



Real Hero

Dave #6: The Serpents Shadow

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Content

1 Prologue.....	4
2 Inaction.....	6
3 House Call.....	9
4 Brotherhood of the Snake.....	14
5 Deutschland.....	17
6 Wewelsburg Castle.....	21
7 Schneider.....	25
8 The Hidden Cabal.....	35
9 Karl Müller.....	39

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10 São Paulo.....	47
11 The Eagles Nest.....	56
12 Dragons Lair.....	72
13 Faking It.....	87
14 Invitation.....	93
15 Freiburg.....	97
16 Stahlkrieger.....	108
17 Precision Engineering.....	117
18 Covert Action.....	122
19 Cold Morning.....	127
20 Forschungslabor.....	133
21 The Fatherland.....	135
22 Magic Mushrooms.....	142
23 The Archive.....	149
24 Divide and Conquer.....	156
25 The Final Solution.....	162
26 Gathering Evidence.....	166
27 Übermensch.....	169
28 Return to the Fatherland.....	176
29 Epilogue.....	182

1 Prologue

Dave Anderson stood at his kitchen window, watching raindrops trace patterns down the glass. Back in his IT days, he'd been at his desk by this hour, getting a head start before the help desk phones began to ring. Now he found himself studying the pre-dawn darkness, waiting for a different kind of call.

The memory made him smile. Strange how that life felt both recent and ancient at once. Everything had changed since then: the Democratic Republic of Congo, where he'd first learned that having unlimited strength didn't make the moral choices any easier. Morocco and Norway, racing to prevent pipeline attacks while learning to trust his team. The Venezuelan jungle, where he'd faced his first true darkness and discovered he could see through it like a ghostly three-dimensional map. The Arctic Circle, where he'd finally met his first real physical challenge in the bone-deep cold of polar waters.

He lifted his mug, careful as always. The same hands that could tear through reinforced steel needed to handle ceramic without shattering it. Another set of calculations, different from debugging code but requiring the same methodical precision.

His phone buzzed - Cecilia's familiar tone. He glanced outside again as his neighbour's lights began clicking on, pinpricks of warmth against the darkness. The small town was just beginning to stir, commuters preparing for their daily drive to London. His own reflection stared back at him - still the same overweight IT professional, complete with slightly hunched shoulders from years at a desk. The same unremarkable face that let him blend into any crowd. The perfect cover for someone who could run at highway speeds and shrug off bullet impacts like raindrops.

The phone buzzed again. Time to go to work.

Somewhere between that old life of server rooms and help desk tickets, and this new one of covert operations and impossible physics, he'd found his purpose. Not bad for a middle-aged IT professional who'd started out just trying to lose some weight.

He answered the phone, already knowing he'd be packing for somewhere far from home. "Cecilia," he said, "what's the situation?"

2 Inaction

Dave sat in his living room, the muted light from the flat-panel TV casting soft shadows on the walls of his semi-detached home. The PlayStation controller in his hands felt foreign, like it belonged to another version of himself, one that found escape in virtual gunfights and missions. On the screen, his Call of Duty avatar was taking hits, falling in slow motion as bullets tore through him. His heart wasn't in it. The game's physics felt wrong now - bullets that should have torn through walls stopped short, explosions that should have levelled buildings barely left a mark. Reality had spoiled the illusion.

He dropped the controller onto the couch, watching as the game's "defeat" screen flashed in bold red letters. The movements, the tactics, the so-called realism --- it all felt too much like work, but not in the way it should. The training scenarios were too similar to the drills he'd been through, but the limitations of the virtual world chafed against what he knew his body could do. In Pakistan, he'd moved faster than any game character could render, felt impacts that would have crashed the physics engine. What was the point of playing soldier when you'd walked through real gunfire?

His thoughts drifted back to the Tarbela Dam. Only a few weeks had passed, but the memories remained razor-sharp. The heat of the explosions that should have burned him, the bullets that should have killed him - all just minor irritations now. The real tension had come from controlling his strength, making sure he didn't accidentally crush the very thing he was trying to save.

He powered off the console and flicked through the TV channels. A hundred different ways to waste time, none of them satisfying. He paused on a news report about a building collapse in Mumbai, calculating unconsciously how long it would take him to get there, how many people he could save. But that wasn't his call to make. The agency had protocols, reasons for keeping him on a leash. Didn't make it any easier to watch.

"Maybe I should just go for a walk," he thought aloud, staring at the empty streets outside the window. The idea was laughable - like suggesting a Formula 1 driver take a casual spin in a golf cart. But it was better than sitting here, trapped in the quiet, waiting for his mind to wander back to the missions, the faces, the lives left behind.

He stood up, grabbed his jacket, and checked his phone. No missed calls, no texts --- nothing from the agency. For once, there were no crises to respond to, no orders to follow. Just the open stretch of free time that felt more like a burden than a blessing.

As he stepped outside, the rain had already started, a light drizzle that his enhanced reflexes seemed to slow down. Each droplet appeared to hang in the air longer than it should, like time itself was stretching out. He could track individual drops as they fell, his mind automatically calculating their trajectories as if they were moving in slow motion. It was beautiful in its way, but it was another reminder of how even the simplest experiences had changed.

The suburban street stretched out before him, peaceful in a way that still felt alien. Even with just his natural vision, he could make out details in the growing darkness that would have been lost to him in his old life. He could have switched to "game mode", his enhanced vision mode if he wanted to, transforming the world into that familiar greyscale model he used in the field, but there was no point here. Better to let the street remain what it was - a quiet corner of England where extraordinary abilities weren't needed.

Dave walked through the quiet streets, his mind drifting back to his time with the agency. What they did mattered --- that much was undeniable. They'd brought down arms dealers, toppled rogue states, and dismantled threats most people never even knew existed. His life as an IT consultant felt like a lifetime ago, even though it hadn't been that long since he was first recruited. Back then, his greatest concerns were network outages and server migrations. Now, the stakes were so much higher, and the pace of his life had changed forever.

The rain intensified, his clothes were soaked through, but his body regulated its temperature automatically now, making the discomfort more memory than reality. Each puddle caught the glow of street lights, creating patterns that his excellent vision picked out in sharp detail.

He looked down at his soaked boots, watching his feet carry him forward without direction or purpose. It wasn't until he raised his eyes that he realised where he was. The Hanged Man --- a cosy, dimly lit pub he hadn't visited in weeks. Light spilled from the windows, warm and inviting. Maybe his feet had remembered the way even if his mind hadn't. He hadn't meant to come here, but now that he was standing outside, it seemed as good a place as any to try to feel normal again, even if just for a moment.

He pushed open the door, the warmth of the pub hitting him instantly as he stepped inside. The familiar smell of wood smoke and ale greeted him, and the soft murmur of conversation blended with the crackling of the fireplace in the corner. His enhanced senses picked apart each voice, each conversation, before he consciously damped them down, forcing himself to experience the pub as he used to. The fire glowed invitingly, and the thought of a pint of Guinness by its warmth was enough to pull him further in.

Dave shrugged off his wet jacket, hanging it near the door, and made his way to the bar. He ordered his usual, the comforting dark stout that always seemed to taste better in a place like this. With the Guinness in hand, he took a seat near the fireplace, letting the warmth seep into him as he stared into the flames. For the first time in what felt like forever, he allowed himself to just sit, just be. The rain continued to fall outside, but in here, the world felt quieter, simpler --- if only for a moment.

3 House Call

Dave caught the movement through his front window before the doorbell rang - a familiar silhouette approaching with that characteristic measured stride. Even without enhanced vision, he recognised Lands' distinctive way of scanning his surroundings, head turning in precise increments as if cataloguing every detail. It was the same methodical approach that had first brought Lands to Dave's door three years ago, when the agent had pieced together the puzzle of Dave's emerging abilities.

The doorbell chimed, and Dave felt an unexpected tension in his shoulders. Lands never made social calls. Every visit had a purpose, usually one that ended up changing Dave's life in some way. The first had recruited him to the agency. The second had activated him for field work. The third had led to his first major mission. Now, as Dave moved to answer the door, he wondered what changes this visit would bring.

Agent Lands stood on the doorstep, cut sharp against the evening light in his perfectly tailored dark suit. His salt-and-pepper hair was meticulously combed back, and those piercing grey eyes were already reading Dave's posture, expression, the slight tension in his stance. That was Lands - always analysing, always three steps ahead in a conversation that hadn't even started.

"Evening, Dave," Lands said, his voice carrying that quiet authority that seemed to make even casual greetings feel significant. "Mind if I come in?"

Dave stepped aside, gesturing toward the living room. "I was just about to make coffee," he offered, noting how Lands' gaze swept the room in that characteristic way of his, taking in every detail while appearing to look at nothing in particular.

"Tea, if you have it," Lands replied, settling into what Dave had come to think of as 'his' chair - the one that offered the best view of both the room's

exits while keeping his back to a wall. Same seat he'd taken three years ago, when he'd first laid out the evidence of Dave's abilities and offered him a choice that had changed everything.

As Dave prepared the tea, he could hear Lands removing something from his briefcase - papers, from the sound of it. Another file, another mission. The kettle clicked off, and Dave took his time preparing the drinks, giving Lands space to arrange whatever presentation he had planned. The agent was nothing if not methodical in his approach.

"Cecilia tells me you've got some downtime," Lands said as Dave returned with the tea. It wasn't really a question - Lands never asked things he didn't already know the answer to. Dave nodded, settling into his own chair and noting the manilla folder on his coffee table, unmarked but thick with documents.

"Three weeks since Pakistan," Dave confirmed, watching as Lands took a measured sip of his tea. "Though something tells me you're not here to discuss my holiday plans."

A slight smile touched the corners of Lands' mouth - the closest thing to amusement he usually showed. "Actually, I might be. How do you feel about South America?"

Dave raised an eyebrow, remembering the last time anyone had asked about his travel preferences. It had led to several weeks in the Arctic, testing the limits of his abilities against the extreme cold. "Depends on what's down there that interests the 'Bigfoot Squad.'"

The nickname for Special Projects usually earned at least a raised eyebrow from Lands, but this time he remained focused, reaching for the folder. "What do you know about Operation Paper-clip?"

"The Nazi scientists?" Dave took a sip of his own tea, mind already working through the connection. "US government recruited them after the

war, brought them over to work on the space programme and other projects."

Lands nodded. "That's the official version. But there was another exodus happening at the same time - one that didn't make it into the history books. While the Americans were taking the scientists, others were securing different kinds of expertise." He opened the folder, revealing photographs of what looked like ancient stone structures half-buried in jungle growth.

"The Nazi leadership was obsessed with the occult," Lands continued, spreading out more photos. "Not just Himmler and his SS rituals - there were entire departments dedicated to searching for supernatural power sources, ancient artefacts, anything they thought might give them an edge in the war. When Germany fell, a lot of that research disappeared. Some of it was destroyed, some was captured by the Allies..." He paused, letting the implication hang.

"And some of it went to South America," Dave finished, starting to see where this was heading. The photos showed more structures, but also documents - old ledgers and files with familiar-looking stamps and symbols.

"Along with the people who knew how to use it," Lands confirmed. "The Nazi escape routes to Argentina and Brazil are well documented, but what's less known is what they brought with them. Special Projects has been tracking links in the documentation to several locations across South America - data that suggests scientists and researches escaping to Brazil, that may have been related to the work on Vril."

Dave felt his chest tighten slightly. Three years he'd been with the agency, and still no one could explain his abilities. The scientists had theories, but nothing concrete. Every test revealed new questions rather than answers. And now Lands was suggesting a connection to Nazi occult research?

"This isn't just about finding old Nazi hideouts, is it?" Dave asked, though he already knew the answer. Lands never brought anything to him without multiple layers of purpose.

"No," Lands replied, pulling out another document - this one newer, with satellite imagery showing heat signatures in remote jungle locations. "This is about finding answers. About your abilities, where they come from. And maybe..." he paused, fixing Dave with that penetrating gaze, "about your biological parents."

The mention of his biological parents hit Dave like a physical blow. It was a topic they'd danced around before, the strange circumstances of his adoption, the gaps in his background that not even the agency had been able to fill. Now Lands was suggesting those answers might be tied to decades-old Nazi occult research?

"Tell me more," Dave said, leaning forward to study the documents spread across his coffee table. As Lands began to explain, Dave couldn't shake the feeling that this visit, like all the others before it, was about to send his life in yet another unexpected direction.

Dave felt a surge of intrigue he hadn't expected. His mind raced through the possibilities. South America, Nazi occultism — it was like something out of a history book or a far-fetched conspiracy theory. But coming from Lands, it meant there was something to it, something serious enough to connect back to his own abilities, to the questions about where they truly originated. He'd never been one for the supernatural, but after everything he'd been through, Dave wasn't about to dismiss anything out of hand.

"So, what exactly are you hoping to find?" Dave asked, already half-knowing that whatever Lands had in mind was bound to be more than just an expedition for historical facts.

Lands leaned back slightly, his expression turning grave. "That's what we need your help to figure out."

Lands' had not only brought Dave into the fold but also became one of his closest contacts within the agency, guiding him through the early stages of his development as a field operative. That connection to the unusual, to the strange and unexplained, made Lands a perfect fit for Special Projects. And now, with new leads that hinted at something deeper — something tied to Dave's abilities — Lands was back, pulling him into yet another mystery.

Lands leaned forward in the chair, his voice taking on a more serious tone. "On this investigation, there is no team, it's just you and me," he said, watching Dave's reaction closely. "We'll be checking out some of the ancient files, digging through old records. It's unlikely we'll find any living resources we can question, but we may be able to access German archives or visit any locations that surface."

Dave nodded slowly, taking it all in. The idea of working without the usual backup was unusual, but not entirely unexpected. Lands was always the one to go off the beaten path, and this investigation felt more like a deep dive into the shadows of history than a standard operation. The mention of German archives piqued Dave's interest further. The potential connection to something larger — something rooted in the past — was hard to ignore.

"Sounds like we're going down the rabbit hole," Dave said.

"More than likely," Lands replied, a glint of curiosity in his eyes.

4 Brotherhood of the Snake

The evening had settled into Dave's living room like a physical presence, shadows deepening in the corners while the lamp cast a warm circle around their seats. Lands leaned back, absently turning his half-empty teacup between his fingers. "Did you spend any time going over that material I sent you on Vrll?"

Steam curled up from Dave's own cup, untouched. He shifted in his chair, the leather creaking softly. "Yeah, kind of. To be honest, those old documents were pretty dense. Half in German, half in what looked like mystical nonsense."

Lands set his cup down with characteristic precision, the porcelain making no sound as it met the saucer. "Let me show you something." He reached for his briefcase, the leather worn smooth from years of use. The brass clasps clicked open, and he withdrew a folder that looked older than Dave's house.

As Lands spread the contents across the coffee table, Dave caught the musty scent of aged paper. The documents were a mix of typewritten reports and handwritten notes, their edges yellow with age. Some bore the distinctive lightning bolt insignia of the SS.

"These were recovered from an Ahnenerbe facility," Lands said, carefully sliding one particular document forward. "The SS wasn't just Himmler's military force. They had research divisions dedicated to finding sources of power - both physical and mystical."

Dave picked up one of the papers, noting how fragile it felt. The German text was faded but still legible, accompanied by diagrams of what looked like energy patterns. "They were researching something called Vrll?"

"More than researching." Lands reached for another document, this one containing photographs of what appeared to be a laboratory. "They were

trying to harness it. Every experiment ended badly - equipment destroyed, personnel affected in strange ways." He paused, watching Dave's reaction. "But the energy signatures they recorded? They match yours."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop a few degrees. Dave set down his cup, the tea now cold. "Match how, exactly?"

Lands pulled out a modern folder, laying out reading charts side by side - one from the Nazi documents, one from Dave's own tests. The patterns were identical.

Outside, a car passed by, its headlights briefly illuminating the room through the curtains. Dave stood, needing to move, to process. He walked to the window, looking out at the quiet street while his mind raced through the implications.

"The scientists can't get blood samples from you," Lands continued, shuffling through more papers. The sound of rustling documents filled the silence. "Can't analyse your tissue. But these energy readings - they're the one thing we can measure. And they're exactly what the Nazis were trying to create."

Dave turned back to face him. "That's why you're bringing this to me now? Because of some old energy readings?"

"Not just the readings." Lands extracted another document from the pile, this one showing an intricate symbol. "Have you heard of the Brotherhood of the Snake?"

Dave returned to his seat, drawn by something in Lands' tone. The leather of his chair was cool now, matching his growing unease. "Can't say that I have."

"It's one of the oldest secret societies in recorded history." Lands spread out more documents - ancient texts, architectural drawings, symbolic references. "Their teachings predate most religions. They were keepers of hidden knowledge, power that wasn't meant for the ordinary world."

A clock ticked somewhere in the house, marking the weight of each revelation. Dave leaned forward to study the documents, noting how the serpent symbol appeared again and again through different eras, different cultures.

"The Nazis didn't just study these teachings," Lands said, producing more recent photographs. "They created their own branch of the Brotherhood, mixing ancient knowledge with their ideologies. The power they were trying to harness - this Vril energy - it was tied to these beliefs."

Dave picked up one of the photos, showing what looked like a ritual chamber. Stone walls covered in familiar symbols, that same serpentine imagery wrapped around swastikas and SS runes. His enhanced abilities had always been a mystery, but this... this felt like standing on the edge of something much darker.

"And you think this connection with the Brotherhood could lead us to understanding what Vril really was?" Dave asked, setting down the photo.

"I think it's our best chance," Lands replied. "The question is, are you ready to follow this path? Because once we start down it..."

"Where do we start?" Dave interrupted, already knowing there was no turning back. The collection of documents on his coffee table represented more than just history - they were perhaps the first real clue to understanding what he was.

Lands nodded, as if he'd expected nothing less. "First, the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. The German national archives might still hold classified files about the Ahnenerbe and their occult research. After that, Wewelsburg Castle. It was Himmler's centre

5 Deutschland

Dave and Lands arrived in Berlin early the next morning. As their plane descended toward Brandenburg Airport, Dave watched the sprawling city come into view - the winding path of the River Spree, the iconic glass dome of the Reichstag, the remnants of the Wall that had once divided east from west. The city was a testament to the weight of history, to secrets buried and uncovered.

They moved through the airport efficiently, muscle memory from countless missions taking over. Within an hour, they were in a taxi heading toward the Bundesarchiv, its imposing classical façade rising before them like a fortress of knowledge. Stone columns flanked broad steps, and high windows stared down at them like watchful eyes. The building itself seemed to guard its secrets.

Lands entered first, approaching the reception desk with practised ease. The receptionist, methodical and precise, acknowledged their scheduled appointment. "Dr. Fischer will be along presently," she said, her voice clipped and professional.

Dr. Anneliese Fischer's arrival commanded attention without effort. She moved with the quiet confidence of someone who had spent decades guarding history's darkest corners. In her mid-fifties, with dark hair streaked grey and pulled back severely, she carried herself with a presence that went beyond her professional demeanour. Her wire-rimmed glasses couldn't hide the sharp intelligence in her eyes, and her navy blue suit spoke of understated authority.

"Dr. Fischer," Lands said, making introductions. "Thank you for assisting us today."

She studied them both with an appraising look that suggested she saw more than she let on. "We don't often get inquiries in your particular field of

interest," she said, her tone carrying layers of meaning. "I'm rather intrigued by what brings the agency here."

Dave caught the slight emphasis on 'agency' - she knew more about them than she was letting on. As she led them through the labyrinthine corridors of the archive, her knowledge of the building's layout seemed almost intuitive, as if she'd walked these paths a thousand times before.

The private meeting room she brought them to was simple but functional, with a large wooden table and necessary amenities. "You're welcome to use this as your base," she said, arranging some files on the table. "Now, what exactly are you hoping to find?"

Lands explained their interest in Nazi occult research, keeping the details vague but professional. Dr. Fischer's response was measured, but something in her expression suggested she understood more than she was saying. "The documentation on such topics is scarce," she said carefully. "Much was destroyed or hidden. But what remains... well, let me see what I can gather for you."

As the morning wore on, the pile of files grew larger than expected. Dr. Fischer's knowledge of the archives proved invaluable, each new document she brought seeming more relevant than the last. By early afternoon, they broke for a brief lunch at her suggestion, choosing a nearby café that offered both privacy and authentic German fare.

Over their meal, Dr. Fischer revealed hints of her deeper connection to the archives. "Twenty years I've worked here," she said, her tone thoughtful. "In times like these, when some would rather erase or rewrite history, preservation becomes more than just a job. It becomes a duty." The weight in her words suggested she wasn't just talking about ordinary historical records.

They returned to their work, the afternoon bringing more files but no clear answers. As five o'clock approached, Dave and Lands prepared for their evening flight to Paderborn. Dr. Fischer's farewell carried an undertone of

something left unsaid, as if she held back information they weren't yet ready to receive.

Dave and Lands had spent the entire day at the Bundesarchiv, sifting through mountains of paperwork, but nothing pointed them in the direction they hoped for. No references to the Brotherhood of the Snake had emerged, and Dave was left staring at the bizarre content they had come across — plenty of wild materials on flying saucers, occult rituals, and even disturbing mentions of human sacrifices. At one point, Dave had glanced over at Lands in disbelief, silently wondering how the man handled dealing with this kind of nonsense every day as part of the "Bigfoot Squad."

They finally reached the conclusion that what they were looking for simply wasn't here. It was time to call it a day. With a late evening flight from Berlin to Paderborn on the horizon, they agreed to get some rest at a hotel near the airport that night and make their visit to Wewelsburg Castle in the morning. Dave could only hope that the next day wouldn't involve more hours of staring at cryptic paperwork.

After saying their goodbyes and thanking Dr. Fischer for her assistance, they realised they had a couple of hours to kill before their flight. With the flight to Paderborn getting them there just before midnight, they decided to find a place to eat in Berlin before heading to the airport.

They chose a traditional German restaurant near Alexanderplatz, a cosy, wood panelled establishment that exuded warmth and hospitality. The place was filled with the scent of roasting meats, rich stews, and freshly baked pretzels. The walls were adorned with old beer seidels, rustic décor, and black-and-white photos of Berlin in the early 1900s. The atmosphere was lively yet intimate, with patrons chatting over hearty meals and clinking glasses of beer.

Dave and Lands found a quiet table in the corner and settled in. They ordered a traditional German meal — Lands went for Schweinshaxe, a massive roasted pork knuckle served with crispy crackling, sauerkraut, and mashed potatoes. Dave opted for Bratwurst, grilled sausages served with mustard, sautéed onions, and a side of buttery potato salad. Along with their meal came seidels of dark German beer, rich and malty, with a perfect balance of sweetness and bitterness that complemented the hearty dishes.

As they ate, their conversation naturally turned to the oddities they had encountered in the files that day. "Flying saucers and human sacrifices," Dave muttered, shaking his head. "I don't know how you deal with this stuff on a daily basis."

Lands chuckled between bites of pork. "It's not always this wild. But yeah, sometimes you come across things that are just... out there. You get used to it. The trick is learning to separate the useful information from the noise."

"Still, hard to believe any of it could connect to what we're looking for," Dave said, taking a sip of his beer. "I just hope tomorrow isn't another day of dead ends."

Lands shrugged. "Wewelsburg is different. It has a lot of history tied to Himmler's occult fascination. If there's anything left that might give us a lead, it could be there. Even if it's not paperwork, we might find artefacts or records that escaped the usual archives."

They finished their meal, enjoying the warmth of the food and the rich taste of the beer. The restaurant had a comforting atmosphere, the perfect way to unwind after a long day of research. As they stepped outside into the cool Berlin evening, the city's lights twinkling around them, Dave felt the weight of the day lift slightly.

They made their way to the airport for the short flight to Paderborn, arriving just before midnight. Tomorrow would bring Wewelsburg Castle and, hopefully, some answers.

6 Wewelsburg Castle

The castle rose before them, its three towers forming a perfect triangle against the overcast sky. Wewelsburg wasn't just another medieval fortress - its unique triangular design had caught Heinrich Himmler's attention in 1934, leading him to seize it as the ideological centre of the SS. Dave could see why - even now, the castle seemed to radiate power, its walls bearing silent witness to the dark ceremonies once performed within.

Dr. Stein met them at the entrance, his tall, thin frame nearly lost in the shadow of the massive doorway. Something about his demeanour felt rehearsed, as if he'd played this role many times before. His silver hair and round glasses gave him a scholarly appearance, but there was a coldness in his eyes that seemed at odds with his position as a historical curator.

"The North Tower remains closed to the public," Stein said as they walked through the entrance hall, his voice echoing off stone walls. "Himmler's personal chambers were there, along with the Obergruppenführersaal - the gathering hall for his highest-ranking SS officers." He paused, adjusting his glasses. "The symbolism was quite deliberate. The North Tower represented the axis mundi in their beliefs - the centre point between Earth and sky."

Dave noted how Stein's gaze lingered a fraction too long on him whenever he thought no one was looking. The curator led them down a narrow corridor, past displays of SS uniforms and photographs showing the castle's transformation under Nazi rule. One image showed workers expanding the castle's cellar into a massive circular chamber.

"The Wewelsburg School trained SS officers in Nazi ideology and occult practices," Stein continued, unlocking a heavy wooden door that led to the archives. "But more importantly, it served as a repository for artefacts and documents related to their mystical research."

The archive room felt older than the rest of the castle, its stone walls nearly black with age. Wooden shelves lined with books and artefacts stretched into the shadows. The air was thick with the scent of old paper and leather, but underneath was something else - a metallic tang that reminded Dave of blood.

As they began their search, Stein maintained a professional distance, occasionally offering context about various items but mostly leaving them to their work. He seemed almost bored by their presence, as if he'd given this tour too many times to count.

The first hint came in a leather-bound volume documenting SS initiation rites. Tucked between pages was a sketch of a familiar symbol - a serpent wrapped around a sword. An hour later, they found ritual instructions mentioning a "Brotherhood of Ancient Knowledge." Dave noticed Stein paying little attention to these discoveries, his mind clearly elsewhere as he worked on cataloguing items at a nearby desk.

The box itself was unremarkable, its wood dark with age, shoved between larger volumes on a bottom shelf. Dave might have missed it entirely if he hadn't been thorough in his search. Inside, wrapped in faded cloth, lay detailed sketches of the emblem - the Roman gladius with its swastika guard, encircled by snakes, all bordered by the SS skull and oak leaves.

"This is remarkable," Lands said, carefully examining the sketches. Dave noticed Stein's head snap up at Lands' tone, the curator's eyes widening slightly as he saw what they'd found.

"Bruderschaft der Schlangen," Dave said quietly, watching as the colour drained from Stein's face.

The curator's professional demeanour cracked. He approached their table with barely concealed anxiety, examining the emblem with a mixture of recognition and fear. "Where... how did you find this?" His voice had lost its earlier detachment.

"It was in with these other documents," Lands replied, his tone carefully neutral. "Is there anything you can tell us about this symbol?"

Stein seemed to struggle internally for a moment before reaching into his desk. "You should speak with Klaus Schneider," he said, his hands slightly unsteady as he wrote down a number. "He's more... knowledgeable about these particular artefacts."

After copying the emblem and thanking Stein, they left the castle. Neither spoke until they reached their car, both aware they'd stumbled onto something significant. Behind them, the castle's three towers stood silent against the darkening sky, holding onto their secrets.

Inside his office, Stein waited only moments after their departure before reaching for his phone with trembling fingers. Klaus answered on the second ring.

"We might have a problem," Stein said, his voice barely above a whisper. Through his window, storm clouds gathered above the North Tower, as if the castle itself sensed what was coming. "They found it - the Brotherhood emblem. They knew what it was."

There was a pause on the other end, and then Klaus's voice came through, calm and measured. "Who are they?"

"I don't know. They arrived with official authorization," Stein replied, a hint of frustration in his tone. "I had no reason to deny them, but... they've gone too close. I gave them your details, so you should be expecting a call."

"Very well," Klaus said, his tone edged with something dark and calculating. "I will deal with them."

Stein hesitated, glancing at the heavy shadows falling across his office. "Be careful, Klaus. They may be more than they seem."

There was no response as Klaus hung up, leaving Stein in the castle's silence, contemplating what his decision might have set into motion.

7 Schneider

Lands dialled the number from Schneider's card, the anticipation building as he listened to the faint ringing on the line. Dave stood near the window, watching the street below with the same analytical focus he'd once used for monitoring network traffic. After only a few rings, a voice answered, audible in the quiet room.

"Schneider."

"Herr Schneider, my name is Lands. I was given your details by Dr. Stein, who mentioned that you might be able to assist us with some research we're conducting," Lands began, his tone carefully respectful.

The pause that followed made Dave shift his position slightly, years of field experience telling him something was off. When Schneider replied, his voice carried an edge that set Dave's instincts on alert. "What kind of research, and for whom?"

"We're researching Nazi occultism, specifically the activities of the Ahnenerbe," Lands replied, maintaining his light tone. But Dave had already caught his eye, giving a slight shake of his head. The whole setup felt wrong, like walking into a trap with both eyes open.

When they arrived at Schneider's home the next day, Dave's trained eye for detail caught things others might miss. The security cameras were too new compared to the weathered façade. The door's hinges showed signs of recent adjustment, suggesting frequent use despite the home's abandoned appearance. As they followed Schneider through the narrow hallway, Dave noted every potential exit, every sight line, his enhanced reflexes ready to respond to any threat.

The study struck Dave immediately as wrong. For a supposed collector of Nazi antiquities, the room was strangely bare. The shelves held only nondescript books, and the walls were devoid of the historical artefacts and

relics that should have demonstrated Schneider's expertise. Nothing about the space matched the reputation Dr. Stein had described. Dave exchanged a quick glance with Lands, seeing his own suspicions reflected there. This wasn't the room of a passionate historian - it was a stage set for deception.

"Tell me, gentlemen," Schneider began, his voice carrying that same dangerous edge from the phone call, "what is your true interest in the Brotherhood of the Snake?"

Dave's enhanced reflexes kicked in before his conscious mind could process the movement - he saw Schneider's hand slip toward the desk drawer and was already in motion. The suppressed shot from the balcony cracked through the air as Dave's superhuman speed carried him forward, but the bullet found Schneider first.

As Dave and Lands took cover, a familiar voice cut through the tension from above. "It's OK, I'm unarmed. You can lower your weapons."

She descended the staircase with steady grace, clad entirely in black, her figure-hugging pants and long coat a stark contrast to her previous academic persona. "I believe we have much to discuss," she said, her voice even. "Since you've come this far, perhaps it's time I took you to meet the real Schneider."

Dave's eyes narrowed. "How do we know we can trust you?"

"You don't," Fischer replied, a glimmer of dark amusement in her eyes. "And you probably shouldn't. But having just killed two Brotherhood assassins and saved your lives, I'd say I've earned a bit of your consideration."

"Two?" Lands interjected, his voice betraying surprise.

Fischer nodded, unfazed. "The other one was waiting upstairs with the pistol I shot this one with. If I hadn't been here, you'd both be dead by now."

"Thanks," Dave said, still processing the rapid change in their situation. "I think."

Fischer's expression hardened. "I had a feeling you would make your way to Wewelsburg. This isn't the first time Dr. Stein" --- she practically spat the name, contempt dripping from every syllable --- "has helped people seeking the Brotherhood to disappear. He plays his role well, doesn't he? A helpful historian, feeding breadcrumbs to the naive and curious until they vanish."

The weight of her words settled on them. Fischer clearly knew more than she'd let on before. The stakes had shifted. Whatever game they were playing against the Brotherhood, Fischer was deep in it --- and, for now, she was their best shot at survival and answers.

artefacts Dave and Lands took in the details of Klaus Schneider's study as they settled into the leather armchairs he had indicated. The room felt alive with the weight of history, a curated museum of dark and esoteric knowledge, meticulously organised with care that bordered on reverence. The dim lighting from antique lamps gave the space an almost sepia-toned quality, making each artefact and piece of furniture appear preserved in time, untouched by the modern world outside.

The shelves lining the walls were packed with books, their spines displaying titles that hinted at the arcane and mysterious: treatises on the occult, esoteric symbols, and ancient civilizations long-lost to memory. Klaus Schneider had arranged these works carefully, each one flanked by brass bookends that looked like genuine German antiquities. Some bore the distinct, almost fanatical iconography of the Third Reich, while others carried symbols Dave recognised from their research into the Brotherhood of Serpents.

Framed photographs hung on the walls, their subjects chillingly familiar — stern profiles of notorious Nazi figures, their eyes gazing out from the past with unsettling intensity. To see these portraits displayed alongside such

occult symbols and relics suggested this was no mere scholarly collection; it was a passion, an active obsession, a pursuit that had driven Klaus beyond ordinary curiosity.

