

OH THE HUMANITY

Written by

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Based on *The Hidden Hindenburg*
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21 Laps Entertainment

TEXT OVER BLACK:

May 6, 1937

Lakehurst Naval Air Station

New Jersey

INT. COMMAND CENTER - LAKEHURST NAVAL AIR STATION - EVENING

A face contorted in horror and awe. His lips move but no sound comes out. His eyes, unblinking, refuse to see.

ROSENDAHL

This is unbelievable.

We're in the second-floor Command Center at the Naval base -- an early air traffic control tower, with radios, charts, and instruments. A dozen UNIFORMED NAVY PERSONNEL man each desk.

Outside, a thunderstorm rages.

COMMANDER CHARLES ROSENDAHL (45) stares at a meteorological map held up by two uncertain MIDSHIPMEN. He has the square jaw and beady eyes of an offensive coordinator and a shrieky, shitty brand of authority. And like most screamers, he's a stone-cold coward.

The midshipmen look at their map. They've drawn arrows all over New Jersey, each pointing in different directions.

MIDSHIPMAN 1

It's kinda hard to get a reading.

MIDSHIPMAN 2

Lotta mixed messages out there.

ROSENDAHL

You have the wind going in literally every direction. That's not how air works.

MIDSHIPMAN 1

Well, tornados...

ROSENDAHL

Is there going to be a tornado?

MIDSHIPMAN 1

Uh, no.

MIDSHIPMAN 2
(maybe...)
Well -

ROSENDAHL
When is the rain going to stop?

The midshipmen just look out the window.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)
I can look out the window, too,
dipshits! Find out how fast the
headwinds are over the Atlantic!
Get me an ETA on the ship! It's
already...
(checks his watch)
...twelve hours late! Fuck! If
those human kidney stones
downstairs tell their little
friends not to fly, airships are
over! They'll shut down this base!
The Navy's gonna stick us all on...
(disgusted)
Boats.

A breathless officer, LIEUTENANT WESLEY (20s), bursts in. He
holds a bloody handkerchief to his hand.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY
Commander Rosendahl, sir! The
passengers are demanding to -

ROSENDAHL
Are you bleeding, Lieutenant?

LIEUTENANT WESLEY
Baroness Rendlesham came at me with
a hatpin, sir. They've eaten all
the olives and cherries. All we
have left are the lesser garnishes.

Growling, Rosendahl reluctantly goes.

INT. PASSENGER LOUNGE - MOMENTS LATER

It's the low-point of the Fyre Festival, but with fancy hats.

There are about FIFTY PEOPLE in the first-class passenger
lounge - all American and European elites unaccustomed to
delays. And they've been drinking on an empty stomach.

In one corner, a COUPLE has a messy argument.

A MAN IN A 3-PIECE SUIT snores on the floor.

A few determined REVELERS dance next to a tinny gramophone.

An overstressed BARTENDER weeps freely.

BARONESS RENDLESHAM
Pardon me! Pardon! Are you in
charge here?!

A British aristocrat, BARONESS RENDLESHAM, marches up to a gobsmacked Rosendahl, trailed by her husband, the BARON. Wesley hides behind Rosendahl.

BARONESS RENDLESHAM (CONT'D)
We have been waiting twelve hours
for your little ship -

ROSENDAHL
Largest flying object ever built -

BARONESS RENDLESHAM
And we have invitations to attend
the coronation! Of the King! Of
England!

ROSENDAHL
The coronation is a week away,
madam, there's ample time to -

BARONESS RENDLESHAM
My gown shall be creased! It's
taffeta!

A BOLT OF LIGHTNING, a CRACK OF THUNDER. Someone drops a glass. Someone steps in it.

ROSENDAHL
You'll be the first to board.

BARONESS RENDLESHAM
Taffeta.

Rosendahl retreats out of the room.

INT. COMMAND CENTER - MOMENTS LATER

Rosendahl, increasingly frantic, barges into the control room. The midshipmen are ready with a new weather map, just as confusing as the last. Gesturing like TV meteorologists -

MIDSHIPMAN 1
So there's a blustery front moving
in from the south -

MIDSHIPMAN 2
Gusting west -

MIDSHIPMAN 1
Dumping a good bit right here-ish -

MIDSHIPMAN 2
It'll be a real light show 'til
nightfall.

Ta-da. They're quite proud of their performance. Rosendahl
isn't impressed. He takes their map and tears it in half.

ROSENDAHL
GET...OUT! Get - where's that
fucking -

RADIO
Hallo? Hallo, Lakehurst?

A peppy GERMAN VOICE crackles over the radio. Rosendahl
lunges for it.

ROSENDAHL
Yes! Hello! We copy!

RADIO
Ah! Guten tag, Lakehurst! Das ist
die Hindenburg!

EXT. NEW YORK CITY - VARIOUS - SIMULTANEOUSLY

IN MIDTOWN - a man walking with an umbrella slowly looks up.

IN A SKYSCRAPER APARTMENT - A woman is drawn to the window.

AT A MUDDY BASEBALL DIAMOND - a kid batter straightens up out
of his stance. His jaw drops.

We now reveal...THE HINDENBURG. A majestic silver dirigible
the length of three Boeing 747s. It's pushed along by four
propellers, each with 20-foot long blades, and underneath is
a compartment that can accommodate 72 passengers and 50 crew.

But perhaps the most notable features are the GIANT FUCKING
SWASTIKAS painted on the tail fins.

But this is 1937 and we're not yet at war. And so down on NYC
streets we see:

TIMES SQUARE TOURISTS wave goofily at the sky.

KIDS ON BIKES race along beneath it, smiling.

FAMILIES ON BALCONIES cheer and snap photos.

AN ELDERLY JEWISH MAN glances up warily then shuffles past the gawking spectators on the sidewalk.

INT. COMMAND CENTER - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Chaos. Everyone rushes to their posts.

ROSENDAHL

Go, go, go! Get the ground crew out there, ready to catch the ropes! She's comin' in fast!

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

Yes, sir!

He runs out.

EXT. AIRPLANE HANGAR - MOMENTS LATER

Wesley rolls open the door to the hangar.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

Okay, guys, it's time to -

He looks inside. No one's there. He panics.

INT. TAVERN - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Wesley, breathing hard, bursts in. There, dozens of GROUND CREW MEMBERS in white coveralls drink at the bar, play cards, shoot pool, etc. It's a crowd of Black, Puerto Rican, and Italian guys who give zero shits.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

The ship's here! Hurry! You gotta pull 'er in!

A crew guy at the bar, FRED (30s, Black) turns his languorous gaze on Wesley. Nah.

INT. PASSENGER WAITING ROOM

Rosendahl triumphantly steps in front of the crowd.

ROSENDAHL

Ladies and gentlemen, I have tremendous news. The Hindenburg will be arriving in a matter of minutes. Therefore, we ask that you collect your...

(observes the hot mess)
...selves and prepare to board.

BARONESS RENDLESHAM

I shan't go out in that rain.

She plops into a chair defiantly. Rosendahl smiles tightly.

INT. TAVERN

A sweaty Wesley negotiates with Fred.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

An extra hour's pay.

Fred chews his ice.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY (CONT'D)

Time and half!

FRED

Waited in the rain all damn day.
Julio's got the sniffles.

A nearby CREW GUY theatrically sniffs.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

Okay! Okay. Double.

Fred looks down at Wesley's shoes.

FRED

Could use some dry shoes.
(beat)
And a dry watch.

Wesley looks at his gold watch. He swallows hard.

EXT. PASSENGER WAITING ROOM - MINUTES LATER

Rosendahl drives up to the waiting room in a rusty, whining MILITARY BUS. It shudders to a halt.

Stepping out of the bus, he shouts to his officers -

ROSENDAHL

Okay! Let's go! Bring 'em out!

Officers with umbrellas lead the dazed passengers out of the building toward the bus.

After the passengers emerge, a MILITARY TRUCK laden with their luggage plows past. It hits a bump and several trunks are LAUNCHED ONTO THE PAVEMENT.

One trunk SPRINGS OPEN, and a taffeta gown explodes out into the raging squall. Baroness Rendlesham SCREAMS as if stabbed.

EXT. LAKEHURST STREETS - MINUTES LATER

The horde of crew guys drunkenly march through the rainy streets. Ahead are gates to Lakehurst Naval Air Station.

Lieutenant Wesley, barefoot, reluctantly rides atop the shoulders of a HULKING CREW MEMBER. Fred leads charge.

FRED

To the Hindenburg!

They CHEER, hoisting bottles of beer they brought for the walk. Wesley struggles to hold on to his perch.

CREW HULK

Let's unionize!

EVEN BIGGER CHEERS. Wesley groans.

INT./EXT. BUS - MINUTES LATER

With gritted teeth, Rosendahl steers the passengers across the tarmac toward a grass landing field.

AHEAD, the jubilant GROUND CREW staggers out to the LANDING FIELD. Shoeless Wesley brings up the rear.

PASSENGER

There it is!

They all look. The Hindenburg looms into view.

Rosendahl, distracted and awed by the ship, doesn't see the passenger's steamer trunk (the one that fell out of the truck) in the path of the bus. He DRIVES INTO IT.

CRASH! POP! The bus's tire bursts. Rosendahl barely controls the skidding bus. Passengers scream. They come to a stop.

Rosendahl throws open the door and stomps out of the bus. A couple OFFICERS follow.

ROSENDAHL
This - this is - I've never - this
is a catastrophe!

OFFICER
Sir, we'll - we'll explain in the
report that -

ROSENDAHL
No! No! They'll never let this go!
This is the end for airships! An
unmitigated, unforgettable disa-

The officer is looking over Rosendahl's shoulder at the massive airship behind him. His jaw drops.

Rosendahl turns. On the Hindenburg, by the rear tail fin, just above the swastika, a SMALL BLUE FLAME has blossomed.

We don't see the inferno. Instead, we see its glow reflected on the horrified, fascinated faces of Rosendahl, his officers, the ground crew, and all the would-be passengers staring out the bus's windows.

Something shifts. We sober up.

The real voice of radio reporter Herb Morrison from 1937:

HERB MORRISON (V.O.)
It's fire and it's crashing! This
is the worst of the worst
catastrophes in the world! Oh, it's
crashing -- oh, four or five
hundred feet into the sky, and it's
a terrific crash, ladies and
gentlemen. There's smoke, and
there's flames, now, and the frame
is crashing to the ground, not
quite to the mooring mast. Oh, the
humanity...

CUT TO BLACK -

TITLE CARD: OH THE HUMANITY

EXT. LANDING FIELD - FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

Water arcs from the mouth of the firehose onto the flaming wreckage of the Hindenburg.

The fire, though still roaring, has started to abate. The steel ribs of the ship are visible within.

A half-dozen FIRETRUCKS continue to spray it down. The hard rain does its part, too.

And the PEOPLE - hundreds of them, some frantic, some frozen. RESCUERS race to help the fallen. PASSENGERS stare, bug-eyed and listing. FAMILY MEMBERS scream the names of the missing.

An unattended camera on the edge of the action keeps rolling, though it's long since exhausted its reel of film.

And then -- running toward us, silhouetted against the inferno, come FOUR MEN carrying a stretcher between them.

As they barrel past us, we get a look at their charge -- a MAN in a suit, though half the garment has burned off his body. His face is black and bloody.

The rescuers heave the stretcher into a waiting AMBULANCE. And that's when we realize they're being chased.

The pursuer is GERTRUD ADELTE (34, German). On better days, she's a glamorous globetrotter. An acid-tongued saucebox. One hell of a good time. Now her red skirt is covered in mud and ash, her white blouse smeared with blood. She's hysterical.

GERTRUD
(in German)
Warten! Halt!

She reaches the ambulance as they're about to heave the stretcher inside. A MEDIC puts his hand out to stop her. He gestures to a SECOND PATIENT, also badly burned, in the back of the truck.

MEDIC
No room!

GERTRUD
Das ist...That is my husband!
Leonhard!!

LEONHARD stirs. His hand reaches inside the unburnt half of his jacket and extracts a POCKET-SIZED NOTEBOOK. He weakly proffers it to Gertrud. She takes it, confused.

The medics slide Leonhard inside and slam the door shut. Then, as she watches in wordless horror, the ambulance pulls away, splatting mud in her face.

Then from behind her -- an earsplitting GROAN - CRASH - BOOM. Gertrud turns toward the fire. A section of the Hindenburg has collapsed. The fire trucks fall back.

Gertrud suddenly DROPS THE NOTEBOOK and winces in pain. She looks down at her palms. She's just noticed they're horrifically blistered and cut. Suddenly -

RADIO REPORTER (O.S.)
M'am! M'am! Were you on the ship?
Were you there?

She looks up to see a radio mic in her face. Holding it is a panting RADIO REPORTER with a CBS badge pinned to his hat.

RADIO REPORTER (CONT'D)
You speak English? Can you tell us
what happened?

Gertrud snaps to attention, suddenly reanimated. She grabs his mic hard with her injured hand. Blood drips down it. She doesn't care that it hurts. She's numbed by rage.

GERTRUD
Ask Hitler.

INT. WAITING ROOM - THIRD REICH PROPAGANDA MINISTRY - BERLIN - THE NEXT MORNING

We consider a portrait of a visionary Adolph Hitler. Then we consider the scowling man sitting directly beneath it: HUGO ECKENER (67, German), tall and barrel-chested with silver hair, mustache and an urbane soul patch. A man who will never get used to not being in charge.

A smiling female RECEPTIONIST approaches.

RECEPTIONIST
Captain Eckener? Herr Goebbels will
see you now.

Hugo laboriously gets to his feet. This is going to suck.

INT. GOEBBELS'S OFFICE

JOSEPH GOEBBELS (39) is a scrawny man with Dracula eyes and the mouth of a snapping turtle. He's currently critiquing the storyboards for a new propaganda film, presented on an easel by a nervous FILMMAKER and a pretentious PRODUCER.

The storyboards are for the climactic scene from "Titanic" -- a real big-budget film the Nazis would later release in 1943.

Goebbels turns as Hugo enters. He sarcastically slow-claps.

GOEBBELS

Phenomenal. Truly eye-popping stuff, Hugo. I mean, I'm the actual Minister of Propaganda. I am especially good at crafting perceptions -- it is my primary skill in life -- and even I could not have found a better way to make us look like planet Earth's definitive twats.

Hugo eyes the storyboards.

HUGO

Not for lack of trying.

This sets Goebbels off. He starts screaming.

GOEBBELS

We're Germany!! That ship was a symbol! Our national pride! Our dominion over heaven and earth! Our enormous, engorged cock!

(quiet but furious)

Then Germany's cock...exploded. So sit...down.

With a pained sigh, Hugo sits across from Goebbels's desk. Goebbels turns back to the storyboards. To the filmmakers -

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)

Okay, I like the English aristocrat knocking down the little German girl to get to the lifeboat. But can we make him, you know, fatter?

FILMMAKER

And sweaty!

PRODUCER

Then his trousers split up the bum!

GOEBBELS

Wha - no! This is "Titanic"! It's a disaster film, not a comedy! It's about Anglo-Saxon hubris. It's an unmistakable metaphor. Dig deeper, I'm begging you.

Goebbels turns back to Hugo.

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)
So. What happened.

HUGO
And how should I know?

GOEBBELS
You're the one who built the
goddamn airship! You used to fly
it! Bobbing about, crossing oceans,
the big brave captain with your
stupid squinty stare, picture in
the magazines. But now it's
"Hindenburg who", is it?

HUGO
I wasn't at the helm. Captain Pruss
was.

GOEBBELS
Your apprentice, wasn't he? And
trust me, we'll be asking Pruss
that question, too, if he lives.
But tell me, Hugo, whose idea was
it to pump it full of hydrogen when
there's all this lovely helium
sitting around, minding its
business, not burning anyone alive?

HUGO
You lot gave me no choice. America
owns the world supply of helium and
they're not going to sell it to a
country with an itchy annex finger.

GOEBBELS
It's prejudice, is what it is.

The filmmakers flip to the next panel of storyboards.
Goebbels double-takes. Re: the storyboard -

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)
No! I don't want to see their
faces! People will empathize with
all the drowning degenerates! Stay
wide - then -
(a new panel)
YES - let's see the humble German
cobbler throw the French pedophile
out of the lifeboat. Okay? See?
This is how we learn.

When Goebbels turns back, Hugo's moving toward the door.
Goebbels stops him - his tone now less scolding.

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)

It can be yours again.

HUGO

Herr Goebbels, right now my life's work is a smoldering ruin in a mud hole in New Jersey. There's no coming back from a mud hole in New Jersey.

GOEBBELS

I don't mean the Hindenburg. I mean a new airship. A bigger one. I know you've been dreaming of it. Your picture back in the magazines.

Something sparks in Hugo, though he tries to hide it.

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)

The American Commerce Department is holding a hearing in New Jersey. I need you to go there and represent our interests. Find out what happened and make sure "what happened" is not our fault.

HUGO

It's not our fault.

GOEBBELS

That's the spirit!

HUGO

It must have been a freak accident. Deus ex machina.

GOEBBELS

I think you can do better than that.

HUGO

What else could possibly explain -

GOEBBELS

What about an act of -

HUGO

Sabotage? Absurd.

GOEBBELS

The Reich has many enemies. And sabotage is a far more appealing story than, you know, "oops."

HUGO

Well, the American investigators
would never -

GOEBBELS

Handle the American investigators.
Control the hearing. Charm the
press. The Hindenburg is the
biggest story in the world and I
need you to go there and give it a
happy ending.

The receptionist cracks open the door.

RECEPTIONIST

Sergeant Syrup is here to -

A peppy Aryan pokes his head in. Weak chin, big teeth, dead
eyes. Goebbels lights up.

CARL SYRUP

(playful)
Don't kill me.

GOEBBELS

You didn't.

SERGEANT CARL SYRUP (30s) enters, wagging several small paper
bags and dressed almost identical to Goebbels. A chummy
psychopath.

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)

You're a bad man, Sergeant Syrup.

Carl gives a bag to Goebbels. Hands another to Hugo.

CARL SYRUP

Don't worry, Captain Eckener, I got
one for you too. Best schneeball in
Berlin!

Hugo, very confused, accepts the bag and pulls out a pastry.

HUGO

What's going on.

GOEBBELS

Carl's going with you to New
Jersey. Public relations. Americans
love him.

Carl mugs. Hugo looks at him with heartfelt disdain.

HUGO

I wish I'd gone down with the
airship.

Goebbels guides Hugo and Carl toward the door.

GOEBBELS

You've got the whole ocean voyage
to build a rapport.

CARL SYRUP

I packed my clarinet!

Hugo stops at the door, looks hard at Goebbels.

