

# **THE IMMORTALITY TRIGGER**

By

Douglas Misquita

A Luc Fortesque adventure thriller

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Douglas Misquita is an action-adventure thriller writer from India. His books have been praised for their quick pace, visuals, intertwining plots, and high-octane action.

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Misquita is a prolific author; he is creating his own oeuvre in the action-adventure-thriller genre, and uses history, technology and fiction quite effectively. - [Roshmi Sinha](#)

It's a perfect Hollywood script, the plot is excellent and the writing style is totally different. - [Nitin Vadher](#)

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An excellent read, this book is fast paced and very difficult to put down -[Omstavan Samant](#)

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This is most definitely going at the top of my recommendations list. - [Molly Edwards](#)

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# CHAPTER 1

## THE BAVARIAN BLACK FOREST, 18 MARCH 1945

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It was a desperate suicide run.

The light beams of the Mercedes-Benz 700K's headlamps pierced the driving rain as the tri-axle Nazi command vehicle raced over the foothills of the Bavarian Black Forest. Leading the 700K's cones of illumination was a weaker beam, this one from a Zundapp KS750 motorcycle. The triangle of lights formed by the vehicles' formation disappeared fleetingly as the motorcade entered a mountain pass, and then reappeared, as the motorcade exited the pass.

The terrain was treacherous: the road was hewn into the face of the hills, a narrow ribbon of gravel and pebbles that hugged the rain-streaked rock, looping like a slithering snake. On the other edge of the road was a sheer drop. The switchbacks on the road — accident-prone under better weather conditions — were navigational suicide on that stormy night.

Eric Koenig, the young German soldier who sat at the 700K's steering wheel, pursed his lips, and peered past the flicking windscreen wipers that were fighting a losing battle against nature's outpouring. Hardly had the wipers completed their sweeping-arcs than the visibility out the windscreen was reduced to near-zero by more rivulets of rainwater.

Koenig channeled all his concentration into keeping the tail-heavy vehicle on the road. His nervous eyes darted to the quivering speedometer needle on the dashboard. He could feel the floorboards through his boots — so much had he mashed down upon the accelerator.

He could sense the vibrations running through the car as its engine was taxed to its limits. If the engine failed, there would be no escape — the 700K, and its four occupants would either be paste across the hill-face, or plunge off the cliff to their deaths.

Morbidly, the first scenario was better, because, in the second, nobody would recover their bodies.

Koenig should have been keeping the hood-ornament of the 700K pointed straight ahead, but he had the car's nose in a delicate jig, to avoid clipping the rear of the motorcycle that was dangerously close to being overrun by the 700K.

The rider on the Zundapp was his friend, and even though the 700K's VIP passenger was white-faced with every twist of the steering wheel, Koenig refused to be responsible for his

friend's death. He had tried to warn his friend, and tell him to move to the 700K's rear, but his shouts were lost in the drumming of the rain and the revs of the engines.

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Koenig believed in the Führer, in the Nazi ideology, and in the glory of the Third Reich.

He had longed to join the war, but his parents had hidden him away, always explaining that he would understand their actions when he was older, or that the ways of the Nazi party were doomed to failure. Their entreaties and explanations had fired young Koenig's desire even more. He had run away, leaving a note of apology to his parents, and enlisted. To his dismay, he was posted away from the major battle lines, at a minor airfield north-east of the Black Forest.

Within a month, discouraging rumors had begun to trickle in: The Nazi Empire was being crushed like an accordion from the east by the Red Army, and from the west by the Allies. More battles were being lost than won, morale was at an all-time low. Could his parents' forewarnings have been correct? Koenig had wondered bitterly. No, he refused to believe that such a noble cause could be collapsing. Just put him, and others like him, on the front lines, and the tide could turn.

Koenig persisted in his belief that he was destined for a bigger role in the war, and every night he asked God why his wish was not being granted.

And then, that morning, a secret communique was received at the airfield. A VIP was making an extremely urgent visit – details would be shared only on arrival. Preparations were ordered: the use of a fast car, and a skilled driver.