Among the more striking artefacts were ceremonial daggers etched with runes, ancient chalices engraved with symbols, and various relics that seemed both out of place and yet eerily at home. Some of these pieces bore the insignia of the Ahnenerbe, the Nazi institute devoted to occult and pseudo-historical studies, while others hinted at even older, more arcane origins, their symbols and designs suggesting a lineage that predated any modern political ideology.

As Klaus settled into the armchair opposite them, the glow from the hearth cast a warm, flickering light over his face, giving him an almost spectral quality. "Please, make yourselves comfortable," he repeated, his voice deep and resonant, as if it too carried echoes of the past. He poured each of them a glass of dark Franconian wine, its rich aroma filling the space between them.

Dave accepted the glass, noting the way the liquid caught the firelight, as though it too carried some hidden story. Lands, beside him, took his glass and raised it slightly toward Klaus. "Thank you for allowing us to meet with you, Herr Schneider. Your collection is... impressive."

Klaus gave a small, knowing smile. "It's more than a collection. It's a lifetime of research — and, some might say, a dangerous fascination." He took a slow sip of his wine, studying them both over the rim of his glass. "Now, tell me, gentlemen, what is it that you are truly seeking? Because for a mere documentary, you seem remarkably well-informed."

Lands exchanged a glance with Dave, sensing they were entering deeper waters. He chose his words carefully. "We are indeed interested in the Nazi occult and its influence on certain modern groups," he began, "but our research has taken us beyond the well-trodden paths. We're particularly interested in the Brotherhood of Serpents."

Klaus's expression hardened just slightly, though he maintained his composure. He set down his glass and regarded them both with a seriousness that hadn't been there before. "Ah, the Brotherhood," he murmured, almost as if tasting the words. "Then it seems we have more to discuss than I initially thought."

Klaus leaned back in his chair, his movements calm, almost lazy, as he reached into a drawer of his desk. When his hand emerged, it held a piece of cold, unforgiving history — a 9mm Luger pistol, worn but meticulously maintained. He levelled it at Lands with steady precision, his face composed, but his eyes alight with a calculating glint.

"I think it's time you told me what you are really doing here," Klaus said, his tone carrying an unsettling blend of curiosity and menace.

Maintaining his calm, Lands held Klaus's gaze and continued with their cover story. "It's as we said, Herr Schneider. We're producing a documentary, though with a particular interest in the Brotherhood," he said, his voice steady and unflinching, even with the Luger trained on him.

Klaus's expression twisted into a small, sardonic smile. "A documentary," he repeated, the disbelief evident in his tone. "Over the years, I've seen many interested parties wanting to know more about the Brotherhood. Few of them were what they claimed to be." He narrowed his gaze, the gun still steady in his hand. "And you are even less."

Lands kept his composure, giving nothing away. "We're not the first to investigate these matters, and we won't be the last. You're well-informed, Herr Schneider. You know the Brotherhood isn't merely a curiosity of the past. There are still those interested in its influence — its power."

Klaus's expression darkened, though his grip on the gun didn't falter. "Power," he echoed, his tone low and dangerous. "Do you have any idea what kind of power you're meddling with? The Brotherhood's secrets are not for outsiders to unearth. Those who seek them often pay a price they never anticipated."

Lands took a slow breath, carefully considering his response. "We understand the risks. But we also understand the significance of what the Brotherhood represents — the beliefs, the artefacts, the lingering influence. And, if we're honest, we believe you do as well. You've dedicated your life to this knowledge; you know its value better than anyone."

Klaus's eyes narrowed further, suspicion still evident, but something else flickered there, perhaps respect or recognition. He lowered the gun slightly but kept it within reach. "Perhaps," he murmured. "But if you want my help, I'll need proof that you're willing to go further than just scratching the surface."

Lands gave a subtle nod. "Then let's dispense with pretences, Herr Schneider. We're not merely documentary producers, but neither are we your enemies. We are allies, if anything, seeking to understand what you know and where it could lead us. Our interests are aligned in more ways than you may think."

Klaus considered them both, his expression inscrutable. After a moment, he tucked the Luger back into his desk drawer, closing it with a quiet click. "Then I suggest you listen closely," he said, leaning forward. "Because what you're seeking goes deeper than any documentary or casual interest in the occult. The Brotherhood's influence stretches far beyond the past — and to follow it, you'll have to be willing to risk far more than a camera and a notepad."

From the shadows of the hallway stepped Dr. Fischer, her presence casting an immediate chill over the room. She moved with an air of calm authority, her eyes sharp and assessing as they settled on Dave and Lands. Klaus's mouth twisted into a faint smile.

Dr. Fischer inclined her head slightly, her expression carefully neutral but with a hint of something colder. "I thought we might have managed to dissuade you from pursuing this line of inquiry," she said, her tone almost disappointed. "The mountain of paperwork you trawled through at the

Bundesarchiv should have sent a clear message. But it seems you're more determined than most."

Dave offered a wry smile, glancing at Lands. "That's Lands for you," he said with a faint chuckle. "Like a dog with a bone."

Lands raised an eyebrow, nodding in agreement. "You could say that. I tend to follow a lead until there's nowhere else to go. And right now," he added, his gaze shifting between Klaus and Dr. Fischer, "this path seems far from exhausted."

Dr. Fischer exchanged a knowing look with Klaus, a silent communication passing between them. It was clear now that she was more than just a historian or archivist — she was involved, deeply so, in the circles they were probing. "Persistence can be dangerous," she said coolly, her eyes settling on Lands with a piercing gaze. "Some knowledge is hidden for good reason."

Klaus leaned back, watching them closely. "You've gone further than most, that's true," he admitted. "But if you are so intent on pursuing the Brotherhood's secrets, there is a cost to consider. You've been warned."

The words hung heavily in the air, the weight of their unspoken implications pressing down. But neither Dave nor Lands flinched, resolute as ever. They were already too far in to turn back.

Dr. Fischer's voice took on a grim edge as she continued, her gaze unwavering. "We've maintained an archive of the Brotherhood's activities where we can. They are ever-present in our government, embedded in the highest echelons, holding positions of power across all walks of life. What you're dealing with here is more than a club with funny handshakes and secret meetings."

She paused, letting the gravity of her words sink in, her expression hard and impenetrable. "The Brotherhood has refined its influence over decades. They have the ability to manipulate from the shadows, nudging events and

decisions in ways that the public could never detect. Their reach is long and their tactics subtle, but the consequences are all too real."

Dave felt a chill creep down his spine, the weight of her words settling heavily. He exchanged a quick look with Lands, who was listening intently, every line of his face set in concentration.

Lands leaned forward, his voice quiet but resolute. "And you've been part of this, cataloguing their actions, observing their influence. What exactly are they after? Power? Control?"

Dr. Fischer's lips tightened, her eyes never leaving theirs. "Both," she said simply. "The Brotherhood's roots are ancient, their methods refined through centuries. They believe in an ideal world shaped to their specifications — a world that serves their vision and silences anyone who dares to stand in their way."

Klaus nodded in agreement, his face shadowed. "They are not easily threatened. Any inquiry, any hint that someone has become too curious, too close to the truth, is swiftly and quietly dealt with. You may think you've come prepared, but few truly understand the risk involved in seeking the Brotherhood."

The silence that followed was thick with tension. Dave felt the challenge in Dr. Fischer's words, and he knew she was testing their resolve. He and Lands had dug deep to get this far, but they were only now beginning to understand the scope of the forces they'd stirred.

Klaus's voice dropped to a near whisper, his words filled with a weight that made the room feel smaller, more oppressive. "What we have uncovered may seem too incredible to be real," he began, his gaze intense. "But understand, the people in positions of power and influence were set in place long ago. They are not just players — they are followers, bound by loyalty to a greater mission."

He leaned forward, his fingers resting lightly on the edge of his desk as though grounding himself for what he was about to say. “At the end of the war, as you know, many high-ranking Nazis escaped justice, aided by networks and sympathisers who shared their beliefs. A number of them fled to South America. Brazil, in particular, became a sanctuary, a place where they could regroup, operate out of sight, and continue their work.”

Dave’s eyes narrowed, the pieces beginning to fall into place, but the implications were staggering. Klaus’s voice grew firmer, his tone matter-of-fact. “The Brotherhood is not a relic of the past. They operate from the shadows in Brazil, and they have managed to infiltrate and influence German politics, working towards a specific purpose — to shape a new world order. The Aryan dream, that twisted vision of supremacy, is alive, quietly seeking a return to power.”

Lands broke the silence, his voice low but charged. “And you’ve been tracking them? Watching as they move through the corridors of power, waiting for the right moment?”

Klaus nodded solemnly. “We have. But understand — they are patient, willing to wait for decades, even generations, to see their goals realised. The Brotherhood’s members believe they are chosen, that they alone hold the wisdom to ‘restore’ the world to their ideals. And they will do anything to protect their vision.”

Dr. Fischer crossed her arms, her gaze cool and assessing. “This is why we tried to deter you. The Brotherhood doesn’t just eliminate threats. They erase them, leaving no trace of those who dared interfere.”

The reality of their situation settled heavily upon them. Dave and Lands exchanged a look, the same determination in each of their eyes. They had come looking for answers, and now they had them — but the cost of that knowledge was beginning to reveal itself, and they knew the path ahead would be treacherous.

Lands leaned forward, his gaze steady. "Alright, so now we know more about the Brotherhood, their reach, and where they're operating from. But what exactly is it that you're trying to do?"

Dr. Fischer's face hardened, her voice tinged with frustration as she replied. "We've been tracking Brotherhood members — politicians, industrialists, financial powerhouses. For years, we've kept a close watch, using every means available to disrupt their activities. We've even employed... shall we say, less-than-ethical methods to discredit them. But despite our best efforts, the impact has been minimal. They're too powerful, too deeply entrenched."

8 The Hidden Cabal

Dave and Lands sat at the long wooden table in Schneider's study, a room lined with the weight of history itself, from heavy, leather-bound books to relics of past wars. Schneider connected a laptop to a large monitor while Dr. Fischer retrieved an external hard drive from her bag.

"We've been tracking Brotherhood activities for years," Fischer said, pulling up a series of photographs and video clips. "Building a picture of their network, their influence. Watch this."

Security footage showed Chief Helga Weiss at a Berlin protest - the camera caught her subtle hand signal to her officers just before they moved against the counter-protesters, leaving the far-right agitators untouched. More clips followed: peaceful demonstrators arrested while known extremists walked free, evidence vanishing from lock-up, cases mysteriously dismissed.

"Weiss controls law enforcement in Berlin," Schneider explained, switching to a new folder. "But she's just one piece."

"We've managed to identify four of the five key leaders within Germany," Fischer explained. "Their names are Weiss, Schwartz, Bergmann, Braun, and a fifth we're still trying to confirm. But their positions make it clear that they are the ones driving the Brotherhood's mission from within."

The screen filled with photographs of Emil Schwartz, Director of the National Archive, documenting his systematic reshaping of Germany's historical narrative. Carefully curated exhibits minimised Nazi atrocities while highlighting technological achievements. School curricula revisions subtly shifted focus from genocide to industrial advancement.

"He's manipulating how an entire generation views the past," Fischer said, her voice tight with controlled anger.

The evidence against Klaus Bergmann at the Ministry of Interior was even more damning. Surveillance photos showed him meeting known

Brotherhood sympathisers. Internal memos revealed how he'd redirected security resources, targeting opponents while protecting allies. Lists of "persons of interest" included journalists, activists, and government officials who'd spoken against far-right influences.

"And here's our latest concern," Fischer said, pulling up military footage. General Rudolf Braun, now Minister of Defence, appeared in careful documentation of troop inspections, training exercises, and staff meetings. Pattern analysis showed how he'd repositioned key personnel, promoting those with Brotherhood connections while side-lining others.

"Last week, a lieutenant filed a report questioning Braun's promotion patterns," Schneider noted grimly. "He's already been transferred to a remote Arctic posting. The message was clear - stay quiet or disappear."

The evidence was methodical, overwhelming - years of careful observation showing how the Brotherhood had positioned its people in centres of power. Each photograph, each document, each video clip added another piece to a chilling puzzle.

Lands let out a low whistle. "So, we're dealing with a fortified core of leadership here. They control the police, the archive of national memory, internal security, and the military."

"And that's just in Germany," Schneider said quietly. "Their reach is international. This is a very carefully orchestrated operation. The Brotherhood has spent decades positioning its people, waiting for the moment to leverage their power in key areas. And now they're ready."

Dave placed the last file down on the table, his mind racing. "This isn't just a network of sympathisers," he said, his voice cold with realisation. "It's a shadow government."

Dr. Fischer nodded, her gaze steady. "Yes. The Brotherhood isn't working toward power; they're preparing to exercise it. If we want any chance of

stopping them, we need to break their control at the roots — starting with these five.”

She paused, glancing at Klaus before continuing, her tone shifting to one of quiet conviction. "The evidence we have could easily be dismissed, denied. We need more than rumours and isolated incidents. To bring them down, we have to shine a light on the Brotherhood and expose them completely."

Dave shook his head, incredulous. "But... how? Everything we've gathered so far, all these documents and symbols — it reads more like a conspiracy theory than solid proof. Right now, it's something you'd find in the 'Bigfoot files.' If we're going to expose them, we need something indisputable, undeniable."

Klaus leaned back, thoughtful. "Precisely. And that's why we need to go beyond simply cataloguing their influence. The Brotherhood has operated in the shadows, hidden from scrutiny. If we're to expose them, we need concrete evidence — explicit proof of their intentions and activities. Anything that links their actions to a broader agenda of subversion."

Lands considered this, his mind racing. "So we need a way into the core of their operations — something, or someone, that can lead us directly to the heart of it all."

Dr. Fischer nodded, a glint of resolve in her eyes. "Exactly. And that's why we believe Brazil is the key. If we can infiltrate their base of operations there, gather documents or witness first-hand the power structures they've built, we might just have a chance to tear down their veil of secrecy."

A tense silence settled over the room as the enormity of the task sank in. The Brotherhood was not a mere shadow from history; it was an active, manipulative force, protected by wealth, influence, and secrecy. They would be going up against a machine designed to eradicate anyone who dared to come too close.

Dave exhaled, breaking the silence. "So, what's the next move? Do we go straight to Brazil, or is there something here we need to secure first?"

Klaus and Dr. Fischer exchanged a look, then Klaus answered. "If you're prepared to go further, then we'll give you everything we have on the Brotherhood's connections. But make no mistake, this mission won't just be dangerous. It's a journey that few return from unscathed."

9 Karl Müller

Lands and Dave arranged a video call with Cecilia, the screen flickering to life as her face appeared, her expression serious as she listened to their findings. After a moment, she spoke, her voice thoughtful. "Dave, you remember one of your first cover identities, Karl Müller? The German identity we set up. We could build on that as a way in."

Dave raised an eyebrow as she continued, "We'd create a history for him — give him a parentage that connects to Nazi bloodlines, shape his background to align with the Brotherhood's ideology. With the right details, Karl Müller could be ironclad, practically impossible for them to question."

Lands nodded, catching on quickly. "Good plan. Now we just need to find the way in."

Dave shifted in his seat, clearly uneasy. "I speak German well enough, but playing a Nazi..." He let out a deep breath, setting his discomfort aside. "I'll make it work."

They ended the call, and Cecilia immediately set to work on fleshing out the Karl Müller identity.

As the screen went dark, Dave glanced at Lands. "I think I need to spend some time with Dr. Fischer and Schneider. If I'm going to make this role credible, I'll need their help. The Brotherhood isn't going to accept just anyone — I need to know what they know."

Lands nodded. "And they'll make sure you're as prepared as possible. We're in uncharted territory here, so every bit of authenticity matters."

With the plan set in motion, Dave knew his next step was to dive deep into the twisted world of the Brotherhood's beliefs, history, and connections, guided by Fischer and Schneider themselves.

For the next few days, Dave immersed himself in the grim world of Nazi history, ideology, and practices under the close guidance of Schneider and Dr. Fischer. Each morning, he'd arrive at Schneider's study, his stomach already churning at what lay ahead. Today's session focused on the specific ways the Brotherhood twisted historical events to suit their narrative.

"Your grandfather would have been stationed here," Schneider said, pointing to a map of occupied France. "The Brotherhood believes these occupation zones represented order, not oppression. You'll need to speak of them with pride." He paused, watching Dave carefully. "Show me."

Dave swallowed back his revulsion and spoke in Karl's voice, letting pride seep into his tone. "My grandfather helped maintain order in the chaos of war. He understood the importance of a firm hand." The words felt like poison on his tongue, but Schneider nodded approvingly.

Dr. Fischer drilled him relentlessly on the minutiae of Nazi military rankings, decorations, and protocols. "The Brotherhood obsesses over these details," she explained. "One wrong comment about your grandfather's rank or unit could expose you."

During breaks, Dave would step outside, letting the cool air clear his head. He couldn't shake the feeling that each fact he memorised, each hateful ideology he practised defending, was another small betrayal of himself. But then he'd remember the Brotherhood's reach, their infiltration of power structures, and he'd force himself back inside.

The preparation wasn't just historical. Cecilia's team had been working around the clock, building Karl Müller's identity layer by layer. Dave studied the fabricated family photos, each one aged and weathered convincingly. There he was as a child in Argentina, standing beside a stern-faced man meant to be his grandfather. School records, immigration documents, even childhood vaccination records - each piece adding depth to the lie.

"Your German is good," Schneider noted during a language session, "but it needs to be perfect. The Brotherhood's members will notice any hesitation." They spent hours fine-tuning his accent, making it authentically South American German rather than textbook perfect.

In the evenings, alone in his room, Dave would stare at his reflection, practising Karl's expressions, his mannerisms. The face looking back at him seemed to change a little each day, growing colder, harder. Sometimes he caught himself thinking in Karl's voice, seeing the world through Karl's eyes, and it terrified him.

One night, after a particularly intense session about Brotherhood initiation rituals, Dave called Lands.

"I don't know if I can do this," he admitted, his voice low. "It's not just remembering facts any more. I have to believe it, feel it. When Schneider tests me, he's not just checking my knowledge - he's looking for conviction."

"You're not becoming Karl," Lands reminded him firmly. "You're playing a role, like any other mission."

"This is different," Dave insisted. "Previous covers, they were just variations of myself. This... this is like poisoning my own mind. I have to think like them, justify what they did. Yesterday I caught myself nodding along to something Schneider said about 'racial purity' before I even realised what I was doing."

The silence on the other end lasted a moment before Lands spoke again. "Maybe that's why you're the right person for this. Because it disgusts you, because you fight it. Someone who found it easier might lose themselves in it."

Whilst Dave struggled to become Karl, Lands worked tirelessly with Dr. Fischer on the logistics of the plan. They poured over files she had amassed on the Brotherhood's known members — their personalities, their

power plays, and, crucially, their connections with Brazil. Fischer's files contained snippets of intercepted communications, letters coded in veiled language that hinted at dealings between Brotherhood members in Germany and their counterparts in South America.

Their task was clear but daunting: Lands needed to find a point of entry, a credible way to position Karl Müller within the Brotherhood's circle. The Brotherhood was insular and suspicious, with ties forged over generations. Their members were conditioned to trust only those whose loyalty was unquestionable.

One afternoon, after hours spent analysing dossiers, Lands paused over a particular file, his brow furrowing. He looked up at Dr. Fischer, who was scanning through more files nearby. "What about this contact here?" he said, tapping the page. "It mentions a regular meeting of high-ranking members, something about commemorating a ritual tied to their history. If we could get Karl invited, it might give him the footing he needs to gain their trust."

Dr. Fischer looked over his shoulder, her expression thoughtful. "That could work. We'd need to lay groundwork — perhaps a reference from another member who would vouch for him. These gatherings are exclusive; they're designed to keep out outsiders."

Lands leaned back, considering the possibilities. "If Karl Müller had a family connection and could be vouched for by someone with a known history, it might be enough."

Dr. Fischer nodded. "Then we build on that. We construct Karl's backstory as a descendant of one of their own. He can use that connection as a way in."

It was a dangerous plan, but as the pieces fell into place, they all understood it was perhaps their only chance to infiltrate the Brotherhood.

Dr. Fischer leaned forward, her eyes sparking with an idea. "I think we have an angle. Obersturmbannführer Friedrich Richter. He was a prominent figure, known to have made it out of Germany after the war before disappearing into South America. His story seems to vanish there — an ideal foundation we can use."

Lands considered it. "And how do we make that connection credible?"

Fischer smiled slightly. "We plant the idea that Richter changed his family name to 'Müller' after his escape to obscure his identity. He fled Germany with his son and daughter-in-law, and, after they settled, they had a child — Karl. A few years later, Karl's parents are killed in a tragic plane crash, and Richter raises his grandson himself. This background gives Karl the lineage to explain his beliefs and loyalty."

Lands nodded, intrigued. "Alright, but that leaves a question. Why has Karl only come into view now? Why wouldn't he have surfaced sooner?"

"We create a history for him," Fischer replied. "We make it so that Karl stayed in South America to care for his ailing grandfather, who only recently died. When he passed, Karl inherited documents, perhaps artefacts, that opened his eyes to the Brotherhood's influence in Germany. He's finally made his way back, following these breadcrumbs."

Dave, listening closely, understood the depth of what he was stepping into. "So, Karl Müller re-emerges, fully convinced of his legacy. It's believable enough, but it's also something the Brotherhood would verify. This cover needs to be airtight."

Fischer nodded. "Then let's get to work. We'll need every detail lined up to ensure Karl's past is unassailable."

"That's a job for Cecilia," Lands said, nodding with satisfaction. "Her team will weave their magic, placing records, documents, and subtle markers where they can be verified. Official archives, family trees, whatever it takes."

Schneider's face brightened with a touch of enthusiasm. "I can help there as well. I have a collection of Nazi antiquities that could lend authenticity — medals, insignias, unit badges, even personal effects. These are the sorts of things that Karl would have inherited from his grandfather. Physical proof of his legacy, and things only someone within their circle would recognise."

Schneider reached into a small, velvet-lined box on his desk and carefully removed an insignia that sent a chill through the room. It was unmistakable — a gladius flanked by serpents, the same emblem Dave and Lands had seen in the sketch from Wewelsburg Castle. The metal was worn, but the detail remained sharp, giving the piece an undeniable aura of authenticity.

"This is something I've held on to for a very long time," Schneider said, his tone almost reverent. "I can't share much about its history, but if this were part of your 'grandfather's legacy,' it would solidify your connection. The Brotherhood knows the significance of this symbol. It would add weight to Karl's story in ways words alone cannot."

Dave took the insignia, feeling its cool weight in his palm, the serpents seeming to coil and twist under the dim light. He understood now — this wasn't just an object; it was a key to the Brotherhood's inner circles.

Lands nodded, encouraged by the plan. "We're building the image, but we still need the key to get him into their ranks."

Schneider leaned forward, a thoughtful glint in his eye. "That's where we use the list of known Brotherhood members. We have records of who's active and where they might be found. If we move Karl into their circles, in places where he's bound to cross paths with them, they'll hear of his grandfather's death, his inheritance — his bloodline. That will trigger their interest, especially if we frame Karl's arrival as a return to his roots."

Dr. Fischer added, "Many of these members are isolated by choice, but they'll have informants everywhere. We plant Karl's name, and they'll seek him out. The Brotherhood's members are watchful for any mention of

figures like Obersturmbannführer Friedrich Richter. With the right setup, Karl will have no trouble getting their attention.”

Dave nodded, feeling the weight of the role he was about to assume. “Alright, then. Let’s make Karl Müller as real and as unmissable as we can.”

Dr. Fischer outlined the plan with precision. “The contact we’ve selected is Klaus Bergmann. He manages a large workforce at a manufacturing company and holds deep connections within the German expatriate community in São Paulo. Our people have monitored his routines and habits — he’s a creature of habit, and we know where to find him when his guard is down.”

Lands nodded as she continued. “Bergmann has a penchant for unwinding with a drink at the end of the week. He frequents a German Bier Keller in a small German enclave just south-west of São Paulo. It’s the perfect spot to place Karl in his path. Karl could be there, supposedly on business, getting a bit too drunk, letting his guard down — just enough to start reminiscing about his grandfather.”

Dave considered the details, picturing the scene. “So, I’d let slip a few hints. Enough to pique Bergmann’s interest and let him connect the dots himself. He’ll take the bait if he thinks he’s stumbled onto something important.”

Dr. Fischer nodded approvingly. “Exactly. The Brotherhood thrives on secrecy and legacy. If Bergmann believes you’re a relic of that legacy, he’ll want to pull you into the fold himself.” She glanced at Schneider, who was carefully packing the insignia into a leather pouch. “And with this emblem in your possession, it’ll lend your story a weight that’s hard to deny.”

Lands chimed in, “It’s a high-risk scenario. But if Karl can pique Bergmann’s interest, he may open doors that would otherwise remain closed. And that could be our way in.”

Dave took a steadying breath. This was a game of cat and mouse, and for the role of Karl Müller, he would have to blur the lines between himself and his assumed identity.

10 São Paulo

Dave and Lands departed from Frankfurt, boarding a long-haul flight bound for São Paulo. As the plane took off, Dave glanced out the window, watching as the sprawling, orderly streets of Frankfurt faded beneath them. The hours in the air stretched out, a mixture of quiet planning and mentally rehearsing Karl Müller's persona, until finally, the lights of São Paulo came into view.

From above, São Paulo looked like an endless sea of lights and concrete, sprawling out in every direction under a faint haze. The city was enormous, its vast neighbourhoods, high-rise buildings, and tightly packed favelas giving a striking first impression. Major roads intersected in spiderweb-like patterns, teeming with cars even at night, and the skyline was punctuated by clusters of gleaming skyscrapers. It was a city that seemed to pulse with life and movement, embodying the chaotic vibrancy they'd heard so much about.

The plane descended into São Paulo-Guarulhos International Airport, and they joined the steady stream of passengers through immigration and customs. The terminal was bustling, filled with travellers from all over the world. Dave and Lands manoeuvred their way through, blending into the crowd as they made their way to baggage claim.

Once they retrieved their bags, they headed toward the car rental counters, where they secured a discreet sedan, practical yet unremarkable. Lands handled the paperwork, while Dave took a moment to glance around, absorbing the frenetic energy of the airport. With keys in hand, they made their way to the parking area and found the car, loading their bags into the trunk.

Navigating through São Paulo's traffic was an adventure of its own. The roads were packed, headlights flashing in all directions as vehicles jockeyed for position, motorcycles weaving through the lanes with

unnerving speed. The city around them was a sensory overload — billboards lit up the streets, and every corner seemed to host a bar, café, or street vendor selling food.

Their destination was a prearranged accommodation in the Vila Madalena district, known for its vibrant culture and nightlife. They finally reached the neighbourhood, where cobbled streets and eclectic murals adorned the walls of buildings. The apartment they'd rented was located in a quieter residential street, providing them with a balance of privacy and proximity to the bustling city.

As they parked and entered the building, Dave couldn't help but feel the weight of what lay ahead. São Paulo was a city of contrasts, full of secrets, and somewhere in its depths, the Brotherhood awaited. Tomorrow, Karl Müller would step into character, taking the first step into a dark world he hoped to dismantle from within.

The next morning, Dave took meticulous steps to shed his own identity and fully embrace Karl Müller. He unpacked his luggage, sorting through each item, discarding anything that could link him back to Dave. His belongings were minimal but carefully curated: a passport and ID in Karl Müller's name, documents connecting him to the fictitious German engineering company, and a few personal effects meant to look like family heirlooms from his Nazi grandfather.

He checked himself in under "Karl Müller" at the accommodation, confirming the pre-arranged payment from the engineering firm that Cecilia's team had crafted for him. Everything had to line up, every detail bulletproof. As he adjusted to this new persona, he felt the weight of it settle over him — Karl was a role, but to be convincing, it had to feel real.

Leaving Lands behind for the day, Dave struck out on his own, immersing himself in São Paulo as Karl. The city buzzed with energy around him, and he moved with purpose, keeping his expression slightly hardened, as if weighed down by an imagined past. He made his way to the German expat

district just south-west of the city, blending into the crowd. His movements were calculated, but casual, as though he were a man visiting a city familiar yet foreign, a place he was meant to explore but with roots that ran deeper.

Each step, every interaction, was part of the act. In a matter of hours, Karl Müller was becoming as real to Dave as the city itself, the line between his life and this constructed persona beginning to blur. The journey had truly begun.

As evening settled over São Paulo, Karl Müller made his way to the Heimat Bier Keller. The place stood out with its distinctly Bavarian flair - dark timber framing against white plaster walls, adorned with flower boxes and painted shutters. Inside, the warmth of wrought iron chandeliers cast a golden glow over dark wood tables and long benches. The scent of sausages, roasted pork, and baked pretzels filled the air, mingling with the earthy, malty aroma of fresh beer.

Karl observed the room with the quiet precision he'd developed over years of analysing systems. The layout was traditional - long communal tables encouraging conversation among strangers, a well-worn bar polished to a soft sheen, and German flags hanging from the rafters. Most patrons clutched tall glasses of pale lager, their conversations a mix of German and Portuguese rising above the gentle clink of glasses against wood.

When it came time to order, Karl chose something distinctive: an Aventinus, a German Weizenbock with a rich, dark hue, served in a curvaceous glass that flared at the top and tapered toward the base. It stood out among the straight, cylindrical glasses of pale lagers most patrons were drinking. He ordered Schweinshaxe to accompany it - a slow-roasted pork knuckle with crispy crackling skin, served with sauerkraut and creamy mashed potatoes. The hearty, traditional dish would give him reason to linger.

Karl settled at the end of a long wooden bench near the edge of the room, positioning himself to observe while keeping a low profile. His choice of beer and meal marked him as someone who knew German culture, but his demeanour remained subdued, as if lost in thought. In his head, he noted the ebb and flow of patrons, the way conversations shifted and moved through the room, each detail catalogued with the same methodical attention he'd once given to network traffic patterns.

The bench gradually filled with a mix of local Germans and expats, each one eager to leave the week behind. Their mood lifted by food and drink, they traded work stories, banter, and casual jabs about last week's football match. Noticing him dining alone, his tablemates drew him into their conversation with typical German directness.

"New to São Paulo?" one asked in German, raising his glass in greeting.

Karl nodded, offering a polite but reserved smile. "Just arrived. Needed somewhere that felt familiar."

They laughed understanding at that, and soon Karl found himself participating in their easy conversation, sharing carefully constructed observations about the city while deflecting personal questions with practised casualness. He bought a round of drinks, establishing himself as generous but not flashy, and let the conversation flow naturally around him.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Karl spotted Klaus Bergmann entering with five other men. They moved past the occupied benches to one in the far corner, their demeanour purposeful even in a setting meant for unwinding. There was a subtle shift in the room's energy as he passed, the unspoken respect among the regulars clear in their glances.

One of Karl's new acquaintances caught his eye lingering on Bergmann. "Ah," he said in German, leaning in slightly, "that's the boss. He's here every week, just like us. He's a good man, but works us hard."

Karl nodded thoughtfully, his mind quickly weaving a response that would hold to his role. "A hard boss makes hard men," he replied, drawing on the sort of old-world wisdom his character would appreciate. He raised his glass as if in a casual toast, drawing his neighbour in further. "A man like him must know a thing or two about keeping his men in line."

His new friend chuckled and returned the gesture, pleased to talk about the familiar figure. "Oh, Klaus knows how to lead, alright. And he knows his way around here," he added, giving Karl a look that seemed to say, You'd do well to know him, too.

Karl made a mental note, allowing a casual interest to show, just enough for the men around him to notice. Now he only had to play his cards right to catch Bergmann's attention, perhaps even tonight, if fortune stayed on his side.

As the evening wore on and the beer continued to flow, Karl found himself slipping comfortably into his role. His new friends laughed and nodded as he shared carefully crafted tales about his life in Argentina. One of the men leaned in, a grin on his face as he remarked, "So that's why your German has a bit of an accent! I couldn't quite place it."

Karl responded with a good-natured laugh, raising his stein. "Yes, it's true. I may not have been born in the Fatherland, but my heart and mind are truly German through and through." He let a moment of solemnity pass, lowering his voice. "I've travelled home to Germany many times over the years, but my work and family have kept me in South America. Now, though... my grandfather has departed, and I am alone."

He lifted his glass higher, his gaze hardening with purpose. "To my grandfather. To the Obersturmbannführer," he said, letting the weight of the title hang in the air.

The men around him lifted their glasses in a show of solidarity, not out of any loyalty to the title but from respect for Karl's loss. They clinked their steins with his, offering murmurs of "To your grandfather" and "To his

memory.” The moment felt authentic, and as he drank, Karl felt the guise of his cover settling over him even deeper.