HUGO

I'm not a member of the Nazi Party.
You're brutish. Fanatical. A bit
vulgar, frankly. And if you people
start a war, you'll leave me with
fewer places to fly.

GOEBBELS

(aside to Carl, amused)
Look at the big balls on this one.

HUGO

But if what you say is true - if I
convince the world that sabotage
killed the Hindenburg -

GOEBBELS

Then we'll build a brand new ship.
After all, how better to defy an
act of terrorism than to rebuild?

CARL SYRUP

Germans bounce back!

GOEBBELS

Well put as usual, Carl. Now go.
Put out the fire, bury the dead.
And then...we go back to work.

Goebbels turns back to the Titanic storyboards. He frowns. To
the filmmakers -

GOEBBELS (CONT'D)

Make that iceberg look more Jewish.

INT. HOSPITAL GROUP WARD - NEW JERSEY - EARLY MORNING

Gertrud, still in her outfit from the crash, sleeps in an armchair next to a hospital bed.

Her feet rest on a tower of tin bedpans - a makeshift footstool. Her hands are heavily bandaged.

Let's take a moment to notice two objects on a side table -- the NOTEBOOK Leonhard gave her at the crash and a WALLET-SIZED PHOTO of a 5-YEAR OLD BOY propped against a lamp.

NURSE RIVERA (O.S.)
(annoyed)
Mrs. Adelt. Mrs. Adelt. Hey -

NURSE RIVERA (40s, Puerto Rican) - the unfuckwithable ward supervisor - is standing over her.

Rivera pokes Gertrud's leg with the end of her pencil. Gertrud JERKS AWAKE and the bedpans clatter to the floor.

GERTRUD
What happened? Leonhard? Is he -?

She turns to the bed. There's LEONHARD ADELTA (40s), unconscious and bandaged, especially along his right side.

We see twenty other PATIENTS along the ward. Awakened by the noise, they stir and groan. Nurse Rivera grits her teeth.

NURSE RIVERA
He's fi -
(catching herself)
He's...unchanged. There's another
call for you. Long distance.

Gertrud scrambles over the bedpans, excited.

NURSE RIVERA (CONT'D)
This ain't your private phone,
frauline!

Gertrud runs barefoot down the aisle toward the double doors, passing beds on either side.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Gertrud, with her bandaged hands, fumbles with the receiver that's waiting for her on top of the wall-mounted phone.

GERTRUD
This is Gertrud Adelt.

OPERATOR (O.S.)
Connecting your call, please wait.

A soft TONE and then the line connects.

GERTRUD
Mother?

HELEN (O.S.)
Two words.

Gertrud deflates, disappointed.

GERTRUD
Hi, Helen.

INT. EDITOR'S OFFICE - FILM UND FRAU - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Her girlboss editor, HELEN (40s), stands in her sleek office. She sports a severe and unflattering haircut. Beyond, the magazine bullpen bustles with activity.

On her wall, we see posters of covers of FILM UND FRAU MAGAZINE -- a saucy woman's gossip and fashion rag.

HELEN
Two words! And you fucked it all up! Ask Hitler? Have you lost your mind? You don't ask Hitler anything, not in proximity to a mass casualty event.

We INTERCUT --

GERTRUD
He stamped his logo on the tail fin!

HELEN
Your little comment got picked up here in Berlin, you know. I just got a visit from a walking rectal thermometer from the Propaganda Ministry.

GERTRUD
They've got some explaining to do!

HELEN
You always blame the Nazis.

GERTRUD
And they seem like such nice guys.

HELEN
How's Leonhard?

GERTRUD
He's...he's still unconscious.

HELEN
Oh. Oh dear. And your son...uh...

GERTRUD
Christian.

HELEN
Right. He wasn't with you, was he?

GERTRUD
No, we left him with my mother in Hamburg. We just came so Leonhard could meet with his New York publishers. And I would, you know, just...nose around a bit.

HELEN
Congratulations. You've nosed enough.

GERTRUD
I'm a gossip reporter, Helen, what else would I do.

An EDITORIAL ASSISTANT comes into Helen's office with a mock-up of a fashion spread showing a model in a feminized SS uniform. She waves her approval as she talks.

HELEN
It's the wrong kind of gossip! I want the fashions that survived the flames! Which survivor's been getting the biggest bouquets! Sex in the burn ward!

GERTRUD
Fine! I'll send you a thousand words tomorrow, all of them tasteless.

HELEN
Don't bother. The propaganda ministry just rescinded your press card. I can't keep you on staff.

Gertrud sags against the wall. It's a huge blow.

GERTRUD

But how can they...two words!

HELEN

Shut up for a second. You can get it back, all right? The Ministry's decided that as a survivor, you're the one they want telling this story to readers back home. As long as it's their version.

GERTRUD

"Hitler honored with fireworks"?

An ORDERLY shuffles past Gertrud and shoots her a dirty look.

HELEN

It sounds like they're looking for a sabotage angle. You're to meet the Ministry official at a press conference today, over at the air field. Ten o'clock.

GERTRUD

But - but I can't leave the hospital! Leonhard - what if he -

HELEN

If you come home with an invalid, you don't want to add the Third Reich to your list of problems. And Gertie...just imagine if you come home alone.

That stings. But Gertrud still resists.

GERTRUD

I'm not writing this Nazi horse shit.

HELEN

Maybe you've forgotten because you're sitting in New Jersey, but we're a horse shit factory now. You can smell us from Geneva. We're tainting the fucking groundwater.

Helen picks up a recent copy of the magazine. The cover shows a woman performing a graceful Heil. She sneers bitterly.

HELEN (CONT'D)

And since when do you care about the truth anyway?

GERTRUD
Since somebody blew up my husband.

HELEN
(sincerely sympathetic)
You still have more to lose.

Gertrud slams the phone in the cradle.

EXT. ZEPPELIN WORKS FACTORY - FRIEDRICHSHAFEN - FLASHBACK

A LARGE CROWD outside an enormous hangar. It's hung with streamers and a banner: "Luftschiffbau Zeppelin Works."

On a stage behind a podium stands Hugo Eckener -- slightly younger but totally transformed. He wears a captain's uniform and exudes charisma. The crowd adores him.

Behind him is the dashing MAX PRUSS (40s), also in uniform.

HUGO
And now, meine damen und herren, my
young co-pilot Captain Pruss and I
proudly unveil...The Hindenburg!

The door rolls open, revealing the nose of the Hindenburg. Hugo and Pruss clasp hands and raise their arms triumphantly. Cameras flash. Fans throw flowers. Hugo's in ecstasy.

And then suddenly, his smile falls -

INT. TOWNCAR - NEW JERSEY - DAY

Hugo snaps out of the daydream as the car lurches to a stop. They've arrived at Lakehurst Navel Air Station, and Carl could not be more excited.

CARL SYRUP
We're here! Okay, one last thing...

He presents a swastika arm band to Hugo, who is unmoved.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)
I insist.

HUGO
I decline.

Carl suddenly grabs Hugo's arm and tries to wrestle the band over his sleeve. They scuffle.

BANG-BANG-BANG on the window. It's Rosendahl. He looks close to tears and like he hasn't slept since the crash.

ROSENDAHL

Hugo? Hugo, oh thank god!

Hugo yanks away his arm from Carl and gets out.

EXT. LAKEHURST NAVAL AIR STATION

Rosendahl wraps Hugo in a desperate embrace.

HUGO

My dear Rosie...

They're blocking Carl from exiting the car.

CARL SYRUP

Excusé moi, mon frere!

Rosendahl moves for Carl, who's carrying a carpet bag.
Rosendahl eyes the Nazi get-up warily.

HUGO

My government chaperone. Sergeant Syrup, this is Commander Rosendahl. He oversees the base and the Navy's airships. We worked together when I helped design the American fleet.

CARL SYRUP

An American sabbatical! I can see you now, Captain Eckener, throwing baseballs in your blue jeans!

Rosendahl can't be bothered. He turns back to Hugo.

ROSENDAHL

Come on. I'll take you to her.

EXT. LANDING FIELD - MOMENTS LATER

Rosendahl leads the men toward the wreckage. Hugo's eyes bulge in horror. Even Carl looks disgusted.

Nothing but the blackened nose of the framework remains. The tail has been reduced to ash. Around the wreckage is a skirt of unidentifiable flotsam. WORKERS pick through it now.

They duck under a perimeter rope. Then Hugo stops, overcome.

ROSENDAHL
It's all over for the airship.

HUGO
Not yet.

Carl picks up a broken dinner plate with the Hindenburg logo.
He holds it up, bizarrely delighted.

CARL SYRUP
Souvenir!

AGENT CONNELLEY (O.S.)
Get the hell outta my crime scene!

SPECIAL AGENT E.J. CONNELLEY (30s) squishes toward them
through the mud in his city-boy shoes. He's got a handsome
face, a pencil mustache and hardcore cop bravado.

ROSENDAHL
No, no! Special Agent Connelley,
this is Captain Hugo Eckener. He
designed the ship!

Connelley squints at Hugo and relaxes.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Ah, sure, I seen you in the papers.

CARL SYRUP
Sergeant Syrup. Third Reich
representative. Happy to be here.

Agent Connelley side-eyes his armband and shakes.

ROSENDAHL
They're here to assist the
technical investigation.

HUGO
Agent Connelley, did I hear you
say...crime scene? Does that mean
you suspect foul play?

AGENT CONNELLEY
(eyes twinkling)
Well now that's a bit of premature
conjecture but uh...

He leans forward conspiratorially and taps his nose.

AGENT CONNELLEY (CONT'D)
You smell that?

They all sniff.

ROSENDAHL
Wet smoke.

HUGO
Petrochemicals.

CARL SYRUP
Human flesh.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Communists.

They're excited yet confused.

ROSENDAHL
How do you know it's communists?

AGENT CONNELLEY
(rhetorically)
How do you know it's Tuesday? Us
guys at the Bureau, we know
commies, alright? They're
everywhere these days. Look, they
got the motive, they got the
opportunity. All we gotta pin down
is -

Across the wreckage, an AGENT waves for their attention.

JUNIOR AGENT
Agent Connelley! Look at this!

Connelley hungrily RUSHES OVER, pausing to wave the others
along. They realize they'd better follow this maniac.

Hugo, breathing hard, meets up with the younger men, who are
hunched over and pointing at something on the ground: a hunk
of yellow-painted metal. Connelley squats to inspect.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Haven't seen this kind of debris
yet. Captain Eckener, this look
like something you might find
inside an airship?

Rosendahl clearly recognizes it.

ROSENDAHL
Oh, that's just the -

Hugo KICKS HIM sharply in the ankle. Rosendahl shuts up. Hugo
makes a show of inspecting the object.

HUGO

Very curious. No, I can't say you would. This might be considered a...foreign object.

AGENT CONNELLEY

A foreign object, eh? How about a foreign object that ticks?

Connelley stands and turns to the group triumphantly.

AGENT CONNELLEY (CONT'D)

Gentlemen, this looks a hell of a lot like means. Get this to the lab!

He hands over the evidence to another AGENT. Hugo grins to himself -- this maniac could be useful.

The others turn to look as LIEUTENANT WESLEY, who we met before the crash, pulls up in a military STAFF CAR. He opens the back door with forced grandiosity. Carl checks his watch.

CARL SYRUP

Ah yes. It's about to start.

Hugo looks confused.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

Ready to meet the press, Captain Eckener? We can announce this new discovery. Ideal timing, isn't it? It's this sort of thing that tells me God is German.

He ushers Hugo, Rosendahl and Connelley into the staff car. They drive off toward the airship hangar, where we can see a large crowd has gathered...

EXT. PRESS CONFERENCE - AIRSHIP HANGAR - MOMENTS LATER

The men exit the staff car as PHOTOGRAPHERS swarm. Hugo, last to emerge, causes the biggest stir. Light bulbs pop.

REPORTERS

(overlapping)

Captain! What happened to the Hindenburg? How'd it feel to see your ship go down?

AUTOGRAPH SEEKERS rush up. A FAN (20s) hands him an old copy of Time Magazine, with a younger, thinner Hugo on the cover in front of a different zeppelin. He signs it.

FAN

You were my hero when I was a kid!

Hugo winces at the backhanded compliment.

MEANWHILE - OUT IN THE CROWD we see a scowling Gertrud jostling for position among the other journalists (all male) near a riser with a podium. One male REPORTER "accidentally" cops a feel of her butt.

She JABS HIM in the hand with her fountain pen. He winces.

GERTRUD

Step back or the next one leaves a mark that won't wash off.

CARL SYRUP (O.S.)

Yoo hoo! Frau Adelt!

Gertrud sees Carl beckoning her from across the crowd. She sighs heavily and goes.

Carl greets her like a kid meeting Mickey Mouse.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

Gertrud Adelt! I love your column. Do you know what I said to Herr Goebbels when I heard you were one of the survivors? I said, we have to get her. She is the perfect writer for this. So lucky!

GERTRUD

(deadpan)

Right place, right time.

CARL SYRUP

Sergeant Syrup, by the way. But call me Carl. I'm not one of those Nazis. They're like, you know -
(mockingly rigid Heil)
And whatever you need -- access, introductions, just ask, okay?

GERTRUD

I will.

She starts to turn away -

CARL SYRUP

Just don't ask Hitler.

There's a tinge of menace. Gertrud stiffens. Carl leans in.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

If you want to keep your job. Can't nurse your husband back to health if you can't afford to eat. Poor thing.

(bubbly again)

Can't wait to see the draft when it's ready!

Gertrud musters a feeble nod. Carl pivots to a nearby photographer who's taking candid shots of Hugo.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

Excuse me - hi - no thank you - hold the photos for after please...

Carl flits away. Gertrud watches him fearfully.

MEANWHILE - Hugo steps away from his fans and turns toward the stage. Sees Rosendahl talking with a tall blonde man.

Hugo approaches. Rosendahl is anxious. With forced cheer -

ROSENDAHL

Ah, here he is! Allow me to introduce Captain Eckener, the man who owns the skies.

The blonde man turns. SOUTH TRIMBLE JR. (45, white) is like if Bill Clinton was born rich. He's a big man with wire-rimmed glasses and a dapper suit. He speaks with melodic Kentucky accent, especially when he's negging a European.

They shake.

HUGO

For now I am earthbound. Some day I'll fly again.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

You think so? On an airship? I do love your optimism, Captain. Hope is God's own lifting gas.

Hugo recoils at the condescension.

HUGO

And you are...

MICROPHONE FEEDBACK pierces the chatter. Everyone winces. Lieutenant Wesley is on the stage behind the podium.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

Hello! Excuse me!

The crowd quiets. Gertrud, among the reporters, takes Leonhard's notebook out of her handbag. WE NOTICE that she has to flip through many pages of his messy shorthand to find a blank page.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY (CONT'D)

Thank you! Thanks for coming and, uh, welcome to Lakehurst. Tough moment, you know? In fact, just this morning I was -

Rosendahl motions for him to shut up.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY (CONT'D)

Okay! I'll go ahead and...yeah...

South Trimble goes to the podium. Hugo, Rosendahl, and Agent Connelley file on stage and stand in a line behind him. South waits for silence. He knows how to milk the drama.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Good morning. My name is South Trimble Jr. I am a representative of the United States Department of Commerce. And it has fallen to me to serve as the chief solicitor of these Hindenburg Hearings. It is a sacred responsibility. Because, you see, one of the world's greatest marvels has killed thirty-five people. And I want to know why.

(building like a preacher)

I want to know why so we can put their souls to rest. I want to know why so we can prevent another tragedy. But most of all, I want to know why so we can punish any and all men who brought this catastrophe to our door. Without truth, we have no justice. And without justice, we are doomed to repeat our gravest mistakes. We must have accountability!

Applause. Hugo watches from behind with a sour expression.

IN THE CROWD - REPORTERS behind Gertrud whisper. She listens.

REPORTER 1

What is this, a stump speech?

REPORTER 2

Ain't declared he's runnin' yet, but I'd say it's crossed his mind.

South continues. Gertrud, intrigued, watches him raptly.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Over the next eight days of these proceedings, we will hear from eye witnesses, survivors, law enforcement, and technical investigators, including the great Captain Hugo Eckener himself. In the end, I will deliver my conclusion and, possibly, my recommendation for any criminal charges. And trust me, my fellow Americans, we will have accountability.

(applause)

Now, I would be happy to take some -

Hugo steps up to the podium, deftly shouldering the stunned southerner out of the way. South steams.

HUGO

Pardon me, if I may. I am Captain Hugo Eckener and -

Spectators applaud loudly as Hugo takes the mic. He smiles with false modesty, as if chiding himself.

HUGO (CONT'D)

Yes, I suppose you already know that. I thank you, Mr. Trimble. I will do everything in my power to assist in the investigation into this terrible crime - or, excuse me - this heartbreaking tragedy.

The press murmur.

REPORTER 3

Crime? Is sabotage suspected?

HUGO

I would never dream of pointing fingers at, er, what is the word...an international communist cabal, or, I don't know, some well-funded anti-fascist extremists. I'm sorry, my English is not so good...

The press shout questions. Hugo points to a reporter.

REPORTER 4

Arnie Ekstein, Newark Star-Ledger.
How come you used hydrogen instead
of helium?

HUGO

Hydrogen has been standard for
zeppelins for years and -

REPORTER 4

Yeah, but there's been accidents -

HUGO

Which is why I begged to buy helium
from the American government. Yet
they refused to sell us any. Yes,
you.

He points to another hardscrabble veteran in the pool.

REPORTER 5

Yeah, Bill Kovacs, Philadelphia
Inquirer. Who made the call to land
it in a thunder storm?

Rosendahl nervously scurries over to the mic.

ROSENDAHL

Uh, the investigation is ongoing so
we can't say yet who -

Hugo sees Carl POINTING TO GERTRUD in the crowd.

HUGO

Yes, you there, madam.

Who, me? Everyone stares at Gertrud, the lone woman. She
catches Carl's eye. She knows what she has to do.

GERTRUD

Er, Gertrud Adelt, Film Und Frau
Magazine. Thank you, Captain
Eckener, big fan. Love your ships.
I was wondering...do you think
someone might have blown up the
Hindenburg because they were, you
know...jealous?

Other reporters snicker. She's embarrassed. Hugo plays along.

HUGO

Yes, I think that's quite possible.
Those who cannot build destroy.

South's finally had enough. With an arm around Hugo's shoulders he maneuvers him away and leans into the mic.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

I think we've had enough speculation for today. The hearings will begin tomorrow with witness testimony. I'm sure I will see many of you there.

The press conference breaks up. Gertrud trails behind the departing reporters, who cast snide glances in her direction.

