrations. Recently the voices had become far more aggressive, and one loud, violent one in particular had filled his thoughts. Even in sleep, the voices would interrupt Edward's dreams, promising power in his future. Edward could not be sure if they could be trusted, but the potential that the pyramid holds is very, very real, and he only hoped to learn more once the station is complete.

"Doctor Wagner continues to be a thorn in my side. All he ever wants to discuss is his love for Maxis, his respect for Maxis, and I hate it. I hate it so very much. I cannot contact Griffin Station during daylight hours while Wagner skulks around. I have considered stealing his work boots to end the irritating squeak that follows him everywhere he goes, but I would rather hear him coming at all times. It is becoming harder to hear anything outside of my own thoughts anymore."

Anyhow, today we are joining Doctor Maxis for a very late birthday party for his incessant daughter. I suppose a consolation for my orphanhood is that I did not have Maxis for a

father. I brought a gift, as Maxis requested. Whether Samantha should like it or not, he did not specify. More importantly, I am reaching the final stages of the Wunderwaffe DG-2 prototype. Before Maxis leaves for Japan, I hope to suggest its mass-production to him once again. This factory has seen nothing like the DG-2 before."

The convoy had begun moving again towards the interior campus of Der Riese, coming to a halt on the street outside the laboratory buildings. German soldiers stationed at the facility unloaded the truck bed of supplies before assisting Wagner and Richtofen out of the vehicle.

Wagner came to his feet on the concrete below, straightening his lab coat, which Richtofen had forced him to leave on, as they had left the lab in a hurry.

"Finally, we are home."

Richtofen rose to his feet, straightening his own lab coat which had a large, bloody blotch on the chest fresh from the night prior. Carefully, he unloaded a case that held components for his *Wunderwaffe* DG-2 prototype, which he would assemble here at Der Riese. Carelessly, he also grabbed a box wrapped in bright blue wrapping paper with a poorly-tied bow on top, as Wagner grabbed a similar, more festive box.

"Let's get this over with, Doctor Wagner, so we can return to work."

"Of course, Doctor Richtofen... "

Richtofen led the way in search of Laboratory C5555, in the building across the street. He climbed a staircase, Wagner in tow, up towards the fifth floor. At the end of the hallway was room 5555 and mounted by a nail in the wall was a note stating, *"Party inside, do not disturb."*

Richtofen straightened himself and dusted off his shoulders before turning the knob to

open the door, a smile plastered on his face all the while.

What he revealed was the sterile laboratory space, its tables cleared and adorned with toys and one orange balloon attached to a table's leg. Scattered around the room were about twenty people, many of them in work attire and a few with pointed party hats on their heads. The center table had an assortment of colored boxes at one side, with a small white cake and candles at the left side. Leaned at the center of the table facing towards the wall was Doctor Maxis.

Richtofen and Wagner entered the room, closing the door behind as Maxis, now facing away, called out behind himself bluntly, "You're late!"

Maxis turned around, his expression inflamed and movements swift. He harshly closed a manila folder of documents and set them aside as he looked into Edward's eyes. "Doctor."

Maxis marched forward as Richtofen cautiously moved further into the room, his expression somewhat confused. "... Doctor? Is there a problem?"

Now inches away, Maxis stopped, staring straight at Edward as the two were at the same eye-level.

"The problem, Edward, lies in your timing. This party was already late when I planned it, but you've continued to set it back further and further."

"Well, as you can see, Doctor Maxis, I have been hard at work..." Richtofen motioned to the blood stains on his lab coat.

"All this time to prepare and you show up dressed like that. Put your uniform in the locker and your gift on the table. I will let Sophia know the party can finally begin now that the last guests have arrived."

"My apologies, Doctor- "

Maxis moved Richtofen aside before approaching Wagner, raising his hand for a handshake.

"Doctor Wagner, how did the ride treat you?"

"It was quite uneventful, I'm afraid, and frankly tiring. But it is worth it to be here again. It is good to see you, Ludvig."

"The feeling is mutual. How was the research in France?"

"Results are promising, Doctor. I will give you the full, annotated report after the party."

"Excellent. Would you care for a drink?"

As the two haughty men mingled, Richtofen fought the urge to lash out, gritting his teeth as he approached the table filled with gifts. He set the gift down before stepping towards the lockers against the back wall, where Doctor Porter was examining his own research, a lopsided party hat attached to a string on his head. Richtofen opened the locker, paying no mind to Porter, and removing his lab coat to replace with another.

Porter did, however, notice Richtofen, as he looked up from his work.

"Ah, Doctor Richtofen. You're just the man whose opinion I need right now."

"Really? Just me?"

"With your *Wunderwaffe* being such a success, I have been inspired to work on a 115-powered weapon along with Doctor Maxis. We seized designs for the weapon from Division 9, but it lacks a proper power conduit as well as many other requirements for a prototype to be developed. We have considered the use of cold fusion technology, but for a weapon of this size,

that seems to be impossible at the moment."

Edward looked over the designs from Japanese scientists sketched into a notebook Porter held. It appeared to be a very portable design, able to be held with only one hand like a handgun. It would fire bursts of plasma that would vaporize anything it came into contact with.

"I wish I could help, I really do. Plasma is not quite my specialty. That will require quite a bit of power, and from quite a small package."

"What about your DG-2? It is meant to be held by one man, is it not?"

Cross, Richtofen shut the locker door and turned to Porter.

"The DG-2 is still a sizable piece of equipment. More like a rifle than a silly little handgun. It is far more practical, Doctor Porter."

"I'm sure we will find a power solution. Thank you, anyway, Doctor Richtofen."

Edward bowed slightly, rolling his eyes as he looked away and carried his bag of equipment to his seat at the left-hand side of the room. Others simply mingled or looked over their work as they ate veal cut and provided by the campus butcher. It was all they ever had to eat in this concrete hell.

A minute or so passed before there was a knock at the door and Maxis motioned for everyone to get into position near the central table as he turned out the lights. The party now ready, Maxis nodded his head towards Doctor Porter, who called out, "Come in!"

The handle turned and the door inched open, as a small silhouetted figure ambled slowly into the room. A larger figure behind reached out to turn on the light switch, the note that was on the door in their other hand. Young Samantha stood in shock as the gathering of old men in the

room shouted, "*Surprise!*"

Now seven years old, she was initially startled, moving backwards towards the young woman behind her, Sophia. Realizing this was the party her father had made for her, however, Samantha's expression turned to joy, her eyes widening and jaw dropping as she looked to the decoration, the cake, and the gifts in her honor. She skipped over to her father, who was now crouching as the two embraced. Richtofen checked his pocket watch: 9:02.

"Daddy, I almost thought I was going to have a party!"

"I know Samantha. Things have become very busy around here, but I would never, ever forget your special day."

"When can I open my presents? Can we now?"

"Of course, but once you see what I got for you, you may want to wait to open the rest."

The others in the crowd smiled, happy for the father and his daughter. Richtofen chuckled to himself, placing his face in his hands.

Sophia left the room for a minute, returning with audio recorder and rolling a large box with holes in the side on a cart. Samantha began to jump up and down, eagerly anticipating the gift from her father.

Sophia placed the recorder on the table, and turned the box around to reveal the mesh cage door, and behind it, a resting German Shepard mix.

Samantha continued to bounce, restless and joyful. Richtofen started to wheeze, attempting to silence himself as he laughed into his hand. Maxis did not notice, but Wagner did, who scolded Richtofen.

Sophia opened the cage, placing a bone on the floor and whistling to the dog inside. The dog opened its eyes, slowly lifted itself up, and skulked towards the bone before sniffing it and laying back down to chew on it.

"Is it a boy or a girl, Daddy?"

"She is a girl."

Maxis motioned to Sophia who began to fiddle with the recording device. Samantha crouched near the dog, petting her ears and rolling her palm across the fur on her back, and she did not seem to mind.

Maxis kneeled down near them. "Now, you must be very diligent with her, Samantha. Owning a dog is a great responsibility."

"Yes, father. Oh, I love her."

"You must feed her every day, and walk her, and be very careful when you play with her. You know she's going to have puppies?"

Samantha's eyes lit up, as she looked back towards her father in disbelief.

"Really? Can I keep the puppies too, father?"

"We'll see, Samantha. One step at a time."

Samantha began to rub the dog's belly, who seemed to enjoy the love and attention as it rolled over and stuck its tongue outward.

"I will name her Fluffy."

"Fluffy? That is a beautiful name, honey."

At the nearby table Sophia was tinkering with the device, and finally deactivated it.

Maxis stood back to his feet. "Thank you, Sophia."

"It was my pleasure, Doctor. She is so happy."

Face red with laughter, Richtofen shook his head, attending to the plate of veal on the table.

Maxis knelt down to face Samantha, who was overjoyed with her new companion.

"Would you like to open the rest of your presents now, or would you like to spend some time with Fluffy first?"

"I want to pet Fluffy first. She is so happy when I scratch her like this!"

"That's wonderful, honey. Let me know when you are ready."

Maxis stood back up and turned around, his eyes now fixed on Richtofen, his expression far more stern.

"Edward. Doctor Wagner told me the two of you made great advancements in your research. Unlocking the secrets of the mind may be key to winning this war, you know."

Richtofen replied as he chewed the meat on his plate, "Yes, you will find that living things are far more cooperative when being cut open than your undead. Through studying their minds, perhaps we will be able to better understand these zombies..."

"You know how I despise that word, Edward... I will review the results with you after the party. But, quickly, I did want to brief you on something all Group 935 scientists will need to know in the near future. Perhaps you can help the new recruits coming this week become acquainted."

Maxis led Richtofen towards the corner of the room, where a table along with something

far larger was concealed by a green tarp. Maxis unveiled the larger object: It was a boxy computer with an elevated keypad and a round screen at the top that had green back-lighting.

Maxis leaned down to power on the computer, as the screen lit up and began relaying data. The simple screen displayed several lines of machine information followed by a blinking green line to denote where information could be input.

"This is the *Datenbediensteter*, or Data Servant. The project is nearing completion, and will see a paperless network of data is established between all of our facilities. You will be able to log in to the Servant using your own set of credentials, input test information, and send messages to other scientists. It is truly remarkable."

At the first screen, Maxis steadily typed out his ID in the system, '*lmaxis*'. On the next line, he quickly typed a set of characters that appeared on the screen as a series of asterisks. Richtofen took note of Maxis' keystrokes, inputting into his memory the password: '*hilda32*'.

The lines of characters faded away as a new line appeared, reading, '*Hallo Welt!*'

Richtofen waiting a moment, before sarcastically uttering, "*Wunderbar.*"

Maxis rolled his eyes upon noticing Edward's reaction, stating, "Much of the functionality is hidden from view for the moment. It is nearly complete and ready for the first file to be input. Doctor Porter and I have tested with it minimally, but Doctor Novak is the programmer of the Data Servant. Any concerns or inquiries should go through him."

"Doctor Novak?"

"Yes, I don't know if you've met. His office is two doors away from mine."

Edward remembered Novak, the spook sent by the Illuminati to spy on him, "I may pay

him a visit or two. This technology seems very... complicated. Surely it will not completely replace audio logs or the simple written word?"

"This technology is far more secure than either of those forms of recording. In times of war, our security is a matter of life and death. All Group 935 scientists will need to become acquainted with the Data Servant as soon as possible."

"I suppose I will have to try to become accustomed, then. In the meantime, Doctor Maxis, I've nearly completed-"

"If this is about the DG-2-"

"Of course it is about the DG-2!"

"We can discuss this during work hours, through an appointment with Sophia. I don't have all the time in the world."

"Be that as it may, Doctor, this project is worth your time. My prototype is nearly complete, and it seeks to blow our other weapon projects out of the water! Sky high! You will not regret hearing me out, Doctor."

"Later, Edward."

"Fine, Ludvig, in either case, I must return to my work immediately. I hope I served my time at your party long enough."

"It was not long at all, actually. Samantha hasn't even opened her presents yet."

"Then let's get the opening started! I'm sure she cannot be too busy with the lab mutt. All it does is lie there and drool on the ground!"

Maxis irately motioned to Samantha to approach them, after they had reached the table

full of presents.

"Honey, Doctor Richtofen must return to his work. Could you open his present now, dear?"

"Yes daddy..."

Edward pulled the blue box from the table, handing it firmly to Samantha. She pulled the bow off of the box, ripping the paper, before revealing what was inside. She recoiled in horror before attempting to reach inside.

Maxis appeared stunned as Richtofen nodded, his face one of child-like glee and nostalgic memories.

In Samantha's hands was a stuffed, brown monkey about the size of her teddy bear. By the feel of the fur, the skin was clearly that of a real monkey, its face frozen in horror, mouth agape and screaming. In its eye sockets, its real eyes had been removed and replaced with plastic ones that protruded out in shock. A striped piece of cloth had been cut and re-purposed into a makeshift shirt for the stuffed monkey.

"It's so ugly! I..."

Continuing to smile, Richtofen replied, "You hate it! That's alright, I am sure he will start to grow on you once you give him some time. The little monkey can be your new best friend!"

Samantha could not bear to look the eternally screaming primate in the eyes, and she held it at arms length away from herself as she lowered it back into the box. Maxis was still gobsmacked, and looked to Richtofen as if he held any answers.

Samantha closed the top on the box. "Thank you, Eddie..."

"Bitte! I really should be going... "

Maxis took the box, and placing his hand on Samantha's shoulder, he guided her away back towards her dog, not speaking a word to Richtofen as he did so. Edward picked up his bag, and without drawing the attention of Doctor Wagner, he slipped out of the door into the hallway.

Free at last, he headed to the stairs, descending to the first floor and outside. He checked his watch again: 9:36. Now would be a good time to read the mail that has accumulated over the past year.

Edward approached another laboratory building, entering through the front and making his way to the mailroom. Reaching into his own box he pulled out a stack of letters. Strangely, however, there was a note on the top. Richtofen headed towards his lab on the second floor, shutting the door and locking it before placing the note down to read it.

"To faithful servant, the seed has been planted, observe and report, Maxis must not know."

Richtofen knew immediately the origin of the note. It seemed the Illuminati believed that Richtofen would still serve them. Doctor Novak created the Data Servant to collect Group 935's research, and Maxis willingly fell right into their trap.

Edward shredded the note, discarding the pieces in a bin. Edward made a vow that he would serve no one any longer. The Illuminati were fools if they believed Richtofen would have a change of heart.

He would not tell Maxis. Not for the Order's sake, but for his own personal gain. In his diary entry, Richtofen penned the password he had remembered from earlier: *'hilda32'*. Perhaps

the Data Servant could serve Edward's needs as well.

"He hides something from you Edward. Him and his stooges. Maxis. Wagner. Porter.

None of them are to be trusted. They have been working against you for years!"

"You've told me this many times, yes."

"You will not understand. Not until it is too late and they have slit your throat, Edward.

They are better off dead men."

"The station is nearing completion... I need more time."

"Time you do not have!"

"Please! Stop yelling... I will do as you say, if you just... Soon we will open the gateway, and finally you will be free."

"And you will ascend to Agartha!"

"Yes... yes, I know. The Aether's power... the dimensions... I am honored that you have chosen me, my lord."

Chapter 13: Upon This Rock...

Dr. Richtofen's Office, Griffin Castle, Werfen, Salzburg, Austria

Dr. Edward Richtofen

February 1st, 1942

The ticking of Richtofen's wrist-watch was deafening through the silent office, where he stood lording over the telephone awaiting a call from Doctor Maxis to discuss the *Wunderwaffe* DG-2. Fifty-two minutes had passed since the time Maxis was scheduled to call. What a waste of time, Edward thought. He had delayed the grand unveiling of the MPD to his colleagues until an hour after the call with Maxis that seemed not to be coming.

Richtofen pondered for a moment: What could Maxis be doing at this time? No doubt, it had little to do with the research he was so adamant would save Group 935. Nay, it was likely an intimate conversation that spiraled out of control with his little girl-friend, Sophia. Possibly, he was entertaining the little brat he called a daughter. Even more fruitless, perhaps he was begging the Reichstag for more financial aid. Unlike Edward, Maxis knew little about getting those maniac bureaucrats to do what he wanted. All they required was a sense of humor and a relatable personality to bounce their large egos off of. Maxis is far too obtuse and abrasive to be the face of Group 935, and as such, all of its members have suffered. Soon, however, things will be changing.

While he awaited his phone call in the desolate, miniature office space assigned to him at the castle, which his team referred to as Eagle's Nest, Richtofen reviewed his notes regarding the MPD. Using Groph's prior research and personal literature, Edward was able to pin down the meanings of some of the symbols inscribed onto the stainless rim of the pyramid. While many of the phrases remain untranslatable, a common motif in the lettering was the Vrilya symbol for "Gateway". As he suspected, the pyramid likely serves as a gateway to another dimension beyond human understanding: The Aether, otherwise known as Agartha in many ancient texts. This realm beyond is unexplored by humanity, and judging by what the voices have told Edward, it holds powers of unimaginable proportion begging to be unlocked.

This unlocking would prove to be Edward's, nay, mankind's greatest undertaking. An immense amount of power must be required to open such a gateway, and for the powers present in the Aether to be fully unlocked, one must create a rift between dimensions. According to a series of journals from disgraced scientists who have pursued this dream, the Earth's core may be the key to opening such a rift to connect this dimension to the Aether.

On a page of his diary, Edward drew out sketches for antenna-like structures, which he dubbed Global Polarization Devices. Such devices, when activated in unison, would reveal the rift to whomever resides within the Aether. If all goes according to Richtofen's plan, it will be him awaiting the rift's opening. Humanity is counting on his success, and they do not even know it.

Step one of the plan, however, must be opening the MPD. Some clues have presented themselves to Edward in the construction on the Moon's surface. Embedded in the soil was an

ancient Vril artifact that nearly destroyed the crew's drill. A black, intricately-designed orb, which Edward referred to as an egg, began to levitate into the air after its uncovering. Attempting to view it closer, however, caused it to move away. It always seemed to gravitate towards the circular panel at the front-facing side of the pyramid. If it contacted the concave center of the circle, it would spark and the pyramid would begin to hum.

Just below the center of the circle there was also a slot in the shape of a curved rod. Upon further research, Richtofen had discovered it matched the shape of a Vril Rod, a conduit for massive amounts of energy used to power entire cities. Perhaps finding this rod may prove to be key in using the pyramid to its full potential.

All of these plans and theories would have been years down the line if not for Groph's outside research during his time at Group 935. His appointment as the head of Griffin Station and the one to discover how to unlock the MPD was completely justified. If only Edward and the others had seen the truth sooner, perhaps the rift would be open already, and this war would have never started.

Richtofen looked to the phone once more, insuring that it was still running by placing the receiver to his ear and hearing the tone. Maxis had failed science once again. Richtofen placed the phone back, and raised himself out of his chair. He placed his diary back into the breast pocket of his lab coat, and the documents regarding Griffin Station and Vril inside his filing cabinet. Checking his watch once again, he decided he must arrive at Griffin Station soon for the ceremony to begin.

Walking through the doorway, Richtofen entered the old stone section of the castle's

undercroft, passing nearby empty laboratories. Every scientist Richtofen had assigned to work with him at Griffin Castle was now awaiting his arrival on the Moon. Since Maxis had decided to give him control of this facility, only his most loyal colleagues would be chosen to work within Eagle's Nest, as they would correspond with his Moon base. Still, there were provisions in place should Maxis or one of his men pay a visit to the castle. The single MTD on-site was hidden away in a room accessible through one stone entrance that could be closed inconspicuously via a lever. Also, all computer systems corresponding with Griffin Station could be reverted to their original operating systems temporarily during any visitations.

One empty laboratory caught Richtofen's attention, in which one of the Data Servants was still powered on. Previously, Edward had avoided using Maxis' credentials to access the Data Servant, as Doctor Wagner had continued to follow him around since he was assigned by Doctor Maxis. With Wagner sent away to Berlin on an errand, this would prove an opportune time to access the system.

Edward entered the laboratory, typing in '*lmaxis*', pressing the enter key, and then typing '*hilda32*' for the password. The top of the screen read, "*Willkommen!*" Two options presented themselves for selection: Personal Files and Server Mail. Richtofen began by perusing Maxis' personal files, starting from the first day the Data Servant's system was finalized. The very first test file consisted of only text written in German, reading:

"Greetings,

*I am Ludvig Maxis, today is 20 January 1942. My daughter has a dog, its name is Fluffy.
This is File 1, for storage in the data servant. I trust in its success."*

Unsurprisingly, his other personal files were just as innocuous. A majority simply cataloged tests using Element 115 and prototype devices Group 935 had been working on that Richtofen already knew about, from Maxis and Porter's Ray Gun development, tests on the undead, and developments in the weapon augmentation program. What was strange, however, was that a majority of the files were typed completely in German. While German is his first language, Maxis has been quite particular that Group 935 scientists learn English and use it exclusively in their reports. The Reichstag men Edward had spoken to seemed to show distaste for this policy. This all pointed to these files being written to be sent to the Reichstag by Maxis.

A revelation troubled Edward: None of these files even mentioned the *Wunderwaffe* in any form despite the repeated attempts to have Maxis forward the results to the Reichstag. *Just what else has Maxis been lying about?*

Richtofen backed out to the home screen, and accessed Maxis' personal mail server. The screen scrawled out a series of message titles and recipient names. He scrolled to the bottom of the list where the first message sent resided. The first few messages were to Doctor Novak regarding problems with the Data Servant to be fixed. Further up was a series of mail to members of the Reichstag, and attached were the files Edward had sifted through. Again, a majority of the mail was innocuous, but a single subject caught Edward's eye near the top of the list: *“**REQUESTING FURTHER INFORMATION REGARDING [FAUST]**”*

Edward opened the mail, reading the message:

“Doctor Maxis,

Since our recent assignment to [FAUST], my men have assembled the hardware and

structures as you've instructed. The projector and screen will function nicely as tools for the experiment, when you are ready, but we need to know when you plan to advance the experiment? In the meantime, we have begun the tests you ordered regarding the weapon upgrading machine and VRIL. Success regarding the machine is minimal as we lack the manpower or experience with such technology, but we will continue tinkering. Tests with the experimental VRIL element are promising, however. Your former scientist, Doctor Groph, has left behind strange, but nonetheless interesting work. Exposing some of the undead you have sent in cryopods to the experimental element has provided unforeseen results. When you arrive in person, we will demonstrate for your viewing. We will continue to update you in the coming weeks.

Signed,

D. T.”

The message had been sent a week prior from an unnamed user. Edward was unsure what [FAUST] might be or who D. T. was. *Something was being hidden from the rest of Group 935.* The mention of Vril confused Richtofen, as like himself, Maxis showed no interest in Groph's work prior. It appears they have stolen his valuable research and are exploiting it without his permission. There were rumors circulating of Vril research in Group 935, but there was never any evidence to prove it. Groph would need to hear this after he is assigned as Station Chief. Knowing Doctor Maxis, however, Richtofen concluded the project would likely go nowhere.

As Richtofen pondered, he heard the beeping of his wireless transmitter. Pulling it from his belt under his coat, he pressed the button on the side and spoke into it.

“This is Eagle's Nest.”

“Eagle's Nest, this is Doctor Schuster. The arrangements are ready, Doctor Richtofen. The men await your arrival.”

“Ah! Danke, Doctor Schuster. I will be arriving soon. Over und out.”

Richtofen placed the transmitter back into its pouch and logged out of the Data Servant. He pressed on towards a stone wall at the back of the undercroft of the castle. He located the lever, and the stone wall opened to reveal a small laboratory with the teleporter at the back of the room. The two-way teleporter now active, Richtofen insured the coordinates to Griffin Station's receiving bay were correct, and set the MTD on a timer before stepping onto the large platform within the bell-shaped device. After a few moments, the sliding door closed around Richtofen, and light filled the chamber as he began to feel the heat. Smoke clouded his vision before he came to within the receiving bay. Feeling off-balance for a moment, Edward reoriented himself and looked around the metal bay.

Before him was a small station with multiple white suits hanging from a rack, and a white, spherical helmet with a semitransparent visor. Surrounding Edward in the corners of the room were control panels for the station's machinery and crates of resources stolen from Group 935. Above them on the walls to his left and right were bulletproof windows giving a perfect view of the Moon's surface.

Edward approached one of the windows to his right. Below his view was a small man-made tunnel with an airlock door that led under the surface towards the location of the MPD. In the distance, a massive excavator drill used to cut through the rock to create the station's many underground tunnels. From this height, Edward could see for miles over the

Moon's gray surface, lit only by the sun now currently above the station.

Richtofen approached the rack filled with suits, and began to enter it one leg at a time, zipping it up over his lab coat. As he did so, he could see a majestic view of the Earth through the other side of the receiving bay windows. He caught himself staring at the beautiful, blue and white colors that contrasted the empty blackness surrounding it. Beneath the receiving bay was a massive man-made canyon that seemed to reach a mile down. Here, he planned to built rockets similar to those researched at Eagle's Nest. Though his ultimate goal was opening the rift between the Aether and Earth in order to reach Agartha, Edward could not help but want to study the Moon and perhaps learn more of the universe's history.

