

CHAPTER ONE

They had been on the move since before dawn, from the moment the black-shirts had stopped the train in the middle of some godforsaken stretch of white hell.

The frozen wasteland seemed to reach away into infinity, vanishing into the haze over low crests of grey rock rising like stone waves. There was that strange kind of silence that snow makes, the way it swallows sound like draining water. Once upon a time, that stillness had reminded Tom Boone of Christmas cheer and holidays with his folks in New Jersey. But not any more.

There had been no warning. The sudden, screeching grind of the freight car's steel bogies as the brakes bit hard, the lurch that threw Boone's head against the frost-rimed wood of the wall, that was all they got. The master sergeant never slept deep anyhow, but the cold had lulled him a little and it was still a rude awakening. His hand went absently to his temple and felt the tacky, still-healing scab there.

Boone couldn't figure it. They'd talked low at the start,

after the Reich-rats had packed them in and sent them on their way. By dint of his stripes, he was senior man, but there was no rhyme or reason for putting them all together. Thirty men, all prisoners of war, all Union Army dogfaces—guys from the States and Britain mostly, along with a few Spaniards and a lone Canuck. Each of them had the same story: they'd been pulled out of whatever POW camp the enemy had been keeping them in and sent here, to the cold heart of what he figured must be Norway, with nothing more than what they'd been stood up in.

About the only common denominator Boone could come up with was that they were all around the same age, and they were fit enough to fight and to hoof it. He didn't know what that meant, but the thought of it lay in his belly like he'd eaten something bad.

Then there was the fact that when the creeps had stopped the train and pitched them out into the cold, they'd given them a sack full of guns. The sick feeling in his gut had drawn tighter.

The gats had mostly been MP40s, poorly maintained stock that had probably been moldering in a bunker for a decade, and empty with it. Another sack, this one rattling with handfuls of loose rounds inside, had come out of the dark and landed at Boone's feet. The men had done nothing for a long second, then they'd dove at the bullets and started feeding the empty Schmeissers like there was no tomorrow; but the train had already been moving back the way it had come, the big diesel engine grunting like an animal, and nobody'd had a good angle to shoot back.

Boone had picked a gun that looked less decrepit than the rest, let off a couple of practice rounds into the snow and pronounced it good. When he'd glanced up, the men had been looking to him. He'd blown out a breath, and it had curled white in the frigid air.

They'd divided up the rounds and the weapons between

them, and set off away from the tracks, buckling up against the cold as best they could.

The Canuck—his name was Anderson—reckoned they were high above sea level, and the biting, dry chill of the air seemed to agree. The first pieces of a plan started to form in Boone's head. Something about getting down to a fjord, maybe finding a boat.

The Reich had other ideas.

As pink light hazed the horizon past the snow-covered crags, a dark shape climbed up over the trees on massive, droning rotors and presently a Luftwaffe sky-fort zeppelin took to making wide circles overhead. A massive blimp, it hovered just below the low, grey clouds, turning lazy arcs and occasionally probing the gloom with the beam of a spotlight. At one point it came close enough that Boone could see the black cross and crimson disc of the Reich Imperial Army emblazoned on its blunt prow, close enough to disgorge a squad of soldiers in winter camouflage down spidery drop-lines.

Then, as the sun came up, the game started. A voice, all hard-edged and brittle sneer, boomed from speaker horns along the massive flyer's landing skids. In clipped, short phrases of English, the voice laid it out.

This was a war game, the voice said. Thirty versus ten. The victory conditions were simple. Survive to nightfall or wipe out the opposing force, and go free.

Boone didn't believe that for a damn minute, but he had a three-to-one advantage and a bunch of guys with him who wanted some payback. The rest, he decided, he would figure out on the fly.

So they didn't wait for the Reich troopers to play their hand. Thirty men, angry and cold and with a stack of grudges against the Kaiser that were taller than Lady Liberty, swarmed round the ridge line and caught the enemy on the back foot. Gunfire crackled like snapping twigs and

the first patches of blood-red hit the white snow, steaming where they fell.

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Generaloberst Klaus Valther turned the delicate china cup in his thin, long-fingered hand and gave a sour face to the tea pooling within. He found a steward and returned the offending item to the server's tray and brushed invisible dust from his fingertips, as if dismissing his disappointment.