With idle time on their hands, the engineers at the base had modified a surplus 700K. Koenig was most qualified to drive it – he was a natural at the wheel, his talents providing stunt-driving entertainment to the airfield's personnel.

As dusk was falling, a lone Messerschmitt fighter lined up with the runway, swooped in and landed perfectly. Lightning flashed across the sky followed by an ominous rumble of thunder as the fighter plane rolled to a stop. Koenig was among the four base-personnel waiting for the arrival of the airplane.

When the canopy slid open, and the VIP leaped out onto the wing and jumped to the ground, Koenig sucked in a breath. He immediately thought that the lightning and thunder were befitting accompaniment to the persona of the VIP.

The pilot striding purposefully toward the welcoming party was none other than the feared SS Oberstgruppenführer, Frederick Mauer.

in Koenig's mind, this one man's contribution to the war was legendary. Immediately, Koenig felt pride swelling in his chest. That Mauer was publicly responsible for the deaths of thousands, and anyone who opposed the Nazi policy, did not matter to Koenig. He would do anything for this man – his idol – even lay down his life. He would take his plea to fight on the front lines directly to Mauer.

\*\*\*

Mauer stood before the five assembled soldiers and gave them a once-over. As his steely eyes passed over Koenig, the young Nazi felt an involuntary shiver. Koenig almost felt like releasing his bladder – so cold and dangerous was this man's casual glance. He dared to look out of the corner of his eye at the other men standing at attention and knew that they too were experiencing the same sensation. Lightning cracked again, the heavens opened, and rain started falling in drenching sheets. Big droplets hammered upon the solemn assembly of men.

Finally, Mauer spoke. "You have been selected for a glorious mission." Koenig puffed out his chest despite the cold seeping through his drenched uniform. "One that will send our enemies scampering away with their tails between their legs like cowardly dogs." Mauer passed his murderous stare over each of them in turn and began pacing. "Our destination is Schloss Schwarzer Adler." He pointed to the distance where the Black Forest loomed dark, deadly and foreboding. "Our enemies are close at our heels. I have instructed the base commander to engage them, to give us the time we need to achieve our objective. You must be ready to fight for your lives!" He stopped pacing and for a moment all that could be heard was the pitter-patter of the rain. Mauer barked, "Are you with me?"

To this man's question, there was only one answer: "Yes, Oberstgruppenführer, we are!"

Immediately after that, Koenig had jumped behind the wheel of the 700K, and raced its engine for effect. Mauer climbed into the back with two soldiers. Koenig's friend jumped astride his Zundapp and kicked it to life, gunning the accelerator. Mauer was armed with a Luger, everyone else carried MP40s. At his signal, the motorcade had blasted away from the airfield and had not slowed down despite the inclement weather.

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Koenig felt the car slide, its rear-end skidding to the edge of the road. In the backseat, Mauer abused Koenig's mother. But there was admiration in his admonishment, and Koenig smiled

grimly to himself. His knuckles were white upon the wheel as he willed the car back onto the road. The rear wheels left the road in a spray of stones that plummeted into the abyss. Koenig danced on the clutch, shifted to a lower gear, stepped back on the accelerator, and nearly drove his foot through the floorboard. Miraculously, the wheels grasped the road, and the 700K clawed its way back onto surer footing. The Nazi standard affixed to the front fender caught the slipstream and unfolded its symbol gloriously in red, white and black.

"What is your name, soldier?" Mauer commanded, brushing an errant strand of hair from his forehead.

"Eric Koenig, sir!"

"Your skill at the wheel is unsurpassed!"

Bolstered by praise from such a man, Koenig's eyes welled. "Everything I do is for the motherland!"

"Words such as yours could turn the tide of this war, Eric," Mauer slathered. "And truly, tonight we will!"

"Yes, sir!" Koenig agreed, over the storm, and urged his 700K onward.

