

THE TONTO CONSPIRACY

A Nine Part Graphic Novel Script
Written by Kevin Fintland

Full Draft

LOGLINE

Germany, 1943. Deep inside a Bavarian castle the Nazis have guarded for seven years, an American spy in the Luftwaffe finds what they've been hiding – an alien child. Alive. Caged. Studied. He can't get the boy out alone. Inside the walls with him: a physicist who's spent seven years pretending not to be a genius, and his daughter, a biologist who's smiled through a compliance she never believed in. The SS is hours from the truth. Steal the child. Steal the ship. Get to America. Can four strangers trust each other fast enough to escape a castle built to make sure no one ever does?

SYNOPSIS

Germany, 1936. A spacecraft crashes in a field north of Paderborn. Inside three grey aliens – two adults, one infant – three fingered hands reach out toward the first two humans who arrive. That moment of almost-contact lasts four seconds when the SS arrives, the farmers are shot, the aliens are contained, and the infant is sealed into a transport unit with one small grey hand pressed flat against the viewport glass. The field grows over. The world moves on.

Seven years later, a burned American spy embedded inside the Luftwaffe walks into a Nazi castle and finds the child still there – behind glass, listening to a radio program, looking back at him. The spy's name is Lars Frei. His real "American" name is Cole Haller. And Lars Frei cannot walk away from something that needs protecting.

What follows is the story of four people who have no business trusting each other becoming the only people in the world they can. Lars, whose charm and medals are a performance hiding a man running on rage and a deal he no longer believes in. ELENA HAHN, the biologist who has kept the child alive for seven years behind a wall of scientific precision she built to keep grief out. PROFESSOR OTTO HAHN, Elena's elderly father – performing harmlessness as a deliberate act of survival, memorizing the hangar bay door codes every Monday morning since 1941, waiting for someone exactly like Lars. And TONTO – the grey child with enormous black eyes who has lived behind glass since before he could form a memory of anything else, and has come out of it still choosing to trust. His power responds to feeling, not instruments. He says very little. What he says lands like a freight train.

The plan they build together is the stupidest thing Lars has ever proposed: steal the spacecraft, steal the child, get back to America. Standing between them and any version of a future is SS Intelligence Chief REINHARD GEHLEN – cruel for efficiency, not pleasure, which makes him worse – and EVA BRAUN, who arrives at the castle with an agenda nobody anticipated and diagnoses Tonto's power in thirty minutes when seven years of scientists failed. She is more dangerous

than Reinhard because Reinhard thinks in chains of command and she doesn't.

The escape will cost a bomber pilot his life, a physicist his daughter, and a spy the identity he spent twenty years hiding behind. And when Lars finally sits in a barn with the child on his lap and the ruins of a castle behind him, he will say what the story has been building toward since page one: the Americans he was working for would do exactly what the Germans did. Same scientists. Different flag. The only choice left is the one a man can live with.

The story ends in 1952 – a stone chalet above the Alps, a found family that shouldn't exist, a Bernese Mountain Dog who has decided Tonto is his person and hasn't reconsidered since. A dark car came and went in the night, leaving a glass shard on the windowsill as a warning. Tonto picks it up. Holds it to the morning light. Small prisms scatter across the kitchen ceiling. The child who spent seven years behind glass, turning a piece of someone's grief into light.

That evening he puts down his crayon, looks at the two people sitting on the floor beside him, and says the word he has been building toward for 196 pages.

Fa... mi... ly.

196 pages. Single volume. Broken down into 9 chapters/issues.

COMPARABLE TITLES

THE TONTO CONSPIRACY sits at the intersection of three proven markets:

MAUS (*Art Spiegelman, Pantheon*) – for readers who understand that a graphic novel set against the backdrop of Nazi Germany can carry the full moral and emotional weight of literary fiction without sacrificing its identity as a comic. Like *Maus*, this book uses a genre framework to examine what institutional evil actually looks like from inside the institution – and what it costs the people who resist it.

SAGA (*Brian K. Vaughan & Fiona Staples, Image Comics*) – for readers who want science fiction that earns its emotional stakes through character rather than spectacle. Like *Saga*, this book is built around a found family that shouldn't exist, in a universe that is actively trying to unmake them. The alien element is not the story. It is the lens through which the story becomes visible.

THE LAST OF US (*Naughty Dog / HBO*) – for readers drawn to the specific emotional register of a damaged person who finds something worth protecting and discovers, in the protecting of it, who they actually are. The relationship between Lars and Tonto follows the same emotional architecture: a child who chooses to trust someone who doesn't deserve it yet, and a man who rises to meet that choice at significant personal cost.

THE TONTO CONSPIRACY is the book for readers who loved all three of these and wanted them to occupy the same world.

HEROES

LARS FREI / COLE HALLER – Austrian-born, American by accident of geography, German by necessity, and none of these things by choice. Late 20s. The charm and the medals are a performance – underneath is a man orphaned at fourteen by the government he now serves, running on rage and a five-year deal he no longer believes in. His tell is the compass he can't stop clicking open and shut. He cannot walk away from something that needs protecting.

ELENA HAHN – Biologist, Otto's daughter, and the most morally consistent person in the castle. Early 30s. Seven years of managed compliance have taught her exactly which battles to fight and exactly how to smile while losing them. Her scientific precision is not coldness – it's armor she built because the alternative was grief. When she finally lets the armor off, what's underneath is not weakness.

PROF. OTTO HAHN – Elderly physicist who has been performing harmlessness for seven years as an act of deliberate strategic survival. The harmlessness is a lie. The genius is not. He has been watching, cataloguing, and building a plan from the first day, and every apparently bumbling professor moment has been calculated to the decimal point. His hands shake when threatened. His face doesn't.

TONTO – Grey alien child. Roughly eight years old by human estimation. Three fingers. Enormous black eyes that understand more than anyone gives him credit for. Has lived behind glass for seven years and come out of it choosing to trust rather than refusing to. His power is emotional – it responds to feeling, not instruments. He says very little. What he does say matters enormously.

VILLAINS

REINHARD GEHLEN — Chief SS Intelligence Officer. Thin, precise, radiating the specific danger of a man who is always the most controlled person in any room he enters. Has spent seven years reducing human beings — and one alien child — to data points in service of a historical vision he believes is inevitable. He is not cruel for pleasure. He is cruel for efficiency. The distinction makes him worse, not better.

EVA BRAUN — Arrives at Wewelsburg with an agenda nobody in the castle has imagined yet. Blonde. Calculating. The only person in the building who correctly diagnoses Tonto's power in thirty minutes when seven years of scientists failed. She uses attraction as a tactical instrument with zero personal investment. More dangerous than Reinhard because Reinhard thinks in chains of command and she doesn't.

HERMANN GÖRING — 6'10" of German aristocracy in a uniform with too many medals. Reinhard's enforcer — present at every significant moment in the castle not because he contributes ideas but because his presence makes disagreement feel physically inadvisable. Still. Watchful. Never asks questions that aren't his to ask.

SIEGFRIED TAUBERT — Castle administrator. Young, slender, cheekbones that could cut glass. Carries a clipboard the way other men carry weapons — as an instrument of control. Finds the world perpetually entertaining in a way that should concern you. His function in the castle is the infrastructure of Reinhard's control: the man who makes sure the terrible things are organized.

HELMA — One of Eva's twin bodyguards. Cold, professional, and precise — until something breaks that precision open and replaces it with something older and more dangerous. Carries Helga's blade and a piece of glass from a crash site like relics. The kind of woman who turns grief into a schedule.

HELGA — The other twin. Identical face, identical coat, identical blank-eyed professionalism. Faster and more dangerous than she looks, which is already very fast and very dangerous.

NEUTRAL / SUPPORTING

WERNER BAUMBACH — German bomber pilot. Late 30s. Assigned to Wewelsburg as punishment for asking too many questions about civilian targets. When he sees Tonto through the glass, his faith doesn't break — it expands. If God created the heavens, everything in them is sacred. He sits outside the habitat every day with his Bible and half a piece of bread. He is the only person in the castle who asks nothing from the child.

ERNST MULLER — German fighter ace. Tall, rakish, impossibly self-assured. One of twenty-seven men alive who holds the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds, and he would like you to notice. Cares nothing for the war, the politics, or the alien child. Cares enormously about being recognized as the greatest pilot who has ever lived.

FRANZ STIGLER — Honored Luftwaffe pilot. The kind of man who asks questions that get him sent to places like Wewelsburg. Draws one moral line and holds it regardless of the cost. Says: some things a man has to be able to live with afterward — that's the only line I've ever drawn. Baumbach calls him the best of them. He was.

DR. ERNST LOWE — Physicist. Compact, precise, spectacles on a chain. Arrives and in three days makes seven years of scientists feel like fools by recalibrating their instruments. Finds things others miss because he refuses to accept that they've already looked. Cannot stop himself from saying what he notices out loud. This is both his greatest quality and his most dangerous one.

ACT I - THE ARRIVAL

Chapter One: "GUTEN ABEND"

Pages 1 - 20 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE ONE (Six Panels)

CAPTION: Germany. The countryside. 1936. Night.

Panel 1. ESTABLISHING SHOT — Deep space. A vast black canvas salted with stars. Peaceful. Infinite. Silent.

CAPTION: ... Space - It stretches on without end — an infinite cathedral of darkness that swallows light whole, that breathes cold silence into the void like a secret too vast for any living thing to keep...

Panel 2. A sleek, disc-shaped craft — smooth silver metal, no visible seams or rivets — streaks silently through the void. It catches the light of distant stars and throws it off in arcs. Beautiful. Wrong. Not from here.

CAPTION: ...It is an emptiness the human mind was never built to hold, a darkness so deep it hums. And yet, amid the killing cold and the violent, churning chaos of colliding galaxies and exploding suns, something extraordinary refuses to be extinguished —

Panel 3. INTERIOR — THE SPACECRAFT. Soft amber light. Three GREY ALIENS — adult male, adult female, infant — move through a curved cabin. The male is at the controls, long fingers dancing over bioluminescent panels covered in alien script. The female holds the infant to her chest. Through the curved viewport: Earth, small and blue, fills the frame.

[ART NOTE: The alien interior should look metallic but feel organic — no sharp angles. The aesthetic is biological, like the inside of something metal and alive.]

CAPTION: Life - stubborn and luminous, erupting in a thousand wild iterations, strange and relentless and shapeshifting through the long millennia...

Panel 4. CLOSE ON: The male alien's face. Enormous black eyes. No mouth visible. But there is tension in every line of that face — he's working the controls harder now. Something is wrong.

Panel 5. WIDE — The craft enters Earth's upper atmosphere. The friction glow begins around the hull. It's coming in too fast. Too steep.

Panel 6. EXT. GERMAN COUNTRYSIDE — TWILIGHT. Two FARMERS — HANS, 50s, and his son KURT, 20s — are finishing a long day's work in a field. Backs bent. Hands rough. Hans straightens, wipes his neck with a rag, and stares up at the sky.

PAGE TWO (six panels)

Panel 1. Hans taps his son's shoulder and points upward. Kurt looks. Above them, streaking across the purple-black sky – the craft, trailing a thin ribbon of smoke from its port side.

HANS:
Was ist das...?

Panel 2. INSIDE THE SHIP – Every alarm is going off now. The panels are flashing red. The male alien slams controls. The female holds the infant tight against the back wall.

SFX: KRAAK–KRZZZT

Panel 3. OUTSIDE – A BOLT OF LIGHTNING splits the sky from nowhere and STRIKES the spacecraft directly. The entire hull flashes white.

SFX: KRABOOM!!!

[ART NOTE: The lightning strike is the largest panel on the page – maybe a full two-thirds spread. The contrast between the white flash and the dark sky should be blinding.]

CAPTION: ...crackling like lightning searching for the ground, burning in whatever form it must, through whatever storm it must, to simply, defiantly exist.

Panel 4. The farmers hit the dirt as a shockwave of thunder rolls over them. Kurt covers his ears.

Panel 5. WIDE SHOT – The smoking spacecraft corkscrews down through the distant tree line. A moment of silence.

Panel 6. Then: a distant BOOM shakes the earth. Orange light flickers through the trees. Hans and Kurt stare at each other.

KURT:
Vater... sollen wir nachschauen? (Father... should we look?)

HANS: (already walking)

Ja.

CAPTION: And sometimes fate arrives uninvited, crashing into the carefully built order of things like a rogue star tearing through a solar system – sudden, indifferent, catastrophic – scattering everything that was once certain into cold and spinning debris, leaving only ruin where there was once light.

PAGE THREE (five panels)

Panel 1. EXT. CRASH SITE – The farmers push through underbrush and enter a clearing. Before them: the disc-shaped craft has gouged a 40-foot furrow in the earth. It rests at the end of it, cracked but intact, steam rising from the hull.

Panel 2. A seam appears in the side of the craft. A ramp extends and drops to the earth with a CLANG.

Panel 3. The FEMALE ALIEN emerges first – one arm cradling the infant, the other shoulder supporting the injured male alien, who is gravely injured and moves with obvious pain. She descends the ramp slowly, carefully.

CAPTION: ...But life, that stubborn and electric thing, does not ask permission to continue – it crawls forward through the wreckage,

Panel 4. At the base of the ramp, she helps the male alien to the ground and kneels beside him. Her hand is on his chest. She looks up – at the forest, at the farmers, at the sky. She does not know what to do. There is no script for this.

Panel 5. Hans and Kurt step out of the tree line into the clearing. They stop. Stare. The infant alien peers at them from the female's arms with enormous unblinking black eyes.

KURT: (whispering)

Heiliger... (Holy)

HANS: (hand on Kurt's arm)

Ruhig. (Quiet.)

PAGE FOUR (seven panels)

Panel 1. The female alien spots them. Her body goes rigid. The infant senses her fear and grips her tighter.

Panel 2. Hans raises his hands — palms out. The farmer's universal gesture for: I mean no harm. He takes a slow step forward.

HANS: (softly)

Wir sind hier um zu helfen. Sie sind sicher. (We are here to help. You are safe.)

CAPTION: it reaches again toward the light with trembling and determined hands...

Panel 3. CLOSE ON: The female alien's face. The tension in those impossible eyes. And then — almost imperceptibly — something releases. She exhales. She doesn't speak, but the meaning is clear: she trusts him.

Panel 4. Still cradling the infant, she extends her free hand toward Hans. Long, spidery fingers. Open.

Panel 5. Hans reaches back. His rough farmer's hand almost touching those alien fingers.

Panel 6. Their fingertips, millimeters apart.

Panel 7. SLAM — BLINDING WHITE FLOODLIGHTS FROM ALL DIRECTIONS.

SFX: CHUNK-CHUNK-CHUNK-CHUNK-CHUNK

[ART NOTE: The floodlights should feel like a physical assault — the entire panel washed to white at the edges, as if the reader is also blinded.]

PAGE FIVE (five panels)

Panel 1. When sight returns: the clearing is surrounded. Dozens of ELITE GERMAN COMMANDOS in dark uniforms and gas masks, carrying advanced-looking machine guns. They emerged from the tree line without a sound.

[ART NOTE: These aren't ordinary soldiers. The gas masks and sleek weapons have a futuristic quality – the best Germany has.]

Panel 2. WIDE PULL BACK – The circle is complete. Farmers, spacecraft, and three aliens at the center. Soldiers on every side.

Panel 3. From the rear of the formation, a figure separates himself and walks forward. He wears not a uniform but a long black leather trench coat adorned with military medals. A commander's peaked cap. No gas mask.

Panel 4. The farmers and aliens are frozen. The infant whimpers. The female pulls it closer.

Panel 5. The figure keeps walking. Slow. Deliberate. No hurry in the world.

PAGE SIX (five panels)

Panel 1. SPLASH — The COMMANDER stops in front of the group and, with theatrical deliberateness, brings both hands to his face and removes his own mask — revealing REINHARD GEHLEN. Late 40s. Thin, precise features. Eyes like polished obsidian. He is smiling. It is not a warm smile.

REINHARD:

Guten Abend. Willkommen auf Deutschland." (Good Evening. Welcome to Germany.)

CAPTION: And when every star has flickered into quiet, when every journey through the void has finally run its course, ...

Panel 2. The infant alien stares at Reinhard. Reinhard stares back at the infant.

Panel 3. Reinhard simply mutters a single word.

REINHARD:

Jetzt." (Now.)

Panel 4. Two muzzle flashes. Short. Sharp.

SFX: BRAP-BRAP

Panel 5. Hans and Kurt crumple to the earth. Dead before they hit the ground, right in front of the aliens. The female alien screams — silent on the page, but we see her mouth open, her body recoil.

[ART NOTE: Hans and Kurt's deaths should be quick and unsentimental — a single panel showing them falling. No drama. That's what makes it worse.]

CAPTION: when all the shapes and storms and iterations of a life have crashed and settled into stillness —

PAGE SEVEN (six panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard watches the farmers hit the ground without expression. Behind him, soldiers pour past.

Panel 2. The aliens are surrounded. Commandos everywhere. The injured male alien lies motionless on the ground – two soldiers crouch over him, but there is nothing to restrain. He has succumbed to his wounds.

Panel 3. The female alien sees him. The chaos around her – the soldiers, the lights, the noise – falls away entirely. She doesn't scream because there are no words for this in any language, human or otherwise.

Panel 4. German Army trucks appear at the treeline. From the back of each: soldiers haul long, coffin-like metal CONTAINMENT UNITS.

Panel 5. TWO SOLDIERS approach the female alien. One reaches for the infant.

Panel 6. She fights. Both arms around the infant, turning her body away, shielding it with everything she has.

PAGE EIGHT (six panels)

Panel 1. The soldiers pry the infant from her arms. She reaches after it.

Panel 2. CLOSE ON: A soldier transferring the infant alien to Reinhard. Reinhard takes it with both hands – carefully, almost reverently. He holds the infant up and looks at it the way a man looks at something he's been waiting his whole life to find.

REINHARD: (quietly)

Wir haben Pläne für Sie, mein kleiner Freund. (We have plans for you, my little friend.)

CAPTION: nothing, in all this infinite and wondrous dark,

Panel 3. The female alien and the deceased male are loaded into separate containment units. The female's muffled screaming stops as the lid seals.

Panel 4. Reinhard places the infant in the last remaining containment unit.

CAPTION: will have mattered more...

Panel 5. CLOSE ON – Through the unit's small glass viewport: the ALIEN INFANT stares back at us. Enormous black eyes. One small hand pressed flat against the inside of the glass.

[ART NOTE: This is the image that should haunt the reader. Hold on it.]

Panel 6. WIDE – The trucks roll away down the dirt road into the dark. Reinhard watches them go. The crash site is quiet now except for the ticking of cooling metal.

CAPTION: ...than family.

PAGE NINE (one panel)

[ART NOTE: Full page. One panel. No dialogue. This page exists to do one thing: show the reader what erasure looks like. They just watched farmers die and a family separated and an infant taken in this field. Now they're looking at a field. The gap between those two facts is the story's first thematic beat – before Reinhard appears again, before the castle, before any of it. Let the emptiness work. Don't fill it. The world moved on. The world always moves on. This is what erasure looks like from the outside.]

Panel 1. Wide. The crash site – Autumn, 1943. Seven years of rain and sediment and new growth have filled the furrow the spacecraft carved into the German earth. The field looks like any other German field: fallow, ordinary, already forgetting itself into winter. The tree line shows no scar. No scorched earth. No grave markers for the farmers. No plaque. Nothing that tells a passing stranger – or a passing army – that anything happened here. A crow picks at something in the grass near the center of the field, where the depression is faintest. Autumn light through the trees. A dirt road at the field's edge, empty.

CAPTION: Seven years later.

PAGE TEN (six panels)

Panel 1. EXT. GERMAN COUNTRYSIDE — DUSK — 1943. A black 1940s sedan rolls down a narrow road through a dense pine forest. Mist hangs between the trees.

CAPTION: Germany. Autumn, 1943. The war is going badly.

Panel 2. INT. CAR — Three SILHOUETTES in the back seat. Shadows obscure the men's faces. From the radio on the dashboard, a German broadcast fills the car.

CAPTION: RADIO BROADCAST (translated): '...Allied forces continue to advance on the Italian peninsula... The Führer assures the German people that victory remains...'

Panel 3. The silhouettes listen. One chuckles.

VOICE 1:

They keep changing the words but the tune sounds the same.

VOICE 2:

The Reich has a thousand channels and only one song.

Panel 4. THROUGH THE WINDSHIELD: The forest opens and there, rising from the hilltop in the last gray light of day — CASTLE WEWELSBURG. Three towers. Ancient stone. Flags bearing the swastika snap in the wind.

[ART NOTE: Wewelsburg Castle should look imposing and slightly wrong — beautiful in the way that a Venus flytrap is beautiful.]

Panel 5. The car enters through the massive front gate. Torches line the courtyard.

Panel 6. The car doors open. The three silhouettes step into the torchlight, and now we see them fully:

LARS FREI — Late 20s. Sharp features. German pilot's jacket adorned with medals. Knight's Cross at his throat. He moves with the easy confidence of a man who's survived things that should have killed him,

and knows it. He surveys Wewelsburg the way you'd survey a poker table
— reading it.

WERNER BAUMBACH — 40s. Broad-shouldered. Watchful. He has the look of
a man who measures everything twice.

FRANZ STIGLER — Youngest of the three. Open face. Almost apologetic
bearing. The kind of pilot who would fly the extra mile. Honorable.

PAGE ELEVEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. Waiting for them in the courtyard: SIEGFRIED TAUBERT. Slender to the point of unhealthy. Young. Cheekbones that could cut glass. He has a clipboard. He smiles when they emerge from the car, and it's the smile of someone who finds the world perpetually entertaining in a way that should concern you.

SIEGFRIED:
Herr Frei. Herr Baumbach. Herr Stigler. On behalf of
Oberstgruppenführer Gehlen – welcome to Wewelsburg Castle."

Panel 2. Lars takes in the castle – the stone, the torches, the sheer size of it.

LARS: (dryly)
Gehlen always was understated.

Panel 3. Siegfried smiles wider. Nothing Lars says will rattle him.

SIEGFRIED:
Your rooms are prepared. Dinner is at twenty hundred hours. Dress is formal. The Oberstgruppenführer asks that you be... punctual.

Panel 4. Lars clocks the guards on the ramparts. The searchlights. The fortified gates closing behind them.

LARS: (under his breath, to no one)
Cheerful place.

Panel 5. As the pilots are led inside, a SECOND CAR arrives behind them. From it emerges another pilot – ERNST MULLER. Tall, rakish, impossibly self-assured. He steps out adjusting his collar like he's arriving at a gala, not a military installation. At his throat: the KNIGHT'S CROSS WITH OAK LEAVES, SWORDS, AND DIAMONDS. It catches the torchlight like a small sun. There are twenty-seven of these in the entire German military. This is a man who wants you to know exactly who he is before he opens his mouth.

[ART NOTE: The Diamonds medal should be visually distinct from Lars's Knight's Cross – same shape at the core, but the Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds clasp above it makes it unmistakable. It's the difference between a medal and a crown.]

MULLER: (calling out to Lars's retreating back)
Frei! I heard you were invited. Good. I was worried this would be boring.

Panel 6. Lars doesn't turn around. Just raises a hand in acknowledgment.

LARS: (to Baumbach)
Muller. Wonderful.

BAUMBACH:
Friend of yours?

LARS:
The opposite of that, but with better hair.

Panel 7. Baumbach watches Muller approach. His eyes drop to the medal. He stops walking.

BAUMBACH: (low, to Lars)
...Is that what I think it is?

LARS: (not looking back)
The Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds. Yes.

BAUMBACH:
There are only twenty-seven of those in the entire—

LARS:
Twenty-seven. And he'll tell you about every sortie that earned it if you give him the chance. Don't give him the chance.

PAGE TWELVE (five panels)

Panel 1. INT. REINHARD'S OFFICE — WEWELSBURG — That same evening. Reinhard sits at an enormous oak desk. Across from him: the TELEPHONE, which he is holding at arm's length as though it has personally offended him. Through it, a voice SHOUTS.

[Art note: The voice on the telephone belongs to Adolf Hitler. We never see Hitler — only his words, rendered in heavy Gothic script.]

HITLER (V.O.): — you gave me your personal guarantee, Gehlen! Your PERSONAL guarantee! And what have I to show for it? Seven years! Seven YEARS and the war still—

Panel 2. Reinhard closes his eyes. His jaw is tight. He has heard this before.

REINHARD:
Mein Führer. We are close. Closer than we have ever—

HITLER (V.O.): Close is not enough! The Americans are at our doorstep! The Italians have surrendered! I need results, Gehlen! I need RESULTS!

Panel 3. Reinhard's hand tightens on the receiver.

REINHARD: (measured, steel under silk)
You will have your weapon, Mein Führer. On my life.

Panel 4. He hangs up.

REINHARD: (under his breath)
Arschloch!

Panel 5. From the corner of the room, a massive shadow peels itself off the wall and resolves into HERMANN GÖRING — 6'10" of German aristocracy, squeezed into a uniform with too many medals on it. He's been there the whole time, watching.

HERMANN:
That sounded unpleasant.

REINHARD: (not looking up)

Everything involving the Führer is unpleasant, Hermann. You know this.

PAGE THIRTEEN (five panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard stands and moves to the window. Below, in the courtyard, he can see the three newly arrived pilots being shown to their quarters.

REINHARD:
Our final group of candidates have arrived.

Panel 2. Hermann joins him at the window. They both stare down.

HERMANN:
Impressive records, all of them. Think any of them can do what needs to be done?

REINHARD:
I need someone willing to sit inside something they don't understand and point it where I tell them. These men are either brave enough or stupid enough. I'll take either.

Panel 3. A knock at the door. Siegfried enters, clipboard clutched like a shield.

SIEGFRIED:
All guests accounted for, sir. Dinner preparations are complete.

REINHARD:
Good. Tell the kitchen: make it spectacular. Tonight, we celebrate our Führer's victory.

SIEGFRIED: (smiling his unsettling smile)
Of course, sir.

Panel 4. After Siegfried leaves, Hermann looks at Reinhard.

HERMANN:
And if the next round of tests goes like the last?

Panel 5. Reinhard picks up his peaked cap and puts it on.

REINHARD:

It won't. And if it does... pilots are easier to replace than patience, Hermann. The Führer has given me a deadline. I intend to meet it.

PAGE FOURTEEN (four panels)

Panel 1. INT. GREAT HALL — WEWELSBURG — NIGHT. A long banquet table runs the length of a room that looks like the dream of a very serious person — stone walls, hanging banners, candelabra. A painting of the castle towers above the far end. Eight pilots are seated around the table — the finest aces in the German Air Force.

CAPTION: Around the table: the greatest fighter pilots in the German Air Force. Men with more kills than most countries have planes.

Panel 2. Lars is seated mid-table, nursing a glass of wine and studying the room with the careful attention of a man cataloguing exits.

Panel 3. ACROSS THE TABLE: ERNST MULLER catches Lars's eye and raises a glass. There's a challenge in it.

MULLER:

Frei. Two hundred and fifty confirmed, is that right? Impressive. For a Tuesday.

LARS:

A Tuesday and a Wednesday. I wanted round numbers.

MULLER: (leaning back, grinning)

I stopped counting at two-sixty. Seemed unsporting.

LARS:

You stopped counting because you ran out of fingers.

Panel 4. A ripple of laughter down the table. Muller grins wider — he enjoys the sparring.

MULLER:

Tell me, Frei — do you ever wonder who's better? Because I think about it. A lot.

LARS: (sipping wine)

I try not to think about you at all, Muller. It's working out well.

PAGE FIFTEEN (four panels)

Panel 1. The double doors at the far end of the Great Hall SWING OPEN. Reinhard enters — framed by torchlight, flanked by Hermann and Siegfried. It is a grand entrance, precisely choreographed to assert authority. Every pilot at the table straightens.

Panel 2. Reinhard walks the length of the table slowly, making eye contact with each pilot. He reaches the head of the table and remains standing.

REINHARD:

Gentlemen. You are here because you are the finest pilots the Reich has ever produced. One hundred sixty men in history have received the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves and Swords. Most of those still alive are in this room tonight.

Panel 3. Lars watches Reinhard as he speaks. He is listening — but he is also thinking about something else entirely.

Panel 4. CLOSE ON: Lars's hand — under the table, his thumb is running over the face of a compass. A habit. He's calculating.

REINHARD (CONT'D):

The Reich has reached a critical moment. The Americans grow bolder. Our lines grow thin. Some of you may have heard... rumors. About a project. A weapon unlike anything the Allies have ever seen.

PAGE SIXTEEN (six panels)

[ART NOTE: The feast in full motion – candlelight, uniforms, the performance of normalcy inside a medieval castle at war. The room is doing what rooms do after enormous things have been said: pretending to be ordinary.]

Panel 1. Around the table: sharp attention. Even the veterans lean in.

REINHARD (CONT'D):

And tonight, you will see it. But not now. NOW – eat, drink. For tomorrow... everything changes.

Panel 2. Reinhard sits. The feast begins. The tension breaks into performance – men eating, talking, filling their glasses. The kind of meal that feels like normality and isn't.

Panel 3. Mid-table: Lars and STIGLER, side by side, voices low beneath the noise of the room. Stigler is looking at Reinhard at the head of the table – not with hostility, with the careful attention of a man who has already done the arithmetic and doesn't like the answer.

STIGLER:

You watch him the same way I do.

LARS:

Old habit.

STIGLER:

I know why I'm here. Reinhard's people have been asking questions about a choice I made six months ago. I imagine tonight is when he makes use of the answer.

Panel 4. Lars looks at him. Stigler still looking at Reinhard.

LARS:

What kind of choice?

STIGLER:

The kind you know is right when you make it and can't explain to anyone who wasn't there. (beat) Nobody would have questioned me if I'd chosen differently. But I'd have known. (beat) Some things a man has

to be able to live with afterward. That's the only line I've ever drawn.

Panel 5. Lars watches Stigler. The feast around them. Lars's compass, under the table, turning in his hand without him deciding it.

LARS: *(quiet)*
And you think that's why you're here.

STIGLER:
I think men like Reinhard collect two kinds of pilots. The ones who'll do anything. And the ones who won't — because knowing where those lines are tells him something he can use.

(Beat.)

LARS:
Which one are you?

STIGLER: *(small, dry)*
I haven't decided yet. Ask me after dinner.

CAPTION: Later...

Panel 6. After-dinner drinks. The table looser, rawer. Lars and Baumbach in the quiet eddy they've established at their end. Lars's eyes on Reinhard. The feast around them carrying on.

BAUMBACH: *(quiet, beside Lars)*
What do you make of him?

LARS: *(equally quiet)*
I make him careful. Very, very careful.

BAUMBACH:
Is that a problem?

LARS:
For most people? No. For a man with my particular secondary employment...

BAUMBACH:
What?

LARS: (*brightly*)
Nothing. Pass the schnapps.

PAGE SEVENTEEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. After the feast plates have been cleared. Reinhard rises again.

REINHARD:

Before we continue — there is a small matter I would like to address.

Panel 2. He looks at FRANZ STIGLER.

REINHARD:

Herr Stigler. You are a remarkable pilot. Your record is exceptional. However... there was an incident. A US bomber. B-17. Severely damaged. Crew dead or dying. You encountered it over the North Sea. You had it in your sights.

Panel 3. Stigler sits very still. This is exactly what he told Lars it would be.

REINHARD:

And rather than destroy it, you escorted it to the coast and let it fly home.

STIGLER:

The crew couldn't fight back. There's no honor in killing men who can't defend themselves.

Panel 4. Silence around the table. No one moves. Reinhard turns away from Stigler, his back to him. He stares at the painting on the far wall.

REINHARD: *(his back still turned, conversational)*

Honor. What a lovely word. What a beautifully useless thing to have in a war.

Panel 5. In one fluid motion, Reinhard turns, draws a Luger from inside his jacket, and fires.

Panel 6. Stigler's head snaps back. A single round, precisely placed. He slumps forward, then slides to the floor. The room is frozen.

Panel 7. Lars's hand, under the table, has stopped turning the compass entirely.

[ART NOTE: Sudden and clinical. No dramatic build-up. Reinhard's arm is already returning to his side before Stigler hits the ground. The violence is in the casualness. The reader just spent a page learning who this man was.]

PAGES EIGHTEEN (five panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard holsters the pistol with the same practiced ease. He has not broken a sweat. He has not changed expression.

Panel 2. Siegfried, at the far end of the table, looks down at the body, then at the rug beneath it. His smile falters – but not from horror.

SIEGFRIED: (sighing, genuinely annoyed)
...and there you have it. A*nother* rug ruined.

Panel 3. Lars watches. His face reveals nothing. His hand, under the table, is very still now – no longer turning the compass.

Panel 4. Muller, across the table, catches Lars's eye. For once, neither has a quip. They both understand what room they're sitting in.

Panel 5. Reinhard calmly refolds his napkin and looks at the remaining pilots.

REINHARD:
There is no room for honor in the Reich. There is duty. There is obedience. There is victory. These are not subject to private interpretation. This is what happens when we forget that.

(beat)

REINHARD (CONT'D):
Now then – I believe I promised you a surprise. Gentlemen, if you'll follow me.

PAGE NINETEEN (five panels)

Panel 1. INT. CASTLE CORRIDOR — The group follows Reinhard through a stone passageway to a large freight elevator — an incongruous modern machine embedded in medieval stone.

Panel 2. They cram in. The door closes. Reinhard presses the single button. DOWN.

Panel 3. The elevator begins to descend. And descend. And keep descending.

MULLER: (looking at the floor indicator)
How far down does this go?

REINHARD:
Seven years of construction, Herr Muller. Did you think we built a basement?

Panel 4. Lars watches the floor indicator tick lower. His expression remains neutral, but behind his eyes — he is storing every detail.

Panel 5. The elevator stops. The doors open.

REINHARD:
Gentlemen — welcome to Der Riese.

PAGE TWENTY (one panel)

Panel 1. SPLASH — INT. DER RIESE UNDERGROUND HANGAR — The pilots step out into something impossible. An enormous subterranean cavern — the ceiling lost in shadow above them. The walls are reinforced concrete. Banks of lights hang from cables. And there, in the center of the hangar floor, elevated on a massive hydraulic platform:

THE ALIEN SPACECRAFT.

It is intact. Clean. Gleaming under the industrial lights. Discs nested within discs, perfect curves that couldn't have come from any human engineering. Around it, scaffolding. Banks of instruments. German scientists in white coats scurrying like ants.

[ART NOTE: This is the money shot. Full page. The pilots' silhouettes in the foreground, the spacecraft massive behind them. Make the ship feel genuinely alien — not just a flying saucer from a 1950s B-movie, but something that makes the human-built hangar around it look like a child's playpen.]

CAPTION: No one speaks. For a long moment, there is only the hum of machines and the sound of breathing.

LARS: (to himself, very quietly)
...Mein Gott.

MULLER: (beside him, for once without irony)
...What is that?

LARS:
The reason they don't care if we die.

Chapter Two: "DER RIESE"

Pages 21 – 44 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE TWENTY-ONE (five panels)

Panel 1. INT. DER RIESE UNDERGROUND FACILITY - The pilots fan out across the hangar floor, orbiting the spacecraft at a respectful distance. The ship is enormous, organic, impossible - curves where there should be angles, surfaces that shift in the light.

CAPTION: Men who have put 250 planes in the ground are rendered speechless. The hum of alien technology fills the silence.

Panel 2. Reinhard leads them toward a cluster of German scientists. At their center: DR. VOGEL, 50s, nervous, clutching a stack of notes like a life preserver.

REINHARD:

Herr Doktor Vogel. Progress report, if you please.

Panel 3. Vogel clears his throat. Sweats.

VOGEL:

Well, Oberstgruppenführer, we have made... substantial... progress on the outer hull composition. The alloy appears to be - that is, we believe the alloy might be -

REINHARD:

Can you fly it, Doktor Vogel?

Panel 4. A beat. Vogel sweats. His mouth opens and closes like a man searching for a sentence that doesn't exist. Reinhard watches him with the patience of someone who already knows the answer and is simply waiting for the other person to confirm it.

VOGEL:

...Not yet, sir.

REINHARD:

Weapon systems?

VOGEL:

We can identify where they appear to be housed, but the activation mechanism —

REINHARD:

Herr Doktor. You have had seven years and the resources of the entire Third Reich. Give me one reason.

Panel 5. Vogel opens his mouth. Whatever reason he had prepared dies there — because Reinhard has already nodded once at Hermann. A single nod. The economy of a man who has done this before. Hermann takes three steps with the unhurried certainty of someone who has never needed to hurry.

VOGEL:

Wait — WAIT — I can —

PAGE TWENTY-TWO (seven panels)

Panel 1. Hermann seizes Vogel by the throat with his other massive hand. Lifts him off the ground. Hermann's face betrays nothing – not anger, not satisfaction. This is a task.

Panel 2. There is a single, efficient CRACK of the neck. Hermann kills Vogel with one hand. Cold. Final. Like snapping a twig.

SFX: CRACK!

Panel 3. Vogel's body drops to the hangar floor. The remaining scientists stare at the floor. Nobody meets Reinhard's eye.

REINHARD:

Now. Who is next in the chain of command?

Panel 4. A beat. Then from the group of scientists, a hand rises – PROF. OTTO HAHN. 70s. Neatly dressed. Round glasses. Sparse hair parted with precision. He does not look afraid. He mostly looks annoyed at the interruption.

OTTO:

Technically speaking, I was never formally in the chain of command, as I was invited here under the understanding that my participation was strictly voluntary and advisory in nature, so this is, strictly speaking, your problem and not –

REINHARD:

...Professor Hahn.

OTTO:

Mm?

REINHARD:

Are you the most qualified person remaining in this hangar?

Panel 5. Otto considers this genuinely.

OTTO:

Yes, I suppose I am, actually.

REINHARD:

Then congratulations. You're promoted. Do not fail me.

Panel 6. Beside Otto, a hand takes his arm. His daughter – ELENA HAHN. Dark hair pulled back, scientific apron, a slide rule in her belt loop. She is watching Reinhard the way you watch a coiled snake.

ELENA (whisper):

Vater. Smile at the scary man.

OTTO:

Yes, yes, delighted.

Panel 7. Lars, at the back of the group, watches this exchange. Something registers in his eyes – he notices her.

PAGE TWENTY-THREE (seven panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard's gaze lingers on Elena a beat too long. He adjusts his cuff – a small, possessive gesture – and addresses her directly.

REINHARD:

Miss Hahn. Your father is fortunate to have such a... devoted assistant. I trust we can count on your continued dedication to the project?

Panel 2. He reaches out and takes her hand, holding it the way a man holds something he is deciding whether to purchase.

ELENA:

The project has my full attention, Oberstgruppenführer.

Panel 3. Elena extracts her hand with practiced politeness. This is not the first time she has performed this maneuver. Reinhard smiles. The smile of a man who is used to eventually getting what he wants.

Panel 4. Reinhard's voice cuts across the hangar as he leads the group to a heavy security door at the far end. Two guards stand outside it.

REINHARD:

Gentlemen!

Panel 5. Lars moves past Elena, following the group.

LARS (whisper):

He killed the last man who didn't deliver. You should know that.

ELENA:

I know. I watched.

LARS:

Most people would have looked away.

ELENA:

I'm not most people.

Panel 6. Lars almost smiles.

Panel 7. The heavy security doors opens. As they descend a short staircase into a below-level chamber – stone walls, older than the rest of the facility. It feels like a dungeon because it is.

REINHARD:

The spacecraft is only part of what we recovered. This is the other part.

PAGE TWENTY-FOUR (Seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Tonto standing at the glass WAITING should be the unsettling visual beat. He knew they were coming. How? Nobody says it. Elena's expression should tell us: he always knows.]

Panel 1. INTERIOR — THE HABITAT — The chamber is circular, glass-walled, climate controlled, stocked with alien objects, a cot, food dispensers. A small radio sits on a shelf, playing the Lone Ranger softly.

RADIO (*small, tinny*):

...Return with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear... Hi-yo, Silver — away!

Panel 2. And inside — the ALIEN CHILD. He is not on his cot. He is not listening to the radio. He is standing at the glass, facing the door. As if he knew they were coming. His enormous black eyes are locked on the entrance. He was waiting.

Panel 3. The pilots stop. Something about the child's posture — the stillness, the expectation — is deeply unsettling. He's not afraid. He was ready. Reinhard steps forward, unperturbed.

REINHARD:

We call it Tonto.

Panel 4. Tonto looks at the group, one face at a time. His gaze moves across the pilots like a searchlight, pausing on each man just long enough to make him uncomfortable. Until he reaches Lars. Their eyes meet. Hold. Longer than comfortable.

MULLER:

It just... stares.

Panel 5. Elena moves to the access panel and enters a code. The inner door opens. She steps inside.

Panel 6. She kneels beside Tonto and says something in a low voice — we don't hear what. Tonto keeps watching Lars as she speaks.

REINHARD:

The little thing is fascinated by that radio program. One of the few things that keeps it entertained. Miss Hahn. Introduce our guests to their co-pilot.

Panel 7. Elena glances over her shoulder at the pilot her patient won't stop looking at. Something registers on her face – not concern, not recognition. A question she hasn't asked yet.

PAGE TWENTY-FIVE (six panels)

Panel 1. Elena produces a metal container and begins preparing Tonto's meal. As she works, she explains – directed at the pilots but really at Lars, who is paying the closest attention.

ELENA:

There were three of them when the ship crashed. The male unit expired at the scene due to injuries sustained in the crash.

Panel 2. Flashback panel, inset, desaturated. The crash site at night. German soldiers pulling the mortally wounded male alien from the ramp. His body limp. The female alien reaching for him as soldiers hold her back.

ELENA (CAP):

They left his body in the containment unit the next morning and then disposed of it like it was debris.

Panel 3. Flashback. The mother alien alone in a clinical habitat, pressing her hand against the glass in the direction they took the adult male.

ELENA (CAP):

The mother watched them take him away. After that, she refused everything. Food. Water. All of it. For weeks.

Panel 4. Flashback. The mother alien, gaunt and fading, pushing away trays.

ELENA (CAP):

They breathe our air. But by the time we figured out the correct diet, she had already begun to deteriorate. I don't think it was just starvation. I think she simply decided she was finished.

Panel 5. Flashback. The mother reaching through the glass toward infant Tonto in a separate unit. Her hand flat. His small hand on the other side.

ELENA (CAP):

The child witnessed everything.

Panel 6. Flashback. Young Tonto curled in a ball in the corner of his habitat after the mother's death. Completely shut down. Empty.

ELENA (CAP):

He didn't move for three weeks after that. Didn't eat. Didn't respond to stimuli. We thought we'd lost him too.

PAGE TWENTY-SIX (six panels)

Panel 1. Back to present. Elena opens the container. The smell hits the pilots like a wall. Several recoil. One gags. Elena is used to the smell. Inside: fermented organ meat, consumed cold, alongside a paste of fermented fish viscera.

ELENA:

Their biology requires fermented proteins – specifically cold organ meat and a paste made from fermented fish viscera. The fermentation process mimics something in their native food chain.

Panel 2. Muller stares at the food with his handkerchief over his nose.

MULLER:

Fermented fish viscera paste? So... fish guts pâté.

BAUMBACH:

Have you never been to a Berlin market on a Sunday? That's half the menu.

Panel 3. Light chuckles from the pilots. Reinhard does not find it funny. His expression doesn't change. The laughter dies.

Panel 4. Elena places the food in front of Tonto. He eats with delicate enthusiasm – each bite savored. The contrast is devastating – the pilots watching in horror as Tonto dines like royalty on something that looks like it was scraped off a pier.

Panel 5. Elena produces a chocolate bar from her pocket. Breaks off a piece. Tonto takes the chocolate with almost religious reverence.

ELENA:

We can't crack their language. We can't fly their ship. We can't even tell which part of the galaxy they're from. Or if it's even this one. But somehow, across all the light-years and all the biology and technology – chocolate. Chocolate is a universal constant.

Panel 6. Mid-meal, Tonto stops eating. Looks at the glass — at a specific spot on the far wall. The spot where his mother once pressed her hand. Seven years, and he still looks. Elena's seen it a thousand times.

Panel 7. She reaches over and gently turns Tonto away from the glass. Back to the food. The routine of grief, managed. Lars sees this. For the first time, something crosses his face that isn't calculation — it's recognition. Elena doesn't see it. But the reader does.

PAGE TWENTY-SEVEN (five panels)

Panel 1. Lars's mask slides back on. Smiling.