In truth, this whole endeavor was disappointing to him. It took a lot to dislodge Valther from the halls of power at the Reichstag, and even more to drag him out of Germany and north to the icy wilderness. Valther had worked long and hard to earn his status as one of the Kaiser's senior advisors and that status carried with it certain benefits. A warm bed and good tea were two of them, and so commonplace to him that their absence was quite wearing. He glanced at Sabine Schmitt, his current secretary, and considered sending her below to find him a more suitable beverage—something stronger, perhaps.

But he doubted that she would find anything even remotely approaching a good brandy aboard this flying barge. Valther heard it said that the man who had brought them here, the man who had summoned the *generaloberst* and a dozen other officers of similar rank, forbade alcohol among his troops. "A poison of the spirit," so it was said. Valther scoffed at the idea; but then it was just one more unusual affectation among the dozens more that characterized the Greek.

And there he was now, sweeping into the zeppelin's observation gallery, affecting that cape he so enjoyed wearing. The man filled the steel-walled chamber as he entered it. The dull light reflecting off the snows below through the gallery's wide windows gave his sallow, lined features an air of great age, even though Valther estimated his host could

not have been more than fifty-five years old—at least, if Valther's investigators were to be believed. A night-black uniform detailed with gold buttons and red silk accented his appearance; where the generaloberst and the other Reich officers sported uniforms in ghost-grey or dark green, his legions preferred the black. *As shadowy as his motives*, Valther mused, trying to maintain an air of affected nonchalance. The reality was less so; Valther would never admit to himself that he found the man menacing.

Valther called him the Greek, but that was only a convenient label, a way in which to denigrate the other officer and amuse himself. Valther's people had analyzed the man, studied his physiology and profile, worked to build a hypothetical model of who he was and how he might think. It was something Valther did with every senior officer who crossed his path, the better to know them and manipulate them. But this one... He defied categorization, and that was irritating. He bore Mediterranean features, but more those found on statues of Hercules and Perseus than of contemporary men. His accent was the baseless sort belonging to someone who had traveled all his life. And perhaps most discordant of all, he wore the uniform of empire as if he had been born to it. The fact was, the birthplace and creed of *Reichdokter* Hoss Harbinger were as shrouded as his gaze, his strange piercing eyes forever hooded under the peak of his cap.

Harbinger moved among some of his men, speaking quietly to them, glancing over their shoulders to peer at flickering green cathode-ray screens where endless trains of data scrolled past. The party from Berlin came to attention and saluted him briskly as he approached. Valther noticed that Harbinger's left hand remained at his side, gloved fingers kneading the grip of what appeared to be a sturdy staff. The head of the object caught Valther's eye: it was an eagle's head, perhaps made of brass, with a wicked beak and the same peculiar gaze as its owner.

Harbinger spared him a nod. "Welcome, gentlemen. Thank you for accepting my invitation."

Valther's lip curled. He did not enjoy being given orders, and Harbinger's "invite" had been exactly that, phrased in such a manner that made it clear it would not be politic for the generaloberst to decline. The reichdokter had the ear of the Kaiser and a rank that existed outside of the conventional structure of the military, a dangerous combination that Valther disliked intensely. He was a soldier and he respected a soldier's ways, but Harbinger had the stink of something untoward upon him, he always had. Some called him the "grim specter of the Empire," as if he were an avatar of death itself. Others said his word was second only to the Kaiser's.

The generaloberst was not ignorant of the Reich's more... *esoteric* elements, nor of the obvious military benefits they gave to his state, but he did not embrace them as many of his colleagues did. He disliked the way that men like Harbinger, his *Obscura Korps* rival Marquis *Generalleutnant* Von Heizinger, or Baron *Oberst* Von Karloff of the Eisendivision squandered men and materiel, chasing legends and the ephemera of the dead past when there was work to be done defeating the enemy. Soldier's work, not playing with forces that defied understanding.

Valther was a rational man, and that which was not rational, that which was shrouded in mysticism and spiritualist nonsense, did not sit well with him. He had seen many of the so-called "wonder-weapons" conjured up by the Reich's radical science divisions, but he refused to accept the foolish notion that these devices were the product of some other realm, some demonic *unterwelt*. They were a technology, perhaps one Valther did not fully understand, but a technology nonetheless. The insistence of men like Harbinger, who reveled in superfluous phantasmal trappings, wore on the generaloberst's patience. But the Kaiser felt otherwise, and

the Kaiser was the Reich, and the Reich was the only thing approaching a god in Klaus Valther's world.

Harbinger was speaking about his project, his deep and resonant voice carrying across the metallic chamber. Valther's lips thinned; he had little interest in the story of why he had been brought here. Sabine would have all of that in the notes she was dutifully recording. Suddenly all he wanted was to be done with this, to be on a jet back to the capital and the real business of the Great War with the Union.