From behind, Edward could hear the parting of sliding airlock doors as a lone figure walked into the room in the same suit as Edward, with a helmet locked firmly at the neck. The cosmonaut placed his hands behind the helmet, pressing two buttons as the seal came undone, allowing the helmet to be removed and revealing Doctor Schuster's face.

Schuster and Richtofen approached one another, wrapping their arms around each other in brotherly triumph.

“We've done it, Edward. We've achieved the impossible.”

“A research station on the Moon. It was no small feat, Baron. But we did it. I am proud to call you a partner in science.”

“I am pleased to see you still call me a partner, with that Wagner fellow... “

“Oh, that old spoilsport is little more than an errand boy. I've sent him to Der Riese to fetch some equipment. I needed him away before we could unveil the pyramid.”

“How much longer will you be able to hide all of this from him at the castle? Surely he will find out sooner or later-”

“You let me worry about him, Doctor Schuster. He is mein problem to deal with. You have enough on your plate with working on this station.”

“I have enjoyed every moment of my time here. It is beautiful, isn't it?”

“Indeed. Shall we depart? We don't want to keep our benefactor's waiting any longer.”

“Yes, Doctor Richtofen. Take a helmet, and we will arrive via the rover. I believe a grand entrance is in order.”

Doctor Schuster replaced his helmet, before approaching a large, four-wheeled vehicle and entering the driver's seat. Edward donned his own helmet, standing near the large doorway leading onto the surface. From within the helmet, he could hear the automated computer system of the station speaking through the suit.

“P.E.S. active. Welcome to Griffin Station. Artificial gravity and life support systems are online.”

Richtofen approached a nearby panel, opening the large doors to reveal the rocky surface of the Moon. Between the interior of the receiving bay and the vacuum outside was a field of energy that kept oxygen and artificial gravity active within the room, but allowed for larger objects such as the rover to pass through.

Edward entered the passenger seat, and gave a thumbs up to Schuster, who set the vehicle in motion. Immediately upon leaving the bay, all that Richtofen could hear was his own breathing and heart rate as all sound around the suit left. The traction and weight of the rover's

tires kept it from flying off due to low gravity, and allowed it to traverse the bumpy ground below. Edward's organs jostled around in the cabin of the large rover as it trekked the natural surface. Soon, it arrived at a man-made metal platform. Schuster exited the vehicle and pressed a button on the keypad to lower the elevator underground several hundred meters. Once it came to a stop, he activated the artificial gravity and oxygen tanks as a metal door to the outer surface closed. Richtofen could now hear the engine of the rover far clearer as he removed his helmet, placing it on a rack alongside Schuster's.

“This way, Doctor. They are waiting for you.”

The two men entered a vast hallway meant for transporting cargo, which led directly to the power and control station. As the large metal doors opened to reveal the room, so too did it reveal a group of around fifty scientists and engineers, who began to cheer and clap as Richtofen arrived. The group separated to clear a path towards the podium, with a banner at its base that read, *'Welcome to Griffin Station.'*

Edward, bold and brash, chiseled his way through the crowd towards the podium, waving and shaking hands as he passed his exuberant followers. It felt nice to be praised for a change. The podium sat in the center of the cave which he had first arrived on the Moon, and behind it was the MPD, now covered by a tarp as it was hidden away until this grand unveiling.

Richtofen climbed the stairs and approached the microphone at the podium. He paused for a moment as the crowd came together, now silent and awaiting instruction from the man towering over them.

“Gentlemen. We've been betrayed, so terribly betrayed. Betrayed by a man I am sure

many of us once looked to for guidance. Doctor Ludvig Maxis was a brilliant man of science, and he had a vision of a world where men like us would improve the human condition. That vision was enough for us to join in his cause, and we devoted our minds, our talents, and our bodies to this man and this vision. We built Group 935.”

The crowd was positively mesmerized by this speech, and not a word was spoken between them.

“Unfortunately, Ludvig and many loyal to him have betrayed our faith in Group 935. He sold his soul and ours as well to the greedy barbarians of the Reichstag. He turned our work towards a better tomorrow into a piece of machinery in the factory of war. He is foolish to believe such a betrayal is possible without a reaction of rebellion.”

Edward pulled the microphone from the stand, walking about the stage as he spoke further.

“Six hundred and one days ago exactly I formed my list of trusted colleagues to join me on this journey. I forged my plan to use what I have found in this cave on this rock floating in the cosmos... to do more than improve the human condition. With what stands before you all, humanity will discover its true purpose. War will end with this discovery, as war is fought over land and resources, a bounty which we will give to all people. This is the prize which humanity has worked its entire existence towards.”

Edward motioned towards Doctor Schuster to prepare to remove the tarp on the MPD.

“Gentlemen, for two long years we have toiled here and at Eagle's Nest to build up fortifications. For two long years we have taken equipment and built up our labs. For two long

years we have worked under Group 935, believing that Doctor Maxis truly wants to help the world. For two long years we've led a double life. Today, that all ends.”

Nodding to Schuster, Richtofen placing his arm outwards to draw attention to the structure behind him. The tarp fell to the ground, revealing the pyramid, its base intricately adorned with symbols and its surface black and spotless, like the open void of space. It stood taller than Richtofen even at the height of the stage.

The once silent crowd began to murmur, shocked and confused by the device.

“I bring to you what this project is all about: What I have worked to keep from my enemy.”

From within the group, Doctor Groph shoved the other men aside, moving himself towards the forefront, closest to the MPD. He asked Richtofen, not averting his gaze from the pyramid, “What is it Doctor Richtofen?! It looks alien.”

“It is an ancient Vril machine. And you, Doctor Groph, are now the lead scientist here at Griffin Station.”

Members of the crowd began to applaud, some patting Groph on the back, his eyes still locked on the perfectly flat face of the pyramid. To the side of the stage, Doctor Schuster seemed shocked, and somewhat hurt.

Richtofen pointed towards Groph, saying “You will be the one to discover how it works.”

Groph came close, nearly touching its surface as Schuster motioned him not to. Groph spoke up, “We first must discover what it does.”

“Nein, Doctor Groph. I know what it does. It is a direct connection to another

dimension.”

Again the crowd murmured loudly, unsure what to make of this revelation. A scientist in the crowd yelled out, “Preposterous!”

Richtofen responded, microphone still in hand, “No more preposterous than teleporting you all to the Moon and building Griffin Station, is it?

Groph finally averted his gaze, now looking up to Richtofen.

“I suppose not. How do you know what it does?”

“I found many interesting Vril artifacts here. I have decoded some of their language. All signs point to this device being a stable gateway to the Aether.”

Through the loud quarreling of the men, Schuster spoke directly to Richtofen.

“Doctor Richtofen, I am aware of a project being run by Doctor Maxis at Der Riese concerning Vril.”

“As am I. I am going back to my post at Group 935 to continue the charade. I will be finding out just how much information Doctor Maxis has on Vril. Once the machine is operational, I will enact my plan and return. Gentlemen, let the games begin.”

The scientists and engineers cheered and clapped, letting their love of the Doctor and his discovery be known. But even louder than this admiration, came the voices again. Midst the speaking was the sound of agonizing screaming.

“Remember your place Edward. You serve our bidding, and our bidding only. Do not let your own emotions cloud your true purpose. You are our vessel! OUR PUPPET, EDWARD!”

“SHHHH! The voices are so loud!”

The others, besides Schuster, did not seem to take notice of Richtofen's pain in their celebration.

Schuster helped Richtofen down the steps, placing his hands on his shoulders.

“What's wrong, Edward? Are you all right?”

Edward spoke softly, his voice shaky as well as his body.

“What have we... what have we done...”

Chapter 14: Little Resistance

Orani, Bataan, Philippines

PFC. Peter McCain

April 13th, 1942

'For every evil act done upon one man by another, there are three acts of good being done elsewhere. No matter the depths man may go to in order to cause harm, there is an inherent love and compassion lodged in his soul. No matter what you see, and no matter what you do, understand that evil is not a part of the human spirit; It is a disease that must be fought at every turn.'

The last written words of Peter's father tumbled around his head, repeating and scrambling until they lost their meaning and gained a whole new one. No matter how much good one man can do, there will always be men who are cruel. These men are not victims of evil, they are its followers. War will always exist as long as there is evil, and evil thrives on war.

With each passing, distracting thought, Peter could not help but repeat in his head these last words his father shared before Peter joined the Marines. As a boy, his father shared stories with Peter about the Great War. He told him about his plucky, optimistic attitude when he first enlisted, and the rush of heading boots-first into the enemy. He told him about the pain, the sorrow, and the loss. He saw his new-found friends blasted into oblivion, impaled by bayonets,

and suffocated by toxic gas. He left the war jaded to humanity, set in his belief that man is inherently evil. He took this aggression and hatred and projected it on his devoted wife and son. He eventually repented years later, not expecting their forgiveness.

All this to say, his words could not numb the pain of seeing men shot, disemboweled, and beheaded, left to rot in the dirt or in trenches of their own filth. Every half mile was another ten dead men, with faces just as unique as their fates. Peter McCain could see them all. He could hear the cries of pain in the distance, soiling the beautiful tropical landscape. He had never felt so hopeless and alone, despite the thousands of American and Filipino men around him. There was nothing to do but walk, hungry, thirsty, and afraid. The weak who slowed or toppled from the heat or exhaustion joined the dead at the wayside.

At his side was Private First Class Anton Johnson, a man almost too short to enlist, immature and afraid of his own shadow. At camp the two had shared playful jabs at one another, sharing the same bunk and training together. What he had been reduced to shook Peter's character. Johnson stood at the center of the marching crowd, which was about six men wide. He slouched, his eyes dead and lips dry, being pushed forward only by the sun-burnt and exhausted men behind him. In a raspy, beaten voice he spoke softly, "I can't go any further Peter. I can't. There's nothin' left in me."

"Don't talk like that. We'll get through this, buddy."

"I can't. We just keep passing water. It hurts."

To their left, they could see a small pool of muck-covered water.

"It hurts to what, walk?"

“Speak.”

“We don't need to be doing much of that anyway.”

“You of all people, Peter... I don't... “

In a hushed voice behind them, their Corporal spoke up, “If you slow us down any more, we are all going to die!”

Peter turned his head, glaring into his Corporal's eyes.

“Shut the fuck up, none of us are going to die!”

The Corporal's eyes widened and brow raised, “Excuse me, Private McCain?”

“You heard me. We are on the same side. Let's all just calm down.”

A Japanese soldier passed by the edge of the crowd, faster than Peter or his brothers, gazing upon each man as he struggled to keep upright. All were silent and gazed forward, as to not make any contact with the soldier's eyes. He slowed his pace to peer at the man immediately in front of McCain, looking into the unflinching marine's soul before backhanding him, sending his helmet flying into Peter's face, bloodying his nose. The soldier who was hit continued to march forward, attempting to appear unfazed as the Japanese trooper cackled to himself and took a canteen from his own belt to drink. Water droplets streamed across his mustache and onto his uniform as some men could not help but watch cautiously.

Anton was especially allured by the canteen, not averting his watch from the moment the cap came unscrewed to the time it returned.

“I'd kill him for that water.”

“Don't talk stupid, Anton.”

“I'm dying, Pete, I have the right to be stupid.”

“Stop that.”

“I'm gonna get that water, one way or another.”

“Don't do anything. Promise me you won't. Just... I'll try to get it.”

“How?”

“I'll ask him.”

“He'll kill **you**.”

“Just let me try.”

Peter stepped out of line, breathing in and out slowly to prepare himself, “Sir, do you speak English?”

Bewildered, the soldier turned around, furious.

Pointing to the water at his side, Peter said, “My friend, he needs that-”

The soldier slammed the butt of his rifle into Peter's face, permanently damaging his already bloody nose and sending him to the ground.

“Bakku! Buta!”

The pain in his head after hitting the ground clouded his vision, and only after a moment did he see the end of the bayoneted rifle inches away from his face. The soldier then proceeded to deliver a swift kick in the ribs and place a boot to his ankle while he laid in agony, the crowd continuing at the same pace as before. Anton had tried to exit the group to help him but was pushed forward by the other prisoners of war.

In a fury, the soldier put the rifle even closer to his eyes, prepared to pull the trigger. A

Japanese voice called out through the sound of horseshoes clomping through dirt.

“Sorede jūbundesu!”

A horse came into Peter's view just above his head, whinnying as its rider stepped down and pulled the rifle from the soldier's hands. Though he could not understand them, the rider was clearly frustrated, and the two were in heated discourse. The rider, with the cap of an officer, had won the debate, pushing the rifle into the soldier's chest and sending him ahead with the wave of onlooking men. The significantly older officer barked an order in English to Peter.

“Up!”

Peter mustered up the strength to stand back up, his ankle twisted from the violent attack. The old officer returned to his horse, pointing to the marchers, now the closest now being a platoon of Filipino troops. Peter obliged without question, returning to the ranks of the marchers.

The officer sat tall atop the white horse, his chest adorned with medals and a blade sheathed on his belt.

Peter limped on, managing to keep pace with the others. Fearing backlash if he were to speak up again, but indebted to this elder officer on horseback, he could not help but try to thank his savior.

“So you speak English?”

A Filipino soldier next to Peter glared at him, to which Peter added, “Not you, *him*.”

The officer atop the horse looked down, his expression somewhat confused by Peter's relentless persona.

Peter continued, “Either way, thank you, but my friend up there.... He needs water. I think

we all do, but he won't make it much further.”

The officer gazed ahead, pretending initially to ignore his words, but looking down and shutting his eyes as the herd passed another corpse, its head resting on a stump, eyes wide open in a state of shock.

“We will stop for water ahead. My underling's response was... unnecessary. But, do not step out of line again.”

“Yeah, I understand. Thanks.”

“Do not thank me. I believe in second chances, but no more than that. You are the Emperor's prisoner, and you will follow orders. That is true for all of you.”

Peter continued silently for a few moments, the pain in his ankle palpable, before speaking up once again.

“This pain is killing me. He really did a number on me.”

The officer looked down on Peter, both angry and puzzled.

“Are you a fool? Or do you have a death-wish, American?”

“A little of both, I guess.”

“How can you find humor on this day?”

“It's how I survive.”

The officer looked away, solemnly, before sharing his thoughts with Peter, “I have not found time to laugh since before my service in Nanking. These young men... they see those not born under the flag of the Empire as lesser. There was a time when the young did not perpetuate this view of self-righteousness. When the young were the ones trying to bring peace and

prosperity to our great nation.”

“They're your men, can't you stop them?”

The officer did not respond for a moment, shaking his head.

“It is not my place. The Emperor has ordered that we show no mercy to an enemy that would surrender rather than die.”

“And what's your opinion?”

He paused, sorrowful, “I was raised to believe there is no dishonor in living to fight another day. The Emperor holds a different opinion.”

“I mean, if you disagree, you don't have to-”

The rider unsheathed his sword, displaying it close to Peter's neck from atop the horse, shouting, “Enough talk!”

Peter looked into the stainless, reflective blade at his own wide-eyed face, and replied quietly.

“Okay...”

The Officer re-sheathed his blade, saying, “You are in no place to speak ill of the Emperor.”

“I mean no disrespect to... whoever. You just seem less... zealous, I guess is the word. Maybe you could ask the Emperor to make a change?”

“How does one man hold so many ridiculous ideas?”

“You seem to be respected by all of your men. Maybe if you spoke up-”

“They respect me, as should you, because I was once the Emperor's personal envoy. I,

like my ancestors, have trained in the Samurai code. Few in our Empire today remember these teachings. Even fewer dedicate their lives to them. My father, I, and my son... we are bound by our heritage to serve the Emperor, unquestioning.”

“What if, and please don’t pull out the sword again, the Emperor is wrong?”

He paused, searching for meaning in his thoughts.

“Times are changing, and I fear my son will be the last of the Samurai in all of Japan. It seems our family and our traditions are being forgotten by the Emperor...”

Peter stayed silent. He let the Samurai Horseman meditate for a moment.

“You may be right, American. I have been witness to the cruel injustice I see before me many times before today. I have failed my ancestors by remaining silent... These young men serving under me... they do not truly respect me. They believe my age means I am unworthy of battle.”

Ahead of them was the sound of a Japanese soldier shouting at someone from the caravan.

“You’ve got to keep them in line, like you’re keeping me in line. Maybe, also, you could stop a little early for some water?”

The Samurai looked down to Peter, eyebrow raised, before displaying a subtle grin.

“I will see to that. The principles of *Bushidō* do not die with me and my son. Remember my name, American: *Saburo Masaki*.”

Saburo hit the horse's side and took hold of the reigns, causing it rear up and gallop away towards the commotion, leaving a trail of dust and trampled grass.

Peter took a moment to breathe, assured he may have saved the lives of many of his comrades but reeling from the attempts at his own life. He began to feel sick, and somewhat guilty he could do nothing for those who had already fallen. Their convoy was also only one of many on the trail on its way from Bataan.

A whisper from behind Peter said, "*Hey!*"

Peter turned, "Hm? Oh, you're welcome."

The Filipino man who had whispered to him tapped his comrade on the shoulder, and the two switched positions to put him closer to Peter.

He reached into the breast pocket on his uniform removing a few pieces of paper. Peter was confused about how he was able to hold onto this paper as each of them had been searched and everything removed from their pockets. Peter saw a man shot dead because he would not give up the letter from his wife.

Peter whispered, "Where did you get that?"

The Filipino soldier put his finger to his lips, checking behind the convoy and ahead to insure no Japanese soldiers were close enough to hear.

"While you were on the ground, I take them from the horse's saddle."

He unfolded the papers close to his chest and low so they would not be seen. The Filipino man's comrades also did not make it obvious they were listening in, as to not draw suspicions.

The paper was entirely in Japanese writing, completely unreadable to Peter.

"What's so important about this you had to swipe it? You know you could have been shot doing that?!"

“I read through some, American. I know little Japanese. There are plans for attack in letters to officer. It has island attack strategy in Pacific. If your government has these plans, they will have the upper hand.”

“Shit... this could change the tide of the war. Well, did you find a gun on that horse too?”

The Filipino man thought for a moment, “No, no weapon.”

“How exactly are we going to get this to them when we have nothing to work with?”

The Filipino man looked to the faces of his friends, and seeing that they also seemed unsure how to approach the situation, he replied.

“We must fight back when we arrive at the train station.”

“We'll be outgunned and outnumbered there.”

“It is our only chance to bring this back.”

“If we start an uprising, they will not hesitate to kill all of us. There's no chance that would work.”

They both stood silent, Peter thinking over the situation. He looked to Saburo, far up ahead, lording over one of his men ahead of him, watching his every move. Peter continued, “But, if we can escape quietly, no one has to die.”

“What is your plan?”

“Plan... yeah, the plan is I distract Saburo, somehow, and draw his men away. We then sneak towards one of those personnel trucks, assuming the keys are able to be found. We take that out to the nearby airfield, and fly the plane to Corregidor where the military base *should* still be.”

“This plan is... suicide.”

“What’s your name?”

“Francisco. Call me Isko.”

“Well, Isko, this plan’s better than everyone dying. If we bring these plans home, maybe we can save everyone here.”

To the wayside was a corpse stabbed multiple times in the neck and chest, facial expression blank as it bled into a nearby ravine.

“Almost everyone.”

Chapter 15: Hard Landing

San Fernando, Pampanga, Philippines

PFC. Peter McCain

April 16th, 1942

Nearly everyone of Peter's platoon that had survived the march now knew Peter's plan for returning to American forces with the Japanese attack plans. They were all gathered together, tired and afraid, as men before them were herded onto rail cars to be sent to Japanese prison camps. Thankfully, the generous officer, Saburo Masaki, had given the soldiers enough sustenance to stage their plan.

To Peter's left were Isko, the Filipino gunner who acquired the documents in the first place, and Hilario, a technician from Isko's squad with a knack for flying and operating military equipment. To his right was Private Anton Johnson, fearful for Peter's suicidal proposition.

“You really think this is going to work? After your last plan?”

“We got fed didn't we? Trust me, this is our only shot at getting these plans out of here. And once we are back with American forces, they will come find you guys.”

“Three men against the whole fuckin' IJA?”

“If our plan goes smoothly, they won't even notice we've left.”

“*If?*”

“Yeah, if. I can't see the future, but we have no other choice. Don't worry about me. I've got Isko and his buddy Hilario. They say he's the best pilot on this island, and with a name like Hilario, I'm sure we'll be well entertained.”

Hilario glanced at Peter, confused at the mention of his name.

Ahead at the train station, a man in high-ranking officer fatigues sat atop his horse, conversing with Saburo. The officer was guiding some men from the march into a line towards the train car furthest in the back, while a majority stayed in the straight path towards the front-most car. The men the officer chose to send to the rear car seemed almost random, and while the front cars were packed tightly, shoulder-to-shoulder, the rear car was sparse and open for the few men on board. Unlike the other gray cars, it was painted a dark shade of red, and the side marked with more Japanese symbols than the others. In Roman numbers, however, there was written '731'.

Peter could see Anton was nervous and unsure of himself, his hands clenched and eyes blinking rapidly.

Peter leaned in, “Hey, stop worrying about me. I can handle myself. You know that better than anyone.”

“Oh, please, worried about you Pete? I'm just worried how the Corporal is going to take it when you actually pull this off. He's gonna flip.”

Ahead in the line, the officer atop the horse was barking orders at an American being sent to the rear car who was begging to be sent with the others.

“Silence! Now!”

The American begged, "Please! They'll kill me, **you're killing me!**"

The officer motioned towards two Japanese foot soldiers to force the American into the rail car. They grabbed his arms and wrestled with him to stay calm.

"They're gonna tear us apart! **You can't do this!**"

He was now on the ground, as one of the soldiers held him down with a boot to his back, the other took hold of his forearm, and yanked it backwards, breaking bone. The American's head was in the dirt, agonized expression facing towards Peter's group. He recognized him now: First Lieutenant Gentiles. They had never seen a man so stoic and respected reduced so low. The two soldiers dragged Gentiles towards the train, tossing him into the car where he was attended to by the other Americans on board, his eyes red and spirit destroyed.

Nearby the officer who gave the orders, sat Saburo atop his horse, eyes shut and face to his lap. He rode the horse, trotting towards his previous position in the line near Peter's squad, ashamed and silent.

Peter whispered, "They won't get away with this, Saburo."

Saburo chose to remain silent.

Peter continued, "I know this isn't what you want, but you have the power to do something."

Calmly, Saburo replied, "Unfortunately, that is untrue."

Peter raised his index finger, pointing towards a Japanese soldier to his rear, "That guy, that guy behind us? He was smacking around one of the prisoners. Even though **you** ordered them not to."

Saburo was visibly incensed, and meditated for a moment to calm himself.

“For once American, stow your tongue.”

Saburo looked to the group of young soldiers watching over the prisoners in the back, then to the officer and the gathering of other soldiers ahead. He put his fingers to his lips, and whistled to the soldiers in the back, motioning them towards him, as he rode his horse nearer to the front. He rallied a majority of his men towards the other officer, and raised his voice as he began speaking to them. The line towards the train had stopped, and the other officer seemed annoyed. One Japanese soldier was ordered to stay behind with the rear to ensure there was no trouble.

Anton put the back of his hand to Peter's chest as he was preparing himself to run.

“Good luck, Pete. We're counting on you.”

“Counting on me? Don't tell me that!”

The singular Japanese soldier stood facing forward where Peter, Isko, and Hilario were, before having his attention drawn towards a Filipino man in the back asking in Japanese what was happening. With him far enough away, Isko barked in a hushed tone, “*Now!*”

Isko, Hilario, and Peter darted out of line, the crowd filling in the gap as they departed. They ran through dirt onto concrete before meeting the wall of the station, away from the view of the Japanese.

Out of breath, Peter took a moment to rest. “Holy... shit.... that... fucking worked!”

Isko leaned on the wall, positioning himself towards the edge to look out on the rest of the station. There was a building that the tracks went through with an open door that was

spacious enough to hold plenty of vehicles.

“We’re not through yet, Peter! Hilario, see that building?”

Hilario joined him at the edge.

“I see. It could have weapons, armored cars, everything we need.”

Peter now crouched alongside them.

“I thought the idea was we get out of here quietly?”

Isko replied, “That is ideal. But we should prepare for the worst. If we are caught, we need protection.”

Peter interjected, “That is, if Hilario can operate whatever we find in there... “

“I can.” Hilario stood up, ensuring he saw no Japanese surrounding the large, open doorway, and sprinted with Isko and Peter in tow. Now crouched, they turned the corner into the spacious building, the size of a large barn.

The walls were mounted with vehicle parts and there was a massive crate filled with ammunition boxes straight from the factory. Around the edges were rows of small tanks, and on the tracks in the center was a vehicle that looked like a tank, but it sat firmly attached to the rails.

The trio moved inside the dimly lit building, the majority of light coming from the open doors and a single window at the highest point on the wall.

Hilario approached the tank nearest to the door, being sure he saw no one inside the building. He laid his hand upon its dark green finish, the armor complete unscathed. He raised himself up on top, chuckling to himself.

