




# **The Mystical Harvest**

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# BOOK I

**Warsaw, Poland, 1939**

## 1

A telling change was in the air, a welcome lull at the end of a day made strenuous by extensive heat. The longed-for break in unseasonably dry weather was greeted by smiling faces. And a thrill was had at the sight of dark clouds ushered in by a late summer swelter. To cheers a sheet of rainfall swept through the thirsty streets and wilted boulevards of Warsaw. The flash point of August was for the moment lessened beneath a cloudburst.

Grey skies flickered overhead, captured through the lens of a black and white motion-picture camera. From throughout, the bustle of a busy street was heard, beset by the heightened clatter of pedestrians delving for shelter from the oncoming storm. In congruence with the unmistakable screech of an automobile's brakes came the klaxon of a horn superseded by a contentious shout almost immediately lost in the rev of a motor engine.

On a wetted city street, a young American man stood unwittingly at the curb. He filmed in the midst of pelting rain with a picture camera he held directly to the sky. The camera was strung around the man's neck, fastened securely to a thin leather strap. Atop of the boxy device an aperture served as a viewfinder through which he distractedly peered.

Caught unaware, he was doused by a wave of rainwater fast brought up onto the sidewalk.

"Watch where you're stepping," came fast with a holler.

A canvassed lorry thumped heavily through a puddle forcing the American man to leap back from the curb. The lorry swayed, teetered, and jolted in passing. An irate fist waved from an open window, the only consolation had for heeding the untimely warning.

"Get out from the road," was added without sympathy.

The American's pants were soaked. He was a tall, well-groomed young man, dressed handsomely in a pair of beige slacks and a fine waist-length overcoat. Soiled by the filthy puddle, chastened for his heedless curiosity—his dark hair lay matted against his forehead and his pale complexion reddened, flushed from the shock—he had drawn unwanted attention to himself. That he was a foreigner was shamefully obvious to the common passersby. Rooted in place, he checked down at himself, at first taken aback, then shrugged good-heartedly and shook himself out.

A safe distance behind him, a sizable group of detained passengers stood huddled together sheltered underneath the broad awning of Dworzec Centralny—Warsaw's newly built Central Railway Terminal. On the sidewalk in front of them sat a heaping pile of suitcases and steamer trunks. The wayfarers, assembled against the rain, consisted mostly of young, smartly dressed American women. The prettiest in particular, Lynn Ann Daily, waved

tentatively and motioned to step from under the awning. She called to the American man by name.

"Oh—careful, James!—Here, James..." shouting sweetly out of concern.

Her voice conveyed an extraordinary amount of emotion; he clearly was uninjured—for such a simple matter she appeared overly concerned. Her attempt to elicit a response from the American man had failed. Her words miscarried, thwarted by the gales and carouses of the storm.

"James." Sheltered from the pouring rain, Lynn once more endeavored to call out, "Here, James."

The man she addressed remained as of yet unaware, his notice drawn away from the group of American women.

She cupped her hands around her mouth to amplify her voice and shouted, poised in the half-light at the edge of the terminal building's extensive awning.

"Come here, James. Do be reasonable and get out from the rain!" The American man was unresponsive. Near enough to be heard, she called once more. "James, do get out from the rain. Why be so stubborn? You're getting yourself soaked!"

Being particular about the camera he wore, James tucked it safely under his jacket, promptly withdrew from the rain and ducked beneath the awning beside Lynn. He deftly held his cold, wet pants out away from his legs. Once white, they were now splattered with grease and mud.

"Look what you've done," Lynn quipped, sympathetically pointing out his ruined trousers. "Honestly though, James, you ought to be a bit more careful," she scolded with an up-turned smile. "You're fortunate not to have gotten yourself killed!"

Mute up until this point, James leaned down to gather a couple of well-packed travel bags which had been placed amongst the group's luggage. He slung a canvas duffle bag and a simple leather tote each over a shoulder. James did not respond to Lynn's chiding with any specific comment, only a garbled grunt followed by a playful, cursive wave.

"What, with that thing 'round your neck," she persisted, "there'll be no end to your troubles!"

Once he had balanced both his bags, James bundled himself up; he glanced to the sky, eyed the worsening weather, and shrugged.

"Nope," was his only reply.

With a stiff pull at his coat collar, James stuck his head out from under the awning. Readied, he motioned to leave.

"Well, I'll see you, Lynn," he added superfluously in the midst of departing.

"You're not waiting for a taxicab?!" she blurted.

His soaked clothing spoke for itself. With a curt answer to her question from over his shoulder, James leapt out into the pouring rain.

"Nope."

Lynn watched as he was engulfed, disappearing into the solid swell of the rain.

"Nice to meet you, James Corbin-Hale," she mumbled aloud to herself.

The length of the street was completely obscured by a thick sheet of grey. Warsaw was lost in a torrential downpour.

## 2

"Nice to meet you, James Corbin-Hale," was spoken in a heavy, masculine voice.

A dashing, sharply dressed Englishman greeted James from behind the counter in the small lobby of The English Lodging House for Men. With an astute nod, he took James' hand in a friendly, vigorous shake. Good-natured and with a charming smile, he settled the arrangements pertaining to the American man's lodgings. He placed down the fountain pen with which he had entered James' information onto an open page of the lodging house's thick register. The formalities of his position as concierge were concluded, and in way of a proper introduction he slid the book over and pulled up the hinged counter.

"Name's Stokley."

"Stokley," James repeated in cue with his greeting.

Under a thick, wavy, parted head of jet-black hair Stokley had a way of offering the most intense sort of stare.

James found his blue eyes to be inclusive and undemanding, and similar to everyone else who encountered Stokley, James was instantly taken in by all of his high-spirited genuineness.

"You're soaked through!" Stokley observed and took a step forward. "A fine first day, huh?! We could use the rain, though. So, it is your first day in Warsaw, then?"

"Yes."

"It's been one of the harshest of summers."

"I could use a change of clothes."

"Right. Sure thing—"

A step out from behind the counter and Stokley, in glancing down, took notice of James' trousers. A puddle gathered at the American's feet. James stood in discomfort; the legs of his pants were sullied to the knees. Taken aback, Stokley stopped himself short.

"What happened there?! Your slacks—"

"A truck," James informed him.

"You can tell that you're an American."

"Yeah?"

Stokley nodded adding equivocally, "Yeah, you can always tell an American!"

A man of bearing, Stokley, who stood graciously before James, was easily a head taller than him. Though quite imposing in stature, Stokley had that kind of characteristic charm, a wonderful comeliness that was generally capable of putting those around him completely at ease. Unprompted, he leaned down to grab a hold of James' bags, which had been laid at the foot of the counter.

"Help with your bags?" he asked assertively.

"No, I'm fine," James courteously declined, quick to edge toward them. "That's all right, I've got 'em."

Regardless, Stokley scooped up both bags and effortlessly tucked one under each arm.

"Really, it's not a problem."

Without giving James a moment to protest, Stokley entered further into the lodging house. He informed him, "Up the street, all the American women stay in this boarding house." He checked back on James before he elaborated any

further. "Popular with the English girls as well. If you like, I could introduce you to the old woman who runs the place. We get on pretty well, she and I, though at times she doesn't recognize me. She must be going on ninety, at least."

"Yeah, sure, if it's not too much trouble."

"Not at all. I'll be sure to introduce you, put a good word in. She's careful with her girls, very protective of them. For the time being though, let me show you to your room. Afterward maybe, if you're free for a moment I'll take you over there."

The men crossed the modest lobby's unbarred threshold. Stokley led James through the portal and into a spacious common room crowded with a multitude of fancy chairs and a softly worn, plain-patterned divan. Set at the far end of the room was a small black wood stove on which a few steaming kettles rested. Several young men stood and chatted while they helped themselves to generous servings of the morning tea and coffee prearranged on a large stand in the middle of the room.

"Did ya come up from Paris, then?" asked Stokley. "They say plenty of American girls can be found there, all of them wanting one thing or another—By the way, would you like anything at all, some coffee maybe?"

James shook his head and politely declined.

Stokley continued. "Tea? No? Well, myself, I prefer these French girls. They come on holiday and have looser mores than most other girls."

He spoke back at James, guiding him out of the common room and into a narrow stairwell that ascended sharply at an awkward angle. Together, they commenced to follow the painted wooden staircase.

"Your room is at the top. One of our lofts." The wood creaked beneath the men's weight. "No lifts in most of these older buildings. You gotta climb. It's one hundred and two steps, eight floors. Actually, come to think of it—"

The clatter from a group of English chaps in fast descent of the narrow staircase and in single file just ahead of the two men interrupted Stokley in mid-thought. In their lead was a lanky, fair-haired, privileged-looking English cad.

With an arrogant intonation he addressed Stokley, gesturing in an overly familiar manner.

"What's this, Stokley?!" he sniffed smugly as he glanced disapprovingly at James.

"Brady," Stokley nodded.

The group barged past, rudely forcing Stokley and James to a halt on the stairs. Where Brady was once first in line, he now withdrew. In standing before Stokley, he had hung back to parley for a brief moment. A few of his lackeys looked James up and down in passing, nudging one another in the ribs and smiling wide.

"You might have this one pay for his room up front!" Brady baited while he thumbed toward the pathetic, soaked-through American.

This comment incited a collective chuckle from his cronies. Stokley dryly introduced the two men to one another.

Their meeting was not at all impressionable.

"Well, if you manage to get 'im clean," Brady disinterestedly announced and turned to resume his way down the stairs, "then bring 'im by Victoria's tonight!" A thought had occurred to Stokley, who reached out and held Brady back.

"Tonight, leave with Patty," he voiced.

Stiff-necked, Brady shook his head, his lips pursed with a knowing look in his eyes.

"Nuh huh. She's got that Negro with her."

"How do you mean?" asked Stokley.

"Downes has got that nigger, Ori, keeping after her."

"Ori Lablanche?!"

"That's right."

Brady shrugged in blatant disregard and broke away from Stokley's loosened grip. A noticeable sprightliness entered into his gait. Free again, he headed down the stairs.

"Tough luck, chap!" he exclaimed and with a pitying shake of his head continued down the staircase.

Unmoved by Brady's callous refusal, Stokley felt inclined to interpret things for his new boarder while he and James proceeded to work their way up the rickety staircase. He informed James about Leland Downes, an American entrepreneur who was most renowned as the owner of the notoriously popular cabaret, Micmac, located in the Old Town of Warsaw.

"A mountebank of sorts. He's into just about everything. Owns this place as well, though he's never around."

"An American—runs this lodging house in Poland?"

"Well sure, why not!" Stokley shrugged. "It's good business. Money should move. That's American, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is."

"You're a Yank, I'd figure you for it. Though, like I said, he's never around anyway." Stokley also deigned to mention Downes' girl, Patty Biset, a well-known chorus dancer for the cabaret. "She had a real scare the other night," he explained. "It seems someone got after her."

Together, the two men continued their climb, although James began to lag a few steps behind Stokley, who talked on insensibly. From up ahead, the Englishman elaborated further; he expounded to the empty air, bounding up the staircase by twos, unaware of James' struggle to keep up.

"She was followed home to her flat across from the Slasko-Dabrowski Bridge along the escarpment near Old Town. Her building faces the Vistula. From her window you can see all along the quay. Nice view of the river. The Vistula—it's said—will continually course so long as the flame of independence remains lit within the hearts of Poland's people. Although, they also say that if it's bad and it happens in Warsaw, that'll be where you'll find it."

There was a sense of urgency in Stokley's tone and pace, of which James was only slightly aware. It was as if the Englishman were somewhat more detached from the story he recanted than he would lead others on to believe.

"A lot of girls have gone missing recently. All the local papers are full of it. There's been a lot of conjecture, let me tell ya. The public can't get enough. I mean, they're mad for answers, and the Slav police aren't saying... 'cause no one's found any bodies yet. These women just up and disappear." In the same breath he told James about Ori Lablanche—the Negro that Brady had derogatorily referred to—and Downes' strong arm. "He works down at the docks on the barges. Been with him a long time now. Downes must have him watching after her, which isn't good for me."

"You and her—" James implied.

"Yeah. Downes doesn't know."

The Englishman's awkward situation was to be appreciated by James, who shook his head, slightly amused by Stokley's frankness.

"No?"

With a yank, Stokley removed a ring of keys from his back pocket, balancing both of James' overstuffed travel bags under his chin while he delivered a gregarious shrug.

"Nope! Well, this is you."

In so much as he was able, Stokley maneuvered under the low ceiling of the uppermost landing. He ducked his head and with candor showed James to the dilapidated door of his room that stood immediately off of the stairway on the topmost floor. The door that Stokley was about to unlock led to a garret hardly adequate for a single occupant. This was made painfully obvious when Stokley bowed his head to step inside once he had swung the flimsy door open with a stiff nudge of his shoulder.

### 3

The door to the holding room at the back of the station manager's office in Warsaw's Central Railway Terminal was forcefully swung open. En masse, several uniformed officials entered, advancing only a few paces into the small, well-lit room. Here they loitered, barring the open doorway, unchallenged in their authority. Among them was the bespectacled station manager, easily identified by the gold placard mounted above the brim of his circular hard-sided kepi. He was gracious enough to step aside for another man, a tall, plain-suited individual. A fine figure of a man, youthfully middle-aged, handsome and with a well-managed bearing, who courteously thanked the station manager in French before wavering a moment to take in the scene, inquired, "Which one is she?"

"At the end there, Monsieur la Prefect," the station manager discreetly responded. "The pretty one, seated there in that small group. The one in the sleeveless dress."

Crowded together inside the holding room with their luggage were the Americans. Lynn, seated with a few of her girlfriends, was approached by the tall Frenchman. This man had a considerable limp. His impediment was made most distinctly apparent when he strode purposefully across the room and over the wooden floorboards to the spot where Lynn sat. The Frenchman stood for an extended moment positioned directly in front of Lynn. It was an intentional intrusion of her personal space and made her quite uncomfortable. In his hand he held a clipboard thick with papers to which he pointed. Hovering over her, he spoke in English with a thick French accent.

"This is you?"

Reluctant to trust this stranger's intentions, though fully aware that Polish law was of a different criterion than that which she was familiar with, Lynn consented to glance at the clipboard being presented to her. It contained a train's long-listed manifest. With a shaky finger, the official pointed to her name, Lynn Ann Daily. His breath was sweet with the smell of liquor.

"Yes, it is," she blurted with a furled brow.

"Lynn Daily, is that correct?"

"Yes, but I don't understand—"

"Lynn Ann Daily?"

"What is it you want?" she voiced out of concern.

Doubtful of her, he brusquely sprang the clasp of the clipboard upward releasing the sheet of paper with her name written on it. With his thumb he emphatically flipped a few pages back. Careful not to overshoot, he slid his finger with meticulous care down the list of passengers and stopped at the name of James Corbin-Hale. The Frenchman tapped the clipboard definitively.

"And him, you know him?"

Made ill at ease, Lynn, if for no other reason, became difficult. Her otherwise bright and intelligible gaze noticeably darkened. She shook her head assertively, "No... we only talked briefly while on the train—"

"You were seen with him, mademoiselle! You mustn't lie to me," he reproached, interrupting her.

Lynn looked up from the passenger list and inquired, "Who are you people?"

"I am a French official," the man replied. "My name is Modest Marquard. I am the Prefect of Paris," he clarified, "an officer of the law, mademoiselle." He dug for a wallet within his coat and presented his credentials. "The Polish government has arranged for me to investigate an occurrence aboard the train you traveled. You were aboard the express from Paris to Vienna and then onto Warsaw, is that not correct?"

"That's right."

The French official was quick to restore his wallet to its proper place.

"And then on to Warsaw, during which time you were seen traveling in the company of this man, James Corbin-Hale?"

"I was, it's true, but I don't understand. What could possibly be the problem?"

"There is the small matter of an improper... boarding pass."

"A boarding pass? That's ridiculous," Lynn proclaimed. "Listen, whatever the problem, it has nothing whatsoever to do with me. I never met him before this in my life," she chimed innocently.

"Do you know where he is?"

"No."

"Did he mention where he was to stay?"

"No, he did not."

## 4

On his own, James wandered the innumerable streets exploring the many quaint and ethnically diverse neighborhoods amassed like a vibrant montage, invariably coloring the Polish capital in uniquely congenial and resplendent tones.

It had ceased to rain. Far above, the spent sky shone, a solid white-grey. In its silvery light, the saturated brick buildings looked darkened, smooth, and hard. Under foot, the many cobbled streets for a long time afterward remained sodden, slick, and glistened when wet.

Through the gritty lens of his black and white motion-picture camera, James serendipitously filmed a few succinct tourist-like city scenes:

On the corner of a busy boulevard, a young impoverished street urchin industriously hustled the daily newspaper from a pile stacked similarly to



haberdashery folded collar-to-shirttail beside him on the sidewalk. A small, well-worn cap turned backward on his head was all the smart-looking child had to show for his hours of hard-labored service. The boy held a paper aloft in midair displaying the front page, which, written in Polish in a bold-faced print, read: Poland mobilizes in response to German aggression. To be heard, he cupped his mouth with his free hand and pitched the headline at the top of his lungs to the multitude of passersby and idlers alike crowded upon the city sidewalk.

At the crossing of a narrow side street onto a larger boulevard, a small, posh roadster jerked to an abrupt stop. James waited for the automobile, which took a sharp turn with a buck of its tires. Inside, the well-to-do passengers waved merrily to James as the car sped off.

Opposite a clumpy lawn, the extant outer fortification wall of medieval Warsaw presided dutifully over an unkempt public park. Boxed within the camera's view, what remained of the antiquated battlements were predominantly the outlying turrets. Remiss for centuries and in use mostly as granaries and storehouses, they rose steadfast to form an incomplete circuit around the many structures huddled together in the historic over-trodden vicinity of Old Town.

A conglomeration of liken images: street level depictions of synagogues throughout the Jewish community in Praga-Warsaw were painstaking cataloged. Each image was distinguishable from the next by the deliberate placement of the camera, positioned at such an angle so as to provide an unobstructed view of the street and locality of each holy building. From the rare, somber, stone corner bastions and city block-long fortresses, to the ubiquitous courtyard prayer house nestled on the typically nondescript, narrow, edifice-lined side street, Warsaw was for centuries a tolerant and embracing enclave of Jewry.

A sizable group of mixed-aged children took advantage of the remainder of daylight to conclude a street game in a blind alley of a lower-class neighborhood. Interrupted by James, who advanced toward them behind his camera, the youths animatedly jumped up and down and called out. A ball, kicked by the children, bounced off the nearby curb and rolled toward him, terminating at his feet. Clustered together, the group noisily passed out of sight. Segregated from them was one inattentive and over-zealous young boy who, while collecting the ball, knocked into James' legs. The child flinched from James, snatched up the ball, and ran off.

James inadvertently caught a glimpse of himself filming with his picture camera, lumbering toward a shop window at the corner of that same blind alley. The low sun shone reddened and polychromed in the scattered clouds, an orangish hue that foretold of the September heat wave destined to come. A glare blazed forth from the western sky, an intensely colored stencil that cut James' figure out crisply and enrobed him in the light of a spectacular aura. Isolated, James could clearly see himself approach the storefront in the glass; his silhouette reflected back at him as he plodded awkwardly up to the window, his head bent down low to peer through the viewfinder. To keep the picture even and still, he carefully planted a solid and steady foot with every step he took. With the cumbersome camera held out impeding him in this way, he appeared comically grotesque.

The weather had cleared significantly. The last spangled light of day was quickly fading. Hurried, Lynn bounded up to the main entrance of James' lodging house. In her hand she held a small creased piece of paper with the lodge's address scrawled on it in a heavy script. A searching pull at the handle and a light push swept open the front door. Lynn briskly entered the lobby. The light ring of a tiny bell hanging at the top of the doorframe announced her arrival.

For a short while, Lynn stood inert in front of the empty post at the lobby counter. It was unforeseen and disconcerting to her that the desk would be left unmanned. Escaping from the adjoining common room was the lilt of piano music, a phonograph recording of a polonaise by Chopin, the Polish composer's beloved Heroique in A-flat major. Lynn called out, leaned over the counter in the slim hope of finding the concierge, but soon withdrew. There was no one. More curious than timid, she followed the faint sound of the radio. The wheedle charm of the melodious music drew her unwanted attention.

The common room's blinds were drawn shut. The room was in complete darkness with the exception of an area of iridescent light emanating from a green glass desk lamp. The lamp was set upon a reading table placed before a tall, dark mahogany radio. It was from the radio that the polonaise played, carried softly through the hollow of the vacant common room. Lynn could just make out the faint smell of a sweet cigar as she discreetly entered the ill-lit room.

Before her, a delicate ribbon of smoke wafted into the still air. A red, brass-studded, leather upholstered wingback armchair was positioned in front of the radio where, in an ashtray built into its arm, glowed the head of a lit cigar.

"Excuse me," Lynn called out in a tentative voice. "Hello, is anyone here?"

This miscarried inquiry heralded her entrance into the common room. She called out more assertively.

"Excuse me, is anyone there?"

Lynn edged around the back of the leather armchair, found to be vacant. In an attempt to switch off the radio turn dial she leaned forward and was momentarily distracted. Behind her a hand reached out just short of grasping her shoulder. Wavering, it brushed against Lynn's hair, which startled her, causing her to flinch away abruptly from the radio. Lynn let out a brusque cry and spun about to find herself facing Stokley. He stood firm for a moment but decided that it would be better of him to back off, apologizing ingenuously yet convincingly enough to put her at ease.

"I'm sorry, miss!"

Not meaning her any harm, the Englishman smiled with discomfort and excused himself. He disengaged and took a large step back for not wanting to make Lynn any more uncomfortable than she already was.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he reassured her.

"No—yes—I'm sorry," she answered fretfully, calming herself. "I shouldn't have—"

"No, that's quite all right. My fault. Really, I should be at the counter, though in the evening... well, I usually have a chance to relax a bit. Was there anything I could help you with?"

"There's an American gentleman staying here by the name of James Corbin-Hale."

At the sound of James' name, Stokley's face lit up. With a sharp snap of his finger and a perceptibly furtive change in his tone, Stokley switched on his raffish charm.

"That's right. Bet you're Lynn!"

A soft flush alit Lynn's features, as she was obviously taken in at the fact that James had said anything about her.

"Yeah. He mentioned me?!"

"Sure thing, said to look out for ya. Said you might come by, James did."

"Is he in?" Lynn inquired.

"I'm afraid not," Stokley shook his head in response, and glancing past her, handsomely screwed up his face in thought. He then nodded, adding, "I'd know where to find him, maybe, if you wouldn't mind joining me?"

"Well..."

Without hesitation, Stokley snatched his jacket and hat off of the red leather chair as well as his cigar, and not forgetting to turn off the radio added, "The place I'm thinking of isn't far from here. A few friends of mine are waiting for me, expecting me about now. It's just up the street here, in Old Town. Won't take but five minutes."

"I—um, well—"

Lynn was slow to respond; she stalled over her words, her mouth slightly agape. Stokley was patient with her, his expression somewhat calculated.

"Well?" he asked.

"No, I'm fine, thank you. It can wait." Lynn kindly attempted an excuse to avoid the company of a man with whom she was barely acquainted, "I'm sure James will be around in the morning, wouldn't you say?"

While Lynn spoke, a few English fellows along with several ladies barged through the front door, a bit tipsy and having a good time. As they noisily passed and arrived at the stairs, one of the men, having noticed the couple, addressed Stokley. The young man seemed a good-natured sort and was off-handed with Stokley, unafraid that he might in any way offend him. Not exactly striking nor ugly, this Englishman's features had a somewhat passive arrangement to them, plotted slothfully on his otherwise cheerful, nondescript face.

"Hey," the young man stopped to wink, "watch your fraternizing there, Stokley!"

"Graff," Stokley gestured dilatorily, answering him by name. "Victoria's tonight?"

Blank-faced, Graff shrugged.

"Victoria's... sure..." He resistantly hung on the doorframe, his friends laughingly tugging at him and coaxing him up the narrow, painted staircase.

"Sure thing. We'll be there..."

Stokley gave him a wave and politely led Lynn out from the common room.

"B-Brady says..."

Stokley stopped short.

"B-Brady says... to..."

With these words caught at his tongue, Graff swayed back and forth. At the end of his tether, he laughed and struggled against the pull of his jovial friends.

"Brady says to bring that blighter-that friend of yours-to bring that American chap around," he was finally able to relay.

"Sure. We were just heading out."

Graff lost his struggle.

"Well, we'll be seeing you," he said sloppily as he was dragged up the stairs. Stokley took a puff from his cigar, turned to Lynn, and accompanied by the winningest of smiles, gallantly offered her his arm.

"He shouldn't be all that difficult to find," he told her with absolute confidence.

## 6

On a corner of an uneven brick sidewalk under the blustery glare of a gas lamp, there leaned a dashing, well-built Polish man. He appeared pensive as he waited for someone, adjusting the collar of his shirt and loosening his tie against the August evening's sodden air. Very much a dignified gentleman, he was dressed with an immaculate sensibility and wore an elegant up-turned mustache that suited his distinguished features perfectly. On in his years though still quite handsome, this personage was Warsaw's chief inspector, Lukasz Starzynski.

At each random encounter and as chance would have it, with every person who came around the corner Starzynski straightened his posture. He would step forward clearing his throat, and each time upon realizing that they were not whomever he was expecting, he would discreetly withdraw.

Impatient and luckless, the inspector distractedly took a step to the stone curb, delicately unfastening a gold cuff link. He had grown increasingly weary and motioned to check his wristwatch for the time. The crystal was covered by a cap which conveniently flipped back to reveal the face. The hour was near to eight o'clock. The rugged timepiece he sported had phosphorescent hands and figures, being easily read in the dark. His wearing it was a habit he had acquired from his distinguished service in the trenches, fighting for the Germany of William the Second—from Berlin to Baghdad—against the Russians as a dismounted cavalry officer in the Polish army on the Eastern Front during the Great War.

Satisfied that it was still quite early enough to catch the person for whom he happened to be waiting, the inspector decidedly preoccupied himself with a smoke. Starzynski removed a silver cigarette case from deep within the inside breast pocket of his lined coat. The case was an ornate gift given to him by his wife to celebrate their tenth anniversary.

Thinking of her, he opened it and removed a cigarette. On the inside lid there was an inscription etched in cursive that read: *To my dearest Lukasz, My youth's love's warmth's embrace.* It was signed, *Marie-Louis Starzynski, December 14th, 1929.* A smile, he lit up the cigarette and in that instance noticed Monsieur Marquard pass, his step colored by an uneven stride. Starzynski was quick to shake out the lit match, and in the same motion toss it to the ground and turn in Marquard's direction. At his approach, the Polish inspector's deportment was glaringly marked with the opprobrium of his position.

"Pardon me, monsieur. May I speak with you a moment?" Starzynski addressed him in clear and fluent French.

"Pardon me, please, Monsieur Marquard." He rose his voice sanguinely, "Monsieur la Prefect... Pardon me, Monsieur Modest Marquard, oui?"

"Oui?!"

With an officious step forward, Starzynski confidently approached the Frenchman and offered his hand.

"Well, well. Inspector Marquard, we meet at last."

"I'm sorry..."

Drawn by the unfamiliar voice, Marquard spun curiously about. The stranger's unreproachful bearing, his aplomb and mannerism had sufficed; Marquard was quick to recognize the man, seized his hand, and stated, "You must be Inspector Starzynski."

The two men shook corrigibly.

"Lukasz Starzynski."

"Oui, Chief Inspector."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Monsieur la Prefect."

"The pleasure's mine."

"Please, I would like to apologize for not being at the railway station to greet you earlier. I was made aware of your arrival, of course, and if I had had an opportunity—Well, there is no excuse, really. My deepest apologies."

"No, no," Marquard insisted. "That's quite all right. As I understand it, you're a very busy man."

Once more the Polish inspector removed the cigarette case from within his coat pocket.

"I've heard you've been busy as well." He offered a cigarette to Marquard.

"Yes, as always. Thank you." Marquard accepted the smoke, which Starzynski promptly lit. He continued with his thought, "As you know, I arrived late last night." He took a drag, inhaling deeply. "I must say though, I haven't had a minute to relax. If you'd like to join me," Marquard was generous enough to proffer. The Frenchman made an open gesture with the cigarette, "I was about to have a late supper."

"Did you have a particular place in mind?"

"No, I wouldn't know where to begin!"

"Have you a preference?"

"Not at all. I've yet to see much of your splendid city."

"Have you visited the palace?"

"No, not as of yet."

"Wonderful! If you like, I know a little brasserie situated near to it that serves an excellent pint."

## 7

Ahead of Lynn, Stokley strode forward under the soft glow of the street lamps. With an adeptness, he led her down the crowded sidewalk all the while speaking to her nimbly from over his shoulder.

"You've got to remind me, I meant to ask Graff about something earlier."

"When do you expect he'll show?"

"Probably an hour or so."

Stokley inadvertently began to outpace Lynn.

"You say we're near to the center of town?" she asked.

"That's right."

He hardly glanced back to answer. Focused not on her but rather in response to her occasional comment, compounded by his overall taken-for-granted familiarity with the city's numerous streets, had distracted Stokley from noticing Lynn as she fell behind.

"Could you slow a bit?"

"Sorry, am I walking too fast for ya?"

"Yeah, a little. I can hardly keep up with you."

Slowing for her, he settled into a more suitable pace; the couple together meandered amicably amongst the hustle and bustle of the busy Friday evening that carried on all around them. A certain optimism, an almost tangible euphoria was to be observed in every person they encountered, read in the engaging expression on each of their friendly yet unfamiliar faces. This inviting thoroughfare of Warsaw sparkled with light and was alive with activity. A myriad of well-to-do ladies and gentlemen in a thick, constant stream passed them by, window shopping at the bright and lively array of storefronts and fashionable boutiques. In the street the jam of glossy cars and from the restaurants and nightclubs, the lights and sounds of the city were absolutely exhilarating.

"Warsaw really is such a beautiful city!" Lynn remarked. "How bustling it all is!"

To the point of distraction, she looked about, her eyes a shine with delight as she enthusiastically absorbed all of the many sights.

"This strip, it's called *The Royal Route*," Stokley informed her as he motioned up and down the busy lane.

Lynn smiled reflectively.

"I like that!" she replied.

"They call it that because it linked the monarch's official and private residence. It'll take us to Castle Square by the palace." Gracious and open with what little understanding he had of local history, Stokley slowed even more so for Lynn, who still lagged behind, in order to continue his pseudo tour. He casually pointed around with his finger. "The majority of the shops and clubs that you see on this boulevard are all relatively new. Most of this was established during the early twenties... That's when all of these nightspots and restaurants were most popular, just after the war when Poland began to enjoy her independence. They say that those were the best of times."

"The palace. Is that where we're going?" Lynn asked with interest. "Will we be passing by it?"

"We'll be near to it. There's the terraced restaurant I told you about, Victoria's."

The popular Brasserie Victoria stood humbly at the foot of the royal palace in the shadow of the soaring spire of a great Jesuit church—the favored meeting point of the gentlemen of the assembly. Below the clock face of Zygmunt's tower, the main entry to the palace, and against the outstanding backdrop of Castle Square, the brasserie was quaintly secluded. Once in service as the carriage house and stables for the royal family, Victoria's now catered to an entirely less regal cliental, though it indubitably remained one of the poshest of troughs in all of Poland.

Indoors at the open-ended restaurant, Inspectors Marquard and Starzynski were seated enjoying a meal together in comfort. From their dining table they

could see out over the covered terrace. Behind brass fixtures and bathed in the patio lamps' soft luminescence, a smartly dressed crowd of evening-goers sat watching automobiles parade, stop and go, around the Zygmunt Column, circling the bustling square. Opposite Marquard, Starzynski savored the last swill of beer from his large glass stein.

Starzynski, having patted his wetted mustache with the neatly folded corner of his cloth napkin, animatedly announced, "To a Pole, there is nothing finer!"

With his own stein, Marquard saluted before he drank, himself with a half empty glass.

"Are you enjoying, my friend?" Starzynski asked with interest.

"Delicious!" was Marquard's exclamatory response.

Satisfied, Starzynski pushed aside his dinner plate and sat back to make himself comfortable. Before him, Marquard patiently finished his meal, a serving of smoked Vistula salmon, a dish for which Warsaw was renowned. Starzynski removed a cigarette from his case, lit up, and leaned forward. He stared transfixed at the heavy smoke that he exhaled.

"Things have become difficult, though," he commented in retrospect.

"Difficult?" Marquard swallowed hard, gently cleared his throat, and asked, "You mean these missing women that you spoke of, yes? Or do you mean the Germans?!"

"The missing women, of course." Starzynski sat squarely in his seat and motioned with his cigarette while he spoke very matter of factually. "The Germans, they're there, we can all see what's happening. Austria, the Sudetenland, Moravia, Bohemia, and the Memelland all fell victim to Lebensraum. Germany has an insatiable appetite for living space. And let it be said that the summer season for maneuvers is over with and was nothing more than a paltry excuse.

France, as you well know, has begun to mobilize, and a written assurance from Great Britain is sure to deter any aggressions—But these poor women, I tell you," he said with candor, "there are eight now, that we're sure of. Family, friends, no one ever hears from them again. They just up and vanish!"

Marquard washed down his meal with the rest of his beer, shook his head in an attempt to make sense out of the scant information the Polish Inspector had provided, and posed the question, "None of these women were Jews?"

"As far as I know, not a single Jewish woman in Warsaw has gone missing." Starzynski stated. "I've got sixteen cases of missing women," he further elaborated, "eight for sure, all foreigners and no bodies."

"You say that these women, they're all foreigners?" Marquard asked for clarification.

"That's right. A few well-to-do English, though mostly young French girls here either for work or on holiday."

Marquard's glance wandered outside. On the terrace, several fellows riled up on liquor stood arm in arm singing patriotic songs while several other merrymakers cheered and laughed along. The group was mostly English and had a certain disregard for the opinions or views of those seated near to them.

"Well, the problem's obvious," Marquard stated, "if you don't mind me saying."

Starzynski followed Marquard's gaze. The charged atmosphere, typical of the drunken holidaymaker, could invoke a congested city such as Warsaw to have a propensity toward immorality and degradation.

"Not at all. I see the problem."

Marquard returned his attention to Starzynski and reneged, "Of course, I didn't mean to suggest—"

"No, no. Let's forget it. Tell me again what it was that was important enough to goad the Paris Prefect of police into coming all the way to Poland?"

Outdoors, Stokley sat comfortably at a table under the cover of the canopied overhang of Victoria's terrace accompanied by Lynn. A glass of brandy in hand, he glanced from Lynn's untouched drink to her, watching as she anxiously scanned the square for James.

"He'll be along any moment. You haven't touched your drink."

Lynn smiled and picked up her glass to take a sip.

"Oh... Well, how long should we wait?"

"However long he takes."

Distracted by the clamor of the outdoor restaurant, Lynn's attention shifted to a group of young people seated at a nearby table causing a commotion. With gaiety, they were egging several drunk Englishmen into doing a song and dance. Stokley took advantage of this spectacle, to which he was immune, to look Lynn over very closely, examining her.

Her pointed elbow leaned daintily at the very edge of the flimsy circular café table; Lynn's long auburn hair was free to hang unbound and to skirt the open shoulder of her summer dress. Trimmed with a hem of floral embroidery, her gentle dress fitted easily through the torso and widened at the neck. Seated astride, her lean legs remained tightly crossed parting only slightly, a hair's width between her inner thighs, when she shifted in her chair. She was turned full round, the accentuated curve of her hips and waist formed a feminine S from the robust trunk of her attractive figure.

Stokley slowly brought his drink up to his mouth, and pausing before he drank, asked over the rim of his glass,

"Why was it so important that you should see James tonight?"

Lynn spun to face the Englishman and caught his smile before he sipped his drink.

"A government official was looking for him this morning," she responded. "He held everyone in our group except James after we disembarked from our train. Asked a lot of questions, wanted to know where he could find him."

Stokley took a swallow, placed his drink down onto the tabletop, and cleared his throat. Interested in Lynn's recount of that morning, he scooted his chair forward. Out of indignation he asked, "Really. Did he say why?"

"Something about a boarding pass."

Stokley let out a short, vexed breath, shook his head, and with a disgusted snicker declared, "These Poles—"

"He was French," Lynn interrupted. "The man was a French police inspector, the Paris Prefect of police..."

Marquard was in the middle of a sentence, seated speaking with Starzynski when he was interrupted by a barmaid.

Not at all unwelcome, the typically fair and attractively bright-eyed Polish girl was warmly greeted when she approached their table with a fresh round of beers.

"...we had checked against the train's manifest, only the two were missing—"

He leaned back to give the young girl room. The pale blue bodice of her frock was secured at the waist by a taut yellow sash. Ample lift was given to her



bosom. With sweetness she smiled at the pair of older gentlemen and daintily placed down two heavy glass steins from the eight or so she somehow grasped in her hands.

"And who was it," Starzynski asked delicately, "that they found on the tracks?"

"That was our man, or what little was left once he was dragged from the tunnel." After briefly wavering on this thought, Marquard clarified respectfully, "It's unfortunate, really."

"He was the agent?"

"Yes, a political operative. The information he was able to relate back to us, it was invaluable," said Marquard as he stared through Starzynski. "He was aware of the risks involved. Regretfully though, he volunteered his life for it." His tacit gaze had begun to waver and his voice became unsteady.

Sensitive to this, Starzynski tactfully brought his cigarette to his lips and took a drag. He broke eye contact with the Frenchman, who had become noticeably distraught. The prefect removed a handkerchief and blew his nose. He regained his composure and continued.

"He singled out the group of Americans before being killed. He was never able to be specific, but one of the American men, a recluse, made the mistake of using the boarding pass of another, a different man who was found dead in Paris over a week ago."

"This dead man," Starzynski contemplated in an attempt to put it together, "he was American?"

Marquard nodded.

"And the other, he needn't have been American at all?"

"That is correct."

"So then only one of two things is possible," Inspector Starzynski postulated. "And naturally, you've implicated this impersonator in the death of your operative."

"Incidentally, the operative's mission was unrelated to the American's death, or at least indirectly... and to believe in mere coincidence!"

## 8

A glimpse from the sidewalk through the multitude gathered on the terrace was all that was needed to notice Lynn. It was a slight, dark-haired, pretty American woman who ambled past and in taking a second look recognized her seated with Stokley at the cafe table. This fashionable woman was Josie Rosen. Fortunate to find her friend Lynn, Josie leaned enthusiastically over the outdoor cafe's brass railing and shouted with an emphatic wave from across the terrace.

"Lynn Ann?! Over here, Lynn Ann!"

Attracted by the shouts, Lynn gazed up, spotted Josie, and excitedly waved in return, motioning for her to join them. At Josie's approach of their table, Lynn rose. The two girls greeted one another with a peck to each other's cheek.

"Josie, how nice! I thought you weren't going to be able to make it out this evening!"

"Oh, I always manage," Josie said wrinkling her nose and winking with a charming, youthful vitality.

"I can hardly believe you found me."

"Well... here I am!"

"I'm so excited!" Lynn added with a sincere smile, "What are the chances? Were you just passing by?"

"Silly luck, I suppose!" Josie responded with a shrug. "I was lost actually. Nonetheless, here I am!"

Without any need for invitation, Lynn corrigibly pulled a chair out for her friend. Josie glanced over at Stokley, smiled pertly, and appropriated the open seat.

"And thank heavens! These tiny streets can be quite confusing. I mean, once you find you're off the beaten path... I was beginning to think I would be spending my first night in Warsaw alone. And worse yet, I thought maybe I was really lost. Heaven knows what could have happened!"

"How dreadful! Well, we're glad to see you're safe. It's still early. Have all the other girls gone out already?" asked Lynn.

Josie looked directly at Stokley, glanced back to Lynn and mirthfully exclaimed, "Well, yeah... but who's your friend?"

"Oh, yes—"

"Lynn, at times you can be incredibly tactless. You must introduce us. This feels so uncomfortable."

On cue, Stokley straightened up, extended an open hand to Josie, and offered up a winsome smile. Lynn reddened and apologetically introduced her friend; by way of introduction, she explained to Stokley that they had all traveled together on the express from Paris with James.

"Is that what this is all about?" Josie snapped. "That man from the train?!"

"Stokley is a good friend of James'," Lynn informed Josie, correcting her friend's insensitive tone. "We've only just been waiting here. We're expecting him in a short while. Please, be a dear and try to behave."

"Oh, Lynn Ann!" exclaimed Josie in an exasperated breath. "Really, you are such a confused girl."

Lynn waved Josie on, in essence, disregarding her. This only encouraged Josie to speak further to Stokley, expounding on the subject of her friendship with Lynn as if she were not present. She had his undivided attention.

Josie's allure, her feminine wile, was most adeptly conveyed in her invitation, a certain indescribably attractive, engaging, and open vigor.

"She was hardly around at all while we were in Vienna. Even the most charming city in Europe can seem a dismal place when one's all alone." A sly dart of her glance flagged the approach of a cutting remark. "It's a shame, really, when a woman abandons her most dear friend for something so ridiculous as a man!"

Hurt by what was being said, Lynn defensively retorted, "Oh, don't you be ridiculous. Listen to yourself. How can you talk like that! We saw plenty of one another."

Josie leaned in flirtatiously toward Stokley, selfishly competing for his attention as if it were merely an object to covet between the two women. Competitive as her nature was, Josie would never have allowed her own personal feelings for a man to come between her friendship with Lynn. For this reason alone, her play had had an undercurrent of truth or something in a resentful way familiar to it.

"She's been carrying on about him ever since this morning. Pish, she's been carrying on about him ever since she met him. She's convinced herself that

she's never going to see him again." Josie conspiratorially cupped her hand to whisper, "You know, she even lied to the Prefect of all of Paris—which is the same as lying to a police commissioner!"

At the opposite end of the terrace, seated inside the restaurant, the two inspectors finished their meal. Marquard set down his empty glass, removed his napkin from his lap and picked up a lit cigarette from the ashtray at the center of the table. The cigarette had been left to burn and its majority was ashen. He tapped the spent length off and then paused before taking a final drag.

"In the local paper," Marquard mentioned, "I read a lengthy article. Apparently this business with the missing women has gotten the attention of some mystic—"

Starzynski cut in with a shake of his head. "I know what you think! ... Ah ha, these people are all superstitious."

"Not at all!" Marquard laughed with an exhale, snuffing out the stale cigarette.

"They say this man has a great gift. His reputation is unprecedented." Starzynski elaborated, "He is famous for solving similar cases in both Berlin and Munich. His agreeing to come here has been highly anticipated."

"Where is he now?"

"He's been traveling throughout eastern Europe. Last night we received a wire from Vienna. He's made an announcement to the press that his arrival by rail has been scheduled for later this evening."

## 9

A locomotive traveled through the rugged Tatra Mountains; steadily it snaked toward the gaping black mouth of an awaiting tunnel. The setting orb of the reddened sun hung low in the westernmost sky, a scarlet curtain against the wild and blackened silhouette of the serrated mountainside. Current events in the region—the resistless German occupation of Czecho-Slovakia, and more recently, the grasp of Memel—piqued a nervousness and severity in those on board for most of the length of the otherwise serene journey.

Within the train, a bluff, stocky, middle-aged man in a dark tailored suit proceeded to exit casually from his first-class compartment and into the tight corridor of a sleeper car. This man was the mystic, Hurkos. There was a vacancy in his dove-grey, glazed-over eyes, set wide in his face, and an otherness aspect to his nominal gestures and mannerisms. Alone, he mechanically worked his way through the train to a large, elegant dining car. The narrow passages of the open train cars were easily cramped in the early hours of the evening when the lesser-class passengers prepared themselves for rest.

The mystic patiently stood off to the side for an elderly lady. The woman apparently was caught up in a tiff with a porter. She spoke low German—her voice ailed and weakened by her old age—she was difficult to understand and the porter was too anesthetized to bother to listen. She explained that a man had taken her seat when she had gotten up to stow away her bags. Hurkos thought it insensitive to leave her to fend for herself and interceded on her behalf. The porter was persuaded to question the man, who peripherally denied

the accusation and dismissively waved his hand in the air. The lack of concern on his part, an almost disinterested aversion to what was being said, prompted the mystic to suggest the porter check the man's ticket. The man balked at the notion; the proposal alone elicited a violent reaction from him. Before the porter had the chance to act upon the idea, the man jumped from his seat. His indignant behavior was provocation enough for the porter to dispute his presence on the train. It became apparent that in fact the man had not purchased a ticket. When asked for the proper fare, he came up short. The conductor was called and the stowaway detained until the train's arrival at the next station.

In the comfort of the dining car, lined with white cloth-covered tables set with fine china and silverware, several wealthy passengers were comfortably seated preparing themselves for an early dinner. Hurkos sat on his own, having been shown to a corner table, and sipped the hot clear broth from a bowl of soup while he read from a folded newspaper. The idyllic surroundings grew that much more astonishing the closer the sun came to buckling the horizon's belt. The dusk light shined into the dining car with the brilliancy of red. The imposing splendor distracted Hurkos from thought. He placed down his paper beside the bowl, slowly lowered his spoon, and stared absently out the window at the distant wilderness.

Throughout the dining car there came a slight reverberation. The passengers instinctively and in congruence with one another quieted themselves. The obtrusive vibration was followed closely by an audible rumble that gradually intensified rattling the delicate china throughout the entire car. Hurkos' attention was brought back to his table; he steadied his bowl and silenced the clamor of his silverware. From outside the dining car windows, the brilliant red glow of the dusk sky was wholly cut off by the abrupt pitch-black of a tunnel into which the train intrepidly entered.

The wet glint of Hurkos' pale, almost colorless eyes gazed unerringly back at him, a reflection in the aberrant emptiness of the window. In the darkness the mystic experienced an elevated level of awareness far beyond the normalcy of his imbedded conscious. Clarity was lent him in the form of a wakeful dream; deadened, he stared off into the void. He was now elsewhere, a mere vessel, a spectator to an overpowering vision.

## 10

Of mystical wisdom and those imbued with the power of prophesy and divination, a knowledge of events which have or will transpire are as easily skewed during their recollection as are memories derived from even the most normal of experiences. The particulars that such forms of observance lend are of an intimation suitable only to the peculiar circumstance of their even odder conveyance-insights which transpire with obscurity to the conditions of and poor substitution for reality. The informed, by way of these metaphysical bestowals, more often than not confuse the message, finding it difficult to recall exact details or recognize the individuals connected with the visions, allowing for the occasional, though minor, error during the process of interpretation.

From platform to carriage, James had been escorted to his train through the hostile atmosphere of a Paris train terminal during the peak hours of operation

and at the height of the dogged summer. The porter in his charge was a gratis, a privilege that was granted to the passengers of the first class compartments. The American man was most grateful, for as he was shown to his berth he passed the porter a gratuity in excess of the standard fare. This was such a lavish sum that when the young man further requested that he be granted privacy, the porter forthwith complied.

The compartment James occupied was well suited to his comfort. Two cushioned benches faced one another, a spacious window provided the view, and twin sleeper mattresses could be folded down from below the luggage rack, providing ample room for rest. An ironed newspaper had been left, as well as a stein of ice water, glasses, and a complementary packet of Parisian cigarettes. There were no matches, as apparently their placement had been overlooked. No matter, a read of local news and a nap were what was in order. The paper was a current issue, dated August Twentieth, Nineteen Thirty-nine. The cover story discussed the German power struggle in Eastern Europe. The news disinterested James, who dozed on and off throughout the train's embarking.

Once cleared of Paris proper, James was startled awake by a rap at his compartment door. The train's conductor greeted the American man with an apology. He explained that the disturbance, though regretful, was necessary. His duties mandated he double-check all the passengers' documentation against the train's manifest. James graciously presented his papers and the first class ticket of the compartment he occupied. The fluency of his French left a great impression on the conductor. The business of verification was briskly executed and the American's documentation returned.

"You don't mind," James said, "if I compliment your staff."

"Of course not, sir," the conductor graciously answered. "Now, if you'll excuse me, sir."

The conductor turned to the corridor, softly shutting the door to James' compartment behind him. There, a porter stood with a male passenger in heated argument. The passenger was American. Unlike James, the French he spoke was atrocious. The man seemed not to give any effort at all, his face a fluster and his glance one of impudence. The porter measured his response.

"I will see what I can do, monsieur."

"You—You must. We are cramped!—Cramped!—Do you understand?"

The way in which the American man butchered the French language was an insult. The conductor interceded.

"Monsieur, allow me," he dismissed the porter. "Your ticket, please."

The man recognized the conductor by the placarded kepi he wore and handed over his papers. The smug look on the American man's face disclosed the great expectations he held of the train man.

"I see," the conductor chimed. "At this time there is nothing I can do for you, I am afraid."

The denial was unacceptable.

"You must!"

"Monsieur—" The tone the train conductor used was demanding and final. "If you prefer, at the next call, arrangements will be made to have you transferred to a later train."

"Later? That is out of the question. We couldn't! We—"

"Nothing can be done. My apologies. Good day, monsieur."

The conductor was not to be disputed with. His supple threat had its desired effect. In defeat, the American man returned to his second-class carriage.

"They said no. Didn't they, Champ?"

The moment he entered he was greeted by a lovely, dark-haired young woman with a bright smile and curvaceous figure. She was not alone. Across from her in their crowded berth sat Lynn and Josie. The woman waited for an answer. The man had by then regained his composure. His wide face had something of a handsome quality. He bared himself, his genteel nose held upward, and he had a certain swagger that negatively effected his comeliness. His name was Champ Butler, and he was a misogynistic drunkard. The woman was his wife, Alistair.

"The others have a more spacious cabin," he responded with a shake of the head.

Lynn could not help herself and corrected, "It's called a compartment."

Her remark incited a guffaw from Josie. Champ was put off and exploded at her.

"You're being smug. If you're so smart, why not do something about it yourself?"

His fists clenched, he remained where he stood. Josie could not help but to be intimidated by him, saw no good in bickering, and suggested that they settle down. An argument was what Alistair was in store for; the couple seemed to argue incessantly. Champ refused to let the issue go. A contemptuous leer at Lynn accompanied his every word. It was enough to make her want to scream. He was so incredibly stubborn and moronic. Lynn took Josie by the hand and departed without an excuse—only a cursory invitation for Alistair to join them. The poor girl declined, left to fend for herself with her asinine husband.

Once liberated from the quarrelsome pair, the girlfriends were able to remark on Champ's behavior. Josie was forthcoming with her concerns for Alistair. The fact that he had beaten her in the past was a sensitive issue. Lynn was sympathetic and damned the whole existence of men and their brutish ways. In the break between cars, the girls passed the conductor and porter. The sounds of their voices heralded their advance. The English they spoke was unmistakable.

The porter greeted them and was gallant enough to hold the vestibule door.

"Merci," Josie responded in the only French she spoke. She smiled sweetly at the attractive young man.

At the American girls' disappearance, he commented to the conductor, "That ass is with those fine young ladies."

"Is that so?"

"That's how it goes."

"Be sure to keep an eye on that bunch. These Americans are traveling together. Not the young fellow in first class, though. He's fine."

"He's a peculiar fellow, isn't he?"

"I suppose, though honorable enough."

"I like that in a man."

"As you should."

Ever since the disturbance, James found it difficult to sit still and was prompted to make an excursionary round of the train, either for a small meal in the dining car or a bit of leisurely idling in the brake-van.

Josie noticed him first. James stepped backwards out of the berth so as to secure his compartment door. Lynn walked ahead of her friend and spoke to her from over her shoulder. She was unobservant of James. The two collided.

"I'm so very sorry," Lynn apologized.

Thunderstruck by Lynn's beauty, James stood speechless. Due to Champ's behavior, Lynn, for the moment hateful of all things masculine, reacted with a peevish humph to James' silence, having mistaken it for arrogance.

"No! No, not at all," James found the words to refute her obvious dismissal.

Lynn corrected her behavior. "You're American?" she observed.

"Yes, you?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I mistook your silence."

"Of course. Really, though, I'm a dote."

"No, not at all."

Josie recognized Lynn's attraction to James instantly and detached herself from their discourse. A step through the open door and she slipped into his vacant compartment unnoticed. Impressed with the lavish size of the first class accommodations, Josie was not at all reluctant to make herself comfortable. A haughtiness accompanied her, and she pointedly planted herself on one of the cushioned benches. She took in the space. Her eyes gleamed with a divisive spark as she ran her hands over the cushions and stretched herself out.

James and Lynn carried on amiably in the corridor, unaware of Josie's indiscretion. It did not take long for the intrusive creature to notice the packet of French cigarettes. Not being adverse to helping herself, she snatched one up.

No matches. Unabashed in her search, Josie came up empty-handed. She poked her head out into the hall and disrupted the couple.

"Um," Josie cleared her throat, "excuse me, but do you happen to have a light, by chance?"

Prior to James' response, Lynn placed her friend's gumption and chastised her unwarranted entry.

"Josie! It's rude of you!"

"What?"

"How rude! You weren't invited to snoop in his compartment."

James intervened, "No, that's quite all right."

"It's not all right."

"I don't mind, Lynn."

"He don't mind," Josie quipped.

"Well, I mind," Lynn retorted.

"Oh, come on, Lynn Ann! Loosen up. You should get a load of the size of these first class compartments!"

Eager to share, James presented the berth to Lynn.

"Don't let us be a bother."

"It isn't a bother at all."

She accepted the invitation and joined her friend in his compartment. At Lynn's entrance, Josie vindicated herself.

The evident comfort of the first class abode justified her rude behavior in how irresistible a curiosity such luxury roused. Lynn scanned James' few belongings resting at the foot of the low, central table and soon recognized the fact of his sole occupancy.

"You're traveling alone," she politely inquired.

Rather embarrassed by all the extravagance, James merely nodded in the affirmative. In way of courtesy, he showed Lynn to the bench opposite her friend, Josie. The three watched the French countryside. An unchallenged and satisfied moment passed before the quietude was broken. Josie was quick to further validate her obtrusive actions. Seated comfortably, she venerated.

"This is really something!" She wheeled around, her eyes alit. "It'd be a waste not to take full advantage of it!"

"Really, Josie, you are incredible!" Lynn blurted.

"He wouldn't mind the company, Lynn."

"No," James answered, "I don't mind at all."

"Is that all you can say for yourself?" Lynn criticized. "It's a bit complacent, isn't it? This woman means to take advantage of your hospitality, you should know."

"So long as I've the room, Lynn, I'd be willing to share it."

Tickled at the prospect, Josie addled.

"We have a couple of friends in second class. Tonight—say around five—We'll stop by this evening."

"Well, sure."

Lynn elaborated further, "The married couple that I mentioned, Champ and Alistair."

"Absolutely. That sounds grand. Five o'clock, then."

The charming and direct nature of James' temperament swooped Lynn off her feet; she could hardly contain herself.

The two friends' return to their own compartment was a-hum with the encounter. Josie reamed about first class. Lynn queried as to her impression of the American man, James. Not at all hidden was her own affinity toward him. Though cautious in her answer, Josie was, as always, blunt.

"He's got a liking for you, that's for sure. I'm talkin' smitten, sweetheart. And he seems kind enough, but aren't you allowing yourself to get a bit carried away? And," she pointed out, "he seems desperate. Anyone who's that easy to have probably isn't worth it."

Lynn cut her friend off, "Is he so awful as all that?"

"You have to ask yourself what it is about him that attracts you to begin with. Maybe it's not him, per se. Maybe it's that he likes you, is all. Have you stopped to ask yourself that?"

"I think you're over analyzing."

"Suit yourself, hon. Promise to be cautious tonight. Don't show your feelings so much." She was partial to her friend and wished the best for her. "You're a beautiful girl. And you have so much to offer. I'd hate to see you get hurt."

## 12

The conductor consented to the party's arrangements, and all the various preparations made for a perfect evening. No rule was broken exactly, though serving guests in the private compartments was usually discouraged; in the case of the American man, the train's staff made an exception. They brought wine, liver pate, and the finest French cheese from the dining car, and to top it off, a singular honor was bestowed—that of a porter to see to James' every need.



The entourage the American girls brought with them was unexpected; it was not that they were unwelcome, but rather overwhelming. Lynn had spoken of the Red Cross nurses she and Josie were traveling with. Under normal circumstances, the company of attractive women would have been agreeable. However, due to the latitude the train's conductor had granted, James was concerned about the ill-attention the crowded compartment might attract.

James' assigned porter quickly recognized the need for more wine and dismissed himself in order to acquire a case.

On the man's way out, James joined him to apologize for any inconvenience and tipped him handsomely. The man was thankful of his patron's generosity and tactfully suggested that if room was available in the dining car, they should reconvene there for supper. The idea was appreciated and the porter dismissed.

James updated Lynn, who had escaped from the berth to join him in the corridor. "He's gone for more wine. If there are tables available, it might be better of us to sup in the dining car."

"I didn't mean for all the trouble, James."

"No trouble. You've explained. I understand how it is."

"Josie can be a lot to handle sometimes. Once she started inviting everyone, there was no stopping her."

"It's all right. I like Josie. I like all your friends. I'm happy you joined me, Lynn."

"That's sweet of you, James."

"What are the chances you and I might get away for a time?"

The bold invitation was welcomed with a smile. Beholden, Lynn deflected his offer demurely by leaving her acceptance up to fate.

"Let's see what the porter has to say about dinner. If the answer is no, and we're to stay, and you trust my friends—"

"Let's."

The porter's return took longer than expected. Several of the girls had withdrawn, which left the more manageable number of a half-dozen or so individuals to the confines of the first class compartment. Josie had commandeered a bench beside Lynn, with a small space provided for their host. Across from them, two young American women of close acquaintance playfully debated with a slightly inebriated and surly Champ, who stood over them armed with a glass of wine and ready with a misogynistic remark.

"You really would have to be an ass to believe a modern woman is that gullible," the prettier of the two quipped.

"We women today aren't so different from our mother's generation," Alistair intervened. "More liberal, perhaps."

She was prone to making excuses for her husband's behavior, to which he was not appreciative.

"Shut up," Champ grouched. "Liberal?" he parroted. "Give me a break! Women want what women have always wanted..." He then added as an after thought, "And will always want, for that matter."

"Yeah, we heard it all before," the pretty girl recalled. "Women want it so's that they won't have to make any decisions. Is that it?!"

"That they be dominated," Champ emphasized.

His comment received a collective objection. James noticed the porter and assisted him with the case of wine.

"Thinned out a bit," the man observed.

"For the better, I think."

"No tables are available in the dining car, I'm afraid."

"Shouldn't be a problem now that there are fewer of us. I apologize for any inconvenience."

"Not a problem at all, monsieur."

"Please watch after my companions and lock up for me if they depart before my return."

"Monsieur is leaving?"

James motioned to Lynn from the corridor. She joined James' side. He explained to the porter.

"We're to take a few moments... to get a bit of fresh air."

"I might suggest the brake-van."

"I think we will."

The couple went, unnoticed.

### 13

"Your French is excellent," Lynn complemented.

"Do you speak?"

"No."

The couple sat at one of the tables within the crowded dining car. They conversed over a coffee and dessert tart after having shared in a light dinner. A companionable and pleasant tone punctuated their every word. A more suitably matched couple was not to be found on board the train. Of a shared attraction to one another, the couple was on both sides equally aware. An acquainted and inclusive manner had entered into their conversation.

"Will you join me in Vienna?" James felt comfortable enough to chance.

"I would like that, James," Lynn answered. "It's so very fortunate that we met."

James took Lynn's hand in his.

"Once we arrive, I've some business to attend to. Should it take long, I'd like to know how to get in touch with you."

"Of course. Josie and I are to room in a little hotel situated just off of the ring. I'll copy the address for you."

"We leave for Warsaw on the same morning, isn't that so?"

"That's right." There was the unmistakable glint of affection in her eyes. "We leave for Poland on Friday."

James delicately pressed Lynn's hand, then broke his grip to wave the steward over, whom he instructed to charge the check to his compartment. The couple rose to leave.

"Don't you have guests to attend to?" Lynn playfully inquired of James.

"I suppose I should. That is, if they're still there."

"Oh, they're there!"

Upon their return to James' compartment, the couple was greeted by an unexpected predicament. The gathering had broken up for the most part. The porter was dismissed, and only Josie and Alistair remained. The girls were flushed—Alistair in particular, who was teary-eyed and being comforted by Josie. Lynn was familiar with the scenario.

"He hit her again, didn't he?" Lynn blurted.

"That son of a bitch!" Josie responded in way of an affirmation to Lynn's accurately presumptive statement.

Alistair could not look any of her friends in the eye, so ashamed was she. Aware that his presence might further humiliate the woman, James withdrew into the corridor.

"What's going on with that one?" Josie inquired of Lynn in reference to James.

"We're getting on fine."

Alistair pulled away from Josie and commenced to gather her belongings—the contents of her purse, which were spilt onto the table. The result of her search was a handkerchief, which she used to stem her tears. Lynn made absolutely sure her friend understood that she was to remain in James' berth until she had composed herself. She even went so far as to suggest Alistair was welcome to stay there for the remainder of the evening, if she wished.

Lynn conferred with James, who agreed that it was best if the three women remained. It was necessary that their belongings be brought from the second-class compartment. She and he volunteered to retrieve the baggage rather than have a porter fetch it and cause further complications. Initially, Alistair was renascent to the idea. She feared, no doubt, that it might incite Champ and cause her more harm than good. There was an overwhelming reluctance on the part of her friends to allow her to return to Champ before he had had a chance to calm down. Josie for one was insistent; the influence she had over Alistair was marked. The poor girl agreed to the plan and the couple left to acquire their belongings.

"He does this a lot, does he?"

"Josie and Alistair go back. They were quite close once." Lynn went on to explain, "Since their marriage, though, Champ has kept her from Josie. They still see one another. It's that, well, he got in between them is all. He feels Josie has a negative influence on Alistair. She's fairly opinionated and not afraid to say what she thinks."

"I've noticed—I like that about her."

"She can be a bit much at times. I find it's a good idea to distance myself, if for only a short while, or—well, I shouldn't say it like that. What I mean is to distract myself. Josie can be very influential. She's got a contagious personality. Some might say corrupting, though I know better than that. Josie is a beautiful girl. I couldn't ask for a better friend."

"It's a special relationship you have. And it's obvious she cares greatly for both you and Alistair."

"This is us," Lynn broke in with and pointed out the door to the second-class compartment.

James held Lynn off and asked of her if she would mind if he confronted Champ alone. She was disinclined. He persisted, explaining that a man like Champ might take it better if it came from another man. If he understood that James' intentions were honorable, and that the decision had been made collectively, then Champ was welcome to join them only on the condition that he behave—a contingency made in leu of the couple's marital status. Once Champ acknowledged that James was wizen to his ungentlemanly conduct, he could not possibly expect otherwise. That the three woman were to remain where they were, that Champ's behavior was unacceptable, and that any further altercations would be brought to the attention of the train's conductor, would be made absolutely clear.

Lynn accepted and agreed to remain in the corridor, though she warned James of Champ's temper. In handing over her key, she advised, "Don't knock. If he has the chance, he won't let you in. And be careful. I'll be here if there's any problem."

"I'll take care, Lynn. Don't worry about me."

"He's a boxer, James. I've seen him break a man's nose for less."

"I'll make certain it doesn't come to that."

James entered the berth with a faint, conciliatory rap at the door. The shades were drawn and the compartment dark.

The initial impression was one of the berth's vacancy. A low moan effectively quit that notion. To his astonishment, Alistair's husband was in the midst of drunken copulation with the prettier of the two Red Cross nurses he had been in argument with earlier. The pair were in a standing position. Champ drove himself from behind her. The dress she wore had been thrown wildly over her head. She was in this way compromised, bent double, her legs splayed wide. He was taller than she and had raised her off the floor. The girl was in the throes of love-making, unaware of anything outside being penetrated.

James' initial reaction was to shut the door against the possibility that Lynn might witness the scene. His entrance was noticed first by Champ, who in his drunkenness insensibly threw the girl off and whirled guiltily toward James.

The woman thumped to the bench with a vexed and confused cry. A hush ensued that stoked the fervid air of the cramped compartment. Not sure exactly what to do, James turned to leave. Champ held him off and begged him not to inform his wife. It was obvious that he was vulnerable and desperate, and desperation in such a man was a danger far greater than any degree of anger. A rap at the door disrupted James from a prudent reply. His attention was directed to the door.

"Everything is fine, Lynn. I'll be with you in a minute."

The cloaked and conspicuous nature of James' answer to Lynn hinted at his mindful intention not to divulge what he had seen. James recognized Champ's thought and asserted himself before Champ could get the upper hand.