From across the room, Karl could feel eyes on him. He looked up to see Klaus Bergmann observing him with a keen interest, his gaze sharp and calculating. The mention of the Obersturmbannführer had clearly piqued his curiosity, and Karl sensed that Bergmann was gauging the stranger before him, weighing every detail he’d seen and heard.

Satisfied that he’d laid enough of the groundwork, Karl returned to his conversation, casually but with an ear attuned to any further acknowledgment from Bergmann’s direction. He could feel the anticipation in the air, a simmering tension that told him his act was starting to work, drawing the right kind of attention exactly as they’d planned.

Karl’s head throbbed dully as he settled himself at a small outdoor table in front of a cosy German coffee and pastry shop. He’d woken with the unmistakable signs of an overindulgent night — a thick tongue, a churning stomach, and the familiar, dull ache of a mild hangover. The fresh air helped a bit, but he knew he’d need more to clear the haze entirely.

After ordering a strong black coffee and a warm, flaky butterbrezel — a pretzel-shaped pastry with buttery layers — he pulled out his agency phone, smiling as he noticed the display language was now set entirely to German. A small but grounding detail, one that kept him firmly in his role as Karl Müller. He kept his voice low as he spoke with Lands, filling him in on the previous night’s progress. He could still feel the satisfaction of having caught Bergmann’s attention and sensed that the seed they’d planted was beginning to take root.

As Karl took a sip of his coffee, he signalled the waitress for another, rubbing his temples and pinching the bridge of his nose, silently wishing for relief. When she returned, she placed the coffee on the table along with two paracetamol tablets. Karl thanked her, his voice appreciative, and glanced up, feeling a presence just in front of him.

Klaus Bergmann stood there, watching him intently. His crisp, well-tailored suit and the sharpness of his gaze contrasted with Karl's more casual, slightly dishevelled look. With a nod, Bergmann spoke in a polished, unmistakably German accent, "Do you mind if I join you?"

Without waiting for a reply, Bergmann took the seat across from Karl, his expression neutral but observant. Karl, keeping his composure, nodded toward the waitress. "Would you like anything?" he asked, his voice steady despite the mild pulse in his head.

Bergmann waved her over and ordered a simple black coffee, his eyes never leaving Karl. "You seem to enjoy the local fare," he remarked, nodding slightly toward Karl's butterbrezel.

"Always have," Karl replied with a faint smile, easing into the character he'd cultivated. "Old habits from Germany, I suppose. It's good to find a piece of home in unexpected places."

Bergmann's gaze was steady, appraising him with an intensity that hinted at more than mere curiosity. "Last night, I overheard your tribute," he said, his voice low. "It's not often one speaks so openly of such... connections."

Karl held his gaze, giving only a slight nod. "My grandfather's legacy is hard to leave behind," he replied, his voice taking on a practised wistfulness. "It's a part of me, no matter where I am."

Bergmann's lips curved ever so slightly, a glimmer of understanding — or recognition — in his eyes. "Perhaps we have more in common than you realise, Herr Müller."

Karl gave Bergmann a polite but curious smile. "You seem to have me at a loss. You know my name, but you are...?"

Bergmann extended his hand in a firm, practised gesture. "Klaus Bergmann. I manage a manufacturing facility here in São Paulo."

"Ah," Karl replied with a nod, shaking Bergmann's hand. "One of my friends from last night mentioned you — with some respect, I might add."

Bergmann inclined his head, acknowledging the compliment with a hint of pride. “Thank you. I run a good team of very focused men. I believe in discipline and loyalty.” He paused, leaning in slightly. “But what caught my attention was your mention of your grandfather, the Obersturmbannführer. It’s not something often spoken of these days.”

Karl held Bergmann’s gaze, allowing a hint of sentimentality to colour his voice. “He was a great man. A war hero, though his contributions will never be recognised as such. The world remembers only certain parts of history.”

Bergmann’s expression softened, a spark of understanding in his eyes. “Not everyone forgets, Herr Müller,” he said quietly. “Some legacies live on — in unexpected places.”

Karl nodded, his expression turning sombre. “I’ve lived with him my entire life. I learned from him, listened to his stories. Losing him was like losing a part of myself.” He took a sip of his coffee, a brief pause that allowed the weight of his words to settle.

Bergmann watched him closely, his interest now fully piqued. “It’s rare to find others who carry such respect for that past. I may be able to introduce you to... others, who share your views.”

Karl gave a small nod of understanding. “I would like that. My grandfather taught me loyalty and discipline — principles I don’t take lightly.” He let a pause linger, as though considering his next words. “In fact, I came to São Paulo to learn more about what he left behind, the connections he hinted at but never revealed.”

Bergmann’s eyes gleamed, sensing a kindred spirit. “Perhaps you’ve come to the right place, Herr Müller. São Paulo has its hidden ties — those who remember and honour men like your grandfather. I think you’ll find your way among us.”

With that, Bergmann lifted his coffee, gesturing for Karl to join him in a silent toast. As their cups met, Karl sensed he'd taken a step further into the world he needed to infiltrate, now firmly in Bergmann's line of sight — and within reach of the Brotherhood's elusive network.

Bergmann set down his coffee with a slight, inviting smile. "Perhaps you would do me the honour of joining me for lunch later today? I am having a few friends over. You might find their company... interesting."

Karl met Bergmann's gaze, letting his face show a flicker of gratitude and interest. "It would be my pleasure," he replied smoothly. "Thank you for the invitation. I look forward to it."

Bergmann inclined his head. "Excellent. I think you'll find these men share certain values your grandfather would have respected. They have a keen sense of history... and heritage."

Karl nodded, understanding the unspoken implication. This was a rare opportunity — an invitation into Bergmann's inner circle, the kind of gathering that might open doors he'd otherwise never have access to. He kept his tone even, though his mind was already sharpening, preparing for the encounter.

"What time would you like me to arrive?" he asked, his demeanour controlled, though his pulse quickened slightly.

"Two o'clock," Bergmann replied, his voice smooth and assured. "The address is just outside the city. I'll have a driver pick you up."

"Perfect," Karl replied, lifting his coffee in a silent toast. "To history — and to honouring those who built it."

Bergmann returned the gesture with a pleased smile, their brief exchange solidifying the path forward. As Bergmann departed, Karl knew he'd taken another crucial step toward infiltrating the Brotherhood's ranks.

11 The Eagles Nest

Karl stepped out of his accommodation precisely five minutes early, the German sense of punctuality ingrained in him from his youth and now reinforced by his role. The sleek black car was waiting, and as he climbed in, the driver nodded, acknowledging the unspoken understanding of their shared discipline. The car pulled away smoothly, taking him through São Paulo's lively streets and out toward the quieter outskirts of the city.

The journey offered a stark contrast to the city's bustling core. High-rise buildings and busy intersections gradually gave way to lush, expansive greenery. As they moved further from the city centre, Karl noted the increasing exclusivity of the neighbourhood, with large, gated homes set back from the road and lined with thick, leafy hedges and palm trees. Here, everything was carefully cultivated, the wealth subtle yet unmistakable.

After a short while, they pulled up to Bergmann's property — an imposing house designed in a style that blended modern and classic European architecture. Tall, white walls contrasted with dark timber beams, evoking a sense of refined simplicity. Large windows framed the structure, reflecting the light that filtered through the surrounding trees, and a winding stone path led to the main entrance. The house was secluded, set back from the road by manicured lawns and rows of meticulously pruned shrubs.

The driver parked at the circular driveway, allowing Karl to take in the finer details of the property. Along one side of the house, he noticed a terraced area framed by wrought iron railings and shaded by a pergola covered in creeping vines. The terrace held an elegant outdoor dining table set for guests, with plush, weatherproof seating and a few smaller tables adorned with potted plants and candles. Beyond it, the view opened up to a meticulously landscaped garden, with low stone walls and a cluster of ornamental trees, lending the area an air of quiet sophistication.

As Karl stepped out of the car, he allowed a moment to compose himself. Today, he would move even closer to Bergmann's world, and with the terraced area as the setting for this gathering, it would be an environment both intimate and deliberate. He had crossed into Bergmann's private domain, and the role of Karl Müller now demanded his complete attention.

Bergmann greeted Karl at the door, extending a firm handshake and a smile that was polite yet measured. "Herr Müller, welcome. I'm glad you could join us," he said, gesturing for Karl to follow.

As they moved through the entryway, Karl took in the refined decor of Bergmann's home. The house was spacious yet tastefully understated, with polished wood floors that stretched down a hallway lined with intricate tapestries and dark oil paintings. The furniture was a blend of classic German craftsmanship and modern minimalism — solid wood pieces, brass accents, and neutral tones. Large windows let in streams of natural light, illuminating the carefully curated art and elegant, built-in shelves stocked with hardbound books and glass figurines that hinted at Bergmann's European heritage.

They passed through a sitting room where leather armchairs and a heavy coffee table were positioned around a stone fireplace, and then into a formal dining area, where a crystal chandelier hung over a long table set with fine china and silver. Everything about the space spoke of quiet, restrained luxury, a place meant for those who valued sophistication over ostentation.

Karl couldn't help but comment, "You have a beautiful home, Herr Bergmann. It's rare to see something with such character."

"Thank you," Bergmann replied, with a hint of pride. "I find comfort in tradition. Now, let's join the others."

They moved through a set of double doors and stepped onto the terrace, which offered a secluded and tranquil setting. The terrace itself was a continuation of the home's understated elegance, framed by wrought iron

railings and shaded in part by a pergola entwined with climbing ivy and flowering vines. Beneath the pergola stood a long dining table set with glassware and a few plates of hors d'oeuvres. The guests, seated in cushioned chairs, were sipping wine and chatting in the gentle warmth of the afternoon sun.

Beyond the terrace, the property opened into a sprawling garden, designed with symmetry and precision. Stone pathways curved through the vibrant green, with rows of carefully trimmed hedges and a scattering of ornamental trees. In the distance, rolling hills extended toward the horizon, creating a peaceful, almost idyllic view that seemed a world away from the bustling city nearby.

Bergmann led Karl to the table and introduced him to the four men, each offering a polite nod in greeting. "Gentlemen, this is Karl Müller. He's an engineer, new to the area and here on business."

The men welcomed Karl with easy smiles, except for Reinhard, who merely inclined his head with a watchful intensity that seemed to dissect every movement Karl made. He was older than the others, perhaps in his late fifties, with sharp features and calculating grey eyes that carried decades of carefully guarded suspicion.

As Karl took his seat, he noticed how Reinhard's gaze followed him, measuring each gesture against some hidden standard. The others didn't seem to notice or perhaps were simply accustomed to it. A server appeared almost on cue, pouring Karl a glass of German wine, a crisp Riesling with a faint, golden hue.

The conversation flowed easily among most of the group, but Reinhard's contributions were sparse and pointed, each question to Karl carrying subtle weight. When Karl mentioned his work in engineering, Reinhard's eyebrow raised a fraction. "Interesting field," he said, his tone carrying an edge of skepticism. "What exactly brought you to São Paulo?"

Before Karl could respond, one of the other men chuckled. "Don't mind Reinhard," he said warmly. "He treats everyone like a potential security breach until proven otherwise. Old habits from his days in corporate security, isn't that right?"

Reinhard's lips tightened slightly, but he didn't deny it. Karl caught Bergmann watching the exchange with mild amusement, as if this was a familiar dynamic he'd seen play out before.

As the day wore on, Karl found himself drawn into easy, unguarded conversations with Bergmann and his friends. Their discussions ranged from business to travel, and sometimes dipped into reflections on German culture and tradition, but always with a light-hearted touch. They seemed genuine in their camaraderie, the way people would be when welcoming a new acquaintance or trying to make a visitor feel at home. There was no probing, no subtle interrogation to test his knowledge or beliefs. Just casual exchanges, the kind that one might share with old friends over wine and sport.

Karl observed each man closely, noting the nuances in their speech and behaviour. They were, by all appearances, merely a group of successful German businessmen enjoying an afternoon of sport and conversation. There were no coded remarks or veiled hints of ideological allegiance, nothing to suggest they held extremist beliefs or had ties to a Nazi underground. In fact, very little was made of his grandfather at all, other than a courteous offering of condolences, as one might give for any family loss.

Could these really be the Nazi Brotherhood he was searching for? He had expected to find a network with distinct signals and coded messages, an organization steeped in secrecy and allegiance to a cause. Instead, he was standing among men who seemed more like a social club than a covert order.

Yet, Karl couldn't shake the feeling that this was all part of the initiation — a silent observation, an evaluation of his own character rather than an interrogation of his knowledge. These men might well be testing him in their own way, watching for any sign that he was less than genuine or for anything that revealed a lack of conviction. For now, he would play along, letting the calm and unassuming nature of the day mask his own cautious vigilance. He reminded himself that the Brotherhood was known for its patience and subtlety, and if these were indeed its members, they would be masters of discretion.

As the day drew to a close, Karl exchanged firm handshakes with his new acquaintances, feeling the warmth of camaraderie and casual pats on the back. Bergmann clapped him on the shoulder, thanking him for joining them, and arranged for a driver to take him back to his accommodation. Seated in the back of the car, Karl gazed out at the sprawling lights of São Paulo as they wove through the city streets, his mind churning with thoughts about his next move. The day had been productive, though not in the way he'd anticipated — no probing questions, no talk of ideology, only the faintest hints that this group might be more than what they appeared.

Once back in his room, Karl let out a quiet breath, taking a moment to settle into the comfortable armchair. He reached for his phone and dialled Lands, eager to share his observations. After recounting the day's events, he finally asked, "Any developments on your end?"

Lands's voice was low but charged with quiet intensity. "Actually, yes. After you left for breakfast and received the invite from Bergmann, I decided to keep a close watch on your accommodation. Almost as soon as you'd gone, I spotted two men approaching, both well-dressed but clearly out of place. They broke in with lock picks, no problem. From my vantage point, I couldn't catch every detail of their movements, but I saw them inspecting your luggage. They took photos of several things with their phones, obviously interested in whatever they found."

Karl's mind raced, thinking through the implications. "So Bergmann sent them," he said slowly, piecing it together. "The lunch invite was a setup, something to keep me out while they took a closer look at 'Karl Müller.'"

"Exactly," Lands replied. "I wouldn't be surprised if you hear from him again soon. Now that he's done some 'background research,' he might test you again, only this time with more specifics, and maybe with a clearer indication of where his interests really lie."

Karl nodded, processing the information. This was a subtle game they were playing, one where any slip could expose his true identity. "Then I'll be ready. I'll stick to the role and play into whatever he throws my way."

"Good," Lands said. "From here on, it's about patience. If Bergmann is genuinely tied to the Brotherhood, he'll give himself away eventually. Just stay alert."

After the call ended, Karl sat back, contemplating the careful balance he'd need to maintain. The door to the Brotherhood was open a crack — now, he just had to be prepared for whatever came through.

The following morning, after Karl returned from breakfast, he noticed an envelope slipped neatly under his door. He picked it up, recognising the handwriting instantly — it was from Bergmann. Inside, a brief message invited him to call, along with a number. Wasting no time, Karl dialled, listening as the line connected.

"Hello, Herr Bergmann," Karl greeted when Bergmann answered. "I very much enjoyed the day yesterday. Once again, thank you for the invite."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Bergmann replied, his voice warm. "I was wondering if you would join me for dinner this evening. There are a few things I'd like to discuss with you."

"Of course, I'd look forward to it," Karl responded, feeling the invitation deepen the connection he was carefully cultivating.

“Excellent. I’ll send a car for you at 6pm.,” Bergmann said. “I look forward to speaking with you later.”

That evening, promptly at six, Karl descended the steps of his accommodation to find a black sedan waiting for him, the same sleek, unassuming model as before. The driver, dressed in a simple, professional suit, opened the door with a courteous nod as Karl approached. Sliding into the back seat, Karl settled himself, his mind focused on maintaining the Karl Müller persona as the car began its steady journey through São Paulo’s streets.

The city lights blurred by as they moved from the bustling heart of São Paulo to its quieter outskirts, where the leafy, gated neighbourhoods reflected a life of privilege and seclusion. The sedan rolled smoothly down a long, winding drive before stopping in front of Bergmann’s house. The property was as imposing as Karl remembered, its carefully maintained exterior a testament to Bergmann’s refined tastes.

Bergmann was waiting at the door, his smile welcoming but his demeanour subtly watchful. “Karl, welcome back. I trust the drive was pleasant?”

“Very, thank you,” Karl replied, shaking Bergmann’s hand.

Bergmann gestured for him to follow. “My wife is preparing a meal tonight. She’s an excellent cook, fond of traditional dishes. Plain fare, but hearty.”

Karl nodded appreciatively. “There’s nothing like good home-cooked food,” he said, adding a hint of warmth to his voice. “I look forward to it.”

As they moved through the familiar halls of the house, Karl caught the rich, comforting aromas of German cuisine. The scent of roasting meats, warm spices, and baking bread mingled in the air, filling the home with an inviting warmth that belied the formality of their last meeting.

Bergmann led him down the hallway and into his study, a room that was both polished and personal. Unlike the more traditional decor in the rest of

the house, the study was sleek and modern, with clean lines and sophisticated furnishings. A fireplace cast a gentle glow over the room, and bookshelves lined the walls, filled with titles on history, politics, and philosophy, their spines organised with meticulous precision. A large, well-used desk occupied one corner, topped with an immaculate setup of a monitor, keyboard, and a small collection of neatly arranged papers. It was a room where work met contemplation, every item in place.

In one of the comfortable, modern chairs by the fireplace sat an older gentleman with a commanding presence. His posture was straight, his expression stern, and as Karl entered, he felt the weight of the man's gaze, appraising him with keen interest.

"Karl Müller," Bergmann said, gesturing to the seated man. "This is Maximilian Engel." Was there an emphasis on the name Müller, or did Karl imagine it?

Maximilian Engel regarded Karl with a steady, probing gaze, his handshake firm, though his movements spoke of restraint honed over years. Karl noticed the faintest inclination of a bow, and perhaps even the slight hint of an old military habit nearly slipping through. Engel's expression remained stern, his sharp eyes taking in Karl's demeanour as if weighing his every word and gesture. Clearly, this was no casual introduction.

"Welcome, Karl," Engel said, his voice deep and composed. "Klaus tells me you're new to the area, originally here on business."

Karl allowed himself a casual smile, projecting an air of relaxed confidence. "Yes, I came here initially on business, but to be honest, I'm not feeling much like work," he replied. "I may forgo the engineering meeting I was supposed to attend and just take the time to relax and reconnect with things that feel... more meaningful."

Engel's stern expression softened ever so slightly, though he remained appraising. Bergmann observed the exchange with a faint, approving smile,

taking note of how Karl handled himself under Engel's scrutiny. The air of casual elegance in the room only added to the gravity of the moment. The polished surfaces, carefully curated book collection, and immaculate workspace were almost clinical in their precision, each detail in the study an unspoken testament to Bergmann's discipline.

"Klaus mentioned your grandfather yesterday," Engel said, his voice level, probing but controlled. "A man who, from what I gather, would have instilled in you a deep sense of loyalty and tradition."

Karl met Engel's gaze evenly, understanding the gravity of this moment. "Absolutely," he said, keeping his tone reverent. "My grandfather taught me much — loyalty, discipline, a strong sense of legacy. He believed in principles that shaped who I am today. Some might say I'm... honouring him by returning here, by seeking a deeper connection to what he valued."

Engel exchanged a look with Bergmann, the slightest glimmer of approval crossing his face. "These values, Karl... they are rare these days. Misunderstood, even vilified," Engel remarked, his tone edged with a quiet bitterness. "But there are those who still understand their worth."

"Indeed," Bergmann agreed, gesturing for them to sit. "We are, after all, a small circle. Those who know the past, honour it, and wish to see it preserved in certain ways. Maximilian and I thought it might be... beneficial for you to know that you're not as alone here as you might feel."

Karl took a seat, nodding thoughtfully. "It is good to be among those who understand," he said, his tone respectful. He could feel the slow, careful peeling back of layers, as though they were letting him glimpse a little more of their intentions — but just a little.

Bergmann settled into a chair opposite him, his gaze steady. "Tonight, we will dine, discuss, and perhaps get to know each other better," he said. "I hope you find our company... enlightening."

Before dinner, the conversation in Bergmann's study was relaxed, unfocused, as though designed to ease Karl into the setting without giving away too much too soon. Klaus offered him a glass of wine, a deep red with a smooth, velvety taste, and they sipped as they engaged in casual, surface-level talk.

A few minutes later, the door to the study opened, and a graceful woman entered. Klaus stood, gesturing towards her as she approached. "Karl Müller, may I introduce my wife, Elsa Bergmann."

Karl rose to his feet, giving her a polite nod. "Pleased to meet you, Frau Bergmann. Thank you for having me at your table this evening."

Elsa smiled warmly, a welcoming yet measured expression. "That's very gracious of you. I hope you enjoy the meal," she said. "Dinner will be served in five minutes."

She left as smoothly as she had arrived, and Bergmann set his glass down, gesturing for Karl and Engel to follow him to the dining room. They moved through the elegant halls to a dining area where a beautifully set table awaited, laden with carefully prepared dishes that exuded the warm, savoury scents of traditional German fare. Platters of roast pork, seasoned potatoes, and red cabbage glistened under the soft lighting, their aromas mingling to create an inviting atmosphere.

As they took their seats, Karl could sense the subtle shift in tone. The pretence of casual conversation was fading, and he suspected that with dinner, the evening's true purpose would unfold.

The table was set for three, with Maximilian at the head, Klaus to his left, and Karl to his right. As they settled into their seats, Karl glanced at the empty place and asked, "Will Elsa not be joining us?"

Klaus smiled with a conspiratorial gleam. "Unfortunately, she has other plans for the evening, which means we need not be quite so... mindful of

our manners.” He let out a chuckle, and Maximilian mirrored his expression with a knowing nod.

The dinner began, a series of meticulously crafted courses, each more impressive than the last. The staff served each dish with practised discretion, appearing and vanishing without notice, allowing the conversation to deepen with each course. They dined on roasted pork with red cabbage, creamy potatoes, and delicate sides that paid homage to German culinary tradition. The food was excellent, a deceptive comfort in the increasingly uncomfortable discussion that began to unfold.

At first, the conversation was light, touching on general topics — family, business, and some idle reflections on European culture. But as the wine flowed and the evening wore on, the dialogue shifted, drifting into politics and, eventually, current world affairs. The tone darkened, their words hinting at deeper, sharper convictions. Klaus and Maximilian’s responses became more pointed, gradually steering the discussion toward ideologies that demanded a certain response from Karl.

As if possessed by his role, Karl’s words took on the persona he had carefully constructed. He spoke with opinions that turned his stomach, expressing increasingly extremist views on cultural decline, race, and the supposed manipulations of global power. Phrases slipped from his mouth, insidious and hateful, evoking a legacy he would never normally condone. With practised composure, Karl defended Nazi ideals as though they were misunderstood virtues — lost in the noise of “insidious” forces, the very groups Maximilian and Klaus seemed eager to decry.

The more he spoke, the more he felt a sickening revulsion rising within, a twisting in his gut at the mask he wore. But he held his composure, mindful of the careful game they were playing. Klaus and Maximilian appeared to listen with a quiet satisfaction, each well-timed nod or glance revealing they had orchestrated this exchange to probe, to see the extent of Karl’s “beliefs.”

With each passing minute, it became clear to Karl that they had designed this evening as a test. Every vitriolic response they extracted from him seemed to satisfy a silent question, each piece of the performance moving him closer to their inner circle. Yet for Dave, submerged within the role of Karl, each word felt like a betrayal of himself.

Maximilian's eyes locked onto Karl's, and he spoke with a chilling certainty. "Your grandfather was Obersturmbannführer Friedrich Richter." His tone was firm, a statement rather than a question.

Karl's brow furrowed in feigned confusion, though inside, he felt a jolt of realisation. He leaned forward, voice tinged with suspicion. "I may have mentioned his rank, but I never gave his name. What exactly is going on here?"

Maximilian's gaze remained steady, his voice calm but unyielding. "You'll have to forgive our... indiscretion. After Klaus encountered you at Heimat the other day, we felt it was necessary to ensure that we were dealing with a true comrade — a like-minded fellow, not a viper sent to our bosom. We have spoken openly of our ideologies, views rarely shared outside certain circles. We had to be absolutely certain of your intentions."

Karl leaned back, maintaining his puzzled expression. "That still doesn't explain how you know my grandfather's name," he replied evenly.

Klaus shifted in his chair, leaning in as he spoke. "Allow me to clarify. We do not know him personally, but we know of him. As you've likely guessed, the gathering yesterday was partly... a ruse. I took the opportunity to investigate a little further. After you left, your belongings were searched."

Karl's expression shifted into one of composed outrage, careful to keep it within the bounds of his role. Klaus continued, undeterred. "Among your possessions were clues — confirmations, if you will, of your grandfather's identity. We found information that allowed us to make the necessary

connection to the Obersturmbannführer, a great man and hero of the Fatherland. You should be proud.”

Karl nodded, letting his face settle into a mask of slight indignation tempered by acceptance. “Had I known that my past would be put under such scrutiny, I might have reconsidered my approach. But I suppose... if it’s earned me your trust, then I can forgive the intrusion.”

Maximilian’s stern face softened, just a fraction, his tone almost approving. “We simply had to know if you were true. Men of your grandfather’s legacy are rare. Now, we are assured that you belong.”

Maximilian’s gaze remained fixed on Karl, his voice resonant with solemnity. “Tomorrow, we will introduce you to the Brotherhood,” he said, the finality in his tone unmistakable. “Your eyes will be opened, and you will feel the gravity of our task.”

Karl met Maximilian’s intense stare, allowing a look of humbled anticipation to cross his face. “I’m honoured,” he replied, voice low with carefully measured reverence. “I’m ready to learn, to understand.”

Maximilian gave a slight nod of approval, his expression softening only a fraction. “Good. We will see whether you truly share your grandfather’s spirit. The Brotherhood is more than words, Karl. Tomorrow, you will witness our purpose first-hand.”

Klaus placed a firm hand on Karl’s shoulder, an encouraging gesture. “Rest well, Karl. You’ll need a clear mind for what’s to come. Tomorrow is only the beginning.”

As they guided him to the door, Karl’s mind raced, every step bringing him closer to a world he’d only begun to glimpse.

After Karl’s departure, Klaus Bergmann, Maximilian Engel, and Reinhard Schäfer remained in Bergmann’s study. The fire had died down to glowing embers, casting long shadows across the room. Reinhard stood by the

window, his posture rigid as he watched Karl's car disappear down the drive.

"He's not what he claims to be," Reinhard said, his voice carrying the weight of decades of suspicion. He turned to face the others, features sharp in the dim light. "The background check was too clean. Every detail perfectly in place, every document exactly where it should be. People leave traces, mistakes. His story is too perfect."

Klaus sighed, swirling the remains of his wine. "Or perhaps, Reinhard, it's clean because there's nothing to find. The man is who he says he is - Friedrich Richter's grandson, seeking connection to his heritage."

"That's exactly my point," Reinhard countered, moving away from the window. "He appears at Heimat, speaks of his grandfather, carries just the right documents to confirm his identity. It's like watching a perfectly rehearsed performance."

Maximilian studied both men, his expression thoughtful. "Your instincts have served us well before, Reinhard. What exactly troubles you about him?"

"It's in his eyes," Reinhard said, his voice low. "When he speaks of the cause, there's something... mechanical about it. As if he's reciting lines he's memorised rather than expressing true conviction." He paused, choosing his next words carefully. "We've seen infiltrators before. They always try too hard to be perfect."

Klaus set his glass down with a sharp click. "And we've also seen genuine believers driven away by baseless suspicion. The Brotherhood needs new blood, particularly someone with Richter's legacy. We can't let paranoia blind us to opportunity."

"Paranoia?" Reinhard's laugh was bitter. "Paranoia is why we're still here, why we've survived when others fell. One mistake, one wrong person trusted, and everything we've built could crumble."

Maximilian raised a hand, silencing them both. "Tomorrow will tell us what we need to know. The ceremony has a way of revealing truth, one way or another." He fixed Reinhard with a steady gaze. "Keep watching him. If your suspicions prove right, we'll handle it. But if they're wrong..."

Reinhard nodded curtly, understanding the warning in Maximilian's tone. "For the Brotherhood's sake, I hope I'm wrong." He moved toward the door, pausing before he left. "But I rarely am."

The study fell silent save for the crackling of dying embers, three men contemplating the weight of tomorrow's ceremony and the true nature of Karl Müller.

Back in the quiet solitude of his lodgings, Karl quickly contacted Lands, his voice low but steady as he filled him in on the evening's events. He explained Maximilian and Klaus's revelations, the chilling ideology of the Brotherhood, and the invitation for tomorrow's "introduction." The weight of the day hung in his words, each detail adding another layer of urgency to their situation.

On the other end of the line, Lands's tone was laced with concern. "We're arriving at a very dangerous junction, Karl. Tomorrow could be some form of initiation, a test of loyalty, or something worse. You need to be prepared."

Karl let out a small, humourless chuckle, though his expression remained tense. "What's 'worse'? Expelled from the Brotherhood?"

Lands's response was blunt. "Death."

A pause followed, both men understanding the stakes. Karl finally replied, his tone matter-of-fact. "Well, we all know what happens then. It won't go the way they think."

Lands gave a short laugh, but it quickly faded. "Just be prepared for anything. If they're as dedicated as they say, tomorrow could involve blood

oaths, pledges, even actions to prove yourself. Watch for any traps, anything that demands too much commitment.”

Karl nodded, feeling the pressure of the role he would need to play. “Understood. Whatever they throw at me, I’ll be ready.”

“Good,” Lands said. “Keep your guard up, but keep up the act. If tomorrow opens the door, we need you inside.”

12 **Dragons Lair**

The following evening, just as the sun began its descent, a familiar black sedan pulled up outside Karl's lodgings. He'd been expecting it, and with a steadying breath, he stepped out to meet the driver. The man greeted him with a nod, opening the rear door with a practised gesture.

Karl slid into the back seat, settling himself as the driver closed the door, but just as they were about to set off, the driver turned back to him, an expression of polite detachment on his face. "I've been instructed to ask you to wear this for the remainder of the journey," he said, producing a soft silk blindfold and holding it out to Karl.

Karl took the blindfold without hesitation, slipping it over his eyes and securing it snugly. Darkness enveloped him, stripping away his sight, and he leaned back, focusing instead on the other senses that would have to guide him through the journey.

The car started up smoothly, pulling away from the city's familiar rhythm. Initially, the hum of nearby traffic and the subtle vibrations beneath the tires hinted at the smooth, paved roads. He could still hear the distant blare of horns and faint sounds of pedestrians, indicating they were still within city limits. But as they drove further, the city's hum faded into silence, replaced by the quiet of the outskirts.

Karl's senses sharpened as the car journeyed onward. The road beneath changed subtly at first, the smooth asphalt giving way to more uneven surfaces. He could feel the faint shifts in the car's suspension as they passed over cracked pavement and the occasional stretch of cobblestone, each jolt a marker of how far they'd travelled.

After a time, the car slowed, and Karl sensed a final shift in the terrain beneath them. The sound of tires against gravel faded, replaced by a rougher, uneven rhythm. They had transitioned onto an unpaved road. The car rocked and swayed as they moved through potholes and dips, the

jarring jolts intensifying as the minutes ticked by. It was clear they were deep in the countryside now, far from the city's reach.

Finally, after what he estimated to be close to an hour, the car rolled to a stop. The stillness was almost jarring after the bumpy ride. Karl heard the rear door open, and a rush of cool, earthy air hit him, tinged with the scent of damp soil and foliage.

"You may remove the blindfold now," the driver said, his tone steady and composed.

Karl lifted his hands and slipped off the blindfold, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the deepening twilight.

As Karl's eyes adjusted to the dim light, the scene before him took on a surreal, almost ancient quality. Flaming torches stood on either side of a massive cave opening, their flames flickering in the evening breeze and casting elongated shadows that danced across the rugged stone entrance. The torches were mounted on tall iron stands adorned with twisting, snake-like designs, and their eerie light gave the entire entrance an aura of something both sacred and sinister. The flames cast an amber glow that seemed to pulse with life, illuminating the dark maw of the cavern in ominous contrast to the natural world outside.

The pathway into the cave was lined with torches, set at regular intervals, their fires creating a steady trail of light that disappeared into the depths of the hillside. The air was thick with the scent of burning wood, mingled with damp earth and a faint metallic tang that hinted at something ancient lying within. Shadows clung to the cave walls, and the darkness beyond the torches suggested depths that few would dare to explore.