Isko spoke quietly to him, “A tank escape is not an option. We need something fast to get

to the airfield before they notice we left.”

Peter looked around the room, then to Isko.

“These are all tanks! Nothing with tires by the looks of it.”

Hilario jumped down, walking towards the vehicle on the track.

“Not **all** tanks.”

By all appearances, the vehicle looked like a tank, with treads, thick armor, and a hatch at the top for the crew.

Isko approached it, ducking his head underneath to see it attached to the tracks. “What is it, Hilario?”

“*So-Ki* armored car. Not many made. Used for reconnaissance and armored transport. It has no weapons, but can move, I believe, near seventy kilometers per hour while on track. Can also be taken off of track at slower speed.”

Peter climbed atop the railroad car, looking inside the hatch at the spacious interior. “Fast on the track is fine. Can you get it moving?”

Hilario replied, “Of course.”

Peter looked to Isko, “I like this guy's attitude, Izzy. He's a keeper.”

Isko grinned before patting Hilario on the back.

“Let us get moving. We won't have much time soon. Hilario, get acquainted with it. Peter and I will find weapons.”

Hilario located the hatch to enter the *So-Ki* as Peter and Isko approached the crate filled with ammunition. Inside were a set of pristine Nambu sidearms as well as a gun the pair had not

seen before. The new Japanese weapon was roughly the size of a Thompson, with some similar components.

Peter muttered under his breath, “Looks like the Tojos have submachine guns now.”

“May be useful. Take a Nambu for Hilario with magazines and what-”

Isko stopped speaking as the sound of boot steps on concrete grew louder. The duo whipped their heads back to a lone Japanese mechanic, unarmed and frightened of the armed prisoners.

He yelled out, “*Tasukete!*”

Peter dropped the gun, and bolted towards him, tackling him to the ground as he tried to run. He wrapped his arms around the man, holding him tight as Isko rushed to shut the large doors on either side of the building, keeping them shut with a piece of piping. Peter held down on the man's neck as hard as he could until he stopped struggling, face blue. Peter let him go, adrenaline pumping, before feeling the man's chest for a heartbeat. He was alive, but unconscious.

Peter rose to his feet, the room now much darker as the doors were closed to the sunny outdoors, with only the single window's light shining onto the tank in the middle of the room. There was a loud banging and shouting from Japanese soldiers outside, attempting to enter the building.

Peter yelled, “*Shit!*”

Peter sprinted to the *So-Ki* which Hilario had managed to get running. Isko was now with them, the weapons loaded on board. Peter entered the car from the back, grabbing the roof then

swinging himself in. It was much louder on the inside than on the outside. There was not any wasted space around the interior walls, which were covered in connective wires and components for the engine and control system. There was only a single seat, now occupied by Hilario. The view port at the front of the vehicle was so minuscule, Peter could not properly view the front facing action.

Peter shouted, "What's Isko doing?"

"Unbarring the doors," Isko replied, "You will want to hold on to something!"

Peter grabbed a hold of the Japanese submachine gun with one hand, while holding onto a grip in the ceiling. The banging from the rear doors of the building was getting louder before Isko finally pulled the door shut behind him.

Isko shouted, "Go Hilario! Go!"

The engine roared even louder, like the sound of a jet engine. The vehicle lurched forward, nearly knocking Peter and Isko to the ground as it impacted the wooden doors to the building, breathing in sunlight through the tiny viewports.

Through the engine's gaining intensity, yelling from the Japanese could be heard. Following this came the pinging of small-arms fire on the outer armor of the tank. As it picked up speed, the number of bullets depreciated to nothing. For a moment, there was peace and tranquility in the deafening interior.

It was short-lived, as a hail of bullets pinged off the left side of the vehicle, leaving impressions in the metal near the viewport.

Hilario jerked his body to a port on the left side, informing the others.

“There is a car! Two men, one driving! They are trying to hit the engine through the viewports!”

Isko took Peter's shoulder, directing him to the hatch at the top of the vehicle, “Wait for a gap in their fire!”

Peter readied himself, locating the handle for the upper hatch, and ensuring his weapon was ready to be fired. As a hail of bullets pinged off the treads and abruptly ended, Peter shoved the hatch aside, raising himself up into the direct sunlight on the tropical landscape. The station was directly ahead, but more pressing was the re-purposed civilian car, with a passenger reloading the same submachine gun Peter was wielding. The driver called out to his passenger, alerting him to Peter's impending attack.

Peter laid the barrel on the hatch's rim, took aim, and held the trigger. The kickback from the foreign weapon shifted its barrel to the side, which unintentionally increased its effectiveness in throwing bullets in a wide arc. Several whizzed past the truck, until one shattered the windshield and several others hit the passenger, who dropped his weapon and keeled over. The driver panicked, now blood soaked and cut by glass, shifting the wheel swiftly causing the truck that was going at top speed to spin out of control, flipping on its side.

Peter lifted the weapon into the air, shouting as he looked back, “**Ooh-rah!** Hell yeah!”

He felt a tugging at his pants from inside the car. “What? What is-”

Peter had shifted his view to the front face of the car, quickly approaching the airfield, and saw an even quicker Japanese Zero whizzing directly towards them. He dropped like rock inside, heavy machine gun bullets sending dirt flying into the cabin from outside, two bullets

even piercing the hull and directly impacting a fuel valve, spurting gasoline onto every surface.

Peter exclaimed, “Fuck!”

The engine screeched and hissed as Hilario attempted to slow the vehicle, now within range of the airfield.

Hilario shouted over the roaring engine, “When we stop, we run to the nearest hangar!”

Peter nodded to red-faced Hilario, then to Isko, his clothes drenched in gasoline. Peter hoped there would be no open flames to ignite the trio as they tried to escape.

The speeding armored car slowed continuously, eventually derailing from the chaotic halt, and veering into a row of transport trucks parked outside a hangar bay.

Isko wasted no time in pushing open the hatch and assisting the dazed Peter and Hilario from the crashed vehicle. Rising to his feet, Peter felt the sun nuzzling his skin and heard the sound of a boisterous, irritating siren. The enemy would be coming for them, soon.

Isko held his Nambu in his right hand, using his left to shield his eyes from the sun and see in the distance, “Foot soldiers on the tracks! They are following the rails.”

Hilario had opened a door into the nearby hangar bay, motioning that it was clear to enter.

Peter grabbed Isko by the shoulder, “Isko, let's go!”

Isko stood firm, “They will block our escape. We will be cornered inside the hangar.”

Peter tugged at Isko's sleeve, “We're pretty well fucked out here too! Now come on!”

Isko stood in place, looking around the corner of the crashed car to see the men running down the rail line.

“There won't be time. I will take one of these trucks, and they will believe the rest of us

are in the back.”

Isko approached the driver side of one of the trucks, opening the door and pulling open a compartment beneath the steering wheel, revealing the innards of the vehicle.

“Once I start the vehicle, you two start the plane and leave, fast!”

Hilario took Isko by the shoulder, shoving him into the side of the car, “That is not happening!”

Peter approached them, “What about me? I can stay behind, divert their attention. I'll find some other plane.”

“No. Peter McCain, you will return home. You are a fighter, and you will help stop this war. You have a daughter. I have none.”

Isko took the stolen documents from his pocket and shoved them into Peter's, returning to the truck. Peter was taken aback by the mention of his daughter, his pride, his reason for living in this cruel world. He had only mentioned her in passing during conversation during the march, and only now did he realize the respect Isko had for him in choosing to take him along for the mission.

Isko continued, “You care for your comrades and for your family. You and Hilario must leave this place.”

Hilario begged with him, “Please, let me stay behind. You can go.”

“You must fly the plane. Go home... tell mama I love her.”

Hilario, normally stoic, was nearly in tears, “*Mahal kita kuya...*”

Isko pulled Hilario close, “You too, brother. Now go, hurry!”

Isko had managed to start the engine of the truck, entered the driver's seat, and hit the gas, heading towards the soldiers who were running directly towards them.

Hilario and Peter ran for the hangar, precious cargo now in possession, and as they shut the door, the sound of gunshots and the truck now turning another direction could be heard.

Within the lit hangar bay was an array of small attack fighters and bombers. The plane Hilario had set his sights on was near the center, a twin-engined light bomber. From what Peter could remember in his training, the plane resembled the bombers designated by the Navy as “*Lily*”.

They wasted no time walking up the ramp of the plane. Hilario located the cockpit, strapping himself in and fiddling with controls.

He barked orders, “You will take the front gunner position. If any of them are waiting outside, give them Hell.”

Lights began to spring to life throughout the interior, where Peter was assessing the machine gun mounted at the nose of the plane, surrounded by a thick set of glass panes to look out of the front of the plane.

The propellers of the plane began to spin, and the plane was in motion towards the front gate of the hangar, where it came to a stop.

Hilario shouted, “Peter, get the doors open! We will make my brother proud!”

Peter took to the ramp, sprinting towards the massive doorway, pushing with all his strength on the left door. The sunlight illuminated the gray bomber, armor painted with the Japanese Empire's flag. Peter then took to the right door, pushing it open enough to reveal the

runway to Hilario. There were no soldiers to be seen.

He bolted up the ramp of the plane, which Hilario had set in motion before Peter could arrive at the turret. Now fully exposed, Hilario turned the plane's direction right, away from San Fernando towards Corregidor.

Peter shouted back from the gunner position, "Do you know the way there?"

Hilario chuckled, "Of course!"

"I don't know why I even ask," Peter muffled to himself.

The plane began to pick up speed on the runway, but had attracted the attention of soldiers laying dormant near the other hangar bays. Men began to run out, unable to keep pace with the aircraft, as two transport trucks parked near the end of the runway, a dozen Japanese men exiting and pointing their rifles to the rogue plane.

In response, Peter took aim with the turret, firing at the stationary targets. Due to the unexpected gunfire, the soldiers at the trucks began to scatter, firing back as they did so, bullets bouncing off of the wings and hull of the armored plane before one bullet impacted the glass in front of Peter's chest. It had luckily been thick enough to stop it from penetrating. Peter did not cease fire, however, as the nose began to rise into the air. The sudden shift in altitude sent Peter tumbling backwards.

Hilario yelled, "You may hold on to something!"

"Yeah..." Peter muttered, gripping his arm that had banged against the wall.

Peter grabbed a hold of a ladder rung leading up to the cockpit, using the other hand to grip his chest as he grew sick.

The plane eventually leveled out, allowing Peter to traverse the plane on his wobbly legs.

“I feel ill...”

Hilario replied, “No worries, it will not be long. The *Ki-48* is a very fast bomber.”

“I can tell... I'm sorry about your brother. He's a hero.”

“Do not be sorry. Be a better man. My brother came to respect you in the three days we have known you. I mostly found you unbearable.”

“A lot of people do. If I'm sorry about anything, it would probably be that.”

“In any case, Francisco Reyes will live on in our memory.”

Peter took a seat, allowing Hilario time to mourn. To take his mind away from the altitude sickness, he took a look at the documents stolen from Saburo. They were folded and crumpled as they were shoved in pockets and passed on during inspections in the march from Bataan. The original document shown to him by Isko regarding attack plans was at the top, and only now with time could he assess the crucial nature of this information. Though writing was in Japanese, the letter to Saburo came attached with a detailed map of the Pacific with areas marked for varied levels of attack.

The next in the pile was, surprisingly, a letter written in English. The intricate cursive handwriting was nigh-impossible to read with the shaking of the plane, but the letter was written to Saburo and mentioned practicing English writing for a mission. The rest was too crumpled or smeared, but at the bottom, the letter was marked by its writer, Takeo Masaki. This must be the son Saburo mentioned whom he trained as a Samurai. Saburo would never know what his actions had done for the greater good on this day.

The last document was completely in Japanese, but was adorned with a plethora of seals, and was typed on a typewriter. The seals were unknown to Peter, but two in particular caught his eye as they contained numbers. The two symbols were circular and highly intricate, with one simply having a large number nine, and the other the numbers nine-three-five.

Peter was shaken from his concentration at the sound of bullets whizzing past coming from the back of the plane.

“Zeros! Get on the rear gun!”

Peter jolted up, pressing his hand on both sides of the plane to keep balanced as he made his way to the rear gun, the same type as that on the front. Hilario began to dip the plane downward to dodge the now-visible twin Japanese Zeros, which were firing their guns at the wings of the plane.

Peter pointed the gun, pulling the trigger and missing as the plane veered to his right, out of view. He swiveled to the second, letting loose a barrage, causing the plane to spin and attempt to dodge the fire. One bullet had apparently hit, as the Zero began to dive, smoke emanating from its engine. It dipped below the clouds, unseen.

The previous plane, however, was still unaccounted for, and Peter scoured the horizon in search of it.

Peter called out to the cockpit, “I can’t see him! Do you have eyes on him?!”

“No, I can’t... wait, he’s high!”

Peter swiveled the gun skyward, setting his sights on the plane as it was now diving at high velocity towards the bomber, firing on all cylinders.

Peter returned fire, failing to hit the significantly smaller target, but the Zero's bullets had penetrated the left-most engine.

Hilario shouted, "We are hit, badly!"

Peter asked, "How long do we have?!"

"I can make it to the island. We are close!"

Peter searched the skies once more in search of the pursuer, spotting him in the distance. He waited, anticipating the plane making another attack. Instead, it slowed down, dipping out of view through the clouds.

Peter yelled back to Hilario, "He's gone!"

He continued waiting, palms sweating and clenching the gun so tightly it began to hurt. From the cockpit, Peter could hear the sound of radio static then a distinctly Southern, American, voice.

"Attention, this is restricted air space. Turn around or you will be shot down!"

Peter had made his way to the cockpit, climbing the ladder and taking control of the radio while Hilario attended to the flight controls of the damaged plane.

The voice returned, speaking in Japanese for one final warning, *"Anata wa gekitsui sa remasu!"*

Peter replied into the microphone, "I speak English, damn it! This is Peter McCain, United States Marines. We are survivors from Bataan! We have crucial documents on the Japanese attack plans. We need to land on the island!"

The plane began to dip left, as the engine began to give out.

Hilario, turned to Peter, “Peter, this plane isn't landing on a runway.”

The radio replied back, “*Copy that, your craft is FUBARed, you need to divert to an open field or you risk hitting the base. You need to pull up, now!*”

Peter held Hilario's shoulder tightly, “You've got this!”

“Get down and strap in, we are coming in hot!” Hilario picked up the radio, “We are going down at the beach south of the base. Send rescue immediately!”

“*Copy.*”

Peter located a seat under the cockpit away from the glass front and rear of the plane, and he strapped himself in and ensured the documents were held safely on his person. He only hoped that if they die, the precious cargo would not burn up in an explosion.

He rattled in his seat, taking his mind elsewhere as a wing of the plan began to crumble and fall. He closed his eyes and prayed for God's protection as they plummeted to Earth.

Hilario screamed, “**BRACE!**”

No more than a few seconds later, Peter heard a hard crack as the hull impacted the tropical beach, nearly crumpling under its own weight as it was shot like a bullet through the sand. Glass flew from the front of the plane to the back, cutting Peter's knees as he jostled in his seat. Peter could feel the plane's fuselage beginning to twist, the wings now completely gone. The last thing he could remember was the loud crunch of the front of the plane as it slowed and came to a sudden stop at a large rock near the tree line.

When he came to, Peter was being dragged through the sand, his view being of the wrecked, burning hunk of metal that was once a plane. He gazed downward at his legs, which

were bleeding profusely, and he felt a sharp pain in his temple, where his head must have impacted the interior of the plane and knocked him cold. He could not bear to move his head enough to view who was dragging him. He placed his hand in his pocket, finding the documents, safe and sound. He placed them back, trying to speak with his bloodied mouth.

“Where is... Hilario... did he...”

Peter felt woozy, and close to blacking out again, before he was picked up by two men and put into the bed of a truck. He tilted his head slightly as the truck began to move, and now saw the bloodied, bruised, but alive Hilario Reyes.

“You... you did it. We fucking pulled it off...”

Hilario groaned, “... Of course we did.”

Chapter 16: ... I Will Build My Church

Unknown Mountain Range, Himalayas

Dr. Edward Richtofen

June 13th, 1942

Richtofen could not help but bask in the glory of the breathtaking temple being constructed in, of course, his honor. The marvelous structure had been designed by the heads of Shangri-La's local village, and in an impressive feat of architecture, was nearly complete with the help of Group 935's machinery. The stone temple should also double as a secluded laboratory for Richtofen's personal experiments, much like his former laboratory at Alcatraz Island under the Illuminati. This would be much more accessible, and most importantly, all his own.

After basking in the direct sunlight beaming down onto the dirt road, Richtofen found solace within the temple, where he had agreed to meet Doctor Schuster to tour the mining operation. He had not had enough of a chance to view the fruits of his labor recently, and would not have many more soon with Doctor Maxis' demands for his latest project: A project that Edward wished to discuss with Schuster today.

Inside, Schuster stood at the center of the room, looking over blueprints for the temple and surrounding construction projects on a stone slab. Only this small section of the room was in direct sunlight from the incomplete roof.

Richtofen emerged from the darkness, frightening Schuster, “Doctor Schuster!”

Schuster let out a yelp, “Ah-ah! My god, Edward, you frightened the daylights out of me!”

“Apologies, Baron. How goes the operations at Griffin Station?”

“Progress on the MPD has been... limited. But you will be excited when you see this!”

From his bag, Doctor Schuster pulled out a rolled-up piece of paper which he unrolled and presented to Edward. Stenciled onto it was a logo, nearly identical to Group 935's but with the numbers '935' removed and the recently added Waffen SS portion of the hand being replaced with the original three vertical bars.

“Hm... what is it?”

Schuster seemed confused, turning the paper around to view it himself, before showing him again.

“It's... it's our proposed emblem.”

“... The Group 935 emblem?”

“No! It has differences, you see. It lacks the numbers, as well as Maxis' recent addition after partnering with the Reichstag.”

Edward paused, absolutely baffled. He now appeared visibly frustrated.

“Four months, and the committee came up with... that? A recycled emblem from Group 935?”

“Well, Edward, you see, the committee quite liked the symbol, just not Doctor Maxis. It gave them a sense of... familiarity.”

Richtofen sarcastically repeated, “Familiarity?”

“Yes... well, I can clearly see you are not keen on it.”

“Not necessarily, Doctor Schuster, but it is clearly the same design! What was the point of changing it at all if they love the original so much?! Whose idea was this?”

“Erm... well, in a way, mine. I said, 'Well, we were once a part of Group 935, and then we decided enough was enough and went rogue, taking what we needed with us. Perhaps it would be fitting to use a similar emblem, with a different number of course.'”

Edward, now vexed, tapped his finger on the center of the logo repeatedly.

“A different number! This does not even have a number! *Mein gott*, what have you all been doing?!”

Schuster placed the paper on the slab dismissively, not able to look at Richtofen directly.

“It was just an idea. I proposed the number be 6-0-1: To signify the 601 days it took to create Griffin Station after formulating your plan for our operation. The others felt another number would cause confusion.”

Richtofen now noticed the disappointment in Schuster's face as he clearly had been proud of the work. He pondered for a moment, seeing that this issue is hardly one to be insulting over. He approached the stone, adjusting the paper so it was parallel with the edge.

“Nein, nein... I am just a little stressed from all the teleporting everywhere, trying to keep Doctor Wagner off our scent... I did not mean what I said. Your justification makes quite a bit of sense, actually. Not to mention, there is plenty of time before our mission is complete to create a design we can all agree on.”

Schuster reluctantly replied, “Hm... actually, Edward, I... anticipated your approval of it, and as such I ordered that banners with this design be created...”

Edward took a deep breath before releasing it as he tried to calm himself and prevent another outburst.

“That's... alright, Doctor Schuster... I have always admired your initiative. Besides... our group's emblem does not matter as much as the scientists within it.”

“Thank you, Edward. I apologize for the delay. Work at Griffin Station has been sporadic as all we have had to focus our research towards has been the MPD, which has hit a barrier, and the greenhouse in the bio-dome.”

Edward took Schuster's shoulder, guiding him towards the doorway leading outside as he spoke.

“Time for research on Vrill and the pyramid is just as limited at the castle. Doctor Maxis has ordered that we continue to work with the rocket experiments, as well as his infernal Ray Gun. *Mein gott*, his naming conventions are terrible! Imagine you are a young, blonde German lad and your allies have abandoned you. You must choose between two weapons to take on the entire Red Army: the... 'Ray Gun', or... the ***Wunderwaffe DG-2!***”

Schuster excitedly replied, “Oh, the *Wunderwaffe!*”

“Exactly! Finally, someone who knows what I mean when I say that a weapon should sound just as powerful as it performs! Doctor Wagner disagrees, of course. Always Doctor Maxis' lapdog... so sad.”

They were now exposed to the sunlight, making their way on the path towards the village

which was located just uphill from the mine resting on the mountain.

“Doctor Schuster, there is a reason I invited you specifically for this meeting.”

“Oh? What would that be?”

“Today I received an unexpected call from Doctor Maxis. He says that in the early hours of the morning, he received a package at his door. Inside were a set of sealed flasks containing a variety of colored liquids, all wrapped in a red scarf.”

“Flasks? What did they contain, precisely?”

“Well, the package also contained a note detailing the chemical composition of each flask. Among other elements, 115 appeared in the recipes. Maxis said he could find no one who was there early enough on campus who had ever seen this package.”

Schuster approached Edward closely, “Edward, I need to know what those concoctions were composed of. They sound eerily similar to my-”

Richtofen cut him off, “Perk-a-Colas. Yes, he noticed the similarity as well to your rejected project. He could not understand how you managed to perfect them without Group 935's funding nor supply of 115. He seemed... impressed with your work.”

“I... that is simply impossible! I abandoned the project after we began work on Griffin Station. Who would have stolen my research? Who **could** have stolen it?”

“I was unsure of that myself. Doctor Maxis informed me that tests with one of them, the red one I believe-”

Schuster gasped, “Juggernog!”

“*Ja*, that. Tests with *ein* pig showed promising results. With the complete recipe, Maxis

anticipates replicating the original mixtures und mass-production within the month. He has even asked that ideas be created for new variations of the formula as he plans to pitch them to the Reichstag.”

Schuster scratched his head, “This is... outrageous! That is **my** work!”

“That is why he called me, asking where you were. He wished to thank you personally for your contribution, but could not contact you.”

“Edward, I promise, I had nothing to do with this! Someone stole my work and handed it away to Maxis! Who would do something like this? Could it be *the Order*, those men you spoke of? I know I promised not to bring them up again, but they must be involved, to rile you up, perhaps, since you know me?”

Richtofen could see the revelation had created great stress for his long-time friend. His denial of his involvement in the conspiracy seemed as genuine as Edward could tell, but it was becoming harder and harder to be sure of the intentions of those he once trusted.

“Calm down, Baron. As I've said, we do not have to worry about them anymore. I will do what I can to find who did this, but it is imperative that you do not involve yourself. Do you understand? As far as Maxis is concerned, you are on an extended vacation from the scientific world. You must not be seen anywhere near Group 935 facilities.”

“I understand, Edward, I will not leave my position. But, please, you must bring the mixtures to Griffin Station so they can be studied! Whomever perfected my project must be one hell of a chemist, pardon my language.”

“For the moment, the packaged mixtures are being kept at Der Riese. I will need to wait

for Maxis to expand the project before I can bring anything to Griffin Station. In the meantime-”

“Yes, yes, do not involve myself. I know, Edward. You do not have to tell me again.”

“*Gut*. I appreciate that I can trust you, old friend.”

The pair had trudged through dirt and through a short patch of mud before arriving at the village square, with architecture adorned with local art and symbols carved into the stone. As they arrived, they could hear scuffling and yelling just around the corner of a home.

Richtofen and Schuster sprinted to discover the source of the commotion. A group of villagers were surrounding the head of the mining operation from Der Riese, who was tugging at the hand of a young boy from the village, as a man who appeared to be his father was yelling in limited English to let him go.

As Richtofen approached the crowd, they took notice of his arrival and cleared a path before kneeling in respect. They were now silent, aside from the father's cries and the boy's struggling.

Richtofen jovially approached the situation, “Gentlemen! What seems to be the problem, Herr Meyer?”

The miner continued to grip the boy's arm tightly, responding to Richtofen as he held him in place.

“There's a frayed wire attached to the generator that needs replacing. But it's deep in the rock and we need someone small to reach in and attach it.”

Edward tapped his finger to his lips, “Hm, that seems quite reasonable. And you, sir, what is the problem?”

Richtofen pointed to the father, now kneeling as well with his hands together, begging Richtofen to free his son.

“Please... my son... no work... danger! Danger!”

The voices returned to Richtofen's head, “*Will you allow these simple beings to trample over you? Convince them to listen to your will.*”

Richtofen replied to the father calmly, “Living in a jungle with element 115 and men rising from the dead is quite dangerous, no? Surely the boy can handle this task.”

The man began to cry, bowing his head as he continued to plead, “Please! Please! Please!”