NEXT TO THE STAGE - Hugo and Rosendahl pose for the photographers. Carl cuts them off.

CARL SYRUP

(to the photogs)

Thank you, gentlemen. We'll see you tomorrow, yeah?

AGENT CONNELLEY (O.S.)

Hey! Let's go!

Carl, Rosendahl and Hugo snap around to see Connelley and his agents sliding into two shiny black sedans, about 50 ft away.

AGENT CONNELLEY (CONT'D)

You're the technical guys, aren't cha? Come on! We're grillin' some witnesses!

CARL SYRUP

Meet and greet!

Carl bounds to the cars. Hugo and Rosendahl are about to follow when -

SOUTH TRIMBLE

My, Captain. The last time I saw a German make the press that happy was when y'all surrendered in '18.

South hands Rosendahl a sheet of paper with a list of names.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

My initial list of subpoenas.

South guides them toward the waiting FBI vehicles.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

I was named after my daddy, South Senior, who was a representative of the great state of Kentucky in the United States Congress. He got that name when he was just a whisper in his mama's womb, back when his daddy was bushwhacked by Union troops seeking to impose their laws on his proud plantation. And so the name South, you understand, was a gesture of defiance. And defiance, like the name, has been passed down in my family for generations.

They arrive at the cars. South stops and turns to both men.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

So you see, gentlemen, that's why I can't allow a Nazi or a Yankee to interfere in my investigation.

HUGO

We seek the truth.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

I seek a scalp. 'Cause I plan on doin' Daddy one better. Next year I aim to run for Senate. And nothin' tastes better to Kentucky voters than a bloody cut of justice.

Connelley HONKS, impatient.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

Go and gather the facts. We'll see what they reveal.

With a steely look, Hugo gets into the backseat, followed by Rosendahl. South watches them depart through narrowed eyes.

MOMENTS LATER - the FBI car cruises past the crowd of departing press. They pass Gertrud as she slumps along.

The rear door swings open as the car keeps rolling. Gertrud looks, sighs, then dives inside.

INT. FBI SEDAN

She slides in next to a grim-looking Hugo and Rosendahl in the back seat. Carl's riding shotgun. Connelley eyes her skeptically in the rearview mirror.

CARL SYRUP

Everybody, this is Gertrud. She's covering the story for the German media. Exclusive access. Tell them the name of your gossip column.

GERTRUD

All the Scandal You Can Handle.

CARL SYRUP

Saucy minx!

As they turn out of the naval base and onto the street -

GERTRUD

Where are we going?

AGENT CONNELLEY

Hospital.

CARL SYRUP

A nice chance to press some flesh.

(beat)

Gently.

She perks up a bit, glad to be heading back to Leonhard.

GERTRUD

Take a left on Dunbar Street.

(they look surprised)

I've done this drive before.

EXT. PAUL KIMBALL HOSPITAL - A LITTLE LATER

Connelley and the second FBI car park obtrusively in front of the small, local hospital. The AGENTS head inside. Hugo, Rosendahl, Gertrud and Carl, with his carpet bag, follow.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Nurse Rivera guides them down a hallway. Gertrud hangs back.

NURSE RIVERA

As the closest hospital, we took most of 'em. We discharged a few, but there's still twenty patients.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD

She opens the door to a GROUP WARD with 20 beds, all filled. It looks like they've been through a war.

HUGO
How many died?

NURSE RIVERA
Thirty-four from the ship and one member of the ground crew.

CARL SYRUP
Well, given that there were a hundred on board, that's...not too bad, is it?

NURSE RIVERA
(are you kidding?)
We got the remains downstairs.
Wanna take a look?

They all recoil. The PRESS GAGGLE shuffles in behind them.

CARL SYRUP
Okay, everybody! Here we go. Lots of smiles, lots of sympathy. I want photos of the Captain with the victims. Except if they're gross.

Connelley to his men -

AGENT CONNELLEY
Get statements from anyone who's conscious. Captain Eckener, you jump in when you want.

CARL SYRUP
Commander?

Rosendahl is still staring at the ward. He looks ill.

ROSENDAHL
So many wounds. I'll...catch up...

He goes.

The FBI agents, notebooks in hand, fan out along the left side of the ward. They approach the patients.

Carl hands out little Nazi flags, wedging the sticks in between gaps in patients' casts. He gives a teddy bear with a Hitler mustache to a confused BOY (10).

Photographers snap photos of Hugo as he solemnly moves down the aisle.

MEANWHILE - Gertrud goes to check on Leonhard. She crouches next to him and strokes his bandaged arm, concerned.

Carl appears behind her. She jumps.

CARL SYRUP
Already chasing down the story?

Carl carelessly pats Leonhard's foot.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)
Won't get much out of this one,
though, eh?

GERTRUD
That's my husband.

Carl awkwardly feigns concern.

CARL SYRUP
I'm sure he'll pull through.

He puts a Nazi flag at the end of Leonhard's bed and moves onto other patients.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE ROOM - we hear Connelley grilling a patient wrapped head-to-toe in bandages.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Are you now or have you ever been a
member of the Communist Party?

The patient groans. Connelley, suspicious, makes a note.

BY LEONHARD'S BED - Gertrud makes sure Carl isn't watching and removes the flag, hiding it under the mattress.

Meanwhile, Hugo has made his way down the line toward her. He notices the bandages on her hands.

HUGO
You were on the ship?

GERTRUD
We both were. Leonhard.

HUGO
I'm very sorry...
(awkward)
Not that there's anything I...

GERTRUD
(dry)
Of course not. Sabotage.

Hugo does a double-take at the man in the bed next to Leonhard's.

He has more extensive burns -- hands are completely wrapped.
This is CAPTAIN MAX PRUSS, barely recognizable from the
flashback.

HUGO

Is that...

GERTRUD

Captain Pruss. Burns. Broken bones.
Smoke inhalation. Can't even speak.

HUGO

He hasn't said anything then? What
about - can he write, has he -

GERTRUD

I don't think so. Burns on his
hands. He just stares and cries.

HUGO

Well that's good.
(she looks confused)
...that he's alive.

GERTRUD

Not exactly his charming self.

HUGO

You know him?

GERTRUD

A bit. My husband was in the middle
of writing his biography. He's the
serious journalist in the family.
He does facts, I do gossip.

Hugo looks alarmed to hear of the book.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

I remember hearing Pruss talk about
you. Said you taught him
everything.

HUGO

I'd like to read that book.

GERTRUD

Unfortunately the manuscript was on
the ship. I never got to read it.
Leonhard said it wasn't ready for
my eyes yet, even with my low
standards.

Hugo looks relieved. Gertrud notices.

Agent Connelley WHISTLES. He huddles with his men. Hugo and Carl join them. Gertrud hangs back and eavesdrops.

AGENT CONNELLEY
 I gotta follow a hot lead.
 (to different agents)
 You two - finish the statements.
 Capshaw - get the German translator
 on that heiress with the lisp.
 Leddecki - see if the ship's pastry
 chef really knows the recipe for
 lady fingers.

He gestures to a SKINNY PATIENT in a nearby bed.

AGENT CONNELLEY (CONT'D)
 I never met a baker who couldn't
 fill out an apron. Somethin' don't
 sit right.
 (to Hugo and Carl)
 Comin'? Asbury Park. Gotta see
 about this man with the dog.

Gertrud shows a spark of recognition.

GERTRUD
 (to herself, worried)
 Ben?

Connelley, Hugo and Carl go. Then Carl turns to Gertrud and gives her a look. "Well?"

She glances at Leonhard. Can she leave him?

NURSE RIVERA (O.S.)
 He's in good hands.

Nurse Rivera, changing a patient's bandages nearby, gives Gertrud a reassuring look. Gertrud nods. She snatches up her handbag and goes.

Hanging back, we see Pruss WATCHING THE GROUP, fear and concern in his eyes.

INT. VAUDEVILLE THEATER - ASBURY PARK, NJ - AN HOUR LATER

The house lights are still up in the run-down theater.

Gertrud's in a row near the back. She's frantically writing something in her notebook (which used to be her husband's).

What we manage to see of her note: "FBI...Suspect."

A young USHER passes up the aisle. She grabs his arm.

GERTRUD

Can you deliver this backstage?
Before he goes on?

She rips the note out and offers it. The usher sneers.

USHER

Show's startin', lady.

The usher goes. Gertrud crumples the note. She looks down at the notebook and sees Leonhard's old scrawl. He's written and underlined a word "FLUTTER." She squints quizzically.

IN THE FRONT ROW, Hugo, Carl and Connelley confer quietly.

AGENT CONNELLEY

If you're just lookin' to sniff
some strange, I know some girls on
the boardwalk who come with fewer
strings. Hearing starts tomorrow
and I gotta come up with more
leads. Ditch the broad.

CARL SYRUP

Mrs. Adelt has a devoted following.
And Germany deserves fair and
balanced coverage, Agent Connelley.
We can't let your free press run
away with our story.

Then the houselights go down.

HUGO

So this is the lead suspect so far?

AGENT CONNELLEY

Name came up with three different
passengers - Joseph Spah. But his
stage name is -

ANNOUNCER (O.S.)

Ladies and Gentlemen, the limber
lad from Lichtenstein, the stunt
man of Stuttgart, the world's
biggest Bavarian pretzel,
it's...Ben Dova!

The curtain rises. On stage is a full-scale street lamp,
alight with a gas flame. This is Ben Dova's legendary act:

A man in a tuxedo and top hat, BEN DOVA (30s), steps out on stage, swaying and staggering drunkenly. He holds a half-full beer stein in one hand.

In the back of the house, Gertrud smiles. She knows him.

He staggers toward the street lamp, nearly prat-falling every step. He almost spills his beer but avoids it each time.

Then he stops. He feels in his pocket and produces a cigarette. But he can't find his lighter. That's when he looks up...and sees the flame inside the street lamp.

CARL SYRUP
(gleeful)
Don't do it!

Now Ben Dova starts to climb the lamppost, which swings to and fro in huge arcs, all without spilling his beer. He hangs like a monkey, twirls like a stripper, demonstrates his stunning flexibility, and finally reaches the top, where he lights his cigarette.

In a series of contortions, Ben Dova theatrically descends to earth. He comes center stage, still clutching his beer stein.

Then he happens to glance into the first row, where he sees Carl's delighted smile -- and his Nazi armband.

This time Ben Dova completes his prat fall...and THROWS THE BEER right in Carl's grinning face.

Gertrud bursts out laughing in the back. Hugo, Connelley, and a dangerously enraged Carl Syrup all turn to stare at her.

INT. DRESSING ROOM - A LITTLE LATER

Ben Dova opens the door to his shabby dressing room.

BEN DOVA
Scheisse.

Hugo, Connelley and a damp Carl are there. Gertrud loiters in back by a rack of costumes.

CARL SYRUP
Hello, Mr. Dova.

Ben spots Gertrud. He's both pleased and confused.

BEN DOVA
Gertie, what are you doing -

She holds up Leonhard's notebook. Her eyes convey a warning.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Do you know why we're here?

BEN DOVA
You're going to ask if I can suck
my own dick?

Loud protests from all.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)
That's what most of the men who
wait around after my show want to
talk about.

AGENT CONNELLEY
We're here because you're the man
with the dog.

BEN DOVA
No, I'm not.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Three other passengers said talk to
the man with the dog. That's you.

BEN DOVA
No, it's not. I don't have a dog.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Then who's that?

He points to a framed photo on the vanity showing Ben Dova
doing a routine with a GERMAN SHEPHERD on its hind legs.

BEN DOVA
That's Ilse.

AGENT CONNELLEY
And she's not yours?

BEN DOVA
Not anymore.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Why not?

BEN DOVA
She died.

AGENT CONNELLEY
How?

BEN DOVA

Well, it's a long story, but it all started when the two of us boarded this zeppelin last week...

They really wanna punch this guy. Gertrud is getting nervous watching the tension mount.

CARL SYRUP

You don't much like the Nazi Party, do you, Mr. Dova?

BEN DOVA

I'm an American citizen now. I don't have to.

AGENT CONNELLEY

Passengers said they saw you in places you shouldn't have been. Restricted areas. Places that are hard to get to. Unless you're good at climbing.

(getting in his face)

Did you plant a bomb on the Hindenburg, you pinko freak?!

A JET OF WATER shoots out of Ben Dova's lapel carnation and sprays Connelley in the face.

Connelley attacks. He SHOVES Ben against the vanity mirror, smashing lightbulbs. Ben takes a makeup powder puff and POPS CONNELLEY IN THE FACE. Connelley sputters.

Carl grabs Ben, pinning his arms behind his back. Blinking away the makeup, steaming mad, Connelley closes in. Hugo inches back. Gertrud is paralyzed with horror.

AGENT CONNELLEY (CONT'D)

You know what we do to terrorists in this country, Mr. Dova? They get the chair. Lights, camera, action.

Connelley SOCKS BEN DOVA IN THE GUT. He doubles over.

GERTRUD

No!

She grabs the nearest object - a WOODEN CHAIR - and raises it over her head. Hugo sees her about to hit Connelley.

HUGO

Stop!

Gertrud freezes, puts the chair down, and sits down primly.

GERTRUD
I have some qualms.

Connelley lunges at her, then Hugo stiff-arms him back.

HUGO
That's enough!

Carl releases Ben Dova. He eyes Gertrud with annoyance.

HUGO (CONT'D)
Let's just...talk. Perhaps Mr. Dova
can explain -

BEN DOVA
Can't. Six shows a day. Curtain's
coming up.

He puts on the top hat from this lamp post act.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)
You can see me at the hearing. Or
you can wait and watch my act
again. Either way, I recommend the
front row. Cheers.

He raises the beer stein from his act and winks. He leaves.

Carl and Connelley give Gertrud dirty looks. Hugo, disgusted
at them all, storms out.

EXT. VAUDEVILLE THEATER - MOMENTS LATER

The troupe stomps to their car in a state of consternation,
Connelley wiping the makeup away with his handkerchief.

Gertrud makes to join them when Carl stops her.

CARL SYRUP
Mrs. Adelt, are you friends with
the suspect?

GERTRUD
(hesitating)
No...well, yes, we met on the ship,
of course, and...
(sincere)
Sergeant Syrup, Ben Dova saved my
life. Not only mine. He stopped us
from jumping from the ship when it
was too high off the ground. We
would have shattered.
(MORE)

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

Ben's an acrobat, he knows what the body can take. He's a hero.

CARL SYRUP

He's a suspect. And I don't think you're taking this assignment very seriously. Why don't you go collect your thoughts, review your notes, consider the consequences. Let me remind you of your loyalties...

He produces an enamel SWASTIKA PIN from his pocket and affixes it to her lapel. With a smile, Carl slips into the car. It DRIVES OFF, leaving Gertrud standing there, wretched.

EXT./EST. COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - NIGHT

A perfect spring night outside a gorgeous Victorian home. We hear a DOOR BELL.

INT. COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - MOMENTS LATER

Rosendahl leads an exhausted Hugo and Carl up the staircase.

ROSENDAHL

(bitterly)

Please. This house is insulting. The one the military gave the Coast Guard commander has a walk-in humidior. You trim your cigar by sticking the tip in a brass mermaid's fish muff. This house just has an herb garden.

HUGO

Fish muff or no, we thank you for your hospitality.

They go down a hallway. He gestures to an open bedroom door.

ROSENDAHL

Carl, your room.

Carl throws himself across the bed theatrically.

Rosendahl and Hugo continue down the hall to a LARGER BEDROOM. Hugo's suitcase rests on a luggage rack. Hugo goes and pops it open. Rosendahl lingers by the door.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)

Hugo, what if South Trimble finds out that there was something wrong with the ship?

(Hugo sighs)

But what if a - a design flaw! We'd be discredited! We'd never fly -

HUGO

The ship was perfect. A triumph.

ROSENDAHL

You really think it was sabotage? This man with the dog? I have to keep the zeppelins coming into Lakehurst, Hugo. If I don't the Navy's going to stick me on a boat, and then if you people start some war -

HUGO

Calm down.

ROSENDAHL

(increasingly hysterical)

Why do you think I'm in this fucking business? I picked the one flying object that's useless in battle! You can take out a zeppelin with a slingshot! I'm not cut out for combat, Hugo, please don't let them put me -

Hugo FLICKS Rosendahl in the forehead. Rosie is stunned speechless. Hugo immediately softens. In fact, he sags.

HUGO

I'm sorry. It's my life's work. It's...it's all I am, Rosie. This can't be how I'm remembered. And the only people I can count on to believe in me are you and the membership of the Nazi party.

ROSENDAHL

(suspicious)

Hugo, are you a -

HUGO

No. No, I'm not a Nazi. But...

It's a heavy "but." An ominous "but." He starts to unpack, hanging each item in the wardrobe.

HUGO (CONT'D)

You have to understand that zeppelins aren't a curiosity in Germany like they are in America. They're a product of our imagination. And the German people - Nazis included, Nazis especially - have a powerful imagination.

A special garment: his old pilot's uniform. He considers it.

HUGO (CONT'D)

I'm not a Nazi. But they can see what I see. A sky full of airships. And me - us - at the helm. Wouldn't that be beautiful, Rosie?

Hugo hangs up the suit and puts a fatherly hand on Rosie's shoulder as he guides him to the bedroom door.

HUGO (CONT'D)

We'll get through this. Trust me. Trust Carl, if you can. That maniac from the FBI. We just need a bit of-

ROSENDAHL

Imagination?

HUGO

Collaboration.

Rosendahl smiles weakly and goes, less than mollified.

Hugo returns to his suitcase and pulls out a tube, from which he extracts a rolled-up BLUEPRINT.

He smooths it out on the desk. It's a design for a massive airship. At the top of the page, the name: LZ 131 ECKENER.

INT. VAUDEVILLE THEATER - SIMULTANEOUSLY

It's nearly pitch-black.

GERTRUD

I knew it would come to this. Made a living from gossip, now I lie to survive.

A SPOTLIGHT finds her on the stage. Gertrud stands in a narrow man-sized metal cage, slumped against the bars -- one of Ben Dova's sets from his act. She looks up to the rafters.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

(droll)

You want me to sing about it?

Ben Dova is on the catwalk above the empty seats in the back of the theater, fiddling with the light in the rigging.

BEN DOVA

Almost got it fixed. The theater
butchered my lighting cues.

He slots a red gel into the light. Gertrud glows demonically. She picks up a comically oversized length of chain made of foam. She tosses it about her shoulders. Strikes a pose.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)

It suits you.

She snorts dismissively. Ben Dova slides gracefully down the ladder and walks through the house to the stage.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)

Well one of us has to go to jail
and I don't have the figure to pull
off the manacles.