Waiting inside the cavern's gaping entrance stood Klaus, his form illuminated by the warm torchlight, his stance rigid and disciplined. He wore a uniform unmistakable in its lineage, bearing the refined cuts and sharp tailoring that evoked the dark legacy of the SS, with an echo of the infamous designs once crafted by Hugo Boss. The lines of the jacket, the

polished black boots, the silver details — all were familiar, a reverent nod to a notorious past. But there was a change: where the blood-red swastika armband once would have wrapped around his arm, Klaus instead wore a fully green armband emblazoned with a double-headed snake motif in stark white. The symbol coiled, its heads facing in opposite directions, an unsettling image that spoke of an ancient and secretive power, reinvented but still evocative of the same deadly ideology.

Karl took it all in, feeling the gravity of the moment. This was no mere ceremony; it was a ritual, a passage into a hidden world that clung to the past with a fervour undiminished by time. Klaus stood like a sentinel, his expression both stern and solemn, as if embodying the same ideals that had once driven men of his kind. It was clear that the Brotherhood sought to keep the “old ways” alive — the rhetoric perhaps adjusted to a modern era, but unmistakably steeped in the same hateful creed, now dressed in new phrases and emblems.

With a slight nod, Klaus extended his arm toward the depths of the cave, his voice echoing slightly as he gestured for Karl to enter. “Welcome, Karl. Tonight, you will begin to understand the true purpose of the Brotherhood.”

Klaus's words echoed in the silence, carrying a weight that pressed down on the air around them. “Before you choose, you have a small opportunity to decide. Once we enter here, there are only two ways out. You will bear the mark of the Brotherhood of the Snake, or you will die. Right now, you can choose to walk away. You get back in the car, and do not contact us again. Or we proceed with the initiation. What is your choice?”

Karl's mind sharpened, knowing that this so-called choice was an illusion. He had already glimpsed too much; it was unlikely the Brotherhood would simply let him walk away. Even if he could, turning back now would mean losing his only chance to infiltrate the group, to uncover its secrets. He kept his expression calm, masking the turmoil within.

“There is no choice,” Karl replied, his voice steady and resolute. “We must all stand together, or fall together.”

Klaus’s face registered a flicker of approval. “Then let us proceed.” He turned, gesturing for Karl to follow him into the cave’s shadowed depths.

Karl’s footsteps echoed softly as they moved into the cavern, the torchlight casting their elongated shadows along the rough stone walls. The temperature dropped noticeably, and the silence grew thick, broken only by the soft crackling of the torches lining the passage. The air felt dense with age, history, and a chilling reverence for the dark tradition Karl was about to enter. Each step deeper into the cave brought him closer to the heart of the Brotherhood, where his commitment would be tested — and where leaving would no longer be an option.

As they moved further in, Klaus’s voice reverberated through the passage, his tone almost ritualistic. “Tonight, you will learn the weight of our oath, the legacy we have been entrusted to guard. For centuries, men like us have been called to this purpose. You are to become one of them.”

Karl kept his gaze steady, his resolve firm as they continued down the path into the depths of the Brotherhood’s inner sanctum.

The floor beneath Karl’s feet was worn unnaturally smooth, polished by countless steps that had passed over it through the years. The walkway itself was a clear path, but the walls retained their natural, jagged formations, creating harsh edges that cast flickering, sinister shadows under the torchlight. Each footfall echoed through the passage, amplifying the solemn weight of their approach. Klaus’s boots clicked in sharp, disciplined rhythm, a steady pace that led them deeper into the heart of the Brotherhood’s lair.

The further they walked, the more Karl became aware of a looming presence. The air grew dense, no longer a mere silence but a weighted hush filled with muffled sounds — the soft shuffling of feet, the faint rustle of fabric, the controlled breathing of many people standing in vigil. The

acoustics of the cave amplified these subtleties, creating a sense of anticipation, a palpable tension.

Finally, they emerged from the narrow passage into a vast, open amphitheatre hewn directly from the natural rock. The cavernous space stretched high above them, a natural vaulted ceiling that seemed to swallow sound and light alike, lending an eerie resonance to the proceedings. Wide, tiered steps, worn smooth like the walkway, formed a massive stone seating area, each level filled with silent figures standing in perfect formation. Hundreds of men, all in identical uniforms, filled the stone seats. Their faces were expressionless, their posture rigid, their gazes focused on the stage below.

Klaus gestured for Karl to halt, his expression unreadable as he took in the sea of silent men before them. This was the heart of the Brotherhood — a gathering bound by ritual, tradition, and unyielding loyalty. The uniformed assembly, the ancient stonework, the symbols of the pulpits — all pointed to a single purpose, one that echoed with the weight of history and the chilling resolve to enforce their twisted vision upon the world.

At the centre of the amphitheatre was a grand ceremonial platform, designed with almost ancient reverence. A heavy stone altar dominated the middle of the stage, its surface carved with intricate symbols that hinted at both mysticism and dark history.

Behind it stood seven imposing pulpits, each one bearing a distinct symbol etched into the rock. At each of the seven towering, dark-stained pulpits stood a figure of authority, each high-ranking member of the Brotherhood exuding a disciplined, intimidating presence. They wore black uniforms, immaculate and severe, adorned with the double-headed snake insignias that marked them as the Brotherhood's elite. Symbols of rank and power gleamed on their collars and epaulettes, lending each figure an air of near-mythical authority. As Karl's eyes adjusted to the dimly lit amphitheatre, he began to recognise the faces standing before him — faces he had studied from the files Schneider and Fischer had shared.

Directly across the central pulpit, he saw Helga Weiss, Chief of Police in Berlin, her sharp features carved into a stony mask of dedication. Weiss was responsible for shielding the Brotherhood's allies within Berlin's law enforcement, allowing far-right agitators to act with impunity while silencing dissent. Now, her posture exuded the cold detachment of someone utterly committed to a cause.

To her right stood Emil Schwartz, the national archivist, whose subtle rewriting of Germany's historical narrative painted a nostalgic image of the past, creating fertile ground for the Brotherhood's agenda to take root. Dressed in the same severe black, his steely gaze scanned the assembled crowd, his presence a reminder that the Brotherhood's power extended beyond brute force and into the manipulation of memory itself.

To the left, Karl recognised General Rudolf Braun, now Minister of Defence, his broad frame radiating military authority. Braun had seeded the military ranks with loyalists and quietly shaped strategies, ensuring the armed forces would be ready when the Brotherhood required them. He stood at attention, hands clasped behind his back, his face impassive but with a focus that betrayed nothing less than absolute commitment.

And in the central pulpit, flanked by these powerful figures, stood Maximilian Engel himself. Engel's gaze was steady, commanding, his stance rigid and ceremonious. Even from a distance, his aura of leadership held the room, demanding reverence and obedience. His every movement seemed calculated to project dominance, the living embodiment of the Brotherhood's vision.

Yet as Karl scanned the remaining pulpits, noting the faces of those he didn't recognise, he realised something surprising: Klaus Bergmann, who had been guiding him through his initiation, was seated beside him in the crowd, not standing among the Brotherhood's highest ranks. Despite his role within the Ministry of the Interior and his influence over civil protection policies, Bergmann was not part of this high table. While clearly

influential, he was not one of the Brotherhood's inner sanctum, contrary to what they had believed.

Karl felt a flicker of insight — perhaps Bergmann was part of a secondary ring, the operational backbone beneath the visible leadership. It was a revelation that shifted his perspective, a reminder that even the Brotherhood's hierarchy was more complex than it appeared.

As Karl returned his attention to the central pulpit, Engel raised his hand in a silent command for attention, his voice soon filling the chamber. The gathered crowd rose as one, responding to his gesture with the Nazi-inspired salute and their battle cry: "In Einheit und Macht!" (In Unity and Power!). The amphitheatre echoed with their voices, the unity palpable, an ominous reminder of the Brotherhood's power and discipline.

This was no mere organization — it was a force, structured, unyielding, and rooted in the very fabric of power. And Karl, for now, had a place within its ranks.

The officer in the central pulpit took a single step forward, his movements precise and deliberate. He raised his right hand in a salute, the gesture unmistakable, its origins stolen from the Roman Empire and repurposed through history. His palm faced outward, fingers extended with calculated rigidity, and as he held his arm aloft, the entire amphitheatre responded in perfect synchrony.

Hundreds of men raised their arms, repeating the salute, their voices thundering in unison, "In Einheit und Macht!" The sound reverberated through the cavernous space, filling every corner with a raw, collective power that seemed to shake the very stone around them. The salute, the words — they held a dark reverence, a chilling echo of an ideology that refused to die.

At a signal from the officer, the assembly lowered their arms and took their seats in disciplined silence. Karl and Klaus followed suit, taking their places to observe the unfolding ceremony. Karl watched as Maximilian

Engel, the officer at the central pulpit, straightened his posture, standing tall with an aura of absolute authority. His uniform gleamed under the torchlight, polished with meticulous care, each silver insignia catching the flickering glow. Engel's eyes scanned the room, proud and severe, his face mirroring the conviction that bound this gathering.

As Karl's gaze travelled over the amphitheatre, he couldn't help but recall old footage from World War II — the grandiose displays of power, the rigid formations, the chilling fanaticism of rallies designed to awe and intimidate. Yet here, the colour palette was altered. Instead of the red, white, and black flags bearing the swastika and eagle, vast green banners hung from the walls, emblazoned with the double-headed serpent insignia in white. The serpents twisted together in a looping pattern, their fangs bared and their bodies entwined, a symbol of both unity and menace.

Where once eagles had spread their wings above the ranks, now there were images of fanged serpents and winged dragons, creatures that harkened back to myth and ancient power. The flags hung in perfect symmetry, draping down from high pillars, each banner meticulously placed to form an imposing backdrop to the stage. In the dim torchlight, the green and white of the Brotherhood's symbols cast an ominous glow, their designs twisted and serpentine, alive with a sense of purpose that was both dark and ceremonial.

The altar, carved from solid stone, was the centrepiece, its surface adorned with intricate patterns that seemed to pulse in the firelight. Strange runes and symbols etched into the rock surrounded the altar, patterns that Karl did not recognise but could sense carried a deeper significance. Each pulpit was decorated with a unique emblem, perhaps signifying different ranks or principles within the Brotherhood. And Engel, standing at the central pulpit, held the highest position — the very heart of this ritualistic ceremony.

The amphitheatre, with its stone seats and towering flags, was alive with grandeur and ritual. Every detail, from the placement of torches to the

colours on the banners, was designed to inspire awe and instil loyalty. The Brotherhood had crafted their own dark pantheon, a homage to the past reimagined with symbols of the present, all set against the ageless stone of the cavern. It was a display of meticulous, sinister pomp, a powerful declaration of their unity, their might, and their unwavering belief in their mission.

As Karl settled into his seat, he quickly realised that this gathering was far more significant than he had anticipated. It wasn't about his initiation or testing his loyalty. Tonight was an occasion unto itself — a dark commemoration, one that pulsed with an almost palpable reverence. The officer at the central pulpit, Engel, announced the purpose of the gathering with solemn intensity: today they celebrated not defeat, but survival. The fall of Berlin, he proclaimed, had marked the beginning of their true mission, a mission carried forward by the Brotherhood.

The Brotherhood saw themselves as protectors of an unfulfilled destiny, charged with sheltering the so-called “birthright” of the Nazi ideal, nurturing it like a flame hidden from the storm. They were here to ensure the beliefs they held were not only preserved but were destined, in their minds, to someday rise in triumph.

For what felt like an eternity, Karl endured the next hour as officer after officer stepped forward to address the assembly, each one delivering their own twisted world-view with fervent passion. Their words dripped with hate, resentment, and the conviction that they were part of something ancient and powerful. They spoke of purging corruption, of protecting purity, of restoring a “lost order.” In their eyes, they were not remnants of a defeated ideology but stewards of an ongoing legacy, biding their time.

The speeches were punctuated by calls to action, chants that filled the cavernous space. Again and again, the gathered men rose from their seats, right hands extended in the familiar salute, their voices thundering “In Einheit und Macht!” — “In Unity and Power!” The echo reverberated off

the stone walls, the collective roar consuming the space with a chilling finality.

Each speech drew deeper from the well of Nazi rhetoric, repurposed in language designed to disguise its old roots in modern phrasing, but the essence remained unmistakable. They spoke of strength, unity, sacrifice, and the preservation of their “ideals” against a world they saw as weakened and corrupted.

Karl kept his expression neutral, his posture attentive, as the minutes wore on. Yet internally, he felt a dark weight pressing down on him. This was no mere nostalgic gathering but a determined, organised effort to ensure that the legacy of hatred lived on. The Brotherhood was not merely protecting its beliefs in secret; they saw themselves as the vanguard of a waiting resurgence.

As the speeches continued, Karl caught sight of Reinhard Schäfer standing near one of the stone pillars, his sharp features cast in stark relief by the torchlight. Unlike the other Brotherhood members who watched the proceedings with reverent attention, Reinhard's gaze remained fixed on Karl, studying his every reaction with the keen eye of a predator watching its prey. Even here, in the midst of their most sacred ceremony, the former security chief's suspicion hadn't wavered.

Earlier, Karl had overheard fragments of a heated discussion between Reinhard and Klaus. "His devotion seems rehearsed," Reinhard had insisted, his voice low but intense. "Like an actor who's studied his role too well."

Klaus had dismissed the concerns with a wave of his hand. "You're seeing shadows where none exist, old friend. The ceremony will prove his worth."

The security chief's stance was rigid, his hands clasped behind his back, waiting for any sign that would validate his suspicions.

With every speech, every salute, the conviction in the room grew thicker, almost tangible, until the air felt as charged as it had been when he first walked through the cave. This was a gathering of men who believed themselves chosen, prepared to do whatever was necessary to bring their “unity and power” to the world once more.

At the end of the speeches, the room fell into a heavy silence as Maximilian Engel rose to his pulpit, his expression solemn and triumphant. His voice carried across the cavernous space, echoing off the stone walls with practised authority. “Tonight, we welcome a lost brother back into the fold. A man of true lineage, descended from heroes, the blood of purity and valour running through his veins. It is his destiny that has brought him here, to us, to reclaim his rightful place among the Brotherhood.”

A thunderous call followed as the crowd once again rose to salute, arms extended and voices booming in unified acclaim. Karl felt the intensity in the room surge as Klaus took him firmly by the arm, guiding him down to the altar. He felt hundreds of eyes on him, their collective gaze pressing down as he was led toward Engel, who awaited him by the altar with a fervent gleam in his eye. The closer he came, the more the shadows from the torches seemed to dance and warp, casting unnatural shapes across the stone.

When they reached the altar, Klaus placed a hand on Karl’s shoulder, urging him down onto his knees before Engel. Karl dropped into position, his mind racing to keep pace with the ceremony unfolding around him. Engel began a low, rhythmic chant, his voice weaving in and out of recognisable German, slipping into words that seemed guttural and archaic, fragments Karl couldn’t decipher. The phrases echoed through the amphitheatre, rising in intensity, as if drawing strength from the energy of the assembled Brotherhood.

Engel’s voice filled the cavern, his words invoking ancient powers and symbols, speaking of a “grand dragon” who had guided their path for millennia, who moulded their purpose, and whose spirit would speak

through him tonight. The torches seemed to burn brighter, their flames stretching toward the stone ceiling as if in answer to Engel's words. Karl's head began to swim, his thoughts becoming hazy as the sounds blended into one pulsating hum, the symbols on the altar blurring before his eyes.

The cave began to distort around him, the world twisting as if viewed through swirling smoke. Engel's figure wavered, his outline expanding and contorting, his face elongating and shifting until, before Karl's disbelieving eyes, he seemed to take the form of a dragon — fierce, scaled, and ancient, its eyes gleaming with the ferocity of ages. The booming chant morphed into a deep, otherworldly rumble, the German words now mingling with incomprehensible syllables that rattled Karl's bones. The voice filled his mind, overwhelming his senses, and he felt the weight of something pressing down on his thoughts, trying to pry open his mind, to force him into submission.

He tried to close his eyes, to shake the image away, but it lingered, the vision burned into his mind. Panic flared as the dragon's face loomed closer, its fanged maw opening as if to consume him. But Karl fought against the fog, forcing himself to focus, to hold onto reality. He took a deep, grounding breath and reached within, summoning every ounce of his willpower.

A familiar shift settled over him as he concentrated. His vision narrowed, and the world around him flattened into shades of grey, his unusual perception taking over. When he opened his eyes again, the dragon was gone, replaced by the unmistakable figure of Engel — or, at least, the shape of Engel. His features, colours, and the dramatic distortions were gone, stripped to their raw texture and form, filtered through the stark lens of Karl's "game mode."

As his clarity returned, Karl realised the truth: whatever he'd just experienced had been designed to warp his perception, bending his mind to see what Engel wanted him to see. Whether through some form of hypnosis or a mind-altering drug, Engel had created the illusion, wielding

it as a tool of control to reinforce the Brotherhood's power and mystique. The symbols, the chanting, the torches — it was all part of a carefully crafted spectacle, a smoke-and-mirrors display to manipulate and bind their followers to their cause.

Steeling himself, Karl forced his breathing to remain steady, playing along to keep his cover intact. He maintained his kneeling posture, pretending to be mesmerised, but his mind was sharp, watching and waiting, now fully aware that this initiation was little more than an elaborate illusion.

As Karl knelt before the altar, shrouded in the swirling fog of his mind's forced vision, Klaus suddenly gripped his shirt and tore it open, ripping the fabric clean down the middle. Buttons scattered across the stone floor, pinging into the darkness. The cold air hit Karl's chest, a stark contrast to the radiating heat he felt moments later as two men stepped forward, carrying a crucible between them. Karl could feel the intense warmth rolling off it, even without being able to see its colours — his altered vision only allowed him a view of muted greys and stark shapes, but the heat was undeniable.

The chanting grew louder, filling the cavern as Engel reached into the crucible. He withdrew a long rod, its end glowing with heat, tipped with an oval disc that bore the distinct outline of the Brotherhood's insignia. Karl's mind raced as he took in the details — the twin-headed serpents coiled around a Roman gladius, the swastika, all encircled by the oak leaf border. His stomach turned with the realisation: this wasn't just a symbolic gesture. They were planning to brand him, to burn the Brotherhood's mark onto his skin as a permanent sign of allegiance.

A shiver of panic shot down Karl's spine. He knew all too well that a brand like this would leave no mark on him. His unique physiology, whatever gave him the strength and resilience, also prevented him from scarring or bruising like an ordinary man. The brand would instantly expose him by leaving no trace — a discrepancy that would be impossible to explain

away. And in a place like this, surrounded by fanatics, that kind of abnormality could spell disaster.

Engel held the glowing brand high, the Brotherhood's twisted insignia gleaming ominously, while the gathered assembly fell silent. The chanting paused, leaving only the steady hiss of the heated metal and Karl's own heartbeat pounding in his ears. He needed to act, to deflect or delay — anything to avoid exposing himself.

In an act of what he hoped seemed devotion, Karl bowed his head lower, pressing his hands into the cold stone beneath him as if in supplication, buying himself a few more precious seconds. He forced his breathing to slow, calculating his next move while the Brotherhood waited in anticipation for the mark to be seared onto his skin.

Karl knelt upright, forcing himself to meet Engel's gaze with unwavering resolve, chest out and prepared for the branding iron. When Engel pressed the heated metal against his bare chest, Karl felt a sharp wave of heat, and he immediately reacted, grabbing the branding iron and forcing it harder against his skin. He masked his true intent with a look of zealous fervour, a fire in his eyes that made Engel pause, momentarily thrown off by the sheer intensity with which Karl embraced the mark.

With the brand still glowing against his chest, Karl turned toward the assembled crowd, gripping the iron tightly and pressing it firmly to his skin, as if to show his unwavering allegiance. He could sense Engel's astonishment, the surprise in his eyes as Karl seemed to brand himself willingly, defiantly. The heat burned through him, but Karl knew he had to put on the display — to act with a devotion that would leave no room for doubt.

As the crowd erupted in thunderous approval, Karl released the brand and fell forward onto his knees, clutching his chest, feigning the reaction they expected. He kept his hands over the spot where the brand should have left

its mark, knowing full well that his skin would show nothing more than a faint reddening at best.

Engel raised his hands in triumph, his voice booming with pride. “This is the mark of a true brother!” he proclaimed, his tone fervent. The crowd echoed in response, their chant of “In Einheit und Macht!” filling the cavern with renewed energy.

Through the haze of his performance, Karl noticed Reinhard's reaction. While the rest of the Brotherhood celebrated Karl's display of devotion, Reinhard remained still, his expression darkening. The security chief's eyes narrowed, focusing on Karl's hands still pressed against his chest, as if trying to see through the deception. In Reinhard's world, such dramatic displays of loyalty often masked the deepest betrayals. Karl knew that despite his performance - or perhaps because of it - he had not convinced everyone. Reinhard Schäfer would continue watching, waiting for the smallest slip that would prove his instincts right.

Klaus approached, a ceremonial cloak in hand, draping it around Karl's shoulders as he guided him to stand. The heavy fabric hung around Karl, mercifully covering his chest. Klaus nodded approvingly, a glint of admiration in his eyes as he addressed the crowd one last time, then leaned in to speak quietly to Karl.

“Come now,” Klaus said, wrapping an arm around Karl and ushering him toward the rear of the stage. “Let's get you some medical attention to help with the pain.”

Karl swallowed hard, trying to maintain his composure. “Thank you, Klaus, but I'd prefer to go without it,” he replied, adding a touch of controlled intensity to his voice. “I want to continue feeling the fire it has ignited within me. To let it burn a while longer.”

Klaus smiled, seemingly moved by Karl's dedication. “Very well,” he said, guiding Karl onward. “A true brother indeed.”

13 Faking It

Karl sank into the comfort of his chair, finally allowing himself to breathe freely after the intense initiation ordeal. He still couldn't believe how close he'd come to revealing his true nature, and he knew that without the cloak Klaus had handed him, it would've been impossible to hide the fact that the branding iron had left no mark. He glanced at the small jar Klaus had given him — the clear, flat container with no markings, filled with an unknown salve. Klaus's words echoed in his mind: "Use this three times a day. It's full of natural ingredients to help expedite healing, prevent infection, and give some pain relief."

Uncapping it, Karl studied the strange ointment, debating whether he should trust its contents. But given Lands's usual advice about caution, he decided against trying it until they could learn more.

It was late, but Karl knew he couldn't delay updating Lands. Dialling his number, he waited as the call connected, then relayed the details of the evening — the initiation, the eerie transformation of Engel into the dragon, and the branding ritual.

Lands listened intently, then responded, his voice thoughtful. "I warned you to be prepared for anything, but this was unexpected. They're clearly using occult theatrics to ramp up initiates' fear and reverence. The whole 'grand dragon' vision? It's clever. By combining myth with a sense of awe, they're setting up a powerful psychological influence over their members."

Karl sighed. "It was terrifying. Without my abilities and shift in vision, I might have been convinced it was real. Whatever they're using, it's powerful."

"I suspect they're relying on a combination of psychoactive drugs and mental suggestion," Lands replied. "Probably in very controlled doses to trigger specific visuals. And that salve... I'd hold off on it until we get it analysed. Usually, I'd recommend a blood test to see what's active in your

system, but, well... with you, that's not an option. How about a urine sample?"

Karl chuckled dryly. "Sure, but that's not the only problem. I don't carry a brand. At some point, they'll realise no mark was left."

"Understood," Lands said. "We'll need to arrange a professional make-up artist — not the beauty parlour kind, but a specialised effects artist, someone who can make it look authentic. Movie quality, you know? I'll reach out to Cecilia; she can set us up."

After a pause, Lands looped Cecilia into the call. She quickly absorbed Karl's briefing, and a note of disbelief entered her voice. "Karl, I have to admit, I'm impressed. But this is risky, and we need to keep you covered at every angle. I'll make sure we get a top-notch artist who can replicate the brand. Meanwhile, take every precaution, and don't trust anything they give you."

"Appreciate it," Karl replied. "It's been a close call, and I'm hoping this buys us enough time to push deeper without raising suspicion."

"Leave it to me," Cecilia assured him. "I'll have someone in place by tomorrow. Stay safe, Karl, and remember — they may still be watching."

Karl's mind was a haze of disjointed images and questions as he moved through his morning. The thought that they might still be watching lingered like a shadow, casting a constant sense of unease over every action. He'd slept poorly, tossing and turning with flashes of the dragon's face and Engel's distorted figure burning in his mind. He wondered if any remnants of the drug might still be affecting him or if the visions had simply embedded themselves in his subconscious. Either way, he felt worn thin by the time morning arrived.

A strong dose of caffeine with breakfast helped shake off the grogginess, and as he sat back in his chair outside the patisserie, enjoying the sun, his phone rang. It was Cecilia.

“I’ve arranged a haircut for you at 1pm.,” she informed him, her tone brisk. “I’ll text you the address. They’re expecting you.”

“Thanks, Cecilia,” Karl replied, mentally preparing himself for the next stage in this elaborate cover.

The time crawled by until the early afternoon, and almost subconsciously, Karl found his hand drifting to his chest, lightly scratching the spot where the brand should have been. The reminder stoked his vigilance, and as he made his way to the salon, he took a circuitous route, subtly cutting through alleys, changing his pace, doubling back at key points, all the techniques ingrained in him to shake any potential tail.

Satisfied that he wasn’t being followed, he finally arrived at the salon. A well-dressed attendant greeted him at the door, her voice soft and professional. “Herr Müller, we’ve been expecting you. Come on through to the back, and we’ll look after you.”

Following her through the stylish, subdued decor of the salon, Karl was led to a private styling room at the back. Inside waited his contact: a confident woman with an artist’s poise, her movements precise as she prepared her tools. Her name was Sabine, and she held an air of assurance that hinted at years of experience.

“Welcome, Herr Müller,” she said, her accent and manner polished. “I’ve been briefed on your request. I understand you need a... fresh ‘mark’ today.” She smiled with a professional warmth. “You can relax. You’re in skilled hands.”

Karl inclined his head. “Thank you, Sabine. I’ll need the brand to look convincing. It has to match exactly.”

She pulled up a stool, noting the seriousness in his expression. “Describe it to me, if you would. I want to make sure I get every detail.”

Instead of attempting a verbal explanation, Karl reached into his pocket and produced the silver insignia, the exact emblem of the Brotherhood that

the members believed had once belonged to his grandfather. He handed it to her, and Sabine's eyes widened slightly, recognition flickering as she studied the double-headed serpents coiling around the gladius.

"Excellent," she murmured, turning it in her hands with an artist's eye for detail. "This is perfect. I'll replicate every detail, down to the smallest edge."

Sabine set to work, her calm demeanour a comforting contrast to the intensity of the last 24 hours. As she began the intricate application, Karl allowed himself to relax, realising that, at least for now, he was safely in the hands of an ally.

As Sabine introduced Karl to her assistant, a skilled beautician from the salon, she offered a warm smile. "You must leave here looking like you've had a full treatment," she said cheerfully. "We'll cut your hair, give you a facial, and do a complete manicure while I work on the brand. You'll feel like a new man."

Karl smirked, slightly amused by the unexpected pampering, but he knew the cover would add authenticity. As Sabine meticulously painted the brand onto his chest, Karl marvelled at her artistry. She layered colour, texture, and shadow with precision, creating an illusion so convincing he could hardly believe it wasn't freshly burnt into his skin.

Once finished, Sabine examined her work with a critical eye. She looked at Karl and gave a satisfied nod. "There, that's perfect." She handed him a small vial of gel and a few dressings in various states of 'healing.' "To keep up the illusion, you'll need to apply this gel to make it look moist, as if it's healing. A few dabs of fake blood, here and there, will give it that fresh wound appearance. And these dressings — you should change them every day to keep up the impression of a progressing injury."

Karl looked down at his chest, impressed. The painted brand glistened with the gel, and the faux bandages gave the wound a believable touch of discomfort and rawness.

“Thank you, Sabine,” he said, genuine gratitude in his tone. He felt rejuvenated after the facial, manicure, and haircut, an unexpected benefit he hadn’t counted on. “I feel like I’m heading out for a gala instead of undercover.”

Sabine laughed lightly, but her tone was serious as she applied the finishing touches. She carefully added small dabs of blood to his shirt, creating the appearance of fresh seepage, making the injury look even more authentic.

“There,” she said, stepping back with a satisfied smile. “You’re ready, Herr Müller. Good luck. And if you ever need a touch-up, you know where to find me.”

As Karl prepared to leave, he suddenly remembered the mysterious salve Klaus had given him. “One more thing, Sabine,” he said, fishing the unmarked jar from his pocket. “Could you please pass this to Lands? He’ll want to analyse it.” He handed over the jar, warning her not to get any on her skin, but to take a sample to pass on to Lands.

Then, with a brief hesitation, he pulled out a discreet bottle containing a sample he’d prepared that morning. “And... this, too,” he added, feeling a bit self-conscious. “Lands mentioned he’d want to for any substances that might still be in my system. You know, just to cover all the bases.”

Sabine took both items without a flicker of surprise, her professionalism unwavering. “I’ll make sure he gets these right away,” she said reassuringly, slipping them into her bag. “Good luck, Herr Müller. And remember — you’ve got allies here.”

With a nod of gratitude, Karl stepped out into the world once more, feeling more prepared and shielded than before. That feeling lasted precisely two seconds.

His stomach dropped as he took in the sight of two men waiting outside the salon. His first thought went straight to Reinhard Schäfer - the security chief’s perpetual suspicion finally bearing fruit. They were unmistakable -

the typecast henchmen, clean-cut and impeccably dressed, their pressed attire resembling a uniform more than civilian clothing. For a moment, Karl's mind raced through scenarios of how this might play out, calculating angles of escape, considering whether he'd need to use his abilities in broad daylight.

"Herr Müller," one of them said smoothly, his tone respectful yet firm. "Herr Bergmann has requested us to take you to him."

The tension in Karl's shoulders eased slightly at the mention of Bergmann's name, though he kept his guard up. He returned a polite nod, falling into step behind them as they led him to the waiting car. Yet even as he settled into the back seat, maintaining a relaxed demeanour, his mind was anything but calm. He couldn't shake the thought: These guys are good. I must have missed them tailing me to the salon.

"Certainly," Karl replied, masking his unease with a polite nod as he followed them to the waiting car. He settled into the back seat, maintaining a relaxed demeanour, but his mind was anything but calm. He couldn't shake the thought: These guys are good. I must have missed them tailing me to the salon. He had taken every precaution, used every trick in his play book to shake any tail — and yet here they were, waiting for him as if they'd known his every move.

The engine started, and the car pulled smoothly into the flow of traffic. Karl felt a twinge of discomfort. If they had somehow managed to tail him to the salon, was his cover now in jeopardy? Had they observed the visit or noted the time he'd spent with Sabine and her team?

But he forced himself to remain calm, knowing that any sign of anxiety could tip them off. He leaned back, allowing his expression to remain neutral, as he let his thoughts spiral through contingency plans. As they drove, Karl prepared himself for whatever Bergmann had in store, knowing that if his cover was compromised, this might well turn into a high-stakes game of survival.

14 Invitation

Seated in Klaus's study, Karl watched as Bergmann prepared two glasses of whisky, his movements deliberate, each gesture measured. The warmth in Klaus's demeanour felt genuine, yet Karl couldn't shake the undercurrent of something darker in their exchange. Klaus handed him a glass, settling into the chair opposite with a broad smile.

"Welcome, brother," Klaus greeted him, his voice filled with camaraderie. "I hope you are well today. We didn't cause you too much harm during the ceremony, did we?"

Karl forced a small smile, raising his glass in response. "Of course not, Klaus. I feel only the warmth of brotherhood in my chest."

"Good, good," Klaus nodded approvingly. "And you are using the salve? It is a special blend, passed down within our circle. Quite effective for... pain and recovery."

"Yes," Karl replied smoothly, "it offers some comfort." He watched Klaus's eyes, searching for any hint that the salve might be more than it seemed. But Klaus's expression remained neutral, his focus shifting to broader topics.

For the next few minutes, Klaus's voice took on an almost reverent tone as he spoke about the Brotherhood, expressing his gratitude for Karl's initiation. "You are a welcome addition to our ranks, brother. Few can understand the true meaning of our purpose, but you... you were meant for this. You have the mark, the strength, and, most importantly, the belief."

