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The Revealing

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Prelude:
Nazi Germany, the Last Days
of the Third Reich

Wolfgang Von Schwerdt hurried up the last few steps of the Fuehrerbunke, the vast underground complex that Adolph Hitler had constructed for his protection, and had made his home for the last 105 days of his life. Pushing open a heavy steel door, he saw an overcast May sky, his first glimpse of daylight in over a week. Then he gasped in astonishment at the twisted steel, broken concrete, and rubble that surrounded him . . . all that was left of the Reichschancellery. The Allied bombing had been unrelenting, pounding Berlin day and night without letting up, until much of the city had been reduced to ashes. An ubiquitous layer of dust and smoke, combined with the smell of rotting corpses and seared flesh, created a living hell.

Von Schwerdt breathed the foul air deeply, enjoying it, tasting it with the tip of his tongue. He loved the smell of war, relished it, was born for it. *If only that madman, Hitler, had not proven to be such a weak vessel, things might have been different. If only someone else with more vitality had been chosen . . .* He let his thoughts slip away as his adjutant, who carried two overstuffed satchels of papers, caught up with him. Von Schwerdt picked his way through the rubble to where the garden had once been. There he came upon a small group of Nazi SS who were dousing two bodies with gasoline.

A captain who noticed Von Schwerdt snapped to attention. "Heil, Hitler!" he shouted as another soldier threw a match on the gasoline which exploded in a rush of flames.

“Look around you, you idiot! The war is over,” Von Schverdt said, and glared at the man.

The captain, unsure how to react, remained at attention.

Von Schverdt walked closer to the shallow pit and looked at the bodies of Adolph Hitler and Eva Braun, his mistress. He gathered a mouthful of saliva and spat toward the flaming bodies, then pivoted on the heels of his boots and walked away.

He turned up the sleeve of his black leather greatcoat and glanced at his watch. It was almost five. He had less than an hour to meet the Americans and surrender.

A burst of machine gun fire sounded very close, and he reacted with a start.

The Russians will be here soon. That realization made him hurry toward a car that was waiting nearby.

Shortly after Hitler had committed suicide by shooting himself, General Wolfgang Von Schverdt had made a series of telephone calls to the Americans from his private room in the Fuehrer’s bunker. He had offered them information, and as he had expected, they had responded eagerly.

Others in the bunker had begun to flee, knowing that capture by the Russians would mean imprisonment or death. Those remaining in the bunker had all agreed that it would be better to surrender to the Americans than to fall into the hands of the Red Army.

Von Schverdt stepped next to the waiting car. He glanced at the driver. *Little more than a boy*, he thought.

“Heil, Hitler,” the youth blurted.

Von Schverdt smiled with feigned affection. “Heil, Hitler,” he responded, and returned the salute.

His adjutant, Heinz, struggled with two bulging satchels, put them down a moment to rest, and then, getting a fresh grip, continued toward the car. Von Schverdt leaned against the car and watched as the man approached.

“Put them in the back,” Von Schverdt ordered as he stepped away from the car.

"*Ja vol,*" Heinz puffed, as he set the briefcases down and opened the rear door of the car. He lifted one of them, set it on the floor of the backseat, and then turned to retrieve the other.

Von Schverdt watched Heinz's every move, as he slowly undid the leather strap on his holster and brought the P.38 to his side, fitting the silencer to it.

It's a pity, he thought, Heinz has been loyal. Still . . .

Von Schverdt waited until the man had finished his task and faced him, awaiting new orders.

Von Schverdt raised the handgun and Heinz took a step backward, a mixture of terror and confusion filling his face. "No, Herr Von Schver—"

Von Schverdt fired once, and the bullet went neatly through the forehead of the man, the force of it driving him into the rear door of the car, where his lifeless body slumped to the ground.

Von Schverdt moved, catlike, to the driver's door, opened it, and caught the boy by the oversized sleeve of his uniform, and yanked him out of the car.

The boy fell in a heap at Von Schverdt's feet and began to claw at his boots, crying out for mercy. Von Schverdt fired once and the boy lay still. He unfastened the silencer, reholstered his sidearm, and as he did so, noticed that a few spots of blood had splattered on his boots. He went over and wiped them off on the dead boy's pant legs. That done, he slid into the driver's seat and sped off to his meeting place with the Americans.

The drive was treacherous. More than once he fired his gun to ward off those attempting to hijack his car. At one point a group of fleeing women and children clogged the road. Von Schverdt held his hand on the horn, but didn't slow the car. Women and children scrambled to get out of the way. One old woman tripped and fell on the road in front of the speeding car. Von Schverdt ran over her, not even glancing in the rearview mirror as the car sped on. *Desperate times require desperate measures*, he reminded himself.