"Where are the girls' bags?"

"What?"

"The women agree that it would be best for all if you were to take some time from your wife. They want me to retrieve their luggage. They will remain in my compartment until such time that you are sober."

Champ attempted an argument, which James would not allow.

"Watch yourself," James advised. "Your position is precarious."

A glance at the woman was a sufficient threat. Anger welled in Champ, and he started in at James.

"You little son of a bitch!"

The limited possibilities the situation presented mandated a degree of diplomacy on James' part if he wished to keep things civil.

"Don't make matters worse."

Champ held his advance.

"I have no intention," James revealed, "of prying into your personal affairs. I simply ask that you grant your wife's wishes." To James, Champ seemed to calculate through his options.

"My wife is my business—"

"Fetch me the women's belongings," James cut in. "Sober up a bit, at which time you are welcome to rejoin us."

"This is Josie's doing, isn't it?"

"What's the difference? Lynn's waiting in the hall, and if I don't produce their belongings, she intends to call for the porter."

Though reluctant, Champ brought down the pieces of luggage. Never during the conversation did anyone bother to turn on the compartment lights. The three individuals had stood for the duration in practically complete darkness.

James took up the bags without comment and retreated.

Champ followed him to the door and remarked loudly enough for Lynn to hear, "Alistair has a few more things mixed with my own, in our steamer trunk. No matter, though, I'll be along in a short while. Tell her I love her," he added after having caught Lynn's glance from outside the door where she came to meet James.

Their return to James' compartment was an uncomfortable one. Lynn had queried him about the cry of the woman, to which he answered with a certain vagueness. The ease with which he had acquired the luggage was informative enough for Lynn. She knew what Champ was capable of and chastised James for protecting him.

"I'd not want to pry," was James' defense. "I'll help with what I can. You're welcome to come and go from my compartment as you please. I enjoy your company, really, but honestly I don't want to get involved with those two. It's a sticky situation and I'd rather avoid it."

"Well, we appreciate what you're doing for us, James." Lynn apologized, "I spoke out of turn. Forgive me. I'm in a bit over my head. It's hard to stand back and get a different perspective, you know?"

"Let me help you with that. I'm a sort of savant when it comes to gaining fresh perspectives."

The couple stopped outside the first class compartment door. Lynn leant in and gave James a kiss on the cheek. A flush colored his face. She thanked him once more before they entered the dark berth. Josie and Alistair each occupied a bunk. Alistair had cried herself to sleep. At Lynn's approach, Josie greeted her softly. The few pieces of luggage were placed in the center of the room. Lynn explained that everything was all right with Champ and that they should expect his eventual return. The couple decided to let the two girls get some rest and went for a nightcap before the dining car closed for the evening.

## 14

The express from Paris arrived in Vienna ahead of schedule. Since the March occupation of Nineteen Thirty-eight, tourism into Austria saw a drastic reduction, though the German government assumed a veneer of normalcy and encouraged travel. The French ministry worked to reopen a dialogue with the newly absorbed state, for Austria no longer had a national identity; the country was administered by Gave, or districts, carved into lesser portions such as Styria, Salzburg, and Carinthia, and the less than coordinated administration of its various parts made it difficult to accommodate for a holiday market. This was an already sensitive circumstance further complicated by various political components. Due to a confluence of events, the drastic increase in the relocation of undesirables either out of the country or to work camps, caused a need for heightened security in and around the major traffic exchanges. Vienna,

in particular, was effected by the presence of the Waffen SS, German secret police, and their coordinated efforts with the Austrian police.

No sooner had the small band of Americans detained than were they approached by an Austrian delegate in the company of a pair of SS officers. It was explained to them that their papers would be processed more expediently in the station's holding area. It was an irrefutable request. The Americans had begrudgingly gathered their belongings together when the Austrian official was solicited by a fourth individual—a tall gentleman dressed in a twill suit who respectfully presented the credentials and the appropriate release forms needed to take the group into his custody. A summary check of the Americans' passports was necessary for them to enter Vienna; it was done promptly and they were dismissed.

Raoult Valset introduced himself to James as his contact from the Los Angeles Tribune. The Frenchman apologized to the American man and his constituents for any inconvenience and dismissed the encounter as routine.

"It's nothing more than your being Yanks. A curiosity, really. The security at the station is particularly thorough. I think you'll find central Vienna quite to your liking. Be cautious, though. Public revelry is very much frowned upon. Keep it to the beer halls and nightclubs. A holidaymaker in Vienna today, I think you'll find, is a welcome sight. There is beer and plenty of sausage, so enjoy yourselves."

The group as a whole embraced the charm of the tall Frenchman's candor and receptive nature. Alistair, in particular, was taken by his energetic air and engaged him forthrightly, without any defensive posturing. She supposed Valset to be in his early forties. He was dark-haired, dark-eyed, and youthful. A handsome, distinguished solemnity pervaded his features. A fetching curl at the part in his thick hair flopped onto his forehead reminding her of a famous French actor she and Lynn had watched perform while in Paris. She was unable to recall the actor's name and thought it silly to mention it. The disposition she showed for openness and understanding was the single most contributory factor to the nurturing of all her strongest attachments.

Valset was no exception. He was smitten and explained to her the pleasure it would give him if she and her friends would accept his offer to act as their local guide for the duration of their stay in Vienna. At the group's polite decline, he insisted, saying it would be an honor. They were swayed and plans made to meet for dinner that evening at the Austerhaus, a notable dining house at the center of town where the booths were private and the rooms above for let.

He sent for an extra car, and the group split. Valset had a driver and a large Austrian automobile for himself and James; Lynn, Josie, Alistair, and Champ joined them. The drive to each of their lodgings—Lynn and Josie were to stay at a modest hotel off of the Ringstause, the married couple at a modern hotel near to the Hofburg where the Habsburgs ruled for so long—was made at a leisurely pace. The midmorning sun exhibited its ideal rays with typical favor over Vienna. Valset took advantage of the opportune drive through the outer city to the inner ring, perched as it was on a tranquil canal safe from the inundations of the whimsical Danube, as an excuse to offer his new friends a survey of the surrounding area. Oddly, the Frenchman's emphasis was on several of the local nightspots. His rank of them was based on the sorts of people one might meet if they were to patronize such places. He had mentioned being in Vienna for nearly a decade, yet it seemed he knew close to nothing of Viennese history.

"The past is in the past," he was happy to say. "I think you'll find most of the finest ladies and gentlemen of the court would agree. What we need now is to embrace our role as just another city of the Reich."

No one was quite sure what to make of his assertions. In parting company with each pair, he admonished a portentous invitation.

"In the however unlikely event that you fall into the care of the local authorities, be sure to mention me by name. Instruct them to contact me, day or night, at the Hotel Metropole. They'll know the address. Adhere to the standard protocol of such a circumstance and wait patiently. I shan't forsake you."

"You think we might have further problems?" Alistair prostrated. The engrossed quality of her stare flagged her affinity and trust in him. In this expression of the way that he fascinated her, she could not help but be apparent.

"No, child. Of course not. It's precautionary, is all. You should have no problems what-so-ever. You have my word." He gave further advice, "Confide in the concierge at your hotel. Rest assured, they will inform you of all the best places to go. Any questions of etiquette I would query them with as well."

Lynn and James exchanged addresses prior to her and Josie's departure. Not at all hidden was the attachment they had for one another. Valset interpreted James' feelings correctly and was happy to be in such warm company.

"Your constituents..." he went on as the two men were motored into Vienna's old town, "you find them satisfactory?"

"Indeed."

"That's well, very well indeed." A solemnity entered his mien and the conversation shifted. "Monsieur Hale, the circumstance of your, shall we say, abrupt departure from Paris is known to us. I ask you, need I reinforce what I've said? Are you clear on my meaning?"

James was attentive, an affirmative nod launched the Frenchman into an unmasked colloquy.

"We have been apprised of your situation. Berlin does have some concerns, you understand. Though you can be reassured, information has been passed that clears you of any fault. It was right of you to return immediately. And wise not to make any unnecessary contact. You, therefore, remain valuable to us, yes? How you handle yourself is exemplary. Consider the remainder of your stay in Vienna as a much deserved rest. Once in Warsaw, resume as you were. The timetable will be tight. You'll receive instructions when you arrive."

The driver steered the car to a flat in the Stephansdom district where Valset had had a room prepared. He instructed James not to bring his constituents by if it could be helped. Although, for his lady friend to stay for a tryst, he decidedly stated, was permissible. The driver gathered James' bags from the trunk and placed them curbside.

"When you have settled yourself and sorted through your belongings, do be sure to stop in at the local constabulary.

There is one very near to here. Register the name James Corbin-Hale, as well as those of any of your friends. It is necessary that you do this in person. The authorities will check your name against a list. Any persons you designate, as well as yourself, are from then on beyond the reproach of the Austrian police."

It was a very fine meal that was served at the Austerhaus, a time-honored tradition, the fusion of gastronomical savoir-faire with a matchless appetite for liveliness and panache. Josie's abhorrence to consume anything so unappetizing was inconsolable. The generous portions of blood sausage and boiled beef served with red and white cabbage and motley brown gravy convinced her of the merits of a liquid diet. She was surprisingly good-natured about it. She made it apparent that she had been warned about the cuisine and had stowed canned tuna and bullion soup in her luggage while still in Paris.

The Austerhaus was ideally situated along the canal in the Stephansdom district a few crooked blocks up from James' lodgings. The Americans were fitted into a private booth by the resourceful maître d', Otto Blitz, who knew Valset well. He had pulled strings to acquire one of the long tables, which were usually reserved on the busier nights of the week.

A curtain was drawn and privacy obtained. The long table easily accommodated the nine women and three men.

The boisterous nurses—several remained in their white Red Cross uniforms after having been routinely called up for registration at the local hospital that very afternoon—garnered the attention of a raft of young SS officers who crowded the tables set in the center of the room. Otto himself saw to the party's needs. From a dim corner, a pianist struck an upright piano, releasing the euphonies of a Viennese song. It was a charged music, the tempo of which reminded the Americans of the polka and encouraged a few of the girls to dance with the unaccompanied serviceman.

The wait staff served the party a plentiful amount of liquor. Champ was at once inebriated. Alistair sat beside the talkative Valset and lent her ear amply to him. The Frenchman strictly abstained from the use of alcohol. The idea was completely foreign to Alistair and its revelation a whirl to her narrow sensibilities. She was captivated and intrigued with the idea.

"You must have a good reason, I'm sure! It's just, well, a fine example, is all."

"Don't. You're liable to cause me to blush. Drink is overrated anyhow. There are plenty of better ways to set an example. That of Alexander's chastity, for instance, made no more celibates than that of his drunkenness made teetotallers!"

Champ thought Valset, whom he found not at all threatening, a good distraction for his wife. Seated directly across from him, the pretty nurse of his earlier acquaintance plied his lap from under the table with her uncovered foot. The two snuck away under the auspices of using the washroom. James and Lynn had long ago departed, fresh air as their excuse. The only recourse for Josie, having been all but abandoned, was to join her colleagues and dance with the handsome SS officers. The music was similar enough, the step familiar. And all men, no matter where in the world, are the same. The women quickly found that there could never be enough of themselves to go around. The bickering started between the officers and a sizable body of coarse, working-class Austrian fellows. The heavy consumption of liquor aside, a sense of pride and deserving in the Austrian youths encouraged them to cut in on the German servicemen.



A scrap quickly resulted, and the incredulous officers were inclined to meet the challenge. A few shoves escalated to a thrown punch and a broken table. Josie found herself the center of the dispute. She was pulled this way and that.

One of the German officers gripped her arm and succeeded in wrangling her away from the Austrians. His grip was excitably strengthened; unintentionally or not, he hurt Josie. In reaction to the pain and the heightened atmosphere, and frustrated by a frantic need she had to remove herself from harm's way, Josie raised a hand in anger. She had not so much as touched the officer, yet her defiant gesture and the simultaneous screech she let escape had an erroneous effect. The bystanders staggered. The officer was taken aback and released his hold. Her indiscretion distracted from the contention, and the soldier's ire transferred to her.

The Austrian police interceded by arresting the workmen and interviewing the patrons of the restaurant. They also detained several individuals unrelated to the disturbance and for no apparent reason. A pair of Gestapo men arrived at the untimely moment Josie's name had been verified with the Austrian major in charge of the contingency of lawmen.

The officials discussed the situation, and Valset introduced himself on behalf of the American woman. He presented credentials that identified him as a deputy in The Office for Jewish Emigration, the sole Nazi agency authorized to issue permits for Jews to leave the country. The SS officer whom Josie had insulted insisted that she be arrested. He was not to be reconciled; he pressed the issue, as he found it necessary to make an example of her. Valset would have none of it. He segregated the Gestapo men, who had but little respect for his position, though he was given the chance to say his peace. The men spoke in hushed tones. There was quite a bit of nodding, the occasional stiffened lip, and a shake of the head.

The senior Gestapo man brought the officer forward and sternly reproved him. They reached an agreement to release the Americans and force Otto Blitz to pay a hefty fine, which Valset reimbursed the following morning out of his own pocket.

## 16

By virtue of the close encounter the previous evening, Valset arranged an outing to the lake-district. His motive was to not provoke the authorities, knowing full well that the group of Americans would undoubtedly be under a fair degree of scrutiny. He had over-extended his privileges with the Gestapo man, who was an occasional acquaintance of Valset's.

The man had done him a favor by not arresting the woman for having risen her hand to a German officer.

The lake-district proved to be a great distraction. There was no end to the constant outpouring of smiling visitors.

The Frenchman had set the entire group up at a lodge in the resort town of Gmunden on the shores of Lake Traunsee.

Once a hunting quarters for the Hofsburges, it had recently been requisitioned and commercially outfitted by German bankers. Valset explained that as an investor he was granted the perk of these accommodations, and that they would only go to waste if he did not take advantage of them. It was his pleasure

to share them with his new friends. On his part, he felt responsible; he had placed the Americans in the precarious position they found themselves when he allowed them to gallivant unsupervised.

There was no one at fault. The civility the Frenchman showed, the Americans espoused. The brilliant summer days were spent mostly in the clear, cool waters of Lake Traunsee. At night, the encompassing ridge of the nearby mountains wholly isolated the scenic enclave. The view was spectacular and had made quite an impression upon Josie.

Afterwards, she was unable to stop raving about it. It had piqued in her an uncommon sentimentality. It was as if the whole of the world were colored perfect. The naked light revealed the withheld feelings and affairs of the people around her. In her euphoric state, she spoke of them as if they were obvious to the others. With their return to Vienna from Linz, she alluded more and more to Alistair and her relations with their French host.

It was the Americans' last day. The departure was scheduled for the following morning. Josie suspected Alistair might run away with Valset, and said so.

"I tell ya, Champ's spent all his time with that whore! He hasn't any idea his wife's taken a lover."

Josie directed her observations toward Lynn. James was at Lynn's side and was entirely disregarded by Josie. The trio was seated at an outdoor Kaffeehaus set in the shadow of the Stephansdom. Most of the time Josie had spent at the lake was away from her friend. The new couple had been so distracted that they had not noticed the liaison, nor anything else outside the sphere of their own immediate needs. Lynn was especially shocked by the news.

"How can you be so sure she intends to stay?"

"Trust me, Lynn Ann. She's my friend and she's fallen hard this time."

"You think it's that serious?"

"I don't think, I know!"

James glanced from the table to see Alistair and Valset close in on the trio. They made space for the couple as Josie commented under her breath, "Judge for yourself." The pair pulled chairs and joined their friends, oblivious to the gossip.

"How's everyone?" Alistair asked.

She and Valset were in fine spirits. A blissful glow was about them; it was obvious they were in love.

"Good," Lynn answered. "And how are things with you two?"

"Swell," was Alistair's response.

Valset unfolded a newspaper he had tucked under his arm. The newcomers ordered the same drink, a Melange, from the waiter and decided to share an apple strudel. Valset spread the paper out on the table. The Frenchman was not one to keep abreast with current events and habitually read yesterday's news. His friends considered this idiosyncrasy peculiar and looked at it with delight. The holiday spent at Lake Traunsee offered the group a good chance to familiarize themselves with Valset. His chivalrous nature was highly esteemed, and no one currently seated at the cafe table was about to try Josie's theory.

At the risk of insult, Josie pressed Alistair with questions about her husband's conduct. Short of an actual accusation of adultery, she effectively vilified Champ. The words Josie spoke were cutting. The least Alistair could have done was to show some reaction at all, but there was nothing, not so much as a blink. The subject was changed; in its place, Alistair spoke excitedly of a fiacre ride she and Valset had planned for that afternoon.

"The drivers are bowler-hatted, and if paid enough, will take you as far as the Danube. You should see the horses..."

Josie was incredulous and silently endured Alistair's long-winded summary of her and her lover's plans for the day.

It was not long before she and Valset had excused themselves.

In their absence Josie remarked, "Champ's gonna kill her when he finds out."

"How can you be certain he'll find out?"

"He's not stupid, Lynn Ann! When she ain't on board the train tomorrow morning, he's bound to figure it out!"

"It'd be a little late by then, don't you think?"

"Well, I don't know about that! All I do know is that Alistair forgot the jewelry her dead grandmother left her in the steamer trunk back at their hotel room. She fretted about it while on the train. He holds it over her head as leverage.

And there's no way she'd leave her grandmother's jewelry behind. It's too important to her. She'll go back for it alright, and Champ'll give her hell when she does."

"Might we want to do something to help her?"

"To help her?!" Josie had to laugh, "She's done this to herself. I'm not touching it!"

"Whatever you say, Josie. This is all hypothetical anyway. We can't even be certain that she's actually leaving him."

"Oh, she plans on leaving him alright!" Josie sat forward, her legs crossed, an elbow on her knee and chin in her hand. "She plans on leaving him for sure. I can see it all now, she and her Frenchman go to her and Champ's fancy hotel to rescue her grandmother's jewelry. Valset will most probably wait in the lobby while she goes up to the room.

There'll be a huge argument. Champ won't budge. She'll get hysterical and grab for her things, and he'll get fed up, lose his temper, and smack her something good! Alistair won't know what to do, probably run down to the lobby in tears. And Champ, of course, will follow her, see her with Valset, figure what's been going on, and box the Frenchman in the nose! You'll see, Alistair'll be seated beside Champ on the train in the morning, ever the diligent wife. No doubt swollen-eyed from all the tears she'd shed the night before. But she'll get over it. She always does."

## 17

Foresight is lent of experience only for those happy few who recognize in it patterns. And Josie knew her friend Alistair well enough to tell when she was being self-destructive. Valset was not the first man she had taken as a lover.

While engaged to Champ, she had run off on several occasions, each of which resulted in a violent out-turn.

The train ride from Vienna was a painful experience. Alistair was seated beside her husband in silence. Not a word passed between them. No one was exactly sure what had transpired, but what was certain was that Champ had had his way. Lynn used James as her excuse not to ride with the group. He and she all but disappeared for the remainder of the journey. The last time Josie saw her friend before arriving in Warsaw was in the dining car where she had

joined her and James for a late breakfast. There was little conversation, everyone was drained by the married couple's escapades.

Josie in particular was miserable. The acute sting of the feeling of abandonment spoils her reminiscence of Vienna.

She could appeal to neither James nor Lynn for sympathy. Both her closest friends had abandoned her for men they had only recently met. Lynn's inconsiderate behavior was least appreciated; Alistair had her reasons and her conduct was not at all a surprise to Josie. Lynn, on the other hand, had deeply hurt her, and she was not about to let it go over a late breakfast. The thought of the remainder of the trip being wrecked frustrated her to no end. Her stewing made for poor companionship. She quit the meal after only a short while.

"What's eating her?" Lynn queried in Josie's absence. "Does she seem high-strung to you, James?"

"I really hadn't noticed. She was a bit more quiet than usual, now that you mention it. Do you think she's all right?"

"She's got a lot on her mind, I suppose. She expressed to me some concerns about Alistair—"

"She didn't seem at all concerned to me."

"That's just her putting on an act, is all. She's really quite sensitive, actually."

"I knew that... I was just saying," James excused his insensitivity, "she and I spoke of you before we arrived in Vienna—"

"Let's take a walk."

James covered the bill and the couple started for the rear of the train. He waited for Lynn to come back to the conversation.

"She mentioned that you two spoke."

"What did she have to say?"

"Well, she wasn't happy to hear about our plans. She would have preferred to hear it from me. I think she thought I was avoiding her."

The train's passage over the mountains and into Poland was made in economical fashion. Due to the early departure, the brake-van had been closed off to the passengers. A sign was posted. None of the train's personnel were present.

"Heck!" Lynn proclaimed. "It's not open."

"Here—" James tested the door.

"James, it's not permitted!"

The door gave way and James entered the vacant interior of the brake-van. Lynn was left with no choice and reluctantly followed.

"Should we, James?"

A broad bench toward the front of the car served as a suitable place to rest.

"It's fine, Lynn. No one's gonna take any notice."

James gently pulled Lynn down beside him. It seemed harmless enough, and she consented. An interlude of silent adjustment came with the train's entrance into a tunnel. The significant change in the light distracted from any further thought of their truancy.

Lynn redirected their discussion, "What can I expect from you once we arrive in Warsaw?"

"I'm not sure what to expect myself. When I learn for certain though, Lynn, I'll let you know. It's for the better, I think. Wouldn't you agree? You'll have a chance to spend more time with Josie."

"Absolutely, though we won't be in Warsaw for long, and, well, we should do everything we can to see one another."

"Well, I can tell you now, Lynn, I'll be kept busy. They'll want me to acquire footage of the Polish troops. It might even require that I travel to the German border."

"Is that safe?"

"Lynn, it's my job as a correspondent. There are always risks. If the Germans invade Poland, it means war."

"I don't like to think about it that way."

"You're a nurse, Lynn. It's why you're here."

"I know that. It's so horrible a thought is all."

James rose from the bench.

"I could use some air."

Lynn remained seated.

"Go on without me."

James held his hand out to Lynn and nodded his head, "Come on..."

Lynn smiled, "I'll catch up with you in a second."

It was enough for her, his offer to join him; she would not remain in the brake-van for long. James exited out onto the rear vestibule. The locomotive, with unrelenting steam-driven forcefulness, careened down the tracks. Passenger cars in tow, it raged through an endless pitch-black expanse, unbroken with the exception of an occasional flicker of white sparks and the soft red glow of the external lamps.

A porter stood at the waist-high railing inhaling upon a cigarette. He pivoted, taking James off guard as he came through the connecting door. The noise of the train and the wind rushing past was so fierce both men were forced to shout.

"Pardon," James called in French in way of an apology. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize—"

He turned to re-enter the train knowing full well that the brake-van was closed and the vestibules off-limits to passengers while the train traveled the tunnels. The porter stopped him before he could do so. The man grinned gregariously and gestured for the American to come forward, offering a cigarette.

"That's all right... Cigarette?"

James stayed, accepted the smoke, and leaned against the railing. From the open end of the vestibule looking out into the tunnel at nothingness, a sense of blind movement was created by the rush of the train's momentum. The porter stepped up close and cupped his hand to ignite James' cigarette with a pocket lighter.

"You're traveling with those American women?" he asked James loudly, speaking into his ear.

"Yes, I am."

There was something in the look the porter gave which made James uneasy. The man's eyes were bright, and the entire time he seemed very alert, intelligibly evaluating James. He wasn't young either, as were most of the porters on board. To find one who was middle-aged was not an uncommon occurrence, though with this man, it was enough to put James on his guard.

The porter said to James in English, "Your French, it's quite good."

"I learned back in the States," James replied, straining over the noise of the train.

"What's that you said?" the porter shouted and leaned in to hear better.

James raised his voice and reiterated, "I learned French while back in America."

A nod from the porter indicated that he understood.

"You speak English well." James observed, "Where was it you learned?"

"I attended classes while at the university, in Paris." The man backed off a little, distancing himself, and further added, "Sprechen sie Deutsch?!"

While having heard the question, James indicated with a shake of his head that he, as if in point of fact, did not. The train, without warning, screeched and bumped forcing both men to hang on to the railing in order to keep their balance.

The porter eyed James suspiciously and took a sudden interest in the camera he wore around his neck.

"And that," he persisted by asking James in German, "that's for the sights, I suppose?"

James straightened himself and motioned to leave.

"I can't understand what you're saying."

The porter grabbed James firmly by the shoulder, holding him back. The grip of the man was of iron strength. In a resolute tone, he accused James, all the while speaking in German.

"Oh, I think you understand."

Indignation compelled James to turn around and refute the man's aggressiveness.

"Sir, your behavior—"

He stopped dead, shocked to see the grim muzzle of a pistol pointed directly at him. With severity, the porter sharply ordered James to freeze.

"Don't do anything stupid," warned the man, who lurched forward and jabbed the barrel of the gun into James' ribs.

"What—" James balked.

The porter reached for the camera around James' neck. The train jolted, having passed over a rough spot on the straight length of track, and the men were thrown backward against the low railing. The porter acquired a tight grip on the camera strap. His attention thus diverted found James with the opportunity to chance a grab for the pistol. In a single movement, James thrust the weapon downward, the muzzle pointed away from his body.

The train thumped, the porter pushed with all his might against James. A single crack escaped from the weapon.

The bullet deflected harmlessly off of the grating between their feet. In combination with the fierce momentum of the train and the forceful struggle, the two men were pulled hard across the vestibule and thrown haphazardly over the railing. James held onto the top rail. Below him, the porter dangled very near to the passing tracks.

James managed to gain a safe footing. He stabilized himself and noticed that his camera had slipped from around his neck and was caught far down below the railing. It was the only thing that the porter had to hold onto.

"I—I can't hold." The porter cried out, realizing the helplessness of his predicament, "I can't hold." He shouted, "Help me, help me, please!"

James scrambled down, lowered himself, and reached out. All but lost, the porter struggled to better his weakened grip. At odds, the man risked taking James' extended hand, compromising himself. James just managed to stretch out far enough to catch the leather strap of his camera yanking it free from the porter's grip. Wild-eyed, the porter lost his hold. He fell with a feeble cry to the

tracks below, was tossed by the passing trusses, and swallowed by the depths of the tunnel.

Without any further thought for the porter, James threw the camera over his shoulder and commenced to climb. The train jarred causing him to slip to a bottom rung. The fall was sudden and James' grip weak. At perilous risk to himself, he chanced switching his camera from over his shoulder to around his neck. The camera thus secure, James attempted to pull himself up, but having lost a firm foothold discovered that he lacked the strength. Unable to regain his foothold, James was on the brink of surrender when Lynn entered out onto the vestibule and sighted him grappling with the railing.

"Oh-careful, James!-Here, James..."

Headlong, Lynn charged the guardrail. Over the repetitious clatter she hollered in vain, her voice markedly distressed.

"Careful!—James!"

James hung tenuously to the exterior of the vestibule's enclosed railing sprawled out nearly fallen to his death.

"I—Lynn, I can't hold!"

"James!—" Lynn strained, "Here-James!" Doubled over the railing, she fully extended herself. "Give me your hand!" she gasped, her arm held taut. "James, give me your hand," she stressed, fearful for James' life.

Blind to her own safety, Lynn reached for James. She let out a deep grunt and grabbed a firm hold of his outstretched hand, denying his fall. A rush of wind enveloped Lynn's face that was of such intensity that her eyes began to tear. From her unfettered determinacy James found the instance to bolster what little will power he could and wrestled to regain his footing. It was to her that he looked for reassurance.

"Pull yourself up-James, keep hold-please, James!"

Verily by fate, which had chanced to pivotally intertwine their two lives, a cruel end for James was swayed. Willful not to lose her grip, Lynn was able to provide him with the leverage he needed to pull himself up.

Out of the darkness there came an inexplicable light; the train emerged with a momentous shrug from the depths of the hapless tunnel. Lynn mustered all her strength and succeeded in pulling James up unscathed. Her eyes welled with the newly formed tears of an exhaustive relief. Caught in the intense light of day together on the vestibule at the rear of the train, they scrambled to the safety of each other's arms, blanched by the sun.

In his mind's eye, James saw and heard Lynn as she called out to him, her voice markedly distressed.

"Oh—careful, James!—Here, James..."

The warm Warsaw air lulled James into a sort of sleep. Away from the street and well-concealed from view, he stood hidden in a niche of the American women's lodging house. He had situated himself just off to the side, yet near enough to the front entrance to enable him a complete view of anyone who came or went from the building. The sensation of brick, his head leaned against the face of the building, kept James cognizant though the vacancy in his gaze revealed that he was somewhere else lost in thought. The clarity with which James' memory lent itself, of the events prior to his and Lynn's arrival in Warsaw, overwhelmed his conscience. He had become overly attached to Lynn and wished to spare her the discomfort of the truth that led to the unaccountable circumstance of the near deadly fall she had saved him from. In

her own way her naivety had made it easy for him to advance untruthfulness; Lynn's emotive response to the accident and James' subsequent safety was to overshadow any doubt as to how he had found himself in such a predicament. His claim to have dropped his precious camera and consequently his blundered attempt at its retrieval she had wholly accepted in exchange for the blind and sincere relief she felt at the thought of his safety.

Leaned against the brick, he stared emptily at the buttery night sky as the innumerable grey fragmented silhouettes of wind-scattered clouds drifted languidly overhead, through which only the most intense of the occasional twinkling star was able to penetrate, brightly alit amongst the vacuous and darkened veil.

"It was, it was such a nice time we had last night..."

James was snapped out of his trance, disrupted by the sound of two American girls exiting excitedly from the building; initially, their voices carried to James' ear in a garbled steam. A familiar quality to the women at their approach in the gaslight, one being curvaceous the other petit, drew James' attention. Not to probe further, he departed from the niche.

"I suppose," one of the women declared in a nasal voice. "I mean, it ain't New York or nothin'. Though, likes ya said and all, it was, it was such a nice time we had last night. And the music, oh, the music was really something, didn't ya think?"

"Really, it was awful noisy," her friend responded laughingly. "And I was quite drunk. And to be honest with you, that sort of person bothers me, if you know what I mean."

The girl glanced in James' direction, attracted by his emergence. Single-minded and heedlessly having strode forward, James quickly realized that neither of the duo were Lynn. He backed off abruptly, only to return to his hidden position. Startled by James' sudden appearance and subsequent reversal, the girls let out uncomfortable snickers and, striving to avoid the indecisive figure, hurried hand in hand on their way.

## 18

Their bill having been paid, the two inspectors stood from their table, collected their coats and hats, and prepared to leave. Starzynski's chair was pinched between the table and wall, which necessitated he sidestep in order to free himself from his place. Marquard proceeded a few paces ahead of him, turned a blind corner of the packed restaurant, and accidentally bumped smack into Josie, who immediately recognized the French Prefect from the incident at the train terminal earlier that morning. She stammered uncontrollably in an attempt to apologize for herself. Taken completely off guard, she turned white; stupefied, the blood ran unchecked from her face. Marquard seemed not to notice. He simply excused himself out of politeness and continued on his way.

In a frantic state Josie hurried to return to her table. As she made her way through the crowd, she inadvertently knocked into one of Victoria's uniformed waiters. After a fumbling apology and a guilty glance back at Marquard, she exited out onto the terrace all the while comically working herself up into a small panic.



Lynn and Stokley, each with a fresh drink in hand, were enjoying themselves, engrossed in a discussion on Poland and her politics. Stokley was in the middle of a sentence, emphasizing a point when Josie reached them.

"...it's how things are for the Jews, all be it, successfully. Whether it's in politics, big business, industry, no matter. Here in Poland, not unlike France and Britain-America as well, dear-the government is viewed as being Jewified. That is, it's in Jewish interests that the politicians have been influenced and on Jew monies that it's dependent."

Lynn glanced up having taken notice of Josie and exclaimed, "That sure was fast!"

"Lynn, that policeman," Josie told her in all seriousness, "He's here!"

"You're kidding!"

Josie swallowed hard and had to catch her breath in order to continue. She gestured toward the restaurant. Disquiet, for a moment, choked the clarity of her thoughts. She stammered, then blurted:

"He—He's just gotten up from his table."

## 19

In safety, Lynn and Josie stood huddled together beside an ancient church, a protectorate, its steeple looming overtop of them. Above, the tall grey mass of the tower cut a swath of austere darkness, which with presence, penetrably bisected the clouded and temporal night sky. The two girls had effectively hidden themselves across the street out of sight of Brasserie Victoria.

"What if James happens along?" Lynn was prompted to question, her voice hushed.

"I doubt he'd be so luckless as to show up now, Lynn Ann. Besides, that Frenchman probably wouldn't recognize him."

Josie periodically peeked her head around the corner to spy on the entrance of the brasserie.

"I'm sure, but still I'd feel better if we could find him."

"What do you think is taking Stokley so long?" Josie testily asked, her back to Lynn.

"He was waiting on some friends of his. I don't know, maybe he's run into them."

"Finally," Josie blurted in an emphatic whisper and spun to face Lynn. "Here, this is him. Here he comes now!"

Stokley exited Victoria's and stepped up his pace across the street to join the girls.

"All righty then," he related. "The bill's been paid. I didn't notice anyone as you described, though I still think it's best if we left. We'll catch up a little later on. I'll go on ahead. You two should be all right on your own."

"Yeah, we won't talk to strangers," Josie maintained with a catty smirk.

Stokley acknowledged Josie with a perplexed expression, gave her a second glance before looking past her and nodded his head directionally.

"Well, I'm gonna see if I can meet up with James back at the lodging house."

"We're both staying at the American women's boarding house," Josie informed him.

He acknowledged her with a look that clarified he understood her meaning.

"When you see James, let him know what's been going on," Lynn added with a fretful sigh.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it," Stokley promised. "We'll see you both in the morning then, all right?"

Stokley pivoted and strode away with a confident wave from over his shoulder. Lynn and Josie wished him good luck and left him behind. Arm in arm, the women walked quickly down the empty sidewalk.

"He's handsome!" Josie said with an up-turned smile.

"What if James isn't even in his room?"

Josie was less interested in James than she was in Stokley and repeated herself, "He's handsome, don't you think?"

The pair took to a busier boulevard. Lynn was distracted, solicitously eyeing every tall man she and Josie passed on the congested sidewalk. Her response to her friend's comment was delayed.

"Don't ya?" Josie was to persist.

"Who... Stokley?"

While they waited with the crowd at a busy intersection, Josie became antagonistic. She tilted her head and leaned in toward Lynn, who grew increasingly paranoid. Josie stared her in the face, forcing Lynn to listen to her.

"Well, yeah!" she mocked. "Don't you think?"

Lynn ignored Josie and spied once more behind them. At the moment the two girls were to proceed into the intersection in step with the crowd, Lynn spotted Marquard. He was alone and not far behind them just as they began to cross the street.

"Well, don't ya?! What's the matter?" Josie asked, sensitive to the sudden spike in Lynn's anxiety.

On the corner, diagonally across from the intersection, a small cinema was open. The bright bulbs that framed the lighted sign garnered Lynn's unsettled attention. The American motion-picture achievement of 1936, *The Road to Glory*, was currently on show in the theater. Several people were waiting in queue to purchase tickets at the kiosk.

Ahead of them, a large group had just finished, shortening the line significantly. Lynn squeezed Josie's hand tightly and dragged her into the line.

"Ouch! You're hurting my hand," complained Josie. "Lynn Ann, where are we going?!" she asked stupidly.

Lynn whispered, "Don't turn around. He's following us."

The girls were next in line. Curious, Josie turned to look. She was shocked to the point of not believing Lynn.

"Come on, don't fool!"

Lynn jerked her up to the window.

"Two, please, for this showing," Lynn told the ticket lady.

"Lynn Ann, what do we do?!" Josie persisted, beginning to lose her nerve.

The teller did not understand English. Irked, she murmured something to Lynn in Polish. Lynn realized her indiscretion. In broken Polish, she attempted a response.

"Sorry, two... two tickets."

Lynn showed the teller two fingers and placed her money down on the counter.

"Dwa... dwa, prosze."

The teller snatched the coins without saying a word and presented Lynn with her tickets and change. The two American women quickly entered the dark, crowded theater.

On the large screen a news bulletin was in progress preceding the show. Lynn groped in the darkness, feeling for two empty seats as she led Josie along by the hand. The newsreel showed scenes of the Polish foreign minister, Jozef Beck, signing papers and shaking the hand of Neville Chamberlain. Below were English subtitles that read: As Britain is expected to announce an alliance with Poland...

The words upon the screen that ran beneath the images changed with the corresponding scene they described. Next, there was a reel depicting fires in a city street and a large mob of Polish citizens gathered in protest outside of a government building.

*...the uprisings along the Polish Corridor worsen.*

A news clip of a dozen German tanks rolling brazenly over a flowering poppy field and rows of stern-faced German soldiers on the march through city streets flashed out into the theater.

*Strong German forces continue summer maneuvers all along the Polish Corridor.*

The Polish cavalry, in pressed and polished uniforms and sporting plumed helmets, proudly paraded by the score through the city of Krakow as throngs of Polish citizens waved and cheered.

*Civil disorder continues in Danzig as Poland prepares to mobilize her army.*

Lynn craned her neck to see behind her and spotted the Frenchman, who entered at the back of the theater. A group of Englishmen seated in front of them were grumbling about the news footage. Several other individuals were upset by the pre-show news and rose from their seats to leave. Josie pulled Lynn down and whispered to her.

"Has he followed us?"

White in the face, Lynn answered in a shaky voice, "I see him. He's looking for us."

Lynn spun forward in her seat to face the screen, her head ducked low. Josie, however, thrilled by the chase, peeked over the back of her seat and saw the prefect. It did not appear that he had noticed them as of yet. From where he stood in the aisle at the back of the theater, he would spot them eventually.

"Turn around, Josie. He'll see you!"

"Really Lynn Ann, you're overreacting—Hold on—"

Before Josie had the chance to complete her thought, she saw Marquard move aside for some disturbed foreigners who had traipsed up the aisle in order to quit the theater. Quick to recognize a possible opportunity, she dared suggest,

"We should leave. He might not notice."

Having said this, in cue with her proposal the group of Englishmen seated in front of them stood. En masse, they scooted out from their row and moved to the front of the theater toward the brightly lit screen.

"Come on!" Josie implored.

Intent on making an intrepid escape, Josie grabbed Lynn by the hand and yanked her straight out of her seat. Caught off guard, Lynn let loose a soft, terse cry. She was jerked up and forced to mix in with the Englishmen, who were in the midst of their departure through an exit at the front of the theater. The Englishmen, a bit perplexed, made room for the two American girls, who

curtly barged past. The women, on their part, made no apologies. In an attempt to escape the Frenchman, the two friends darted through the door and out into a tiny alleyway tucked behind the theater.

"Hurry!" Lynn urged.

Josie checked back over the heads of the small group of Englishmen. No one followed.

"I think we lost him!" Josie enthusiastically exclaimed.

The two women promptly exited out of the alley that ran perpendicular to the busy boulevard, then cut down the sidewalk and joined in the corollary of pedestrian traffic. A few blocks away, when they both felt they were a safe distance from the theater, Lynn hesitated and pulled against Josie.

"What is it? What are you doing?" Josie asked, perplexed. "It's this way."

"I know, but—"

Josie tugged at Lynn's arm.

"Don't be crazy, Lynn!"

"He needs me."

"Don't even—"

"I have to find him."

"Lynn Ann!"

"I've gotta try."

"No."

"I know it's crazy, but he's somewhere."

"Listen, dearie. He's probably with Stokley, right now...waiting for us."

"Could you go on ahead to their lodging house, please," Lynn implored, trying to get Josie off of her back. "Try and see if they're there?"

"Honestly... Lynn Ann, what good will it do, your trying to find him?"

"I don't know. But still, Josie, I've got to try. Just in case. I don't want that man catching up to James before I have a chance to warn him."

"Sweetie," Josie pleaded, "you'll never find him."

"I have to. Please, try to understand."

Lynn fished in her purse and removed the paper she carried with James' address written on it.

"Here, this is the address," she said as she handed the piece of paper to Josie. "It's not far from where we're staying."

## 20

Upon having entered the front lobby of the lodging house, Stokley was greeted by a brazen hoopla of popular music and merriment originating from the common room. With a glance through the wide arched portal as he made his way obsequiously around the front counter, he caught a glimpse of a half-dozen or so people having a good time hanging around on the couch, laughing and frittering away the evening. His entrance did not go unnoticed, however. Brady, who stood with Graff in the center of the room, stepped over and frontally engaged Stokley.

"Hey ya, Stokley!"

"Evening, Brady," was his reply.

Not to be deterred, Stokley subsequently lifted the hinged counter, and though Brady stood there, brusquely positioned himself in the concierge's

station by lowering the counter between them. Brady took no noticeable offense to the separation.

"Where ya been? Graff says he saw you with one of these American broads."

"She's a friend of our new boarder," responded Stokley. While he spoke, he reached behind and into the cramped space where he pulled up the heavy register book from a filing desk and placed it down with a thump upon the flimsy counter.

"That so?!"

"Yeah. Did Graff figure when he's to leave?" he asked Brady evasively as he reached to open the book set before them.

"Not yet."

With a thick turn of a thumb's-length of the spine's width, Stokley opened to the end of the register near the page that had James' name entered onto it. He then hesitated for a moment longer, waiting for Brady.

"Why don't you come with us?" Brady permissively asked. "We're having a few more people join us before heading to Victoria's."

"Not right now," Stokley declined, and with disregard to Brady's presence flipped a few pages more before discovering James' entry. "I'll be around a little later on tonight," was his final reply.

Graff stuck his head around the corner and peered into the lobby past the arched doorway. A glint in his eye foretold that he was minding discreditable intentions.

"Who was the dame earlier!" he blurted, including himself in the conversation. He strode, uninvited, up to the desk.

"A friend of James'," replied Stokley.

Nonchalant as could be, Stokley grabbed a straight ruler from off of the counter and placed it carefully along the edge of the register's spine on top of the entry page that contained James' information.

"Can't wait to meet this fellow," Graff continued, having rooted himself beside Brady. With a disconsolate glance, Brady dismissed Graff's pestersome manner.

Half to himself, Stokley responded, "You're not alone."

At his utterance of these words the remainder of the group advanced noisily from within the common room, through the unbarred lobby, and headed out the front door. Graff skipped ahead to join them, not bothering to say goodbye.

Without pause, Stokley addressed Graff dryly from under his breath, "We'll be seeing you."

Brady, who wavered for a moment to observe Stokley tear the page neatly with the flat of the ruler, did not immediately follow. Not without interest, he witnessed Stokley pick up a fountain pen and carefully copy all the information that did not pertain to James onto the following page, effectively erasing any evidence of his stay at the lodge. With an inquisitive gesture, Brady raised an eyebrow and nodded nosily at what Stokley was doing.

"I might ask—" he started before Stokley cut him off with a short, assertive laugh.

"Don't," Stokley countered grievously with a severity in tone and a shake of his head.

Only moments later, the group riotously made its way outside. Warm air pocketed inmost Warsaw. No breeze deposed the severity of the summer night and only the most peripheral outskirts were exempt. Reactive to the change in temperature from lodging house to street, the band noticeably recoiled. Not far behind, Brady doubled his step to catch up with his friends. The crowd

animatedly passed Josie on the sidewalk in her approach of the front entrance to the lodging house. She stepped aside and curiously gazed as they went happily along. Josie paused a few seconds to pleasantly reflect, pivoted to continue on her way and was taken completely by surprise to find Stokley standing before her.

Hat in hand, he announced unexpectedly, "I'll have to introduce you," and raised his head to motion in the direction of the departed gang, not at all attentive to her startled reaction.

Josie recoiled, "Stokley!" and swatted playfully at the tie he wore, knocking it with her hand. His imperturbable demeanor remained, as was usual for him, thoroughly intact. Straight-faced, she firmly reprimanded him, "Lord, you frightened me!"

"Where's Lynn? Has she found James?"

Scrunch-nosed, Josie shook her head in the negative.

"That silly girl," she precociously replied. "Can you imagine, she insisted on looking for him herself!"

"Did she?!"

"And that French policeman. He followed us from the restaurant. Can you believe that? He's got some nerve! Well, even so, he wasn't hard to lose," she smiled wide and then chuckled. "I mean, with his leg an' all. We lost him at the cinema by ducking out the back. It was thrilling!" she concluded animatedly.

"Well, there ya are!" Stokley added, emphasizing the expression with an approving nod.

In so much as the mores of the day allowed, Josie asserted her intentions unabashedly. She updated Stokley with a gleeful smirk, and with considerable dash, flirtatiously took it upon herself to link arms with him. The Englishman was so obviously not offended; ever receptive to femininity, he made it an easy thing for a woman to express her feelings to him.

"I haven't had such a fun time since I don't know when!"

"What was that about his leg?"

"He's got a limp."

"Oh, so the two smart girls outwitted the old fox," Stokley playfully summated.

"Well, I don't know exactly what that's supposed to mean. But yeah, and like I said, it was a fun time to boot!"

"Fair enough. And where were you headed?" he asked with interest while she patted his forearm with one of her fair, ungloved hands.

"Well, to see you, actually," Josie confessed peering at Stokley through her long eyelashes. "Lynn asked me to before she ran off. Have you seen him?"

"Seen who?"

"James!" Josie exclaimed.

"Right—James—no. That reminds me. I meant to check up on a hunch I had—that is, if you're interested. He mentioned something earlier, something about seeing the river, going down to the quay. Not sure I'd wager my only hat, though it is a bit more pleasant nearer to the river. Would you—"

"They say it's wonderful."

"Would you like to join me?"

Unable to shake her unwanted fears, Lynn prowled the many narrow and divergent streets on her own and was quick to find herself disoriented; in her stubbornness to beat the pestersome Frenchman to James, she had transgressed off the main boulevards and entered down the less-frequented side streets. At a certain point she happened to exit aimlessly out onto a tight alley distinctly lined with cobbler shops. Nearest to her, the closed shop windows all were dark; in them, wooden shoehorns and leather soles were loosely displayed beside the latest in men's and women's footwear.

Lynn pushed forward, disconcerted and all a fluster. She made her way haplessly through the ill-lit neighborhood only barely noticed by the occasional passerby, who appeared less frequently the further she proceeded until eventually none were encountered. Far in advance she had decided to take a course that proved to put her in considerable jeopardy.

To calm herself against near panic, she came to a standstill on an unfamiliar corner consisting of three points, where a nominal thoroughfare intersected with a pair of nondescript side streets. Unable to recognize her surroundings, she searched for some clue as to where she might be—a street placard or building that she might be able to identify.

Surveillant, she noticed that in the pavement in the sidewalk at her feet were several words written in Hebrew within the outline of a Star of David.

Lynn soon discovered, after having made a few turns in place to regain her bearings, that she was utterly lost in one of the several predominantly Jewish sections of the city. Stymied and hard-pressed to think her way through her problem, she had failed to retrace her steps in her mind. Lynn had done her all to free herself from her quandary, and with no idea where she was exactly, she arrived at an uncomfortable realization; upon close examination, she noticed that many of the storefronts were not simply closed for the evening, but had been completely boarded up.

In a frantic attempt to work her way back to any place that looked familiar, she withdrew, vexed and frustrated.

Hastened in her retreat and equally unobservant, she came fast round a blind corner and inadvertently startled an old Jewish woman. The old woman swept out the entrance to a shop; in scarce a breath she retreated to the stoop.

Both hands raised in supplication, Lynn approached the elderly woman, apologized, and asked directions, stammering the entire time in broken Polish. The skittish old Jewess did not answer Lynn; she simply leered and cowered away ever warily, vanishing into the storefront.

Lynn turned once more to leave. Taken aback, she withdrew blindly and in her haste accidentally kicked over a pile of glass, clumsily scattering it across the sidewalk with her foot. The noise seemed to divide the silence of the back street and isolate her. Lynn was utterly overwrought. Everywhere in this loathsome neighborhood, her tried nerves caused her to imagine, these indifferent and unhelpful people indubitably felt animosity toward her and her presence there. The thought appalled Lynn. A rush of blood filled her head. Near hysteric she took the first few involuntary steps one goes through to regain one's composure, such as to stare down and to control her breath, when Lynn noticed the glint of innumerable shards of broken window panes at her feet. Instinct bade her to wheel back around, and in doing so she realized that a

number of the shops' windows had been shattered and vandalized. To her dismay, the few glass panes that remained intact were covered with a thick graffiti smeared in a white grease paint. There was depicted a grotesque caricature of a hooked-nosed Jew as well as several stark slurs written in Polish which partly read: *Filthy Jew* and *Fowl* and *No More*.

The hate she read in these words horrified Lynn. She had to cover her mouth to stifle a short cry and spun to leave.

Caught in the grip of panic, compounded by her stress, she fled into the empty street, absconding from such a shock and being confronted with the fear of having completely lost her way. Once more, to shore up her grit, she made an attempt to calm herself and halted in the middle of the road. Lynn's imprudent escape had almost put her at an utter loss, though not entirely, for there was something familiar about the predicament that confronted her. She thought back to what Josie had mentioned earlier that evening about how easy it was to get disoriented. Mollified by the memory of her friend's anecdote, Lynn regained control of herself, and taking consolation in Josie's experience, in the idea that finding oneself lost in Warsaw was not at all uncommon, her anxieties were relieved. A few deep reflective breaths eased her mind.

At her feet lay the recessed trolley tracks of a pair of streetcars, one of several which ran throughout Warsaw.

Overhead, obscured by the darkness of the night sky, cable lines hung parallel to the tracks. Like the observant girl that she was, it dawned on Lynn that if she were to follow the tracks she would eventually make her way back to civilization. Confident, she walked in the direction of the inbound track. Chance deemed that Lynn would best the even odds, and keeping focused, she soon discovered that she recognized her surroundings. Almost immediately she found herself back onto one of the more busy thoroughfares.

Lynn offered up a sigh of relief and patted herself on the back for the propensity she had to reason through even the most trying of difficulties. In short order, she mustered a ways down Market Street, where she had fortuitously found herself to be. She made a few easy turns that landed her at the gate of a palace under the watchful eye of the bronze equestrian statue of Jozef Poniatowski, once a commander of the Polish army for Napoleon's Duchy of Warsaw. Lynn knew the statue; it stood only a few blocks up from her accommodations on the Royal Route.

Lynn's worries for James were momentarily eclipsed by her elation at having found her way. Just ahead, the entrance to her lodgings awaited. It took a search of her purse for her key to prompt her to think of him. Upon her return to the American women's boarding house, Lynn was softly greeted.

"Lynn."

She ascended the first few steps to the entrance resigned, having failed to find James, her keys held out poised to unlock the door. Trapped in a half-daze, she had not heard the voice.

"Lynn!"

It registered. Lynn heard her name. She froze in place, her heart caught in her throat. Again, her name was called to her.

"Lynn. Over here."

Lynn was drawn to the familiar voice. In astonishment she spun around to find James walking straight in her direction. He approached unabashedly; a comely bravado was paired with his handsome bearing. She rushed down the



steps to meet him. In her anxiousness she tensed. Lynn's voice quivered as she pulled James aside.

"James, thank God!"

"What's wrong?" James wondered aloud, taking her in his arms. "Lynn, you're trembling!"

It was obvious he had not conferred with Stokley.

"Where have you been?"

James did not understand. He shrugged, speechless.

"This morning, after you left, a man detained the whole group of us," Lynn explained. "He was the Prefect of Paris, and he asked a lot of questions."

"I don't understand."

"He said it had something to do with your boarding pass. He followed you all the way from Paris. He must have gotten ahead of us while we were in Vienna. He's been here waiting for you."

"What did he want?"

"He wanted to find you. I told him I hardly knew you and that I didn't have any idea where you were staying."

"How strange. Did he—"

"There has to be more to it," Lynn interrupted. "It wasn't right. To come all the way from Paris? He followed Josie and me... Your friend, Stokley, went looking for you. Everyone—"

"He followed you," James cut in. "When?!"

Across the narrow street stood the vague figure of a man hidden in the niche of a nearby building, invisible to James and Lynn. From within an inner pocket of his jacket he produced a revolver and mechanically checked it for ammunition. Satisfied that the weapon was loaded, he promptly tucked it away. There, the figure would remain for some time, resolute in his singular purpose and watchful of the couple's every movement, scrutinizing them as they spoke in secret outside the entrance to the boarding house.

## 22

Sauntering amicably along, Stokley guided Josie by the arm through the quiet air of a secluded alley and down a narrow, gradual flight of stairs. The entire alley was nothing except for this straight length of stone steps that led down to the distant quay. In whispered breaths the couple conversed; pleasantly they strolled past and out of sight, the narrow passage left vacant behind them.

The summer night's warm embrace came in the form of a soothing breeze that skimmed along the river in pace with Stokley and Josie up on the escarpment wall. Alone, they followed closely where the path of the escarpment led them.

Below, all along the distant quay, the high river, Vistula, plodded through the calm and slumbering city. At their side, the silhouette of Warsaw rose far above them, the mighty pith of Polish independence, her streets alit with the rows of a thousand street lamps.

Josie clung to Stokley's arm, wary of the pervasive darkness that encroached upon the dim light ill provided to them by the row of gas lamps that lined the

escarpment's ledge. Of dubious intent, Stokley made to release her arm from his.

"Suppose we go down to the water?" he suggested, breaking the silence.

The couple was yet to be separated; Josie would have none of it. A rigidity on her part refused that possibility, and as her discomfort increased, she clung even tighter to her trusted Englishman.

"Really, I can't imagine why he'd be here," she replied.

Arms intertwined, Stokley gingerly guided Josie to the ledge and leaned over the iron banister to peer down to the water's edge. To accommodate his whim, Josie loosened her hold. She allowed for a certain freedom of movement on Stokley's part while he strained to see as far up ahead as he could. The heels of his feet literally rose from the ground so dangerously far forward was he leaned. Not a thing was had for his effort. The water of the Vistula, even, was barely visible.

"No telling if he's down there or not," he observed.

"Is that right?" Josie murmured, not at all interested.

"Hard to tell from up here," Stokley observed.

"I'm sure this is a nice place... when it's light out!"

Stokley snapped his head around, a raised eyebrow crooked knowingly.

"You're not afraid, are you?!" he teased.

Josie had to laugh at how ostentatious Stokley could be. Though she found him to be charming, she could not let his harrying go unanswered, and with a bob of her head, she mouthed his last phrase in silent mimicry, "You're not afraid, are you?!"

"Well, are ya?"

"No. Are you? I'm bored is all!" was her defensive reply, slighting him. He remained silent. She then pulled lightly at his hand and appealed to his reason.

"Oh, come on, now. What could he possibly be doing down there?!"

In response, Stokley broke away from her, and with a stalwart bound, playfully took a few strides toward the flight of steps that led down to the river. Josie did not follow.

He was quick to notice and egged, "Well?"

"Give me a break!"

That said, he leapt back at her and snatched her by the hand.

"Let's find out, then!" Stokley challenged.

Against her better judgment, Josie went along with his shenanigans. She allowed herself to be coerced down a few steps before she reneged.

"He's not here," she observed solemnly.

"Come on."

Josie shut down and pulled against Stokley. Settled in her mind, she resisted.

"No," she stated flatly.

The firm grip she had upon Stokley's hand and the stiff arm that she presented jerked him back. Where she spurned him, near to the bottom step, he spun to reface her and saw that she had had enough. Stokley, on a sudden, was very serious.

"You've got nothing to fear," he stated. His voice conveyed sincere belief in what he said. He looked at her steadily,

"I'm here with you."

The face he wore shored up her nerve; Josie stared back, all but convinced. He reiterated himself.

"You're safe."

Absolute conviction was ably discerned in his eyes. Upon her face he read an intense wanting of his reassurance.

"I swear it."

## 23

Step-wise, the unseen man stalked in the hollow of the night. It was Lynn who had unknowingly led him directly to his purpose. Now all that was left to do was wait for the moment when she and James would part from each other's company. And that was precisely what had happened when, with a wave, Lynn safely entered the boarding house leaving James behind.

Alone, James traversed the street ignorant that he approached where the individual was hidden. There was nothing untoward about the scene that lay before the American man—a seemingly empty street late in the evening, though not without the periodic passerby. At first, the male figure shrunk back remaining secluded while James walked past in haste. In conjunction, the figure stepped out and followed close behind.

At a steady pace and consistent distance from James, it was apparent that this man had a significant limp. The clack of uneven footfall gleaned this fact indubitably. It was not long before James took notice of his pursuer and soon quickened his own step, but to no avail. The unseen figure was persistent. After a spurred rounding of a corner, James turned to challenge whoever followed.

There was a short lapse of apprehensive silence, wherein no one assailed him.

"Who's there?" James beckoned sternly.

No answer came.

"I say, who follows?" he demanded.

Before long, the footsteps were heard to proceed. Marquard came around the corner calmly, having anticipated James' reaction.

"What do you want?!" James asked angrily in Polish, poised and ready for a confrontation.

The prefect answered, "Monsieur Hale," wherein he stopped just short of an arm's length.

"Who?"

"James Corbin-Hale?"

"H—How do you know me, sir?"

To provide some sort of explanation, Marquard removed his identification papers from an inside pocket, all the while keeping a steady eye on James. The manner in which Marquard spoke was both slow and deliberate. Opposite him, James remained calm, though he did not hide the fact that he was put off.

"I am an official with the French government," Marquard candidly explained to James in English, careful to enunciate each word he spoke.

He held his credentials out, strode forward, and openly presented them. James wavered momentarily.

"My name is Modest Marquard."

The American man abruptly snatched the papers from the prefect's hand.

Familiar with what was most often an unpredictable reaction from a suspect and to stem the potential danger of the confrontation, Marquard intentionally

forced James to break eye contact with him in handing over the papers, effectively lowering James' guard. The distance kept between the two adversaries was telling of the mistrust on each of their parts.

"What is this about?"

"It is unfortunate, but there was an accident on the express you traveled in on."

James glanced over the identification papers, impartial to what bearing they might have had or even to their plausible authenticity. He was quick to hand them back.

"Was there some kind of trouble?" James interjected in an attempt to cut this meeting short.

"Indeed. There may have been. That's the reason for my being here. I've been conducting interviews with passengers. I was hoping we could—"

"There weren't any problems on board that I'm aware of."

"Is that so?"

"None."

"Just the same, if it weren't too much trouble, near to here there is a station house. If you were to accompany me, it would be greatly appreciated."

"Not at all. That is, in the morning—"

Marquard laughed uncomfortably and then interceded upon James' presumption by announcing candidly, "I'm sorry to say that now is the only time to do this."

"It couldn't possibly wait?"

"I'm afraid not. I am aware of the late hour."

"As am I, monsieur," James lashed back.

"Yes. Well, Monsieur Hale, I would give you a choice, I assure you, if it could wait."

James was resistant to this. Double-checking his gold wristwatch, he faked indignation.

"Really, this is very unusual! I was a passenger on the express, of course, though I'm not at all aware of any accident while I was on board. I don't see why this couldn't wait. Tomorrow morning, perhaps—"

"It is urgent," Marquard firmly stated, not giving in to James' protestations. "I'm sorry, but I must insist."

## 24

The quay was dark. On the side nearest to where Josie and Stokley walked in each other's company, the water seemed to sit perfectly still, having risen to the brim of its concrete bounds. Opposite the couple, the blackness of the escarpment wall pressed everything nearer to the broad, flat depths of the river. Far above, the occasional street lamp provided just enough uneven light to enable the twosome a partial view of the next few paces ahead of them on the path.

"Close your eyes for a few seconds," Stokley softly instructed, "and they'll adjust to the dark."

To illustrate, he stepped around Josie, and in keeping her stationary with a transient grip upon her elbow, placed his hand discreetly over her eyes. There was a certain confidence in the way he managed her.

"How's this for being resourceful?!" she replied, conceding to the playful experiment.

Together like this the couple stood inert. Josie felt Stokley's soft breath at the nape of her neck. The fine hairs rose.

The seconds nagged, her knees weakened. With him holding her like this, Josie managed to lean down.

"For how much longer will I need to keep them closed?" she asked, all the while feeling with an outstretched hand for a place to sit. Stokley followed her down. Both his large hands effortlessly covered her face.

"For just a few seconds longer," he whispered.

The couple rested on a low-set ledge. Josie slowly brought her delicate fingers to Stokley's to pry them loose. She lingered, their hands touched. Stokley was seated behind her. The closeness of him aroused her and she intentionally hesitated. This tender moment was marred by a strange, distant glint in Stokley's eyes. His stare hardened at the white of the nape of her neck.

Josie delicately removed Stokley's hands from over her closed eyes. For a brief moment he let her slender hands alight upon his own, their fingers intertwined. Her mouth was wet; tenderly she sighed. A mutually understood and obvious attraction was shared between them, she thought. The moment her eyes fluttered open, they darted to a glittering on the water in the foreground. From close behind, Stokley stared through her; threatful, he rose incredibly slowly from where he was seated.

Josie commented inquisitively, not glancing back, "Do you see that?!"

Though belated, Stokley answered, "See...what?"

His voice was raspy. His tone was sinister, almost—his words were bespoken in a murmur—although Josie was inattentive to it. Distracted, she peered down and leaned forward. Drawn by an inquisitive impulse, she extended her arm out to reach for the shiny object floating at the surface. Stokley stood stiff, his harbor held straight as if his back were knotted, as if he anguished in pain. He hovered over her with a wild, oblivious look in his eyes.

"What do you think it is?" she asked.

He offered her no reply.

"Stokley, can you see that?" she pressed.

Stokley's face hardened into a distorted grimace, a harrowing masked expression, that showed a concerted effort on his part to resist some unspeakable temptation. Vulnerable, Josie was situated below him. She extended her thin arm back, and with her free hand, grabbed hold of the front of his jacket. Never having taken her eye off the prize, she stretched far out over the nebulous water almost in reach of the sparkle of light.

Josie efforted, "I think... I can... reach it."

She dangled with the Englishman as her anchor, teetering for a moment, guided by an irresistible curiosity.

"Almost..." Josie muttered as she strained to attain the object. "A little more..."

The gleam transfixed her. She was determined in her effort to acquire it. At an incline, Stokley loomed over Josie.

Her weight countered his precariously; both her arms were fully extended. Her left hand held the jacket tightly fisted, her right was within centimeters of its purpose. In concert with an utterly maddened look about him, Stokley too reached a hand forward. His face was white, contorted in a look of horror. His glance strayed beyond Josie to rest on some unknown point.

"Almost... Got it," she sputtered.

The moment that Josie touched the lighted object, she disturbed the unbroken water. The delicate ripples her touch initiated banded outward. Not having gotten a hold, she made a second try. Her reattempt revealed from right below the surface, previously concealed, a diamond ring.

"Look at that! It's a—"

The many inlaid diamonds on the gold band had a distracting luster. It was not at first apparent that the ring was worn on the swollen finger of a pale, lifeless body. A bloated, nude woman emerged from the depths. In the twinkling that it took to register, Josie dazedly withdrew her arm. She froze. The harrowing visage that stared out at her was caught in an entanglement of hair suspended weightlessly atop of the murky water. The pale flesh was a mere shade, an indistinguishable grey, shapeless mass.

Josie let out a piercing, frightful scream and recoiled from the ghastly sight, her mind only half-full with the stark realization of what horror she was experiencing. Her shrill cry roved unbroken over the Vistula's listless surface. Josie snapped backward violently and fell in a swoon to Stokley's arms.

## 25

Safely then with the body in the care of the authorities, the thought of having to recall the whole episode again seemed incredulous to Josie; and so much so, as she had complained to Stokley, due to the fact that what they had to say was treated with a measure of irreverence and skepticism. Worse, the Polish police inspector at the scene, Inspector Lukasz Starzynski, expressed some reservations concerning the legitimacy of the couple's presence at a location where mostly criminals and prostitutes were to be found, even putting forth the suggestion that Josie was a whore. The realization that Stokley would be so irresponsible as to bring a lady to such an unsavory place and at so indecent an hour was, to the chief inspector, an unconscionable decision on the Englishman's part. Once more, what they had to say was treated both peripherally and with much skepticism. Starzynski's urgency to retrieve the victim from the river and "to remove her to a more secure location," as he put it, was at that time of paramount importance.

Regardless, Josie and Stokley together decided it would be best to stand off to the side, as they were instructed, while the corpse of the unfortunate woman was hurriedly brought in, disrupting the quiet, near vacant constabulary.

The dead weight of the body, covered only by a thick, black tarp, proved to be overly cumbersome. Its awkward shape made it difficult to manage, and it took the effort of several constables to carry the body through the lobby. Close behind, Inspector Starzynski, accompanied by the mystic, Hurkos, approached the Englishman and American woman.

He politely asked them in English to take a seat and wait.