But Karl noticed something strange in Klaus's choice of words. Repeatedly, in subtle but deliberate phrasing, Klaus kept invoking the "grand dragon." Each mention was woven naturally into their conversation, yet it became impossible to ignore. Klaus referred to the Brotherhood's shared strength as "the dragon's fire," to their purpose as

“the dragon’s path,” and even to their legacy as being guided by “the dragon’s will.” Every statement seemed almost calculated, laced with subtle reinforcement.

The effect was jarring, as if Klaus were attempting to summon the vision of the dragon back into Karl’s mind, weaving it into the fabric of the Brotherhood’s identity. What should have been a simple conversation of camaraderie was saturated with suggestive cues, pressing the idea of the dragon further, as though Klaus were testing Karl’s belief or planting seeds for something deeper.

Karl kept his responses neutral, nodding and showing interest, but his mind was churning. He’d expected reinforcement of Brotherhood ideals, but the repetitive mention of the dragon hinted at something else — a deliberate attempt to condition him, to tie his allegiance not just to the Brotherhood but to the image of the “grand dragon” itself. The casual warmth of Klaus’s conversation felt scripted, each line chosen to mould Karl’s thoughts.

Still, Karl held his composure, matching Klaus’s enthusiasm, even as he realised that he’d have to tread carefully. If this entire conversation was a subtle reinforcement, then any hint of disbelief could raise suspicion.

Klaus leaned forward, his gaze intensifying as he spoke, “Tomorrow, we will take you to where the Brotherhood’s true work takes place. It’s a town dedicated solely to our people, where members and their families live beyond the reach of modern interference. No worldly restrictions, no prying eyes — only the freedom to build our vision.”

Karl nodded, keeping his expression one of reverent interest, even as an undercurrent of unease stirred within him.

“We’ll collect you in the early morning,” Klaus continued. “You should pack all your belongings and out of your current lodgings. There will be a place prepared for you in Freiburg. But,” he added, his tone shifting to one of solemn emphasis, “to live among us, you must sever all connections to

the outside world. No mobile phones, no internet, no electronic tethers of any kind.”

The words hung heavy in the air, and Karl forced himself to appear thoughtful, as though weighing the significance of this change. Freiburg, then — a place designed to insulate the Brotherhood’s inner circle, perhaps, where any slip in his cover would be far more difficult to escape. Still, his path was clear; he could see no alternative that wouldn’t risk suspicion.

“Understood,” Karl replied, nodding slowly. “I am ready to embrace this next step, to leave behind distractions that don’t serve the Brotherhood.”

Klaus’s approving smile returned. “Good. You are truly one of us, Herr Müller. Pack only what you need. Everything else will be provided. Tomorrow, we will welcome you into the very heart of our purpose.”

As they rose, Karl maintained the mask of loyalty, though his mind raced. Stripping away his lifeline to the agency — to Cecilia, to Lands — would mean venturing into deeper waters than ever before. And yet, he had no choice but to follow this path, to step further into the Brotherhood’s inner circle, where even the smallest mistake could lead to disaster.

Back at his lodgings, Karl dialled Lands and laid out the situation. “I’m about to go completely dark. They’re expecting me to get rid of my phone and all other electronics. I’ll be totally cut off, Lands. Completely solo.”

There was a pause before Lands responded. “Karl, you don’t have to go through with this. We’ve gathered valuable intel already. We can use what you’ve collected to make a case, even without pushing you deeper.”

Karl shook his head, even though Lands couldn’t see him. “It’s not enough. If we’re going to bring the Brotherhood down for good, we need undeniable proof from the heart of their operations. This has to be seen through to the end.”

A thought struck Karl then, something from his earliest days under Lands's watch. "What about the trackers you used back when you first followed me? Could we use one of those?"

Lands seemed to catch his drift. "You mean the micro-transmitters? We could, but they're designed to be fired into a target, and we can't get them under your skin."

"What if I swallowed it?" Karl proposed, bracing for Lands's reaction.

There was a beat of silence. "It's possible," Lands finally replied, sounding cautiously optimistic. "It's small enough, and the signal should go undetected by any wireless scans they use – I'm not sure of the technology, but I believe it's not radio. But the design may not be exactly... gastrointestinal-friendly. There's some risk, Karl."

"More of a risk if I go in there with no backup," Karl countered.

Lands sighed, a resigned tone seeping into his voice. "Alright, we'll make it happen. I'll set up a dead drop, and you'll get the tracker. But once it's in, you need to be careful. Don't take unnecessary risks. We'll be monitoring you, but you'll still be alone."

They quickly arranged the location and time for the dead drop, with Lands giving him specific instructions on how to retrieve the tracker covertly. With that small piece of security, Karl felt a renewed sense of resolve. This was going to be the deepest he'd gone undercover — a step that would either expose the Brotherhood or endanger him more than ever.

15 Freiburg

At precisely 4am, Karl was greeted by the sight of a rugged, matte black Ford Ranger 4x4 pulling up in front of his lodging. The vehicle looked well-used, its paint dull with the grit of countless back roads. The driver, a stoic-looking man with a military bearing, stepped out, hoisting Karl's bag into the back of the cab before opening the passenger door for him.

"Herr Müller, I am Christian," he said, his voice brisk. "I'm here to take you to Freiburg. Can you confirm that you have no electronic devices with you?"

"Thank you, Christian. Call me Karl," he replied, stepping into the passenger seat. "I've left all my electronics behind."

"Good," Christian nodded, seemingly satisfied. "We have a long drive ahead of us today. There's water and snacks in the compartment, and a flask of black coffee with milk sachets if you need."

Karl nodded appreciatively, trying not to betray his nerves. "Thank you. Very thoughtful."

Christian settled into the driver's seat, checking the mirrors with military precision before starting the engine. As they began to roll through the still-dark streets, Karl could feel the tracker he'd swallowed last night — a solid reminder that, despite the Brotherhood's best efforts to isolate him, he wasn't entirely alone.

As they picked up speed, Christian broke the silence. "Feel free to change the radio station, if you like."

Karl glanced at the controls, the casual offer feeling strangely out of place in the otherwise austere setup. "Thank you," he replied, amused by the efficiency. Germans, he thought, never miss a detail.

The early morning road stretched ahead, and Karl took a moment to observe his driver. Christian's demeanour was reserved but polite, exuding a calm, dutiful energy. It would be hours before they reached Freiburg, and Karl knew this journey was only the beginning. He leaned back in the seat, preparing himself mentally for the next step into the Brotherhood's world — a step from which there'd be no turning back.

The journey through the Brazilian countryside unfolded in a mesmerizing display of contrasts. Dense jungle stretched out on either side of the road, a tapestry of lush greens and tangled vines that seemed to swallow everything around it. Mist lingered in the valleys and clung to the towering trees, casting an ethereal glow over the landscape as dawn broke. Here and there, small, rustic villages dotted the roadside, their humble buildings a testament to the rural life of Brazil, remote and untouched by modernity. Karl watched the changing scenery in silence, the dense greenery and occasional bursts of colour from tropical flowers an odd prelude to his destination.

Nearly six hours into the drive, Christian finally spoke, breaking the long stretch of silence. "We're almost there," he announced, steering the 4x4 off the paved road onto a wide dirt track.

Karl felt the weight of the decision he needed to make. The tracker he'd swallowed was meant to keep him connected to Lands, but as they approached what was clearly a heavily secured compound, the risk of detection became too high. One scan with the right equipment would expose everything.

The transition from smooth asphalt to rugged path was jarring, the wheels kicking up clouds of red dust as they began winding deeper into the forest. When Christian slowed to navigate a particularly rough section, Karl seized his moment. He leaned out the window, ostensibly to avoid the motion sickness from the bumpy ride, and quietly expelled the tracker into the dense undergrowth. With any luck, they were close enough to their destination for Lands to pinpoint the general location.

Immediately after, Karl noted signs posted along the roadside in both German and Portuguese: "Danger: Mine Works, Risk of Death." A clear message to any unwanted visitors, reinforced by security cameras mounted high on poles, tracking their passage with an unblinking gaze.

The forest closed in around them, thick with tangled undergrowth and towering trees, their canopy creating a shadowed tunnel that stretched onward. Despite Christian's earlier statement that they were close, the drive continued for nearly an hour more, winding along narrow trails and through steep, wooded hills that seemed to isolate them from the outside world with each passing mile. It was as if they were being absorbed by the jungle itself.

As the rugged Ford Ranger approached the outskirts of the town, Karl saw the road ahead blocked by a heavy wooden barrier, reinforced with iron bands and flanked by two sharply dressed soldiers. They wore stark black uniforms, with high leather boots, polished to perfection, gleaming in the morning light. Each soldier bore the now-familiar green armband, emblazoned with the two-headed snake motif, their insignia ominously standing out against the dense green backdrop of the forest.

Slung across their shoulders were H&K G36 assault rifles, the modern weapons lending a jarring contrast to their otherwise old-world appearance. Holstered at their hips were sleek, black handguns, and their expressions were serious and professional, showing none of the casual indifference Karl had seen at checkpoints elsewhere. Every detail was meticulously controlled — even the way they moved seemed steeped in the precision of German military tradition.

Christian slowed the vehicle, rolling down the window as they approached. One of the soldiers stepped forward, clipboard in hand. His voice was low but authoritative as he addressed Christian in German. "Name and purpose of your passenger."

Christian gestured to Karl with a nod. “This is Karl Müller. He’s an expected arrival.”

The soldier glanced at his clipboard, scanning down the list with practised speed. With a curt nod, he motioned to his partner, who held a wand-like device in his hand, clearly designed to detect electronic signals. As the first soldier checked off the names, the second walked slowly around the vehicle, sweeping the wand meticulously over each corner, each door, and under the chassis. The tension was palpable as Karl sat perfectly still, aware that even the smallest device would set off an alarm and potentially compromise him.

After a few tense moments, the soldier with the scanner straightened and gave a nod to his companion. “Clear,” he announced in clipped tones. With a swift movement, the first soldier signalled to raise the barrier, and Christian drove forward without a word, the Ranger rolling smoothly past the checkpoint and into the heart of the Brotherhood’s secluded domain.

Karl exhaled slowly, feeling the weight of the encounter sink in. Every step they took toward the town seemed to pull him deeper into a world of control and secrecy, where even the smallest misstep could unravel everything.

Finally, the dense foliage gave way, and the town came into view, a vision plucked straight from the heart of Bavaria. Nestled within the encroaching forest, the town looked like a slice of Germany transplanted into the Brazilian wilderness. Rows of half-timbered houses lined cobbled streets, their white walls accented with dark wooden beams and steeply pitched roofs that gave each building a classic Alpine charm. Flower boxes brimming with red geraniums hung beneath windows, while the gabled facades of the houses added to the quaint, storybook quality of the scene.

The town’s central square came into view, complete with a clock tower rising above the rooftops. The clock face, adorned with Roman numerals and an ornate iron framework, gleamed in the filtered sunlight. Around it,

Bavarian-style shops and small bakeries with signs in German advertised fresh bread, cured meats, and imported goods from the “homeland,” reinforcing the unmistakable European atmosphere.

Yet there was an eerie quality to it all. The neatly painted signs, the immaculate facades, and the carefully maintained gardens seemed almost too perfect, like a staged set rather than a lived-in town. Despite its picturesque appearance, there was an underlying sense of isolation, as if this place existed in a world of its own, untouched by time — or by Brazil.

As they drove further into the town, Karl took in the immensity of the Brotherhood’s hidden settlement. The streets were wide and immaculate, but they felt strangely empty. There was no hum of engines, no parked cars, no bicycles leaning against walls. The entire town seemed to function without the convenience of modern transportation, suggesting either an intricate system of unseen garages or, more likely, a commitment to maintaining an old-world aesthetic. It was eerily quiet, save for the occasional distant murmur of voices or footsteps echoing between buildings.

The journey to the central square had been longer than anticipated, the wide streets winding through what seemed like endless rows of houses, shops, and public buildings, all built in that same Bavarian style. Half-timbered facades, steeply pitched roofs, and wrought iron signs adorned each building, giving the town a quaint European charm that felt utterly at odds with the Brazilian jungle just beyond.

When the square finally came into view, dominated by the towering clock, Karl’s sense of unease grew. This wasn’t just a small hidden village; it was a fully realised town, meticulously constructed to house a significant population. If the buildings extended far beyond the square — which seemed likely from the narrow alleyways winding off in various directions — then the Brotherhood’s enclave could easily accommodate thousands. The sheer scale was staggering.

As they passed through, a few pedestrians moved along the side walks, all dressed in muted, conservative attire. They glanced at the Ranger but quickly looked away, as if trained not to notice vehicles or unfamiliar faces. It was as though the town's inhabitants had perfected the art of blending into the background, creating an air of quiet vigilance that made Karl's skin crawl.

His thoughts raced. The Brotherhood had effectively constructed a hidden society here, built on Nazi ideals and woven into a closed community of like-minded individuals. Bringing this operation down would be monumental — far more challenging than he'd originally anticipated. How many members were there, and how deeply embedded was this network? How did they live, isolated yet seemingly content in a place rooted in warped history and secrecy? And if it ever came to a confrontation, what would an extraction or takedown even look like?

As the Ranger finally pulled to a stop in front of an austere, half-timbered building, Karl braced himself. The scale of what he was about to infiltrate was dawning on him in full. He was one man, now without his team, deep in a place where the Brotherhood held absolute control. Every instinct warned him that the slightest slip could turn this mission from infiltration to survival.

As Christian drove off, leaving Karl alone in the broad square, Karl took a moment to compose himself. He adjusted his bag on his shoulder, steeling himself for what lay ahead, and entered the administration building.

Inside, a sharply dressed man processed Karl's arrival with mechanical efficiency, handing him a slim welcome pack emblazoned with the Brotherhood's double-headed snake emblem. Every detail, from the crisp papers to the man's immaculate appearance, spoke of control and precision.

"Welcome to Freiburg, Herr Müller," the man said, his voice laced with polite formality. "Your accommodations have been arranged at the newcomer's quarters, designed to help you adapt to our community. You'll

find the location marked on this map,” he added, pointing to a circled area near the town’s edge. “It includes all the essentials — a bedroom, living area, and bathroom — along with access to laundry, dining facilities, and other conveniences.”

Karl nodded as the man continued, glancing through the materials in the welcome pack. The booklet contained information on town amenities. There was also a section outlining behavioural standards and codes of conduct, emphasizing the importance of respect for tradition, obedience, and cohesion. Newcomers, it seemed, were expected to adhere strictly to these guidelines, maintaining the community’s values without question.

His accommodations, he quickly learned, were more like a well-appointed hotel suite than simple lodgings. “Should you require any assistance, simply inform your housekeeper,” the man concluded, his hands clasped in front of him. “You are here to embrace the Brotherhood’s way of life, Herr Müller. We trust you’ll find everything to your satisfaction.”

With a final nod, Karl left the desk, map and welcome pack in hand. As he walked toward his designated quarters, he could already sense the intricacies of this well-organised community. The Brotherhood had thought of everything, from rigid control over residents’ movements and interactions to providing comfort that would help soften the isolation from the outside world. Every detail was a piece of the intricate web that held this place together, cementing its inhabitants’ loyalty — and Karl would have to navigate it all, slipping into the role of a true believer to uncover the secrets hidden within.

Karl sat back in his chair, sifting through the materials from the administration centre, mentally replacing each instance of “responsibilities” with “regulations.” The meticulous expectations were clear: everyone was to follow a rigid schedule, their lives organised down to the hour. Mealtimes were fixed, with no room for spontaneity. Shops and businesses adhered to a strict operational timetable, creating a sense of mechanical order that seemed designed to enforce control under the guise

of community discipline. Every activity was laid out, turning life in Freiburg into an orchestrated routine where individuality seemed not just discouraged but entirely erased.

A knock at the door pulled him from his thoughts. When he answered, he found the housekeeper waiting, her demeanour composed but expectant. “Herr Müller, Herr Bergmann will be attending at 8pm. He has requested that you join him for dinner in the restaurant downstairs.”

Karl inclined his head. “Thank you. I’ll be ready.”

She offered a brief, courteous nod before turning to leave. As Karl closed the door, he checked his watch. It was just after seven. He had time to prepare, but the invitation came with a weight of its own. Dining with Bergmann would be an opportunity to learn more about the Brotherhood’s intentions for him, but it would also demand that he keep up his persona, adjusting to the ever-tightening grip of this community.

He glanced once more at the pages of the welcome pack spread out before him, mentally cataloguing the rigid schedule and rehearsing the phrases he’d need to echo as Karl Müller, the loyal initiate.

Karl had prepared himself carefully, knowing that punctuality here meant arriving early. Arriving at an 8pm event at 8pm would be seen as late, arrival by 7:55pm expected. He was dressed and ready, descending the stairs to the restaurant, his attire crisp and fitting the formal standards outlined in his welcome pack. The restaurant itself was as polished as everything else in Freiburg, with tables set immaculately, linen napkins neatly folded, and candlelight casting a warm glow over dark wood panelling. It looked like a high-end Bavarian dining room — refined, orderly, and conspicuously devoid of any hint of Brazilian influence.

As he entered, Klaus rose to greet him, extending his hand in a firm, almost brotherly shake. “How are you settling in?” Klaus asked, his expression one of polite interest.

Karl returned the handshake with a slight nod. "I can hardly believe such a place exists in the heart of Brazil," he replied smoothly. "A slice of heaven from above."

Klaus's smile widened, pleased. "Yes, Freiburg truly is a sanctuary — a carefully cultivated haven away from the chaos of the world. It's where we can live freely, unburdened by modern distractions or outside influences."

They took their seats, and a server promptly arrived to fill their glasses with a deep red wine. The air was thick with the aroma of traditional dishes: sauerbraten, dumplings, and savoury soups. The formality of the meal seemed a ritual in itself, every detail reinforcing the Brotherhood's discipline and reverence for tradition.

As the first course was served, Klaus looked at Karl thoughtfully. "In Freiburg, we value stability, purpose, and adherence to the legacy of those who came before us," he said, his tone conversational yet layered with meaning. "How does it feel to be part of something with such structure? To be able to live by a clear set of principles?"

Karl nodded, carefully choosing his words. "It's refreshing. The predictability, the structure... it's grounding. It reminds me of the values my grandfather held. Order, loyalty, a sense of duty." He raised his glass in a small toast. "To stability."

"To stability," Klaus echoed, clinking his glass with Karl's, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

Klaus swirled the wine in his glass, and for a moment, his carefully maintained facade seemed to slip. "You know, Karl, I was once like you - questioning, uncertain. I had a successful career in the Ministry, a comfortable life. But I saw our culture eroding, our values being stripped away." His voice carried a hint of genuine pain. "My grandfather fought in the war, died believing in something greater than himself. And what did we do with that sacrifice? We became soft, apologetic, ashamed of our heritage."

He set down his glass, and Karl noticed a slight tremor in his hand - the first crack he'd seen in Klaus's disciplined demeanour. "The Brotherhood gave me purpose again. Not just the ideology, but the vision of what we could become. Here in Freiburg, we've built something pure, untouched by modern weakness. When I see those children growing up strong, understanding duty and honour..." Klaus's eyes took on a distant look. "Sometimes I wonder if I'm doing enough, if I should be here permanently instead of playing politics in Berlin. But we each serve where we're needed, don't we?"

As they dined, Klaus leaned forward, his tone both conversational and weighted. "You see, Karl," he began, gesturing subtly to the dining room around them, "I didn't bring you here to live in Freiburg permanently. Rather, I wanted you to experience it — to understand our true objective." He paused, letting his words settle in. "This place represents our vision, our ideal. Freiburg is what we strive to bring to the world: a simpler existence, free from the poisons of modern greed, a society grounded in self-sufficiency and unity. For us, it is Nirvana."

Klaus's gaze swept the room, pride evident in his expression. "While our acolytes live and develop here, honing their abilities and learning the values we hold dear, our leaders — those destined to shape the world — operate beyond these walls. Their task is to bring about the transformation we need, to set the Fatherland and eventually Europe on a course back to this kind of life. Freiburg, you see, is the model."

Karl took a measured sip of his wine, nodding in understanding. Klaus's words revealed that Freiburg was more than a hidden community; it was the Brotherhood's blueprint for a world order they intended to impose on a much larger scale.

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you wish," Klaus continued, his tone softening. "You still have some healing to do." His eyes flicked briefly to Karl's chest, where the dressing was visible beneath his shirt collar. "And while you recover, I'll make sure you're brought up to speed on

every aspect of the Brotherhood's plans. Then, you can decide how you'll contribute."

He leaned back, giving Karl an appraising look. "But let me assure you, Karl, this is entirely a choice. Each of us finds our place here; we contribute as our talents and backgrounds best allow. Not everyone here is meant to be a baker, or a soldier. Some are politicians, others are leaders in business, engineering, education. And I feel certain," he added, with a slight smile, "that a man of your legacy, your skills, will be invaluable to our cause."

Karl inclined his head, choosing his words carefully. "I appreciate the trust you're placing in me, Klaus. To be part of something of this scale... I only hope my skills can meet the Brotherhood's expectations."

Klaus lifted his glass, his smile deepening. "Oh, I have no doubt you will find exactly where you're meant to be. To the Brotherhood and its future, Karl."

"To the Brotherhood and its future," Karl echoed, clinking his glass with Klaus's, all the while feeling the weight of the path they were laying before him.

16 **Stahlkrieger**

The next morning found Karl in the dining hall as dawn broke. The Brotherhood's strict schedule meant most members were already seated, their breakfast a mirror of German tradition - dark bread, cold cuts, and strong coffee. He found an open spot at a table where three men sat reading copies of the town's newspaper, printed in crisp German type.

"Müller, isn't it?" one of them asked, folding his paper with methodical precision. He introduced himself as Weber, an accountant who'd lived in Freiburg for five years. The others - Schmidt, a teacher, and Fischer, who managed one of the town's workshops - nodded in greeting. Their conversation flowed with practised ease, but Karl noticed the careful pattern to their interaction. They spoke of their work, their families, the day ahead - all normal topics, yet each comment seemed measured, as if weighed before being spoken.

When a senior member entered the hall, the subtle shift in atmosphere was immediate. Backs straightened, voices lowered, and conversations took on an almost ceremonial quality. Even here, over morning coffee, the Brotherhood's hierarchy imposed itself. Karl watched as Weber caught Schmidt's eye after a slightly too-casual remark, the tiny gesture enough to make Schmidt adjust his tone. These weren't just colleagues sharing breakfast; they were men who had learned to navigate a world where every interaction was noted, every word evaluated. Their friendly discourse masked a constant awareness of being watched, of being judged against the Brotherhood's exacting standards.

Gunter arrived just as Karl finished his coffee. "Herr Müller," he said with crisp efficiency, "I'm to show you our community today." Karl replied, "Please, call me Karl. There is no need of formality." "Of course, Herr Müller... Karl." stuttered Gunter.

Karl followed Gunter through the meticulously organised town, taking in each detail as they walked. The tour began with the heart of Freiburg: the imposing town hall, where the Brotherhood's administration operated, maintaining order and overseeing daily activities.

Following Gunter through the quaint streets of Freiburg, he began noticing something strange about the town's children. Unlike the usual exuberance of youth, the children had a disciplined air about them, a maturity that felt unnatural. There was no laughter, no running or playing, only an intense focus in their eyes as they spoke in low, quiet tones.

Karl watched the children file past, their movements eerily synchronised. There was something unsettling about their uniformity - not just in behaviour, but in appearance. Despite different ages, they shared an uncanny similarity, as though they could all be siblings. Their features, their builds, even the way they carried themselves seemed cut from the same cloth. It wasn't just indoctrination shaping these children; something deeper was at work.

"This is the school," Gunter said, stopping in front of a modest, two-story building nestled between a bakery and a library. The building was plain, almost sterile, with neat rows of windows and a small sign bearing the Brotherhood's double-headed serpent motif.

Inside, the school echoed the solemnity of its young pupils. Karl noticed children sitting at their desks in a disciplined posture, attentively watching their teacher, who was addressing the room in a firm, authoritative tone. Alongside the usual academic subjects like reading, writing, and arithmetic, the blackboard displayed words he hadn't seen in any other classroom: Loyalty, Heritage, Strength, Duty — each written with a purpose, like pillars on which the curriculum was built.

"These children are the future," Gunter said proudly, sensing Karl's curiosity. "They're raised to understand their place in our society. Discipline is instilled early, along with our beliefs."

Karl nodded, hiding his discomfort as he observed a young girl, perhaps eight or nine, whose eyes met his briefly. There was a fleeting hint of curiosity, but it quickly faded as she resumed her stoic expression, her gaze returning to the teacher. These children weren't being educated; they were being indoctrinated. Karl realised that joy and individuality had been stripped from them, replaced with an almost mechanical loyalty to the Brotherhood.

"We teach them the importance of unity and purpose," Gunter continued. "From a young age, they're trained to think of the Brotherhood as family, to embrace their heritage, and to commit themselves to our mission. They are our hope for the future."

Karl forced a smile, his heart sinking as he saw the weight these young children carried, a forced maturity that deprived them of innocence. He wondered how many of them had been part of the Brotherhood's genetic experiments, engineered to fit their twisted ideals. The Brotherhood wasn't just creating soldiers or acolytes; they were moulding a generation to embody their beliefs, erasing anything that might lead to dissent.

As they left the school, Karl couldn't shake the image of those serious faces, already lost to a cause they hadn't chosen, bound by the Brotherhood's relentless control.

Karl's measured steps belied the churning in his gut. Those children's eyes haunted him - not just their stillness, but the complete absence of childhood within them. He'd seen that look before, in old footage of the Hitler Youth, but seeing it in person, in these young faces, made it viscerally real. Each child sat like a miniature soldier, their spirits already stripped away, replaced with the Brotherhood's iron discipline. He thought of his own nephew back home, always laughing, always asking 'why,' his curiosity boundless. These children would never ask why. They'd never know the simple joy of being young, of making mistakes, of learning through play rather than diktat. The Brotherhood hadn't just built a

community; they'd created a factory for manufacturing loyalty, starting with minds too young to resist.

"This," Gunter said as they continued past the more public spaces, "is where we come together for announcements, for community celebrations, and — when needed — public displays of commitment to the Brotherhood."

Gunter's tone hinted at an underlying purpose, but Karl remained composed, nodding with interest as they left the town's main area, crossing over into grounds toward the town's rear. Here, the landscape opened up, revealing a large, open field bordered by dense forest and a few neatly arranged training structures. Gunter gestured to the area with pride.

"This is the parade ground," he announced. "It's where we conduct all of our training. Every man here is expected to be disciplined in body as well as mind."

Karl looked across the parade ground, noticing small groups of men drilling with a precision he recognised immediately. He watched as they moved in synchronicity, practising hand-to-hand manoeuvres under the strict guidance of their instructors.

"What kind of training?" Karl asked, his tone casual.

Gunter's eyes gleamed. "We are trained for combat, marksmanship, hunting, hand-to-hand combat, fencing, horse riding... even survival and tracking." He gestured toward the forest on the far edge of the grounds. "We must be prepared for any environment, any task. Our physical abilities are honed here to ensure we're capable in all manner of disciplines."

Karl feigned a look of admiration, though internally, he was cataloguing each detail with scrutiny. This wasn't simply a secluded community; it was a well-organised training hub, designed to turn members into versatile operatives, skilled in both combat and survival. He kept his expression respectful, masking the unease brewing within him.

“Impressive,” he replied, nodding. “It’s clear the Brotherhood holds its standards high.”

Gunter looked pleased, his chest swelling slightly with pride. “Absolutely. We are guardians of a legacy, and it is our duty to be ready at any moment.” He gestured to another section of the grounds, where rows of targets stood, waiting for sessions. “Would you care to try your hand at marksmanship, Karl?”

Karl smiled, maintaining his facade. “It would be my pleasure.”

They strode onto the parade ground and toward the rifle range, where each firing station was equipped with sleek, modern rifles and handguns neatly arranged on racks. Gunter gestured for Karl to take a spot, nodding to a soldier currently manning the station. The soldier snapped to attention, promptly ejecting the magazine and clearing the chamber before handing over the H&K MG36 to Karl in a smooth, practised motion.

“Would you like any assistance with the rifle, Herr Müller?” the soldier asked with formal deference.

Karl shook his head, his voice calm but confident. “I think I can manage.” With practised ease, he took the magazine, inserted it, and racked the bolt, feeling the familiar weight and balance of the rifle in his hands. The agency training had included the G36 platform extensively, making the MG36 variant feel like second nature.

Setting the bi-pod onto the shooting bench, Karl lined up his sights on the 100-metre target, his breathing steady. He fired a controlled burst, each round snapping through the air with precision, hitting close grouping on the target’s centre. He switched to single fire, adjusting his aim with subtle corrections, and squeezed off another series of shots.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Gunter watching him with an approving smile. “You’ve done this before,” he remarked, a note of admiration in his voice.

Karl lowered the rifle, casually flicking the safety on as he looked at Gunter. “It’s always been in our interests to be prepared,” he replied smoothly, nodding as if sharing a mutual understanding of the need for readiness.

Gunter chuckled, clearly impressed. “Preparedness is the key, Herr Müller — or rather, Karl. Here, you’ll find that dedication runs deep. We do not tolerate weakness or complacency. Our men are as sharp as their weapons, their skills honed as a matter of pride and survival.”

Karl handed the rifle back to the soldier, allowing himself a look of respectful appreciation. “I can see that clearly, Gunter. The Brotherhood takes pride in producing men who are more than capable.”

“Indeed,” Gunter replied, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction. “And with your background, Karl, I’m sure you’ll find your place among us easily.”

As Karl and Gunter continued their tour around the parade ground, Karl’s attention was drawn to a group of soldiers practising hand-to-hand combat in a designated training area. Dressed in basic training kit — shorts, trainers, and vests — they moved with precision, executing each strike, block, and counter with the kind of disciplined rhythm that spoke to hours of rigorous . But among the group, one soldier stood out immediately, a towering man with a build that seemed almost unnatural in its size and strength.

Gunter noticed Karl’s gaze and chuckled. “Ahh, you see Werner. He’s hard to miss, isn’t he?”

Karl nodded, not bothering to mask his amazement. “You can say that again. He’s built like a tank! What are you feeding him?”

As Werner turned, Karl caught sight of what he first took to be a scar running down the left side of his face. The mark started at his temple and traced a jagged path to his jaw, the skin puckered and discolored. But something about it caught Karl's attention. Unlike a typical scar, the edges

weren't clean or surgical, nor did they show the characteristic marking of a wound. The more Karl studied it, the more it looked like something else entirely - as if the skin had failed to form properly during development, leaving a twisted ridge of tissue that resembled melted wax. The imperfection stood in stark contrast to Werner's otherwise physical perfection.

Gunter grinned, clearly entertained by Karl's reaction. "Werner is one of the Stahlkrieger — a member of the Brotherhood's elite forces. They are a cut above the rest, and they sometimes come here to sharpen their skills or to... demonstrate, shall we say, the standard we should aspire to."

Karl watched as Werner faced off against four regular soldiers. Even from a distance, the match looked laughably uneven. The other men circled Werner, trying to coordinate attacks, but he was undeterred. With fluid precision, he evaded their attempts, his movements deceptively quick for someone of his size. When he struck, each blow was delivered with ruthless efficiency — a swift, calculated hit designed to incapacitate immediately. Within seconds, his opponents were down, either unconscious or groaning in pain on the ground.

"Very impressive," Karl commented, unable to hide his respect for Werner's skill.

Gunter gave a wry grin, nodding in agreement. "Indeed. Werner is... an honour to face in combat," he said, his tone carrying a hint of humour. "Though it's a very painful honour. The Stahlkrieger are not like the rest of us; they're trained for missions requiring exceptional strength, skill, and loyalty. They're the Brotherhood's hammer, and when they strike, they don't miss."

Karl absorbed this information carefully. Werner wasn't just a physical powerhouse; he was a symbol, a reminder of the elite force the Brotherhood had at its disposal.

As Karl observed Werner's imposing form and the ease with which he dispatched multiple opponents, an unsettling thought crept into his mind. How many of these Stahlkrieger does the Brotherhood command? Werner's size and strength seemed almost beyond natural limits, his movements honed to an instinctive perfection that suggested both training and something... more.

Watching Werner move, the way his muscles coiled and released with inhuman power, the fluid grace that defied his massive frame - it was like looking in a warped mirror. Karl had grown accustomed to his own abilities, learned to hide them beneath a facade of normalcy, but Werner was different. The Brotherhood had engineered him to be a weapon, proudly displayed. A cold realisation settled in Karl's chest: maybe he wasn't unique. Whatever force had changed him, whether Vrill or something else, had the Brotherhood harnessed it? How many more like Werner were out there? And more chillingly, how many more could they create? The implications made his skin crawl. If the Brotherhood could manufacture power like this at will, no force on Earth could stop them from reshaping the world in their image.