GERTRUD

You're not going to jail.

Gertrud drops the chain and steps out of the cage. Ben, with a light hop, bounces onto the stage. But his tone is sharp.

BEN DOVA

I'm not? Isn't that the story they
want you to write? "Circus freak
pops the big balloon"?

GERTRUD

They don't have a leg to stand on.

BEN DOVA

They don't need legs when they've
got...

With a flourish, he magically produces Gertrud's swastika pin from out of thin air. He presents it to her.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)

Sleight of hand. Dropped this.

She grabs it resentfully.

Ben starts to roll the cage toward the wings of the stage. Gertrud stalks after him, indignant.

GERTRUD

You're an American now. You've survived. I have to keep surviving. If I cross the Reich, I'll lose my job! We'll starve! I have a child, Ben. And if Leonhard doesn't wake up...

(can't say it)

I want my life back.

They're both in the darkened wing as Ben stows his set piece. He turns back to her - less flippant, more sincere.

BEN DOVA

I didn't do it.

GERTRUD

Of course you didn't do -

BEN DOVA

But if I didn't do it, who did? You said "ask Hitler." You said it for a reason, Gertie. What was it?

The mystery tugs at her.

GERTRUD

Captain Pruss seemed worried. On the flight. Leonhard, too. Like they knew something was coming.

BEN DOVA

(with a wry grin)

Now that's "all the scandal I can handle."

GERTRUD

I see what you're doing.

BEN DOVA

You can find out who's really to blame! My god, you're brilliant at this. I know your reputation. No one keeps a secret from Gertrud Adelt.

Her mind whirs, the mystery drawing her in...but then -

GERTRUD

I owe you my life, Ben, but...I can't. It's suicide. Besides, they're going to have these hearings. That Trimble fellow sounds rather serious.

(MORE)

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

The Americans certainly don't need
my help.

Ben pulls a lever against the wall and as a sandbag falls,
rigging holding a piece of scenery ascends to the rafters.

BEN DOVA

I haven't been American for long,
but let me assure you, darling: we
do. Some people in this country see
the Reich for what it is. But
there's plenty of others who see a
lot to like.

Gertrud stomps back across the stage. When she gets to
center, the GHOSTLIGHT flickers on, startling her. She stops.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)

War isn't coming, Gertie. It's
already begun. Which side are you
on?

Gertrud, conflicted, hurries off stage.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - THE NEXT MORNING

Gertrud is again sleeping in the chair at Leonhard's bedside.
She stirs at a SOUND: whispering voices, rustling fabric.

Cracking open her eyes, Gertrud sees Nurse Rivera and two
ORDERLIES quietly tending to a heavily bandaged PATIENT.

The orderlies lift him onto a stretcher, pull a sheet over
his head. Nurse Rivera sighs as the orderlies wheel him away.

She catches Gertrud watching. Shakes her head.

NURSE RIVERA

Thirty-six.

Nurse Rivera indicates paper shopping bags by Leonhard's bed.

NURSE RIVERA (CONT'D)

For you. The nurses pulled some
things together.

Inside, Gertrud finds clothes, shoes, cosmetics. Tears come.
She nods her thanks. Rivera returns a small, exhausted smile.

Gertrud goes to try on the clothes. Pulling off her jacket,
she discovers the swastika pin inside the pocket. Her lip
curls, face hardens.

GERTRUD

No one keeps a secret from Gertrud Adelt.

EXT. NAVAL AIR STATION - THE NEXT MORNING

And so it begins: the Hindenburg Hearings. The whole world is watching as the investigators, officials, and witnesses stream toward the massive airship hangar.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Hindenburg Hearings - Day 1*

Ahead, we see dozens of REPORTERS and PHOTOGRAPHERS grouped at the entrance, shouting questions and snapping pictures.

Hundreds of SPECTATORS behind a rope line jostle to get into the facility. Naval OFFICERS attempt some crowd control.

Gertrud, coiffed, made-up and wearing a dress, strides confidently toward the hangar. Ben Dova appears at her side.

BEN DOVA

Morning, Gertie. You're looking plucked and polished. Punching in at the bullshit bureau are we?

GERTRUD

Not exactly. I've gone freelance.
(off his curious look)
The fuck-you factory was hiring.

They arrive at the entrance to the hangar, where Lieutenant Wesley fails to stem the flow of spectators.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

Press and officials only, please!

Gertrud and Ben Dova follow the crowd inside.

INT. AIRSHIP HANGAR

It's a quarter mile long, five stories high. The hearings are set up on a SECOND-FLOOR LOFT at the back of the hangar.

After they enter, Gertrud leads Ben behind a stack of crates.

GERTRUD

I'm gonna nail the bastards who did this.

Ben lights up. She cautions him.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

But if I'm going to find out what really happened, I can't let those psychopaths know I'm asking questions. They'll cut off my access. I have to look like I'm writing their pathetic propaganda.

They see Connelley and his G-Men waltzing toward the loft.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

I've got eight days. That's til the end of the hearing. But if I find the truth and get the evidence to the Americans by then, no amount of Nazi propaganda will convince the world an autofellating acrobat -
(Ben rolls his eyes)
- took down the mighty Hindenburg. But we have to keep it quiet. The Nazis can never know it was me who spoiled their little pity party.

BEN DOVA

Don't reporters always want the credit?

Over the crates, they see Hugo march by, trailed by a gaggle of press, then Carl Syrup. She watches Carl warily.

GERTRUD

Not when credit can kill your whole family.

He nods with sober respect. She puts on her swastika pin.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

Let's go to war.

INT. HANGAR LOFT

It's a makeshift courtroom, with a gallery full of chairs and a long table at the front where the judge's bench would be.

At the head table, we see South Trimble conferring with a few other DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE OFFICIALS.

Hugo stoically reviews documents, with an eye on the crowd.

Carl greets guests near the front. Some recoil from his swastika, others warmly shake his hand - just like Ben said.

Gertrud sits in the back row. She takes out Leonhard's notebook and pen, wincing in pain at her hands.

The grandfatherly PAUL LITCHFIELD (60s) appears at her side.

PAUL

Is this seat taken, my dear?

Gertrud shakes her head. He sits, then reaches into his pocket and produces a handful of wrapped candies. Offers one.

GERTRUD

No, thank you.

PAUL

Ever since the crash I've been
turning to sugar. Sometimes candy
helps sad things feel temporary.
Tells you sweeter times lie ahead.

Gertrud looks at him with more interest now.

GERTRUD

Are you with the government?

PAUL

Oh no. I'm just an...interested
party.

She's intrigued.

MEANWHILE - AT THE FRONT TABLE...

Carl and Hugo are wrestling over a swastika pin, which Carl is trying force into Hugo's lapel. Hugo GETS POKED.

Rosendahl rushes up, out of breath. In a stage-whisper -

ROSENDAHL

Hugo! Paul Litchfield is here!

Hugo and Carl look out into the crowd and see Paul in the back, talking intently with Gertrud, who takes notes.

CARL SYRUP

Who's Paul Litchfield?

HUGO

CEO of Goodyear Tire. Been working
on an airship design for years.
Utterly obsessed, and that's me
saying that. Largest private
investor in dirigibles in the
world.

ROSENDAHL
 But all he's got is that idiotic
 blimp, bless his heart. Glorified
 weather balloon.

Hugo thinks, has an idea. He turns to Carl.

HUGO
 Carl, darling, Mr. Litchfield needs
 your VIP treatment.

Carl snaps into action, hustling over to Paul and Gertrud.

Hugo leans in toward Rosendahl.

HUGO (CONT'D)
 If my Reich or your Navy refuse to
 fund the next ship -

ROSENDAHL
 We can go private with Goodyear!
 Unless we lose him, too...

BACK IN THE GALLERY - Carl takes Paul by the elbow. Paul
 turns to Gertrud.

PAUL
 Lovely meeting you, dear. I will
 pray for your husband's recovery.

GERTRUD
 Perhaps an interview this -

CARL SYRUP
 A tremendous idea! I'd be delighted
 to supervise.

Gertrud and Carl exchange hard smiles. Paul tips his hat to
 her and Carl guides him to the front.

MINUTES LATER - At the front of the hearing room.

South to the gallery, like a conductor cueing an orchestra -

SOUTH TRIMBLE
 And now...our first witness.

INT. HEARING - TESTIMONY SEQUENCE

We intercut WITNESS TESTIMONY and FLASHBACKS.

A dapper man with mild burns on his face, GEORGE HIRSCHFELD
 (35, German), sits in the witness seat.

Trimble is at a table opposite him, his back to the gallery.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
How was the flight?

GEORGE HIRSCHFELD
It was...awesome.

FRANKFURT AIRFIELD - EARLY EVENING - FLASHBACK

Delighted passengers gaze up at the sparkling Hindenburg. The loading ramp has been lowered to the ground for them to board. An injury-free George is awe-struck.

HEARING

MARIE KLEEMAN (61, German) has a cut lip. Her eyes twinkle.

MARIE KLEEMAN
They give you these lovely little
chocolates when you board.

HINDENBURG GANGWAY STAIRS - FLASHBACK

Marie follows other passengers up the stairs, where a SERVER offers a tray of truffles. Marie takes one. And then another.

HEARING

MARGARET MATHER (50s, stylish, British) recalls wistfully -

MARGARET MATHER
And champagne in the lounge.

HINDENBURG LOUNGE - FLASHBACK

Margaret follows the other passengers into the airy lounge, where she accepts a champagne flute.

The walls of the lounge are painted with a world map showing famous explorers' routes. It's furnished with brown chairs and square tables. Slanted windows line one side.

In one corner, there's a BABY GRAND PIANO. Margaret tinkles a few keys and smiles.

HEARING

ELSA ERNST (63, German) wears an eye patch.

ELSA ERNST
Gorgeous china.

CUT TO - NELSON MORRIS (45, American) with a thick mustache. He leers.

NELSON MORRIS
Gorgeous staff.

HINDENBURG DINING ROOM - FLASHBACK

Indeed, a knockout STEWARDESS delivers a coffee to Nelson. His gaze then shifts past her, to a smokeshow steward, FRITZ DEEG (24) pouring champagne for a flirtatious Margaret Mather. Fritz looks over and WINKS at Nelson.

HINDENBURG SMOKING LOUNGE - FLASHBACK

GEORGE HIRSCHFELD (V.O.)
There was even a smoking lounge! On
an airship! Can you believe it?

George pushes open the plexiglass door of the smoking lounge and steps into the haze. He coughs and smiles.

HEARING

GEORGE HIRSCHFELD
I mean, you would think that would
be dangerous around the hydrogen
but apparently it's...
(realizes)
Oh. Well. Maybe it w -

CUT TO - FIRST OFFICER ALBERT SAMMT (48, German). Stiff.

SUPERIMPOSE: Hindenburg Hearings - Day 2

ALBERT SAMMT
It was the Hindenburg's tenth
flight, and the second of the '37
season, with an expected flight
time of fifty-five hours. The
launch occurred at seventeen
hundred hours on the third of May.

HINDENBURG CONTROL ROOM - FLASHBACK

Captain Max Pruss turns away from the windows at the prow of the ship and shouts to his FIVE OFFICERS.

MAX PRUSS
Up ship!

A RADIOMAN echoes this call into his radio.

HINDENBURG - FLASHBACK

Outside, ballast is purged and the ground crew lets go of their lines. The Hindenburg begins to rise.

HINDENBURG CONTROL ROOM - FLASHBACK

MAX PRUSS (CONT'D)
Engines! 1350 RPM!

HINDENBURG - FLASHBACK

The engines roar to life. Four twenty-foot propellers begin to whirr and the ship starts to move horizontally.

HINDENBURG CONTROL ROOM - FLASHBACK

MAX PRUSS (CONT'D)
Twenty-five degrees southeast!

A RUDDERMAN glances at a compass and turns the wheel.

HINDENBURG EXT - FLASHBACK

Outside, we see the massive rudder slowly shift.

FRANKFURT AIR FIELD - FLASHBACK

From below, SPECTATORS bid adieu to the rising passengers, who are gathered at the windows -- smiling, waving, blowing kisses. Blissfully unaware of what lies ahead.

HEARING

Fritz Deeg, the hot steward, is on the stand. He smirks like he's keeping a delicious secret.

SUPERIMPOSE: Hindenburg Hearings - Day 3

FRITZ DEEG
Then, as they say, the party
started.

VARIOUS HINDENBURG ROOMS - SUNSET - FLASHBACK

CLOSE on a set of fingers as they land on the piano keys. They bang out a frisky jazz tune - Fats Waller's 1937 hit "*The Joint Is Jumpin'.*"

Pulling back, we see these fingers belong to Ben Dova.

Soon, Gertrud leans over the piano and SINGS. What she lacks in soul she *almost* makes up for in enthusiasm.

GERTRUD

*They have a new expression along
old Harlem way/
That tells you when a party is ten
times more than gay/
To say that things are jumpin'
leaves not a single doubt/
That everything is in full swing
when you hear someone shout...*

Leonhard watches her lovingly from a table, tapping his foot.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

*The joint is jumpin', it's really
jumpin'/
Come in, cats, and check your hats/
I mean this joint is jumpin'*

As the song continues over the action, a montage:

- Cocktails pouring, cocktails sloshing.
- Passengers dancing together bawdily.
- Children race among the grown-ups. Delightful mischief.
- People excitedly point out the window at icebergs below.
- An OLD WOMAN throws down her playing cards and pulls the pot of chips toward her, to the chagrin of her opponents.

AN OVERHEAD SHOT pans over the ship's private sleeping compartments. Inside each one we see:

- Children jump on beds,
- Fritz Deeg does a sexy striptease for Nelson Morris,
- Leonhard pulls Gertrud into their cabin, throws her up against a wall, and hoists her dress,
- And Margaret Mather, with her ear pressed up against their shared wall.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (PRE-LAP)

Any complaints?

HEARING

WILLIAM LEUCHTENBERG (68, American) has half his face wrapped in gauze. He looks out at the gallery with a sour expression.

LEUCHTENBERG

Yeah. Yeah, I had complaints.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

And what were they regarding, Mr.
Leuchtenberg?

LEUCHTENBERG

They were regarding the flying
Nazis.

INT. HINDENBURG DINING ROOM - AFTERNOON - FLASHBACK

All the passengers are well into a gourmet lunch -- except William Leuchtenberg, who sits sullenly at a table with his arms crossed and no food in front of him.

Then a hand delivers a plate. It's poached fish on a bed of greens with, inexplicably, a strip of bacon across the top.

Leuchtenberg scowls at the WAITER, who smirks.

LEUCHTENBERG (V.O.)

They took both of the Jews and
stuck us together.

Reversing, we see Leuchtenberg is sitting across from a frizzy-haired, bespectacled man, MORITZ FEIBUSCH (48, American). They look at each other with distinct dislike.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (V.O.)

Moritz Feibusch?

ANOTHER NIGHT - The two men glare at each other over a romantic candlelit dinner. They simultaneously remove the strips of bacon covering their food. A ritual.

LEUCHTENBERG (V.O.)

Yeah, that's right. Breakfast,
lunch, and dinner, the same table.
That was the routine. A slice of
bacon and faceful of schmuck.
Feibusch. Feh.

HEARING

LEUCHTENBERG

Stubborn! Irrational! Wouldn't jump
out the window when the fire broke
out. I said, what are you doing,
this thing's burning up, but...now
look at him. Alav ha-shalom.

Grief suddenly hits him. South lets this hang for a minute.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Was there anyone else on board who seemed dissatisfied with the German government?

Leuchtenberg cracks a smile.

LEUCHTENBERG

Yeah. Ben Dova.

CUT TO - BEN DOVA ON THE STAND. He's relaxed -- a man accustomed to an audience.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Hindenburg Hearings - Day 4*

And what an audience. It's packed as usual, but now there's Agent Connelley and a half-dozen other G-MEN sitting in the front row, lasering Ben Dova with their eyes.

Gertrud sits a few rows back, silently rooting for him. Hugo watches like a hawk.

South is up and pacing, ready to grill the suspect.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Now, Mr. Dova, is it true that you harassed certain passengers?

BEN DOVA

Only the fascists.

South refers to some notes.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

You put strudel on Mr. Reichhold's seat?

BEN DOVA

A satisfying squish.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

And led a chant of "Heil Shitler"?

BEN DOVA

Admittedly low-brow.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

And said that Jesse Owens's victory at the Berlin Olympic Games made Germany look like a bunch of whimpering homunculi? What are homunculi, Mr. Dova?

BEN DOVA
Very, very tiny men.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
I see. Mr. Dova, do you oppose the
Nazi government?

BEN DOVA
Every day.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
And have you opposed them
violently?

BEN DOVA
Someday it may come to that.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
But not yet?

Ben shakes his head. Connelley snorts and Ben winks at him.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)
Mr. Dova, three passengers reported
seeing you in unauthorized sections
of the ship on multiple occasions.
In fact, you were witnessed
entering the rear cargo hold, the
precise area where the fire began.
Why were you there?

Connelley, excited, leans over to one of his agents.

AGENT CONNELLEY
(whispering)
Watch him try to wriggle outta this
one.

BEN DOVA
I was feeding my dog.

AGENT CONNELLEY
(whispering)
Fuck.

South expresses only mild surprise. Cocks an eyebrow at Ben.

BEN DOVA
They made me keep her in the cargo
hold for the entire flight. She was
part of my act. You didn't know? I
thought I had more fans.

Gertrud smiles. The crowd chuckles. Hugo and Carl meet eyes. This isn't good.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)
 Besides. We had to do something
 with all that bacon they kept
 serving the Jews.

Some laugh. Others shoot dirty looks at Carl's Nazi regalia. South changes tack.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
 I understand you're booked for two
 weeks of shows at the Asbury Park
 Vaudeville Theater. How much for a
 ticket?

BEN DOVA
 Twenty cents for the cheap seats,
 and all the seats are cheap.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
 And how much for a ticket on the
 Hindenburg?

Ben pauses. He realizes he's been caught in South's trap. Hugo sits up a little straighter.

BEN DOVA
 Four hundred dollars.

The crowd GASPS and MURMURS. That's a lot.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
 Four hundred dollars! That's a
 brand new car! That's a year at
 Harvard College! That is an awful
 lot of cheap seats. Now I've got
 two questions for you Mr. Dova -
how and why?

Ben's on his back foot -- we haven't seen him there before.

BEN DOVA
 Well, I - I missed my ship out of
 Hamburg. I'm ashamed to say I had
 too much whiskey the night before.
 But I had to get to America to make
 my dates at the Vaudeville. They
 were my first shows in months, you
 see, and the Hindenburg was the
 only way to get there in time. So
 I...borrowed the money for a
 ticket.