LARS:

Charming. What's your plan for the creature, Herr Oberstgruppenführer?

REINHARD:

It crashed in an alien spacecraft. It is from the civilization that built this technology. We are cultivating its trust – hoping that one day it shows us how to operate the vessel. Miss Hahn is our... liaison.

Panel 2. The group begins to file out. Reinhard leads. The pilots follow, subdued. Elena stays behind with Tonto.

Panel 3. Lars is the last to leave. At the door he pauses. Looks back. Tonto is watching him go – not Elena, not the other pilots. Lars. Those enormous black eyes hold him across the room.

Panel 4. Lars holds the look for one beat. Then turns and walks out. The door closes.

Panel 5. Inside the habitat, Tonto goes to the glass. Presses his three-fingered hand against it. In the direction Lars went. Elena watches from the floor. Her expression: he's never done that for a pilot before.

PAGE TWENTY-EIGHT (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Two-page scene. Hit four beats – Stigler's empty chair, Baumbach's crisis, Muller's ego, Lars's silence – and let them breathe.]

CAPTION: Later that evening...

Panel 1. INT. GREAT HALL – WEWELSBURG – NIGHT. The banquet table. Formal dinner is long over – candelabra burned low, plates cleared. Empty bottles of schnapps and brandy. Just the pilots now – looser, rawer. The great hall should feel cavernous and under lit. These men look small at this enormous table.

Panel 2. Wide shot. The remaining pilots scattered along the long table. Baumbach hunched over a glass. Two other pilots drinking steadily. Stigler's chair conspicuously empty. Nobody sits in it.

Panel 3. Lars at the far end, leaning back, compass in one hand. Brandy untouched.

Panel 4. Silence. Then Baumbach breaks it.

BAUMBACH:

So. We all saw what we saw. I'm asking because I need someone to tell me I wasn't hallucinating.

Panel 5. One of the other pilots pours himself another drink. His hand is not entirely steady.

PILOT:

You weren't hallucinating.

BAUMBACH:

A spacecraft. An actual spacecraft. From somewhere that isn't here. And a child. A living child that is not from this world.

Panel 6. He looks down the table at Stigler's empty chair.

BAUMBACH:

Stigler was the best of us. The only one with the courage to speak up.
And now he's in the ground like it was nothing.

Panel 7. That lands. The table goes quieter. Everyone heard the shot.
Nobody is pretending otherwise.

PAGE TWENTY-NINE (nine panels)

Panel 1. Muller breaks the silence. He's been lounging with his boots on the table – the only man who doesn't look shaken. He looks exhilarated.

MULLER:

Gentlemen. You're all looking at this wrong. That ship down there – something built it. Something flew it. Not across an ocean. Not across a continent. Across stars. The fastest, most advanced aircraft in the history of anything, anywhere – and it's sitting in a basement in Westphalia waiting for someone good enough to take it up.

Panel 2. He swings his boots off the table and leans forward. Electric.

MULLER:

Now. I don't know about the rest of you. But I didn't come here to stare at it.

BAUMBACH:

A machine nobody on Earth built, and you think confidence is enough to fly it.

MULLER:

Confidence is what got me into every cockpit I've ever sat in. Understanding came after. That's what makes me a pilot, Baumbach. And you a passenger.

Panel 3. Baumbach looks at Muller with something between admiration and disbelief.

BAUMBACH:

Doesn't it bother you? Any of it? Stigler? The child?

Panel 4. Muller considers this for exactly one second.

MULLER:

Stigler had principles. I have priorities. Only one of those keeps you alive.

Panel 5. Baumbach turns his glass.

BAUMBACH:

I'm a man of faith. Always have been. If that child is real – if what we saw tonight is real – what else is real that I've never questioned?

Panel 6. Nobody has an answer.

PILOT 2:

Well. At least the schnapps is good.

Panel 7. Nobody laughs.

Panel 8. Close on Lars. Still turning his compass. Hasn't said a word. Eyes working. Cataloguing. He clicks the compass shut. Pockets it. Stands.

LARS:

Goodnight, gentlemen.

Panel 9. Lars walks out. He does not look back as Muller raises a mock toast to his back.

MULLER:

Sleep well, Frei. Tomorrow we find out which of us is better.

PAGE THIRTY (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Hermann fills every panel he's in. He's not menacing through action – he's menacing through mass and silence and the absolute economy of his words. Baumbach's cross should catch the light for exactly one frame during the explosion – a reflexive gesture that tells us everything about the man.]

CAPTION: *The following morning.*

Panel 1. EXT. CASTLE WEWESBURG – OUTER WALL – MORNING. Overcast. Cold. HERMANN leads the pilots along the perimeter. Hands behind his back. Reinhard is nowhere – this is beneath him.

Panel 2. Hermann stops at the DOG KENNELS. A row of steel enclosures. Inside: twelve Belgian Malinois. Enormous. Absolutely silent, which is worse than barking.

HERMANN:

Twelve dogs. Belgian Malinois. Trained not to bark. By the time you hear them, they have already reached you.

Panel 3. He lets that sit. The pilots look at the dogs. The dogs look back with the flat, patient focus of animals that have been trained to kill quietly.

HERMANN:

Stigler's replacement will arrive Thursday. Until then, you are seven.

Panel 4. Hermann leads them through a gate in the outer fence and along a narrow marked path into a field. The path is barely visible – tamped earth between wild grass. Hermann picks up a rock from the edge of the path. Tosses it casually fifteen feet to the left. An easy, unhurried motion – the way a man skips a stone across a pond.

Panel 5. The explosion is disproportionately large. A column of dirt and smoke erupts – twenty feet high, debris raining outward. The blast wave hits the pilots. Baumbach staggers. Two of the unnamed pilots flinch backward. Muller doesn't flinch. Dirt rains on everyone. The sound rolls across the field and echoes off the castle walls.

SFX: KRRAKOOOM

HERMANN:

The field extends four hundred meters in every direction. There is one safe path. I know it. Oberstgruppenführer Gehlen knows it. No one else.

Panel 6. In the aftermath — ears ringing, dirt still falling — BAUMBACH. His hand has moved to his chest. Fast. Automatic. The muscle memory of a lifetime. His fingers find the silver cross under his uniform and grip it. His lips move — nothing audible, just the shape of words. A prayer said the way a man breathes: without thinking, because stopping would be harder than continuing. The silver cross catches the morning light for one frame — a flash of metal against the dark wool of his uniform.

[ART NOTE: This should be a tight panel — Baumbach's hand on his chest, the cross visible between his fingers, his lips moving. The other pilots are recovering from the blast. Baumbach isn't recovering from the blast. He's doing what he always does when the world reminds him it can kill him at any time: he talks to God. One frame. The reader should clock it and file it the way Hermann does.]

Panel 7. And Hermann does clock it. His eyes have moved from the smoking crater to Baumbach's hand on his chest. The cross. The prayer. Hermann's expression doesn't change — it never changes — but his gaze lingers on Baumbach for one beat longer than necessary. He files it. The way he files everything. A man who prays during explosions is either a coward or something else entirely, and Hermann has been around enough cowards to know the difference.

PAGE THIRTY-ONE (six panels)

Panel 1. Hermann steps toward Lars — not Muller, not Baumbach. Lars specifically. A foot taller and twice as wide. The shadow he casts covers Lars entirely.

HERMANN: The castle is easy to enter. The castle is impossible to leave. This is not a boast. It is geography.

Panel 2. Back inside the castle. Tour over. The pilots disperse — Muller toward the officers' quarters with the stride of a man who has already decided the minefield is someone else's problem. Baumbach toward the chapel, his hand still near his chest, the cross still warm from his grip. Two of the unnamed pilots toward the mess hall, moving faster than necessary. Men who want to be indoors.

Panel 3. Lars hangs back as the others move ahead. He pauses near the courtyard's main gate and bends down to retie his left boot — fingers working the laces with deliberate slowness. To anyone watching, he is simply a man with a loose bootlace. He is not.

[ART NOTE: Ground level. We see Lars from behind and slightly to the side — the boot, the hands, the laces. Mundane. Unhurried.]

Panel 4. His eyes. While his hands perform their theater, his eyes are working. Paces from courtyard to gate. Gate width. Distance to the motor pool. The angle of the nearest watchtower's blind spot. The guard who rotates past every four minutes and twelve seconds. He is building a map — not on paper, not in words, but in the specific and permanent memory of a man who has survived this long by never needing to write anything down.

[ART NOTE: Close on Lars's eyes only — calm, still, measuring. The courtyard geometry visible in the background: gate, watchtower, motor pool, guard. The contrast between the stillness of his face and the precision of what he's cataloguing is the whole panel.]

Panel 5. A shadow falls across him. Lars looks up. Hermann is standing over him. He didn't leave with the others. He didn't walk away. He's just... there. Two hundred and forty pounds of silence, watching Lars Frei retie a boot that didn't need retying.

Panel 6. One beat of eye contact. Hermann's face reveals nothing – not suspicion, not accusation, not even interest. Just the flat, professional observation of a man whose job is to notice things. Then he passes Lars. Doesn't stop. Almost conversational, the way a man comments on the weather:

HERMANN: Your left lace was fine.

Panel 6. Lars stares after him. Four words. Not a threat. Not a report. Not even a warning, exactly. Just a statement from a man who noticed everything – the boot, the eyes, the counting – and is choosing, for now, not to do anything about it. For the first time in the castle, something on Lars's face looks like genuine concern. Not fear. Concern. The recognition that the largest man in this building might also be the most observant, and that being observed by Hermann Göring is considerably more dangerous than being observed by Siegfried Taubert, because Siegfried writes things on clipboards and Hermann writes things on people.

He has been seen.

[ART NOTE: The bootlace is the real threat of these two pages. The minefield tells the pilots the castle is a cage. The dogs tell them the cage has teeth. But the bootlace tells LARS – specifically Lars, personally, directly – that someone is watching him, that someone noticed what his eyes were doing while his hands were busy, and that someone is smarter than he assumed. Hermann's "Your left lace was fine" should land with more weight than the explosion. Four words. A man's entire escape plan, questioned in four words by a giant who doesn't raise his voice.]

PAGE THIRTY-TWO (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Visually stunning – Lars alone with the ship in emergency blue light, alien writing glowing under his hand, Tonto watching from the habitat across the darkness. And Muller on the observation platform above them both.]

CAPTION: Late that night...

Panel 1. INT. DER RIESE – MAIN HANGER. Late night. Emergency lighting only – the ship is a silhouette in blue-dark. Lars moves through the hangar alone.

Panel 2. He walks the perimeter of the spacecraft. Slowly. Studying the hull – memorizing dimensions, angles, access points. Reconnaissance.

Panel 3. He stops at a section of hull covered in alien writing. The symbols are fluid, organic, like something grown rather than carved.

Panel 4. He reaches out. Touches the hull. Just his fingertips. The metal – if it is metal – is warm. Body-temperature warm.

Panel 5. The ship responds. Not a blast, not a defense mechanism. A hum – low, warm, almost welcoming. The alien writing near his hand glows briefly. Soft blue-white. Spreading outward from his palm like ripples. Then fading.

SFX: HMMMMMmmmm...

Panel 6. Lars pulls his hand back. Stares at his palm. The glow is gone as though it never happened. He looks up. Across the hangar, through the habitat glass, Tonto is standing at the wall. Awake. Watching. His three-fingered hand pressed to the glass. They look at each other across the dark hangar. The ship between them.

Panel 7. Pull back wide. The hangar in blue emergency light. The ship. Lars at its hull. Tonto at his glass. And above them both – on the observation platform, partially obscured by shadow – MULLER. He's been watching Lars the entire time. Studying him the way a boxer studies an opponent before a fight. His face is unreadable – not jealousy, not

anger. Assessment. He saw the ship respond to Lars's touch. He's recalculating.

[ART NOTE: Three men. Three levels. Lars at the ship. Tonto at the glass. Muller in the shadows above. None of them knows all three are awake. The reader knows.]

PAGE THIRTY-THREE (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Intercut two scenes: Lars and Elena in the corridor, Siegfried and Reinhard in the office. Same exchanges, two perspectives.]

CAPTION: The following morning.

Panel 1. SCENE A — INT. CASTLE CORRIDOR — outside Tonto's habitat. Elena walks briskly, carrying a metal case of supplies. Lars steps into the corridor from a side passage. The timing is clearly not accidental.

LARS:
Miss Hahn. Good morning.

ELENA:
Herr Frei.

Panel 2. He falls into step beside her. She does not invite this.

LARS:
I wanted to ask you about the child. His behavior patterns — the way he imitates gestures, the hand-through-the-glass communication. Is that learned or instinctive?

ELENA:
Why?

LARS:
Pilot research. If I'm going to fly a ship built by his species, understanding how they think might help keep me alive.

Panel 3. Elena glances at him. Evaluating.

ELENA:
The imitation behavior is learned. He watches, he absorbs, he mirrors. It's his way of building trust.

Panel 4. CUT TO SCENE B – INT. REINHARD’S OFFICE, that evening.
Reinhard at the window. Siegfried enters, clipboard first.

SIEGFRIED:

Good evening, sir. A small observation. The pilot – Frei – found Miss Hahn in the east corridor this morning.

REINHARD:

Found. Or arranged to find?

SIEGFRIED:

Arranged. Quite deliberately. He was waiting for her. At least ten minutes.

Panel 5. SCENE A – Elena stops walking and faces Lars directly.

ELENA:

Is there anything else, Herr Frei? Or can I get back to work?

Panel 6. SCENE B – Siegfried consults his clipboard.

SIEGFRIED:

They spoke for several minutes. The manner was... familiar. He was attentive. She was guarded. But then –

REINHARD:

Then?

PAGE THIRTY-FOUR (Eight panels)

Panel 1. SCENE A – Lars shifts tactics. Tries charm.

LARS:

You know, I've been stationed at some very strange facilities, but this is the first time the most interesting thing in the building wasn't the aircraft.

Panel 2. Elena stares at him. The charm bounces off her like a tennis ball off a battleship.

ELENA:

Are you referring to Tonto or are you attempting to flirt with me?

LARS:

...Tonto. Definitely Tonto.

ELENA:

Good. Because I have no patience for it and you have no talent for it.

Panel 3. Lars laughs – a real one, surprised out of him. She didn't expect that.

LARS:

Fair enough.

Panel 4. He drops the act. Something genuine shows through.

LARS:

Miss Hahn. That child in there trusts you. In a place like this – surrounded by men who see him as a specimen, an asset, a problem to solve – he trusts you. That's not nothing. That's... remarkable.

Panel 5. CUT TO SCENE B – Siegfried delivers the knife.

SIEGFRIED:

She stopped walking. Turned to face him. Gave him her full attention. For Miss Hahn – who, as we both know, does not stop for anyone – that is rather extraordinary.

Panel 6. Reinhard's jaw tightens.

REINHARD:

She stopped.

SIEGFRIED:

Briefly. Then she walked away. But yes. She stopped.

Panel 7. SCENE A – Elena pauses. The first crack. Then she shuts it down.

ELENA:

Trust isn't remarkable, Herr Frei. It's survival. He trusts me because everyone else here wants to cut him open the second they know how that ship works.

Panel 8. Elena turns and walks away. Lars watches her go. At the far end of the corridor, barely visible: Taubert. Clipboard. That smile.

PAGE THIRTY-FIVE (seven panels)

Panel 1. SCENE B — Reinhard turns from the window.

REINHARD:

Which pilot has the highest flight hours? The steadiest hands under pressure?

Panel 2. Siegfried doesn't need his clipboard.

SIEGFRIED:

Frei. By a significant margin. Muller has the ego but Frei has the record. Two hundred and forty-seven confirmed missions.

Panel 3. Reinhard moves to his desk. Opens Lars Frei's dossier.

REINHARD:

Frei flies first.

Panel 4. Siegfried tilts his head.

SIEGFRIED:

An excellent choice, sir. His arrogance will make him eager. And if the interface proves... unforgiving... well. The program is bigger than any single pilot.

REINHARD:

Exactly.

Panel 5. Reinhard straightens a pen.

REINHARD:

One more thing. When the test flight is scheduled — make sure Miss Hahn is present. She should see what's at stake.

SIEGFRIED:

Of course, sir. Front row.

Panel 6. At the door, Siegfried pauses.

SIEGFRIED:

Sir? I don't think Frei is interested in Miss Hahn romantically. I think he's interested in what she knows about the specimen. He's an opportunist, not a romantic. But then... the two can look very similar from the outside, can't they?

Panel 7. He exits. That smile is the last thing out the door. Reinhard alone. He picks up the photograph on his desk – Elena in the frame, not looking at the camera. He sets it face-down.

REINHARD (small):

I didn't build you a life inside these walls so you could give it to a pilot.

PAGE THIRTY-SIX (Seven panels)

CAPTION: Very late that night...

Panel 1. Interior, castle corridor, night. Lars moves through the castle with the confident walk of someone who belongs everywhere. He passes a guard.

GUARD:

Halt. Ihre Identifikation?

LARS: (Attempting Humor)

Frei. Major. I got lost looking for the bathroom. This place could use a map. Or at least arrows. Very welcoming for your guests.

Panel 2. The guard waves him through.

Panel 3. INT. CASTLE COMMUNICATIONS ROOM. Radio equipment. Unmanned. Lars sits at the main console with practiced ease.

Panel 4. He dials through frequencies. Static. Static. Then a crackle.

LARS:

This is Greyhound. Calling Bulldog. Do you copy?

RADIO:

...Greyhound, this is Bulldog. Go ahead.

LARS:

Get me Dulles. Priority one.

Panel 5. Long pause. Static hums.

DULLES (OP):

Greyhound. This is Dulles. Go ahead.

LARS:

Allen. It's me. Cole. Cole Haller. Designation six-niner-niner-alpha-four.

Panel 6. Long pause.

DULLES (OP):

Haller. Confirmed. Go ahead.

Panel 7. Lars leans in.

LARS:

I'm at Wewelsburg Castle. Inside. I have intelligence you're not going to believe.

DULLES (OP):

That's what they all say. Go on.

LARS:

The Nazis have an alien spacecraft, sir. A real one. Crashed in '36. They've had it for seven years and they're trying to reverse-engineer it as a weapon. They have test pilots now. They're close.

PAGE THIRTY-SEVEN (six panels)

Panel 1. Dead silence on the line. The kind of silence that has weight.

LARS:
Dulles. I need to invoke our arrangement.

DULLES (OP):
...What arrangement?

LARS:
The one where I feed you German military intelligence, you feed me protection when this war ends, and we both pretend I'm not a German fighter ace shooting down American pilots in the interim.

DULLES (OP):
Hold for direction.

Panel 2. INT. SAFE HOUSE - BERN, SWITZERLAND. Allen Dulles in a cramped second-floor office above a bakery. Pipe in one hand. Radio in the other. He sets down the pipe. Picks up a separate telephone.

DULLES:
Operator. Get me William Donovan. Office of Strategic Services Command. Washington. Priority one.

DULLES:
Yes, I know what time it is in Washington. That is why I said priority one.

Panel 3. INT. OFFICE OF STRATEGIC SERVICES, Washington, D.C. A clock in the background reads 12:47 AM. Skeleton crew. A junior officer picks up the phone, listens for four seconds, and goes very pale.

Panel 4. William "Wild Bill" Donovan picks up the receiver. He was not asleep. Men like Donovan are never asleep.

DONOVAN:
Dulles. What.

DULLES (OP):
Bill, I have an asset inside the Luftwaffe. Reliable. Five years of solid intelligence. He's reporting that the Germans have a crashed alien spacecraft at a castle in Westphalia. Recovered in 1936. Fully intact. They're attempting to fly it.

DONOVAN:
Allen. Did you just say alien spacecraft?

DULLES (OP):
I did.

DONOVAN:
As in. Not from this planet.

DULLES (OP):
That is what the word alien typically implies, yes.

Panel 5. Donovan stares at the phone.

DONOVAN:
Get me Patton.

JUNIOR OFFICER:
Sir, General Patton is in -

DONOVAN:
I KNOW WHERE PATTON IS. Get him on the line or I will promote you to a position where you get shot at. Move.

PAGE THIRTY-EIGHT (four panels)

[ART NOTE: Comedy of escalation – each man's face more horrified than the last.]

Panel 1. INT. FIELD COMMAND TENT – NORTH AFRICA. Command table. Maps everywhere. Sand on everything. General George S. Patton asleep on a cot in his boots. An aide shakes him awake.

AIDE:

General. Washington on the line. Priority one.

Panel 2. Patton sits up. Grabbing the phone.

PATTON:

Donovan. This better be worth my time. I was having an excellent dream about Rommel.

DONOVAN (OP):

General, we have an asset inside the German air force. Reliable source. He's reporting that the Nazis have recovered an alien spacecraft.

PATTON:

...Son, have you been drinking?

DONOVAN (OP):

No, sir.

PATTON:

Because I have six hundred thousand men to move across a continent and you are calling me in the middle of the night with – what – little green men?

DONOVAN (OP):

Apparently they're grey, sir. And there's a child. A living alien child.

Panel 3. Patton stares at the tent wall. A long time.

PATTON:
GET ME THE PRESIDENT.

AIDE:
Sir, it's one in the morn -

Panel 4. Off the aide's face.

PATTON:
DID I STUTTER?

PAGE THIRTY-NINE (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Roosevelt should be in silk pajamas, looking simultaneously presidential and deeply annoyed.

Panel 1. INT. THE WHITE HOUSE -PRIVATE RESIDENCE. A telephone rings. Franklin Delano Roosevelt puts the receiver to his ear.

ROOSEVELT:
This is the President.

PATTON (OP):
Mr. President. It's Patton.

ROOSEVELT:
George. It's one in the morning.

PATTON (OP):
Sir, I am aware of the time. I am also aware that I have a war to fight, men to command, and a continent to liberate, and instead of doing any of those things I am on the telephone because William Donovan has called me - ME, Mr. President - to inform me that some spy in a castle has seen a SPACESHIP.

Panel 2. Roosevelt sits up in bed.

ROOSEVELT:
...I beg your pardon?

PATTON (OP):
A SPACESHIP, Mr. President. From OUTER SPACE. With a CHILD in it. A GREY child. Donovan seems to think this is something I should be involved in. I would like to know WHY.

Panel 3. Roosevelt puts his hand over the receiver. Looks at the ceiling. Puts it back.

ROOSEVELT:
Put Donovan on.

Panel 4. Donovan's voice, now with the quality of a man who realizes the potato has been passed back.

DONOVAN (OP):
Mr. President —

ROOSEVELT:
Bill. Is this what my intelligence agency does at one in the morning? I have Churchill calling me about U-boats, Stalin calling me about a second front, and now I have my own general calling me about Martians. I was told the OSS was the best intelligence operation in the world. Was I misinformed?

DONOVAN (OP):
Sir, the asset has been reliable in the past —

ROOSEVELT:
The asset is reporting SPACESHIPS, Bill.

DONOVAN (OP):
...Yes, sir.

Panel 5. Beat.

ROOSEVELT:
Burn him. Obviously. The man has gone off the deep end. Disavow. Destroy the file. This conversation did not happen. Am I clear?

DONOVAN (OP):
Crystal, Mr. President.

ROOSEVELT:
Good. And Bill? If you ever wake up George Patton to tell him about little green men again, I will dissolve your agency and replace it with a boy scout troop. They would be equally effective and significantly less expensive. Good night.

Panel 6. Donovan's office, Washington. He holds the dead receiver against his ear — the expression of a man who has been yelled at by the President, the General, and his own conscience in the span of eleven minutes and has nothing to show for it.

SFX: CLICK!

PAGE FORTY (nine panels)

[ART NOTE: The comedy collapses back down the chain as fast as it went up.]

Panel 1. Donovan picks up the Bern line, and dials with the weary efficiency of someone who has made too many bad-news calls to give them ceremony.

DONOVAN:
Dulles.

DULLES (OP):
Bill. What did they say?

DONOVAN:
Burn the asset. Disavow all contact. Destroy the file.

DULLES (OP):
And the spacecraft?

DONOVAN:
What spacecraft? There is no spacecraft. There was never a spacecraft.
Good night, Allen.

Panel 2. Click. Dulles in his bakery office. Relights his pipe. Picks up the radio.

Panel 3. Interior, castle communications room. Lars still at the console. Waiting.

DULLES (OP):
Greyhound.

LARS:
Dulles. What's the word?

DULLES (OP):
Unfortunately, with intelligence about spaceships and little green men, I am sad to report that I don't know who this is. This line is

unsecured. Whoever you are — we have no arrangement. We have no relationship. And this call did not happen.

Panel 4. Lars stares at the radio. What just happened?

DULLES (OP):

But thank you for your service. Good night, Greyhound.

SFX: CLICK!

LARS (small):

...Grey. He's grey.

Panel 5. He pulls off the headset. Sits back.

Panel 6. Close on Lars's face. Every option closing. Every door shutting.

Panel 7. Quietly, almost to himself:

LARS (small):

Right then. The only way to prove I'm not insane is to show them.

LARS (small):

Which means I need to steal a space ship AND an alien child.

Panel 8. He stares at the wall.

LARS:

That is, without question, the stupidest sentence I have ever said.

Panel 9. He clicks the compass open. Clicks it shut. Stands.

LARS:

Well. Stupid's all I've got.

PAGE FORTY-ONE (one panel)

Panel 1. Full page. Lars walks out of the communications room into the dark corridor of Castle Wewelsburg. Behind him, the dead radio. Ahead of him, the labyrinth of stone corridors, guards, minefields, and an alien child behind glass who doesn't trust him yet. The compass is in his hand. The needle spins. He walks toward the hangar. Toward the ship. Toward the stupidest decision of his life.

[ART NOTE: Hold on Lars walking into the dark. The reader should feel the weight of what he's just committed to: a man alone, burned by his own government, inside a Nazi castle surrounded by minefields and silent dogs, planning to steal an alien child from the most dangerous intelligence officer in the Third Reich. He has no backup. He has no plan. He has a compass and whatever it is that made the ship glow under his hand. This is your page-turn into Chapter Three.]

Chapter Three: "TONTTO"

Pages 42 – 63 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE FORTY-TWO (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: The bonding rejection should feel like Lars hitting a wall – three attempts, three failures. Tonto takes the offering but gives nothing back. The reader should feel Lars's frustration and Tonto's caution equally.]

CAPTION: Over the next several days.

Panel 1. Wide. The habitat corridor – stone walls, the glass habitat running its length, the equipment stations dark and empty. Early morning. The facility not yet awake. LARS, alone, sitting on the cold floor outside the glass with a chocolate bar. This is where he comes now. Every day. Nobody asked him to.

Panel 2. He breaks off a piece and slides it through the feeding slot.

Panel 3. Inside: Tonto approaches. Takes the chocolate. Eats it. Does not look at Lars. Returns to his cot.

Panel 4. Same setup, different day. Different light. Lars at the glass. Chocolate offered. Tonto takes it. Pauses this time – half-turns, as if considering something – then walks away. Progress measured in millimeters.

Panel 5. Third attempt, different day. Lars places the chocolate in the slot and waits. And waits. Inside: Tonto sits on his cot, facing the wall. He knows the chocolate is there. He won't come get it while Lars is watching.

Panel 6. Lars leans his head back against the glass. His eyes close. The compass in his hand clicking open and shut. Click. Click. Click. The sound of a man who has run out of immediate ideas and is waiting for a new one.

Panel 7. Elena appears behind him – she's come down the corridor and stopped. Her arms are folded. The posture of a woman who has watched too many uniformed men be kind to that child for reasons that always turned out to be about the child's usefulness.

ELENA:

He doesn't trust you. Every man in a uniform who's ever been kind to him wanted something cut off and catalogued.

Panel 8. Lars doesn't turn around. Still looking through the glass at the child who won't look back.

LARS:

If I wanted to take something from him, I'd at least buy him dinner first. I'm not an animal.

ELENA:

Then what are you doing?

LARS: *(looking at her)*

Showing up.

ELENA:

That's your strategy? Persistence?

LARS: *(back at Tonto)*

Everyone here watches him. I'm trying to be the one person he doesn't mind watching back.

PAGE FORTY-THREE (nine panels)

[ART NOTE: The turn. Everything on this page is a small forward movement after a page of stillness. The dark chocolate advice is Elena choosing, for the first time, to help rather than observe. The eye contact is Tonto choosing the same. The Baumbach moment closes the page quietly – a reminder that Lars isn't the only one who sees a child instead of a specimen.]

Panel 1. Elena studies him. Something in her expression shifts – not trust, not warmth, but the recognition that this pilot might be slightly different from the others. She makes a decision.

ELENA:

He likes the dark chocolate better than the milk. If you're going to bribe him, at least do it properly.

Panel 2. She turns to leave. Lars watches her go.

Panel 3. Lars looks at the chocolate bar in his hand. Milk chocolate.

LARS: (small)

Noted.

Panel 4. He looks back at Tonto. Tonto has moved – standing now, facing the glass, but still at a distance. Watching Lars the way a wild animal watches someone who has left food and hasn't moved. Calculating risk.

Panel 5. Lars places the remaining chocolate in the slot. Stands. Steps back three paces. Gives the child the room to decide.

Panel 6. Tonto approaches. Takes the chocolate. And this time – the smallest thing – glances at Lars before walking away. Eye contact. Half a second. Then gone.

Panel 7. Lars exhales. The compass clicks shut. Whatever that was, it was something.

Panel 8. Close on the glass where Tonto's fingers touched the feeding slot. A faint smudge of chocolate. The first mark Tonto has left that wasn't a handprint of grief.

Panel 9. Footsteps in the corridor behind Lars. BAUMBACH, walking past — not headed for the habitat, headed somewhere else entirely. But he slows as he passes the glass. Stops. Looks through it at Tonto. His hand moves to the cross beneath his uniform. His lips move. No sound. A prayer said for a child who was born under different stars but is, to Baumbach, no less a part of creation. He finishes. Nods once — to Tonto or to God, it's not clear which — and walks on.

[ART NOTE: Baumbach's cross should catch the corridor light here — the same way Lars's Knight's Cross catches the light in the guards scene later. Two men, two decorations, two different kinds of devotion. Lars watches Baumbach go. He is not the only person in this castle who sees a child instead of a specimen. He is beginning to understand this.]

PAGE FORTY-FOUR (eight panels)

CAPTION: Two days later. 0300 hours.

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat, night. An alarm sounds – quiet, internal, a temperature warning. The habitat's glass has developed a hairline crack along the lower seal. Cold air is seeping in. The temperature is dropping.

Panel 2. Tonto is on his cot, curled up, shivering. His skin – normally a smooth grey – has taken on a bluish tint. He's cold. Really cold.

Panel 3. Lars is in the corridor – he's been sleeping near the habitat, something he's taken to doing without telling anyone. He hears the alarm. Runs to the glass. Sees Tonto shivering.

Panel 4. Lars looks at the access panel. A six-digit keypad. He knows the code – he watched Elena enter it from twenty feet away three days ago and memorized it.

Panel 5. He punches in the code. The door opens. He's inside the habitat for the first time. The temperature is dropping fast – he can see his breath.

Panel 6. He finds the crack in the glass seal. Pulls off his belt. Uses the leather and the buckle to create a makeshift seal over the fracture, pressing it against the glass with his bare hands. Holding it. The cold bites into his fingers.

Panel 7. Behind him, a small three-fingered hand reaches out and touches his boot. Just touches it. Lars looks down. Tonto is beside him, looking up. The enormous black eyes hold something that wasn't there before – not trust exactly, but the beginning of it. The recognition that this person came when the cold came.

Panel 8. Running footsteps. Elena arrives, breathless, having been woken by the alarm. She stops in the doorway. Lars is inside the

habitat, hands on the glass, belt holding a seal, and her patient is touching his boot.

ELENA:

You — you memorized my access code.

LARS:

You should change it.

PAGE FORTY-FIVE (five panels)

CAPTION: *The next morning.*

[ART NOTE: No dialogue on this page. Pure visual storytelling. The silence should feel sacred. This is the immediate payoff of the boot-touch – Tonto showing Elena what happened last night.]

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat, morning. Elena enters through the access door carrying Tonto's breakfast. The routine. She kneels to set up the food.

Panel 2. Tonto takes her hand. Elena looks at him – surprised. He doesn't usually initiate contact during meals. He pulls gently, leading her.

Panel 3. He leads her to the feeding slot. Points at the glass. Elena looks. On the glass, at the height where a man's hand would rest: Lars's handprint from the repair. And on the edge of the feeding slot: a smudge of chocolate. Dark chocolate. And on the floor inside the habitat: the makeshift belt seal, still pressed against the crack.

Panel 4. Tonto places his own three-fingered hand next to Lars's handprint on the glass. Then looks at Elena. His expression – as much as an alien face can express – is clear: this one. This one came when the cold came. This one is different.

Panel 5. Elena stares at the handprint. The chocolate smudge. The belt on the floor. Her patient's hand on the glass beside the print of a pilot she's been keeping at arm's length. Three hands, two species, one gesture. Something in the glass wall she built around herself develops a crack that matches the one in the habitat.

PAGE FORTY-SIX (seven panels)

CAPTION: The following morning.

Panel 1. Interior, castle corridor. Reinhard intercepts Elena as she walks toward the habitat. He's carrying a package – small, wrapped in brown paper. His manner is warm. Solicitous. The courtship.

REINHARD:

Miss Hahn. A moment?

Panel 2. He presents the package. She opens it – a leather-bound journal, high quality, the kind that costs more than a month's salary.

REINHARD:

For your research notes. I noticed the one you're using is... rather worn. I also wanted to discuss your accommodations. The quarters near the laboratory are small. I could arrange something on the upper level – warmer, better light, a view of the courtyard.

Panel 3. Elena holds the journal. It's beautiful. She wants it. But she knows what it costs.

ELENA:

That's very thoughtful, Oberstgruppenführer. But I prefer to stay near the habitat. Tonto's feeding schedule is unpredictable, and the proximity is... practical.

Panel 4. She places the journal back in his hands. Gently. Politely. The most diplomatic rejection since Versailles.

ELENA:

But thank you. Truly.

Panel 5. Reinhard's face. The smile holds. But behind it, something tightens. He nods once. Turns. Walks through the courtyard toward the castle's main gate.

Panel 6. As Reinhard crosses the courtyard, the gate opens. Three black Mercedes enter, one behind the other, moving with the slow precision of a funeral procession. Reinhard stops. He wasn't expecting this.

Panel 7. EVA BRAUN steps from the lead Mercedes. Blonde. Elegant. Wrapped in a coat that costs more than the car. Behind her: HELGA and HELMA, matching shadows in matching coats, flanking her like mirror images. Eva surveys the castle with the interest of a woman deciding whether to buy a property or demolish it.

EVA:

You look like a man who's just been told no. I recognize the expression — I've caused it so many times myself.

PAGE FORTY-SEVEN (six panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard's jaw tightens almost imperceptibly. Eva notices because Eva notices everything.

REINHARD:
Fräulein Braun. This is... unexpected.

EVA:
Unexpected is what I do best, Reinhard. The Führer sends his regards. He's very interested in your progress. So interested, in fact, that he asked me to come see it personally.

Panel 2. She walks past Reinhard without waiting for an invitation. Helga and Helma fall into step behind her. Reinhard has no choice but to follow his own guest into his own castle. As Eva passes through the courtyard, she glances at the journal in Reinhard's hand – the rejected gift. She doesn't comment. The glance is enough.

EVA:
Don't worry. I'm not here to inspect. I'm here to... appreciate. Think of me as a patron of the arts.

Panel 3. Siegfried appears at the courtyard entrance. His smile, for once, has a question in it. He wasn't expecting Eva either. Nobody was.

SIEGFRIED:
Fräulein Braun. What a... pleasure.

EVA:
Isn't it? Show me everything. Start with whatever you're most afraid to show me.

Panel 4. Interior, Der Riese. Eva enters the hangar. She walks through the space with the confidence of someone who has seen extraordinary things and is merely adding to the collection. Helga and Helma fan out behind her, scanning the room – exits, threats, angles.

Panel 5. As Eva crosses the hangar floor, a SCIENTIST fumbles with a thermal probe near one of the ship's outer panels. There's a flash – a small discharge of energy from the hull. The scientist yelps and stumbles backward. A piece of alien debris clatters to the floor near Eva's feet.

Panel 6. Eva doesn't flinch. Doesn't break stride. She bends down mid-step and picks up the debris. Pockets it. Nobody notices. The scientists are too busy attending to their colleague. The guards are watching the scientists. Eva is the only person in the room paying attention to the right things.

[ART NOTE: This debris will become important. Eva just pocketed a piece of alien technology that nobody else thought to secure. It will hum in her hand in Chapter 4's cliffhanger and glow during the ceremony in Chapter 8.]

PAGE FORTY-EIGHT (eight panels)

Panel 1. Eva reaches the spacecraft. Studies it with genuine fascination – not fear, not reverence. Interest. The interest of a woman who collects things.

Panel 2. She runs her hand along a railing, taking in every detail.

EVA:

A ship like that doesn't fly itself. It was built by something. Flown by something. Something with hands and eyes and... Tell me about the creature.

Panel 3. Off his suppressed surprise. How did she know?

REINHARD:

The specimen is being managed by our biology team. Miss Hahn has developed a rapport with it over seven years. It trusts her.

EVA:

It. You keep saying "it." Does "it" have a name?

REINHARD:

The staff call it Tonto. After some American radio program it listens to incessantly.

Panel 4. Eva turns this over.

EVA:

Tonto. The faithful companion who does all the work while the hero gets the credit. How perfectly German of you to miss the irony.

Panel 5. She moves on.

You have the specimen. You have the ship. And in seven years, your scientists haven't connected the two?

Panel 6. Reinhard's silence is its own answer.

EVA:

Let me see it. The specimen. Let me see Tonto.

Panel 7. Reinhard hesitates. Eva notices the hesitation the way a shark notices blood.

EVA:

Reinhard. I didn't drive three hundred kilometers to look at metal. Show me the specimen, or I'll tell the Führer you're hiding things. And we both know how he feels about surprises.

Panel 8. Across the hangar, near the habitat entrance: ELENA. She's emerged to see what the commotion is about. Eva spots her.

EVA:

Pretty.

REINHARD:

I hadn't noticed.

EVA:

Of course you hadn't.

[ART NOTE: Eva smiles. She has just catalogued every relationship in the room and filed them for later use.]

PAGE FORTY-NINE (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Eva doesn't wait. She came for the child and she's going to see the child TODAY. This is the scene that seeds the ceremony – Eva diagnoses his power as emotional, not mechanical.]

CAPTION: The following morning.

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat. A gathering – Reinhard, Eva, Elena, Lars, Siegfried, Hermann, and two scientists. Eva has demanded to see the specimen up close. Reinhard has reluctantly agreed. Helga and Helma position themselves at opposite sides of the room – between them, every exit is covered.

Panel 2. Elena enters the habitat first. Tonto comes to her – the familiar routine. She kneels, speaks softly, positions him near the glass where the others can observe.

Panel 3. Eva approaches the glass. Studies Tonto with the intensity of a collector examining a rare acquisition. Tonto looks at her. Then past her – at Lars, standing at the back of the group.

Panel 4. Tonto reaches toward Lars. Not toward Eva. Past her. Through her.

Panel 5. Eva notices. She doesn't like being looked past. She reaches through the feeding slot and takes Tonto's outstretched arm. Her hand closes around his wrist.

Panel 6. The lights flicker. The floor hums. A vibration that everyone in the room feels in their teeth. Tonto's eyes go wide as Eva's grip tightens. Something is happening – energy passing between them, visible as a faint blue-white glow at the point where her hand meets his skin.

Panel 7. Elena steps between them. Breaks Eva's grip. Shields Tonto behind her body.

ELENA:
Don't touch him.

Panel 7. Eva looks at her hand. The blue-white glow fades from her skin. She's not frightened — she's fascinated. Calculating.

EVA:
Interesting.

(a beat - evaluating)

EVA:
His power is emotional. Not mechanical. It responds to feeling, not to instruments. The lights, the vibration — those weren't defensive. They were reactive. He felt something when I touched him, and the energy responded to the feeling.

[ART NOTE: This diagnosis recontextualizes everything that follows. Every bonding beat between Lars and Tonto after this page carries double meaning — the reader now knows that emotional connection IS Tonto's power. The compass spinning? That's power. The mirroring? That's power. The hand-on-glass? That's power charging.]

PAGE FIFTY (five panels)

Panel 1. Eva turns to Reinhard.

EVA:

Your scientists have been treating it like a machine. Probing, measuring, analyzing. But it's not a machine. It's a child. A frightened child with power it doesn't understand. You don't unlock a child with instruments. You unlock a child with feeling.

Panel 2. Reinhard's face. He doesn't believe in feelings. He believes in results. But Eva's observation is more concrete than anything his scientists have produced in seven years, and that unsettles him.

REINHARD:

What are you proposing?

EVA:

Nothing yet. I'm... collecting information. When I have a proposal, you'll be the first to know.

Panel 3. She walks out. Helga and Helma materialize from opposite sides of the room and fall into step behind her. Three women moving through the hangar like a current through still water. Elena watches them go with the expression of someone who has just identified a new and more dangerous threat.

Panel 4. Lars, still at the back of the group, looks at Elena. Elena looks at Lars. The same thought behind both pairs of eyes: Eva Braun just became the most dangerous person in this castle, and she wasn't even the most dangerous person in her own car.

Panel 5. Inside the habitat, Tonto has retreated to his cot. He's holding his wrist where Eva grabbed him. The skin is unmarked, but he's rubbing it. Over and over. Something happened when she touched him, and he didn't like it.

PAGE FIFTY-ONE (ten panels)

[ART NOTE: The comedy page. This should hit like a Looney Tunes short in the middle of a thriller. It works as relief here because the reader just experienced the tension of Eva meeting Tonto and her chilling diagnosis. Maximum visual comedy, minimum dialogue.]

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, main hangar, day. Two SCIENTISTS are near the spacecraft's lower hull with a thermal probe – a device designed to measure energy signatures at specific hull locations. They are wearing blast shields. This should tell the reader something.

SCIENTIST 1:
Ready?

SCIENTIST 2:
Ready. Touching panel seven in three... two...

Panel 2. The probe touches the hull. The hull panel SINGS – a high, pure note like a tuning fork struck by God.

Panel 3. The singing intensifies. The scientists exchange a glance – this has never happened before.

Panel 4. A flash. White. Total. Filling the panel.

Panel 5. The flash fades. Where two scientists stood: two pairs of boots. On the hangar floor. Laces still tied. Everything above the ankles is gone. Vaporized. Two pairs of boots standing perfectly upright as if their owners simply evaporated.

Panel 6. Across the hangar, Siegfried lowers his clipboard. Stares at the boots.

Panel 7. He makes a note.

Panel 8. Otto appears beside him, glasses slightly askew.

OTTO:

I'm going to need a requisition for two additional scientists and one mop.

Panel 9. Siegfried continues writing.

SIEGFRIED:

I'll have the paperwork on Oberstgruppenführer Gehlen's desk by morning.

Panel 10. Otto looks at the blast shield on the wall — which has a sign reading "STAND BEHIND THIS LINE — PROF. HAHN" — and then looks at the boots, which are ten feet in front of the line.

OTTO:

I'm also going to need a larger sign.

PAGE FIFTY-TWO (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The guards scene should feel like watching cruelty from a distance – the reader sees it before Lars does.]

CAPTION: That night.

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat, night. Two guards – GUARD 1 and GUARD 2 – are posted outside the glass. Regular rotation. Bored. The kind of bored that becomes cruel in men with power and nothing to do.

Panel 2. Guard 1 produces a chocolate bar from his pocket. Unwraps it slowly. Holds it up to the glass where Tonto can see it.

GUARD 1:

You want this? Come closer. Come on. Come to the glass.

Panel 3. Inside the habitat, Tonto watches the chocolate. His enormous eyes track it. He's hungry – it's between meals, and chocolate is the one thing that connects him to something like pleasure. He approaches the glass. Slowly. Cautiously. Reaches the feeding slot. Guard 1 moves the chocolate toward the slot – then pulls it back. Laughing.

GUARD 2:

Look at it. Like a dog. Does it do tricks too?

Panel 4. They do it again. And again. Offer. Pull back. Offer. Pull back. Tonto's hand reaches through the slot each time – three fingers extended, grasping, closing on air.

Panel 5. Guard 1 breaks off a piece of chocolate and eats it himself. Slowly. In front of Tonto. Chewing with exaggerated pleasure.

GUARD 1:

Mmm. Good chocolate. You want some? Too bad. Aliens don't get chocolate. Aliens get fish paste.