Meyer shook his head, speaking directly to Richtofen now, “This one has refused to cooperate before. I say you tell them to follow our demands, or we will never get anything done! Tell him I'm taking the boy.”

Richtofen paused for a moment, reviewing Meyer's words carefully. He turned his body to face Meyer, and approached him slowly, coming uncomfortably close to his face. He was a few inches taller than Meyer and looked down on him with a stern, stone-faced expression as he gripped his shoulders tightly. Meyer became visibly uncomfortable, averting his gaze downwards towards the sobbing man. Richtofen spoke softly so he, and he alone, could hear.

“They... are not our slaves. They are willing laborers, und they answer to me, not to you.”

He squeezed tighter on Meyer's shoulders, his breath hitting his face due to the closeness.

“Why do they answer to me, you ask? Do they fear me? No. They respect me. They can see that I will lead them on a path to greatness. They see that I am their savior. Let me command

my people. You... should return to your work in the mine, where you belong. Understand?"

The voices creeped in, "*Bravo, old boy.*"

Now sweating at the forehead, Meyer nodded his head in submission, as Richtofen released him and turned back with a smile on his face to the father, who was still muttering to himself and his son through the tears.

"Alright, calm yourself! Let us form a deal, shall we? Herr Meyer will still use your son for this very, very important task. But, you can take off work for the day. *Ja?* No work today! How fun! How does that sound?"

The villager shook his head, "No! No! No work! Please!"

Richtofen seemed perplexed by the fatherly attachment to the boy, a feeling he could not relate to.

"Really? I thought that was a fair offer, myself. I would have taken it!"

The man was still kneeling and begging, eyes red with tears. Meyer was visibly shaken and removed from the conversation. Schuster watched silently.

Richtofen paced back and forth for a few moments, before making a final offer, "Hm... ah! How about the boy does no work in the mines, but you solve this little problem und work for longer periods throughout the next couple of days? Hm? No work for the boy, the lucky little brat, und you will pick up his slack."

The villager hesitantly nodded, finally standing from his position and taking the now released boy to his side.

"Thank you! Thank you. Richtofen."

Richtofen grinned, waving to the father and the boy, “*Bitte!* Send the boy running home, now, Herr Meyer will need your help with this wire situation.”

Meyer hesitated for a moment about speaking up, but did so anyway, “How are we supposed to attach the wire? That's why I needed the boy!”

Richtofen placed one hand on Meyer's shoulder gently, still provoking him to flinch.

“I'm sure you will figure it out, Herr Meyer. I'm confident you will find a solution without my help. Goodbye.”

Meyer and the father stood silent for a moment, before Meyer led the two of them to the mineshaft's entrance, stepping inside the torch-lit hole. Richtofen looked to Schuster, pumping his fist into the air.

“Now that, Doctor Schuster, is how you run an organization!” Richtofen chuckled to himself.

“That was... impressive, Doctor. Both parties seemed... satisfied.”

“Follow my example, and one day, when we've unlocked the MPD's powers und I can safely retire, it will be you in my boots giving all of the orders.”

“Me? I don't know what to say, Doctor. I was beginning to think you did not think me capable of leading a project.”

“Of course I do, Baron, I taught you everything you know! I had hoped you would not take Groph's assignment as head of Griffin Station as an insult to your leadership ability. I simply wanted to avoid the appearance of nepotism!”

“Of course not, Doctor. Eh... thank you. I appreciate all that you've done. The station,

this... jungle is simply marvelous.”

The crowd around them was now dispersing as they trekked down the hill towards the ruined temple, now the entrance to another set of mines.

“All you need, Mr. Schuster, is confidence! Confidence und assertiveness. Everyone responds well to these traits. Soldiers, laborers, scientists... we are all ready to serve the needs of others with the right leadership to light the way.”

“I will certainly work on that when I have the chance. Perhaps I will try with these mercenaries you’ve hired?”

“Hm... *ja*, that could work.”

Up ahead a few meters was a soldier, sat down on a stone sunk in the mud, smoking a cigarette, his German MP-40 resting against a tree. Schuster began to pick up his pace, moving ahead of Richtofen, eager to exploit his newfound confidence. Richtofen felt the urge to stop him, but the voices prevented him, “*Let him go, Edward. How else will he learn?*”

Schuster called out to the soldier as he approached, “You there, uh, sir. How many undead attacks have there been in the past forty-eight hours?”

The mercenary continued to puff smoke, looking at Schuster with confusion and then contempt.

“Erm, did you hear me? Can you answer the question? You don't seem to be doing much work-”

He stood up from the stone, now visibly taller than Schuster, and his build much more intimidating than it had seemed before. Schuster seemed unsure, and most of all, frightened.

Richtofen had now caught up with them, and jovially wrapped his arm around Schuster.

Richtofen let out a mood-lightening chuckle, “*Mein Freund hier ist Doktor Schuster. Er wunderte sich nur über die jüngsten Angriffe der Untoten.*“

Schuster interjected, “Oh my, I, uh, apologize, I mean, *es tut mir leid. Ich bin Doktor Schuster-*“

The soldier raised his hand towards Schuster, instructing him to stop speaking before replying, “Three, perhaps four attacks in the past forty-eight hours. Doktor Richtofen, we need more supplies, and certainly a higher payment for such work.“

“Ah, *ja*, of course, thank you for bringing this to me personally... I will see that your shipment is doubled, and your wages are... improved.“

The mercenary tossed the cigarette into the mud before wrapping the strap attached to his weapon around himself, “The rest of the men are down below. The miners have begun blasting.“

Richtofen bowed, replying, “*Danke*, comrade!“

Richtofen guided Schuster forward until they were near the mine's entrance, where another mercenary stood guard. The facade of the mine was held up by wooden scaffolding, and the interior was lit by a gas lamp for many meters before the tunnel branched. Placed in the dirt leading outside was a set of rails for carts to transport ore, particularly 115.

Richtofen patted Schuster's back, smiling as he did so.

“A noble attempt, Mr. Schuster, but some nuts are harder to crack than others, to speak metaphorically. You must remember these men are not loyal to our cause... Group 621... 615, or whatever your number was. They are only loyal to the man handing them their *Reichsmarks*,

which happens to be me. Give them time, and perhaps they will understand what we are working towards. Then, maybe they would work for free... But probably not.“

Schuster replied, “I may have been a bit overzealous. Surely, they will come to know me as I continue my work here and at Griffin Station. No need to rush these things.“

Richtofen halted as the voices began to whisper in his ear, drawing his attention towards the end of the mine shaft.

Then came the eruption of echoed gunshots and screaming from inside. The man standing near the entrance motioned for them to stay back before pointing the weapon into the sparsely-lit mine. From inside, the screams grew louder before a set of lights from mining helmets cut through the darkness. The men scattered once they reached sunlight, heading for the secure radio station outside the village. Inside the cave there were flashes from the barrels of automatic weapons, and more boots as a set of armed mercenaries ran towards the light. Amongst them were village laborers, defending themselves with the help of pickaxes and hammers. They all formed a defense around the entrance, pushing Richtofen and Schuster back as they prepared for an ambush.

From inside the mine there was unnatural screaming and snarling. A set of figures passed by a gas lamp, one even knocking it to the ground as they lumbered forward. They could hardly be seen by Richtofen through the crowd within the dark cave, but he could see the dim lights of their eyes, completely void and dead-set on the end of the tunnel.

The man from uphill came running down, followed by two more mercenaries, faces red and sweat dripping. He took aim with the others and crouched in formation. The lamps in the

tunnel began to fade as they were blotted out by the beings inside.

The first one came into view, head first. Its skin was grey and covered in muck, the skin around its jaw decomposed. Its bare body was covered in tattoos and splotted with various bumps and lesions where maggots had lived. Its yellow pants were torn revealing bone poking through skin and muscle. It swung its veiny, thin arms, attempting to pounce as it entered daylight before an anonymous gunman tore a hole in its chest, knocking it back. It was quickly trampled as two more, equally rotten and disgusting corpses, charged forward. The surplus of ammunition proved to be enough to hold them at bay for now.

A stray bullet impacted a gas lamp near the entrance, cutting out the last available light to spot the attackers. It seemed almost endless, as the trained professionals fired in shifts, taking note of each other's ready status. Another stray bullet created a loud 'ping' as it bounced off of the metal rail, creating a spark which ignited the gas dripping from the hanging lamp. A few in the center of the horde were now burning at their legs, revealing a pile of corpses beneath and the empty tunnel to their rear.

As Richtofen watched in awe, he heard the whispering voices return, which drew him away towards the ground beneath him. He was shaken by the tugging of something at his ankle. There was a filthy, brown and grey hand wrapped around him, and the ugly, terrorizing face of its host, snarling as it pulled itself through the shallow mud.

“Sheiße!”

With the attention of everyone else drawn towards the mine, they had not noticed the riser. Richtofen moved swiftly, pulling from his bag a small, relatively dull knife, leaning down

and shoving it into the wrist of his attacker as he used his other leg to stomp on the wound. It grew angrier, rearing its head as it came out of the dirt. Richtofen continued repeatedly stabbing shallow wounds into the wrist, but it showed no sign of easing off. It pulled Richtofen's weight to the ground, and as he struggled, he toppled over.

“Doctor Schuster!”

Schuster had turned his head to see Richtofen's situation, attempting to alert one of the mercenaries. Edward's screams were silent compared to the hail of gunfire.

The beast's ravenous face grew still as the metal point of a pickaxe shot through the top of its skull to the bottom of its jaw, spurting blood in all directions. Its wielder was a village laborer who left the tool in place, before prying the fingers off of Richtofen's boot. Through the haze of adrenaline, Richtofen could see the outstretched hand of the man, a tattoo of a black sun on his chest. He took his hand, rising to his feet as gunfire ceased.

“Mein gott, thank you, I would have-“

As the villager knelt to the ground, Richtofen could now see the festering wound in the man's neck he had recently acquired in the mines. He also noticed the shakiness of his hands and heavy breathing before coming face to face with his bloodshot eyes. As the group of mercenaries began to disperse in search of more undead, the laborer began to lower further, fainting onto the ground, barely even alive.

Richtofen cocked his head around to the men around him, who were paying no mind to the dying man before him.

He knelt down, examining the wound, gaping and filled with pus.

“That is... quite large.”

With no one paying any mind to them, Richtofen raised his voice, “Will anyone get this man to the barracks? He needs medical attention! This is surely infected!”

He had drawn the attention of two other laborers, who arrived and attempted to keep the man alive as they dragged him away.

Richtofen and Schuster were now left shaken standing in the middle of all the chaos. Edward looked at his blade, stained red with aged blood, before resting his arms at his side and turning to Schuster.

“It appears we will not be touring the mine.”

Schuster's complexion was pale and demeanor like that of a frightened child, “So it seems.”

Edward began heading back up the hill, and Schuster followed in suit. The two men were silent as well as slow in their pace.

The voices chimed in, “*Why do you worry your mind with these worthless beings?*”

Richtofen muttered to himself, “They were going to just... leave him to die.”

Schuster turned to Richtofen apparently hearing his statement, “There was nothing that could be done Edward. His injuries seemed... fatal.”

“What does it matter, Edward? Just another body to the pile. He lived a meaningless life, and he died for you. Take solace in the one useful deed you allowed him to perform.”

In hushed shout, Richtofen said, “**Quiet!** Stop tormenting me!”

Richtofen was now gripping the blade's handle so hard his hand was a bright red.

Schuster sorrowfully replied, "I am sorry, Edward, I didn't mean to--"

Edward cut him off, "Nein, no, not you... you've done nothing wrong."

Edward paused a moment to calm himself before continuing, "Do you know what they called me during my time at the front? I'm sure you've heard the nickname I was given. '*The Butcher*'"

"I've heard these rumours, yes."

"It began as a facetious nickname given to me by General Amsel during my time there, but he and his... men transformed it into propaganda. A tool for fear. The occupied peoples on the streets dared not to rebel against the Reich. '*Beware the Doc.*' The Butcher would torture and tear you apart, with no morality or even a purpose. It is a fate worse than death to be in The Butcher's hands."

They had reached a nearby stream, where Edward was crouching down, placing the blade of his knife into the water to wash away the blood.

"Every day I've thought about how... ludicrous it all was. I am a man of science. I took the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. *The Butcher* should mean nothing to me... as time has passed, however, I've begun to wonder if he is truly gone. If perhaps, I am not as innocent as I seem, in my endeavors to do good: To do the right thing."

He raised himself up, taking a look into the dull blade, before wiping it dry with his coat and placing it back into his bag. Schuster stood silent, listening intently. With nothing further, Richtofen began to head back towards the hill, but was stopped when Schuster asked him a question: "Edward, where did you get a Hitler Youth Knife?"

Edward turned back, sullen-faced, replying simply, "It was a gift."

"From whom?"

He took a moment to respond, "During that time, I was invited to present some of my work in science to a group of Hitler Youth for the week. I was reluctant to, as children and I do not quite get along. At this time, however, I needed to form a strong partnership with members of the Reichstag, and this was the perfect opportunity to prove myself."

"Was it a gift from the staff?"

"*Nein...* there was a boy in the group who had followed my work, only that which was published, of course. He seemed to be the most interested in my presentation, and during my stay with them, he would constantly ask me questions I could not answer. It was a constant barrage of information and details that I did not care for. The boy simply would not leave me to myself. During a trip through Berlin, he confided in me that his father had left to fight in the war, leaving him and his sister with nothing. His father did not seem to care for him very much, denying him a chemistry kit every year for his birthday and physically reprimanding him when he would ask. He wanted to be a doctor and save lives."

The sun was beginning to set towards the opposite side of the mountain, reddening the cloudy sky.

"On my last day, the boys created their own knives to use in their scouting trip. The child who had continued to follow me said that I must save as many lives as I can until he can become a Doctor. He came to me with his completed knife, and took from his belt a leather sheath. He had cut into the leather, 'Dr., ...' well, I can't remember his last name. He was glowing... with this

expression of pride und happiness... und when he showed me the sheath... I took it and tossed it aside. He had ruined it, rendering it completely useless, and I told him as much! What a waste of raw material for a barely legible inscription! He ran off in tears, of course. The little brat could not handle the criticism. Since he clearly had no use for the blade anymore, he tossed it to the ground, und I collected it. Now... I mainly use it to spread jam on toast.”

The two men stood silent under the sunset, the buzzing of mosquitoes and chirping of crickets booming in comparison. Schuster searched his mind for words, before turning his body towards the upper hill and pacing towards the barracks.

“The sun is getting low, Doctor.”

Chapter 17: Semper Fi

1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW, Washington, D.C., United States of America

PFC Peter McCain

June 16th, 1942

At the dawn of a new day, the sun low, peeking over the horizon, Peter forced his aching, tired body out of the government limousine into the chilly morning air. He wore his most formal outfit, with a bright blue tie, a grey jacket, and grey dress pants. His right arm rested in a cast at his chest, almost completely healed from the near-impossible landing in the Philippines. He had sent a letter to Hilario as soon as he was able to write while in the hospital, and to his surprise the surly mechanic sent a heart-felt response with an image of him and his brother, Isko, as boys. Hilario hoped to continue writing back even as he is being sent back to the front to assist Filipino forces. Peter, on the other hand, had been dealt an entirely different proposition.

He was greeted with a sweaty handshake by a man in all-black business attire, a collection of files in a manila folder under his other arm, “We're glad to have you, Mr. McCain.”

Behind him was the majestic and revered White House, the residence of the President of the United States. Peter paid little attention to the neurotic man before him as he looked out on the freshly cut lawn and intricate stone pathway leading up to the building. It was just as grand a piece of architecture as he had seen in pictures, perhaps even greater.

The man guided him up the path leading up to the front doors.

“A beautiful morning, isn't it, Mr. McCain?”

“Yeah, you could say that. Seems pretty early to have a meeting for a guy like me, though.”

“Hm, apologies. Director Donovan and the rest of the OSS could only book the meeting room for this time. They've been quite busy, as you can imagine.”

Peter perked up, “Director... Oh! I thought you were Donovan. See, I was being real quiet and smooth, 'cause I thought you were the Director. Who are you?”

“I am Cornelius Pernell. I will be your handler once you begin training. I thought he had mentioned that in the letter... “

“Ah, yeah, he probably did. Sorry. I've been focused on spending time with my little girl. We've been watching those cartoon pictures at the theater. You need to keep paying' those guys making the ones with the bunny. She loves those.”

“That isn't quite our department, that would be the concern of the Office of War Information. You'd have to talk to one of them, assuming you are not joking.”

“Only partially, Mr. Pernell.”

“You can just call me Cornelius. We're going to be doing a lot of work together.”

Pernell opened the doorway leading into the reception room and then into the central hallway. The floors were shining, freshly cleaned, and an intricate chandelier hung from the ceiling, tying together the various works of art and plants lining the walls. A wide, red carpet sat in the middle, leading them on the path to the West Wing. Looking upon the old-fashioned

marble work, Peter whistled in awe at the sheer size and majesty of it all. It was everything his home was not: Massive, regal, fit for a king and his queen, and completely spotless. Since he was no longer living with his ex-wife, the importance of what she had done for him had now become readily apparent. For all that he had said and done, she was happy to see him alive again when he came to pick up little Mary.

Again the duo passed through another set of doors into the West Wing's lobby area, the architecture slightly more modern with an entirely different color scheme and atmosphere. In the center of the room were several men in military uniform talking, before glancing at Peter as he entered the room.

Peter began to panic, adjusting his tie, and wiping away any hair on his shoulders, “Shit, they are looking- I shouldn't have worn the blue tie. It was too much, wasn't it?”

Cornellius muttered quietly, “Peter.”

“Look, they're all wearing striped grey ties.”

In a hushed tone, Cornellius exclaimed, taking Peter's shoulder, “Peter!”

“What?”

“Just... stay calm, I'm fairly distressed too, you know... look, don't worry about what they think of you; They know you're good at what you do. Just look at your cast: It says it all. But me? I'm new to all this bureaucracy. If they're looking at anyone, it's me... it's probably me. When we get inside, just sit down. Be humble.”

With his hand firmly on Peter's shoulder, Cornellius guided them left into another hallway, and then immediately right into a wide room with a table in the center, covered in

papers. Sat at the table was a man with posture that commanded the room. He was most definitely Director of the OSS, William Donovan. At his right was a young lady with a typewriter, now smoking a cigarette, and to his left several more men in military uniform listening in to him. At one end of the table was an image projector, turned off on a rolling cart. At the other, was a portable, white screen placed near the opposite doorway.

Noting their arrival, Donovan stood up from his seat, leaning over and outstretching his hand to Pernell who accepted the gesture.

Pernell motioned towards Peter, stating, "Director! This is Private Peter McCain."

Donovan offered his hand to Peter as well, "A Private no longer, Cornellius. It's great to have you Agent McCain."

Unlike Pernell's clammy, unrefined grasp, Donovan's was firm and daunting. Peter was at a loss for words, already being referred to as an agent of the OSS before training had even begun.

"Thank... th- thank you, Director. Uh... is the President anywhere around here too, or... because I don't know if I'm ready-"

Pernell nudged him above his ribs behind the cast, urging him to silence. Donovan responded promptly, "Mr. President will not be joining us as he has other matters to attend to, but I know for a fact he would love to meet you in person. For now, we should begin the meeting. Deandra?"

The young blonde woman put out her cigarette, insuring her typewriter was ready before nodding to the Director, now seated alongside the others. Pernell and McCain sat down at the opposite side of the ovular table, Peter meeting eyes with the assistant before passing a flirtatious

wink. This did not seem to faze her as she prepared to write the transcript of the meeting.

Donovan looked over the paper before him, reciting it to the room.

“Gentleman, just three days ago the President issued an order to establish the Office of Strategic Services. Our agenda is to perform special operations and intelligence work for the United States military. You are all the first members of this historic organization, and have been hand-selected for your skill-sets, expertise, and technical prowess. In particular, the purpose of today's meeting will be to introduce our first field agent, Mr. McCain, to his upcoming operations. Mr. Cornelius Pernell will be his handler for all upcoming operations, and Mr. Hampton will be the Chief Operations Coordinator.”

Peter leaned over, nudging Pernell and whispering to him, “Which one is Hampton?”

Pernell promptly motioned with his index finger towards the stout older man behind Donovan's chair.

“With time, we will have more new recruits for Operation Torch in North Africa, but Mr. McCain, your training will concern intelligence far greater in secrecy, that will affect the future of the United States after the war is won. George, the lights?”

Near the doorway, a suited man dimmed the lights of the room, as another activated the projector, beaming a light onto the white screen. Peter squirmed in his chair, dying to ask questions but afraid to do so at this time.

The first image that came onto the screen was that of an older, bald, and bearded man in a lab coat sitting at a desk.

Donovan continued, “This is Doctor Ludvig Maxis. In 1931, he founded Group 935, a

scientific research organization headquartered outside of Breslau at a location known as The Giant, or in German, Der Riese. The world's most prestigious scientists were invited to join the group by Doctor Maxis, and it has since expanded across the globe. Group 935 is an extremely exclusive and secretive organization sharing next to none of its research publicly. Their research primary revolves around a rare, new element known as 115, and The Giant is smack dab on top of one of the largest depositories of 115. Group 935 concerns us because of Maxis' dealings with the Nazi Party.”

The slide changed to a blurry photo of two figures shaking hands, one apparently Doctor Maxis, and the other in German military fatigues.

“We have confirmation from numerous operatives previously watching over Group 935 that Maxis has formed a deal with the Nazi's to support their military in exchange for future funding. What this support has garnered for them, we are not entirely certain yet. British operatives discovered spent shell casings that seem to have been forged partially using 115. Now Group 935 has expanded its influence into Austria, Siberia, and Japan. They also have two facilities in Berlin that are unknown to even some members of Group 935, and the Reichstag believes we know nothing about them. Your ultimate goal, Agent McCain, will be discovering the purpose of these two facilities. Their secrecy to all but Maxis' most trusted inner circle is concerning and could turn the tides of the war for the worse.”

Now on the screen was a map of the world with red dots scattered across the eastern hemisphere denoting known Group 935 locations. Peter grew more anxious thinking of being sent to Europe.

“Because of your actions in the Philippines, you’ve grabbed our attention, and according to your records you excelled in every training regiment, with... minimal complaints from your superiors. You exceeded in medical training, and apparently speak fluent German?”

He looked to Peter expectantly, who nodded his head nervously as he spoke. “Germ-yeah, I learned it in High School, then some College classes... yeah, *ja*.”

Donovan nodded, assured, returning to his prepared words.

“For these reasons you have been chosen for this operation, henceforth known as Operation Firebrand. At the moment Group 935 is closed off from allowing non-German citizens into its ranks, but you will still be performing missions in Germany to find out more about Group 935's movements and just what the hell they are doing in Berlin. Major Sawyer, here, has top men forging a medical license and research to be published under your name. If Group 935 will ever allow Americans into the organization again, you will need the proper scientific authority to join. Once you are ready and your body is healed, we can begin espionage training and a further debriefing on your upcoming mission. Mr. Pernell will be handling all of that and more. He will be your direct connection to the OSS in the field and will provide you with everything you need.”

Pernell adjusted himself in his seat, seemingly nervous at the very mention of his name.

Donovan continued, “While you are preparing for field work, Agent McCain, you will need to conduct research of your own on Group 935's top players: Doctor Maxis, Edward Richtofen, Hermann Porter, Josef Weber... any known associates: Doctor Friedrich Steiner, Doctor Kosuke Okitsu... Study their books, their discoveries, anything you can find. Mr. Pernell

can assist you in finding any information we have available and a list of known Group 935 members. Do you have any questions, Agent McCain?”

Peter mumbled to himself, slumped in his chair, searching for a proper question as the entire room looked directly into him. “Yeah, yes. Until we can fully commit to Operation Firebrand, what would you have me doing in Europe?”

“We are currently gathering intelligence on vulnerable communications outposts across German territory that may be communicating with one of the top secret Berlin facilities. Once we have a target, you'll be needed to infiltrate the outpost and recover what you can. You've proven yourself very capable of espionage given that you are alive here today.”

Peter looked to the window, blinds blocking in any sunlight before returning his gaze to Donovan. “And uh... when will I be coming back home?”

Donovan nodded thoughtfully, closing the folder before him before motioning the man near the door to turn the lights back on. “You'll be coming home periodically to debrief and train for upcoming missions safely. Of course, during that time you are free to visit family and friends before you are needed again.”

Peter stared blankly at the table for a moment, then to the young lady at the typewriter. She raised her eyebrow before looking to Donovan. Donovan broke the silence, “Any more questions, Agent McCain?”

Peter caught himself staring, before regaining his composure and replying, “No sir, no more. Thank you!”

Donovan nodded, smiling, and outstretched his hand to him, “Thank you, Agent McCain,

I'm sure you'll do us proud.”

Peter shook his firm hand before standing up and heading towards the door, Pernell behind him. Pernell looked back to the Director, stating, “You can count on us sir. I'm sure Agent McCain will not let us down.”

The pair had now exited into the lobby of the West Wing, Peter stopping as the door shut behind them to backhand Pernell in the chest, who exclaimed, confused, “Hey!”