South lets this hang for a long, uncomfortable moment.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
You're deep in the hole, Mr. Dova.
It does make me wonder...if there
was another reason you had to fly.

BEN DOVA
(angry now)
Yes. There was. I had to get the
hell out of Nazi Germany.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
And slam the door behind you?

Ben sneers then starts to get up out of his seat.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)
One more question. How's your act
these days?

BEN DOVA
My act's fine, thank you.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
Not a scratch on you, is there. You
do seem to land on your feet.

Ben stares furiously at South, then a smug Carl. Hugo and
Rosie exchange subtle, hopeful looks. Gertrud's worried.

EXT. PIER 86 - NEW YORK CITY - MORNING

A MILITARY BAND in full Nazi uniform plays a mournful
rendition of *Die Fahne Hoch*, the anthem of the Nazi Party.

SUPERIMPOSE: Hindenburg Hearings - Day 5

We're at a large covered pier, the dock for the Hamburg-
Amerika Line. Nazi flags and wreaths hang from tall posts.

There are 36 coffins in a row, some draped with the American,
Swedish or British flag, but most shrouded in a Swastika.

Carl stands at the front of a heil-ing German color guard.
Hugo lurks uncomfortably nearby. The large, mostly American
CROWD watches the display - some skeptically, some
admiringly.

Gertrud takes in the scene, Leonhard's notebook at the ready.

A FEW MINUTES LATER -

The formal memorial has ended and people now circulate.

South Trimble mingles with visitors, shaking hands and conveying condolences. Hugo sidles up with a smirk.

HUGO

They ought to check the caskets for Ben Dova. After what you did to him yesterday, I'm sure he'd like to crawl inside.

South gives Hugo a queasy grin.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

I'm only raising questions, Captain. No stone unturned.

They stroll together along the row of coffins. They PAUSE for a press photo with a dour OLD WOMAN. As they move on -

HUGO

Of course. And my technical report is nearly ready to present.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

(dripping with sarcasm)
Oh whatever will it reveal?

Next coffin. They both shake hands with mourners. They're doing dueling politician acts, toggling between charm with the "common people" and menace with each other.

HUGO

Science. Unlike you, I'm not trying to politicize a tragedy.

The two of them pose together with THREE NAVAL MIDSHIPMEN in dress whites. Grin, shake, flash.

South turns to face Hugo, dropping the pleasant artifice.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

I never asked for your help. That you're here at all is a matter of international diplomacy, well beyond my influence. And while you may have a favored explanation, it makes no difference to me if it was Ben Dova or Jehovah who brought down the Hindenburg, so long as justice is done. But what I don't like - what I detest - is being taken for a patsy by a stool pigeon.

HUGO
I don't think that idiom
translates.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
Give me the fuckin' facts, Captain.
How's that translate?

South goes off to greet more mourners. Carl comes up to Hugo.

HUGO
(to Carl)
I think Mr. Trimble needs a bit
more persuading.

MEANWHILE - Gertrud is talked at by a wild-eyed American NAZI FANBOY (40s) in Third Reich merch. He shows her a PHOTO from a newspaper. Gertrud, taking notes, looks perplexed.

NAZI FANBOY
So here it is when the fire starts.
Look closer. See? Who's that, huh?
He's got a clear shot at the tail.
The Fuhrur has been warning us
about them. He's got codes in his
speeches. And look! They're here!

He indicates a group of Black and Brown men, plus Italian immigrants, gathered around a American flag-draped casket. It's the GROUND CREW, including FRED, from the opening scene.

MOMENTS LATER - Gertrud approaches them. Re: the coffin --

GERTRUD
Who was he?

FRED
Dead weight like the rest of us.

GERTRUD
You're the ground crew and he -

FRED
Was slow as fuck.

GERTRUD
I'm so sorry. So...you must have
seen the ship come in. You saw when
the fire started?

FRED
Front row seat.

Gertrud gets an idea, then makes sure Carl isn't watching.

INT. ICE CREAM PARLOR - A LITTLE LATER

POP! A balloon bursts and a toddler wails in outrage.

It's the platonic ideal of an ice cream parlor. Around them, little girls with pink bows demolish banana splits.

Fred and DOM (30s, Italian) gather at a table with Gertrud. Fred slurps a milkshake and Dom licks a cone.

Gertrud has a cup of coffee. She takes notes, wincing occasionally at her hands. Her bandages are fraying again.

FRED

Happened that fast, man. Saw that little blue flame by the tail and then, bam, thirty seconds later -

DOM

Finito.

FRED

Jorge caught a girder. Then people started droppin' from the sky...

Pantomiming hair on fire -

DOM

Capelli in fiamme...

FRED

Screamin' all this German shit...

GERTRUD

Yes, I was one of them.

Fred's chagrined. Oh. Right.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

Can you walk me through those first moments, when the ship approached?

FRED

Well we got there a little late -

DOM

Union negotiations.

FRED

So the ship was almost at the landing field. And she was comin' in real hot. Had to swerve a little to slow down.

GERTRUD

And then what?

FRED

Stopped on target, dropped some ballast, slowed the motors -- you know, procedure.

GERTRUD

So everything was normal?

The guys exchange a look. Fred gurgles his milkshake.

DOM

Non normale.

FRED

We know airships, right? Maybe we ain't engineers, but I been doing this for fifteen years. Commercial flights, experimental crafts. American, German, British, Italian. Lakehurst sees all the airships. We got three in storage. Shit, the USS Los Angeles is just sittin' in a hangar, gatherin' dust.

Dom giggles mischievously.

GERTRUD

Why's he laughing?

FRED

Commander Rosendahl likes to visit it after hours. His officers, too. Pretend like they still over international waters. Like they got dick-lomatic immunity.

Dom giggles. Gertrud blinks this away. Back to the point.

GERTRUD

But what was different about the Hindenburg's landing?

FRED

All right, well, you know how it looks like it's all made of metal? Unh-uh. The outer cover's canvas, and it's painted with this shit called "dope." That's a technical term.

(MORE)

FRED (CONT'D)

Makes the canvas waterproof,
shrinks it up so it's tight around
the frame, and it's silver, so it
reflects the sunlight.

LANDING FIELD - FLASHBACK

Fred and Dom look up, squinting into the wind and rain.

FRED (V.O.)

So we was right underneath her and
the wind was blowin' hard.

ICE CREAM PARLOR

Gertrud listens intently, pen poised.

FRED

Now, that dope is supposed to make
the cover tight, right?

GERTRUD

But what did you see?

LANDING FIELD - FLASHBACK

We see the Hindenburg from below as it hovers over the
landing site. Its cover is rippling in the wind.

DOM (V.O.)

Le ondulazione.

ICE CREAM PARLOR

FRED

Flutter.

Gertrud sits up as if she's been stung. She frantically flips
back through her notebook, to Leonhard's handwriting, and
finds one word, circled: "FLUTTER."

EXT. ALLEY BEHIND THE THEATER - LATE AFTERNOON

Gertrud paces around the trash-strewn alley. She's fired up.
She holds Leonhard's notebook open to that page.

Meanwhile, Ben Dova is training his new dog -- a standard
French poodle with a "Continental trim." It's not going well.
Ben's anxious, fraying under the strain of the suspicions.

GERTRUD

It means something, Ben!

BEN DOVA
 (to the dog)
 Up! Stand up! On your hind legs! On
 your fucking legs!

The dog just blinks at him. Ben turns back to Gertrud.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)
 What means something?

GERTRUD
 That word! Flutter!

BEN DOVA
 (doubting)
 Flutter. Flutter like a butterfly.
Flutter took down the Hindenburg.
Flutter is the clue that's supposed
 to save my life.

GERTRUD
 (acidly)
 I don't expect a man to understand
 the power of a sustained flutter.

The dog barks at Ben Dova.

BEN DOVA
 (to the dog)
 Oh and you do because you're
 French?
 (addressing Gertrud)
 I switched to a French Poodle from
 a German Sheppard as an act of
 resistance and now look. He's
 turning me into a ethnonationalist.
 (to the dog)
 Do the bit or I'll use you as a
 toilet brush.

The dog pees on the dumpster. Gertrud's preoccupied.

GERTRUD
 It was the outer cover. It was
 flapping.

BEN DOVA
 All right. And what's the problem
 with that?

GERTRUD
 I don't know yet. But Leonhard
 thought it was important.
 (MORE)

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

Maybe it's some kind of design
flaw. Look. It's here in his
notebook.

She holds out the book. Ben looks, grim-faced.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

"Flutter - how long, how bad?"
That's all there is. Leonhard takes
terrible notes. Relies on his
memory. Which is extraordinary,
actually.

(a wave of grief)

The last thing he did before he
lost consciousness was give me this
notebook. He wanted me to see. But
now the rest of the story is locked
up inside a - a fucking mummy.

Tears escape. Ben goes to comfort her. He thinks.

BEN DOVA

But...if Leonhard knew...

GERTRUD

It means someone else did, too.
Because someone had to tell him.
Pruss.

BEN DOVA

Perfect. Another fucking mummy.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - A LITTLE LATER

Gertrud steps in. Carl Syrup springs up from a chair just
inside the doorway. She gasps, surprised.

CARL SYRUP

I caught you!
(Gertrud goes white)
On your way in!

Oh. She exhales and hurries to Leonhard's bed. Carl follows.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

I insisted on hand-delivering this.
You're second on the docket
tomorrow. Be there at nine sharp.

He gives her a letter. She opens it and reads. Her feet slow.

GERTRUD

I thought they were done with
passenger testimony.

CARL SYRUP

I got him to squeeze you in.

They get to Leonhard's bed. She tosses the letter onto the
chair, dejected. Carl observes with displeasure.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

The Ministry decided we need more
than just a propaganda piece. We
need your sworn testimony against
Ben Dova.

He steps closer, takes her chin in his finger tips and turns
her to look at him. She bats his hand away. He chuckles.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

Gertrud, darling. It would mean so
much to the Reich. And we'll make
it mean much, much more to you.

He clearly draws her attention to the PHOTO OF HER SON on
Leonhard's bedside table. Color drains from her face.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)

The clown goes down, understand?

She vaguely nods. Carl smiles and saunters away.

Gertrud turns back to the photo. Comes to a decision.

INT. TELEGRAM OFFICE - MINUTES LATER

Gertrud talks with urgency to a TELEGRAM OPERATOR behind a
glass partition, dictating her message.

GERTRUD

Mother, take the Red Star Line from
Hamburg to Southhampton. Departs
tomorrow at three - stop - gravest
importance - stop - confirm receipt
- stop - tell Christian I love him -
full stop.

EXT. NAVAL AIR FIELD - SIDEWALK - THE NEXT MORNING

The crash site is now a tourist attraction. The area around the base hosts dozens of VENDORS selling souvenirs -- from Hindenburg pennants to vinyl records that play Herb Morrison's radio report. His HYSTERICAL VOICE loops.

SUPERIMPOSE: Hindenburg Hearings - Day 6

Gertrud weaves her way through the throng, then spots Ben Dova buying an apple from an APPLE VENDOR.

She rushes to him and pulls him around the back of the apple cart. She yanks him down into a squat. Whispers frantically.

GERTRUD

They're making me testify! About you!

BEN DOVA

You - you can't! You'll send me to the electric chair!

GERTRUD

They'll go after my son.

BEN DOVA

So you're going to -

GERTRUD

No! I'm going to tell them about the flutter.

BEN DOVA

But your son -

GERTRUD

I need your help. Call the Red Star Line, the port in Hamburg. Check if Brunhilde Stolte and Christian Adelt are on the manifest for the ship departing for England in one hour. I couldn't get through earlier. But if I know they're on the boat, the Nazis can't stop me.

BEN DOVA

But if they're not...

She gives him a grim look. He understands.

GERTRUD

I'm second on the docket. Go!

He kisses her on the forehead then takes off running.

INT. AIRSHIP HANGAR - HEARING LOFT

Gertrud sit in the back row. Her foot jiggles nervously. Checks her watch. She looks at the rear, hoping to see Ben. He's not there.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (O.S.)
Gertrud Adelt...

She jolts. As Gertrud stands, heads turn. She self-consciously makes her way to the front of the hearing room.

She passes Agent Connelley with his stone-cold stare. Then Paul Litchfield, who smiles warmly at her.

As she nears the witness chair, she meets eyes with Hugo and Rosendahl, who regard her with suspicion.

Gertrud sits and faces South Trimble. In the front row is Carl Syrup with a grin full of teeth.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)
Welcome, Mrs. Adelt. How are you recovering?

GERTRUD
I'm - I'm fine, thank you.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
I understand your husband's condition remains serious.

GERTRUD
Yes.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
My sincere sympathies. As I believe you're aware, there have been some suspicions of sabotage circulating among both airship experts -
(indicating Hugo)
- and terrestrial observers.
(indicating the press)
Some have singled out Mr. Ben Dova as possessing both motive and opportunity.

She checks the back again. No Ben Dova.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

Now, I understand that you're a journalist.

GERTRUD

I'm just a gossip reporter.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

(smiling broadly)

Well ain't that just ideal! Our airborne Hercule Poirot, minus the mustache. So with your nose for bad behavior, your instinct for ignominy, what did you spy with your little eye on those three days aboard the Hindenburg?

We wait. Hugo's fingernails dig into the table. Carl bores a hole in her with his eyes. Rosendahl twitches. Gertrud sweats.

Then, in the back, BEN DOVA APPEARS. He looks at her apologetically, helplessly. He shrugs. Couldn't get through.

Gertrud wilts. Looks down at her bandaged hands, then out at Ben, who silently pleads with her. What's she going to say?

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

Mrs. Adelt?

Gertrud takes a fortifying breath. Guttural and defiant:

GERTRUD

Flutter.

South's head jerks up from his notes. Hugo's jaw drops. Rosendahl looks concerned. Carl stares murderously.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Please explain, Mrs. Adelt.

GERTRUD

I could. But the expert is right there.

She indicates Fred, standing in the back of the room, dressed in a suit and looking confident.

South looks and narrows his eyes. Doesn't like the look of him. He grudgingly waves him forward.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

All right, now. Let's hear it.

EXT. AIRSHIP HANGAR - LATER

The hearings have just ended for the day and Gertrud pushes past the horde as they make their way out of the hangar and through the gate. She hurries for the main gate.

Meanwhile, REPORTERS SWARM around Fred, shouting questions. He revels in the attention.

Carl, on a warpath, marches out. Hugo follows.

CARL SYRUP
That disobedient hack!

HUGO
(snide)
Did the puppet master get his
strings tangled?

CARL SYRUP
What is this - this flutter?

HUGO
Utter nonsense.

CARL SYRUP
Fine. We have to get this back on
track. What we need are the results
from the laboratory about the bomb
fragment.

HUGO
But it's not a bomb fragment.

CARL SYRUP
You're the technical expert, aren't
you? It's a bomb if you say it is.

A black sedan as it drives too fast through the crowd.

CARL SYRUP (CONT'D)
That's Agent Connelley!

They scurry after it. It slows and Connelley rolls down the window with a sour expression. Hugo and Carl have to jog alongside like a couple of dumb assholes.

AGENT CONNELLEY
Trail's growin' colder, boys. I'm
not gettin' that commie stink.

CARL SYRUP
But the bomb fragment. Did you hear
back from -

AGENT CONNELLEY
Negative for explosive residue.
Turns out that was just a valve
casing.

HUGO
Well, that's open to interpret -

AGENT CONNELLEY
Dunno, fellas. Sounds like there
mighta been something wrong under
the hood. This, uh, flutter.

HUGO
No, no - only an act of sabotage
could have -

AGENT CONNELLEY
Yeah? Convince me.

He steps on the gas, leaving Hugo and Carl huffing and
puffing pathetically in the crowd. Carl storms off.

Then something catches Hugo's eye -- something worrying.

TWO PEOPLE on a bench at the edge of the airfield. Hugo goes.

AT THE BENCH -- There's Paul Litchfield and an older
passenger we met during the testimony montage, Marie Kleeman.

Marie and Paul are crying. Hugo, terrified, interrupts them.

HUGO
Paul, my friend, are you all right?
You - you can't possibly take that
flutter business seriously. There's
no reason to think that -

PAUL
Mrs. Kleeman just told me about
Captain Pruss.

Hugo perks up hopefully. He's excited but feigns concern.

HUGO
Oh. Oh dear. Does it seem he was
somehow...at fault?

PAUL
His extraordinary courage!

MARIE KLEEMAN
He saved me!

HUGO
(disappointed)
Ah. Did he now.

MARIE KLEEMAN
Yes...

CRASH SITE - MARIE'S POV - FLASHBACK

It's just moments after the ship came crashing to earth. Ahead is a wall of flame. Dozens flee from it. But Marie is hunched on the grass as fiery debris rains down.

MARIE KLEEMAN (V.O.)
Someone had pushed me out of the window. I hit the ground, and I...I couldn't move.

Suddenly, a SCORCHED FIGURE staggers from the direction of safety and lifts her to her feet.

MARIE KLEEMAN (V.O.)
And then he was there! Captain Pruss! He carried me. He saved me.

Pruss delivers the dazed Marie to a fire fighter. Then he turns back to the inferno with a pained, determined look.

MARIE KLEEMAN (V.O.)
And then he went back. He went back to save more.

Pruss disappears into the flames.

BENCH

Hugo tries to look moved. Paul is a puddle of tears.

HUGO
Yes. That Pruss. Lovely fellow.

Paul grasps Hugo's arm.

PAUL
I need to see him, Hugo. I have to tell him...tell him he's a hero!

HUGO
Well he's looking a bit...melty these days. Not sure if he can -

Paul jumps up. Offers Marie his arm. She shakes her head, indicating that she plans to stay.

Paul sniffs then turns on his heels and strides toward the lot, where a luxury sedan waits for him.

PAUL
He's at Kimball Hospital. Not far.

Paul plows ahead. Rosendahl, by the hangar, catches the action and hurries up to Hugo, who lags behind Paul.

ROSENDAHL
Where's Litchfield going?!

HUGO
To see Pruss. We have to stop him.

ROSENDAHL
What? But why -

HUGO
Pruss doesn't know the narrative.

ROSENDAHL
Pruss barbecued his goddamn larynx!
He can't narrate shit!

HUGO
He can blink in morse code, can't he? We're losing the FBI, we can't lose Goodyear, too. Without the rich, we won't have a prayer with the government.

They jog to catch up with Paul.

ROSENDAHL	HUGO (CONT'D)
Paul! Paul!!	My friend! One moment!

He pauses, his hand on the door of the sedan.

PAUL
You fellas wanna come?