He cleared his throat. "My time is limited, Herr Reichdokter. We were brought here on the promise of something *worth* that time. Perhaps we can, as the Americans say, 'cut to the chase'?" Valther gave a pointed look toward a large mechanical board, similar to those one might see at a railway station, where ten names and ranks were listed alongside a ticker bearing a single letter. All showed an "L," meaning *lebendig*—alive—but as he watched two flicked over to display a "T" for *tot*—dead.

Far below them, the men they represented were in pitched battle with a rabble of Union POWs; the faint rattle of machine guns could be heard under the constant drum of the rotor blades, and Valther could see the flickers of muzzle flashes among the ice and rocks. "I wonder what the point of this little show might be," continued the generaloberst. "More than a creative way to execute our own men, that is."

Was that anger that flashed across Harbinger's face? The expression was so swift and his craggy countenance so rough-hewn it was hard to know for certain. But instead he bowed slightly. "Of course. Forgive me. I tend to become so involved in the story I forget you are here to evaluate the end result, not the road to reach it." The reichdokter turned to throw a nod toward a dour-faced *hauptmann* waiting near one of the control consoles. The officer saluted and walked to a hatchway. Waiting on the other side was a nondescript soldier carrying a large

wooden box. The hauptmann escorted the soldier into the room, and Valther noted that the officer kept his hand resting on the butt of his Luger at all times. The two men approached Harbinger, and there was the sudden whiff of ozone in the air. Valther's skin twitched, reacting at something unseen; nearby his secretary responded in a similar fashion, shifting uncomfortably. Everyone in the Berlin party seemed faintly unsettled by the new arrival.

Harbinger gestured at the box. "For some time I have been developing extranormal strategic initiatives for the Reich. What you are about to see represents my most recent and most promising success." He laid his gloved hand over the polished grain of the box, savoring the moment as his fingers found the brass latches. "We call this the Enigma machine."

The portentous name almost made Valther snigger. "We?" he echoed. "You did not build this...magic box alone, then?" The generaloberst knew the answer to the question before he asked it. Harbinger was known to be employing the assistance of a foreign scientist whose identity was a closely guarded secret. *Another missing piece of the puzzle.*

Harbinger ignored Valther's clumsy attempt to draw him out with a thin smile. "The Professor and I have accomplished a great deal in a very short period." With those words, he opened the box and a flickering light, like fire captured in a bottle, emerged.

The device inside the case resembled a mechanical typewriter with a rudimentary illuminated display, but the symbols on the keys were from no language that Valther had ever seen. They were odd, curved runes that suggested Arabic or Cyrillic, and they seemed to squirm and shift as he attempted to read them. The unusual firelight came from a series of crystalline discs arranged in a line above the keys. They whispered as they turned, counter-rotating against one another, throwing off the crimson glow from deep within

their quartz-like structure. They floated without any mechanism to suspend them, tiny ticks of energy passing back and forth. Valther found it physically difficult to pull his gaze away from the discs; he was mesmerized by the play of light and color they gave off.

When he looked up, Harbinger was watching him with faint amusement. Valther schooled his expression and made a play at scratching his chin. "What does it do? Send letters to the dead?"

The reichdokter's hand rose and the eagle-head staff was in it. He pointed it toward Valther. "The generaloberst is a skeptical man. He thinks only in terms of soldiers and bullets, of the physical and the measurable." The brass eagle tapped Valther's chest very lightly, and suddenly he couldn't move. No one else seemed to notice; it was like time itself had frozen all around him, sealing him in a single moment. *He could not breathe.*

Harbinger kept talking, addressing the assembled officers. "I assure you, gentlemen, that what I have to show you will do no less than change the face of warfare." His voice seemed to come from very far away. "I'm sure you've all heard bold claims like that one before, from men with bigger tanks or more powerful bombs... But I have a weapon that dwarfs all of those. I have something that touches on the most basic element of a war, without which all battles are lost."

Inside his head, Valther was screaming, panicking, but nothing emerged from his lips. He was like a frame of film caught in the projector's gate, static and unchanging. Only Sabine seemed to be aware that something was awry, but she was across the room from him and he couldn't summon her, couldn't even turn his head to look straight at her.

"The greatest weapon is *information*, gentlemen. If you can know a thing, you can influence a thing." Harbinger nodded at his own words. "Victory goes to the side that can marshal intelligence faster than their enemy. Those who can

react without delay, who can know the battleground without error... That is the side that will win, no matter what the odds." He turned back to Valther and tapped him with the staff a second time. "Don't you agree, Herr Generaloberst?"