The road was straight now, though rising more sharply. When the sky was lit by the next fork of lightning, Koenig saw their destination: Schloss Schwarzer Adler – Castle of the Black Eagle – perched precariously upon a craggy outcropping.

It looked like a castle out of a witch's dream: a single barbican fronted a stout curtain wall. Koenig could see through-and-through the passageway in the barbican, to an arched portal in the curtain wall that gained access to the castle's bailey. A guardhouse loomed over the machicolation of the curtain wall. A gigantic chemise sprung from one side – literally rising from a rock – and from within the chemise, the keep soared to a pinnacle. Turrets and towers climbed toward the sky, each growing on the other like stone warts. Yellow lights blazed from Schloss Schwarzer Adler, one through the arched portal, four in the guard house, and three more in the windows of the keep. The crag upon which the castle sat was separated from the foothills by a yawning chasm. The chasm was bridged by a single-span archway, wide enough for the 700K to traverse.

The Oberstgruppenführer leaned forward expectantly. At that moment, over the storm, the men heard a dull resounding boom of an exploding bomb. "The cursed Allies are here!" Mauer tapped Koenig on the shoulder. "We must hurry."

Koenig held back a retort that he was going as fast as he could.

The motorcade rushed across the bridge, the rumbling beneath the tires changed character as they raced over cobblestone. Then they were illuminated by fiery sconces in the barbican. At the far end, they rushed over a drawbridge, under the portcullis, and skid to a stop inside the bailey.

After the insane rush from the airfield, Koenig trembled with adrenaline. He could still feel the throb of the 700K's engine as he climbed unsteadily from the driver's seat. A little distance away, he could see the rider of the Zundapp sway slightly as he dismounted, and took off his riding goggles. The two friends shared a look of mutual commendation: they had made it!

Mauer barked, "Koenig, turn this car around, block the entrance!" He jabbed a finger at the motorcycle rider and the two escorts. "You, you, and you, will make your stand here!" They looked at him quizzically. "No Allies shall pass as long as you breathe! Is that clear?"

It dawned on the three men that they were not going to leave this castle alive. Mauer saw that they needed encouragement for what they were to do. "Men," he said, his voice full of pride and determination, "You were selected for this mission. Rest assured that every second you gain for me will increase our chances of winning this war! You will be glorified and all be awarded the highest merit for your actions on this night!"

"What about me, Oberstgruppenführer?" Koenig found himself asking. He gripped his MP40, ready for whatever his idol would command.

"You will accompany me into the castle."

"We have only 3 MP40s with us, sir," Koenig's friend interjected. He was shivering in the rain. "The Allies outnumber, and outgun us."

Mauer snarled. "In the trunk of the 700K is enough dynamite to take out the bridge. Wait for the opportune moment."

"Are there guards in this castle?" One of the other men asked hopefully. "They will be of assistance to —"

Mauer cut him off abruptly. "There are no guards. This castle is a house. To post guards here would raise suspicions of its true purpose. But traitors within our ranks informed the Allies about the work we do here. We must ensure these secrets are forever kept from the Allies. It is our only chance to win this war."

That stunned Koenig. It was the first time he had heard the words "our only chance" from someone so senior. He consoled himself that their mission here would prevent that. He was excited by the proposition that he was an integral part of that mission, and would witness the secrets of Schloss Schwarzer Adler. On moonlit nights, the men of the airbase would jest that the castle was being used to create *monsters*! Of course, it was just silly rumor-mongering by bored men, but tonight Eric Koenig would behold the Third Reich's secrets.

Another explosion wafted across to them from the air base. They could now hear the drone of approaching airplanes. Oberstgruppenführer Mauer clapped his hands snapping them into action. "To work, men! Heil Hitler! Long live the Third Reich!"