Karl's gaze returned to the parade ground, his expression carefully neutral as he processed the implications. If the Brotherhood had even a small unit of soldiers with the strength and endurance that he himself possessed, their influence would go unchecked. Infiltration, control, and fear — they wouldn't need armies. A single Stahlkrieger could act as an unstoppable force. And if the Brotherhood could replicate such power, then any plan to take them down would face near-impossible odds.

Karl's resolve only hardened, but his unease grew. He needed to find out just how deep this ran, how far they'd gone with their pursuit of power, and whether the Brotherhood was as close to unlocking the secrets of Vrill as he feared.

It was early evening when Karl was returned to his quarters. He thanked Gunter, offering a polite nod. "I found today very enlightening," he said, keeping his tone respectful.

Gunter gave a small, approving nod in return before heading off, leaving Karl with just enough time to shower and change for the evening meal. Freiburg's insistence on strict standards meant no one dined in work attire, and Karl made sure his appearance was impeccable, knowing that even minor details mattered here.

17 Precision Engineering

As Karl descended into the restaurant, freshly showered and changed, he was momentarily taken aback to see Maximilian Engel seated at a table, clearly waiting for him. Engel's presence seemed to ripple through the room, commanding an atmosphere of even greater precision and reverence. Every staff member moved with heightened care and attentiveness, their discipline sharpened by the knowledge that the "grand dragon" dined in their midst.

Engel looked up, his gaze settling on Karl with a slight smile. He gestured smoothly for Karl to join him, a gesture that held both welcome and expectation. Karl approached, matching Engel's composure, and took the seat opposite.

"Good evening, Karl," Engel began, his tone warm yet carrying that unmistakable air of authority. "How was your day?"

Karl inclined his head respectfully. "Fascinating," he replied, choosing his words carefully. "I found it very educational."

Engel's smile widened, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. "I am pleased to hear it. Freiburg is more than just a place; it is our vision for the future. Each part of it serves a purpose — a glimpse into what we intend to accomplish."

Karl nodded, knowing Engel's words held layers he was meant to absorb. "It's an impressive vision, Maximilian," he replied, allowing admiration to colour his tone. "The Brotherhood has created something unique here."

Engel leaned forward, his expression serious. "Indeed. And you, Karl, are no ordinary addition to our ranks. There is strength in you that reflects our ideals. As you witnessed today, we seek to forge men — and a future — that are unyielding. Freiburg, the Stahlkrieger, our leaders abroad... it is all part of our grand design."

He paused, studying Karl's reaction closely, as if weighing his commitment. "I wanted this dinner, Karl, to better understand what you see in our future together. How do you envision your place within the Brotherhood?"

Karl had anticipated this moment, knowing that sooner or later, Engel would press him for a deeper declaration of loyalty, a vision of how he intended to serve the Brotherhood. He'd rehearsed scenarios, thought through various answers — but now, face-to-face with Engel's intense, calculating gaze, he realised how carefully he'd need to tread. Every word would be dissected, every nuance weighed. This wasn't just about saying the right thing; it was about embodying the beliefs he was expected to hold.

He took a slow breath, letting his gaze settle on Engel with an expression of contemplative reverence. "Maximilian, I see the Brotherhood as not just a movement but as a rebirth," he began, choosing each word deliberately. "To me, it's a path forward — a way to revive what was lost, to secure a future where strength and loyalty reign."

Engel's expression remained impassive, but Karl could sense the weight of his attention. Taking that as a cue to continue, Karl pressed on, blending conviction with careful ambiguity. "I've come here to learn, to understand how I can best serve the Brotherhood's purpose. My background, my skills... they've prepared me to support this vision. But where exactly I fit, I trust that will reveal itself through my actions and my dedication."

He leaned forward slightly, as if to underscore his commitment. "I want to be of use, to contribute to this grand design in the way that would best serve the Brotherhood. I'm open to your guidance — to any role you believe would make full use of my strengths."

Engel studied him for a long moment, his eyes shrewd, searching Karl's face for any hint of insincerity. "Spoken like a true initiate," he finally said, a trace of approval in his voice. "Dedication and trust in purpose... these

are qualities we prize. The Brotherhood has many paths, Karl, and yours will be unique, forged through your own strengths. We will watch, and we will guide you."

Karl inclined his head, masking the relief beneath his expression. He'd passed another test — but Engel's words suggested more trials were yet to come.

"Karl, your reputation for precision engineering has not gone unnoticed," Maximilian said, his voice low but charged with purpose. "The Brotherhood requires certain... specialised facilities in the Fatherland. Facilities that will support our people's return home."

Karl leaned forward slightly, projecting eager interest while his mind raced to catalogue every detail. "I understand. What exactly are you envisioning?"

"We need a facility near Berlin," Maximilian replied, swirling his wine thoughtfully. "It must serve two purposes. Officially, it will be the cornerstone of our repatriation programme - a place where our returning German engineers can establish themselves, contributing their expertise to the Fatherland's industry. But beneath that..." He paused meaningfully. "It will house our purification technology."

"A manufacturing facility would be a perfect cover for returning personnel," Karl observed. "German engineering expertise is always welcomed back home."

"Precisely." Maximilian's eyes gleamed. "We need state-of-the-art clean rooms, isolation systems, airlocks - everything required for the most stringent biological containment. Our purification process requires absolute precision, Karl. The slightest deviation could compromise years of research."

"The permits for such a facility won't be simple," Karl said carefully. "The authorities tend to scrutinise anything involving biological containment quite closely."

Maximilian's smile tightened. "This is where your network becomes invaluable, Karl. We need someone who can navigate the bureaucracy without raising red flags. The repatriation programme provides perfect cover - who would question returning German engineers wanting to establish a high-tech manufacturing facility?"

Karl appeared to consider this, allowing a thoughtful frown to crease his brow. "We could position it as a medical device manufacturing centre. That would justify the ultra-clean environments and precision engineering requirements. It would also explain why we're bringing in specialised personnel from abroad."

"Go on," Maximilian encouraged, clearly pleased with Karl's approach.

"The precision machinery could be explained as necessary for manufacturing medical implants or diagnostic equipment. The biological containment systems could be presented as quality control measures." Karl paused, then added, "I have contacts in the medical manufacturing sector who could help smooth the way. They'd welcome the expertise of returning German engineers."

"And the purification delivery systems? The ultraviolet wash chambers? The advanced air handling?"

"Standard in modern medical manufacturing," Karl replied smoothly. "Especially for anything involving implantable devices. With the right paperwork, our returning specialists would raise no eyebrows bringing in such equipment."

Maximilian nodded slowly, satisfaction evident in his expression. "You see why we chose you for this, Karl. You understand both the technical

requirements and the need for... creative solutions. Our work in purifying the Fatherland must proceed without interference."

"How soon do you need this operational? Repatriating our people and establishing the facility will take careful coordination."

"The sooner the better," Maximilian replied, his tone hardening slightly. "Our research here has proven the concept. Now it's time to bring real purification to our homeland. The facilities here in Brazil have served their purpose, but for what comes next, we need to be closer to home. Our people must return to lead this vital work."

Karl nodded, understanding the unspoken urgency. "I'll begin making arrangements as soon as I return. There's an industrial park outside Berlin that might suit our needs - far enough from residential areas to avoid attention, but close enough to major transportation routes. Perfect for both our manufacturing needs and as a base for our returning personnel."

"Excellent." Maximilian raised his glass. "To bringing our people home to the Fatherland. To purification."

"To the Fatherland," Karl echoed, clinking glasses while his mind raced with the implications. The Brotherhood wasn't just building a factory - they were creating a facility to manufacture a weapon of genetic cleansing, using returning "engineers" as cover. Every technical requirement, every precise specification was aimed at one goal: the systematic purification of Germany's population according to the Brotherhood's twisted ideology.

As they finished their meal, Karl maintained his facade of eager efficiency, discussing practical details about power requirements and clean room specifications. But beneath his careful questions about infrastructure and zoning regulations, he was piecing together the Brotherhood's true intentions. The repatriation programme wasn't just about bringing their people home - it was about positioning their operators throughout

Germany, preparing for something far more sinister than medical manufacturing. Whatever the Brotherhood had developed in Brazil, they were now preparing to weaponise it on a massive scale, using Karl's expertise to create a facility capable of manufacturing both the biological agent and its delivery system with exacting precision.

18 Covert Action

In the quiet of his room, Karl replayed the day's events, each detail of his conversations with Engel etching itself into his mind. The Brotherhood wanted him to be part of their grand repatriation plan, but he had yet to glimpse the full scope. They had carefully positioned him to play his part, but part of what? Whatever the true agenda was, it was buried somewhere beneath layers of secrecy.

By 2am, Karl was ready. He dressed in his darkest clothes, ensuring he blended into the night, then quietly slid open the rear window of his lodging. The cool night air was still and silent as he scanned the surroundings. Seeing no one, he slipped through the window and dropped soundlessly into the garden below, immediately moving into the cover of nearby shrubs.

Sticking close to the shadows, Karl navigated the deserted streets with caution. The town seemed to sleep under an air of enforced quiet, and each street lamp cast stark cones of light onto the cobblestone paths. Karl avoided these pools of light, using the buildings and narrow alleyways as his cover as he made his way toward the town square, where the imposing administration building loomed against the starless sky.

As Karl crept silently through the empty streets, his senses on high alert, he suddenly caught the sound of footsteps — a steady rhythm of two pairs of boots approaching. Instinctively, he retreated deeper into the shadows, pressing himself against the cold stone wall of a nearby building and holding his breath.

Moments later, a pair of uniformed soldiers rounded the corner, their faces shadowed beneath peaked caps. They moved in synchronised strides, their alert eyes scanning the darkened street, hands hovering near the holstered handguns on their belts. Their green armbands, adorned with the double-headed snake motif, caught the faint light as they passed.

Karl held his position, watching them carefully, his gaze tracking every step. He knew that even the slightest noise could draw their attention, so he remained perfectly still, allowing them to pass. The soldiers continued down the street, their footsteps gradually fading into the distance until only silence remained.

When he was certain they were far enough away, Karl exhaled slowly, letting his muscles relax just enough to refocus. He waited a few moments more to ensure no other patrols were nearby before slipping out of his hiding spot and resuming his cautious approach toward the administration building.

Upon reaching the square, he paused in the shadow of a tree, scanning the area for any signs of movement. The administration building stood silent, its tall windows dark. From his observation earlier, Karl remembered seeing a side door, likely used by staff. He approached it, each step calculated and soundless, his senses heightened.

The door was locked, but Karl was prepared. Reaching into his pocket, he retrieved a set of picks and quickly went to work, his hands steady as he manipulated the lock's mechanism. Within moments, the lock clicked open, and Karl slipped inside, closing the door softly behind him. The hallway beyond was dimly lit, the faint hum of an emergency light casting a faint glow over the polished floors.

Moving swiftly, Karl made his way through the corridors, bypassing empty offices and carefully checking each door. The building's layout had suggested an archive or records room, where files on Freiburg's operations and long-term plans might be stored. If he could find it, there was a chance he'd gain insight into the Brotherhood's big picture — the full extent of their plans, the scope of their operations.

Karl slipped through the administration building, his unique "game mode" vision giving him an unparalleled advantage in the dimly lit hallways. The greyscale overlay of shapes and textures allowed him to navigate as though

the darkness were merely an inconvenience, and where the emergency lights cast faint pools of illumination, he could see hints of colour and detail, even faintly read print.

The dim lighting was perfect as he made his way to the archive room, and with one final, cautious glance around, he pushed open the door. What he saw inside made him pause.

Rows of desks were outfitted with sleek, modern computers, their monitors dark but clearly functional. Alongside these sat banks of filing cabinets, their drawers meticulously labelled. On one of the larger desks stood a multi-function printer-copier, complete with a control panel and a tray stacked with papers. The sight of this equipment struck him as out of place; until now, he'd seen no other technology in Freiburg, only the radio and military gear he'd spotted during training. This level of modernity here felt like a startling anomaly in a town supposedly dedicated to traditionalism and isolation.

Karl's mind raced. If the Brotherhood maintained this level of technology in their administration centre, it suggested they were far more connected than they let on. This was more than just a self-sustaining community; it was a command centre, equipped to process and store large amounts of data.

He moved to one of the computers, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, and considered his next move. He needed to access information, but any error or disruption could easily alert the wrong people. Glancing toward the filing cabinets, he weighed his options. A search through physical files might take longer but could be quieter — while any electronic records could be a goldmine if he could access them without detection.

Deciding to stay cautious, Karl turned to the nearest filing cabinet, scanning the labels with his hybrid vision. He pulled open a drawer, his heart pounding with the anticipation of what he might uncover.

Karl's instincts had proven correct. After hours rifling through paper files, finding nothing but mundane administrative records, the sheer volume of documents had made it clear he'd need another approach. The networked computers upstairs hinted at something more, something centralised. Following the network cables to a riser, he'd traced them downwards, suspecting there might be a server room tucked away in the building's basement.

Now, standing before a heavy door marked "Keller," he felt the pulse of possibility quicken in his veins. He opened the door carefully and descended the narrow staircase, keeping his movements deliberate to avoid any echoing sounds in the quiet of the building.

Reaching the bottom, he scanned the corridor, orienting himself based on the layout above. To his left, tucked in a corner, was a door with a small, narrow window that allowed a partial view inside. Peering through, he saw precisely what he'd suspected: an air-conditioned room housing two large server racks. Rows of hard drives, network switches, and other hardware flashed their LEDs in silent, rhythmic patterns, casting a soft glow through the glass.

The door's lock was mechanical — a shrewd choice. An electronic lock would have required an internal computer control, which, if networked, could risk exposing the server to potential outside interference. The Brotherhood clearly valued security above convenience; everything about this setup screamed isolation. If he could get inside, he'd have the entire system at his fingertips, free from external controls.

He examined the lock closely, noting it was a high-quality tumbler mechanism. Without hesitation, Karl pulled his set of picks from his pocket, inserting them into the keyway with the practised precision his training demanded. He worked in silence, his senses honed to detect even the smallest change in tension.

After a few moments, he felt the lock give, and the door clicked open. He slipped inside, letting it close softly behind him, and surveyed the server room.

The air was cool, almost frigid, and the hum of the equipment filled the space with a steady drone. Karl quickly assessed the setup: two racks filled with networked hard drives, each meticulously organised, their LED indicators flashing with data traffic.

Karl tapped a key, and the screen blinked to life, displaying a simple, unadorned text terminal with a cursor flashing expectantly, awaiting a username and password. He considered his options, knowing that his previous real world job had provided him with a few tricks for situations like these. But without the proper credentials, his best chance at bypassing the system would involve rebooting it. The problem, of course, was that a reboot would almost certainly trigger alerts — likely on every machine connected to the network upstairs.

He exhaled, his mind racing through contingencies. If they were to discover someone tampered with their server, my cover would be blown in an instant, he thought. For now, just knowing the server's existence — its location, setup, and isolation — was valuable intelligence. It was a core piece of the puzzle, confirming that the Brotherhood's data and communication network was as secure and compartmentalised as he'd suspected.

He carefully powered the monitor back down, making sure everything was left as he'd found it. Slipping out of the room, he locked the door behind him, listening for the telltale click that signalled it was secure. As he retraced his steps back toward his quarters, he tucked this new piece of information away, knowing that with patience and the right moment, he'd find a way to return and dig deeper — when it could be done without raising the alarm. For now, knowledge of the servers' existence was going to have to be enough.

19 Cold Morning

The next morning, Karl entered the breakfast hall to find Reinhard Schäfer already seated at a table, flanked by two Brotherhood security officers. Their presence broke the usual pattern of communal dining, creating an island of tension in the otherwise bustling room. Reinhard's calculating grey eyes fixed on Karl the moment he appeared, tracking his movements with predatory intensity.

"Herr Müller," Reinhard called out, his voice carrying just enough authority to make ignoring him impossible. "Join us, please. We were just discussing how our newest members adjust to life here."

Karl approached the table, noting how the security officers shifted slightly, their movements synchronised and deliberate. He settled into the chair across from Reinhard, maintaining an outward calm despite the inner acceleration of his pulse.

"Sleep well?" Reinhard asked, stirring his coffee with methodical precision. "The nights here can be... interesting. So different from Germany. Some find it hard to rest properly."

The question hung in the air, weighted with possible meanings. Karl reached for the coffee pot, using the mundane action to mask his careful consideration of Reinhard's tone and expression.

"Actually, I slept quite soundly," Karl replied, pouring his coffee with steady hands. "Something about the mountain air, I suppose. Very peaceful."

Reinhard's thin smile didn't reach his eyes. "Indeed. And have you seen everything you expected to see in Freiburg? I hope nothing has... disappointed your expectations."

There it was – the subtle probe wrapped in courtesy. Karl felt the familiar tightness in his chest, the sensation that had served him well in his previous

life when systems were about to crash. Was this a fishing expedition, or did Reinhard know something? The security chief's reputation for paranoid but accurate instincts was well-known.

"The town has exceeded my expectations," Karl said, buttering a slice of bread with deliberate care. "Gunter has been very thorough in showing me around. Though I'm sure there's still much to discover."

"Hmm." Reinhard leaned back, his gaze never wavering. "There always is, isn't there? So much beneath the surface, if one knows where to look." He paused, taking a slow sip of coffee. "Or when to look."

The security officers remained silent, their presence amplifying the weight of each word exchanged. Karl maintained his composure, but his mind raced. Had they spotted him? Or was this Reinhard's famous technique – probing for weakness, watching for the slight tells that might betray guilt?

"Speaking of looking," Reinhard continued, "I've always found nighttime brings a different perspective to things. The darkness has a way of... revealing truths. Don't you agree?"

Karl met Reinhard's gaze steadily. "I wouldn't know," he said. "I prefer my truths in broad daylight."

Reinhard's smile widened fractionally, though his eyes remained cold. "How pragmatic of you." He stood, the security officers rising in perfect sync. "Well, enjoy your breakfast, Herr Müller. And do let us know if you need anything. Anything at all."

As they left, Karl maintained his steady breathing, methodically finishing his breakfast while his mind processed the encounter. Either Reinhard knew something and was playing with him, or the security chief was simply doing what he was famous for – testing, probing, watching for reactions. Either way, the message was clear: Karl wasn't as invisible as he'd hoped.

He took another sip of coffee, letting the warmth steady him. If Reinhard had proof, Karl would already be in custody. This was a warning shot, a reminder that in Freiburg, someone was always watching. He'd have to be more careful next time – much more careful.

Like clockwork, Gunter arrived after coffee to continue Karls tour of Freiburg, a walk that seemed designed to highlight the town's quaint, self-sustained community. Gunter led him along a broad cobbled street lined with various shops and artisan store fronts, each one adding to the idyllic Bavarian charm meticulously preserved here in the heart of the Brazilian jungle.

As they passed the carpenters' workshop, Gunter paused to explain. "This is one of our most important trades here in Freiburg," he said proudly. "Our carpenters are skilled in traditional techniques, crafting furniture, home fixtures, and everything we need to maintain our town." Through the open doors, Karl could see craftsmen at work, sanding and carving pieces with expert precision, piles of rich timber surrounding them. The workshop smelled of wood shavings and varnish, a nod to the old-world aesthetic they cherished.

Next, they stopped by the clothing shop, its displays filled with well-made, conservative attire in the styles favoured within the Brotherhood. "Our tailors provide for all members, from daily wear to uniforms," Gunter explained. "Everyone here is fitted, whether for work, social gatherings, or ceremonial events." Karl noted the uniformity of styles, with no trace of modern fashion trends. Here, even clothing was tailored to reinforce conformity and tradition.

Further along, they passed a charming patisserie, the air thick with the aromas of freshly baked bread, pastries, and rich Bavarian desserts. The baker waved to them from behind the counter, and Karl glimpsed rows of meticulously arranged pastries — Schwarzwälder Kirschtorte, apple strudel, and pretzels, each piece crafted to perfection.

As they moved down the street, Karl took in the other amenities: a butcher's shop, a dairy supplier, and even a small book store stocked with carefully curated titles, all within the Brotherhood's preferred canon. Each shop represented a trade or craft, making Freiburg as close to a self-sustaining town as one could find.

But when they reached a squat, nondescript building tucked near the end of the street, Gunter's tone changed subtly. "This is our medical centre," he said, his tone almost dismissive. "Not quite a hospital, but it has a ward and can handle most ailments and injuries."

The building's plain facade and the way Gunter skimmed over its functions left Karl curious, but Gunter didn't linger, brushing off further questions with an air of indifference. "I don't know much about it myself," he said, as though that settled the matter, before steering the conversation back to the well-stocked shops and community workshops.

Karl noted the stark contrast. More time was spent discussing trades, pastries, and tailor shops than the medical facility, as though the latter was either unimportant or intentionally downplayed. But the avoidance of details about the centre struck Karl as intentional, a clue that there might be more behind its quiet facade than the Brotherhood wished to advertise.

They arrived at Zum Alten Fass, Freiburg's Bier Keller, a rustic space with low wooden beams, long communal tables, and the warm scent of freshly grilled bratwurst and brewing hops in the air. Heavy, dark-wood furniture and iron lanterns cast a cosy glow over the room, adding to the traditional German ambiance. As they entered they discovered Klaus already sat at a table in the corner. Karl noted that this place seemed to draw a dedicated crowd, a core gathering spot in the heart of Freiburg.

Gunter offered his excuses shortly after they entered, leaving Karl alone with Klaus, who raised his glass in a welcoming gesture before diving into conversation. "How are things going, Karl? Is the brand healing well?" he

asked with an air of concern. “Would you like us to have someone look at it? We don’t want it to become infected.”

Karl kept his tone light, masking his inner tension. The last thing he needed was a medically trained eye examining Sabine’s skilful but artificial brand. “Thank you, Klaus, but I believe it’s healing well,” he replied, managing a sheepish smile. “Just a few more days, and I doubt it’ll need a dressing at all.”

He hesitated, then added, “If I’m honest, I have a bit of a... phobia about being touched. It’s a bit of an anxiety thing. I’m just more comfortable handling it myself.”

Klaus seemed satisfied, chuckling and taking a sip of his beer. “Ah, a strong sense of self-reliance. I can respect that.”

As the meal continued, Klaus steered the conversation toward the repatriation project, probing Karl’s thoughts on how soon he could initiate contact with his organisation. Sensing his chance, Karl subtly shifted the conversation to his need for his mobile phone.

“I’d like to start as soon as possible,” he explained, “but I’ll need to reach my contacts directly. Unfortunately, all the numbers are on my phone — I’ve become reliant on technology for that, I admit. I’m not quite prepared without it.”

Klaus gave a knowing smile, clearly understanding the request. “We can provide you with a phone here,” he replied. “We’re happy to support your work however possible.”

Karl countered with a casual shrug, feigning embarrassment. “I appreciate that, but I’d still need my personal device to retrieve my contacts. I’m afraid I’ve not committed them to memory.”

Klaus nodded, but his expression shifted slightly as he weighed his response. “Technology certainly has its uses, Karl, but here in Freiburg, we limit it where possible. You may have noticed that our town doesn’t use

electronic cash registers or other unnecessary devices. Social media and other modern distractions are viewed as weaknesses. We use technology only when absolutely necessary.”

He paused, watching Karl closely, his tone turning subtly instructive. “The Brotherhood makes great use of technology outside these walls, particularly in monitoring, manipulating, and understanding the weaknesses of others. But within Freiburg? Our strength lies in our resilience, our ability to thrive without reliance on unnecessary gadgets. It’s a philosophy we take seriously.”

Karl nodded thoughtfully, absorbing the underlying message. Freiburg was not just a haven for the Brotherhood’s ideals; it was a place to live their principles in isolation, stripped of the “crutches” the modern world depended upon. They were shaping a world where technology would be a tool wielded with precision — a tool of control and observation rather than dependence.

Karl managed a look of impressed understanding. “It’s a powerful philosophy, Klaus. The Brotherhood’s approach is unlike anything I’ve seen.”

Klaus smiled, lifting his stein. “To Freiburg, and to strength without reliance.”

“To Freiburg,” Karl echoed, clinking his stein, mentally noting that the Brotherhood’s restraint here wasn’t just a preference — it was an ironclad discipline designed to protect their core.

20 **Forschungslabor**

Once more at 2am, Karl found himself preparing for another covert excursion. After his unsettling breakfast encounter with Reinhard, every movement required additional calculation. He spent extra time observing the street from his window, watching for any sign of surveillance. The security chief's probing questions still echoed in his mind – had that been a warning, or was Reinhard fishing for a reaction?

When he finally slipped out into the night, Karl moved with renewed caution. Each shadow could conceal one of Reinhard's watchers, each darkened window might hide observant eyes. His destination was the medical centre – a building Gunter had conspicuously glossed over during their tour, making it all the more intriguing. But tonight, Karl took a longer route, doubling back several times to ensure he wasn't being followed.

The medical centre's activity level surprised him. Despite the late hour, the building hummed with life, its windows casting pools of light onto the empty street. Medical staff moved efficiently through the corridors – orderlies, doctors, and nurses working with purpose that suggested more than routine care. Through the front windows, Karl observed the ward. Only a handful of patients occupied the beds, yet the staff numbers seemed excessive for such light occupancy. What kind of operation required this level of overnight staffing in a supposedly simple community clinic?

Karl circled the building with painstaking care, freezing at every unexpected sound. Reinhard's reputation for catching infiltrators weighed heavily on his mind as he moved from shadow to shadow. The rear section of the centre revealed an anomaly – yellow-striped road markings and wide roller doors clearly meant for ambulances, though Karl had seen no vehicles in Freiburg. He hesitated longer than usual before approaching a small window, hyper-aware of potential security measures Reinhard might have implemented.

Crouching in the darkness, Karl examined the signs along the corridor beyond. Leichenschauhaus – a morgue, expected in any medical facility. Pathologie followed, again nothing unusual. But the third sign made him catch his breath: Forschungslabor – Research Laboratory. The presence of a research lab in what should be a simple community clinic suggested something far more significant. This wasn't just about healthcare; the Brotherhood had other purposes for this facility.

Karl suspected the lab itself would be heavily secured, likely with monitoring systems that would make access challenging – especially if Reinhard had increased security following Karl's previous nocturnal activities. Still, the existence of a research facility, particularly one that might be conducting experiments related to genetics or enhancement, could provide crucial answers about the Brotherhood's true agenda – and possibly about the origin of Karl's own abilities.

Memorising the building's layout, Karl retreated with even more care than he'd approached, taking an entirely different route back to his quarters. Not tonight, he thought, melting into the shadows. The risk was too high with Reinhard's attention focused on him. He would need to wait, perhaps let suspicion die down, before attempting to penetrate the facility's secrets. But he would return – the presence of that research lab demanded investigation, no matter how carefully he had to proceed.

21 The Fatherland

Karl rose early that morning, enjoying the stillness of Freiburg as he took a contemplative walk through its streets. The town was idyllic, a picture of perfection with its half-timbered houses, meticulously kept gardens, and the surrounding dense greenery. The sight was almost surreal, given the darker realities simmering beneath this peaceful facade. What would Freiburg look like if the Brotherhood's ideals were channelled toward genuine progress instead of supremacy? he wondered. It was a place with undeniable potential — but, as he knew, it was laced with rot.

Entering the restaurant for breakfast, he spotted Klaus waiting for him. Klaus waved him over with a welcoming smile, and they exchanged pleasantries, placing their orders with the precision expected here. After a few minutes, Klaus reached into his coat and slid a new, sleek smartphone across the table.

"It's a secure phone," Klaus said, his tone measured. "Encrypted messaging and email. This will be your primary means of communication with us."

Karl thanked him, picking up the device and studying it briefly. The phone was state-of-the-art, no doubt equipped with the highest level of encryption — another mark of the Brotherhood's careful planning. He slipped it into his pocket, already mulling over the implications of this new directive.

"I've discussed it with the cabal," Klaus continued, lowering his voice slightly, "and it's been agreed that we should commence preparations for the repatriation project. We want you to start planning a factory in the Fatherland, a base of operations for our people returning home."

Karl nodded, outwardly keeping his expression neutral but inwardly assessing the challenge ahead. "Understood. When should I begin?"

Klaus leaned back, looking at him with something like approval. "As soon as you're ready, Karl. The sooner, the better."

“Today?” Karl asked, surprised by the urgency.

Klaus’s smile widened slightly. “Yes. We’ll arrange transport back to São Paulo. You’ll have access to all the contacts you need once there. I’ll also be returning home today — best if we keep some distance from each other once we’re back.”

Karl nodded, taking a sip of coffee to mask his reaction. Going home today, he thought, feeling a mix of relief and frustration. He hadn’t yet uncovered all he wanted, particularly about the medical centre, but the opportunity to reconnect with Lands and regroup was a welcome prospect. He wondered how Lands was faring without contact, no doubt piecing together what he could about Freiburg through the breadcrumbs Karl had left.

After breakfast, Klaus rose to his feet, extending his hand. “This is the beginning, Karl. The Brotherhood will be watching your progress with great interest.”

Karl shook his hand firmly. “I won’t disappoint you.”

As he packed his belongings and prepared for the journey, Karl’s mind was already whirring with plans. He was heading back to familiar ground — back to Lands, Cecilia, and the agency. But now, he carried the Brotherhood’s secrets with him and a new directive that could lead them right to the heart of their operations.

The six-hour drive back to São Paulo was a stretch of quiet highways, winding through landscapes that slowly shifted from Freiburg’s lush, controlled environment to the urban sprawl on the city’s outskirts. Christian, the ever-attentive driver, kept the conversation light, asking how Karl had enjoyed his time in Freiburg.

“It’s a different world, isn’t it?” Christian mused. “The air, the people, the discipline. Nothing like the polluted chaos outside.”

Karl offered a non-committal smile, thinking of the iron control the Brotherhood exerted over every aspect of life in Freiburg. "It certainly has its charms," he replied, keeping his tone neutral.

Finally, they arrived in São Paulo. Christian pulled up to the curb, unloading Karl's luggage with the efficient politeness he'd shown throughout the drive. "Safe travels back to your world, Herr Müller," he said, giving Karl a brief nod before climbing back into the vehicle and disappearing into the stream of city traffic.

Once alone, Karl's first order of business was to take immediate control of his communication. He powered off the Brotherhood's new phone, removed the SIM, and stowed it away. The next step was contacting Lands. Using a landline from a discreet location, he dialled his partner.

"You're back and safe," came Lands' voice, a subtle undertone of relief detectable even over the phone. "Good to have you back. Let's meet and catch up."

They arranged to meet at a small, unassuming restaurant outside of town with absolutely no German connection — a deliberate choice to avoid any association with the Brotherhood. After checking back into his previous accommodation, Karl left the Brotherhood's phone in his room, mentally noting it as a potential source of intel but also a risk if mishandled.

As evening settled over the city, Karl put his trade craft skills to full use, moving through side streets, doubling back, and paying extra attention to any unusual signs as he made his way to the meeting spot. He added layers of subtle checks to his usual surveillance techniques, determined not to let anyone tail him this time.

Satisfied he was in the clear, he arrived at the restaurant. *O Recanto Brasileiro*, a cosy, family-run establishment on the outskirts of São Paulo. Known for its authentic Brazilian cuisine, the kind of place locals frequented for hearty meals and a taste of home. The exterior was modest, with a wooden sign hanging above the door and small plants in ceramic

pots lining the entrance. Inside, the restaurant was a warm, welcoming haven, with simple wooden tables covered in colourful cloths and mismatched chairs that gave the place a comfortable, lived-in feel.

As Karl stepped inside, he was greeted by the rich, earthy smell of spices and roasted meats. The air was heavy with the aroma of feijoada, Brazil's signature black bean stew simmered with pork, garlic, and bay leaves, along with the scent of pão de queijo, the famous Brazilian cheese bread, fresh from the oven. From the back, there was a faint, mouthwatering whiff of grilling meats — picanha and linguíça sausages — sizzling on an open flame, filling the room with a smoky warmth.

The atmosphere was lively but relaxed. Soft Brazilian music played in the background, blending samba and bossa nova melodies that drifted through the air, punctuated by the quiet hum of conversation and the occasional clink of silverware. Small ceiling fans whirled overhead, creating a gentle breeze that rustled the napkins on the tables. The lighting was dim but warm, provided by amber-hued lanterns that cast a soft glow over the walls, which were decorated with framed photographs of São Paulo's historic neighbourhoods and landscapes.