The moment of suspension was gone as quickly as it had come and Valther could not help but gulp in a gasp of air. Harbinger raised an eyebrow, but the officer covered quickly and licked his lips. "O-of course," he replied. Valther's mind was reeling, foremost in his thoughts the conviction that Harbinger had done something to him in those silent moments. But what could he say that would make any sense? *He cast a spell upon me?* Valther almost shook his head, catching the quizzical look from his secretary. He swallowed and went on, finding his poise. "But knowledge is an ephemeral thing. And the...the turn of the battle changes so fast, no man can ever know every element of it at once. Not until the engagement is ended and the fog of war lifts."

Harbinger's thin smile grew, and Valther got the sense that he had played right into the reichdokter's hands. "Ah, no," he began. "Not any more. Not with Enigma."

A crash of sound from below drew everyone's attention to the sloped floor-to-ceiling windows along the gallery's length, and Valther glimpsed the black puffball of a small explosion. Another of the name indicators on the scoreboard switched from "L" to "T."

"*Stielhandgranate*," offered Harbinger's man, the severe-looking hauptmann. He seemed to listen to the report of the grenade detonation like a musician hearing a perfect note. "The *ami* dogs are becoming creative. They're taking the weapons of those they kill."

One of the other senior officers from Berlin grimaced and folded his arms over his barrel chest. "The tide of your little war is turning against our men, Harbinger. And still we wait to see the point of all this."

The reichdokter accepted the admonishment without

concern. "True." He nodded at the windows and the snow-fields below the aircraft. "A numerically inferior group of fighters, outnumbered by a foe with drive and determination. The soldiers of the Reich down there are the most ordinary, unremarkable men I could find. The poorest of our recruits to hand." His words sent a ripple of consternation through the assembled officers, but he went on regardless. "The Union prisoners, on the other hand... They are fit, determined, and they have nothing to lose. It should be a rout, don't you think?" Harbinger threw a nod to the soldier carrying the Enigma device. "Begin now."

The soldier sat at a desk and stared blankly into space as his hands tapped out a string of symbols on the metal keyboard. The crystal discs whirled, their colors flashing brightly. It was then that Valther noticed for the first time that the soldier operating the Enigma had a tattoo on his neck, just visible over his collar. But not a tattoo, no. *A brand*. Like the mark a farmer would burn into the hides of his animals. The symbol seemed to catch the reflected light from the spinning discs and the soldier's eyes rolled back into his head to show the whites.

"This machine," Harbinger was saying, "allows the instantaneous transmission of information across any distance. *Any* distance, gentlemen. A command given in Berlin can be received and acted upon in, say, Peking within seconds of the words being spoken. Not limited like a land line. Unlike radio, impossible to jam. It cannot be overheard or decoded. It works through the resonance of a psychically attuned crystalline matrix...the discs you see here." He pointed at the box. "The Enigma is no less than the melding of our most advanced technology and the ethereal potential of U-World science. And the sending of messages is but its most basic use."

Harbinger nodded again to the hauptmann, who adjusted a control on the device's upper surface. The soldier

stiffened as the Enigma gave off a low hum, and Valther saw the brand on his neck glow red, like fire-heated metal.

"The mark is the key," said the reichdokter. "Any man so branded can instantly be connected to those who share the same sigil. At once, they will share consciousness. They become a linked mind...greater than the sum of their parts. A single entity possessing many bodies."

The soldier twitched and his hands became a blur. Valther heard a torrent of clicks and turned to see the indicators on the board spin again, this time displaying the letter "Z."

"*Zeichen*," said the hauptmann, pointing at the glowing brand.

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Boone felt it like a vibration through the air, like a sound pitched so high that he could only sense the passing of it and not the noise itself.

The Reich-rats were coming apart. The master sergeant's plan of brute-forced, fast-paced attack had caught the enemy soldiers on the hop and they were paying for it. Anderson went down in the first exchange of fire, three more guys with him in the first five minutes, but the Union soldiers kept up the momentum. Ignoring the zeppelin droning over their heads, the POWs fought like tigers, giving no quarter. Anything remotely resembling battle discipline among the Reich troopers evaporated and they fell back in disarray. Straight off, Boone knew that they were fighting reservists and rear-echelon types, the kind of men who had never been shot at before, who had none of the combat experience of the seasoned soldiers standing with him. It wasn't going to be hard to run them into the ground—and once again he had that bad, sick feeling in his gut. Boone had learned to trust that instinct, never to ignore it, and even as they advanced on the Reich troopers and closed the distance, he was shooting glances up into the air. *Waiting for the other shoe to drop.*

The air vibrated, struck like a drum-skin, and the enemy

soldiers stopped, halting out of runs as if they'd hit brick walls. Boone didn't see or hear anything, but they acted like they did. All at once, the seven men still standing turned around one-eighty and came charging back at the Union soldiers. He saw their faces: blank-eyed and dull, not a lick of fear showing in any of them. They were suddenly different men.