He brushed past Koenig and stepped to a door in the inner curtain wall. As he passed, he muttered to Koenig, "It is best you say your good-byes to these brave men!" Then he grabbed ahold of the big brass knocker, that was shaped like an eagle with outstretched wings, and rapped thrice on the door. Bolts were thrown, the door opened, a manservant, dressed immaculately in a three-piece suit eyed Mauer. There were no greetings exchanged; the manservant stepped aside, holding the door wide open, allowing Mauer to pass.

Koenig shook hands with the brave trio. There were no words to be said, only knowing looks, and thin smiles of encouragement.

"Herr Koenig!" Mauer called impatiently from the doorway. "Come!"

Then Koenig left his comrades as they began carefully extracting the dynamite from the 700K's trunk.

## CHAPTER 2

Koenig's jaw dropped in awe as he beheld the interior of the castle. If the outside of the castle was a witch's dream, the interior was King Midas' dream. Everywhere, gold glittered back at him. The walls were gilded, five-foot-high candle-holders marched along one wall – all gold. The tapestries on the wall depicted battles scenes on land and sea, all painted in shades of gold: swords and bayonets flashed; a horse's mane was artistically ruffled in the breeze as it reared majestically; waves crashed and curled against the seashore, sails billowed, lit by a golden sun. Commanders resplendent in armor dramatically urged their battalions forward.

Koenig's eyes rose upward where gigantic crown-shaped chandeliers hung from the roof. Gemstones adorned the chandeliers. The carpet underfoot was thick and lush. He imagined it would be better than any bed he had ever slept in. The carpet threads were gold, in dizzying patterns. Where the wood floor showed, it was polished to a shine, reflecting his awestruck features. "My god!" he whispered to no one, "My god!"

Oberstgruppenführer Mauer and the manservant were ignorant of the treasure in the hallway. They marched under a crenelated archway and paused before a section of the tapestry that depicted a meandering stream of distraught civilians, carrying their meager belongings, fleeing the invading navy. The manservant pushed at the tapestry revealing a secret doorway. The two men disappeared through it. Koenig followed hastily, stealing one last look at the fabulous hall, committing it to memory. He cursed the Allies for they would plunder this precious German treasure, the dogs!

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Wide stone stairs spiraled downward. The trio emerged in a banquet hall. A long mahogany table dominated its center, eight high-back chairs were neatly positioned equidistantly along the length of the table, with one chair at the head. A line of candelabras strode down the table's longitudinal axis. Ceiling-to-floor banners bearing Nazi swastikas were hung about the hall. A mammoth fireplace commanded the far wall, beneath a gigantic painting of the Führer. The painting dwarfed the trio, as it was intended to inspire awe. In the scene, the Führer struck a pose on a cliff-top, his eyes gleaming with ambition as he looked out into the distance, with the rising sun behind him. Beneath him, on the plains, thousands of mortals looked up at his godliness.

The manservant stood beside the fireplace and rapidly pushed at a set of stones. Koenig blinked, seeing that ten stones were *different* from the rest of the masonry: a cleverly

concealed keypad. With a heavy *clunk*, a lock disengaged, and the entire fireplace swiveled with a grinding noise.

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In the bailey, the three soldiers waited with bated breath. They were hunkered behind the 700K, their MP40s resting on its wet body. One of them held the dynamite detonator in a trembling hand. They wished for their ordeal to be over soon. As the minutes passed with agonizing slowness, they were filled with mounting dread of the imminent confrontation. Their only consolation was that they were determined to take many Allies with them.

The darkness of the road was vanquished by brilliant headlights as the first of the Allied vehicles reached the castle. The vanguard stopped, no doubt surveying the castle and its battlements. The glare of the lights, blinded the three Germans, but through the cadence of the rain, they could hear orders being shouted back and forth among the Allies. A powerful searchlight mounted atop the lead vehicle was turned on. They ducked out of sight, clinging to the curves of the 700K's tail. The searchlight probed the curtain wall, shone through the arched portal and rested upon the 700K.

"There's a car blocking the entrance!" someone shouted in a British accent.

"The castle isn't protected!" someone else stated.

"Then whose car is that? That's a pretty odd spot to park a car!"