In one corner, Lands sat at a small table tucked against the wall, looking up as Karl entered, his expression lighting up as he gave a slight nod. Here, in *O Recanto Brasileiro*, surrounded by the smells and sounds of genuine Brazilian hospitality, Karl felt worlds away from the rigid, regimented order of Freiburg. He slipped into the seat across from Lands, taking in the comfortable atmosphere — a momentary refuge before diving into the details of his mission.

As Karl recounted the events of his time in Freiburg, Lands listened without interruption, his expression serious. He absorbed every detail, from the Brotherhood's intense rituals to the enigmatic figures at the seven pulpits, to the insights gleaned from his tour of Freiburg and the Brotherhood's disciplined restrictions on technology.

When Karl finally finished, Lands leaned back, his fingers steepled thoughtfully. "We did some digging on our end too," he began. "I followed the tracker you swallowed — got as far as the entrance to the so-called 'mine works' road. The place is fortified. Cameras, sensors, everything short of guard towers." He shook his head. "I tried finding a way to continue on foot, but there was no blind spot. They have the whole area monitored, inside and out."

Karl nodded. "You made the right call to pull back. Another hour past that point by car... it would have been too far to risk on foot."

Lands leaned in, his voice low as he shared the next piece of information. "We had the lab test that salve they gave you — and the urine sample. Turns out both were laced with a powerful psychoactive drug derived from a specific fungal spore. Had you kept using it, they could've influenced you to believe almost anything. Even reality would start to feel malleable."

Karl grimaced, feeling a fresh wave of unease. "Makes sense now, with the visions of that 'grand dragon' during the initiation. They weren't leaving anything to chance." He paused, then added, "The leaders must have immunity, an antidote or some kind of blocker, otherwise they'd be equally susceptible during the rituals."

Lands nodded. "That's what we think, too. They're playing on both biological and psychological levels, using this drug to bend reality during initiations and bind new recruits to their will. It's all about maintaining control and inspiring absolute loyalty."

Karl took a deep breath, absorbing this new insight. "So, it's not just manipulation through rhetoric and tradition. They're chemically enhancing loyalty, creating an unbreakable hold on their initiates."

Lands frowned. "It's worse than that. This isn't just a tool for recruitment; it's a weapon. If they're able to wield this on a larger scale, they could start influencing a population before they're even aware of it. If the

Brotherhood spreads their ideology using this method... they'd control people's minds directly."

A chill settled over the table as both men grasped the gravity of the Brotherhood's capabilities. If the Brotherhood were to weaponise their methods beyond Freiburg, their ideological hold could extend through society like the fungal spores themselves — subtle, invasive, and dangerously effective.

Karl leaned across the table, his voice low and deliberate. "The Brotherhood's plan is for me to return to Germany and start preparations for the repatriation. But I'm thinking we take a different route." He glanced around to ensure they weren't overheard before continuing. "The phone they gave me? I'd bet it's not just for secure communication. It's probably doubling as a tracker."

Lands nodded, following Karl's logic. "So, if they're watching your every move, you need them to believe you're doing exactly what they asked."

"Exactly. I need someone to courier it back to Germany, leaving a trail that convinces them I've gone there to start the work on the factory." Karl paused, letting the implications settle in. "But what I really want to do is revisit Freiburg, and the Dragon's Lair. I think it's where the Brotherhood's true agenda is unfolding. This time, though, I'll have tools with me to gather solid evidence."

Lands's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "You're talking about a covert return. We'd need some very precise tools. Surveillance devices, maybe something to hack into their systems if you get close enough again?"

"Exactly," Karl confirmed. "We'll need something that can stand up to Freiburg's security without setting off alarms. If I can get near that server room again, I'll need a way to extract data — something discreet that I can leave behind, to capture whatever flows through their network."

Lands took a deep breath, a glint of resolve in his eyes. “We can arrange that, no problem.”

“And one more thing,” Karl added, “I’ll need equipment to deal with any other... surprises. The kind of psychoactive interference they used on me last time, I want to be ready if they try it again.”

Lands nodded slowly, mentally compiling the list. “Understood. I’ll get in touch with Cecilia to help us source what we need. We’ll get you everything — cameras, data tools, protective gear. I’ll even look into blockers for that drug so you won’t be susceptible to any hallucinations or mind games.”

Karl felt a surge of determination as they laid out the plan. “Good. Then let’s make sure they think I’m busy in Germany while I find out what’s really happening in Freiburg. If we can document this, we’ll have something substantial enough to expose the Brotherhood.”

With a firm handshake, Karl and Lands sealed the next phase of their mission, a silent understanding passing between them. The Brotherhood had set its plans in motion, but they weren’t the only ones working in the shadows.

22 Magic Mushrooms

Lands spent the better part of the day making discreet calls, activating every resource he could leverage to equip Karl for his covert return to Freiburg. The list was ambitious, but Lands knew they'd need every advantage. High-resolution cameras, audio bugs, and data extraction tools would be delivered along with an encrypted device for secure communication. The most vital item, however, was the psychoactive blocker. It would offer Karl immunity from the Brotherhood's fungal-based mind-altering drug — a substance that had almost ensnared him during the initiation.

Once the orders were placed, Karl set about disappearing from São Paulo. He checked out of his lodgings, casually mentioning to the hotel staff that he was headed to the airport for an early flight to Europe. At the airport, he passed the Brotherhood's phone to a trusted courier with instructions to leave a breadcrumb trail, making it appear he was on a flight back to Germany.

For the next few days, Karl stayed with Lands in a nondescript safe house on the outskirts of São Paulo. They spent hours going over every detail of the plan, the risks, and potential exits. Lands helped him run through scenarios, from covert data extraction to worst-case confrontations, while they waited for the equipment to arrive.

One evening, Lands chuckled as he handed Karl a small vial. "Here it is. Your psychoactive blocker, courtesy of a German pharmaceutical giant. Funny how the Brotherhood's home country may end up providing the antidote to their mind games."

Karl examined the throat spray, feeling the weight of it in his hand. "It's ironic," he agreed, pocketing the spray carefully. "But if it does the job, I'll take irony over hallucinations any day."

With every detail ironed out and the equipment nearly in hand, Karl and Lands felt a renewed sense of focus. The Brotherhood had welcomed Karl into their ranks — and now, Karl was prepared to peel back the layers of their operation, armed and ready to reveal their darkest secrets.

As evening settled into night, Karl approached the Dragon's Lair with prenticed stealth. The cave loomed before him, its mouth a dark, gaping maw in the side of the mountain. He noted the pair of guards pacing before it, their hand-held torches cutting small arcs of light through the encroaching darkness. In place of the flaming torches that had lit the way during his initiation, a lone brazier now blazed near the cave entrance, positioned between two sturdy wooden chairs. It was likely the guards' warming station, a place where they could sit and watch the cave entrance without venturing too far into the cold night air.

Karl waited, concealed in the shadows, watching as the guards made their rounds. As the night deepened and the chill set in, they finally took their seats, leaning in to stoke the fire and feed it more wood. Flames leaped higher, casting dancing shadows on the cave's walls and reflecting brightly off the guards' faces. They spoke in low voices, close to the warmth of the brazier. The combination of the fire's brightness and the dark expanse surrounding them compromised their night vision, providing Karl with the perfect opportunity.

He slipped silently past, taking advantage of their proximity to the flames and their focus on the warmth. Moving quickly but soundlessly, he glided into the cave's dark interior, feeling the cold stone walls envelop him as he left the glow of the brazier behind. The darkness was intense, impenetrable to ordinary sight, but Karl concentrated to activate his unique "game mode," allowing him to navigate the shadows with ease. To him, the world appeared in muted shades of grey, with the smooth path and jagged edges of the cave walls clearly defined in his vision.

He moved deeper into the cave, his senses attuned to every sound, every change in the air, each shift in the rough contours around him. The memory

of his initiation echoed in his mind as he walked the same path, but this time, without the ceremony or the psychoactive haze, he felt acutely aware of the raw, unvarnished space. As he ventured further into the cavern, Karl steeled himself, knowing that he was about to uncover what lay beneath the Brotherhood's rituals — the real reason this place held such significance.

In the amphitheatre's eerie silence, Karl took in the scene with a focused eye. The space had been stripped of its ceremonial trappings; the serpent flags and banners were gone, exposing the raw, dark rock of the cave's walls and ceiling. The only way in or out seemed to be the cave mouth he'd entered through, further lending to the sense that this was a place designed to trap attention, to immerse initiates fully in the ritualistic environment.

Moving toward the dais, he examined the altar and the surrounding pulpits more closely. Strange, ancient symbols were carved into the stone, worn but clearly intentional, their meaning an enigma but adding a mystic weight to the space. Sensing no one else around, Karl pulled out his agency-issued phone and began taking photos, documenting every detail: the carvings, the structure of the altar, the pulpit arrangement, and the layout of the amphitheatre. The flash cut through the darkness, illuminating each detail for an instant before plunging the space back into shadows.

As he moved, however, an unsettling dizziness began to swirl through his head. He recognised the sensation immediately: The psychoactive drug! But he hadn't taken the salve or encountered anything obviously tainted. That's when the realisation hit — the drug was present in the very air around him, an ever-present element of the cavern itself.

Quickly, he retrieved the blocker spray from his jacket and administered it, the bitter solution hitting the back of his throat as he took slow, deep breaths. Gradually, the dizziness faded, his mind sharpening as the effects dissipated. But the question nagged at him: if the drug was present in the

cave, it must be natural, not something applied or distributed by the Brotherhood.

Switching to “game mode” only helped him see the room in greyscale; it couldn’t reveal the finer details he needed now. He pulled a small flash light from his pocket, sweeping its beam over the walls. In the bright, narrow cone of light, he noticed something peculiar: the rock face was dusted with a fine, greyish substance, like powder, faintly coating the walls and settling on the surfaces. As he angled the beam upward, he saw tiny motes drifting from the ceiling, an ever-present haze of spores raining down into the cavern.

The pieces fell into place. The Brotherhood was harnessing a natural fungal phenomenon, exploiting these psychoactive spores to amplify the effects of their rituals. It was a perfect tactic: undetectable unless you knew what to look for, and subtle enough to take effect slowly, heightening the mystique and fear surrounding the initiations.

Karl pulled a sterile scraper from his gear, carefully scraping some of the dust into a plastic bag, making sure it didn’t contact his skin. Once the sample was sealed, he pocketed it. If analysed, this substance could provide vital evidence of the Brotherhood’s methods, especially if the drug was unique to this location.

With his mind now clear, Karl’s attention returned to the stage. He moved behind the pulpits, scanning for anything that might reveal more of the Brotherhood’s practices — a hidden alcove, storage spaces, or any signs of equipment. After a few minutes of searching, he found a concealed storage compartment behind the central pulpit, its door blending into the rock with nearly invisible hinges.

Inside, Karl discovered a collection of Brotherhood items, neatly stowed and ready for the next ceremony: ceremonial robes, serpent flags, and several vials filled with a liquid he suspected were preparations made from the psychoactive spores. He took quick photos of the stash, documenting

each item and its contents, then carefully replaced everything as he'd found it, ensuring no trace of his search was left behind.

Karl retrieved several compact devices from his gear, each no larger than a coin. These were the agency's latest in covert surveillance - self-contained units housing both video and audio capability, with memory cards that could record for weeks. He'd need to recover them later, as the cave's rock walls made any kind of wireless transmission impossible.

Working methodically in the darkness, Karl placed the first device near the entrance, angling it to capture anyone entering the cave. He carefully pressed it into a crevice, the device's matte black surface virtually invisible against the dark rock. The second went high in an alcove overlooking the amphitheater, positioned to record the entire ceremony space. A third he tucked behind one of the pulpits, focusing on the area where the leaders would stand.

Each placement required careful consideration - the devices needed clear sightlines while remaining completely hidden from casual inspection. Karl knew the Brotherhood would regularly sweep for electronic devices, but these were designed to be virtually undetectable, their power signatures too low to register on standard scanners, and with no wireless signal they should be untraceable.

He saved the final device for the hidden storage compartment, securing it in a corner where it could capture anyone accessing the ceremonial items. This one was particularly crucial - it might reveal how the Brotherhood prepared their ritual implements, perhaps even catch them handling the psychoactive substances they used to enhance their ceremonies.

As he worked, Karl noted the positions of each device in his phone, marking their locations precisely. Recovery would be just as delicate an operation as placement - he'd need to retrieve the devices and their recorded data without leaving any trace of his presence. But the intelligence they could gather would be invaluable: weeks of the

Brotherhood's secret activities, their ceremonies, their leaders' private conversations, all captured in high-definition video and audio.

The recordings might finally reveal the full extent of their manipulation techniques, their organizational structure, and perhaps even details about their plans for the purification facility in Germany. Every scrap of information could help the agency understand and ultimately dismantle the Brotherhood's operation.

He slipped back into the shadows, his objective clear: he'd gathered what he needed here, evidence that would lay bare the Brotherhood's psychological manipulation tactics. Now, he needed to exfiltrate the Dragon's Lair undetected and get these findings into trusted hands. With one last glance at the imposing amphitheatre, Karl moved back through the cave, steeling himself for the final, cautious trek back into the night.

Back at the safe house, Karl spread the photos across the table, carefully placing the sealed sample of the cave fungus beside them. Lands examined each image with a mixture of fascination and disbelief, his eyes narrowing at the altar carvings, the hidden stash, and the amphitheatre's eerie layout.

"This," Karl said, pointing to the sample, "is how they're controlling perceptions. The cave itself is the source. They've chosen the location not just for its isolation but because it's an unending supply of this psychoactive fungus."

Lands nodded, still taking in the implications. "A smart setup. Initiates would never suspect it — they think it's just the atmosphere or the power of ritual." He glanced at Karl. "Good thing you had that blocker with you. Otherwise, they'd have had you right where they wanted you."

Karl nodded, his expression grim. "The cave feels like any other dark space, but this fungus can't be ignored. It's creating exactly the mind-altering effects they need to manipulate recruits."

Lands leaned back, his mind already racing with next steps. “This changes things. If we can get this sample analysed, document that it’s naturally psychoactive, we have concrete proof the Brotherhood is inducing altered states to bind loyalty — even induce hallucinations if they need to.”

Karl crossed his arms, deep in thought. “It’s insidious but effective. They don’t need drugs or salves every time. The Brotherhood could repeat this over and over, using the same setting to amplify their influence.”

“This is bigger than we thought,” Lands agreed. “And it gives us exactly the kind of evidence we need to start dismantling their methods. We get this out to the agency for analysis, then work out the best way to get the truth into the public eye.” He glanced at Karl with a rare smile. “Looks like your infiltration is paying off.”

They shared a quick nod, the weight of their mission settling as they realised just how close they were to exposing the Brotherhood’s shadowy tactics. Now, all that was left was to follow this evidence trail back to its source and tear down the Brotherhood’s manipulative hold, one layer at a time.

23 The Archive

The mission ahead was critical — and precarious. Karl and Lands had reviewed every angle, knowing that this second infiltration of Freiburg would demand utmost precision and stealth. They couldn't risk smashing their way into the archive or hauling out hard drives; that would compromise everything and tip off the Brotherhood immediately. Instead, they'd opted for a high-tech siphoning method, one that would allow Karl to tap into the data and extract it remotely, providing real-time access to their findings as they unravelled the Brotherhood's secrets.

At the heart of their plan was the agency's newest piece of tech: a laser transceiver, a sleek 25mm cube with capabilities as inconspicuous as they were powerful. The Freiburg compound operated in a tech-devoid bubble, and any kind of radio signal would stand out like a flare. But the laser transceiver circumvented that entirely, using an invisible beam of light to transmit data over a line-of-sight connection. This meant they could quietly stream the Brotherhood's files to Lands without tripping any alarms.

The primary challenge was positioning. The laser transceiver needed to be installed on Freiburg's network, with the small cube affixed to a window that offered an unobstructed line of sight to its counterpart outside the compound. The two cubes would self-align within a small range, as long as they could "see" each other. The setup was delicate and would require precise placement inside the archive — a detail Karl couldn't afford to miscalculate.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, Karl and Lands waited at Freiburg's border. They were parked in a concealed location within the dense forest, their vehicle camouflaged by foliage and prepared for a swift exit if needed. Waiting for full darkness, Karl checked his equipment one last time, feeling the weight of each tool, each component, knowing that tonight's success would hinge on flawless execution.

As night deepened, the faint light of Freiburg's isolated Bavarian buildings became visible in the distance. Karl turned to Lands, who gave him a firm nod. "Remember — quiet, fast, and stick to the plan."

Karl returned the nod, steeling himself as he slipped into the shadows and made his way toward Freiburg. Each step brought him closer to the heart of the Brotherhood's hidden power, the archive where their plans and secrets were stashed. Once he made it inside and set up the transceiver, the agency would finally have a live tap into the Brotherhood's real-time data, feeding them critical intelligence without detection.

Tonight would mark the Brotherhood's first, invisible vulnerability — and Karl was ready to exploit it.

The first incursion into Freiburg's protected borders was, indeed, the most dangerous. The Brotherhood's territory was ringed with cameras and sensors, their presence so thorough that no movement on the ground would go unnoticed. But Karl had no intention of moving along the ground, at least not for this part.

Outfitted with night gear and a rucksack brimming with the agency's finest tech, he planned his approach with meticulous care. There was only one solution that played to his unique strengths: go over the perimeter. He prepared himself, took a deep breath, and launched into a colossal leap, the kind of impossible manoeuvre only he could pull off. Sailing through the air, he rocketed over the treetops, catching fleeting glimpses of the ground far below, silent and shadowed in the night.

For a moment, he was soaring, his arc perfectly on course. Then came the landing. Karl crashed into the side of a tree, branches snapping in quick succession as he tumbled down, each one slowing his descent but jostling him roughly. He managed to grab hold of a thick branch, his grip steadying him in a way that finally broke his fall. For a few seconds, he dangled there, catching his breath.

Quite the landing, he thought, as he cautiously climbed down, branch by branch, until his boots met the solid forest floor.

From there, he moved swiftly, sprinting deeper into the wooded perimeter of Freiburg, careful to stay within the natural cover of trees and shadows. Now that he was inside the Brotherhood's borders, he hoped he'd bypassed their primary line of defence. The remaining challenge would be evading ground patrols and maintaining his cover until he reached the archive.

The night pressed in around him, quiet but charged with tension, as he moved deeper into enemy territory, one silent step closer to unlocking the Brotherhood's secrets.

Karl moved with practised silence, skirting the pools of light cast by the street lamps and slipping between shadows like a ghost. Freiburg was quiet, but he knew better than to assume complacency. He had no cover story if he were spotted; as far as the Brotherhood was concerned, "Karl Müller" was already back in Germany, starting the groundwork for the repatriation project. This mission depended entirely on his ability to stay undetected.

To minimise his exposure on the ground, he took to the rooftops, gliding across them with fluid precision. Each leap from building to building was calculated, his eyes constantly checking the streets below for any sign of patrols that might happen to glance skyward. From his elevated vantage, he made it to the central area of Freiburg without incident. But as he crouched on a ledge overlooking the administration building, he noticed an immediate problem: surrounded on all sides, the building didn't have a clear line of sight to the outskirts. Even the windows of its lower floors were hemmed in by adjacent buildings.

Should have seen that coming, he thought, adjusting his plan on the fly. Plan B: he would have to position the transceiver cube high enough to get the line of sight needed, and then run the fibre optic cable to connect with the building's network.

He scanned the roof, spotting a place where the cube would be unobstructed and able to send a signal across the town to the treeline. Using his phone's compass, he carefully angled the cube to face the spot where Lands and the team would be waiting to receive the transmission. The alignment would be critical once the second cube was in place.

Karl secured the fibre optic cable into the eaves of the administration building's roof, letting it drop discreetly into the crawl space above the ceiling. He moved with precision, knowing each minute counted. With a final glance at the rooftops to ensure no one had spotted him, he lowered himself from the edge, landing silently beside the building's side door. It was the same door he'd used on his previous incursion, and he slipped in with practised ease.

Once inside, he paused, scanning for any sign of movement. The building was silent, as it had been last time — empty at this hour. Without hesitation, he made his way to the ducting in the wall, threading the fibre optic cable into the main ventilation system, concealing it as he routed it down through the risers between floors. The thin cable blended seamlessly into the narrow passageways, practically invisible in the shadows. Step by step, he guided it down toward the basement, where he knew the server room waited.

When he finally reached the basement, Karl approached the server room door, once again grateful for the simplicity of the mechanical lock. Inside, he moved with care, knowing any loose cable would be a dead giveaway. Working methodically, he positioned the fibre optic line alongside existing network cables, blending it with the neatly routed cords within the server rack. He used a network splitter to splice it directly into the system, then tucked the cable back so it disappeared seamlessly into the cabling structure.

Once the setup was complete, Karl double-checked everything, ensuring the cable was hidden and secure. With the connection in place, all that remained was positioning the second transceiver in the treeline. For now,

the line was prepped, lying in wait for that invisible laser link to spring it to life.

His mind clear and focused, Karl exited the server room, retracing his steps quietly back up to the first floor. The next stop would be the Medical Centre, where he hoped to find answers about the Brotherhood's biological capabilities and, potentially, evidence of experiments tied to their manipulation techniques.

The Medical Centre loomed at the end of the street, dimly lit and quiet but unmistakably staffed by medical personnel. It would require the same level of finesse — and some ingenuity — to access it without detection.

The rear of the Medical Centre was a blank, windowless expanse of wall, as if purposefully designed to hide its contents from any prying eyes. Karl had expected as much; the Brotherhood wouldn't risk casual observers glancing into areas like the morgue, pathology, or the research lab. Approaching the building with measured steps, Karl scanned upward and saw what he was looking for: a large skylight above the research lab, likely the only point of natural light in an otherwise concealed room.

Climbing quietly onto the roof, he moved toward the skylight, which was sealed tightly but, fortunately, not alarmed. He circled its frame, gripping each edge with a careful yet unyielding force, lifting bit by bit until he'd loosened it from its mount. With a final, controlled lift, he slid the skylight to the side, setting it down silently.

Dropping through the opening into the darkness below, Karl activated his "game mode." Instantly, the room became a sharply rendered, greyscale model, every object visible as a series of smooth and jagged contours. He scanned the laboratory, noting the equipment layout and the distinct shapes of medical machines and workstations.

Moving with calculated steps, Karl made his way through the lab, each piece of equipment another clue in his search for answers. There were standard lab benches, but also more sophisticated devices — machines that

looked designed for cellular analysis, some with incubation chambers that could likely sustain fungal growth or other organic cultures. He stopped by one station, examining what appeared to be glass slides and Petri dishes stacked neatly, each labelled with scientific shorthand.

Karl retrieved his agency phone and began snapping photos. The labels might reveal research connected to the fungal spores used in the Dragon's Lair, or worse, a new form of chemical enhancement the Brotherhood could be developing. He moved carefully from station to station, recording every detail, aware that any one piece of evidence could expose the Brotherhood's operations.

In the far corner of the lab, Karl spotted a secured cabinet. His fingers brushed over the lock, confirming it was mechanical, and he carefully picked it open. Inside were a series of vials, each filled with a translucent liquid and labelled with a code. He photographed each vial, making a mental note to cross-reference the codes later, and placed one vial into a protective sleeve inside his gear bag.

Satisfied he'd documented all he could, Karl turned to retrace his steps, his senses on high alert. This laboratory might be the key to the Brotherhood's covert research, and now he had enough evidence to start piecing together exactly what they were planning.

With the mission at the Medical Centre completed, Karl silently replaced the skylight, leaped off the roof, and sprinted back through the cover of darkness to rejoin Lands. A loud crash in the trees startled Lands, who instantly drew his weapon, scanning the shadows.

"Lower it, it's just me," Karl called out as he stepped into the dim glow cast by their parked vehicle. Lands relaxed, holstering his weapon as Karl gave him a quick rundown of the night's success and the setup of the laser transceiver in the administration building.

Without delay, Karl scaled a nearby tree, taking the second laser cube from his pack. He affixed it to a sturdy branch, aiming it in the general direction

of the administration building. Using the app on his phone, he made fine adjustments until a signal strength confirmed a solid connection with the partner cube in the heart of Freiburg.

Dropping the fibre optic cable from the tree, they connected it to the computer system set up in their vehicle and powered it on. Within moments, Karl's phone buzzed, and he saw Anya's name on the screen. He put her on speaker.

"Hi, Dave. It's Anya," she said, her tone warm but focused. "Cecilia had me monitoring the laser transceiver system. I'm seeing a clear connection, and we're good to go."

"Good to hear from you, Anya," Karl replied. "The transceiver's stable. I've done all I can on my end; now it's up to you."

"Got it," Anya confirmed. "I'll start the siphoning process as soon as I breach their systems. Then we just need to retrieve the cube when it's safe."

"Thanks, Anya. We'll be in touch," Karl replied, ending the call.

Together, he and Lands buried the hard case housing the transceiver's connection at the base of the tree, camouflaging it with leaves and soil to keep it hidden. Mission complete, they set out for São Paulo under the cover of night, leaving the system quietly at work, gathering the Brotherhood's secrets for the agency.

24 Divide and Conquer

Back at the safe house, Lands met Karl's determined gaze, contemplating the strategy with deliberate care. "We have enough intel streaming in to expose them — but if we go public right now, it's going to look like just another conspiracy theory. That's exactly what the Brotherhood would expect and could easily dismiss."

"So, what's our angle?" Karl asked.

"We turn their own power against them," Lands said, voice low and precise. "We'll use what we're gathering from the archives to exploit their weaknesses from the inside. We can plant selective information to breed mistrust between them — make them question each other, doubt their allegiances. Divide and conquer."

Karl's eyes narrowed, absorbing the plan. "Use their hierarchy, the secrets they keep from one another."

"Exactly. We'll find records on their dealings, private correspondences, details on how much influence each member wields and any resentments simmering below the surface. Once those seeds are planted, their suspicions will snowball. We focus on the biggest players and watch the fallout. By the time we're ready to expose the evidence publicly, they'll already be dismantling themselves."

"Let's get to work," Karl replied, with a grim smile. "We're going to need every weakness we can dig up from that archive."

They had the Brotherhood's secrets within reach — and now, they would use them as weapons.

As the data streamed in from the Brotherhood archive, the agency's operatives worked tirelessly to analyse the files, aided by sophisticated AI designed for deep data mining. The output, a blend of insights and chilling

revelations, was soon delivered to Lands, who pored over it with increasing concern.

Karl stared at his laptop screen, his stomach churning. The clinical language of the Brotherhood's research files couldn't mask the horror of what he was reading. Each document was another piece of a nightmare, methodically catalogued with the same attention to detail he'd once used for system logs. But these weren't server errors he was analysing – they were human lives.

"Subject 23-F," he read aloud, his voice barely a whisper. "Age at termination: 6 months. Genetic markers failed to express desired traits..." He pushed back from the desk, running his hands over his face. The image of the nursery at the Dragon's Lair flashed in his mind, those innocent faces now carrying new weight.

Lands looked up from his own stack of files. "You found something?"

"Names. Dates. Details about their 'failed subjects.'" Dave's hands clenched. "They weren't just theorizing about genetic manipulation. They were practicing it. On children."

The findings from the research lab were nothing short of horrifying. He pulled up another file, this one containing photos. A young girl, no more than three, laying in what looked like a medical examination room. Her skin was mottled with dark patches, her limbs distorted. The caption below was devastating in its simplicity: "Trial 45 - Terminated due to unexpected mutation."

Lands's hands tightened around the file as he read on. "This... this is appalling," he muttered, his stomach churning at the implications. The records suggested that the vial Karl had collected was a blend of growth hormones, genetic material, and steroids — all engineered to produce the Aryan race the Brotherhood so fervently desired.

“It’s worse than we thought,” Karl said, his voice barely above a whisper. He leaned back in his chair, disgust flooding through him. “Manipulated pregnancies, forced abortions, artificially inseminated and modified embryos... this has to be stopped.”

Lands clenched his fists, fury simmering beneath his usual stoic demeanour. “These aren’t just crimes against individuals. This is an attack on humanity itself.”

Karl shook his head, struggling to control the wave of anger and revulsion. “They’re erasing life if it doesn’t meet their twisted standards. They have to be stopped. We have to make this public.”

Lands nodded, his expression grim. “This isn’t just an ideological battle any more. This is outright human rights violations, experimentation on a scale we can’t ignore. If we expose this...”

Karl interjected, “We need to act decisively. We can’t allow them to continue these practices. It’s not just about the Brotherhood any more; it’s about saving lives.”

They both knew that revealing the full extent of these atrocities could mobilise public outrage and governmental intervention. But the risk was immense; the Brotherhood would do anything to protect their secrets.

“Let’s compile everything we have and plan our next move,” Lands said, steeling himself. “We need to figure out how to present this evidence without tipping them off. We need to ensure that when we strike, it’s a knockout blow.”

Karl nodded, determination set in his eyes. They had the power to change lives, to potentially save countless victims of the Brotherhood’s cruel ambitions. It was time to turn their findings into action.

The files now put a name to a face Karl had seen in a pulpit at the Dragon’s Lair, Greta Klein — the name now resonated with a dark significance. She wasn’t just another member of the Brotherhood; she was deeply entangled

in the eugenics that had created the twisted “future generation” Karl had witnessed. As one of the high-ranking figures at the pulpit, Klein’s influence was instrumental, her reach extending into every corner of Freiburg’s insidious projects.

Greta Klein’s professional background painted a disturbing picture. Her reputable position with a leading German health organization, renowned for its genetic research and advancements, had yielded breakthroughs in therapies for genetic conditions across the third world. But now, with the Brotherhood’s twisted experiments brought to light, Karl couldn’t help but see the horrifying underpinnings of those achievements. Every so-called breakthrough she claimed could be rooted in the Brotherhood’s inhumane eugenics, using human suffering to fuel medical “progress.”

To the outside world, Klein was a celebrated scientist, advancing genetic therapy for noble causes. But to Karl, she represented a façade — a respected professional cloaking the Brotherhood’s dark ambitions in the guise of scientific progress. This realisation intensified his resolve; exposing Klein’s role would not only crack the Brotherhood’s foundation but reveal the horrifying ethical costs behind her celebrated discoveries.

Karl knew this meant Greta Klein would have to be one of their primary targets. Her position, likely just as secure as any of the others, might be the key to unravelling the Brotherhood’s most secretive operations. Now that they had a name and a face connected directly to the genetic manipulations, the path to dismantling the Brotherhood’s inner circle grew clearer — and more urgent.

Karl's stomach churned as he examined the documents from the Brotherhood's archive. Chief of Police Helga Weiss had crafted templates that mirrored official German government documents, but with a sinister twist - they were designed to provoke chaos rather than maintain order. Her strategy was horrifyingly simple: position police to allow violence between

protesters and immigrants, making it appear that society was collapsing while the Brotherhood pulled the strings from the shadows.

The archived minutes revealed regular meetings between Weiss and General Braun, Germany's Minister of Defence. Their discussions focused not on peacekeeping, but on maximizing the impact of staged confrontations. Braun's military forces would stand ready to "protect German interests" - really just an intimidation tactic to legitimise the Brotherhood's orchestrated violence.

Each document bore their signatures, damning evidence of their manipulation. The Brotherhood's meticulous record-keeping, once a source of pride, would now be their undoing. Karl knew that releasing this information would do more than damage reputations - it would expose Weiss and Braun as architects of violence rather than protectors of peace. The revelations would shatter the Brotherhood's leadership circle, turning them against each other as public scrutiny mounted.

These weren't just records any more; they were the key to dismantling the Brotherhood from within. Karl exchanged a determined look with Lands. They had what they needed to tear the organization apart, and they wouldn't need to fire a single shot to do it.

The challenge of bringing the Brotherhood's leaders to justice weighed heavily on Karl and Lands. Discrediting Emil Swartz might be a relatively straightforward task — his position at the Bundesarchiv depended on credibility, and undermining it could force him out. But simply stripping him of his title wouldn't deliver the justice their victims deserved. Likewise, Maximilian Engel, the so-called Grand Dragon, was a trickier target. As a retired academic with no recent public ties in Germany, any exposure might be dismissed as a smear against an old man — a meaningless consequence for someone so deeply complicit in the Brotherhood's atrocities.

“We need to find more than just a way to ruin their reputations,” Karl said, pacing the room. “We need evidence that guarantees consequences.”

“Public exposure will make it hard for them to hide,” Lands replied, eyes locked on a map of Germany. “But you’re right. Forcing them out of positions of power isn’t enough. We need criminal charges that stick — real, tangible evidence that can’t be swept under the rug.”

Their options were grim but necessary. The archives, with their records of manipulated genetic experiments, their documentation of human lives ruined in pursuit of a twisted ideal — this was damning material. Linking each of the cabal members to these documents would be key, but it wouldn’t be enough without a connection to specific acts. They needed living witnesses or physical evidence tying Engel, Swartz, and the others to crimes committed beyond mere association with the Brotherhood.