Panel 6. A voice from down the corridor. Cold. Quiet. Carrying the authority of a man who does not need to raise his voice to be terrifying.

LARS (OP):
Give it back.

Panel 7. The guards turn. Lars stands in the corridor. He's in his undershirt — he was sleeping nearby. His Knight's Cross catches the corridor light. His face is calm. His eyes are not.

GUARD 1:
Major Frei. We were just —

LARS:
The chocolate bar you stole from a child. Give it back. Now.

PAGE FIFTY-THREE (ten panels)

Panel 1. Guard 2 straightens.

GUARD 2:

It's not a child, sir. It's a specimen. We were testing its behavioral responses to —

LARS:

You were testing whether you could make something small and helpless feel worse than it already does. You passed. Congratulations. Now give it back before I test something on you.

Panel 2. Beat. Lars doesn't move. He doesn't need to. The Knight's Cross says he's killed enough people to earn Germany's highest decoration, and his posture says he's considering adding two more.

Panel 3. Guard 1 puts the chocolate bar in the feeding slot. Quickly. Lars watches him do it.

LARS:

Both of you. Go. And if I find you near this habitat again outside your rotation — if you've stressed our guest, damaged its cooperation, reduced its willingness to interface with the technology this entire program depends on — someone will need to explain that to the Führer. And I have a feeling Oberstgruppenführer Gehlen won't volunteer himself.

Panel 4. The guards leave. Fast. Lars watches them go. Then turns to the glass.

Panel 5. Inside the habitat, Tonto has the chocolate bar. He's holding it with both hands. Not eating it yet. Looking at Lars through the glass.

Panel 6. Lars puts his hand on the glass. Flat. Open. The same gesture the mother alien made. The same gesture Tonto made for his dead mother. Lars doesn't know the significance. Tonto does. His eyes widen.

Panel 7. He approaches the glass. Slowly. Places his three-fingered hand on the other side, mirroring Lars's hand. The first time Tonto has voluntarily mirrored anyone other than Elena.

[ART NOTE: Hold this image. Two hands on glass. Different species. Same gesture. The beginning of something. And the reader NOW KNOWS – from Eva's diagnosis three pages ago – that this emotional bonding IS Tonto's power activating. The hand-on-glass isn't just a character beat anymore. It's a weapon charging.]

Panel 8. They hold the moment.

Panel 9. Then Tonto pulls away. Sits on the floor near the glass. Begins eating the chocolate. Small, careful bites. Savored.

Panel 10. Lars slides down the wall on his side. Sits on the cold corridor floor. Pulls out his compass. Opens it. The needle swings – and for the first time, points directly at Tonto rather than north.

LARS (small):
That's... new.

PAGE FIFTY-FOUR (seven panels)

CAPTION: Over the following days.

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat. Lars sits outside the glass, cross-legged, compass in his lap. Tonto sits inside the glass, cross-legged, mirroring Lars's posture. The compass is open. Lars holds it up to the glass.

Panel 2. Close on the compass. The needle is spinning wildly – not settling, not pointing north, just spinning in circles. It does this near Tonto. Only near Tonto.

LARS (small):

Every time. Spins like it's trying to point everywhere at once.

Panel 3. Tonto leans forward. Studies the compass through the glass. Then raises his hand and makes a slow circular motion with one finger – mimicking the spinning needle. Mirroring the compass the way he mirrors people.

Panel 4. Lars holds the compass closer. Tonto mirrors his movement – pressing closer to the glass. Separated by inches now. The compass between them, needle spinning, alien child spinning his finger in sync with it.

Panel 5. Elena arrives. She stops in the corridor and watches. The pilot and the alien child, separated by glass, synchronized in a ritual with a brass compass.

ELENA:

He's mirroring you.

LARS:

He does that. He's been doing it for two days now. Every gesture I make, he copies it.

ELENA:

He only does that with people he's studying. People he's deciding whether to trust.

Panel 6. Tonto stops mirroring the compass. He leans away from the glass and looks at the corridor floor – at the spot where Lars has been sitting every day. The spot where the floor is worn. Then he taps the glass. Once. At that spot. Showing Elena: this is where he sits. This is where the new one comes.

[ART NOTE: He's reaching for someone new. Elena sees it. The reader sees it. The question is whether Elena is relieved or threatened by this – and the answer, from her expression, is both.]

Panel 7. Elena studies Tonto. Then Lars. Something shifting in her face – the controlled woman deciding whether to name what she's watching.

PAGE FIFTY-FIVE (eight panels)

Panel 1. Lars looks at Elena.

LARS:

Does this mean he's starting to trust me?

ELENA:

It means he's starting to study you. Trust takes longer. Trust takes... years, for him. After what happened to his family, I'm surprised he studies anyone at all.

Panel 2. Elena kneels beside the glass. Tonto comes to her side – comfortable, familiar, the seven-year bond. She places her hand on the glass. Tonto places his hand on hers, through the glass.

Panel 3. Then he does something extraordinary. He takes Elena's hand and moves it – gently, deliberately – to the spot where Lars's handprint is still faintly visible. He places her hand over Lars's print. Connecting them. Through himself.

Panel 4. Elena's face. The alien child she's protected for seven years is showing her something. Not telling – showing. In his language of gesture and placement and careful, deliberate touch: these two things belong together.

Panel 5. She pulls her hand back. Stands. Her expression is complicated – she's not ready for what Tonto is suggesting, but she heard it.

ELENA:

He... doesn't usually do that. The matching. The connecting. Not with strangers.

LARS:

Maybe I'm not a stranger anymore.

Panel 6. Elena gives him a look that says: don't push it.

ELENA:

Don't get ahead of yourself, Herr Frei. He likes you enough to eat in your presence. He likes me enough to enjoy it. There's a difference.

Panel 7. Elena walks away down the corridor. Her footsteps fade. Lars watches her go. And then — just before she rounds the corner — she glances back. One beat. Half a second. Not at Lars. At Tonto. Then she's gone.

[ART NOTE: This is Elena's tell and the reader gets it before Lars does. She's not ready to name what Tonto just showed her — but she heard it, and the look back confirms it. Lars is still watching the corner she disappeared around. He missed it entirely.]

CAPTION: Late that night.

Panel 8. The habitat, empty of visitors. The corridor dark. Tonto alone. Tonto crosses the space — deliberate, unhurried, the walk of something that has made a private decision — and stops at the radio. He knows the dial. He has watched Elena turn it ten thousand times. He extends three fingers and turns it. Static. A frequency. Static. Then — the voices. The Lone Ranger. The familiar signal. He crosses back to his spot on the floor and sits in front of it. His enormous eyes half-close. His posture settles. No performance. No audience.

[ART NOTE: This is what he wants. This is the first time the story has shown us what Tonto wants rather than what he does. Lars is not here. Elena is not here. Nobody is watching. Hold on this panel. The child who has been reactive to everything is, for the first time, simply himself.]

PAGE FIFTY-SIX (six panels)

CAPTION: Later that day.

Panel 1. Interior, Reinhard's office. Muller stands at attention before the desk. He's dressed formally – pressed uniform, medals polished. This is not casual. He requested this meeting.

MULLER:

Oberstgruppenführer. Thank you for seeing me.

REINHARD:

You requested a formal audience, Muller. I don't get many of those from pilots. Usually they just want more brandy.

Panel 2. Muller places a folder on Reinhard's desk. Inside: his flight records. Not the glamorous summary – the detailed operational logs. Every mission. Every altitude record. Every aircraft he's mastered.

MULLER:

I'd like to make my case to fly the spacecraft first. Not as a request – as a professional recommendation.

Panel 3. Reinhard opens the folder. Muller continues – and this is a DIFFERENT Muller. The showmanship is gone. The ego is dialed back. What's underneath is a man who lives to fly, presenting his qualifications with the precision of a surgeon describing his technique.

MULLER:

I have twelve hundred hours in eighteen aircraft types. I've flown in conditions that grounded every other pilot in the Luftwaffe. I understand aeronautical engineering at a level that Frei does not – he's a stick-and-rudder man, brilliant in the air but limited in his theoretical understanding of why aircraft behave the way they do.

Panel 4. Muller leans forward.

MULLER:

That ship is not a Messerschmitt. It is not anything anyone has ever flown. The pilot who takes it up first needs to understand propulsion

theory, gravitational dynamics, and aeronautical physics well enough to improvise when nothing works the way it should. I am that pilot, sir. On paper and in the air.

Panel 5. Reinhard studies the folder. He's impressed — this is visible. But he doesn't commit.

REINHARD:

Thank you, Muller. I'll take this under advisement.

Panel 6. Muller's jaw tightens — he knows "under advisement" means no. He clicks his heels. Turns. Exits. The door closes behind him with controlled force.

PAGE FIFTY-SEVEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. The moment Muller's footsteps fade, the side door of Reinhard's office opens. EVA. She's been listening from the adjacent room.

EVA:
He's not wrong, you know.

REINHARD:
Eva. How long have you been listening?

EVA:
Long enough. Muller is the better pilot on paper. His argument is sound. His records are impeccable.

Panel 2. She crosses to the desk. Picks up Muller's folder. Reads it with the speed of someone who processes information the way other people breathe.

REINHARD:
Then why don't I trust him?

Panel 3. Eva sets the folder down. Looks at Reinhard directly.

EVA:
Because Muller wants to fly the ship. Frei wants to understand it. And you don't know which one is more dangerous.

Panel 4. She sits in Reinhard's chair — his chair, behind his desk, a gesture so audacious that Siegfried, entering with tea, nearly drops the tray. Eva opens the top drawer. Pulls out a file. Studies it.

EVA:
You should lock your filing cabinets, Reinhard. A woman could learn all sorts of things.

Panel 5. Close on Siegfried's face. His smile falters – the first time in the entire story. Eva is playing every game in this castle better than the people who invented them, and Siegfried just realized he's not the smartest person in the room anymore.

Panel 6. Eva stands. Straightens her skirt. Walks to the door. At the threshold:

EVA:

Let Frei fly first. If he dies, Muller gets his chance. If he survives, you have a pilot the ship already trusts. Either way – you win. That's what this is about, isn't it? Winning?

Panel 7. She exits. The door closes behind her with the quiet certainty of a woman who has never needed to slam one. Reinhard stares at the open drawer – the files, the photographs, the seven years of accumulated intelligence on a pilot he has underestimated until approximately thirty seconds ago. Siegfried stares at Reinhard. His clipboard is motionless for the first time in the scene. Neither man speaks.

[ART NOTE: The room feels different now. Eva Braun walked in as a guest and walked out as something else entirely. Reinhard's expression is not anger – it's recalibration. The most dangerous expression a man like Reinhard can wear. Siegfried reads it and decides, correctly, that this is not the moment to write anything down.]

PAGE FIFTY-EIGHT (six panels)

CAPTION: Later that evening...

Panel 1. Interior, Reinhard's office. Siegfried enters. Clipboard.

SIEGFRIED:

Sir. Two observations regarding the specimen.

Panel 2. Siegfried places two photographs on the desk. Shot through the surveillance system. Both show the habitat glass.

SIEGFRIED:

First — the handprints. These appeared over the past week. The smaller print belongs to the specimen. The larger print... belongs to Major Frei.

Panel 3. Close on the photographs. Two handprints on glass, side by side. Human and alien. Five fingers and three. Paired. The image is oddly beautiful — like a cave painting from the future.

SIEGFRIED:

Second — the time logs. Major Frei has spent an average of forty-seven minutes per day outside the specimen's habitat for the past week. The specimen comes to the glass consistently during these visits. This is more sustained interaction than it has shown any personnel other than Miss Hahn in seven years.

Panel 4. Reinhard picks up the handprint photograph. Studies it.

REINHARD:

Forty-seven minutes.

SIEGFRIED:

Yesterday it was fifty-three. The trend is increasing.

Panel 5. Reinhard sets the photograph down. Stands. Moves to the window.

REINHARD:

Move the test flight up. End of the week, Siegfried.

SIEGFRIED:

Sir, the scientists have requested at least another month of —

REINHARD:

End of the week.

Panel 6. Siegfried nods. Makes a note. Exits. Reinhard stays at the window, looking out at the dark courtyard.

PAGE FIFTY-NINE (five panels)

CAPTION: *Elsewhere...*

Panel 1. Interior, corridor outside Tonto's habitat. Lars is at the glass again. Late night. The compass is open in his hand, needle pointing at Tonto. They've developed a routine – Lars sits, Tonto mirrors, the compass spins. Tonight Tonto is pressed against the glass, his hand flat where Lars's hand is flat on the other side. The glow is faint but the reader can see it – the blue-white shimmer at the edges of Tonto's fingertips.

Panel 2. Far down the corridor – where two points of light catch the darkness – eyes. Watching. The light shifts and the eyes are gone. We don't know who was watching. But the reader remembers Siegfried's report. Someone is always watching in this castle.

Panel 3. Lars doesn't notice. He's looking at his compass. The needle is vibrating now – not spinning, vibrating. Trembling toward Tonto with an intensity it hasn't shown before. Something is building.

Panel 4. Tonto pulls his hand from the glass. Tilts his head. Looks toward the hangar – in the direction of the ship. He can feel something Lars can't. His eyes narrow. Then widen.

Panel 5. Lars with a "What is it?" expression that Tonto doesn't answer. He presses both hands to the glass and closes his eyes. The blue-white glow intensifies for a moment – then fades. Whatever Tonto heard from the ship, he's not telling.

PAGE SIXTY (five panels)

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, main hangar, night. A hull panel activates on its own – no probe, no contact. It sings. The same note from the scientist blunder, but sustained. Louder. Growing.

Panel 2. The singing spreads. Panel to panel. The ship's hull illuminates in sequence, blue-white light racing across the surface like a wave. The hangar vibrates. Equipment rattles on tables. Coffee cups fall.

Panel 3. The vibration reaches Tonto's habitat. The glass – already weakened from the earlier crack – fractures. New cracks spread across the surface in a spiderweb pattern. Alarms trigger. Guards run.

Panel 4. Elena is in the corridor when it happens. She braces against the wall as the vibration rolls through. When it stops, she runs for the habitat. Finds the cracked glass. Finds Tonto inside, calm, standing at the center of the room as though the vibration came from him and not from the ship.

Panel 5. Elena stares at Tonto. Tonto stares back. The ship is still humming faintly – winding down. But Tonto's eyes hold something that wasn't there before. Recognition. Of what, Elena doesn't know. But the ship called and the child answered, and neither of them is telling her what was said.

PAGE SIXTY-ONE (four panels)

[ART NOTE: A brief page that threads Muller back into the chapter's end. He's been watching since page 32 of Chapter 2. He never stopped.]

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, observation platform. Muller stands where he stood on page 32 — the shadows above the hangar floor. He watched the ship sing. He watched the hull illuminate. He watched the vibration crack glass. And he is doing what Muller always does: recalculating.

Panel 2. He looks at the ship below. The glow is fading but the afterimage remains — the pattern of illumination, the sequence of panels, the direction of the wave. He's mapping it. Not with instruments. With instinct.

Panel 3. He pulls out a small notebook — not unlike Otto's. Makes a sketch. The ship's layout. The panels that activated. The sequence. He's building a flight manual from observation alone.

MULLER (small):

Panel seven first. Then nine. Then the dorsal array. That's the ignition sequence. That's how you wake it up.

Panel 4. He closes the notebook. Looks at the ship one more time. His expression is not ego, not competition. It's hunger. Pure, undiluted hunger to fly the most extraordinary machine ever built. And the knowledge that Reinhard has chosen someone else to do it.

PAGE SIXTY-TWO (six panels)

Panel 1. Interior, Otto's laboratory, that night. Elena finds her father at his workstation, surrounded by papers, diagrams, and seven years of notes. He's measuring something on a schematic of the ship's interior.

ELENA:

Vater. The glass cracked again. The whole habitat shook. The ship activated on its own.

OTTO:

Yes. I felt it. Remarkable, actually – the resonance frequency suggests the hull panels are interconnected in a way we hadn't previously –

ELENA:

Vater. You're going to get yourself killed in that ship. You spend fourteen hours a day inside something that vaporizes people who touch the wrong panel.

Panel 2. Otto stops working. Takes off his glasses. Cleans them slowly.

OTTO:

Elena. I'm the only person in this facility who understands what... forty percent of those panels do. The defensive systems alone – if Reinhard's pilots activate the wrong one –

Panel 3. He puts his glasses back on.

OTTO:

I am the only thing between this project and a catastrophe. If I stop working, someone less qualified takes over, and instead of two pairs of boots on the floor there will be twenty. I am not being brave. I am being practical.

Panel 4. Elena sits down across from him. The weight of seven years in this castle visible in her posture.

ELENA:

Eva Braun touched Tonto today. The lights flickered. The floor vibrated. She said his power is emotional.

OTTO:

Emotional. Hmm. That's... actually rather insightful for a woman whose primary qualification is being the Führer's girlfriend.

Panel 5. Elena doesn't laugh.

ELENA:

She's dangerous, Vater. More dangerous than Reinhard. Reinhard wants to use the ship. Eva wants to use Tonto.

Panel 6. Otto looks at his daughter. For a moment, the absent-minded professor drops away, and what's underneath is a man who has been protecting his child in a castle full of monsters for seven years.

OTTO:

Then we'll need to be more dangerous than both of them. In our own quiet way.

PAGE SIXTY-THREE (four panels)

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, observation deck. Night. Lars is alone. Leaning on the railing, looking down at the spacecraft in the dim hangar below. The ship is quiet now – the singing has stopped, the glow has faded. But it feels different. Alert. Waiting.

Panel 2. Lars opens his compass. The needle points at the ship. Or at Tonto's habitat beyond it. He can't tell which.

Panel 3. He stares at the ship. He doesn't know the test flight has been moved up. He doesn't know Reinhard is watching him through Siegfried's reports. He doesn't know Eva is three moves ahead of everyone. He doesn't know the ship is waking up. He doesn't know Muller has been mapping its ignition sequence from this same platform.

Panel 4. Full panel. Lars alone on the observation deck. The ship below him. The castle above him. A man who has bet everything on a child he barely knows and a ship that vaporizes people, standing in the dark with a compass that won't point north, planning the stupidest thing he's ever done. He doesn't know what's coming. The reader does.

[ART NOTE: This is your page-turn into Chapter Four.]

ACT II - TRUST AND DECEIT

Chapter Four: "THE ARRANGEMENT"

Pages 64 - 84 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE SIXTY-FOUR (six panels)

CAPTION: Three weeks into the program. Der Riese.

[ART NOTE: This scene should move fast. The containment field activation is sudden. Lars's response is instinctive. The ship responding to his touch should feel like the most natural and the most impossible thing in the world simultaneously.]

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, main hangar. A routine day. Scientists at their stations. Guards at their posts. Otto is inside the spacecraft, crouched in the navigation bay with a notepad, measuring the distance between alien symbols on a console panel. Elena is outside the ship at a monitoring station, tracking her father's readings.

Panel 2. Otto reaches for a panel he hasn't touched before – deeper inside the ship, past the areas they've mapped. His hand brushes a surface covered in dense alien script. The symbols illuminate under his fingers – blue-white, the same glow Lars triggered in the Chapter 2 night scene. But this time the ship doesn't hum. It PULSES.

SFX: WHUMMM

Panel 3. A containment field activates around Otto – a shimmering, translucent bubble of energy that encloses him completely. He stumbles backward but the field moves with him. The air inside begins to change – Otto's breath fogs, then thins. The ship thinks it's protecting a crew member and is switching to the native atmosphere.

OTTO:

That's – that's rather unexpected –

Panel 4. Elena at the monitoring station. Alarms triggering. She sees the readings spike – atmospheric composition inside the field is changing. Oxygen dropping.

ELENA:

VATER!

Panel 5. Wide shot of the hangar. Scientists panicking. Guards unsure of protocol. Elena sprinting toward the ship's ramp. And at the base of the ramp – Hermann. Arms folded. Blocking.

HERMANN:

Standing orders. No entry during an active event.

ELENA:

My father is suffocating in there!

HERMANN:

Standing orders.

Panel 6. From across the hangar – Lars. He was near the pilot briefing area when the alarms started. He's already moving. Not running – walking fast, with the focused momentum of a man who has made a decision and is not going to slow down for anything in his path.

PAGE SIXTY-FIVE (seven panels)

Panel 1. Lars reaches the ramp. Hermann is still blocking. Lars doesn't stop. He doesn't ask. He drops his shoulder and pushes past Hermann – physically, bodily, which is insane given that Hermann outweighs him by a hundred pounds. But Lars is fast, and the angle is right, and Hermann is surprised that anyone would try. Lars is past him and on the ramp before Hermann's hand closes on empty air.

Panel 2. Hermann turns. His expression doesn't change – it never changes – but his eyes track Lars up the ramp with the focus of a predator deciding whether to pursue. He doesn't pursue. He watches. That's worse.

Panel 3. Interior, spacecraft. Lars moves through the narrow corridor toward the navigation bay. The ship's interior is alive around him – panels glowing, symbols shifting, a low vibration in the walls. It feels less like entering a machine and more like entering a body.

Panel 4. He reaches Otto. The professor is inside the containment field, on his knees now, glasses fogged, breathing shallow. His hand is still on the panel that triggered it. He can't pull away – the field is holding him in place.

LARS:
Professor. Can you hear me?

OTTO:
The – the atmosphere is changing – I believe it's trying to –
accommodate me –

LARS:
It's killing you.

OTTO:
Yes – that too –

Panel 5. Lars looks at the containment field. Looks at the hull. The same surface that glowed under his hand two nights ago. He reaches out

and places his palm flat on the hull panel adjacent to the field generator.

Panel 6. The ship responds. The familiar hum – warm, resonant, recognizing. The alien writing around his hand illuminates. Blue-white. Spreading outward from his palm like ripples in water. The containment field flickers. Stutters.

Panel 7. The field drops. Otto collapses forward, gasping. Lars catches him – one arm around the old man's chest, keeping him upright. The alien atmosphere dissipates. Normal air rushes back in.

OTTO:

Fascinating – the field was a crew protection protocol – it assumed I was –

LARS:

Can you walk?

OTTO:

I believe so. Though I may need a moment to –

LARS:

We're leaving now.

PAGE SIXTY-SIX (seven panels)

Panel 1. Lars half-carries Otto down the ramp. Elena meets them at the bottom — she's past Hermann now, protocol be damned. She takes her father's weight from Lars. Otto's glasses are cracked. His hands are shaking. But he's alive.

ELENA:

Vater — are you —

OTTO:

The crew protection system is atmospheric, not gravitational. We should note that. Also — I may need to sit down.

Panel 2. Elena looks at Lars over her father's head. Really looks at him — for the first time without armor, without evaluation, without the professional distance she's maintained since the day he arrived. What she sees is a man with a red handprint on his palm from where he touched alien metal, who pushed past the most dangerous enforcer in the castle without hesitation, to save a man he has no obligation to save.

Panel 3. She says nothing. She doesn't need to. The look is enough. Lars sees it. Nods once. Walks away.

Panel 4. Hermann, still at the base of the ramp, watches Lars leave. His eyes drop to Lars's hand — the palm that touched the ship. He files this away the way he filed the bootlace.

Panel 5. At the edge of the hangar, partially obscured by a support column: EVA BRAUN. She arrived during the chaos. Nobody noticed. She saw the whole thing — Lars pushing past Hermann, the ship glowing under his touch, the containment field dropping on command.

Panel 6. Close on Eva's face. She is recalculating. The pilot made the ship sing. The ship chose him.

Panel 7. She turns and walks away. Helga and Helma materialize from the shadows and fall into step behind her. Three women moving through the hangar like a current through still water.

PAGE SIXTY-SEVEN (eight panels)

CAPTION: That evening.

[ART NOTE: Two scenes intercut on one page: Siegfried delivering reports to Reinhard, cut against Lars sitting peacefully at Tonto's habitat. The reader watches the trap being set while the target sits with a child. Dramatic irony – not recap.]

Panel 1. SCENE A – Interior, Reinhard's office. Siegfried stands before the desk. Three folders in his hand. Reinhard sits behind the desk, fingers steepled. The photograph of Elena is still face-down from Chapter 2.

SIEGFRIED:

Three items, sir.

Panel 2. SCENE B – Interior, Tonto's habitat corridor. That same evening. Lars sits outside the glass, compass in hand, clicking it open and shut. Routine. Peaceful. Tonto sits on his side, mirroring Lars's posture.

SIEGFRIED (CAP):

The spacecraft activated its crew protection protocol for the first time in seven years. The pilot Frei entered against standing orders, placed his hand on the hull, and the ship... responded.

Panel 3. SCENE B – Lars holds the compass up to the glass. The needle spins wildly near Tonto. Tonto raises his finger and mirrors the spinning. The routine they've built. The bond neither of them can name.

SIEGFRIED (CAP):

It has never activated for a pilot before, sir. Only for the specimen.

Panel 4. SCENE A – Second and third reports.

SIEGFRIED:

Second – if we're putting a pilot in that cockpit at the end of the week, we need assessment scores on record. Reaction times, spatial awareness, interface compatibility. We're flying blind otherwise – and Berlin will want to know we weren't. Third – Frei has spent an average

of forty-seven minutes per day outside the specimen's habitat. More sustained interaction than it has shown anyone other than Miss Hahn in seven years.

Panel 5. SCENE A — Reinhard absorbs all three.

REINHARD:

He's too useful to waste and too dangerous to keep.

SIEGFRIED:

That is rather the problem, sir.

Panel 6. SCENE A — Reinhard stands. Moves to the window.

REINHARD:

Move the test flight up. Three days.

SIEGFRIED:

Sir, three days doesn't give us time to —

Panel 7. SCENE B — Lars at the habitat. Tonto's hand on the glass. The glow faint at his fingertips. Lars doesn't know the clock just started. The reader does.

REINHARD (CAP): Three days, Siegfried. If the ship accepts him, we have our pilot. If the ship kills him, we have our answer.

Panel 8. SCENE B — Wide shot. Lars and Tonto on opposite sides of glass in dim light. Peaceful. Unaware. The last quiet moment before everything accelerates.

[ART NOTE: The intercut should feel like a split screen — warmth on one side, cold calculation on the other.]

PAGE SIXTY-EIGHT (eleven panels)

CAPTION: Later that evening.

Panel 1. Interior, Reinhard's office. Eva has arrived. She doesn't knock.

EVA:

I heard about the excitement today. Your ship made friends with a pilot.

REINHARD:

The ship exhibited an anomalous response to physical contact. It's being investigated.

Panel 2. Eva sits on the edge of the desk. One leg crossed.

EVA:

Investigated. With science.

Panel 3. A beat.

EVA:

Eight dead scientists with every instrument the Reich can build. One pilot with nothing but his hand and whatever was behind it. At what point do you stop calling it science and start calling it something else?

Panel 4. Reinhard's face. Calculating.

REINHARD:

What are you suggesting?

EVA:

I'm suggesting that Himmler's Ahnenerbe division has been researching psychic phenomena for five years. Spiritual energy. Consciousness transfer. The intersection of will and matter. You've dismissed it as mysticism because you're a rational man. But your rational men keep dying, Reinhard. The pilot who put his hand on the hull and made it sing – he's alive. Maybe it's time to ask why.

Panel 5. She leans forward.

EVA:

At what point does rational methodology become irrational stubbornness?

Panel 6. Reinhard's expression does not admit defeat, only allied compromise.

REINHARD:

I'll consider it.

EVA:

That's all I ask.

Panel 7. Eva stands. Smooths her skirt. Pivots — the shift so smooth the reader almost misses it.

EVA:

The pilot. Frei. He's becoming a problem.

REINHARD:

I'm handling Frei.

EVA:

Are you? Because from where I'm standing, Frei is bonding with your specimen, charming your researcher, and communing with your spacecraft. That's three of your most valuable assets in one pilot's pocket. Let me help. Find out what he actually wants.

Panel 8. Eva walks to the door and exits. Reinhard stares at the empty doorway with no response. Only contempt.

[ART NOTE: Eva's exit should feel like the end of a chess move — she has positioned every piece she needs and is now waiting for the board to respond.]

Panel 9. Hermann materializes from the chair in the corner. Even Reinhard looks startled — he'd forgotten Hermann was there.

HERMANN:

Frei pushed past me today. On the ramp.

REINHARD:

I heard.

HERMANN:

Nobody pushes past me.

Panel 10. Beat. Reinhard looks at his enforcer.

REINHARD:

Not yet. He flies in three days. After that — he's yours.

Panel 11. Hermann nods once. Exits. The promise hangs in the room like smoke. Three threats delivered in one page: Eva hunting Lars, the occult ceremony seeded, and Hermann given permission to kill after the flight.

PAGE SIXTY-NINE (nine panels)

CAPTION: The following day. Two days before the test flight.

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, testing area. A makeshift pilot assessment station set up near the spacecraft – reaction time equipment, spatial awareness rigs. Guards and scientists have gathered to watch. It has the energy of a sporting event.

Panel 2. MULLER goes first. Theatrical – rolling his sleeves, cracking his knuckles, playing to the audience. When the test begins, the showmanship drops and raw ability takes over. His hands move with frightening speed.

Panel 3. He finishes. Posts the top score.

MULLER:

There it is. Fastest hands in the Luftwaffe. Anyone want to try?

Panel 4. A beat.

MULLER (goadng):

Frei?

Panel 5. Lars steps up. Doesn't showboat. Takes the test with the quiet efficiency of a man filling out paperwork.

Panel 6. The scientist running the equipment stares at the readings.

SCIENTIST:

The scores are... within three-hundredths of a second. Across all categories.

Panel 7. Silence. Muller's grin fades. Not a tie – worse. A declaration of equality from a man who didn't even try.

MULLER:

Run it again.

LARS:
I'm satisfied.

MULLER:
I'm not.

LARS:
Then I'd suggest you practice.

Panel 8. Lars walks away. Muller watches him go with the first genuine edge of anger we've seen – not the playful rivalry, but the real thing.

Panel 9. In the observation area above: Eva. She watched the entire test. Now she descends and approaches Muller – not Lars.

PAGE SEVENTY (eight panels)

Panel 1. Eva reaches Muller. Her voice is warm, sympathetic.

EVA:

Impressive, Herr Muller. Truly. You must be disappointed that the Oberstgruppenführer chose Frei to fly first.

Panel 2. Muller's head turns. Sharp.

MULLER:

What?

EVA:

Oh. You didn't know? Frei flies first. Reinhard's orders. Two days from now.

Panel 3. Eva smiles. Touches his arm once – consolation disguised as flirtation – and walks away. She just lit a fuse.

Panel 4. Muller stands very still. The Knight's Cross glints at his throat. He's been passed over. The scores prove it isn't about skill – which means it's personal.

Panel 5. Lars is collecting his jacket when Muller's voice stops him. The tone has changed. The charm is gone.

MULLER:

Two days. Interesting. I wonder what you did to earn that.

LARS:

I showed up.

MULLER:

So did I. And I have the Diamonds to prove it.

Panel 6. They look at each other. The rivalry just stopped being fun. Lars turns and walks away. The information has landed: the test flight is in two days. Reinhard's clock has become Lars's clock.

Panel 7. Lars doesn't go to the habitat. He doesn't go to the officers' mess. He goes to the stairwell. Sits on the cold stone steps. Alone. Opens his compass. Closes it. Opens it. The plan he thought he had time for just lost two-thirds of its runway.

Panel 8. Close on his face. The mask slips for three seconds. What's underneath isn't fear — it's the rapid calculation of a man redesigning a plan in real time with no margin for error. Then the mask slides back. He stands. He knows where he needs to go.

PAGE SEVENTY-ONE (ten panels)

CAPTION: That evening.

[ART NOTE: Baumbach and Lars intercut at the habitat. Two men, two kinds of devotion. Baumbach's faith and Lars's desperation, separated by a few minutes and the same spot on the corridor floor.]

Panel 1. The testing area has emptied. Muller stalks toward the officers' mess. Scientists pack up. One figure moves in the opposite direction from everyone else — BAUMBACH, walking not toward the mess hall or the barracks but toward the habitat corridor.

Panel 2. Interior, corridor outside Tonto's habitat. Baumbach sits on the floor — the same spot Lars sits in, though neither of them has acknowledged this. He pulls a piece of bread from his pocket. Tears it in half. Doesn't offer the other half through the slot. Just sits. Eating his bread. Keeping company.

Panel 3. Before the first bite, Baumbach bows his head — brief, automatic, the muscle memory of a man who has prayed before every meal of his life. He is saying grace in the presence of a child he considers one of God's creatures. The bread is communion. The corridor is the pew.

Panel 4. Inside the habitat, Tonto is already at the glass. Not because Baumbach called him. Not because anyone did anything. He simply came — the way you move toward warmth without deciding to. He places one three-fingered hand against the glass and stays there. Not mirroring. Not studying. Just present. Keeping company back. Whatever Baumbach radiates, Tonto felt it coming down the corridor before the man arrived. He chose to meet it.

Panel 5. Baumbach finishes his bread. Brushes the crumbs from his uniform. Stands. Touches the cross under his collar. Then walks away. Quiet. Unhurried.

Panel 6. Lars arrives from the opposite direction. Sees Baumbach leaving. Their eyes meet for one beat in the corridor. Lars sees the crumbs on Baumbach's uniform. Sees the direction he came from. Understands — without either of them saying a word — that he is not the only person in this castle who sits with the child. Lars nods. Baumbach nods. Nothing else is needed.

Panel 7. Lars takes his spot on the floor. Tonto comes to the glass immediately – more eagerly than usual. He places both hands flat on the glass and closes his eyes. The glass warms under his palms. Lars feels it through the cold surface. A pulse of warmth that shouldn't be possible.

Panel 8. Close on Lars's face. Something passes between them – not words, not images, but a feeling. Calm. Steady. The alien equivalent of "I'm here. Whatever is frightening you, I'm here."

Panel 9. Lars pulls his hand back. Stares at it. Tonto opens his eyes.

LARS (small):
Two days. I need help.

Panel 10. He pockets the compass. Tonto's handprint glows faintly on the glass as Lars walks away.

PAGE SEVENTY-TWO (ten panels)

CAPTION: The next morning. One day before the test flight.

Panel 1. Interior, castle gymnasium. A large stone room repurposed from the original SS officer fitness facility. Weapons racks, sparring mats, heavy bags. HERMANN is in the center, working a heavy bag with methodical, devastating blows. Each hit sounds like a car accident. And in the far corner, almost invisible against the stone wall: BAUMBACH. Sitting on a bench. Reading a Bible.

Panel 2. Elena enters through the far door. She's not passing through — she's here on purpose. After the hull incident, after watching Lars push past a man twice his size, after seven years of managed compliance — she realizes she may need to fight her way out of this castle, and she has never thrown a punch in her life. She scans the room: Hermann at the bag. Baumbach in the corner, reading scripture as though the sound of fists on leather were church bells.

Panel 3. Hermann stops. Looks at her. She doesn't leave.

HERMANN:
This room is not for civilians, Miss Hahn.

ELENA:
Is there another one?

HERMANN:
...No.

ELENA:
Then this one will have to do.

Panel 4. The side door opens. HELGA enters — dressed for training, hair pulled back, moving with the fluid economy of someone who has been in more fights than conversations. Behind her, HELMA — identical, carrying a knife she's been sharpening.

HELGA:
Sparring partner?

HERMANN:
The bag.

HELGA:
You need a better partner.

Panel 5/6/7. What follows is brief and spectacular. Helga engages Hermann – terrifyingly fast. Inside his guard, outside his reach, redirecting his momentum. Hermann isn't losing, exactly, but he's working harder than the reader has ever seen him work.

Panel 8. Elena watches, transfixed. Helma sits on a bench beside her, still cleaning her knife.

HELMA:
You move well. For a scientist.

ELENA:
I'm not a scientist. I'm a biologist.

HELMA:
Same thing. Soft hands.

Panel 9. Hermann and Helga disengage. Hermann breathing hard. Helga is not. She turns to Elena.

HELGA:
Show me your hands.

Panel 10. Elena, against every instinct, shows her hands. Helga takes them, turns them over. Studies the calluses.

HELGA:
You climb. The habitat wall – you climb it to clean the upper vents.

ELENA:
...Yes.

HELGA:

Good grip strength. Bad stance. You'd last eight seconds.

ELENA:

Against who?

HELGA:

Anyone.

PAGE SEVENTY-THREE (eleven panels)

Panel 1/2/3. What starts as assessment becomes instruction. Helga shows Elena a basic defensive hold – how to break a wrist grip, how to redirect forward momentum, how to create distance. Clinical. Efficient. Like teaching someone to use a fire extinguisher.

Panel 4. Elena picks it up fast. Faster than expected. Helma watches with growing interest. Hermann watches with something that might be amusement if his face were capable of expressing it.

HERMANN:
The twins are trying to recruit you.

ELENA:
For what?

HERMANN:
I've been asking that since they arrived. I still don't have an answer.

Panel 5. Elena steps back. Slightly breathless. The training is over. She turns to leave. At the door, Hermann's voice stops her.

HERMANN:
Miss Hahn. Why the sudden interest in fighting?

ELENA:
A woman in a castle full of soldiers should know how to defend herself.

Panel 6. Hermann studies her. That flat, unreadable gaze. Elena holds his gaze. Hermann doesn't press.

HERMANN:
That wasn't a castle answer. That was a leaving answer.

Panel 7. Helga and Helma watch Elena leave. Then exchange a look – the first time the twins have communicated anything to each other on-page.

HELMA:
She'll do.

Panel 8. The gymnasium is quiet. Hermann toweling off. The twins gone. Baumbach hasn't moved from his bench. He turns a page. Without looking up, he speaks – to nobody in particular, to the room, to the stone walls:

BAUMBACH:
She's preparing for something.

Panel 9. Nobody responds. Hermann looks at Baumbach for one beat. Baumbach doesn't look up. Continues reading. There's nothing to threaten a man who's already at peace. Hermann exits.

Panel 10. Baumbach alone in the gymnasium with his Bible. The heavy bag still swinging. He knows. He doesn't know the details. But Werner Baumbach is not a stupid man. He's just a patient one.

Panel 11. Elena in the corridor outside the gymnasium. She's leaning against the stone wall, hands shaking. Not from exertion – from realization. She just spent thirty minutes learning how to break a man's wrist. She is a biologist who feeds an alien child. And she just learned to fight because somewhere in the last seventy-two hours she accepted that she might need to. The violence of it – the reality of what she's preparing for – has caught up with her.

PAGE SEVENTY-FOUR (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The stairwell scene is the emotional core of the chapter. Lars's confession should feel like a man jumping without a parachute. Part of this plays as FLASHBACK – diplomat parents, premature birth in America, orphaned when the Nazis murdered his parents, joined the military of his parents' killers, sought out Dulles himself. We see the man beneath the charm for the first time.]

Panel 1. Interior, stairwell between Der Riese and the castle upper levels. Stone walls, narrow, no cameras, no guard rotations. The one blind spot in the facility. Elena is sitting on the steps, head in her hands. She came here from the gymnasium. Her hands are still shaking.

Panel 2. A sound on the stairs above. Lars descends. He sees her. Sits down on the step below her – not beside her, below. Looking up. The geometry puts her above him. He's not trying to lead. He's trying to ask.

LARS:
Elena.

Panel 3. She looks up. It's the first time he's used her first name. She notices.

ELENA:
Herr Frei, I'm not in the mood for –

LARS:
My name isn't Lars Frei.

Panel 4. Beat. She stares at him.

Panel 5. FLASHBACK – desaturated, warmer palette. A DIPLOMATIC RECEPTION in Vienna. 1920s. Elegant. Chandeliers. A COUPLE – his parents – move through the crowd. His mother is visibly pregnant, radiant, laughing at something his father said. They look like people who belong to a world that hasn't broken yet. An Austrian flag beside an American flag on the table. Diplomatic postings. A life between two countries.

Panel 6. FLASHBACK — A HOSPITAL in Washington, D.C. His mother in a hospital bed — the birth came early, too early, during an American posting.

LARS (CAP):

My parents were Austrian diplomats. My mother went into labor during a posting in Washington. I was born premature in an American hospital.

Panel 7. A doctor holds a tiny infant. His father stands beside the bed, one hand on his wife's hand, the other signing a document. The document is visible enough to read: BIRTH CERTIFICATE. COLE HALLER. WASHINGTON, D.C. UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

LARS (CAP):

They gave me an American name on my birth certificate — Cole Haller —

PAGE SEVENTY-FIVE (seven panels)

Panel 1. FLASHBACK — The same boy, now ten, living in Austria. A comfortable home. Books. Music. The parents at a dinner table, laughing. The boy doing homework. A life that looks permanent.

LARS (CAP):

- but I've gone by Lars Frei my entire life. It was the name my parents used. The name I grew up with.

Panel 2. FLASHBACK — The world changes. 1933. Darkness. Swastika flags on buildings that used to have flower boxes. The boy's parents at their door — two SS officers on the step. His mother's hand tightening on the door frame. His father stepping in front of her.

LARS (CAP):

When the Nazis rose to power, my parents were denounced as Jewish sympathizers. My father had helped Jewish colleagues obtain exit visas. My mother had hidden documents. They didn't deny it. They couldn't. They were executed three weeks later.

Panel 3. FLASHBACK — The darkest panel. A fourteen-year-old boy standing alone in an empty house. Furniture covered in sheets. His parents' photographs on a mantel. Everything still. Everything over. He is holding a suitcase and he has nowhere to go.

LARS (CAP):

I was fourteen. Orphaned. No family. No country. No home. The government that raised me had murdered the two people who loved me, and the country that gave me my real name was an ocean away and didn't know I existed.

Panel 4. FLASHBACK — The same boy, now eighteen, in a Luftwaffe recruitment office. Signing papers. Putting on the uniform. His face is closed, hard, adult. There is nothing in his eyes that resembles the boy at the dinner table.

LARS (CAP):

At eighteen, I joined the Luftwaffe. Not because I believed in it. Because I had nowhere else to go. They gave me a bed, three meals, and

a cockpit. I gave them a pilot. And every day I put on that uniform, I felt my parents turn in their graves.

Panel 5. FLASHBACK — A young man, early twenties, walking into a bakery in Bern, Switzerland. He climbs the stairs above the shop. A cramped office. Across the desk: a man with a pipe and hooded eyes. ALLEN DULLES. The young man places a document on the desk. The birth certificate. COLE HALLER. WASHINGTON, D.C.

LARS (CAP):

It was me who found American Intelligence. Not the other way around. I walked into that office in Bern with an American birth certificate and five years of rage and told him what I could offer: a German fighter ace with a perfect record, already inside the Luftwaffe, with a dead family's worth of motivation.

Panel 6. FLASHBACK — Dulles studying the birth certificate. Then studying the young man. Then opening a desk drawer and sliding a German military ID across the desk. The name on the ID: LARS FREI. The same name, formalized. The mask made official.

LARS (CAP):

His price: five years of intelligence. My price: a new life in America when the war was over. The birth certificate was my proof — Cole Haller, born Washington, D.C. American by an accident of geography. American by choice when choice finally mattered.

Panel 7. FLASHBACK — Lars in a Luftwaffe cockpit. Flying. The mask fully formed — the charm, the arrogance, the pilot persona. Through the cockpit glass: Allied aircraft. He's shooting at them. The spy shooting at the allies of the country that gave him his real name.

LARS (CAP):

I've been putting on the uniform of the government that killed my parents for five years. Shooting down the allies of the country that gave me my real name. All of it — the charm, the medals, the cockpit — it's all revenge. And it's all a means to an end.

PAGE SEVENTY-SIX (seven panels)

Panel 1. Back to present. The stairwell. Elena's face – processing. The flashback fades. Lars is sitting on the step below her, having just told her who he really is.

LARS:

I called the Americans three weeks ago. Told him about the ship, about Tonto, about everything. The Americans don't believe it. Burned me. They think I've lost my mind.

Panel 2. Elena's voice, when it comes, is very quiet.

ELENA:

Have you?

Panel 3. Lars almost smiles.

LARS:

Possibly. But the ship responded to my touch, your father nearly suffocated inside it yesterday, and there's a grey child in a glass box who trusts me for reasons I don't fully understand. So either I've lost my mind or this is actually happening. Either way, I need your help.

Panel 4. He lays it out – the plan: steal the ship AND Tonto. Not smuggle out – fly out.

LARS:

The test flight is tomorrow. If I fly it and survive – if the ship works – I'll have proven it can be done. Then I make a second flight. But on the second flight, Tonto is on board. And we don't come back.

Panel 5. Elena stands.