The moment came as such a surprise that for a second, no one fired. The Reich troopers ran at them in quick, loping steps, silent with it. Boone was reminded of a pack of wolves, moving in lockstep, fast and deadly in intent.

Then he snapped out of it and pulled the MP40 to his chest and started shooting. The man he aimed at wasn't even looking in Boone's direction, but still he dodged suddenly, ducking the hot streaks of lead, slipping out of the line of fire.

Everyone was opening up on them now, but not a single round was landing where it needed to. Snow spat from the ground in little puffs of grey as bullets missed the mark and bit into the frozen earth.

The Reich troopers raised their weapons as one and each fired off a shot in the exact same instant, the sound of seven discharged rounds rolling into a long growl of gunfire.

Seven of Boone's men died instantly. He saw headshots, pinpoint-perfect hits right between the eyes, or bullets to the heart that blew through greatcoats, skin, and bone. That first set of kills was still falling to the ground as another seven-fold salvo was fired, and a half-dozen other men were clinically dispatched in the same fashion. In less than five seconds, Boone's rag-tag force had been halved in number.

He spat and concentrated his fire on the closest of the troopers. Two more of the POWs did the same and between the three of them they put the enemy soldier down in a welter of blood, but he didn't make it easy. He snaked right and left as he ran, never putting a foot wrong, almost as if he

could think fast enough to see where the bullets were going to go. Boone killed him, but he had to work for it.

It was impossible. These could not be the same men that had fled from him moments earlier, panicked and unsteady. And yet they were.

They were a mute machine, dealing death in concentrated bursts of activity. Boone's gut twisted as the Reich troopers all drew stick grenades, priming and hurling them in one swift motion.

He dove for cover behind a rock outcrop as the explosive discharge buffeted him, knocking him off his feet. The MP40 bounced out of his grip and Boone went face-first into the ice and grit.

Dazed, he lost precious seconds trying to shake it off. The machine gun lay nearby and he scrambled toward it, catching sight of other men from the POW group being cut down in another simultaneous salvo of gunshots.

Boone was almost to the weapon when he heard the march of boots crunching over the hard-packed snow behind him. He turned and stared into the advancing line of Reich troopers. Beyond them, he could only see the bodies of the newly dead: the men from the rail car, collapsed in untidy heaps, thin pennants of vapor rising from their cooling blood.

Boone was one of four survivors, the other POWs close by. Four, out of thirty, their numbers thinned so swiftly and so brutally.

Slowly, he raised his hands and stood up. "Okay, pal," he said, "you win. That's as far as this is gonna go." As the other men warily followed his example, Boone searched the gaze of the nearest Reich trooper for some sign of understanding.

The enemy soldier had the blank, dead of eyes of the dolls his kid sister'd had when they were children.

"What the hell are we gonna do now?" Boone didn't look toward the POW who had spoken, but he heard the sound of guns thudding into the slush as they were dropped.

Better alive and back in a prison camp than dead in this icebox, he told himself. "We surrender," said the master sergeant. "Get me? We ain't here for your target practice."

The troopers said nothing, the vacant stare repeated on all their faces.

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Valther lowered the binoculars from his face and gripped them tightly. He was still unnerved by Harbinger, but he was determined not to show it. "Impressive, I will grant you. But a handful of soldiers... Is that worth the expense the Reich has had to pay for your experiments?"

Harbinger's cold eyes turned to him. "You do understand what you saw, Herr Generaloberst?" He gestured at the men below. "Those are not elite troopers. They are cooks, stewards, motor pool drudges! Men skilled only in warming chairs with their backsides, not fighting with prowess! And yet with the flick of a switch, I turned them into stone killers. You see the potential, don't you? Guided by the Enigma, they become components in a war machine made of flesh and bone. They have no fear, no doubts. They are a collective, all weakness overwritten by the greater power of the whole." His eyes narrowed. "Now imagine that power applied to real soldiers. And not just a handful, but dozens. *Hundreds*. An entire army, connected by a web of thought, acting with one, singular will."