“Hey you, Cornelius. *I* won't let you down? What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I have confidence in you, Peter.”

“Why?”

“I said be humble, not *that* humble.”

“I don't know if I can do this. This is all so crazy.”

Peter was now leaned against the wall near a window looking over the lawn of the White House. Pernell joined him at the opposite side.

“I don't know if you are aware of this Peter, but that stunt you pulled to get the battle plans to Corregidor... **that** was crazy. No weapons, no air support, that took brains and most of all, that took guts.”

“It wasn't all me. Isko-”

“I've read the dossier. There were three of you, and you certainly couldn't do it alone. But without you they would have gotten nowhere. Neither of them knew how to get there, what to look out for. It was a team effort. Think of me like one of them.”

“You? Like Isko? Or Hilario?”

“Okay maybe not like them, but I've got your back. I know you can do this, Peter. What you did that day may have saved the lives of your entire platoon and more.”

“*May have*' being the key phrase there. Since then I haven't seen Anton, or Stanford, or, Hell, Corporal Little-”

“These things take time. Now, I don't know you yet, not really. But I know you've got the skills that the OSS needs. The skills to save some lives, maybe kick some ass. First, I want to learn a little more about you, Pete.”

“Don't call me Pete.”

“Noted. Won't make the same mistake again.”

Peter paused for a moment, looking back onto the lawn before continuing to walk towards the doors he came in through, Pernell in tow.

“If you want to know something about me: I don't like change. Not one bit. In terms of a career, pencil-pushing and pretending to be a scientist is a pretty big change from failed field medic turned grunt. I'm gonna need some time to get acquainted with all of... **that**. I hadn't even heard of Group 935 before all of this.”

“Very few have. And for the record. Everything you saw in there was completely confidential.”

“Oh please, who would I tell? Have all the information on Element 115 you can find sent to my flat. Also everything on Doctor Maxis; I'm gonna need to get inside his head.”

Peter and Cornellius were now out of the front doors of the White House, walking down the path towards a different limousine from the one before.

Cornellius patted Peter on the back, “I’ll get right on that. You take care.”

As Peter prepared to lower himself into the vehicle, he stood back up, speaking to Pernell.

“Also, send me an English-to-German dictionary too. Maybe some lessons for kids or somethin'. I’m a bit rusty. No *sprechen ze Deutsch sehr gut!*”

Pernell said nothing in response, choosing instead to offer a thumb's up and reassuring expression as he closed the door of the vehicle, waving to the driver to take Peter home. As the limousine drove away from the White House lawn, Peter looked out the window back towards Pernell, who tripped and fell as made his way up the steps, scattering the contents of his briefcase as another suited man in a wheelchair came outside and tried to assist him.

“I guess that's why I'm the field guy...”

Dr. Schuster Diary Entry: 18th of July, 1942

“Dear diary,

It has been quite some time since I arrived on the Moon, and in that time I have had little to no chance to practice in my primary field of expertise: Chemistry. Dr. Richtofen has requested that I oversee the study of the pyramid along with Dr. Groph, a task I do not take lightly. Still, since I heard the news that Dr. Maxis had taken control of my old Perk-a-Cola project, I have been eager to return to my favorite branch of science from my undergraduate studies. Edward informed me that Group 935 is beginning to formulate new ideas to be added to the project, but none have matched the utility of my original four concepts: Juggernog, Speed Cola, Quick Revive Soda, and Double Tap Root Beer. I fear what the Wehrmacht will be capable of with my creations. Hitler's armies have trampled across Europe and are now on Soviet soil. At times I am thankful to be on a celestial body far from the Earth, away from the violence.

Dr. Richtofen also informed me that much of Group 935's supply of chemical compounds including diatomite and prussic acid are being sold off to a pest control company in Germany. It seems the Reichstag is no longer interested in chemical weapons of war, and I am thankful to no longer take part in such barbaric research. I often feel alone at Griffin Station; Groph and his cohorts are all uniquely bizarre and I find that I cannot relate to any of them. Edward visits the station occasionally, but he has not been himself in quite some time. The cause may quite possibly be the stress of working under two scientific organizations, all the while hiding one away from the other. Another theory stems from a behavioral pattern I have noticed in many other scientists here, and even occasionally myself. All of us who have worked closely with the

pyramid tend to have outbursts of anger and confusion, some more than others. Richtofen's behavior in particular has been completely irrational, unlike anyone I have seen before, and he was the first to discover the MPD. At times he can be the same jovial busy-body I once knew, and at others he is short and cross with anyone who crosses his path. I have chosen to withhold this theory from him, because I fear what extra stress this may cause. I know the weight of the world rests on his shoulders in his endeavor to make the world a better one. I believe he will overcome the burden and succeed in the end; He always has.

It was Edward who suggested I keep a diary of my daily routine and my thoughts, and I understand now why: It is an amazing relief of stress. The past two weeks suggest a positive outcome in our project. Two days ago, our archaeological team discovered a new deposit of Element 115 south of Griffin Station and have begun mining operations. We have also completed the second phase of the BioDome project last night. We no longer need large shipments of oxygen to the station, as the plant life located in the BioDome along with the MPD now generates enough oxygen to support the station indefinitely. Our success proves that human life may be sustainable on any planet should overpopulation become an issue. This is exactly the type of work I expected when I first joined Group 935, and two years ago I could have never foreseen such progress.

Today Dr. Groph and I will be working with the MPD as we attempt to discover how to open the gateway. Last night, Dr. Groph showed me a set of ancient symbols seen on the face of the pyramid that he intends to input into the device. I can only hope Dr. Richtofen was correct in his assertion that Dr. Groph knows what he is doing regarding this 'Vril' technology.”

Chapter 18: Pressure

Living Quarters, Griffin Station, Mare Crisium, Moon

Dr. Baron Schuster

July 18th, 1942

“Doctor Schuster! Time is being wasted. You are needed in the field.”

Doctor Schuster raised his body from his cot, tucked away near the laboratories of Griffin Station. Raising to his feet and rubbing his forehead to stow his headache, Schuster called out through the grey, metallic door to Doctor Groph, “I will be just a moment. Go ahead and prepare the testing area.”

Groph followed, shortly, “The testing area has been ready for over an hour. Now, we only wait for you.”

“Alright, alright, one moment.”

Schuster approached his personal locker, the interior walls holding a framed picture of his father as well as his PhD, and he removed his lab coat, carefully folded and placed on the shelf the night before. Dressing himself, Schuster placed his diary and fountain pen into his breast pocket. He placed his thumb onto a keypad near the doorway, changing the light on the door from red to green, before it separated in the middle, revealing Doctor Groph. His hands were behind his back and his lab coat wrinkled as if it had been slept in. Groph himself seemed to be

lacking in sleep, however, as his eyes were bloodshot and there was grey beneath them.

“Come now, Doctor Schuster. We cannot delay any longer. I believe I know what we have been missing.”

Schuster stepped through the doorway, pushing through the small gap between Groph and the wall, and stepping out into a hallway of cots for Griffin Station's scientists.

“The symbols?”

“Yes... how did you know? Have I told you before?”

“Yes. One time or two, I believe. If I may ask, the front panel of the MPD seems to hold roughly fifty symbols, many of which appear to be identical. Surely we could use a brute force method to discover the pyramid's functions?”

“To an inexperienced eye, the symbols appear the same. I know your knowledge regarding the ancients is... elementary, but you surely must understand the potential consequences if we input the wrong sequence. They are very, very particular in their designs, and it has taken years for me to even achieve my own knowledge of their architecture and language. One wrong action and you may doom us all... “

“It was a simple suggestion. I understand the implications of such an ancient device being in our care, even if I know so little of its creators.”

“None of us know just what power is held here... it is truly incredible.”

Groph and Schuster walked through the middle section of the laboratories, passing several tired and slow-moving scientists preparing their stations. Reaching the stairs, they were halted as Groph let out a yelp and staggered backwards. Before them was a Beagle dressed from

the neck down in an aluminum suit not unlike those used by scientists to explore the Moon's surface. The joints were lined orange and a green ball was attached to the side of the suit. It stopped as well at the sight of Groph and Schuster, wagging its tail which was also encased in the pressurized suit.

Groph scolded the dog's handler, another scientist on the station also dressed in a space-safe suit, a helmet under his arm.

“Why is this mutt in the testing area during working hours? It should be in the kennel!”

The middle-aged scientist spoke up, pulling the dog aside, “I was taking Sir Davy for his morning walk on the surface, I apologize, Doctor Groph.”

“Do not apologize, just do as I ask.”

Groph passed the dog, being sure he was as far from it as possible. Doctor Schuster followed after patting Sir Davy on the head and scratching behind his ears to the enjoyment of both parties. Schuster nodded to the handler before catching up with Doctor Groph near the door.

Groph shared his frustration inside the airlock leading to the cave where the MPD is held. “They even created a suit for the dog... such a waste of our precious time and resources.”

“I believe Sir Davy provides an excellent relief of stress for them.”

“Why do you call it... no matter. Our team is performing the most important experiment in humanity's history. What is stress in the face of such achievement?”

Like the doors of Schuster's sleeping quarters, the airlock opened allowing entrance into the pyramid testing area. The pair descended a metal staircase leading to a stone floor, to the right the glorious pyramid, and to the left a power module and rows of computers connected to

the device with scientists lording over them. It was a sight seen so many times by Doctor Schuster in the past few weeks it felt almost mundane.

Groph called out to the technicians and scientists at the computers, “Are we ready?! Doctor Kaufmann?”

A short, older man with unkempt white hair stood at attention.

“Doctor Groph?”

“Have you ensured that all data files are backed up and stowed away, and that all crucial systems are connected to the backup generator?”

“Yes, Doctor. We are ready to begin.”

“Good. Doctor Schuster, join me, and keep a recorder handy. I have a *very* good feeling.”

The pair stood together near the front face of the pyramid which held a circular dial covered in sets of engraved symbols outlined with engraved boxes. Schuster held a recording device in his left hand he retrieved from a scientist near the computers. Groph seemed eager to begin, approaching the front panel.

He guided his hovering hand over it, muttering to himself with what seemed like gibberish.

“Yani-Ya Koom-Zi Vril-Ya...”

Schuster approached closer, trying to make sense of the symbols Groph chose.

Groph muttered, *“An Sumer An...”*

Schuster interrupted, “Doctor Groph... you haven't... touched the pyramid have you?”

Groph stuttered, “What? No, no. Doctor Richtofen specifically instructed we do not make

physical contact with the pyramid itself or face expulsion from the Group... now, quiet, I need concentration... “

Groph placed his index and middle finger on a set of symbols to the left of the center, causing the engraving to glow a bright blue. He then touched another set, and then another, lighting four and stepping away from the pyramid. The room was deathly silent as everyone looked to each other and to the pyramid awaiting any outcome. After a few moments, the lit up symbols faded to their original form.

“*Scheiße!*” Doctor Groph exclaimed, frustrated as he placed his hand on his bald head.

The room remained silent for a moment, before Groph exclaimed once again, “Ah!”

He input the same sequence of symbols again, changing the last to another symbol. Backing away he waited, and the symbols soon faded once again. Groph stepped away, humbled and lacking words. Schuster dared not to speak up.

Then Doctor Kaufmann called out from the computers, “Doctor Groph, we are experiencing some interference in the signal.”

Groph hurriedly approached one of the screens, Schuster close behind. There was a visible static and warping effect on the screen's representation of the station's power systems. Groph slapped his palm on the top of the system, shifting the warping effect and restoring the picture to normal. Now red in his face, Groph shoved Kaufmann aside and returned to the pyramid. “I don't understand! I input the symbols just as they were written! This is impossible!”

Schuster spoke up, “Perhaps you are remembering them incorrectly. Where are they written?”

Groph barked back, “I remember them perfectly! Doctor Richtofen himself has told me I have impeccable memory on several occasions, I...”

He trailed off in his speech as he heard a loud banging coming from the direction of the other scientists. Up the stairs leading to the subsurface tunnels there was yelling in German as the banging grew louder. There was then a slam as a large, metal Group 935 storage container barreled down the stairs into the area, before flying through the air towards the MPD.

“Get down!” Schuster shoved Groph aside, who stood in its path mesmerized. It impacted the front panel of the pyramid with an echoing clang, sitting completely still on the surface. Every scientists in the labs had heard the commotion and was now piling into the cave. Men all the way from the receiving bay were now down the stairs, attempting to catch up to the rogue crate.

Groph rose to his feet, perplexed by the object that nearly crushed him. He attempted to push it away from the panel, with it giving no sign of movement. Even pulling with the strength of three men did nothing.

“What is in this container?”

The exasperated man from the receiving bay said, “Some type of artifact Doctor Richtofen wanted stored away...”

“The egg?”

Confused, the bay worker asked, “Egg?”

“Unlatch the box, and pull it away vertically! Now!”

As instructed, the worker input on the sideways keypad a passcode to unlock the

container, and the heavier end on the hinge came away from the top, hitting the floor and shuffling the contents. The lid of the container was still firmly placed on the surface of the pyramid's panel, and in the center was the Vril egg that seemed to always gravitate towards the pyramid, its surface adorned with grooves and symbols just like that on the MPD's base.

Three men pulled the box downwards and away from the base, managing to move the box's lid down, the egg rolling along its surface, still gravitating towards the direct center of the pyramid's panel. They managed to pull the crate completely away, removing any barrier between the panel and the orb. The convex center of the circle had become concave, allowing for the orb to fit firmly in place. The entire panel began to light up as electricity sparked, heightening the temperature in the room.

After a moment of sparking, it stopped, and at the front left corner of the pyramid, a circle previously thought to be ornamental rose from the ground, revealing a seemingly glass tube about the height of an ordinary man. All of the scientists gazed at the tube, dazzled by it.

Doctor Schuster turned to Groph who was now smiling ear to ear. He approached the tube, gazing into it, before barking commands.

“Return the container to storage, and the rest of you return to your stations! Doctor Schuster, prepare the recording device. We have made history today.”

The crowd dispersed leaving behind only Groph, Schuster, and the technicians. Doctor Schuster fiddled with the device as Doctor Groph touched the glass. He turned to Schuster.

“Are you ready, Doctor Schuster?”

“I am- **AGH!**”

Schuster dropped the recorder and stepped away frightened as a rat scurried across the stone below. The rat ran under a metal grate on the floor meant to make the uneven ground flatter. Schuster stood shaking as Groph picked up the recording device from the floor and initiated his log entry.

"Log, 1075. Doctor Schuster and I have spent countless hours with the pyramid device in an attempt to understand how it functions. We have made little progress... until now. Today we uncovered what looks to be some kind of tank with a glass like front. The glass itself seems-

The rat had now left its hiding spot, revealing itself to Doctor Schuster, who took the opportunity to try and kill it.

"I've got you now, rat!"

Rolling his eyes, Groph frustratedly called out, "Kill it, Schuster!"

Schuster managed to cut off the rat's escape route towards the labs, stomping on it with his boots, crushing it. Immediately upon death, a beam of light shot out from the rat's body towards the pyramid.

Stunned, Schuster asked Groph, "Did you see that?"

Doctor Groph approached the glass tube, which had begun to fill with a blue liquid-like substance. "Look! The capacitor is illuminated, the tank is filling-"

Doctor Schuster interjected, "The machine, it seems to be activated! What did you do?"

"I think we just discovered what powers this machine." Groph turned off the recorder, pointing towards the computer team. "Call Doctor Richtofen. He needs to know what has happened."

The two doctors ran towards the monitors, waiting as Doctor Richtofen received the transmission. A live feed from the teleporter room of Eagle's Nest appeared, with Doctor Richtofen in his lab coat nodding to another scientist before sending him away.

"Griffin Station, this is Eagle's Nest. Do you have an update?"

Groph shoved the technician aside, speaking directly to Richtofen.

"Yes, Doctor! Schuster and I were inputting the Vril symbols as you suggested and the Vril egg you discovered flew across the station directly into the device. A glass tube then rose from the ground! That is not all; After Schuster killed a rat near the MPD, it seemed to emanate a beam of energy directly into the panel itself, partially filling the tube."

He waited a moment, and Richtofen responded, confused, *"So we have a rodent problem?"*

"Doctor Richtofen! I believe this may be the key to powering up the device!"

"Ah! I see. Why do you believe this may be a power source?"

"It is merely a hypothesis, but from what I and Doctor Schuster saw, the rat seemed to emit an energy at the moment of death. Its life force, if you will."

Doctor Schuster inquired towards Groph, "Its... soul?"

"Not quite. From your perspective, that may be an ample description, but it is something more. As we have studied the pyramid we have noticed its tendency to recognize living beings that approach it and flare up in power levels. The device itself seems to recognize some type of... aetherial life force within all living beings. The rat, the dog... us."

Richtofen pondered, *"Intriguing... we will need more of this energy to completely power*

up the device, ja?"

"Correct. Where we can find more living creatures to harness this energy will prove a problem. The chance Doctor Schuster will find more pests on the station is minimal... although the dog-"

Schuster looked to Richtofen on the screen, "Edward, couldn't you supply us with undead subjects? Or the testing animals?"

"Nein, Mr. Schuster. Maxis has a close eye on our inventory of living, and non-living subjects. Any misstep and his cronies will be here investigating our interests. Besides, would zombies even still contain this energy?"

Groph responded, "I believe they would, as no device was around to collect the energy. The sudden burst of adrenaline at the moment of death may be the spark that allows their energy to be collected. Otherwise, Schuster and I would be dead and our energy collected in the machine while we were still alive."

"Regardless, this would be impossible. We cannot create our own undead subjects either, as any supplier of cadavers under the Reich is connected to Doctor Maxis und Group 935. There cannot be any chance that he discovers what we are doing here."

The three men pondered for a moment, unsure just how they may power the device with their limited resources. Doctor Schuster felt prepared to give up on the project altogether.

Then, Groph had an idea, "Do we have access to any prisons?"

Schuster was appalled at Groph's implications, "Are you suggesting we use living humans to power this machine? Have you gone mad?"

“Mad? I can think of no other way. There is no wildlife to harness for energy on the Moon or the barren snow around the castle.”

Schuster replied, “With time, I believe we can-”

Richtofen cut him off, “*Kustover Posten.*”

“What?”

“I have contacts within Kustover Posten: The prison for spies und Anti-Fascists within Group 935 und Germany's other affiliated organizations. They will not be thrilled to hear from me... ”

“Doctor Richtofen! You can't be serious! You can't... “

“Unfortunately, as Doctor Groph said, there is no other way. I wish there was another way, old friend.”

“I can't be involved in this! What about the hippocratic oath, Doctor? How can we do this in good faith?”

“I know, believe me. You must understand this is the last thing I want to do... but history will shine brightly on us und these men for their sacrifice.”

“What if Doctor Groph is wrong? What if it is all for nothing but a bloody light show?!”

“We will not know unless we try, Doctor Schuster. You und I could spend all day exchanging the possibilities, but there is only one way to rule any of them out. You know this.”

Schuster backed away from the monitor, unable to see the humanity in Groph or Richtofen any longer. They seemed like complete strangers, no longer the men he once knew. He felt sick, walking out of the cave towards the pyramid.

Richtofen sighed, speaking to only Groph now, *“I will contact Kustover Posten. The first shipment will be on its way within a day, hopefully. I will have them send as many men as possible, so we can be done with this mess.”*

Groph hesitated for a moment, seemingly conflicted himself.

“Understood, Doctor. Griffin Station out.”

The signal cut out into static and the screen dimmed, Groph returning to the pyramid alongside Schuster. The two gazed into the black abyss on the surface of the pyramid.

Groph cut through the silence, spouting, “It is the only way.”

Schuster adjusted his lab coat, placing his hand upon the stainless glass container at the corner of the pyramid.

“It isn’t.”

Chapter 19: Infernal Rite

Teleporter Room, Griffin Castle, Werfen, Salzburg, Austria

Dr. Edward Richtofen

July 20th, 1942

“Isn't it time to check on your progress towards opening the gateway? The sacrificial lambs should have arrived by now, surely?”

Richtofen searched within cabinets, through drawers, and behind equipment within the hidden teleporter room. He was looking for a screwdriver set he had set out to find in the castle half an hour before, and there had not been any luck in locating it before official work hours would begin. He had hoped to find the set in order to continue work on the *Wunderwaffe* DG-2 during the morning hours, while Doctor Wagner was still preparing for the day's work.

“And if they have? Doctor Groph will inform me when the work is complete. Unlike you I find no pleasure in this unfortunate solution.”

“You mistake our intent Edward. Their energy is required if you are to form a bridge between your dimension and the Aether. Only then will we meet and you prosper.”

“Ja, ja, you've told me again und again. I understand what we are doing... it doesn't make it any easier.”

“Call the station and see for yourself what you have been doing. With time, it will become

clear that their sacrifice is necessary."

With the screwdriver set nowhere in the room, Richtofen looked to the set of monitors atop a wooden table. Their picture showed a grainy feed from Griffin Station's cameras, the screen refreshing every second and a half. Various rooms on the station were empty apart from the MPD chamber and the receiving bay, which were filled with armed mercenaries and a line of prisoners bound at the wrists shuffling towards the chamber.

Though there was no audio, detail was difficult to discern, and there was excessive jumping of frames, Richtofen could not help but feel a deep pain in his chest as he could not bear to watch. After a moment, he sent an outbound call to Doctor Groph. The larger, greenly-lit screen mounted on the wall lit up with the image of Doctor Groph and the pyramid behind him.

Richtofen stared into the pyramid through the feed for what felt like an eternity, switching his gaze to a distressed but stoic Groph, prepared to tell him to end the madness. Instead, Edward stated, "Griffin Station. This is Eagle's Nest. Status update. Over."

Groph seemed almost disappointed in Richtofen's request. Doctor Schuster was nowhere in sight.

"Hello, Doctor. We have the shipment, and are carrying out your orders..."

Through the feed, Edward could see a blindfolded, confused man stood before the massive, ominous structure. He jerked his head around, searching around the room without any sight, trying to grasp just where he was and why he was there. An armed mercenary stood behind him, a Luger in hand, guiding him forward towards the front panel. He then gripped the man's shoulder to hold him still, pointing the Luger to his back, swiftly putting a bullet into his heart.

The lifeless body let out a final grunt and gasp as it tumbled to the floor, a red beam of energy shooting directly into the pyramid. Another mercenary dragged the body away as the shooter went out of the camera's view.

“It is grim work, Doctor...”

Though he dreaded seeing such barbarism personally before, Richtofen was beginning to understand the voices in his head, for all their cryptic talk. On the grainy feed, the killing seemed to be a force completely out of Edward's control for no greater purpose; But, up close, he could see the importance, nay, the necessity of their sacrifice. With such a perspective, it was almost satisfying to witness such progress for the greater good. Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin... they send good men to die for nothing but petty squabbles. Hitler sends his enemies into camps and prisons to waste away as part of his deluded, grand fantasy. Little does he know his enemies are here... being used to save humanity. They die for a cause worth dying for: Eternal prosperity for those who deserve it.

As the gunman pushed another clueless pawn towards the pyramid, Edward responded to Groph's notion.

“All in the name of science, Doctor Groph. Continue until the tanks are full.”

“Yes... doctor...”

Another man in prison uniform, blindfolded and dazed by the sudden removal from captivity, stumbled forward before having his heart pierced by the round of a Luger. He let out a gnarly, pained groan as he tumbled to the ground, his life force being harvested by the machine. As the clear tank continued to fill, the voices in Edward's head grew restless, chattering and

moaning in his mind. Before he ended the transmission, he could hear Groph say under his breath, “*May God have mercy on us all...*”

As the audio cut out and feed ended, the final frame of Groph's dejected and shaken eyes looking towards the pyramid stayed on screen for a moment before fading.

“Satisfied?”

The primary voice in Edward's head responded, “*Are you?*”

Richtofen headed for the stone entrance, placing his ear against it to listen for any sign of Doctor Wagner outside.

Nothing.

He pressed the red button on a keypad near the wall, moving the stone door aside to let him through into the undercroft of the castle. After a few seconds, the stone wall reconvened, appearing indifferent to the rest of the castle's aged walls. Perhaps soon Richtofen may convince Wagner to leave his side and all of this convoluted secrecy may finally come to an end.

Richtofen ascended a small set of stairs, passing a short-range matter transference device created under Maxis' supervision.

The small pad could send objects between three points around the facility instantly, but unlike Edward's own MTD it required a direction connection and proved to be dangerous when used on living subjects. With the proper protection, however, it could be used to send tools and equipment between the interior of the castle and the rocket test site as well as the roof where Edward and Doctor Wagner would be working today. The quaint little device amused Richtofen, as years prior, Maxis had insisted matter transference would be a waste of resources. Yet now, he

begged Edward to create a working teleporter. Edward created this device, a mere speck on the grand scope of what teleportation could be, and Maxis was perfectly satisfied. This was one of Maxis' many great faults: A lack of ambition.

Edward ascended another stairwell leading to the snowy ground-level of the castle, before taking to a spiral staircase into a small lab where he would meet with Doctor Wagner before the day's work.