HUGO
Oh, yes. Very much. It's just that -

ROSENDAHL
We should honor dear Captain Pruss first...with...a toast.

HUGO
Yes! And dinner! He loved dinner.

ROSENDAHL
Tell tales, share memories -

HUGO

And then we stop by the hospital.
End on a, uh, high note. Huzzah...

Paul seems unsure. Then his face crumples. He cries.

PAUL

That's beautiful.

Hugo and Rosendahl are relieved. They all climb into his car.

INT. TAXI - EVENING

Gertrud and Ben Dova ride in the back of a taxi. He's enjoying a good gloat. She's oddly subdued.

BEN DOVA

You just blew up their story! Ten dollars says flutter's in the first paragraph of tomorrow's story in the Times.

GERTRUD

Well I won't be the one breaking the news. Ever again.

BEN DOVA

Come on. This is better, isn't it? You're making the news.

She just stares out the window. He regards her with sympathy.

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)

I know what you just risked. But I'm sure your son's in England by now. You'll hear soon. If your mother's anything like you, she's smart enough to stay a step ahead of the Gestapo.

(earnest beat)

And you saved my life.

GERTRUD

Well now we're even, aren't we.

(dejected)

I risked everything I love but I didn't change anything. Not really.

(off his offense)

I'm glad you're going to live. I mean the truth.

BEN DOVA

You gave them the truth.

GERTRUD

They needed proof and I gave them rumors. Witnesses they won't believe. It might be enough to save your life but thirty-six people are already dead, Ben. My husband could be thirty-seven. There's only two days left in the hearings and I still haven't found out what really happened.

(crushed)

Leonhard knew. He knew. He should have told me. Why didn't -

BEN DOVA

Maybe he didn't want to scare -

GERTRUD

Scare me? What do I look like, Little Miss fucking Muffet? No. That wasn't it.

The cab pulls up in front of the HOSPITAL. Gertrud's resigned, embittered.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

I never gave him a reason to think I cared about the truth. I only showed him I'm bad at keeping secrets. Quite a way to make a living.

It suddenly hits her. The weight of inevitability.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

He's going to win, isn't he?

BEN DOVA

Who, that Aryan with the big teeth?

GERTRUD

Hitler. Hitler's going to win. If we can't unwind this lie, here... what about all the others?

Gertrud climbs out. Ben watches her disappear through the hospital doors, deeply uneasy.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - MINUTES LATER

Gertrud slumps into a chair next to Leonhard's bed. She rests her head on the mattress. Strokes his leg. Starts to cry.

GERTRUD
Why did this happen to us?

NURSE RIVERA (O.S.)
(whispering)
Ask Captain Pruss.

Gertrud turns to see Nurse Rivera leaning over the foot of Leonhard's bed, delivering a clean bedpan. She checks to make sure Pruss is asleep -- he is.

NURSE RIVERA (CONT'D)
I checked his chart. There's nothing wrong with his voice. You just have to get him to talk.

A determined look steals over Gertrud's face.

CUT TO - Gertrud pokes Pruss with a tongue depressor. He wakes.

GERTRUD
No one keeps a secret from Gertrud Adelt.

INT. COMMANDER'S QUARTERS - PARLOR - SIMULTANEOUSLY

They've been drinking. Rosendahl is at the piano, accompanying Hugo and Paul in a slurred rendition of "Come Take a Trip On My Airship." They sing -

HUGO
*I love a sailor, a sailor loves me/
And sails every night to my home/
He's not a sailor that sails o'er
the sea, or over the wild briny
foam...*

PAUL
*For he owns an airship and sails up
on high, just like a bird on the
wing...*

ROSENDAHL
*And when the shadows of evening
draw nigh, He'll sail to my window
and sing...*

At the chorus, Paul hoists his glass and lurches around the room in a kind of solo waltz.

ALL THREE

*Come take a trip in my airship/
Come take a sail 'mong the stars/
Come have a ride around Venus/
Come have a spin around Mars/
No one to watch while we're
kissing...*

Paul plants a wet one on Hugo's cheek -

ALL THREE (CONT'D)

No one to see while we spoon...

- and gives him a slap on the ass. Paul goes to sit next to Rosendahl on the piano bench.

ALL THREE (CONT'D)

*Come take a trip on my airship, and
we'll visit the man in the moon!*

Paul tilts backwards and TOPPLES OFF the bench.

HUGO

And they let you drive the blimp.

Rosendahl helps Paul to his feet.

PAUL

Up ship!

ROSENDAHL

Let me show you to the guest room.

PAUL

But what about the hospital?

Rosendahl guides him up the stairs. Hugo watches them go, then turns to the piano and closes the lid over the keys.

A FEW MINUTES LATER -

Rosendahl slouches back into the parlor. Hugo's in an armchair by the fire, a fresh glass of scotch in his hand. He's half-drunk.

HUGO

We need a new story.

ROSENDAHL

You mean blame someone else?

Rosendahl pours himself a drink and falls into another armchair by the fire.

HUGO
Anything but the airship.

ROSENDAHL
You mean anything but the Germans.

HUGO
I'm just trying to keep us flying.

ROSENDAHL
Seems like you're trying to cover
your ass.

HUGO
Is there a difference?

ROSENDAHL
I'm not the one who built a bomb
with a smoking lounge.

Hugo gives Rosie a long look. Reevaluating.

HUGO
I'm curious, Commander. Why did you
have it land in a lightning storm?

ROSENDAHL
(defensive)
The conditions were acceptable.

HUGO
Just. Why not wait until the sky
cleared a bit? The engines had
plenty of fuel.

ROSENDAHL
It was twelve hours late already.

HUGO
What's two more?

ROSENDAHL
We - we had to land. The departing
passengers...you weren't there,
Hugo, they were - they were armed!
And hungry! They had to get to the -

HUGO
The Coronation.

ROSENDAHL

Imagine all those aristocrats
telling their friends about how you
can't count on an airship. Think of
the fallout.

HUGO
(deadpan)
Yes, we truly dodged a bullet.

ROSENDAHL
Exactly! I...

He realizes what he's saying. He looks at Hugo suspiciously.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)
But it wouldn't have mattered -
lightning, a fucking blizzard. It
wouldn't have mattered at all if
you had built the ship right.

Hugo looks sharply at Rosendahl, who holds his gaze.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)
Flawless flying machine, was it?
Was it, Hugo?
(intense beat)
If I don't know the truth I can't
help you cover it up. It's time.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Gertrud sits near Pruss's bed. Nurse Rivera approaches with a cup. Gertrud takes it, holding it so Pruss can sip from a straw. Setting it aside, she regards him frankly.

GERTRUD
I heard what you did. You survived,
you escaped, and then you went back
in. How many did you rescue? What
made you finally stop? Was it when
your hair caught fire? Was it when
the shirt burnt off your back? Was
it when there was no one left to
save?

Tears begin to well in his eyes. He still avoids her gaze.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)
You have to go back, Max. One more
time into the fire. Because if you
don't tell the truth now, imagine
what lies they'll tell next. Max.
(MORE)

GERTRUD (CONT'D)

Tell me. Was it this flutter? What did it do?

Pruss finally looks at her, full of grief and regret. Croaks -

PRUSS

What we feared.

INT. PARLOR

Hugo is on his knees by the hearth, throwing on another log. The fire pops and sparks. He stares into the flames.

HUGO

You see, the problem with airships...is that they're so fucking expensive.

INT./EXT. ZEPPELIN WORKS FACTORY - FLASHBACK

OUTSIDE THE HANGAR - Hugo grudgingly shakes hands with a THIRD REICH DELEGATION. They look pompous and condescending.

HUGO (V.O.)

The Nazis found that out after they spent seven million Reichsmarks building the Hindenburg. Flew a few laps 'round the Berlin Olympics then decided to recoup something more than hearts and minds.

Hugo ushers them inside the factory for a tour.

CONFERENCE ROOM - A miserable Hugo gets talked at by the Nazi officials.

HUGO (V.O.)

They demanded that I add ten more passenger cabins - which would give us about five thousand dollars more per flight. So after the Hindenburg's first season, we had to open her up.

FACTORY FLOOR - The ship has been stripped of her outer cover and her bones exposed. Hugo leads workers inside.

HUGO (V.O.)

And that's how we came to discover the...situation.

INSIDE THE SHIP - A WORKER, straddling a beam, detaches an inflated gas cell from the rigging. The cell is encased in metal netting -- kind of like a ham.

Something catches the worker's eye. He trains his headlamp.

WORKER
Kapitan Eckener!

Hugo climbs up a ladder to inspect.

HUGO (V.O.)
We were taking out the gas cells to
resize them when we saw that...my
god, Rosie, it made my heart stop.

ROSENDAHL (V.O.)
What?

Hugo pulls back the wire netting on the canvas gas cell. The surface looks frayed and raw. Hugo's eyes fly open.

HUGO (V.O.)
Chafing. The fabric on two cells
had been worn paper thin. You could
have pierced it with a fingernail.

INT. PARLOR

Hugo paces as he talks. Rosendahl, pale and drawn, sits on the windowsill.

HUGO
This had never happened with the
Graf Zeppelin. The Graf Zeppelin
was perfect! Six hundred flights -
not a single problem!
(beat)
I spotted it in a film -- lift-off
on a blustery day.

INT. ZEPPELIN/FACTORY FLASHBACKS

HUGO'S OFFICE - Hugo and other ENGINEERS watch a black-and-white reel of a Hindenburg take-off. You can see a rippling along the cover.

HUGO (V.O.)
The outer cover was loose, and in
high winds, it would flap against
the frame. A little...flutter. It
looked so harmless. Almost pretty.
(MORE)

HUGO (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I didn't know what it was doing to
the guts of my ship.

HINDENBURG RIGGING - In intimate detail, we trace the path of the destructive energy: from the fluttering COVER...through the vibrating steel FRAME...into the gas cell RIGGING...and across the HUMMING WIRE NET that encases the cell.

HUGO (V.O.)

It became a snare drum. The
flapping reverberated through the
frame and down into the netting.

The wire buzzes against the cell. We see it begin to fray.

HUGO (V.O.)

A vibration -- tiny little cuts,
millions of them, hour after hour,
day after day, mile after mile.

FACTORY FLOOR - Hundreds of WORKERS make repairs as Hugo anxiously watches from a catwalk above.

HUGO (V.O.)

We felt lucky we'd caught it before
disaster struck. We installed the
new cabins, resized the gas bags,
and re-stretched the canvas cover
as tight as we could.

A CRANE drapes a new canvas cover over the ship.

FRIEDRICHSHAFEN LANDING FIELD - Hugo trains his binoculars up into the sky and frowns.

HUGO (V.O.)

When we were finished, we took her
on a test flight. Still. Flutter.
We did it again and again. But
there it went, flapping in the wind
all over Friedrichshafen. How like
a Nazi to resist circumcision.

INT. PARLOR

ROSENDAHL

But why couldn't you stop it?

Hugo drifts back to the armchair and sinks into it.

HUGO

It was just...too big to fly. What worked on the Graf Zeppelin failed on the Hindenburg. It was three hundred feet longer, and apparently three hundred feet too long.

Rosendahl shakes his head. Something he can't make sense of.

ROSENDAHL

If you knew all of this...why did you still let it fly?

Hugo shrugs. An evil, heartbreaking shrug. A Sackler shrug, an Exxon shrug, a Philip Morris shrug. Then the truth:

HUGO

We'd already sold the tickets.

Rosendahl looks sickened. Hugo sneers.

HUGO (CONT'D)

Don't look so shocked. Think of what would have happened to you if I'd grounded the ship, hm? We'd have gone out of business. No more airships for Lakehurst. And you'd be getting seasick on some poop deck right now.

Rosendahl turns to him with a bitter smile.

ROSENDAHL

Oh I'm not shocked, Hugo. Pruss sent me the refit report, all of your hysterical memos. They arrived the day after the crash.

Hugo's stunned.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)

I just couldn't let myself believe it until you said it to my face.

Hugo recovers from his shock. Mildly, but the threat implied -

HUGO

And where might that report be now?

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Gertrud frantically scribbles notes despite her aching hand. Pruss speaks more fluidly now, though his tone is grim.

PRUSS

I sent the file the day before we departed from Frankfurt. I needed someone else to know -- someone beyond the reach of the Reich. Someone who would understand.

GERTRUD

Well if Commander Rosendahl got your evidence he's done nothing with it.

PRUSS

I suppose he has too much to gain from keeping it quiet. But who else was there?

A beat. Anger steals over Gertrud's face.

GERTRUD

Why did you let us get on the ship?

PRUSS

I thought I was smart enough to stop the worst. I knew about the flaw, but I didn't know, couldn't dream it would...Every other nation has suffered airship accidents. But Germany's record is faultless. We're the best. And I'm the best of them.

(a devastated pause)

That's what Hugo told me. I believed him. He has a way of making you believe.

Pruss looks at Leonhard. Tears fill his eyes. Gertrud's, too.

PRUSS (CONT'D)

Now who will believe me? If I could tell the truth about what happened? I'm just a captain making excuses.

Gertrud dabs his eyes with a piece of gauze and they share a moment of quiet grief.

INT. HOSPITAL BATHROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Gertrud spits toothpaste into the sink. Finishes brushing. She looks at her haggard reflection. How did she get here?

She exits the bathroom into the -

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY

Two ORDERLIES support a drunken NAVAL OFFICER with a bruised and bloody face as they weave down the hall. He grins at Gertrud as he passes, displaying some newly missing teeth.

BEAT-UP OFFICER
Wanna party, thweet-cheekth?

Gertrud recoils and watches them move on down the hall. Then she's STRUCK BY AN IDEA. She hurries back to the burn ward.

INT. BURN WARD - MOMENTS LATER

She rushes over to Pruss's bed, excited.

GERTRUD
We can get the proof! The documents
you sent to Rosendahl!

PRUSS
He must have destroyed them by now.

GERTRUD
No. He wouldn't. Not yet. Because
this case isn't closed, and he'll
want to hold onto his leverage.
(leaning over Pruss)
*And I know exactly where he stashed
it!*

PRUSS
But how could you...

GERTRUD
Gossip.

EXT. LAKEHURST NAVAL AIR FIELD - NIGHT

Gertrud kneels next to a parked car, applying red lipstick in the side mirror. She fluffs her hair. Ready.

GERTRUD (O.S.)
(explaining to Pruss)
I just have to get in and get out
without being noticed, then slip
the file to South Trimble tomorrow
before the hearings begin.

PRUSS (O.S.)
But your family -

GERTRUD (O.S.)
 I'll make sure my family's safe
 before the Nazis can realize I'm
 the one who stole the proof.

Crossing the street, Gertrud creeps along the chainlink fence that surrounds the base, looking for a way in. She finds a spot without barbed wire then takes off her shoes, tucks them under her arm, holds the strap of her handbag in her teeth, and climbs.

She's caught in the beam of a FLASHLIGHT. She freezes.

PATROL OFFICER 1
 Hey! What are you -

Two Naval OFFICERS have caught her on her side of the fence.

PATROL OFFICER 2
 (to his partner)
 It's all right. Sarge said to let
 the girls in.
 (to Gertrud)
 Come 'ere, honey, I'll take you
 through the gate.

She smiles winningly.

EXT. HANGAR - A FEW MINUTES LATER

The officers have led Gertrud to a neglected airship hangar at the edge of the base. One yanks open a side door. It's dark inside. She hesitates.

PATROL OFFICER 1
 How bout a ride on my dirigible?

They snicker. She goes in.

INT. HANGAR

She reels. There's a massive airship -- The USS Los Angeles. Though smaller than the Hindenburg, it's still a behemoth.

The gondola lights are aglow. We hear voices, jazz. She approaches and climbs the metal steps into the ship.

INT. USS LOS ANGELES

The Los Angeles has a different layout than the Hindenburg: much more like a spacious train car than a floating hotel.

The passenger cabins are on either side of a long aisle and are furnished with two velvet couches facing each other. A table is in between and curtains hang on either side.

Gertrud slinks down the aisle in what's clearly a den of iniquity, each compartment home to a different flavor of sin.

- A poker game with a pot that includes cash and firearms.
- A cloudy compartment for smoking jazz cigarettes.
- A high-stakes turtle race.
- A fantastic tabletop burlesque performance.

Most people present are NAVY PERSONNEL of various ranks. The others appear to be SEX WORKERS of various genders.

Gertrud continues down the end of corridor to a door, which says "FLIGHT CONTROL." She tries the handle. It's locked.

It suddenly swings open and a female SEX WORKER and a SENIOR OFFICER stumble out giggling. They brush past Gertrud, who slips inside the cockpit.

COCKPIT

The dark, empty cockpit is big enough to accommodate a half-dozen crew.

Gertrud locks the door and begins to search -- opening drawers, looking under desks and among stacks of maps.

There's a BANG at the door. Gertrud startles.

DRUNK OFFICER (O.S.)
What's the problem, Bryson? Whiskey
dick? Come on!

OUTSIDE THE COCKPIT

The DRUNK OFFICER has his arm over the BURLESQUE DANCER. He continues to hammer the door.

MIDSHIPMAN 1(O.S.)
Shit...

Behind the officer, a midshipman (one of the terrible meteorologists) is standing in the aisle, petting a turtle and staring at the newly arrived Hugo. Rosendahl peeks out from behind him, looking disgusted.

They push past the midshipman. The drunk officer gulps.

DRUNK OFFICER
 Commander Rosendahl, sir. Welcome
 to our grieving circle. We're very
 sad.

Rosendahl glares at him as they shoulder by.

INSIDE THE COCKPIT

Gertrud hears these voices and freezes. She looks frantically around. Nowhere to hide. Then she notices a HATCH in the ceiling. She pulls it down.

A ladder unfolds down to the floor. Gertrud tries to climb, but it's impossible in her narrow wool skirt.

She hears them trying the locked door. Gertrud hastily unzips her skirt, slides it off, and shoves it in her handbag. She CLIMBS THE LADDER easily in just her slip and stockings.

OUTSIDE THE COCKPIT

Rosendahl tries different keys. *Hugo's more anxious than we've seen him before. Little by little, he's losing control.*

HUGO
 Hurry up. Every second that goes
 by...

Finally, the right key. The door opens and they step inside.

INSIDE THE COCKPIT

The room is in appalling disarray after Gertrud's search.

HUGO (CONT'D)
 You'd never see this in the German
 Navy.

ROSENDAHL
 Oh shut up, Hugo.

The hatch is closed and the ladder tucked away. Rosendahl opens it. The ladder slides down. They climb.

IN THE RIGGING

They climb up a long ladder in the dark.

HUGO
 You couldn't have tucked the file
 behind your headboard?

ROSENDAHL

The FBI was scouring Navy property.
You want this falling into their
hands?