Stokley checked his wristwatch; it was half-past eleven. He glanced back up and motioned to Josie, though he stopped himself short of speaking. Marquard entered the lobby with James in his custody.

The Englishman was not alone in noticing the two men. His response was timed with that of the chief inspector.

Surprised at the French Prefect's auspicious entrance, Starzynski waved him over; shocked to see James, Stokley shuffled him aside to confer with him.

"James!"

"Stokley, what's happened?" James shot, confused to find both Stokley and Josie at the constabulary together.

"Josie! What's going on here?"

Stokley interceded, "We've run into a bit of a surprise."

"We found a woman's body," was Josie's belated response.

"My God!"

Stokley shot a glance across the room to where the Polish inspector introduced the mystic, Hurkos, to the Parisian prefect of police. The two men spoke in hushed tones.

"What's happening with him?" Stokley asked as he motioned in the French official's direction. "We've been looking for you. No one seemed to know where you were. Are you in some sort of trouble?"

James peered over at Marquard and noticed him make a subtle though emphatic gesture to Inspector Starzynski, who apparently conceded by offering a nod. Starzynski parted with the prefect and accompanied Hurkos into the room where the woman's body had been taken.

"I know. I spoke to Lynn," James told Stokley. "Everything's all right. Thanks, though."

Marquard approached the group and took a stern hold of James' arm. With outright curtness he half-heartedly excused himself to Stokley and Josie.

"You'll have to pardon me. You may all leave together... after I've had a moment with Monsieur Hale."

The Frenchman escorted James to the door of the room where the body awaited, and in opening it, dolefully informed him, "I'm afraid our meeting has been postponed."

The door Marquard held opened inward. With a severe movement of the head, he indicated for James to enter. The prefect's pensive behavior was reflective of his dubious intent, to which James was not attentive. Unknowingly, James took a step into the room.

What shock met him therein slowly registered. Starzynski stood with Hurkos at the back of the small dark space and at the foot of an examination table, on which the woman's body had been laid. She was nude, and a bright lamp shone directly upon her. Her flesh was firm and distended. A faint acrid malodor pervaded, lingering beneath the mélange of the men's cologne. It was evident from the marring of her breasts and by the defiled appearance of her labia that she had been brutally ravaged. The two men were unaffected by James' presence and only shifted their attention momentarily from the corpse when he entered the room ahead of the prefect.

James' response to the scene before him was reflexive; in a meek display he turned automatically to leave, only to be held off by Marquard, who had closed the door behind him as he too entered the diminutive space.

"I want you to see something," he said definitively.

Marquard spun James around to face the metallic table, upon which lay the corpse. Fair, even in death as she must have been in life, the woman's nude body beckoned to be touched. A mixed sensation and disparity of emotion—a simultaneous feeling of attraction and revulsion—came over James at once, disorienting him. Sickened, he began to perspire, remaining silent, repelled while Marquard proceeded to examine the body.

"Have you ever been this close to the corpse of a victim of murder before?" he inquired.

James shook his head indicating that he had not. He was mute and inconsolable, standing stiff and tight-lipped. A change in pallor blotched his complexion. The adverse reaction of James brought on by the unexpectedness of the encounter articulated for the prefect the sense of repulsion James experienced.

"No... Monsieur Hale?"

For Marquard, familiarity dulled any natural discomfort around death. He simply placed his hands forthright on the woman's porcelain face and delicately tilted her head back revealing her smooth white throat, marred by thick horizontal black bruises. Via this summary examination, Marquard was able to espy the cause of the woman's death.

Inspector Starzynski came and stood behind Marquard, observing him closely. All the while the mystic, Hurkos, who lingered further back, eyed James each time Marquard addressed him. An unplaced familiarity drew him to the young American man.

"You see these bruises... these are called ligature marks." Marquard made the distinct gesture of tightening an imaginary cord with his hands. "This type of bruising is caused by the tightening of a cord during strangulation."

Absent of emotion, Marquard took the woman's hand in his and paused. The diamonds in her ring glittered when he turned it to the light. Distracted from his thought, his mind noticeably wandered. Inspector Starzynski stepped up from behind and spoke to Marquard softly enough for only him to hear.

"That is enough," Starzynski muttered in French.

The prefect's spell was broken. Nothing more needed to be said. Marquard nodded in agreement with Starzynski, aware of his untoward behavior. Respectful of the dead, he carefully lowered the woman's hand, backed away from the examination table, and seized James by the arm. The American offered no resistance. Escorted by Marquard, James was led back through the examination room door and into the constabulary's lobby, where Stokley and Josie awaited his return.

"If we could," said Marquard while he guided James out, "I'd like to finish our discussion." He motioned to James' friends, addressing them, "This way, please."

Stokley and Josie followed the Frenchman, who, accompanied by James, escorted them to the front entrance.

Marquard held the door and stood as each person in the group passed through. He made certain that James was to exit last.

"Not tomorrow, unfortunately," the Frenchman continued, talking directly to James with a fixed stare, "though maybe the following morning... Ah yes, bring your papers with you."

The group exited the constabulary. Marquard remained at the entrance and watched them depart from the open doorway. A moment later Starzynski joined him.

"If you suspect him to be a spy—" Starzynski started.

Marquard nodded.

"Why not have me arrest him for espionage, then?"

Marquard shook his head definitively, "No. Not yet. He could lead us to others."



"Yes, others," said Starzynski, having put emphasis on the word others. His reply was followed by a short, nasal sniff. Without further comment he reached into his jacket and offered a cigarette from his silver case. Marquard chose one and leaned in to accept the match that Starzynski lit for him.

"Thanks... I need to ask a favor of you."

Marquard ignited his cigarette from the wooden match cupped in Inspector Starzynski's hands.

## 26

A silent portrayal of the Polish capital city was captured through the lens of James' black and white picture camera—a weapon versed in difference-various vignettes taken throughout the course of the morning. Chosen carefully for their depiction of Warsaw, each brief sequence encapsulated some sense of contemporary Poland: The rushing waters of the Vistula glistened with morning's undefiled light, a solid glare which played brilliantly off of the river's mirrored surface. Across the water a short distance from the rise of the antiquated vicinity of the city, the marvel of an expansive bridge was seen to straddle the untenable river, supporting a constant flow of automotive traffic in and out of central Warsaw.

Captured from afar was the wide-angled view of a broad boulevard that droned with the passage of city life. Where the ramble of the trolley, the glint of automobiles, and the tide of pedestrians mingled at every intersection, there was a constant, mutual, and vibrantly synchronized exchange of the modern and the outmoded, a rhythmic clockwork-passerby, auto; auto, passerby; passerby, trolley; auto, passerby; passerby, auto; auto, trolley—a mechanical ticktock through an unending progression.

An incredibly overcrowded outdoor market was alive with a flurry of activity. Everywhere, free commerce flourished amidst an open square. For generations the citizenry of Warsaw gathered similarly to this. Nothing about the market was modern or had in any way changed. People, shoulder to shoulder, waded back to front through the summer heat in an attempt to gather what they were able for life's meager necessities. Stationed throughout, fruit stands and flower carts, peddlers and gypsies, all in competition with one another, displayed their wares to the whimsical public.

It was here where James found himself, transfixed, diligently filming the busy square. His jacket was sopped by sweat, through each underarm and the back, though he scarcely seemed to notice so focused was he on the task at hand. To those in the crowd the American stood out, a curiosity. James took small steps, almost shuffling his feet across the cobbles to keep the camera steady.

James ducked off to the side, and lowering his camera, took refuge under the shade of a covered stand to escape the blistering rays. Here, he remained still for a moment enjoying a small respite. There was a significant change in the temperature once sheltered from the sun. At his feet, a few aberrant brown-speckled song sparrows rummaged gingerly in the shade, and with a swift leap, exited into the light and flitted spiritedly over the scorched ground before pausing in the shadow of a leafy spruce tree. Like them, he too preferred to remain cool. A taut smile came to his lips in regard to this thought. With a jerk, he removed a handkerchief from his pants pocket to wipe his brow.

For a short period of time, he waited idly at the small stall, if for no other reason than from his reluctance to rejoin the heated and congested crowd. At the stand, a gypsy dressed in a garish red shirt had an elaborate array of inexpensive adornments on display. A silver hatpin attracted James' attention. He snatched it up and held it fondly in his open palm and reminisced. He thought of Lynn, heard her voice, "Give me your hand!" In his mind's eye he saw her on the vestibule at the back of the train doubled over the waist-high railing, her arm held taut, reaching down as she struggled to get a firm hold of his outstretched hand. On her head she wore a felt hat, and on the hat was a long, silver hatpin in the shape of a feather. It was almost identical to the hatpin he held in his hand at the market. When she had pulled him up, saving him from certain death, the hat and pin were taken by the wind and lost.

With a mechanical gesture, James yanked his wallet out from the breast pocket of his shirt to pay the gypsy for the feather hatpin. James was quoted a price. The seller had no reason to haggle; James paid what was asked. It was a bargain apparently, for the man seemed tickled with the transaction.

Satisfied, he commented in English to James while he wrapped the pin in a bit of tissue paper, "For a girl, yes?"

James had not caught what was said to him.

"I'm sorry?"

"The feather, yes." The gypsy clarified with a broad grin, "For a girl, sir. Yes?"

With a polite smile, James deigned to answer the man, "Yes. For a girl." He then turned to leave.

"Oh, sir!" the gypsy called back.

James fidgeted with his wallet.

"Sir!"

"Yes?"

"Your change."

"Keep it."

"Thank you, sir. Good day, sir"

James returned his wallet to the outside breast pocket of his shirt and stepped back out into the sun. All around, the crowd milled about making it difficult to get through. After a bit of a struggle, James managed to work his way out into a slight clearing. From out of the thick of the crowd an elderly grey-haired gypsy woman approached. To acquire James' attention, she feebly held his hand in hers, lightly tugging at him. James was lured to a halt and unwittingly let his guard down, whereupon she looked him directly in the eyes with a calm, non-confrontational expression. If only briefly, he garnered the old crag his ear, into which she spoke slowly in a language he did not understand.

"Ma'am, I—I'm sorry—but I can't help you."

The grandmotherly woman released her grip of his hand; in it, she had secretly placed a small object. James was momentarily distracted. A simple glance down to discover what she had handed him was all that she required.

Brazenly, the old lady reached into his shirt pocket and removed his wallet. Done with an expert touch and adroit hand, this was not felt in the slightest. The shrewd witch filched it from under his nose. In fact, he saw her snatch his wallet but was powerless to stop her. It had not registered fast enough.

James opened his hand. In it was the silver hatpin he had purchased. He snapped back to reality, though it was too late. The old gypsy had already disappeared into the thick of the crowded square. Not having recognized that the opportunity was lost, he pursued the old crag and quickly became

disoriented. He had not a chance. In desperation, he hauled himself up onto the ornate base of a light pole and scanned the crowd. The old woman was nowhere in sight. Far down, a hand rose above the milling heads of the throng of people. In its grasp was James' wallet. James waved to acquire the attention of whoever had possession of it.

A moment later, he found himself conversing with a middle-aged English woman, an honest vacationer—the wife of the British ambassador to Poland, it turned out—who had apparently found the wallet on the ground and was quite happy to see it returned to its proper owner. It was empty.

## 27

From outside Inspector Starzynski's office door there resounded a hollow rap. Starzynski stood at the desk and paused before removing a thick file from the top drawer. He was caught in mid-sentence, "...to see that both of you could come. The inspector's reputation being what it is, I thought it might help if we—"

"Allow me," Marquard signaled and rose from the table where he was seated with the mystic, Hurkos. He shuffled over to answer the knock at the door.

Starzynski motioned, "Yes, would you?" and continued where he left off. "Well, if we were to collaborate..."

He set aside some inconsequential papers he had removed from within the folder and stepped from his desk to join Hurkos, who sat squarely, his hands placed palms down on the white tablecloth. The mystic's back was to the open upper window, a broad Palladian window that provided a clear vantage of the front granite steps and the gradient roof of the portico leading to Warsaw's Główny Komisariat Policji—Warsaw's main police station. Through the office window's round-headed archway the brilliant sun cut a swath of anomalous light across the tablecloth's textured surface.

"Here, have a look at these," Inspector Starzynski instructed Hurkos, gesturing with the dossier impressing importance upon the mystic, "Tell us what they reveal."

Marquard promptly returned from answering the door, having acquired a tray laden with coffee and cakes. A reverse step and a pivot into the room and he was aided by Starzynski.

"Ah, that's fine," the Polish inspector vocalized and rose from his place at the table. "Let me assist you, my friend."

"Please."

With the courtesy becoming of a host, Starzynski assisted Marquard to set the tray down. Decidedly, the Polish inspector served both men before he sat to help himself.

"Shall we, then?" Starzynski began and flipped open the folder that he had placed on the table in front of Hurkos.

Inside were numerous photographs documenting various scenes of investigation and victims. With a tepid glance, Marquard noted the contents of the folder. Starzynski informed Hurkos in German that the pictures the folder contained were pertinent to the cases of the missing women.

"Also," he added reaching into his coat pocket, "these are the personal effects of the woman we found." In handing over a bundled handkerchief to Hurkos, Inspector Starzynski announced, "This might inspire a divination."

The small parcel was bound by a piece of twine that the mystic Hurkos carefully unfastened. He emptied the contents of the bundle onto the table revealing the diamond ring and a tied-off switch of the victim's hair. Placed before him, these items were left isolated from the photographs, readily observable.

Starzynski turned to Marquard and explained, "He's going to study the photos and tell us of his impressions."

Likened to a fortuneteller or soothsayer, Hurkos flipped selectively through the photographs in the folder, spreading a half-dozen out in front of him on the coarse white tablecloth. Attentive to the minutest detail, he scrutinized the glossy face of each picture, running the tips of his fingers gingerly over each image. He drew his eyes shut, respiring evenly and deliberately.

Starzynski watched, fascinated by Hurkos. Across from them, Marquard consumed a pastry and sipped his coffee indifferently. At a certain point in Hurkos' observance, the mystic seized on one photograph in particular, a large professional portrait of a woman. In the picture, the soft light captured by the lens played evenly across her features adding a stateliness and dignified air to her exquisite beauty. The mystic's face became ashen-white; he no longer breathed. A vision came to him in his wakefulness. An interval of quietude came prior to the detailing of his impressions.

He recounted, "Blithe, feminine laughter." The Polish inspector translated the strange phrasings of the mystic for the prefect. "A languid air fills where drollery is absent." The mystic expressed a sense of foreboding. There was darkness. He saw a woman's head, barely distinguishable, "a mere blur of untrussed hair." The night sky he described as a void, over which was audible the hushed inflections of a woman in the throws of lovemaking.

Hurkos' strength lapsed. He reflected, gathered himself, and continued, "I see the woman. She is thrust forward, nude up to the midriff." She was recognizable to the mystic as that of the beauty in the portrait. "Fear and pain gleam across her face. Her head is thrown back and her throat exposed. Behind her, under the veil of blackness, is a man-hidden. He has strung a cord... he chokes the woman... she gasps for breath... her throws quashed by the rushing water of the Vistula."

Stokley sulked, his chin on his hand and his elbow on the table. He wore a torpid expression where dejectedly he sat in front of a drink on the terrace of the brasserie Victoria. Across from him, a woman spoke though he was unresponsive.

"Stokley?! Are you listening to me?!"

The supple voice of the woman peaked slightly, betraying her aggravated nerves, a sound distinguishable from the drone of automobile traffic on the square. Stokley came to with a quick shake of the head.

"Right!" he emptily asserted.

Opposite him was the strikingly beautiful Patty Biset. A woman of means, she sat with a lady-like posture, confident and conscious of her surroundings. Her dress and hair reflected her wealth and wellbeing. The features of her attractive face were accentuated with the perfect amount of makeup

appropriate to her station in society and of her profession. A dancer, she was lean and long-legged; in stature, an equal yet feminine match to Stokley.

"Yeah, there ya are!" she said quite annoyed. "Have you even heard a word I've said?!"

A waiter interrupted, dropping their check off at the table. Stokley reached for his wallet.

"No, you're not listening to me," she said aloud in answer of her own question.

Stokley placed enough coinage down to cover the bill, his eyes on Patty as she got up to leave. Having risen completely, her pair of legs, glimpsed from the mid-thigh down at the gape of the flouncy skirt she wore, lengthened to their fullest extent. These were her most distinguished feature, comprising almost two-thirds of her overall height.

She told him, "I'm gonna make myself scarce. You've heard what I've said, haven't you?"

Stokley was not responsive.

"Anyway, will you be at Micmac's tonight? If so, remember Leland. You've been warned. He knows and he's got a temper. I swear, if you make a scene, I'll never forgive you."

This last remark was made with a certain amount of understanding. Stokley sat sullenly. Patty pitied him and hugged his neck, kissing his cheek.

"Oh, sweetie! You know I love you." In departing she remarked with sass, "Besides, why make such a fuss?!"

Stokley smiled thinly and waved goodbye to Patty, who batted her eyes and slinked away. Swift in her exit, what remained of Patty was a whiff of rosy perfume left to linger at the table. Once alone, Stokley dolefully returned his attention to his drink, his hand brought to his chin in a thoughtful and reflective pose when he recognized James across the terrace. Unaware of the Englishman's presence, James had entered Victoria's dining area and did not notice Stokley holler his name. Stokley rose from his chair. From where he was seated, he had to go around the brass fixtures and clear vinyl sheets that sectioned-off the terrace from the rest of the restaurant to get to the front entrance.

At the furthest end of the dining room, around a corner and down a tight corridor, James had stopped to make use of a public pay phone. A pull on the disconnect and, shortly after, an operator came over the line. James gave a number.

The line rang several times before being answered by a man who spoke in Polish with a heavy German accent.

"Hello?"

James was reluctant to answer.

"Hello, is anyone on the line?"

James answered in German, "Yes. Good morning. Do you give appraisals?"

"Yes."

"On the virtue of an object of Germanic origin?"

The answer was spoken in German. "What is it you have?"

"A problem."

"Go on."

"My papers have been stolen."

"I see."

"It's uh... it's necessary—"

"We've been expecting you."

"Yes, though it's necessary that we—"

"That's fine. It will be taken care of. There's a popular dance hall, a cabaret... Micmac. Do you know of it?"

"Yes."

"Tonight, be there for the last show."

"How will I know who to—"

"You won't. We'll know you. Goodbye."

The phone disconnected. James promptly hung up the receiver and rounded the corner to quit the hall. Where he entered onto the floor of the dining area he was confronted by Stokley.

"Hey, James," Stokley greeted him with a grin. "I thought I saw you come back here." Taken off guard, James stammered guiltily.

"Oh—ah-Stokley, wh—where are you coming from?"

Curious, Stokley stuck his head around the corner. He saw only the wall-mounted telephone.

"Nowhere. I was out on the terrace with Patty when I saw you come in."

To defer Stokley's attention, James pulled him away from the hall and into the restaurant.

"Patty, huh? If you're with her, you should introduce me. That is, if you don't mind."

"She left, James."

"Oh, that's unfortunate."

"You all right?"

Stymied, James fidgeted in place, slow to respond. He calculated the risk; his answer was evasive.

"Yeah, I suppose. Could use some resting up a bit, to be sure. And how's Patty?"

The act was unconvincing.

Stokley disregarded the preclusive question and pressed James further. "You're sweating," he noticed, a bit perplexed.

"It's been one of those days," James convincingly replied and removed a handkerchief to pat his brow.

"So long as you're all right."

"I'll be fine. Thanks for asking. Incidentally, I was hoping I might run into you."

"Well then, how about a drink?!"

## 28

Seated at a large solid-oak desk, a spruce, thin-haired, middle-aged German nationalist, Fritz Adelheid, mindfully hung up the telephone, leaned back, and took a puff from a cigarette set in a long elegant holder. His ill-character was that of a conceited effeminate, a rakehell of lean and sickly deportment. On the opposite side of his desk sat Leland Downes, a slick-looking capitalist. He, too, enjoyed a smoke. Both men were exceptionally dressed—Leland, who wore a dark pinstripe suit likening himself to a gangster from Chicago, which was what he fancied himself, and Adelheid, tiepin and ascot, and neat and prim like a flight, which was what he was.

"Who was that on the telephone?" Leland asked in English.

Adelheid responded in kind, "One of our people."

The gallery itself was operated in more of a farcical manner than a practical storefront or showroom. Not bearing any resemblance to a legitimate business, The Gallery of African and Oceanic Arts, of which Fritz Adelheid was both director and sole proprietor, was rather a shill to espionage implicitly set up for the purpose of conspiratorial intrigue.

Crowded on the desk and placed all around the open, elongated room were the bizarre figurines and wooden masks of Africa. An eery light emanating from an unseen source seeped into the stuffy space, which had the constant reek of stale cigarette smoke. The art works were primarily of a fiendish appearance painted in the most garish of tones. Hung in a row, the primitive masks gazed hollowly from their moorings mounted on the grimy wall, screaming out in silent protest, in objection to their occidental abode. Of all of the most offensive carved figures the multitude of oceanic peoples could offer, the present collection in its outright degree of perversion and overt sexuality could keenly be appreciated by only the most daring connoisseur-its being nothing if not exemplary.

"Who do you mean?"

"I told you about this man. One James Corbin-Hale. He's come from Paris with orders directly from Berlin. Fiona means to attach him to our operations."

"Ah, yes... I recall."

"I'll need you to make some arrangements for me."

Subservient to Adelheid, Leland without a word tacitly nodded in concurrence, reached forward, and snuffed his cigarette out in an ashtray in the middle of the desk.

## 29

Leland squelched a cigarette out in a crystal ashtray in the middle of a white cloth-covered table and sat back. On the raised stage of Cabaret Micmac, a chorus of showgirls performed for a rowdy audience seated at large banquet tables positioned at the edge of a dance floor. Linked arm in arm with the other performers in line on stage, Patty Biset kicked her long, bare legs wildly, throwing her skirts up high to the accompaniment of Micmac's orchestra. At center stage she led the dancers through a grand finale, resplendent with the frills of shown-off lacy bloomers and those burlesque escapades of renown, which concluded only after the weighted curtain was dropped to an unruly crescendo of applause from the spectators.

On the crowded floor at the head table, Stokley was slow to finish his glass of champagne before joining in the ovation. Seated with him was James, as well as Brady and a few of his English hangers-on. Everyone was having a good time; the drinks poured freely. Several of the men and women got up to dance as the band played a set of popular standards.

Preoccupied, James was turned in his seat in the midst of scanning the crowd when Stokley interrupted him. A certain distractedly stoic mask had come over the American's usually attentive and energetic features.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Lynn," James mechanically replied. "When did she say she would come by?"

"Oh, that's right... I don't know. She did, though. She said she'd be here."

James fidgeted with a small package he held in his hands on the cloth-covered table. He openly tapped it top over bottom in front of him.

"Is that for her?" Stokley asked curiously.

"This? Yeah," James nodded. "She lost a hatpin when we were on the train..."

The music was loud which made conversation difficult, and Brady, who was very drunk, got up from his seat further worsening the distractive air of the dance hall.

"I was lucky enough," James continued, only noticing Brady peripherally as he spoke with Stokley, "to find one exact... ly..."

Almost immediately upon having risen, Brady's legs gave out on him. He put a hand out and caught his chair. In his free hand, he held a drink and miraculously, as he pulled himself up, did not spill a drop of it. Pleased with himself, he toasted to Stokley and James, witnesses to his sobering recovery. Quite the dolt, Brady drank to his hat trick and slipped back into his seat.

Stokley quipped at Brady, "You think maybe you've had enough?!"

To escape the heat and congestion of the busy dressing room of Micmac's, Patty exited into the cool back hallway.

She stood aside for Graff, who hauled a steamer trunk and some luggage down the corridor to the back office across from the dressing room door. Bent double, he had not noticed her. Patty still wore her glittering green-sequined show costume and was toweling her neck as she loafed in the open doorway. Her breasts heaved, reddened and flushed from the rush of blood.

"Hey ya, Graff," she called out to him. "Did you just get in?"

"Yeah. How are things, Patty?"

"Good. And you?"

"Fine, thanks. Give me just a moment while I straighten these things here in Leland's office."

"Sure thing."

With a lack of finesse, Graff kicked his belongings through the office door and jammed it closed behind him. He then leaned with his back against the door, worn from his effort.

"Where have you been?" Patty observed.

"A get-together with some colleagues of mine. They wanted a chance to say goodbye."

"I'm sorry to hear you're leaving."

"Thanks, Patty. Have you decided to stay, then?"

"For now."

Graff stood and faced her. Behind Patty the door to the dressing room remained open. He smiled thinly, straightened himself, and with a crick of his neck gestured toward Leland's office door.

"That bloody trunk about broke my back!"

"You get along all right?"

"Sure, the chaps at the Photo Pool helped me to strap it to the roof of my taxi cab."

Graff's eye contact with Patty began to drift, attracted by the voices through the open door and then by a glimpse of the half-naked dancers as they shamelessly changed their costumes in the overcrowded dressing room, a flutter of the women's smooth backs, their heavy breasts, and pocked thighs.

"You... uh... should have seen it, the cabbie was blue in the face...."



Patty was noticeably flushed and continued to stroke herself with the soft terry towel. A renewed glance at her and he correctly surmised that she had just finished her set.

"Did I miss it?"

"Yeah, we just came off."

"Oh. Sorry I missed ya, Patty."

"You've seen it all before, Graff."

"Still though..."

A number of robust, scantily dressed dancers passed noisily, a whirl of tightly fitted costume dresses in glittering sequins of the lightest blues, yellow-reds, and violets. By way of an impromptu encore, the ladies re-entered the dance hall, greeted by an uproar of lively music and a collective cheer from the spectators. The sweet smell of feminine perspiration and talcum powder pervaded throughout the closed-off corridor. Distracted by all the excitement, Graff's attention had permanently been drawn away from Patty. The renifleur in him was mesmerized by the sour-sweet scent of the chorus girls. Not meaning to offend, he turned from Patty and began subconsciously to shift his feet in his eagerness to join the others.

"Go on, then," Patty said with a tinge of cynicism. "You don't wanna miss anything."

"Aren't you coming?"

"Sure thing. In a minute. When you see Stokley, tell him I want to talk to him."

## 30

Stokley stood abruptly from his place at the table to wave and pulled out a few empty chairs. Very much aware of himself, he primly refastened the second button down on his open sports jacket. James turned in his seat; through the crowd, he spotted Lynn and Josie in their approach of the table. Lynn came first, and the sight of her truly affected him.

Aglow in even the most informal of evening dresses, she had a natural and unefforted beauty. There was a freshness and a resplendent air to her being which piqued in him the strongest of attachments.

"I'm sorry we're so late," she apologized the moment the two women closed within earshot of the table.

She was greeted by James with a soft smile.

"We've missed everything, I suppose," she verbally replied having made direct eye contact with him.

"No, not at all. Things are just getting started," Stokley accommodated and explained. "We saved you both a seat."

He introduced the two girls around the crowded table. Men and women constantly came and went, and the few that Stokley managed to gain the attention of acted pleasantly enough, though it was obvious that they were disinterested.

The only one at all happy to meet them was Brady.

"Hey, it's the American girls... Hey, American girls, do ya, do ya..." Brady stammered drunkenly. He leaned forward in his seat and took Josie by the hand.

After a playful look directed toward Stokley, Josie sat to humor Brady. Lynn seated herself, delighted to have a chance to catch up with James and spoke with him exclusively. Charmed with the fresh company, Stokley graciously poured each of the newcomers a glass of champagne from an uncorked bottle placed amongst the empty remnants out-numbering the few full bottles remaining on the table. He settled back to make himself comfortable.

For a brief moment, Stokley contently watched his friends. His eyes beamed with a gaily spirited sense of satisfaction. Across the table, Josie did everything she could to swat Brady's bantering hands off her knees. She caught Stokley's glance and mouthed "help." A shrug from him was her only consolation. With a bright smile, she broke into a fit of demure laughter. Lynn accepted the present garnered from James, for which she seemed genuinely surprised.

Embracing of his new friends, Stokley allowed the moment to linger. Contented, he took out a cigar and peaceably cut its end when he sighted Graff, who had exited from the corridor and stepped over to their table.

"Hey, if it isn't the man of the hour!" Stokley spit the cigar end and exclaimed cheerfully.

Graff nodded his head and impassively waved. "Sorry I'm late," he offered in way of apology.

The instant he stepped forward, Stokley stood to greet him. With a supportive *oomph*, he patted his chum on the back.

"So, where have you been? Is it too hard to ask of ya, you louse! We thought maybe you weren't gonna make it to your own going away party!"

Stokley pulled a chair out for Graff to sit in.

"No, no, I'm sorry, really." The two men sat. "I wouldn't have missed it... Listen, Stokley, before I forget—" Graff leaned in and spoke secretly into Stokley's ear.

The message was clear, and having risen to excuse himself from the table, Stokley turned to James and Lynn. The couple was engrossed in conversation.

"I can't tell you how important it was. My mother gave it to me before Josie and I left the States. It belonged to her mother before her and her's before that."

"It was silly luck I found one so identical to it," James delightedly explained.

The Englishman politely waited for a break in their conversation in which to interject.

"I don't know how else to thank you, James." She glanced from him to the feather, "It's just so very wonderful!"

Lynn was lost in sweet admiration of the silver hatpin in her hands.

"Sorry," Stokley cut in, "if you'll excuse me, I've gotta leave for a moment."

James broke off from Lynn and glanced up, "All right. Where are you headed—"

"Look what James got me," Lynn announced, so ecstatic that she inadvertently spoke over James. "Isn't it lovely!"

"That's very nice."

With a sly smile and a wink at James, Stokley withdrew from the table. His escape went without further inquiry.

"Wasn't it thoughtful?" Lynn commented to Josie.

"It was," Josie replied with a sidelong glance. "It was very thoughtful," she repeated. The entire while she kept a close eye on Stokley, observant of his every movement. From her seat, she discreetly watched him pass through the crowd.

Lynn affectionately pawed at James' arm. Her heart a whirl with sentiment, she had to hold back her emotions, mindful of the message the hatpin held for her. Very much appreciative, smiling, she remarked, "It was a lovely thing for you to do."

Oblivious to all else, Josie brusquely finished off her drink scrutinizing Stokley's every movement—his passage through the crowded hall, a brief parlay with a well-to-do couple of his acquaintance, his entrance into the hallway that led to the dressing room beside the stage. A determinacy could be read in her stare, blind and without concern.

Out of sight, Stokley worked his way down the narrow and now vacant hallway. He came to the open door of the showgirls' dressing room. The bright interior of the room through the doorway was an invitation to the companionable Englishman. Patty prettied herself below the row of glaring bulbs in front of the long, slender mirror that lined the counter of the dressing room wall. In its reflection she noticed Stokley leaning on the frame of the open doorway in prolonged observance of her. In shadow his figure was, for the most part, obscured. She was now out of costume and had put herself neatly into a dark muslin dress, which flatteringly accentuated the full length of her hourglass figure.

"You're having a good time tonight?" she half-asked him, remaining in place.

Stokley pushed off the frame of the door with his shoulder and swaggered into the room toward her. His was in a subservient place-being at her beckoning-though he acted contrary.

"Not bad..." he shot back.

Aware of his self-prowess and overbearing magnanimity, Patty warily peered into the mirror at Stokley. Undaunted by her offish stance he approached, never breaking eye contact with her. She clearly projected an intense amount of misgivings. Regardless, he stood behind her, and in taking her by the waist, his large hands snug on the satin slip beneath the muslin cloth which clung to the swell of her haunches, spun her to face him. In doing this, his firm grip slipped the supple fabric up against her taut flesh. Her body stiffened.

"You looked good up there."

Stokley pulled Patty close. He brushed her cheek with his mouth and familiarly kissed her neck. His affections she aimed to spurn. Careful to get her meaning across, she slowly turned away from him to face the mirror.

In the brightly lit dance hall at their banquet table set across from center stage, Josie sat entranced peering past Brady to the back hallway. Drunken, Brady's speech was slurred. It was a struggle for him to form a complete thought.

"...for the past few weeks now, anyway. And the London Daily Mail—that's whose dime I'm here on—they want—they don't want just the story. No sir! They'll want the pictures to go along with it! Pictures sell stories! Mostly everybody's in the photo pool. Say, put enough foreign correspondents in one place, and you're bound to stumble into somethin' newsworthy."

Cavorting before Josie were the many men and women coupled on the dance floor. Captivated by the strains of the brass ensemble, inattentive to what Brady said and lost in a sort of daze, Josie found herself struck by what she saw; inadvertently she had captured the couples at the very moment of a musical change, a cue in time to a new tempo in the orchestra's medley. She was witness to a strange metamorphosis. Due to a sense of melancholy, nothing else was to have significance. Her observation of the partners startled from

independent dance and regulated into one cohesive and familiar step was for her, as she stared spellbound in the direction of the distant hallway, a sanguine and profoundly distinctive moment.

"So, shall we, then?"

Josie had not heard a word that Brady said; she just thoughtlessly finished another glass of champagne which he promptly refilled in midsentence.

"After all, that's what we're here for, isn't it?"

Brady rose from the table having placed the bottle down and wheeled toward the dance floor, a hand extended to her. The outward gesture was left neglectfully unanswered.

"Well?!"

Josie glanced up at him through her glass, his empty hand waiting for her. His bid for her broke Josie from her reverie.

"Well, what!"

"Are we or aren't we gonna dance?" he descried.

"Oh, right," was her sanguine response.

Josie threw her drink back and swallowed it off before she rose to take Brady's hand. The liquor went straight to her head. Brady yanked her up from off her seat. The room swirled with the music.

Isolated from all the fun and excitement of the club, together in the tawdriness of the dressing room, the lovers spat.

Patty stood her ground, turning her back to Stokley in disregard. She made an unsuccessful attempt to let him down easy, blaming Leland and his jealousy as the reason she had distanced herself from Stokley, to which he refused to be baited. She extricated herself the best she knew how, spun around teary-eyed, and ventured to appeal for clemency.

"Leland demands so very much from me. He's a simple man, that's true, but he's also a jealous one. I'm not as free as I used to be. I've got only myself to think of. He can take away everything I've worked so hard for."

Her attempt at transferal elicited a defensive response. Behind her, Stokley paced back and forth angrily shaking his head.

"No! And why?" he blurted.

She forced her point, "This is the way Leland wants it."

"Nothing you say makes sense," he rebutted.

Unresponsive to Stokley's belligerency, nor willing to put up with his badgering, Patty, in her offish attitude irked the Englishman when she re-faced the mirror. He remained composed. She rifled through a small makeup bag on the counter.

"You're not acting rationally!" Stokley pointedly stated.

Patty applied lipstick, leaning close to the mirrored surface. She rubbed the waxy makeup onto her upper lip.

"There's nothing I can do about it," she explained with a smack in a final attempt to get him to understand.

Stokley reared back in utter frustration and directed a spiteful comment at her through the mirror. "No. You've minded yourself enough. Leland doesn't know anything unless you tell him!"

"Well, Leland does know. And he won't have it!"

The reflection of Stokley's face, ugly and reversed in the glass, was a true measure of his indignation.

"If Leland knows and isn't man enough—"

Patty hastily replaced the tube of lipstick and zipped the makeup bag shut, fed up with the entire conversation. At Stokley's last words, she slammed it down hard onto the counter keeping a tight grip on it.

"Damn it, Stokley! That's because I asked him not to."

"I can take care of myself," Stokley retorted, his voice greatly raised at Patty.

In a temper, Patty threw the makeup bag against the counter top. It came against the edge, and with the force of the impact, tore the seam causing its contents to spill. She covered her face with her hands and fretfully exclaimed, "You just... don't get it!"

## 31

Brady dragged Josie willingly by the hand across the congested dance floor. To his credit, he proved to be quite an accomplished dancer; he swung her around for a bit before the liquor caught up to him.

"Suddenly, I don't... feel so well," he murmured with a sour look on his face.

"What's the matter?"

Brady grimaced and stumbled off the dance floor slumping into the nearest empty chair.

"Are you all right?!" Josie let out.

"Here... let me sit here a minute," he countered meekly.

"Are you gonna be sick?!"

Feeling ill and irritable, Brady curtly waved Josie away.

"Just... let me alone to catch my breath."

He sat bent double in the chair with his head down. A more loathsome man than he was not to be found, and Josie was far too unattached to concern herself with his well-being.

"Fine," she shrugged, hardly offended by his offhanded remark. Josie exploited Brady's weakness expressly to provide herself with the excuse she needed to turn away in disinterest and seek out Stokley. Drawn by this ulterior agenda, she glanced over at the hallway beside the stage that Stokley had previously gone down. An inexplicable weight pressed down upon her chest. Anxiousness taxed her pulse, and her head rushed with blood. She took a second look at their table, fully aware that she would not find him; only James and Lynn were there, seated comfortably and speaking in private with one another. Driven by impulsiveness, she backed away from Brady and headed down the corridor.

Ever heedless, Josie chanced to pursue Stokley through the narrow corridor though she risked imposing herself upon his private affairs, the thought of which was not at all considered until when from the open door of the dressing room she overheard him argue loudly with Patty Biset. Her placement so far remained undisclosed. Josie stood within earshot, near to one of several single-arm sconces which lined the hall, and braced herself against the textured papered wall.

"What ever for?!" Patty yelled, her voice projecting out into the cramped hallway.

"So this is just fine with you!"

Josie sensed a seething in Stokley's tone of voice; the words he bespoke were uttered with heart-pounding intensity, a rancor laden with more hostility than

she could have ever imagined him being capable. Much exhilarated, she bit upon her lip barely able to stifle the escape of a sigh.

"It is!" Patty retorted nastily. "This is how I want it... Don't look so surprised!"

There was pause. It was a stillness not shared between the quarreling lovers, rather amassed so as to fuel their resentment toward one another.

"I have nothing to say to you," was Stokley's plainly indignant response.

"That's fine, Stokley!"

Patty stormed out through the open dressing room door abutted by silence. An overt self-possessed hatred skewed her intelligibility. Viciousness and spite compelled her injured vanity to be sated. Piqued that he had been so impudent as to scorn her, she stalled to yell at him from over her shoulder.

"As if you didn't know what you were getting into!"

These last words were spoken in earnest, though not scathing nor adequate to allay her anger. Patty waited in vain for a response to which there was none. Irrate and in a tizzy, she rushed headlong down the narrow hallway. Josie backed away and ducked off to the side, unseen. Patty was so angry and heated that when she barged past Josie, she failed to take notice of her.

Stokley stared hard at himself in the mirror. In an agitated state, he stood for a moment, his weight rested on the knuckles of his fisted hands. He would have to focus before being able to regain his composure. The flushed rush of blood that colored his face gradually withdrew and allowed him his normal pallor. A glint of libertine pleasure curled at the corner of his mouth while he leaned heavily upon the counter, thoughtful of Patty's malicious comment: as if he didn't know what he was getting into.

"S-Stokley?" Josie called. Out from the recesses of the hall, her voice barely carried through the open doorway.

He peered up to see Josie tentatively enter the unevenly lit dressing room. She came from behind him, a lucid reflection in the mirror's surface.

"Hey, Josie?!" he half-bade her.

Stokley ascertained from Josie's prudent demeanor that she had overheard his argument with Patty.

"How long have you been out there?"

"Not long," she was able to answer with discomfort, glancing away from his burrowing stare.

The unsteady way in which she had approached him also made it evident to Stokley that she had had far too much to drink. The pleasure of spurning her would all too well mend his hurt pride for him to ably resist.

"You poor man..."

He remained stationary. It was evident, his wanting to hurt something, someone, her. Beside him she leaned stroking the padded shoulder of his sports jacket; he himself stood offish, silently evaluating her. To coddle him, she cooed into Stokley's ear.

"...how could she be so selfish?"

With a slight turn of his body he brushed her away. Intent on having her own way, she was more forceful and came in again. He held her off.

"How could she?" Josie pressed.

"Oh yes, she is selfish," he said. "All women are."

"Oh no, you'll see," she purred. "I'll show you... I can be... very giving."

Beguiled by her seemingly unyielding interest in him, he chanced to bring her in close to test her resolve. Full of herself, she yielded her hips and grazed against him. Stokley pressed her by the waist and held her fast.

"You'll see," she slurred with a drunken, stymied look in her raving eyes.

She tilted her head back, licked her teeth, and let out a deep sigh. Her small burgeoning breasts perked through the folded top of her wrap dress. Wetted with anticipation, Josie gave her mouth up to Stokley's. Then with an abrupt break of their kiss, Stokley lustily spun her petite body around and leaned her over, bent against the counter. Rough in his handling of her, he rent her top open, grabbed hold of her hair, and arched her back with a vigorous jerk. His coarse hands groped at her neck, reached down for her breasts. Josie brought her arm back and grasped for him. He drove himself against her and whispered, "You're all the same."

Incensed, he kissed her mouth full on, then reached brazenly up her skirt between her legs and grabbed a firm hold of her buttocks with one large hand. Like this he was able to scoop her up onto the counter and in doing so turned her over onto her back. Her legs sprawled open, he squeezed at her moistened crotch. With his oversized fingers he slovenly jabbed the cotton front of her undergarment a short ways up inside of her body. Synchronously, Stokley's free hand pulled and forced at her breasts.

"You're hurting me!" Josie cried.

"I—Here, like this."

Unabashed in his intent, he got himself in between her spread legs. Fixed on top of her, he twisted her arms backward and kissed her breasts, pinning her painfully to the counter.

"S—St—Stokley—no!—"

"Shh. Like this."

"Stokley-you're hurting me!—Stop!"

"Like this—"

Josie was desperate to wrangle herself free from Stokley's grasp. She shifted her body opening her mouth possibly to scream. Stokley sprang forward and grabbed hold of her throat. Self-possessed he struck cutting her off as she was about to cry out. Gone was the handsome expression he always wore. Now a grimace replaced that charming countenance. Blue in the face, tears strewn down her cheeks, it took little time before Stokley's great hands strangled the very life from Josie Rosen.

At the moment it was finished he released his grip and reared away. For a time Stokley remained insipid, seemingly immovable with the entirety of his weight on top of her slender body. Only gradually did he become fully aware of the reality of his situation, staring down at his hands, at Josie.

Once cognizant of the crime he had committed, he then actively took precautions to cover it up. Once he had removed himself from the counter, Stokley proceeded to the open door. He stuck his head out into the hallway, sighted no one, closed the door, pulled Josie's body from the counter, dragged her to a small soft-grey sofa situated at the back of the dressing room, and set her down.

Stokley slipped out of the dressing room and casually strode the few paces it took to get across the hall to the back office. The office door stuck. To force the jam, he successfully used his shoulder, although careful when he realized it was Graff's baggage that obstructed the entrance. He shoved the door, the luggage kept at bay, and went inside. A few moments later he exited, Graff's oversized steamer trunk dragged behind him. Stokley reentered the dressing room and discreetly closed the door.

The Englishman stood before his victim, the steamer trunk positioned calculatedly at the foot of the worn sofa.

Blank-faced, he proceeded to empty the trunk's contents and conceal them in the space between the sofa and the wall.

Absent of any emotion, he pulled the body over, slid it into the trunk, and stuffed it down. The corpse gathered easily—a secure fit. He then closed the lid shut.

For the second time, Stokley dragged the heavy steamer trunk across the vacant corridor. He opened the back office door, slid the trunk in, and kicked the door shut. Hands clapped clean and a brush of his suit, he calmly walked away from the office to adjourn into the dance hall as if nothing had happened.

## 32

Stokley blended back in with the anonymous crowd. He stole a swift scan of the hall spotting James and Lynn together on the dance floor and Patty at the back table seated with Leland. She seemed to enjoy herself, drink in hand and her mouth smiling wide. The scathing look the Englishman gave went unobserved. He had caught her, her head tilted back, in a gross fit of blustery laughter. The whiteness of her delicate throat made a mockery of him. Consorting with them was an incredibly tall and imposing Negro man, Ori Lablanche. The whites of his vicious eyes and row of teeth within his broad mouth were in such deep contrast to the black saturated color of his skin that they manifested savageness.

Stokley turned back to the dance floor and was cut off by Fritz Adelheid.

"Stokley."

"Hey there, Fritz," Stokley casually greeted. "Just get in?"

"Why don't you introduce your American friends," Adelheid answered with a nod.

"Well, sure. I hadn't thought of it. I was just about to return to our table—"

"I'm sure Leland would enjoy meeting them... Now, I expect you'll be peaceable."

Stokley shook his head, not exactly sure what Adelheid was getting at.

"Patty mentioned that you were disappointed with the new arrangement."

The music ended. The couples applauded the orchestra and shuffled off the floor to retake their seats. Stokley checked over Adelheid's shoulder to the spot where, only a moment before, James had been dancing with Lynn.

"Women talk too much. Give me a second, will ya?"

Adelheid acknowledged Stokley's chauvinistic remark with a knavish smile, "I'll give you two seconds," was his rejoinder and encouragingly slapped the Englishman on the shoulder.

"Sure thing, Fritz." Stokley placated.

He cornered James, who was corrigibly escorting Lynn back to their table. Once the Englishman had stepped away from Adelheid he was free to approach the couple. There was nothing unusual about Stokley; he remained as ever charismatic.

"Have you two darlings got a minute?"

"Yeah. You havin' a good time?" James asked.



"Uh huh. A good time," he parroted. "I've got a few friends I'd like to introduce you to."

Stokley gestured past the dispersing crowd toward the far corner of the room. Adelheid worked his way to the back table secluded from the rest of the club. He exchanged a brief word with Leland, checked on Stokley and with a wave indicated that he and his friends should join them.

"We spoke earlier about them, you and I," Stokley added conspicuously.

"Yeah, that's right," was James' attentive responded. "You mentioned something, if I recall."

Not at all bothered in appearance, Patty sat and watched Stokley guide the couple through the crowd toward the corner table. She could hear him address James, so pronounced was his bearing. His presence grated at her insides. The Englishman spoke loudly over the commotion that filled the room. He glanced in her direction. Their eyes met. He observed in her a transformation. She was radiant, pure, and free from the mere enchantments typical of her attractiveness. She indulged a lark from within and in that moment made up her mind to disregard Stokley for the remainder of the evening; in her yielding to clemency she shed the sense of resentment she felt for him.

"Well, they're a friendly sort. Everyone here is always pretty curious about Americans..." Stokley added.

Lynn held James by the hand, though she trailed a step behind; so out of syncopation with him was she that for a moment she forgot herself and shook off his grip.

"What is it?" was his only response.

Lynn pivoted and searched distractedly around the congested hall for Josie. Stokley's voice whirred at her ear.

"Nothing," she was prompted to answer. She then reaffirmed their handhold.

"...You're going to meet Leland Downes. He's who we owe all this to—" Stokley bespoke.

"Stokley," Lynn softly interjected, "have you seen Josie?"

"No, Lynn, I haven't," he responded dryly.

Adelheid joined the others at the private table. He went directly over and whispered to Leland, who in turn decisively nodded to Ori, seated beside him. Ori rose from the table timed exactly with Stokley, who stepped up to introduce James and Lynn. Ori withdrew, eyeing the American man contemptuously. Chairs were arranged and the group was made comfortable. James was aware that he was being watched by the large Negro, who so submissively hung back from the table.

"Where's Josie?" Lynn asked again.

"She's with Brady, isn't she?" Stokley answered coolly.

"This is Leland Downes, sweetie. He owns this place," James told Lynn.

"Oh," she checked her manners. "I'm sorry, Mister Downes—"

"Leland. Please," he said with all politeness. "Who is it you're looking for?"

"A friend..."

Brady arrived at the table, drunken and incoherent. Lynn assisted him into a chair subsequently placed beside Adelheid's. The effect of Brady's reappearance on Lynn was electric and ill-mannered, and the disconcert she felt for Josie diverted her discourteously from any other thought.

"Where's Josie, Brady?" Lynn brashly inquired of him.

"Who?"

"Josie. Where is she?"

"I haven't seen her. She isn't with you?"

"No. Weren't you dancing with her?!"

"Yeah—I don't know—maybe?" Brady winced, "I think she might have gone to the loo."

Lynn shook her head in frustration at Brady's idiocy and pivoted in her seat to scan the crowded room for her friend. Stokley eyed her warily before he returned to James' introduction.

"James, this is Fritz Adelheid. Fritz owns a small gallery here in the city."

James exchanged a handshake with Adelheid who, a bottle in his possession, was more interested in serving champagne for Brady. His peripheral glance never quite completely broke from his pouring.

"Ah, yes," Adelheid said pleasantly. "It's nice to meet you."

He emptied the bottle only half filling Brady's glass.

"What sort of work does your gallery showcase?"

"How kind of you to ask!" The bottle was promptly discarded, "May I continue?" Without waiting for a response Adelheid went on with a curt explanation. "Mostly sculpture, Africana and Oceanic."

"Oh," was all James could find to say.

"Primitive art," Adelheid further elaborated.

James' attention was diverted from the rest of the goings-on at the table, his being introduced to Fritz Adelheid. Ori stepped up behind Leland's chair and murmured in his ear. Leland glanced to James and nodded and leaned back in response, discreetly cupping his hand.

"Allow me to show you something," Adelheid announced. He snatched a corked bottle of champagne from the center of the table and demonstrated. "How a primitive, if so inclined, might uncork a bottle of champagne!"

Adelheid captured the table's undivided attention.

"Observe."

He picked up a knife from his table setting to commence.

"Take a knife, like so..." and placed its serrated edge to the bottle neck, brought all the way up to the glass lip.

"Now, ever so carefully, saw just at the lip here. The whole way 'round."

With a steady hand Adelheid sawed the whole way around the bottleneck.

"Just the appropriate amount of pressure," he directed.

That having been accomplished, he removed the knife. A slight groove was barely perceptible. Otherwise, there was no change to the bottle's condition.

Adelheid gestured to the bottle, triumphant, "There! And then, careful, if you please..."

He grasped the champagne bottle and with a stiff shake faced it away from the table, pointed upward toward the ceiling. In his other hand he held the knife aloft as if it were a baton, poised a short distance from the bottle. After a dramatic pause, his audience breathless in anticipation, Adelheid gave the glass neck of the champagne bottle a single decisive smack. And with it came a pop as the cork and lip of the bottle were cleaved from the neck and shot off like a rocket into the air.

The table was astonished. In the uproar he displayed the razor edge of the open bottle neck and stated declaratively,

"Barbarous for sure, yet equally as effective!"

The trick was thought of as precious, telling from the enthused applause of the intimate group. Adelheid was elated.

He turned to Brady, who sat sullen and inattentive, "Here, finish this. You'll feel better," and topped off Brady's glass.

Lynn, though amused and somewhat distracted by Adelheid's entertainment, was more preoccupied with finding Josie and once there was an opening ventured to ask where the facilities were located. In unison, Leland, Stokley, and Brady answered. They all indicated by pointing behind them, that the lavatory was located around the corner at the opposite side of the stage, far from the corridor that led to the back office and the dressing room. Lynn slid her chair away from the table. She leaned in toward James and spoke softly.

"James, I'm worried about Josie."

"I'm sure she's all right," he reassured her.

"Maybe she's in the washroom?"

"Go and see... I'm sure she's fine."

Lynn excused herself, rose from her seat, and departed from the company of the cheerful band only to return in a dejected state a few moments later.

Humored at something someone had said at the table, the group laughed together. Stokley glanced over at Patty, who hung onto Leland's arm. Across from them, Adelheid playfully slapped Brady; this brought him in and out of his stupor and got plenty of chuckles. Lynn approached the table having returned from the lavatory alone and distraught.

She sat back down next to James.

"I can't find her anywhere, James." Lynn informed him, "I'm really worried... What if she's gone—"

"Listen... here, try to calm down. I'm sure she's fine."

"I should leave. Maybe she went back to our room."

"No, she wouldn't go back to the boarding house, not alone."

"Really, I should leave."

James thought Lynn was a bit over concerned and chanced a suggestion. "Let's take a look around, all right?"

"Wha'da ya say? She's got to be here."

Stokley overheard, knew the truth of the matter, and was all too happy to lend a hand.

"Why don't you go back to the other table and wait for her, Lynn? James and I'll check out the rest of the hall. I know this place pretty well. We'll find her."

The small detachment of friends departed company with those of the corner table going their separate ways in an attempt to find Josie. After a futile search, Lynn retook her seat at their former table with Graff and several Britons.

"You doing all right?" Graff asked her.

"Not really. Do you recall the girl we were sitting with? She was dancing with Brady."

Graff shook his head.

"Sorry. Why, is something the matter?"

"She's gone missing."

Near to their table and mixed in with the crowd, James stood conferring with Stokley. He spotted Lynn, excused himself for a moment, and approached the banquet table. There he remained his hand rested on the back of her chair.

"We're gonna find her," he tried to reassure Lynn, his voice betraying the fact that he too was concerned. "Stay here, okay?"

Hopeful, Lynn forced a smile and offered an affirmative nod. In acknowledgment of her courage, James responded in kind. She was fortified by his unspoken confidence in her. From sorrow to a quick expectancy to rise

above the situation, Lynn's resolve entreated her to sudden strength. The shame she felt had transformed to scorn so as to alleviate the disappointment she felt for not being capable of doing more to find her friend. Her eyes beamed without restraint. It was all she could do to keep herself from crying. Satisfied that Lynn was momentarily contented, James walked back over to Stokley.

"She's staying put," he told him.

"Good. I'll check the back. You go up front and look outside. She may have taken some air."

James worked his way through the crowd to the front entrance in search of Josie. A few folks lingered out front and a good number of automobiles were parked along the curb. He took a short walk up and down the sidewalk. Luckless, James turned to re-enter the club when, in passing, he was bumped by Ori Lablanche. The tall black man knocked James with his shoulder, simultaneously handing him a folded note all the while acting apologetic. James pocketed the note, excused himself, and continued along.

Stokley took it upon himself to check the vacant corridor, passing the dressing room and Leland's back office and proceeded straight to the rear exit door. He stuck his head out to make sure the coast was clear. Behind the cabaret an impasse led off to a side street. Placed directly beside the exit door was a large steel garbage receptacle roughly one and a half meters high and two meters wide. It stood open, its lid raised up and leaned against the building.

Stokley entered backward into the alley, dragging the steamer trunk out through the open door. He turned the trunk, weighted down with Josie's body, on its end lengthwise. A cursory check of the hall and he closed the door behind him.

It was a task to heave the trunk up onto the edge of the receptacle and tip it in. Too much effort was being wasted in covering his tracks. The thought had occurred to him that the taking of Josie's life was hardly worthwhile. That was as capable as Stokley was to feeling remorse for the crimes he committed. The Englishman doubled back to the front entrance of the cabaret and promptly rejoined Lynn and James at their table.

"I couldn't find her anywhere."

"I think we should check back at our room," Lynn suggested.

"That's a good idea, Lynn," Stokley agreed with a nod and a look to James. "You and James head over there, all right? I'll stick around... in case she shows up."

James nodded his head concurrently. Out of concern, Lynn took Stokley's hands in hers.

"I'm probably overreacting," she said.

"Everything's going to be all right."

### 33

"What if she's not there," Lynn, in an apprehensive state, inquired of James while she allowed him to lead her by the arm past several brilliantly lit storefronts. She repeated herself, her voice raised, aggravated with James for not having immediately responded. "James, what if she's not there?"

"She'll most likely be there."

"Why would she go back all alone?" As Lynn spoke, the couple increased the rate of their already frantic pace.

"Wouldn't she at least have mentioned something first?"

Brought out from under a row of umbrellas that lined a street-side cafe, Lynn readied herself to step from the curb and into the busy street when James held her back.

"We were dancing, Lynn. Maybe she didn't want to bother us."

"No, that's not like Josie. She's probably not at the boarding house," Lynn persisted.

"Then she's probably with Stokley."

Across the boulevard once clear of traffic, James guided Lynn by the hand toward the American women's boarding house.

"I'm worried, James."

"Don't, Lynn. We'll find her," he promised emptily.

Together they arrived at the front steps of her lodgings. They could see no sign of life from their position on the sidewalk. Discouraged, Lynn stayed her advance, rooted in place, and leaned indecisively against the railing, a foot poised upon the lowermost step.

"Go on up," James urged her. "If she's not in, I'll go back to the club."

Lynn swiftly ascended the front steps. Upon reaching the entrance, she hesitated. The dread of what she felt would inevitably be an unfruitful search impelled her to wheel back around at the very top of the landing. She braced herself, reestablishing her grip of the iron railing. Fraught with doubt, prior to her entrance of the building, Lynn forced a stiff-lipped smile.

"I'll be back down in a minute."

"Be sure to check with the concierge... and don't look so glum. I'm sure she's fine."

Through the front door Lynn disappeared into the dimly lit lobby. Gone hither, James was left alone at the curb for a few moments in which time he was to dwell. While Lynn was to inquire about Josie, James paced out front. In his pants pocket the folded letter furtively passed to him fell with a vast weight upon his overburdened conscience. He had read the note and could not confuse its meaning. In conflict with the strong attachment he had to the American woman was a duty to his beloved country that in the past had been elevated beyond any human bond. It vexed him how much he wrestled with the guilt over the role she might continue to play as an asset to his ever prevalent deception.

Preoccupied with these taciturn thoughts, James impatiently eyed his gold wristwatch. The time read approximately a quarter to midnight when Lynn came back down. She was alone and looked upset. Flushed, she found it difficult to express her dread and stammered with doubt.

"I—I don't know where she is and no one's seen her."

"What of the concierge—"

"No, James. No one has," she answered with a pitiful shake of her head.

At one point in her descent, Lynn became noticeably faint. She reeled back, which prompted James to climb toward her. Taken directly and steadied by James before she could fall, Lynn was guided delicately by her arm down the last few steps. She verged on tears, and stared with hope into James' eyes, then cried softly taking consolation there. James reached up to brush her long hair from her face and pulled her close.

"Don't worry, Lynn," he whispered assuredly in her ear. "I'll go back to the cabaret and see if she's with Stokley. You stay here and wait for her."

James initiated their separation. She resisted him. His parting glance was for a fleeting moment drawn straight into Lynn's teary eyes; very much considerate of her anguish, he removed a handkerchief for her from within his pants pocket. Always a comfort to Lynn, James would stand by her. Without any further words, he helped her to wipe the tears from her face and waited patiently for her to regain in part her lost resolve.

"Oh, James, I don't know what I'd do without you."

"There, there, now. We'll all get a good laugh out of this in the morning."

With that said, Lynn mounted the steps that led to the front door and then pivoted back to face James. She wavered stricken by uncertainty before she dare reenter the boarding house. There was a skittishness in her stare and an uneasy sense of foreboding in the air. She was in need once again, which James could sense, of his reassurance.

"You'll see," he said.

"I hope, James. I do so hope."

Micmac's was one of only a few cabarets in Warsaw that held a crowd late into the evening. A migrant herd of drunken revelers passed from one establishment to the next guarantying the infusion of fresh faces and of high-spirited attitudes. Prior to the late show the night's liveliness wound down a bit. In the lull Stokley passed through the thinned-out crowd, the thrill of a recent slaying clutched at his throat, and the smell of Josie's life on his hands. He slinked toward the back hallway running smack into Fritz Adelheid.

"Hey, Stokley! Help me out here!"

Adelheid supported a half-conscious Brady under the arm struggling to get him to the door. His need for assistance had precedence.

"Sure thing," Stokley conceded. "Where are we taking him?"

"Out to the car. We're driving him home."

Stokley held Brady under the opposite arm to help Adelheid steady him. The majority of the dead weight was passed to the stronger man.

"Here, let me—"

"Let's see if we can get him to the door."

Stokley slapped Brady's face lightly a few times before commenting, "He's that bad, huh?!"

"Leland doesn't want to see him like this."

Brady grunted, a remark to be construed as being almost in defense of himself. He then fell completely unconscious while the two men carried him through the front door and fought to get him to the curb where a long, elegant automobile was parked at the entrance of the cabaret.

German-made, the four door stretched Maybach SW-38 glistened in enamel black. White wall tires, a tan leather interior, and a massive chrome-plated front grill—the crowning glory to its one hundred horsepower frame-based front motor—allowed for a more impeccable automobile being readily found in all of Poland a near impossible feat.

The unconscious Brady was leaned against the hood of the car. Adelheid kept him from toppling over as he swung open the weighty passenger door. With Stokley's assistance, he managed to hoist Brady in. Upon coming so close in proximity to Stokley's person, Adelheid inadvertently got a good whiff of him.

"Phew wee, killer... you smell like garbage. What have you been doing, going through the trash?!"

Stokley was completely taken aback by Adelheid's disparaging observation. He could only gaze for a moment, a blank look worn guiltily upon his face. At this point Ori came over, saw Brady in the backseat, and exclaimed, "What's he doing in the car?!"

Not waiting for an excuse from Stokley, Adelheid shifted his attention to Ori and said flatly, "He's coming with us," and then climbed into the backseat next to the inebriated Brady.

Ori was disgusted. With a keen shake of his head, he strode past Stokley and around to the driver's side. In contrast to Stokley, who was of good bearing and straight harbor, Ori stood head and shoulders taller. Not until a chance comparison of this sort was it made more clearly evident the purpose Ori might serve to his employer. It was necessary that Ori duck his head in order to fold himself into the car. Before Adelheid slammed his door shut, he said to Stokley with a wink, "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

Stokley offered a weak wave and nodded, "Thanks."

Made comfortable, Ori shut his door and turned the engine over with a lot of gas, causing the Maybach to roar. A perspicacious step backward away from the curb and Stokley found himself left in the vapor of the automobile's exhaust as it sped off.

## 34

The Maybach's headlamps drove a torpidly lit path that cleaved the night and skirted the river's urban bank in silence.

Coming within view of the quay below, the long, elegant automobile eased along the embankment wall before being maneuvered through a three-point turn. With skill, Ori parked facing the escarpment's ledge. He had dimmed the lights and checked the dashboard's built-in clock at the center of the console. It read fifteen to twelve. In his haste to exit, he turned to Adelheid.

"Watch out for him... When you see him, flash the lights."

The engine killed, Ori left the automobile parked facing a banister and a set of stairs that led from the escarpment down to the darkened quay. In acknowledgment of Ori's instructions, Adelheid nodded and waved him on.

"Try to get this right," Ori commented with repulsion, watchful of Adelheid, who turned himself in his seat to face Brady, who lay senseless and vulnerable beside him. For the second time Adelheid impatiently motioned for Ori to leave, conscious of the Negro, who stood irresolute at the open driver's side door. "Do you mind?" Adelheid snipped, after which Ori promptly exited.

A quick dozen strides took Ori down to where he stood alone at the river's edge. For the entirety of his wait he kept an eye on the escarpment for Adelheid's signal.

Brady regained consciousness to find himself bent over and shoved forward, pinched between Adelheid and the backseat. From behind, Adelheid pushed firmly against him and let out a series of short, stuttered grunts. A painful burning sensation greeted Brady, from which his instinct bade him to jerk away defensively. In the muddled confusion he fumbled forward to pull at his pants that he found were down around his ankles. With an acute sense of horror, the

realization of what was happening came to him. He scrambled away from Adelheid, and desperately grabbed at the passenger door's handle in a feeble attempt to open it. Adelheid offered little resistance; he merely muttered disappointedly and fixed himself while Brady ineptly grappled with the lock. Escape followed Brady's make of the door and his tumble out onto the raspy asphalt. An unbearable humiliation overcame him. Frantically, he picked himself up and ran from the Maybach crying out with shame and disgust.

Where Ori remained down at the river's edge, he sharply glanced upward. The escarpment wall loomed above him.

He may have heard Brady's cry; he may not have.

A short distance away, Brady leaned heavily against the escarpment's ledge. A few uneven steps unwarily delivered him down to the narrow edge of the empty quay. Drunken and half-conscious, he groped through the half-light. Unsure of himself, Brady stumbled and collapsed in a heap blacking out behind the solid hulk of a public bench.

James did not think anything of the parked Maybach as he conspicuously walked down the stairs leading to the water's edge. No sooner had he taken the first few steps down to the quay when inexplicably the car's headlamps flashed. This caught James' attention. Divided, he became indecisive, wavering between the car and the quay when from below, a voice beckoned him.

"This way."

Ori stepped out into a clearing. Dauntless, having recognized the tall black man, James went down the steps to meet him. Not one to wait, Ori turned his back to the American man and started along the quay. James hesitated. With a brief gesture, Ori indicated that James was to follow.

Brady faded in and out of consciousness where he lay. For a time he existed in a quasi-lifeless state. Over the arduous rustle of the river, sloshing and lapping at its artificial concrete basin, he could hear the faint sound of parley between two men nearer to him and then farther off.