The rain continued to fall like a liquid curtain. More conferring: "It could be booby-trapped!"

"There's space between the car and the walls!"

"Enough to get the men through?"

"Enough!"

Soldiers were identified; names were called. These would be the unfortunate souls who would make the first crossing. Peeking around the 700K, the Germans saw the Allied soldiers huddle by the lead vehicle in a brief conference, silhouettes in the bright lights.

Then the Allied soldiers made their advance.

They came cautiously, sticking to the walls of the bridge, hunched over, guns held at the ready. They were no different than the Germans, young soldiers doing their commander's bidding, afraid of the enemy, but propelled on by some sense of duty, pride, and loyalty.

The Germans knew there would be no grand opportune moment, as Oberstgruppenführer had said. The advancing Allied foot soldiers would stumble upon them within moments and there would be a brief firefight – which the Germans would win. But that would be the end: the waiting Allied forces would obliterate them within seconds of that small victory.

The Germans exchanged looks of agreement. They waited until the enemy was dead-center of the bridge. Then they shielded their eyes a split-second before the Zandupp's rider pushed the detonator button.

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The bridge exploded in a blinding flash of fire, a spectacular shower of bricks and mortar, a spray of water, and five Allied soldiers, whose bodies were expelled from the epicenter of the blast like ragdolls, and tossed into the chasm.

Even before the sound of the blast had died, the Germans flicked on the 700K's headlamps. The trio stood, and opened fire, screaming in conjunction with the clatter of their submachine guns.

There was confusion among the Allies which was quickly replaced by fear and a need for self-preservation. They scrambled in a mad attempt to get out of the German fire. The lead vehicle was pummeled by bullets, its occupants instantly killed. Soldiers standing beside the vehicles were cut down before some of the others took cover behind the dead or the vehicles.

The Germans quickly consumed all their ammo and then paused to reload. In those precious seconds, the Allies wielded an M9A1 rocket launcher and fired. The warhead flew in a straight line through the barbican and smashed into the parked 700K. The front of the car opened like a metal flower, as the warhead detonated against the engine block. The force of the explosion pushed the car backward as if a giant had punched the car into the bailey. One of the Germans was in the way of the rear bumper and bore the full brunt of its collision with his sternum, which snapped like a twig. The car rolled over him, and though he was alive, there was no time for his comrades to save him because they were diving for cover from the incoming allied fusillade. Bullets chipped into the walls, lodged into the ground, chewed up the metal of the 700K.

Another rocket came in and exploded in the confines of the bailey. The force of the explosion permeated the walls and sent tremors running upward, through the turrets and towers of the castle.

What happened next was fantastic: the highest turret that protruded precariously from another tower was shaken *off* its affixing mortar work. It crumbled to the earth in a hailstorm of stone, wood, and glass. The ungodly rain flattened the 700K to a pile of scrap metal. The two cowering Germans, mere flesh, and bones, stood no chance and were turned to pulp.

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Oberstgruppenführer Mauer, Koenig, and the manservant felt the shockwave of the explosion in the dining hall. Plaster rained down on them, the candelabras rattled against the table-top.

"Your friends have given their lives gloriously!" Oberstgruppenführer Mauer remarked. He turned to the manservant. "You know what must be done?"

The manservant nodded. "I will seal the portal after you and make my stand here!"

"Farewell!" Mauer gripped the manservant's forearm in departure, and then he and Koenig walked through the portal. When they were through, the manservant reached for a figurine atop the fireplace. The figurine was a disguised lever and its purpose was to shut the secret portal. But it malfunctioned. A look of fear crossed over the manservant's face. Mauer seethed at the malfunction. He glared at the manservant. "Do you have a weapon?"

"Yes," the manservant answered in a tremulous voice.

"Fetch it! And take as many of them as you can!" Mauer waited expectantly. When the manservant did not move, he barked, "What are you waiting for?"