HUGO

I don't even want it in yours.

Rosendahl and Hugo heave themselves up onto a platform. Rosendahl finds the knob and turns on a string of bare bulbs that run the length of the keel -- about 600 feet. Steel girders rise all around them, and tucked among them are canvas sacs -- gas cells.

This is a giant jungle gym, surrounded by 2.5 million cubic feet of ultra-flammable hydrogen.

They begin to walk, single-file, down the middle of three parallel catwalks, each separated by girders and gas cells.

A hundred feet away, Gertrud, sweating, is tucked between the gas cells. She inches further along a girder, away from the catwalk. She hears them coming. There's nowhere to hide.

In the nick of time, she swings herself behind a gas cell. Rosendahl and Hugo pass.

She looks down -- *there's nothing but steel, canvas and the rigid shell below.*

HUGO (CONT'D)

You should have given the file to me the moment I arrived. There are some...incriminating papers. Not that I'm, you know, some kind of -

ROSENDAHL

Criminal?

Gertrud looks over her shoulder and sees the right-side catwalk. Protruding onto the catwalk, wedged between two gas cells, is a CARDBOARD BOX. Bingo. She goes to it.

HUGO

Why didn't you tell me you knew, Rosie? For leverage? Blackmail?

ROSENDAHL

(feigning offense)

Hugo. Please. You can count on your co-pilot.

Rosendahl turns to the right.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)

Now it should be through here...

They sidestep along a girder toward the right catwalk.

Meanwhile, Gertrud has lifted the lid on the box. But hearing them cross over, she frantically reaches into her bag. She pulls out her tube of lipstick.

She THROWS the lipstick toward the opposite side of the hull. It clatters loudly, ping-pongs around the girders, then comes to a rest on the center catwalk.

Rosendahl and Hugo hear the sound.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)

Someone's here.

They REVERSE COURSE back toward the center catwalk. Hugo sees the lipstick. Picks it up. Inspects it. Pockets it.

Gertrud opens the box. Underneath a few pornographic photos she finds an accordion folder bearing the logo of the Zeppelin Works Company. She takes the folder and shoves it into her bag.

Hugo and Rosendahl step out onto the center catwalk. Seeing no one, Hugo directs Rosendahl to the left catwalk.

HUO

You take that side...

Rosendahl goes back to the right catwalk, sliding back along the girders. Slipping once. *This is a delicate chase.*

Gertrud, caught between catwalks, hears them coming. There's no escape. Then she looks down. *There's nothing but steel bars, bags of gas, and the rigid shell, 40 feet below. And there's only one place to hide...*

Rosendahl and Hugo step out onto their parallel catwalks. Both walkways are empty. They're befuddled.

We dip under their feet, and we see Gertrud dangling from a girder with her hands and feet. Sweating bullets, she holds her handbag in her teeth.

ROSENDAHL

Let's get this thing and go.

He looks around and SPOTS THE BOX.

ROSENDAHL (CONT'D)

Ah. Here it is.

He goes to crouch next to it as Hugo comes to join him. Hugo pushes him aside as he tears through the box.

Gertrud manages to SWING HERSELF BACK ON TOP of the girder and inch her way back to the central catwalk. She TIPTOES BACK TOWARD THE HATCH.

ROSENDAHL (O.S.) (CONT'D)
It's - it's gone!

Now she RUNS. The men hear her and hurriedly climb back toward the CENTER CATWALK.

HUGO (O.S.)
You there! Stop!

Hugo gets to the catwalk - but Gertrud is too fast. She DROPS THROUGH THE HATCH just before the men can spot her.

Gertrud slides down the ladder. She lands hard on the cockpit floor, staggers to her feet and LURCHES THROUGH THE DOOR...

Above, the men pound down the catwalk toward the hatch.

AISLE - PASSENGER COMPARTMENTS

Gertrud streaks down the aisle. Then she stops -- a scrum has erupted at the end of it. Drunk Navy boys SHOVE AND GRAPPLE, blocking the exit.

Gertrud's close to panic. Then she sees the BURLESQUE DANCER in the aisle, sharing a joint with an officer. She grabs the dancer by the arm and yanks her into the CLOSEST COMPARTMENT.

Meanwhile, a frantic Hugo and Rosendahl throw open the cockpit door and STORM DOWN THE AISLE, checking each compartment as they go.

They get to Gertrud's. We know she's behind the curtain. Hugo, with Rosendahl at his heels, BURSTS IN.

INSIDE THE COMPARTMENT, here's what they see:

The dancer in a skimpy dress perched on the table with her bare legs crossed, smoking and fluffing her hair.

BURLESQUE DANCER
Hey there, big boys...

Hugo stares. She winks. Something's funny...but he can't put his finger on it. THE MEN LEAVE and continue their hunt.

Here's what's really happening. They look like one person, but they're really two. It's an old burlesque bit:

Gertrud is sitting on the table with her bare legs crossed, and the dancer is straddling her lap, facing out, her own legs tucked back and covered by her skirt. The dancer's arms are pinned back behind Gertrud, while Gertrud's arms stick through, holding the joint and fluffing the dancer's hair.

The men gone, Gertrud peeks out from behind the dancer.

GERTRUD

Thanks.

The dancer climbs off Gertrud and looks through the curtains. She sees Hugo and Rosendahl push the rowdy drunks out of the way and hurry down the steps OUT OF THE AIRSHIP.

BURLESQUE DANCER

They're gone.

Gertrud collapses onto the couch. The dancer sits opposite.

BURLESQUE DANCER (CONT'D)

Don't blame ya, honey. I heard the
Commander's got crotch crickets.

Gertrud snorts. She sees Hugo, followed by Rosendahl, lumber across the hangar floor. She draws her handbag with the stolen file closer.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - THE NEXT MORNING

Gertrud comes hurrying up the aisle, clutching a telegram.

SUPERIMPOSE: Hindenburg Hearings - Day 7

Ben Dova sits next to an alert Pruss, paging through the stolen file. They look up as she approaches.

GERTRUD

The Red Star line still can't tell
me if they made it on the boat. But
I got a message back from my
mother's neighbor. She says no
one's home.

PRUSS

A good sign. Even if they didn't
get to England -

GERTRUD

- they must be hiding somewhere.

Ben turns back to the file. Shakes his head in astonishment.

BEN DOVA
 Did you see this?
 (reading)
 Grave concern...corruption of the
 of the gas cell...

PRUSS
 And then Eckener's reply.

BEN DOVA
 (flips to the next page)
 Fortify netting intersections with
 tape and *proceed with refit as
 scheduled...*

Gertrud is disgusted. Looks at her unconscious husband.

GERTRUD
 It was murder. And the world will
 know.

She turns back to her collaborators.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)
 All right, let's get this to
 Trimble before Eckener arrives. He
 testifies this morning.

Ben gives her the file, which she puts inside her bag.
 Gertrud turns to Pruss. Softens.

GERTRUD (CONT'D)
 Max. Thank you, I -

PRUSS
 I'd be there if I could, but...

She nods, and with Ben Dova in tow, walks down the ward,
 looking again at the Hindenburg's victims. It's for them all.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY

Gertrud step into the hallway. Remembers something. She looks
 through her purse. Ben Dova pauses.

GERTRUD
 Shit. Where's my -

CARL SYRUP
 Lipstick?

Carl Syrup is sitting on the bench in the hallway, fiddling
 with her tube of lipstick. Gertrud freezes.

Nurse Rivera comes into the hallway. She watches, concerned.

BEN DOVA
(re: Carl)
Oh look. A possessed marionette.

Carl gets up and comes closer to Gertrud. He's not his usual candy-coated self. This is the Carl underneath the Syrup.

CARL SYRUP
Fire engine red. How appropriate.

GERTRUD
What do you want?

CARL SYRUP
The file inside your handbag.

Gertrud draws herself up to full height and stalks toward him, stopping inches from his face. She takes the lipstick.

GERTRUD
No.

He glares at her. She doesn't flinch. Then she turns and strides back toward Ben Dova. They make to leave, then -

THE PUBLIC PHONE BEGINS TO RING. Gertrud ignores it at first.

CARL SYRUP
It's for you, Mrs. Adelt.

Gertrud slows. Her stomach drops. The phone keeps ringing. She picks up.

CHRISTIAN (O.S.)
Mama?

It's her son, CHRISTIAN (5). He's cheerful, though confused. The color drains from Gertrud's face.

GERTRUD
Christian?

CHRISTIAN (O.S.)
I'm at the police station!

GERTRUD
Did you...did you get on the boat?
Did you get on the boat, Christian?

CHRISTIAN (O.S.)
We went to Tante Margot's house.
Then the police came.

There's a pause on the other end of the phone. We hear muffled male voices in the background. Carl grins.

CHRISTIAN (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Mama, he says...to give them some papers or me and Grandma have to go to a hotel. It's not a nice hotel.

Gertrud trembles as she pulls the file from her bag and holds it up. Carl takes it and yanks the receiver from her hand.

CARL SYRUP
(into the phone)
Give the policeman the phone, please, Christian.
(a beat, then to the Gestapo agent)
I have it.

GERTRUD
Tell them to let them go.

Carl rolls his eyes.

CARL SYRUP
(into the phone)
They can go. For now. Thank you, Major. Well done.

He hangs up.

NURSE RIVERA
Get out of my ward.

He smirks, then pauses.

CARL SYRUP
Oh! Don't be late for Captain Eckener. He's going to tell us who really blew up the Hindenburg.

After a smug look at Ben, Carl goes.

Gertrud slowly sinks onto a bench by the phone, quietly reeling. Ben, ashen, comes to sit next to her.

GERTRUD
I'm sorry, Ben. I can't -

CARL SYRUP
It's all right. It's not too late for me to run.

Nurse Rivera subtly observes. Her jaw hardens with determination. She goes back into the ward.

INT. HEARING

The hearing has just begun when a dour Gertrud slides into a seat in the back row. It's packed as usual. Carl Syrup and Paul Litchfield are in the front row.

Hugo and Rosendahl push a blackboard into the center of the room. Meanwhile, South Trimble addresses the crowd.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

...welcome you all to the final day
of testimony. Today, we'll receive
the results of the technical report
from Captain Hugo Eckener.
Tomorrow, I will summarize the
Department of Commerce's findings
and issue our final report. Now, if
you're ready, Captain -

Heads turn to the back of the loft. Two MIDSHIPMEN are carrying Captain Pruss up the stairs in his wheelchair. He winces with each bump - clearly very fragile.

Nurse Rivera walks in behind him looking fiercely defiant. She pushes his chair down the aisle to the front of the room.

Gertrud watches, stunned, moved and worried. Paul Litchfield swoons over the wounded hero.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

My...my god. Do we have Captain
Pruss himself?

The crowd whispers. Photos snap. Rosendahl and Hugo share panicked looks, and Carl glares at Gertrud. She looks back at him helplessly. *Not my idea.*

South goes to greet Pruss.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

Captain, are you well enough to -

PRUSS

I can speak.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Then speak you shall.

South motions to a young ASSISTANT, who guides Pruss and Nurse Rivera to the end of the front row.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)
 I'll call you after we hear from
 Captain Eckener -

PRUSS
 (distressed)
 No, no, I must -

But he's too quiet. South moves on. He cues Hugo. Hugo waits for the room to settle...and the drama to build.

HUGO
 It takes little more than two days for the Hindenburg to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Less than half the time of the fastest sea-faring ships. And yet, on the airship's final flight, it took nearly three due to powerful and sustained headwinds for the duration of the flight. And so, when Captain Pruss piloted the ship over Long Island Sound and the winds were finally in their favor, what did our determined captain do? He made up for lost time.

Hugo can tell that the audience is riveted, and he loves it.

HUGO (CONT'D)
 Now, Mr. Trimble, when you're behind the wheel of your car, and you're about to turn into your old Kentucky home, do you speed up or slow down before pulling into your front drive?

SOUTH TRIMBLE
 That depends on who's waiting for me in the parlor.

Two chuckles from the gallery. Hugo doesn't want South stealing focus.

HUGO
 All right, but traditionally you -

SOUTH TRIMBLE
Traditionally I tap the breaks.

HUGO
 As would I. But not, evidently, Captain Pruss.

Heads snap to Pruss. Eye narrow. Pruss just watches Hugo in agony as he butchers the truth. *His breath begins to quicken.*

With a nod from Hugo, Rosendahl flips over the blackboard to reveal a chart showing the curving path of the Hindenburg.

HUGO (CONT'D)

Which is why he soon had to slam on the breaks. To stop the ship so suddenly over the landing field, Captain Pruss performed a sharp S-shaped maneuver.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Here we call that a fish-tail.

HUGO

Precisely. A fish tail. But a zeppelin is no mackerel. It is rigid. Brittle. And when Captain Pruss zigged and zagged down the scenic Garden State, something... broke. It was small, insignificant. An interior metal cable.

He dramatically pulls a short length of half-inch thick cable out of his pocket and shows it to the gallery.

HUGO (CONT'D)

But in the turbulence this cable became a wicked lash.

He swings it down onto the table in front of South with a loud SLAP. Everybody jumps. South looks alarmed.

HUGO (CONT'D)

It whipped throughout the keel. In a better world, it would have simply wrapped itself around the rigging. But in this world, it struck a softer target. A gas cell. A clean slice. And the hull began to fill with hydrogen.

He puts the cable away. He looks squarely at a pale, sweaty Pruss as he slowly stalks toward him like a surly predator.

HUGO (CONT'D)

But Pruss held tight the reins. He brought the Hindenburg to heel. Didn't you? You dropped the ropes, and lightning crashed, and thirty seconds later everything... everything was gone.

A heavy silence. Rosendahl marches over to South's table and drops a thin bound report in front of him.

HUGO (CONT'D)
My complete analysis.

Pruss's face is spookily blank. Nurse Rivera looks concerned.

South cuts the silence. He seems not entirely convinced.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
Thank you, Captain Eckener. But
what do you make of the testimony
about this - this flutter business?

HUGO
(smug)
I think Mrs. Adelt is an excellent
gossip reporter.

Gertrud laughs bitterly. Of course. After a heavy moment,
South turns to Pruss.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
Now, Captain Pruss, are you ready
to...

Pruss looks out at the room -- hateful, disgusted faces in
the gallery. Carl's gloating smirk. Hugo's cold regard.

NURSE RIVERA
(whispering to Pruss)
Captain?...Are you all right?

Then he meets Gertrud's eyes, full of desperate hope.
Pleading with him to tell the truth. Pruss begins to shake.

GERTRUD
(under her breath)
Go into the fire...

Suddenly, Pruss's eyes close. He slumps over, caught by Nurse
Rivera. The Midshipmen rush to his side and ferry him out of
the loft as people gawk.

Onlookers whisper, alarmed. Hugo meets Gertrud's eye. But he
looks away, unable to endure her accusing stare.

EXT. HINDENBURG CRASH SITE - DUSK

Hugo picks his way through the twisted wreckage of his
greatest dream. The wind stirs dust and debris. Another
thunder storm is brewing.

South Trimble saunters out from behind a charred girder.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Thirty-six souls on your
conscience. Can you imagine that,
Captain Eckener?

Hugo stiffens a bit but tries to act natural.

HUGO

Shame Pruss was there to hear that.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Perhaps it was somethin' of a
blessing. I wouldn't want to go
through life in a fog of
culpability.

HUGO

The skies are clear at last...

As he gestures to the sky, anything but clear, the first rain drops fall. South turns his piercing gaze on Hugo.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Are they. I think there's a piece
of this story you don't want told.

HUGO

I'm not sure what you mean.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Somebody's flat in the orchestra,
Captain. This tune don't sound
quite right.

HUGO

(sharper)

Maybe because there's a story
you're straining to hear. You want
to embarrass the Reich. But Germany
isn't responsible for the actions
of one reckless pilot.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Reckless pilot. Uh huh. Before that
it was sabotage. It's hard to keep
up with all your villains.

Hugo is losing control of his temper. Rain falls harder now.

HUGO

My villains. America is the
villain!

(MORE)

HUGO (CONT'D)

We should have had helium in that ship but your government refused! You're paranoid! Selfish!

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Bit rich coming from a Nazi.

HUGO

I'm a pilot. My ship bridges nations, it - it erases oceans. It's everything I've - everything we've ever hoped for. We must protect it at all costs.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

At a cost of thirty-six lives.

Hugo snorts. He stomps away, squinting into the rain.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

I had an odd phone call this morning. My old friend Harold Ickes.

Hugo stops in his tracks.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

The Secretary of the Interior, you know him. I asked him about that helium hold up, 'bout why he never let you have any. Got a bit fresh with him, truth be told. And do you know what ol' Harold told me? Said he'd offered you all the helium you could want. But you never put in an order.

(quietly threatening)

Now why the fuck would you do such a thing?

HUGO

I have no idea what you're talking about.

South slowly closes in on Hugo.

SOUTH TRIMBLE

Was it the money? Hydrogen's cheaper, ain't it. Or were you just tryin' to keep things local? Didn't wanna have to count on us when y'all were rustlin' up a war.

Thunder rolls, wind gusts. The girders creak.

HUGO
I have no interest in war -

SOUTH TRIMBLE
(furious)
You put them people in the belly of
a bomb! Just to make some money, to
fly your flag -

HUGO
That's not -

SOUTH TRIMBLE
How the hell can you explain -

HUGO
(exploding)
Because we don't need it! We're
German! Airships from other
countries crash. Yours. Britain's.
Italy's. France's. Not ours. Not
us. We're fucking better.

SOUTH TRIMBLE
(disgusted)
Heil Hitler.

South turns away. Hugo sneers.

HUGO
Aren't you better, too, Mr.
Trimble? Isn't that why you occupy
the halls of power? Why you're
after more? All those generations
of Trimbles on your big plantation,
thousands under your thumb. What
happened there, when mistakes were
made? Did you beg forgiveness from
the slaves?

Hugo laughs darkly. On the other side of the wreckage, a
jagged scrap of steel crashes to the ground. The storm howls.

HUGO (CONT'D)
So what now. You want to throw out
all the experts because of one
goddamn mistake? The men who taught
the world to fly, the men who
deserve respect?

Hugo stalks toward South, his voice low and ugly.

HUGO (CONT'D)

You wanted a scalp and I gave you one. But you'd rather listen to that yapping cunt. The *ground crew*. You'd have us answer to them. Is that how you do things in America?

Hugo is getting through to South.

HUGO (CONT'D)

We put out the fire. We buried the dead. Now we go back to work.

Hugo walks away from the ruins without a backwards glance. South stays a while longer, considering.