Beneath a sullen moon James and Ori stood pressed against the escarpment wall where the refractive light of the water played malevolently, teasing the men with its iridescent glare. James' eyes squinted against the Vistula's vermilion reflection. The men fulfilled their purpose for being there when James received a thin packet from Ori that he promptly hid away under his jacket.

"We're nearer than you think," Ori confided in James, speaking to him in German.

Together they pivoted and continued their amble along the empty quay. The Negro's demeanor was tensed. James, with trepidation, responded likewise in German.

"It will be Danzig, then?"

"Yes, though we have not been given a date," replied Ori.

The two men paused in the darkness near to a set of steps, beside one of several public benches that lined the quay.

A pensive air invaded their short-lived consortium.

"You'll know when," he continued. "We'll contact you—"

Brady came to. He could hear the two strangers converse close to him in proximity. He dragged himself up; the figures were near enough to him, and he could just make out their faces in the dark. To his surprise he recognized them both.

"James..." he called out and stepped brazenly toward the two men. "James... O—Ori?!"



Ori and James were completely taken off guard by the chance appearance of Brady. Waxen and pale as a ghost, Brady gave them both a scare when he stumbled out from where he was hidden. His unearthly pallor was accentuated by the primeval glare of the listless Vistula.

"Brady!?" James cried out, totally astounded.

Astonishment had transformed into anger for Ori, who darted forward and grabbed Brady roughly by the shirt collar. The spell Brady's visage had over James was disrupted instantaneously. The Negro's grip on Brady's shirt tore the first few buttons from their fastenings and shot them off wildly in every direction.

"What are you doing here?"

"I—I—"

"Where were you hiding?!" Ori spat through his teeth further rending Brady's open collar.

"I—I wasn't—I—"

"What did you hear, you son of a bitch!"

There was a murderous look in Ori's eyes. Set narrowly in his face, they burrowed into Brady, transmitting a merciless intent. James took a few steps back and stared hard knowing full well that Brady was a dead man.

"N—Nothing—" Brady blurted out, meekly looking to James, who stood defenseless.

Ori abruptly shifted his gaze to address James.

"Run," commanded Ori, absent of any emotion.

James furthered himself, balking. Brady became anxious and began to shift. Ori raised a clenched fist and crashed it down on Brady's head. The brute force of the impact flattened him to the ground. James stared. Ori turned to him once more.

"Get out of here! Run, goddamn it!" he demanded.

Unable to alter the murderous course that Ori chose, James did what was needed—bettered self-preservation over any ethic—and took flight, his only recourse. At his withdrawal James observed Ori bear down on Brady. The beating that was delivered was brutal. Overwhelmed by the blunt weight of the Negro's ominous stature, Brady was felled in defenselessness and could only grunt under his attacker's onslaught.

James fled. His legs carried him a confident distance before he fiercely quit against the abutted wall of the escarpment at a blind bend of the quay. Buckled over from exhaustion, James retched uncontrollably. During a short respite he beheld some movement from out of the corner of his eye. He peered up and caught a glimpse of Stokley at the water's edge. The chance encounter of these two men was remote at best, though circumstance and what variables there were fell through and deemed it possible. That Stokley would risk venturing back to the scene of his previous crimes, where no doubt the authorities had increased nightly patrols, was attributable to the thrill a psychopath gets at the show of such impudence. James was not as of yet fully aware of Stokley's guilt. A racing pulse needs to slow for the laborious connections that are made during the process of realization. The Englishman was seen to sink a large steamer trunk. Again, James vomited.

It dawned on James, there could be no doubt as to the Englishman's role in Josie's disappearance; there was guilt to be had with Stokley's presence on the quay where he was seen to sink the steamer trunk.

Newly aware of James, Stokley patiently waited for the trunk to disappear completely into the depths of the river before he dared to approach his friend.

"You all right there, James?"

Appalled, James turned his back and withdrew in a futile attempt at retreat; his legs gave out on him and he crumbled to the ground. The shared fault of James's presence on the quay, magnified by the aplomb that Stokley showed at his approach, made prominent in James' mind that his secret might very well have been disclosed. James was petrified at the thought and was unable to chance seriously contesting the Englishman's presence—an awful reminder of what is unmet in shame when wrestling with regret.

"Stokley—How? ... Why?"

Stokley placed James' arm around his own neck, then raised him up, and with directness spoke, "Come on then, James. The constables are on the prowl. Can't afford to be caught poking around at this time of night. Wha'da ya say we get you home?"

"I—You're—"

"Don't worry about me. Nobody would bother with an English gentleman," he said with immense confidence as he carried James away from the river, adding, "Tomorrow morning, this will seem like an awful dream."

## 35

In silence, a black and white portrayal of the Polish capital city—a steady and faithful depiction—was taken with James' portable motion-picture camera. Pieced together throughout the course of a vivid summer day were the goings-on of sunup, midday, and the early evening:

Sunup. Warsaw slept. The gleam of the enveloping dawn unveiled the river's majestic splendor with an unchecked scrutiny. The embodiment of a people—self-governed and independent—the Vistula plodded blamelessly at the center of a moral crisis. Through the dissipated haze the ancient structures of the city proper surmounted the silvery glare of the water's mirror-like surface. All around, an electricity filled the air, a great city and proud nation on the verge of a coming of age.

Midday. The wide, grandiose boulevard of Market Street that bisected the city of Warsaw, a modern thoroughfare laid to usher in the new republic's burgeoning commerce, had been cleared of trolleys and cordoned off from automotive traffic for the entire length of its course. A vast multitude of citizenry gathered at the curbs; steadily they swelled in droves and crowded behind the barriers placed all along the sidewalks. Overhead, from the open windows of nearby buildings, the occasional onlooker could be seen peering curiously at the spectacle below. Up and down the avenue the masses waited, full of a restless nationalism that malingered with the stifling heat of the late afternoon.

Early evening. A military parade marched in the finest fashion and with a quick step. The Polish cavalry in broad, seemingly endless columns trotted, flank to flank, on review through the streets of Warsaw. Before them, the infantry led the way honored with the singular privilege to display the Polish republic's colors. From the rooftops, confetti fell in clumps, was scattered by the breeze and splendidly streamed to the ground showering the troops with

kindness and liberality. As a finale, closing up fast behind the horsemen a score of light tanks passed with waggish briskness to the encouraging cheers of an overflowing populous.

With his picture-camera appended to his neck, James drudgingly entered the Englishmen's lodging house leaving behind the preferably crisp night air—a well-received relief to an otherwise overly humid and fatiguing day. Indoors, a tumult greeted him as he forced his way up the busy stairwell; over-exhausted, James was blind to the goings-on of his fellow boarders. Not late as of yet, it might have seemed odd for James to turn in at such an early hour had anyone bothered to notice.

With a heave, James swung open the door to his unlit lodgings. Exhausted he plopped his picture camera down on the room's minuscule writing desk before relegating himself to his bed, falling fast asleep.

*Innumerable railway lines were congested by a plethora of train traffic converging into the flats of Vienna's southernmost railway terminal. The crisp morning air was utterly disrupted by the bracketing noise and unnatural haze of the overactive station.*

*One of various passenger trains keyed into position, vying for a claim on an available platform. Within a second-class compartment Josie Rosen struggled to lower a burdensome piece of luggage from the overhead rack. The face she wore captured a consternate though contented expression. At a loss, her grappling with the case was alleviated when James sighted her from the congested corridor and entered through the open door of the berth to come to her much needed assistance. In recognition of his consideration she smiled generously, careful to pass the weight off evenly, and twisted out from under his outstretched arms.*

*"Thanks, James. There are still a few smaller pieces of Lynn's that need to be taken out. Should I do that?"*

*The case was brought to the floor with a thud. James could not help but to comment on the weight of the two girls' baggage.*

*"Lord knows what you women have in these things."*

*"Contraband," Josie leaned in and retorted with a demure wink.*

*"Don't joke," James answered. "We managed to get assistance with the steamer trunks. Everything's going to be brought out together."*

*James pinched his outer breast pocket and withdrew an odd number of identically colored tags tied off with loose twine.*

*"Here, affix these to the bags," he instructed. "I'll grab Lynn and we'll bring 'em out together and join the others."*

*"That sounds fine. Listen, James, we need to talk—"*

*Josie was interrupted by a young, smartly dressed American woman who, passing by in the corridor, noticed both Josie and James. She stuck her head into the compartment and announced brightly, "Last stop, Hot dog bun—Wiener Express!"*

*An encouraging smile and wave from Josie greeted the girl's glibness.*

*"I'll see you out, Alistair. Wait for me."*

*"Can't, hun. Gotta rush. I'll wait for you in the terminal though, all righty?"*

*"I think so!" Josie quipped. "Won't be but two minutes."*

*The girl made off, satisfied with Josie's facetious reply. James set the pieces of luggage at the door, readied to take leave. Not to allow him to depart before she was able to pick up where she had left off, Josie voiced, "What are your designs on Lynn Ann? What is it you want with her, James?"*

Respectful of Josie's consternation in regard to his relations with her best friend, James openly responded.

"Why is it, Josie, that it would concern you? What I don't want with Lynn, that's more to the point."

"That's not exactly an answer."

"No, not exactly."

"Lynn and I have a history, James—"

"I like you, Josie Rosen. And I know the kind of friend you are to Lynn."

"The first time I met Lynn Ann—"

"You don't have to explain."

"I want to. The first time I met Lynn Ann was a year ago this June in New York City. It was at the local chapter of the American Society of the Red Cross. And I wasn't always a member! Truth be told, James, I was a mess. I knew myself less than a stranger, men knew me better than I like to think, and drink even more than that! They say when at your wit's end, one big problem'll mollify all the other problems. Unconsciously we seek it out. In fact, that's what it is to be self-destructive. And I know how to be that... three months pregnant by a drunk I hung 'round with, a three time loser. He used to beat me something awful, and he wasn't exactly thrilled to find out, my being pregnant, I mean. And he saw to it that I'd find myself with a miscarriage... I never thought. And for how long I went before passing out I'll never know. All I do know is I about died. I ended up being watched after by Lynn Ann while I recovered. She introduced me to the Red Cross, where in no time I began to volunteer as a nurse. When someone accepts you for who you are the way Lynn has me—no, that's cheapening—she did more than that for me. She saw through the person I was to the person I would become. This past year has been my life, James."

"Josie, I didn't know that. Lynn hadn't told me. I'm sorry."

"James, I like you fine. Lynn Ann seems genuinely happy when you're together. That's got to count for something."

"That's all I want anyway, is for Lynn to be happy."

"She is happy, Josie."

"It's ridiculous, really, but I must confess I've got this ideal picture in my mind of how life is going to be for her and I. To be happily married, live near to one another, raise our children together. It's silly I suppose, but understand, it's not too late for me. It's just not too late."

"And why not, Josie? I'm not going to keep your dreams from you. I enjoy your company. In fact, I don't see Lynn being as complete of a person without you as her friend."

"That's a sweet thing to say."

"Honestly though, Josie. I don't claim to know what's in store for our future. I don't claim to want to know. We're here now, together is all. You and Lynn have your responsibilities once you've settled into your hotel. I've mine. The time we spend together, why not make the best of it?"

"All righty, then, but what after? I mean, once we reach Warsaw, within a few days anyway, Lynn and I'll be conveyed by airplane into England. And, well, how exactly you fit in is what I was wondering."

"The Los Angeles Tribune will need the footage I've taken. They should have arranged my itinerary. I'm to contact a colleague here in Vienna. Once I've settled myself in, I'm to see him. I plan to let Lynn know. We figure maybe London is as good a place as any to meet up once I've finished."

"So you and her have your own plans. Is that it?"

*"It's not like that, Josie."*

*"Well, that's funny because I wasn't made aware. Must have slipped her mind is all."*

*"Like I said, I plan to let her know as soon as I find out myself. There was nothing for Lynn to mention because nothing's final as of yet."*

*"Lynn Ann's my friend. We have definite plans together, previous commitments. She can't be waiting for you to finish whatever the hell it is you're doing!"*

*"I'm trying to help here. A minute ago you were concerned for Lynn. If you allow me, I'll show to you that my interests in her are honorable—"*

*"Don't, James. Spare me. Everything you say is tainted by half-truths or sweetened with condescension. I swear to Christ, I think maybe you're not even totally aware of how contrary the words you've spoken are!"*

*Pensive and though offish to Josie's affront, James thought it better to allow for her indiscretion, and was disinclined to defend himself.*

*Her face a-flush, Josie savored the moment, her lip bitten against further berating.*

*Their disparity, percipient in its nature, was canceled abruptly when Lynn made an entrance into the deadened compartment. Unaware of any misgivings between Josie and James, she offhandedly announced, "There you are! What is taking you so long?"*

*Josie and James, each inclined to think of themselves as having been personally addressed by Lynn—whose attention they were intent to prove was undivided—answered in unison.*

*"We were only just now about to leave."—"Lynn Ann, I'm sorry. Were you waiting long?"*

*The quirky simultaneity of their response caused Lynn to suspect that she caught them conversing about her.*

*Furthermore, she knew Josie well enough to recognize the fluster in her cheeks, which was yet to fully abate, and saw it as an indication that her friend had most probably spoken her mind. A glance at James reinforced those suspicions.*

*"Are you coming or am I going!" Lynn delicately upbraided.*

*James cursorily excused himself, "I'll follow up outside, all right?"*

*Lynn answered him, "Wait for us."*

*"Of course. I'll be with the rest of the group."*

*"All right, James. We won't be two seconds."*

*A tight smile and James made himself scarce; having stepped into the corridor revealed that the train had been all but emptied. The only person visible was the train's conductor, who lingered at the rear of the car at the opening, his hat in hand. The gentleman's head was topped by a tuft of coarse hair which shone blond in the glaring light. A brightness flashed across his intelligible face in recognition. At James' approach he readily addressed him.*

*"You there, monsieur. You're not with us."*

*The man gestured openly with a clipboard thick with papers, which he grasped in his hands.*

*"Have a look here. You're not with us."*

*Near to the conductor, James noted that his hair was, in fact, dark. James' response was to be expected.*

*"I'm sorry, I'm to disembark—"*

*"You're not with us on the manifest, I'm afraid," he chimed.*

*"I understand. I'm now just disembarking."*

The conductor brought James' attention to the passenger list, pointing to it and repeating, "Here, then. Have a look.

*You're not with us, I'm afraid."*

*Confused, James restated, "Yes, I understand. I'm to get off at this stop."*

*A glance at the first page of the manifest revealed it was blank. Once again, the conductor gestured to it.*

*"You're not with us," he persisted and flipped a few pages forward. All were blank. The manifest he presented was without any list of passengers. Each individual sheet of paper seemed blanker than the last, if such a thing were possible. James was perplexed and glanced the man over weighing his odd sense of humor against the inappropriateness of the situation. The train's conductor, having responsibilities that went beyond such a bizarre inkling of mirth or dysfunctional levity, did not at all humor James. He promptly retreated from the strange gentleman, who commented one last redundant time.*

*"You're not with us."*

*Permitted to detrain without further restriction, James freed himself from the trainman's company and stepped out onto the platform where, taken aback, he was to discover that not a single passenger remained where previously there was great congestion in the station. The once bustling platform was now as vacant as the blank pages of the train's supposed manifest.*

*A step down the line to the terminal entrance doors proved ineffectual; locked from the inside, James was barred entry. Behind him the train commenced to egress from the station. The repetitious bellow of its whistle drew his attention. James pivoted in place, stymied to find the train steaming out of the empty terminal.*

*Absent of further thought, he promptly pursued the gradual exit of the train. He ran in pace with the nearest car to catch an opening. Through the carriage window he saw an array of passengers overcrowd the just recently emptied train. James' confusion was quickly superseded by the dire realization that to re-board was made infeasible by the increased speed of the locomotive. The window adjacent to him provided a glimpse of Lynn and Josie seated complacently within their second-class compartment. Josie's glance fell on James; a vacant smile curled at the corner of her lips. Lynn in particular did not seem bothered by their inexplicable departure, nor by James' absence. Chin in hand, she stared out onto the platform.*

*Frantic, James pounded at her window, though he elicited no response whatsoever from Lynn. Beside her Josie was seen to make some comment. Blank-faced, Lynn gazed out the window, a pert smile alit her features. James, try as he might, was unable to rebut being left behind.*

Following sunup the brightly lit common room of the lodging house was a bustle with the morning's activities. James found himself situated inexplicably at the center of the room's lively commotion. As far as he could tell, his eyes reddened from lack of sleep, the night had passed with scarce a beat. Several young men served themselves coffee and tea from the kettles on the stove. To the side, there was a chair placed at a table in front of an open window. In the chair an English chap sat with his head back. The morning sun streamed onto his face, which was bearded in white foam, having been lathered for a shave. In the close communal living of the lodging houses frequented by travelers in Europe, a boarder was often expected to perform occasional chores. Behind him stood James who, positioned as a barber, readied himself and leaned forward to

shake out an unfolded razor in a large porcelain bowl filled with lukewarm water set upon the table.

"Sure I can trust you to get a close shave?!" the English chap asked candidly. James paused before taking his first swipe.

"Sure thing. My father was a barber. I've seen this done a thousand times."

"A barber. Is that so?!"

"Yeah, now sit still."

James ran the long blade smoothly over the man's skin, carving a slow, deep course through the white lather all the way from his Adam's apple, over his chin, and up to his bottom lip. Once again James leaned forward to rinse the razor out in the bowl of water. One of the young men had separated himself from the crowd and helped himself to a seat on the divan. This young fellow rested a cup of coffee on his lap and in between sips addressed everyone in the room. His voice had a trenchant intonation which carried well over the ambient noise of the over bustling lodging house.

"So, has anyone seen Brady lately?" the young man questioned before James took another swipe with the razor.

"He didn't leave with Graff did he?" the English chap asked as he was put under the blade.

"He ought not have... He owes me money."

James continued to shave, ears perked listening in.

"Well, he was with Graff," the English chap proceeded, "with the photo pool."

James rinsed the razor and then joined in the conversation.

"Where's Stokley? He's not here?"

"Nope," the young man answered. "He was in earlier this morning. Some dame came by and he mentioned that they were headed out to the station house together."

James paused in the midst of a new swipe.

"Something about another missing woman," the young man concluded.

James turned white. On a sudden drop of everything he was off. From over the arm of the sofa he grabbed his jacket and headed for the door.

"I'll uh... sorry... I just remembered something," he stuttered as he excused himself.

"Wha—" started the half-shaven English chap.

"I'll finish ya up later," James half-heartedly promised.

"Well... well, I—hold on—"

"There's something I forgot. Later—"

"Later what?"

"Can't. Sorry."

As soon as James had stepped out the door, the young man turned and offered a conciliatory shrug to his soap-faced companion, who sat dumbfounded in the makeshift barber chair.

## 36

Seated at ease before Starzynski's desk in the Polish chief inspector's private office at the Komisarjat, Marquard succumbed to boredom; busying himself he flipped through a score of papers in his possession filed assiduously into an oversized manila folder. He pinched the spine of the folder between his knees

and opened it on his lap when Starzynski, unannounced and dressed gallantly in the uniform of a Polish Army officer, noisily entered. He remained in the doorway speaking over his shoulder not yet aware of the presence of the French prefect seated before his desk.

"All right, then. But of course," Starzynski called to an individual in the corridor. "Yes, yes, those would be here in my office as well." The most outstanding feature of the otherwise nondescript Polish Army's walking out uniform was the zigzag ornament sewn onto the stiff, upturned collar of the drab tunic. On Starzynski's head he wore the standard Czapka, a square, four-sided, soft, peaked cap with a tight black brim—a spruce addition to the otherwise plain ensemble.

Quick to notice Marquard, Starzynski indicated with a held up forefinger for the prefect to grant him a further moment. Once inside the office, he headed over to his desk and retrieved a batch of papers. With a glance up and gesturing with the stack, he gave Marquard a gentlemanly wink. Pressured for the papers, he stepped from his desk and handed them over to a young Polish soldier who stood patiently outside the door. He promptly returned.

"My apologies," Starzynski injected as he came around Marquard's seat, flanking his desk. In passing he snatched a liquor bottle from a zinc bar stand and courteously placed down two small glasses.

"A vodka, my friend?"

"Please," Marquard replied as he cleared his throat.

One of the dozens of varieties of Poland's most celebrated drink, a vodka was what was needed to further dissuade the heat. Starzynski filled the two glasses and seated himself across from Marquard. He removed his cap and with a lick of his palm fixed his hair remarking, "It's nice to see you, Inspector." He proceeded to slide open the top desk drawer and extracted an unsealed envelope.

"You look sharp," Marquard commented.

Starzynski presented the envelope to Marquard; by its glugged appearance it held some bulky article. That having been done, he remarked.

"A formality. As of this morning, I am a commander in the Polish Army."

"Well then, congratulations!"

With a clink from their glasses the two friends cheered and drank. Commander Starzynski was the first to finish, his mustache a bit wetted.

"No need, my duties remain the same," he answered with a smack of his lips. "Duty to God and country for men like you and I will always remain the same. The rank is what is temporary."

"Of course."

Marquard set his empty glass down upon the metallic desk in front of him and in scarce a beat satisfactorily commented, "Very smooth."

"More?"

"Please."

To oblige, Starzynski once again poured into both of their empty glasses, careful that they be equally half-full. The clear liquid was inviolate—colorless, tasteless, and odorless.

"Then you're to be stationed at the garrison here in Warsaw?" Marquard inquired as he dilatorily flipped open the ponderous envelope.

"Yes. The city's entire police force has been requested to act in conjunction with the army."



Seated across the desk from Starzynski, Marquard leaned back, his attention shortly diverted while he rifled through the envelope. In it were James' stolen personal effects missing from his wallet. Most importantly, the envelope contained his identification papers.

"You have everything you asked for. It should help," Starzynski explained, adding, "There's an address as well, an English lodging house which is actually quite nearby."

With an assertive knock, the young soldier entered the room and interrupted Starzynski. Tall and broad-chested, the fair-haired soldier stood quite handsomely—a fine example of Poland's proud masculine populace. In relation to Starzynski, the man was of a lowly rank—a batman or orderly, apparently assigned to him as an attaché.

"Commander. Excuse me, sir. The American woman is still waiting."

"Yes."

"She has finished filling out the missing person's report and insists on speaking with you personally. She claims her friend who has gone missing is one and the same as the American tourist that made the discovery of the woman's body in the river."

"Is that so?" said Commander Starzynski, his brow raised. "Well, show her in."

Marquard excused himself, "I should be leaving." He stood promptly from his seat.

"Of course, I understand," Starzynski began in pulling away from his desk. "If you have any need for further assistance—"

"Yes, thank you again."

The two men shook hands for the last time.

"It's nothing, my friend."

The soldier escorted Lynn into the office, cleared his throat, and announced her name.

"Miss Lynn Ann Daily."

The commander stood to greet her. An abrupt sense of constraint followed the American woman's admittance.

Starzynski was immediately struck by Lynn's shock to see the Frenchman there at his desk.

"Mademoiselle," Marquard received the American woman with a solemn nod.

Lynn froze, thinly smiling in reply.

With an adroit bow of his head Marquard excused himself. "I should be on my way, then. Good day, Commander."

And again, congratulations." Politely, he stepped past Lynn and without further utterance quit the Polish commander's office.

Starzynski showed Lynn to the empty seat.

"Please, be seated," he began. "You've met the prefect, I take it."

"Yes, at the train station," she said timidly. "We arrived only a few days ago."

In long strides, James bounded by twos up the broad granite steps that led to the Komisariat. When he arrived on the landing of the broad portico he

spotted Stokley leaning between columns off to the side a comfortable distance from the entranceway, smoking one of his cigars. James rushed up to him.

"Stokley! Is Lynn inside?"

Stokley spun around sharply, having been taken off guard by James' advance.

"James! Where have you been?!"

"How long have you been waiting out here? Have you heard from Josie?"

"A short while now... Where have you been?" Stokley reiterated. "No one's seen you since Saturday night."

"I got caught up. There were things I had to do. Have you heard anything from Josie? ... Is Lynn all right?"

"No," Stokley directly answered. He followed this with a sharp remark, "And Lynn is not all right."

The uncharacteristic way in which Stokley made this last comment worried James.

"Are they doing anything for her?"

"I don't know. She should be down any minute now. Maybe you should ask her yourself."

"She's upset, then?"

Stokley took James aside positioning him so that he faced the building and chastised James for his indiscretion.

Told off to his face, James was for the remainder of their conversation unargumentative. Straightforward, Stokley clued him in as to Lynn's misgivings. Astonished at what he was being told, James stood immobilized with his back to the street.

"So yeah, she's angry. What did you think, James, that she'd be..." Stokley wavered, his eyes shifting past James.

His glance fell over James' shoulder. Marquard exited the municipal building and was in descent of the stone steps.

Stokley took hold of James' arm and gave him a stern look to prevent him from turning. The prefect loitered for a moment, and not having noticed the two men above, lingered at the bottom of the steps directly below them.

"What?" James asked in confusion.

"Don't look now, but that Frenchman, the one gunning for you, he's on the walk below."

"Has he seen us?"

Curbside, Marquard did not appear to take notice of them. The prefect, rooted to the pavement, faced the street with his back to the building. With a raised hand he hailed a cabbie.

"No. He's waiting to hire a car."

James stole a glance spotting the prefect. The taxicab pulled to a stop in front of Marquard, who secured it, unaware that the two men were watching him from the steps. Lynn, on her way out from the nearby entrance, sighted James conversing with Stokley and went directly over to confront him. It was obvious from the stern demeanor of her approach that she was furious with him for having disappeared while she and Stokley were so frantically in search of Josie.

"James, where have you been?! We've looked everywhere—I mean everywhere—for you."

James started, "Lynn!"

"Where were you yesterday? I was worried sick. We still haven't found Josie. Have you seen her?"

"No, Lynn. I haven't seen her."

"I've been worried sick, James. Why haven't you been around? It isn't fair, your doing that. We went looking for you. We had no idea where you were."

"I know."

"What? What do you know?" Lynn fumed.

He stammered, "I—I know. Lynn, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" she parroted in complete exasperation. "Well, where the hell have you been?"

James refused to reply.

"Why won't you answer me, James?" she pressed in a firm, unshaken voice.

"Right now, I think what we need to do is find Josie," he responded, changing the subject.

"You're gonna talk. I won't have you shut me out."

"Not right now, Lynn."

Stokley interjected, "So what's our next move?"

"Well, both of you are coming with me to the cabaret," she was precocious enough to explain. "An official is on his way down and he's having me take him there."

"Did you speak to—" Stokley began.

"Yeah, one and the same as you spoke of, a Commander Starzynski. The prefect was in his office."

"Not to worry, Lynn," James chimed in. "He left just now."

Lynn partly ignored him.

"Does Starzynski think he can help?" Stokley quarried.

"Yeah."

"Was he meeting you here?"

"Yeah, he is. I think he's having us wait for someone else before we can leave."

"What did he say?" James pried.

"Just... that it didn't look good," Lynn related with a sick look of worry on her face.

## 38

At the center of Stare Miasto, the Old Town of Warsaw, the notorious cabaret, Micmac, stood inauspiciously at the furthest end of quaint Market Square. The nightclub's facade was garishly crowned with a sign not dissimilar to the marquee lights above a theater; the word Micmac was written in cursive by means of bulbs, and above it was the outline of a five-pointed star. When lit at night, it shined in brilliant contrast to the more sober old-world appearance of the neighboring slat-roofed houses and businesses. Of the foliage on the trees that lined the square, all the leaves had turned to the sky, an indication of the inclement weather soon to come.

The cabaret's dance hall was completely cleared; the banquet tables were stacked pell-mell and the chairs piled high against the walls. Several custodians busied themselves with the carrying out of various chores. At the open doorway, barring entry, was the cabaret's owner, Leland Downes. Alone in

facing him was Commander Starzynski. Behind the commander, in the narrow passage of the club's foyer, Stokley and the mystic, Hurkos, stood abreast out of earshot.

"That's fine," Leland blurted, his intonation full and utterly irritated. "Things are all over the place right now, and as you can see, I've got a business to run."

"Thank you," Starzynski said easing him. "It won't take but a moment."

"Stay put," Leland discourteously directed.

Contemptuous of Starzynski's uniform, Leland brusquely stepped away to address his hired help in regards to some of the logistical details of reorganizing his place for an upcoming event. He promptly returned to re-address the commander.

"Make it quick. I'll have my guys take a break."

Wryly, Starzynski turned to face Stokley.

"Run back to the car and gather everyone together."

After exchanging a permissive glance with Leland, Stokley, in compliance with Commander Starzynski's request, went outside and headed over to a drably painted military car parked directly in front of the cabaret. The crisp exterior light gleamed off its surface. At the bottom corner of the front windshield a small tin white over red placard displayed the Polish republic's colors. In the back of the vehicle, Lynn was seated waiting anxiously with James. Upon spotting Stokley exit the cabaret she unrolled her window.

"Come on inside," Stokley called out to them at his approach of Lynn's door. "Everything's fine. We're to take a quick look at the place. Leland's all right with it."

Ill-timed, Ori Lablanche pulled up behind them in the same long, elegant automobile, the black Maybach, previously used for the secret meeting on the quay. James quit his seat and came around the rear of the military car. He noticed Ori first, scarcely a few seconds before Stokley; the Englishman assisted Lynn to step from the car. Given James' relative position to the Negro, who had in that moment exited the Maybach, a brief exchange was unable to be avoided. James acknowledged him with a thin smile. To Ori, the American man was invisible.

"Let's not keep them waiting," Stokley pressed James and Lynn, egging them along.

The trio of friends collectively entered the cabaret. Last through the door, Stokley imparted a nod to Ori in passing.

There was not any response. The Negro lingered before he crossed the front grill of the Maybach, inconspicuously stepped to the curb, and trailed close behind.

"Where was it, Miss Daily, that you last saw Miss Rosen?" was Starzynski's greeting to Lynn. Authoritative in his approach, he walked beside her and led the group through the empty hall.

Detached from the others, Hurkos wandered through the expansive room, running his hands delicately across the cool brass railing that partitioned the periphery from the main floor. He stood aloof in the center of the hall, his stare fixed as if obtaining a feel for the large, vacuous space. Arched, poised above him, the vaulted ceiling soared to an unobtainable height. The exposed rafters were dotted with the many light fixtures and polytechnic apparatuses that made for one of the most celebrated and spectacular venues in all of Warsaw.

A *Schweinehund* was Hurkos' thought of Leland Downes, who at that moment hovered near to the intrusive group loitering in the middle of the vacant dance floor. All of this grandeur, Hurkos expounded to himself, was attributable to a conceited man and the influence of the wealth he tended. Leland, he assessed, had not a modicum of constraint. Here was a depraved individual who suffered fretfully from avarice.

Ardent in her effort to assist Starzynski with his investigation, Lynn described in more detail than she had in her previous statement the last time she saw her dear friend, Josie Rosen.

"She was sitting here, very content," Lynn commenced with her reiteration of the events leading to Josie's disappearance. "Neither of us had had much to drink. We were released late from the hospital where we've been assigned to volunteer. Our trip to Europe is paid for by the American Society of the Red Cross, and we're expected to put a few hours in whenever we can. By the time we arrived at the club, we were both pretty tired. That's why at first I thought maybe she'd gone home. James and I were talking, and then I think she got up to dance with Brady after Stokley left the table. We'd only just arrived, maybe half an hour earlier."

Starzynski chimed in, "What was the last thing you can recall her saying to you?"

"I don't remember. I mean, she didn't say anything that seemed important."

"This fellow, Brady, I'll need to question him."

"He and I keep the same lodging," Stokley informed the commander. "I'll be sure to tell him."

Curious about what was being said, Leland had not refrained from listening in on the interlopers' discussion. At this junction Ori obtrusively approached to inform Leland that he had parked the car out front. Leland broke away and took him aside.

"That's good," Leland said discreetly. "Actually, on second thought... why don't you pull the Maybach around back and load it in the alley."

With this interaction, Ori inadvertently attracted attention to himself. His stature alone, not to mention that his skin was as black as pitch, was enough to make him seem suspicious to the mystic. Hurkos eyed him as he exited the club, while Leland somewhat passively stood by not having taken notice.

Separated from the two men, the group spent the next few moments in the empty dance hall trailing behind Starzynski, who from time to time broke the hallowed silence with an inquiry. For the most part, the questions the commander deigned to ask were mundane. There was an inordinate duration in which these queries were made prior to his questioning Stokley as to the Englishman's whereabouts that evening.

"Where was it, again, that you went when you left the table?" he politely asked.

"In the back."

Stokley pointed toward the back hallway.

"What's there? Could you show me?"

"Sure thing, it's this way." Stokley nodded and guided the group to the back corridor as he informed them, "There's a private office and the dressing room."

Ori was in the corridor. The rear exit door, which led out to the impasse, was held wide open by an unmarked wooden case roughly the size of a footlocker. He had previously arranged a small number of identical wooden cases, and

having piled them against the wall, proceeded to take them out into the alley individually.

The group intruded down the narrow sconce-lined corridor with Stokley in its lead. Calm and deliberate, the Englishman's demeanor in no way divulged an inkling of plausible guilt on his part.

"I met up with a close friend. Her name's Patty Biset," Stokley disclosed, relating the events prior to the slaying of Josie Rosen on the night in question. "She's a dancer for the club-the chorus captain. She had just gotten off of work when I came back here to meet her. She and I... we had an argument. It was trivial, though she got pretty upset over it. I'll be sure to leave you a number where she can be contacted."

Without concern, he led them into Patty's dressing room. The diminutive space was made more confined by the presence of these four out of place visitors. Inside, he, Lynn, and James gave the commander a respectful amount of space to work.

"And you didn't see Miss Rosen at all?" Starzynski countered as he continued with his inquest.

"No."

"I see."

Commander Starzynski did not press the Englishman; stolidly he inspected the broad makeup counter. The many feminine accoutrements upon it were dismissive. In a reflective pose, he paused there and faced the long, slender vanity mirror. His image was dim past the dark counter; a flick of a nearby switch and the score of bright bulbs that bordered the mirror illuminated his face.

"No one saw her after she went dancing with this friend of yours, Brady?" was his final query before he made his way to the sofa at the back of the small room.

Hurkos had strayed out into the narrow sconce-lined hallway, not following the group any further. Upon his immediate entrance he made eye contact with the Negro. Ori took to the open rear exit door, heaved the last few wooden cases, and exited into the alley though not before he made certain to shoot the mystic a glaring look.

Undaunted, Hurkos proceeded to the rear exit, where he stood defiantly in the open doorway and observed Ori dump the last load of cases into the trunk of the Maybach. Following a cursory glance at the darkening sky, the Negro undertook to move around the automobile and enter the driver's side without regard to being observed. He eyed the mystic through the rearview mirror, turned over the Maybach's engine, and pulled away.

Hurkos became the recipient of an intense vision in which the Negro, partly obscured from view, heaved a cumbersome object into the ample trunk space of the Maybach. A shroud of irregular darkness encompassed all, a hazy and fragmentary image owing to an unnaturally starless night. It was nearly impossible for Hurkos to ascertain precisely what transpired. From within the parked automobile a nervous and somewhat panicked voice told the Negro off, urging him to hurry. Ori reinstalled himself on the driver's side, reared the vehicle from the escarpment, and sped off. At an intersection and with a jolt, the Maybach's white wall tires bounced over a tract of uneven pavement; the automobile skirted over a raised set of trolley tracks that ran perpendicular to the street. From the Maybach's trunk a thump escaped and the indefinite form of a lifeless body was revealed to the mystic.

"Hurkos! ... Herr Hurkos!" the commander, in an exhilarated state, hastily called from within the showgirls' dressing room.

On his own, Hurkos stood entranced leaning on the frame of the open doorway of the cabaret's rear exit. Caught unaware, he started, then spun sharply toward the direction of Starzynski's voice to find Stokley just stepping out into the hallway in search of him. With a venerate wave, the Englishman motioned for the mystic to come and join them in the dressing room. In vain, Stokley informed him that they had found something.

"We're not quite sure what to make of it," he related in English. "The commander would like for you to give us your impression."

The dressing room was exactly how Stokley had left it the previous night with the exception of the soft-grey sofa, which the men had pulled back away from the wall. The small group gathered around the commander and watched as he squatted down to sift through the pile of men's apparel that had been scattered on floor. Hurkos entered the room as Starzynski inquisitively directed his attention to Leland, who hung back disinterestedly.

"Do you recognize these clothes?"

Leland stuck his nose around the sofa to have a look and flatly responded, "If I knew about every little thing that went on back here with my dancers, I'd— Listen, why don't you take it up with them?!" He then recanted defensively, "I don't know nothin' about no men's clothes behind some sofa in my girl's dressing room!"

Starzynski noticed Hurkos, who had stepped further into the dressing room, and motioned to him.

"Come take a look at this."

Diligent about skirting the grey sofa, Hurkos came and knelt down closely beside Starzynski. He was careful to only come in contact with an object once he was focused on it. That was his method, his fastened approach to a more clear and pure perception. With a stoic demeanor, he casually ran both his hands through the garments. Confounded by them and in expression of his consternation, the mystic, Hurkos, with a slight shrug, murmured to Starzynski addressing the commander in German, "Something is not right."

"Yes, it's strange, isn't it?"

"Who was the Negro just now who took the car?"

"I don't know," Starzynski replied. He then re-addressed Leland, keeping him at the door where he attempted an exit. "Mister Downes?! Who is that Negro you have working for you?"

"Ori LaBlanche?! Why? He's just one of my hired hands." In the Negro's defense Leland informed them matter of factually, "I've been using him a long time now. He's a good man."

"LaBlanche, you say. He's French?"

"I believe so, but why? He's got nothing whatsoever to do with this! I assure you. Nothing whatsoever. He was by my side for the entire night."

Starzynski turned to Hurkos to make sure he understood. Hurkos nodded and pondered for a moment before he responded. A false assuredness gripped his better judgment.

"Still," in an assertive and decisive tone, the mystic with this single word refuted Leland's assertion of Ori's innocence.

"What is it he does for you, Mister Downes?" Starzynski was impelled to inquire.

"He runs errands for me," was Leland's immediate reply. "He's got a strong back and he's trustworthy."

"When did you hire him?"

"Going on a few years now... I'd have to check my records."

"I'd like to see those."

"Really, this is ridiculous!" Leland retorted. "No. They aren't readily available. I'm not even sure that they still exist."

"He works on the river," Hurkos observed; the statement was made clearly while spoken in German.

"He works on the river?" Starzynski repeated.

"Uh... yeah... he does at that," Leland stammered. "A longshoreman. Loads the barges down at the docks."

## 39

Under an overcast midday sky, the Maybach sped along an unpaved road through the outer limits of Warsaw. The elegant automobile hit a pothole causing the contents of the trunk to stir. A clunk escaped, as the weight of a sizable group of wooden cases, haphazardly piled atop one another, shifted. Packed within each of the cases were African statues carefully wrapped in newspaper and protected with hay. Each statue held some contraband. Tucked inmost were stowed rolls of film, clandestine files, and numerous secret documents.

Ori drove to the furthest outskirts of the city where a small, seemingly abandoned airstrip awaited. On this all but deserted aerodrome's flat overgrown airstrip, a burnished raw steel-surfaced German Junkers type-52 transport aircraft idled noisily. Its three immense turbine engines roared, and the fierce wind generated by the whirl of its propellers threw up a dense, billowing cloud of dust.

At Ori's approach the unmarked plane's side door was thrown open. A built-in staircase unfolded forward and extended to the ground. The automobile pulled through an open gate and followed the tire path a roundabout way before it veered out onto the airstrip, indirectly skirting a narrow gully that coursed on either side of the tract.

Circumspect in its approach, the Maybach gradually came to a halt along the tail of the aircraft. With not a moment to waste, Ori jumped out, went around to the trunk, and grabbed an armful of wooden cases.

An older German woman, Fiona Faulkner, impatiently awaited his arrival. She hastily exited from the aircraft's oval doorway, shielding her eyes, and prior to her descent of the steps, held her long, fair hair against the lifted dust and the bracketing wind. Dressed severely in a pair of pressed grey slacks with a neatly tucked dark linen blouse, Fiona fit the role of that of a foreman to the clandestine loading of contraband on board the plane. She was forced to yell over the wind and noise that the engines generated in order for Ori to hear her.

"Come on, you're late!" she shouted to him in nasty, guttural German. "We're running behind! We have been waiting far too long as it is."

With the cases in hand, Ori rushed up the stairs and entered the Junkers. Her chastising him, he would overlook. It was more pressing that the cases be



stacked at the back of the transport. With this excuse he then scrambled back down and bounded past her to gather another load. Fiona held him back.

"It's risky being here like this!" she yelled in his ear.

"I'm aware," he hollered to her.

"We've been given a date, Ori."

"When?"

"It's almost time."

"Yes, but when."

"Thursday night. Maybe sooner."

Ori nodded, satisfied, went around to the back of the long, elegant automobile, and grabbed another load from the trunk. Over the next few minutes he traveled to-and-fro from the Maybach to the Junkers transport. On the last occasion, in passing, Ori pried a bit further of Fiona.

"I'm about finished... Tell me, do the others know?"

"Fritz knows. We spoke," she consented.

Ori nodded and, in conclusion, took the few remaining cases up the collapsible steps and into the plane. Fiona followed. Once the pile of heavy cases was securely fastened to the inside wall with a sturdy strap, Ori started down the exit. Without a hint of resignation Fiona held him back. Before she allowed him to leave, she added so as to reassure him, "This won't be forgotten." Her words were staunch. "You have been loyal."

A final nod was the Negro's sole response; not bothering to look back at her, he promptly deplaned the Junkers.

Once he had assisted Fiona to collapse the stairs and secure the hatch, he returned to the Maybach and backed the automobile away from the large aircraft. Within a few seconds the plane's engines redoubled, quickly conveying the Junkers down the airstrip and lifting it off into the stark sky.

## 40

Poised in the doorway of the back office, Leland lingered, a telephone pensively held in his hand. He stood in such a way that enabled him to see straight down the dim interior hallway, through the clearing of the dance hall, and out the front door that had been left wide open. He brought the receiver up slowly to his ear and peered at the small group gathered around the Polish military car parked at the curb just outside the entrance of the club. Their figures seemed mere shades enveloped in the harshly contrasted white-light so characteristic of the slate-white skies of late summer.

The shrill voice of a female operator came over the line abruptly and inquired in Polish as to which extension was needed. Leland tersely instructed the woman to connect his number. The phone rang in his ear. The other end was promptly picked up.

Straightforward, Leland shouted in a firm tone into the receiver, "What the hell happened with you and Ori the other night?!" His exasperated breaths became less arduous and he slowed noticeably, checking his temper. From the opposite line a fervor of utterances escaped. Fire-branded, he listened in on the response which he all too quickly cut short with a hard telling off of what had occurred. "I'm talking about that son of a bitch inspector. The one that's got his

picture in the press... uh... what the hell's his name? Starzynski! That fuck just turned my club inside out looking for some goddamned dead broad."

Leland paused and then spat angrily.

"I won't calm down! ... Well, it is."

He listened.

"That's right, goddamnit. And he's been asking a lot of questions about Ori... No, you wouldn't believe how close it was. Just as he was loading up—Yeah... yeah, I'm serious!—I am. I'm looking at them right now!"

There was another lull. Leland listened intently for a long moment. He swallowed hard before answering.

"All right... All right. I've got it."

Leland slammed the receiver down into the cradle. He disconnected just as the group outside made their departure.

Red in the face, he advanced through the hall and carried himself past the foyer to the front entrance, then out onto the sidewalk. There he lit a cigarette for himself, inhaling on it deeply. A bright luminescence filtered through the slate sky.

Though insufferable, the humid air was enlivened by the glint of the sheltered sun, which shone prevalent. He stood and watched with a renewed calm as the automobile drove off in the distance.

At a gentle pace, the military car gradually pulled away from the cabaret and the tiny square. Lynn was seated in the back between James and Stokley. Drawn intuitively by the inkling that they were being watched, she shifted her position to peer out at the departing view of the club through the rectangular frame of the rear window. Staring back at her, Leland stood at the entrance steadily diminishing in size as the car pulled further and further away.

"How did you know he works at the docks?" Starzynski asked while he drove, his question directed to Hurkos, seated beside him on the passenger side. The commander spoke in German with a casual yet curious tone.

"He brings attention to himself. It is easy for me to receive images that pertain to him."

"Was there anything definitive?"

"The automobile."

"So not him, but the automobile?"

"I suspect him," Hurkos responded in his native tongue. "He's probably the one." Certain and confident in his power of divination, Hurkos was not at all hesitant to place the culpability on the Negro, Ori Lablanche.

In the rearview mirror, Starzynski inadvertently caught James listening in on their conversation. A recognizable clarity, a certain awareness discernable within the American man's gaze told of his understanding of the German that the two men spoke.

"We should take him in, then," the commander responded sustaining eye contact with James.

Upon James' realization that he was being observed, he turned away reflexively.

Immoderate blackness.

The screech of a train. Dim red lights. Sparks. The porter's face fell aghast with a sallow pallor. Desperate and wild-eyed, he extended his hand in reach of James.

"Help me... please!" he strained.

James clung with one arm to an upper rung of the railing and was stretched out perilously, his available hand tendered to the helpless porter. Not far below, the trusses sped past, a blur that threatened to churn up anything unfortunate enough to happen into its awful snare.

"Oh—careful, James!—Here, James... give me your hand! James, give me your hand!"

James could hear Lynn's voice call. In an inexplicable turn of events, it was he, James, who was now near to the tracks, not the porter, and Lynn who was at the back of the train doubled over the railing. She struggled, her arm held taut, reaching down to obtain a hold of his outstretched hand. Upon her head was the felt hat, and on the hat was the long silver hatpin in the shape of a feather. As she strained to pull him up, saving him from certain death, the hat and the pin were taken by the wind and lost.

Once more everything was steeped in a void.

Atop the low railing, James hung, caught in the soft red glow of the external lamps. He reached out. Below him the porter implored, his voice lost against the harsh screech of the train.

"Help me, please!"

Powerless, the porter struggled to keep hold. James scrambled down, lowered himself, and reached his hand out.

The porter called for help and fought to reaffirm his grip. In desperation and having greatly compromised himself, he attempted to take James' extended hand. James just managed to stretch out far enough to grab the leather strap of his camera and yank it free from the porter's grip. The porter lost his hold and fell feebly to the tracks where he was tossed by the passing trusses. Fallen away onto the tracks below, the porter slipped into the darkness, swallowed by the depths of the tunnel.

A noisome, black, unnatural void pervaded.

"*Nice to meet you, James Corbin-Hale,*" was bespoken in Stokley's voice.

In the dark the Englishman, a mere shade of his true self, stood on the quay at the river's edge. Wrath-like, he gazed as the trunk slipped away sinking down into the murky depths.

With a jolt, James awoke drenched in a cold, damp sweat. Beneath him the mattress felt as if a morass. The tiny room he had been accommodated with was to be his sanctuary no more. His thin wetted sheets thrown off, James groggily turned himself over and pulled aside the curtain at the cell window above his bed to reveal the crisp half-light of the vestigial hours of another inescapable day.

Out-of-doors, the clear morning sky shone overhead. The summer sun broke out over Warsaw, blanketing her in an ominous, reddish tinge. James watched the sun rise from a bridge. He leaned heavily against the stone balustrade far above the rushing water of the high river Vistula.

Slung around James' neck by its thin leather strap was the boxy motion-picture camera. Out of a sort of veneration he delicately held it directly in front of him, not to film but rather to turn it over in his hands, to thoughtfully

examine it. The refractive curvature of its polished lens glinted back at him—an all-seeing eye that beheld an impartial truth to those who dared wield it. James removed the leather strap without ceremony, mechanically bowing forward to release it from around his burdened neck. He slid open the back of the camera grasped securely in one of his hands, careful to pull out the spent spool of delicate film it contained. He set the camera aside atop one of the balustrade's support posts and then wrapped the film in a handkerchief, placing this safely into a front pant pocket.

A short time afterward, James stepped unburdened from the far-flung bridge and headed back toward the newly awakened city. There was no longer any picture camera. In James' eyes and about his person there radiated closure, which left a very satisfied impression.

## 42

Several Englishmen loitered in the lobby of the lodging house, mingling near the front entrance. They seemed restless and anxious where they stood ready to leave with their well-packed baggage at their sides. Marquard was engaged at the counter poring over the register with the concierge, a short stout fellow who, telling by the unchecked expression on his priggish face, seemed irked by the Frenchman's persistent manner.

"I'm sorry," the concierge said unapologetically, "I don't normally work the front desk. But—"

"He's here. This is the address."

"Sir, if you don't see his name then you must have the wrong address."

Marquard flipped through the register.

"James Corbin-Hale. Are you sure?!"

"The name isn't in the register."

"Not that I can see."

"Then you must have the wrong address."

James unknowingly entered the lobby. The front bell chimed in announcement of an arrival. At the sound Marquard turned—He had got his man.

"Ah, this is him!" the prefect exclaimed. "How delightful," said he, quite pleased at the good fortune of James' appearance. "Excuse me, Monsieur Hale!"

James stopped dead. It was the prefect who had the initiative.

"May I have a word with you for a moment?"

"Monsieur la Prefect?! Why, yes. Yes of course, monsieur. My apologies." James straightened his posture ready to receive him. Deft of hand, he withdrew his papers from the inside pocket of his coat and with the utmost confidence presented them to the prefect. "I must have forgotten. Here you are."

"Is that so?"

"I would have turned these in earlier, I assure you, if it weren't for... well—"

"I see?!" the French man said curiously.

Keen to James' error, Marquard snatched the papers handed to him. In turn he fished into his own pocket and drew out the small envelope containing James' personal effects which Starzynski had had acquired for him days earlier. The prefect had intuitively calculated through their interaction and found

himself barring the only exit; he had advertently positioned himself between James and the front door.

"That's funny," he said with an arrogant smirk, "I was actually here to return this to you."

He opened the envelope and triumphantly removed James' previously stolen papers, which until this point he had decidedly withheld. In the baring of the two documents beside one another, thus comparing them, it was obvious that there were differences.

"That's odd?!" Marquard continued. "These were brought in to us only yesterday."

"What's that?" was James' only response.

Feigning concern, Marquard scrutinized the papers.

"There appear to be discrepancies."

The prefect's tone betrayed his deception. James figured it out. Inwardly he recoiled, pained to realize he had been set up and frustrated at his gullibility. He accurately surmised that Marquard had prearranged to have his papers stolen, and that he had just now walked naively into a trap.

"No, this isn't right. This isn't right at all," Marquard confidently hummed. He then tucked the papers away and forcibly grasped James by the arm. "Could you please come with me, monsieur?"

Caught as he was, James consented to the Frenchman's request and cooperated without complaint. Together the two men quit the lodging house. They were held off at the curb. A need for pause due to the midday congestion came prior to their crossing the busy street. Marquard took the opportunity to exercise his authority and patted James' jacket, an apparent check for any concealed weapons.

"Really," James objected, "is this necessary?" He espoused taking on innocent airs, "Monsieur, I tell you, I've done nothing whatsoever."

Very near to them in the street was a trolley stop where a crowded trolley car had come to a halt; there were two cars in actuality, coupled together.

"We'll see about that," was the prefect's ambiguous response.

James permitted himself to be subjected to the Frenchman's scrutiny. The search turned up no weapon. Satisfied, Marquard recommenced to guide James across the street by the arm. His captive went along complacently enough, offering the prefect no further resistance. Ahead of them the trolley continued on its tracked course, and its bell rang in way of warning when it crossed the two men's path. Forced inactive while the coupled cars advanced—for the brief moment the trolley took to gradually acquire speed and pass them by—the two men had no choice but to wait.

James recognized a possible chance to flee and seized upon the opportunity. With a hard shrug he broke away from his captor and darted after the trolley. Marquard commanded James to halt and limped heavily in pursuit. It was a struggle for the prefect, impeded as he was, to gain ground on the spry young man. James easily caught up to the trolley, and given his advantage, took a calculated risk by allowing the trolley to increase in speed, putting extra distance between himself and Marquard before he scrambled aboard. At the rear of the car, James hoisted himself up by a bottom rung of the surrounding railing and threw himself over, where in triumph he stood grinning from ear to ear.

Close behind, Marquard pushed himself; he dug deeply for strength. And for his quarry, who was in awe of such nerve, James witnessed his assailant

manage to somehow catch up. Before James' eyes and quite to his chagrin, Marquard, having barely made it, grabbed a hold of the railing and miraculously heaved himself up.

Astounded at such an accomplishment, James' jaw dropped agog. He staggered backward in a bewildered daze. It was beneath James' ethic to not have regard for the prefect's doggedness. He was incapable of stooping so low as to relinquish the Frenchman of his achievement by breaking his grip or assassinating his effort with the heel of his shoe.

James was choked by disappointment and cursed Marquard's determinacy. In the same breath, he wheeled around and made a run for it through the crowded trolley car in a hapless reattempt at escape.

At the back, a few attentive passengers assisted Marquard to get safely onto the car. Stayed from overexertion, crouched upon his hands and knees, the prefect remained enfeebled while he caught his breath, his eyes affixed on James in the aisle ahead. Far to the front of the trolley car, desperate and panicked, James pined for a way out.

The trolley conductor, attracted by the ruckus, glanced blindly over the heads of the passengers and ordered the crowd to settle down. In an unchallengeable tone he barked out several angry words in regards to renegeing antagonistic fares. It was evident that he remained ignorant of the two black riders he had on board. A number of the passengers, crammed in the aisle further along, chastened James with sidelong glances. They were paralyzed and indignant, all but capable of expressing their consternation at the unwelcome aggression. Any initiative that the passengers might have had to rebuke the hostile behavior of the ruffian that had boarded was flagged by a telling reluctance on their part to act. Intimidation was all that refused them recourse; though intimidation was, in appearance, the very order of the day.

James pushed to the front of the crowded aisle, was spotted by the conductor—which prompted him to veer off to one side—and bounded over a few seated ladies. The open-sided trolley traveled too fast to ditch. James' indiscretion solicited an outcry. Afraid for their own wellbeing, the two women recoiled from the mad actions of the unruly stranger. Oblivious to the ladies' objections and to the danger posed if he were to dare abandon the trolley, he started for the open sill—with no solution to be found within—his thoughts rested outside the trolley car. Watchful of the tracks and pavement that blurred past, James was quick to spot a second trolley advance toward them on the opposite track.

Marquard got himself up and without a moment to spare worked his way through the dumbfounded crowd toward the American. "That man there!" he assertively bellowed. "That man is under arrest!"

The pressing situation, disintegrating to what it had, forced James to concede to a more questionable fate than that of allowing himself to remain stuck where he was. In his desperation he clambered onto the railing deaf to the wary screams and frightful hollers of the passengers.

"There, that man there!" Marquard spit. "Get down from there. You're under arrest."

Pressed and aware that the prefect was closing in, James, against his better judgment, leapt across to the trolley on the opposite track just as it passed. This proved to be a hazard he would chance which repaid him handsomely when he caught the railing and pulled himself on board. There he hung to the

ledge and waved unvanquished, and with a grin once more out of insolent glee, watched the prefect pass in defeat, stranded on the other trolley.

James' victory was, in short order, curtailed when at the next stop he was given a toss that almost tore his jacket, thrown forcibly from the trolley by the infuriated driver. Easily twice his size, the man came down on James, and with an iron grasp on the American's jacket collar, yanked him up and fiercely lifted him from the ground. A slip of his arms out from his jacket and James retreated. He did not dare stick around to see what might happen; he simply took off into the crowd and vanished down a side alley.

Where James had been forced to disembark was at the previous stop, near to where he had made his initial escape.

From the side alley he traipsed back around to the front of the lodging house, having chosen the narrow, unused space between buildings as his path. Slow and deliberate in his next actions, James held back to gain control of his nerves before venturing forward.

"Come on, think," he could have been heard to mutter if he was not on his own. "No. Never. He'd never think me to return." At the corner he stuck his head out to confirm that all was clear before he dared a re-entry of the lobby. "A cinch," he said under his breath when he passed the front desk.

"Hey, wait!" the concierge shouted upon his sighting James reenter. James heard, ignored him, and passed by without a word. The young man was too lazy to attempt to stop him, supposing he would catch the American on his way out.

James barged into his empty room. There wasn't a moment to spare. He rifled the drawers, quickly collected a few articles of clothing, and piled them haphazardly into a small leather travel bag. Without further thought he went straight to the room's tiny closet. He donned a fresh jacket and reached for the topmost shelf where he brought down a cardboard box, and in opening it, pulled out several reels of spent picture camera film stored in tin canisters, which he transferred into the leather bag. He reached into his pant pocket and withdrew the spool of film that he had carefully wrapped in a handkerchief after removing it from his camera earlier that morning and threw it on top, promptly zipping the bag shut.

In exiting his room, James made sure to lock the bolt from the outside and slide the key under the door before he rushed down the narrow stairs, often having to squeeze past fellow boarders who were coming and going. In fact, it seemed as if James was not the only one in a rush to acquire his belongings and leave. Intent on his purpose, he single-mindedly made it down to the rez de chaussée where he passed unmolested through the bustling common room, ignorant of anything beyond his own concerns. James entered into the lobby where behind the concierge's desk sat the same stout young Englishman. Chancing the question, James approached him and inquired as to whether or not he had seen Stokley.

"Stokley left a short while ago," the concierge brusquely informed him. "He was looking for you." With suspect directness the young man was quick to point out, "You're not in the register." And sure to add an amount of effrontery, he stated, "I'm doing Stokley a favor by not saying anything. What was with that French inspector anyway? Are you and Stokley in some kind of trouble?"

Not to deign to answer with any immediacy, James diverted his eye contact and glanced past the young man into the room. Through the open portal he observed the common room, more full than it had ever been. The mahogany

radio was tuned in to England's national radio channel. Over the air, soft tunes played intermittently between news updates.

Gathered together, not a single individual listened without interest for the latest broadcast. A great number of bags were scattered throughout the tiny room; the divan was piled high with luggage, and obstructing the stairs were several enormous steamer trunks. There was an anxiety in the air and a nervousness that was contagious.

"No. There was a misunderstanding, though we worked it out." James stated this prevarication with conviction.

Unnerved by the assembly of Britons, his glance wandered around the disorderly goings-on of the overcrowded common room. Funny, he thought, in having been so worked up he had not taken notice before he had proceeded to his accommodations.

"What's happening, exactly?"

"As you can see," the young man sardonically replied, "things here are getting a tad complicated."

"What are you talking about?" James furthered.

"You haven't heard?!"

Silent, James shook his head.

"All British have been ordered out of Poland on the behest of His Royal Majesty. It's only just recently come over the radio. Where have you been? The Polish army is mobilizing. They're convinced of a German invasion."

## 43

An apprehensive pulse pounded at James' temples as he raced up the few deeply set steps that led to the American women's boarding house. Upon his initial entrance into the lobby, James was thunderstruck. There he was confronted by a completely opposite scene than that which he had left behind him at the English Lodging House for Men. The women's boarding house had been vacated. The difference numbed him from thought, robbed of action. He stood confused and in shock, lost in the emptiness and silence of the lifeless building. An overwhelming feeling of loss had gotten a vehement grip upon him. James put a hand out to catch himself on a tiny wooden table placed against the wall.

He saw stars and may have fainted if not for the appearance of an old lady, erupting into a short hectic fit of coughs.

James spun toward the noise. Muddled and dependent on the entrance table, he nearly collapsed. At a loss for words, he found the elderly woman having just stepped down from a flight of stairs. The old woman's frail hand remained on the wood railing in support of her insignificant weight. Similar to one another, they both stood in the empty lobby seemingly enfeebled. She cleared her throat and addressed him.

"May I help you?"

Paralyzed for the moment, he could only stammer before being capable of fetching his own voice.

"I—I—I was—"

"I can't hear you, dearie," the woman blurted.

"I—I was hoping to find someone."



She cupped her ear, screwed up her face, and craned her thin neck forward. "What's that? I've got a deaf ear. You're going to have to speak up."

"I was hoping to find someone."

"Everyone has left," she stated meekly.

The woman began to withdraw. A pitying shake of her head and sad garbled comment to herself was her only conciliation to the naive young man who stood dumbfounded in her parlor. James was stifled by the elderly lady's curt reply.

"I'm looking for an American woman—an American woman." He raised his voice, "Her name is Lynn Daily. Do you know of her?" He repeated Lynn Daily, for the elderly woman's expression conveyed that the words he spoke were unclear. "Lynn Ann Daily. She came here only within the last few days. Please, it's so very important that I find her."

"You must be James," the old lady observed.

"Yes," James answered very much so in astonishment. Without the least reluctance, he inquired of the old woman,

"When did she leave?"

"Oh, the poor girl. She waited as long as she could." The elderly woman shook her head. "She waited and waited."

She drearily mulled over what she had recounted before enlightening him further still. "She said you would come!"

"Woman, when did she leave?!"

"They left for the train station an hour ago or so, she and that charming Englishman."

James stormed out of the boarding house and caught a trolley that was about to depart from its corner stop. On this occasion he made sure to pay the proper fare. Anxiousness wantonly taxed his every breath and with much trepidation he took to an unanticipated excursion on the overcrowded trolley car. Laid bare was a desperate nation, unfolding before his eyes during his passage through the heart of the Polish capital, scrambling in preparation for its defense.

An orderly hustle of men and equipment disrupted the normalcy of the typical congestion of the city streets. Open lorries piled high with army supplies passed in long, even trains. Limbers pulled by teams of horses hauling military gear, in a constant coming and going, drowned the paved roads in a sea of metallic-rimmed wagon wheels. Uniformed soldiers on the march toward the railway station hauled their helmets and burdensome haversacks, their rifles shouldered in preparation for their entrainment. These and all the thousands of various contrivances that made real the meticulous preparations of modern warfare teemed in a steady flow out of Warsaw.

For the length of the trolley's course, all the wider, heavily paved boulevards had been completely cordoned off to facilitate the passage of weighty tanks and massive pieces of artillery. Never was it observable in the faces of any of the mobilized young soldiers the enthusiasm or pretence brought about by the uniformity of the proud and dutiful serviceman, nor in those ceremonious military actions that were being exploited contemporaneously throughout the whole of Poland. A near riotous apprehension was what steered the country's motives and engaged her complex mechanism for warfare, not the superhuman heroism required of a righteous cause and its ideological fulfillment.

Here and there isolated groups of soldiers were scattered about; some crowded the sidewalks, and were every so often incomprehensibly compelled to cross the streets in large numbers, causing a perturbable disruption of traffic.

At one particular intersection the trolley was forced to a halt and made to wait as an entire cavalry column noisily crossed its path. Lancers with their ornate breastplates and distinct gilt and plumed helmets—each mounted atop a steed in blacks and bays, dapples and grays—completely enveloped the trolley car.

## 44

Sickly pink mobilization posters appeared for the first time on the streets of Polish cities. The president of the republic, they announced, had decreed the full mobilization of Poland's armed forces. Warsaw was fearful, a soon to be beflagged and delirious city.

A harried mob had gathered outside the principal entrance to the central train terminal. Many knew their appointments and with indifference elbowed past to enter the station. More were without direction and loitered aimlessly below the broad awning. A uniformed soldier appeared in the entry and strode a few paces forward to address the crowd. The man read off of a clipboard from where he stood on the landing, clearing his throat before his announcement into a megaphone. Straight off, he informed the crowd that to tarry in the entryways was strictly forbidden, stiffly declaring that only one civilian train was scheduled to depart the station before noon, and without clarification on the train's destination, notified them on which platform it was currently boarding. All other trains in and out of Warsaw were apparently sequestered strictly to facilitate troop movement.

James followed the heated push of the crowd into the cool void of the vaulted terminal. At the big board he double-checked the posted timetable to verify the scant information the soldier had provided. The train's destination was denoted—*VIENNA*. James made a mad rush to the appropriate platform with the slim hope of finding Lynn. From the dim terminal James exited into the stifling brilliance of the day; the strong contrast from interior to exterior light held him back briefly. Once he was acclimated, he pushed himself forward having stepped out onto the platform where an unmanageable throng hastened to climb aboard the choked train. In the midst of this sea of people and luggage, James searched hopelessly. He was pulled to-and-fro and often had to move against the inherent inclination of the surging crowd in order to make his way down the congested platform.

A small opening was presented to James. He lunged at it. Luck and what was gained from the fortunate instance when the multitude divided provided a clearing for several paces in which James spotted Lynn not far from him preparing to board the train from the platform. She stood aloof, her back to him, accompanied by a train porter who assisted her with her baggage. Relief surged in James' chest. He strode forward and called out her name.

"Lynn!"