"Perhaps," Valther allowed, "but they are still common men at the end of the day. You promised us a wonder-weapon, not a glorified radio."

"This is not enough for you?" The reichdokter allowed disdain to enter his voice. "No. I suppose it would not be." He turned to the hauptmann and gestured at the Enigma. "Take them to the final phase. The full potential."

"As you wish." The officer leaned in once more and touched a control. The tickers turned once more to a new letter; this time it was an "M."

"What does that mean?" asked one of the other generals. Harbinger nodded toward the snows. "See for yourself." Valther raised the binoculars again, and beheld a horror.

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Boone waved his hand in front of the lead trooper's face. "Hey. You hear me in there? I'm talking to—"

The soldier's free hand shot out, fast as a striking cobra, and caught the master sergeant's wrist. The grip was like iron, and he snarled in pain as he felt his bones grinding on one another. The blank-eyed trooper shoved him back with strength that seemed to come from nowhere, and then he began to twitch.

All of them were doing it, shivering as if they had the DTs. Hot gusts of breath emerged from their lips in plumes of pale haze and their faces went red. Then there was a crackling noise, the wet snapping crunch of breaking bones.

"Back off..." Boone called out the warning, but it was too late. The Reich trooper closest to him reached out and his arms bent in places where there were no joints. Fingers jerked and elongated, growing into talons. Boone saw the flesh of the soldier's face lose definition and shift, becoming soft and malleable like heated wax. The guns in their hands were swallowed up by slick tendrils of skin that grew around the metal of the weapons. Spines of bone like little tusks protruded through sleeves and collars, ripping cloth; and for the first time Boone saw that each of the Reich troopers had a glaring, livid mark on their necks, like a cattle brand. Steam wreathed them as their bodies generated blood-warm heat in the icy air.

Tom Boone had never really been one for church and all that. He didn't rightly believe in some kind of great hereafter, no eternal reward or great damnation. Boone had seen too much hell on earth in the mud and blood to give credence to those things; but now, as he looked on these men

becoming something inhuman and freakish right before his eyes, all he could think of was the pictures of the demons he'd seen in the lurid horror comics he'd read as a boy.

One of the POWs scrambled for his machine gun and the troopers—the *creatures*—went for him. Guns barked and claws raked skin. Boone heard the man gurgle and die as he choked on his own blood, but by then the master sergeant was running for his own MP40, still lying in the snow where it had fallen.

Never looking back, shutting his ears to the screams and the grinding snap of what could only be teeth on meat, Boone threw himself at the gun, snatching at it and rolling to come up in a firing stance.

One of the Reich freaks was right on him and Boone pulled the MP40's trigger by reflex, all the way to the stop. The machine gun's chattering rattle sounded loudly, a line of brass shell cases arcing up over his head from the ejector port. He emptied the remains of the magazine into the trooper at point-blank range, but all that did was make him stagger and slip. The trooper's momentum stayed strong and he swept a distorted, overlong arm at Boone's head. The tips of a clutch of claws brushed past his face as he reeled backward, almost ripping him open. The swipe slammed the MP40 from his grip and sent it spinning away.

Boone misstepped on a loose rock and fell, cursing a blue streak as he hit the hard-packed earth. A flicker of red off to his right told him he had to be the last man standing now; he turned and saw a corpse missing a head stumble forward and land in the slush.

The freak he had shot at came stalking toward him, stinking of sweat and sulfurous odors he couldn't identify. Heat came off the mutant trooper like a campfire, and in every footprint the snow turned to murky melted water. Oily blood trickled from dozens of entry wounds across his shivering chest.

"What are you?" Boone blinked, suddenly realizing that the question had come from him.

The dead eyes regarded him without comprehension, and then a length of something long and sharp that could only be bone slowly emerged from the trooper's palm. Boone raised his hands, but the freak-soldier was already upon him. The bone-blade punctured his heart and ran him all the way through, pinning his corpse to the cold ground.

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"*Monstrum*," said Harbinger, amused at the word. "Perhaps there's a little too much theatricality to the name, but it serves the purpose. You understand the procedure now, Generaloberst?"

Valther nodded woodenly. "I...I have heard of such regimens. The alteration of soldiers via U-World energies in order to enhance their bodies and stamina. Von Heizinger has—"

Harbinger made a noise deep in his throat, like a curt growl. "My esteemed colleague of the Obscura Korps has a handful of such warriors, little more. His so-called Stoss-truppen are few in number, less than a cohort of bodyguards for the marquis generalleutnant. Certainly not enough for a full fighting unit. I, on the other hand, can build a brigade of *monstrum* in a matter of hours, with the Enigma's help."