ELENA:

You're going to fly an alien spacecraft that has killed eight scientists, land it, and then somehow get back inside it with an alien

child and fly it OUT of an underground military facility while every soldier in this castle tries to shoot you down –

LARS:

Exactly! And here's the part where I need you.

Panel 6. Elena folds her arms.

ELENA:

Need me for what, *exactly*? Because if this is the part where you ask me to betray the only people keeping my father alive –

LARS:

Your father comes with us. You both do.

Panel 7. That stops her. She turns.

PAGE SEVENTY-SEVEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. Lars stands – the first time in the conversation he's risen to her level. Eye to eye.

LARS:

Elena. You and your father have been prisoners in this castle for seven years. Reinhard calls it a position. He calls it a project. But your father resets security codes because Reinhard doesn't trust anyone else to do it, and you feed an alien child because Reinhard knows the child dies without you. That's not employment. That's leverage. You're hostages who happen to be useful.

Panel 2. Elena's jaw tightens. She knows this. She's always known this. But hearing it said aloud – by someone from the outside, someone who sees the cage for what it is – hits differently.

LARS:

I can get you out. Both of you. New identities. America. A life that doesn't involve smiling at scary men and pretending you chose to be here. But I need something only your father can give me.

Panel 3. Elena's eyes narrow.

ELENA:

The hangar bay doors. You can't fly the ship out without opening them.

LARS:

The doors are controlled from Reinhard's command console. Six-digit code. Changes weekly. And the person who resets those codes every Monday –

ELENA:

Is my father.

Panel 4. Lars holds her gaze.

LARS:

Get me those codes, and your father and you can be free of this place. All three of us walk out – you, Otto, Tonto. New lives. No more castle. No more Reinhard.

Panel 5. Elena studies him. Looking for the lie. Seven years of Reinhard's possessiveness have taught her to distrust every offer. But Lars isn't offering something for nothing. He's offering a trade – her father's knowledge for her father's freedom.

ELENA:

If we fail, Reinhard kills everyone. My father. Tonto. You. Me.

LARS:

If we don't try, your father dies in that ship anyway. Tonto stays in that box forever. And you spend the rest of your life managing a cage.

Panel 6. Long beat. Elena looks at the stairwell. The bare stone. Seven years.

ELENA:

Don't make me regret this.

LARS:

I'll do my best.

ELENA:

You've been here three weeks and your entire plan hinges on a ship that has a one hundred percent fatality rate. Pardon me but your best NEEDS to better.

Panel 7. They sit together on the steps. The first moment of genuine alliance. Elena begins talking – quickly, precisely. Ventilation routes, emergency habitat access, the ship's hatch timing, guard shift blind spots. Seven years of observation pouring out in operational detail. And the codes – she'll get them from her father. She won't tell Lars how. That's her insurance.

PAGE SEVENTY-EIGHT (six panels)

CAPTION: That evening. One day before the test flight.

Panel 1. Interior, castle corridor, upper level. Lars is walking from the stairwell toward his quarters. Dimly lit – most personnel in the great hall for dinner. He's carrying a folded piece of paper in his pocket – the first draft of the escape route, drawn from Elena's intel.

Panel 2. A figure steps into the corridor ahead of him. EVA. She's been waiting. No pretense of coincidence – she is positioned, centered, blocking his path. Helga and Helma are nowhere visible, which makes their absence more threatening than their presence.

EVA:
Herr Frei. Walk with me.

LARS:
Fräulein Braun. I was just heading to –

Panel 3. Close on Eva's face. She says not as a request and with all the charm of a viper.

EVA:
Walk with me.

Panel 4. Lars decides to play along as they walk. Side by side. Eva sets the pace – slow, deliberate.

EVA:
Reinhard is going to kill you.

Panel 5. Lars doesn't break stride.

LARS:
I suspected.

EVA:

The test flight. He's put you first. Not because you're the best pilot — you are, but that's not the reason. You're the pilot he wants gone.

Panel 6. Lars glances at her.

LARS:

I appreciate the warning. Why are you giving it?

EVA:

Because dead pilots don't fly ships. And I have plans for that ship that Reinhard hasn't imagined yet.

PAGE SEVENTY-NINE (seven panels)

Panel 1. They've reached a corridor junction. Eva stops. Turns to face Lars fully. Standing very close.

EVA:

Reinhard is a jealous man, Herr Frei. He doesn't love the Hahn girl – he simply can't stand the idea that someone else might have something he's claimed. You should know that.

LARS:

Thank you for the warning.

EVA:

It wasn't a warning.

Panel 2. Eva kisses Lars. Quick. Precise. Passionately. With full understanding of what it will look like if seen. It is not passion – it is deployment. A weapon fired from a distance of zero inches.

Panel 3. Down the hallway – ELENA, who has just turned the corner carrying notes from the stairwell planning session. She stops. She sees exactly what it looks like.

Panel 4. Lars pulls back. Sees Elena over Eva's shoulder. Eva, not turning, is perfectly aware of who is standing behind her. She was counting on it.

Panel 5. Eva leans in. Her lips near Lars's ear. The whisper is for him alone:

EVA (whisper):

The test flight isn't a test. Reinhard's ordered the weapons panel activated during the flight sequence. The interface is set to do something unexpected. What, I don't know. But the first pilot who sits in that cockpit isn't testing the ship – he's triggering something. Bad. Reinhard doesn't want data, Herr Frei. He wants your ashes.

Panel 6. She pulls back. Studies his face – watching the realizations land.

EVA:

There. Now Reinhard will hear she was upset, and he won't wonder why you've been spending so much time near her. You're welcome.

Panel 7. She walks away. Her heels echo down the stone corridor with the crisp precision of a completed chess move.

PAGE EIGHTY (four panels)

Panel 1. Lars stands in the corridor. Processing. The taste of Eva's lipstick. The weight of her whisper. The image of Elena's face. And the bomb she just dropped: the test flight is designed to kill him. The weapons panel triggers something. Whoever flies first may not survive. Which means Lars can't fly first. Which means he needs someone else in that cockpit.

Panel 2. He looks to where Elena was standing. She's gone. The notes she was carrying are on the floor where she dropped them.

Panel 3. Lars picks up the notes. Elena's handwriting – small, precise, scientific. Ventilation routes. Guard shift schedules. Habitat protocols. The plan they built together, scattered on cold stone because of a kiss that lasted two seconds.

LARS (small):
...That could have gone better.

Panel 4. He gathers the notes. Folds them into his pocket. Two plans in one pocket – his and hers – and between them, a new and terrible variable.

PAGE EIGHTY-ONE (six panels)

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat, later that night. Elena is inside, feeding Tonto. Her movements are mechanical – efficient, precise, stripped of warmth. She won't look at the glass. She won't look at the corridor.

Panel 2. Lars appears outside the habitat. Elena sees his reflection in the glass. Her back stiffens.

LARS:
Elena –

ELENA:
Not now.

LARS:
It wasn't what it looked like. And you need to hear what she told me.

Panel 3. Elena turns. The fury is controlled – cold, scientific.

ELENA:
It looked like Eva Braun kissed you in a corridor six hours after you told me your real name. It looked exactly like what it was.

Panel 4. Lars steps closer to the glass. His voice drops.

LARS:
She whispered something during the kiss. The test flight isn't a test, Elena. Reinhard's ordered the weapons panel activated during the flight sequence. Nobody knows what that will do, but it can't be good for the pilot.

Panel 5. Elena's anger doesn't disappear – but something else joins it. The operational mind. Seven years of survival instinct.

ELENA:
Then you can't fly.

LARS:

And I can't back out. I'm working on what to do next.

ELENA:

Working on what?

LARS:

I don't know yet. But I'll figure it out. I always figure it out.

Panel 6. Long beat. Tonto, between them, looks from one to the other. He reaches out and takes Elena's hand. Then reaches through the feeding slot and touches Lars's fingers on the other side. Connecting them. Through himself.

PAGE EIGHTY-TWO (five panels)

Panel 1. Elena looks at Tonto's hand on hers. Looks at Lars's fingers through the slot. Looks at Lars. The anger is receding. What's replacing it is fear – not for herself, but for the man on the other side of the glass who just told her he's climbing into a death trap tomorrow and doesn't have a plan to survive it.

ELENA:

The codes change Monday. The test flight is tomorrow. If we survive tomorrow, you have four days before the codes reset to attempt the escape.

Panel 2. Lars's expression doesn't change. But something behind his eyes is working – the same rapid calculation from the stairwell. The four-day window is what Elena believes the plan is. Lars is already thinking past it. But he says nothing.

LARS:

Four days. That's a lifetime.

ELENA:

That's optimistic.

Panel 3. They look at each other through the glass. Tonto's hand still on both of theirs.

ELENA:

Promise me you'll come back from that flight.

LARS:

I'll come back.

ELENA:

That's not a promise. That's a prediction.

LARS:

It's the best I've got.

Panel 4. Elena's face. She wants to believe him. She can't. Tomorrow, the man she just trusted with her real situation is going to sit in an alien cockpit that Reinhard has weaponized, and there is nothing she can do about it. She is, once again, standing behind glass watching someone she cares about walk into something that might kill them. The parallel to Tonto – watching people he loves through barriers he can't break – is not lost on the reader.

Panel 5. She pulls her hand back from the glass. Tonto's hand stays on Lars's fingers a moment longer. Then he pulls back too. The connection breaks. Elena turns away. Back to the feeding. Back to the routine. The armor going on, piece by piece.

PAGE EIGHTY-THREE (eight panels)

CAPTION: Late that night.

Panel 1. Interior, The Great Hall. Lars is sitting alone at the long table – the same table from the Banquet scene in Chapter 2. Brandy in hand. The first time in the story he's drinking. Stigler's empty chair visible in the background. The room is large and dark and Lars is small in it.

Panel 2. Footsteps. MULLER enters. Sees Lars. Pauses in the doorway – surprised to find someone else awake, and more surprised that it's Frei.

Panel 3. Then Muller sits down across from him. Pours himself a glass without asking. Two pilots. One bottle. The Knight's Cross catching the lamplight at Muller's throat. The silence is companionable for the first time – two men who have spent weeks circling each other, finally sitting still.

MULLER:
Can't sleep?

LARS:
Can you?

MULLER:
I never sleep before a flight. Bad habit. The anticipation is better than the rest.

Panel 4. Muller drinks. Stares at the table.

MULLER:
You know what I love about flying? The air doesn't care about your medals. It doesn't care about your politics. It doesn't care who your parents were or what uniform you're wearing. It only cares whether you're good enough. Everything else – rank, ego, war – is just noise. The air is the only honest thing left.

Panel 5. Lars turns his glass. Something in Muller's words has landed closer than either of them expected.

LARS:

Did you ever put on something you knew was wrong and wear it anyway?
Because the alternative was having nothing at all?

MULLER:

Every pilot puts on a machine that's trying to kill him and calls it a career. That's not courage. That's just not having anywhere else to go.

Panel 6. They look at each other. Something passes between them – not agreement, not conspiracy, but the mutual recognition of two men who are more alike than either would admit. Two men in uniforms that don't quite fit, in a castle they didn't choose, on the eve of something neither of them can fully predict.

LARS:

To tomorrow.

Panel 7. Muller raises his glass.

MULLER:

To whoever's brave enough to sit in that cockpit.

Panel 8. Two glasses clink.

PAGE EIGHTY-FOUR (six panels)

CAPTION: Late that night. The night before the test flight.

[ART NOTE: Four locations. Four characters. One frequency. This is the chapter's final image: separate threads converging on something none of them fully understand.]

Panel 1. SCENE A – Interior, Lars's room. On his bed: a hand-drawn map of the castle, assembled from three weeks of observation. The minefield path. The guard rotation schedule. Elena's additions: ventilation routes, habitat emergency access, the ship's hatch timing. And circled in red at the center of the map – the hangar bay doors. The only exit that matters.

Panel 2. Lars sits on the edge of the bed, studying the map. It's taking shape. Incomplete. Dangerous. But it's real. Tomorrow. He picks up his compass. Opens it. The needle spins – and keeps spinning. He holds it toward the wall that faces the hangar, three floors below. The needle doesn't settle. It points at the ship and trembles there, as though drawn by something stronger than magnetic north.

Panel 3. SCENE B – Interior, Eva's quarters. The room is candlelit. On her desk: the piece of alien debris she pocketed from the hangar floor in Chapter 3. She's holding it in the candlelight, turning it slowly between her fingers. It's humming. Faintly at first, then louder. The candle flames bend toward it. She reaches into her luggage and pulls out a book. Old. Leather-bound. Hand-annotated. The symbols embossed on the cover are not German. They are not any human language. They look like the writing on the spacecraft's hull.

Panel 4. She opens the book. The alien debris hums louder. The candle flames lean toward the page like flowers toward sunlight.

EVA (small):
There you are.

Panel 4. SCENE C – Interior, Tonto's habitat. The facility is dark. Nighttime. Tonto is asleep on his cot – curled on his side, the way he always sleeps, the way he's slept since his mother died. But his hand, in sleep, is raised toward the glass. Three fingers extended, reaching for something – or someone – in a dream. The glass beneath his hand glows. Faintly. The same blue-white as the ship. Pulsing in time with his breathing.

Panel 5. SCENE D – Interior, Muller's quarters. He sits at a small desk, the Knight's Cross removed from his throat and placed on the desk beside a lamp. He is polishing it. Slowly. Methodically. Beside the medal: the notebook he's been filling since the observation platform in Chapter 3 – the ignition sequence, the panel activation order, sketches of the ship's layout. He is preparing for the most important flight of his life. He is studying. He is ready.

PAGE EIGHTY-FIVE (one panel)

Panel 1. Full page. Four panels arranged as quadrants – Lars's compass trembling toward the ship. Eva's debris humming in candlelight. Tonto's hand glowing against glass. Muller's medal gleaming beside his notes. Four threads. One frequency. Something is converging. By this time tomorrow, everything changes.

[ART NOTE: Hold on this image. This is your page-turn into Chapter Five. The reader should feel the weight of what's coming – the test flight, the danger, the plan. But what the reader doesn't feel – what they CAN'T feel yet – is the moral cost.]

Chapter Five: "TAKING FLIGHT"

Pages 85 – 108 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE EIGHTY-SIX (six panels)

[ART NOTE: The countdown has begun. Compress the setup – new scientists and ship activation happen on the same day, cause and effect. Lowe's calibration triggers the ship. Save pages for the emotional material.]

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, main hangar. A new face at the science station – DR. ERNST LOWE. Compact, precise, spectacles on a chain. He's been here three days and has already reorganized the equipment stations, demanded new calibration tools, and annoyed every surviving scientist. He is exactly the kind of man who finds things others miss because he refuses to accept that they've already looked.

LOWE: Who calibrated this spectrometer? It's off by three degrees. Three. You've been measuring an alien spacecraft with an instrument that couldn't accurately measure a bathtub.

Panel 2. Otto beside him, notepad in hand. Otto is pointing at two different sections of the ship's hull – one near the cockpit, one near the ventral array. The writing on each section is visually distinct.

OTTO:

Dr. Lowe, you've been here three days and you've just made me feel like a fool for seven years. Two writing systems. I never – look. The symbols near the navigation bay are curved, flowing. The symbols near the ventral array are angular, dense. Two systems on one ship.

LOWE:

Navigation and weapons?

OTTO:

Navigation and weapons. Two languages. Two operating systems. Designed to function independently.

Panel 3. Lowe studies the hull. Runs his finger along the boundary where the two writing systems meet.

LOWE:

And if someone activated both simultaneously?

OTTO:

I imagine the ship would have a very strong opinion about that.

[ART NOTE: The weapons panel and the navigation system are separate operating systems. They need to have 2 distinct visual styles. When the pilot triggers it, the two systems collide.]

Panel 4. Lowe begins his calibration – a new instrument package, more sensitive than anything the previous team used. He adjusts settings. Makes contact with a hull panel near the ventral array.

LOWE: Sensitivity at point-zero-three. Full spectrum. If this ship has a pulse, we're about to hear it.

Panel 5. The ship responds. Not the usual hum – something deeper, fuller. A CHORD. Every panel on the spacecraft illuminates simultaneously. Blue-white light floods the hangar. The hangar's overhead lights dim as the ship draws power from the facility's electrical grid. Scientists scramble to their instruments. Guards step back. The air pressure changes – ears pop across the hangar.

Panel 6. Close on Lowe's face. He hasn't moved. His hand is still on the instrument. His expression is not fear. It is the face of a man who has just confirmed a hypothesis he was afraid to voice.

LOWE (small):
It was waiting for us to ask the right question.

PAGE EIGHTY-SEVEN (three panel)

[ART NOTE: SPLIT PAGE SPREAD. The ship fully activated for the first time. This should be the most visually spectacular page in the chapter – the alien spacecraft alive, luminous, enormous, humming with power that makes the human technology around it look like campfires beside the sun.]

Panel 1. The spacecraft in full activation. Every symbol on the hull glowing. The blue-white light casting shadows across the hangar that move like living things. Scientists frozen at their stations. Guards with weapons half-raised, unsure what they're aiming at.

Panel 2. And entering the hangar from the far door, drawn by the sound, by the change in pressure, by the instinct of a man who owns everything he surveys – REINHARD. He stands in the doorway and stares at the ship. His expression is not awe. It is ownership. Seven years. Eight dead scientists. An alien child in a glass box. And now, finally, the ship is awake. It is his. Or he believes it is.

Panel 3. - at the bottom - in his habitat, TONTO stands and presses both hands to the glass. His eyes are wide. Not frightened – expectant. He felt the ship activate before the instruments did, before the lights dimmed, before the chord filled the hangar. He has been waiting for this. The ship is calling and the child is answering, and neither of them needs instruments to hear the other.

PAGE EIGHTY-EIGHT (eight panels)

CAPTION: That evening. Emergency briefing.

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, briefing area near the spacecraft. Reinhard at the front. Full assembly – all surviving pilots, all scientists, senior guard detail. The ship behind him, still glowing faintly, as if the activation left a residue. The room has the energy of a war room before an invasion.

REINHARD:

The ship is ready. Seven years of preparation. Eight men lost. One successful interface contact. And now – full activation. The test flight happens tomorrow morning.

Panel 2. Murmurs through the crowd. Tomorrow. Scientists exchange glances. The timeline was supposed to be weeks away.

SIEGFRIED:

Sir, we haven't completed the interface calibrations –

REINHARD:

We've waited seven years, Siegfried. We're not waiting another week. The ship activated on its own. If it's ready, we're ready.

Panel 3. Reinhard's gaze sweeps the room.

REINHARD:

Frei flies first.

Panel 4. The room absorbs this. At the back: MULLER. His jaw tightens when Reinhard says the name. But there's something different in his body language – not the hot anger from the reflexes test. Something quieter. Settled. As if he's already made peace with what tomorrow looks like.

REINHARD (CAP):

There is a kind of man who sees what others cannot. Who carries a vision so complete, so inevitable, that the world rearranges itself

around him. The Führer is such a man. And he has entrusted this program – this ship, this moment – to me.

Panel 5. EVA watches from the doorway, arms folded. She already knows the test flight is an execution. She watches Lars the way a chess player watches a piece she's positioned – curious whether it will move where she expects.

REINHARD (CAP):

Tomorrow's test flight will evaluate both propulsion and weapons capability. I want the full array activated during the flight sequence. Not after. During. Because a weapon you cannot deploy under fire is not a weapon – it is a decoration.

Panel 6. BAUMBACH stands near the exit. His hand is on the cross under his uniform. He hasn't spoken. He's been watching people – Otto's quiet face, Elena's tight grip on her father's arm, Lars's unreadable expression. Baumbach is not a stupid man.

REINHARD (CAP):

The pilot who flies tomorrow carries the future of the Reich in his hands. If the ship flies and the weapons respond, we will have achieved what every civilization in history has dreamed of and none have possessed – absolute, unchallengeable, permanent superiority.

Panel 7. Elena beside Otto, gripping his arm. She's looking at Lars across the room. Tomorrow, the man she trusted is climbing into that cockpit. She gave him the codes. She taught him the escape routes. And now all she can do is watch.

REINHARD (CAP):

The Führer's vision. My execution. Your obedience. That is the architecture of tomorrow. And I promise you – the man who succeeds in that cockpit will be remembered. And the man who fails will be replaced before his chair is cold.

Panel 8. Lars stands in the center of the room, face unreadable. The mask is perfect. Not a flicker. He looks like a man accepting an order. He looks nothing like a man who has already rewritten every variable in the plan.

PAGE EIGHTY-NINE (seven panels)

CAPTION: Later that night.

Panel 1. Interior, Tonto's habitat. Night. The corridor is empty – guards are at the hangar, prepping for tomorrow. Lars stands outside the glass. Elena is at the habitat door, key card in hand.

ELENA:

He's been agitated since the activation. He felt it.

LARS:

Can I go in?

Panel 2. Elena opens the habitat door. Lars steps inside – no glass between them for the first time since the malfunction seal in Chapter 3. The air is different in here – slightly warmer, slightly thinner. Tonto's atmosphere. Lars has to breathe deliberately.

Panel 3. He sits on the habitat floor. Tonto approaches – slowly, studying Lars the way he always does, but with something new behind those enormous black eyes. Urgency. The child takes Lars's hand.

Panel 4. Tonto places Lars's hand flat on the habitat floor. The floor illuminates – not the full ship schematic, but one system. One panel. The weapons array. The same angular writing Otto identified on the hull. The schematic pulses red – a warning. Tonto is showing Lars what NOT to touch.

Panel 5. Close on Lars's face as he stares at the schematic. The weapons panel. The system Reinhard ordered activated. The system that will kill whoever triggers it. And Tonto is warning him – the way a child hides a sharp object from someone he loves.

LARS:

I know. I won't.

Panel 6. Tonto holds Lars's hand on the floor for a long moment. Then releases it. Looks up at Lars. Those black eyes – steady, trusting, full of a faith that Lars does not deserve and cannot return.

Panel 7. In the doorway: Elena, watching. She sees a pilot making peace with a child before a dangerous flight. She sees tenderness and fear and devotion. She does not see what the reader now sees — a man keeping a secret that will break her heart twelve hours from now.

PAGE NINETY (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Lars and Elena's last conversation before the flight. This should feel intimate, quiet, and unbearably loaded with dramatic irony. Everything Lars says is true. Everything he means is different from what Elena hears.]

Panel 1. Interior, the stairwell. Their place. Night. Elena is sitting on the steps. Lars sits below her – the same geometry as the first pact scene. Looking up at her.

Panel 2. Lars takes the compass from his pocket. Opens it. Holds it out to her.

LARS:

If I don't come back, this is how you'll know.

Panel 3. Elena pushes it back toward him. Her hand covers his on the compass.

ELENA:

You're coming back. That's not a request.

Panel 4. They review the plan

ELENA:

I spoke to my father. He gave me the current codes. Six digits. I've memorized them.

LARS:

Good. After the test flight, we'll have four days to –

ELENA:

I know. Fly. Land. Prove it works. Then we get Tonto and we leave. I've been running through it in my head for twelve hours. I'm ready.

Panel 5. Lars holds her gaze. There's something behind his eyes she can't read – not fear, something heavier. Guilt that hasn't been committed yet. He wants to tell her something. He almost tells her.

Panel 6. He doesn't. He takes the compass back. Opens it. The needle doesn't point north — it points toward the habitat. Toward Tonto, asleep behind glass.

LARS:

Whatever happens tomorrow, trust the compass.

ELENA:

That's not reassuring.

LARS: (with a wink)

It's the best I've got.

PAGE NINETY-ONE (six panels)

Panel 1. Lars walks Elena back to her quarters. The corridor is dim. Their footsteps echo. Neither of them speaks. The silence has the quality of a held breath – both of them carrying things they haven't said.

Panel 2. At the door, she turns. Studies his face. Something is wrong and she can feel it but she can't name it. Seven years of reading people in this castle – smiling at scary men, decoding Reinhard's moods, surviving Siegfried's surveillance – and she cannot crack whatever Lars is hiding behind his eyes.

ELENA:

You look like a man saying goodbye.

Panel 3. Lars almost flinches. Almost.

LARS:

I look like a man who hasn't slept.

ELENA:

Those aren't the same thing.

Panel 4. Beat. Lars holds her gaze. For one second, the mask cracks – she sees something underneath, something that looks like an apology for something that hasn't happened yet. Then it seals.

LARS:

Goodnight, Elena.

Panel 5. He walks away. She watches him go. She almost calls after him. She doesn't. The door closes.

Panel 6. Elena alone in her room. Sitting on the edge of her bed. The compass is gone – Lars took it back. But she can still feel the weight of it in her palm. She can't shake the feeling that something he said was a lie. She just can't figure out which part.

PAGE NINETY-TWO (eight panels)

CAPTION: Test flight day. 0700 hours.

[ART NOTE: The longest walk in the story. The suited figure moves toward the ship. The reader believes it's Lars. Elena believes it's Lars. The focus is on the walk, Elena's terror, the crowd. Lars's absence from the frame should be felt subconsciously, not consciously.]

Panel 1. Interior, Der Riese, main hangar. Full house. Every seat in the observation platform filled. Every scientist at their station. Guards at every exit. The ship sits at the center – still faintly glowing from yesterday's activation, as if it slept with the lights on. The air has the electric charge of a stadium before a final.

Panel 2. Elena on the observation platform. Her hands on the railing. Otto beside her at his safety monitoring station – but distracted. Elena's face is tight. Controlled. The face of a woman who has been preparing for this moment since the stairwell and is now discovering that preparation doesn't help.

Panel 3. Eva in the observation area, Helga and Helma flanking her. Arms folded. Her eyes are on the prep room door.

Panel 4. Reinhard at the command console, Siegfried beside him with the clipboard. The room is silent except for the ship's hum.

Panel 5. The prep room door opens.

Panel 6. A pilot emerges. Custom-fabricated pressure suit – bulky, reinforced, designed for an alien cockpit that wasn't built for human proportions. OPAQUE HELMET. MIRRORED VISOR. No features visible. No insignia.

Panel 7. The pilot walks toward the craft. Confident, eager strides – not cautious steps, not the measured walk of a nervous man, but the walk of someone whose focus is so absolute the hangar could collapse and he wouldn't flinch. The walk of a man with absolutely no fear.

Panel 8. Close on Elena. She grips the railing so hard her knuckles go white. Behind her across the hangar, in the observation area where Lars should be watching – his spot is empty.

PAGE NINETY-THREE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: The walk continues. Slow, ceremonial. The intercut panels at the bottom plant Otto and Baumbach's movements without drawing attention.]

Panel 1. The suited pilot crosses the hangar floor. Boot steps on concrete. The only sound in the room besides the ship's hum. Every eye follows him. This is the moment seven years of work has been building toward.

Panel 2. Cut to: Reinhard watching from the command console. Cold satisfaction on his face. He built this moment. He selected this pilot. And if Eva is right about the weapons panel, this pilot is walking toward an execution designed to look like a test. Reinhard doesn't care which pilot dies in that cockpit. He cares that the ship's reaction is recorded.

Panel 3. Cut to: Eva watching with calculation. She told Lars what the weapons panel would do. She expected him to refuse the flight, to argue, to reveal himself. Instead, Lars is walking toward the ship in silence. Or someone is. Eva's eyes narrow slightly.

Panel 4. Cut to: Elena's face. Close. This is the face of a woman watching the man she trusted walk toward something that has killed eight people. Her breathing is shallow. Her eyes are wet but she won't blink. She is praying without knowing she's praying.

Panel 5. The suited pilot reaches the base of the ship's ramp. Pauses. Looks up at the spacecraft – the mirrored visor reflecting the blue-white glow. Then takes the first step up the ramp.

Panel 6. INTERCUT – small panel, bottom of page: Otto on the catwalks. He's been at his monitoring station for the walk. But now, as the crowd watches the pilot climb the ramp, Otto quietly steps back from his station. Moves toward the service corridor. His monitoring screen continues to display data. Nobody is watching the old professor. They're watching the ship.

Panel 7. INTERCUT – small panel: Near the hangar's secondary exit – the vehicle ramp to the motor pool – BAUMBACH. He wasn't assigned here. He came on his own. He stands against the wall, hand on the

cross under his uniform. He saw Otto leave. He understands the shape of what's happening.

Panel 8. The suited pilot disappears into the ship. The hatch begins to close. Elena's hand reaches out involuntarily — toward the glass, toward the ship, toward the man she thinks is inside. The hatch seals. The ship is closed. And whatever happens next, she can't stop it.

[ART NOTE: The reader should feel trapped with Elena on that observation platform. She can see everything and control nothing. The ship is sealed. The pilot is inside. And the woman who learned to break a wrist in a gymnasium yesterday cannot break through an alien hull to save the man she loves.]

PAGE NINETY-FOUR (seven panels)

Panel 1. Interior, spacecraft cockpit. Close on the pilot's gloved hands reaching for the controls. The alien console is alive – symbols shifting, panels glowing, responding to the proximity of a living presence. Through the visor: the blue-white glow of the interface illuminating the inside of the helmet.

Panel 2. POV - Interior The pilot's Helmet. The pilot's breathing – audible inside the helmet. Not afraid. His hands settle on the console. The ship recognizes him. The interface activates fully – symbols rearranging themselves around his fingers, the navigation system coming online.

Panel 3. Through the cockpit viewport: the hangar floor below. Scientists at their instruments. Guards gripping their weapons. The observation platform – Elena visible as a small figure gripping the railing. Everything below looks small. Everything inside the cockpit feels infinite.

Panel 4. The pilot's hands move. Deliberate. Practiced. Not guessing – following a sequence. Panel seven. The ship hums louder.

Panel 5. Panel nine. The hum becomes a vibration. The cockpit trembles. The blue-white glow intensifies.

Panel 6. The dorsal array. The ship's systems come fully online. The vibration smooths. The cockpit steadies. The pilot's breathing evens out. He's in control.

Panel 7. Panel seven, panel nine, dorsal array. The Pilot isn't guessing.

PAGE NINETY-FIVE (five panels)

Panel 1. FULL HALF-PAGE PANEL. The ship lifts off the hangar floor. Three feet. Five feet. Hovering. The crowd below watches, transfixed. Gasps. The ship is flying. For the first time in seven years, the alien spacecraft is airborne. Light from the ship's hull casts moving shadows across the hangar walls. The sound it makes is not an engine — it's a chord, a frequency, something felt in the chest more than heard in the ears.

Panel 2. Inside the cockpit: the pilot's visor reflects the hangar below. Through the viewport, the upturned faces of the crowd. He can see Elena on the platform. He can see Reinhard at the console. He can see the ship doing what seven years of work and eight dead scientists could not make it do. And he is the one at the controls.

Panel 3. The pilot's hands move across the console with increasing confidence. The ship responds. Banks gently to the left. Corrects. Banks right. The interface is intuitive — not quite reading his thoughts, but close. The ship follows intention more than input.

Panel 4. Close on the pilot's gloved hand. It moves across the console toward a panel that looks different from the others — the angular script, not the flowing navigation symbols. The weapons panel. The separate system. The one Reinhard ordered activated. The one Tonto warned about.

Panel 5. The hand touches the weapons panel.

PAGE NINETY-SIX (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: One page. The moment it goes wrong. The two writing systems collide. The ship fights itself. And the pilot – whoever is inside that suit – fights to survive with everything he has.]

Panel 1. The ship SHUDDERS. A violent, full-body convulsion – not mechanical failure but systemic rejection. The two writing systems – navigation and weapons – collide. The blue-white glow of the navigation system and a new red glow from the weapons array pulse against each other, out of sync, fighting for control of the same ship.

Panel 2. Inside the cockpit: instruments scream. Every display flashes conflicting data. The navigation symbols scramble. The weapons symbols pulse. The ship bucks hard to the left – the pilot is thrown against the restraints.

Panel 3. The pilot fights the controls. His hands move with extraordinary speed – the same speed the reflexes test measured, the fastest hands in the Luftwaffe, now fighting for his life instead of posting scores. He's trying to regain control of something that was never designed to be controlled this way.

Panel 4. POV – Inside the helmet: the pilot's breathing changes. Fast. Faster. But still no fear – frustration. Anger. The instinct of a man who has never lost a fight with a machine and refuses to lose this one.

Panel 5. The ship flat spins. The hangar becomes a blur through the viewport. The pilot's hand reaches for the weapons panel again – not to activate it further, but to DEACTIVATE it. Trying to undo the command. Shut it down. Separate the systems before the conflict cascades.

Panel 6. The weapons panel doesn't respond. The system has passed the point of pilot override. The conflict has cascaded through every circuit. The navigation system is shutting down panel by panel – the flowing symbols going dark one at a time, replaced by the angry red pulse of the weapons array.

Panel 7. The cockpit goes dark. The last navigation panel winks out. The pilot is flying blind in a dying ship. His hands are still on the controls. Still fighting. Still refusing to lose.

Panel 8. POV - Inside the helmet. The pilot's gloved hands, gripping controls that no longer respond, in a ship that is no longer flying. Determination without hope. Skill without a system to apply it to. A BRIGHT BRILLIANT FLASH OF WHITE LIGHT!!!

PAGE NINETY-SEVEN (six panels)

[ART NOTE: The crash from outside – Elena’s perspective. The reader is pulled out of the cockpit and placed back on the observation platform with Elena. The shift is disorienting – we were just inside the helmet, now we’re watching the ship fall from a distance. The reader should feel the whiplash.]

Panel 1. Exterior, Der Riese hangar. The ship spirals. The crowd on the observation platform recoils. Scientists duck behind their equipment. Guards raise shields. The ship’s trajectory is wrong – not a controlled descent, not a powered landing, but a fall. An object obeying gravity because it has nothing else left to obey.

Panel 2. Elena on the platform. She’s standing when everyone else is crouching. Her hands are on the railing. Her face is – the reader has never seen this face. Not the armor. Not the frost. Not the scientist. This is the face of a woman watching someone die.

Panel 3. The ship CRASHES into the hangar floor. The impact, the sound, the dust. The ship hits hard, violent, but strangely contained, as if something inside caught it on the way down – the navigation system’s last act, an automatic crash protocol that prevented a total explosion but couldn’t save the pilot. The impact shakes the entire facility. Ceiling tiles fall. Equipment topples. The lights flicker.

Panel 4. Silence. Dust settling. The ship sits on the hangar floor, cracked, dark, the glow extinguished. Smoke rising from the hatch seams. Alarms begin – one at a time, then all at once, a cacophony of sirens that fills the hangar.

Panel 5. Recovery team in blast suits approaches the hatch. Tools on the hull. Sparks. The hatch mechanism is jammed – they have to pry it. The crowd watches. Elena watches. She hasn’t moved. She hasn’t breathed.

Panel 6. The hatch opens.

PAGE NINETY-EIGHT (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The reveal of the ash and the medal. Elena's grief. This page should hit the reader like a physical blow.]

Panel 1. Interior, spacecraft cockpit. What's left. A neat pile of ash where the pilot sat. A melted pressure suit — everything above the boots is gone. Vaporized by the weapons panel overload. Exactly what Eva warned would happen. Exactly what Reinhard intended. The cockpit is scorched but intact — the ship protected itself. It didn't protect the pilot.

Panel 2. Close on the ash. And sitting in the center of it, like a coin at the bottom of a well: the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds. Pristine. Not a scratch. Not a mark. Not a single scorch. The most decorated medal in the German military, sitting in the remains of its owner as though it was designed to survive everything its wearer could not.

[ART NOTE: The medal should FILL the panel. It is the most important object in the chapter. On first read, the reader doesn't immediately process what it means — they're still recovering from the crash. Then the recognition lands: that's not Lars's medal. Lars doesn't have a Knight's Cross with Diamonds. Only one person in this castle does. The switch registers.]

Panel 3. Elena's grief. She SCREAMS. A sound the reader has never heard from her — not the controlled fury of the corridor, not the diplomatic frost of the journal rejection, not the scientific precision of seven years of managed survival. A scream. Raw. Full-body. The sound of a woman whose world just vaporized in front of her.

Panel 4. She runs toward the ship. Leaps from the observation platform. Guards move to intercept — two of them grab her arms. She fights them. The wrist-break Helga taught her in the gymnasium — used for the first time. On the wrong people. On anyone between her and the cockpit. Because grief has no targeting system.

Panel 5. She breaks free from one guard. The other holds. She's screaming his name — not Lars, not Frei. The real name. The one he told her in the stairwell.

ELENA:
COLE —

Panel 6. More guards. They restrain her. She collapses against them – not surrendering, just emptied. The fight gone. She believed Lars is dead. She believes the man who told her his real name, who showed her the child beneath the mask, who promised to take her father and her to safety, has just been vaporized. This is not performance. This is devastation.

Panel 7. On the observation platform: Eva. She heard the name Elena screamed. "Cole." Not Lars. Not Frei. Something else. Eva files this. Everything is currency.

EVA: (small)
Cole?

PAGE NINETY-NINE (five panels)

Panel 1. Elena breaks free from the guards. She doesn't run to the ship – she runs OUT of the hangar. Toward the corridor. Toward the habitat. Toward Tonto. Because in Elena's mind, the plan is dead, Lars is dead, and the only thing left is the child. Seven years of instinct: when everything falls apart, go to Tonto.

Panel 2. She runs through corridors she's walked a thousand times. Seeing nothing. Tears blinding her. Her footsteps echo off the stone walls – the same walls she leaned against outside the gymnasium when her hands were shaking. The same corridors where Lars walked with Eva. The same castle that has taken everything from her, and is now, apparently, taking the last thing she trusted.

Panel 3. SPLIT PANEL – Meanwhile in the hangar: a technician from the recovery team lifts the medal from the ash. Holds it up. THE DIAMONDS encrustation catches the hangar lights. The Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds.

Panel 4. Close on the medal in the technician's gloved hand. Every person in the hangar knows whose medal that is. There is only one Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Swords, and Diamonds in this castle. It belongs to Ernst Muller.

Panel 5. The technician looks at Reinhard. Reinhard looks at the medal. The room shifts – the grief converting to confusion, the confusion converting to understanding, the understanding spreading through the hangar like a wave. That wasn't Frei in the cockpit.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED (four panel)

[ART NOTE: Reinhard is realizing he's been outplayed. This should be the quiet before the storm – one man's face, one medal, and the collapse of everything he controlled.]

Panel 1. HALF PAGE. REINHARD's face. Close. The medal visible at the bottom of the frame, held by the technician. Reinhard's eyes on it. The calculation behind them is visible – every assumption collapsing, every plan rewriting itself in real time. This is not Frei's medal. This is Muller's. Which means Frei is alive. Which means Frei planned this. Which means –

Panel 2. Reinhard turns. Looks at the observation platform. Frei's spot – empty. Turns to the catwalks. Otto's station – empty.

Panel 3. Turns to Elena's monitoring station – empty. Three positions. Three absences. The entire chessboard has been swept clean while Reinhard was watching the wrong piece. And somewhere in this castle, a spy, an old professor, a biologist, and an alien child are running. Through his facility. Toward his exit.

Panel 4. Reinhard's fist closes around the medal. The Diamonds press into his palm hard enough to draw blood. He has been outplayed by a pilot with a compass and a birth certificate. The most dangerous man in the Third Reich just discovered he's not the most dangerous man in the room.

REINHARD: (one word to himself)

Frei!

PAGE ONE HUNDRED ONE (six panels)

Panel 1. Interior, habitat corridor. Elena running. Barely seeing through tears. The corridor she's walked a thousand times – the glass habitat on her left, the feeding station, the monitoring equipment. She rounds the final corner toward Tonto's habitat –

Panel 2. And stops.

Panel 3. LARS is standing in the corridor outside the habitat. Alone. In his uniform – not a pressure suit. His hands at his sides. His face is – not triumphant, not relieved. Guilty. The face of a man who has been standing in this corridor listening to a woman scream his name through the walls of a castle and choosing not to answer.

Panel 4. The habitat behind him is empty. Glass door open. No Tonto. No cot. No feeding station activity. The habitat that has held an alien child for seven years is an empty glass box.

Panel 5. Elena stares at him. The grief converts to shock. The shock converts to relief – a full-body tremor, the cellular release of believing someone was dead and finding them breathing. Her knees buckle. She catches herself on the wall.

Panel 6. She runs to him. Kisses him. Hard. Real. The relief pouring through her like a dam breaking. Her hands on his face, his jacket, his chest – confirming. Solid. Warm. Alive. Not ash.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWO (seven panels)

Panel 1. She pulls back. And slaps him. Hard enough to turn his head. The sound echoes off the empty habitat glass.

ELENA:
YOU — you — I thought you were —

LARS:
I know.

Panel 2. Elena's face. Grief and fury and relief fighting for the same space.

ELENA:
You KNEW. You knew you weren't going to be in that suit. You let me believe —

LARS:
I needed your reaction to be real. Reinhard would have known if you were faking.

Panel 3. That lands. The implication — that he used her grief as cover. That her devastation was part of his plan. That the most honest thing she's felt in seven years was someone else's tactic.

ELENA:
You didn't trust me.

LARS:
I trusted you so much I knew you'd forgive me.

Panel 4. Beat.

ELENA:
That is the most arrogant thing anyone has ever said to me.

Panel 5. She hits him again. Then grabs his jacket and pulls him close. Not romance — necessity. The physical need to confirm he's solid, warm, not ash. She holds on for three seconds. Her face pressed into his collar. Her hands fisted in his jacket. Breathing him in. Alive. He's alive.

Panel 6. Lars's arms come up — around her, briefly, holding her the way you hold something you almost broke. Then he pulls back. His eyes are urgent.

LARS:

Your father is in the motor pool with Tonto. The crash bought us time but Reinhard is already figuring it out. We have to go... NOW.

Panel 7. She lets go. Wipes her face. The armor reassembles in three seconds — the same woman who has managed a cage for seven years, switching from grief to operational mode because that's what survival looks like in this castle. Her eyes are red. Her jaw is set. She nods once.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THREE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: Intercut: Lars and Elena running through the castle, cut against Reinhard in the hangar piecing it together. The reader watches the villain closing the gap while the heroes are still in the building.]

Panel 1. SCENE A – Lars and Elena sprinting through the castle corridors. They know the route – Elena’s seven years of mapping every hallway, every shortcut, every blind spot. They take the service corridors, not the main halls.

Panel 2. SCENE B – The hangar. Reinhard still holding the medal. Siegfried materializes at his shoulder with the clipboard. Always the clipboard.

SIEGFRIED:

The alien child’s habitat is empty, sir. Also absent: Miss Hahn and Professor Hahn.

Panel 3. SCENE B – Reinhard closes his fist around the medal. The Diamonds press into his palm.

REINHARD:

He switches with Muller and thinks he can walk out with my property? He's confused getting out with getting away. We'll help him understand the difference soon enough.

Panel 4. SCENE A – Lars and Elena rounding a corner, nearly colliding with a guard who doesn’t stop them – he’s running the opposite direction, toward the crash site evacuation point. The chaos is cover.

Panel 5. SCENE B – Reinhard turns to the room. The hangar is still in crash-response mode – recovery teams, fire suppression, medical standby. Nobody is looking for a spy. They’re looking at wreckage.

REINHARD:

All units. Seal the exits. Every gate, every door, every tunnel. Find Frei. Find the specimen. NOW.

Panel 7. SCENE B – Baumbach at the secondary exit takes this opportunity to pull the fire alarm which triggers a castle-wide

evacuation protocol, and then fades into the exit. A man of faith who sees a child's opportunity for escape and is helping to clear a path.

Panel 6. SCENE A — Lars and Elena reach the motor pool entrance. Elena's key card. The door opens.

Panel 8. SCENE B — Reinhard stares at the crashed ship. The ash. The medal in his fist. Seven years. And a pilot with a compass just walked out with everything.

[ART NOTE: The intercutting should make the reader's heart race. Reinhard is issuing orders while Lars and Elena are still inside the building. The gap is closing. Every panel that cuts back to the hangar is another second of lead the heroes are burning through.]

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FOUR (eight panels)

Panel 1. Interior, motor pool. A large underground garage – military vehicles, staff cars, supply trucks. And parked near the vehicle ramp: the convertible. Engine off. No sign of anyone. For one terrible beat, Elena thinks they didn't make it.

Panel 2. Lars moves to the trunk. Pops it open.

Panel 3. Inside: OTTO, curled around TONTO like a question mark, holding the child against his chest. Tonto is calm – watching Otto's face the way he watches everything, absorbing, reading. Otto blinks up at them in the sudden light. His glasses are askew. His hair is a disaster. He looks like a man who was packed by someone in a hurry.