“Engel may be untouchable as a public figure,” Lands mused, “but if we can prove he orchestrated experiments, manipulated people... maybe there are survivors. Someone who escaped, someone willing to testify.”

Karl nodded, determination etching lines into his face. “We dig into the pasts of every one of them. There has to be something we can use — a link, a thread we haven’t pulled yet.”

“And if not,” Lands said grimly, “we might have to consider a different angle. The Brotherhood’s documents contain enough to ignite public fury. If we can’t put them in jail, we might at least incite the kind of outrage that demands true accountability.”

It wasn’t perfect, but it was a start. They needed to hold every member of the cabal accountable for their actions — not just ruin them, but ensure they paid for their part in the Brotherhood’s darkness. The world needed to see these monsters for what they truly were.

25 The Final Solution

The call came at 3 AM. Karl had been dozing in his safe house chair, laptop still open to Brotherhood documents, when Anya's ringtone jolted him awake. Her voice was uncharacteristically shaky.

"Karl, I... I need you to look at something. Now." The usual playful edge in her tone was gone, replaced by something he'd never heard before - raw fear. "I've been mapping Weiss's private server structure, the one she kept isolated from the Brotherhood's main network. I found... God, Karl, I don't even know how to describe it."

Karl sat up straighter, fully alert now. Anya didn't scare easily. "Send it through. Talk me through what you found."

"It's coming now. Heavily encrypted. Weiss buried this deep - personal files, research data, project specifications. She called it 'Project Reinigung' - Project Purification." The sound of rapid typing came through the line. "But it's not just some theoretical study. They've been developing it for years. The genetic research, the targeting mechanisms, delivery systems... Karl, they're planning to kill millions."

The files began populating Karl's screen. His IT instincts kicked in automatically, categorizing and analysing the data flow, but each new document made his hands shake harder on the keyboard. Molecular diagrams. Genetic markers. Population dispersal models. Engineering specifications for delivery mechanisms.

"The agent is designed to look natural at first," Anya continued, her voice hollow. "They engineered it to target specific genetic sequences - anyone who doesn't match their criteria for 'racial purity.' Initial exposure presents like a common cold. But in the targeted populations..." She paused, taking a shuddering breath. "The progression is horrific. Organ failure. Neurological breakdown. A slow, painful death that looks like a natural outbreak."

Karl opened a video file marked "Trial Results." The footage showed laboratory animals in various stages of decline. He closed it quickly, bile rising in his throat. "How were they planning to deploy it?"

"Multiple vectors. They've been developing specialised rockets designed to seed clouds over major cities. High-altitude balloons with timed release mechanisms. Even a network of automated drones programmed to disperse the agent at precise coordinates." Anya's typing grew more frantic. "But that's not the worst part. Look at the file marked 'Currency Initiative.'"

Karl found the document. It detailed plans to introduce a contact-based variant of the agent into the Euro supply chain. A single contaminated banknote could spread the initial exposure through entire communities. The Brotherhood had calculated infection rates, spread patterns, estimated casualties...

"The manufacturing facility," Karl breathed, the pieces clicking into place with horrible clarity. "The clean rooms, the precision engineering requirements, the environmental controls. It's all for this. They're building a death factory."

"Karl," Anya's voice cracked slightly. "I've seen a lot of horrible things in this job. But this... the scale of it... they've thought of everything. Population density maps. Weather patterns. Economic flow models. They're planning a genocide engineered to look like a natural disaster."

Karl was already dialling Lands when another file caught his eye - personnel lists. Names of scientists, engineers, and technicians recruited for various aspects of the project. Many were unwitting participants, their legitimate research twisted to serve the Brotherhood's ends. But others...

"Dr. Werner Adler, Genetic Engineering Division," he read aloud. "The same Dr. Adler who runs the children's ward at the Freiberg. He wasn't just monitoring their development. He was using them as test subjects."

Lands answered on the first ring. "Do you know what time it is?"

"Get to the safe house. Now." Karl's voice was ice. "Anya found what the Brotherhood's really building. And we have to stop it."

After disconnecting, Karl sat in silence, staring at the streams of data that outlined plans for mass murder. His enhanced vision picked up every horrific detail in perfect clarity, each word burning into his memory. The Brotherhood's 'perfect future' hadn't just been about propaganda and social manipulation. They'd been working toward something far more final.

He thought of the children he'd seen at the Dragon's Lair, of Werner's scarred face, of all the 'failed' test subjects who'd never had a chance to grow up. The Brotherhood had spent years perfecting their weapon. Now they had the means, the method, and the manufacturing capability to unleash it.

"We're going to burn it all down," he said. "Every lab, every facility, every piece of research. And then we're going to make sure everyone responsible faces justice for what they've done."

The sun was rising as Lands arrived at the safe house. Karl had barely moved, still processing the magnitude of what they'd discovered. The Brotherhood wasn't just trying to reshape society through manipulation and fear any more. They were preparing to remake it at a molecular level, choosing who would live and who would die based on their twisted ideology of genetic purity.

When Karl shared what they'd found, Lands' usual composed demeanour cracked. His face went pale as he reviewed the technical specifications, the trial results, the deployment strategies. This wasn't just evidence of crimes - it was a blueprint for an atrocity that would dwarf anything in modern history.

"We need to move fast," Lands said finally. "If they realise we've found this..."

"They'll accelerate their timeline," Karl finished. "Deploy what they have ready, consequences be damned." He stood, determination replacing the horror in his eyes. "Time to show the Brotherhood what real purity looks like - the pure light of truth exposing every dark corner of their operation."

The weight of their discovery hung in the air between them. They had the evidence to destroy the Brotherhood completely now. But first, they had to make sure this weapon never saw the light of day. The race against time had begun.

26 Gathering Evidence

Karl and Lands examined the Brotherhood calendar with focused intent. The gathering in two weeks, set to coincide with the new moon, seemed typical on the surface: on the agenda, an occult ritual and an update on the Brotherhood's repatriation efforts. But Karl knew these monthly rituals were a means to reinforce the Brotherhood's hold on its followers, subtly boosted by the psychoactive effects of the spores in the cave. This gathering offered a critical opportunity to gather real-time footage of the Brotherhood's leaders performing their most secretive acts, exposing the twisted heart of their rituals.

Two weeks was a short window, but Karl and Lands now had a crucial advantage. They could monitor and prepare for every move, anticipating not just what would be shown, but how they could best use the footage to dismantle the Brotherhood from the inside.

Lands and Karl set a plan into motion with swift precision. Using the Brotherhood's encrypted email addresses that Karl had extracted from his phone, they enlisted Anya to create a carefully crafted series of messages between Weiss and Braun. The goal was simple: manipulate the two into believing they were reaching out to each other for a private discussion about their plans to destabilise and undermine law enforcement. It would be delicate work, requiring Anya to perfectly mimic their language, tone, and covert style.

The plan was risky, but with Weiss and Braun's own arrogance and sense of superiority, it just might work. They would each believe they were being trusted with a crucial, clandestine discussion — unaware that every word they spoke would be recorded.

"We need to select a place where we can control every angle," Lands said, his voice low and focused. "Somewhere private but believable."

Karl nodded. “Agreed. If they sense even the slightest hint of a trap, this all falls apart.”

Using the Adlon Kempinski a luxurious hotel in Berlin added an air of sophistication and plausible deniability for the planned meeting between Weiss and Braun. The choice was deliberate: a discreet, upscale location known for hosting high-profile guests and meetings. It was just the kind of place where powerful figures would feel at ease discussing sensitive matters under the guise of official business or private dealings.

Anya worked to craft messages that suggested a clandestine meeting at this location, hinting at the need for utmost secrecy. Weiss and Braun, accustomed to manoeuvring in the shadows, would see it as a natural extension of their covert operations. Meanwhile, Karl and Lands arranged for the hotel room to be rigged with state-of-the-art recording devices — microphones embedded in light fixtures, cameras disguised as everyday objects.

By the time Weiss and Braun arrived, every angle would be covered. They would speak freely, thinking themselves secure within the plush confines of a five-star hotel room, unaware that every word and gesture was being captured. If all went according to plan, this meeting would provide the irrefutable evidence needed to expose their orchestration of unrest and bring their machinations crashing down.

Karl could already envision the chaos that would unfold among the Brotherhood’s ranks. Their leaders, once untouchable figures operating in the shadows, would be publicly named and held accountable for the abhorrent acts captured on film. The Brotherhood, built on a foundation of secrecy, power, and manipulation, was about to experience a fall that would be as hard and fast as it was irreversible.

The stage was set for a decisive strike against the Brotherhood. With hard evidence from the archives — detailed records of their manipulative, violent strategies — paired with undeniable video footage of their high-

ranking leaders performing twisted rituals at the Dragon's Lair, the Brotherhood's carefully guarded secrecy was hanging by a thread. When Karl and Lands released this damning material, it would expose every sinister facet of the organisation to the world.

With everything meticulously prepared, Cecilia and Anya's surveillance operation on Weiss and Braun unfolded exactly as planned. The luxurious hotel suite, discreetly fitted with advanced recording devices, became a silent witness to the two conspirators' machinations. When Weiss arrived first, she took stock of the suite's elegance, settling into the plush surroundings with an air of impatient calm. Moments later, Braun entered, and after a brief exchange of pleasantries, he wasted no time producing a small electronic device, designed to detect any hidden bugs.

Braun methodically swept the room, moving the device over furniture, walls, and decor. Satisfied, he announced that the room was secure. But what he didn't realise was that the true surveillance lay beyond his detection capabilities: Anya's laser sound recording system, picking up every vibration through a framed picture on the wall. It captured their every word.

As the meeting began in earnest, Anya activated the room's hidden devices, ensuring crystal-clear audio and video recordings from every angle. What followed was a damning discussion: Weiss and Braun spoke candidly about their coordination of far-right activities, manipulating police response to fuel violent clashes, and their deliberate efforts to undermine Germany's immigrant communities. The evidence revealed a chilling, orchestrated strategy — protecting far-right agitators by compromising investigations, misplacing evidence, and exploiting procedural loopholes. Every detail was captured, leaving no room for denial or escape from justice.

The operation was a triumph, the trap sprung perfectly. The recordings would expose Weiss and Braun's treachery for all to see, dealing a significant blow to the Brotherhood and laying the groundwork for their inevitable downfall.

27 Übermensch

Following the gathering at the Dragon's Lair, Karl needed to return and obtain the cameras and recordings that had been made from within the cave. It was long after midnight when the cavern was emptied of people from the gathering, and it was safe for Karl to return inside to collect the evidence. Tonight there was no one on guard, maybe they didn't feel the need after all hundreds of Brotherhood soldiers had just left. Karl made his way easily inside.

As he neared the amphitheatre, light flickered ahead. The cavernous chamber was bathed in the glow of torches --- they seemed to burn brighter than before, casting long, jagged shadows on the walls. Karl halted, taking in the scene. Something was wrong. This was supposed to be an empty space, a silent recovery mission, but instead, he felt like he had walked straight into a spotlight.

"Have you come to recover your electronic devices?" Reinhard Schäfer's voice cut through the silence, each word dripping with vindication. "You can step out of the shadows. We know you're there."

The amphitheatre was alive with the flickering, ominous glow of torches, shadows dancing along the jagged walls. Karl felt every sense sharpen, every nerve attuned to the danger. He had expected a silent recovery of his hidden cameras and recordings --- instead, he walked straight into a trap. The Grand Dragon himself, Maximilian Engel, stood at the central pulpit, with Reinhard at his side, their figures casting long shadows across the stone floor.

The shock on Engel's face was palpable as Karl emerged from the shadows. Reinhard's expression, by contrast, held only cold satisfaction.

"You!!!" Engel's voice echoed through the chamber, a mix of disbelief and rage. From the darkness of the entrance tunnel, the sound of marching feet

grew louder. Soldiers filed in, black uniforms and cold, hard eyes, sealing the only exit.

"I told you, Maximilian." Reinhard's voice was steel wrapped in silk. "I warned you from the very beginning. His devotion was too perfect, his background too clean." He turned to Karl, grey eyes calculating. "You were good, I'll grant you that. But there's always something mechanical about a performance, isn't there?"

"How is this possible? I welcomed you myself. We trusted you," Engel spat, his tone dripping with betrayal.

"No, Max. *You* trusted him," Reinhard corrected, never taking his predatory gaze off Karl. "Some of us knew better."

Karl met their combined gaze, his expression hardening. "Your twisted Brotherhood ends today, Max."

Reinhard's laugh was sharp and bitter. "The Brotherhood ends because you refused to listen. Because you were so desperate to believe in your grand vision that you ignored every warning sign." He turned to Engel, voice thick with disgust. "I told you he was an infiltrator. I *told* you something wasn't right. But no --- the great Maximilian Engel knew better."

Engel's eyes blazed with fury, his voice icy and controlled. "It is you who ends today." At his signal, four towering figures stepped forward from the shadows of the stage --- Werner and three other Stahlkriegers, the Brotherhood's elite warriors. The crowd of soldiers tightened their circle, ready to witness their leader's command play out.

Karl felt the weight of the moment, but he pushed it aside, focusing on survival. "Stop this now, Werner," he said, his voice low but firm, addressing the nearest of the Stahlkriegers. "You're gonna get hurt."

Engel's laughter rang out, mocking and cruel. To the Brotherhood soldiers, Karl seemed outmatched — a mediocre, ageing man facing giants. Werner

stepped forward, his bulk moving with deceptive speed, planting his foot and launching a vicious blow at Karl's head.

Time slowed, a familiar sensation for Karl. He sidestepped effortlessly, feeling the rush of air as Werner's fist passed inches from his face. In the same fluid motion, Karl delivered a crushing left hook to Werner's exposed ribs. The crack of breaking bone reverberated in his ears, and the air left Werner's lungs in a wheeze of pain.

Werner staggered, shocked, but Karl gave him no time to recover. He struck again, driving a fist deep into Werner's solar plexus. The Stahlkrieger's eyes bulged, his body betraying him with pain and — was it fear? Werner doubled over, and Karl ended it with a brutal left hook to the jaw. The crack was sickening; blood and teeth sprayed as Werner crumpled, unconscious before he hit the ground.

The amphitheatre fell silent, the stunned gasps of the gathered soldiers echoing like distant whispers. Engel's face was a mask of disbelief, rage, and something else — fear. One of their elite, their strongest, had fallen to this unassuming man. And Karl, now fully in the moment, prepared himself for what would come next.

The remaining three Stahlkriegers wasted no time. They lunged at Karl in unison, their collective strength a crushing force that bore down on him like a rugby scrum. The impact drove him to the ground, and for a few tense moments, he was buried beneath a storm of fists, every strike a brutal reminder of the power arrayed against him. But beneath the pummelling, Karl's mind was a cold, focused centre of determination. He gathered his will, every ounce of strength he possessed, and with a sudden surge of power, he erupted upward, using both his legs and arms.

The force of his movement sent the giants flying, each crashing to the stone floor in separate directions. The shock on their faces matched that of the soldiers watching from the perimeter — no one had expected such raw,

explosive strength from Karl. He didn't give them time to recover. He moved with predatory precision toward the first of the Stahlkriegers.

The man was still disoriented, scrambling to his feet. His eyes locked with Karl's, but his movements were slow, his stance telegraphed. As he planted his right foot, Karl lashed out with a brutal heel strike. The impact folded the man's leg backward at the knee, a sickening crunch echoing throughout the cavern as ligaments tore and bones shattered. The Stahlkrieger crumpled, a howl of pain torn from his throat.

Karl spun, already sensing the second warrior closing in. He barely registered the fist flying toward him before his instincts took over. He met the attack with his own fist, their knuckles colliding with a deafening crack. It was like a sledgehammer striking a bag of gravel — the bones in the Stahlkrieger's hand shattered instantly. The man recoiled, clutching his mangled fist with a look of shock and agony.

But there was no time to celebrate small victories. The third and final Stahlkrieger seized Karl from behind, massive hands wrapping around his throat like a vice. He lifted Karl off the ground, squeezing with inhuman strength. Even as the giant tried to choke the life from him, Karl's eyes met his captor's — unyielding, fierce.

Grabbing the Stahlkrieger's forearms with both hands, Karl squeezed with all his might. His grip was like iron. The muscles beneath his fingers tore, bones fracturing under the immense pressure. The giant's eyes went wide with disbelief, then pain, his grip loosening. Karl dropped back to the floor, landing with the grace of a predator ready for more.

He stood among the devastation, the three fallen Stahlkriegers groaning or unconscious around him. Blood dripped from his knuckles, his chest heaved with exertion, but his gaze never wavered. In the flickering torchlight, surrounded by the gasps of stunned onlookers, Karl looked every inch the warrior who had just shattered the Brotherhood's strongest elite.

Karl's eyes burned with a mix of defiance and fury as he turned to face Engel, who stood atop the central pulpit. The leader of the Brotherhood's gaze was a storm of disbelief, fury, and fear. "You," Engel spat, his voice trembling with rage. "You were one of us. I branded you myself!"

As he stepped forward, the tension in the cavern so thick it was almost suffocating. He ripped open his shirt, baring his chest for all to see. It was smooth, unmarked, utterly unblemished. "Some things, like your twisted ideology and your psychoactive drugs, just didn't take," Karl said, his voice a cold, cutting edge. His words echoed off the cavern walls, a dagger through the Brotherhood's collective pride.

Engel's expression shifted from rage to something closer to madness. His hands trembled as he reached beneath his cloak and drew a pistol. "You dare?" he whispered, voice tight with desperation. Without hesitation, he fired three times, the shots ringing out like thunderclaps in the cavernous space. Each bullet struck Karl's chest — and each one fell uselessly to the stone floor. Not a mark. Not a flinch.

Karl took a slow, deliberate step forward, the torchlight casting shadows across his face, making him seem larger than life. "So much for your Stahlkrieger," he said, his voice calm, deadly. "Meet the Übermensch."

For a long moment, Engel could only stare, wide-eyed and disbelieving. Everything he had worked for, every myth he had clung to, shattered before him. The man he had tried to mould, to bring into the fold, was something else entirely — and now, his betrayer.

Engel's mind broke. His grip on reality splintered. With shaking hands, he raised the gun, pressing the barrel beneath his chin. "No... this cannot be..." he whispered, tears streaming down his face. Then, he pulled the trigger. The sound echoed through the amphitheatre, a final punctuation to the Brotherhood's hubris and downfall.

As Engel's body crumpled to the floor, Reinhard stood perfectly still, his face a mask of contained fury. His calculating eyes swept over the scene ---

the fallen Stahlkriegers, the shocked soldiers, the blood on the stone floor. Everything he had predicted, everything he had warned them about, had come to pass.

"You've destroyed us," he said quietly, his words carrying in the stunned silence. "But you haven't won. The Brotherhood's ideals will survive, even if Maximilian's foolish trust did not." His grey eyes locked onto Karl's, sharp with hatred. "Remember that."

Without another word, Reinhard turned and walked away, his footsteps echoing through the cavern. His precise, controlled movements never faltered, even as the world he had helped build crumbled around him. He disappeared into the shadows of the tunnel, leaving behind the remnants of the Brotherhood's shattered dream.

The soldiers lining the perimeter of the cavern stood rooted in place, their faces masks of shock and disbelief. Everything they had been told, every symbol of their supposed supremacy, had been destroyed in a matter of moments. Their leader was dead, their strongest warriors defeated, and standing at the centre of it all was the man who had shattered their delusions. For a few heartbeats, the only sound was the crackling of the torches. The Brotherhood was broken, their myth exposed as nothing more than a desperate dream.

The stunned silence in the cavern seemed to stretch on forever, broken only by the flickering hiss of the torches. Slowly, the soldiers began to shift, their once-commanding presence now subdued, shoulders slumped under the weight of disbelief. One by one, they turned and began to file out of the amphitheatre, their expressions a mix of shock, confusion, and dawning realisation. Everything they believed had been shattered.

Before they could all disappear into the tunnels, Karl's voice rang out, firm but without the bitterness of victory. "Please," he called, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "Some of you, help me get these men some medical attention."

There was a beat of hesitation. Then, something shifted. Several of the soldiers turned back, their gazes wary but softened. They saw Karl carefully lift Werner's broken form, cradling the unconscious giant with a gentleness that belied their brutal clash moments before. Without a word, Karl began to walk, carrying Werner through the group, his strength never faltering.

The soldiers parted, watching in silence. Then, one by one, they moved. Some went to the stage to assist the other fallen Stahlkriegers, helping them to stand or limping alongside them. Together, they made their way out of the cavern, a strange, almost surreal procession of former enemies united by the raw humanity of the moment.

Karl's mind was a whirlwind of exhaustion and conflicting emotions. He had come prepared to end a threat, to fight and, if necessary, to kill. But the reality was something different. These men, twisted by ideology, were still human. Broken, fallible, and, in this moment, vulnerable. Even as he bore the weight of Werner's body, Karl felt another weight on his conscience. He had bested them in combat, but he could not abandon them to die. The battle had been necessary, but the compassion — that was his choice.

He looked around at the sombre procession, at the men who had been his enemies moments before but were now comrades in this grim task. The cavern that had been a place of cult-like ceremony and twisted ambition now felt different. Quieter. Perhaps, just perhaps, this was the first step toward something better — for them, and for himself.

28 **Return to the Fatherland**

With the Dragon's Lair recordings securely recovered, the damning evidence from the Weiss and Braun meeting digitally captured, and the horrific revelations from the Brotherhood's medical experiments catalogued, the operation was entering its final phase. As Karl and Lands flew back to Germany, there was a sense of heavy anticipation in the air. Anya worked tirelessly from her end, meticulously editing the footage, cross-referencing every piece of evidence with the Brotherhood's own archive. The narrative that was emerging would strike with precision — revealing the hidden horrors and deeply rooted corruption of the Brotherhood.

As the plane touched down, Karl and Lands moved with urgency. This was the culmination of years of covert work, sacrifices, and deadly risks. They needed to consolidate their efforts and prepare for what was coming. Their next stop was Schneider's secluded home, where he and Fischer awaited news of the operation's progress. The weight of decades of secret pursuits, silent battles, and relentless commitment to justice hung heavily in the air as they gathered.

In Schneider's study, the tension broke as he listened to their report. His face was solemn at first, taking in the enormity of what they had accomplished, but then a rare smile broke across his weary features. He reached for an elegant bottle of whiskey, aged to perfection, and cracked it open. Pouring four glasses, he raised his own high. "To the fall of the Brotherhood," he declared, his voice thick with emotion. "To every risk taken, every truth uncovered. And to you, for daring to finish what so many have feared to begin."

They drank deeply, savouring the victory not yet fully realised, but so close they could almost touch it. Fischer's eyes glistened as she set her glass down. For years, she had chased shadows, worked tirelessly to expose the Brotherhood's poison within Germany's institutions. The prospect that it

was finally ending felt almost unreal. “You’ve done what many thought impossible,” she said softly, her gaze steady. “Tomorrow, the world will see their true faces.”

That evening, Cecilia prepared the release. The material — a blend of video footage, incriminating documents, detailed testimonies, and irrefutable links between the Brotherhood and key figures of power — was set to go live through every channel they had at their disposal. The press would be given exclusive insights, the internet would carry the full weight of the story, and within hours, public outcry would follow. Justice would have its day.

Karl stood apart for a moment, watching Lands and the others. They had fought for this moment, each in their own way. But it wasn’t over yet. Tomorrow would bring backlash, desperation, and, perhaps, retribution from the Brotherhood’s remnants. But for now, they raised their glasses again, steeling themselves for whatever came next, and knowing they had struck a mortal blow to the heart of darkness. Tomorrow, the world would know, and the Brotherhood would crumble.

Karl stood with the group, a weight lifting off his shoulders as he raised his glass one final time. “Finally,” he exclaimed, a mix of relief and exhaustion in his voice, “I’m ‘Dave’ again! I didn’t like the way Karl thought and acted around the Brotherhood. It still makes me shudder that my thoughts and words were his.” He shook his head, his expression caught somewhere between disgust and lingering fear. “It’s good to be me again.”

The others nodded in understanding, but the moment of relief was short-lived. Dr. Fischer’s eyes remained distant, her expression unreadable. For her, this victory carried a bitter edge. She had spent years, decades even, weaving her web to entangle the Brotherhood. She knew the system — how slowly justice moved, how quickly powerful people slipped through the cracks. Some of the Brotherhood’s leaders would escape prosecution, hide behind layers of influence and legal manoeuvring, and spin their own

twisted narratives. The media circus, the court delays, and the political posturing were inevitable.

Her jaw tightened. “Justice... true justice... may still be out of reach,” she said quietly, her voice cold and resolute. “We’ve torn away their masks, but that doesn’t mean they’ll all pay. Some will wriggle free. Some will spin their lies. And some will still find a way to spread their poison.”

Her words hung heavy in the air. Lands placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, recognising the truth in what she said. The battle wasn’t truly over, even if they had struck a mortal blow. The work of dismantling, of seeking accountability, of ensuring the darkness they had exposed wasn’t allowed to fester again — that work was still unfinished. Dave — back in his own skin, his own mind, and his own morality — knew they’d face whatever came next. The fight wasn’t over. But for now, they had dealt a blow that would reverberate, one that the Brotherhood would never recover from.

They drank deeply, not to victory alone, but to the long road ahead and the unshakable resolve that had brought them this far. It was the beginning of the end, but not yet the final chapter. Dr. Fischer’s eyes burned with a determination that would not be quenched, not until every shadow of the Brotherhood was extinguished. And Dave, now fully himself again, felt that same fire. They’d come too far to turn back now.

In the days following the release of the Brotherhood’s secrets, the world exploded in a frenzy of outrage and reckoning. The press dissected every word, every image, and every horrific detail. Headlines screamed of betrayal and conspiracies that ran deep into the fabric of Germany’s institutions. Public anger surged, demanding accountability and swift justice. The legal system, often slow and reluctant, had no choice but to move.

Weiss, the infamous Chief of Police, was suspended almost immediately. A storm of criminal charges rained down upon her, ranging from abuse of

power to inciting violence and corruption. Her fall was as public as it was swift, the cries for her imprisonment echoing across the nation. General Braun, facing mounting pressure and overwhelming evidence of his complicity, was forced to resign. The former Minister of Defence now stood stripped of his rank and status, dogged by criminal proceedings that promised a lengthy custodial sentence. The once-untouchable figures were falling, their power shattered.

Greta Klein's story took a darker, more chilling turn. Arrested and questioned, she was inexplicably granted bail. Two days later, she was found dead in her home, having consumed a mixture of drugs that caused a long and excruciating death. The media reported it as a suicide, but whispers of foul play spread quickly. Klein's choice of such a torturous end made little sense to those who knew her ruthless self-preservation. It was a loose end that would likely never be tied, dismissed officially but never forgotten.

Equally disturbing was the sudden investigation into Emil Schwartz, the Brotherhood-affiliated curator of the Bundesarchiv. In a shocking twist, evidence surfaced linking him to a web of child pornography and historic abuse. The charges were so damning and pervasive that Schwartz couldn't muster a plausible defence. He was arrested, his disgrace complete. The archives he once guarded with sinister zeal were now in the hands of Dr. Fischer, who was appointed as interim curator.

Dave reached out to congratulate Fischer on her new role, recognising the significance of her victory. "Congratulations, Dr. Fischer. It's well-deserved. Though, I have to say... Klein's suicide and Schwartz's sudden exposure seem rather... coincidental," he said, his words carefully chosen.

Fischer's voice, calm and measured, carried a weight of unspoken truth. "Thank you, Dave. Your words mean a great deal. But you know I couldn't possibly comment on such coincidences." There was a pause, then, with a hint of a smile in her voice, she added, "And as for Dr. Stein's sudden

disappearance from Wewelsburg... well, it seems you've stumbled upon more mysteries."

Dave felt a chill run down his spine. There were layers upon layers to this fight, even beyond what he had seen. The Brotherhood's web might have been torn apart, but its shadows lingered. Still, they had done what they set out to do — they had shattered the Brotherhood's power and exposed their evil for all to see. Justice was being served, even if it moved in ways that no one could openly acknowledge. The war was far from over, but this battle had been won.

Bergmann's disappearance in the aftermath of the Brotherhood's exposure cast a lingering shadow over the victory. While not among the highest-ranking members of the cabal, his role as a key architect and organiser of the Brotherhood's operations could not be overstated. For years, he had orchestrated their growth, laid the groundwork for their influence, and carefully nurtured their network of loyalists across German society. His absence left a gaping void, and for the security services scrambling to contain the fallout, his potential next move was a terrifying unknown.

Reports swirled, but none could confirm Bergmann's whereabouts. Some believed he had gone underground, hiding within Germany's remaining pockets of far-right sympathisers. Others whispered that he had fled across the Atlantic, seeking refuge among Brotherhood expatriates still embedded in South America. For those tracking his movements, it was like chasing a ghost.

The implications of Bergmann's flight rippled across Germany's intelligence community. Years of infiltration and subtle manipulations had left scars that wouldn't easily heal. Old wounds were reopened as public trust in the security services eroded further. How could someone with such deep ties to the Brotherhood have thrived in their ranks for so long? It was a question no one had a simple answer to, and one that would haunt internal investigations for years to come.

For Karl and Lands, Bergmann's vanishing act felt like unfinished business. It was a reminder that even as the Brotherhood fractured, pieces of its dark legacy would continue to evade justice. The war against their influence would be far from over. Bergmann, wherever he was, remained a symbol of that struggle—a man who had wielded power from the shadows and now clung to them desperately, waiting for a chance to strike again or fade into obscurity.

"Maybe he's gone for good," Lands speculated one night as he and Karl poured over what little intelligence they had on Bergmann's movements. "Hiding under a rock in the Amazon somewhere."

"Or planning his next move," Karl countered, the weight of their victory tempered by the nagging reminder of Bergmann's unfinished chapter. "Men like him don't just disappear without a plan. We have to stay vigilant."

Whether Bergmann had truly fled or was simply biding his time, one thing was certain: the Brotherhood's legacy of secrecy and manipulation would continue to haunt them. And for those like Karl, Lands, and Dr. Fischer, the fight to expose and dismantle it would never truly be over, not while figures like Bergmann still drew breath.

29 Epilogue

The 15:45 flight from Berlin to Buenos Aires boarded with precision, as expected of a German airline. “Herr Hoffman, welcome aboard,” the steward greeted each first-class passenger with polite deference, his eyes bright and professional. Hoffman, a man of refined but understated demeanour, nodded in acknowledgment and eased into his luxurious seat. Accepting a glass of champagne, he adjusted his tailored jacket and unfolded a newspaper with an air of practised calm, immersing himself in headlines as if the outside world held no special sway over him.

As the aircraft taxied to the runway, its engines roaring with contained power, Hoffman glanced briefly out the window. He was a picture of poise and detachment, betraying no hint of urgency or tension. The plane took to the skies, bound first for Munich, then Frankfurt, before the long haul across the Atlantic. Hoffman’s movements were measured during the flight — a polite nod to the stewardess here, a quiet request for more wine there. Even in moments of stillness, he radiated the aura of a man who belonged, who could vanish into any crowd, even in the conspicuous luxury of first class.

The layover at Frankfurt allowed for a brief reprieve. Hoffman stretched his legs, enjoying a few minutes of quiet in the exclusive first-class lounge. He sipped an espresso, his eyes scanning the terminals, the subtle shift of posture indicating his awareness of everyone around him without seeming to. He was a man in motion, even when still. When it was time, he rejoined the flight, once more settling into his seat with that same effortless grace.

But there was another player in this carefully orchestrated departure. Seated directly behind him, a striking woman with dark hair streaked tastefully with grey observed everything through keen, intelligent eyes. Her suit was tailored with precision, exuding an air of authority and experience. Wire-rimmed spectacles perched on the bridge of her nose, framing eyes that missed nothing. She moved sparingly, each motion

deliberate. To the casual observer, she might have appeared to be just another executive or diplomat. But her gaze, sharp and analytical, hinted at depths not easily discerned.

As Hoffman read, she mirrored his calm, sipping a glass of mineral water while her eyes flickered briefly toward the newspaper he held. The flight attendants moved through the cabin, oblivious to the silent interplay of observation and awareness. For Hoffman, this flight was a departure, an escape from a crumbling façade. For the woman behind him, it was the beginning of something else entirely—a mission, perhaps, or the end of a long pursuit.

The engines roared again as the plane soared high above the Atlantic, bearing its passengers toward Buenos Aires. Hoffman remained engrossed in his reading, while the woman, ever watchful, waited for the next chapter to unfold.