The generaloberst said nothing. Like every other officer in the room, he had heard the stories about Hermann Von Heizinger's personal guard. Men with the strength of ten, brutal and animalistic... To meet them in close battle was to die. And now Harbinger had apparently *improved* on that ideal, molding something far worse out of the common clay of line soldiers.

An acrid smell reached his nostrils and he grimaced. Valther glanced around, looking for the source of the odor, and his eyes fell on the Enigma operator. Thin wisps of pale

smoke were issuing from his lips, and every few seconds he trembled like a man with palsy.

Harbinger frowned and folded his arms. "However, it pains me to admit that this process is still in a test iteration. Full calibration of the Enigma is incomplete at this time. And sadly, that leads to...issues." He nodded at the hauptmann, who immediately drew his Luger.

The Enigma operator had stopped working the device; now he was shuddering, his flesh turning pink. Smoke threaded from every orifice in his body, and his lips began to blacken. Valther smelled burning meat.

The Luger barked once, a shot blasting a spray of brain matter across the steel deck. Sabine cried out, muffling the sound with her hands over her mouth. Paling, she turned away.

No one spoke as the operator's corpse went through a sudden and shocking transformation; his body lost all color, becoming sallow and bloodless. Then it slumped under its own weight, becoming ash in the vague shape of a man. Presently, the dead body was little more than a heap of cinders among a crumpled, singed uniform. It was enough for the Schmitt girl's stomach; the secretary fled for the door from the gallery and was gone.

"The Professor assures me that the burn-out phenomenon is a transitory problem that he will have dealt with in due course. Once the operation of the Enigma is fully refined, this occurrence will be negligible in any battlefield deployments."

Valther peered out of the window to find the transformed soldiers down on the snow, but they too had suffered the same fate as the hapless operator. Piles of ash lay smoldering next to the dead bodies of the Union POWs.

"The technology will be field-ready within the week," Harbinger concluded. He studied Valther intently. "I believe you will approve it, Generaloberst."

"How can you be certain?" Valther tried to maintain an air of defiance but he failed. Harbinger's entire performance had been designed to put the generaloberst off balance, and damn the man, it was working.

"Because I see the future very clearly," he replied. "And for those who share my vision, it is always bright."

"O-of course." Valther found himself saying the words, nodding in agreement, even as part of him recoiled.

* * *

Down the short corridor that ran the length of the zeppelin's spine there was a storage compartment with a slatted window, and Sabine Schmitt slipped into it, turning the latch of the door to lock it shut behind her.

She was breathing hard, and her fingers tingled with an adrenaline rush. It took the woman a moment to find her focus, moderating her pulse and pushing down the very real sense of revulsion that had uncoiled inside her. The sight of Hoss Harbinger's demonstration was like nothing she had expected. It seemed unreal, but she could not allow such judgments to interfere with her mission. It was not her job to understand what she had just witnessed—there were far smarter people far higher above her pay grade who would do that. She just had to make sure they were told.

In her purse, lying in plain sight among all the pocket litter and detritus that sold the lie of Sabine Schmitt, was an ordinary-looking brass compact. She recovered it and held it flat in her palm. Working the latch would open it to reveal an oval mirror, a cotton pad and a discreet shade of blusher, but turned a specific number of rotations left and then right, the case opened the opposite way. A spool of antenna wire flicked up like a tiny mast and the blue light of a diode no bigger than a grain of wheat bathed her face in a cold glow. A tiny Ilirium battery mounted in the compact's frame connected to a wireless transmitter, tuned to an ultra-high fre-

quency that no one but certain ears would be listening to. With the perfectly manicured fingernail of her index finger, she began to tap out a coded message in Morse. Each dot and dash pulsed into the ether with silent urgency.

For the next few moments, Sabine Schmitt—secretary to Generaloberst Klaus Valther, born in Bruges, recruited into the Reich as an administration auxiliary—was gone. Instead, another woman stood in her place. She was Suzy Sanders again, a girl from Kansas City, a graduate of the Army of the Union's Counter-Intelligence Corps. Sanders had been a deep-cover operative for the Union for more than five years now, working slowly and carefully to position herself where she could get close to the Kaiser's inner circle, to men like Valther.

To keep Sabine Schmitt alive, Sanders had seen much that had tested her resolve, witnessed many things that had made it hard for her to remain silent. But the cover had been the most important thing. That was the mission. That was what she had been trained for.