Once inside, Edward spotted Wagner hunched over a table, pencil and compass in hand as he marked over a large piece of paper. He lifted the paper from the table, revealing underneath the blueprints of the *Wunderwaffe* DG-2. Edward picked up his pace, now questioning of Wagner.

“*Was ist los?! What are you doing with my work?*”

Wagner seemed happily surprised to see Edward, responding while cutting away at a section of his large piece of paper.

“Doctor Richtofen! I was just taking a look at the DG-2. It is a remarkable device.”

Bemused, Edward replied, “Thank you... erm, so what is it that you are doing?”

Wagner had cut out a small portion of the white paper with some sort of mechanical part drawn onto it. He then placed it on top of the *Wunderwaffe* blueprint near the end of the barrel.

“I read about the experiments and the difficulty with excess heat being vented backwards towards the user. I do not know if you had something in mind to solve this issue, but I had this idea... and wanted to know what you thought of it. If the barrel were wrapped in a coil made of a strong, electricity-resistant material combined with a 115-resistant material that Maxis has been

working with-”

“115-resistant?”

“It's still in the experimental stage. I'm surprised Doctor Maxis has not informed you of it yet... I believe the pseudonym for it as of right now is Artificial Vril-

“Ah yes! Of course! I almost forgot Doctor Maxis had told me that; So much is going through my head at any one moment. Anywho, how would you integrate this into the DG-2?”

“With the coil being made of a combination of Vril and the same non-conductive metal you used near the capacitors, the bolts fired should not cause any significant damage to the user or the device itself as the beam comes out in a more narrow fashion.”

Richtofen felt almost offended this young brown-noser would attempt to suggest changes to his invention, yet the idea seemed viable and beneficial to the project still in its prototyping stages. Not to mention the prospect of Maxis' artificial Vril being recreated for projects at Griffin Station.

“A bold proposition, Doctor. I will give it some thought in the future. We cannot be too hasty with new iterations as I am still trying to convince Doctor Maxis to have it mass-produced.”

“I am certain he will convince the Reichstag to begin ordering their own soon enough. I am just as hopeful as you, and have sung my own praises of the design to him.”

Richtofen patted Wagner on his mildly-irritating shoulder, putting on his toothiest grin.

“I thank you for that. Shall we begin?”

“Yes, of course! Shall I... “

He motioned to the table where he had been viewing the blueprints, prepared to clean the station.

“Nein, I will handle it und meet you there. You should prepare the generator.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

As Wagner headed out of the doorway, Richtofen gathered the bits of waste paper and placed them into a bin. He then took the DG-2 blueprints and Wagner's drawn component, placing it within the folded schematic and into the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet before closing it. For good measure, he took a combination lock from a table drawer, locking the cabinet with a set of numbers.

He donned a heavy coat over his ordinary lab coat, then left the small room into the bitter cold walkway towards the front-facing bastion of Griffin Castle. He ascended a small set of stone stairs as the testing area came into view. In the center of the bastion as a large generator with a control pad and energy-monitoring dial. Near his own set of stairs and the opposite end of the bastion were two massive metal rods, and at the end of each were metallic ball-shaped structures with what looked like protruding spikes around them. These rods were directly connected to the generator where Doctor Wagner stood, checking the components and circuitry. He spoke to Richtofen, now overlooking him working, “It is a shame our work is used for death and destruction. This research could be put towards a far more peaceful use.”

For once, Edward found himself admiring the youth within his field. Smirking to himself silently and approaching the command module of the generator.

“Is the device ready?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

“Und the targets?”

“Prepared for testing, Doctor.”

Aside from Wagner were several stacked cages, inside were doves, cooing and distressed by the intense cold of the mountain tops. He took one from the cage, holding it in his two hands to keep it from flying away.

Edward activated the device, listening to the humming and buzzing as it sent electricity through to the rods. At the ends, the spikes were transferring electricity between one another at a high, visible rate. Edward twisted a knob on the device to switch its setting from Protect to Destroy.

This contraption was known around the castle as the Death Ray, and was commissioned by Maxis in response to Tesla's research. The primary goal of the device is defense, and its Protection Mode has proven to be effective in defending the small area from aerial threats as large as planes to small bombs. Anything to cross within its dome of protection will be bombarded with high-voltage electricity effectively turning attackers to small debris. The Destroy Mode is, however, untested. It requires more precise targeting from the command module at the generator, but would allow for attacks at a longer distance, effectively turning any military facility into an impenetrable fortress.

Edward donned a set of protective eye-wear, nodding to Wagner to release the target. Wagner whispered to the bird, “Think happy thoughts, little one. It will be quick,” before letting it fly directly between the two large rods into the air.

On the command module, the dove appeared as a red blip, shrinking as it flew away. Edward locked onto its position, training the device on it before hitting a key to destroy the target.

The generator began to buzz and whirl, before going silent as the bird shrunk in the distance. Confused, Edward pressed it again, before the target disappeared from the screen.

A voice taunted Edward's mind once again, *"You continue to struggle work far below your qualifications. Why is that, Edward?"*

"Oh, for the love of-"

He slammed his closed fist into the side of the device, causing the screen to fuzz and the machine to grow louder in volume. Looking to the rods, he noticed that a larger concentration of electricity was gathering and beginning to chain between the two rods at a quickening rate.

Wagner stared directly at one of these rods, muttering, "Doctor... "

Intensity growing, Richtofen panicked attempting to power down the device as the energy continued to grow. He called out to Wagner, "Get down!"

The two men dove to the ground, their faces down but clearly able to see the growing light from the two coils. They braced after a quick and deafening clash of sound and a heat so strong it canceled out the cold temperatures around them. Edward experienced a feeling like he had never felt before: A force being shot through his entire body.

The event now over, he opened his eyes once more, his vision normal and now he was able to see Doctor Wagner, still braced on the ground. He heard, however, a loud, irritating screech like that of a train coming to a halt. It weakened its intensity, and soon his hearing was

completely normal. Edward rose to his feet, without any physical problems. There seemed to be nothing wrong on the surface, but something had most definitely changed.

As he hypothesized the cause and the impact of the explosion, he realized what had changed. He could finally think straight, formulate clear and concise ideas, remember his childhood, his education, the meal he had the previous night. His mind was cleared... of them. The voices seemed to be gone; Their torment finished.

Edward clutched his head, looking to his surroundings: the castle, Doctor Wagner, the village at the base of the mountain. His connection to all of these things felt so distant, like he was being kept away from them for so long.

Wagner appeared positively frightened, looking to Richtofen for guidance. Richtofen offered a smile in return, beginning to laugh so hard there were tears in his eyes. He pumped his fist into the air, calling into the morning sky, “YOU NO LONGER CONTROL ME! DAMN YOU, ALL OF YOU!” Richtofen began to laugh into the morning sky.

“Doctor Richtofen... ?”

Their attention was drawn by the sound of a gunshot, echoing within the stony walls of the castle intermixed with a wail from one of Maxis' undead creations. Both men at the bastion were unsure of what to do, but a cry out in pain drove Wagner to rush for the door. Richtofen hesitated, looking out onto the clear, light blue sky above.

Wagner called out, “Hurry, Doctor Richtofen!”

He followed behind, passing by the power generator and a set of knight statues, turning left onto a scaffolding overlooking the main laboratories. All of the monitors and machines

appeared powered down due to the blast at the roof. Near the entrance leading to the courtyard was the source of the pain, a German soldier, arm bleeding onto the floor surrounded by three others as well as the corpses of three undead.

There were no other scientists in sight, and upon spotting Wagner and Richtofen, one of the soldiers stood up and called to them, “He needs a medic!”

Wagner turned to Richtofen, “We have to help him.”

“We... I don't know if-”

Wagner begged, “Please, Doctor. There is no need for all of this death. We may have inadvertently caused this outbreak.”

The soldiers were lifting their wounded comrade, awaiting Richtofen's instruction.

After a moment of fear, Edward regained his composure, directing the men behind him.

“Get him to the living quarters. I have supplies there. *Schnell!*”

He turned and jogged to the ornate, wooden hallway between a living area, an office space, and Samantha's personal bedroom. Edward headed into the office space, the tables covered in gadgets and tools. He gathered a bone saw, bandages, gauze, alcohol, and any other tools that could potentially be needed. Meanwhile, Wagner was assisting the soldiers through the hall.

Edward searched around the room, realizing the tables were not large enough to operate on the wound. As the soldiers grew closer, he beckoned them to follow him past a bookcase into Samantha's room. Scattered on the floor were toys, and on the walls a child's drawings. Edward grabbed the teddy bear sitting on the pillow, tossing it aside into a toy chest, and removing the

sheets from the mattress of her bed.

Wagner now realizing his intentions, asked Richtofen directly, “Are you sure that's a good idea-”

The Germans had dropped the screaming, pained man onto the bed, splattering the mattress with blood as they lifted his legs up. The man cried out, “*Mama!*”

Richtofen hastily investigated the wound, replying to Wagner, “She hates this room anyway... and I'm sure Maxis will buy her a new mattress. Wagner, get his legs still!”

One of the soldiers comforting his ally asked Richtofen, “What do you intend to do?”

Richtofen ripped the pant leg away from the wounded leg and prepared the chemicals for the operation.

“If I say it, he won't like it!”

Edward looked into Wagner's eyes, now holding the man's squirming legs in place.

“Just like Paris, ja?”

Wagner nodded, motioning the soldiers to hold the man's whole body in place.

Edward removed the bone saw from the table, lining it up above the knee where a chunk of flesh had been torn out. One of the men placed their hand over the patient's eyes as Richtofen inhaled deeply, exhaling as he pushed the saw into the man's flesh, cutting through skin and muscle.

The leg jerked slightly as its owner wailed in intense agony. Every man at the table tried their best to keep him still and quiet as Richtofen concentrated on completing the operation.

Sweat was dripping from Edward's face as blood spurted from the wound and the saw

reached bone. There was a disgusting crunch when it went through, and by then the man had gone silent. He had fainted from the intense pain.

As Edward pushed through the last inch of muscle Wagner had left the room and returned with a block of wood to be used as a splint.

All were silent as Edward efficiently dabbed the cut with peroxide and wrapped it in gauze. Wagner assisted him in putting a splint around it before Edward finally backed away, wiping his forehead.

“One of you get him some food und water for when he comes to. Keep an eye on him.”

The sickened young men look to each other, muttering in German, as one stayed at the bedside, while another left to the nearby office to find running water. The other approached Richtofen.

“Something deactivated the electronic locks und that is how they escaped. We tried to use the Electro-shock defenses, but they too were powered down.”

“A power surge, it seems. Our hold on the test subjects must be greater in the future. I assume the rest have been dealt with?”

“They have been contained.”

“Meaning?”

“They are all dead. We tried activating the alarms but, of course, they were down. It was just the four of us against them.”

The young man shook his head, recalling images of the events that had just transpired. Edward placed his hand on his shoulder, trying to halfheartedly comfort him.

He then turned to Wagner, letting out a breath of relief as the adrenaline drained.

“Just like old times, right?” Edward chuckled.

Wagner had his hands on a small chair which he was leaned onto. “I unfortunately have to agree.”

Richtofen said, “We will have to find out what went wrong, back there. The effect it seems to have had on electronics may prove a positive-”

Wagner interjected, “The experiment almost killed someone.”

“Almost being key, Wagner. There was no way we could have predicted that outcome.”

Wagner shook his head, thinking to himself before placing his arms at his side and heading for the door.

“I will inform Doctor Maxis of what happened. He needs to know.”

He left the room, shutting a wooden door behind him and leaving Richtofen to stand over the unconscious man and his comrades. He felt a twinge of anger pulsing through his thoughts: Thinking of Maxis meddling with his work, halting his progress, stealing his achievement.

Behind him near the bookcase, a lamp that was previously turned off lit up, illuminating the area. Richtofen looked to it, jerking his head around as he heard a familiar whisper in his mind.

“We will not leave, Edward. We will be here forever...”

Chapter 20: Uniform

Exclusion Zone, Griffin Station, Mare Crisium, Moon

Dr. Baron Schuster

December 8th, 1942

Assigned to a post he could not leave, Doctor Schuster had found himself engrossed in a text-based adventure on the computer screen before him. Doctor Hoch, a man similar in age to Schuster, designed a game in his free time that can be played on Group 935's systems, where the user must type an action for playable character to take after being presented with a prompt. The setting for the story is in a mansion filled with undead, and the user must find a way out. Schuster continued to find himself stuck in the labyrinthine corridors of the mansion only to be eaten. Still, there was little else he could do outside of the game.

Doctor Groph had most of the scientists, including the head technician of Griffin Station, Doctor Kaufmann, working on Project 87: A wonder weapon project using Maxis' experimental Vril substance that Richtofen had managed to get a sample of. With Kaufmann being used to run diagnostics during the experiments, Schuster was the only scientist with enough knowledge about the MPD to watch over it.

Since they had begun sacrificing prisoners to the tank attached to the MPD, it has been emitting an enormous amount of energy that has overloaded any devices attached to it. It appears

that with the energy going unused inside the tank, the pyramid begins to push this energy out into the air, damaging electronics over time and creating copious amounts of static electricity. The architects and engineers are attempting to formulate a ventilation system of some sort to send this energy into space, but this may not be possible without completely exposing the lab to the vacuum.

An undead ghoul approaches you from down the hall. It snarls and bounds towards you with its rotting, filthy hands poised to tear you apart.

Schuster typed one character at a time on the keypad: 'Run Away'

You run backwards the way you came, passing a suspiciously crooked painting. You see a zombie coming directly at you, its putrid jaws preparing to take a bite.

"No, no..." He typed: 'Attack'

Choose your weapon. You have: Butcher's Knife. Bolt-Action Rifle

'Bolt-Action Rifle'

You pull the trigger. Click. No bullets. The zombie pounces, tearing you apart.

You failed to escape the mansion. Would you like to try again? Y/N

"Damn, damn, damn!" Schuster placed his hands on his head, shaking in disapproval.

"How could I have no ammunition? I thought I grabbed the box of bullets in the main hall!

Infernal game!"

Schuster placed his face in his hands, rubbing his eyes, and checking the clock mounted on the wall. Three hours alone, with no end in sight.

Gathering his composure again, Schuster closed the program, prepared to look over

inventory sheets for the third time, when he heard the low rumbling of the cargo elevator to his right. Schuster was not aware of anyone scheduled to be arriving at the station at this time. He paced towards the entrance to the tunnel system, his knees aching from standing still at the computer system for so long.

A few moments later, in walked a man carrying a crate which obscured his face. He wore black military pants and a tannish-gray uniform with a red armband, on it a swastika. On the mysterious head was a German military hat marked with the eagle emblem of the Wehrmacht. Schuster was prepared to call security to deal with this stranger, only for him to place down the crate with his black leather gloves and reveal the familiar face of Doctor Richtofen.

“Edward?”

Richtofen grinned with a friendly gesture to come closer for a hug. Confused but relieved all the same, Schuster came closer, wrapping his arms around his colleague and patting him on the back. He felt a sharpness in his chest from a set of medals and an iron cross on Richtofen's outfit. There was a patch with the name ‘Amsel’ above the breast pocket.

“Edward, erm, where did you find this... uniform?”

“Isn't it sophisticated und stylish?” He chuckled, “Do you remember General Amsel? Wait, of course you don't, you haven't been to Earth in quite some time, eh-heh. Anyhow, I got to know General Amsel while I was in France, und we hit it off so to speak. This is his old officer's uniform.”

“That was rather kind of him to gift to you.”

“*Nein, nein*, it was the Reichstag who sent it to me. As it turns out he was shot by Russian

snipers in Stalingrad back in September. **Boom!** Right in the head.” He motioned a gun going off near his temple and the jerking back of his head from impact.

Still confused, Schuster inquired, “Why exactly did you receive the uniform rather than, ahem... his family?”

“This is quite amusing, actually. It turns out he wanted me to have it if he ever passed... because I was one of his best friends!” Edward began to cackle and slammed his fist into the table out of mocking jest, “We knew each other for, what, four weeks before he left? Oh, that is rich... “

Schuster shuddered as Richtofen guffawed, his laugh echoing throughout the area.

Schuster asked, “Do you think, perhaps, they wanted you to have it as a sort of keepsake to remind you of the departed Amsel?”

Richtofen wiped away a tear before replying, “That is most likely the case, but why waste such a prestigious uniform by letting it gather dust on the shelf? *Nein*, the SS are all brainwashed, power-hungry animals, but they know a thing or two about style und presentation... *Mein gott*, it fits me so perfectly!”

Richtofen looked at his arms, inside the jacket, at his pants, and at his chest, bobbing side to side causing the medals to clash with one another. He took notice of the patch that read ‘Amsel’ and reached for his satchel wrapped around his body, removing his Hitler Youth knife and cutting away at the patch. It came off cleanly as Edward carelessly tossed it away before cutting away any loose threads to ensure the uniform was in immaculate condition.

“Ah, I’ve been meaning to remove that. What do you think of the medals, hm?” Richtofen

pointed to a dangling iron cross, “This one here was for bravery. It might just be *mein* favorite. It's a little rusted, perhaps it is older... This one- “

Schuster interjected, nodding towards the box that Richtofen had brought along, “The outfit is impressive, Doctor. But, what is it you've brought with you?”

Edward smiled and unlocked the box using the keypad at the face towards him. “You will be excited when you see this, Baron... **ta daaa!**”

Inside the box were four bottles with screw caps filled with liquid, each a different color: Red, blue, green, and yellow. On the faces of the bottles were stickers with unique designs and the names of each liquid: Juggernog Soda, Revive Soda, Speed Cola, and Double Tap Root Beer.

Schuster hastily grabbed the bottle of Double Tap Root Beer, unscrewing the cap and wafting the scent of the liquid to his nostrils. “It even smells of root beer. Do they work?”

“Tests prove they are nearly perfected. Double-Tap allows for quicker neural synapses and thus quicker motion und finger dexterity. Juggernog is shown to increase the consumer's strength three-fold, and increase toughness of the skin at a molecular level.”

Schuster ogled at the beverages, “Just as I envisioned...”

He reached for the bottle of Speed Cola, before Richtofen motioned him not to.

“I would be careful *mit* the Speed Cola. I can't say for certain, but the ingredient used to increase the subject's reflexes may also be rotting the mind. Test subjects showed memory loss over time.”

“What about Revive? Is it able to heal tearing of the skin?”

“Any minor lacerations, *ja*. They still have not quite nailed the taste, however... “

“These bottles... are they mass-producing Perk-a-Colas already?”

“Not quite '*mass*'-production, but dispensers are being sent to Group 935 und Division 9 facilities for further testing und review. Apparently Doctor Maxis is having quite a hard time explaining the very concept to the old crones in the Reichstag.”

Schuster stared longingly at the stickers placed on the bottles, before placing them back into the box and checking the monitor for any signs of activity from the MPD. Nothing.

Richtofen stood before him, arms behind his back, raising an eyebrow at Schuster.

“You're welcome, by the way. It wasn't exactly easy to acquire these samples.”

“Thank you, Doctor Richtofen. I will discover the chemical composition of each one when I find the time.”

Schuster did not even lift his head from the monitor as he spoke, before starting up the mansion game again.

Unsatisfied, Richtofen leaned over to put himself in Schuster's view.

“Are you being... **obtuse** because you are still frustrated with me regarding the MPD? Because of what we did to those prisoners?”

“I have nothing to say on the matter.”

“Oh... really? Is that so? Because Doctor Groph told me you were moaning und whining about it for weeks... He has moved on... I have moved on, why can't you?”

“Because the tanks are leaking the energy! The... atrocity we committed was for nothing. We still have no progress on opening this magic gateway to the Aether you believe it to be... “

“These things need time, Doctor Schuster. You know that. Und how can you say it was

for nothing? We are inching ever closer to stepping foot into another dimension! If there was any other way, I would have never ordered their deaths! Do you think I wanted to murder twenty six men?"

"Of course not, Edward... but we do not know that this was the only way. I cannot move past this like you. You come in here, gallivanting in your Nazi's uniform acting as if none of this happened, but it did!"

"You don't understand, Baron, there is such little time left. We cannot any more trying to find alternatives when we know something that will work!"

"What do you mean there is little time?"

"Forget about it... I thought you cared about the cause, about humanity, about a better world."

"I still do."

"If you are still loyal... then you will continue to work on unlocking the pyramid, without question. The road is long und dark... but I know where we are going."

Schuster shook his head, "I believe in you Edward. I know you are not a bad person. You just cannot expect me to overlook the darkness we leave in our wake."

"You can look wherever you choose, as long as we are moving forward."

Richtofen adjusted the neckline of his uniform, heading for the door.

"I will be departing to Der Riese with Doctor Wagner soon... Doctor Groph will be taking over for me at the castle while I am away... and if I can still trust you, you will be in charge of Griffin Station."

Schuster returned his gaze to the computer screen, replying, "You can trust me. Whether or not you will is your decision."

The door slid open and Richtofen had left the room back towards the cargo elevator. As he heard it going up, Schuster paced towards the cave holding the MPD, searching his thoughts. Edward had hurt him deeply and seemed to show no remorse for his actions. He was never one to show any sign of regret, but looking into his eyes, Schuster saw nothing human about them.

He paced around the pyramid, his legs trembling from a combination of stress and low blood sugar. He peered into the void, spotless face of the pyramid to see his own distorted reflection. Not the young man from University anymore.

Schuster looked down towards the base, marked with symbols all around. Performing his own research, he had been unable to find any trace of known symbols that match them aside from Groph's own research papers. They may truly be Vril in nature, but whether or not Groph or Richtofen actually knew how to interpret them was uncertain. For all he knew, they could be meddling with a destructive force the likes of which are hitherto undreamt of. All he could do was have faith... and trust in his friend.

He took note of another corner of the base, also adorned with the circular top seen on the tank they had filled. It had been theorized this was an alternate energy tank, as were the two others at each of the corners. It then dawned on Schuster that perhaps all four must be filled to be able to unlock the gateway. He then shuddered at the thought of over a hundred men killed to achieve this goal. It may not be wise to clue Groph in on this theory until an alternative method is found, if there is one.

Schuster moved himself back towards the front of the pyramid, looking into the panel where the egg still sat in the center. He bowed his head, thinking of the many men killed and buried beneath the soil outside the station. He grew angry, furious he allowed this to happen. He took a rock from the ground, tossing as hard as he could into the blackness of the pyramid. It reflected off with a loud clang that echoed for a few seconds, leaving no mark.

Doctor Schuster stepped back, sitting on the ground to try and calm himself. After a moment, he removed a pen and his diary from his lab coat, preparing to write of his day. This was until he heard something he would truly never understand.

It was a voice, somewhat quiet but able to be heard over the hum of the machine. Distinctly German and coming from seemingly the pyramid itself, it echoed in the cave for Schuster to hear.

“You will be spending a majority of your time with me, overseeing the mining operation und working with his designs.”

Schuster was absolutely gobsmacked as he realized this voice was that of Richtofen, but much more calm and reserved than usual.

After a pause, the voice returned.

“They discovered the dig site in France as they pushed forward through the front. Doctor Maxis says it is the largest supply of Element 115 in recorded history.”

Schuster was now sure it was Edward, with the mention of Doctor Maxis. He was unsure, however, of what he meant about a dig site in France. He had heard no such news of an Element 115 deposit there, and if that were the case Doctor Maxis should not be struggling to find more

supply of 115 as he currently is.

“Doctor Maxis? Yes, yes, I am a great admirer of his work as well. He is a great man. He mentored me when I was still an undergraduate, and took me under his wing when I was at mein lowest... “

Baron searched his thoughts for an answer to this strange voice, which must surely be a hallucination. Richtofen said that he had not met Doctor Maxis until he was formally invited to Group 935. What Edward is saying is impossible, if he had not been lying to Schuster. He began to think this voice was Edward speaking to someone, possibly Doctor Wagner, and he has been actually working with Doctor Maxis on a project he is keeping from the scientists at Griffin Station... or perhaps just Doctor Schuster. This theory was torn apart, however, as the voice uttered its last words.

“I am just as excited as you are. You should come meet the others before we depart. My friend Doctor Wagner has been looking forward to meeting you... Welcome to Group 935, Doctor Schuster...”

Schuster backed away from the pyramid into the computer room. His world was spinning as he tried to process the meaning of the sounds he was hearing. They must be auditory hallucinations, that is all. Perhaps he is going mad. Could there be another Doctor Schuster, coincidentally? What are the chances?

The room was completely silent but racing thoughts passed through Schuster's head at a rapid pace. The silence seemed to fuel this mental haze, so he located a gramophone near the corner of the room, playing the recording, a piece by Bach. The music seemed to calm his nerves

as he brought up the vitals of the MPD on the computer screen. Searching the log of power levels, he noticed a substantial increase over the past few minutes he had been within the room.

Doctor Schuster stared into the pyramid several feet away, vowing to stay as far from it as possible in the future. Something is not quite right on this station.