His cry went unheard, for at that very moment the train whistle was inopportunistically blown. Struck agog, he once more cried her name during the course of his rush toward her.

"Lynn! Lynn Ann!"

To James' voice Lynn unmistakably was drawn. She spun in place and drove boldly ahead in an attempt to get through to him. The moment she did, the

break closed on her barring her path. In desperation, she fought against the push of the crowd between them.

"James. Oh, please, James!"

James reached for her hand and waded with a forcible determinacy through the solid throng of people. The human swell was locked against him, and James found it difficult to gain distance. The whistle resounded, whining feverishly with its incredulous cry, an exclaimer of doubt further rending a separation between the two lovers.

"Lynn! I'm so sorry, Lynn," James, in hopelessness, appealed to her as loudly as was possible.

She could hear him—most importantly she understood—yet it was impossible for her to make any headway. The bull-headed passengers were callous to the couple's plight and shoved against her, carrying her backward close to the train as it slowly began to depart. Lynn was swept up into the passenger car, her hand braced behind her to catch herself from falling. The last few passengers managed to jump on board just in time, pushing past her. In a dire attempt to stay the tide of her departure, she seized the handrail at the carriage's entrance. In the distance, James burst through the mob doing everything in his power to get to her. The train's whistle blew a few consecutive times. Slow to start, the locomotive steamed out away from the platform and a gradual increase in speed saw the train to its doubtless emergence from the station. Certain of James' love, Lynn inwardly rejoiced at his ardent refusal of their loss, yet in that same moment she was saddened to watch him run alongside the train hopelessly losing ground.

Out of James' reach, Lynn clung to the rail at the car's opening. Ferried from him at a swelled rate of speed, any hope for them to reunite was dashed. She leaned out of the train and waved frantically, unable to hold back tears.

"James... James!"

"I'm sorry..." James blurted out. The opportunity was lost, his heart rent. "Lynn, I didn't mean for this." He recognized that he was not to make it to her. "Lynn... Lynn!..."

"James... I love you, James!" she cried endearingly.

James could do nothing while the train, ahead of a stream of dense black smoke, stolidly left him behind. Dejected, he stopped and stood in place for a long moment. His spirit sank, and the anguish he felt fed off his guilt, to be met with no comparison. The unutterable contempt he had for himself was akin to the ferocity of a consumptive flame, the cause of irreparable harm. Where he remained, breathless and stilted, James was bumped and pushed. The dispersing crowd milled about all around him. He was like this for a short while longer, long enough for the crowd to have thinned out a bit.

"In her own way, I think she understood you."

It was Stokley who addressed him.

"Wh—What?"

James immediately recognized the Englishman and pivoted, responding in a staggered voice, "Stokley, you—"

"What's the matter?" Stokley cut in. "Don't you trust your friends?!"

"I—you—"

"No?"

"No. I—I wasn't sure."

Stokley nodded. James' meaning was clear. The short lapse of discomfort Stokley suffered at the insinuation of his unspoken secret was broken when James redirected the course of their dialogue.

"You're not leaving?" he asked.

"Think I'll stick around," Stokley answered on cue. "Warsaw is no different than any other place. Things never change that much. Besides, I've gotten use to it here."

"I left a few things of mine back in the room. I won't be needing them. Do whatever you want with them. The key's under the door," James told him.

"Sure thing. Oh yeah, before I forget," Stokley said as he pulled something from within his outer coat pocket, "she asked me to give this to you."

With a thoughtless smirk Stokley handed him a folded letter, inside of which was the silver hatpin James had given Lynn as a love gift. He turned and without comment respectfully left James to his own devices.

Near enough to the station for the rumble of arriving and departing locomotives to be audible, James sat on a park bench and read the letter Lynn had written him. From amidst the genial shade and to the seclusion of the park grounds, a freshness and clarity was lent by the leafy coverage provided by the outstretched branches of several giant spruce trees, which effectively obscured the surrounding buildings. It was odd, he idly reflected, how isolated it felt to be seated in this little patch of pastoral green at the core of a great urban center turned upside down with the tumult of an unsure conflict.

*Dearest James,*

*I haven't much time to write. I am to take the first train bound for Vienna. Please forgive me for not properly having said goodbye. Though I remind myself over and over, it is you who is not here with me. If it would make a difference, I might ask you why. Would it? How could you explain?*

*Why are we at the whims of such cruel times? I hear you tell me again, as you once did when we were both happy together, that we all must do what our hearts tell us is true. I ask then, what is there for me, my love? When what my heart tells me and what I fear most, is that for me the truth, simply put, is that what I want doesn't matter enough to you. And to ask more of you may be asking too much.*

*In Vienna we are to board the express bound for Paris. I will wait for you there as long as I can. If you look, you'll find me there, where first we met.*

*Yours,*

*Lynn*

Aboard the train, in a stuffy, open, and overcrowded third class passenger car, Lynn had been fortunate enough to be seated beside a window. With a mechanical gesture she unfastened the latches and slid the top half of the window down letting in a soft, sultry breeze. She gazed, thoughtful of her plight while the train passed unbarred through the brightly lit countryside.

Tears dried and sullen eyed, her head pressed against the glass, Lynn stared sleepily out the compartment window.

For how long she might wait for James, she could not be sure. The distance fate would place between them was too vast for mortal love to abridge. Though still light outside, she felt the exhaustion of the last few days irresistibly pull her in and out of consciousness. She found herself powerless to resist its sway.

The train by now was safely away from the city, and as she fell fast asleep there was a sense of her escaping a pervasive danger.

## 45

The evening was the most splendid of the summer thus far. At a wooden cafe table the Frenchman sat. A thick liquor brimmed from a glass of ill-capacity, priced thrice what was the cost elsewhere in Warsaw. Previous to that beverage, several others of inadequate size had been served, as was evident by the many emptied tumblers stacked upside down before him. Throughout the evening he had patronized numerous other establishments, though it was the lively atmosphere of the current one that captivated him most, a concert-cafe, like those popular in Paris before the Great War.

Beneath the harsh glare of the electric lamp and the white shine of the footlights set upon the raised stage, a throng of ladies and gentlemen were gathered in jollity together at the tables cramped in the open court of a sort of cloister, constructed of wood and painted thick with a bright red lead-based paint. Opposite the stage was a brass-railed bar, the high spot of cafe nightlife. On it, the many colored bottled liquors lined in neat rows below its lengthy mirror shone magnificent in the sparkle of the electric bulbs. At the head of this menagerie was the cafe singer. Wholly unlike les femmes de la café-chantant of the French capital, in Warsaw she was under appreciated, of lowly means, a performer with neither recognition of nor respect for her abilities.

The woman, who sang for the audience that cloudless evening, had finished her set with a miserable rendition of

*"Ah! Je la Trouve Trop Forte."  
Un jeune homme qui se disait Baron,  
M'offre un hotel et deux voitures  
En baissant les yeux je m'approche,  
Mais en voila bien du nouveau,  
Le Baron n'etait qu'un calicot.*

[A young man who said he was a Baron,  
Offered me a town house and two carriages  
Lowering my eyes, I went towards him,  
But here's something new,  
The Baron was only a shop assistant.]

The garishly painted features of her bloated, youthened face, her mouth held wide on an uneven note, seemed diabolic under the floodlights. The depraved way she heaved her huge chest and invitingly screwed up her features tickled the Frenchman's plied sensibility. A good chuckle chased the remainder of the poison he drank down to the pith of his empty belly.

Weak applause accompanied her exit. The interlude was an opportunity for the barmaids to replenish their patrons' drinks. Before too long, the prefect was quite inebriated. His faith in the barmaid's honesty was ill-advised when he passed her his wallet to pay for the next round. Her character was not above shirking a customer, but on this occasion she did not bother. The thought

might not have occurred to her, or Marquard for that matter, though it had occurred to someone else. Seated at a neighboring table was a lone gentleman—a fop of sorts—in a top hat and grey suit. His critical observance of the prefect's carelessness and demeanor attracted the stranger to a plan of dubious intent.

The next act was a young girl of the man's acquaintance, a certain prostitute whom he used from time to time for various corruptions. A favorite turn of hers, which she performed with alacrity, was the neat trick of waylaying a wealthy customer with whom she had had intercourse. To have sexual congress, which she was always insistent upon, was her way of psychologically overcoming her frigidity.

At her entrance onto the stage, she routinely scanned the tables for her gentleman friend, her Kochanek-her lover.

This Kochanek was the first member of the audience to applaud. The start of the man's clap turned Marquard in his seat. The spectators were prompted to join in the applause. A gracious nod accompanied the gentleman's notice of Marquard.

Deferred by the stranger's pleasantries, the prefect re-faced the young cafe singer. Something in the man's dark hair and fair features reminded the Frenchman of James Corbin-Hale. Otherwise, the gentleman was completely forgettable.

On stage the girl caught eye contact with her lover. When she broke into song the gentleman gestured to Marquard, a subtle suggestion that he was to be her mark. An exaggerated nod directed toward the orchestra indicated that she understood.

The Frenchman was instantly taken in by the girl's charms. The verse she began with was all too familiar to him.

*La-bas, la-bas, tout au bout de la terre  
La-bas, bien loin tout pres du Luxembourg,  
Fut un vieillard, Chansonnier populaire...*

[Over there, over there, at the end of the earth,  
Over there, far away, close by the Luxembourg,  
Was an old man, a popular songmaker...]

Sung perfectly in his native French, the old tune and the way she sang, those same pretty mannerisms of the best ladies of the café-chantant, transported him back to his days of youth. When she stepped from the raised stage to the floor, she had each man in the audience captivated by the feeling that he were personally being addressed by her, the prefect in particular. A bat of her eyes and click of the tongue greeted him as she reintroduced the verse:

*La-bas, la-bas, tout au bout de la terre  
La-bas, bien loin tout pres du Luxembourg,  
Fut un vieillard, Chansonnier populaire...*

The prefect sang along with her under his breath. He, she was of the utmost in confidence, would leave with her on that evening. Scarce the whole song was performed before she wound up seated in his lap.

The intentions of the prefect were not wholly without a slanderous thought; he had entertained the pleasure of her in his lap. He was as human as anyone

and equally as flawed. At heart, though, companionship was his sole aim, and as a gentleman always, he kept his hands to himself. Once she had concluded her set she re-approached Marquard. No one was more surprised than he. Her presence at his table hastened the time, and he was incapable of recalling how or when she had spirited him from the cafe.

On the boulevard she led him without restraint.

"I don't think I know your name," she chided in French.

"Modest—" he answered, unable to continue for she had a habit of talking over him.

"It's a nice name, I think. Isn't it, Modest?"

"I suppose."

"I'm happy to be out of that hole. Don't you feel better for it, Modest?"

Marquard stumbled for an answer, uncomfortable about how to address her.

"Oh," she blurted, "I am a silly girl! Friends call me Nan. You can call me Nan, Modest."

"Nan," he bowed.

She curtsied, "Modest."

Her gaiety intoxicated him further. He absolutely reeled from it. Compelled by some caprice, she reached out and hugged the prefect's neck. She lacked wholly in self-control and could not help but kiss him full on the lips.

For Marquard it was a shock. Her lips were supple, her kiss soft-not at all what he might have expected.

Dumbstruck, the prefect meant to shun the girl's advance once he had caught his breath. He formulated his thoughts, ready with a delicate reprisal when a coupled trolley car rang at a stop near to them in the street.

"Let's," she broke off her embrace and skipped toward the trolley, Marquard's hand grasped in hers.

"I—Arrr!—Nan!"

"Now, don't you be a ninny, Modest!"

Marquard willingly conceded to being hustled onboard by the girl.

"Where is it, then, that we're going?"

"Let us take to Lazienki Park."

The fare for each was paid by the prefect. Situated at the rear of the car, the couple stood at the end rail. The trolley was sparsely occupied so late in the evening. Yet, as there were plenty of empty seats available, it was Nan's fancy to stand at the back.

Nan remarked, "You mind that I kissed you?"

"It isn't that," he retracted.

"It isn't so strange that a young lady might find herself attracted to an older gentleman."

Marquard fixed his hair. "Why Lazienki Park?"

He threw the question into the conversation in an attempt to stem the awkward feeling he got from her display of affection for him. It was at this juncture that Marquard had his last abstemious thought of the evening: to part from Nan's company once he had escorted her through Lazienki Park.

"I know a secluded place," was her answer.

Together they leaned close to the railing, and consequentially she brushed against him. Nan's perfume wafted to his nostrils, and a rush of heat overcame him. At once his faculties were in an utter state of collapse, a loss of all cognisance initiated by the whiff of the scent Nan wore. The change over him

was total. A man apart, he broke into the first few verses of the song she sang at the start of her set.

*La-bas, la-bas, tout au bout de la terre  
La-bas, bien loin tout pres du Luxembourg,  
Fut un vieillard, Chansonnier populaire...*

Nan was humored by the sudden change. Not unimpressed by the prefect's baritone voice, she squealed and cupped his mouth when he sang further.

Laughingly, the couple detrained at the stop for Lazienki Palace and surrounding park.

"What happened back there?" Nan chanced, humored at the prefect's odd behavior.

In his delirium, their sojourn south of the city proper was haunted by apparitions of personal introspection, a wakeful dream, revealed to Marquard in the form of a stream of bizarre encounters with several of the passengers who shared in the cramped trolley. The first had been the French train porter, whose death the prefect had connected to James Corbin-Hale. This was followed closely by the specter of a French soldier in the antiquated uniform of an infantryman circa nineteen fifteen; Marquard had in fact been the recipient of an encounter with his former self as he was in his early twenties, honored and ready to serve on the Western Front. For the remainder of the excursion he sporadically sighted Hales' likeness, whether it had been a businessman seated not far up the aisle, a woman of the working class, or on the last occasion, Nan herself. The visage of Hale taunted him persistently throughout.

"What happened back there?" she repeated. "You lost all your color."

"I thought I recognized someone. Let us forget about it."

"Well, I think we will!"

Nan offered her arm. Once in the park grounds, she kept to the periphery. There was activity near the palace on the water from various points along the man-made lagoon. To the east of the palace and within the park's limits stood the officer's college and several other official structures. Nan indicated to Marquard that these were all occupied for the facilitation of the troops and recently closed to the general public. The amphitheater, she mentioned, which was tucked on the eastern bank of the lagoon, marked the boundary of the restricted area. It was here where Nan suggested she take him, though not before she went well out of her way to circumvent certain obstacles.

"Technically, we're not suppose to be here," she explained. "The theater has been locked up since July. This late at night we shouldn't have a problem, though. For the most part, the sentries are posted on the paths around the palaces.

This way nobody will notice us, our going out of our way, that is."

A gentleman walked in the company of a woman. Arm in arm the couple was observable at a bend.

"There is someone up ahead," Marquard discreetly pointed out, not certain that Nan was aware of the couple's approach.

"Oh, there are plenty of folks around."

The gentleman greeted them, "Dobry wieczor," in passing. His companion kept her eyes to the ground.

Nan smiled and continued, "Nobody's much interested in going the whole way 'round the park."



"I see that."

Nan hugged Marquard's arm tightly.

"You never told me who it was that you mistook on the tram."

"Mistook?"

The prefect's unsteady glance gleamed his stupor. He was thus far able to control his deportment. It was mentally that he was unsettled. Nan found he needed a bit of encouragement.

"You were deathly pale," she said, her arm kept tight to him.

"Oh, that—"

"Who was it you thought you saw?"

"No one, really. It wasn't anyone important."

"It's quite lovely out, is it not?"

"What's that?"

Nan released her hold and diverged from the tree-lined park path where she entered onto a broad lawn. She sprung up balancing on one foot then the other to remove her high-heeled shoes. The moon shone brightly above her, the only light provided them as the twosome trespassed further into the confines of Lazienki Park.

"It's a lovely evening."

"Shall we, then?" Marquard belted and bent to remove his own shoes, a low genuflection, unexpected from his impairment.

"Careful," Nan cautioned, observant of the prefect's rather sudden movement.

The rush of blood to his head struck with a flash of heat and threw off his equilibrium.

"Oh—Oh, careful!—careful," she started.

He toppled over, unbalanced. An attempt on his part to compensate for the forward momentum of his fall landed him awkwardly upon his back. A deft heave upward and he sprang gracefully to his feet.

Beside herself with surprise, Nan hooted at the proclivity of his success.

"Encore," she encouraged. "Encore!"

Marquard was unbridled; disarray had grip of his every function. He bowed deeply then collapsed to a seated position upon the grass. Nan was choked by her laughter, and with a heave assisted the prefect back to his feet. Tears ran down her cheeks.

A pallid expression came over Marquard's face.

"There's that look again!"

She backed off from him for a moment.

"Who is it you're seeing now?" she half-jested.

Her words were missed, so concentrated was he on the concealment of the delusion he was under. Marquard forced a stoic indifference and turned from Nan, barely able to contain his nerve.

"There weren't any problems on board that I'm aware of."

It was the first time the apparition had spoken. The prefect was stilted by the voice.

"What is the matter?" Nan uttered.

She took hold of his hand; her touch was soft, obvious. A cursory glance confirmed that it was hers.

"I didn't mean—"

"Nan, that's quite all right."

He reaffirmed her transitory grip with a light tug and guided her across the lawn. Where the lawn terminated at the man-made lagoon a grove of spruce

collected, encircling the amphitheater. The bulk of the stone structure consisted of the exposed auditorium, divided from the stage by a narrow moat.

The couple's nocturnal entrance into the auditorium opposite the stage went without observance. The staggered seating of the arena encompassed an open area in size and shape similar to the stage that was set across the moat.

"This is the place," Nan announced under her breath.

"Need we whisper?" the prefect muttered too loudly to effectively conceal his voice.

"Well, I don't know," Nan shouted mirthfully.

"Well, I wouldn't know either," answered Marquard in kind.

The drunken twosome laughed heartedly.

"What is this place?" Marquard advanced.

Nan ignored the inconsequential question and took to the flight of broad concrete steps which were the auditorium's seats. Her footfall was light and deft, unlike his, stilted, precarious, placed heedful of the intoxicating effects of the alcohol he had consumed.

The humid air of the man-made lagoon stifled at the collar and shoulders of the prefect's apparel. His discomfort was not entirely brought about by the climb—the allure and vigorous youth of the girl, her capricious presence, projected from in the auditorium and carried down to the arena—it too had a direct effect upon him. Above, she paced through a simple dance step, a graceful trot in time to a blithe tune she hummed satisfactorily aloud to herself. Marquard watched her as he had when a spectator at the concert-cafe, pleased with himself for the charms of the company he kept. A wet, mirrored look in Nan's eyes reflected the prefect's vanity directly back at him.

Nan struck a pose, her back arched, a leg held crooked forward, her toe pointed to the steps. The dress she wore was of muslin, the bodice tied off at the back, laced down to the waist of her skirts. Hand behind her back, she slowly undid the fastening. She stood before the man below, undaunted. A moist, flirtatious turn of her painted lips was the only show of her brash intentions.

No sooner had the partial idea accommodated itself, that their behavior was inappropriate and compromising, then Nan had liberated herself of the constraints of her top. Pulled open, her arms slipped through and the sleeveless bodice hung freely, attached as it were at the waist. Nan's breasts were pert, not heavy, white and consisted almost entirely of the nipples and large areola, full with blood, swelled pink and thrust outward from her flesh. He could count her ribs. A pitiful empathy impeded the rush of sexual energy which surged in his loins. She was unaware that he was emotionally impervious to her seduction. His mute, stunned appearance encouraged her designs. Pleased with herself, she slinked down one step at a time toward him.

Instead of engaging her, Marquard withdrew, to which she wryly remarked, "We are shy." Nan strode out into the arena. The moat that separated the stage and the auditorium barred him from further retraction. She came swiftly upon him.

The prefect failed to vocalize his dispute. His mind swelled. A cold sweat upset his demeanor. In his incomprehensible delirium, Hale bespoke:

"Really, is this necessary?"

The utterance was emitted from in the proximity of the stage. Marquard pivoted. He reeled from Nan, his arms involuntarily brought upward. She

countered the gesture and swiveled with him, putting her back to the water. The couple fenced with their arms. The melee was playful initially.

"Oh, don't be like that!" she managed.

Any advantage she had had was lost. He gained opposition and secured a grip on each of her wrists. It dawned on her, of a sudden, the seriousness of his rebuke.

"Monsieur, I tell you. I've done nothing whatsoever," the specter voiced.

Marquard's eyes trembled, their focus beyond Nan. She glanced over her shoulder, the heels of her bare feet teetered at the water's edge.

"Careful!" Nan cried, startled to realize that she was being handled with such untoward care. "Careful, Modest.

Watch what you're doing!"

An overwhelming desire to shuck the degradation of the sexual impulses that she brought out in him, a revulsion to her vapid indecency, drove him to bind himself to the mast, to shove her into the moat.

The moment lingered in which Nan fell with a whoop into the shallow waters of the man-made lagoon. Marquard meditated on the fall, on his lack of impulse control, and re-enacted the event repeatedly in his mind's eye. In the midst of his flight, he observed that same young fop, the one in the top hat from the concert-cafe, emerge from beneath the thicket of spruce and ease Nan of the humiliation of her predicament. The prefect recalled his hesitation; a quarrel had erupted between she and the stranger. It was evident to him that they were familiar with one another.

"You've let him go!" Nan was heard to chastise.

"I?" the man had professed.

Marquard's return journey was a convoluted one. He blacked out on several occasions, and when awake he was doggedly pestered by wild delusions. Those people who encountered him thought him mad. A fever raged in his mind, only subsiding after a rather long lapse of unconsciousness.

The senseless hours found him seated at the end of a platform in one of Warsaw's railway stations. The immense iron latticework of the terminal's canopy arched overhead. The artificial light infusing the open space offered a sense of security; in contrast, the wide black hole of the terminal exit seemed a wounding void. Where he lay perfectly still, he pondered the while sparing himself the embarrassment of being placed under arrest for dipsomania were he to remain on the emptied streets. A clarity was lent to this idea of discretion, taken the state that he found himself. Not yet entirely sobered, the sentry called upon to remove his person had taken Marquard by surprise when addressing him.

"Pardon me, sir. I am afraid you are not welcome here. It has been suggested that you leave."

The prefect was promptly escorted from the premises of the railway terminal and abandoned in a small dismal park across the way near enough to the station for the rumble of arriving and departing locomotives to be audible.

For a moment Marquard hovered over a park bench on which James Corbin-Hale soundly slumbered—another delusion, no doubt. Under the prefect's breath he sweetly sang a verse of Nan's song from the concert-cafe.

*"La-bas, la-bas, tout au bout de la terre."*

James languidly opened his eyes to the Frenchman.

"It is not possible," he mumbled in his native German and shut his eyes tight.

He looked again to find Marquard was no longer at the bench standing over top of him.

## 46

The morning heat was unimaginable. A filmy glaze clung irritably to the skin that perspired oppressively in such humidity. Disgusted with Leland and Patty and their incessant bickering, Adelheid walked on ahead toward the elegant automobile parked alongside the curb on the square in front of the cabaret Micmac. The beautiful break of day went unnoticed in the eastern sky, so over-involved were all in personal agendas. Not far behind Adelheid, Leland followed with a black case in his possession. Adelheid sat in on the passenger side and pensively watched him through the front windshield stop one last time to yell at Patty.

"You know why," he said, then cut himself short.

Leland balked at the sight of Patty, who stood livid holding the door ajar at the threshold of the front entrance.

"What the hell am I arguing for?" Leland maddeningly proposed to himself and whooped, "Just do it! I don't care if you don't like it."

"I don't get it. You told me before—"

"We're leaving when I say so! Now get back inside and pack our shit!"

A sudden look of confused and disgusted rage washed over Patty's face.

"But—"

The expression she wore sickened Leland. In blatant disregard for her feelings, he curtly ended their conversation with a turn of his back to the cabaret.

"Goddamnit, Leland!" Patty burst. "Don't you turn your back on me!"

Not at all hidden was his disdain for her. Leland climbed into the automobile without further comment. He got in beside Adelheid and threw the small black case he carried onto the backseat. Furious, Patty shouted after him calling him a bastard, brashly slammed the front door, and retreated inside. Ineffectual as Patty's prostrations had been, she succeeded in one thing—to put both men in an irritable mood.

Adelheid, seated on the passenger side, gestured to the case in the back and asked, "What are you doing with that?"

"If there's trouble..." Leland started. Trailing off, he glanced back toward the club.

The keys to the Maybach, Adelheid had previously placed into the ignition. Aggressive with the starter, Leland caused the gears to grate when he attempted to turn over the already idling engine.

"Easy there," Adelheid upbraided, "the car is running, in case you hadn't noticed!"

Once the automobile engine had been started, with the flywheel industriously rotating, if the ignition was unnecessarily reengaged by a push of the starter or turn of the key, it would force the solenoid to come into contact with the gear and cause grinding.

"Yeah, I've got it!" Leland shot.

"You need to calm down."

"Everything's under control. Everything will happen exactly as we planned. I don't see Ori being a problem. Though if he is, I want to be prepared."

"This is a very simple thing," Adelheid replied very much in disapproval. In the same way a parent might, he patronized Leland. "This is a very simple thing. You understand, Fiona wants us to leave and that's all."

"If they get to Ori before we do—" Leland added gruffly, getting back to the conversation.

"Ori should have stayed put," Adelheid peevishly interrupted.

Leland put the Maybach into reverse and pulled out into the empty square.

"Yeah, well—"

"Well, he should have done what he was told," Adelheid figured grievously.

"A lot of good that does us now!" Leland retorted wryly.

The short drive along the river to the docks was spent mostly in pensive silence. Between Leland and Adelheid there was an unspoken, almost tangible severity, an understanding that time was running low and that their situation had reached a critical juncture.

A clear sky promised the unmolested sun dominant rule over the day. The two collaborators crossed uneventfully to the opposite side of the Vistula, where up river the docks cut a niche built to serve as a safe haven against the current. A dismal drive through the underdeveloped area led them to one of several piers, wherein they braked along side a gross line of obtrusive brick warehouses situated along the river's bank.

At the rear of the nearest building and in plain view, a bevy of denim-garbed and sun-darkened longshoremen gathered curiously around an unmanned vehicle adorned with Polish markings. Parked on the boards obstinately fronting the water outside the warehouse's unloading gate, this car stood unchallenged, a symbol of military authority.

The moment Leland and Adelheid exited their own automobile, Ori, handcuffed and escorted by Commander Starzynski, emerged from within the warehouse. The Negro was caught unwarily at his place of work as was evident from the pair of coveralls he wore. Leland reared angrily in the face of this unforeseen adversity and dispatched a leer laden with contempt; any initiative that he might have had was promptly checked when the commander situated his captive into the backseat of the drably colored military car. The black and chrome Maybach was pronounced, and Starzynski could not help but notice the two men who stood before it, as did Ori. Leland Downes' disdain went unchecked. Impetuously, he turned to retrieve the case. Adelheid held him back.

"Not now! There are too many people."

"Let's get back to the car," Leland ceded.

The pair resituated themselves within the automobile.

The commander's snap assessment of the cabaret owner and the German nationalist and their probable intention to cause a scene led Starzynski to waste no time in getting on his way. Once withdrawn from the docks, he was to return to central Warsaw. A lead on the two men would greatly reduce the chance of having any difficulties in the transport of his captive to the Komisarjat, was his thought with a check of the rearview mirror.

"I've done nothing wrong," Ori ejaculated from the backseat, annoyed with himself at having been so inopportunistly taken into custody. "What is this all

about?" He instigated, "Why is it, your taking me in like this? I've done nothing!"

"Just answer the questions we ask you, that's all."

Through the tight frame of the military car's rear window Starzynski sighted his pursuers closing in brazenly. Ori noticed the commander's focus on the mirror and spun around in his seat to spot the enamel black Maybach shortening the distance between the two cars. He faced forward wearing an insolent grin, smug with the thought of his compatriots following.

Starzynski stomped the clutch hard and jerked the military car through a wide turn. He gave the engine gas, cranked through the gears, and raced down the broad boulevard leading directly to Warsaw's Główny Komisariat Policji.

Close behind, Leland eased the Maybach off and conceded to the advantage Starzynski gained when he drew the military car up to the steps of the municipal building. Promptly, the commander exited from the driver's side. Leland pulled the Maybach along the opposite curb and slowed to a halt. Starzynski presided over his prisoner; confidant, he brought him around the front end of the military vehicle and ascended the main police station's stone steps to its colonnaded front entrance. The commander shot the elegant automobile a telling look prior to his entry. The conspirators remained seated within the Maybach, parked facing away from the police Komisariat, forced to wait for an opportunity if they intended to act.

"This is no good," Adelheid remarked, defeated. "This is neither the place nor the time—"

"I'll take care of it, thank you very much," Leland responded in a derisive manner. He delivered his rebuke to Adelheid steeped in disdain for the man's impudence at setting forth such a cowardly observation.

"I say we leave."

While Adelheid bemoaned, Leland seized the case from the backseat and with it placed upon his lap swung the lid open. Revealed was an American-made Thompson submachine gun and a full magazine of ammunition.

"Have you any idea the trouble this could cause us?" portended Adelheid while seated very still, his voice inflecting with uncertainty.

Leland slapped the cartridge in place, the gun pointed at the baseboards between his legs, and with a resolute pull racked the mechanism back. Resoundingly, the first round was loaded into the chamber of the brutal weapon.

"If you've got a problem with it," Leland remarked, "then step out of the car."

Sure-handed, Adelheid reached forward and with certitude decorously redirected the muzzle of the weapon, which Leland had thoughtlessly brought up to illustrate his point.

"If we could wait," he was reasonable enough to suggest, "for a more suitable opportunity."

## 47

Seated alone on the passenger side turned full around, Adelheid watched angst-ridden for Leland's return. To distract himself from his nervous prostration, he allowed his thoughts to rest momentarily upon the vacant backseat of the automobile. Under the scrutiny of the sun, Leland made a swift

descent of the broad stone steps of the municipal building. His face wore a telltale grimace. He hustled across the street, promptly returning to the Maybach after having gone inside to gather information. Once in on the driver's side he slammed his door. Adelheid started at his entrance.

Leland appeared to be quite irate.

"What did you find out?" Adelheid chanced.

"They're holding him on some trumped-up charge," Leland reported.

"It's been hours now, Leland. And our waiting out here all morning hasn't helped any. If they obtain information from him—if we don't leave soon—"

"Right now they're still questioning him," Leland corrected.

"How long do they plan on keeping him?"

"We've got to be patient with this sort of thing. Our chance'll come when they move him."

"Move him! When?"

"We'll have to wait. Evening most probably. When they transfer him, then that'll be our chance."

Adelheid glared up at the entrance of the Komisariat. Inside, Ori sat smoking a cigarette at a small table in the middle of a cramped windowless cell. He was without light except for that which was provided by a single desk lamp that shone brightly into the flat plane of his dark brown face. His skin glistened, coated in perspiration. The heat of the cell quickly became insufferable.

Commander Starzynski entered the room accompanied by the mystic, Hurkos. A thinly masked severity marked the rigidity of their collective advance, being easily perceived by the heightened senses of their captive. Both men took a seat across from Ori.

"What am I being held for?" Ori was quick to demand.

"For questioning, that's all," replied Starzynski.

"How long will this take?"

In an attempt to placate his only suspect for the time being, Starzynski slid an ashtray across the table to Ori and answered, "For as long as we might need."

Hurkos remained remote and evaluative. Ori snuffed his cigarette out and eyed the mystic. The yellow-white that encircled the dark corneas of his eyeballs shined malevolently in the glare of the lamplight. The commander began his interrogation.

"Who is this woman?"

The question was put forth with nonchalance. Equally off-handed, he placed a passport photo of Josie Rosen in front of Ori. Ori looked the photo over and scoffed.

"I don't know her!"

A curl came to the Negro's upper lip, an insipid and defiant sneer. It was obvious to his two interlocutors that he was withholding information.

"No, that won't do. That won't do at all. We know the truth of it! You were both seen at the same place," Starzynski sternly insisted. "And at the same time on the very night she went missing! We have witnesses," he was quick to point out.

Ori laughed out mockingly.

"Is that so? I haven't seen this woman, ever!"

"We know—"

A change came over Ori, who instantly shifted his cool demeanor into that of unchecked frustration. Contemptuous of the commander's authority, he recanted, "I don't know who the hell she is!" With a venomous glint in his eyes, he pushed the photograph back to Starzynski.

The initial round of the interrogation went worse than Starzynski had expected. He brooded. Worse, he became doubtful of his and Hurkos' suspicions. The provocation he encountered from the Negro had offset the commander's presumptive stratagem. Unseated at his desk in his shirtsleeves, he expounded his thoughts aloud to Hurkos, who sat secure in his own visions. While Hurkos listened to Starzynski's diatribe, to preoccupy himself, he scanned over the newspaper. A German citizen, he was of course concerned with the potential conflict—the crisis as it was now pawned off as by the press—one that he himself knew with certainty was unavoidable.

"He refuses to answer a single question. He's got to know we have him, yet he's cock-sure enough to treat our questions with blatant disregard." In turning to the arbiter in Hurkos, Starzynski stated his point observedly, "Did you notice the way he reacted to the photos? I mean, he could have cared less where we were going with them. There's something hidden here under the surface, something unseen, something unimaginable."

"He's like a dangerous animal," Hurkos postulated. "Defensive. Very difficult for me to read."

"His guardedness is incongruent with the thought processes of someone who is pathological," Starzynski postulated as he checked the time on the face of his wristwatch. "We'll give him a few more hours before we continue to question him."

To change speed, on the second attempt in his quest for answers, the commander was firm with his suspect. He impressed upon the Negro his increased dissatisfaction by bantering and questioning him in an accusatorial manner.

"We know about the trunk!—Your drive!—What you do!" Starzynski seethed in Ori's face, "You're not getting out of this!" He bared down heavily upon him.

Ori was not responsive to intimidation. The commander slammed his palm down hard onto the desk.

"Confess!"

The ploy was abysmal; its effect insufficient. Away from his suspect, Starzynski leaned dejectedly at his desk revealing his utter dissatisfaction. He sopped up the sweat of his effort from his brow with an embroidered handkerchief that he had jerked from his pant pocket. His perspiration was profuse, the cloth darkened, unable to inhibit its flow. Across from him and mindful of the commander's frustration, the mystic Hurkos, intending not to be thwarted by angst, studied a case file confident the answer was within reach.

"He won't budge!" exclaimed the commander, broken with a stalwart and frustrated conscience.

A silent and studious observer, Hurkos pored through the various loose papers enclosed in the dossier. Names, photos, addresses—nothing helped. He shook his head, doubtful, and from time to time glanced up.

"There's nothing there," Starzynski ejaculated, having regained his composure. "He's impossibly inane. Nothing he says jinxes with any of our facts. It's as if we are looking at the guilty party, that's to be sure, but accusing him of the incorrect crime."



Commander Starzynski removed his silver cigarette case, his only consolation, from the breast pocket of his uniform's tunic which was slung over the back of his chair beside him. He flipped open the case and removed one of a dozen cigarettes lined neatly in row. After he snapped the lid closed, he frenetically tapped the chosen cigarette down on the case. Like this he stood, all the while thinking aloud; he bespoke in a brief monologue.

"That contemptible bastard might be covering up for someone. The answer is with him. He telegraphs it. Of that, I am quite certain."

There was a knock at the door.

"Enter," Starzynski called authoritatively.

The young soldier, the clerk of the previous day, stuck his head into the commander's office.

"Commander," he respectfully addressed him, "the prefect, Modest Marquard requests to see you, sir."

"Of course. See him in."

Marquard was shown into the room.

"My friend!" Starzynski greeted Marquard. The commander remained beside his desk while he commiserated. The tone he used was germane. "How are you?"

"Very well, and you?"

"Fine, fine."

Marquard, not a speaker of the German language, briefly greeted the mystic, who acknowledged the French prefect with an agreeable nod of the head.

Starzynski quit the unlit cigarette, having placed it down delicately, kept between his thumb and the case, and leaned across his desk to pick up a loose piece of paper that he then handed to the prefect. The sheet contained a brief typewritten message.

"This wire came in last night. It's for you."

Marquard read the wire while Starzynski lit his cigarette. The commander returned his silver case to the breast pocket of his uniform's linen tunic. Thrown as it was over his chair, the epitaph on each shoulder prominently displayed his rank and assignment to the Zandarmeria, the Polish military police.

"I see," Marquard said with an assertive nod. "I've been ordered to return to France."

"It is unfortunate."

"Are you to remain here in Warsaw, then? I understand several repatriated divisions are being gathered together and mobilized from the surrounding provinces in order to bolster the strength of the armies."

"Yes. I've been posted at the garrison here in Warsaw. For the time being though, I am to fulfill all my regular duties as chief inspector."

"Allow me to—"

A rap at the door interrupted the prefect.

"Enter," Starzynski bid.

The young soldier was at the door a second time.

"Commander, the lorry you requested is being brought around to transport the prisoner."

"Yes. We'll be right down."

The young clerk nodded and promptly retreated, the door shut softly behind him.

"Allow me to—" Marquard picked up from where he had begun. "Allow me to leave the files I've prepared. Unfortunately they are not complete, though they may foment further investigation."

"Very well. That would be fine."

The commander turned respectfully to the mystic, Hurkos, and begged his pardon.

"I'll see to the transport. Be sure my batman has a copy of the transcripts prepared for the prefect."

Starzynski gathered his things in preparation to exit the office. He made sure to check his service revolver before he accompanied Marquard out into the hall.

"Have you considered this American man, Hale?" the Frenchman put forth. "He has come up in both of our investigations," he blandished.

"No... Come to think of it, I hadn't."

## 48

Early evening quickly encroached. In the Maybach, Leland and Adelheid waited restlessly, enveloped by the invasive silvery-grey ill-omened dusk light for Ori's inevitable transfer. Leland had an eye out, his neck crooked to the side, his torso held upright in an alert posture on the driver's side. In his lap was the Thompson submachine gun, and to Adelheid's sidelong glance it appeared as if he coddled the weapon.

"What are we looking for?" Adelheid pressed. "How do we even know what to look for?" His incessant fretting was long past being an annoyance to Leland. "Are they going to simply walk out with him? Just like that I suppose. And once it's dark, how might we recognize them?"

"Would you be calm!" Leland sharply retorted.

"You did say they would transfer him."

"He'll have to be. They can't hold him indefinitely."

Adelheid attempted an argument.

"When? When will they move him? He's been in there for hours now—hours, Leland. We haven't much of a plan, sitting as we are on our asses and such! What's to say they won't keep him? And if he is moved, how do we know where they'll take him from? Or if they even intend to—"

A peddler woman forced a bushel of wild flowers through the open passenger side window. Adelheid was stymied into silence by the sudden intrusion. Her singsong voice rang, "Spare a few dollars?" She begged in her best Polish, "Buy some pretty flowers for the wife?" The flowers were nettlesome and wrapped in a tattered wax paper.

The nag's unwelcome arrival had prompted Leland to lean the whole way forward in his seat. Mindful of their sinister designs, he wrapped an arm around the steering wheel to block the woman's line of sight, his other he tucked in his lap where the weapon was partly concealed.

"No. Get away from the car," he chided.

The lady brought her face close to the front windshield and with a curl of her bottom lip, shot the cabaret owner a beastly look. Her snake-eyed glance fell short of the scrutiny required of her to recognize the black muzzle of a firearm.

"Come on, you understood the man," Adelheid related and with a deft hand removed the bushel. "Now get on your way. We don't want your flowers."

The woman shared her contempt, her stare passed equally between the two gentlemen. "How's that for manners," she grouched and withdrew from the elegant automobile. Flowers in tow, she waddled away.

Leland straightened, his lip bitten against relief; his eyes kept on the weapon drew Adelheid's attention and prompted him to chastise, "Would you be so kind as to set that aside? Villainy of the sort you've in mind is going to lead us absolutely nowhere." While Adelheid clicked at his ear, Leland's glance had strayed; the lorry drew up behind the parked military car at the foot of the Komisariat's stone steps. The cabaret owner recognized the prospective circumstance of the wagon's arrival and turned over the Maybach's engine.

"This is it," Leland chimed with determination.

The commander exited the Komisariat; the tall Negro in his custody, hands bound behind the back, was ushered down the series of stone steps.

Situated as the Maybach was, opposite the municipal vehicles, Leland—if he wished to clear a direct line of sight—calculated that it was imperative that he pull the automobile around. A man without conscience, Leland without hesitation lurched the Maybach from the curb. The headlamps were kept extinguished, which assisted in the concealment of the automobile's initial movements in the half-light.

Marquard prepared to take his leave of the Komisariat, unaware of the unfolding of events. A train ticket to Paris had been provided him; he was to pack that very evening and leave the following morning. From fresh off the copy desk, the commander's handsome batman passed the prefect a duplicate of the transcripts as he had been ordered.

Piqued, the proud young man was not apt to withhold his convictions and commented despondently, "If you don't mind me saying, sir, with all due respect, what relevancy is there in your having these?"

The prefect was so obviously taken aback by the soldier's statement, that before he was able to respond, the batman had retracted what was said.

"Monsieur le Prefect's assistance," the soldier appended, "if I might propose, was invaluable and greatly appreciated." The young man's French was stilted though comprehensible. "That is to say, with Monsieur's return to France, what relevance is there in his possession of sensitive materials?"

"My dear fellow," Marquard began, his voice inflected with a saged aversion to insult, "relevancy, as you so delicately put it, is exactly what your commander had in mind when he requested to have these papers prepared for me."

The young batman was stymied by the contained rebuke.

The prefect explained: "As is in all things, though agreeably difficult to recognize in this particular case, a system exists that is identifiable. My experience has lent itself on occasion for me to recognize, in the facts that emerge, the truth of the matter. You understand, I might glean the why or wherefore of these hideous crimes if kept abreast—"

The Frenchman's invective was cut short by the abrupt crackle of gunfire. The burst was steady and he was drawn into the commander's anterior office. He hastened to the Palladian window catching the bright muzzle flash from the Maybach down below. Marquard could only watch as Commander Starzynski and his captive were shot down in cold blood. A deafening silence followed the weapon's blustery cry. The sodden air, rent by the bullets' trajectories, was at once reclaimed by the humidity that abounded. Marquard's throat closed, overwrought at the sight of Starzynski as he fell. A ringing gorged the prefect's ears. In vain, he attempted to vocalize his distemper. A mute witness, he gaped

from the open second story window helpless to stop the Maybach as it raced from the curb.

In advance of the killers' escape, the police lorry parked behind the military car jetted forward; its driver, intent on taking action, made a valiant attempt to block the Maybach's path. With a crash, the automobile hit the lorry's front end and spun it out a hundred and eighty degrees into the street. The large automobile muscled through with a roar, mustering enough horsepower to cram clear and impetuously drive off unscathed.

Those involved were left in shock. Soldiers streamed forth from the municipal building, and a number of civilian bystanders gathered around on the steps. The dutiful driver of the lorry, having exited the crippled vehicle, was the first official to get to the fallen men. The scene was appalling. At such a range the damage the weapon had inflicted was irreparable. The Negro had been killed instantly—cleaved practically in two. The severity of the wounds the commander sustained immobilized him. He struggled to breathe, laid prostrate over the unforgiving stone steps of the Komisariat.

Marquard rushed from the entrance, sighted the crowd, and came to the stricken man's aid, whereupon he took Starzynski up in his arms and cradled him. The Frenchman fumed pitifully. The commander remained conscious.

Though he had been fatally wounded and was quickly dying, he found the strength to speak. His voice was miraculously clear.

"Lift me up."

Marquard brought Starzynski to a seated position and assessed that thanks in part to the silver cigarette case—kept habitually in the breast pocket of the commander's tunic, having diverted a bullet from hitting the commander's heart—he was not instantly killed.

"My f—friend—" Starzynski stammered weakly.

"Don't talk," Marquard coddled.

Starzynski shook his head, coughed, and fought for a last breath to convey his dying words.

"Downes... Leland Downes."

Incensed, Marquard glanced up to see Hurkos, who knelt down to assist him. The mystic nodded assertively at having overheard Starzynski utter his brief valediction. In Commander Starzynski's hand were the keys to the military car. Marquard released them from the dead man's grip.

## 49

The Maybach took a tight bend and decelerated into a vacant back alley near the congested streets of the older, medieval section of town. In passing roughly through the narrow space, the car emerged with a jolt and exited at the opposite end where the alley opened onto a square. Here the elegant automobile was forced to a crawl by a throng of Jewish worshipers—men, women, and children taken to desperate measures—that milled outside a crowded synagogue.

The square was filled beyond capacity. The assembled mob held an anxious vigilance together in a queue of ever increasing length. Each kept with them a lit candle shielded from the wind by a perforated tin sheath and waited for their turn to enter the holy building. More incomprehensible than the general fear

and panic which had hold on the capital was the apathy of each individual gathered together in that tiny square. An acceptance of their pitiful circumstance and the danger that awaited was, through a false sense of security and the empty promise of leadership, relegated and calmly sustained through an inordinate belief in spiritual faith.

Quick to lose his patience, Leland honked the Maybach's horn and forced the automobile through the densely packed crowd. Insensitive to all else except for that of escape, he edged his way along. Adelheid, unaware, was turned full in his seat, his back to the mobbed square. He watched warily for the authorities through the back window.

"There isn't anyone behind us!" he was astute enough to observe.

"How are we gonna get through this?" Leland, in disinterest of Adelheid's comment, remarked.

"There's no one—"

Adelheid faced forward and fell aghast upon his first encounter of the sight of the many candle flames. Preserved behind each perforated covering, the lights flickered ceremoniously throughout the open square, a distorted plane of white stars that seemed to sparkle from the darkness and congestion that encompassed them.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed.

Leland unrolled his window and rudely waved the people on. "This is just craziness! Make way. Coming through!"

he was so impudent to yell ahead, and honking again, finally made his way.

Within minutes Leland pulled the car up behind Micmac's in the back impasse. Leland alone climbed out, whereupon he ceded his place, still in possession of the Thompson submachine gun. Adelheid scooted over to the vacant driver's side and situated himself behind the steering wheel.

"Be ready," he shouted tossing Leland the empty gun case. "Within the hour. Be out here and ready to go."

Without saying another word, Adelheid slammed the door shut, backed the Maybach out, and drove off. Leland remained stock-still and watched with a sense of foreboding his compatriot depart from his company. He walked heavily toward the back exit. Patty rushed out to meet him.

"Baby! Where the hell ya been?!" she inquired of him. "I've been waiting here all day. I—I was gettin' nervous."

"Just get back inside," he muttered irritably.

"What's going on?"

"Get inside," he instructed.

Patty, in her anxiousness pressed for answers, "What's happened, Leland?"

"Nothing," he replied, disregarding her concerns. "We haven't long. Where's our shit?!"

## 50

In an overtly aggressive manner, Leland threw down a few stuffed travel bags to the ground by the rear door. They landed with a thud at Patty's feet, where she stood on the lookout for Adelheid's automobile. Indignant and unflinching, she hardly batted an eye, her arms tightly intertwined across her chest. Planted

where she was, Patty stubbornly refused Leland a surreptitious glance nor gave him even the slightest indication that she might be in any way agreeable.

"Where the hell is he, anyway?!" Leland griped.

"He's left us, Leland. I'm tellin' ya!"

Disgusted, Leland made to head back into the club. "Shut up," was all he had to say as he motioned toward the door.

"You're a fool, Leland! He's leaving us behind!"

"Goddamn it! He's not," Leland blurted, disinclined to reenter the building.

Keeping at him, Patty infuriated Leland to no end.

"You're a goddamned fool!"

"Shut up! Shut up, goddamnit!"

Spittle gathered at the corners of his mouth he was in such a rage. Leland clenched his jaw, wiped at his mouth with his shirtsleeve, and stormed into the nightclub. The heavy rear exit door slammed closed behind him.

"He's goddamn leaving us!" Patty screeched yanking the door open and screaming after him. "You're a fool, Leland! You're a goddamned fool!"

It was pointless to carry on as they were. Deflated and out of breath she withdrew to the curb. Her arms crossed, Patty took up a ridged stance. There was no consolation for her; the more she resisted the worse the situation became.

She tapped her foot at a frenetic pace and exhaled abhorrently, seeped in a most fierce torpor.

"What the hell am I doing here?" she spoke surly from under her breath.

In direct response to this blurt an automobile took a tight turn into the impasse behind the cabaret. The bright beams of the headlamps cut a broad swath of light through the dark alley. The vehicle jerked to a halt. Its headlamps rested on Patty, who responded with an excited wave.

"Thank God," she groaned, and picking up one of the bags, started toward the automobile. "Come on, Leland," she called. "He's here!"

Relieved at not having been left behind, Leland was as inclined to offer up a smile as he had ever been in his entire life. And so disposed, he followed Patty's voice arriving at the exit with a sure, confident step, certain that it was Adelheid there to convey them to the aerodrome in the Maybach. Nimbly, he leaned down to scoop up several of the bags, and only then was he to hesitate. The wide smile on Leland's jubilant face melted. There was something that was not right—the headlamps.

Patty never made it to the car. The sight of Marquard stepping out with a revolver in his possession stopped her in her tracks. She saw the weapon, screamed, and ran back toward the club. Leland had already started for the building a selfish instant ahead of Patty. Clear-minded, he took to the corridor. Her faith in him died at his sudden disappearance.

"It's the cops! It's the cops! He's right behind me!" Patty yelled as she burst into the hallway.

Leland grabbed the Thompson submachine gun from off of his desk in the back office and frantically reloaded it with a fresh drum-shaped cartridge.

"He's, Leland, he's—" Patty's swallowed her voice.

Leland charged out of the office blasting away with the Thompson. Heedless of her safety, he ran for the dance hall firing the weapon wildly from over his shoulder. Marquard arrived at the door behind Patty just as Leland opened fire.

Patty crumpled to the floor and curled into the fetal position. A round of bullets sputtered past clear above her head and hit the ceiling. A spray of plaster fell down upon her in a cloud of white dust.

Marquard squatted down and took aim, his arm held outstretched, the revolver leveled with a calm solemnity. He fired once, careful not to kill Leland, hitting him in the upper thigh, crippling him. The momentum of the shot carried the cabaret owner helplessly into the dance hall.

On the hallway floor, Patty lay at the prefect's feet, crumpled under the discharged revolver. She lost control of her bladder. The puddle of resultant urine caked in the settled plaster. Defenseless, she rolled herself into a tight ball sobbing hysterically. Leland stumbled out onto the dance floor where he tried to stanch the dark, almost black blood that spilled out of the penetrating wound to his leg. The moment the prefect arrived at the corridor's open doorway, Leland fired a burst keeping the lawman at bay.

The bullet shot to Leland's upper leg was aimed true and scored a direct hit to the femoral artery. Unchecked, blood spurting out in a pulsing stream. The finished man desperately dragged himself off the dance floor and found refuge between the banquet tables set in the center of the dance hall. Weakened and leaning heavily on one of the tables, Leland turned to deal with his pursuer. Spun quick about, he offset his equilibrium and stumbled forward; involuntarily he rocked back and began to lose consciousness.

"Come on... goddamn you," he goaded, reeling as if he were inebriated.

He let a loud grunt escape, crashed down, and hit the table, which gave out under his weight. Finished, Leland slumped half-conscious to the floor.

"Come on... Come on," Marquard heard him mumble.

Marquard saw his chance and took it. Without pause he darted out from the hallway, rushed in unprotected, and assertively leapt onto his adversary. The prefect pinned Leland's arms to the floor and confiscated the Thompson submachine gun. Leland began to black out. Not to allow it, Marquard pulled Leland up by his hair and held his head aloft a foot rule from the ground. Poised emphatically, the prefect threatened to throw his half-aware enemy's head back.

"Stay with me," he shouted into his man's face.

Leland was not cognizant enough to offer a reply. A slam of the cabaret owner's head back onto the hard tile floor and he came to.

"Where were you headed?" Marquard demanded.

There was no reply. From shock Leland faded.

A sharp crack, and once more Marquard jarred Leland's head back, intentionally keeping him conscious for a short while longer.

"Where were you headed? Do you hear me? Who are you waiting for?" he demanded, insane with rage.

"Adelheid—Adelheid double crossed me," Leland confessed.

"Where is he?"

Leland started to black out. His lost blood began to pool on the floor. Again, Marquard cracked Leland's head back.

"Come on. Where is he?"

"An airstrip... just outside the city."

"Where is he going?"

"Danzig—"

Leland's eyes rolled back into their sockets. One last time Marquard roused him.

"Is the other American with him?"

"W—What?—Who?"

"The American, Hale," Marquard pressed.

"No... he's... Danzig... Danzig..."

"Danzig?"

"Danzig... midnight..."

"What about Danzig? Come on. What about Danzig? What are you saying?"

"Midnight... Danzig... the train—"

## 51

Secreted by night, the Junkers transport sat vulnerably on the overgrown airfield. Its three massive props roared and the bluster generated hurled up a grayish cloud of dust. Fueled by a thirst for flight, the palpitating flying machine seemed powered by the hate of the devil. The nearest object to the aircraft was Adelheid's abandoned automobile, parked down at the furthest end of the airstrip. The headlamps were intentionally left burning as an indication to the pilot of the aircraft where the airstrip ended.

Fiona helped to spirit Adelheid aboard. The severity of the situation temporarily muzzled the normally outspoken German woman.

"Are things in order?" Adelheid risked to ask.

"Everything has been arranged. Once we arrive in Danzig there'll be no time to waste," was Fiona's curt reply.

"We're already behind schedule as it is."

"That's nothing for you to worry about."

These words reverberated in his head, and having consigned himself to the pre-ordained circumstance of his pitiless fate, Adelheid assisted Fiona without further complaint to seal themselves in the aircraft. Together they folded up the steps, closed the small door of the plane, and latched it securely in place.

"That should do it, then," Adelheid said, satisfied.

From the cockpit the pilot hollered back to Fiona.

"Frau Faulkner! Someone is coming. Quickly! There is a car approaching the runway!"

Alarmed, Fiona and Adelheid rushed into the cockpit. The pilot sat with a clear vantage of the entire span of the scarcely adequate length of overgrown airstrip. Distracted with the business of operating the Junkers, the man busily flicked various switches and checked his gauges in preparation for takeoff. He kept himself calm and collected.

"Where, where is it!?" asked Fiona, forcibly trying her tone so as to not sound panicked.

Ahead of them the pilot pointed out a second pair of headlamps at a fast approach. The lights of the automobile skirted the aerodrome's perimeter just beyond the entrance to the airstrip.

"There!"

"Go! Go now," Fiona, unable to repress her extant fright, commanded wily. "We shan't be kept any longer. Go now! We have to go right now!"

The Junkers could be seen clearly through the front windshield of the military car as Marquard pulled through the main entry of the abandoned airfield. He tossed an unfolded map onto the passenger seat, having found the



way, grabbed the loaded Thompson, and with a certain keenness placed it readied in his lap. Nearing in the distance, the steel-grey aircraft spun quickly around to position itself for takeoff.

Ignorant of the purpose of Adelheid's automobile parked directly ahead of him, Marquard focused instead on the escaping transport. To drive straight at the aircraft was made impossible by a long, deep furrow lining the entire length of the airstrip. Marquard was forced to a halt. The Junkers pivoted a complete hundred and eighty degrees. Its immense wings began to waver delicately under the tremendous power of its three engines. Flaps readied and with its rear stabilizer straightened, the giant transport appeared poised for liftoff.

Capitalizing on the prospect of reprisal, Marquard rushed headlong from the military car, scurried down into the ditch and across the few meters of its width and then over the opposite end, where he emerged onto the airfield. With gusto the prefect sprinted out into the middle of the overgrown airstrip. He limped heavily and triumphed over his impediment, not at all slowed by his lame leg. The Junkers had begun its taxi out and would soon be airborne. In observance of the aircraft's relative distance from him, his nerve was checked. Desperate to score his prize, Marquard let out a few ineffective shots from the Thompson submachine gun. These found his range and, reinvigorated, he opened fire at the tail of the transport some forty or fifty paces ahead, though it was of no use. The plane swiftly outdistanced him.

Bent double to catch his breath, his hands on his knees, Marquard was sure he had been trumped when inexplicably the aircraft came to a dead stop at the farthest end of the airstrip a hundred meters down. Marquard checked behind him in amazement. A slow realization came to the prefect. It was there that Adelheid's automobile stood, headlamps ablaze.

Its placement cued him in to a renewed state of awareness; the Junkers was only now in the process of taking off. The transport came full around and readied itself for liftoff.

Ahead of the plane Marquard stood his ground. There was nothing on this earth he desired more than retribution.

His mind swelled in anticipation, and obdurate, he waited. Seen from the Junkers' cockpit in the distance, the prefect seemed an intolerable speck.

"Quickly, do it! Do it now," Fiona yelled. "Quickly. Run that fool down!"

"But—"the pilot protested.

"Now!" Fiona shrilly commanded, "Do it!—Do it now!—Get us into the air!"

In defiance Marquard held his insignificant piece of ground. He leveled the vindictive Thompson submachine gun, the butt of its stock tucked tight under his armpit. Of calculated daring and with a collected effort, he took careful aim and stood fast. The aircraft came straight at him with the strain of its three propellers' horrid, simultaneous roar. Careful to make every shot count, Marquard squeezed off several short controlled bursts, never to flinch from the transport that, by an alarming degree, had steadily gained ground on him. For an instant it appeared that he might be run down.

The large, dark mass of the Junkers rose a short distance over his head, and with a dreadful noise in passing, the wind the plane's engines generated as well as the stiff push of its enormous lift tossed Marquard like a paper doll to the ground. He staggered and having swiftly gotten himself back to his feet kept at the aircraft letting out a steady, undying stream of bullets. At his hands the barrel of the submachine gun reddened from over-fireage. A flareback discharged from the exhausted weapon's breech, followed by a metallic ping.

The crisp, dark shape of the plane seemed to hover only meters above his head, suspended in midair. It banked to the right and off it went—up, past Adelheid's abandoned automobile and out of Marquard's range.

There was nothing more that could have been done. The prefect lowered the ineffectual weapon and watched impassively. The transport diminished in the sky, a mocking grey silhouette against the starless night, a blithe shape that trailed effortlessly away over the forsaken airfield. It was to be expected, and after a moment of introspection he was thankful, though his effort had been thwarted, that he remained uninjured. His teeth gnashed, he followed the Junkers with a spiteful gaze as it went safely on its way.

A clank followed by a loud crack escaped from the aircraft, an indication of mechanical failure. All doubt and regret were scattered to the wind. Smoke, a long ribbon of dense smoke, escaped from the nose engine. Again the Junkers banked, this time sharply to the left and downward. Flames, reddened and serrated, erupted from the crippled engine. The aircraft rolled sharply in mid-flight. Run to the earth, the two remaining propellers of its wing-mounted engines whined wretchedly as it was hurdled downward at a precipitous angle. An evasive maneuver successfully carried the cumbersome Junkers out of its dead fall and in a graceful arc brought it in line with the airstrip. An apt landing found the machine safely returned. In bewilderment, the prefect witnessed the touchdown of the crippled transport by its adept operator.

Slowed to a crawl, the Junkers passed Marquard by. The inflamed engine spread its infliction to the plane's fuselage and encompassed the cockpit in entirety. The rate of speed unaltered, the transport and those souls entrapped within rolled from the airstrip; the furrow lining the airstrip's length retarded further progress. The broken earth embraced the stricken vehicle. The aircraft's silver tail shot straight into the air when it impacted, whereafter the plane terminated into a horrendous ball of flames.

## 52

James, a desperate loner on a crowded platform, loitered in the midst of a long queue that snaked alongside a tiny junction box, anxious and watchful of the train's inevitable boarding. The dolor of the displaced wayfarers stoked the air of despondence that pervaded the station. Grown increasingly impatient, he paused to check his wristwatch. The time read ten 'til twelve. Unsure of his tardy compatriots, James stepped out of the line. Begrudgingly, he lingered off to the side and waited, his back to the flimsy corrugated steel wall of the kiosk. Teased by the prospect of a thwarted escape, he fidgeted in place, an eye kept on the train which was quickly filling. Every wasted second for him came to increase his agitation.

Opposite James and shielded from view by the junction box, Marquard discourteously cut to the front of a disorderly crowd assembled together at a window opening. There an elderly attendant was posted behind the counter of the booth. He staggered back overwrought by the onslaught of inquiries made by the near panic-stricken mob. Above his head the departure times of the many trains were haphazardly listed, written in an almost indiscernible hand on an inadequately sized black slate board.

"Hey there!" the man testily shouted in Polish to the prefect, chiding him for his apparent indiscretion. "Back in line!"

Indignant, Marquard was quick to show the man his credentials. The prefect struggled to identify himself in broken, practically incoherent Polish.

"French police. I am on official police business. What—What train—Which is the train for Danzig, please?"

"Oh," the attendant respectfully replied in acknowledgement of the prefect's credentials, "there is only one train scheduled for Gdansk. It leaves from the third platform, boarding on track six."

Marquard could not quite comprehend the fluent Polish of the elderly man's response. The attendant realized this and simplified his answer by saying, "Gdansk... there!"

The old man pointed with a crooked index finger and indicated that the train was directly behind him.

"Right there... platform three." He put up three fingers. "Platform three, leaving for Gdansk."

The attendant gestured to the slate board above his head. Marquard stared up at the sign. Chalked prominently in red was the time and place that the last civilian train of the day was designated for departure—twelve midnight, track six, platform three. The platform, as the attendant had indicated, was identifiable by a large number 3 posted overhead at the gangway to the adjacent platform. Marquard ascertained that the night train to Danzig was to depart from the track situated directly behind the junction box.

On platform three James grew increasingly impatient. The train on track six was promptly filling to capacity; it was imperative that he get on board. Once more James motioned to read the face of his gold wristwatch and in doing so was distracted at the precise moment Marquard came around the corner. James looked up; the two men froze. They paired off with about ten paces between them. James slowly backed away. The instant Marquard flinched forward James spun and made a run for it through the thick of the crowd.

In order to make his escape, James dashed headlong down the jammed platform, heedlessly shoving strangers aside.

He was frantic at the thought of being caught so near to his escape; unmindful of his impetuous flight, it was not long before James found himself at the end of the line. Success rewarded him with grief. Before him stood a cluster of wooden crates piled together barring his path where the platform terminated. With nowhere to run he was forced into a panicked lack of decision. There beside the towering black locomotive, he made a vain attempt to hide himself away behind some of the nearer crates. Marquard pushed through the crowd not far behind and strained to see up ahead.

James made his way around the crates, hidden from Marquard's view. From atop the engine, the train's engineer spotted James, shouting down to him in Polish.

"Hey, you there! Get back out onto the platform!"

Marquard ran toward the sound of the engineer's voice just as James darted out from behind the crates and scrambled down onto the tracks. Flabbergasted, the train engineer observed James flippantly disregard his orders, hunch down low, and pass underneath one of the crowded passenger cars.

"Hey," the engineer now shouted at Marquard, "get him out from there. He'll be killed!" At witnessing Marquard preparing to pursue James down onto the tracks, the man rebuked, "Wait, wait there. You'll get yourselves killed!"

Marquard paid no heed and followed James.

Below on the tracks, James scurried beneath the pylons of the next platform over, then under a number of train cars.

From one to another he moved parallel down the various lines. The train yard was a noisy, dark, and smokey place.

There were plenty of opportunities for James to conceal himself, though at the expense of wasted time. He had to keep on the move, flank around, and get back up to the platform unnoticed; he could not afford to miss the train designated for Danzig.

Isolated by the noise and confusion of the yard, Marquard paused. Before him the space below the train seemed impossibly narrow, and to get himself underneath with his lame leg proved to be an uncomfortable feat. Still, he struggled to pursue James, ready with his revolver, and through sheer determination promptly managed to scurry down a number of the occupied train lines.

In the dark underworld of the terminal, the prefect's senses did not at all fail him. The ambient clamor and the half-light of the rail yard was unto itself an intelligible disorder, gradually made more easily discernable once adjusted to it.

Marquard had become keen to his surroundings. Aware of a sound dissimilar to any other, he halted and upon closer examination was capable of distinguishing a rustle of loose gravel not far ahead and very near to another locomotive.

The prefect kept himself low, this time walking down the line instead of beneath the rail cars. Bent double, he checked under the train, conscious of the danger the American man posed. He saw a shadow move a few meters beyond the engine.

Onto his adversary, James picked up a lead pipe from the ground. He heard the prefect approach and rushed under another boxcar. This time when he emerged on the other side, he was stopped short by a train loaded with Polish troops on departure from the station and headed out to the front. The massive engine blew its whistle with a wicked shrill and steadily rolled by under full steam away from the station.