This broke all those rules. Even if Valther was too dense to see the terrifying potential of Harbinger's Enigma device, Sanders understood it immediately. If it could do what he said, deployment of such a technology would shift the balance of power radically toward the Reich. No longer would the Kaiser's armies need the time to gather and train elite soldiers; the Enigma could make them out of anyone. And what, she wondered, might happen if that horrifying brand was applied to others—to civilians, perhaps? What if it could turn whole armies against their commanders? It would reduce men to machines, and all of them in service to the Reich.

If they found her, she would be dead. All those years of building this cover, wasted. But this was too much, too big to wait on. She could construct a full report for her handler once she had returned to Berlin, but this thing, this

Enigma... The Union had to be warned. She had no time to waste.

"There never is enough time, is there?"

She wheeled around, jerking back into the slatted window. The compact snapped shut in her hand and she clutched it to her chest.

Harbinger stood less than an arm's length from her. Her eyes immediately flicked to the door and she saw that it was still closed, still locked. There was no other way in. There was no way he could have entered without alerting her, the compartment was just too small.

"Herr Reichdokter...", she began with a weak grin, blinking to make her eyes tear a little. "Forgive me, I..."

"I won't forgive you anything," he told her, his stark gaze holding her. "My suspicions about you were correct. You are here to betray us." She started to shake her head, but he held up a hand. "Don't insult my intelligence. You have to understand, girl, this was always how it was going to end. You and I, here in this place. The line of time, of your personal time, threading out across the world. Ending here."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Sanders gave nothing away. Her instructors had instilled in her the one rule that all undercover operatives never dared to break. *You carry your legend to the bitter end, to the grave if you must.*

He nodded at the compact. "Did you finish?" When she didn't answer, he shrugged. "No matter. There's nothing that can be done now. The paths of probability are intersecting. The majority of them show success. Ending your line will help lessen any chance of failure."

For the first time, she noticed that Harbinger wore an arcane mechanism on his back, a strange apparatus of brass cogs and whispering armatures. "What is that?" The question slipped from her lips.

"Consider it a clock, of sorts," he replied, and his tone

was almost gentle. "Perhaps hourglass would be a better term for this moment. The sands run empty."

"Please, I am unwell." Sanders stepped forward. "I really should go," she told him.

"I agree," Harbinger replied.

* * *

To cut the sour air in the observation gallery, the steward had returned with fresh beverages and Valther was forced once more to avail himself of the weak tea. He sipped it absently, just for something to do, to keep his hands occupied. The ashen remains of the Enigma operator had immediately been removed, and now the generaloberst and the other officers from Berlin stood in a loose group, discussing what they had seen. Harbinger had made himself absent for a few moments, and without him there, the room seemed to breathe again.

Valther turned the possibilities of the Enigma over in his mind. If the reichdokter and his erstwhile "Professor" could deliver on the promise of the machine, then it would be a great leap forward for the war effort. Harbinger would be richly rewarded by the Kaiser...and so would the men who supported the project.

A choice was forming in his thoughts. If he put his colors to Harbinger's mast on this, Enigma's success would mean drawing ever-closer to the Kaiser's inner circle, and that was something Valther desired greatly.

A sound drew his attention and he glanced up from the cup. For an instant, Valther thought he saw a flash of something out of the corner of the gallery window—a shape, something wrapped in grey cloth, falling away from the aircraft. At the same time, under the steady thrumming of the zeppelin's rotors, there was another sound, brief and barely audible. High-pitched, like the bark of a vixen. *A woman's scream?*

The hatch to the gallery opened and Harbinger strode back into the chamber, scanning the faces of the officers with perfect certainty. "I have spoken with my colleague. He is very enthused by the data from today's test. I hope that you will share that enthusiasm for this project."

There were a series of wary nods. No one seemed to want to find fault or take issue with the demonstration.

"Excellent." Harbinger came toward Valther. Those fathomless eyes bored into his, and the officer had the uncanny sense that the reichdokter was looking right *through* him, reading him like the pages of a book. "So, Generaloberst, I hope I can count on your support." Harbinger held the eagle-head rod in his hand, pointing with it.

Valther couldn't help but recoil a step from the strange object. "I...I suppose so." He glanced around, trying to maintain his assurance, desperate to change the subject. "My secretary... She has not returned. Where is Ms. Schmitt?"

"The girl seemed unwell," Harbinger said as he turned away. "I suggested that she take some air."