Chapter 21: Raising Sam

Laboratories, Der Riese, near Breslau

Dr. Edward Richtofen

December 14th, 1942

“I must admit, Doctor Richtofen, when you are right, you are absolutely right!” Doctor Wagner was marvelling at what they had created.

Richtofen grinned, “He only needs a few minor finishing touches und you will need to record the lines I've written to give it *ein* voice. Then... he will be perfect.”

On the table in front of Doctor Wagner and Doctor Richtofen was a stuffed monkey made from the body of a real primate, its eyes replaced with painted marbles and mouth made to be protruding from the head with over-sized fake teeth. It rested in a seated position, holding between its hands a set of small cymbals, and it wore a blue striped cloth shirt with tan cloth pants. On its head was a plastic cup painted blue and marked with the Group 935 logo by Doctor Wagner. There was a metal crank on its left side, that when twisted would cause the monkey to begin clanging its cymbals together and chattering its teeth.

Doctor Wagner responded, “I will as soon as I am able to. The eyes and the teeth are quite... disturbing. That is only appropriate, however, given its purpose.”

“I think he is quite an adorable little specimen... I don't know what Samantha could not

see in you, little one... ”

Richtofen prodded the lifeless toy's nose, leaning in close.

Wagner said, “The cymbals in combination with the music and the voice recordings may be able to hold the undead's attention indefinitely. I am thrilled to begin testing... how about you, Doctor?”

Richtofen was adjusting the simian's hat to be slightly tilted on its head, before rubbing his finger along the underside of its chin as if to scratch it.

“*Ja, ja*. But, come to think of it, I feel... it is missing something.”

Wagner pondered, “Hm, well the gramophone in the lab was playing at a much lower decibel level when it attracted the undead-”

“What if... we connected an explosive to the crank? *Ja!*”

“An... explosive? Would the device destroying itself not defeat the purpose of directing the attention of the undead in a uniform direction?”

“Not if the dynamite was set to explode right as the monkey completes its performance!”

“But that would kill the undead when they come close enough, surely?”

“Precisely, Doctor Wagner! What if the test subjects are let loose at the castle again, and there is no power for the Electro-Shock Defenses? This sweet little monkey would make short work of them!”

Wagner raised his eyebrow, possibly a little shocked or taken aback by the proposal.

“It seems a little crude... but I like the idea of a power-less method of dealing with another outbreak. For now we should test its effects on subjects we **don't** intend on blowing up.”

Richtofen picked up the monkey, holding it in his hands as he viewed it from all angles.

“*Ja*, you are absolutely right Doctor, work now, *fun later*.”

From across the room there was an attempted twisting of the locked door knob, followed by a groan and a pressing of keys on a keypad. The door came open swiftly revealing an irate Doctor Maxis. His eyes were bloodshot and grey beard unkempt. He walked in the room with great strides and purpose, arms at his side and gaze firmly set on the pair of scientists.

Richtofen twisted his body towards Maxis, before turning his smile to a frown as he looked into the eyes of a man he so despised.

Maxis gazed into the lifeless eyes of the monkey in Richtofen's hands, cocking his head and asking shortly, “What on Earth is that?”

Doctor Wagner replied, “It is a little device Doctor Richtofen and I have been working on. When we were performing the weapon tests you commissioned, I accidentally turned on the gramophone in the lab. The test subject grew restless and focused its entire attention on the music, paying no mind to us as we came closer. We think that certain frequencies may be the key-”

Maxis cut in, “The key to controlling them? Surely you understand that is nonsense, Doctor Wagner. Any creature able to sense vibrations would pay attention to loud noise.”

Wagner retorted, “This was different, Doctor Maxis. It seemed completely mesmerized by it-”

Maxis ignored Wagner as he stared to Richtofen, waving his hand as if to dismiss the monkey's existence.

“I presume this was your idea, Edward? It looks an awful lot like the disturbed 'toy' you gave to Samantha for her birthday last year.”

Richtofen replied, “That's because it is, Doctor Maxis. She did not seem to like it very much, if I am remembering correctly, which I am. You always say to never waste our resources, do you not? Its clothing is even made from Samantha's old bed-sheets we... ahem, bloodied several months ago.”

“Why do you continue to disobey my instructions time and time again? It seems no matter the partner, you find a way to derail our important work.”

Wagner interjected between them, “I promise, Doctor, this has not slowed our progress on perfecting the matter transference device for human teleportation nor our research into controlling the undead.”

Maxis spoke more calmly to Wagner, before redirecting the conversation to Richtofen's failings, “I wish that were true, Doctor Wagner, but Doctor Richtofen has made no significant progress in months. He spoke so highly of teleportation three years ago.” Turning to Richtofen, Maxis asked, “What happened to your ambition, Edward?”

Richtofen dedicated every iota of his being towards maintaining his smiling disposition, stating, “I am very rarely wrong, Doctor Maxis, but perhaps I was then. I was a younger, more foolish man, after all. We can't all foresee the future. We will be returning to MTD testing very soon, once I have *ein* proper idea how we should proceed.”

“You should be working towards perfecting teleportation **now**, Edward. Manufacturing weapons is only the first step in impressing the Reichstag. They demand more from men of our

intellect. I *expect more* from my scientists.”

Edward felt slightly light headed from a combination of his own anger, and the anger of the voices in his head, chattering and screaming all at once, “*How can he speak to us this way? Show him what you are capable of Edward! END HIS WRETCHED LIFE!*”

He placed a hand on his head to soothe his nerves, putting the monkey down on the table as he did.

“Why don't we all just calm down, und use our **inside voices!**”

Wagner and Maxis were taken aback and silent for a moment. Maxis cocked his head, stating, “No one here is yelling except for you, Edward!”

“Of course. I knew that.”

“You've become increasingly erratic since I've assigned you to the castle... If you feel it is too much responsibility-”

“*Nein, nein*, of course not! Believe me, the work at Griffin Castle is superb. Just ask Doctor Wagner.”

Wagner nodded to Maxis, “It was a rocky beginning, but Doctor Richtofen has proven an excellent administrator.”

“Nevertheless, it is supremely important that your role is taken seriously, Edward. You cannot waste time on these... insufferable little projects that seem to have the goal of irritating me... Tell me, Doctor, who have you delegated power to at the castle while you are away?”

Richtofen shifted from one foot to another.

“Hm, well... let me see... well I told Doctor Groph to make sure everyone kept up with

the agenda and to listen for any calls... but I prefer a more... 'open' structure when it comes to science.”

Maxis added, “And so your scientists work with no direction, no leadership.”

“I lead them, Doctor Maxis. Trust me, they know who is in charge. I simply believe in a more... creative environment for discovery where *mein* scientists can feel trusted to complete the task at hand.”

“How wonderful. Do they eat their lunches before or after recess is out?”

“Ah, the sarcastic tone: The very inspiration for *mein* own leadership style!”

“My point is, Edward, that may work if you are supervising children, but these are men. Men with agendas and egos. If you let them wander freely they are sure to see you as a weak leader and fall back on their work ethic. I have been leading Group 935 for over ten years now; I know poor leadership when I see it.”

Richtofen could not look him in the eye for fear of what he might do or what the voices may say. He said, “I understand, Doctor. I will work to improve... under your example.”

The simple, guided response seemed to be enough to calm Maxis, who seemed prepared to fire back at any of Richtofen's retorts.

“Thank you, Edward. I know, in time, you will be capable... Speaking of children, I regretfully have an enormous favor to ask of you.”

*“The arrogant being asks something of you, Edward? How will you make him regret this decision? **HOW WILL YOU TEAR DOWN HIS EGO, BEFORE SLITTING HIS PETULANT THROAT?**”*

Edward attempted to stow the voices, patting the side of his head, before nodding, “*Ja, ja*, what?”

Maxis placed his hands behind his back. “The Reichstag wishes for me to report to a location... nearby Berlin. I will be staying there for an extended amount of time to attempt to take control of the undead and forge their army. General Lehmkuhl has recently informed me that I will not be able to bring my daughter with me.”

“You need *ein*... babysitter?”

“Someone to keep watch over her for however long I am gone. It could be a few weeks to, in the worst case, a couple of years.”

“Could you not find anyone else?”

“Doctor Porter will be running the organization here at Der Riese and will be much too busy. Others that I would ask, well, they are coming with me. You and Doctor Wagner are the last people I can... *trust* with this task.”

Richtofen was beside himself, “What about family?”

“Edward... you know there are none left.”

“Oh of course... surely Sophia-”

“She is accompanying me on the trip.”

Richtofen began to grin, “Ah! So that's what this is about! The honeymoon phase... “

Maxis seemed prepared to lash out, as Wagner extended his hand for a handshake with him. “You can trust us, Doctor. We will delegate responsibilities between ourselves and ensure Samantha is well taken care of.”

Maxis sighed, stepping back as he came dangerously close to confronting Richtofen physically. He shook Wagner's hand, before offering his own to Richtofen.

“Hans, do not allow Edward to relegate all responsibilities to you. Raising a child is a team effort, much like science, and perhaps Doctor Richtofen could learn a thing or two from her. She's become quite clever these last few months.”

Richtofen accepted his hand, replying, “Wow! That is quite a compliment coming from you, Ludvig. Just leave the instructions in my mailbox und we will handle it.”

Edward returned his view to the table, taking a piece of clear tape to ensure the cymbal on the monkey's left hand was secure.

Maxis approached the table, setting the monkey aside, “You two should return to your **real** projects. Work hours have begun.”

Edward stared into Maxis' aged, blue eyes, noting the wrinkles all over his bald head and the crow's feet at the sides. He continued to stare with a smoldering fury. Voices whispered at the volume of a blow torch to Richtofen's ear, dulling any of his senses but the sight of the pompous, despicable Doctor.

Maxis raised his hand, placing it on Richtofen's shoulder. Edward averted his gaze from the eyes towards the hand. The voices passed through his head truly awful, wicked thoughts.

Richtofen took his own hand, patting Maxis on his shoulder, as he began to grin and laugh. “Very good point, Doctor Maxis. Doctor Wagner, let's begin shall we?”

Doctor Wagner stood two feet away, a clipboard in his hands which he held tightly as he viewed the events that had transpired. He weakly replied, “Absolutely. I will... set up the testing

area.”

Wagner approached the MTD prototype covered in a blue tarp, uncovering it before ensuring it was being powered correctly. Richtofen continued to chuckle, the tension now gone; Maxis was less amused.

Doctor Maxis pointed towards the monkey on the table, speaking to Richtofen, “Do not let my daughter see that thing. And be sure it is not within Fluffy's reach.”

“Oh *scheisse*, I forgot about the mutt...”

“I will have Sophia send you the list of instructions. Taking care of Fluffy will be crucial as well. We need her to produce more young for testing. Samantha does not need to know what happens to her puppies.”

Richtofen lifted the military cap from his head, brushing his hair back before replacing it.

“Before you leave Doctor, what have the Reichstag said about the *Wunderwaffe*?”

Maxis turned towards the door, brushing his words aside, “I have told you before, Edward, discussion on the matter is ongoing.”

“Surely you can give me *ein* update? I am ready to begin phase three, *nein*, phase four, within two weeks if they will begin mass production of the DG-2.”

“I will update you when there is something to update. If you put as much worry into the progress of the MTD as you did your *Wunderwaffe*, we would be on the Moon by now!” Maxis reached for the door, stepping halfway through as he left one last remark of frustration, “And lastly, Edward, take that foolish uniform off and put on a lab coat. It is incredibly unprofessional.”

The door slammed shut, knocking over an empty flask from the table onto the floor, shattering it.

Wagner shook his head, “My god, I've never seen Doctor Maxis be such a... a...”

Richtofen suggested, “Jerk?”

“Yes. It is very unlike him. I will clean the glass, Doctor.”

Wagner reached for a broom and dustpan, heading to the door before sweeping up shards of glass into a bin. He returned to Edward who was rubbing his temples to calm his nerves.

“For the record, Edward, I like the uniform. It is... uh, stoic. Much like you. And with the pockets, highly functional.”

Edward nodded and smiled to Wagner, “Thank you. Doctor Maxis has good intentions a majority of the time... but he tends to let his anger und emotion drive his decisions.”

Wagner rubbed his hands together before picking up a pair of goggles from the shelf.

“I was always taught in my studies that emotion is best kept out of the lab. Science and feelings... they don't mix well.”

Richtofen chuckled, taking a pair of his own goggles, “An excellent guideline to work under, I find... who taught you this wisdom?”

Doctor Wagner and Richtofen were lifting a pig body into the test chamber, lowering it in the center.

“A professor at Heidelberg. You knew I went there, right?”

“*Ja, ja*, I remember you said that.”

“It was... ah, Professor Schussler!”

“Schussler? I remember a Schussler in my studies. Surely not the same one... “

“I believe Schussler's father used to teach before he passed.”

“*Ja*, I remember him. He always wore these ridiculous bow-ties... “

“His son must have inherited his dresser, he does as well.”

“Really?” Richtofen chuckled, “What a strange man. I'll have to tell Doctor Schuster... “

Wagner did not seem to notice the mention of Schuster, preparing his and Richtofen's ear plugs.

Richtofen added for good measure, “If I can ever... contact him, eh heh.”

The testing area was now prepared, and Wagner had placed the recording device on the table.

“Should I begin recording, Doctor?”

Richtofen input a set of false settings into the keypad of the MTD to ensure the test's failure.

“*Nein, nein*. It is only the first test of the day. Why waste the tape?”

“I understand, Doctor. I am ready.”

“Commence test number... erm, what are we on now?”

“335, Doctor.”

“*Ja*... 335. Go!”

Wagner flipped the switch, causing the teleporter's door to shut and the chamber to fill with smoke. The lights flickered as power surged into the massive, bell-shaped device. After a few moments, the test chamber opened, dispelling smoke into the room. The two doctors

approached.

The carcass appeared completely unchanged, not even singed by the radiation.

As Wagner turned around to head back to the testing area, Richtofen alerted him, “Wait! Doctor Wagner, I think I saw the *schwein* move!”

“What?” Wagner turned back around, carefully approaching the test chamber, as Richtofen quickly jabbed his pointer finger into Wagner's ribs, frightening him and sending him reeling back. “Just kidding!”

As Wagner understood it was in jest, he began to laugh with Richtofen. The two shared a moment chuckling, as Richtofen headed back for the control panel.

He approached the table, Wagner pointing to the recorder as Richtofen shook his head, “*Nein, nein...* “

“Ready, Doctor.” Wagner placed his hands with all of his fingers on the table spread apart, which Richtofen noted. Edward fiddled with the control panel as he said, “I'll simply adjust a knob or two... begin test 33...7.”

“Six.”

Wagner flipped the switch, initiating the same teleportation sequence. The chamber filled with smoke and a flash of light before opening once more. This time, however, the pig was nowhere to be found; Neither in the chamber nor the receiving pad off to the right.

The two scientists crouched near the chamber, looking for any sign of its remains: Nothing.

Richtofen put his finger to his lips, remarking, “I wonder where it went...” He, however,

knew fully well the carcass had been transported to a random point in space.

Wagner sighed, "I suppose I will fetch another."

"Thank you, Doctor. You are an enormous help."

The two rose up, Richtofen heading back to the table as Wagner left the lab.

With Wagner gone, Edward took the opportunity he had been waiting for. From his breast pocket he removed a small container filled with baking powder and a brush.

He leaned close to the table, dumping the contents of the container over the spot Wagner had placed his hands moments earlier. Edward brushed the powder over the fingerprints creating a white pattern copy of them. He took a piece of clear tape, placing it over the two index finger prints so that the white powder stuck to the tape. Folding the tape over, he placed it onto a page in his diary.

Richtofen repeated the same process with the two thumb prints, quickly placing them aside the others, and with his fountain pen writing above them, "*Wagner – Index and Thumbs*"

Above his prints were both sides of Maxis', the right hand of Porter's, and, regrettably, the right hand of Schuster's. Richtofen's own prints were also on the previous page for comparison.

He quickly shut the diary, placing it with his other belongings as Wagner pushed open the door and wheeled in another set of carcasses on a dolly.

As Wagner approached, Edward hastily wiped away the powder from the table, leaning over the spot he had worked.

"Doctor Wagner, I was thinking, why don't we eat lunch now, and then we can work on a full stomach, *ja?*"

“Hm... I did skip breakfast and this would allow us to work without interruption. A good idea, Doctor. I believe they are serving veal today.”

As Wagner turned away towards the door, Richtofen placed the brush and opened powder container into his pocket before joining Wagner.

“They have veal everyday... when are they bringing back the *leberwurst*? I was just starting to like it.“

“Soon, hopefully. I've asked Maxis this numerous times to no avail.”

“Typical. Oh, Doctor Wagner, about *mein* idea to strap a bomb to our monkey... “

ServantA91374.txt

TOP SECRET

LEVEL 1 CLEARANCE ONLY

DER RIESE *SERVANT* SAMPLE A91374

What follows is the chronological primary sample from the Der Riese project "Datenbediensteter" (translated: DATA SERVANT). Sample was acquired from CIA asset based out of Vozrozhdeniya in the Soviet Union and is translated from its original German below:

SERVANT ENTRY A91374

Ludvig Maxis. Personal file.

The experiments continue and the Reichstag call it a success but these creatures cannot be controlled. Their minds are lost. They are automatons. This is what the Reichstag wanted. Between the teleporters and our Undead army, they believe the world will be theirs. But the Undead cannot be contained. It spreads far worse than ever imagined. It will be the death of us all.

END FILE

Chapter 22: Watched

Deutsches Sol Kino, Berlin, Nazi Germany

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

January 8th, 1943

Typically, Doctor Maxis would find the act of organizing his office a calming reprieve from the stress of scientific authority. Today, however, was the beginning of the long-dreaded Kino Project. The Reichstag had funneled a large helping of resources and time into repurposing a retired theater into a research facility with the primary goal of controlling the minds of the undead. Maxis knew, however, that even with such resources and brain-power, there may be no way to maintain control at all. He regretted ever bringing the idea of an undead army to the Reichstag in the first place. He had staked the livelihood of all of his scientists, as well as Samantha's future, on performing a feat that may truly be impossible.

The Kino Facility is meant to be a secret from the majority of Group 935, and especially from the general population. Only those hand-selected by the Reichstag and Doctor Maxis should ever know of its existence. One such person was Sophia, Maxis' assistant who previously served in a government secretary position. She had been helping Maxis set up his office with his

personal belongings having now arrived. Now, however, she sat on his desk, legs crossed, speaking to Maxis as he was hastily placing files into his cabinet.

“This is a lovely change of scenery... I mean no offense Doctor Maxis. Der Riese was just so... lifeless. Concrete walls und dirt... so far from the city. Here we are so close to, well, everything!”

Maxis dabbed at the sweat on his forehead with a cloth, before kneeling down to place another group of files into place, sorted chronologically.

“I suppose. It is certainly much more lively here, especially at night. I'm finding it much harder to sleep with the constant activity.”

Sophia hopped off of the table to her heeled feet, straightening out her blouse as she did so.

“I'm sure you will find yourself acquainted to it soon. You do know I grew up in the city, don't you, Ludvig?”

Maxis locked away the rest of his files in the cabinet, before placing the cardboard box they had been transported in back onto a rolling cart.

“Yes, you've told me before. You've lived and worked here all of your life. It is a shade different from my own upbringing in the countryside with no night life except for the buzzing of insects. For the first fifteen years of my life, I only knew... perhaps a dozen people personally. Here, there are so many. I've shaken so many hands, had to remember so many names, exchanged so many words. Sometimes I yearn for the simple life again.”

Sophia stepped close to Maxis, closer than any professional relationship would entail.

“We all wish to be young again, Doctor...”

Maxis began to push the cart to the door, stopping to look to Sophia. As they locked eyes, she averted hers, looking to the framed photos on Maxis' desk. One of Samantha on the day she was gifted Fluffy, another of Maxis with his departed wife, Hilda, pregnant with her unborn daughter.

Sophia spoke with coyness as Maxis pushed the cart out the door into the hallway, “I have an idea, why don't we... you und I, und perhaps a few others, go out on the town tonight. I think you would quite enjoy the experience, und your scientists deserve a reward for all their work, don't you think?”

Maxis imagined the satisfaction of a well-earned break after the long move from Der Riese to Berlin. The thought of spending just a night independent of Group 935's morbid research was so alluring he was prepared to accept Sophia's offer. As he loomed over the enticing fantasy, Maxis came back down as he looked over Samantha's face in the frame sat upon his desk. In the corner of the frame was a drawing by her from a young age when he still had time to care for her. It was Ludvig and Samantha standing together outside of a house in a field, surrounded by flowers.

“We all deserve time away, Sophia, but now is not that time. The Reichstag needs this vital project to be complete before we can leave this facility. Do you not want to return home?”

Sophia shifted from one foot to another, visibly disappointed, “If I am being honest, Doctor, this place already feels like home.”

Maxis was taken aback, “That is understandable, but I need to return home to Samantha as soon as possible. She is coming to an age now where she will need her father around.”

“I thought Doctor Richtofen was caring for her, no? She will be fine, Ludvig. I'm sure she will understand.”

“Doctor Richtofen was my last choice. I can only hope Doctor Wagner can pick up the slack... Richtofen has become increasingly erratic and unpredictable.”

“You are becoming stressed again, Ludvig.” She came closer to him to touch his shoulder as he pushed her away.

“Stressed does not begin to describe my state of mind. No, this is something more. The fate of my career... of all of our careers rests on my shoulders during this experiment. You've brought my newspapers, so surely you've seen the state of affairs on the Eastern front... I'm not afraid of what will happen if we do not create the army in time... but of how the world will react if we do.”

“Ludvig... “

“You cannot begin to imagine it. What it is like to have every eye in the world watching over you, ready to determine your fate if you do not act as they want you to. I need to do as they say, Sophia, because I have promised them results in a timely manner. And yet you stand here,

asking me to spend my time in nightclubs, dancing away while Samantha lies alone in her bed, wondering why her father abandoned her to tame monsters!”

“I just wanted to help you... I'm sorry.”

“Then help me by continuing to work diligently as I try and save Group 935... General Lehmkuhl will be here any minute to oversee the first round of tests. Be sure the others are ready before he arrives.”

“Yes, Doctor... “

Spirit deflated, Sophia raced to the door, ducking her face down as she left the room. Maxis now stood alone to gather his thoughts and prepare himself for the day.

He never wished to hurt Sophia, or anyone for that matter, but she held a childish mindset without any pretense of responsibility to anyone. How could he blame her, however; She was significantly younger than him.

Maxis picked up the photograph of himself and Hilda, looking into Hilda's face and feeling somewhat confused. He realized with great sorrow that he was beginning to forget exactly how her face looked. After decades of loving her, it was like seeing her for the first time all over again. The memories flooded Maxis' mind as he remembered the contours of her face, the imperfections in her skin, and exact shade of brown in her eyes.

The positive aura of her presence soon became clouded by an angry self-loathing in Maxis' mind as he questioned how he could forget her; How he could forget the bond they shared.

Maxis set the frame back on the desk with care, shutting his eyes to hold back his frustrations. What would Hilda think if she knew Ludvig was attracted to his young assistant? What about the decades of unrequited, irrefutable love for one another? Could he ever love another? For all his achievements in scientific and medical research, these questions and those like it Ludvig would always defer to her. She always knew the right answer.

Perhaps Sophia is a distraction, her very presence an obstacle in the way of Ludvig's career. Ludvig pondered how to move forward. He could not send her away, not after all that she has seen, no matter how much Ludvig desired to. The only option now is for Ludvig to look past this animalistic attraction to Sophia, and focus on completion of the task at hand.

He peered wistfully at the clock above the door frame, noting the remaining two and a half minutes before the scheduled meeting with General Lehmkuhl. With it taking roughly a minute to reach the foyer entrance from his office, Maxis sat in his chair, closing his eyes as he counted down the minute and a half of free time.

Maxis tried to imagine himself and Samantha in a year's time. After completion of the Kino Project, Ludvig will sell his assets within Group 935 for a sizable sum of money and retire from science. Doctor Porter will throw Ludvig a large party in honor of his tenure at Group 935, as leadership of the organization will shift to him. Doctor Richtofen will be in attendance, and he will apologize for his behavior the past couple of years, thanking Ludvig for teaching him so much of what he knows. Under Ludvig's strict leadership, Richtofen will be the first working teleporter for living beings, revolutionizing transportation for all mankind. After the war, when the dust settles, the teleporter will be what Group 935 is remembered for, for the rest of human

history; Not the undead army. With his riches, Maxis will buy a modest house in the countryside, and with his connections to the Reichstag he will give Samantha access to the best private school near their home.

There, in that house, Ludvig will grow old, and Samantha will become a woman. Eventually, however, she must leave. Then, Ludvig will be alone. Alone again.

As the small hand of the clock struck nine, Maxis bolted out of his chair to the door, now leaving a minute later than he had planned. He nodded as professionally as possible to passing scientists and he rounded around hallways to reach a waiting area. He turned left, descending a small set of stairs, before turning left to look out on the foyer. At the base of the staircase in the foyer was General Lehmkuhl, chatting with Sophia, two SS soldiers by his side. Maxis adjusted his tie before descending the staircase.