Koenig sensed that the manservant had originally intended to save his life by surrendering to the Allies. But now, under Mauer's glare, he was forced to arm himself. He reached under the banquet table, groped clumsily and withdrew a small Walther that had been concealed there.

"Shameful!" Mauer spat with disgust. His hand went to his holstered Luger and the manservant's eyes widened. Then Mauer reconsidered and said, "It will have to do! Koenig, come!"

They left the manservant standing on the other side of the portal, his back to them, the Walther outstretched in both hands.

## CHAPTER 3

Lights embedded in the corridor's right wall illuminated their way and cast their shadows on the opposite wall. The corridor branched and Mauer took the left fork without pause.

They passed solid iron doors with tiny windows set in them at eye-level. Even the windows were barred by a crisscross of iron grills. Koenig was about to ask Mauer what lay behind the doors when a hideous scream caught the question in his throat. Even Mauer stopped momentarily and looked back at him. Something threw itself mightily against the other side of the iron door and Koenig could have sworn the heavy door shuddered with the impact. If Koenig thought that Mauer would explain, he was sorely disappointed. Mauer only said, "Come!", and took off at a trot.

They passed another door and Koenig could not help himself. He stopped and peered through the window. Darkness greeted him on the other side of the door. A fetid odor of decay and excrement overwhelmed his olfactory senses and he involuntarily sniffed. He could hear heavy breathing from the other side of the door, accompanied by a guttural growl that curdled his blood. Koenig retreated from the door just as the creature on the other side slammed into the iron and shrieked. The shriek was answered by the creature behind the first door, and then by another. Koenig clamped his hands over his ears and backpedaled to the opposite wall, his eyes wide in fear. He was embarrassed by a blossoming stain over his crotch.

"Herr Koenig!" Mauer shouted. "This is not the time!" Koenig noticed that Mauer had unholstered his Luger and held it by his side. Behind Mauer, was an elevator shaft with a waiting elevator cab. "I cannot have you delaying me!"

"Sorry, Oberstgruppenführer." Koenig shielded his crotch as best as he could with his MP40.

The two men stepped into the cab, and Koenig pulled the doors shut. Mauer pushed the single button on the panel and, with a lurch, the cab began to descend on a creaking system of chains into the very bowels of the earth.

"I wish we had a way to sabotage the elevator," Mauer mused aloud.

Koenig had no answer. He was embarrassed and angry with himself. He mustered, "I will kill any Allied soldier who uses this elevator!"

Mauer glanced at the dark stain on Koenig's crotch and looked at the young soldier askance as if doubting his ability for the first time. "It may well come to that, boy."

Koenig's anger grew. The oberstgruppenführer had demoted him to 'boy'. He clenched his MP40. "I will serve to death."

"Hmmm, it may well come to that, Herr Koenig!"

Even in this admission, Koenig smiled. He had redeemed himself in his idol's eyes.

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The manservant considered surrendering. But what would become of him? He could not deny his complicity in the secret activities of the master of the castle. The oberstgruppenführer had stationed three German soldiers in the castle's bailey. The explosion that they had heard earlier would have surely spelled their doom. Even if the bridge leading to Schloss Schwarzer Adler was destroyed how long would it take for the Allies to use their Bailey bridges, or even grappling hooks to overcome that obstacle? Yes, the gilded hall above would slow them down, but soon, they would locate the secret door in the tapestry, and in a short time after they found this banquet hall, the Allies would find out about the inhuman experiments.

They would discover the *monsters* confined to the cells beneath the castle.

They would bring him before a court and make him stand trial and convict him. He knew that the death penalty before a world audience was inevitable if he was caught. The tiny Walther felt heavy in his sweaty palms.

He considered his options. No escape if he surrendered. If he followed the Oberstgruppenführer, he would be shot for abandoning his post. No escape there, too. He had been a mere tool in the hands of more powerful men.

No escape. No escape.

The manservant turned so that his eyes were looking up at the god-like painting of the Führer, sucked the Walther into his mouth, pointed it upward, closed his eyes, bit down on the metal, and pulled the trigger.