Near panic, James was forced to reassess his situation while aware that behind him the Frenchman closed in. The moving train made it impossible to go on ahead. To James' side where he had emerged from under the boxcar, very near to him, rose an iron underpinning. He gazed upward and was surprised to discover that he was standing at the foot of the station's only signal box, a sentry perched high above the rail yard.

Mindful of the contrivances which crowded the undercarriage, Marquard stooped low to crawl out from beneath the rail car. The train loaded with Polish troops was in passing. Due to the late hour the soldiers entrained within were mostly at rest. Any enthusiasm to mobilize had been long extinguished. The prefect went without notice and mere happenstance chanced to bring him up in time to catch a glimpse of James as he scaled the ladder of the signal box and intrepidly entered inside.

The moment of his unauthorized entry into the box the attendant installed within upbraided James.

"You can't be here, sir."

Straight away the uniformed attendant gathered from the interloper's demeanor that something was not right about him. The man made a dutiful attempt to detain James.

"Who are you?" he questioned in Polish. "What are you doing in here?" He stepped toward James, unresponsive to his aggressive posture. "What's your business in the train yard?!"

James charged forward roguishly brandishing the pipe. Fearful, the attendant raised his hands in a defenseless gesture and flinched backward.

"Wait!—Don't!—What do you want here?!" He was heard to shriek, "Don't," upon which James unconscionably walloped the man and tossed him bodily from the box.

The flimsy junction box door James shut securely behind him, and without pause he enacted a scheme to secure his escape. Along the wall of the signal box below a broad window that provided an ample view of the rail yard in its entirety were dozens of levers lined neatly all in a row. Each of these levers had a grip that, in turn, James grabbed and then pulled. One by one, down the line he threw them back or forth, helter-skelter, causing the flashing of indicator lights which triggered various signaling apparatuses and initiated each of their many functions down below on the tracks.

Far in the distance at the neck of the railway, a huge wrought iron signal gate expanded far up and over the dozens of convergent rail lines. The train loaded with troops steamed out of the station and started for the gate when all the signals and semaphores went off, an indicator to the engineer that the various lines had been switched, closed, or thrown open. He was forced to heed their warning and cautiously brought his locomotive to a grinding halt.

Pursuant after having helped the fallen attendant to his feet, Marquard started up the signal box ladder. The man, though still dazed from the blow, admonished a tug at the prefect's coat.

"W—Watch out," the attendant managed. "That guy... he is out of his mind!"

James overheard the parley and squatted down beside the door, bar raised and ready. The exact moment that Marquard stepped through the door, revolver held out before him, James struck. The swipe caught the prefect solidly at the forearm. The sharp blow caused him to drop the weapon to the floorboards. Defenseless, he reeled forward in pain and fell to a knee. Tears welled in his eyes, and suffering the impact reflexively, grasped at his fouled arm. Glancing back up he discovered James, who stood before him with the revolver pointed his way. Marquard rose slowly and backed off. James' hand was unsteady. The baited threat of the weapon he brandished begged itself to be challenged.

Only if instigated would he shoot, of this Marquard was certain. James' nerve was ensnared by his driven want of ease.

"Don't. Don't do this," the prefect pronounced.

"I can't have you following me," James told him. "I don't want to be looking over my shoulder anymore."

He hesitated and looked unsteadily past his maimed foe seeming only to reconsider transitorily.

"You don't want this," Marquard bartered.

In his rival's eyes Marquard correctly read that there was a struggle that, in consequence, was quickly acquitted.

James' resolve was regained. He lowered the gun, took aim at Marquard's leg, and fired once. Marquard went down.

The impact of the bullet threw his lower leg unnaturally back and crumpled him to the floor. Satisfied, James stepped over Marquard and put the revolver away into his jacket pocket saying nothing as he left.

Marquard had gradually recovered from the blow, pushing himself up with a bottomless groan. The attendant stuck his head in, saw the prefect crippled on the floor, and exclaimed, "My God, has he killed you?!"

While he helped the prefect to sit up, the attendant stared down, his mouth agape, gawking at Marquard's leg, the lower half of which had literally been twisted sideways just below the knee. It was a mangled piece of work, and in appearance, an excruciating wound. He gave Marquard a wide-eyed horrified look.

"Do you speak French?" asked Marquard, not noticeably affected by the injury.

"Why, yes! You must be in shock," the attendant answered as he reached for a telephone receiver mounted on the wall. "Sit still," he fretted. "I will call for help."

"No! Don't."

"We must—"

"No—"

"We must get you medical attention!"

"I'll be all right."

Marquard pulled at his twisted limb, the sight of which caused the man to start.

"Oh, don't! It's too terrible."

"Calm down. It's all right."

In lifting his pant leg Marquard revealed a wooden foot and calf that was attached to his knee with leather straps.

The lead slug could be discerned, flattened and lodged a centimeter into the hardened wood of Marquard's prosthetic limb.

"A souvenir from the war!" Marquard said with a crooked smile and a bit of sick humor.

The attendant was completely aghast.

"I should like to call the police. That man—"

"Don't," Marquard insisted. "Instead, call the superintendent and have him hold the train to Danzig long enough to get me on board."

## 53

Full to its capacity with refugees, the night train steamed its way out of Warsaw. Marquard stood in the forwardmost compartment of the train. He was the furthest person to the front of an open and densely crowded third class passenger car. Inside, some of the exhausted passengers had already succumbed to sleep while others, too anxious to rest, whispered news and rumors with those that shared in their misfortune. A hum, they talked all at once, heard softly in unison throughout the entire length of the narrow train car, speaking of cares and concerns in regards to family and friends whom they had already begun to miss or had hopes of soon being reunited with.

Over the ambient noise of the train the prefect spoke in French with a Polish constable, who in turn translated what Marquard said to the train's conductor and a small group of porters. The locomotive was seen through the open portal between it and the coupled passenger car. Atop the engine, the train's chimney was perched, a black iron mass trailed by a stream of dense, grey smoke and

the occasional release of a shrill cry which ventured out into the blind countryside. The men were huddled together and conversed in hushed tones behaving secretively about what was under discussion.

"There's no telling where he might be. Start here and work your way back. He is armed and probably traveling under an assumed name. Comprehend this: he is youthful and determined and is to be considered dangerous. If he is spotted, don't attempt to detain him. Contact the conductor, the constable, or myself. You all have a description so take your time. We don't want him to think anything is out of the ordinary."

The train conductor, a middle-aged gentleman, chimed in, eager to address Marquard.

"The assistant conductors will check tickets and identification for all of the first and second class passengers within the berths. You understand, though, that the steerage," he pointed around the crowded open third class compartment, "due to the circumstances, they won't have to pay their way. Incidentally, checking everyone's papers is going to prove itself to be a bit of a problem."

The constable translated.

"Only the grown men on board will need to be checked." Marquard clarified, "And I realize the time that it's going to take. Arrangements have been made to delay the train where possible. At each call we will restrict which exits are to open and will double-check every passenger who detrains."

When the briefing was concluded, the men split into groups. The conductor and a contingency of porters exited with the constable from the far end of the passenger car and entered the next car over. Marquard was to remain in the open third class car, presumably to audit the men's progress.

The fugitive would prove to be, for the moment, elusive. The constable and the conductor had split up, and each led a pair of the porters in the search. The constable with his men proceeded ahead to the subsequent passenger car.

Steadfast, the constable pushed onward through the aisle toward the end of the car. The two porters in his charge were left behind to check the adult males. James was seated a few rows back and noticed the scrutiny with which the train porters compared the passengers' papers to the clipboards they carried. Suspicious of their behavior, he rose from his seat and promptly quit the open compartment at the opposite end.

Through the door and into the vestibule, when James stepped out between cars, the constable unexpectedly doubled back and retreated from the adjoining door. James spotted the constable first, turned his back, and knelt down as if to tie a shoelace. The constable passed without having taken notice of him.

At the window in the vestibule's connecting door, James stood and spied. Observable in the train car, the constable re-approached the two porters and pointed something out to them on their clipboards. Their conspiratorial behavior was disconcerting to James and was enough to alarm him. On edge, he continued along and due to his precaution had momentarily evaded the danger with his entrance further into the train.

Watchful for some key indicator as to James' identity, Marquard strolled down the aisle of a congested passenger car. He stopped at a well-dressed man who was asleep in his seat, his hat worn down low over his face. With the clipboard Marquard nudged the man, waking him. The man roused and straightened his hat. It was not James. The constable entered the car and interrupted.

"Monsieur, the train is scheduled for its first stop."

"Have you informed the local police?"

"Yes. He won't get off without us spotting him."

"Good. Let's make this as quick as possible."

James stood in a vestibule of the train with a young English couple from whom he borrowed a cigarette. The train slowed into the station and passed several small groups of local police awaiting its arrival. The band of armed men on the platform were easily sighted from the vestibule where the three young people stood.

"Where was it you said you were headed?" the man asked James while his wife pleasantly listened in.

Though James' attention had been drawn to the train station outside, he was sure to answer.

"Danzig."

## 54

James bundled himself against the sting of the night air which bracketed him from the open sides of the narrow vestibule he shared with a group of refugees. None of the steerage was designated a seat; any charge of the third class compartments held strictly to the rules of venture. The train had become a crowded lifeline and the passengers' conveyance was at a fair degree of discomfort. Those relegated to the open vestibules held their own as best they could.

Huddled together, circumstance apprised them of the sorrowful commonality of their struggle, reciprocated by the release of bodily warmth they collectively generated.

The advantage of intermingling James exploited each instance the authorities entered the train car opposite from the end. A quick retreat saw him to safety the next car over; systematically James was filtered through the train and at every stop his movement controlled by the deliberate facilitation of the passengers through exits opened nearer to the front most compartments. The tactic of funneling their fugitive was so far effectively employed by the authorities. At each station a contingency of men met the ingress of the locomotive; an armed soldier positioned at each carriage ensured no person made an unwarranted exit. Any chance for escape diminished and at his recurrent withdrawal further through the train, James was made more aware of the meticulousness of the trap that was set for him.

Due to the overtaxed schedule, troop traffic necessitated the railway line remain open; each station afforded only a brief opportunity for arrivals and departures. At the larger more accommodating stations, the authorities maintained the passengers' use of the public facilities, though at the cost of some privacy, for so inundated were the lavatories that impromptu latrines had to be dug.

The nearer to Danzig the train the greater the number of passengers to exit—a cause of much confusion. And, when at one particularly congested stop several of the train's crew came close to being stranded, James was provided with the perfect opportunity to disembark. The locomotive had been brought to a halt prior to any digression. The platform was not yet cleared, and a lesser part of



the train of carriages remained exposed to the supervision of the authorities. The better half, consequently, was not. It was here James slipped unnoticed from the open side of the vestibule and into the train yard.

At once a sentry materialized. James was prompted to conceal himself. Stationed parallel to the track, a derelict boxcar provided temporary refuge. The soldier passed unwarily and was met by another. The pair united mere paces from James. A canine was handled by the second man. The animal was drawn to the undercarriage, pulling against its owner.

"Now, now," the handler discouraged. "Easy, there!"

"The dogs are jumpy tonight," his companion observed.

"It's the smell and the noise—"

James scurried through to the end of the boxcar. The shepherd detected his movement and barked out.

"If it isn't one thing it's another!" the handler groused.

The sentries were undutiful in response to the shepherd's behavior, little concerned with what had attracted its attention. James made haste; he was not to chance being discovered.

A barbed wall guided him for several car lengths. Further entry into the rail yard was made impossible. The passengers within the lit carriages James passed were unable to discern his movement in the darkness. The muffled voices of the sentries, the bark of the shepherds, and the glare of the spotlights verified the broadening risks. A clearing ahead was brightened by the busy station, and to trespass would expose him. Beside him the wall guardedly loomed, the barbs and height of which served to confine him. The train itself was flush with the platform; the platform was built solidly into the ground, with no space provided beneath it. He pined for an escape. Of the few and restricted choices he had, none was an option.

Disorder on the line temporarily retarded the train's reversal. An apparent miscommunication between the train engineer and the station manager resulted in the authorization of an inbound train loaded with Polish troops to key into the occupied platform. Those sentries assigned to the platform were hurriedly positioned down on the track to herald admonishment to the advancing locomotive. The event allowed James to proceed unobserved across the lit clearing.

The barbed wall veered at a corner and abruptly terminated. The vast train yard lay before James, a veritable store of unclaimed train cars and equipment. James pondered the compound. Daunted by its sheer complexity, he reconsidered his attempt at escape. Better were his chances of not being discovered aboard the train, he imagined, and turned to leave.

Several soldiers neared from James' previous direction. Their entrance was marked by their grouses at the assignment allotted them during a brief exchange in regards to the mishandling of the heavy train traffic. James followed a second set of tracks into the compound that led to an uncoupled locomotive set upon a roundabout. In the distance there was audible the movement of a large body of men. The locomotive served as a secure point of observance. Beyond the turntable and the structures of the roundhouse that encompassed it was an active Polish army encampment. James trespassed no further.

The soldiers came within passing of the roundabout. It was necessary that James further conceal himself. He pinched himself between the train engine and the band of men when inopportunely a team of attendants exited the

roundhouse. James went unseen, secure within the bulk of the locomotive that hid him, though unable to see beyond it.

The haste with which he concealed himself committed James to the vulnerable placement of his person between two adversaries, the parties of which encircled him. At the attendants' approach, the soldiers doubled back.

"You there," a soldier called.

James winced, his back reared up against the locomotive.

The attendants were drawn forward. "The engine's needed," one of the men answered for the group.

"We'll lend a hand," the soldier offered.

James' inability to act jeopardized him; his chances were favorable only in how unexpected his presence was in the train yard, the unlikelihood of which was the cause of the obliviousness on the part of the assembly of men stopped practically within arm's reach of him. The group commiserated prior to taking places caddie cornered and at either end of the train engine. The rollout of the locomotive onto the line necessitated the complete turn of the roundabout.

James was immobilized by his fear and consternation, incapacitated at the thought of capture. The redirection of the locomotive was to benefit him, spun from the open train yard to face the confines of the roundabout's surrounding structures. The attendants relinquished the train engine to the soldiers. An opportunity was provided for James to seize.

The distance between him and the roundhouse was negligible and encouraged him to remove himself from further danger.

The dilapidated structures offered the perfect refuge for James to finalize his decision. The cry of a train whistle initiated his hasty withdrawal. James backtracked to the platform, followed the station's retaining wall unobserved, and caught the train bound for Danzig at the timely moment of its departure.

## 55

Marquard stood in a vestibule between cars with the constable, who translated the prefect's orders to a group of porters.

"It's almost dawn," the constable yelled, forced to raise his voice over the wind and the noise of the train. "If he hasn't already gotten off," he continued, "then this is the last place we'll find him."

"And this car—this is the observation car?" Marquard asked.

"Yes," the constable answered, and further explained, "There are two levels. The lower deck is the lounge and above it is the observation deck."

"There are no passengers inside?"

"No. It wasn't to be opened until morning."

"All right then, have these men stay back. Only you and I shall proceed."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Have them remain here, just in case."

"I recommend we enter in force, to out number him."

"No. That's not good. These men aren't cut out for this. Besides, they haven't any weapons."

The officer looked the men over. Indeed they were useless, standing callow and doe-eyed, fidgeting nervously.

"Have them stay behind," Marquard instructed. "Make certain they understand: No one enters the observation car.

No one. If things go bad for us tell them to wait it out until the train makes its stop in the next town. It is very important. Have them leave it up to the local police. They'll handle him."

"All right."

"Be absolutely clear with them. No one goes in and no one but us comes out."

After the constable explained to the porters how things were going to happen, he veered his attention back to Marquard. The two men exchanged staunch glances. Intent on the accomplishment of his duties, the constable was first to prepare himself, removing a service revolver from the holster around his waist and checking it for ammunition.

Marquard followed suit, reached into his own pocket, and came out with a black, small caliber automatic pistol. A thumb flick released a long slender clip from where it was moored at the butt of the weapon. He verified that it was loaded with cartridges and slapped it back in place.

The constable nodded at the gun and remarked, "It's a Russian model. Holds twelve rounds of ammunition."

Marquard tested the weight of the pistol before he replied satisfactorily, "It's a fine weapon. Thank you."

The constable put a hand out to the prefect. Honored, Marquard shook the man's hand respectfully.

"Shall we, then?" was all the constable had to say as he bravely stepped forward, readied to exit the vestibule and poised to enter into the fray. Before him the observation car stood deserted, all the lights forebodingly extinguished.

Inside and unseen, James scurried up a small spiral staircase at the back of the lounge, revolver in hand. Likened to a feral creature condemned to hunch at the top of the stairs in fear, James peered direly from behind the wrought iron bars of the railing, the florid shapes of which cut crisp ornate shadows across the pallor of his solemn features. Through the desperate twitch of his staring eyes a frenetic stream of grim and endangered thoughts could be discerned, indicative of a frenzied and wild panic. Across the way the menacing silhouettes of the prefect and his men cut eerily into the frosted glass window frame of the connecting door.

Frantic, James looked on. He gathered together what little resolve he had left to face what he felt was his inevitable end. The two men entered. James retreated in silence upward to the observation deck. There he dissolved into the pitch-blackness, a mere diminished blur at the rear of the narrow, confined space. With the revolver held level, he readied himself and crouched facing the stairwell, fully prepared for whatever was to come.

The din of the two men infiltrating the car could be heard below. There were hushed voices. Someone slowly clamored up the spiral staircase. A dark figure rose, cautiously stepping out onto the observation deck.

Met with the brunt of four discharges, the constable folded; following a quick series of white flashes, James had unloaded the revolver producing a dense cloud of acidic smoke. Sparks flew off the iron railing of the spiral staircase.

The reverberated pitch of the bullets' ricochet rattled the cramped compartment. There were throws in the darkness from where the constable had shown himself accompanied by a sharp cry of pain. Then the consecutive clicks of the depleted revolver tried thrice more.

James had spent the revolver's ammunition. After an unabated discard of the weapon, he turned to one of the many considerably sized windows that lined the observation deck and struggled to slide it open. The mechanism of the window entailed the user to unlatch the brace and draw the pane forward whereupon it would catch a sleeve and remain in an open position. James, in his haste, attempted to force the window upward though to no avail, when from behind him he was yanked back and spun forward to face a wrathful Marquard.

"Y—You!" James screamed.

Marquard wore a rampant expression and snatched his adversary from where he cowered. A growl from deep down escaped the prefect's throat. James was brought up roughly by the shirt front and thrown to the floorboards. Marquard stood over James; one hand remained grasped on his shirt front, and with the other the prefect unleashed a volley of hard backhands to James' face.

The keen smack the prefect's knuckles delivered against James' face escaped with resounding clarity at each blow.

Abruptly, Marquard froze, his hand held aloft in mid-swing. Over them—over everything—was a faint whine, a steadily loudening scream similar to that of a siren. Marquard directed his attention to the roof of the observation car. The scream was cut short, followed at once by an audible whistle, low and sharp.

A shiver ran down Marquard's spine. James could sense it in him. It was enough to have caused James himself to shudder. The whistle raised in pitch. For an instant James had thought to escape, though a sense of overwhelming horror paralyzed him. No matter, for it was then that the upheaval of an explosion was accompanied simultaneously by a loud crash and a jarring halt that threw both men forward, clear across the observation deck and into blackness.

## BOOK II

### Polish Corridor, 1939

#### 56

A narrow tract of open land that cut a path through a dense pine forest, a pass meant to facilitate the interminable course of a railway line—one of various lines which circuited throughout Poland—was jarred by the sudden shock of a brilliant, red flash. From out of daybreak a blast shook the clearing, echoing across the silent and desolate pine forest.

Toppled over and piled upon itself, the derailed train lay aggregated on its side, snaked beside the slight rise of the railway embankment in smoldering ruin. Disoriented, the survivors milled about. Some helped the injured while others attempted to recover what baggage they could from the wreckage.

In the pale light, up far above the disrupted locomotive, a German Stuka dive-bomber rolled silently over onto its back and fell toward the ground. Splitting the sky, it made a terrible scream as it cut through the thin, crisp air.

Immobilized, the derailed train lay prone upon the churned and freshly wounded earth, fixed in the pilot's sights at the very center of his cross hairs. Down below, his intended victims scurried for cover, dehumanized specks busily set to the task of self-preservation.

There was a flash and the impact of another explosion. Innocents were killed. Panic-stricken, the crowd dispersed in wild abandonment of the train and fled in a dire attempt to take refuge in the surrounding forest.

Rattled by the reverberations of the blast, Marquard had come to. Wearily he rose from within the wreckage of the observation car. A miracle granted that he should go unscathed. The entire roof had been torn from the observation deck and was toppled over onto its side. The lounge level had been flattened making the car appear as nothing more than a heap. The impact was so great at the front of the compartment that the flimsily constructed car had collapsed in upon itself like an accordion. Rent from its fixtures the spiral iron staircase sat intact teetering erroneously. It seemed to defy the wreckage abutted against it on all sides. And it was from this rubble that Marquard spotted movement. Bent double, he rushed over to James, who was caught in a pocket of debris. Hauling him up, Marquard dragged him out from the ruins and into the open, whereupon he soon discovered James had been injured.

A shallow gash across James' scalp was hidden under a tuft of his hair already matted with congealed blood. He was hardly conscious and mumbled a stream of meaningless German utterances in an enfeebled voice.

"Fünfe," was discernable and increased to, "zehne," then in ascending order, "zwanzig, dreißig, sechsunddreißig, and dreiundvierzig," until lastly he stated in a calm plainly voice, "J-Ja, ich sehe, bestes Mädchen... wie der Kranz so schön dir steht."

Marquard kept himself calm, caught a glimpse of the altered state of their surroundings, collected a clean length of cloth which lay nearby and tore it into

strips, solidly dressing James' head wound. From all sides the two men were assailed by a nightmarish cacophony of noise and ruin. In full flight from the drone of an enemy aircraft, a number of helpless passengers hastened past. The Stuka came in low over the pine trees straight for them. Marquard shook James and slapped his face.

"Come on, now! Come on, boy!"

Jarred from a half-conscious state, James unwittingly came to. Helpless, he clawed the soft earth at his sides.

"What's happening?!" he cried out.

The German fighter swooped down from the sky. A fiery shot tore from the wings and blazed forth to strafe the ground spitting globs of dirt high into the air. Marquard nimbly dashed James up off the ground and spirited him to his feet. Together they dove backward and out of the way, barely able to escape the rapid volley of bullets. Without resistance James retreated with the prefect to the shelter of the observation car.

Overhead, the pilot, having missed his target, banked his plane and came around for another run. Marquard stuck his head out to make sure that all was clear. The wide swing of the Stuka heralded the pilot's intent. Marquard held James back, taking it upon himself to protect the young man. Ensnared within, dire circumstance raised Marquard's humanity to a level deserving of his extraordinary character.

"Stay put! He's coming back around!"

The German fighter came full around. From a distance its awful and jagged shape posed a threatening insult to its intended prey. The prefect grabbed the sleeve of James' jacket, and shook him firmly, staring hard.

"Forget about everything!—Do you understand? Forget about everything!—We have got to run for it!" he spat, speaking close up and in James' face.

The Stuka pilot realigned the observation car in his sights and opened up, strafing the ground. The observation car was churned up in a show of white sparks. From the cloud of debris two figures emerged, scrambling and scurrying to the safety of the densely canopied forest.

A spirited charge garnered James and Marquard the cover offered a safe distance within the thicket of pinewood.

The two men gasped for breath, crumpled from fatigue. Beneath the overlaying security of a dense conifer, James collapsed heavily onto a blanket of soft pine needles.

"Wh—Why did you save my life?" he inquired of the Frenchman, fighting off dizziness due to the loss of blood from his head wound.

"Listen... What—Whatever it is you've done..." Marquard tried to explain, quick to catch his breath. He advanced forward and stood ably before James. "Whatever it is you've done—look around you—at this point it doesn't matter."

James glanced up helplessly, wanting to believe the reassuring words that were being issued to him.

Marquard continued, speaking his thoughts aloud. "No. It doesn't matter." He shook his head. "Not anymore! It's not how it began, it's how it ends. Together, we might make it out of this alive."

The whine of a fighter overhead startled Marquard.

"Get down!" he ordered.

In defenselessness the two men sought out whatever protection the surrounding coniferous growth might offer. A German fighter plane shot past and flew out of sight.

"He didn't see us," Marquard announced half to himself. "We need to leave."

Slow to get to his feet, James remarked, "We're in the middle of nowhere!" He leaned dejectedly against the trunk of the pine and asked, "Which direction should we even go in?"

"We're about thirty or forty kilometers from Malbork. That's one of the last major stops before Danzig. Nearby, on the way, directly to the northwest, if we follow the river we'll pass the small town of Nowy Staw. There we might be able to procure a vehicle."

"A vehicle?"

"Yes. A vehicle."

"Then what?" James asked groggily.

"We could split up if you want. Or—Or if you would come with me, maybe—"

"Where is it you're going?"

"Out of here! Out of the godforsaken Polish Corridor! This is where all the fighting is going to be," Marquard pointed out, working himself up.

"Have you thought about Danzig?" James asked. "It's a free city and you could get to Norway across the Baltic sea and then to England."

"And from Danzig you'll get back to Germany."

James confirmed that this guess was correct with a single nod. He kept to himself the thought that Danzig might be in German hands.

"And if the city is under siege?" Marquard put forth, fully aware that Danzig was one of the causes of German aggression.

"Never mind that. We would know well in advance. All we need now is to get to the sea."

"I'm not sure."

"We can't afford to hesitate. You're not sure? It's all guess work. Danzig is as good a choice as any. We could be there by nightfall if you are correct and we're as close as you think."

## 57

By midmorning the German advance would penetrate deep into the Polish Corridor effectively dashing any hope of serious resistance west of the river, Vistula. Together the two wayward travelers navigated their way along the bank of a stream. Each man kept to himself. Both made headway, fixed on their common aim in stalwart silence. A few paces ahead of James, Marquard stopped to wait. Once James had caught up, Marquard pointed out a shallow. The rich and silty riverbed was clearly discernable through the translucent waters.

"Here! We should cross," he suggested. The abrupt sound of his voice frightened a pair of white storks that sprang gracefully into the air from a thick outcropping of reeds.

"Look at that!" Marquard remarked as the birds flew over the trees and out of sight.

James stood still for a moment to observe.

"We should cross here." Marquard continued, "The summer has been hard on the river, so it shouldn't be difficult to make our way downstream. This whole area consists of nothing but lowlands. There are estuaries similar to this one,

only too wide for leaping, which twist throughout the area. Our continuing in this direction should lead us to Nowy Staw."

In the distance was the faint sound of battle that rose erratically, threatening from behind them. Of intensity, the din of drumfire was at intervals greater or lesser, though it was a constant, distinctive threat and predicted absolutely the grave danger that awaited them.

"Are you sure this town is up ahead?" James asked, getting irritated. He had resisted the need to lie down for some time. His head throbbed. "This is taking incredibly long!"

"Do you feel like you might need to rest?"

The crackle of the innumerable gun rapport echoed beyond the forest. James took a sardonic glance in the direction of the roll of artillery fire and, in a single word and with much trepidation, responded.

"No."

"It's not much further. We're getting close."

"How can you be sure?"

"While on the train I was shown a map of our route to Danzig. Nowy Staw was on it. Seemed as if it was only kilometers from Malbork near to where we were derailed, just south of the last stop."

"How far were we from Malbork?"

"Maybe thirty kilometers, maybe less."

"We're not going to be able to turn back."

"It's up ahead. I'm sure of it."

"Still, the fighting is close. I mean, how far can we hope to get before-"

"What else are we to do?"

"It's just that it's uncomfortable, the idea that we won't be capable of turning back."

"That's fine, not turning back," Marquard responded. "We have a chance at this... as long as they're not fighting up ahead of us." He wiped the sweat from his brow and in the same motion leveled his hand to block the sun. "It must be near noon," he thought out loud.

Being astute, James pulled his jacket sleeve and made the common motion to read his wristwatch. Unfortunately, he found his gold watch to be missing.

"Damn!"

He checked down at himself and with a pat of his pockets pivoted in place to examine the ground. Disappointed at how careless he had been to lose it, he exclaimed, "I damn well lost my watch!"

"When was the last time you checked it?"

"I don't know. Maybe a few kilometers back."

"Well, we're not going back for it." And giving James a diffident look Marquard sardonically added, "There are worse things I could think of losing."

"That's reassuring!" James was quick to quip.

At that Marquard had to laugh. James joined in. This levity was necessitated by circumstance, and to not release some stress would have been detrimental to the spirit. He told James that it reminded him of something and resumed their march forward.

"A story about a gold watch that was once given to me a very, very long time ago... It's funny really, there are moments in life when one has the sense of being a mere character in the greater part of an other person's life."

Silent, James kept on Marquard's heels and contently listened while the tale was recounted.



"This was during the war, in northern France, well, Flanders in actuality. Early nineteen-fifteen. We were children, some as young as seventeen, and we were stationed at the front for the first time. Mostly conscripts... I was. There were still a few professional soldiers. Most wouldn't last the year. The staff commanders, for their part, did everything they could to prepare us. But there wasn't anything in reality that they could do. No fancy maps or drills or maneuvers could prepare a boy for that place."

With a cursive glance behind, Marquard continued.

"Nothing could prepare a person for that. It's subhuman. And when we found ourselves steeped in the sordid filth and violence of the altogether godforsaken trenches, well... I'll tell it to you straight from the horse's mouth: There wasn't a man who didn't struggle with morale.

"Survival... by survival I don't mean to suggest surviving the enemy. I mean the will a man has to stay alive. There was a general apathy about it, really. It was said that when your time came up...anyway, to stay alive a fellow had to have something more. A fellow had to be charmed. And if you felt unsure about it, then you would put your faith in some object. It was superstitious maybe, but if you could get a hold of something tangible, a keepsake, then maybe it would protect you.

"It seems ridiculous thinking back, but there wasn't a soldier who didn't tote around some goddamned thing or another! The Germans, as well. On one occasion which I'll not forget, I'd bayoneted a Boche officer—poor fellow—I hadn't quite done him in, and he lay there beside me in the filth of a shell crater, pinned down for hours. Uncomfortable as he must have been, with his belly torn as it was, he didn't grouse at it. Just lay there, prone, holding himself in, gradually bleeding to death.

"Come to find out he spoke French fluently; it seemed he had been a headwaiter in Paris before the war, like so many young Germans at the time. Asked a favor of me as he was dying. He wore a gold pocket watch, nothing special, except for the history behind how he happened upon it.

"He had been stationed in the Caucasus Mountains early on in the war. There on the Eastern Front it was the Turks who manned the trenches for the Boche, and they were loathed for their brutality. Infidels are without compassion.

They know nothing of magnanimity or kindness. When the regional pasha discovered that a share of his domain's rail lines were being sequestered for the passage of refugees—Christians who had settled in the area before the war—he became insane with fury. Showing of his true barbarity he decided to make an example by ordering a random train full of refugees to be stopped and all the passengers therein executed.

"The Turkish officer in command passed the pasha's brutal request verbatim to the train conductor: 'The passengers will spend the remainder of their journey,' he grimly ordered, 'outside the train, their heads hung from the roof of each car.'

"It so happened the very German I'd been talking to had the misfortune of riding on this particular train. Being a German officer, of course he was spared, but to witness such an unimaginable order being carried out by the hardened Turkish soldiers was enough to strain his tolerance and loyalty to their limits. Still, to intervene would have meant he was guilty of insubordination and he too would have been executed. So biting his lip, he and his German colleagues, a number of scientists with whom he traveled, stood by and watched as every

man, woman, and child was forced outside the train knee deep in snow, and after about an hour of being exposed to the elements, were all separated and put to death.

"During one of several interludes—the Turks had tricked their victims by bringing them in small groups to the opposite side of the train where a squad awaited with fixed bayonets—it was at one of these particular breaks that an elderly man had noticed the German's revulsion to the situation outside. And at this point he approached the officer, begging his sympathy.

"Apparently, the Turkish commander had prepared a phonograph to play music during the whole escapade to cover up his victims' cries. The ruse didn't hold for long. In the general panic that ensued, a few refugees attempted escape, distracting the sentries, and it was during one of these distractions that the elderly man turned to the aid of the empathetic Germans.

"Desperate to save his family, he pleaded with the officer, begging him to smuggle his young wife and children on board the private car the Germans occupied, which the Turks wouldn't dare search. Misdirected as the guards were and in the general panic, it was a request that was easily granted.

"To reward the German officer for his kindness, the elderly man insisted he take the only thing of monetary value he had—his pocket watch. The man shoved his gold watch into the officer's hand at the last moment, before the Turkish sentries returned to drag him away. The German was left with no choice but to turn his back and inconspicuously reboard the train.

"This German gave me that elderly man's gold watch. He gave it to me so I would never forget that I hadn't killed just another enemy soldier, like so much filth, but that I had taken the life of a human being. He gave me that timepiece to remind me of his merit and to give himself the dignity of being more than another nameless face. The watch was evidence of his worth."

At this juncture there was a poignant and reflective silence shared between the two men. Marquard let it last momentarily before he deemed to add:

"I lost it under circumstances beyond my control. Still, I sometimes think that that gold watch was what kept me alive throughout the long years of that conflict."

## 58

The lick of the super-heated sun, risen to its apex, forced the two sweat-drenched migrants to rest from their exhaustive flight. At the bend of a rivulet, divergent from the principal bulk of the Vistula, a deer path led the two men along a gradient course to a forgotten fen. The encompassing forest effectively isolated the bog and its lush thicket of reeds and marginal growth from being sighted from the sky or adjacent waterway. The temperate shade and humidity which were prevalent in the cloister corrigibly welcomed Marquard, the first of the pair to breach the sanctum of the swampland.

"The difference, James," he announced, preceded by an expansive gesture which he further elaborated upon back where James closed, "the difference it makes. You can't imagine!"

An area of firm ground, clear of undergrowth, provided a fine place for a respite. Overhead, a burgeoning outcropping of willow offered shelter from the light and heat. A low stone wall—the boundary marker of a bygone property—lay

derelict and covered in tiny rock plants. The low water of the bog, where it was not broken by reeds, was carpeted by innumerable, flowerless, glossy lilies, an idyllic enclosure when compared to the extreme conditions outside its sphere of influence.

At the wall James surrendered to lassitude and sat in comfort. The languid air placed a charm over his being.

Trance-like, he stared at the back of Marquard's hatless head. Marquard in that instance knelt to test the cleanliness of the stagnant waters.

"We'll not want to drink from this." He bespoke, "The water is nonpotable, of that I am quite certain," and pivoted to re-face James.

Startled involuntarily from his detached gaze, James averted his eyes from Marquard's. His wayward glance from the bog to the boundary of woods led him to the leafy fold, where a naked child appeared. A prepubescent girl, a glow in a sliver of light and drawn by an unknown, unwarily stepped before James. It was not to be detected, by her behavior, that she was in observance of him. She seemed catatonic and abstracted from reality. The distance between either party was sufficient enough that speech fell short. Spectral in her aspect, she glided past and disappeared without trace.

"Did you see that?!" James managed.

Marquard, not yet privy to the secret of the fens, strode forward and uttered a predictable reply, "See what, James?"

"There was a woman, just now—a girl, I mean. She hadn't any clothes on."

The thicket that stood before the men was a motionless void. Neither sight nor sound indicated any other presence except their own.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"I—For a moment I thought—"

A middle-aged man in a crumpled suit stepped from the wood. A distracted air was about his person. His clothes were disheveled, and he was preoccupied with the hasty fit of his arm into the linen jacket that he wore. Marquard sighted him at once.

"Wait—" he called out.

The prefect's initial outburst was met by the stranger's startled retreat.

"Wait! We shan't hurt you!"

A bewildered check at James and both men were off in pursuit. The man quickly outdistanced them.

"Mister!" James beckoned in Polish. "Mister, wait!"

"Don't!" Marquard retracted. "Let us follow," he explained, "and see where he goes."

They followed the path the man took beyond the stone wall and into the thicket which had not led them far from the clearing before segregating them geographically from the bog.

"That girl I saw—" James whispered.

The snap of a twig nearby stifled him. To the immediate left of their position a rustle of underbrush indicated a presence. Marquard stopped James in his tracks, brought his index finger to his lips, and threw aside a densely foliated branch to reveal the naked child.

The prepubescence of the innocent girl was accentuated by the narrowness of her hips and flatness of her chest. She stood defenseless at waist height, her eyes rooted to the ground, not due to shame, but rather due to subordination and respect for the two clothed adults who were before her. Though taken aback from shock, James' reaction was swift and deliberate; empathetic to the

girl's plight, he shucked his own jacket in order to cover her nudity. In Polish he strove to comfort her.

"It's all right. Everything's going to be all right."

In her complacent way, the child was responsive to James' warmth. A look from him was all that was required to constitute her trust.

"Ich verstehe nicht," she blurted in German.

"Sie sprechen Deutsch?," James declared, utterly shocked.

"Sie sprechen Deutsch?" she parroted in way of reply.

"Ja. Sind sie Deutsch, kleines Mädchen?"

"Ich bin."

"Was ist ihnen geschehen? Wer war dieser Mann gerade jetzt? Sind sie verläßt?"

Absent of any emotion, the girl answered.

"Nein. Er ist unser Chordirektor. Er läßt uns Sachen tun. Ich darf nicht sagen-Sie nicht sagen ihm, ich Ihnen sagte daß, werden Sie?"

Marquard watched in apprehension as James conversed with the girl. He was not about to confuse the issue—that the child was German posed a problem. Forbearance compelled him to intercede.

"What is it she's said?"

James had no immediate reply.

"James. What is it that she's said?"

"She knows the man. They aren't alone. Near to here is a ruin. They hid themselves, apparently."

"Who, James?"

"He is the director of the Berlin Girls Choir. They were unable to return to Germany when ordered. It seems he had planned to wait it out until such a time that they would be saved!"

It was important that Marquard impress upon James with certainty his anxiousness in regard to their shared nationality. His wish was not to be complacent.

"Were that I was more confident in our relationship," he began, "then there would be no need of me to ask this—"

"Ask what? I don't understand."

"If this man and these children are German as you say they are," he was frank to a fault, "it might be best for all if you were to remain—"

"No, you don't understand. He molests these girls!"

"I didn't know!"

"Just look at her."

James re-addressed the girl.

"Has this been going on for long?"

"Many times."

The blameless circumstance she revealed in so forthcoming a fashion infused the girl's testimonial with a dignity and maturity beyond the pale of her youth. Her courage overwhelmed James. The impressionability of her injured purity indubitably was imprinted upon him. It was James' sense of protectiveness, alone, that dictated his conduct. Until this point James knelt by the girl. Now risen to his feet, he placed his arm paternally around her. Impelled by this instinct, he was imprudent enough to propose that the child leave with them. Marquard's measured response was firmly stated with much criticism of James' non-confrontational attitude.

"What of those remaining? We make off with her, and where does that leave them?"

"We'll leave with all of them, then."

"James, that would put us in a fix, wouldn't it? We can't afford to be slowed. I won't allow for it."

"Allow for it? You'll have us send her back, I suppose."

"I suggest we mind ourselves. Any rash decisions we make now are bound to affect us in the long run. Were we to take on these children, there would be repercussions."

The men's tone upset the girl. No longer mindful of her, she was able to slip away. James shouted after her and motioned to follow, an action the prefect barred.

"Reconsider. We leave well enough alone—Listen to what I've got to say—What happens, then? We go on our way.

"They'll be back in Germany by nightfall." Marquard paused. "James, whatever it is that's been happening, has been happening well before we came along. I understand your consternation. After all, she's only a child. Under any other circumstance—Try to understand our dilemma, being what it is—You have to acknowledge that it does us no good whatsoever. We simply can't risk to stick our necks out, not for anyone."

"That goes against every instinct I have."

"If we mean to survive, then we must think only of ourselves. That is the way of it. The business of warfare is unhappy, its suffering arbitrary."

"It's not right."

"It never is—"

The crack of a single gunshot in their proximity silenced them; its unmistakable sound nullified all debate.

Marquard stiffened, resolutely pulled the Russian-made pistol, given to him by the constable on the train, from his coat pocket and brandished it forward, readied for confrontation. An unspoken understanding passed between he and James.

Together they strove to abate the offense.

The path they traversed quickly terminated at the outskirts of a ruin. A mere shamble of structural blocks stood in the apparent configuration of an early monastery, a long rectangular shape, a columnar basilica, the vaulted apse of which was most prominent. What once was the ambulatory of the colonnaded chapel, of which the pillars were all that remained, now lay beneath the rubble of the extant walls. The structure was an overgrown hulk devoid of any semblance to its former splendor.

The cautionary silence of the men's approach was contrastingly met with the blithe chorus of children. Carried softly, the origin of their premature voices was initially difficult to place.

*Herzlich tut mich er freuen  
die liebe Sommerzeit,*

[My heart abounds with pleasure  
In this fair summer time]

Closer inspection revealed them to be huddled together within the rubble. A group of a dozen girls ranging in age, the youngest might have possibly been

nine, the eldest sixteen at most. At their center they guardedly protected the young child the men had encountered in the thicket.

*Wann Gott wird schön verneuen  
alles zur Ewigkeit.*

[When God, with fullest measure,  
Renews the world benign.]

Her stare fell full upon James; wetted with tears, her eyes signaled a worsened development. The wavering chorus the children sang the eldest girl coordinated. This girl of no more than sixteen bravely embraced her frightened brood, leading them with her bright, steady voice.

*Den Himmel und die Erden  
wird Gott neu schaffen gar,*

[All earth and all the Heavens  
Doth God with life imbue;]

Never having taken his eyes from the child's, James mouthed in German, "Where?" The girl glanced sidelong and indicated with a nod. "There," she mouthed in return. James focused past the group of children. The vaulted apse of the chapel obstructed any perspective, so close were they in proximity.

*all Kreatur soll werden  
ganz herrlich hübsch und klar.*

[All creatures, high and lowly,  
Grow beautiful and true.]

At the foot of the structure Marquard pointed out a pair of men's dress shoes. Prior to James, his scrutiny of the scene disclosed the bottom of a man's bare feet. The remainder of whom they belonged to was hidden from view. An involuntary jerk of one foot clued James in.

"There!" he started.

"Quiet!" Marquard cut and flanked the apse wide, pistol readied.

The tension that he carried in his posture all of a sudden loosened, and beckoning James, hid his weapon.

"Have a look."

In James' passage from front to back of the apse, he had closely observed the director's shoes; within each a sock was meticulously balled and placed. The director lay inert on his back in a patch of tall grass. A service rifle sat across his chest, pointed toward his face. He was dead, his mouth ajar. Blood had gathered around his head, where the suicidal round had pierced the back of his skull and which the dry earth readily absorbed.

"What happens now?" James inquired without his taking his eyes from the grisly sight.

Marquard knelt and took one of the director's legs.

"Help me with him."

James assisted Marquard to drag the corpse of the pedophile several hundred meters into the nearby woods without being observed by the children. The rifle remained in place for the entirety of the journey. Taxed, they

abandoned the body in a random spot without burial, only a cursory gesture paid to the rifle.

"Shouldn't we—" Marquard suggested.

"Not I!" was James' retort. "It has been defiled."

"Let us head back, then."

"Fine."

The return walk was made in silence.

James shuffled the eldest girl aside and conferred with her in private. Marquard sat by without comment. He had a sense that the girls were all aware of what had transpired. Jointly, they had organized what baggage they had in the men's absence, gathering together their meager provisions.

James tended to the younger girl whom he had comforted with his jacket—to which she had become attached and which he allowed her to retain. A tender word was shared between them prior to his departure. Before long, James returned to Marquard's side.

"She has an extraordinary will," James stated.

"Is that so?"

"She said to me just now that we needn't worry for her well-being, that our Lord would protect her. She then expressed a beautifully free association of thought."

"What was it she said?"

"While we are on the roadway, it would please her if we were to notice that atop the telegraph poles there are large nests. Storks, apparently. She'd like for us to see them."

"They're not to accompany us, then?"

"No. The eldest girl won't have it. She feels that they've enough provisions to wait it out until they are rescued. I told her we would find them help once we had arrived in Nowy Staw, which she begged me not to."

"We'll have to. I saw what little they have. They won't last more than a few days. Once we arrive, we'll inform the townspeople."

"I... agree." James wavered in speech for a brief moment, a subtle though telling sign of exhaustion.

"If you've enough strength to continue?"

"Let's."

## 59

Through the thick of the woods, Marquard helped James to hobble along. The ground ahead of them was rough and uneven. The sun-dried forest itself was relatively sparse; it was the tangled undergrowth that made it difficult to get through. Behind them the sound of fighting intensified, pushing them forward and driving them to their physical limits.

Unable to continue, James collapsed out of overexertion, going limp in Marquard's arms.

"Let... me rest a while."

"We must push on."

"I haven't the strength."

"Come on, James. It can't be long now."

"Please. I think I might be sick!"

"For a moment, all right," Marquard consented. "We'll stop only shortly."

"Thank you. Here..." Where they stood was adequate for James. "Here, this is fine."

Marquard helped him down, propping his back up against a small mound of earth. He was careful to do what he could to make James comfortable. As luck would have it, a depression in the ground served well to rest in.

"Sit for a while."

"Yes, this—this is fine, thank you."

James had grown pale and the bandage around his head was soaked with blood. Disparagement fed off what little endurance James fought to retain. His willpower drained from his open head wound despite how strenuous his resistance. James' life was near to an end.

"The town can't be much further ahead," Marquard tried to reassure him, uneasily eyeing the loosened dressing. "It would be best to push ourselves."

"I can't. I'm afraid I might pass out."

To gauge James' temperature, Marquard placed his hand to James' forehead, the feel of which was unexpected, and retracted it sharply.

"You're as cold as ice!"

"I feel—"

"Don't talk," Marquard interrupted. "Just lie still. Let me think for a moment..." Mechanically he removed each of his arms from the coat he wore. "You may have a concussion. If that's the case, we'll need to get you medical attention."

With empathy and a show of kindness, Marquard placed his jacket over James.

"Stay here."

"Where are you going?" James asked, barely able to hold up his head.

"Just ahead. To find out how far we have to go."

The prefect fished through one of the deep pockets of the jacket blanketed over James and withdrew the small black Russian-made pistol.

"Don't worry about anything."

To aid him, he racked the weapon, cocked back the hammer, and placed it with confidence into James' hand.

"Just in case," said Marquard still clasping the gun firmly, which was now in James' grip, with both his hands.

"What about you?" James found the strength to ask.

"I shan't be long."

James laid back and relaxed his body. The bounding footfall of Marquard sounded faintly away.

## 60

A sedate breeze of cool air momentarily encroached upon James where he lay settled into the depression. The longer he waited for Marquard's return the more his body seemed to sink into the leafy ground. Overhead, a soft half-light permeated the thick canopy of branches casting a terrestrial and viridian shade throughout the entire median of the forest. Almost at once the dark and convoluted wilderness was transformed through a lighted enchantment into the



utmost ethereal of settings, a revealment sylvan in colored sublimity, a veritable heaven upon earth.

Soothed, James momentarily permitted himself to shirk his anxiety and allow his weighted eyelids to close. He imagined Lynn far away in safety, carried beyond the perilous ground where war pervaded. In comfortable silence he let the pistol fall to his side and unerringly he began to drift into a plainly slumber. James became uncommonly motionless. The strong features of his youthful face, which shone waxen due to his weakened condition, emphasized in him a statuesque dignity.

Brought up by reflex and starting disruptively, James was jerked awake. An involuntary fright roused him from sleep. Though his mind resisted, his body was more inclined to rest.

Unmindful in his torpid haze, he shifted in place, displacing his weight in an attempt to make himself more comfortable. He rolled from flat on his back to his side, where in turning over onto Marquard's coat he heard and felt some object snap. Driven by his natural curiosity, James discovered upon checking within the outside breast pocket of the jacket—over his heart—a pair of thick-framed reading spectacles. Not recognizing the spectacles, he removed them from the pocket to find that one of the lenses had fallen out. He fished this piece out of the pocket and attempted to replace it. The cracked frame was no longer able to keep the lens securely in place.

At once James returned the broken spectacles safely to the outer pocket. He held only the single lens, now quite useless, in the palm of his hand. After he had risen and emerged effortlessly from the place where he was hidden, James stepped out past some brush and into a clearing. There he stood on his own in complete solitude surrounded by the interminable forest. With the heel of his foot he found a soft spot in the ground and pressed an indentation into the dry, red soil. He knelt down and ceremoniously dug a shallow hole with his hands and buried the lens.

Distracted by a rustling noise, James glanced up. A solitary white stork stood before him. Most conspicuous were the bird's elongated red legs, so acute was their color compared to the florid oily feathers. Lean and elegant, the beautiful creature's head was crooked where it rooted through a clump of earth, inserting its needle-like beak into the ground with felicity.

Sure to frighten the animal if he moved, James waited remaining squatted in place. He stared at the bird indefinitely, taken completely aback by the oddity of such a wild animal so oblivious to a human being. In an attempt to see more closely, he strained, focusing in on what the bird rooted for, observant of where the beak was being inserted.

The black polished eye of the stork gazed intelligibly through James with an impactive, unerring cognisance, peering directly into his conscience. In that moment James' thoughts rested once more on Lynn, and consequently, as he knelt transfixed before the bird he became caught in an endless pitfall of deep introspection. To reflect, the bird's brazen stance challenged him accusatorially by the very proximity of its daring vibrancy and purity.

Thrown back to the conciliatory thought of Lynn's security, James justified his selfish behavior to himself. In that instant the stork's head came up with a small dirt-caked object caught in its beak. Curious and self-assured, James reached his hand out to the bird, who reacted predictably. Wings unfolded and jetting into the air, the stork sprung away, returning again to the ground only a few dozen paces in the distance. The stork fiddled with the tiny object in its

beak, tossing it to the ground and pitching it up again. When James motioned toward it, the bird snatched up its prize and flew from him once more, settling to the ground a bit further on. Intrepidly James pursued the animal, getting a bit closer each time before it retreated from him.

The white stork led James unwarily to the river. There at the embankment on the opposite side, the stork remained.

The glistening clear water of the Vistula ran deep and rapid, an impassible obstacle to the animal's grounded pursuer.

Perplexed, James stood inept and witnessed the stork dip its beak into the unclouded waters and rinse the dirt-caked object. The bird lifted its head holding the silver feather hatpin—the very hatpin James had given Lynn as a love gift.

James was taken aback. The bird shot a glance at him and dropped the hatpin into the water.

## 61

Marquard hopped over the ledge of earth that hid James.

"It is I. Modest!" he announced at his approach so as not to startle his companion.

James was woken from a deep slumber.

"What, what's happening?!" he blurted groggily. "How long have you been gone?"

Marquard knelt down beside James. He held a bundle under his arm and smiled with the devilishness of a high-spirited child. At James' feet Marquard placed the parcel.

"Not long," he responded while he undid the bundle. "Look what I have found!"

He reached within, removed two loaves of bread, and held them aloft. In the light they shone like gold tablets.

James had not any remark to the prefect's find, only a telltale smile.

"How's that?!"

After he had plopped them down into James' lap, he exhibited to him a small medical kit, a sizeable tin canister painted a solid forest green and labeled: *For Use of the Polish Military*.

"And this! ... And..."

With all the suspense characteristic of a magical feat, Marquard reached in and produced a nearly full bottle of Vodka.

"...voila!"

A wide-grinned laugh escaped from Marquard's crooked mouth. He uncorked the bottle with his teeth and helped James to take a sip. Dry-lipped, James drew a careful draft from the upturned rim of the bottle's glass mouth.

"Where did you find it?" James asked coughing.

"There's a road leading to town just up ahead and it seems clear. I found these things on my way back at what appeared to be an army encampment of some kind. There weren't any soldiers. Looks as if they left in a hurry."

James lifted himself and sat upright in order to eat some of the bread. He returned Marquard's coat.

"Polish?"

"Yes. And everything was left intact. Where they went I don't know, but they didn't have time to break anything down," Marquard recounted as he donned the coat. "You're feeling better?"

James nodded.

"Modest. That is your name?"

"Yes," replied Marquard.

The curiosity James displayed had inadvertently caused some degree of discomfort to Marquard. To busy himself, he took a clean bandage out of the medical kit and delicately removed the soiled one from James' wound. The cut remained open. With some gauze Marquard stanching the flow of blood.

"How can I thank you, Modest?"

In silence Marquard rewrapped James' head with the fresh bandage. His patient stared with a fixed brotherly fealty.

"Dieter, Dieter Milch... that's—" James began to tell him, disclosing his secret.

"Don't! It would be better if you didn't. Let's just help each other to get out of this alive."

His understanding, and in concurrence, James granted this request by saying nothing more about it. With forthrightness he handed back the pistol Marquard had entrusted to him that all the while lay inert at his side. Upon receipt of the weapon Marquard delicately uncocked the hammer. He tucked the pistol away when the two men were attracted by a distinct and unsettling sound, the mechanical whine of a tracked vehicle forcing its way through the underbrush of the woods not far from them.

"Get down!" Marquard whispered hastily.

He shoved James down, stuck his head up, and peered through the brush. Concealed from view behind the ledge of earth, Marquard observed the woods part, disrupted by a commotion. Emergent from the forest were two grey-green military vehicles both with German markings. The lead vehicle was a military half-track mounted with a large caliber machine gun, and behind it, a canvas covered truck. Close behind the truck were nearly a dozen German soldiers; subsequently these men, on foot, had the aspect of the professional soldier. The small column drove out into a clearing where it came to a complete halt only a mere dozen paces or so from the place where the two men were effectively hidden. The latch-back was dropped at the rear of the covered truck. A group of civilian prisoners were hauled down and forced at gunpoint out into the glade. Reluctance on the soldiers' part in the observance of their duties disclosed their intention to enact the German doctrine of harshened remand against resistance, of which these civilians were to be made an example.

"What's happening?" James asked in a hushed tone.

"Stay down." Marquard murmured, "Don't move. Don't make a sound!"

The Polish prisoners, Marquard could clearly discern, consisted of four women and two middle-aged men. One of the women was older than the others. She appeared quite dignified though unseemly dressed in a long nightgown, and it was apparent that the three accompanying teenage girls, likened to her in beauty, were her children. A pair of German officers stepped down from the half-track, each wearing shiny knee-high boots and pressed outfits. These two smartly uniformed men had been all along conversing casually as the less spruce soldiers under their command proceeded to separate the men from the women. The mother was stubborn and refused to leave the side of one of the two men, her husband. Dressed in his suspenders, an undershirt, and a pair of

pressed slacks, the husband attempted to reason with his wife while he stood, helpless. A look of desperation came over his face. He pleaded to her in Polish.

"Dear, please... do as they say."

The younger of the two German officers, cocksure and fed up, marched straight over to the couple, grabbed hold of the woman by her hair, and pulled out his pistol. A fire burned in his eyes and his handsome features hardened into a disgusted grimace.

"Get over with the others!" he hollered degradingly at her in guttural German.

The woman refused, resisted the officer, and began to cry hysterically. She kept after her husband, who begged her to stand with their children. The officer raised his pistol to the woman's head. His tight-fisted grip on her partially rent the woman's hair from its roots, and consequently she recoiled from the pain. The muzzle of the officer's pistol teetered against her forehead when she fidgeted. Not worth the trouble to keep the weapon in place, he rigidly released his hold on her hair, throwing her backward with a stiff push and toppling her down to the ground.

In silence Marquard squatted down, his back turned to the mournful scene so near to them. Beside him James lay frozen where he listened intently. Both men stared straight ahead; hushed, hunched down low, they remained as motionless as was possible.

"Filth!" they heard the German spit.

A single shot rang out, the electromotive result of which caused both James and Marquard to involuntarily recoil.

The husband shouted out in agony and defiance, a natural response to the horrific loss acted out so callously in front of his eyes.

"Murder! Oh... murder!" he was heard to bewail.

There were more cries followed by another single, deafening shot from a pistol.

Hidden and unable to see, nor willing to watch what was happening, the two men winced once more, startled by the crack of the pistol shot. There were cries and the sound of panic and fleeing and several consecutive pistol blasts trailed closely by the *rat-tat-tat* of machine gun fire.

Tears welled in James' eyes as he listened blindly to the slaughter. He lay prone, shuddering, reflexively flinching with every abrasive sound of gunshot. At each crack both men could not help but recoil. Finally, pitifully, the shooting abated.

"Where was there to run?" the German officer deigned to ask. This levity brought uncomfortable laughter from his men. The outspoken officer could be heard to upstart, "Whoa, whoa, where are we off to?" to which he balked,

"Pity... such a waste, don't you think?!" There were a few more merciful pistol shots before a short period of unbroken silence.

Marquard shut his eyes in an attempt to escape into the dark and quiet of his mind. He and James waited for the distinct sound of the two vehicles' departure. In absentia of the murderous soldiers there came a pervasive calm which seeped unaffected into the forest clearing. For an unmeasured time the two men lay inert, suppressed by their fears and overcome with the shame of having done nothing to stop the grisly massacre.

"Come on, then," Marquard sighed, mustering enough strength to rise from the loathsome spot and step past the brush into the open clearing.

Alone, Marquard walked among the dead in the glade of the forest. The six victims of the massacre were separated into two groups. The two men and the

eldest woman were in the middle of the clearing and close by, near to the edge of the wood, were the three teenage girls. Marquard turned to look for James.

"James?!"

He had not followed. There was no answer.

Marquard strode back to their hiding spot where James remained motionless in a seated position.

"We must move on, James," he told him resolutely.

It was plain to see that James had been shaken by the brutality they both had been witnesses to. The prefect felt something akin to pity for him.

"Come!"

Marquard leaned in to assist James to his feet. Together the men passed the dead in silence.

## 62

It was midday and the two men had arrived at a roadside. In tandem they kept to the shoulder careful to remain innocuous. As far as could be seen, no traffic nor persons were in sight. Between the thickets of variegated woods, narrow parceled fields of ripened wheat were left laden in the rich soil to course intermittently, readied for the summer harvest. At a bank in the road James wavered and leaned tensely against the nearest tree. Marquard pushed on; in his doggedness he had not taken notice of James' withdrawal. The sound of battle was heard far off in the distance. James rested uncomfortably. For a short while he remained ridged and stood emotionlessly with a deadened look in his eyes.

"Sounds like the fighting has lightened up a bit," he bespoke mechanically without moving a muscle.

Marquard was beckoned forth by James' voice which necessitated that he backtrack; he approached from far down the unpaved road. The gravel that sounded beneath his shoes grated on James' nerves.

"Did you say something?"

"The fighting—" James attempted to restate falling silent on his own accord.

"Save your strength," Marquard uttered. For a moment his thoughts rested on the derelict fields of wheat. "Look around you. Look at the fields. Already they are white, ready for harvest."

James was in a pitiless state and was not about to waste what strength he retained with a response.

"The town should be just up ahead," Marquard speculated, "beyond that tree line."

Before them the brink of the forest stood, a sylvan crest attesting to the burgeoning and wild tributaries of the Vistula which homogenize the lowlands and northernmost Poland.

"I can hardly stand."

Marquard removed the bottle of Vodka, plucking it from the bundle he carried under his arm. Once the bottle was uncorked, he cupped his hand and poured a small amount for James.

"It was important that we circumvented the abandoned army encampment. We were at risk. I'm sorry we had to traipse this far out of the way."

"I understand."

Careful not to spill, Marquard offered his cupped hand to James' lips. "Here, just a sip."

James slurped the potent liquid without even a grimace.

"I noticed there was petrol at the camp. It didn't look as if it had been disturbed. Logic would dictate that the detachment was heading there."

"Yes," James said looking up. "I understand."

"All right." Marquard wiped his hand on his trousers and promptly returned the bottle to the bundle. "The town is only a few hundred meters more, just beyond the forest... near to the river there."

"I'll find the strength."

"Here." Reaching out to support him, Marquard took James' arm, and shouldering his weight, helped him along.

"We're almost there. We'll have you taken care of soon."

In conjunction they began down the long road.

"It's safe, then," James urged weakly.

"I didn't see a single person. No one at all."

"Isn't that strange?"

"Yes, it is, isn't it. I hadn't thought about it till now. There weren't any Germans!" Marquard emphasized. "The town's residents have all probably hidden themselves. Besides, if we don't find someone and get you help soon—"

"If we're captured," James interrupted.

"Listen—" Marquard started.

Stuck on the idea of capture, James stubbornly refused. "If we are captured," he repeated himself in a somber tone, "there's nothing I can do. Without any means of identifying myself there's no way for them to know."

"How did you plan on getting into Germany?"

"Through contacts in Danzig."

Marquard nodded.

"They'll kill us, you know," James said dryly, "if they capture us like this."

## 63

The two men soon entered the tiny rural town of Nowy Staw. Guided by the gravel roadway, the journeymen were able to enfilade beyond several vacant cottages and pass unbarred beneath the portal of the town's extant retaining wall.

For a moment James held back and observed, "This is unnerving. We should have seen someone by now. Don't you find it strange?"

"No, this isn't right at all. Still, we've come all this way." Marquard pressed forward. "Stay close and keep an eye out. Let's not get ourselves caught."

"I don't like this. What if there are soldiers here?"

"If there were we would know by now."

"What of those in the forest?" James was reminded.

"We'll take the risk," Marquard responded. "If we find ourselves transportation, then we can get out of this."

Everywhere the streets were entirely deserted. There was complete silence, no movement. Once within the town center the men quickly found themselves assailed by the stone facades of several quiet and austere structures, which they verified were empty, before reaching the town's main square.

Like the rest of the village, the town square was desolate. Ill at ease, James feebly seated himself at the base of a fountain. He soaked his handkerchief in the remainder of water that gathered shallowly at the bottom of the basin and weakly rang it out in his mouth. Parched to distraction, he sucked on the cloth and thirstily drank the vital liquid.

Meanwhile, Marquard checked the small shops and houses, knocking on doors and pulling at door handles. After he had exhausted all his options he astutely cupped his hands over his eyes at one of the shop windows to see if any of Nowy Staw's inhabitants were inside.

"There's no one! No one at all." He tested the window. It too was fastened shut.

It was incomprehensible that the entire town had been abandoned. In defeat and with a shake of his head, he walked back over to where James sat slouched by the fountain. Engrossed, James cupped the wetted handkerchief in his shaky hands and greedily sucked the moisture from it.

"Don't drink too much," Marquard warned.

"I'm parched," James said taking a pause.

"Still, it's best not to drink too much."

James obeyed, ringing the cloth out over his head before he tucked it away in his back pocket. A dismal amount of moisture dribbled down his forehead. He was left unsatisfied.

Marquard voiced, "We need to find out what's going on. There has to be at least a few hundred townspeople here, probably a lot more. They didn't all disappear."

"Did they have everyone murdered?" James asked hopelessly, implying that the German High Command might possibly have ordered every person in the village executed.

"No. To what purpose? It's more likely the townspeople ran off when that German detachment approached, or are still hidden away in their cellars. But why latch all the doors and windows?" Marquard replied. "It makes no sense.

None of this does. All the fighting is behind us."

From around the corner a small boy pulled a wooden cart noisily into the open cobbled square causing Marquard and James to startle. The boy noticed the two strangers in the midst of his hurry past and stopped dead. He uttered not a word, promptly dropped the cart, and scurried back in the direction from which he came.

"Wait!" Marquard yelled after him. "Wait there—Damn it!"

Without any thought to consequence, Marquard hobbled off in pursuit of the boy. Even with his handicap, which was compounded by exhaustion, he capably caught the sprite youth after only a few paces. Marquard scooped the child up under his arm.

"Hold on there!"

"Pus'c' mnie! Pus'c' mnie!" the youth protested.

The boy tussled against his captor's hold with all his might. It was a struggle to keep the child still, and in doing so, Marquard had become distracted. He only glanced back peripherally when he hollered for James, who remained seated at the fountain.

"Tell him that we shan't harm him. James!? Tell him we're not going to hurt anyone."

Silent, James stood slowly, his empty hands raised up over his head. His gaze fell beyond where Marquard and the boy stood struggling. Confused,

Marquard spun around and was taken aback to see an old Jew bedecked in a loose-fitted burnoose, the sort worn most often by women in that part of Eastern Europe. In a single motion the hood was cast from over the elderly man's head and an antiquated hunting rifle hatched from beneath the mantle; the weapon was brandished, pointed directly centered on Marquard's chest.

"Let the boy go," the old man firmly demanded, his words gravely spoken in Polish. "Release him this instant." His hold on the two men was steady.

There was no need to comprehend. The rifle was a language unto itself. Marquard delicately set the boy down, who ran straight away to the old Jew and took refuge behind his legs. In turn, Marquard also brought his hands above his head.