Lehmkuhl exclaimed, "Doktor!"

Maxis stretched out his hand, "Apologies for the delay, Generaloberst, there is no excuse..."

Lehmkuhl took Maxis' hand, and wagged his finger in response, "Ah, ah, there is no need for apologies. I know the work being done here takes time, and I am sure you are a very busy man."

"Danke, Generaloberst."

Lehmkuhl looked down to his boots, shaking his head, as he corrected Doctor Maxis, "Actually, Doktor, it pains me to say this, but I have been promoted to Generalleutnant."

Maxis feigned shock, “Why should this pain you, General? If I had known of this promotion I would have congratulated you in my letters.”

“Do you remember General Amsel? I believe you met him two years ago at the castle's opening, *ja*?”

“Yes, I do.”

Lehmkuhl sighed, “Last September, he was killed by a Russian sniper in Stalingrad. Since then, I have taken his rank and place on the Eastern Front.”

Sophia shook her head in solidarity, Maxis doing the same, remarking, “*Mein gott*, I had no idea... Generalleutnant Amsel was a friend to all of us at Group 935. What an incredible loss for the Fatherland.”

“Amsel was a greater man than any of us. We would not have the foothold in Stalingrad we have today if it were not for his leadership... He was a brave man, inspecting every garrison near the front lines, knowing his soldiers by name... all to be killed by a coward from afar. Such is the way of Communists: Cheating, lying, backstabbing bastards.”

“How might we contact his family? We would like to offer our condolences in any way we can.”

“His... wife left him for America when he was sent to the Soviet Union. There is no one left for you to contact.”

“If there is anything that we can do, we would be honored. Nothing, however, will amend such a tragedy.”

“Indeed, Doktor... “ Lehmkuhl patted Maxis on the shoulder, leaning in to speak, “However, your work here will ensure his actions were not in vain. The Soviets will not see your army coming, und General Amsel's work will be done... “

Doctor Maxis grinned, glancing to Sophia for reassurance as the thought of failure began to wrap its hands around his throat. He looked back to General Lehmkuhl, “He would be incredibly proud of what we have accomplished in the past two and a half weeks.”

Lehmkuhl grinned, revealing the gap in his teeth, as he motioned towards the staircase with an open hand, “So, shall we look over your progress?”

“Of course. Sophia? Inform the stage crew that we are about to begin.”

Sophia returned a grin, not one she would normally give to Maxis, but one of professional courtesy. “Yes, Doctor.”

She turned, pacing towards the doorway beneath the stairs that led to the stage. Maxis led Lehmkuhl upwards towards the waiting area, and then left into a locked doorway. He knocked at the wooden door, revealing Doctor Weber who came to open it.

Maxis nodded to Weber as he entered the Projectionist's Room. Several shelves lined the walls, all brimming with film reels marked with Group 935's insignia. The projector sat near an open, rectangular window overlooking the stage and the arena filled with seats. Only a handful of the seats nearest the stage were occupied, with those in the seats sitting nearly completely still

looking up at the screen. On the rolled-out projection screen was a repetitive video of a dot, disappearing and reappearing on different sections of the screen. Near the stage from a set of loudspeakers, a small beep would play every time the dot appeared on the screen.

General Lehmkuhl looked down on the occupants of the theater, squinting to look closer at their pale, gray heads, which seemed to dip left and right as the dot moved around the screen. Nearby the screen were multiple soldiers armed with MP-40's.

Lehmkuhl remarked, "*Mein gott*, that sound... is incredibly annoying, is it not?"

Doctor Weber chimed in, "The sound is not pleasant, but it keeps them docile before we begin the daily exercises. It was actually Doctor Richtofen's idea to use repetitive sound as a method of diverting their attention."

Lehmkuhl's voice lit up, "Ah! I remember Doctor Richtofen, he's not around here is he?"

Doctor Maxis rolled his eyes, sure that no one could see in the dim lighting of the projection room, "He is not stationed at this facility. For the moment, he is still at *Der Eisendrache*."

"If this works, Doktor, you must send him my regards."

Lehmkuhl twisted his head as Weber left to fetch another film reel, and something in the corner of the room caught his attention.

"*Was ist das?*"

He approached something covered in a light blue tarp underneath the clock on the wall, Maxis following behind.

Maxis replied, “That is a prototype for a new iteration of Doctor Porter's weapon upgrading machine. After we began prototyping more approachable designs for the Perk-a-Cola's, he had the idea to create an improved version of his own device in a similar charming style. It is currently non-functional, however, and, a bit crude.”

“If it is covered, it is none of my business, Doktor. I trust in your projects. Speaking of, shall I see the demonstration?”

Maxis looked to Doctor Weber and nodded as he removed the current reel from the projector, and inserted a specially marked one from its case. Maxis and Lehmkuhl approached the window as the film began.

The speakers began to project the same repetitive beeping sound as before at a consistent interval. On the screen flashed an image of Doctor Maxis, who stood silently looking at the audience for a few moments. The viewers were restless for a few moments due to the change in visuals. They soon became acquainted with the image of Maxis and settled down to listen to his commands.

Maxis motioned towards a particular test subject in the front row, “Watch the one in the second seat on the right. He is an example of our best subjects.”

The Maxis on the screen began to speak, “*We will begin by raising our right arm into the air.*” Maxis then began to raise his right arm above his head like a salute.

Lehmkuhl leaned in close to view the response of the test subjects, and his eyes widened as one by one, they slowly began to raise an arm into the air, some right and some left. They held their trembling arms in the air for roughly eight seconds, before the screen's Maxis lowered his.

“*Mein gott*, how can they hear the commands through that awful sound? It is as loud as the film.”

Doctor Weber answered, “That is why it works so well. They are already receptive to the repetitive, calming noises, which allows us to slip in commands freely without their minds rejecting them.”

Lehmkuhl said directly to Maxis, “This is... marvelous, Doktor, *sehr* marvelous!”

The Maxis on the screen raised his left hand into the air, palm upwards, “*Raise your arm to the sky. Keep it there.*”

Like a dog, they followed the command instantly, keeping their arms in the air as long as the film dictated.

Lehmkuhl inquired, “Have they been able to do anything more significant, such as, say, opening a door? Lifting objects?”

Maxis replied, “We have begun with simple commands that will not divert their attention away from the screen. We are slowly determining the best candidates for more mobile experiments.”

Lehmkuhl chuckled to himself, shaking his head, “At this rate of progress, they will be the ones running the experiments soon!”

Maxis chuckled with him, looking to the blank-faced version of himself on the projection screen.

“Up... down... up... down...”

Ludvig seemed almost entranced by himself when the film suddenly froze on this frame him lowering his hands.

Doctor Weber seemed confused, looking to the projector, worried, “*Was ist los?*”

Maxis and Lehmkuhl recoiled backwards as the image of Maxis on the screen suddenly zoomed in to his face. Maxis' blood turned cold as the screen flickered on his own blank, dead expression, and the repetitive beeping audio suddenly became a high-pitched, electronic wail.

Lehmkuhl covered his ears, “What is... what is happening, Doktor?”

The screen quickly changed frames to a blank black background, and in the foreground was a white symbol of a pyramid with a human eye at the top. It stayed on the screen for a moment before the loudspeakers let out a distorted voice that echoed the same words, over and over, throughout the theater, “*Kill the Doctor.*” The screen flashed back to Maxis' face, then to a black background with the words: “*Kill the Doctor*” and “*Töte den Doktor*“. As the words rang out in the theater, the film would switch between Maxis' face and the message, again and again.

The subjects quaked in their seats, thrashing their arms around, some tearing each other apart. One had managed to pull itself from the restraints, and leapt towards a soldier stood by the

screen. He gunned down the subject with three loud gunshots, which only served to rile up the audience even further. They were now groaning and screeching as they waved their arms towards the men on the stage.

Maxis snapped into action, ordering Weber, "Remove the reel, *NOW!*"

He then approached a system on the wall that led to the loudspeakers in the theater. He switched the audio to be sourced from the speaker in the Projector's Room, shouting, "*Men, remain calm! Restrain any test subjects that you can, and kill the rest. Do NOT harm Subject Two-Six or Subject Three-Eight. When the subjects are contained, find us in the foyer. Do not let ANY of them leave this facility!*"

Maxis turned to Lehmkuhl as Weber removed the reel from the projector, and turned on the lights to the stage. He motioned for him the two SS soldiers to lead the way as they followed. Weapons raised, they guided the group through the waiting area and into the foyer where a crowd of scientists and Sophia were waiting.

Maxis ran ahead of the armed men down the stairs and towards Sophia, "Are you alright?!"

"Yes, Doctor, I am fine. I was here when I heard the gunshots. What is happening?"

Maxis ducked his head in shame as he turned back to see the shocked and frightened Lehmkuhl now approaching him. "Only a minor setback. A problem with the projection."

Lehmkuhl placed his arm on Maxis' shoulder, pulling him aside, "What happened in there, Doktor?" His expression and tone seemed to be more out of fear than anger, which was marginally better for Maxis.

"Something went awry with the projection. That was not the film we had prepared. At least... not near the end."

"Why would it say such awful things towards you, Doktor? Did someone in Group 935 tamper with your films?"

"That is incredibly unlikely, with all due respect, Generalleutnant. My men are vetted, and Doctor Weber and I are the only two scientists who know exactly which reel we planned to use today."

"Doktor Weber..."

Lehmkuhl turned to Doctor Weber, who pushed his glasses atop his nose closer to his sweaty face. He shook his head, "*Nein, nein!* Doctor Maxis, I swear to you on my little Abigail's life that I ensured the correct film was in that case just hours ago. I watched it in its entirety. This is not my doing."

Lehmkuhl moved in closer, looking up from his short stature towards Weber, "Then who did this? I am returning to my post and reporting what I saw today exactly. I believe in this project, Doktor Maxis, but I demand an investigation and an answer to this disruption and any further disruptions in the near future. Do you understand, Doktor?"

Maxis nodded, "Yes, Generalleutnant... "

“Gut, we should be leaving this madness, men...”

Lehmkuhl motioned for his two personal SS soldiers to lead the way towards the exit out of the theater.

Maxis ducked his head to the ground, closing his eyes and trying to picture his future with Samantha. He could see the house, the country; He could see her. But as he looked closer, the grass surrounding the home began to wither away and die. The perfect sunrise was blocked by a flurry of clouds. The house was completely empty.

Sophia approached Maxis, putting her palm to his chest as she spoke closely to him, “What awful things were said towards you Doctor? By whom?”

Maxis opened his eyes, taking Sophia's hand and pushing it away, “Do not worry, Sophia. It is nothing I wish to discuss.”

The two of them peered into each others' eyes for a few moments as the crowd of scientists chatted with one another. Ludvig found solace in her eyes, wide and bright, and though he had not noticed before, he could see now that they were brown.

Now in reality, Maxis let go of Sophia's hand, placing his own at his side. Sophia then averted her eyes away towards the wall. As she let out a sigh, she reached for the handbag in her right hand, and removed a small, red letter which she handed to Maxis.

“I found this in your mailbox before the General arrived. There is no return address... perhaps it is from Samantha.”

Maxis took the red letter, nodding to Sophia before turning his back to her, “Thank you, Sophia.”

He approached the bar of the foyer, its cabinets stocked with vodka and beer that were off-limits during work hours. He placed the letter on the bar, pulling it open to reveal the contents. It simply held a blank white card. Upon flipping it to the opposite side, however, there was a short message in black ink, and at the bottom, the same symbol he saw in the projection screen just minutes earlier: The pyramid and the all-seeing eye.

“You are being judged, Doctor Maxis. Today was the first of many demonstrations of our influence. Do not underestimate us Doctor, or you and those you care about will pay dearly. We know where Doctor Richtofen and Samantha are at any given moment on any given day. If you wish to see them go unharmed, you will do exactly as we demand. You will receive more messages from us, some like this, others in a different manner. We implore you to pay attention. You are always being watched.”

Chapter 23: Alone

Stalingrad, Soviet Union

Sgt. Nikolai Belinski

January 15th, 1943

“Death solves all problems - no man, no problem.”

- Joseph Stalin

*“Nikolai! Nikolai! **Nikolai!**”*

The words rang out in parallel with a barrage of rounds being burrowed into the snow. Sergeant Nikolai Belinski paid them no attention, his mind still wandering to places outside his own reality. In this fugue state, the explosive sound of bullets pelting the concrete wall to his rear became the banging of a hammer on a nail through a fresh plank of wood. The cold layer of snow clutching his bullet-wounded leg became the warm embrace of a beautiful woman. The screaming of his name by the Russian soldier trapped behind cover became, most intense of all, the beautiful woman’s whispering in his ear.

*“Nikolai... Nikolai... **Nikolai...**”*

The stabbing pain in his lower leg arrived once more as the return fire from his comrade returned his senses. The fantasy faded to reveal the grim reality Nikolai's homeland had become. Where churches, schools, and homes once stood tall, all that remained were fragments of these institutions, propped up like scarecrows in a field of snow.

The other Russian shouted, "*Can you stand?*"

Nikolai peered down at the drum magazine he was clutching tightly in his hand, his last vestige of safety, releasing his grasp as he diverted his energy towards moving his wounded leg. He started with his toes, bending them within his work boots, until he was sure he could move the entire leg.

Ensuring he stayed completely behind the concrete wall to avoid the stray round of an MG-42, he put his weight onto the leg, exacerbating the pain. He was now on his feet, returning a glance towards the other Russian to assure him he was not ready to give up.

The soldier raised his shoulders, firmly gripping his sub-machine gun and nodding to Nikolai. Each man stared into the white void between them, listening intently for the last round to be fired off.

As the MG continued its barrage for another few moments, the Russians prepared for what may be their final moments. Nikolai could see within the other man's eyes that he too knew the consequences of taking even one step back towards Soviet lines. Soviet commanders have little sympathy to share for those who would retreat from battle; Nikolai learned this lesson some time ago.

The flurry of rounds from the MG halted, and the last two Soviets in the reconnaissance group jolted from their cover, charging towards the enemy. With nothing but a magazine of ammunition for his comrade, Nikolai put forth the last of his energy into advancing. The German gunner's nest was still several blocks ahead, its occupants now surely scrambling to load their machine gun and mow them down. Nikolai thought of nothing but the precious seconds he had remained alive, and what little he must now have left.

The pain of the wound in his leg was now excruciating, and his adrenaline was no longer enough to keep his pace like that of his comrade. Nikolai was now lagging behind.

Ahead of them just a few more meters and to the right were the remains of a concrete wall just high enough to take cover behind. The two survivors veered right as they anticipated the Germans' MG now being loaded and trained on them.

They would be correct in this assumption, as the flashes from the MG nest in the distance were accompanied by their signature concussive ringing. Before Nikolai could reach the safety of the wall, he felt a sharp pain slash across his cheek. A fragment of the other Russian's skull had been flung in his direction as a lone bullet passed through his head. The other Russian fell to the ground, painting the snow a deep red.

Nikolai lost balance as he whipped his head around from the MG nest to his comrade, the pain of his wound crumpling his legs beneath him and sending him face-first into the snow. The hail of bullets did not stop, whizzing over his head. He tossed the magazine aside, now realizing retrieving his fallen ally's weapon would be impossible. Nikolai instead focused on his

immediate survival, clawing at frigid clumps of snow leaving his gloved fingers frostbitten. Every bullet that whizzed over Nikolai's head was another second cheated away from Death, and only natural instincts kept him from rising to his feet and facing it.

Nikolai pushed deep into the snow to raise his body up and against the wall. He shook his hands and flexed his fingers, attempting to regain feeling and rid them of excess snow. He peered down at the leg that had slowed him down, placing his left hand over the wound.

After stowing the pain for a moment, Nikolai leaned in for a closer inspection. It was like no other war injury he had ever seen. The bullet had not only punctured the skin, but had burned the edges of the entrance point. Still lodged deeply in the leg, Nikolai could feel it inside. It felt incredibly warm in contrast to the rest of his body, and even placing his hand near the wound he could feel that physical warmth. The pain, however, was worsening with every passing moment as the bullet seemed to corrode away as his muscle tissue.

Regardless of the nature of the bullet that caused the injury, Nikolai could sense it would be a fatal one without any other Soviets to help. He considered wrapping it in spare gauze he held on his person, but he saw little reason in doing so.

Nikolai shut his eyes, trying to picture the peaceful moments he had seen just moments ago. The pain clouded these visions. There was no soft whispering but cries of agony from men, not gunned down by the German soldiers sent to kill them, but by their own comrades, ordered by the commander meant to lead them to victory. They wept, begging for their lives after being shot by their brothers who looked them in the eye as they pulled the trigger. Those still clinging

to life were executed by the repugnant commander himself. Nikolai gazed into the eyes of one soldier who let out a last whimper as the commander approached him, pulled back the hammer, and shot that Private Belinski like a dog. Nikolai stared into those eyes he so recognized, which were now fading with his life. There was only rage in Nikolai's soul, and the memories of this moment in time become difficult to retrieve. An image that cannot be erased, however, is the commander's face as Nikolai had him pinned to the ground, his knife being pounded into his chest. Some said twelve times, others said fifteen. Nikolai did not count.

It is only appropriate that Nikolai would die here in Stalingrad, in their 'glorious' leader's namesake city. For all his speeches and facades of leadership, Stalin was a fearful little *mudak*, afraid of those who truly believed in the Communist cause and who cared for the Soviet peoples. Those who spoke of a brighter future were often sent to the *Gulag*, but the Belinski name could never be wiped from history in this way. Stalin's solution to any man he could not handle himself would be to toss them aside like scraps for the Germans to feast upon. He had tried many times before to kill Nikolai; Today was the day he died for the Motherland.

After the MG-42 had ended its barrage, Nikolai heard voices through the cold wind, followed closely by boots trudging through snow. Germans: Now approaching.

Not ready to surrender his life to a German prison camp, Nikolai peered to his left down what used to be a street of the city, away from his fallen ally who was now half-buried in the snow. He leaned his body down to the ground, and began to crawl using his elbows, not wanting to give his fingers further frostbite. He moved slower than before, avoiding the potential of alerting the Germans to his location, making his way around the corner of the building, and

looking down a long stretch of what used to be the street. At the end were the remains of a statue of Stalin, the trunkless legs still standing, the body and shattered visage buried under a layer of snow.

Nikolai began to lose energy as his joints ached, pulling his whole body across the ground. He now realized how thirsty he had become, and began to feel lightheaded. If he stopped, however, he knew he would never move again.

After passing several blocks, the injured leg could no longer propel him forward, resting limply as Nikolai continued to pull at the ground beneath. No longer able to bear the bitter cold, Nikolai peered at the building to his left; He could not quite make out any signs, and there were holes blasted in the site from explosives, but it would be warmer than the streets.

Nikolai crawled up the steps and through the doorway missing the door. Now out of the snow and onto wood, Nikolai used his hands once more to inch along the floor. The energy had drained his body to such a degree that his limbs went completely limp as his body temperature crept upwards.

He could not move any further for the moment, resting his head firmly on the chilly wooden floor and shutting his eyes. His visions of death grew fuzzy and his fingertips began to tingle. For a moment, Nikolai felt bliss.

“Prost an Herrn und Frau Adler!”

Feeling began to return in his fingertips, and blood flowed back to his head as he raised it from the damp floorboards.

“Prost!”

Nikolai peered at the doorway down the hall, knowing that the German voices were coming from there.

He inched forward, remaining quiet as he did so. Through a hole in the wall, Nikolai could see the sky growing darker, and soon the Soviet mortar strikes on the nearby airfield would begin.

Nikolai came closer to the edge of the doorway, and he could hear the German soldiers inside clearly. There seemed to be only two, and they were laughing.

Nikolai slowly peered around the corner into the room, now recognizing the location. It was a bar, two tables sitting in the open area, and cabinets filled with vodka. The two young soldiers were guzzling shots of the Russian vodka, giggling and muttering to each other in German. They held no weapons. Their MP-40s were resting against the wall: Right in front of Nikolai.

He pushed against the wooden floor, raising his body up onto his wobbly legs. He stood crouched, leaning with one arm against the wall to remain balanced. Nikolai took one of the sub-machine guns, placing around the corner, out of sight. He took the other in his hands, checking that it was loaded and ready to fire.

Nikolai raised up to standing position, holding the weapon in his right hand, finger at the trigger, as he used his left to stand up straight. He entered the room, weapon pointed towards the German boys.

When the first locked eyes with Nikolai, they flinched before noticing their own weapon in the Russian's hands. The other turned around as he noticed his friend frightened by something in the room, and gasped before grabbing an empty bottle of vodka and holding it like a pistol towards Nikolai.

“Nein, nein, n-!”

Nikolai placed his index finger against his lips before taking grip of the MP-40 with both hands.

The drunk German holding the bottle placed it back on the bar, raising his hands in the air to signal his surrender. The other was so stunned he could not move at all, snapping out of it as the first nodded to him to raise his hands. Both men stood silently, staring into the Russian's vacant, emotionless expression. Nikolai did nothing but divert his gaze between the two young men as he held the weapon pointed to their chests just over a meter away.

The one who first raised his hands, who was visibly the youngest of the pair, spoke up softly in German, *“Bitte, wir werden es niemandem erzählen...”*

Nikolai did not waver, weapon still trained on them.

Outside, explosions from mortar strikes could be heard. Each pop of the mortar hitting its target caused the Germans to flinch. Each of them was sweating like it was a Summer day, the eldest starting the cry softly.

The younger German began to shake his head, muttering in Russian, *“I speak Russian... some. You are Russian?”*

Nikolai slowly nodded his head, never moving the barrel of the weapon away from its target.

“Please do not kill us. We will leave... telling no one. No one will find you...”

The mortars continued to rain down outside. *Pop. Pop. Pop.*

“Have mercy. Please, have mercy.”

Nikolai began to tense up, his expression turning to a sneer, and his hands gripping the trigger tightly. He took aim, and waited.

“Mercy!”

Pop.

Nikolai held the trigger for only two second, unleashing a dozen rounds in an arc, ending the two Germans' lives on the spot and bursting two glasses rested on the bar. One of the bodies slumped backwards onto a desk before resting.

The only noise following was the rolling of shell casings on the wood floor. Nikolai stood still for a moment, before placing the MP-40 onto the bar and pacing towards the bodies. The floor beneath him creaked, indicating a room underneath.

Nikolai stepped over the body on the floor, taking in his hands a bottle of vodka from the cabinet above him. Closing the cabinet, he passed the one resting on the table, and leaned onto the bar. Nikolai leaned back and downed nearly half the bottle before slamming it back onto the bar. He could feel some measure of warmth returning to his body.

On the floor near the wall was an abnormal piece of wood with a string attached. Nikolai approached it, lifting the string and the wood panel to reveal a cellar beneath the bar. He looked down towards his wounded leg, the blood still seeping through, and began to descend the ladder leading to the cellar. The room was dim and damp, a rat scurrying across the floor under a barrel. All along the wall were dozens of crates of vodka, completely untouched by the war above. Nikolai limped over to a dark corner of the cellar, lowering himself to the ground.

He pulled back the cloth surrounding his wound, downed a shot of vodka, and poured the rest onto the bloody mess. It did not burn as much as it should, Nikolai thought.

Through the darkness, Nikolai could see something dripping from the floorboards above, with the droplets making noise as they collected on the ground. Nikolai realized it was the blood of the boys he had slain.

Nikolai tossed the empty bottle aside, resting his head on the wall and shutting his eyes. He began to hum a Tchaikovsky melody, and grabbed another fresh bottle of vodka before chugging more.

His mind drifted, blurry and feeling weightless. He finally felt completely alone.

Nikolai awoke with a sharp pain at the back of his head, as if he had been thrown backwards. There was a rumbling beneath him. He could feel the touch of another person, they were close, attending to the pain in his leg. Nikolai opened his eyes once again, blinded by an overhead lamp. Regaining his vision, he could see a dozen Germans, fully armed and sitting

strapped to chairs. Where the wound had been in his leg, there was a bandage and no pain whatsoever. Nikolai could feel his toes, and he realized he was now on a plane.

He searched the area for any way to kill his captors, spotting only a set of medical tools on a nearby table. Nikolai mustered the energy and attempted to leap from his bed, his head being slammed backwards as he was restrained at the wrists. The sudden noise and struggle alerted the Germans, who tried to restrain Nikolai as best they could, his head thrashing, attempting to headbutt any of them.

A younger man in a white lab-coat approached Nikolai. He adjusted his glasses, visibly afraid of the Russian, and brandishing a syringe in his hands. His coat was marked with a symbol Nikolai did not recognize: An atom held by a hand, in its center, the numbers '935'.

He approached Nikolai, putting on gloves, and pulling back his sleeve, injecting the fluid from the syringe into Nikolai's bloodstream. He began to feel cold, drifting back into peaceful sleep. The last words he heard were in English from the young man.

“Quite a fighter. Doctor Richtofen will enjoy working on this one.”

Chapter 24: Pygmalion

Deutsches Sol Kino, Berlin, Nazi Germany

Dr. Ludvig Maxis

February 12th, 1943