OTTO:

I believe I've made a significant discovery about the cargo capacity of German automobiles. It is not designed for a seventy-year-old man with a hip condition. We should note that.

Panel 4. Lars helps Otto out of the trunk. Elena takes Tonto – scoops him up, holds him against her chest. Tonto's arms wrap around her neck. For one second, nothing else matters – not the escape, not the chase, not the dead pilot in the hangar. Just a woman holding a child she has fed for seven years.

Panel 5. Lars climbs INTO the trunk. He's the face every guard in the castle has been ordered to find. If anyone checks the car, he can't be visible.

LARS:

Elena – drive. Otto, front seat. You're a harmless old professor going for a morning drive. Nobody looks twice at you.

OTTO:

I resent the word "harmless." But I take the point.

Panel 6. Elena places Tonto in the trunk with Lars. The child curls against him in the dark – small, trusting, fitting into the space beside Lars the way he fits into every space he's given.

Panel 7. Inside the trunk – Tonto pats Lars's head. A small, three-fingered pat. The same gesture Elena uses when she soothes him.

[ART NOTE: The gesture is innocent, sincere and semi comical.]

LARS:

Thanks buddy, but we're not out of this yet.

Panel 8. The trunk closes. Darkness. Elena behind the wheel. Otto in the passenger seat, adjusting his glasses, straightening his collar – performing harmlessness, the role he's been playing for seven years. Elena starts the engine.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIVE (nine panels)

Panel 1. The convertible moves up the vehicle ramp from the motor pool to the courtyard. Daylight. Elena drives at normal speed – not fast, not panicked. A woman and an old man in a staff car. Routine. Anger masked at pleasantries.

ELENA:
You KNEW.

OTTO:
I knew several things, Elena. I knew the codes. I knew the trunk was uncomfortable. And I knew you'd be furious. Two out of three I could plan for.

Panel 2. The courtyard. Chaos. Guards running – not toward vehicles, not toward the gate. Running toward the upper levels. Responding to a FIRE ALARM. The castle alarm, not the hangar alarm. Evacuation protocols. Every courtyard guard has abandoned their post to respond to a fire that doesn't exist.

ELENA: When this is over, you and I are going to have a conversation about what fathers tell their daughters.

OTTO: I look forward to it. Preferably in a country that doesn't execute people for having conversations.

Panel 3. The gate ahead. Barrier down. Guard booth – empty. The guard who should be checking vehicles is running up a staircase three hundred meters away, responding to an alarm that Werner Baumbach pulled because he saw a child and made a choice.

Panel 4. Elena drives through the gate. The barrier arm is down but not locked – she pushes through it. The wooden arm cracks. The car is through. Otto doesn't flinch. Elena doesn't look back.

OTTO:
That was government property. I'm sure they'll send us a bill.

Panel 5. Clear of the castle walls. The road ahead: forest, hills, the German countryside in morning light. Elena pulls over.

Panel 6. Elena Pops the trunk. Lars climbs out, blinking in the sunlight. Takes the driver's seat. Elena moves to shotgun. Otto shifts to the back seat. Tonto climbs out of the trunk and into the back seat.

Panel 7. Angle on: Tonto in the back seat with Otto. He sees the sky. The real sky. Not through glass. Not through a camera feed. Not through the memory of a ship that crossed stars. The actual sky. Clouds. Light. Depth.

Panel 8. His enormous black eyes go wide. Wider than the reader has ever seen them. He tilts his head back and stares upward with the pure, unfiltered wonder of a child who has lived in a box for seven years seeing the world for the first time.

OTTO:

The atmospheric refraction is slightly different than I calculated from the habitat readings. Fascinating. Also — I may never recover feeling in my left leg.

Panel 9. One panel: a castle window. BAUMBACH, watching. The convertible is a small shape disappearing into the tree line. Baumbach's hand is on the cross under his collar. He doesn't smile. He knows what he just did. He knows what it will cost. Behind him, the castle is in chaos — alarms, guards running. Baumbach stands at the window, watching a child leave a cage, and touches the symbol of a faith that just told him to act.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIX (eight panels)

Panel 1. The convertible on a forest road. Trees on both sides. Dappled morning light. The first moment of quiet since the crash. Tonto in the back seat with Otto, looking up – watching the trees pass above him, the branches, the leaves, the patches of sky between them. He has never seen a tree from outside. Everything is new. One three-fingered hand is raised toward the canopy, reaching for the light that filters through the leaves the way he used to reach for the glow on his habitat glass.

Panel 2. The silence holds for one panel. Elena staring straight ahead. Lars's hands on the wheel. The distance between them is twelve inches and everything he didn't tell her.

Panel 3. Elena breaks the silence. Her voice is controlled – not the scream from the hangar, not the slap from the corridor. The voice of a woman who has already filed her fury and opened a new folder marked SURVIVAL.

ELENA:

We're going to talk about what you just did to me. But not now.

Panel 4. Beat. Lars glances at her. She doesn't look back. She's already past it – not forgiven, just triaged. There's a more immediate problem.

ELENA:

How far to the border?

LARS:

Sixty kilometers. Maybe seventy. Depending on which crossing we use.

ELENA:

And between here and there?

Panel 5. Otto leans forward from the back seat. Tonto is still watching the trees.

OTTO:

At least three Wehrmacht checkpoints on the main road. Four if they've activated the garrison at the Paderborn crossroads. And we should assume they will within the hour.

Panel 6. Elena turns and looks at the back seat. At Tonto – grey-skinned, black-eyed, unmistakably not human – sitting in an open convertible on a German road in broad daylight.

ELENA:

We're in a convertible with no roof, no travel papers, and a child who doesn't look like anything that has ever existed on this planet. How exactly were you planning to get through a checkpoint?

Panel 7. Lars's jaw works. A beat.

LARS:

The plan was to get out of the castle. We're out of the castle. Everything from here I'm making up as we go.

ELENA:

So your escape plan had an expiration date and that date was four minutes ago. Wonderful. Take the next left – the Teutoburg road has fewer patrols.

Panel 8. Otto reaches down and produces a blanket from behind his seat and drapes it over the child. Tonto doesn't resist – he's been covered, hidden, contained his entire life. He knows the drill. The ease with which a seven-year-old alien child accepts being hidden should break the reader's heart.

OTTO:

Not left. Right. The Teutoburg road has a garrison that knows me by name. Take the farm road – nobody patrols a road that only leads to cows. I've been driving these back roads for supply runs since 1938. I know every pothole. Regrettably, there are many.

ELENA:

Fewer patrols until Reinhard makes a phone call. Then every road in Westphalia has patrols.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVEN (nine panels)

Panel 1. Lars takes the farm road — narrower, darker, the tree canopy closing overhead. The convertible moves through a corridor of ancient oaks. For a few hundred meters, it feels almost safe. Almost hidden.

Panel 2. Then the road opens. A clearing. And in the clearing — a CHECKPOINT. Wehrmacht. Two soldiers. A wooden barrier across the road. A guard booth. Routine. Not a response to Reinhard's alert — this checkpoint has been here for months. A bored corporal and a private, checking papers on a road that doesn't see much traffic.

LARS:

Otto. What happened to 'nobody patrols a road that only leads to cows'

Panel 3. Lars slows the car. His knuckles tighten on the wheel. Elena's hand moves to the back seat — she pulls the blanket tighter over Tonto. Tucks the edges. Tonto's black eyes disappear beneath the wool. Otto straightens his collar, adjusts his cracked glasses, becomes the harmless professor again — the role he's played for seven years, deployed now on an open road.

OTTO:

In my defense, the data is three months old. Science evolves. Apparently, so do checkpoints.

ELENA:

Vater! Shhhhh!

Panel 4. The corporal steps out of the booth. Young. Bored. He waves them to a stop. Walks to the driver's side.

CORPORAL:

Papers.

Panel 5. Lars produces his Luftwaffe identification — still valid, not yet flagged. The corporal takes it. Studies it. Looks at the photograph, looks at Lars, looks at the photograph again. Flips it over. Checks the stamps.

CORPORAL:

Luftwaffe. Long way from an airfield.

LARS: Assignment transfer. Castle Wewelsburg. I'm returning from an errand for Oberstgruppenführer Gehlen's office.

Panel 6. The corporal's posture shifts at the rank. He glances at Otto.

CORPORAL:
And him?

OTTO: Professor Otto Hahn. Faculty of Physics, formerly of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute. I would show you my credentials but they're in my other coat. The one without the trunk dust.

Panel 7. The corporal almost smiles. Then his eyes move to the back seat. The blanket. The shape beneath it — too small for equipment, too still for cargo.

CORPORAL:
What's under the blanket?

Panel 8. The air tightens. Lars doesn't turn around. Elena, from the passenger seat, answers — her voice steady, bored, the voice of a woman who has lied to more dangerous men than this one.

ELENA:
Medical supplies. For the field hospital at Paderborn. We're running late.

Panel 9. The corporal steps back. Waves them through. The barrier lifts. Lars drives. Normal speed. Not fast — fast draws attention. The checkpoint recedes behind them. Fifty meters. A hundred. Two hundred.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHT (six panels)

[ART NOTE: This is the page-turn into Chapter Six. The reader should feel the trap closing – not behind the heroes, but around every road ahead of them. The checkpoint they just passed is about to become the first alarm in a chain that locks down western Germany.]

Panel 1. Two hundred meters past the checkpoint. Elena exhales. Otto removes his glasses and wipes them – his hands are shaking. Under the blanket, Tonto peeks out. Looks at Elena. She puts her finger to her lips – not yet. Stay hidden.

Panel 2. The radio in the dashboard crackles. Static. Then a voice – broadcast on all military frequencies, loud enough to fill the car:

REINHARD (radio):

All units. Every vehicle. Every checkpoint. Four fugitives – two men, one woman, one asset of critical strategic value. They are traveling in a staff vehicle stolen from Castle Wewelsburg. The pilot Lars Frei is to be considered armed and extremely dangerous. The asset is to be recovered alive. All other parties are expendable. I repeat – expendable.

Panel 3. Lars and Elena lock eyes for one second. Realizing.

Panel 4. Behind them, two hundred meters back, the corporal at the checkpoint is hearing the same broadcast. He's looking at the radio. He's looking at the road. He's remembering the Luftwaffe pilot and the professor and the blanket in the back seat.

Panel 5. Lars accelerates. The engine opens up – the convertible wasn't built for speed but it has enough. The trees blur. The wind pulls at the blanket over Tonto. Elena reaches back and holds it down.

ELENA:

Every checkpoint between here and Switzerland just heard that broadcast.

LARS:

I know.

ELENA:

We have maybe two minutes before that corporal calls it in and they know which road we're on.

LARS:

I know.

ELENA:

Stop saying "I know" and start driving faster.

Panel 6. Last panel. Wide shot. The convertible tearing down a forest road, small against the landscape. Behind them, barely visible – the checkpoint. The barrier coming back down. The corporal reaching for his field telephone. Ahead of them – the forest, the hills, sixty kilometers of hostile road between them and the Swiss border. In the car – Lars's hands on the wheel. Elena's hand on the blanket. Otto in the back seat, making notes even now, because Otto always makes notes. And under the blanket, hidden from the world that isn't ready for him – Tonto. Peeking out through a gap in the wool. One enormous black eye watching the trees go by.

[ART NOTE: The chapter ends on velocity and dread. The reader should feel two things: the beauty of a child seeing the world for the first time, and the machinery of a police state waking up around them. Every road between here and Switzerland just became a trap. The chase begins – not as a sudden explosion, but as a slow, relentless tightening. By the time Chapter Six opens, the net is already closing.]

Chapter Six: "THE CHASE"

Pages 109 – 131 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINE (ten panels)

[ART NOTE: Open IN the pursuit. No buildup. The reader was left at the checkpoint with the corporal reaching for the phone. We don't see the phone call. We feel the result.]

Panel 1. The convertible tearing down the farm road. Elena at the wheel. Lars shotgun. Otto and Tonto in the back seat. Trees blurring on both sides. The road is unpaved, narrow, the car bouncing on ruts and stones. And behind them – two Wehrmacht motorcycles, closing fast. The corporal at the checkpoint called it in. It took four minutes, not five.

Panel 2. Gunfire cracks through the trees. Wide shots – probing, testing range. Bark explodes off a trunk to the left. Elena swerves without flinching.

SFX: BANG! BANG!

Panel 3. In the back seat: Tonto under the blanket, pressed against Otto, flinching at every gunshot. He's never heard a gunshot. Never heard an engine at full throttle. The world outside the glass is louder and more violent than anything the habitat prepared him for.

OTTO (holding Tonto):
It's just noise. Just noise. It can't hurt you.

Panel 4. A beat. Otto looks at the road behind them. At the motorcycles. At the guns.

OTTO:
I should mention that I've never actually been in a car chase before.

LARS:
Noted.

OTTO:
Is it typically this fast?

LARS:
Yes.

Panel 5. Elena takes a hard left at a stone wall. The motorcycles overshoot the turn. Tires screaming on gravel as they correct.

LARS:
Where does this road go?

ELENA:
I don't know.

LARS:
You don't know.

ELENA:
No.

Panel 6. Elena takes a hard corner at a stone wall. The tires scream. The car tilts on two wheels for a half-second before slamming back down. Lars braces against the dashboard. Behind them, the motorcycles overshoot the turn.

LARS:
You — the woman who shoved me out of the driver's seat because she 'knows this area better' — doesn't know?!?

ELENA:
I know the CASTLE. I know the corridors and the checkpoints and the feeding schedule. Not every farm road in Westphalia.

LARS:
So we're lost.

ELENA:
We're not lost. We're... navigating.

LARS:
At ninety kilometers an hour. With guns behind us. On a road you've never seen.

Panel 7. – A bullet cracks through the space between their heads – punches through the windshield exactly where Lars was sitting a second ago. Elena doesn't flinch. Lars does. She accelerates.

ELENA:

Can we do this later?

LARS:

Sure. Let's wait till we get to the car. Oh wait.

Panel 8. Otto from the back seat, not looking up from Tonto:

OTTO:

The ford is two hundred meters ahead. Shallow this time of year. It will slow the motorcycles more than us.

Panel 9. Elena accelerates toward the ford. Water sprays as the convertible hits the stream – the car lurches but pushes through. Behind them, the motorcycles reach the water and slow, tires struggling on riverbed stones.

Panel 10. Lars turns in his seat, watching the motorcycles fall behind.

LARS:

Nice driving.

ELENA:

Don't talk to me.

LARS:

Copy that.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. The convertible on a narrow forest road. The motorcycles still behind them but the ford bought distance. Elena driving hard, jaw set.

OTTO:

The bridge ahead is one lane. If we cross first, they can't follow two abreast. Forces them single file.

ELENA:

How do you know every road in this region?

OTTO:

Supply runs. Three years of supply runs. I've had tea with every farmer between here and Paderborn. The military doesn't watch old men with requisition forms.

Panel 2. Elena takes the bridge – a narrow stone structure over a creek, barely wider than the car. The motorcycles reach it and have to slow to single file.

Panel 3. A motorcycle pulls alongside on the far side of the bridge. The rider raises his weapon – aiming at the back seat. At the blanket. At Tonto.

Panel 4. Lars grabs a toolbox from the floor of the car and swings it. The rider goes down – motorcycle spinning into the ditch. But the second motorcycle accelerates past the wreckage.

Panel 5. The remaining rider gets a clean burst. Not at Lars – at the back seat. A bullet catches OTTO in the side. He doesn't scream. He grunts. Looks down at his shirt. Looks at the blood with scientific curiosity, then concern, then fear.

OTTO:

Elena –

Panel 6. Elena glances in the rear view mirror. Sees her father's face. The blood. Her hands tighten on the wheel — knuckles already white, now bone.

ELENA:

Vater — hold on —

Panel 7. In the back seat, Tonto emerges from the blanket. He sees the blood. He sees Otto — the man who has held him for seven years, who carried him through the motor pool, who curled around him in a trunk — bleeding. Tonto's eyes go wide. Not with fear. With something older. Something that predates language.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED ELEVEN (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: One healing. One cost. This should feel like the most important thing Tonto has ever done – and the most dangerous. The power is healing. The price is himself.]

Panel 1. Tonto doesn't hesitate. He places BOTH hands on Otto's wound. Instinct. His small three-fingered hands flat against the blood-soaked shirt.

Panel 2. Tonto's hands GLOW. The same blue-white as the ship, but warmer, softer – a different frequency. Not mechanical. Biological. The light spreads from his fingers into Otto's body. The wound beneath his hands begins to close – tissue knitting, blood receding, damage reversing cell by cell.

Panel 3. Otto gasps – not pain, the opposite. The absence of pain so sudden it's its own kind of shock. He looks down at Tonto's hands on his side. At the light. At the miracle happening under an alien child's fingers on a back road in western Germany.

OTTO (whisper):

Kinetic energy conversion applied to biological tissue. He's using the ship's energy signature to accelerate cellular repair...

Panel 4. The wound closes. The blood dries. The healing is complete. But the cost – Tonto collapses backward. His skin goes pale – paler than his usual grey, almost translucent. His eyes flutter. His breathing is shallow, rapid, wrong. The glow dies. He's given everything he has to save the one person who's been protecting him from afar for seven years.

Panel 5. Elena watching in the rearview mirror. Driving. Unable to stop. Unable to help. Watching her father healed and the child who healed him breaking in the same back seat.

OTTO (holding Tonto against his chest):

Conservation of energy, Elena. The most fundamental law in physics. You cannot create something from nothing. What he gave to heal me, he took from himself.

Panel 6. The motorcycle behind them falls back — the rider saw the light. Saw something through the back window that didn't look like medical supplies. He's radioing in. But for now, the road is clear.

Panel 7. Tonto is unconscious in Otto's arms. The child who can fix broken things has broken himself.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWELVE (seven panels)

Panel 1. Two more motorcycles appear from a side road – the garrison has scrambled. Fresh riders, fresh fuel. The reprieve is over.

ELENA:
We have company.

LARS:
How many?

ELENA:
Enough. Take the wheel.

Panel 2. They swap – Elena climbing over Lars, Lars sliding under her to the driver's seat. Inelegant, dangerous, the car swerving. During the swap, a bullet grazes Lars's shoulder – his left. He hisses. Blood on his jacket.

ELENA:
You're hit.

LARS:
It's a graze. I'm fine.

ELENA:
You're bleeding.

LARS:
I said I'm fine.

ELENA:
You say a lot of things. Most of them turn out to be lies.

Panel 3. Elena in the back seat now with Otto and Tonto. Tonto stirs in her arms. His eyes half-open. He sees Lars's shoulder – the blood. His hand reaches toward the wound. The glow flickers at his fingertips – faint, trembling. Wanting to help.

Panel 4. Elena catches his hand. Gently. Firmly.

ELENA:

No. Look at me. You gave everything you had for Vather. I won't let you give the rest away.

Panel 5. Close on Tonto's hand – hovering near Lars's wound, the glow dying at his fingertips. The child who can heal anything, unable to heal the man he chose. His hand drops. His eyes close. Back to unconsciousness.

Panel 6. Lars drives one-handed, bleeding. The road ahead splits three ways – farm tracks branching into the forest like veins. No signs. No markers. Nothing but trees and mud and the sound of motorcycles regrouping behind them. He doesn't know this landscape. He's been here three weeks.

LARS:

I need directions. Now.

ELENA:

Right at the split oak. Then straight through the clearing. There's a covered bridge – if we make it there, we're out of their sightline for thirty seconds.

Panel 7. Lars takes the turn. The motorcycles follow. Two people furious at each other, working in perfect coordination because their survival depends on it.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN (six panels)

Panel 1. The covered bridge – a wooden structure over a ravine. The convertible shoots through it. For a moment, darkness. Silence except for the engine and tires on old planks. Then daylight on the other side.

Panel 2. Lars checks the mirror. Elena is wrapping a strip torn from her coat around Lars's shoulder – reaching from the back seat, tying it one-handed while holding Tonto with the other.

LARS:
You're bandaging me while I'm driving!?

ELENA:
You're bleeding while you're driving. One of us should be doing something useful.

Panel 3. She ties the knot. Hard. Lars winces.

LARS:
That's tighter than it needs to be.

ELENA:
No it isn't.

Panel 4. The road forks. Left: wider, faster, exposed. Right: deeper forest, narrower, unknown.

LARS:
Left or right?

OTTO (eyes closed, holding his healed side):
Right. The left fork connects to the highway at Detmold. Right goes deeper into the forest. Rougher but no patrols.

ELENA:
You said that about the last road.

OTTO:

And I was correct about everything except the checkpoint. My accuracy rate remains above ninety percent. You're welcome.

Panel 5. Lars takes the right fork. The road narrows immediately – barely a track, branches scraping the sides of the car.

Panel 6. Behind them: the sound of motorcycles at the fork. A beat. Then the engines fade to the left – they took the wrong fork. For the first time in fifteen minutes, nobody is behind them.

ELENA:

...I don't hear them anymore.

LARS:

Wrong fork. We've got maybe five minutes before they double back.

ELENA:

Five minutes.

LARS:

Not long enough. But I'll take it.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FOURTEEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. The narrow forest track. The convertible moving slower now – the road demands it. Branches overhead forming a tunnel. Lars's shoulder bleeding through Elena's bandage. Otto holding Tonto. A moment that feels almost quiet.

Panel 2. Then – an engine. Not behind them. BESIDE them. A different sound – faster, smoother than the motorcycles. A staff car, moving on a parallel road through the trees. Keeping pace.

Panel 3. The staff car emerges from a connecting track ahead of them and falls in behind. Driven with lethal precision.

ELENA:

That car is gaining. Fast. Military doesn't drive like that.

LARS:

Military doesn't. Helma does.

Panel 4. Behind the wheel: HELMA. Alone. Without her twin for the first time in the story. Helma's car closes the gap. Fast. She drives the way she fights – precisely, without wasted motion, without hesitation.

Panel 5. Helma's car pulls alongside on a brief stretch of wider road. Close enough to see her face through the window – focused, cold, the mirror of her twin without the twin beside her.

OTTO:

Is that – is that one of the twins?

ELENA:

Yes.

OTTO:

Which one?

LARS:
The angry one.

OTTO:
They're BOTH angry.

ELENA:
The angry one on the LEFT!

Panel 6. Helma LEAPS. From the moving staff car to the moving convertible. The staff car veers into the ditch, driverless. Helma lands in the back seat – on top of Otto and the blanket, inches from Tonto.

Panel 7. Elena throws herself over Tonto – shielding the unconscious child with her body. Helma gets a hand on the blanket, pulling. Elena grabs Helma's wrist – the wrist-break Helga taught her in the gymnasium. Helga's own technique, used against Helga's sister.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTEEN (eleven panels)

Panel 1. Helma twists free – she knows the counter. Of course she does. She and Helga developed these techniques together. Elena holds her ground, putting herself between Helma and Tonto.

Panel 2. Lars turns from the driver's seat – grabs Helma from behind, one arm around her, trying to pull her out of the back seat. The car hits a rut. Both of them thrown forward. Faces close. Mouths collide – brief, accidental, A KISS due to the physics of a car on a bad road.

Panel 3. They separate instantly. For a brief moment a devilish grin creeps across Helma's face – like kissing a dead man goodbye. Enjoying the chaos. Then instantly dismissed. Back to the cold focus. The grin was there and gone so fast the reader almost missed it. Almost.

Panel 4. Lars wipes his mouth. In the rearview mirror: Elena's eyes.

ELENA:
Really.

Panel 5. Lars uses the moment of off-balance to shove Helma sideways. Elena kicks – both feet, from a seated position, the way Helga showed her. Helma goes over the side of the convertible.

Panel 6. Helma hits the road. Rolls. Comes up in a crouch – already on her feet, already looking for her staff car. It's in the ditch behind them, engine still running. She's not done.

Panel 7. Lars accelerates. A beat of silence. The road ahead is clear. The crisis is over. But something is still bothering Lars – something that has been bothering him for exactly twelve seconds. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

LARS:
That was the road.

ELENA:

Of course it was.

Panel 8. A Wehrmacht soldier on a motorcycle — one of the fresh garrison riders — launches himself at the convertible from the passenger side. Lars punches him out of the air without looking. Without turning his head. His eyes on Elena in the mirror, his fist finding the soldier's jaw by instinct alone.

LARS:

I did NOT kiss her.

Panel 9. The soldier tumbles off the car. The motorcycle wobbles and crashes into the ditch.

Panel 10. Lars turns back to Elena. The look on his face is a man who just knocked a soldier off a moving vehicle and considers that less important than winning this particular argument.

LARS:

SHE kissed ME!

ELENA:

We're still doing this? Now?

LARS:

Yes! Because it's going to come up later and I want it on the record!

Panel 11. Elena almost — almost — smiles. She catches it before it forms. Kills it. Refuses to give him the satisfaction. She looks out the passenger side at the empty road as if the conversation never happened.

ELENA:

Drive the car, Lars.

[ART NOTE: They're furious at each other and functioning perfectly together and neither of them is going to admit it. The arguing-while-escaping rhythm is the energy that keeps them both sharp. Two people who fight BECAUSE they work well together.]

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTEEN (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Helga's death. Not in combat with the heroes – in a collision during the chaos. Random. Meaningless. Which is what makes Helma's need for meaning (revenge) more human and more dangerous.]

Panel 1. The convertible rounds a sharp bend. The road opens to an intersection – a crossing where the farm track meets a wider road. Ahead: HELGA'S staff car, appearing from the main road. She was running the parallel intercept – the other half of the twins' strategy. Cut them off at the intersection while Helma drives them into it.

Panel 2. But the timing is wrong. A Wehrmacht motorcycle – one of the original pursuit vehicles, circling back on the main road – is coming from the opposite direction. The motorcycle, Helma's recovered staff car now catching up from behind, and Helga's car all converge at the same crossing at the same moment.

Panel 3. Helga plows through the motorcycle – the rider disappearing under her wheels. But the collision throws her line. She's heading directly at Helma's car. She yanks the wheel – not to save herself, to save her sister – and the overcorrection takes her off the road.

Panel 4. The tree is there before she can straighten. The impact is absolute. Glass. Metal. Silence. The convertible is already past the intersection – Lars didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

Panel 5. In the rearview mirror: the wreckage. Helga's car wrapped around an oak. Steam. Stillness. And behind the wreckage – Helma's staff car. Skidding to a stop.

Panel 6. Helma gets out. She doesn't run to the wreckage. She walks. Slow. The absence of running is worse than running. She already knows. She looks at the car. At the crushed driver's side. At the stillness of it. She says nothing. She stands on a road in the middle of a German forest, alone for the first time in her life.

Panel 7. Wide shot: the intersection. Helga's car around the tree. Helma standing beside it. One figure where there have always been two. The convertible disappearing down the road in the distance. Helma

doesn't pursue. For the first time in the story, Helma has chosen something over the mission. She chose her twin.

[ART NOTE: One shadow where there used to be two. The reader should feel the weight – not sympathy for a villain, but the recognition that grief doesn't care which side you're on. Everything that comes next from Helma begins on this road, beside this tree, in this silence.]

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTEEN (six panels)

CAPTION: A short time later...

Panel 1. The convertible crests a hill. The road descends into a valley. Lars sees it first – his hands tighten on the wheel as Elena now notices...

ELENA:
Lars...

LARS:
I see it.

Panel 2. Below: a full military roadblock. Four vehicles arranged across the road. A dozen soldiers. Weapons visible. A barrier. This isn't a checkpoint – it's a capture team, deployed by Reinhard's broadcast.

OTTO:
How many vehicles?

LARS:
Four. At least a dozen men.

OTTO:
Turn around?

LARS:
We'd drive straight into Helma.

Panel 3. Lars slows the car. Stops. The engine ticking in the silence.

Panel 4. The interior of the car. Tonto unconscious in Elena's arms. Otto beside them, hand on his healed side. Lars's shoulder bleeding through the bandage. Fifty meters ahead: soldiers with weapons aimed at the convertible.

OTTO:

His vitals are — I'm not a medical doctor, but his breathing is wrong. Too shallow. Too fast. Whatever the healing took from him, it took more than energy. It took time. Time he doesn't have if they put him back.

Panel 5. Silence. Three seconds. Lars looks at the roadblock. Looks at Elena holding Tonto. Looks at Otto. The arithmetic starts calculating.

LARS:

Do you trust me?

ELENA:

That's a terrible question to ask right now.

LARS:

Answer it anyway.

ELENA:

...Yes.

Panel 6. Lars turns to Elena. His eyes are the clearest she's seen them — no mask, no charm, no calculation. Just the raw math of survival.

LARS:

If we're in this car, Reinhard kills us both. If we're not, Otto and Tonto live. Reinhard needs Otto for the ship. And Tonto is "the asset." He won't hurt the asset. We are expendable. It's the only way we all live.

ELENA:

We're leaving them!?! I can't —

LARS:

You can. Because it's the only way we all survive today.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTEEN (six panels)

Panel 1. Before Elena can respond, Lars lets the car roll forward – slow, walking speed, toward the roadblock. The soldiers watch. Weapons steady. The car approaches like a surrender.

Panel 2. Twenty meters from the roadblock. Lars reaches across. Grabs Elena's arm.

LARS (low):

When I say go, we go left. Into the ditch. Don't think. Don't look back. Roll and stay down.

Panel 3. Elena looks at Tonto in her arms. The unconscious child. The child she's fed for seven years. She's about to hand him back to the cage she just escaped.

Panel 4. Elena places Tonto on the seat beside Otto. Her hand lingers on the child's face – three seconds. Then she lets go. Otto watches. He understands. He puts his arm around Tonto and nods once to Elena.

OTTO (quiet):

Go. I'll take care of him.

Panel 5. Ten meters from the roadblock. The soldiers can see into the car. Lars and Elena still visible in the front seats. The soldiers are relaxing – the car is surrendering.

LARS:

Go.

Panel 6. Lars grabs Elena. They roll out of the slow-moving car – left side, away from the soldiers' sightline. Into the drainage ditch. Into the mud. The car continues rolling forward, Otto reaching from the back seat to steer, Tonto beside him under the blanket. Two passengers where there were four.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETEEN (eight panels)

Panel 1. Lars and Elena face-down in the drainage ditch. Mud. Cold water. Lars's wounded shoulder screaming. Elena's coat torn. Three feet below the road surface, hidden by weeds and the curve of the embankment.

Panel 2. Through the weeds – the car. Rolling to a stop at the roadblock. Soldiers surrounding it. An officer approaches the driver's side. Otto's hands go up – immediate, practiced, the surrender of a man who has been harmless for seven years.

SOLDIER 1:

Halt! Hände hoch! Hands UP!

OFFICER (approaching the driver's side, weapon drawn):

Out of the vehicle. Slowly. Both hands where I can see them.

OTTO:

Gently Lieutenant. I'm a physicist. I don't resist. I merely observe.

Panel 3. The soldiers pull Otto out. Search the car. Find Tonto under the blanket – unconscious, translucent, barely breathing. A soldier recoils. Another stares. They've heard rumors about Wewelsburg. They've never seen the specimen.

SOLDIER 1:

What the – Leutnant –

SOLDIER 2:

What IS it?

LIEUTENANT: That's above every clearance you'll ever have, Gefreiter. Radio command. Tell them we have the asset and the professor.

Panel 4. Elena in the ditch. Lars's hand over her mouth – not to silence a scream, but to stop her from breathing too loudly. Her eyes are fixed on the scene above: soldiers lifting Tonto from the car.

Carrying him like cargo. The blanket falling away. The child's grey skin exposed in daylight. His limp hand hanging.

Panel 5. Elena's hand grips Lars's arm hard enough to bruise. She is watching the child she's fed for seven years being loaded into a military transport. Watching her father being handcuffed. Watching everything she built being dismantled in sixty seconds. And she is lying in a ditch, in the mud, unable to do anything except stay silent.

LIEUTENANT:

The pilot. The girl. Where?"

OTTO:

Lieutenant, I have the utmost respect for your work. Truly. But in my experience, the most honest answer a scientist can give is 'I don't know.' And on this particular subject – people, their movements, their intentions – I don't know. It's not my field. I hope you understand.

LIEUTENANT: (to his soldiers):

Search the ditches. Both sides. Five hundred meters. They're close."

Panel 6. A soldier walks within ten feet of the ditch. Scanning the tree line. He looks directly at the spot where Lars and Elena are hiding. The weeds are thin. The mud is disturbed. If he takes two more steps...

Panel 7. The radio on his belt crackles. He turns. Walks back toward the roadblock. The moment passes. Lars and Elena don't move. Don't breathe. The transport's engine starts.

RADIO (crackling):

Roadblock seven – Oberstgruppenführer's orders: secure the asset and the professor. Return to checkpoint delta. Perimeter search is reassigned to mobile units.

LIEUTENANT: You heard them. Put the old man on the transport. Gently – command still needs him breathing.

Panel 8. The military transport pulls away. Dust. The sound of the engine fading. At the roadblock, soldiers packing up – the capture is complete. Two of four fugitives recovered.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY (four panels)

CAPTION: A short time later...

Panel 1. Reinhard arrives checkpoint delta – staff car, still holding Muller's medal. He steps out. Uniform perfect despite the morning. He looks at Otto, standing handcuffed beside the transport. Looks at Tonto, visible through the canvas cover, still unconscious.

REINHARD:
Where are they?

OTTO:
I'm a physicist, Oberstgruppenführer. I observe. I don't navigate.

Panel 2. Reinhard's jaw tightens. He back hands the old man not hard enough to cause damage. Just hard enough to make a point. He needs this old man for the ship. Otto is the only person alive who understands the dual writing systems, the navigation interface, the crash data.

REINHARD:
Put them in the transport. Back to Wewelsburg. Double the guard on the specimen's habitat. If the girl shows up – and she will – detain her. If Frei shows up, kill him.

Panel 3. Inside the transport: Tonto stirs. Opens his eyes. Looks around – the military vehicle, the guards, the canvas walls. Then finds Otto beside him. His hand reaches for Otto's lapel – grips it. Even exhausted, even captured, the child holds on to the person closest to him.

OTTO (whisper):
Rest. Save your strength.

Panel 4. The transport pulls away toward Wewelsburg. Otto and Tonto inside. Reinhard's staff car following. The roadblock disassembles. The road empties. Birds resume.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-ONE (seven panels)

Panel 1. The ditch. Lars and Elena. Still there. Covered in mud. The transport is gone. The soldiers are gone. The road is empty. Elena is staring at the space where the transport was. Her eyes are dry – past tears, past grief, in the territory where loss converts to something harder and more useful.

ELENA:
They're taking him back to the box.

LARS:
I know.

ELENA:
He can't survive it again. Not like this. Not after what he gave.

Panel 2. Lars and Elena crawl out of the ditch. Muddy. Bleeding – Lars's shoulder has reopened, the bandage soaked through.

ELENA:
You're bleeding again.

LARS:
It doesn't matter.

ELENA:
Stop saying things don't matter.

Panel 3. Elena looks at the empty road. At the tire tracks from the transport. At the direction it went – back toward Wewelsburg. Then she looks the other way – south. Switzerland. Safety.

ELENA:
They went north.

LARS:
Switzerland is south.

Panel 4. Lars watches her. He knows what she's calculating. The same arithmetic he just did in the car – except Elena's math includes a variable Lars's doesn't: seven years of showing up.

LARS:

We need to move. They'll search the area.

ELENA:

Which direction?

LARS:

Safety first.

Panel 5. Lars points south. Elena says nothing. She starts walking south. Lars follows. They move into the trees – away from the road, into the forest.

Panel 6. They walk. Side by side but not together. The silence between them is the loudest thing in the chapter – louder than the gunfire, louder than the crash, louder than Elena's scream in the hangar. It's the silence of two people processing the same catastrophe from different angles and arriving at different conclusions.

Panel 7. The forest closes around them. The sky visible through the canopy – the same sky Tonto saw for the first time an hour ago. The same trees he reached for through a gap in a blanket. Everything looks different when the child who made it matter is gone.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-TWO (five panels)

CAPTION: *Hours later...*

Panel 1. Deeper in the forest. Afternoon light. They've been walking for hours — south, always south, staying off roads, following streams. Lars's compass behaving strangely. The needle doesn't point north. Doesn't point south. It points BACK. Northeast. Toward Wewelsburg. Toward Tonto.

Panel 2. Lars stares at the compass. Closes it. Opens it. The needle swings northeast. He pockets it. Keeps walking south. The compass disagrees and he's ignoring it.

LARS:

This Fucking Thing!

Panel 3. Elena walks ahead of him. She hasn't spoken in two hours. The silence is not anger — it's the silence of a woman assembling something inside herself, piece by piece, the way she assembles everything: methodically, precisely, completely. When she speaks, it will be finished.

Panel 4. The forest thins. Through the trees: farmland. A valley. And in the distance — a barn. Stone walls. Thatched roof. No smoke. No animals. Abandoned.

Panel 5. Elena stops. Looks at the barn. Looks at Lars. Looks at his shoulder — the bandage soaked through, his face pale.

ELENA:

The barn. We stop.

LARS:

Elena —

ELENA:

We. Stop.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-THREE (six panels)

[ART NOTE: The barn scene is a battle. Two people making opposing cases for what survival looks like. Lars argues from resignation – the quiet, calculated surrender of a man who knows he's giving up and hates himself for it. Not rage. Worse than rage. The calm of someone who has already made the wrong decision and is building a case to justify it. Elena argues from certainty. Both are right. Both are wrong.]

Panel 1. Interior, barn. Stone walls. Hay. The smell of animals that haven't been here in months. Gray light through gaps in the wood. Cold. Elena wrapping Lars's shoulder with a fresh strip from her coat lining. She's not gentle about it. Lars winces but doesn't complain. He's lost that right.

Panel 2. She finishes the bandage. Sits back against the stone wall. Knees drawn up. Arms around them. Lars sits against the opposite wall. The distance between them is eight feet and everything that happened today.

Panel 3. Lars speaks first. His voice is level. Measured. The voice of a man presenting a conclusion, not starting an argument. And that's what makes it worse – he's already decided. Everything he says from here is a formality.

LARS:

We go to Switzerland. In the morning. Both of us.

Panel 4. Elena looks at him.

ELENA:

No.

Panel 5. Lars doesn't raise his voice. He nods. As if he expected that answer and had already accounted for it.

LARS:

My parents were murdered and nobody showed up. I was fourteen years old – barely older than Tonto is now – standing in an empty house, and not one person on this earth walked through that door. That's not self-pity. It's data. It's what happens.

Panel 6. He studies his hands. The compass in one. The bandage on the other. The tone of a man reviewing evidence in a case he's already lost.

LARS:

I showed up for Tonto. Every day. Forty-seven minutes on a cold floor. I brought the chocolate. I learned his rhythms. I let that child choose me. And what did it get us? A dead pilot, a bullet hole, and your father in handcuffs. I did everything right, Elena. And here we are. In a barn. With nothing.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FOUR (six panels)

Panel 1. Lars stands. Not pacing – moving to the barn door. Looking out through the gap at the darkness. His back to Elena. The posture of a man who is already halfway to the border in his head.

LARS:

I've been German. Put on the uniform, flew the planes, said the words. I've been American. Fighting for a country I have some sense of allegiance to not because of its ideology but because it allows me of a sense of revenge. And tomorrow I'll be Swiss. I'll walk twenty steps across that border and I'll find a room and I'll become nobody. Forgettable. Invisible. Nothing.

Panel 2. He turns back to her. Not challenging – matter-of-fact. The resignation is what makes it devastating. He's not fighting her. He's reporting.

LARS:

Becoming someone new is easy when you were never allowed to be someone real in the first place.

Panel 3. He sits back down. The energy isn't fury – it's the quiet disgust of a man who can see himself giving up and can't quite stop the machinery.

LARS:

Come with me. New names. New country. It's not about being a hero, Elena. It's about being alive. The people who play hero end up as ash in a cockpit. I should know – I put one there.

Panel 4. Silence. The wind through the gaps. Then Elena speaks – and she doesn't respond to his argument. She replaces it.

ELENA:

My mother died giving birth to me. Did you know that?

Panel 5. Lars looks at her. He didn't know. The shift is so sudden it takes him a beat to register.

ELENA:

She hemorrhaged on a hospital table and my father held me before they'd even cleaned the blood off. He told me that story exactly once,

when I was twelve. He said: "The people who love you will always cost you something. The ones worth keeping are the ones you pay for gladly.

Panel 6. She looks at him. Directly. Without armor.

ELENA:

I have paid for that child in that glass box for seven years, Lars. Gladly. Every day. And you want me to walk into Switzerland and pretend the bill is settled?

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-FIVE (six panels)

Panel 1. Lars's response comes quickly — too quickly. Rehearsed. He's been running this calculation since the ditch.

LARS:

If you go back, Reinhard uses you. The way he's always used you. You hand him the one piece of leverage he didn't have and nothing changes. Except now you can't leave. You've paid your bill, Elena. Seven years. Your mother would understand.

Panel 2. That was the wrong thing to say. Elena's face doesn't harden — it clarifies. The way a lens focuses.

ELENA:

My mother didn't understand. My mother died. And my father didn't walk into Switzerland. He didn't start over with a new name. He picked me up off that table and he carried me home and he never once pretended the bill was settled. Because it's never settled. That's what love IS.

Panel 3. She stands. The geometry of the stairwell, reversed.

ELENA:

Tonto has nobody NOW. Without me, he dies in that box. He won't eat. He won't respond. I know that because I've BEEN that — the person behind the glass, watching everyone, except my father, I trust walk away. And I will not leave that child.

Panel 4. Lars looks up at her. He doesn't argue. Something worse — he calculates. She can see him doing it. Running the numbers. The odds. The exits. The cost. The same arithmetic that put Muller in a cockpit.

LARS:

One of us is being practical and one of us is being brave. And I'm not sure brave survives this one, Elena.

Panel 5. Elena's voice drops. Quiet. The thing underneath the argument.

ELENA:

You're not being practical. You're giving up. And you know it. I can hear it in your voice — you're not arguing with me. You're arguing with yourself. And you're losing.

Panel 6. That lands. Lars looks away. Because she's right. Every word he's said tonight has been a man building a case he doesn't believe in — competently, persuasively, and with the hollow ring of a closing argument delivered by a lawyer who knows his client is guilty.

ELENA:

You can be Cole Haller or you can be Lars Frei or you can be nobody — but you cannot be the man who walked away from that child and live with it.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SIX (six panels)

Panel 1. The barn. The cold. Lars is looking at the floor. When he speaks, the calculation is gone. What's left is the thing he's been trying not to say. The real reason. The one that isn't strategic.

LARS:

I sent Muller into that cockpit because I calculated that his life was worth less than yours. And your father's. And Tonto's. That's not courage. That's arithmetic. And arithmetic is the only thing that's kept me alive since I was fourteen.

Panel 2. He takes the compass from his pocket. Opens it. The needle points northeast. Toward Wewelsburg. Toward Tonto. He stares at it the way a man stares at a mirror that's showing him something he doesn't want to see.

LARS:

And what if I go back and it ends the same way? Another ditch. Another barn. Another version of right now. What if showing up isn't enough? What if I'm not the man that child thinks I am?

Panel 3. Elena sits down. Across from him. Same positions as before. The eight feet is the same. The geography has changed.

ELENA:

Then you show up anyway. That's what it means.

Panel 4. Lars doesn't answer. He closes the compass. Places it on the hay-covered floor between them. The needle still pointing northeast through the closed case. The only thing in the barn that knows where it wants to go.

Panel 5. Elena's voice — quieter now. The battle is over. What's left is the morning.

ELENA:

My father will try and keep Tonto alive. He'll tell Reinhard whatever he needs to to stay useful. I go back tomorrow. Walk up to the gate and tell them I came back for the child. Reinhard won't kill me — he needs me. Tonto doesn't eat without me.

LARS:

And what do I do?

Panel 6. Elena holds his gaze.

Elena:

I can't answer that for you. You already know. You've always known. You just buried it under twenty years of revenge and called it a plan. Revenge got you a barn and a bullet hole. Try fighting for what's right.

LARS:

You make it sound simple. It isn't. I've lost my parents. My name. My country. Every person I've let close enough to matter. The only thing I've managed to hold on to in twenty years is a heartbeat. And you're standing there asking me to put that on the table too.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-SEVEN (four panels)

Panel 1. The barn in darkness. Blue moonlight through gaps in the walls. Lars and Elena on opposite sides, coats pulled around them. Neither sleeping. The compass between them on the hay-covered floor, the needle pointing northeast. The only thing in the barn that knows where it wants to go.