"James!" he was careful to call back in a low voice, needing his help imperatively.

"We mean you no harm," James told the old Jew tentatively, speaking in Polish. He used this verbiage clearly, sure to enunciate his every word so as to get his point across.

"Who are you people? What is it you want here?!" the old man demanded.

Though cautious of the eminent danger, James chanced to stand and negotiate. Readied with the weapon, the elderly man braced against the possibility of reprisal, his aim redirected toward James. James, having risen too fast all the way up, found himself suddenly light-headed.

His voice wavered, "Our train was attacked," he started. "We're trying to—to get to Danzig..."

The sky above spun. He reeled backward uncontrollably and quickly lost his balance. James lowered his hand to the stone base of the fountain to keep himself from falling forward. In response to this abrupt movement the old man again threatened with the rifle.

"Stay... as you are!"

"I've been injured," James stammered. "I-I feel dizz..."

He fell forward and passed out.

## 64

A young Jewish woman, Helena, tended gainfully to James' head wound. Once treated James' state would drastically improve. Helena was youthful and strikingly beautiful. Her hair, in long, soft, black strands, hung freely in part from where it escaped the bun she had trussed it in. Her wearing of a dark dress typical of a Jewess did not at all diminish her comeliness; Helena did her utmost to make herself pleasant and otherwise presentable. This vanity of hers had always drawn the disapproval of her peers, and while she modestly adjusted the bundle beneath James' person, she let escape the silent thought of how lovely he looked even under such dire circumstance.

James had been placed in a secluded enclosure beneath the vaulted brick ceiling of an old cloth market converted to a field hospital. Particular about their new patient, his caretakers had been careful to separate his space from the rest of the building by a cloth partition that encompassed him on all sides. While he lay unconscious he mumbled a stream of gibberish in German. Curious, Helena leaned in close and listened, gently patting James' brow with a damp cloth. After a moment of silence James came to and suddenly rose up.



He shouted, "No! Not that!"

Helena held him down. James' panic quickly abated. To calm him further, she spoke softly in Polish.

"It's all right. You're safe! Lie back."

Confused, James answered Helena in kind. He was delirious due to fever.

"W-Where am I?"

"You're in a hospital and you need to rest."

Without realizing it, James' Polish reverted back into German, though only momentarily. "We made it?"

"Made it where?" she answered him in Polish, having understood. "Where do you think you are? Now lie back."

"We've made it, yes?" James' intonation was peaceful. "We've made it," he repeated to himself reassuringly.

"Made it where?"

"It's over."

"What's over?"

"Now that we're here."

"Where is here?"

"Danzig."

"Is that where you're going? Danzig?"

"Danzig. Yes."

"Lie back."

"Danzig. Are we in Danzig?"

"No, you're about a hundred kilometers from Danzig, in the town of Nowy Staw."

James laid back, closed his eyes, and lost consciousness once more.

## 65

"Danzig?!" cried the town's rabbi. This exclamation was released from his wet mouth hidden behind a long beard of bristling silver and grey. He was an old, robust, stubborn Jew, with firebrand cunning in his eyes and condemnation in his booming voice.

"Danzig! Is he out of his mind?!"

The rabbi turned to face a tall distinguished-looking, fair-haired gentleman who appeared to be no more than thirty.

Donned in a fine suit, this other man was the town's only doctor, Wilhelm. On his head he wore a dark skullcap.

Together they stood at the altar rail that enclosed the central bimah beneath the vaulted ceiling of a synagogue's prayer hall. Built of timber, this remarkable synagogue at Nowy Staw was an early eighteenth century masterpiece, the epitome of Eastern European Jewry. The sanctuary itself was distinguishable from the lesser aspects of the wooden synagogue due to the bright vernacular frescoes that adorned its ceiling—depictions of flowers and animals arranged invariably within a singular motif.

"Also, he says a group of German youths," informed the doctor, "a girls choir, has been left unsupervised apparently, near to the ruined abbey."

"And his companion," the rabbi inquired, "how bad is he?"

"With a little rest he should recover."

"There was no concussion?"

"None. There is something else."

"What is it?"

Out-of-doors, sheltered from the denuded sun by the crisp, elongated shadow of the wooden synagogue's paneled gable, Marquard waited alongside the entrance accompanied by the old Jew who obstinately harnessed a decrepit run-down mare to a rickety wooden cart—the long, narrow Polish type with sloping sides.

"Where is everyone?" Marquard asked in broken Polish.

"Town Hall," the old Jew answered. "Some wish to leave."

"You?"

"No. Where would I go?"

Wihelm exited the synagogue with the rabbi and a group of holy men. After dutifully having removed the skullcap from his head, Wihelm stepped forward and unabashedly presented the Frenchman to the rabbi. The doctor translated between Polish and French for the two men.

"What is it exactly that you saw?" he asked Marquard directly, wasting no time.

"German soldiers. They shot down two men, a woman, and three young girls," Marquard told them as he pointed toward the forest. "Out there... in a clearing."

The mayor and his family had been missing since early morning, and in comprehension of what Marquard had seen, Wihelm, in turn, morosely related an accurate interpretation for the rabbi of what had been recounted. Wise and furrow-browed, the town's rabbi listened carefully to the doctor without any overt sign of emotion. When Wilhelm was through he said only a few words.

"You must take us there," Wihelm informed Marquard.

"Of course. In exchange for a vehicle."

Wihelm did not translate this last phrase. He only shook his head derisively, pointing to the cart and horse.

"This is all that is left. The German detachment you saw, they appropriated all the petrol, the horses, even our bicycles. That, or destroyed everything they thought we could use."

"Have you heard any news?" was what the doctor's informative refusal had prompted Marquard to ask. "What's happened? What of Danzig?"

At the word Danzig the rabbi spoke.

"Tell him."

"Danzig has been taken," Wihelm stated.

"What?!" exclaimed Marquard, unable to comprehend what was being told.

Wihelm nodded regretfully.

"It's true. We heard it on the wireless. News has been streaming in since early this morning."

"But how?!" Marquard asked with great concern.

"We've been cut off from the west, from East Prussia. Bottle-necked—"

"It's too fast! It can't be!"

"I assure you! Our enemy, they say, is motorized. The German army is equipped with tanks and planes. They cut off nearly every railway line that connects to the corridor. And worse, our own troops were unable to completely mobilize. We had scant the chance to defend our ground. By midmorning the Germans penetrated deep into our territories. The fighting has been the fiercest just south of here, in the village of Mokra."

"This is madness!"

"They have been bypassing the smaller towns and villages, taking only what they can carry and destroying what they can't. Some sort of new tactic, apparently. Here they demolished our radio tower and arrested the mayor and his family."

## 66

James lay awake flat on his back, tensed. He remained listless in his cot, unable to move. There were several other injured patients in the hospital who were separated from James by the curtain that surrounded him. Their frequent moans were what attracted him to them, and through the break in the curtain he was able to see these other patients each time Helena entered his enclosure.

"What happened to those people?"

Helena turned James onto his side after she prepared a needle, helped to undo his pants, and injected him in his buttocks. There was no smell to Helena; beautiful as she was, she had been mindful to wear neither fragrance nor paint her face to prevent the possibility of a patient growing any unnecessary attachment to her.

"Several people were killed and a number terribly injured this morning when a saboteur exploded the radio tower and destroyed our transmitter," she informed him.

"Oh..."

Helena completed the injection. With his back to her, James discreetly refastened his pants while she placed the needle safely aside. She proceeded to help turn him back over and double-check his bandage.

"Why don't you try to get more rest?" she suggested.

Content, James laid still for a moment allowing himself to drift back to sleep. Helena quietly finished up, removed the bedpan from beside the cot, and stepped behind the curtain.

Not long after, Marquard entered. He too checked James' bandages, unintentionally rousing him.

"Lie still. You look good."

Bravely, James rose up, supporting himself on an elbow.

"I'm feeling better."

From behind the curtain Helena prepared a dosage for another patient. Let on by the strange occurrence of James having spoken German, she snooped closer to hear the two men parley, listening in on their conversation.

Marquard ran his hand over his face, from his brow down to his chin, and exhaled deeply.

"You're not telling me something," James said, picking up on the doubtfulness behind Marquard's unconscious signal.

Concealed by the curtain Helena leaned in to better hear the conversation. The men's voices were muffled behind the curtain. Together they discussed with candor and brevity the diminishment and risk of the few options left open to them. Unaware that Helena was eavesdropping, Marquard explained the situation in its entirety.

"What will you do?" James shot.

"James, neither of us will make it to Danzig."

"I have to chance it. There's no other way for me to get back to Germany."

"We shouldn't talk about this now."

Marquard stood and withdrew from the conversation. He turned himself away, but before he could leave the enclosure James stopped him. At this point Helena was provided the delay she needed to retreat unnoticed from her locality on the opposite side of the cloth partition, though not before James was to continue.

"Modest, listen. We could still get you to the channel. Listen to me. We could go tonight."

Notwithstanding her preparedness to exit, she had overheard this last bit and was tempted to remain in place before rethinking that it would be smarter to make herself scarce.

"I don't think so," Marquard cautioned.

"With the fighting behind us, we have nowhere else to go."

In announcement of his return, the doctor entered the hospital and called out for the prefect.

"We'll need to think it over," Marquard concluded.

Wihelm threw back the enclosure curtain, blindly addressing the prefect in French.

"Monsieur, if you could..."

He stuck his head into the enclosure. The doctor had forgotten himself for the moment—the infirmary being under his charge—and upon his glimpse of the two men's skittish consortium was reminded of his place.

"My apologies," he blurted out of respect for the two men's privacy, and backed immediately away.

"Get some more rest," Marquard instructed James on his way out. "We'll deal with all this later."

"They're waiting outside," said Wihelm as Marquard stepped from behind the enclosure.

Marquard nodded and left the room, exiting the hospital alone and leaving the doctor behind to tend to his patients.

James had settled back into the cot when Wihelm re-entered to examine him. The doctor familiarly addressed his patient, speaking to him in phlegmatic English.

"He's a good man, you know. You owe him your life."

"You speak English?!"

"Yes," Wihelm modestly replied. "Helena teaches me. She was educated in England."

As if on cue, Helena entered the enclosure and replaced the pan beneath James' cot. A severity marked her emergence.

"Helena, did you know our patient here is from America?" Wihelm asked her, smiling in a friendly manner.

"No—no, I didn't. And he should be resting, Wihelm," she said sternly with a serious and unrequited look in her eye.

She gazed over James and moved around the cot to Wihelm's side. "Come," she said in a supple tone, taking his hand in hers and pressing it perspicaciously. "I need you to assist me in the back."

Jointly they excused themselves from James' presence and proceeded into the supply closet where Wihelm began to gather together some glass medicine bottles.

"What is this all about?" he asked in concern about Helena's odd behavior.

"He is German, Wihelm!"

"What's that you say?"

"He is a German!"

"Nonsense, woman! What are you talking about?"

"I overheard them."

"What?!"

"Yes, I—"

"What? What did you overhear?"

"I overheard them, Wilhelm!" Unfettered, she lowered her voice and explained, "They spoke of getting to Germany, and when he lay unconscious he mumbled to himself in German."

"Don't be ridiculous," he refuted.

His sharp words curbed her tenacity. Discouragement assailed her spirited design, which came across clearly to Wilhelm through an abrupt change in her facial expression. Helena recognized her weakness, checked herself against his possible resentment, and in the grasping of his hand, pleaded to Wihelm.

"Listen to me, Wihelm."

Stubborn, he repudiated her appeal with a mute shake of his head. Helena could not bear the situation any longer.

Resolute, she was quick to find strength within herself.

"You must listen!"

"Helena—"

Clear-eyed, she implored, "Listen: Like you, he too must get back into Germany. They plan on leaving tonight. We could go with them."

"Impossible!" he descried, rebutting her.

Tears welled in her eyes. Helena appealed desperately to Wihelm. On the outside she managed to keep herself calm while she argued by reason and with much sentiment; within her, desperation disrupted any semblance of true reasonability.

"Wihelm, my love, please listen to me! Listen with an open mind. They will discover that it was you!—They will!—They already suspect. You must leave. Leave and never come back. If I'm right, these two men have a way."

Her inward hysteria was paired with a companionate resolve. It was in how insistent she had become that made her plea so convincing. Persuaded, Wihelm pulled Helena close, his desire was to comfort her.

"Shh... I'll listen."

"Please," she persisted further, begging of him, "if we don't leave soon, we are sure to die!"

Helena was nearly hysterical. She choked on the tears that had snuck into her last sentence. The degree of her unwanted fears and consternation was accurately reflected in the fragility of her countenance. Ever susceptible to her feelings, Wihelm planted a reassuring kiss on Helena's brow.

"Tell me what they said."

Marquard stood by as the rabbi led the holy men in the unsavory act of gathering the mayor and his family together from the forest clearing. Due to the gravity with which the men addressed the removal of the victims of the

massacre, Marquard was renascent to further press the matter of acquiring transportation nor did he have any better idea of what help he might be able to expect from the elders of Nowy Staw. Not being in a position to barter, he had hoped only to be in good enough graces with the rabbi to receive some favor or pittance for having offered to take them to the location where he and James had witnessed the slaying.

A shiver ran down Marquard's spine. To return to the scene involved little risk. There was no way the murderous soldiers would show their faces. No doubt they were long gone. Still, the spot where the executions had been carried out invoked considerable horror for the prefect. It was an incredible waste of life. A sudden sense of guilt rose up in place of his fear. It was an insult to weigh the loss of innocent lives against his and James' safety, yet there he was bartering the information he had for their freedom.

Where, if any place or in which direction, would best guarantee their safe passage was what most concerned Marquard. It appeared that if the extent of Poland's calamity was as grave as the earliest reports had indicated, then any refugees were bound to find themselves as bottlenecked as was Poland's army. A withdrawal to the west of the river, Vistula, and an immediate reconsolidation in Warsaw for the latter was the only recourse. If they were to consider their survival, James and Marquard would be forced to do the same. Danzig was therefore out of the question. However, if what was being said was true, he speculated, by nightfall the Germans might already have advanced on Warsaw effectively cutting them off from the south. To heedlessly turn back could prove catastrophic.

No longer at odds with James, and with both their interests kept in mind, Marquard realized the difficulty he might have in convincing him of some alternate plan. For them to remain in Nowy Staw, knowing fully well that the town was left undefended, its only radio transmitter sabotaged, the rail line cut and having been hit by an advance detachment of the German army, would have been suicidal. Even if they were hidden by the townspeople, it was a prospect that Marquard could scarcely imagine. Both he and James were too fiercely independent for any such predicament; taking their chances on the open roadways seemed most suited to them.

In silence the bodies were brought one at a time to the rabbi for identification before being loaded onto the cart. The process was without requiescat in pace: there were no prayers, nor kind words of departing, only the stoic and respectful conveyance of the mayor and his family. Somewhat detached in a situational sense, Marquard allowed himself to be exempt from the ceremony. Neither intending to seem callous nor to risk offence, he remained apart, removing himself in any formal function and only cursorily assisting to identify the exact locations where the victims laid.

## 68

With an uncharacteristic solemnity, the doctor breached James' enclosure. In his hands he carefully handled a steel surgical platter that supported a prepared syringe paired with a sterol piece of cotton gauze.

"Another shot?!" James asked, a bit uneasy, while not at all masking being concertedly put off.

"This is the last. Turn over."

"I'm feeling much better," James insisted.

With a pinch of flesh and a deft flick of his wrist, Wilhelm thumbed the plunger and thoroughly injected James.

"This might make you feel a little woozy."

A moment behind the doctor, Helena had also passed through the drapery and entered into the enclosure. James glanced over and took notice of the Jewess. There was a medicinal quality to her as well, which further disconcerted him.

"Is something the matter?" he asked of the doctor.

"No, not at all," was Wilhelm's answer to James while he removed the needle and passed the syringe to Helena.

"Tend to the other patients," he told her, addressing Helena curtly from over his shoulder. "I'll be with you momentarily."

Helena obeyed, discreetly slipping out through the drawn curtain. She was quick to take away the spent syringe Wilhelm had handed her. Made uneasy, James rolled back over, his hand raised to his forehead. A tinge of discomfiture in the pith of his stomach flagged disconcert.

"I'm starting to feel light-headed," he sighed. Precipitously, his brow commenced to bead with sweat.

"That's normal. It should wear off shortly."

"Let me close my eyes a minute."

"Sit up," Wilhelm maintained and roused James, helping to bear his weight up. "I need you to remain awake. Tell me something about yourself." A fixed hold kept on his patient, the doctor asked, "How is it, your stay in Poland?"

Though he fought off drowsiness, James was able to find humor in the awkward wording of Wilhelm's question.

"You mean, how I ended up here!"

"Yes. Oh, I see, my English!" Wilhelm laughed. "Of course... I didn't mean it that way."

"I see." James smiled weakly, explaining, "From Paris we took a tour of some European cities. Scheduled for a couple three weeks or so...some of it was spent while we were in Vienna. Warsaw happened to be—"

James stopped in midsentence and shook his head.

"I'm really not feeling well."

"Relax," Wilhelm reassured him, continuing with the intrusive line of questioning. "Where were you headed when your train was attacked?"

"Danzig."

"What's in Danzig?"

"In Danzig? There are some people there."

"What people?"

"I feel sick—" James remarked weakly.

"Who are the people there?" the doctor insisted.

"Friends. They mean to help me."

"How?" Wilhelm pried.

"What was in that shot?" James considered aloud, growing very much confused and suspicious of the doctor's intentions.

He looked James in the face, "The dosage was quite strong." His stare hardened, careful not to neglect his patient's anxiousness as he explained, "It might make you a bit woozy." Wilhelm more firmly maintained, "It'll pass shortly."

Just sit still a moment longer and allow it to do its work." He questioned once more, this time more directly. "These friends, how are they going to help you? Are they expecting you, then? How do you intend to contact them?"

"W-Why are you asking me these questions?" James stammered through the fog in his head.

"From Danzig you intend to get into Germany," Wihelm flatly accused.

"Yes—No!—Who told you that?"

"It's just that, I also must get into Germany. You see, we might help each other."

"What?" James said, shocked.

"I have a radio transmitter."

James lay encouragingly silent.

"We could contact your people there," suggested Wihelm. "Tell them we are coming."

"No, the transmitter was destroyed."

Wihelm leaned in closer to James and lowered his voice.

"I have a secret one, that nobody knows about."

Taken aback, James was unresponsive. The doctor could see the temptation in him as he thought it over. Not to risk to lose the opportunity, Wihelm exploited the moment when James was hesitant. He took a fast hold of James by the arm and helped him to his feet.

"Here... I'll show you."

"Why are you telling me this?" James asked. "Why take the chance?"

The room spun when James rose from the cot. He began to lose balance. Wihelm steadied him but not before James retched onto the floor. After having set James back down, the doctor seized a towel and handed it to him.

"Do you feel better?"

"A little," James answered, feeling less sick.

"This way."

Guided out from within the enclosure, Wihelm led James to the supply closet. There was little space amongst the various boxes and jars, which lined the numerous shelves. Brought forward and left unattended, James languished while the doctor drew the closet door shut. It took James' all to keep himself together. At the far end of the closet Wihelm pulled a shelf aside revealing a hidden room.

James was drawn inexplicably forward. In great astonishment he stood at the opening of the previously concealed room where he leaned dependently against the doorframe. A new energy surged through James' person. Enthusiasm entered into his heart for the first time since the train derailment. Inside, Wihelm showed him the radio transmitter on a table in a corner of the room. The black heart within James' breast trebled at the sight. In pristine condition, the transmitter suggested a higher purpose, evidence of a consortium. It revealed the doctor's deliberate misuse of the hospital and the delusive expropriation of its humane functions.

The thought that the radio transmitter in itself might not be convincing enough, Wihelm further illustrated his duplicity when he picked up the radio transmitter's operation manual, the cover of which prominently displayed a German swastika. After he flipped through the thin tissue pages, the doctor presented it, drawing his fellow countryman in and providing James with the evidence that he was who he claimed to be.



"Here, these here... have a look. These are all the frequencies we need," Wilhelm smugly clicked.

James stepped willingly into the secluded room. Wilhelm was positioned before him, with the incriminating radio behind him and a secret code book held in his hands. Caught up in the establishment of what he might possibly offer James, Wilhelm forgot himself, turning his back to demonstrate the operation of the many confusing knobs and gauges of the radio panel.

"We could radio right now, if you like."

Once having regained his wits about him, James scanned the tiny room and quickly observed that on the desk there was a list of names, complete with addresses, as well as a detonator for high explosives, several passports, and a Luger pistol, all well within James' reach. The transmitter came alive with a whine and a crackle, its display lit from within.

James looked up as Wilhelm wheeled around.

"What do you think? Yes. With this, we can inform them we're coming." Sure that James was convinced, Wilhelm broke into German. "We're the same, you and I." He smiled with self-satisfaction before he continued. "You'll take me with you. Together we could get back home."

James stood rooted in place. A glaze came over his eyes. He was on his own and lost in thought. He had become detached out of introspection. Silent, he listened to Wilhelm's oration with deaf ears.

"What do you say!?" Wilhelm implored once more. "The two of us! You'll convince your friend. You'll see to it, will you not? If we consolidate our efforts— It will mean a good deal to you."

"You destroyed the radio tower," James stated plainly.

"Yes."

"You brought the soldiers here," James added, his intensified anger withheld.

"Yes."

"You told them where the mayor and his family—"

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

There was no way for James to help his disdain for the loathsome doctor. To conceal it, he was incapable. His glance wandered involuntarily over to the pistol lying beside the radio. Wilhelm saw this and read James' thought. There was a single moment where neither man was able to move, a visceral interlude broken only when Wilhelm sprang first for the unclaimed weapon.

It was Wilhelm who succeeded James. And for James, with the initiative lost, there was only the chance to grab hold of the doctor's gun hand and attempt to yank the Luger away. The two men struggled over control of the weapon, fell into the radio transmitter, and knocked over the table. In the confusion a desperate screech escaped Wilhelm, upset by the synchronous static squeal of the felled radio transmitter. From the orifice of the disputed pistol, a single bracketing shot was released.

Dazed by the blast, James stepped backward with his unsteady hands held out before him, palms up covered in blood. He looked down at himself. The shirt he wore was splattered with it. Wilhelm stood before him, stunned, the smoking Luger gripped tightly in his hand. The doctor's eyes were vacant. Emptily he glanced to his side, down at the fallen radio transmitter, mumbled, "But—why?" dropped the pistol, and crumbled to the floor.

The blast from the gunshot attracted Helena, who immediately barged in to the secret room and pushed past James.

She screamed at the sight of Wihelm and broke down, sobbing over his lifeless body.

"What have you done!?" she demanded, not of James but of the doctor. Desperate, she shook Wilhelm's body and pounded at his chest. "Oh, Wilhelm! What have you done!?"

In Wihelm's free hand he still grasped the operation manual, the German swastika condemningly displayed. At this moment Marquard, the rabbi, and the holy men entered.

"What's happened?"

It was Marquard who came first and shouted as he shouldered past. "Mon Dieu!!" he exclaimed upon sighting the dead doctor. "James, what's happened here!?"

The rabbi forced his way into the previously undisclosed room and stopped short overcome by the pitiful scene that lay before him. The holy men crowded in, effectively barring any exit. Blameless, Marquard stood by James' side, helping to support him while at their feet Helena wept over her lover's body. A number of the holy men made an attempt to pull her up.

"Helena," the rabbi spouted in dumb shock, "Helena, what is all this?"

She was deaf to his inquiry. With untold strength she pushed the holy men away, intent on clinging to her dearest Wihelm. It would have been impossible to separate her without a fight.

"Damn you!—Oh, my love!—Damn you, damn you, and damn this place!" she bemoaned.

The holy men avoided her, skirted past, turned over the radio transmitter, and presented it to the rabbi. With a firm, condemning shake of his head, the rabbi leaned down to pull the operation manual from the dead man's hands. The abhorrent corpse had refused to relinquish its prize. Ensconced upon the dun leather cover the crooked swastika blazed; below it, written in German, was a clear statement that the book accompanied the transmitter.

The old rabbi looked up sharply at Marquard. His long whiskers bristled with despondency and his fiery eyes begged understanding. With great trepidation and uncertainty Marquard lingered, listening.

The rabbi stated flatly with an inarguable severity in tone, "You should go. I'm sorry, but you both must leave."

## 69

*From out of Zion shall go forth the law and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.* Before the two men lay an open roadway that extended through the wide, sparsely forested countryside, a path carved westward toward Germany.

Behind them in the distance was the tiny town of Nowy Staw; even then, to be barely thought of so soon after their departure, the exiles set their energies on what was an unforeseeable tomorrow.

For a long while the two men exhausted themselves, consuming what little stamina they had when they left Nowy Staw. Their movement, ever steadily forward, propelled them down the pastoral roadside in silence.

They stopped without a spoken word to take a rest. The summer days were forever long, and heralded by the low position of the sun the unforgiving night was soon in coming. In the lagging heat they sat by the side of the gravel road

beneath a crossroad marker. The painted wood arrows indicated approximate distances to city centers in every pertinent direction. Malbork read some twenty kilometers, Danzig under one hundred. James drank from a jug that Marquard passed to him.

"If this sign is correct," Marquard observed, "then we'd better make up what time we've lost."

"If Danzig has been taken, then what do we do once we get there?" In answer of his own question, he persisted,

"We head for the sea, I mean, I know you tried to explain, but still I'm unsure. We're not turning back, that's fine. If Danzig is taken, if we have to turn away, do we even have a plan?"

Marquard did not respond immediately. Somehow having said his small peace was apparently enough for James for the moment. Responsive to Marquard's aversion to doubt, he did not at all press the issue. The two men shared bread and cheese from a sack they carried. They felt better for the nourishment.

"I told you," Marquard regrouped, "leave it up to me. For now we make for the Vistula. Then we'll head in the direction of Danzig, staying off the major routes. If it gets too hairy we'll go for the coast. If it's as bad as they say it is then I guarantee that there will be hundreds of refugees flooding across the sea to get to Norway for days to come."

Mentally refreshed and having mulled it over, James seemed content with Marquard's strategy. Still weak, he only nibbled at his share of bread and cheese.

"Eat up," Marquard said. "You'll need your strength."

"I'm fine."

Marquard glanced over at his weary companion. James appeared gripped by self-defeat, though a flush at his cheeks reassuringly confirmed that he was now healthfully more autonomous than he was prior to his treatment. Not able to let it go, Marquard dwelled aloud.

"The road ahead will take us west. For the most part it should be clear of any danger."

"We haven't much of the day left to us."

"Nowy Staw is but a short distance from the river itself. We should push on until nightfall. Have you the strength?"

"I'll make it."

"The river you understand, if we traverse it, will take us to where there has been much fighting." Marquard gathered himself in preparation to continue along in the direction of the painted word—*GDANSK*. "If it becomes too dangerous, I think we'll head north—that or when we hit the Vistula, whichever comes first."

"Will the road stay clear?" James procrastinated, enjoying the rest and the conversation.

"I don't know, James."

The sporadic sound of artillery fire far off in the distance recommenced.

"Sounds as if they're at it again," James declared as he looked down the road apprehensively.

"They'll be at it all night most probably. This might prove to be quite perilous."

"And to turn north now—"

"To turn north now will surely get us lost."

Marquard stood and pointed to the north.

"That. That is Prussia," he went on. "And to cross into Prussia will get us captured, or worse."

He redirected his attention to the west toward the horizon and the crackle of artillery.

"I find the prospect of heading west as daunting as you! By all accounts most of the fighting is south of us. And east as well."

"While I was being tended to, there was something mentioned about an attack from Prussia."

"With Prussia so near we must keep westward. Once we get to the river we can follow it north to Danzig."

## 70

The dusk light fell, overlaying the countryside with its beauty and splendence. At the horizon the redness of the departing sun was distracting in its intensity. Atop the lighted trees, upsetting the serenity that abounded, the distinct drone of a propeller was heard fast approaching from an unknown direction. In response, James and Marquard ducked off to the side of the road and took shelter at the edge of the woods. Lightning-like, a fighter plane flew low overhead and passed out of sight. The threat of the white German cross was represented clearly on the underside of each crooked wing.

"He didn't spot us!" Marquard announced from his crouched position. "Let's keep moving."

"That was a bit close! There's a lot of activity in this direction. Shouldn't we be more cautious, maybe?"

"If it means stopping, then no. Now come on!"

That said, Marquard led James up from their concealment and the two men continued down the long stretch of winding road. To keep cover, they traversed the shoulder of the gravel touching against the tree line. James doubled his pace and gained ground on the prefect, who proceeded him. James overtook Marquard and was first to come around the following bend.

"We're near," he heedlessly pointed out. "I think I can see something. Just up ahead!"

"Hold back!" Quick to intercede, Marquard seized James firmly by the elbow. "Be more cautious, James. If there's a bridge then there will most likely be troops."

Around the bend the two men came across a stranded motorcar—a luxurious, long, white, sumptuously outfitted automobile. In their approach, it became evident that the car was severely disabled, having been riddled with bullets.

The interior was wrecked, as the leather seats were blackened and charred by fire. Up a ways in the distance, they found many other abandoned vehicles, all of which had been deliberately pushed to the side of the road. Some were simply broken down carts, others were more commonplace automobiles, though none of them were in working order.

An extensive number of dead carhorses had been dragged into the woods and grouped together in loose clusters. The roadway, that lay immediately

ahead, was for the most part clear of debris. Upon closer inspection, James made a startling observation.

"These are all civilian."

In support of his claim there were numerous personal effects which copiously littered the roadside. The contents of over-turned luggage were spilled onto the ground and entangled in the overgrowth. Garments had been strewn about by the wind or were clumped together pell-mell in absurdly large piles. A particularly bright acidic yellow blouse hung from a sapling at the approximate center of the two men's path. A sign of forewarning, it impeded progress only in the way that it forbade them to continue their truantry without further circumspection.

"This is odd."

"What do you think happened here?"

"There was talk in the town of refugees being slaughtered by the Germans," Marquard remembered.

"There were those dead horses, but what of the refugees?"

Nowhere were there human remains to be found. The stark question James had posed came without further comment. A disconnect and unsettled severity followed.

The Frenchman, his attention diverted, noticed a bicycle at the edge of the roadway, the chrome handlebars of which stuck out from a bearberry bush.

"What have we here? Have a look at that, James!" he announced and advanced toward the bush.

The renewed dash in Marquard's overall step brought James out of his solemnity. Curious, he followed. Until that moment abandoned to the chance of being discovered, the very much overdue furnishing of some sort of transportation was a welcomed relief and the men's good fortune was met with an enormous amount of enthusiasm. The bicycle's front wheel was rimmed. A numbered placard identified it as a postal vehicle. Saddlebags were draped on either side of the back rack, the contents of which had spilled onto the ground. The handlebars were slightly bent, but otherwise it functioned properly.

Marquard wasted no time in trying it out. He peddled through a tight figure eight and jerked to a stop before James.

"Well, get on the back. Let's not waste this opportunity."

"If you don't mind hauling my weight," James answered, shouldering their satchel.

"I'll manage. Better not to walk."

The littered roadway proved to be quite the enjoyable obstacle course for the two grown men. Conveyed at a brisk pace, the taxed bicycle tires ground over the gravel surface. A hard turn this way or that to avoid the derelict vehicles and various obstructions caused the steering to slip, and under these circumstances the bicycle was difficult to manage.

All fear and consternation was forgotten. An unchecked thrill at the freedom speed sent made certain that joyousness and pleasure was to be felt most keenly by both riders.

"Watch here," James sounded at the sight of a turn. "Careful! Watch it!"

"Brace yourself, James! I can't slow fast enough—"

A blind bend threw them wildly off course and landed them in an outcropping of trees. Both tires bit into the earth, which drastically slowed the pair. The Frenchman heaved upon the handlebars and peddled like mad; his companion locked arms around his waist and flounced forward in a vigorous

and repetitive motion. The momentum produced was enough to sustain them through the thick of the underbrush and out onto the opposite side of the bend.

Success is infrequently celebrated with as much elation as was had in that instant. And to recognize it in the moment was a blessing of which James and Marquard were aware. Quietude rewarded them for the remainder of their ride. The length of gravel road spirited past. The whoosh of warm air filled their ears. The flotsam was less and less a hindrance to them. For a stretch there was almost none.

Their approach to a modest wooden bridge was a great cause of alarm. Careful to go no further without probing first, they came to a halt. The night was near and the sight provided by the dwindled rays of the sun diminished rapidly.

The twinkle of a few planets and early risen stars accompanied the moon in the east where the sky had darkened.

"Careful now," Marquard warned. "We advance only once we're certain that it's clear."

"I will follow."

The men dismounted and scouted ahead. Cautious in his approach, Marquard closed the distance. James trailed behind, the bicycle at his side.

"I see no one," James observed.

The measures taken were unnecessary; the planked bridge was secure.

"Let us continue, then. You understand, it's best we stopped. So as to be certain."

James nodded and brought the bicycle round.

The winds in the road from there on out became more difficult. Ahead of them as they came quickly around another blind bend, just beyond a lightly wooded area, there rose a thick column of smoke. Grey-blue against the red-orange of the western sky, the pillar extended malevolently upward as its dense fumes were carried steadily, filtering into the dusk sky.

The site sobered the men; promptly, Marquard steered for the shoulder of the road where they quit the bicycle. With their wits about them, James and Marquard entered the wooded thicket. A strange din gradually emerged from the far side of the thicket, muting the snap of the broken twigs in the underbrush at their feet. The foreign sounds came louder and were soon discernible as that of machinery and garbled voices. In silence the two lone men snuck up for a better look.

From the edge of the woods, beside the road and hidden from view, they observed a drably painted bulldozer fill in a large pit. Several German officers stood near a staff car while the numerous soldiers under their command went about collecting debris, throwing everything they found onto a pyre of burning refuse.

"Let's head north now!" James whispered.

Before Marquard had a chance to respond, in close proximity, two armed sentries strolled past. One of them pulled his partner aside, where in they came to a halt.

"Smoke?" the sentry offered the other.

The two sentries slung their rifles and lit up cigarettes. Together they turned to the sound of the artillery, drawn by the confidence that it instilled. They stood with their backs to James and Marquard, just an arm's length within reach.

The staunch scent of the German cigarettes wafted through the thin evening air.

"We're really giving them a thrashing, poor louts!"

Protective of him, Marquard held James back. Unblinkingly, the older man's aspect infused the mettle of experience into his companion's youthful face. Both men were frozen, averse to breathe, only able to listen in pensiveness to the mean, guttural voices of the two sentries.

"We'll soften them for the morning."

"This kind of preparation is brutal."

"They won't withstand."

The younger of the two soldiers shied from the thought.

"The cigarette is good."

"And well-deserved."

"Clearing these roads sure is unsavory duty."

"Yeah. It was a bit much to stomach."

"Humph... I'm having a hard time with it." An unsteady hand was held out as the man demonstrated to his compatriot. "Have a look at me. I'm shaking! If we have to bury anymore bodies, I'll be sick. Aw, the stench! The stench... it's unbearable."

"I don't see why we just don't burn the whole lot of them all together with their useless belongings."

From the staff car an officer upbraided the two sentries.

"You there! Get back to work!"

The sentries straightened up and flicked their cigarettes into the woods. One of the lit cigarettes went straight for James. It hit him smack dab in the chest and threw out a shower of red sparks, causing him to flinch back involuntarily.

"What was that?!" the sentry was heard to say and motioned toward James and Marquard, who wasted no time in running for it, directly into the thick of the woods.

"Halt! Halt!" a sentry hollered.

The other blew a whistle. Several shots were fired. At a frantic pace James followed on Marquard's heels as they bounded blindly through the thicket.

"Don't look back!" Marquard yelled to James as they ran away from the present danger. "Don't look back," he kept breathlessly repeating. "Don't look back!"

Several bullets whizzed past, just centimeters over the fleeing men's heads. James broached the sound suggestion not to look back. At shoulder height a sapling was rent by a near miss. With a change in direction Marquard led James deeper into the woods, further distancing themselves from their pursuers. He spun around with skittishness now and again to glance at James.

"Keep moving," he could be heard to say. "Come on, James. Keep moving!"

For what was an indeterminable distance and a more indistinguishable amount of time, the men fled further into the thick of the densely wooded haven, a veritable maze of tree trunks and underbrush. The remainder of the day's heat wreaked havoc on the inner bearing and orientation of the men. The heavy air shimmered and cavorted, trapped as it was in the vacuous void below the insular canopy of abundant forestation. Any true sense of direction flitted incomprehensibly as did fixed objects; the pine forest itself lost its validity.

Both men were confused as to their locality. Exhausted, they stumbled into a clearing. James collapsed against a tree. Marquard paused and turned sharply.

"Don't—Don't stop."

"I can't go on."

"Are they... following?"

"I-I don't think so," James stammered, in an attempt to regain his breath.

"My God, James! That was close!"

Fraught with relief, Marquard slumped to the ground in a cross-legged seated position.

"I left the water," James admitted.

"That's all right," Marquard said. "We've got to be close now, real close," He repositioned his false leg and with a short laugh added, "I think, James, I think... we must have run for... for an... hour!" Trailing off, he raised his hands in the air. "If we... continue in this direction... maybe we'll—"

James wheeled around to find the cold, hollow muzzle of a rifle pointed in his face.

## 71

Hands upon their heads, James and Marquard were prodded through the woods at gunpoint by a small rabble of Polish soldiers. Forced to remain silent for most of the trek, which the troop had made with impunity right beneath the nose of the German Wehrmacht, the two captives were never able to fully explain themselves before being brought into a small hidden encampment. The position itself proved to be a defensible place in what was an advantageous and better concealed area, where the terrain became less flat and more densely forested.

One of the soldiers, a noncommissioned officer, carried the bag Marquard had brought from Nowy Staw; in his hand he held the prefect's identification papers. The man bore a roguish hair lip and lacked a certain intelligence. The old soldier in Marquard summed his captor up as being the type who was not dependable.

"You'll have to wait here," he told his two captives designating a spot. "I'm going to speak with our commanding officer and present him with your personal effects."

The place pointed out was little more than a shallow ditch, a freshly dug sap which ran between two short, albeit strongly fortified trenches.

James addressed the soldier in Polish, "Is there anything he can do for us?"

"Just relax," the man said before his departure. "If you're who you say you are, then I'm sure the commander will do whatever he can for you."

The noncommissioned officer's last words, as he took leave, prompted James to query Marquard, "Are we going to be all right?"

"I'm a Frenchman and an officer of the law," was his answer. "My papers show that I'm in Poland on official business. You're an American on holiday. I'll vouch for you, James."

After a short wait under guard in the shallow ditch, they were summoned by the same soldier and escorted further into the entrenchment.

"Commander Dorozka will address you both in his billet. Know that you are in no position to negotiate."

"Negotiate?" James deigned to ask.

"The commander is a fair man," the soldier pointed out. "Treat you justly he will."



James thought it better to remain content with the noncommissioned officer's last peace. They carried on without further word. Surrounding them on all sides was a network of recently laid defenses. In passing, Marquard observed a tarp-covered bivouac cleverly set into the face of an outcrop of rocks, slightly recessed. There emanated from this spot a strong smell of manure, and out of the corner of the prefect's eye, he sighted a dozen or so unbridled horses. Just ahead, where the trench took a sharp bend at a traverse, the men came to an unexpected halt. Spirited past them was a white steed dappled lightly in blue-grey, a vision arresting the three men exactly where they stood. The equestrian redolence of the noble beast filled the men's nostrils; in such close proximity, its corded musculature and silky mane sparked courage and a resurgence of energies for all the weary soldiers it passed. Accompanied by its handler, guided kindly to the makeshift stable, the commander's war horse had been whisked past, and as unexpectedly as it had appeared, was hidden from sight. Beside themselves, the three men continued further into the breastworks. Nothing was said of the beautiful animal; there were no words which could be spoken. At the center of the camp, James and Marquard were forced to enter a dugout and were presented to the commander.

Tall and noble in character, the leader of this ragtag outfit, Commander Judeo Dorozka, graciously received his two new guests. A more amiable inquisitor could not have been asked for. Stately nosed and with a cropped salt and pepper beard, he was a fatherly figure, well-loved by his troops. An inclusive air of comradeship, an esprit de corps, preceded their meeting.

"Please, be seated," the commander insisted.

A stately, dark, oak table sat in the middle of the dugout, which was less a room dug into the ground and more an area between two rock faces with wood planks for a roof and stacked sandbags for walls. The round stately table with mortise and tenon joinery belonged no more than any other luxury, so unsuited was it for such an abode. The space was cramped and the only light that was provided came from an oil lamp suspended on a nail in the corner. Shown to two rickety chairs, the men were made comfortable, joining the commander at the table. Dorozka cursorily glanced over Marquard's papers, and apparently satisfied, handed them back.

"You appear to be who you say you are. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. May I offer you a drink?"

Marquard did his utmost to understand Dorozka's Polish. James was to answer for him.

"Yes, sir. Thank you very much."

"He doesn't speak Polish," Dorozka acknowledged.

"Very little."

"And you, sir, you're an American."

At the table's center were placed several crystal glasses and a near full bottle of Vodka. The commander promptly uncorked the liquor.

"I am," James stated.

Dorozka poured.

"Your Polish, it's good," the commander said.

From the three tumblers he pushed a half-full glass before each man, and then in a single motion threw back his own drink. James, as well as Marquard, took a modest sip from his glass.

"Thank you, sir."

After a hard swallow, the commander wiped his mouth on the buttoned sleeve of his drab tunic and forthwith continued, "What are you doing here?"

"Our train was derailed," James explained. "We've been trying to avoid the fighting."

The commander refilled his own glass.

"Well! You've done poorly at that!"

He downed another.

"It would appear so."

"It would appear," Dorozka announced with loose lips, "that our two fates have irreparably crossed paths."

"Indeed... How is it, all this?"

The commander straightened himself.

"Yes, well," he began while pouring once again, refilling each of their glasses to the brim. "We are with the Twenty-Second Lancers, Group Czersk, of Army Pomorze. We were sent as a detachment about two days ago, stationed east of here near Malbork."

Through his beard the commander slurped at his drink. His steady gaze, even breath, and unshaken hand were each a variable that fell through making it possible to readily discern that truth not fiction was what was being said.

"We were cut off during the day's fighting by an armored group, part of Germany's third army. A detachment from the Prussian corps entangled up there in the Mlawa fortification line."

"Tanks?"

"Yes," he cursively replied as he drank a bit more. "Everything has gotten bottled up there in Mokra. My orders called for a fighting withdrawal, so as to meet up with the rear guard defending the town. But here we are! South more, it's true, but caught between the river and the German mechanized fourth army."

"How far south are we?" James asked.

"Smack-dab between Malbork and Mokra, about one hundred and fifty kilometers from Danzig."

James was completely taken aback.

"What's the matter, did I say something?" Dorozka innocently inquired.

"No, not at all."

"Come on now boy, you're not fooling anyone. I have said something wrong, telling from that look on your face."

"You say we're still at least a hundred kilometers or more from the city of Danzig?"

"Something like that, but who gives a damn for Danzig?! Chin up! You're being minded by some of the finest troops in all of Europe. Lancers, cavalry—we have been beaten it's true, but not defeated! Besides, we have our orders."

"You're still receiving orders?" James asked, amazed.

"Yes, we're to head south past the railway and then westward over the river. I was forced to abandon our tank guns. We are to hold out here and at all costs avoid enemy armor. There's to be a large counteroffensive at dawn. We have the honor of breaking through the German line!" the commander proudly informed them.

"And then what?"

"Well, we should meet up with the main body, I imagine. Join with Army Poznan on the Vistula line and then head back toward Warsaw."

James looked over at Marquard, who sat with his vodka and listened, catching the occasional word or phrase. James nodded reassuringly before he turned back to Dorozka.

"How can we help?" James inquired.

"That's the spirit!"

Pleased, Dorozka cheered with his glass of vodka and in one hard gulp swallowed it down.

"Neither of you are uniformed, of course, so if you are caught and you are armed, well, you'll be treated as partisans and shot! Now, I have every able-bodied man on the line. That means I haven't many left for support. I could use you there. You won't see much fighting, though..." the commander trailed off. A conciliatory shrug was all that was gotten in way of acquiescence.

Satisfied with not having to fight, James agreed on his and Marquard's behalf to Dorozka's settlement.

"We'll do what we can."

## 72

James and Marquard were prodded through a shallow fire trench which, having been freshly dug, ran a serrated edge along a rocky outcrop. The position was well-concealed. Not a single open fire was lit; in fact, no light could be seen whatsoever. Without exception, every soldier they passed kept low and quiet.

The two men were led to a shallow redoubt occupied by half a dozen slumbering infantrymen and left to fend for themselves. Exiled to this way-place, they conceded to the discomfort of their temporary abode, and with their voices kept low, conferred with one another about what Commander Dorozka had spoken.

"How is it we fell so far south?" Marquard grumbled, crouched opposite the sloped dirt wall of the redoubt. "I had no idea. A hundred and fifty kilometers from Danzig. That can't be!"

"Zamknij sie!" rose abruptly from a roused soldier sharing in the hole.

"How," his voice lowered, Marquard continued, "How is it we got so turned around?"

"As we left Nowy Staw the road signs seemed to indicate we were near enough."

"We must have got turned around somewhere. But surly not by so many kilometers!"

"We turned south for a bit on that road. And it was a few hours before we ran into any soldiers."

"Still."

"Don't forget, these fellows marched us pretty far through the woods before getting us here. Easy to lose track if you don't know where you're headed."

"I can't figure. It doesn't make any sense."

Exasperated with himself, Marquard threw his arms up and plopped himself down. Dismay for a moment overwhelmed him; psychologically he shut down. A relaxed breath relinquished any inkling of responsibility that he withheld. Being better for it, apathy prompted him to bitterly reflect on how fortunate it was that there was no further need to make decisions for themselves. He rifled

through the bag they carried, having had it returned, and took stock of what was missing.

"They stole just about everything."

"What's that? You say our supplies are missing?"

"Stolen, James. They took just about everything."

"Did they take the medical kit?"

He removed the first aid kit from the sack. "There was some iodine which is gone and the better part of the field dressing." Then he offered, "There looks to be a bit of gauze. Do you need your bandage to be replaced?"

Careful to check the dressing of his wound and deciding to leave well enough alone, James declined. "I think it would be best to leave it for now."

At the bottom of the sack Marquard discovered some stale bread. He pulled it out, and splitting it with James said, half-amused, "That was our Vodka we were drinking!"

"At least he had the decency to share it," was James' wry reply, recognizing a certain humor in the thought.

Marquard smiled slyly and removed his coat.

"Share it?! Did you see how fast he drank it down!"

The two men chuckled. Marquard spread his coat out for James.

"Here, we should try to get some rest. Regardless of what you say the commander thinks, if we are caught, armed or not, the Germans will kill us."

## 73

The heavy percussive boom of innumerable artillery pieces being fired in the distance rang through the forest all throughout the night and into the early dawn. It was a nerve-racking display of the enemy's overwhelming military superiority. The German offensive was seemingly met without rebuttal. With the first break of morning light came the loud impactive explosions of missive blasts. Conical pillars of grey shot straight upward at intervals ahead of the line.

The terrible whine of splitting pine and fern was heard as large caliber shells tore through the nearby woods. Startled from sleep, James woke to find Marquard beside him, knelt upon a knee, his studious glance shied from the lip of the parapet.

"What's going on?" James asked, somewhat disoriented.

Marquard kept his head down low and listened carefully. From the blue, the bombardment ended; following the brief attack there was a queer silence.

"We're under fire."

James stuck his head up.

"What are they firing at?"

Marquard drug him back into the hole.

"Keep down!"

"What should we do?"

"We'll need to move. It won't take long for them to—"

The eerie quietude, as abruptly as it had come, was thoroughly disrupted. Another thunderous artillery barrage was sent off by the outlying enemy emplacement, this time more accurately. The rapport of the cannonade broke across the thin air, heralding a recalibrated arrival of ordinance. All along the

length of the defensive line of the concealed encampment, the Polish soldiers set themselves into their entrenched positions. The mean shriek of incoming projectiles overhead was followed by a piercing wave of explosions. There were flashes of light, a terrible noise, earth was thrown into the air, but still the German shelling was to remain inaccurate.

In the momentary respite that closed on the heels of the last barrage, an unsettled and despondent atmosphere overwhelmed the line. The redolence of timber, freshly rent from the toppled forest, filled the air. Braised sap and singed needles wafted over the defensible position. An unnatural static raised the hairs on the back of each man's neck.

Unaccustomed to the sensation of having life so equivocally threatened, James found himself nauseated. Beside him Marquard was hunched over covering his head. He stared at James and was about to offer him consolation when a Polish sergeant barged into their hole shouting orders.

"Stand to!"

There was enough of a lapse between bombardments for the call to arms.

"Stand to!" the sergeant told off. "To your feet—"

He grabbed a few of the soldiers by the collar and pulled them up roughly from where they cowered.

"Down the line! Everybody, down the line!"

James and Marquard, as well as the half-dozen men they shared the redoubt with, were herded brusksly by the sergeant through the shallow trench. "Man the fire step, ya louses! Down the line!" A stiff kick in the pants greeted anyone retarded in their actions. "Come on! Move, ya bastards—"

Once again, a round of artillery fire sounded from beyond the forest, this time fixed in on the emplacement. A holler preceded the breach.

"Cover!"

The blasts rattled the trenches and showered everything in dirt. Casualties were taken. After reeling back, the line quickly recovered. Checks were made, shouted from down the line. The sergeant, with a whistle held in his mouth, cried out.

"Ready where you stand!"

His feet held wide and courageously planted on the ground, the Polish sergeant took a firm posture, reflective of his resolve. With the utmost in confidence he directed his men.

"Man the fire step! Grab only what you can carry! And only from the man who falls ahead of you!" Between each annunciated breath the whistle he bit down on sang, the causality of a small cork ball that danced audibly inside the nickel chamber. At attention, the sergeant snapped a salute and blurted out, "Ready!"

A Polish officer rushed past, double-checking the line.

"Look sharp!" the officer encouraged. "Wait for your orders!"

At the ready, the huddled troops amassed. A throng of men and arms wading against the parapet in anxiousness began to swell over the top.

"You heard the man," the sergeant upbraided with a holler. "Wait for the order!"

A wave of cheers carried opposite their position from way down the line. A veritable well of enthusiasm rose up from the length of Polish troops as Commander Dorozka, mounted on horseback, galloped encouragingly past the entrenchment. His steed was the same fine white mare the men had encountered the night before, and together they blazed forth rallying the

infantry's strength. The effect was as the emergent smoldering phase; the most minute deviation of circumstance would initiate an enormous amount of the men's energies. From his waist, the commander lifted a heavy polished saber, and brandishing it, pointedly dashed adversity. Close behind the commander, following gallantly, were a score of mounted cavalry men. The support of the vanguard voiced by the enlivened soldiers was a favorable condition, and through such rallying they would better their chances of victory.

The entourage passed from sight. The men settled once again. A stillness gripped them before the whistles were blown, a moment of calm shattered by the order to advance, by the shouts and hollers of frenzied men who scrambled forth from within the trenches and charged headlong into the dense and forbearing forest. The enemy shelling was yet to recommence. The brave soldiers' frontal attack came without resistance.

James and Marquard held together at a steady pace allowing for a gracious berth between themselves and the main body of the charge. The only sound that initially met their ears was that of the occasional hurrah from an enthused soldier. They followed the force through the thicket of the forest to where the terrain thinned out into a more sparsely wooded area. Ahead of them, fanned out, the wall of Polish troops advancing toward the German position was met by a staggering barrage of artillery fire. The wooded area was rapidly transformed by the firestorm and steel shrapnel into a killing field. The Polish troops were absolutely stymied by the German onslaught. Shock and dogged perseverance were all each man, rapt in his soldierly duty, had to keep himself moving forward.

Just before them, as James, a few paces ahead of Marquard, stepped into a small clearing, a soldier, slowed to struggle with a bulky wooden case, was torn down by shrapnel from a nearby explosion. The wretch's nose was rent from his face by a large splinter, killing him instantaneously. James was firmly ordered by an officer to collect the fallen soldier's cumbersome baggage.

Marquard would not allow for them to be separated, so he volunteered in compliance with the officer's command and assisted James to pull the wooden case from the dead man's hands.

In a half-daze, James gaped wide-eyed at the bright color of the faceless corpse. Marquard, in way of support, gave him a firm tug on the shirttail. Aware of the exposure to shrapnel that they were under in the clearing, he remarked through clenched teeth, "Let's get this over with!"

Hunched over, they lifted the burdensome case by the rope handles built into the planked sides. Together they hauled it out of the clearing and into the cover of forest. The occasional shell blast landed dangerously near to them.

Dirt and splinters pelted the two men; that and the tearing of the shells contended with their frazzled nerves while helplessly they strove to drag the case through the underbrush. The tattering of a sleeve by a whetted object on Marquard's jacket produced a slight wound to his upper arm. Having had enough, he stopped to kick the wooden case open.

"What are you doing!?" James shrieked, irritated at the risk and apparent randomness of Marquard's action when such situational danger threatened them.

"We can't be lugging this damn thing around!"

A swift check down at his sleeve to address his arm inadvertently brought James' attention to Marquard's wound.

There was but a superficial amount of blood.

"You're injured!"

"No. It's trifling—Here, help me with these."

Inside the case, packed in sawdust, were explosives. The size and color of bricks, lined in rows of a dozen and stacked solidly atop of one another, there were too many to be carried.

"What is this?"

"Demolitions," answered Marquard.

He pulled several blocks of explosives from the case, separated them, and discarded the rest.

"Here, let us lighten our load. We need to keep moving."

In a crouched position, he hastily placed the heavy blocks into their bag, secured it, and with a heave slung it over James' shoulder.

"Can you handle that?"

"Yeah! But is it safe?"

"They're latent without a charge."

"And if I get hit?"

"We'll dump them as soon as we're able." A cursory glance past James and into the fray, Marquard spotted something. "Stay put," he ordered.

"Where are you going?"

Marquard darted over to the body of a fallen soldier lying a few meters away. He turned the dead man over. No sign of a wound could be seen. He was killed most likely by the percussive force of a high explosive shell detonated too close to his proximity, the power of which could stop a man's heart. The man was more a boy, seventeen at most, thought Marquard as he searched his uniform. There was a grenade hooked to the soldier's utility belt which Marquard took. On the ground was the boy's rifle.

The sight of the forward assault made by the Polish troops engrossed James. He could not but help to note the bravery with which each and every Polish soldier engaged his unseen foe. Torn asunder and reneged by an oppressive enfilade, there was nothing that would deter the death march of these courageous people, so set were they on the vigorous defense of their beloved homeland—a nation that, in the midst of utter collapse, was to be proud of her citizenry so far removed were they from the point of demoralization. In the midst of these bittersweet reflections, Marquard had returned to a bemused James with the rifle in hand that he had recovered from the dead boy.

"Wake up!"

Half-smiling to himself, he passed the grenade over to his ingenuous companion.

"Where'd you get this?"

In lieu of an answer Marquard instructed, "Keep it with you," and then added with confidence, "Stay behind me and maybe we'll get through this!"

## 74

The artillery barrage had ended though the sound of battle was still heavy up ahead. There was a country road discernable through the thicket some twenty paces in the distance, and as Marquard led James toward it, the men caught a blurred glimpse of several passing vehicles. From the woods' edge at the shoulder of the road, they stopped to observe.

There was a gradual bend in the road about a hundred meters away. On it a small motorcade of German armored cars swerved headlong around a massive panzer tank parked obstinately in their path. The armored cars sped off hurriedly, leaving the tank behind. The turret of the tank had been trained on the woods well beyond the bend, the intended target obscured from the two men's line of sight. This sort of weaponry, which the Germans so effectively employed, was in essence mobile artillery, a sobering tool to anyone with an inkling of military knowledge.

"Have a look—" Marquard established.

"Good God, Almighty!" James rejoined, his mouth agape in wonderment at the horrific sight of the grey mechanical behemoth. "What chance have we got?"

"I'll make sure the road is clear before we—"

The tank fired silencing Marquard. The crack of the rapport shattered any awareness outside its own intensity.

"Jesus," James exclaimed, "that's close!"

At that moment, two Polish soldiers closed in from behind, their approach concealed by the tumult of the panzer.

James and Marquard were defenseless, caught unaware. The two Poles, brandishing weapons, thrust the barrels into their backs, having taken the two men completely by surprise.

"Who are you!" one of the Polish soldiers called out. "State your unit and purpose!" he grimly commanded.

This sordid-looking soldier was outfitted with a steel helmet. His partner was without, a soft cap being all he wore to protect himself. James pivoted in place.

"Don't shoot," he answered. "We're Polish! We're with support."

"Polish, huh?"

James confirmed this with a nod of the head.

"You've an accent," the soldier in the steel helmet was quick to observe.

James stared blankly.

The two soldiers lowered their weapons. "You're with support, you say?" the soldier confirmed.

Again James nodded. The two soldiers laid down beside them and commenced to set up an antitank rifle.

"Well, we'll need your help, then," one of the men huffed, pulling around his haversack.

The soft-capped Polish soldier positioned himself and aligned the sights while his fellow appropriated a rack of oversized ammunition from a pouch in the haversack and loaded it into the tremendous weapon. This hatchet-faced man loading the antitank rifle turned to James.

"We'll need a diversion," he told James.

"What is that, an elephant gun?!"

With a smirk the soldier answered, "No." With a severe gesture he proffered toward the panzer and added, "But we do intend on killing that elephant with it. But first off, we'll need for you to buy us time."

"What is it you want us to do?"

"On my mark, both of you are to run across the road. Simple enough?"

"Yeah."

James translated for Marquard, who knelt uncomfortably and remained silent. Once again the tank fired, which prompted the antitank team into action. The soldier behind the rifle was careful to fix his aim. James and Marquard were poised, ready and waiting.



"On my mark!" the helmeted soldier warned them sternly.

Settled into their position and with the purpose of disabling the tank, the gunman released a single shot from his rifle. The weapon jerked him back with its powerful recoil. The crack from the muzzle was followed by a loud bing.

The bullet had ricocheted off of the tank's armor.

"Not yet! Not yet!"

Everyone stayed in place. The shooter adjusted his huge rifle and hurried to realign his sights.

"Not yet! Wait 'til I say," the other man reiterated.

The panzer seemed for a moment as if it were paralyzed by the wayward shot when, precipitated by a metallic grate, a German gunner cautiously rose from the iron hatch at the top of the tank's turret. Reacting on pure instinct, Marquard took aim with his carbine. The Polish soldier reached out, grabbed a hold of the barrel, and lowered it to prevent him from firing.

"Don't! Nobody moves!"

Marquard complied with the soldier.

In a hushed tone the man restated that no one was to move as he crouched, his body stiffened to heed his own admonition.

The German perched himself atop the panzer and manned the machine gun that was mounted beside the hatch.

Once he had surveyed the area, he swiveled the weapon in the antitank team's general direction. His adversaries lay prone; he wavered, as he was unsure of his target.

"Careful," the loader whispered to his colleague.

With the utmost of care taken in his aim, the rifleman fired scoring a hit. A white spark flashed forth from the steel plating. The sound of the ricochet indicated that twice a shot was wasted.

"Now!" screamed the Polish soldier. "Go now! Go!"

On command, James and Marquard sprang forth from their position and dashed across the road making for the tree line on the opposite side. The machine gunner turned with them and opened fire. Bullets chewed at the gravel and trailed behind the men, barely amiss of their intended target, which streamed as a unit across the clearing and escaped unscathed into the thick of the woods.

Once more the antitank rifle was heard to fire, and again it was in vain. The German machine gunner spotted where the shot had come from and ducked down into the turret which, in turn, swung sharply around and leveled its massive gun at the antitank team's locality.

Stopped dead in his tracks, James' conscience bade him to linger. He was drawn by great empathy. Dry-mouthed, he spun about while Marquard ran ahead.

"James!" Having noticed him falter, Marquard balked in a frightened panic, "Don't look back, goddamnit!"

Perspiration gathered at James' upper lip. A taste of salt bit at the tip of his tongue. Arms unbound at his sides, he stood paralyzed, unable to breathe, his mouth agape.

The tank fired. In dumbfounded bewilderment James followed the projectile's contrail as it tore a path through the trees and terminated in a volatile blast. The denuded trunks of the two soldiers were tossed limbless, stripped and thrown into the air by the powerful detonation. The steel helmet soared—the last object to remain identifiable.

"Come on, James! Keep moving!"

Marquard pulled James along. Near panic they strove onward at a frenetic pace, shearing through the underbrush.

Just a hundred paces from the road, they came to the railway line which cut a path through the woods. The tracks were laid on a waist-high berm, either side of which was overgrown with a fine cover of tall weeds. As the two men approached the tracks at the woods' edge, they halted, startled by the snorts and neighs of horses. What passed before them was a detachment of some half-dozen Polish cavalymen of the vanguard who, spurring on their mounts, galloped in haste and vanished from sight down a ways along the railway line.

With much trepidation, James followed Marquard as he slipped over and across the tracks and approached the woodlands on the opposite side. For a moment he paused. Overhead, a dark cloud blocked the sun casting a vast silvery shroud to the earth. James continued on his way. A sedative breeze carried over the tracks in pace with him as he reentered the wood thicket a step behind Marquard. Unknown to either of them, a few German infantrymen had hunkered themselves in the tall weeds beside the railway tracks, observant of the duo's progress from a distance.

## 75

It began to rain interspersedly, a gentle almost imperceptible fall. Each occasional swollen droplet impacted audibly throughout the weald and the misshapen wilderness. Marquard was a few paces ahead of James. He was positioned on a ridge, rifle in hand, and turned to wave James over.

"It's here! We've made it!"

James promptly caught up.

"This is it, then."

"Have a look."

"I can't believe it," he said as he shrugged the strap and plopped down the heavy bag. James thoughtlessly placed the grenade on top of the bag before taking a moment to ponder the view. The river, Vistula, ran wide, meters below the ridge.

"It sure is something." Marquard admired aloud.

"All we've got to do now is to get across."

"The river's low. It shouldn't be a problem."

Marquard pointed out a spot down below. The clear water ran close to the riverbed where it was seen to churn over the polished rocks and ripple in the shallows.

"You can see it's not deep."

"Let's go, then," James announced, motivated by the prospect of finally discovering a potential way out. "It looks clear enough."

"Not yet!"

"There's no one. Why not? It's clear—"

"Hold on. Let's not be hasty."

One step closer to the ridge's edge revealed a bend down river. Marquard scanned up river as well, where the lush and overgrown furrow continued in the far distance tracing the Vistula's course past the throne of the land.

"Hasty?!" was James' impatient reply.

"Not yet."

"Let's just go."

"No. Not yet. I want you to wait here and watch my back."

"What for? Let's go together."

"I'll go down first to make sure that it's clear," and in saying this Marquard started down the ridge.

"No!—Wait!—" James protested.

Altogether having forgotten himself, he knelt down to lift the bag. As he threw the strap over his head, he was distracted by a sound. Instinct bade him to freeze. It took a glance over the shoulder to make him aware of several armed men advancing from behind.

"Modest!" he called, sharply yet quietly.

There was no answer from Marquard. In James' hand was the grenade. Discreetly, he attempted to conceal it by using the bag. He pressed the grenade against the pliable canvas fabric and held them together. James calmly rose and pivoted in place to find himself face to face with three German infantrymen.

"Don't shoot!" he begged of them in perfectly enunciated German. "Please, I'm unarmed! Don't shoot!"

"Don't move!"

"Don't shoot," James reiterated. "I'm a friend!"

"Shut up! Don't move! Stay where you are!"

The three soldiers encircled James. Helpless, he remained stock-still. They approached him cautiously, their rifles raised.

"Put down the bag!" one of them shouted. "Do it now! Put the bag down on the ground!"

"I'm German. I'm a German! Don't shoot, don't shoot!"

Slow and deliberate, James brought the bag up, raising his arms, the grenade kept hidden from sight.

"Put it down. Put the bag down, now!" the one infantryman screamed, his face reddened with mounted intensity.

"I am German—"

"Put it down!" he stressed.

One of the three German infantrymen peered over the ridge and spotted Marquard, unaware, down by the clear water and called out to him.

"You there! Halt! Halt!"

The soldier took aim with his rifle.

"No! He's with me," James interfered. "He's a friend!"

Once more the German soldier shouted for Marquard to halt. To which there was no response. He then fired.

Marquard heard the shouts from upon the ridge and turned in time to catch the muzzle flash from the soldier's rifle.