## CHAPTER 4

As the elevator descended, for the first time since Mauer had landed, Koenig had time to collect his thoughts. A question gnawed at the fringes of his mind, and slowly consumed him.

It was the most obvious question: if Schloss Schwarzer Adler was so important to the Führer, why was the Oberstgruppenführer alone on this mission? His expression must have revealed something because Mauer seemed to read his mind. "You are wondering why I came alone?"

Koenig swallowed, nodded. "The thought crossed my mind."

"No one else could be trusted."

Koenig was not swayed by that glib explanation, so Mauer elaborated, "And the Führer, as visionary as he is, does not believe it what we are doing here." His eyes gleamed manically. "He prefers to use brute force to repel the dogs. I was free to come here if I believed in it." He paused and for a few moments they could only hear the *clanking* of the elevator hoist machine, and the *whizz* of chains passing over gear teeth. "I prefer to think the Führer was testing my resolve."

The elevator came to a jarring stop. Koenig obediently pulled open the collapsible gates and Mauer stepped forth. They were in a small room: at one end was the elevator shaft and at the other was another iron door. Mauer approached the door fearlessly, and said, "No monsters here, Herr Koenig." There was a numeric keypad beside the door and he punched in a code. The door opened silently.

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Koenig faced row upon row of work tables. Mounted atop the tables were all kinds of laboratory paraphernalia. It looked to Koenig that he had stepped into a biochemistry lab. White-coated men and women were intent on work, oblivious to the attack on the castle.

A line of six clear-walled cylinders, each big enough to accommodate an adult human being, stood by one wall of the laboratory.

Five held a naked human body each, suspended in a pale-yellow-colored liquid that filled each cylinder to the brim. A thick tube ran into the top of each cylinder. An array of electrodes and intravenous lines, bundled within the tube, emerged inside the cylinder, and were either clipped onto, or inserted into the occupant of the cylinder.

Despite the less-than-translucent liquid, Koenig could discern the puckered bullet entry wound in the torso of the body in the nearest cylinder. It struck him then, that the bodies in the cylinders were all dead.

The sixth cylinder left him aghast. A monstrosity floated within: *two human bodies sewn together* to create a grotesque two-headed *thing*.

Tearing his eyes away, he focused on a huddle of lab-coats. A woman raised an arm, holding a meat-cleaver high above her head, and brought it down in a slicing motion. The lab-coats parted as the cleaver amputated the forearm of the body prone on the operating table in their midst. Blood spurted and spilled off the operating table. The lab-coats stepped back to avoid the blood splatter. A spasm jolted the body on the operating table. It was alive! Koenig adjusted his line of sight and saw that the subject's mouth had been muzzled into silence. He was so stunned by the butchery that he did not see that the hack wound had sealed itself almost immediately.

Then Koenig's eyes came to rest on the operating table in the center of the room. A man lay on the table, naked, a name-tag affixed to his right big toe. The subject's wrists and ankles were manacled to the table-top. Numerous intravenous tubes delivered an amber liquid into him. A man and a woman stood over the naked man.

The man looked up, saw Mauer and Koenig enter, and left the table, approached them.

He met Mauer and Koenig mid-way. Koenig was aware that the others in the laboratory were now watching them. They began to cluster, began to ask one another what was going on.

The man who stood before Koenig was as tall as Mauer, but he was hunched from too many hours spent at a desk, or pouring over textbooks, or experiments. He was reed-thin, his head was shaved to a glistening shine, and his eyebrows were nonexistent. It was impossible to tell his age. His eyes shone with gloating intelligence, and were magnified by high-power spectacles that were perched upon a sharp nose. He glanced at Koenig before determining that the young German was nothing more than brawn. Thereafter he focused all of his attention on Mauer.

"You, here, unannounced, could only imply that *it* has begun?" It was more of a statement of fact than a question. There was no reverence or respect in his tone; this was a man who considered Mauer his peer.