Panel 2. Lars's eyes are open. Staring at the compass. He's been German. He's been American. In the morning, the border is twenty steps away. He could be Swiss by noon. He could be nobody by evening. Lord knows he's done it before. Lord knows he can do it again.

Panel 3. Elena's eyes are open too. Staring at the same compass from the other side. In the morning, she walks back into a castle she just escaped. She could be a prisoner again by noon. Lord knows she's done that before too.

Panel 4. The compass between them. The needle steady. Pointing home. They sleep. Or they don't. The reader doesn't see which. The barn goes dark.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-EIGHT (five panels)

CAPTION: Dawn.

Panel 1. Outside the barn. They stand in the cold morning air, the barn behind them. Neither has slept. Neither has spoken. Everything that needed to be said was said inside. What's left is the doing.

Panel 2. The forest thins ahead of them. A meadow. And beyond it – a gentle slope. A stone marker. A different country. Switzerland. Twenty yards from freedom. Morning light on the grass. The air is cold and clean and belongs to no one.

Panel 3. Side by side. Exhausted. Dirty. Bleeding. Starving. Twenty yards from everything Lars has promised – new life, new name, Switzerland. Twenty yards from the end of running. The border is right there. Neither of them moves toward it.

Panel 4. Elena turns to him. Her eyes are clear. The argument is over. It was over hours ago. She knows where she's going. He knows where she's going. And she knows – from the way he's standing, from the way he hasn't put the compass away, from the way he's looking at Switzerland the way a man looks at a locked door he has the key to but can't quite turn – that she hasn't changed his mind. And he hasn't changed hers.

ELENA:
I'm going back.

Panel 5. Lars doesn't argue. He's known since the barn. Since "the ones worth keeping are the ones you pay for gladly."

LARS:
I'm going forward.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED TWENTY-NINE (five panels)

Panel 1. Elena faces him. This is goodbye and they both know it. She holds his gaze. Every wall she's ever built is down. Every piece of armor stripped. She is standing in a meadow in the morning light, more exposed than she's been since she was twelve.

ELENA:

If you have any of the man you showed me in that stairwell – you'll come back for us.

Panel 3. She doesn't say "promise me." She doesn't ask. She states it and leaves the weight in his hands.

Panel 4. She turns. Walks away. Back across the meadow. Back toward Germany. Back toward the castle. Back toward captivity and a child in a glass box. Her stride is steady. She doesn't look back. Her father's daughter. Her mother's legacy. The cost of love, paid gladly.

Panel 5. Lars watches her go. He stands at the border of two countries and two choices. Freedom. Twenty steps to the right. And Elena walking away to the left, growing smaller against the German landscape.

Panel 6. Lars looks down at the compass in his hand. Open. The needle isn't pointing north. It isn't pointing at Switzerland. It's pointing northeast. Toward Wewelsburg. Toward Tonto. Toward Elena, walking away.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY (two panels)

[ART NOTE: The chapter ends on ambiguity. The reader does not see Lars choose. The compass already knows.]

Panel 1. HALF PAGE. Elena walking toward Castle Wewelsburg in the distance. Alone. A small figure on a long road. The castle a dark shape against the morning sky. She is walking back into the place she just escaped because a child needs her more than freedom does. She doesn't look back. Not once.

Panel 2. HALF PAGE. Lars standing at the Swiss border. Alone. The stone marker beside him. Switzerland behind him — safety, silence, the promise of a new life. But his body is turned toward Germany. Toward the castle. Toward Elena, now just a speck on the road. The compass is in his hand. Open. The needle pointing back. Always back.

ACT III — THE LONG WAY HOME

Chapter Seven: "REPERCUSSIONS"

Pages 131 — 152 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-ONE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: Open with Helma. Dawn. Two women walking toward the same building from opposite directions, for opposite reasons. One returning to a cage. One sharpening the tools to open it.]

Panel 1. The intersection where Helga died. Dawn light through the trees. The tree is still scarred – bark stripped, wood exposed where the staff car hit. The wreckage has been cleared but the glass fragments are still in the grass, catching the first light like scattered teeth.

Panel 2. HELMA is standing where her sister's car hit. She's not crying. She's not mourning. She is cataloguing – the angle of impact, the trajectory, the speed. Reverse-engineering her sister's death the way a detective processes a crime scene. Understanding is the first step toward making someone pay.

Panel 3. Close on Helma's hand. She picks up a shard of glass from the grass. Holds it between her fingers. Studies it. Then pockets it. A piece of her sister's death, carried like a relic.

Panel 4. Helma walks back toward the castle. Her stride measured. Precise. Not the stride of a woman in grief. The stride of a woman with a schedule.

Panel 5. INTERCUT: Elena walking toward the castle from the opposite direction. Muddy. Coat torn. The same gate – the barrier arm still cracked from where she pushed through it yesterday. She looks like what she is: a woman who slept in a barn and walked through the night to get back to a cage.

Panel 6. Siegfried waiting at the gate. Clipboard in hand. He looks at Elena the way he looks at everything – as data.

SIEGFRIED:

Miss Hahn. Oberstgruppenführer Gehlen predicted you would return.

ELENA:

I'm here for the child.

Panel 7. Siegfried studies her. Makes a note on his clipboard.

SIEGFRIED:

Of course you are.

Panel 8. Wide shot: the castle gate. Elena being escorted through it from one direction. In the far background, barely visible, Helma approaching from the other direction. Two women entering the same building. One to save. One to destroy.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-TWO (ten panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard meets Elena in the courtyard. Not in his office – in the open, where the guards can see. A demonstration. Uniform perfect. Muller's medal in his pocket – he carries it now, a reminder. He looks at Elena the way he looked at the ship: property that misbehaved.

REINHARD:

Ah. Miss Hahn. The prodigal biologist returns. We've been expecting you. Well – I've been expecting you. Everyone else assumed you had the good sense to run. But I know you better than that, don't I?

ELENA:

You couldn't keep the child alive without me. You need me.

Panel 2. Reinhard's expression doesn't change. The control is in the civility – the precise, measured way he demotes her from valued staff to supervised prisoner while maintaining the illusion of courtesy.

REINHARD:

Your accommodations will reflect the change in our relationship.

ELENA:

I'm not here for the accommodations.

REINHARD:

No. You're here because you can't help yourself. That's the most useful thing about you, Miss Hahn. Your predictability. Take her to the specimen's habitat. Under guard. She feeds it and she sleeps beside it and she does not leave the room.

Panel 3. INTERCUT: Helma in the armory. Alone. She's not reaching for the standard-issue sidearm. She's reaching for a blade – Helga's blade, recovered from the wreckage.

Panel 4. Helma tests the edge of the blade on her own thumb. Draws a thin line of blood. Doesn't flinch. Doesn't look at the blood. Looks at the blade. This is not a woman preparing for a mission. This is a woman preparing for a reckoning.

Panel 5. INTERCUT: The hangar. The crashed ship, dark and cracked on the floor. LOWE at his instrument station – the one man in the castle who hasn't stopped working. He's going through the test flight data on a portable recorder, cross-referencing it against the hull contact logs from the morning of the flight. His spectacles low on his nose. His pen moving in precise columns.

Panel 6. Lowe stops writing. Goes back. Reads something again. His head tilts – the specific angle of a man who has found something that shouldn't be there and cannot pretend he hasn't found it.

LOWE: *(to himself, barely audible)*

That's not right. The secondary interface contact at oh-nine-forty-seven – that's not from the cockpit. That's from the hangar floor. The ship registered a pilot from outside the hull six minutes before the crash.

Panel 7. He looks up. REINHARD is standing at the hangar entrance. Still in his uniform from the courtyard. How long he's been there is unclear. His expression reveals nothing.

LOWE: *(looking up, professional, not yet afraid)*

The test flight data has an anomaly. The navigation system recorded a second pilot interface during the flight window. Someone on the hangar floor made contact with the hull at oh-nine-forty-seven. I can cross-reference the station positions to identify–

Panel 8. Reinhard holds up one hand. Lowe stops. The hand is not a threat. It is something quieter than a threat.

REINHARD: *(conversational)*

How sensitive is your equipment, Dr. Lowe?

LOWE:

I recalibrated everything. Point-zero-three. It's accurate.

REINHARD:

That's what I thought.

[ART NOTE: Lowe is not shown again. There is no panel of what happened in the hangar between panels 8 and 9. The reader understands. The castle has eight dead scientists before Lowe's arrival. It now has nine.]

Panel 9. Reinhard's office. The interrogation continues. Siegfried recording. The clinical atmosphere unchanged.

REINHARD:
Where is Frei?

ELENA:
He's gone. He crossed into Switzerland. He's not coming back.

Panel 10. He glances at the door. Eva's shadow visible in the corridor – one frame. Listening. The alternative approach is already in the building.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-THREE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: The habitat as a cage that Elena walked back into willingly. Everything in this page should feel smaller than it did before – the glass heavier, the space tighter, the silence louder. Elena has spent seven years managing this room. She has never been a prisoner in it until now.]

Panel 1. Elena inside Tonto's habitat for the first time as a prisoner. Armed guard outside the glass – two soldiers, rotating shifts. The habitat has been "enhanced" since the escape: heavier glass, new locks, monitoring cameras at every angle. A cage upgraded because the bird came back.

Panel 2. Tonto on his cot. Not just withdrawn – physically broken. Still translucent from the healing in Chapter Six. Barely conscious. His breathing is shallow, his skin almost see-through, his body too weak to sit up. The child who healed Otto on the road gave everything he had, and what's left is a shell.

Panel 3. Elena sits beside him. Lifts his head – gently, supporting his neck with one hand. Tries the dark chocolate – the good kind, the kind he saves. She holds it to his lips.

Panel 4. Tonto takes it but doesn't eat. Holds it against his chest with a three-fingered hand. The chocolate pressed to his heart like a talisman.

Panel 5. Tonto's eyes – barely open, unfocused – drift to the glass. To the spot where Lars's handprints used to be. The glass has been cleaned. The prints are gone. The last physical trace of the man who sat outside that glass for forty-seven minutes a day, erased.

Panel 6. Tonto's hand reaches toward the empty glass. Three fingers extended. Reaching for someone who isn't there.

ELENA: (holding him)
I know. I know he's not here.

Panel 7. Tonto. Still on his cot. Barely conscious, barely breathing, his skin still translucent with exhaustion. Then – something. His eyes open. Fully, suddenly. Not the unfocused drift of a sick child. Something sharp. Alert. His head turns, slowly, toward the north wall of the habitat – the wall that faces the forest outside the castle perimeter. He holds that stillness for one beat. Two. Three. Then his

eyes close again. Whatever he sensed, he has registered it. Filed it. The way he files everything. Elena is looking at Tonto's hand against the empty glass. She doesn't see this.

[ART NOTE: No dialogue. No caption. No explanation. The reader who is paying attention will ask the right question. The answer comes twenty pages later.]

Panel 8. Elena's expression doesn't say "he's coming back." She doesn't believe it. She told Reinhard he crossed into Switzerland and she meant it — because that's what he said he would do. She is the one who came back. She is the one sitting on a cot inside a glass box, holding a broken child in a place she could have left. He made the rational choice. She made the only choice she was capable of making. And somewhere in the arithmetic of that — in the distance between his decision and hers — is something she has not named yet and will not name here. She holds the child who can fix broken things. He is the most broken thing in the castle. And she is the second most.

[ART NOTE: No dialogue. Elena's face does all the work — not grief, not anger. The specific expression of a woman who made a choice she doesn't regret and is paying for it alone.]

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-FOUR (nine panels)

[ART NOTE: One page. One emotional arc: laughter to horror. Panels 1-3 are comedy – Otto animated, lost in his data, the guard bored to death. Then Helma arrives and the same man in the same cell becomes unrecognizable – his face stays harmless but his hands shake on the bars, and the reader who was laughing thirty seconds ago should feel sick. The page turn carries Otto's shaking hands into everything that follows.]

Panel 1. Otto in a cell. Treated well – too valuable to damage. Otto talks to his guards endlessly about science, about weather, about the philosophical implications of molecular disintegration. Every conversation is intelligence gathering dressed as boredom.

OTTO:

...and the most remarkable thing about the cellular repair was the energy signature. You see, when the child placed his hands on the wound, the conversion rate was approximately 4.7 kilojoules per second, which if you account for the thermal differential between alien epidermis and human tissue – are you following this?

Panel 2. The Guard does not respond. On his face, the expression of a man who has been listening to this for hours and is reconsidering his life choices.

OTTO (OP):

I'll take that as yes. Now, the FASCINATING part is the bidirectional transfer. Conservation of energy dictates that the child's biological mass must decrease proportionally to the energy output, which means – and this is where it gets truly exciting – the child essentially converted his own cellular density into a healing catalyst. Do you understand what that implies for thermodynamic theory?

Panel 3. The Guard's eyes roll.

GUARD:

I'm a man who appreciates silence.

OTTO (OP):

Silence! Yes. Interesting you should mention that. The acoustic properties of this cell are remarkably similar to the resonance chamber inside the spacecraft. The stone walls create a standing wave pattern at roughly – would you say this ceiling is three meters? Three

and a half? I could calculate the resonance frequency if you could lend me a pencil. And perhaps a ruler. And – while we're at it – do you happen to know who handles the maintenance schedule for the hangar bay doors? Purely academic curiosity.

Panel 4. In the corridor – footsteps. Different footsteps. Precise. Measured. HELMA enters the corridor outside Otto's cell. The guards don't stop her – she outranks them in everything except title.

HELMA:

Good evening, Professor Hahn. We haven't met. I'm the one who's left.

Panel 5. Helma stands at the bars and looks at Otto the way a surgeon looks at a diagram. Doesn't threaten. She describes. Quietly. Clinically. Her voice is level. Almost gentle. Each word placed like a scalpel.

HELMA:

I want you to know that in the not too distant future, when we have no further need of the specimen, your daughter and I are going to spend some time together. I'll start with her hands. The hands she uses to feed that creature. I'll take her fingers one knuckle at a time. Not quickly. There's no artistry in quickly. I'll let her feel each one. I'll even let her count. Then her wrists. She has good wrists – my sister taught her a technique, did you know that? A wrist-break. Helga showed her in the gymnasium. I'm going to break both of hers. Slowly. So she understands what my sister gave her and what I'm taking back. After that, Professor, it gets creative.

Panel 6. Helma withdraws her sister's knife from the sheath at her back.

HELMA:

I have my sister's blade. It's very sharp. I maintain it myself now. I won't kill her right away. That would be a waste. I want her to be awake for all of it. I want her to know exactly what is happening and why. And when she asks me to stop – and she will ask, Professor, they always ask – I'm going to tell her about Helga. About the tree. About the glass I picked out of the grass this morning. And then I'm going to continue. I will start at the extremities and work inward. Slowly. The way you dissect a specimen. You're a man of science. You understand anatomy. So I don't need to explain which parts I'll remove first, or in what order, or how long a body can survive without them. You already know. I thought you should hear this from me. Father to... well. Just from me.

Panel 7. Otto stands at the bars. His face stays harmless. Perfectly, impossibly harmless. Because any reaction – any flicker of rage, any flash of fear – confirms that Elena matters to him. And Helma is fishing for exactly that confirmation.

OTTO:

I'm a physicist, Fräulein. I don't have opinions about personnel matters.

Panel 8. Helma studies him. She didn't get what she wanted. But she planted something – the image, the description, the promise – and she knows it will grow in Otto's mind like a weed. She turns. Leaves.

Panel 9. Otto grips the cell bars after she's gone. His hands are shaking. The harmless professor, shaking with rage and fear he cannot show and cannot name. His daughter's face in his mind. The description Helma gave him playing on repeat. And his face – his face stays harmless. Because the guards are still watching. Because harmless is all he has.

OTTO (barely a whisper – to himself):

I can solve any equation. But there is not equation for this.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-FIVE (ten panels)

[ART NOTE: Eva's pitch and Helma's deal – one continuous sequence in the corridor outside Reinhard's office. Political machinery. One location, one escalating chain.]

Panel 1. Eva in Reinhard's office. Standing, not sitting. A power move disguised as deference.

EVA:

Science has had seven years and produced eight corpses and a pile of ash. Give me one night.

Panel 2. She presents a book with alien symbols on it and a plan: the occult ceremony. Ahnenerbe protocols. Spiritual energy extraction. Her voice is calm, measured, the cadence of a woman who has rehearsed this pitch in her head for months.

EVA:

The child's power is emotional. The ceremony channels emotion. Let me channel the child. With this – Das Himmelsbuch – The Sky Book. The Ahnenerbe sent expeditions to Tibet and Iceland looking for proof of the master race. They had it in their filing cabinet the entire time. Das Himmelsbuch isn't a book. It's an operating manual – not for the ship, for the child. The symbols aren't sentences. They're ceremonial instructions. Let me follow them.

Panel 3. Reinhard is skeptical when suddenly the phone rings if almost on cue. Reinhard answers knowing already who it is.

REINHARD:

Mein Führer.

HITLER (OP):

Reinhard. I am looking at a map. Do you know what I see? I see a war on every border and a weapon in your basement that does NOTHING. Should I send someone who can make it do something?

REINHARD:

That won't be necessary, Mein Führer. A new approach is underway. I will contact you personally with the results.

Panel 4. Reinhard hangs up. The realization of what he's just promised and to whom landing on his face.

REINHARD (at the phone):
Schwanz. (Dick.)

Panel 5. He catches himself — glances at Eva.

REINHARD:
Sorry...

EVA:
It's alright... he's a dick. Just be happy you don't have to fuck him.

Panel 6. Reinhard stares at Eva. The silence stretches. He's calculating — running every variable, every outcome. But the math isn't working. The ship is grounded. His best pilot is ash. His second-best is in Switzerland. The look on his face is a chess player studying a board where every remaining move belongs to his opponent.

REINHARD:
One night. If it doesn't work, we resume the scientific approach the following morning.

Panel 7. Eva smiles like a shark as she exits with the calm of a woman who has been waiting for this moment since she arrived. She steps into the corridor —

Panel 8. — and Helma is waiting. Pacing — a short, controlled circuit. The energy coming off her is not grief. It is fury compressed into a human shape. She stops when Eva appears. Her voice low. Even. Each word placed like a blade on a table.

HELMA:
I want the girl. I want the old man. I want the creature. I want them to understand what was taken from me. Slowly. I want them to feel every second of it. And then I want time to find the pilot and extend him the same courtesy.

Panel 9. Helma steps closer.

HELMA:

I will not stop. I will not rest. I will not negotiate. I want them to HURT, Fräulein Braun. The way I hurt. For as long as I hurt. Which is forever.

Panel 10. Eva calculates. Helma's rage is a weapon – blunt, relentless, aimed at people Eva needs alive for exactly one more night. The trick is timing.

EVA:

After the ceremony. I need the child intact for the ritual. After that – they're yours. All of them. Take as long as you like.

HELMA:

After the ceremony.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-SIX (nine panels)

Panel 1. Siegfried in the barracks. The clipboard. He stands over Baumbach's cot with the practiced patience of a man who already knows the answer but wants to hear the lie.

SIEGFRIED:

You were near the secondary exit during the test flight incident.

BAUMBACH:

I was stretching my legs.

SIEGFRIED:

Your legs carried you to the one position in the castle that would have given you access to the fire alarm.

BAUMBACH:

Coincidence.

Panel 2. Siegfried doesn't believe him. Baumbach doesn't care. The silver cross is under his uniform. His Bible is on his cot. The impasse holds. Baumbach remains — under watch, not under arrest.

CAPTION: That night.

Panel 3. Baumbach at his barracks window. The castle is quiet. He can see, from certain angles, down the corridor toward the habitat. The glass. Tonto's shape inside — small, still, barely visible. He starts to pray. The cross under his uniform. Lips moving. No sound.

Panel 4. Through the glass: Tonto turns his head. Toward the window. Toward Baumbach. The child felt the prayer the way he feels everything — as energy, as intention, as the presence of someone who sees him as sacred. They can't reach each other. But they know the other is there.

Panel 5. Elena in the habitat. Holding Tonto. He's so weak she has to support his head against her shoulder. She tries the radio. Nothing. He keeps looking at the glass — the empty corridor where Lars's spot was. Raises his hand. Reaching.

ELENA:

I know. I miss him too.

Panel 6. Elena begins to cradle Tonto telling him a story. Not as strategy — as a lullaby. Her voice low, steady, the rhythm of a woman who has been holding things together for so long that holding is all she knows how to do.

ELENA:

The first time I saw you, you were curled up in the corner of that box. You wouldn't look at anyone. Every uniform that walked past, you turned away. But when I opened the feeding tray, you looked at me. Just once.

Panel 7. Tonto listens. Doesn't turn. But his head tilts — the same tilt from Baumbach's visit. Listening. Absorbing.

ELENA:

And I thought — he's not afraid. He's deciding. Three weeks before you took the chocolate. And when you did, you didn't eat it. You held it to your chest. The way you're holding it right now. That's when I knew you weren't a specimen. You were a child waiting to see if anyone was worth trusting.

Panel 8. Tonto reaches for Elena's hand. Takes it. Holds it. Doesn't let go. Not the electric bonding from Lars. Something older and sadder — the grip of a child holding on to whoever is left.

Panel 9. The guard outside the glass sees nothing worth reporting.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-SEVEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. Eva's ritual chamber in the north tower. Black candles being placed with geometric precision. Symbols scored into the stone floor with fresh chalk. A stone altar at the center. The alien debris arranged in specific patterns around it. Das Himmelsbuch open on a stand. Eva directs the setup like a stage manager — every candle to the centimeter, every symbol aligned with hull markings from the ship.

Panel 2. The debris hums. Louder than before — responding to the arrangement. The symbols on the floor glow faintly. Whatever Eva is building, it's working.

Panel 3. Eva alone in the ritual chamber. Night. The preparations complete. She stands at the altar. Eyes closed. No audience. For the first time, the reader sees Eva without a room to perform for. What's underneath the performance is not madness and not faith. It's hunger. She wants the power. Not for Germany, not for the Führer. For herself. She places her hand on the alien debris. It responds — the hum intensifying, the glow spreading up her fingers.

[ART NOTE: The candle flames lean toward her.]

EVA:
Tomorrow.

Panel 4. Reinhard's office. Late night. Muller's medal on the desk. Reinhard stares at it — the cost of the program sitting in front of him, polished metal that survived everything its owner could not. For one beat: doubt. Not moral — strategic. Is Eva playing him? Has he ceded too much control to a woman who arrived with candles and a book? The doubt sits behind his eyes like smoke behind glass.

Panel 5. He picks up the medal. Turns it in his fingers. Then pockets it. The doubt buried. Or simply filed.

Panel 6. Siegfried enters.

SIEGFRIED:
Preparations complete, sir. The specimen will be transferred at sundown.

REINHARD:
Baumbach?

SIEGFRIED:
Confined. Under watch.

REINHARD:
If he moves during the ceremony, shoot him.

Panel 7. A beat.

REINHARD:
And Helma?

SIEGFRIED:
She has requested access to the prisoners afterward.

REINHARD:
Granted. After the ceremony. Not during.

SIEGFRIED:
And if the ceremony fails?

REINHARD:
Then Helma can have them sooner. It won't matter.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-EIGHT (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: The hinge page. Tonto's offering, the procession, and Baumbach watching from the window – the seed that will grow into a fire extinguisher swung at a guard's head.]

CAPTION: The following day. Dusk...

Panel 1. Elena in the habitat. Whispering to Tonto – strategy, not comfort.

ELENA:

I don't know what's going to happen tonight. But I need you to be brave.

Panel 2. Tonto presses his hand to her cheek. His palm glows faintly – the last ember of his healing power, given as comfort. Not healing a wound. Healing fear. The glow is barely there – a whisper of what it was when he saved Otto on the road. But it's enough.

Panel 3. Tonto looks at the dark chocolate in his hand. The piece he's been saving.

Panel 4. He holds it out to Elena. Offering. The child who has nothing left to give, offering the one thing he's been holding for the man who isn't coming.

Panel 5. Elena almost breaks. She doesn't take it.

ELENA:

Save it. Save it for later.

Panel 6. Tonto holds the chocolate to his chest again. Still waiting. Still saving it. The child's faith in a man who argued for Switzerland in a barn.

Panel 7. Guards come for Tonto. Elena carries him – he can't walk. The corridor lined with candles and hooded acolytes. Twenty. Anonymous. Robed. Standing at intervals like sentinels. Tonto's head resting against Elena's shoulder, eyes barely open. "Stay near me."

Panel 8. INTERCUT: Baumbach at a corridor window. He sees them pass below — Elena carrying the child, the hooded figures flanking, the candlelight. He watches the procession the way he watched the fire alarm — the same instinct rising, the same cross under his uniform. But the order is clear: "shoot him if he moves." He doesn't move. Not yet. But something in his face has changed. The decision hasn't been made. But the ground it will grow from has been prepared. Elena walks in carrying a child who can barely open his eyes.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY-NINE (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The ritual chamber. Let the room breathe. The reader should feel the weight of the stone and the candlelight and the dread.]

Panel 1. The doors open fully. The ritual chamber in the north tower – ancient stone, low arched ceiling, black candles throwing uneven light across every surface. The geometric symbols scored into the floor glow faintly in response to something in the room. In response to Tonto. Elena walks in carrying a child who can barely open his eyes.

Panel 2. The audience. Reinhard in dress uniform, Muller's medal chain visible at his throat. Hermann at his flank – massive, immovable, his eyes tracking the room the way they always do. Siegfried with the clipboard, making notes on the ceremony's attendees as if cataloguing a dinner party.

Panel 3. Helma against the far wall – alone. Helga's blade at her hip. Her eyes are not on the altar, not on Eva, not on the ceremony. Her eyes are on Elena. Watching her target. Counting minutes now. Not hours.

Panel 4. Eva at the center. Ceremonial dress – dark, dramatic, the alien debris around her neck pulsing in a rhythm that matches Tonto's heartbeat. Das Himmelsbuch open on the altar. The acolytes lining the walls – twenty hooded figures, silent, anonymous. Standing at intervals like sentinels. The reader does not look closely at any of them.

EVA:

Tonight we do not study the child. Tonight we do not measure it or probe it or theorize about it. Tonight we SPEAK to it. In its own language. The language it was born hearing. The language this book has been waiting seven years for someone to read aloud.

Panel 5. Elena carries Tonto to the altar. The child is barely conscious – limp, translucent, struggling to keep his eyes open. His enormous eyes scan the room without focus. He can feel something in this room. Not the debris. Not the symbols. Something underneath. Something old.

EVA:

The child's power is emotional. It responds to feeling – fear, love, trust. This room is full of feelings tonight. Good. Das Himmelsbuch requires it. The more this room feels, the more the child gives. And the more the child gives, the more I can take.

Panel 6. Acolytes lay Tonto on the altar. He cannot sit. Cannot stand. The most vulnerable thing in the room, placed at its center. The stone is cold under his back. His hand reaches for Elena's – she takes it. Holds it. The guards step forward to pull her back.

Panel 7. The guards grip Elena's arms. Pull her from the altar. Her hand is torn from Tonto's. The child's fingers close on empty air. Elena is held three steps from the altar – close enough to see everything, too far to touch.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY (six panels)

Panel 1. Eva begins. Her voice carries a chant drawn from the book – the alien symbols spoken aloud for the first time, matching the writing on the ship's hull. The language is not human. It tastes wrong in the mouth. But it works. The candle flames bend inward – toward the altar, toward Tonto, as if the fire itself is listening.

EVA (chanting, alien syllables rendered in caption boxes):
Vrel'akh tonn... shai'ur vrel'akh tonn... kha'leem sur'rhaa...

Panel 2. The geometric symbols on the floor intensify – brighter, pulsing. Eva's hands raised, the debris between them glowing, pulsing in rhythm with Tonto's heartbeat. The debris and the child are connected – the same frequency, the same source.

EVA (eyes wide, feeling it work):
The Himmelsbuch was right. Every syllable opens him further.

Panel 3. What the reader sees and Reinhard doesn't: Eva's eyes. The hunger behind them. She isn't extracting power for Germany. She's channeling it into herself. The Ahnenerbe research, the spiritual energy transfer protocols – all of it designed to move Tonto's power from the child to Eva. This was always her plan. Not the Reich's weapon. Her weapon.

Panel 4. Tonto on the altar. Trembling. His eyes close. His body levitates – slightly, impossibly – from the altar surface. An inch. Two inches. Hovering. The debris in Eva's hand pulses faster. Something is happening.

EVA:
There you are. There you ARE. Come to me, little one. Give me what they've been too afraid to take.

Panel 5. Elena fights the guards. Pulling against the hands gripping her arms.

ELENA:
You're hurting him!

Panel 6. She uses the wrist-break on one guard – free arm – but the second holds. She's screaming, fighting, watching the child she's fed for seven years being drained on a stone altar by a woman who sees him as a battery.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-ONE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: The energy circuit. The revelation that changes everything – the ceremony is charging Tonto, not draining him. But Eva doesn't notice because she's focused on what she's receiving.]

Panel 1. Energy being drawn from Tonto becomes visible – tendrils of blue-white light reaching from the child toward Eva's outstretched hands. The same blue-white as the healing on the road, but brighter, more intense.

Panel 2. Eva's face: ecstatic. She's absorbing something. The room feels different – charged, pressurized. The candle flames are horizontal now, pointing at Eva like compass needles.

EVA:

Shhh. Don't fight it. You've been holding this so tightly for so long. Let it go. Let it come to me.

Panel 3. In the background – barely visible, a detail the reader won't register on first read – HELMA has moved. Closer to Elena. Working through the crowd of acolytes with patient, deliberate steps. Using the ceremony's spectacle as cover. She's three steps behind Elena and closing.

Panel 4. But something Eva didn't expect is happening. Close on the tendrils of energy between Tonto and Eva – the light isn't flowing in one direction. It's cycling. Out of Tonto toward Eva – and BACK. Each tendril that reaches Eva bounces, returns, re-enters Tonto amplified. The ceremony is a circuit, not a siphon. The emotional charge of the room – fear, love, rage, faith – is being amplified through Tonto's empathic biology and fed back into him.

Panel 5. Close on Tonto's face on the altar. His skin is shifting – from translucent, deathly pale, back to grey. Healthy grey. His breathing deepens. His fingers, limp for two days, curl against the altar stone. The ceremony isn't draining the child. It's charging him.

Panel 6. Eva doesn't notice. She's too focused on what she's receiving to see what she's giving back. Her eyes are closed. Her face is rapture. She believes it's working, but not good enough.

EVA:

His body is holding on. There is only one way to change that.

Panel 7. Elena sees it. From three steps away, held by a guard, she can see what Eva can't – Tonto's color returning. His breathing changing. Something is happening to the child and it's not what anyone planned.

Panel 8. Eva opens her eyes. She thinks the transfer is working but incomplete – power flowing but slowly, resisting. She needs more. She needs a catalyst.

EVA:

Bring me the dagger.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-TWO (five panels)

[ART NOTE: The dagger. The setup for the greatest reveal in the story. Build it slow. Let the tension compress.]

Panel 1. The room responds to the command. The chanting – which had been continuous, a drone beneath the ritual – shifts. Lowers. Becomes a single sustained note. Eva's hand extended toward the crowd of acolytes. Waiting. Elena screams –

ELENA:
NO!

Panel 2. One of the acolytes steps forward. He carries a ceremonial blade on a cloth – dark metal, alien symbols etched into the handle, part of the debris Eva has been collecting since she arrived. The blade is not human craftsmanship. It's something else. Something older.

Panel 3. The acolyte approaches the altar. His steps are measured. His hood is deep – the face invisible. He reaches the altar. Extends the blade toward Eva on its cloth.

Panel 4. Eva reaches for the dagger.

Panel 5. The acolyte holds it out –

[ART NOTE: Page turn. The reader turns the page and discovers who is holding the dagger.]

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-THREE (six panels)

[ART NOTE: FULL PAGE ENERGY. This is the moment the reader has been waiting twelve pages for. Let it land like a bomb.]

Panel 1. — and doesn't let go. Eva pulls at the dagger. The acolyte's grip holds. She pulls again. The grip doesn't break. Eva looks up at the hooded face. Confusion. Then something colder.

Panel 2. The room is still. The chanting has stopped. Every eye in the chamber is on the acolyte and the dagger. The candle flames have frozen — vertical, unmoving, as if the air itself is holding its breath.

Panel 3. Close on the acolyte's hand — visible beneath the robe sleeve. Not old. Not soft. Not the hand of a cultist or an academic. It's the hand of a pilot. Callused. Scarred. The hand that touched an alien hull and made it sing.

Panel 4. The acolyte reaches up with his free hand. Grips the hood. Pulls it back. ****LARS FREI.**** The face beneath the hood is the face Elena believed was in Switzerland. The face Reinhard ordered killed on sight. He's been inside the ceremony since it started.

Panel 5. FULL WIDTH PANEL. Lars's face. The hood pulled back. His eyes finding Elena across the room. One word.

LARS:
Evening.

Panel 6. The room freezes. Elena stares at him. She believed he was in Switzerland. She told Reinhard he was gone and she was telling the truth — her truth. But not his. He didn't cross. He never crossed. The compass was right. It was pointing at him the entire time.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-FOUR (nine panels)

Panel 1. Lars pulls the dagger away from Eva. Twists it from her grip. Draws an MP 40 from under the robe with his other hand – The robe falls open. Underneath: not ceremonial dress. The clothes of a man who has been sleeping in storage rooms and eating stolen rations for three days.

Panel 2. Lars punches Reinhard. Full force. Closed fist. Full satisfaction. Reinhard staggers backward into Hermann. The medal chain swings.

LARS:

I've been wanting to do that since dinner with Stigler.

Panel 3. Lars fires the MP 40 into the ceiling. The sound is deafening in the stone chamber. Plaster and dust rain down. The candle flames whip sideways from the shockwave.

Panel 4. Elena stares at him through the chaos – dust in the air, guards scrambling, acolytes fleeing – and her face is doing something it hasn't done in three days. She's smiling. Not the controlled, managed, holding-it-together smile. The real one. The one that cracks her whole face open.

ELENA:

You asshole. You magnificent asshole! You said Switzerland!

LARS (reloading):

I lied.

Panel 5. Chaos. Acolytes scatter – the real acolytes, who are cultists and academics, not soldiers. They run for the doors like startled birds. Guards go for weapons.

Panel 6. Eva staggers back from the altar. Not dramatically – her knees simply give. She catches herself on the altar's edge, breathing hard. The debris around her neck guttering like a candle in wind. The

ceremony didn't just fail to give her power. It took something. She looks hollowed. Drained. The conduit burned both ways.

Panel 7. On the altar: Tonto's eyes OPEN. Not the dazed, translucent weakness of the last two days. His eyes are clear. Focused. The enormous black pupils sharp for the first time since the car chase. The ceremony that was supposed to drain him has done the opposite — it recharged something fundamental. Something that was always there, dormant, waiting.

Panel 8. Tonto sits up on his own. On the altar. Under his own power. For the first time since he healed Otto on the road. Color in his skin. Strength in his arms. The child who was the most broken thing in the castle is awake.

Panel 9. Elena wrenches free from the guards — they released her to draw weapons and she didn't wait to be asked. She reaches Tonto. Grabs him. He stands — unsteady but standing, holding Elena's arm. His feet on the altar stone. His eyes scanning the room with a clarity that wasn't there an hour ago.

ELENA:

Up. Hold on to me. We are walking out of this room and we are not stopping.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-FIVE (eight panels)

Panel 1. Helma moves. She's been waiting since the intersection where Helga died. She's been counting hours since Eva said "after the ceremony." The ceremony isn't over – but it's in chaos, and chaos is close enough. The deal said after. Helma's rage says now.

Panel 2. Helma pulls Helga's blade and closes on Elena from behind. Not from the front – from behind, because Helma is a professional and professionals don't give their targets a chance to prepare. Three steps. Two. The blade rising –

Panel 3. Tonto makes a SOUND as he points at Helma. His first vocalization in 145 pages. Not a word – not yet. An alarm. A sharp, keening note that isn't heard with ears but felt in the chest. A child's warning system, triggered by sensing lethal intent directed at someone he loves. The ceremony energized this too – his empathic senses sharper, faster, louder than they've ever been.

TONTO:

(ALARMED/ALERT SCRECH)

Panel 4. Elena turns. Helma's blade is already coming – the arc descending, aimed at the base of Elena's neck. Fast. Trained. Lethal. Lars sees it from across the room and does the only thing he can.

LARS:

ELENA!!!

Panel 5. Lars throws the ceremonial dagger across the room – the alien blade spinning end over end through the dust and candlelight.

Panel 6. Elena catches it – instinct, not skill – and blocks Helma's strike in the same motion. Steel on steel. The impact jars up Elena's arm. Not clean. Not graceful. The block of a woman who learned to fight three days ago and is fighting for her life against someone who has been fighting since birth.

Panel 7. Their eyes meet over the crossed blades. Helma's face: fury compressed to a point. Elena's face: terror managed into function.

Panel 8. Lars turns from the door — raises the MP 40. But Elena and Helma are too close — tangled, grappling. He can't fire without hitting Elena. He starts toward them —

ELENA:

Get Tonto out! GO! I got this!

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-SIX (nine panels)

[ART NOTE: This page runs three tracks simultaneously – Elena vs. Helma, Eva's collapse at the altar, and the aftermath. The three tracks converge at the door. Keep the energy fragmented and brutal.]

Panel 1. Elena vs. Helma. Brief. Brutal. Ugly. Helma fighting on rage – the first time the cold precision has cracked. She's faster than Elena. Stronger. Better trained. Every strike is aimed to kill, not disable. This is not a fight. This is an execution that Elena is somehow surviving.

Panel 2. But Elena has something Helma doesn't – the wrist-break. Helma's technique. Taught in a gymnasium that feels like a lifetime ago. Elena grabs Helma's knife wrist. Rotates. BREAKS it. The snap echoes off the stone walls.

SFX: CRACK!!!!

Panel 3. Helma's face – and this is the moment that makes her human: not pain – recognition. She knows that technique. She taught it to Helga. Helga taught it to Elena. The move that's killing her came from her own sister.

HELMA:
Is that the move my sister taught you.

ELENA (breathing hard, blood on her hands):
Yes.

HELMA:
She only taught you the beginning. Let me show you how it ends.

Panel 4. Helma picks up the blade left-handed. Because of course she does. She's ambidextrous. Helga's mirror in everything. She raises the blade –

Panel 5. The ceremony's energy has destabilized the tower structure – masonry cracking, stones shifting, the ancient stone responding to

forces it was never built to contain. A falling STONE BLOCK catches Helma mid-stride. She goes down. Leg pinned. Not dead. Trapped.

Panel 6. Elena looks at her. Helma looks at Elena. The blade is still in Helma's left hand. Her eyes still carry the same white heat from the corridor. The debt is not paid. The deal is still open. Elena turns to run. Looks back once. Helma watches her go.

HELMA:

Run. Run as far as you can. It won't matter. There is no country, no border, no corner of this earth where I won't find you. And I WILL find you and when I do – you'll wish this stone had fallen on me harder.

Panel 7. Eva. Alone at the altar. Weakened. She pulls at the connection to Tonto and finds emptiness. The power she tried to steal was stolen from her instead.

EVA:

It was supposed to... I was supposed to... what did it DO to me?

Panel 8. A SOLDIER bursts through the ceremony chamber door – one of Reinhard's men, scanning for the pilot through the dust and chaos. He sees Eva at the altar. The only authority figure still standing in the wreckage.

SOLDIER:

Frau Braun – the pilot. Which way did they go?

Panel 9. Something moves in Eva's face that isn't mercy and isn't goodness. The ceremony that was supposed to make her powerful gave her nothing. Reinhard used her as a conduit and she got nothing for it – not power, not standing, not even the satisfaction of watching the child break. She looks at the soldier and points. Not toward the corridor Lars took. Toward the north tower stairwell – the opposite direction, deep into the collapsing castle.

EVA: (*calm, precise*)

The north tower. He had a weapon. Take at least four men.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-SEVEN (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The corridor outside the ceremony chamber. The escape is moving fast. The chaos is their cover. The castle is eating itself. Keep the energy urgent.]

Panel 1. The corridor outside the crumbling ritual chamber. Dust and stone fragments falling from the ceiling. The tower groaning above them. Lars has the MP 40. Elena has Tonto – still unsteady but conscious, energized, his eyes sharp for the first time in days. His hand grips Elena's collar the way he used to grip Otto's lapel. Holding on.

LARS:
We need to get to the ship.

ELENA:
The ship? Lars, it crashed –

LARS:
Hull's intact. If she can still fly, she's our best bet out of here. But the bay doors – your father.

Panel 2. Elena's face – the impossibility of what he's asking landing against the impossibility of everything that's already happened.

ELENA:
He's in a cell. Under guard.

LARS:
Then we get him first.

Panel 3. Lars checks the MP 40. Half a magazine. He looks down the corridor – the castle is fracturing around them. Soldiers running in every direction. No coordinated response. Siegfried is in the ceremony chamber and Reinhard is bleeding. The infrastructure that held this castle together was always one man with a clipboard.

LARS:
Which way to the cells?

ELENA:

Down. Two levels. Follow me.

Panel 4. They move — not toward the hangar, toward the cell block. Lars leading with the weapon. Elena carrying Tonto. Running against the flow of panicking soldiers and fleeing acolytes. The chaos is their cover. Nobody stops them. Nobody has orders. Nobody knows which way the pilot went.

Panel 5. The stairwell. Stone steps spiraling down. Emergency lighting — red, intermittent, casting everything in the color of an alarm. Lars checking corners. Elena behind him with Tonto. The child's head is up now — alert, watching, his enormous eyes tracking every shadow. Getting stronger with every minute. Color returning. Grip tightening.

Panel 6. Above them: the sound of the castle fracturing. Shouting. Running boots — but fading, moving away. Toward the north tower. Lars registers this without breaking stride.

LARS: *(quiet, almost to himself)*

Someone sent them the wrong way.

Panel 7. They reach the cell block level. The corridor stretches ahead — dim, industrial stone, emergency lighting casting long shadows. And at the far end: Otto's cell. Two guards still at their posts.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-EIGHT (seven panels)

Panel 1. Lars and Elena pressed against the corridor wall. The two guards at Otto's cell haven't seen them yet – they're facing the other direction, watching the stairwell that leads UP, listening to the chaos above. Professional. Disciplined. The ones who stayed at their posts while the ceremony went to hell.

Panel 2. Lars assesses: half a magazine. Tight corridor. Elena holding Tonto. Bad odds for a firefight. Worse odds for the child caught in the crossfire.

LARS (low):

Two guards. I don't have enough ammunition to be sloppy about this.

ELENA:

What do we –

Panel 3. A SOUND behind the guards. A crash – metal on skull. One guard crumples forward, his knees folding. Standing behind him, holding a fire extinguisher like a baseball bat: **BAUMBACH.** The bomber pilot. The Lutheran. The man Reinhard ordered shot if he moved. He moved.

Panel 4. The second guard spins – Lars is already moving. Rifle butt to the temple. Clean. Efficient. The guard drops. Two men down in two seconds – one by a spy, one by a pilot with a fire extinguisher.

Panel 5. Baumbach looks at Lars. Looks at Elena. Looks at Tonto in her arms – the child he prayed for through two floors of stone. The child he watched being carried to the ceremony from his barracks window. The child whose procession planted a seed that grew into a fire extinguisher swung at a soldier's head.

LARS:

How? Why?

BAUMBACH:

I saw them take the child to the ceremony. I saw the look on that woman's face – Elena's face – carrying him through the corridor. And I

decided that even if this child is not of this earth, it does not mean he is not a child of God.

Panel 6. Baumbach takes the keys from the fallen guard's belt. Opens the cell.

Panel 7. Otto steps out. Blinks in the emergency lighting. Sees Elena. Sees Tonto. Sees Lars — alive, not in Switzerland. The harmless professor looks at the man who was supposed to be in another country and isn't.

OTTO:

You have a talent for not being where people expect you, Herr Frei.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FORTY-NINE (seven panels)

Panel 1. Elena shifts Tonto to one arm and reaches for her father. The old professor puts his hand on his daughter's face. His cracked glasses pressing against her forehead. For one beat – before the urgency takes over, before the war reasserts itself – a father holds his daughter.

OTTO (quiet):
You're alive. You're... let me look at you. Let me see you're alright.

ELENA:
I'm alright, Vater. I'm here.

OTTO (quiet):
She said... that woman said things. About what she was going to...

ELENA:
I know. I'm here. She didn't.

Panel 2. Lars breaks the moment – gently, necessarily. There is no time.

LARS:
The ship. The hangar. Can it fly?