There's nothing left . . . They've destroyed everything, he thought, as the car rolled by block after block of leveled, smoldering buildings. He had trouble getting his bearings, as many of the street signs were missing, and most of the familiar landmarks that would have aided him had vanished.

He stopped the car and looked around, trying to get a sense of where he was.

Nothing here . . . But wait. He noticed the base of a statue by the side of the road, all that was left of a beautiful bronze sculpture he had once admired.

He turned the car, stepped hard on the gas pedal, and the car lurched forward.

Only a few more miles and then, the Americans. The thought made him anxious. *How much of his work had been destroyed, or discovered?* He gripped the steering wheel tighter.

A short time later he saw a roadblock with an American flag flying alongside it and a dozen armed American GIs brandishing rifles. To the left a machine gun nest was lined by rows of sandbags.

Von Schverdt slowed the car and stopped twenty yards away from the roadblock. He opened the door of the car and stepped out, being careful to raise his hands over his head as he did so.

One of the Americans shouted to him in very bad German, *"Übergeben sie sich mit ihren hande hoch!"* (Surrender with your hands up.)

Von Schverdt raised his hands higher and stood motionless.

More shouting, this time from behind the roadblock. Four GIs approached.

Another one called out, *"Bewegen siesich weg von den auto."* (Move away from the car.)

Von Schverdt chuckled. *Idiots,* he thought. *How could they have beaten us?*

His mind raced back to a better time, years ago in Nuremberg, when Hitler was cresting to the peak of his power just before the war. Thousands of flashlights, each held by Hitler

Youth, illuminated enormous swastika flags encircling the arena, which billowed in the cool breeze of a German spring night. Endless rows of helmeted soldiers melted in the distance. Von Schverdt, along with other Nazi party leaders, was seated on a platform above the gathered throng, and, just in front of him, the Fuehrer himself was in the midst of an impassioned speech: coercing, whispering, then his voice exploding in a thunderous crescendo. But not by his own power. The force that filled and swelled the dictator was not human. Von Schverdt knew only too well what it was that came and filled the little corporal with such tremendous force and power that even he, who had helped the possession to occur in the first place, was awed by the magnitude of its power, and the visceral vitality of it.

And this is all that is left of our thousand years of rule? Our thousand-year reich? What happened? he mused as he watched the Americans, the victors, draw closer.

The Americans stopped twenty feet away, their guns pointed at him. Von Schverdt heard them ask each other the German words for “kneel down.”

Stupid, he thought, as he slowly dropped to his knees.

The American soldiers surrounded him. Two of the men took his arms and, pinning them behind his back, yanked him to a standing position. They checked his sidearm holster and found it empty.

“Hey, will you look at this,” called one of the Americans. He pulled Von Schverdt’s coat away from his shoulders.

“Looks like we got ourselves a general.” A sergeant ambled forward, gumming the butt of a cigarette.

The others crowded around, peering at his uniform.

“I am *SS-Obergruppenfuehrer*, Wolfgang Von Schverdt,” Von Schverdt said, in almost perfect English, but with a heavy accent.

The Americans looked at each other in astonishment.

“I have very important information there, in the back of the car, for your superiors. They are expecting me.” And he gestured toward the rear of the car.

“Take a look, Charlie,” the sergeant ordered.

Charlie, a stocky youth with unshaven stubble on his face, hurried over to the car and opened the rear door.

“Two satchels . . . lots of papers, Sarge. Hey, he’s got a handgun lying on the front seat.”

“Bring ’em along,” Sarge replied.

The soldier slung his rifle onto his shoulder and hoisted the satchels out of the car, then retrieved the Luger.

They escorted Von Schverdt toward the roadblock. Von Schverdt’s eyes darted about, searching for the official that had promised he would meet him. When they reached the roadblock, one of the soldiers raised the wooden crossbar and Von Schverdt passed under it. He heard the sound of a jeep growing closer from behind him.

“Hey, looks like we got more company,” one of the American soldiers, manning the machine gun, yelled out.

“Looks like the Russians,” someone else replied.

Von Schverdt saw an officer emerge from the shell of a burned-out building, with the remains of shaving cream still on his chin.

Shaving at this time of day . . . Where is the discipline of this army? Von Schverdt wondered.

“Who’s this?” the officer asked, throwing a glance at Von Schverdt as he buckled his sidearm to his waist.

“Looks like a general, sir. He just pulled up outta nowhere and surrendered to us,” the sergeant replied.

Von Schverdt turned his head and looked at the incoming jeep with a bright red Russian star painted on the hood and flags flying from each of the front fenders. The jeep came to a stop inches from the wooden crossbar. A tall, thin man in civilian clothes climbed out.

One of the American MPs called out, “What can we do you for?”

The civilian crossed his arms in front of him. “I am Vladimir Patchenko, Russian Secret Service.”