Mauer nodded. "It has, Doctor. We must implement our contingency plan."

"The Vesuvius Group?"

"Yes, they are unanimous in their decision to accept you into the Group."

The bald head nodded. "How much time do we have?"

"They will breach the banquet hall at any moment."

The doctor sighed with finality. "All right." There was no dread in his voice, nor was he distraught. This was a man who had considered this outcome and had made his peace with it a long time ago. "What about all these people?" Since the doctor, Mauer, and Koenig were standing a little distance from the other scientists, their conversation did not carry to the others assembled in the laboratory.

Mauer flicked his chin at Koenig. "Herr Koenig will address that."

Koenig felt his lips go dry at what was being suggested. His heartbeat hastened as the doctor simply nodded and left them to address his scientists. Koenig only heard him start saying, "Everybody, please gather here and listen to what Oberstgruppenführer Mauer —"

Thereafter, every sound was drowned in the roar of blood that rushed to his head. He felt unsteady, drenched in a cold sweat. He closed his eyes hoping that this was a nightmare, but when he opened his eyes, Mauer was looming over him.

As Koenig refocused, he realized that Mauer's features were no longer unblemished and handsome – the face of a leader – but rather, this face was pockmarked, and horribly scarred with his crimes against humanity. His eyes were no longer ice-blue, but black pools of death. This was not a man; *this was the monster of Schloss Schwarzer Adler*. Mauer's mouth was moving in a carnivorous snarl. Koenig snapped out of his stupor and heard the growled question: "Are you a boy or a warrior?"

"Sir, I..."

"Are you a boy or a warrior?"

"Sir, this is not..."

Oberstgruppenführer Mauer stepped closer. "Your parents, Matilda and Peter Koenig, live on a farm, not far from here, with your younger sister, Nicola who loves horses. I also know the names and address of your mother's brother and his family. I assure you that their deaths will be extended and more terrible than you can imagine. I can assure you that my loyal soldiers in Berlin will make their last minutes in this life Hell. All of this, I promise you, will

happen if you do not give me the correct answer." He paused and in that silence, young Eric Koenig felt the absolute terror that this man wielded as a weapon. He was so paralyzed with fear that it did not occur to him that he had an MP40 that could easily cut down the monster standing before him, breathing death with every breath he exhaled. "Are you a boy or a warrior?"

Koenig felt the word escaping his trembling lips even though he had no recollection of answering. The MP40 in his hands felt alien. Mauer stepped aside, giving Koenig a clear firing field.

The MP40 came up. Koenig's brain no longer controlled his hands or his finger as it curled around the trigger. He could hear nothing, he only felt the gun buck repeatedly in his hand, as he panned it from right to left and left to right. All he saw were people dancing grotesquely as his bullets hit their bodies. Some of them died immediately, others tried to run but there was no safety. He found them, and he brought them down. Laboratory equipment was blasted to smithereens, tables were chewed up, the walls of three cylinders shattered, expelling their occupants in torrents of preservation liquid.

Koenig was screaming in hate – hate for Oberstgruppenführer Mauer and the Nazi party – but he could not hear it.

Somehow the clicking of the MP40's hammer falling on an empty chamber snapped him out of his nightmare. The MP40 fell from his hands; they may as well have been lifeless for what he had just done. Tears stained his boyish cheeks. He was not ashamed of his stained trousers; he was ashamed of what he had just done. All around him was his handiwork: bodies contorted in death throes, swaths of blood on the once-white floor; splatter of blood and human tissue on the tables and once-white walls of his pristine lab. God, he pleaded, take my life.

"Boy!"

Koenig's eyes flicked in the direction of the voice. He had a blurred impression of Mauer and the doctor running toward a tunnel at the far end of the laboratory. The doctor was lugging a heavy silver case, leading the escape. Mauer was mocking him, pointing something at him. "Warriors don't cry," was Mauer's last taunt.

Koenig did not feel the bullet as it entered his forehead and exited the back of his skull in a spray of red mist and gray brain matter.