INT. HEARING - THE NEXT MORNING

It's silent as South reads his concluding statement. We see solemn faces in the crowd: Gertrud, Ben, Paul Litchfield, Special Agent Connelley, Carl Syrup, and at the head table, Hugo and Rosendahl.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Hindenburg Hearings - The Last Day*

SOUTH TRIMBLE (O.S.)

What brought down the Hindenburg?
This marvel of human ingenuity?

South addresses the audience from the head table.

SOUTH TRIMBLE (CONT'D)

A human. One pilot's grave error.
This disaster reveals the true
stakes of poor leadership, and
reminds us to choose our leaders
wisely.

Hugo shakes his head sadly. But his eyes are dry and dead.

EXT. NAVAL AIR STATION/SIDEWALK - LATER

The hearings have concluded and the spectators spill out. The press pack up. The circus is leaving town.

A HELIUM VENDOR stands by his tank.

HELIUM VENDOR

Ten cents to talk funny! All gas
must go!

Lieutenant Wesley can't resist. For a dime, he takes a hit.

LIEUTENANT WESLEY

(helium voice)

This hearing was a farce and a disservice to the dead. I fear for our future if we cannot hold our leaders to account.

No one pays him any attention.

Paul Litchfield approaches Hugo and Rosendahl.

PAUL

My friends, thank you. The truth is a bitter pill, but that's how you know it's medicine.

ROSENDAHL

Beautifully put as usual, Paul.

PAUL

Real shame about Pruss. Real shame. But now...

(closer, conspiratorially)

...now that we've put the design flaw rumors to rest...I can pull together some investors. What do you say to a bi-national German-American fleet?

Rosendahl and Hugo exchange excited looks. But then -

PAUL (CONT'D)

Assuming that Hitler fella tones things down, of course. Boy, he's a real hothead, isn't he? But I'm sure he'll see how much there is to gain from friendship.

HUGO

(unconvincingly)

That's the Fuhrer for you.

They all shake hands.

PAUL

Well, folks, it's home to Ohio for me. Keep your head in the clouds...

(heading to his car)

Oh, and Hugo -- I'm gonna get you that helium!

Hugo salutes queasily. Paul gets in the car and pulls away.

Carl Syrup scurries up urgently.

CARL SYRUP
I got him on the phone!

Hugo, confused, is hustled away from the crowd and toward another building -- the COMMAND CENTER/WAITING AREA.

INT. COMMAND CENTER - MOMENTS LATER

We're back where our story began - the airship traffic control center. Carl leads an anxious Hugo into the empty room. On one desk, there's a phone with the receiver resting on the table. Carl picks it up.

CARL SYRUP
I have Captain Eckener.

He hands it to Hugo, who take a deep breath.

INT. GOEBBELS'S OFFICE - SIMULTANEOUSLY

Goebbels is on the other end of the line. He's pissed.

GOEBBELS
Pilot error?!

INTERCUT Hugo and Goebbels. Hugo is indignant, defensive.

HUGO
Well no one's asking Hitler anymore.

GOEBBELS
The pilot was German!

HUGO
So he's a bad apple strudel.

Hugo laughs at his own feeble joke. Goebbels isn't having it.

Goebbels is distracted by the work inside his office: A SCULPTOR, sweating bullets, slowly chisels a large neoclassical sculpture of a nude Prometheus. Right now he's crafting the ballsack. After every tap of his hammer, he looks to Goebbels for approval.

(This is a real work made in 1937 by Arno Breker, official sculptor of the Reich. Prometheus has prominent privates.)

GOEBBELS
(to the sculptor)
I want peaches, not pears.

HUGO
Herr Goebbels, I did what you
asked. I restored German pride.

GOEBBELS
(eyeing the statue)
German pride's a work in progress.

HUGO
And that's why my next airship -

GOEBBELS
Your next airship? Are you drunk?

HUGO
You said you'd finance -

GOEBBELS
I'd rather finance a punch in my
own face. No sabotage, no zeppelin.

HUGO
But -

Carl Syrup gives him a insincerely apologetic look.

GOEBBELS
Welcome to Earth, Captain.

We see Goebbels hang up. There's a CLANG of the chisel
followed by a LOUD THUMP on the floor. Prometheus's manhood
has been accidentally amputated. Goebbels looks murderous.

INT. COMMAND CENTER

Hugo, bereaved, gently lays the receiver in the cradle. Carl
eases his way to the door.

CARL SYRUP
Go ahead and take a moment. See you
on the boat home, yeah?

Hugo ignores him. Carl slinks out.

EXT. COMMAND CENTER

Carl exits and looks around the airfield, taking it all in
one last time. He lets out a satisfied sigh.

CARL SYRUP
I'll miss you, New Jersey.

FRED (O.S.)
No you won't.

He turns in time to see Fred (of the ground crew) PUNCH HIS NAZI FACE.

INT. PASSENGER WAITING ROOM - A FEW MINUTES LATER

Hugo slumps in. It's empty -- except for Gertrud at the bar, helping herself to a whiskey.

Hugo goes to the inside of the bar and pours himself a drink from the same bottle. Gertrud glances up, unfazed.

After long, tense moment, she begins to unravel her bandage.

GERTRUD
The light was so beautiful. I
thought it was the sunset.

HINDENBURG LOUNGE - FLASHBACK

The passengers are gathered at the windows as the ship prepares to land. Gertrud, standing next to Leonhard, looks up curiously as the light turns a soft pink. Leonhard notices too, but he's instantly alarmed.

GERTRUD (V.O.)
Leonhard knew what it really meant.

Other people begin to notice as a roar swells.

GERTRUD (V.O.)
The floor tipped. Everyone fell. We
were under a pile of bodies.

The lounge violently bucks to a 45-degree angle, sending everyone toppling against a wall.

Gertrud and Leonhard are pinned. People scream as the fire begins to consume the corners of the wall.

GERTRUD (V.O.)
Then I felt the heat.

Passengers scramble away from the wall and Gertrud and Leonhard are freed. They haul themselves uphill using the windowsill for support.

GERTRUD (V.O.)
The ship was falling.

The ship sinks rapidly. Others cling to the window.

NELSON MORRIS

Jump!

BEN DOVA

Wait! We're too high!

Smoke billows into the lounge. Ben watches carefully, then -

BEN DOVA (CONT'D)

Now!

Ben helps people jump from the windows -- THREE CHILDREN and their MOTHER. Gertrud and Leonhard are about to flee, too. But then Leonhard sees some passengers who are frozen in fear. Leonhard goes to them, tries to drag them forward.

GERTRUD (V.O.)

We had to jump. We were burning.

Ben Dova pulls Gertrud to the window, forces her through -

LANDING FIELD - FLASHBACK

Gertrud falls 15 feet and lands heavily. She crawls to her feet as fire and debris rain down. Ben Dova lands gracefully next to her. Gertrud runs away from the fire, then stops, looks back.

GERTRUD (V.O.)

But Leonhard...he wasn't there.

Then I saw him. He was on fire.

Leonhard's about to jump when a PLUME OF FIRE EJECTS HIM.

Gertrud runs toward Leonhard, who's motionless on the ground. The side of his suit is on fire. She SLAPS IT OUT with her bare hands. *This is how she got her burns*. Then she loops an arm around his uninjured shoulder and starts to drag him.

PASSENGER WAITING ROOM

Gertrud's bandage is off. We see her wound for the first time. It's ghastly: swollen, blistered skin, peeling scabs.

GERTRUD

I don't know how we survived. Even people who jumped before us...

LANDING FIELD - FLASHBACK

Several figures thrash as they're consumed by fire. Gertrud watches from beyond the inferno, crouched over Leonhard.

GERTRUD (V.O.)
Have you ever seen a man on fire,
Captain Eckener?

PASSENGER WAITING ROOM

GERTRUD
No of course not. You have a
perfect record.

Hugo, ashen, stares at Gertrud's hand from across the bar.

HUGO
You don't think I'm in pain?

GERTRUD
Not nearly enough of it.

HUGO
I know what I've done.

Gertrud begins re-wrapping her wound.

GERTRUD
It's not about what you've done.
It's about what you're going to do
now that you've gotten away with
it. This is war, Captain Eckener.
Which side are you on?

HUGO
It's not that simple.

GERTRUD
Of course it's not. But you still
have to choose.

Gertrud throws back the rest of her whiskey and gets up. She
walks stiffly toward the exit.

HUGO
Rest assured, Mrs. Adelt, no matter
which side I'm on, I won't go
unpunished. Not for a day. Not for
a moment.

Gertrud turns to him.

GERTRUD
Oh yes. I'll see to it.

She goes, leaving Hugo with his whiskey, waiting for an
airship that will never come.

INT. HOSPITAL WARD - A LITTLE LATER

Gertrud shuffles in, a husk.

Then she sees Leonhard's bed. People gathered around. Terrified, she runs to him.

He's awake. Leonhard is propped up in bed, and Pruss is in his wheelchair by his side.

Leonhard feebly grins. She bursts into tears of relief.

We PULL AWAY as Gertrud goes to Leonhard -

- drifting out the window...above the hospital...and INTO THE SKY. We pass the Jersey Shore and head out over the Atlantic.

Down below is an OCEAN LINER.

EXT. OCEAN LINER

Hugo and Carl, sporting a black eye, stand on the deck. They gaze at the receding continent, relieved to see it fade away.

Overhead, an engine roars. Hugo looks up. Fucking airplanes.

EXT. ZEPPELIN WORKS FACTORY - FRIEDRICHSCHAFEN - DAY - FIVE YEARS LATER

A German military CARGO PLANE buzzes overhead. Below, the rusted Zeppelin Works sign still hangs over the massive hangar and factory.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Five Years Later*

INT. ZEPPELIN WORKS FACTORY

Hugo Eckener is alone. Wearing a stained white button down under a pair of overstressed suspenders, he rattles around his huge, empty hangar. He holds a tumbler of liquor.

We hear the simple, haunting tones of "Come Take a Trip On My Airship." Hugo begins to waltz along to the music in his head. Then, just before the chorus, he sings:

HUGO

*And when the shadows of evening
draw nigh, he'll sail to my window
and sing...*

He stops. There's a small commotion outside the hangar and the massive door ROLLS OPEN.

Hugo sees FIVE SENIOR NAZI OFFICIALS standing in front of their shiny black sedan.

It's like the sun breaking through after a squall. Hugo blinks. Smiles. And welcomes them in.

INT./EXT. WARTIME SEQUENCE

"Come Take a Trip On My Airship" resumes with the triumphant chorus -- florid, orchestral and increasingly dissonant.

ON THE FACTORY FLOOR

Hugo's back -- swollen with pride and self-importance.

He stands on the floor as WORKERS wheel in huge pieces of machinery, pallets of sheet metal, rolls of wire, etc.

He turns to the doors as a large truck stops outside. DOZENS OF GAUNT PRISONERS are crammed into the open bed. ARMED S.S. GUARDS unload them.

Hugo's uneasy. Is he really going to use slaves?

ON THE PERIMETER CATWALK

Yep! Hugo strolls and looks down at a bustling factory floor. They're assembling something big - almost like a small zeppelin, except...not quite.

It's the fuselage of a 50-foot long V-2 rocket. A bomb.

We notice the prisoners. Each person wears a red arm band bearing the letter "Z." Z for zeppelin.

THE NIGHT SKY OVER LONDON

The bombs fly over landmarks -- Big Ben, London Bridge -- then over residential neighborhoods. They sink lower and lower, inches over chimney tops, then -

HUGO'S ZEPPELIN WORKS OFFICE

POP! A cork goes flying. A dozen NAZI OFFICIALS celebrate in Hugo's office with champagne. Hugo forces a joyless smile.

PERIMETER CATWALK

MONTHS LATER, Hugo again strolls the catwalk. He looks older. Hollow.

Down below, the emaciated prisoners move slower than before. Their red "Z" armbands are dirty. Hugo slumps into his...

OFFICE

It's SUNSET. The photos and memorabilia from Hugo's airship career are aglow. He stares wistfully.

Then he hears them: *airplanes*. Many of them. Growing louder.

AMERICAN BOMBERS (O.S.)
(radio chatter)
Target in sight. Copy. Bombs away.

OUTSIDE HUGO'S FACTORY

A singed Hugo jostles in the bed of a German military truck as it hurtles away from his burning factory. He watches, aghast, as the fire consumes everything he's ever loved.

SUPERIMPOSE OVER HUGO'S TORTURED STARE:

In the first years after the war, Allied nations endeavored to bring war criminals and profiteers to justice.

CUT TO BLACK -

SUPERIMPOSE:

But some of them were useful.

INT. HALLWAY - HEADQUARTERS, U.S. EUROPEAN COMMAND - 1947

We follow an ARMY PRIVATE (20s) as he pushes a cart with several banker boxes down a long corridor. The boxes are labeled "TOP SECRET."

SUPERIMPOSE: *Operation Paperclip was a secret U.S. government program that patriated German scientists and engineers who could help advance American technology -- provided their crimes were not too heinous.*

We turn a corner, and there at the end of the hallway we see two figures in a doorway:

A decorated ARMY INTELLIGENCE OFFICER and Hugo Eckener, looking thinner, older but relieved. They shake.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Hugo Eckener pleaded innocence. And raised his hand.*

EXT. AKRON TRAIN STATION PLATFORM - WEEKS LATER - AFTERNOON

Hugo descends the steps from the train.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Akron, Ohio. Goodyear Headquarters.*

Paul Litchfield and Rosendahl are waiting for him. Big, welcoming smiles. An emotional reunion.

INT. GOODYEAR AIRSHIP HANGAR - A LITTLE LATER

Paul and Rosendahl lead Hugo into the empty hangar. Inside, there's an easel holding a large poster board. A BLUEPRINT.

Closer, Hugos sees it's the design for his long-sought airship: the USS Eckener. Tears of joy fill his eyes.

EXT. VERANDA - PAUL LITCHFIELD'S MANSION - GOLDEN HOUR

Paul, Rosendahl and Hugo lounge on Paul's glorious veranda as the sun sinks behind the oak trees. A bottle of champagne chills in an ice bucket.

ROSENDAHL
To the USS Eckener!

Rosendahl and Paul raise their glasses. Not Hugo.

HUGO
No...to the Hindenburg. Ten years
gone. I thought she was the last.

PAUL
But we're only just beginning.

ROSENDAHL
This one will be better.

Bigger. HUGO

Hugo hoists his glass triumphantly.

Up ship!

Up ship! PAUL Up ship! ROSENDAHL

Paul playfully cups his hand to his mouth.

PAUL (CONT'D)
Engines at 250!

Rosendahl pretends to push the throttle. Makes an engine noise with his voice. They're grown men but little boys. They continue to pantomime each action.

HUGO
Rudder at ten degrees northwest!

ROSENDAHL
Elevator, level us out!

PAUL
Jettison the ballast!

Hugo tosses the champagne in his glass over his shoulder and onto the porch. SPLASH! They all roar with laughter.

HUGO
To the Eckener!

They toast again. Hugo swigs directly from the bottle.

PAUL
We need another bottle!

Paul gets up and goes. Rosendahl stands, too.

ROSENDAHL
I think I need to jettison some
ballast myself...

He goes into the house.

On the other end of the porch, we see a MAIL CARRIER handing a stack of letters to a HOUSEKEEPER. We think nothing of it.

Hugo, now alone, gazes out at the rolling green lawn. *He begins to fantasize...*

EXT. GOODYEAR AIRSHIP HANGAR - DAY - FANTASY

Hundreds cheer from the stands as Hugo takes the stage. He's wearing a dashing pilot's uniform. Cameras snap. Women wave.

Behind him, an airship rolls out of the hangar, bigger even than the Hindenburg. On the side it reads: USS HUGO ECKENER.

Then the tail emerges. On the fin, there's a SWASTIKA. Hugo's confused, distressed. This shouldn't be there.

The crowd begins to boo and hiss. He sees that some of their faces are grotesquely burned. He sees Pruss among them, ghoulish and accusing. Hugo GASPS -

EXT. VERANDA

Hugo shakes himself out of his horrifying reverie. Notices the sun has set. The golden glow is gone.

He hears glass shatter inside the house. He goes.

INT. HALLWAY/STUDY

Hugo wanders through Paul's elegant home. Sees no one.

HUGO

Paul? Are you all right?

Hugo turns into the ground floor STUDY.

Paul's standing by his desk and reading a letter. Rosendahl reads over his shoulder. A shattered champagne bottle lies at their feet.

They both turn to Hugo with a look of utter revulsion.

Then Hugo sees what Paul is holding in his other hand. It's a red armband with the letter Z. Z for Zeppelin. Hugo pales.

Paul stalks toward Hugo, gets right up to his face. Paul reaches into his pocket, pulls out a twenty dollar bill and crushes it hard into Hugo's palm.

PAUL

Airfare.

Paul shoulders past him out of the room, taking the letter and the armband with him. Rosendahl follows with a look of furious betrayal.

Meanwhile, Hugo goes to Paul's desk, where the airmail envelope remains. He picks it up, checks the return address -

From: Gertrud Adelt.

INT. EDITOR'S OFFICE - FILM UND FRAU - ONE WEEK AGO

Gertrud is handing that same envelope to an EDITORIAL ASSISTANT, who scurries out with it under her arm. She hurries through the bustling FILM UND FRAU BULLPEN, over which Gertrud now presides.

Gertrud goes to her window. West Berlin, not yet rebuilt, lies beyond. She looks down at her hands. Her palms still bear the scars from the fire.

Then her fingers slowly curl into a fist. She smiles with satisfaction.

INT. MILITARY CARGO PLANE - DAYS LATER

Hugo -- miserable, defeated -- rides back to Germany on a cramped military cargo plane, surrounded by boxes, crates and some EXTREMELY SURLY AMERICAN TROOPS.

SUPERIMPOSE: *A post-war Political Cleansing Committee eventually ruled that Hugo Eckener was a war profiteer and responsible for the destruction of his beloved home of Friedrichshafen. It fined him 100,000 RM and banned him from all professional engagements for five years. Three years after that, he died.*

EXT. NORTH SEA BEACH - A SUMMER DAY - 1947

Gertrud and a teenage CHRISTIAN skip rocks into the calm water.

SUPERIMPOSE: *Gertrud's husband, Leonhard, survived the Hindenburg only to die during the Allied bombing of the city of Dresden in 1945. She raised their son, Christian, alone, and enjoyed a long, successful career in journalism covering what she loved: art, design and film. She died of a heart attack in 1985 at the age of 82.*

Behind Gertrud and Christian on the beach, we reveal the ruins of a German naval installation -- concrete and steel submarine pens, mangled field artillery. Remnants of the recent past.

Gertrud rolls up her trouser cuffs and wades deeper into the surf.

END.