OTTO:
I don't know. But the child activated it once.

LARS:
Then we move. Now.

Panel 3. They turn toward the stairwell that leads down to Der Riese –

Panel 4. HELMA in the corridor. Standing on one leg. The other ends at the knee – wrapped in a tourniquet torn from her own sleeve, blood soaking through. Behind her, a blood trail from something she left behind. Helga's blade in her left hand, slick to the handle. She cut herself free. The way an animal does – without hesitation, without

sentiment, without anything except the absolute biological certainty that stopping is not an option. Broken wrist. One leg. One blade. And enough hate to walk on a stump through a collapsing castle to kill the people who took her sister.

Panel 5. Helma Lunges at Elena who freezes. Lars raises the MP 40 – but Otto is closer. The harmless professor. The man who stood at the bars and gave Helma nothing while she described, in clinical detail, what she would do to his daughter. Who held his face harmless while his hands shook with a rage he could not show. He is no longer at the bars. And he is done being harmless.

Panel 6. Otto picks up the fallen guard's rifle by the barrel. Swings it like a cricket bat. The stock connects with Helma's jaw. She goes down. Out. The blade clatters to the stone floor. Silence. Everyone stares at Otto.

Panel 7. Otto stands over Helma's unconscious body. Breathing hard. His cracked glasses askew. The most harmless man in the castle, holding a rifle by the wrong end, having just knocked out the most dangerous woman in the building.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY (six panels)

Panel 1. Otto straightens his glasses. Looks at the group. The professor who has been performing harmlessness for seven years, and for three seconds wasn't.

OTTO:

I am a physicist. Not a fighter. But I will crack the skull of anyone who threatens my loved ones.

Panel 2. Beat. He looks at the rifle in his hands. Turns it over. Examines the stock — which is now cracked from the impact.

OTTO:

Also — I may have broken the rifle. I'm not familiar with the operational tolerances of the butt stock as an impact instrument.

Panel 3. Lars takes the rifle from him.

LARS:

Let's go. Now. Before she wakes up.

BAUMBACH (looking at Helma on the floor):
How long will she be...

OTTO:

I have no idea. I've never hit anyone before. I didn't calibrate.

LARS:

OK. We Gotta go!

Panel 4. They descend — Lars leading, Elena carrying Tonto, Otto behind them, Baumbach at the rear. The stairwell toward Der Riese. Emergency lighting. Red. The sound of the castle fracturing above them. Four people and a child, heading toward a crashed alien ship that may or may not fly.

Panel 5. The hangar level. They push through the access door into Der Riese. The underground cavern stretching away into darkness. Emergency lighting casting red pools across the concrete floor. And at the center – the ship. Cracked from Muller's crash. Dark. But intact. The hull writing still visible, faintly glowing at the edges of the scorch marks.

Panel 6. Baumbach has been in this hangar before. He's seen the ship. But seeing it AFTER – after the prayer through the window, after the fire extinguisher, after choosing a side – is different. He crosses himself. Not for the ship. For whatever put that child inside it and sent it here.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-ONE (seven panels)

Panel 1. Lars reaches the monitoring station. Otto moves to the panels – his hands finding the controls like a pianist returning to a familiar instrument. Cracked glasses reflecting the dim emergency lighting.

LARS:

The codes. The hangar bay doors.

OTTO:

Six digits. Rotates weekly. I've been memorizing them every Monday morning for two years. Just in case.

Panel 2. Lars looks at the ship. The dark hull. The cracked panels. The scorch marks from Muller's crash. Everything rational says this ship is dead.

LARS:

Can it fly?

OTTO:

The navigation system is dead. The propulsion... I don't know. But the child activated it once. The ship recognizes him.

Panel 3. Tonto slides from Elena's arms. He can stand now – the ceremony's energy still building in him. He walks to the ship. Slowly. Unsteady. But under his own power for the first time in two days. His bare feet on the cold hangar floor. His eyes fixed on the hull.

Panel 4. He places his three-fingered hands on the hull. Flat. Fingers spread. The same gesture as the habitat glass – reaching, connecting, choosing. But this time there's no glass between him and what he's touching.

Panel 5. The ship responds. A hum – faint at first, then building. The hull writing flickers. The scorch marks glow at the edges – not the navigation symbols, those are dead, but the deeper writing, the structural language of the ship itself. Tonto is giving the ship what

the ceremony gave him – energy, connection, life. The ship is waking up.

Panel 6. Elena watches the child touch the ship that killed Muller and feels it stir. Otto watches the monitoring panels – readings he hasn't seen since before the crash, flickering to life one by one.

Panel 7. Baumbach watches the child and the ship. The glow spreading from Tonto's hands across the hull. He doesn't understand any of it. He doesn't need to. Whatever is happening between that child and that ship is not science and it's not magic. It's something older than either. Something Baumbach has a word for. Grace.

Chapter Eight: "THE FINAL CONFRONTATION"

Pages 153 – 174 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-TWO (five panels)

[ART NOTE: The chapter ends on HOPE. Not dread – hope. The ship is responding. The doors are opening. Stars visible. The reader turns the page into Chapter Eight believing they might actually make it. Page 1 of Chapter 8 continues this hope. Page 154 destroys it.]

Panel 1. The ship's hum deepens. The hull writing spreads – lines of light tracing across the surface like veins carrying blood back to a stopped heart. The monitoring panels in Otto's station are alive with data. Something is working. Something might actually work.

OTTO (reading the displays):
Propulsion is... responding. Partial. I'm seeing output on three of seven arrays. It's not full power. But it's something.

LARS:
Is it enough to fly?

OTTO:
I honestly don't know.

LARS:
Then we're about to find out.

Panel 2. Lars moves to the hangar bay door control panel. Otto calls the codes across the hangar – six digits, committed to memory, spoken aloud for the first time.

OTTO:
Zero-Five-One-Two-Seven-Three

Panel 3. Lars punches them in. The massive doors GROAN – metal grinding, ancient mechanisms engaging. A crack of night air. Then wider. Stars visible through the gap. Cold wind rushing into the hangar. For the first time in seven years, the outside world touches the inside of Der Riese.

Panel 4. Lars looks at the ship. Looks at the doors. Looks at Tonto, hands on the hull, the glow spreading. Elena beside the child. Otto at the monitors. Baumbach standing watch at the personnel entrance, the cross under his uniform, the broken rifle still in his hands. It feels, for one impossible moment, like it might actually work.

Panel 5. Lars allows himself one breath. One beat. The compass in his pocket is pointing forward — toward the ship, toward the open doors, toward whatever comes next. For the first time in the story, everything is aligned. The pilot. The ship. The child. The codes. The doors. The stars beyond them. For the first time, everything is aligned.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-THREE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: Hope – Technical. The ship is waking up. Everyone enters the ship. Stars visible through the viewport. Let the reader believe.]

Panel 1. The ship's hum fills the hangar. Tonto's hands on the hull, the glow intensifying – spreading from his fingertips across the alien metal like sunrise tracing a horizon. The hull writing pulses in rhythm with the child's heartbeat. The deeper language of the ship awakening after seven years of silence.

Panel 2. Lars moves toward the cockpit. The interface responds to his presence – alien writing flowing under his hands the way it did in Chapter Two, the first time he touched the hull and the ship recognized a pilot.

Panel 3. He slides into the seat. The controls are damaged – panels cracked from Muller's crash, half the displays dark – but the ones that work respond. The ship knows him.

Panel 4. Otto at the monitoring station inside the ship. Cracked glasses reflecting the alien displays, data scrolling in two writing systems he's studied for seven years.

OTTO:

Propulsion stabilizing. Four of seven arrays now. The child is feeding it.

Panel 5. Lars calls back through the ship's interior.

LARS:

Everyone inside. If this thing flies, we fly together.

Panel 6. Elena carries Tonto up the ramp – the child still holding the hull as they pass through the entrance, his fingers trailing along the alien metal like a child trailing fingers along a banister.

Panel 7. Baumbach crosses the threshold and goes still. The others have been here before. He hasn't. His hand moves to the cross at his chest – not prayer exactly, just something to hold. Five people inside a vessel built for a species that never knew his God, and Baumbach is the only one in the room still deciding what that means.

Panel 8. Baumbach looks at the alien walls – the writing, the glow, the architecture of a civilization that communicated through feeling rather than language. He crosses himself. Not fear. Reverence.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-FOUR (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Top half: the emotional peak — HOPE. Bottom half: TERROR. Hope and terror share a page.]

Panel 1. Through the ship's viewport: the hangar doors widening. The gap now large enough to see the treeline. The stars. The night sky. Freedom is twenty meters of open air away. The ship's hum deepening. Something is working. Something might actually work.

Panel 2. Lars looks back from the cockpit. Through the ship's interior: Elena near the viewport, holding Tonto. Their eyes meet across the alien ship. For one panel, neither speaks. No dialogue needed. Just two people looking at each other with stars visible through the door and a child between them and the knowledge that they might actually live. The closest thing to peace either of them has felt in three weeks.

Panel 3. Otto notices them looking at each other. Doesn't say anything. Smiles. The old professor — reading his displays, tracking propulsion arrays, calculating survival odds — pauses to watch a pilot and a biologist discover what they are. The family seeing itself as a family for the first time.

Panel 4. Baumbach at the viewport, watching the hangar entrance. His face changes. Then — the sound. Not boots. Not gunfire. Something heavier. Deeper. The grinding of treads on concrete. A sound that vibrates through the ship's hull and into the bones of everyone inside it.

SFX: RUMMMMMMMMBLE!!!

BAUMBACH:
Something's coming.

Panel 5. Through the viewport: the personnel doors on the far side of the hangar BLOW OPEN — breached, not pushed. Soldiers pour through — two dozen, armed, spreading to cover positions with the discipline of men who've been briefed and pointed. Behind them: a PANZER IV, pushing through the widest entrance, the barrel sweeping the hangar like a searchlight.

SFX: BOOM!

Panel 6. Standing in the turret hatch: REINHARD. Uniform torn. Blood on his face from Lars's punch. Medal chain swinging from the turret's vibration. But commanding with the focus of a man who has nothing left to lose except control. He has found them. He has brought everything.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-FIVE (six panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard's voice carries across the hangar – amplified by the stone cavern, calm, controlled, as if he's addressing a dinner party rather than an assault.

REINHARD:

I see you found the ship. And each other. How sentimental. Gunner – put a shell through the hull.

Panel 2. The tank's barrel adjusts. The sound of the breach loading – mechanical, final.

SFX: CHA-CHUNK!

LARS (offpanel):

HOLD ON!

Panel 3. The shell hits the ship's hull and the shields automatically kick in absorbing part of the impact – the alien metal flexing, distributing force the way it was designed to. But something CRACKS inside the systems. Not the hull – the hull holds. The containment matrix beneath it. The thing that keeps the ship's energy from eating itself alive.

SFX:

CRACK-WHOOOOM

Panel 4. The interior shudders violently. Everyone thrown. Otto slams into the monitoring station. Elena shields Tonto with her body. Lars grips the cockpit seat. Baumbach catches himself on the wall. Panels flicker. Emergency lighting shifts to a pulsing red. A high-pitched whine begins – faint, then building. The sound of a machine dying from the inside.

SFX: WHINNNNNNNNN!

Panel 5. Otto pulls himself up. Stares at the displays. His face goes white.

OTTO:

That's not a weapon charging. That's a cascade failure. The tank shell fractured the containment matrix.

Panel 6. Lars comes up behind Otto. Softly. Realizing.

LARS:

How long?

OTTO:

Minutes.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-SIX (six panels)

Panel 1. Lars's hands on the controls – pulling, pushing, trying to coax life from the dying systems.

LARS:

Then we fly it out. Now.

Panel 2. Otto shakes his head. Points at the propulsion display – arrays dropping offline one by one, the numbers cascading downward like a countdown.

OTTO:

The shell didn't just destabilize the core – it severed the flight systems. This ship isn't going anywhere.

Panel 3. Through the viewport: the hangar doors, still open. The stars RIGHT THERE. The treeline. The night sky. Twenty meters of freedom – and the ship dying around them.

Panel 4. Elena, holding Tonto, looking at Otto:

ELENA:

So what do we do?

OTTO:

We get OUT. The energy release will destroy everything in this hangar. And everything above it.

Panel 5. Otto points through the viewport toward the far side of the hangar.

OTTO:

The elevator. Emergency shaft – far side of the hangar.

Panel 6. Lars looks through the viewport. Between the ship and the elevator: two dozen soldiers. A Panzer IV. And Reinhard, standing in the turret hatch, waiting.

LARS:

Past twenty soldiers and a tank.

OTTO:

Yes.

LARS: (ironically)

Of course...

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-SEVEN (seven panels)

Panel 1. Elena reaches the external weapons console on the ship's hull – an alien interface near the ramp, designed for three-fingered hands. She studies it – the biologist who spent seven years learning this child's language, now trying to learn the ship's.

Panel 2. Tonto, beside her, points at a sequence on the console. Three fingers tracing a pattern. Guiding her.

Panel 3. Elena follows the sequence. A beam fires from the ship's exterior – blue-white, the same color as the healing, but concentrated, weaponized. It hits a support column near the soldiers. The column EXPLODES. Soldiers scatter. Concrete rains down.

Panel 4. But the ship's whine spikes – the sound sharpening, the internal glow flickering. Using the weapons accelerates the instability.

SFX: WHINNNNNNNN!!!!

OTTO:

Stop firing. Every discharge accelerates the failure. We're killing ourselves faster.

Panel 5. Wide shot – the hangar floor yawns between them and the elevator like a killing ground. Fifty meters of nothing. No cover. No shadow. Lars presses his back against a support strut, the MP 40 angled

Panel. 6 Lars checks the MP 40 angled low, half a magazine left and counting. Above them, whatever is in the air won't engage – but the moment they move, that changes. The only way out is straight across the open, and everyone in the room knows it.

Panel 7. Elena looks around the interior. Counts heads. Lars at the cockpit. Otto at the panels. Baumbach at the viewport. Tonto was just beside her at the console –

ELENA:
Where's Tonto?

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-EIGHT (seven panels)

Panel 1. Through the viewport: a small grey figure walking down the ship's ramp. Alone. Into the open hangar. Into the space between the dying ship and the Panzer IV. Tonto.

ELENA:
TONTTO! NO!

Panel 2. Lars lunges from the cockpit toward the ramp — Elena grabs his arm.

ELENA:
Wait. Wait. Look!

Panel 3. Tonto stands in the open hangar. Small. Grey. His enormous eyes fixed on the tank. On Reinhard. On the soldiers. Standing between the army and the ship the way his mother stood between the soldiers and him in 1936, behind the glass, before the blood. The parallel is exact. Except this child is not behind glass. And this child is not helpless.

Panel 4. The soldiers stare at the alien child standing alone in the hangar. Some raise weapons. Others hesitate — they've heard the stories, they've seen the reports, but none of them have seen the specimen outside its box. The thing they were guarding is standing in front of them and it's smaller than any of them expected.

Panel 5. Reinhard in the turret. His expression doesn't change. He raises his pistol.

REINHARD:
Interesting.

Panel 6. He fires.

Panel 7. One hand comes up. Tonto doesn't reach for a weapon. He doesn't have to. The gesture says everything a drawn gun would — *don't*.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED FIFTY-NINE (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The force field. The reader has watched Tonto get physically stronger for twelve pages. But THIS – telekinetic abilities, kinetic energy manipulation – is new. The ceremony didn't just recharge him. It unlocked what was always dormant.]

Panel 1. A FORCE FIELD appears in front of Tonto's hand – visible, shimmering, blue-white. Not the warm glow of healing. Something harder. Brighter. Defensive. A wall of energy that solidifies between Tonto and the bullet like glass forming from nothing. The bullet flattens against it and drops to the concrete floor. The sound: a sharp, crystalline PING that echoes through the hangar.

SFX: PING!

Panel 2. Silence. Every soldier staring. Reinhard staring. The flattened bullet on the floor between them and the child.

Panel 3. Reinhard fires again. Three more shots – rapid, professional. Each bullet flattens against the force field like rain on glass. Tonto doesn't flinch. The field holds.

SFX: PING. PING. PING.

Panel 4. Otto watches through the ship's viewport. His cracked glasses reflecting the blue-white light. The physicist seeing something he's theorized about but never witnessed.

OTTO:

That's not healing. That's kinetic energy manipulation. The ceremony reactivated his deeper abilities – the ones that were dormant since his species crossed stars. My God...

Panel 5. Reinhard fires again – the bullet hits the force field at an angle. Ricochets. The deflected round crosses the hangar in a flat arc and hits SIEGFRIED in the chest. Center mass. Hole through clipboard.

Panel 6. The clipboard drops first. Then Siegfried drops to his knees. The smile finally leaves his face – the first unperformed emotion of his entire existence.

SIEGFRIED (looking down at the wound):

Well... that's not good.

Panel 7. He falls. The clipboard lands beside him, open to the last page. Baumbach's name is still underlined.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY (six panels)

Panel 1. Wide on the hangar floor. Siegfried lies still at center – the collapsed hub of everything. The soldiers fanning out from him: a few pressing forward, weapons up; others stopped mid-step, glancing at each other, waiting for a command that died with the man giving them. The fight hasn't ended. It's just lost its spine.

Panel 2. Suddenly with rage HERMANN charges. The biggest man in the story running at the smallest. Full sprint across the hangar floor – boots shaking the concrete, fists like cinderblocks, the enforcer doing the one thing he's ever known how to do: apply overwhelming physical force to a problem.

Panel 3. Tonto catches him mid-stride. Not with his hands – with his MIND. Telekinesis. Hermann's legs stop moving but his body keeps going, momentum arrested by an invisible wall. He hangs – suspended three feet off the ground, arms reaching, legs cycling, going nowhere.

Panel 4. Hermann's face: the first expression beyond flat assessment in the entire story. Not fear – confusion. His entire identity is physical dominance. Every problem he's ever solved has been solved with mass and force. A child has made his body irrelevant. He doesn't have a framework for what's happening to him.

Panel 5. Tonto studies him for a moment. The way he studied everyone who came to his glass – reading the energy, the intention, the shape of the person underneath the uniform. Hermann is not cruel. Hermann is a tool.

Panel 6. And Tonto sets the tool down. Gently. The way you set down something that might break. Hermann lies on the hangar floor. Not injured. Not unconscious. Unable to process what just happened. The remaining soldiers in the background see their enforcer on the ground – the biggest, strongest, most dangerous man they know, placed on the floor like a child's toy – and the breaking accelerates. Weapons lower. Men step back. Some drop their rifles and back away toward the personnel doors.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-ONE (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Reinhard's speech begins. UNINTERRUPTED. Full attention. He is the main villain. He commands the room through fear and certainty even when everything is falling apart around him. Three full pages. Let the villain have his thesis. He's earned it.]

Panel 1. HALF PAGE — Reinhard climbs out of the tank turret. Steps down onto the hangar floor. His enforcer is down. His lieutenant is dead. His soldiers are breaking. The ship is screaming behind the child. And Reinhard Gehlen stands in the open — alone, upright, uniform torn, blood on his face — and the room listens. Because even now, even bleeding, even finished, Reinhard commands attention the way he always has. Through the absolute certainty that he is right. He looks at the ship. At Tonto. At the faces visible through the viewport — Lars, Elena, Otto, Baumbach. The people who have dismantled his life's work in a single night.

REINHARD:

You think I'm the monster? Well, let me tell you what I really am.

Panel 2. Medium shot — Reinhard walking toward Tonto. Slowly. Not charging — approaching. The pistol at his side. One bullet left. The child's force field shimmering between them again. Behind Reinhard, the empty tank turret. Behind Tonto, the dying ship. Two figures in an ocean of hangar floor.

REINHARD:

Seven years ago, something fell out of the sky and landed in a German field. Not a meteor. A machine — built by something that is not of us, from somewhere we cannot reach, using principles we cannot comprehend. And do you know who they called? ME. Not a scientist — scientists panic. Not a politician — politicians leak. They called the one man in Germany with the stomach to look at something impossible and not flinch. And I did not FLINCH!

Panel 3. Close on Reinhard's face. The blood. The torn collar. The eyes that haven't blinked.

REINHARD:

SEVEN YEARS! I have kept that specimen alive. The Reich would have dissected it in the first week. Himmler wanted it vivisected. Mengele sent me letters. Detailed letters. With diagrams of what he wanted to do. And I said no — not because I cared about it, but because a living

specimen is more useful than a dead one. I have kept this alive for seven years.

Panel 4. Reinhard stops. Ten feet from the force field. Ten feet from the child. The shimmering barrier between them catches the light from the screaming ship — Reinhard's face half-lit by alien energy, half in shadow.

REINHARD:

I lied to the Führer's face. Repeatedly. Made promises I knew I couldn't keep. Told him we could use it to win the war when my scientists didn't even understand how to turn it on. I did this because I AM THE ONLY man in Germany — perhaps the only man alive — who understands what is actually at stake.

Panel 5. Wide shot — Reinhard small against the vastness of the hangar. The ship towering behind Tonto, pulsing, screaming. The scale of the room dwarfing the man. And yet the man fills it. Because what he's saying is the largest thing in the room.

REINHARD:

This is not about the war. The war is already lost — anyone with eyes and a map knows that. Russia. Stalingrad. The Americans. The Reich will fall. Germany will fall. It doesn't matter.

Panel 6. TIGHT — Reinhard's hand, open, gesturing upward. Past the hangar ceiling. Past the castle. Past the sky. Toward what's out there.

REINHARD:

What MATTERS is that we are not alone. What MATTERS is that something out there built a machine that crosses stars the way we cross streets, and no one on this planet is prepared for what that means. Not the Führer. Not Roosevelt. Not Churchill. Not Stalin. None of them.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-TWO (five panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard's gaze shifts from Tonto to the viewport. To Lars. Locking onto the pilot who dismantled everything, piece by piece, from the inside. The accusation is specific now. Personal. Candlelight catches the medal at his throat — the Knight's Cross with Diamonds. Muller's medal. On the wrong man's neck.

REINHARD:

The pilots I brought here — yes, most of them died. And those that didn't I shot. Muller? I mourn Muller. He died sitting in the most extraordinary machine ever built, pushing the boundary of what human beings are capable of. And if you'd told him that seat meant certain death, he still would have volunteered. But of course, you know this, Frei. That's why you put him there.

Panel 2. HALF PAGE — Reinhard in profile. The room is silent. The ship screams behind him but the silence around his voice is absolute.

REINHARD:

Stigler was the finest man at that dinner table. Brave. Principled. Honorable.

Panel 3. SMALL PANEL — Just Reinhard's eyes. Nothing else. No background. No context. Just the eyes of a man who killed someone he respected and would do it again without hesitating.

REINHARD:

And that is exactly why I killed him. Honorable men can't keep secrets. Yes. I killed an honorable man. And I would do it again. I would kill a thousand Honorable men. Honor is a luxury. What is in this hangar requires men who carry ugly secrets to their graves.

Panel 4. Reinhard looks through the force field at Tonto. The child he caged. The child he studied. The child who has just defeated his army, killed his lieutenant, and grounded his enforcer without breaking a sweat. Tonto looks back at him. Two figures separated by a wall of light. Seven years compressed into ten feet of shimmering air.

REINHARD:

This creature is not a child. It is not a pet. It is not a stray you found in the rain. It is the single most important strategic asset in

human history. And you – all of you – look at it and see something that needs saving?

Panel 5. Reinhard turns to Elena. Visible through the viewport beside Lars. The woman who came back to a cage because a child needed her. Reinhard sees weakness. The reader sees the bravest person in the room.

REINHARD:

I gave you and your father the single greatest scientific opportunity in human history. Access to a living extraterrestrial specimen. Years. Funding. Protection from men who wanted to saw it open and look inside. And you taught it to eat chocolate. As if it MATTERED. You gave it a NAME, a BLANKET and someone to hold its HAND – as if tenderness could protect it from what's coming. As if LOVE were a strategy.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-THREE (five panels)

Panel 1. Reinhard's voice drops. Quiet. The quietest he's been. The most dangerous. He is looking tight at Lars through the viewport now. Elena no longer in view. Hatred focused on a singular individual

REINHARD:

And you! You waltzed in here six weeks ago with your smile and your compass and you DESTROYED it all. Everything I built. Everything I sacrificed. Gone. Because you couldn't keep your hands off a woman and your conscience off a child.

Panel 2. Medium shot — Reinhard straightening his torn uniform. A man reassembling his authority out of nothing but conviction. The gesture of a commander who has lost everything except the certainty that he was right.

REINHARD:

I have done terrible things. Clearly. Deliberately. With intent. With full knowledge of the cost! That is not evil. That is leadership. You call me monster. I call myself the only honest man in this room.

Panel 3. He raises his pistol. Not at Tonto — past Tonto.

REINHARD: And you — all of you — are standing between me and the future of the human race because a specimen touched your hand and you decided that was more important than everything.

Panel 4. FULL HALF-PAGE — Reinhard alone on the hangar floor. The Panzer IV behind him, empty. Hermann's body on the ground to his left. Siegfried's clipboard on the ground to his right. Soldiers retreating through the far doors. The ship screaming, pulsing, dying. And Reinhard Gehlen — alone, bleeding, holding a pistol with one bullet — is the last man standing on his side of the war. Everything he built is rubble. Everyone who served him is gone. And he is still talking. Because Reinhard has never needed an army. He has never needed agreement. He has only ever needed the absolute, unshakeable conviction that he is the only person in the room who understands what matters.

REINHARD:

Now. Get out of the ship. All of you. This is the last time I ask.

Panel 5. SMALL PANEL – Reverse shot. Tonto's face. The force field shimmering. Those enormous black eyes, looking at the man who caged him for seven years. Not afraid. Not angry. Something older than both. The child's answer is silence. And the silence is louder than anything Reinhard has ever said.

[ART NOTE: Hold on this panel. Let the reader sit in Tonto's silence after two and a half pages of Reinhard's voice. The contrast IS the moment. The villain has given his thesis. The child's response is to simply exist – present, unbroken, unjustified. Everything Reinhard cannot be.]

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-FOUR (seven panels)

Panel 1. Nobody moves. The force field shimmers between Tonto and Reinhard. The soldiers are breaking. The ship is screaming. And Reinhard is standing alone on the hangar floor with one bullet left and the certainty of a man who knows exactly what he's going to do with it.

Panel 2. On Reinhard as he fires his last bullet. Maniacal smile of his face. He knows what he has done.

Panel 3. The bullet. It passes over Tonto's force field's upper edge – through the gap between the child's shield and the ship's hull –

Panel 4. – REVEAL: AND HITS ELENA, who has come out of the ship and is standing behind Tonto on the ship's Exit Ramp. She is hit square in the abdomen. Center mass. The sound is small. The damage is not.

Panel 5. Elena goes down hard. On the ramp. Her hands go to her stomach – and come back red. Not a graze. Not a shoulder wound. A shot to the abdomen that will take hours to kill her. A slow wound. A deliberate wound. Reinhard didn't try to kill her quickly. He chose the shot that would make them watch her die.

Panel 6. Everyone reacts. Lars vaults from the cockpit – moving toward the ramp. Otto spins from the monitoring station. Baumbach steps forward. The ship's whine is building but nobody hears it because Elena is on the floor and the blood is spreading.

OTTO: ELENA!

Panel 7. Reinhard smiles. His final victory. He couldn't have the child. He couldn't have the ship. He couldn't have the power. But he could destroy the one thing that made all of it matter to the people who took it from him. The family. He smiles the way a man smiles when he's set a fire he knows he won't survive.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-FIVE (eight panels)

[ART NOTE: The six-panel kill. Three panels of Tonto's face: rage building. Three panels of Reinhard's face: the pressure, the agony, the end. The alternation IS the violence. Let the reader's eye bounce between them.]

Panel 1. Tonto turns. Sees Elena on the ramp. Sees the blood — spreading, dark, too much. His mother died behind glass seven years ago. He was three feet away and he couldn't reach her. His surrogate mother is bleeding ten feet away and he can reach her. But he doesn't go to her. He turns to the man who fired the shot.

Panel 2. TONTO — PANEL ONE OF SIX. Close on Tonto's face. His eyes widening. The force field around him shifting color — from blue-white to something hotter. The air around him vibrating. Not grief. Not fear. Something older and more terrible rising from a place inside him that has nothing to do with a child and everything to do with a species that crossed stars.

Panel 3. REINHARD — PANEL TWO OF SIX. Reinhard's face. The smile still there. Then — a flicker. A twitch at the temple. His hand goes to his head. Something is building inside his skull. Pressure. Not pain yet. Pressure.

Panel 4. TONTO — PANEL THREE OF SIX. Closer. Tonto's eyes have gone dark — the enormous black pupils that were always gentle, always curious, always reading the room — are flat. Dead. Ancient. The eyes of a being whose species doesn't have a word for mercy because they never needed one until they met humans.

Panel 5. REINHARD — PANEL FOUR OF SIX. Reinhard's smile is gone. His hands are at his temples. The pressure has become pain. Blood at the corner of his left eye. His jaw clenching — the bones shifting under the skin. The control — the absolute, legendary, seven-year control — breaking apart from the inside.

Panel 6. TONTO — PANEL FIVE OF SIX. Tonto's mouth open. Silent. A scream with no sound and all the fury of a child who thinks he's just lost the only person who's ever cared for him. The force field is gone — all of that energy redirected, focused, aimed at a single skull. The air between Tonto and Reinhard WARPS — visible distortion, heat-shimmer, the physical world bending under the weight of a child's rage.

Panel 7. REINHARD – PANEL SIX OF SIX. Reinhard's face – the features torquing, the skin pulling, the bones underneath shifting like tectonic plates. Blood from both eyes. From his nose. From his ears. His mouth open in a scream that never arrives. The last expression of a man who spent seven years controlling everything – and in the final second, cannot control his own skull.

Panel 8. ****REINHARD'S HEAD EXPLODES.**** The body stands for one more second. The medal chain swings. Then it falls. The empty turret behind it. The pistol clattering to the concrete. The hangar goes silent except for the ship's escalating scream. The most powerful thing in the room is a child who just watched his family bleed.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-SIX (six panels)

Panel 1. Silence. Not complete – the ship's whine is building, the cascade failure accelerating – but human silence. No one moves. No one speaks. The remaining soldiers drop weapons and Flee through the personnel doors. The man they feared, the man who gave them purpose and direction and a reason to hold their posts, is a body on the floor and they don't know what to do without him.

Panel 2. Hermann, still on the floor where Tonto placed him, stares at the ceiling. Processing nothing. A tool without a hand to wield it.

Panel 3. Lars reaches Elena on the ramp. She's conscious. Gripping his arm. The wound is bad – abdomen, deep, the blood spreading across the ramp in a pattern that tells Lars everything he needs to know about how much time she has. His hands press against the wound. Blood between his fingers.

ELENA:

Don't look at it like that. I've seen that face on you before and it wasn't helpful then either.

LARS:

Stop talking. Save your energy.

ELENA:

I'm a biologist, Lars. I know how bad this is. Don't lie to me.

OTTO:

Elena. Look at me. You look at me right now.

Panel 4. Tonto stands in the hangar. The force field gone. His hands at his sides. His enormous eyes wet for the first time in the story. He's crying. Not from pain. Not from exhaustion. From what he just did. The child who studied every person who came to his glass – who read their energy, who felt their intentions, who chose mercy with Hermann because mercy is what his species understands – chose violence with Reinhard. And the difference is breaking his heart.

Panel 5. The ship's whine is getting louder. The containment failure building. The walls of the hangar vibrating. Dust falling from the ceiling.

Panel 6. Otto. His face tells everyone what they already know.

OTTO:

We need to go. We need to go NOW.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-SEVEN (six panels)

Panel 1. The ship's whine has become a shriek. The hull writing pulsing erratically – the dual systems fighting each other the way they fought Muller. The cascade failure accelerating.

OTTO:

The containment matrix is collapsing. When it releases, the energy will destroy everything in this hangar. And everything above it.

Panel 2. Otto starts to move toward the containment panel – the station inside the ship that controls the energy distribution. He knows the ship better than anyone. He knows what needs to happen. Buy time for the rest to escape.

OTTO:

Someone needs to hold the containment panel. A living presence stabilizes the matrix – the ship's systems were designed for biological operators. I can –

ELENA (from the ramp, bleeding):

No.

Panel 3. BAUMBACH steps forward. The bomber pilot. The Lutheran. The man who pulled a fire alarm for this child, who swung a fire extinguisher for this child, who opened a cell door for this child. Each choice bigger than the last. Each choice bringing him closer to this moment.

BAUMBACH:

Show me what to do.

Panel 4. Otto looks at Baumbach the way a man looks at something he didn't expect to find – a variable he hadn't accounted for, an answer that arrived before he finished asking the question. A moment ago the calculation had no survivable solution. A moment ago everyone in this hangar was going to die. This man just changed the math.

OTTO:

The containment matrix will stabilize around a living presence. It will hold. For minutes. Perhaps less. The person who stays must keep both hands on the primary panel — do not move, do not release it. The matrix needs an anchor. You are the anchor.

Panel 5. Otto stops. Can't finish it. Baumbach looks at him for a moment — then at the panel. Then back at Otto.

BAUMBACH:

The anchor doesn't leave the ship.

OTTO:

No. It does not.

Panel 6. Baumbach asks one question.

BAUMBACH:

Will you get out in time?

OTTO:

If you hold? Yes.

BAUMBACH: (*a soldier's nod*)

That's all I needed to know.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-EIGHT (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Baumbach enters the ship for the last time. Let this land. The man who expanded his faith for an alien child is putting that faith to the final test.]

Panel 1. Baumbach enters the ship. Walks past the monitoring station. Past the viewport. Past the cockpit where Lars sat minutes ago. To the containment panel – deep inside, near the core, where the dual writing systems pulse and fight and die.

Panel 2. He puts his hand on the panel. The energy stabilizes – temporarily, shuddering, the cascade slowing but not stopping. The blue-white glow spreads up his arm. It doesn't hurt. It's warm. The same warmth as Tonto's healing. The same energy, from the same source.

Panel 3. He looks at the alien writing on the walls. The language of a civilization that crossed stars. He can't read a word. He doesn't need to. Whatever this species believed, whatever they worshipped, whatever they called the thing that made them cross an ocean of darkness with their children – Baumbach has a word for it.

BAUMBACH:

So this is what You've been building out there.

Panel 4. He looks through the ship's viewport. Across the hangar. Lars is lifting Elena from the ramp. Otto is taking Tonto's hand. They're moving toward the elevator. The child who made Baumbach expand his faith – the child he prayed for through two floors of stone, the child he swung a fire extinguisher for, the child he opened a cell door for – is walking across the hangar holding an old professor's hand.

Panel 5. Baumbach nods. Once. To Tonto or to God. It's not clear which. It never was. It never needed to be.

Panel 6. The glow intensifies. Covers his hand. His arm. His shoulder. Spreading. The containment holding. The shriek stabilizing to a manageable scream. He's buying them time with the only currency he has left.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SIXTY-NINE (nine panels)

Panel 1. Lars carries Elena across the hangar floor – her arm over his shoulder, his hand pressed against her abdomen wound, blood between his fingers. She's conscious but fading. Otto holds Tonto's hand – the child walking under his own power, his eyes still wet, looking back at the ship where Baumbach's silhouette is visible through the viewport.

Panel 2. They pass Hermann's motionless body. Past Siegfried's clipboard on the concrete. Past the empty tank. Past the scattered rifles dropped by soldiers who decided they'd had enough. The hangar floor – a battlefield five minutes ago – is empty now except for the debris.

Panel 3. The elevator – the emergency shaft to the surface. A steel door in the far wall. Otto's hand finding the keypad. Six digits – the same system, the same codes he's carried for six years. His fingers steady despite everything.

OTTO:
Zero-Five-One-Two-Seven-Three.

Panel 4. The doors open. They crowd in – Lars holding Elena against him, Otto pulling Tonto into the small space. The elevator is industrial – military, designed for equipment transport, not comfort. The four of them pressed together in the dim light.

Panel 5. The last thing Baumbach sees through the ship's viewport is the elevator doors closing. Four people – alive because he chose to stay. The pilot. The biologist. The professor. The child. A family he helped build with a fire alarm and a fire extinguisher and a set of keys and his own two hands on a panel that is slowly turning him to light.

Panel 6. The elevator rises. The shriek fades below them – growing distant but not quieter. Deeper. More final.

Panel 7. Lars eases Elena to the floor of the elevator. Her back against the wall. The wound is still bleeding – his makeshift pressure isn't enough. She's pale. Her breathing shallow. She looks at Tonto.

ELENA (weak):

It's alright. I'm still here.

Panel 8. Tonto kneels beside her. His hand reaches for the wound — the same gesture, the same glow, the same instinct that healed Otto on the road. His palm pressed against the blood-soaked fabric. The blue-white light flickers...

Panel 9. Nothing happens. The light sputters. Dies. Tonto pushes harder. Both hands now. The desperation of a child trying to do the one thing he knows how to do and watching it fail.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY (eight panels)

Panel 1. Second attempt. Tonto's hands pressed against Elena's abdomen. The glow returns – brighter this time, the effort visible in his body. His arms trembling. His face straining. But the wound doesn't close. The light reaches the wound and dissipates like water on hot stone. Too much spent. Too much given – to the ship, to the force field, to the six-panel fury that killed Reinhard. There's nothing left.

Panel 2. Third attempt. Tonto's whole body glows – forcing everything he has into his hands. The elevator shakes with the energy. But the wound remains. Elena's eyes are closing. Her hand finds Tonto's head. Strokes his scalp.

ELENA (barely audible):

It's OK. It's OK. You gave enough. You always give enough.

Panel 3. Tonto looks at his hands. Empty. Spent. The child who can fix broken things cannot fix this.

Panel 4. Tonto looks at Lars. Then – a decision. Something passing through his enormous eyes that is not human but is understood by every human in the elevator.

Panel 4. Tonto takes Lars's hand. Lifts it. Places it on Elena's wound – Lars's palm flat against the blood, against the torn flesh, against the place where the bullet went in. Lars doesn't resist. Doesn't understand. But doesn't resist.

Panel 5. Then Tonto places his own hand on top of Lars's. Three hands stacked – Lars on Elena, Tonto on Lars. The circuit. The same principle as the ceremony – energy that flows through connection. Power that can only be given, never taken. The healing doesn't come from Tonto alone. It comes from the three of them together.

Panel 6. The glow returns. Not from Tonto's hands – from the space BETWEEN the hands. From the connection itself. Elena's wound closes.

The bleeding stops. The color returns to her face. Her breathing deepens. Her eyes open – clear, focused, alive.

Panel 7. Otto watches from the corner of the elevator. The physicist who has measured everything in his life – kilojoules, resonance frequencies, the molecular composition of alien hull material – staring at something that has no measurement. No formula. No equation.

OTTO (quiet, almost to himself):

I don't have a word for what that was. And I've spent my whole life making sure I have always had words. But some things... love can explain science cannot.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-ONE (six panels)

Panel 1. Below, the ship's whine has crossed out of sound and into something physical: felt in the chest wall, in the back teeth, in the bones of the inner ear. Lars watches the floor indicator. It is not moving fast enough.

ELENA:
How far?

LARS:
Too far.

Panel 2. The whine climbs. A hard lateral lurch throws Elena into Otto, sends Tonto into Lars's side. The shaft lights flicker. Hold. Flicker again.

OTTO:
That was structural. The shaft could—

LARS:
I know.

OTTO:
If it goes before we—

LARS:
Otto. I know.

Panel 3. Baumbach. The ship's light has moved through him completely — blue-white, total, warm. He stands with both hands at his sides. Eyes closed. Lips moving slightly. He is not bracing. He is not afraid. Whatever he came here believing, the light is answering something. A Wehrmacht chaplain at peace inside a dying alien ship, the cross at his chest and the stars all around him. This is his panel. Hold on it. It is the last time we see him.

Panel 4. The whine becomes a roar. The shaft wall splits — a long diagonal crack opening fast, chunks of ceiling beginning to fall. Tonto drives his face into Lars's chest and covers his ears. Lars pulls him in, eyes on the indicator.

LARS:
Come on. Come on—

ELENA:
Lars—

LARS:
Almost. Hold on to something.

Panel 5. The indicator hits the top. The elevator doors grind — catch — grind again. Lars hits the manual release with the flat of his hand. Once. Twice.

OTTO:
It's not—

LARS:
It's opening.

Panel 6. The doors open. Dawn light. Cold air. Lars is through before the doors are fully open — Tonto under one arm, other hand locked on Elena's wrist, pulling hard.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-TWO (five panels)

Panel 1. They run. The courtyard is coming apart beneath them – stones dropping in increments, the ground pulling toward its own center. The north tower has a crack in it that is visibly widening with every step. A staff car sits twenty meters ahead in the carport. It might as well be a hundred.

LARS:

The car. GET BEHIND THE CAR.

ELENA:

We're not going to make it–

LARS:

We don't need the road. Just the car. GO.

Panel 2. They hit the carport and throw themselves behind the staff car – Lars pulling Tonto down, Elena dropping flat, Otto going to his knees against the rear wheel well with the graceless urgency of a man who has never done anything like this in his life and is doing it anyway. Lars gets his body over Tonto. The castle comes down.

Panel 3. Not an explosion outward – a consumption inward. The hangar ceiling first, then the corridors above caving in sequence, the north tower folding at its base in one long slow piece. A subsonic pulse moves through the ground, through the carport floor, through the chassis of the car and into every person pressed against it. The staff car rocks on its wheels. The carport shudders but holds. Stone and dust and everything that happened here falling into the earth where a ship used to be.

Panel 4. Silence. Then dust – settling over everything in a slow grey coat. Lars lifts his head first. Then Elena. Tonto sits up from under Lars's arm and looks at what used to be Der Riese. His hand raises – not waving. Something older and quieter than a wave. For the habitat. For the radio. For Baumbach.

Panel 5. Then Otto, who has lost his glasses and is patting the ground around him with remarkable composure given the circumstances.

OTTO: (*finding his glasses*)

We appear to be alive.

LARS:

We appear to be.

Panel 5. The four of them on their feet, grey with dust. Elena's hand goes to her abdomen — not pain, just the instinct to check. The blood on her clothes belongs to a wound that no longer exists. She looks at Tonto. The child looks back. Something passes between them that has no word for it.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-THREE (five panels)

Panel 1. Lars takes the compass from his pocket. Opens it. Behind him, where Der Riese stood, there is nothing – torn earth, scorched grass, a column of settling dust catching the first morning light. The needle swings. Settles. Points at the child. It always pointed at the child. Lars closes it.

ELENA:

The ship is gone. Your proof. Everything.

LARS:

Yes.

Panel 2. Tonto moves to the edge of the scorched earth and crouches down. Elena crouches beside him. Tonto presses one three-fingered hand flat against the ground. He stays like that for a long moment – a grey child saying goodbye to the only human who ever sat outside his glass and talked to him like it mattered. Like he was worth talking to.

LARS: (to Tonto)

He was a good man. Better than most of us. And he chose you. Don't forget that.

ELENA:

So what do we do now?

Panel 3. Lars sees it before the others do – keys hanging in the ignition like a small gift from a universe that hasn't been generous lately. He crosses to the driver's door and without a word and opens it.

LARS:

We go.

Panel 4. Otto, looking at the car:

OTTO:

I should note that the last time we were all in a vehicle together, it was not a positive experience.

LARS:

Get in, Otto.

Panel 5. They drive. West. Away from the dust and the ruin and everything beneath it. Morning light comes through the trees in long columns — the same roads, the same forest they fled through in Chapter Six. The same covered bridge visible in the distance. But no motorcycles behind them. No gunfire. Just tires on dirt and the sound of four people breathing.

PAGE SEVENTY-FOUR (five panels)

Panel 1. Back seat. Tonto is asleep – the first real sleep since the habitat. His head against Elena's shoulder. His three-fingered hand still gripping her sleeve. Holding on even in sleep. Elena doesn't move it.

Panel 2. Elena catches Lars' eyes in the rearview mirror. He looks back.

ELENA:
Lars.

LARS:
I know.

ELENA:
I just need you to know that I–

LARS:
Elena.

ELENA:
What?

LARS:
I know.

Panel 3. Elena doesn't answer. Just turns to the window – forest, dawn light, the road ahead. The expression of a woman realizing she misjudged the distance between who she thought Lars was and who he actually is

Panel 4. Otto in the front seat stops writing. Looks at the compass. Then at the road.

OTTO:
It just occurred to me that the four of us are traveling in a stolen military vehicle, with no identification, no destination, and an extraterrestrial child. This may be the most impractical situation I

have ever been in. And I once tried to build a particle accelerator in a broom closet.

LARS:

I'm open to suggestions.

OTTO:

Well we've survived this long on improvisation. I find that both encouraging and deeply alarming.

Panel 5. Wide. The staff car on the road, forest swallowing it on both sides. Behind them: a castle, a buried ship, and a man who chose to stay. Ahead: just road, disappearing into trees. On the dashboard, the compass needle holds steady — pointing at the sleeping child between the two people who carried him out of the dark. They don't know where they're going. But they're moving together.

Chapter Nine: "THE BARN"

Pages 175 – 187 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-FIVE (five panels)

Panel 1. The staff car on a dirt road. Morning light through the trees – the sun above the tree line now, casting long shadows across the road. The same landscape they fled through in Chapter Six. The same covered bridge in the distance. The same split oak where Elena shouted directions while Lars bled. The land remembers everything they did to it. They remember too.

Panel 2. Nobody speaks. Lars drives with one hand, the other resting on the door. Elena in the back seat with Tonto – the child awake now, watching the trees pass with enormous eyes. Otto in the passenger seat, his notepad closed for once. Just looking at the road.

Panel 3. The barn appears around a curve. THE barn – the one from Chapter Six. The hay door still open. The wheel ruts still visible from where they pulled in during the chase. It looks exactly as they left it – unremarkable, abandoned, the kind of structure that exists between places that matter.

Panel 4. Lars pulls the car off the road. Parks beside the barn. Turns off the engine. The silence that follows is the loudest thing in the chapter.

Panel 5. They get out. Stand in front of the barn. The four of them and the dawn and the absence of a plan.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-SIX (six panels)

[ART NOTE: The barn. Morning light. The hay still flat where they slept before. Everything that happened since they were last here lives in this room without being spoken.]

Panel 1. Elena stands in the barn door. Behind her Lars leans against the frame — eyes scanning the perimeter out of habit — windows, shadows, exits — the soldier's reflex that never fully sleeps. He stops when he sees the hay. Still flattened where they slept. The spot where he sat and argued for Switzerland. He looks at it the way you look at something you didn't expect to see again.

ELENA:
Switzerland. You really were going to go.

LARS:
I really was.

ELENA:
I'm glad you're bad at following through.

Panel 2. They sit. Inside the barn, on the hay. Tonto between Lars and Elena — his hand on Lars's knee, his other hand holding Elena's sleeve. The child who has been held and carried and shielded for the entire story, holding on to both of them equally. As if he knows what's coming before they say it.

Panel 3. Otto leans against the barn door frame. Watching the road. Watching his daughter. Watching the child. His mind working — the way it always works, calculating, cataloguing, building a plan from the wreckage of the last one.

Panel 4. Lars stares at the hay. At his hands. At the blood still on his shirt — Elena's blood, from a wound that is no longer there. He takes a breath.

LARS:
Eva saw us running. She was the only person in that chamber who could have stopped us.

ELENA:
Why didn't she?

LARS: Reinhard used her and got nothing. She'd rather watch him lose than watch us get caught.

(Beat. Then:)

LARS:
I've spent three days running the odds on everything. Every exit.
Every angle. And I keep arriving at the same answer.

Panel 5. Elena watches him. She knows. She's known since the hangar – maybe since the ceremony, maybe since the barn the first time. She knows what he's about to say because she's been thinking the same thing.

ELENA:
You're not going back.

Panel 6. Lars looks at her. Then at Tonto.

LARS:
I can't go back. Not with him.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-SEVEN (five panels)

Panel 1. Lars looks at Tonto — sitting on the hay, holding his knee like an anchor. The child who reached through the glass. Who activated the ship. Who stood between a tank and his family.

LARS:

I was going to hand him over. My proof. My credibility back. But the moment I do, they send people here. And whether the ship exists or not, they'll want to be sure. And while they're being sure, he's in a different lab, somewhere undisclosed, being very politely taken apart. Different flag. Same table. The Americans just have better manners about it. (beat) And I need to be able to live with what I did here. That's the only line I know how to draw.

Panel 2. Close on Elena's face — the expression of a woman who has been waiting for Lars to say what he just said and didn't know she was waiting until he said it. Not relief exactly. Recognition. Her hand finds Tonto's head. He tilts it slightly into her palm without thinking. Neither of them looks at the other. They don't need to.

LARS:

I can't do it. I can't hand him to anyone.

ELENA:

So we don't go back.

Panel 3. Lars at the barn door — not open, just standing at it, one hand on the frame. Looking at the gap between the boards at the road beyond. A man who has spent his entire career knowing where the exits are, now working out which one doesn't lead somewhere worse.

LARS:

Dulles burned me. But he'll send people to look. The OSS doesn't lose their assets quietly.

ELENA:

Then we can't stay here either.

Panel 4. A beat. Both of them sitting with the weight of that. Tonto looks from one to the other — reading the room the way he always does, understanding more than anyone gives him credit for.

ELENA:

Then where do we go?

Panel 5. From the barn door, Otto's voice:

OTTO:

I may have an idea about that.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-EIGHT (six panels)

Panel 1. Otto steps inside the barn. Sits on a hay bale across from Lars and Elena. The physicist who always has something to say has been quiet for the entire drive. When Otto is quiet and then speaks, it matters.

OTTO:

I have an uncle. Had an uncle. Friedrich. He died in 1938. He left me a house — a chalet, in the mountains above Interlaken. Remote. No neighbors for kilometers. A place where a physicist could disappear to think, which is exactly what Uncle Friedrich used it for.

Panel 2. Otto looks at Lars. At Elena. At Tonto.

OTTO:

Two people and a child could live there. Quietly. Indefinitely. No government would look for you because no government would know you exist.

Panel 3. Elena sitting very still — the expression of a woman who wants this to work and is therefore looking very hard for the reasons it won't. Her eyes on Otto. Her hand still resting on Tonto's shoulder without her noticing it's there anymore.

ELENA:

What about papers? Identities?

OTTO:

Forged papers can be found. False identities can be traced. But a man nobody is hunting? A woman nobody has catalogued? The OSS is not searching for a family. They are searching for a spy. Give them nothing to find and they will find nothing. And the child...

Panel 4. He looks at Tonto. The child who doesn't need a passport because he doesn't belong to any country on earth.

OTTO:

This child doesn't need papers. He needs walls and a roof and two people who show up every day.

Panel 5. Lars hears what Otto isn't saying. The plan has two people in the chalet. Not three.

LARS:

You're not coming with us are you?

Panel 6. Otto on his hay bale — the physicist who always has the next thought already forming, sitting completely still for once. No notepad. No pen. Just a seventy-year-old man watching the two people he is about to hand his daughter to, in a barn in Germany, at the end of the worst war in human history, hoping he taught her enough and loved her enough and that the man sitting across from him is exactly who Otto has decided he is. The question is still in the air. Lars already knows the answer.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED SEVENTY-NINE (six panels)

Panel 1. Otto takes off his glasses. Cleans them on his shirt. The delay of a man organizing the hardest thing he's ever said.

OTTO:

I've heard rumors. The Americans are collecting German scientists – a program, unofficial, something called Paperclip. They want physicists. Rocket engineers. People who know things.

Panel 2. He pauses. Puts his glasses back on. Looks through the cracked lenses.

OTTO:

I know things. I know more about alien propulsion than anyone alive. If I go to them – if I present myself as the sole survivor of Castle Wewelsburg – I can tell them everyone else is dead. The pilot. The biologist. The specimen. All killed in the collapse. I'm the only one left. The only witness.

Panel 3. Elena understands before he finishes. Her face changes – the control cracking at the edges.

ELENA:

You're going to America.

OTTO:

I'm going to make sure no one ever comes looking for you.

Panel 4. Elena stands.

ELENA:

If you go – if they take you in – you'll be watched. Every letter. Every phone call. Every visitor.

OTTO:

I know.

Panel 5. Elena's voice drops.

ELENA:

You'll never be able to come back. You'll never be able to see us.
You'll never be able to see HIM.

Panel 6. Otto sits with Elena's words still in the air. *You'll never be able to see him.* The physicist who measured everything – who spent seven years counting every variable, every data point, every outcome – is sitting very still with the one number he cannot reduce to anything manageable.

OTTO:

That is correct.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY (five panels)

Panel 1. The weight of *that is correct* settles over the barn like the quiet after a shot – everyone still, everyone waiting for what comes next, nobody wanting to be the first to find out. Lars at the door. Elena and Tonto folded into each other. Otto standing with his notebook open and his pen unmoved.

Panel 2. Lars watches Otto. The spy and the physicist. Two men who met after a dinner where a man was shot and have been in each other's orbit since – not friends, not allies exactly, something harder to name. Two people who chose the same child for different reasons and ended up in the same barn.

LARS:

You don't have to do this.

OTTO:

Yes, I do. It's the only way that works. If I'm in America, I control the narrative. I'm the physicist who survived. I'm the expert they need. And the story I tell them – the story where everyone else is dead – becomes the official record. No one looks for ghosts.

Panel 3. Elena turns away. Her back to Otto. Her hand on the door frame. Not crying – Elena doesn't cry. But close. Closer than she's been since her mother died the day she was born.

ELENA:

I would make the same choices. Every time –(beat) That doesn't make it hurt less. Knowing it costs you someone you love for someone you saved.

Panel 4. Tonto slides off the hay bale. Walks to Elena. Takes her hand. Holds it. The same gesture from the habitat – the grip of a child who knows when someone he loves is breaking.

Panel 5. Otto watches his daughter and the child. The two things he loves most in the world, standing in a barn door, holding hands. He's about to lose both of them so that both of them can live.

OTTO:

I know exactly what that costs. (*beat*) I'm standing here paying it right now.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-ONE (six panels)

Panel 1. Elena turns back. Walks to her father.

ELENA:

I can't let you do this.

OTTO:

You don't have a choice my dear. And neither do I. This is the only way to keep you safe – all three of you.

Panel 2. Elena's voice, steady but cracking:

ELENA:

You're asking me to lose my father.

Panel 3. Otto's face – the harmless professor, the man who performed harmlessness for seven years, who talked about kilojoules while his hands shook on the bars. Now performing something harder: certainty he doesn't entirely feel.

OTTO:

I am a physicist. I deal in what is provable. And I can tell you with absolute certainty – what is in this barn is worth protecting. All of it.

Panel 4. Otto says it like a diagnosis – precise, clinical, and utterly certain. A physicist's word for the most unscientific thing he's ever witnessed.

OTTO:

You have a child who needs you. You have a man who came back for you. You have a life that is worth protecting. And if the price of protecting it is that I go somewhere else and tell a very convincing lie, I will gladly pay it knowing you are all safe.

Panel 5. Elena's face. The control cracking. Not fully – Elena never fully cracks. But the edges.

ELENA:
Vater...

Panel 6. Otto puts his hand on her face. The same gesture from the cell block – a father holding his daughter. The gesture that will carry across nine years and an ocean and never lose its weight.

OTTO:
I will miss you too. But I am seventy years old. I have had a career. I have had discoveries. I have had seven years with the most extraordinary child in the universe. And I have had a daughter who became braver than I ever was. That is enough. That is more than enough.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-TWO (six panels)

Panel 1. Otto holds Elena. She lets him. For one long panel – the physicist and the biologist, the father and the daughter, standing in a barn that smells like hay and gasoline and the end of something.

OTTO:

Go. Raise him. Love him. And when he's old enough – tell him his grandfather was a physicist who counted everything and measured everything and the only thing he couldn't calculate was how much he loved his family.

Panel 2. Otto releases her. Turns to Lars. The two men – apart from Elena, apart from Tonto. Two people who chose the same child for different reasons and found each other in the choosing.

LARS:

I'll take care of them.

OTTO:

I know you will. You came back.

LARS:

That wasn't...

OTTO:

THAT was everything, Herr Frei. A man who comes back is a man who stays. I don't need to calculate that.

Panel 3. Otto reaches into his pocket. Pulls out Baumbach's Bible – Small. Worn. The last physical piece of the man who chose to die inside an alien ship so four people could live.

OTTO:

I took this from Baumbach's pocket before he put his hand on the panel. I don't know why. Werner would want the child to have this. I don't know if Tonto can read German. I don't know if God's word applies across galaxies. But Werner believed it did. And Werner was right about every important thing.

Panel 4. Lars takes the Bible. Holds it. The weight of a man's faith in his hands.

Panel 5. Otto pulls out his notepad. Tears out a page. Writes something – a set of numbers.

OTTO:

The coordinates for the chalet's location. The key is under the third stone from the left of the front step. Friedrich was not creative about hiding places.

Panel 6. Lars takes the page. Folds it. Puts it in his pocket next to the compass.

LARS:

You're trusting me with everything you love. I won't forget that. I'll get them there. You have my word.

OTTO:

I know. That's why I'm asking you and not someone else. (a beat) See that she's happy, Lars. That's all. Just – see that she's happy.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-THREE (five panels)

CAPTION: A short time later...

Panel 1. The four of them standing outside the barn. The staff car behind Otto – he'll drive east, toward the American lines, toward Paperclip, toward a lie that will keep three people safe for the rest of their lives. The road ahead of Lars and Elena leads south – toward the Swiss border, toward Interlaken, toward a chalet in the mountains where nobody will find them.

Panel 2. Tonto breaks free from Elena. Walks to Otto. The child who doesn't speak, who has been silent for 183 pages except for one psychic alarm. He reaches up and puts his three-fingered hand on Otto's face.

Panel 3. The same gesture Tonto uses when he heals. But he's not healing anything. He's saying goodbye the only way he knows how – through touch, through feeling, through the empathic connection that his species uses instead of words. Otto closes his eyes. Holds the child's hand against his cheek. His glasses fog. He doesn't wipe them.

OTTO (voice breaking):

I will miss you too little one. You have shown me a universe so vast that given infinite amount time I will never understand a fraction of it. I find that I am perfectly at peace with that now. Now go. Before an old man makes a fool of himself.

Panel 4. Elena takes Tonto's hand. Lars takes the other. They walk toward the road – south, toward the border. Otto stands by the car. Watching.

Panel 5. Lars looks back. Once. The pilot who never used to look back – who walked away from every identity, every cover, every life he'd borrowed – looks back at the old professor standing beside a stolen staff car in front of a barn.

LARS (quiet, to himself):

Thank you, Otto.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-FOUR (five panels)

[ART NOTE: This page is quiet and earned. No shadows. No threat. Just morning light, tall grass, and distance.

The palette shifts here – cooler, cleaner, the grey-white of Swiss mountains replacing the concrete and fire of everything before it. Let the panels breathe. Wide shots. Open sky. After nine chapters of darkness the artist should resist filling the space.

The visual spine is simple: distance increasing panel by panel. The border approaching. The ridge receding. Otto shrinking toward the edge of the frame until he's just a figure beside a car against a skyline.

Two images anchor the page and should mirror each other: Tonto's three fingers against the morning light. Otto's five answering from the ridge. Frame them the same way. Let the symmetry do the work.

Panel 5 is the last shot of Otto. Keep him small. Elena's hand held toward a silhouette that is still getting smaller is the last gesture of the book's longest relationship. Hold it. Let him disappear at the panel's edge – gradually, then completely.]

Panel 1. The border is visible from the ridge above the road. A stone marker. A line between one country and another. Between the war and whatever comes after. The Swiss mountains rising beyond it – grey and white and impossibly permanent against the morning sky.

Panel 2. Three figures walking downhill through tall grass toward the stone marker. Lars on the left. Elena on the right. Tonto between them. Holding both their hands. The way they walked out of the castle. The way they'll walk for the rest of their lives.

Panel 3. Tonto looks back. Over his shoulder. Up the ridge. Then looks back again. Two looks – one for Elena, checking she's still watching. One for Otto. The second time, he waves. Three fingers against the morning light.

Panel 4. On the ridge: OTTO. Alone. The staff car behind him. His notepad in one hand. His cracked glasses in the other. Watching the three people he saved – or who saved him, he was never sure which – cross a border into a country where no one will find them. He waves back. One hand. Five fingers.

Panel 5. They cross the border. The stone marker passes beneath them. Lars doesn't look back again. Elena looks back once more — finds Otto's silhouette on the ridge, small now, getting smaller. Holds her hand up. Holds it there until she can't see him anymore.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-FIVE (five panels)

Panel 1. Otto alone on the ridge. The three figures below him – getting smaller, disappearing into the tall grass, into Switzerland, into a life he made possible and will never see. The morning light catching the stone marker. A bird circling above the meadow. The war happening somewhere else entirely.

OTTO: *(to himself)*

Insufficient data. Impossible outcome. *(beat)* Best result of my career.

Panel 2. He puts his glasses on. Opens his notepad. Writes something. The physicist cataloguing one final observation.

Panel 3. Close on the notepad. His handwriting – cramped, precise, familiar. The words: "Subject: L. Frei (Cole Haller). Status: Defected. Classification: Family man. Notes: Finally learned to stay."

Panel 4. He closes the notepad. Pockets it. Gets in the staff car. Starts the engine.

Panel 5. The car pulls away. East. Toward the American lines. The road behind him leads to a border he just watched three people cross. The road ahead leads to a lie that will keep them safe. Otto drives. The physicist who measured everything, driving toward the one variable he can still control.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-SIX (six panels)

CAPTION: Three days later.

Panel 1. The chalet above Interlaken. Stone walls, slate roof, a porch facing the Alps. Remote. No neighbors. Lars stands at the top of the path looking at it – the coordinates on Otto's torn notepad folded in his hand. They made it. This is the place.

Panel 2. Lars crouches at the front step. Counts the stones from the left. Third one. He lifts it. The key is there. He looks at it for a moment – this small ordinary thing that Otto put here years ago for someone he hadn't met yet. Then picks it up.

Panel 3. The door swings open. The three of them standing in the frame – Lars, Elena, Tonto between them. The chalet dark and still and smelling of wood and cold air and someone else's life waiting to become theirs. Tonto steps through first.

CAPTION: Three weeks later.

Panel 4. Lars on the porch repairing a broken shutter – his hands working with the ease of a man relieved to be doing something that requires no aliases and no ammunition. Elena beside him, planting something in a window box. An act so ordinary after everything that preceded it that it borders on miraculous.

Panel 5. Inside: Tonto on the floor with crayons. Not alien symbols. Stick figures – four of them, holding hands. The sun too big. The grass too green. The sky crowded with stars. The family he has. The one he's drawing because he wants to remember it looks like this.

Panel 6. Elena sees the drawing. Doesn't say anything.

Panel 7. Elena pinning the picture on the wall above the kitchen table. Stands back. Looks at it. That's Elena – she keeps things. She always keeps things.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-SEVEN (four panels)

CAPTION: Three months later.

Panel 1. Night. The chalet. A radio plays in the corner – the Lone Ranger. The same program that played through the habitat glass. Tonto sits in front of it, cross-legged, riveted. Same posture as the habitat. Same enormous eyes. But no glass between him and the sound. No guards. No cameras. Just a child listening to a radio in a living room that belongs to him.

RADIO:

There are those who ride into darkness so that others may ride toward the light...

Panel 2. Lars sits on the floor beside Tonto. The way he used to sit outside the glass for forty-seven minutes a day. Except now he's inside. He's home.

RADIO:

But the Lone Ranger asks for nothing. He leaves no name. Only the ones he saved knew he had ever been there at all...

Panel 3. Elena in the doorway, watching them. The pilot and the child. The two people she crossed back into a castle for. She looks at the drawing on the wall – four stick figures, holding hands. She looks at the two figures on the floor. Counts. Subtracts.

RADIO:

Some men are not remembered by history. They are only remembered by the ones they loved.

Panel 4. On the kitchen table: Baumbach's Bible. Open. Worn. Tonto can't read it. And on the counter beside it – a bar of dark chocolate. The good kind. Unwrapped. And Lars Compass.

RADIO:

And somewhere out there – someone is safe tonight because of what he did. That's enough. That was always enough.

Epilogue: "FAMILY"

Pages 188 – 196 | Full Panel-by-Panel Script

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-EIGHT (six panels)

[ART NOTE: Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Dayton, Ohio. 1952. Grey morning. The architecture of American military bureaucracy – functional, fluorescent, designed to process information without sentiment. Everything the opposite of a castle in Germany.]

CAPTION: Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Dayton, Ohio. September 1952.

Panel 1. A black government sedan moving through the main gate of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. An MP waves it through without stopping it. The base stretches beyond the gate – flat, orderly, American.

Panel 2. The sedan stops outside an administrative building. A uniformed airman opens the rear door. OTTO steps out – eighty if he's a day, smaller than he used to be, his suit better than the one that got buried under Der Riese. He looks up at the building for a moment. A man who has survived two world wars, a dying ship, and seven years of lying now standing outside a government building in Ohio. He straightens his hat. Goes in.

Panel 3. A small office. Fluorescent light. Two men standing as Otto is ushered in by a junior airman. On the left: CAPTAIN EDWARD J. RUPPELT – mid-thirties, sharp, the bearing of a man who takes the impossible seriously without apologizing for it. On the right: DR. J. ALLEN HYNEK – early forties, glasses, the careful stillness of a scientist who has learned to listen before he reacts. A notepad already open on the desk. Otto's written report between them – dense, precise, the handwriting of a man who spent a lifetime being exact.

RUPPELT:

Professor Hahn. Captain Edward Ruppelt. This is Dr. Hynek, our scientific consultant.

HYNEK:

Professor. Thank you for making the trip.

OTTO:

I was not certain I would. Several times.

Panel 4. The three of them seated. Ruppelt has Otto's report open in front of him. He taps it – not aggressively. Just the gesture of a man who has read something he needs confirmed before he goes further.

RUPPELT:

Your report, Professor. Everything in it – you stand by it? All of it?

OTTO: (*without hesitation*) Every word. I am a physicist. I do not write things I cannot support.

HYNEK: (*quiet*)

We read it... twice.

OTTO:

I imagine you did.

Panel 5. Ruppelt and Hynek exchange a look – brief, professional, the look of two men who have been waiting for someone like Otto for three years.

RUPPELT:

We need to hear it from you. The whole story. From the beginning.

OTTO:

I know. That's why I came.

Panel 6. Otto folds his hands on the table. The physicist assembling his thoughts with the same precision he brought to everything. Outside the window: grey Ohio sky. Ordinary. Indifferent. He looks at it for a moment – then back at the two men waiting.

OTTO:

I am eighty-one years old, gentlemen. I have a condition my doctor describes with great professional optimism and I describe with considerably less. (*beat*) There are things I will take to my grave. This is not one of them.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED EIGHTY-NINE (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The panels shift as Otto speaks – each one a flashback, memory-lit, slightly overexposed, warmer and darker than the Dayton office. The dialogue lives in the present. The images live in the past.]

Panel 1. PRESENT on the left: Otto talking, his hands moving slightly as he speaks. Hynek writing. Ruppelt leaning forward, elbows on the desk. Dissolving into the PAST on the right: deep space – not the crash site, not yet. Just the dark between stars. Vast. Cold. Eerily similar to the very first panel of Chapter 1.

OTTO:

It came from somewhere I cannot calculate. Somewhere beyond what our instruments could reach or our mathematics could map. It arrived the way things arrive when they have crossed a distance the human mind was not built to hold. *(beat)* What I mean is – it came from very far away. And it came alone.

HYNEK:

When you say somewhere beyond – Outside our solar system?

OTTO:

I mean I looked at the propulsion architecture for seven years and I still cannot tell you where it originated. I can tell you it was not built for the distances between planets. It was built for the distances between stars.

Panel 2. Flashback: The habitat – not Tonto's face but the whole picture. The glass, the climate controls, the calibrated lighting, the scientific instruments mounted on the walls outside. A habitat built by the most precise minds the Reich could assemble. And inside it: a grey child, small against the machinery of his captivity, one three-fingered hand pressed flat against the glass.

HYNEK (OP):

The child. How long was he held?

OTTO (OP):

Seven years. We built him a habitat. Climate controlled. Nutritionally calibrated. Scientifically precise. *(beat)* A cage, Dr. Hynek. We built him a very precise cage. And I told myself every morning that the precision made it something else.

Panel 3. Flashback: Otto's reflection in the habitat glass – his face overlaid on Tonto's face on the other side. Two scientists looking at each other across a barrier. One with a clipboard. One with nothing.

Both of them understanding more than the arrangement was designed to allow.

OTTO (OP):

I told myself it was necessary. That we were protecting him as much as containing him. That the work served a purpose beyond what the Reich wanted from it. *(beat)* Scientists are very good at telling themselves these things. We have been doing it for centuries.

RUPPELT (OP):

But you kept working.

OTTO (OP):

I kept working. Yes. Until I couldn't anymore. And then I kept working anyway. *(beat)* That is the part of the report I am least proud of.

Panel 4. Flashback: Lars and Tonto – the glass dividing the panel down the center. Lars on the left, still in mission mode, hand braced against the frame. Tonto on the right, completely still, enormous eyes level with Lars's. Two beings from opposite ends of the universe, separated by two inches of glass, already in the process of changing each other's lives.

HYNEK (OP):

What changed?

OTTO (OP):

A pilot arrived. American. Working for the OSS pretending a member of the German Luftwaffe. He had been sent to assess the installation – his people knew something significant was there but not what. And then he saw the child through the glass. *(beat)* And he couldn't leave him. He tried. He came back. Some people are like that – they see something that needs protecting and they can't unknow it. I had not encountered that before.

Panel 5. Flashback: The habitat glass – Lars's hand pressed against it from one side. Tonto's three fingers on the other. And there, reflected in the glass between them, barely visible: Elena. Standing behind Lars. Her hand on his shoulder. The three of them connected through two inches of glass in a way none of them have words for yet.

HYNEK (OP):

This pilot. His name. Was it Lars Frei or Cole Haller?

OTTO (OP):

Oh, neither. I took that liberty deliberately in the report. He has a family now. People who depend on him being exactly where he is and exactly who he is. *(beat)* Whatever you do with this report — that name stays protected. I did not survive all of this to put him at risk from a filing cabinet in Ohio.

HYNEK (OP): (not looking up)
Noted.

RUPPELT (OP): (also not looking up)
Noted.

Panel 6. Flashback: The hangar — wide. The ship filling most of the frame, its surface catching the light in a way no earthly metal does. And at the base of it, barely registering against the scale of the thing: Lars. One man. Standing alone in a hangar built for something that crossed the dark between stars. Small enough to be an afterthought. About to become the only thing that matters.

OTTO (OP):

He was reckless and stubborn and occasionally infuriating. *(beat)* He was also exactly the right man. I knew it when I watched him go back in.

HYNEK (OP):
Go back?

Panel 7. Flashback: Split image — top half: the ship's hull, close, the surface of something that crossed the dark between stars, vast and cold and incomprehensible. Bottom half: Lars's hand against the habitat glass. Tonto's three fingers on the other side. The smallest possible gesture at the end of the longest possible journey.

OTTO (OP):

Into the castle. After he had already gotten out. *(beat)* Do you understand what that ship represented, Dr. Hynek? The distance it traveled? There is nothing in our mathematics that makes that journey casual. And yet here — at the end of it — the thing that mattered was one man who couldn't walk away. *(beat)* I think about that. The scale of space and the smallness of the thing that answered it. I think about it often.

HYNEK (OP): *(quietly)*

The distance. You implied it came from outside the solar system — you mean deep space.

OTTO (OP):

Much further. Yes. That is what I need to explain to you next. See...

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Seven tight panels. Memory-lit – warmer than the Dayton scenes, slightly overexposed. No dialogue. Otto's captions only. Each panel a different chapter of the same story.]

Panel 1. FLASHBACK: The crash site – not from ground level but from above, as if seen from a reconnaissance plane. A perfect radius of scorched earth in the German forest, the ship half-buried at its center, still faintly luminescent. From this height it looks like a wound in the landscape.

OTTO (VO):

...Space – It stretches on without end – an infinite cathedral of darkness that swallows light whole, that breathes cold silence into the void like a secret too vast for any living thing to keep...

Panel 2. FLASHBACK: The hangar beneath Der Riese – the ship fully revealed for the first time, suspended in the purpose-built space, scaffolding around it, SS engineers small against its hull. Otto in the foreground, younger, looking up at it. His clipboard at his side. Not writing. Incapable of writing.

Panel 3. FLASHBACK: Elena – not at the entrance but inside the habitat observation room, already at work. Her notes spread across the desk. Her eyes on Tonto through the glass – focused, precise, and already, though she doesn't know it yet, beginning to care.

Panel 4. FLASHBACK: Baumbach in his folding chair outside the habitat glass – not reading today. Just sitting. His Bible closed on his knee. Tonto on the other side, mirroring his posture. Two beings with nothing in common, keeping each other company through glass.

Panel 5. FLASHBACK: Eva in the hangar – not at the doorway but close to the ship's hull, one gloved hand almost touching it. Her reflection in the surface. Her face and its reflection looking at each other. Both expressions identical. Both wanting the same thing.

Panel 6. FLASHBACK: The ceremony chamber – pulled back, wide, the scale of the ritual visible. The altar at center. Elena on it. Reinhard above her. The SS ranked around the walls. The candles. The Himmelsbuch. The light beginning to build at the room's edges. Otto in the far corner – the smallest figure in the frame – his face the face of a man who has finally run out of reasons.

OTTO (VO):

... It is an emptiness the human mind was never built to hold, a darkness so deep it hums.

Panel 7. FLASHBACK: The hangar floor — the aftermath of the ceremony's rupture. Soldiers thrown back, scattered. Candles guttered. The Himmelsbuch face-down on the concrete. And at the center of it all: light. Blue-white, spreading outward from somewhere it shouldn't be. The beginning of the end of everything.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-ONE (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Eight small panels. The pace accelerates. These are the moments of rupture – the story breaking open. Still memory-lit but darker now, higher contrast. The warmth is gone.]

Panel 1. FLASHBACK: Tonto in the habitat – standing, arms out, the psychic alarm building around him. Blue-white light beginning at his fingertips. His face not angry. Determined.

Panel 2. FLASHBACK: The ceremony chamber rupturing – light exploding outward from Eva, from Tonto, the SS soldiers thrown back, candles scattering, the Himmelsbuch flying from the altar. Tonto's eyes open. Alive.

OTTO (VO):

And yet, amid the killing cold and the violent, churning chaos of colliding galaxies and exploding suns, something extraordinary refuses to be extinguished –

Panel 3. FLASHBACK: Close on Reinhard's skull – the blue-white light finding every seam at once, every fault line in bone and tissue, the pressure building in a single catastrophic millisecond before the whole architecture gives. Outward. All of it. What lands on the hangar floor is not something you look at twice.

Panel 4. FLASHBACK: Baumbach at the ship's primary panel – both hands on it, the blue-white light moving through him completely now. Eyes closed. At peace. The last time we see him.

OTTO (VO):

Life – stubborn and luminous, erupting in a thousand wild iterations, strange and relentless and shapeshifting through the long millennia...

Panel 5. FLASHBACK: Hermann carrying Helga – her leg gone at the knee, his arm around her, half-dragging her through a side corridor as the walls crack around them. Not heroes. Not villains anymore. Just two people trying to survive the collapse of everything they served. Hermann's face: grim, determined. Helga's: white with pain but conscious. They make it through a door. The corridor collapses behind them.

Panel 6. FLASHBACK: The elevator shaft – the four of them inside, the walls cracking, the lights flickering, the floor indicator moving too slowly. Lars's hand flat on the control panel. Elena gripping Otto's arm. Tonto's face buried in Lars's chest.

Panel 7. FLASHBACK: Wide. The collapse – the castle consuming itself, the dust rising in a slow column into the pale dawn sky. The four of

them at the edge of the carport, small against it. Otto on his knees, finding his glasses.

OTTO (VO):

...crackling like lightning searching for the ground, burning in whatever form it must, through whatever storm it must, to simply, defiantly exist.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-TWO (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: The flashbacks begin to resolve. The pace slows. We're moving from rupture back toward stillness. The light warms again.]

Panel 1. FLASHBACK: The staff car on the road — forest on both sides, morning light through the trees in long columns. The compass on the dashboard. The needle pointing at the back seat.

Panel 2. FLASHBACK: The barn interior — Lars and Elena in the hay, the conversation that changed everything. Lars's face: a man making a decision he can't take back. Elena's face: a woman watching him make it.

Panel 3. FLASHBACK: The stone marker. Three figures walking downhill through tall grass — Lars, Elena, Tonto between them, holding both their hands. The Alps rising beyond. Switzerland.

Panel 4. FLASHBACK: Otto alone on the ridge. The staff car behind him. His notepad in one hand. Below him, disappearing into the tall grass: three people. He raises his hand. Five fingers against the morning sky.

OTTO (VO):

And sometimes fate arrives uninvited, crashing into the carefully built order of things like a rogue star tearing through a solar system — sudden, indifferent, catastrophic — scattering everything that was once certain into cold and spinning debris, leaving only ruin where there was once light.

Panel 5. FLASHBACK: Tonto's hand — raised, looking back over his shoulder from the tall grass below. Three fingers against the light. The wave that is not a wave. The goodbye that both of them will carry.

Panel 6. FLASHBACK: Lars crouching at the front step of the chalet. The coordinates in one hand. The key in the other. He looks at it for a moment — this small thing that Otto put here for someone he hadn't met yet.

Panel 7. FLASHBACK: The chalet door swinging open. The three of them in the frame — Lars, Elena, Tonto between them. Tonto steps through first. Into the dark. Into the rest of their lives.

OTTO (VO):

But life, that stubborn and electric thing, does not ask permission to continue — it crawls forward through the wreckage,

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-THREE (seven panels)

[ART NOTE: Back to Dayton. The fluorescent light. The linoleum. Otto and Hynek and Ruppelt. The present tense. The room feels smaller now than it did when the story started.]

Panel 1. Back to Present. Otto trails off. Not because he's forgotten — he will remember every detail until he dies — but because remembering it and saying it out loud in a fluorescent office in Ohio are two entirely different things. Hynek's pen is still. Ruppelt hasn't moved. They know when to let the silence work. Otto looks at his hands. Somewhere behind his eyes, a ship is going into the ground.

OTTO:

It reaches again toward the light with trembling and determined hands...

Panel 2. Otto has stopped talking. Hynek has stopped writing. Ruppelt has stopped leaning forward. The notepad between them is full — both sides of every page. They sit for a moment in the specific silence of a room where something enormous has just been set down and nobody is sure yet how to pick it up.

HYNEK:

The child. The report says he's safe.

OTTO:

The child is safe. That is all I can tell you. That is all I will ever tell you.

Panel 3. Ruppelt. Quietly — not pushing, just needing to ask.

RUPPELT:

You wrote that in the report. That he communicated.

OTTO:

Not in language. Not at first. He communicated in — presence. In feeling. You understood him before you heard him. *(beat)* I have never found the scientific framework for that. I stopped looking for one.

Panel 4. Hynek looks at what he's written. Reads the last line back to himself. Underlines it — slowly, deliberately, the way you mark

something you know you'll come back to. Then closes the notepad. The way you close something that matters.

HYNEK:

Professor Hahn. In three years on this project I have interviewed two hundred and fourteen witnesses. Military personnel. Pilots. Scientists. Civilians. *(beat)* I have never interviewed anyone who spent seven years with a subject.

OTTO:

No. I don't imagine you have.

Panel 5. Ruppelt stands. Crosses to the window. His back to the room — looking at grey Ohio outside. He stays like that for a moment. A man running the implications and not quite arriving anywhere comfortable.

RUPPELT:

The ship. You said it's gone. Destroyed.

OTTO:

The ship is gone. Der Riese is rubble. The castle, I'm told, has been largely rebuilt — the Germans are quite good at covering their mistakes in stone and calling it restoration. It's something of a national specialty. But if you feel compelled to contact the West German government and request permission to excavate a medieval castle on the grounds that you believe an extraterrestrial spacecraft is buried beneath it — *(beat)* — Well I would very much like to be there for that meeting.

Panel 6. Hynek crosses to his desk. Opens the bottom drawer — already thick with folders, other impossible accounts, other things that don't fit anywhere the Air Force has a category for. He takes Otto's report — dense, precise, the handwriting of a man who spent a lifetime being exact — and slides it into the drawer. Takes his pen. Writes on the tab. Three words. We see them clearly:

THE TONTO CONSPIRACY.

Panel 7. The drawer closes. Hynek straightens. Offers his hand. Otto takes it. Then Ruppelt's. A room of three men who have just agreed, without saying so, on what this moment means and what it doesn't.

HYNEK:

I can't tell you what happens next with this. I won't make promises I can't keep.

OTTO:

I'm not asking for promises. I'm asking for the record to exist.

Whatever happens to it after that - *(he picks up his coat, his hat)* -
is above my pay grade, as the Americans say.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-FOUR (six panels)

Panel 1. The corridor outside Hynek's office. Otto walking — unhurried, unremarkable, an old professor leaving a government building on an ordinary Ohio morning. His footsteps on linoleum. The fluorescent lights above him. The physicist who measured everything, walking through a building full of people who will never know what just happened in that room.

Panel 2. The building's exit. Glass doors opening onto grey Ohio daylight. Otto steps through. Puts his hat on. Adjusts it with the particular care of a man who still believes in doing small things correctly.

Panel 3. Otto on the steps. Already turning to leave. Then — the door behind him opens. Hynek. Coat on, notepad still in hand. He stops at the top of the steps. Otto stops without turning around. As if he knew.

HYNEK:

One more question. Off the record.

OTTO: *(still not turning)*

There is no off the record, Dr. Hynek. Not with this.

HYNEK:

Why now? You carried this for nine years. Why come forward now?

Panel 4. Otto turns. Slowly. The full weight of a man who has been waiting a long time to say this to someone worth saying it to. In the background, slightly out of focus — a dark car parked across the street. Engine off. A figure behind the wheel. Otto has seen it. Hynek hasn't.

OTTO:

Because I am an old man, Dr. Hynek. And old men have a responsibility to the truth. I spent seven years studying the most extraordinary things the universe has ever produced, and I reduced it to data. I will never make that mistake again. Someone should know what happened. Someone should know that a pilot came back, and a biologist walked into her own cage, and a bomber pilot stayed inside a dying ship to free a child who crossed galaxies. *(beat)* Someone should know. Even if no one believes it.

HYNEK:

Someone does. *(beat)* Whether anyone can do anything about it is a different problem.

OTTO:

It always is. But someone knowing is enough. It was always enough.
(beat) Good day, Dr. Hynek. Take care of that report.

Panel 5. Otto rounds the corner. The dark car lost from sight. His hand finds his notepad, his pen – the physicist's reflex. He opens it to a fresh page. Writes one line. We see it clearly:

"They are still looking. Good. Let them look somewhere else."

Panel 6. Otto closes it. Keeps walking.

OTTO: *(to himself)*

And when every star has flickered into quiet, when every journey through the void has finally run its course...

Panel 7. The street swallows Otto as he walks off into the distance the way streets swallow unremarkable old men. Completely. Without a trace.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-FIVE (nine panels)

[ART NOTE: This page has two tracks running simultaneously – the domestic and the dangerous – and the reader should feel both without either being announced. The shard is the pivot point. Everything before it is setup. Everything after it is Tonto turning a threat into light. The dark car, the guns, the careful eyes – these are the facts of their life. The prisms on the ceiling are what they chose to do with those facts.]

Panel 1. The Alps above Interlaken – wide, overwhelming, impossibly permanent. Grey and white against a morning sky. The mountains that were here before the war. Before the castle. Before the ship. Before any of it. Somewhere below the treeline, invisible from here: a swiss chalet . Smoke from the chimney. A hawk circling above the meadow. The world doesn't know. The mountains don't care. Life continues anyway.

OTTO (VO):

... when all the shapes and storms and iterations of a life have crashed and settled into stillness...

Panel 2. The kitchen. Morning light. Elena at the table – coffee, a notebook open in front of her, writing. Not field notes. Something that belongs to her. On the counter behind her: a SIG P210 within easy reach. Not hidden. Not holstered. Just there – the way a tool lives in a kitchen where someone knows how to use it.

ELENA:

They've known where we are for longer than yesterday.

Panel 3. Lars (or now our Nameless Spy) at the window – the MP40 on the sill beside him, his eyes on the mountain road below. In the distance, barely visible through the trees: a dark car. Moving away. Unhurried. Deliberate. In the passenger window – the silhouette of a figure with a CANE. Beside her: a massive shape behind the wheel. They came. They looked. They're leaving.

The Nameless Spy:

It doesn't matter.

Panel 4. Close on the kitchen windowsill. Helma's glass shard. Standing upright against the glass – not lying flat the way glass falls, but placed. Leaning with precision. A small deliberate object that wasn't there yesterday. Morning light catching its edge. No hands in frame. Just the shard and the question of how it got there.

[ART NOTE: This panel has no dialogue and needs none. The shard is standing upright. The reader who remembers Chapter 7 – Helma picking it up at the crash site, carrying it like a relic of her sister – will feel their stomach drop. The reader who doesn't will still feel that something about the way this glass is positioned is wrong. Hold on it.]

Panel 5. Tonto on his step stool at the windowsill. He's looking at the shard – not with curiosity, not with the open wonder he brings to most things. Something more careful than that. The way you look at something that belongs to someone dangerous, that has weight you can feel before you touch it. He reaches for it slowly. Three fingers. Lifts it with both hands. Careful. He understands the gravity of this object without being told.

Panel 6. He holds it up to the light. The morning sun moves through it and breaks apart – small prisms scattering across the kitchen ceiling, across Tonto's upturned face, across the walls. He watches them. The child who spent seven years behind glass, turning a piece of someone's hatred into light.

OTTO (V.O.):

...nothing, in all this infinite and wondrous dark...

Panel 7. The Nameless Spy sees it. Doesn't move toward the window. Doesn't reach for the MP40. Just registers it – the soldier's read, the calculation that takes less than a second. He looks at Elena. She's already looked up. Her hand already near the pistol on the counter. Their eyes meet across the kitchen.

The Nameless Spy: *(quiet)*
We're fine.

ELENA: *(equally quiet)*
I know.

Panel 8. The Bernese Mountain Dog sits directly below Tonto's step stool – chin tilted up, watching him with the total uncomplicated devotion of a creature who decided on the first day that this was his person and has not reconsidered since. He hasn't noticed the dark car. He hasn't noticed the glass shard. He hasn't noticed the guns. The Nameless Spy looks down at him.

The Nameless Spy: *(dry)*

Some guard dog you turned out to be.

Panel 9. Wide. The kitchen. All of them in it — Lars at the window, weapon nearby, watching the road; Elena at the table, weapon within reach, watching Tonto; Tonto on his step stool, watching light; the dog below him, watching Tonto. Baumbach's Bible on the table. Dark chocolate beside it, half unwrapped. The stick figure drawing on the wall — four figures holding hands, sun too big, sky full of stars. The compass on the table. The needle still.

PAGE ONE HUNDRED NINETY-SIX (five panels)

CAPTION: That Evening.

Panel 1. Inside. Tonto on the floor with his crayons – a new drawing taking shape, more detailed than the stick figures now, more confident. He's been practicing. A stone house. Mountains behind it. Three people in front of it. He's drawing what he has. What he knows. The dog is in the drawing too – a rough brown and black shape, slightly too big, sitting beside the smallest figure.

Panel 2. The Nameless Spy sits down on the floor beside him. Just sits – the way he used to sit outside the glass for forty-seven minutes a day, except now there is no glass and no countdown and no mission. He looks at the drawing. Tonto looks at him. Then back at the drawing. Then at Lars again.

Panel 3. Elena sets her pistol carefully on the table. Crosses the room. Sits on the floor on Tonto's other side. The three of them together – Tonto between them, the way they crossed the border, the way they'll sit for the rest of their lives. The dog moves from his spot and settles against Tonto's leg. Nobody asked him to. He just does.

Panel 4. Tonto puts his crayon down. Looks at the drawing. Looks at The Nameless Spy. Looks at Elena. Takes a breath – the deliberate breath of a child choosing words carefully in a language that is not his and never will be and is his anyway.

Panel 5. Close on Tonto's face. The enormous eyes. The grey skin. The three fingers resting on the grass-green crayon. He speaks – slowly, like someone who has been holding a word for a very long time and has finally decided the moment is right.

OTTO (VO):
... will have mattered more than...

TONTO: Fa... mi... ly.

[Art Note: Hold this panel. Don't cut away. Don't add anything. Just this face – an alien child who crossed the dark between stars, who spent seven years behind glass, who said one word in the worst place imaginable and one word in the best, and both times meant exactly the same thing.]

END.