The projectile hit Marquard at the center of his chest. There was a crack and a zing. And he was knocked backwards by the force of the impact. Stunned and with a stumble back, he came full around and made to run in a desperate attempt to traverse the river. From atop the ridge a struggle ensued. Marquard staggered forward. His carbine fell and with both hands he held his open wound. Blood poured grievously forth, guiltlessly defiling the streaming water of the Vistula.

Another shot was fired abutted to an obliterative detonation which cleaved the ridge. The force of the blast threw Marquard forward onto his hands and knees into the shallow water. A brief scattering of dirt and debris pocked the

commensurableness of the river's surface. Marquard was incapable of pulling himself up and dragged himself the last few meters to the river's bank. There he collapsed and rolled over onto his back. The last breaths he took were shallow, difficult. He stared upward.

Above him was a filthy-grey sky. From drizzle, a heavy rain suddenly began to fall.

## BOOK III

### Northern France, 1917

#### 76

A young soldier violently awoke to a closed throat and nettled eyes, his face smeared with black soot. A stream of tears poured grievously forth as he struggled intermittently with the terrible delirium brought upon by the inhalation of noxious gas. His lungs flared, charged with fluid. He gaped wide-eyed and lay suffering, helpless to affect the worst of a bettered outcome.

The choked muscles of the youth's larynx miraculously loosed; he reeled onto his side, gagged and retched a vile liquid. He was free to draw a complete breath. The tousled expression he wore upon his face released and a calm washed over his entire person, lending a curious softness to the hardened mask of soot. A spirited refusal to yield, owing to his youth, shone through the caked filth. The features of this angst-ridden soldier were that of the French infantry lieutenant, Modest Marquard.

A renewed state of awareness brought Marquard from his wild stupor. His eyelids snapped open. From off of the canvas gurney, where he had been left to struggle with an extraordinary amount of pain, his body heaved in a single, convulsive movement. The disoriented sway and lightness in the head that had grasp of his senses gradually dissipated.

His eyes, wetted from irritation, were wide and clear; their intelligible gaze imparted his cognizance. There were no sounds. He was imprisoned in a void of complete silence.

A frenzy of madness carried on all around the French lieutenant. Deafened and crippled he found himself at the enemies' mercy, one of many wounded patients in a German casualty clearing station. He was not the only Frenchman.

There were many in German custody, denotative of the interim of mutinies and upheavals that had so effectively taken a toll on the front-line French soldier. And if he were not a deserter, then most likely he had been pounded so thinly that any will to fight had long been given up to insufferable dismay.

Military doctors, assisted by the occasional nurse, scrambled frantically to-and-fro, these brave and selfless men and women made do the best they were able to tend to the inundation of wounded jumbled beneath the makeshift canvas shelter-an inadequate refuge that teetered and burst with an utter commotion. The wounded consisted of not only French but German soldiers as well-disoriented souls, equaled in their misery, left to writhe on sullied cots, hands grasped protectively at fresh wounds, or as they died, doubled over in bewilderment, laying still to cradle horrid and grievous injuries. Out of thirst, most begged for water but were summarily denied by the calculated judgment and deliberately practiced gumption of the medical staff.

A German military surgeon, Doctor Rudolf Gotts, rushed over to aid the risen Frenchman, stiffly pulling him down and hovering overtop of him. The doctor's

priggish face was turned away from the lieutenant, his thin-lipped mouth held agape frozen in a soundless cry. In a decisive movement he reached over his patient and with both hands, firmly grasped the upper thigh of the lieutenant's left leg.

Without delay a young nurse, Lucia Bruegel, rushed to the doctor's aid. The desperation she wore upon her face brought out in her a marked beauty—a beauty which was at once as unfamiliar to such a horrid place as it was beguiling and serene, putting Marquard mercifully at ease. No words passed between her and the doctor. Her actions were without hesitance. The scissors in her hands swiftly split the inner seam of the Frenchman's khaki trousers. The tough fabric was easily wrent by her graceful hands.

The doctor struggled to clasp at the loose flesh. In practiced and steady skill he operated with a steel surgical clamp.

Blood washed each failed attempt. While Gotts wrestled control, Lucia strained to keep pressure applied to the main artery of Marquard's upper thigh. She searched the French lieutenant's face, fixed upon his youthful features; the very tightness of his cheeks, his fleshy chin and handsome nose. She looked deeply into his eyes, found coherence in them, and focused there in an attempt to calm him. The loose flesh was clasped. The doctor succeeded in stanching the heavy bleeding from Marquard's leg. Lucia released the lieutenant's thigh.

She placed her stained hands on his face, brushed his matted hair aside, and spoke directly to him. Upon her chest she wore a silver cross. The religious ornament dangled heavily. Now and again it peeked from the open neck of her white blouse, darkened from perspiration. Her lips moved in an even way; she seemed to talk calmly while those around her shouted. In complete silence Marquard gazed into her face. He was attentive to her mouth, her lips movement; succored by her peace and beauty. The doctor gestured to him and directed some comment at Lucia prior to attending to another patient. She nodded in acknowledgment and turned back to the French lieutenant.

"You're going to be all right," she spoke softly.

He was able to hear her voice and her voice alone. There was no other sound. There were only her soothing words, spoken in French with just a slight German accent. He was drawn to her and edged forward.

"You must sit still. Lie back."

He was captivated by her, was oblivious to the directions she gave, and rose up toward her.

"Lie back," she persisted.

And delicate with him, Lucia held Marquard at bay.

"I need you to be still. You were wounded in battle. Do you understand? This is a..."

Marquard reclined onto the gurney, drained of a sudden, and sunk listlessly. He now heard the rest of it—the ambient noise of a raging battle and the lurid air of the dressing station thick with the cries of the wounded and dying—a sound unto itself. The bewailing, the blasts and distant crackle of gunfire, were so intense the French lieutenant was forced to strain in order to catch any of Lucia's comforting words.

"...take care... the doctor will be with you shortly... remain still... be brave... lay back... we'll need to move you as soon as possible—"

Lucia's voice eased back into focus. For a brief moment he was able to concentrate. Her compassionate words renewed him, encouraged optimism,

when abruptly an intense boom washed her away. Overhead, the canvas buckled.

Several large beams of wood escaped from their moorings. The large tent of the field hospital was rattled and swayed by a nearby explosion. There was a sweeping panic and a great crash. Lucia laid her body lengthwise over the lieutenant's—a reflexive, protective gesture.

## 77

The distinctive crack of rifle fire pierced a still and frigid air. A squad of French soldiers made a vigilant advance, fanned out on a barren potato field at dusk in the dead of the Flanders' winter. The Belgium landscape that these men made headway on would by wars end be unidentifiable. The shot carried short, harmlessly missive. None in the squad were reluctant to take cover from the sudden gunfire. A flurry of khaki dashed to the frozen and unyielding earth.

Lieutenant Marquard ducked behind some winter bear brush and called out to his fellows.

"Did anyone see where the shots came from?"

A French sergeant, Pierre Bonnet, shouted in return, "The house... the house there just beyond!"

Marquard stuck his head up and spotted a small country manor only a few hundred meters ahead. The structure was a secure location from which it would be possible to hold the relatively unobstructed ground of the surrounding farmland. There was a slight movement in the windows. Between the house and the French soldiers' position was an outgrowth of trees—a thicket dense enough to provide them adequate cover to enfilade against their faceless enemy.

Marquard rolled onto his back.

"All right, then," he barked out his orders. "You see that small group of trees up ahead? On my mark, we're going to make a run for them. Pierre! Valset! Lay down cover!"

More shots rang out from the direction of the house. A grey smoke wafted through the still air from where each discharge originated. The Frenchmen prepared for the fray. Their hidden assailant's onslaught redoubled in its intensity, readied for the French infantrymen's assault.

"On three," Marquard admonished.

The rifle fire was loud with its constancy. Marquard hollered over the din and led his men in a gallant rush toward the outcropping of trees. The thicket provided the men the refuge needed to regroup and counterattack. The French soldiers returned a thick fire on the small country manor. White shingling broke from the building's exterior. The resultant measures stifled any German advantage. The Frenchmen fiercely cajoled the unseen foe; their banter fed off the shattered windowpanes and the consequent lessening of their enemy's resistance. The two soldiers Marquard ordered to lay down cover fire, Pierre and Valset, charged headlong to gain ground and secure a new position.

Together, on Marquard's order, the group stormed the manor.

Perseverance afforded them success. Sergeant Bonnet forced the front door of the country manor with a stiff blow from his shoulder. A sorry barricade of brittle furniture acted out all the futility of an undefendable position and

collapsed on impact. There were shouts and an exchange of gunfire as the Frenchmen assailed the main living area of the house. Several German soldiers had grouped together and beat a retreat down a narrow corridor. A grayish blur of uniformed figures herded up the tight staircase at the corridor's terminus.

In the French lead, Marquard pursued the small detachment, his revolver readied and in hand. He rushed to the upper level and into a stately and decorous drawing room set directly off of the staircase. The lieutenant fired blindly ahead of himself, hitting a German officer square in the back, killing him instantly. A blare of popular music escaped from a radio set in the corner, abruptly rivaled by hollers and the spray of bullets. The officer had made an apparent attempt at discretion failing to terminate the music at the moment of his death.

From around the corner, Marquard was fired upon erratically. The bullets flew up to the ceiling, pulverizing the thin plaster. Marquard flattened out onto the floorboards and returned fire with his revolver, emptying it. He had blasted another of the enemy who had concealed himself around the corner down the hall. Where the thin plaster wall had successfully blocked his person from a direct line of sight, it, in point of fact, was not adequate in thickness to protect him from the projectiles of the Frenchman's service revolver.

Pierre followed the stairs and the din of the skirmish. From half in, half out of a second-story window, opposite the front yard of the manor house and the small thicket of trees, a German officer took aim on an unwary Marquard. Pierre stormed into the room with a French-made submachine gun and blasted the officer back through the open window before he was able to get off a shot. Marquard was startled and froze in astonishment. Pierre stopped to wink and made for the open window while the lieutenant went through the motion of reloading his revolver. The weapon was cracked open, the empty casings scattered over the floorboards, and the chambers were each filled by his deft hands. Marquard rose and checked around the corner to make certain it was clear before he addressed the window. There, Pierre took careful aim at a number of Germans who had leapt from a small balcony and were in retreat across the lawn. Pierre opened fire just as Marquard got to him. From the window the two men finished off the remainder of the enemy.

The struggle, as suddenly as it had begun, subsided and the Frenchman, free to roam the house, quickly found themselves listless. The band of hardened soldiers lounged comfortably on the hardwood floor; disinterestedly, they assembled around the radio to listen to intermittent news broadcast.

*...This could be the great push of Nineteen Fifteen... It is the aim of the French armies to reinstate a war of movement and strategic accomplishment... which is the least effective of the enemy's gains... announced yesterday that some portions of the grand armies could be expected to see fierce fighting well into the holidays... in a sign of restraint... after a gain in ground... In what could be the last stand of an over fatigued enemy... A force is being developed to head in that way, says military officials... Regardless of a guarantee of victory, we are poised for a tough fight...*

Haversacks and gear were leaned against the plaster walls, lined up beside the shut windows. Cheerful, Pierre entered the drawing room from the staircase. Bundled in his arms were some broken furnishings he had collected



from the house. In a plainly fireplace at the room's far end he commenced to feed the wood remnants to the roaring fire. With a turn to his melancholy mates, he broke some of the wood with his heel, intentionally snapping it against the floorboards.

"Come on now!" Pierre exclaimed, fed up with their lackluster attitudes, "Look up, will ya?"

He went over to the radio to turn the dial.

"Why," he continued, a bit aggravated, "find some damn music on this thing! The lieutenant'll be fixin' up something good from whatever's left in the pantry. A real Belgian feast! Them Boche had wine and cheese, so look up, for the Lord's sake! Better than being rationed bread in the Flanders mud. Show a little thanks."

Those first hours of Christmas Day the soldiers brought in with merriment unknown to them throughout the duration of their service. The wine and warm sensation it brought on in the men's full stomachs made for a whole new mind-set. Marquard and Pierre stood on the balcony of the second floor of the house. From the glow of the frosted window they could see the silhouettes of the soldiers inside gathered together singing along with the radio to a Christmas carol known to them all, *Dans Cette Étable*.

*Dans cette étable,  
Que Jésus est charmant!  
Qu'il est aimable,  
Dans son abaissement!  
Que d'attraits à la foi!  
Tous les palais des rois  
N'ont rien de comparable  
Aux beautés que je vois  
Dans cette étable.*

[In this stable,  
How sweet is Jesus!  
How lovable he is,  
In his subservience!  
Such appeals to faith!  
All kings' palaces  
Have nothing comparable  
To the beauties that I see  
In this stable.]

Sergeant Bonnet wiped a window pane to have a better look. The soldiers were drinking from bottles of wine and swaying back and forth, momentarily forgetting all their many worries.

*Que sa puissance  
Paraît bien en ce jour,  
Malgré l'enfance  
Où le réduit l'amour!  
Le monde racheté,  
Et tout l'enfer dompté,  
Font voir qu'à sa naissance*

*Rien n'est si redouté  
Que sa puissance.*

[How well His power  
Appears today,  
Despite the infancy  
To which love reduces him!  
The world atoned,  
And all of hell subdued,  
Show that at his birth  
Nothing is so feared  
As His power.]

Content with himself for the moment, Marquard turned away. With a glass in his hand he leaned on the balcony's painted wooden railing, looking out at the distant night sky. He shivered at the cold.

*Touchant mystère!  
Jésus, souffrant pour nous,  
D'un Dieu sévère  
Apaise le courroux.  
Du testament nouveau  
Il est le doux agneau;  
Il doit sauver la terre  
Portant notre fardeau:  
Touchant mystère.*

[Touching mystery!  
Jesus, suffering for us,  
From a strict God  
Appeasing the wrath.  
From the New Testament  
He is the gentle lamb;  
He must save the Earth  
Bearing our burden:  
Touching mystery.]

Pierre occupied himself with his plate. He regarded each of his men as a brother and proudly observed their revelry through the haze of the window.

"It's nice to see they've loosened up a bit," he commented.

"It's been hard on all of us," replied Marquard.

The lieutenant bundled himself, pulling his collar up and watching his breath. Pierre pivoted toward him, sensitive to his concerns, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"You're doing right by us, Modest."

"Valset might have his chance tonight," Marquard said as he motioned to the dark. "The bombardment has been light."

Pierre nodded in agreement. He glimpsed through the window and searched out Valset who, seeming cheery enough, caught his glance and raised his glass.

*S'il est sensible,  
Ce n'est qu'à nos malheurs,*

*Le froid pénible  
Ne cause point ses pleurs.  
Mon coeur à tant d'attraits,  
À de si doux bienfaits,  
À ce charme invincible  
Doit céder désormais,  
S'il est sensible.*

[If he is sensitive,  
It is only to our ordeals,  
The biting cold  
Does not cause his tears.  
My heart to so many appeals,  
To such sweet kindnesses,  
To this invincible sweetness  
Must give in from now on,  
If it is sensitive.]

Pierre motioned respectfully in response.

"I'm behind you indubitably," Pierre proclaimed, turning his attention back to Marquard. "So are the others. If Valset deserts, it's due to circumstance. Neither you nor he is to blame. This damned campaign is stretching all of our nerves about as far as they can be stretched."

The darkness drew Marquard's attention away from the fogged window. The soldiers' muffled voices were passed on gently, fading into the night air.

*Ah! Je vous aime,  
Vous vous cachez en vain,  
Beauté suprême  
Jésus, Enfant divin!  
Vous êtes à mes yeux  
Le puissant Roi des cieux,  
Le Fils de Dieu lui-même  
Descendu dans ces lieux:  
Ah! Je vous aime.*

[Oh! I love you,  
You hide yourself in vain,  
Supreme beauty  
Jesus, divine Child!  
You are to my eyes  
The powerful King of heaven,  
The Son of God Himself  
Descended to these parts;  
Oh! I love you.]

An occasional white flash was visible over the horizon.

"Modest, if it weren't for your example..." Pierre trailed off, turning Marquard to face him. "In complete confidence and away from the others, if it weren't for you, my friend, I tell you... I'd be the first to desert."

The dawn's broad, endless horizon was filled with streaks of burning white, a cascade from the sky that irradiated over a crater-pocked wasteland. The scar and ruin of Northern France was utter and complete by the time of the Nivelle offensive in the fourth year of the Great War, Nineteen Seventeen. Colored arcs raced across the heavens. Artillery fire in the distant skyline flashed in continuity, a solid strobe along the furthest reaches of a ravaged landscape. A cacophony of sound was soon accompanied by the sight of terrific bursts and steady streams in every color of the rainbow—Very lights, tracer fire, signal flares, and clouds of turbid smoke—a circus of violence.

A mass of French soldiers lined up on the fire steps in preparation to cross over the parapet of an endless, crenelated entrenchment. It was a solid line of khaki uniforms, a force without character or distinguishing feature, which mingled against the drab, chalk ground. Ahead of them, the long stretch of no man's land was an impenetrable sea of entangled barbed wire belts. The earth rattled. The tempestuous reverberation of battle grew ever more deafening. The shell bursts of the enemy's cannonade and rapport of friendly artillery fire resounded all around like a rolling timpani.

A whistle pierced through the thick of the noise. A collective holler rose, growing as in unison hundreds of men scrambled from their positions and charged over the parapet into the quasi-darkness. The crest of a nation's unshakeable resolve sent headlong to face the reality of war. One by one men fell to an unseen foe. The long, broken line of French infantrymen worked its way sporadically through the volatile killing field that was no man's land.

Hunched over, Lieutenant Marquard stalked behind his trusted sergeant, Pierre Bonnet. The men exhausted themselves with an on-again, off-again sprint from shell crater to shell crater. The clinging mud of the weatherworn earth retarded their progress. The exhaustive drive wasted the French momentum. In tandem the two friends fell over the lip of an enormous crater and sought the protection of a derelict pillbox—all which remained of an abandoned forward German redoubt. The French enfilade into the German territory was met with little resistance from the enemy.

Overexertion quickly stifled the French advance. Above the noise and through the smoke, the two men conversed as they took a breather. Pierre placed down an armful of stick-bombs, which he had cradled through the front, and leaned back on his haunches.

"All this time they hadn't gotten the ground we'd anticipated," the French sergeant commented as he yanked at the water canister slung over his shoulder.

"What's that? What's that you say?" Marquard forced, getting down low.

"The damned Boche... and this defense in depth. They've pulled as far back as Nivelle had promised, but it looks as if they never completely secured these positions to begin with."

Marquard nodded in concurrence. Defense in depth was a tactic brilliantly employed by the Germans. It involved weak opposition, coaxing the enemy to attack, and striking when his line was over extended. The German defensive abounded with all the advantages of an occupying force, with well-fortified entrenchments, the higher ground, and superior provisions and equipment.

Pierre took a tremendous swig from the canister, swished, and spit it out.

"Some big push!"

Marquard was responsive to his sergeant's observations.

"It seems they overextended themselves."

"It wouldn't have been difficult to have pushed ahead all along. And after all..." Pierre replied as he handed the canister to the lieutenant. "With or without the help of the contemptible English... Nivelles has promised us too much, Modest."

"How is that, Pierre?" Marquard questioned tersely.

"Once our push comes against the German defensive line, it'll be over!" was Pierre's response. "Without the collaboration of our allies in this offensive, it won't fall through. Valset was right."

"Valset deserted us."

"They say that more and more men abandon Nivelles everyday," Pierre proclaimed.

"Maybe, Pierre. Maybe that is so. It can be seen in the higher-ranking officers, I'll admit that. It is saddening but it is true. They're holding on far too tightly."

"They restrict us and send us so far ahead, with nothing but empty promises. In that way, even if we were to want it, there'd be no turning back."

A number of shells exploded near to their position. The impact of the high-caliber shells trembled the very ground, though fell short of causing any harm. The din was enough to startle them back to the reality of their current circumstance.

"In any event," Marquard concluded, "we're here. So let's not debate about it."

Marquard handed over the sergeant's canteen and crawled to the edge of the crater. The violated ground that lay ahead of them was a churned damp faceless pulp. Pierre checked the phosphorescent face of his wristwatch and joined the lieutenant. A seasoned serviceman, Pierre promptly evaluated the chaotic terrain that fastened them.

"Our barrage is delayed," he observed. "It seems as if the line's come to a halt."

There was little or no human movement ahead, only the crash and upheaval of earth and sky. The enemy's bombardment had redoubled. The drone of heavy artillery shells coming in from above was followed by a series of blasts, this time just ahead of their position. The screech of the projectiles was eviscerating. The white flashes and spray of heated phosphor dazzled to distraction. A French runner rushed up from behind the two men and shared cover with his fellows.

"Is there any word?" Marquard inquired.

"The rear has fallen back," the French runner breathlessly responded.

"What's that?" Marquard asked for clarification, taken aback at the man's statement. "What is it you say?"

"The forward line has been cut off," the runner reiterated. "We've been ordered to hold our ground." The look on the lieutenant's face discouraged the runner from the stark truth of the matter. "The first wave of attacking troops has been forced to withdraw."

"That's... That's just fine!" Pierre blurted out.

He shot Marquard an unsatisfactory glare. A shell landed nearer to the men's position.

"No one has yet to fall back," hollered Marquard.

"That's because they pulled too far ahead," the French runner replied. Marquard gave him a hard look prompting the runner to come out with the

facts. "There is no more sorry a group of fellows than them. It appears they were met with our own barrage."

"So what has happened then, is that the rear has broken rank!" Pierre roundly exclaimed.

Static filled the sordid air of their surroundings. The fine hairs rose on the nape of each man's neck; reflexively, they took cover. The artillery barrage had zeroed in on their position. The runner was unable to respond. There was a tremendous explosion. Intense whiteness gleamed throughout. The impending conflagration, by the fierceness and resultant verity of its torrent, suspended reality.

Numbness eased the moments of initial shock. Marquard lay conscious flat upon his back. His face was black and covered in soot. To his side lay what remained of the French runner—a torn and tattered mass of flesh. Marquard cried out for Pierre. He checked about himself, unconcerned with any injury he may have sustained, determined to seek out his friend. The shell crater and ridge by the pillbox the men had shared had been torn apart by the blast and now resembled nothing of the former cover it once provided. Marquard was completely exposed. Sergeant Bonnet was nowhere in sight.

"Pierre! Pierre!" he gasped.

Marquard lay prone. The lower part of his left leg tingled. A sudden awareness that he was unable to turn over shattered his nerve. His outcry once more miscarried.

"Pierre..." There was no reply to Lieutenant Marquard's desperate cries for his comrade, Sergeant Bonnet.

## **Paris, France, 1939**

# **79**

An evening sky of unbroken jet was readied for the advent of another irretractable day. On the Quai D'Orsay, where the entire body of French savoir-faire was conducted within the confines of a few structures, there stood the neoclassic building of the French Ministry of foreign affairs. Situated along the bright and bustling Parisian Boulevard des Invalides, across from the lovingly cared for Jardin des Invalides, the ministry straddled a bend on the Seine's left bank.

Hung from the great pillars of its entryway were the traditionally colored flags of France and her foreign colonies.

Across the river, by way of the Pont Alexandre III, the lit windows of the Grand and Petit Palais and the gas lamps that lined the paths of the venerable royal gardens were aglow.

At the far end of a hall, sharing the top two floors of the Ministry building, was the suite of the events coordinator.

The slant-roof corner loft housed a file room, and the floor below it, two offices. In the larger of the two—the coordinator's office—Lucia Bruegel pored over a stack of loose papers piled atop a solid oak desk. A fire roared in the fireplace at the opposite end of the room. In the glare of the flames she leafed through some of the papers from a dossier, studying each closely, scrutinizing

them. The hard light exposed her age. The years had been kind to her for, though she was no longer youthful, she was still quite beautiful.

A well-groomed, middle-aged French statesman entered through the open door. He was handsomely dressed in a dark, expensive suit. On his broad lapel he wore a small pin distinguishing him as a member of the Nazi party. This was the Ministry Coordinator, Henri Vassal. Without a word to Lucia he knelt over a heap of papers, which were piled on the floor, tore them up, and mechanically fed them into the roaring fire. The flare-up generated a spectacular yellow glow; nothing escaped the intensity of its light. A glance to the desk and he noticed the intense scrutiny Lucia paid to the contents of the dossier in her possession. He focused on her, paying particular attention to the small stack of papers she held in her hands. There was little of note about the papers that differentiated them from the various piles, a pink slip at the top perhaps. A narrowing of his eyes signaled discontent. He walked directly to her and rudely snatched the papers out of her hands.

"Where did you find those!?" he addressed her curtly.

"I... You didn't..." she stammered, taken aback.

Vassal shoved the papers into an open manila folder that lay upon his desk and coldly turned his back to her.

Without further mention of what it was she had done to offend, he commenced to exit the office.

"You never mentioned these papers, Henri," Lucia blurted.

Vassal halted in mid-stride at the open door. The darkened boundary of the empty doorframe was as an impasse; it challenged him to trespass further. He turned his head and retorted with a sharp comeback from over his shoulder.

"Not everything that passes my desk is included in these damned reports."

Vassal motioned for the door.

"These papers, Henri..." Lucia sprung toward Vassal and placed a hand on his upper arm to prevent him from leaving, "...they were meant for the report. Excluding them—"

"Now don't be apprehensive about it," was his rejoinder, effectively cutting her off. "This is the right thing to do."

Vassal took her hand in his. A renewed calm entered into his purpose; softly, he relinquished her grip of his arm.

"No! What if they—"

"They won't miss it," he reassured her.

"Absolutely! They will."

She snatched her hand away from his. The gesture was one of intense loathing. Her eyes were deadened of emotion.

Rejected, he took a step to his desk.

"You're not to keep this from them!" Lucia exclaimed.

It was Lucia now who had her turn at the door. Vassal spun round and advanced toward her. The tide had changed. His movement was deliberate; hers was calculated. To coddle her, he retook her hand.

"Lucia, it doesn't have to be this way. It could be the way it used to be."

"Nothing good will come of it," she replied in a stern, refusing manner.

"What they don't know—"

Lucia pulled her hand from Vassal's and violently turned away from him.

"They know you've been contacted. I've told them," she spoke cruelly, out of anger. It was done detachedly, without looking at him.

"You've what?!"

Vassal snatched her arm and yanked her around. Lucia reared back.

"Lucia, you've done what?!"

"I have told them. They threatened me."

"No, Lucia! How could you do that?"

"You brought this upon yourself, Henri."

With a harsh shrug, she threw off Vassal's grip.

"I trusted you, Lucia! I did this for you!" he blurted with clenched fists.

A sneer in disgust and she advanced.

"Your acting so selfless really is repulsive, Henri," she venomously retorted.

"There's nothing you do that you don't do without thinking of yourself first."

Vassal had heard enough. Hurt to the very core he lashed out in frustration, slapping Lucia with an open hand. She was immobilized. He could not look her in the eye. His glance fell downward. Stupefied, Lucia in silence stormed out of the office. Vassal, too, was shocked at what he had done and remained where he stood, motionless.

## 80

The night air in the French capital was heavy. Moisture lingered in the form of a haze. A strained breeze skirted the quay from off of the broken surface of the River Seine. The current ambled in the glare of the street lamps while the city slept. On the Boulevard des Invalides the flow of automobiles lessened significantly toward late evening.

In the Ministry building the decor of the events coordinator's suite had been changed extensively. The office was choicely remodeled with a new color scheme, modern trim, and a more contemporary refurbishment of the fireplace.

The cold season had passed. It was now the height of summer. The office windows stood wide open. Vassal was alone, finishing up some work late into the evening. A phone rang repetitively in a nearby room. A fast brassy tremolo heightened by the humidity. Vassal could ignore it no longer.

"Damn it!" he muttered to the air.

A slue of harassing disconnects were a recent cause of considerable grief for the coordinator. Vassal was not so much upset by the calls as he was aggrieved at how at the mercy of his medial position he was. With an indignant air, he set down his pen and rose from his desk. He rushed out of his office into the corridor and entered a small, empty auxiliary room. The ringing telephone lay atop the mantle of a marble fireplace facing opposite the door. The fireplace was coupled by a large, inset antique mirror tastefully hung at head height. The mirror was placed squarely above the white carbolated mantle piece. Vassal answered. He was greeted by silence on the other end.

"Hello? Who is it? Hello?"

The sound of traffic and what he imagined to be breathing was all the coordinator could discern.

"Is there someone on the line? Hello?!"

No answer came. Irritated, Vassal hung up and stormed back to his office. Immediately upon the coordinator's arrival at the door the phone rang once again.

"This is ridiculous!" It irritated him so. He refused to be baited. Stubborn to the end he remained in place. The irksome summons ceased and the



coordinator continued with his late night appointments. If let be he would finish shortly. A few letters to be addressed and tomorrow's itinerary was all that needed completion.

Upon his return to his desk there came a loud crash-the explicit sound of broken glass. He remained in place, unsure of the source. The silence lingered in the air. It was palpable, a deadened stillness, amplified and piqued by the coordinator's increased awareness. A profound sense of foreboding prompted him to get out from behind his desk and march down the corridor to the adjoining room. Vassal stood in the doorway and listened intently. Nothing in the auxiliary office was altered. He paid particular attention to the base of the mirror set above the fireplace, affixed as it was to the mantle piece by a large, ornate appliqué. The unsettling feeling that something was wrong hounded him; he hung back for a short duration, sure that he was overlooking it. The coordinator was rewarded for his persistence, for right away there came another crash and the distinct sound of shattered glass. This time it was obvious that the noise originated upstairs. Vassal glanced up to the file room. Bated by the renewed disturbance and sure of its source, he headed down the corridor to its end. Careful of his step, he commenced to climb the sharply inclined L-shaped staircase, following it up to a tiny room lined with filing cabinets.

A number of the panes of glass in the large windows that ran the length of the upper room were smashed. Slow at the start, Vassal strode over to the row of broken glass. The shards were scattered across the wooden floorboards. It was an appalling act. The panes had been shattered inward. No rock, nor any other large projectile possibly used to break the window glass, was evident. Closer scrutiny would have divulged several tiny pocks in the plaster ceiling where the twenty-two caliber rounds had lodged themselves. The thought of this more ominous means of shattering the panes had not occurred to the coordinator. The unprovoked nature and randomness of the disturbance elicited no reaction from the coordinator, whose demeanor had not changed; of collected resolve, he investigated the scene. From the vandalized window he caught a glimpse on the street of a long, elegant automobile. The type of automobile was impossible to make out in the dark. It was parked across from the embassy, headlamps out. The car jerked forward with a loud squeal and sped away.

## 81

A rap sounded at the door of the events coordinator's suite. It was late in the afternoon and the majority of the ministry offices had been closed up for the day. Vassal let in a young man. The man was no more than thirty, handsome, fair-haired, tall, and healthfully slender; he was an acquaintance of Vassal's. Henri knew him as Emery Haskins. Emery wore a bluish-grey plumber's uniform and carried the appropriate tools of the trade. The arms and legs of the uniform were creased; it appeared to have been recently pressed. He entered the corridor of the coordinator's suite from the narrow hallway careful not to bump the far wall with the length of copper pipe he had tucked underneath his arm.

"Herr Haskins," Vassal greeted him, "it's so nice to see you! How have you been?"

Emery maneuvered backwards into the tight passageway and set the piping aside.

"Very well, Monsieur Vassal. Thank you."

"Have you got all you need there?"

"Yes, Monsieur." Toolbox at his side, he awaited the coordinator's direction.

"Allow me, then. This way, please."

Vassal guided Emery to the crooked staircase at their immediate left. Beneath it and to the side was a small closet, a space below the stairs.

"And how has your first winter in Paris been?" Vassal questioned politely.

Emery placed down his tools and inspected the space.

"Very good."

He proceeded to crouch and craned his neck for a better look. There was nothing in need of immediate repair.

Vassal stuck his head in and pointed out the plaster wall beneath the staircase.

"Yes. Well, you'll need to break in through here, I imagine. The toilet is down a short ways across the hall from the receptionist's office." Vassal continued, "Most of the remodeling was done in my own office. These old buildings, well, as you know...This should be similar to the work you did in my town house, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, exactly," Emery agreed. "Through here, there should be a crawlspace."

Vassal patted Emery on the shoulder and removed himself from under the staircase.

"Though, really, how has it been? The winters here in Paris can be unimaginable!"

Emery stood up and clapped out his hands.

"Yes. God must really hate Paris!"

Vassal laughed out. The two men shared in Emery's levity. The phone rang from the adjoining room, interrupting their laughter. Vassal excused himself, apologizing for not currently having a secretary.

The work passed without fuss; Emery was quite deft at his business, and though he broke through the wall beneath the staircase, he was never the cause of much disturbance. He had finished up for the evening, gathering together a load of copper piping of various lengths. Prepared to take his leave, Vassal approached and corrigibly escorted him to the front door. The coordinator was quite happy with the job Haskins had done so far and expressed as much. He explained that he had to work late into the evening on a few last minute things. Emery apologized for not shaking hands, owing to the piping he currently had bundled in his arms. In acknowledgment of this, Vassal smiled, gave Emery a corrigible pat on the shoulder, and led him out of the suite. The door Vassal held for Emery momentarily blocked the view of the vacant hallway. When Emery slipped through, Vassal noticed a woman pass.

From the corner of Vassal's eye he thought he recognized Lucia. He inconspicuously craned his neck to get a better look at her. The woman's back was all he saw. A thump misdirected the coordinator's attention. Emery had inadvertently allowed some of the piping to slip. In asking for assistance, he distracted Vassal from Lucia's presence.

"Oh, of course. Let me help you with that."

Decorum momentarily inflected Vassal's interest away from the woman. The men gathered the copper piping.

Emery secured the bundle under an arm. Vassal turned to find the woman gone. He stood at the open doorway watchful of Emery, who left in the opposite direction. The moment Emery was out of sight, Vassal stepped into the hall. He was driven by an impulse, careful to shut the door to the suite behind him though leaving it open just a crack. He had the keen intuition to follow the empty hall in Lucia's direction.

Vassal closed in on the stairwell entrance-the most probable exit of the anonymous woman. From a door beside him he heard the clamor of footfall. The door was the emergency fireproof exit and had a wire mesh window at its center.

The knob was not secured and the heavy door gave when he pushed against it.

The room was no larger than a walk-in-closet. The diminutive space was taken up in its entirety by a metallic spiral staircase. Electric safety lights harshly illuminated the metal grating and smooth lead painted walls. Due to the precipitous descent of the spiral of the staircase, nothing was perceivable beyond each step. The clack of hurried footfall and the slam of a door bid Vassal-he cautiously followed the stairs down one flight. The heavy fire door off of the stairwell had been left slightly ajar. The door exited onto the first floor corridor. The coordinator passed through it, the heavy door shutting weightily against the doorframe behind him, remaining unclosed. Vassal checked it, pulling the door back, and noticed that the deadbolt on the latch appeared to have been intentionally left in a locked, outwardly protruding position so as to prevent the door from shutting securely.

Vassal stepped out from the stairwell and into the hallway when he was spotted by one of the ministry's uniformed guards. The man, apparently attracted by the sound of the door, cautiously approached. Not being able to see well in the dark hallway, the ministry guard asked in a firm voice for whoever was there to remain in place. The moment Vassal spoke, the man recognized the coordinator.

"Sorry, sir. Didn't recognize you at first. I was just finishing up my rounds for the night when I heard a bit of a racket."

"That was me," Vassal informed him. "You were told I was holding up tonight till quite late?"

"Yes-Yes, sir," the guard stammered. "You're on your own. There's a man posted out front if you need anything. I was just on my way home myself. Saw your plumber out the back only a few moments ago."

"The front's all closed up, then?" Vassal asked.

"Yes. You'll be all right with locking up, sir?"

"It's getting late as it is. I'll be here till early morning probably," Vassal confirmed. "Collect your things. I'll see you out."

## 82

At Vassal's return to his office suite, everything appeared to be as he had left it. The coordinator checked his pricey wristwatch for the time, the gold hands of which indicated it was half past one. A startled shake of Vassal's head and an involuntary humph displayed his shock to learn of the late hour. The moment he reentered his suite, his attention was drawn to the staircase where Emery

had been working. It was on his mind and he made certain it was the first thing in the suite that he addressed. He walked over and inquisitively stuck his head under the stairs where an opening had been made. A small makeshift curtain divided the space. Copper piping and Haskins' plumbing tools were neatly placed to one side. Vassal pushed the curtain aside and removed a lighter from his inside breast pocket. The dim light the flame produced revealed a narrow crawlspace between the walls.

It was a curious sight and Vassal was compelled to enter the cramped space between the wall of his suite and that of the adjoining apartment. Careful of his head Vassal made his way forward, hunched over, feeling along the tight space.

Well into the recess he doubted himself and hesitated; he commenced to withdraw when the lighter extinguished. An unsuccessful attempt to relight it only succeeded in scalding his finger. In the still of abrupt darkness, overhead, the wooden staircase audibly creaked. Vassal noticed a faint light up ahead, felt his way toward it, and arrived at an opening just large enough to squeeze past. The opening led to the washroom in his suite.

At his approach of the opening, Vassal heard muffled voices. He stopped and strained to overhear. The sound of voices was distinguishable as that of two men. He heard them pass the bathroom door and through the corridor. The men spoke in guttural German and, though the language was identifiable, it was too difficult to make out what was being said. Vassal was not at all surprised by the intrusion; his next set of actions were deliberate, precise, and of certain daring. He entered the washroom and risked to creak the door open only slightly. The two intruders muttered conspiratorially. The clatter of objects being dropped and furniture being shoved predominated. Vassal craned his head out into the corridor to find his office door wide open. Light spilled into the darkened passage. The shadows of the two men played devilishly upon the facing wall. He stepped into the corridor, heedlessly crossed over to the adjoining room, silently pushed open the door, and entered.

Once the coordinator was situated within the auxiliary office, he went directly to the fireplace and to the mirror above the mantle piece. Vassal bypassed the phone on the mantle and slid the mirror over, turning it on its side where it hung precariously from a single point. From behind the mirror he pulled out a thick file, also hidden was a small caliber pistol that had been taped to the reverse side of the mirror, the weapon he seized. Careful not to make a sound, he quietly slid the mirror back. Vassal was about to quit the room when the mirror suddenly slid out of place. The movement caused the heavy mirror to grate. Vassal froze. There was no apparent response to the unanticipated noise.

He stuck his head out into the corridor and stole a glance toward his office. The shadows of the two men continued to search undisturbed. Aware of the danger, Vassal crept back to the washroom.

The coordinator's actions were calculated. He was not the type to take unnecessary risks. Once he had crawled into the narrow space, he tucked the weapon away in his pocket. He stopped and pivoted in place, reached for a large wicker hamper, and slid it over, effectively concealing the hole. He relit his lighter and promptly searched for a spot to hide the file. There was some brickwork and a run-down plaster section of wall. He placed the file aside and chose a small piece of copper piping amongst a pile of conduits of various lengths. At a weak portion in the wall he pressed the pipe firmly against the plaster. The ancient brick and dilapidated stucco were soft. The way gave without difficulty. With one hand he reached far inside, up to his shoulder, and

felt along the crumbling and dilapidated brickwork. Behind this inner wall he discovered a cavity where he promptly placed the thick file. He rolled it and tucked it far back.

The two men continued to turn the office over unaware of the coordinator's return. One of them, Georges, cut the back of the couch with a large knife. The stuffed cushion was split wide; the wound bulged with white cotton. He turned to his mate in frustration.

"Cuvée," he instructed, "take care to check every drawer."

Cuvée tilted Vassal's desk and turned out the drawers. A loud scratch emanated from the mirror in the auxiliary room. The mirror had slipped from where it hung haphazardly over the marble fireplace.

Vassal, remaining in the narrow crawlspace, veered his head sharply at the sound.

The sound carried into the office. The two men ceased what they were doing, unmoving for the moment, unsure of the sounds origins. Georges started for the door.

Cuvée interceded, "Wait—"

There was an enormous crash.

At a frantic pace Vassal dashed through the crawlspace, exiting by the narrow stairs. Each of his breaths lapped at the next. The rush of blood and inhalation of air caused him to hyperventilate. He threw the screen up behind himself and came with a oomph out into the corridor. There was but a single option for the coordinator; he took the corner and was confronted by the two men, who stood at the door of the auxiliary office. A keen pang turned in his belly. Vassal found himself in a pinch. Between him and the intruders, the suite's door exited into the main hall. The two thugs approached him cautiously, one of them with a knife in hand.

"Where are the papers, Vassal?" Cuvée demanded.

"You've got the wrong man," Vassal breathlessly replied. He removed the pistol and brandished it threateningly.

His skittish glance frittered upon the staircase-an inane thing and at an impossible distance from him.

"There's nowhere to run, Vassal," Georges threatened.

The weapon the coordinator pointed he parried indefinitely between his foes. Georges withdrew imperceptibly, Cuvée advanced. One last time, Vassal checked the staircase.

The hall light was killed. In the darkness there was a scuffle and a muffled gunshot.

## **Flanders, Belgium, 1917**

### **83**

A pair of German orderlies clad in white rushed Lieutenant Marquard up the narrow staircase of the country manor.

The snap decision had been made to chance moving the French Lieutenant from the Front in Northern France through the city of Lille to just inside the Belgium border. The risk was high and could have cost him dearly. The

lieutenant lay half-conscious on a sullied cot, helpless. Lucia followed closely behind the orderlies, who managed the cot through the confined space. She steadied Marquard's head and assisted in attempting to lift him up the sharp incline of the staircase without harm. The orderlies tilted the cot diagonally upward and jarred it up the stairs. The abrupt movements caused Marquard to wince and cry out in pain. He watched Lucia, who leaned over him. The cross she wore swayed with each jolt. The soft, needful look on the young French lieutenant's face grew increasingly ridged with each thump. Marquard's eyes rolled back; he fought off unconsciousness. Lucia caught his glance and encouraged him with a comforting smile.

A tremendous lightness overcame him; he was to no longer resist and passed out.

Marquard lay flat upon his back. The canvas gurney he was stretch out on provided no comfort. From his low position, having been set down upon the floorboards, he was enabled a broad scan of the room he occupied. Beside him, Lucia was tending to an injured soldier. His drab uniform was soiled and torn beyond recognition. The lack of any identifiable emblems made it difficult to tell the patient's nationality. German was the French lieutenant's assumption telling from the attention the man was receiving. The soldier was being supplied blood intravenously. Marquard attempted to speak but only gasped. He strained and tried once more, unsuccessfully. Tears fell across his soot-covered cheeks. Lucia turned to assist another patient and saw that the lieutenant had regained consciousness. She crouched down beside the Frenchman, clasping his hand to comfort him.

"Don't speak," she whispered softly. "Shh... there now, try not to speak."

Marquard found her voice most soothing. The singsong quality it had calmed him. He lay back peacefully.

"Modest, isn't it?" she questioned.

Marquard nodded.

"Modest," Lucia continued. "May I call you by your first name, Lieutenant?"

Marquard nodded and arose from his cot. Once more he made an attempt to speak.

"You must keep your strength," Lucia murmured restraining him. "You must lie back. Try not to speak."

Marquard relented. With a cool rag she wiped his face.

"You've been through quite an ordeal. We've moved you away from the front. You'll be safe here. Do you understand me?"

Marquard nodded. Lucia rung the rag out in a bowl of water and reapplied it to the lieutenant's face.

"I'm sorry," she continued, "but you've been injured very terribly. You must prepare yourself for this. Will you be strong?"

Her eyes on his, his hand held reassuringly in hers, Marquard smiled. A difficult piece of news was to follow, of that her solemnity made him aware. Lucia tightened her grip. She cleared the remainder of soot from Marquard's face.

He turned his eyes away from hers as she began her sentence.

"You've lost your leg... just below the knee. I'm sorry, there was nothing else that could have been done."

Marquard stared out the window beside him. The windows and adjoining balcony were somehow familiar. Barron fields stretched to the horizon. In the yard, an outcropping of trees grew a few paces from the entrance to the house.

"The surgeon who performed the operation is a good man and a skilled doctor." Lucia continued. "There weren't any complications."

Marquard stared at the trees and slowly glanced back around the room. A certain recognition alit in his eyes.

"Where is this place?" he asked in a raspy, inarticulate voice. "I know this place."

## 84

An interval of a few days had passed—though for Marquard it felt an eternity. The lieutenant sat comfortably in a wheelchair; Lucia stood by and assisted him. There was a pensive quality about Marquard's person. Rapt in one another's company the couple whiled the morning away on the manor's balcony in full view of the countryside. In the yard, the outcropping of trees blossomed a few paces from the entrance to the house. Lucia listened intently as the lieutenant related a bit of his past. The days were spent in the quaint company of his nurse, a woman he grew quite fond of; his convalescence was unmercifully dull, and to share one's thoughts with a generously lent ear was the keenest of blessings.

"Christmas Eve on the front—"

"Whatever happened to this man, Valset? Did you ever see him again?" asked Lucia.

"No... How about you?" Marquard strained to pivot in his chair and direct his answer to Lucia. "Do you have family, Lucy? Were you in Germany for Christmas?"

"We all had a hard Christmas, Modest," she replied in glancing down at him. "But that should all be over soon for you. You'll go back home. You can't fight. They shan't keep you prisoner. As a show of good faith... after your convalescence you'll be returned home. It shouldn't be long now... a few more weeks, maybe another month."

The French lieutenant eyed his useless leg. Lucia took his hand and knelt down by his chair.

"Be strong, Modest. You're a gallant officer and a handsome French war hero, and your people will embrace you with open hearts."

Marquard drew her hand in closer to him. He gazed with unguarded openness into her eyes. The minutes drifted. He opened his mouth to speak but could only smile. The moment they shared was marred by Doctor Rudolf Gotts. He stepped out onto the balcony, cleared his throat, and looked Lucia over disapprovingly, addressing her in German.

"Nurse Bruegel, you shouldn't procrastinate. You have the other patients to consider."

At being addressed so abruptly, Lucia straightened, nodded, and stepped away from Lieutenant Marquard.

"Yes, Herr Doctor."

Doctor Gotts maneuvered behind Marquard and took charge of his chair. The stop was freed and the chair brought around to face the manor.

"I'll look after the lieutenant here. Continue with your other duties," he instructed.

Lucia obeyed. She stepped past the two men to reenter the house. In passing, her glance fell one last time upon the French lieutenant. Prior to her leaving, Gotts alluded to a new set of patients.

"I understand, Herr Doctor," Lucia replied. "I'll be sure to see to them."

The next few days that passed were hectic for Lucia and caused her to be distant from the French lieutenant. In the mornings Marquard lingered solemnly on the sofa in the infirmary's drawing room listening to the radio. The most recent news of the war to arrive over the airwaves was of France's attempted advance. What little information there was to be garnered from the broadcasts was bleak. In all appearance discouraged by rumors of desertion and disobedience, the French army had once more given up their advantage.

The lieutenant was one of many patients in the manor house. Lucia, as well, was not the only nurse. And likewise, Gotts had colleagues. The infirmary consisted of the main living area on the top floor of the house. The apartments below were left to the hospital staff. The garden was open to all and was a godsend when new patients arrived. For the most part the infirmary was set up for special cases—the seriously injured, those incapacitated or permanently crippled.

The French lieutenant, though a cripple, was more importantly considered a political case; his comfort and the best possible care for him was priority to all.

Marquard sat sullen. When the news concluded, Lucia rolled in the lieutenant's wheelchair. She stepped to the radio and switched it off.

"Lieutenant," she interjected, disrupting his introspection, "why is it you listen to such discouraging news? Isn't there music you could find?"

His spirit weakened, Marquard gazed longingly at Lucia. She knew his very thoughts and refused him direct eye contact. She prepared his wheelchair and positioned it in front of him.

"Really, to get yourself into such a state... you mustn't. You do have your health to think of."

"Lucy..." Marquard trailed off.

Lucia made as if she had heard nothing. Her implacable demeanor earned her a wistful stare. She leaned over to assist him up from his seat.

"Come now," she strained. "The doctor has asked to see you in the infirmary."

"Yes. But, Lucy..."

"Honestly, Lieutenant, you mustn't carry on like this," she protested.

Marquard lifted himself off of the worn sofa with Lucia's help. Together, they situated him into the wheelchair.

"Yes," agreed Marquard. "Though, I want—"

Lucia placed her finger to Marquard's lips to silence him.

"Shh... maybe later. This afternoon, perhaps. For now there has been some news. Someone to see you."

"Who?"

"A friend. He was brought in last night. He was a man in your unit. He is terribly shell shocked."

"What is his name?" asked Marquard.

"I'm not told. The doctor thought it might be good for him to see a familiar face."

Lucia steered Marquard out of the living area, down a narrow corridor and into a small, ill-lit room. On a bed lay Valset. Thin and wasted, he was reduced to a shadow of his former self. At Marquard's entrance a change came about the



corporal's deplorable state of lethargy, his eyes opening wide in recognition, and with a grin he rose up excitedly.

"Lieutenant?" he exclaimed. "Lieutenant Marquard?!"

Surprised to see that Marquard had lost a leg, Valset's tone suddenly changed.

"I'm sorry, old boy. Are they taking good care of you?"

"Valset..." Marquard hesitated. "We hadn't heard from you. Not at all, not since..." he trailed off in disbelief.

"Don't be cross with me," Valset pleaded. "I—"

Marquard instantly overlooked Valset's previous shortcoming, so happy was he to see a familiar face.

"How is it, your winding up here like this?"

"You're not cross with me, then?" Valset laughed, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. "Oh, I know it was wrong... and to wind up back here where it all started." Valset continued, shaking his head, "The irony! It serves me right. You won't say anything after the war, will you? There will be enough time for me to regret this, all of it, once they've moved me to one of those prisoner camps," he concluded in a serious tone.

Marquard looked up at Lucia.

"Will he be sent to a camp?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so... once he's recovered."

Once again Valset glanced at Marquard's lost leg. Marquard caught him at it and smiled uncomfortably.

"It hasn't been easy," Marquard commented.

"Are they sending you home, then?" asked Valset.

"Once I'm fit."

## 85

Lucia wheeled Marquard through the freshly tended grass behind the country manor. A bright day greeted the couple.

A boundary of tall poplar trees and the flowering garden that encompassed them kept the yard perfectly hidden from the war. A scent of callow herbage and cut grass wafted through the gusty air. The dense coverage the barricade of foliage offered hindered the sun's intense rays, providing a fair amount of shade. Marquard remained content to be conveyed in his wheelchair; he had grown accustomed to it, was made peaceful by the ritual, quieted and reflective.

"He's who you had mentioned earlier?" Lucia inquired.

"Yes."

"You won't ever tell anyone, then?"

Marquard nodded his head in the affirmative and scooted himself forward in order to pull himself up. It was a sensitive subject and he preferred that they change the conversation and conveyed as much with his uncharacteristic silence. No more needed to be said. Lucia came around and assisted him to sit on a small zinc garden bench.

"You're regaining your strength," she went on. "You're a fast healer. It's pleasant to see. The doctor says you're recovering quite nicely."

"Sit beside me."

Agreeable in spirit, Lucia took a seat beside Marquard. She watched his glance move from her to his leg. The action was pitying.

"You're no less of a man, Lieutenant."

"You've stopped calling me Modest," he observed.

"We mustn't fool ourselves," said Lucia. She pivoted and avoided looking at him. "We've both duties to perform."

"I'm well aware—"

"There's nothing extraordinary about it." She turned back, "Really it is commonplace enough of an occurrence. We nurses are told this happens every so often. It's natural... and if you're to consider our circumstances—"

"Please," he interrupted. "You needn't explain."

"It's just that... we're told what to watch out for."

"It isn't fair."

Lucia took this at first in the wrong way, as if Marquard had spoken unguarded and had confided his true feeling. A rush of blood colored her cheeks. It constituted the concealment of a self-inflicted pinch to her side to contain herself.

She opened her mouth but was unable to speak.

"It isn't fair," Marquard continued over her. "They brought us together like this. It's inevitable. The doctor tells you these things. He watches you."

From the open bay window of the country manor's main office, Doctor Gotts overlooked the garden. His back was to the dark room. The only source of light came from the scene before him. Unbeknownst to the couple, he peered at them conversing down below.

"They have a strong attachment to one another," Gotts muttered aloud.

Seated opposite his desk was a youngish, handsome German woman, Fiona Faulkner. Dressed in a dark blouse and men's slacks, she appeared overly mature for her age and had a severe, masculine aspect. She examined Doctor Gotts coolly.

"And this French lieutenant?" she began in an arrogant intonation.

Gotts turned away from the window and stepped to his desk. He stood ridged, not taking his seat nor answering Fiona. His mien was supplicating.

"He will be persuaded by her?" Fiona inquired.

The doctor nodded confidently, pulling the chain on his desk lamp. The lamplight glared upon the neatly kept desktop.

"It is crucial that she understands," she continued.

Gotts interjected, "He is frustrated and embittered. She can see that it brings him some peace to have her confidence, to be accepted by her."

"Yes, but if she becomes confused by him, if he resists her—"

"That will not happen."

"And how can you be sure? By all accounts his loyalty has remained steadfast—"

"Corporal Valset," Gotts interrupted at once, "the French soldier brought to our attention not long ago, assures us that Lieutenant Marquard feels betrayed. His heart is not in the war. Nurse Bruegel has confirmed as much. He minds himself, it is true, yet he can not hide his disenchantment. He no longer has any loyalty toward France. I am sure of it.

He would have deserted if it weren't for his obligations. Corporal Valset has told us that much. He feels he was responsible for the men under his command." He paused and nodded emphatically. "His character is invariably dictated by a single motivation—an overwhelming sense of obligation to duty."

The infirmary's drawing room was a large, open, brightly lit space—something of a comfort when compared to the more cramped, plainly decorated and sanguine accommodations of the infirmary. Valset was seated with the lieutenant on the soft, worn sofa. Alone, they argued affably in hushed tones. The radio, sounding loudly over their voices, played a French news broadcast. The signal was shoddy and escaped in short bursts between intervals of static. Amongst the various trivial happenings in French politics there was the disconcerting account that the Army of France was losing ground.

"I don't give a damn for it all!" exclaimed Valset.

"It is what it is. They lose ground, we gain ground. We lose ground, they gain it back."

"And so it goes, back and forth again. And who pays for it? We do, with our blood."

"There now, Valset!" Marquard sought to calm him. "It's no good getting worked up over it."

"We are losing and we have been lied to, worse yet!" Valset further commiserated.

"We do as we're ordered. That's all there is to it. Simple as that! Now stop complaining about it!"

"You know, it's not that we've been lied to that gets me, nor that this is a mean and stupid war..."

"Then what is it?"

"It's that men like you, Modest, good men, honorable men, shoulder all the blame. How is that? How could you possibly be to blame for all the meanness and stupidity of the war?"

"We have only ourselves to blame," replied Marquard.

"Ourselves?! No. Can't you see it, Modest? Honestly, old boy, it's not your fault. Nivelles and the rest of those bastards are the ones to blame—"

A young German nurse passed lithely in front of the open doorway that led into the drawing room. She inquisitively stuck her head in and looked the two men over. The woman was busty, slim-waisted, with a fair complexion and blond hair, though a certain severity masked her otherwise marked comeliness. Valset ceased his colloquy, took a puff from the cigarette he held daintily in his hand, and waved the nurse away indicating that they were in no further need of her assistance.

"Nivelles has done what's best," Marquard continued. "It is we who have lost the fighting spirit."

"The fighting spirit? Come off it! You've spirit. What good was that in the end?"

"It's not Nivelles nor the general staff that beat back the Boche when they were twenty-five miles outside of Paris. It was the French spirit."

"The French spirit is a lie. I've seen it, and it's wanting."

"We have spirit. France will find her courage, and liberty will prevail."

"Liberty? Liberty isn't going to cut it. Courage, though, I'll give you that. With sons such as you, how could France fail?"

Marquard looked at Valset unsure of his meaning. The idea that his courage was in question and by a man who showed himself for what he was—a deserter and coward—had occurred to the lieutenant in a mere fraction of a second.

Though before such an ugly thought took root, Marquard had dismissed it. For not being low-minded or mean-spirited, he was more inclined to accept what was said—albeit gullibly—at face value and with graciousness devoid of any conceit, prompting the lieutenant in all modesty to deflect, "I could have done more."

"No, you did everything that was humanly possible."

"I suppose."

"You don't sound so convinced." To this, Marquard had no response. Might Valset have overstepped himself with this remark? In answer to his own invective he answered, "It's difficult, is all. Yes, I understand. Some wounds are deeper than those inflicted by our enemy."

"I don't wish to place blame—No, there's blame. I am responsible for my actions alone."

"It's they who are to blame, Modest," Valset argued, "not you. I can speak for Pierre and myself, I'll tell you, and for the whole rest of the unit. Never, never for a moment did we think that you betrayed us. Not a single man was lost thinking badly of you. That you could possibly be at fault was the furthest thing from any of our minds. Those boys loved their lieutenant. Do you hear that? They loved their lieutenant and they died for him."

It was enough to induce a bit of a teary eye from the lieutenant. Marquard took Valset's shoulder and gave him a good, appreciative shake. The corporal beamed.

"There, there." Valset comforted.

Marquard wiped his eyes with the back of his hand and sleeve and said, "Good ol' Valset, always speaking his mind, what for." He trailed off sheepishly. "It was a hard campaign, a great toll, to think of the loss. I—I miss Pierre mostly though."

"I saw him, you know."

"What's that you say?!" asked Marquard in a state of suspended disbelief. "When?"

"Before I was brought here, during internment."

Marquard muttered, relieved, "I thought he was dead. Did he say anything about the others?"

"We didn't get a chance to speak. He was being rounded up with the rest of the prisoners, marched off to Germany."

The news was greeted with a disconcerted frown and a reassuring answer, "But at least he made it."

## 87

Lucia and Marquard sat together on the zinc bench, warmed by the sun. The airy clouds of spent rainfall retreated in the distant skyline. The spring sun alighted upon the fresh grass and burgeoning trees. There was no wheelchair, only a single wooden crutch. The weather had warmed noticeably and the little manor garden was in hasty bloom.

"Your mood of late has really improved," commented Lucia.

Marquard nodded, smiling.

"I feel stronger with each day."

"To think, it was only a week ago that you were confined to your chair."

"I miss your toting me about, though."

The favorable comment plainly showed Marquard's newfound optimism. A wishful affection welled within Lucia.

"Yes, well you have really taken to your cane."

"Now and again, when I'm down in spirit, I might need to have you push me about!"

"It's a promise, Modest."

"I have a lot to be thankful for."

"I'm so glad to see you happy."

"Oddly, I feel at home here."

"Now you mustn't grow dependent," the nurse in Lucia bespoke.

"Nonsense. It's you I speak of when I say at home. I've so much to be thankful for."

"It is inevitable that we part," she further clarified.

"I understand that."

"We have lots of time still. You have far to go in your treatment. And not just physically."

"You mean my mental health, of course."

"Well, now that you're not alone going through this."

"Valset has lifted me up from a bad place."

"He has given you encouraging news."

"Pierre's a good man. To find out that he's still alive after blaming myself—and Valset—well, maybe this damned war hasn't taken quite as much of a toll as I once thought."

Lucia encouragingly stroked Marquard's arm. She was so very fond of him. When he finished speaking, Marquard subconsciously glanced down to his missing leg.

Sometime later, Lucia and Marquard found themselves in the exact spot on the zinc bench, in a sea of freshly cut grass on the country manor's carefully tended grounds. The sky overhead was of unblemished blue. Marquard glanced up at Lucia and smirked.

"Let's. Let's give it a go, then," he confidently challenged himself.

"You're certain?"

"Absolutely so."

"If you're ready."

"Ready as I'll ever be."

The garden was in full bloom. An inspired sun shined overhead. Lucia smiled and jumped up from the bench. She backed away reassuringly and positioned herself a few paces from where Marquard was to remain seated. He waited for her mark. A conclusive nod indicated that she was prepared to receive him. He checked down at his leg and fixed his trouser. Both his legs were in place.

"Check it first to make sure it's securely in place," Lucia suggested.

Marquard gave a rough pull at the knee of his deficient leg and surveyed, "It seems fit enough."

"Now stand up on it," Lucia excitedly prodded him. "Go on! Distribute your weight evenly on it. If there's much pain, sit back down immediately. It's only been seven weeks. We can't take a chance on it opening."

Marquard steeled himself, rose precariously to his feet and shifted his weight to find his balance. There was no more pain than a pinch and that of the mere discomfiture of having to relearn something most people take for granted.

He took the first few confident strides needed to get to Lucia. Lucia laughed out. A winsome cheer heralded his initial success. Awkwardness preceded each consecutive step forward. She clapped him on. With every new step a renewed confidence supplanted doubt. When he reached her outstretched arms, she gave him a firm, congratulatory hug. Her eyes welled with tears as she stared up at Marquard. Lost in their joy, she permitted him the satisfaction of placing a tender kiss upon her forehead. She embraced him unabashedly.

## 88

At a rather early hour for the lieutenant, he had retired to the ease of his infirmary bed and drifted fast to sleep. The rainy season had commenced. The first sign of dark shirked the remainder of the day. The mattress was firm beneath him and the bed linen, having been laundered, was stiff. His eyes wandered under their lids. He tossed lightly through a dream. Above his bed, through the narrow slit of an inset window, the gleam and strobe of a dazzling light display flickered over the horizon. Each flash peeled in succession. The faint though distinct rattle of artillery drumfire sounded and resounded, coupled and doubled, growing in the distance. For the remains of the eventide the tumult would gather in severity. The lieutenant was ailed that day by a slight fever. Weak to the point of exhaustion, he slept on and off throughout the night, disturbed by fretful dreams.

Lieutenant Marquard rolled onto his back. His face was a black smear of soot. He surveyed his surroundings to discover himself alone on a battlefield. Neither man nor machine was present, yet he heard the shouts of the soldiers, the crackle of gunfire, and artillery blasts. Though the din of battle was intense, a single cry pierced through, distinguishable from all other sounds.

The French runner lay on the ground beside Marquard, a limbless torso torn apart by the blast. A gaping hold replaced the dismembered soldier's face. It was this pitiful creature that emitted the maddening cry. He should have been dead. Instead, he was quite alive. Marquard recoiled from the writhing, ghastly trunk. He could not look, it horrified him so.

All fell silent. Marquard remained motionless. After a brief duration, the quiet was broken by an unerring voice. It was Pierre's, spoken softly though carried from far in the distance.

"Modest!" Pierre's voice called out.

Marquard's eyes snapped open. His head remained turned away from the dismembered soldier.

"Modest. It is Pierre."

Marquard froze, his eyes wide, not to dare roam.

"It is I, Pierre, your good friend." The voice grew insistent and was maintained at a close distance.

Slow to encouragement, Marquard was drawn to the nearer and more emphatic and comfortably familiar voice of his dear friend and fastened colleague.

"They lie. We're closer now."

The disfigured soldier had vanished. There was nothing—no field, no bluff, no light—nothing. From the void he heard Pierre's hollow voice.

"We're closer now than ever before."

Marquard's glance fell short of a blank stare. It focused, lingering on the barren depth of field. There was no one, nothing remained of the emptied battlefield. A discomfoting wind whistled through the veil of silence.

"They lie," whispered Pierre's voice. "We're closer now than ever before."

Pierre's voice resonated in his friend's mind. Marquard was startled awake, hot with fever and drenched in sweat. His unlit lodging emulated the dreamscape of emptiness from which he was roused. The sound of artillery had amplified. It drew his attention to the inset window and the flashes of light. The flicker played eerily across his waxen features.

"We're closer now than ever before," Pierre's ghostly, vacuous utterance echoed.

Marquard shuddered and stared blankly out at the unbroken horizon. In contrast to the severity in his expression, the strobe of the light capered playfully. The faint sound of harried footfall passed on the floorboards outside his shut door. The slight clop broke him momentarily from a trance.

Doctor Gotts moved quickly through the darkened hallway of the infirmary. He was shaken by the artillery fire, which had steadily increased throughout the night. A pale-faced patient arrived at the door of one of the rooms. The doctor stopped him, addressing him in German.

"Stay in your room. Everything is under control."

Dumbfounded, the patient did as he was directed. The doctor continued down the hall. The lights were out in the manor house, and he bumped smack into Lucia as she dashed around the tight corner and up from the sharply inclined stairwell.

"Doctor, what's going on?" she appealed, concerned. "Are we in danger?"

"Damned if I know," he retorted. "There's been no word. This racket has gotten some of the patients upset."

"I'll need to check on them, shall I?"

"Yes. Do that. I'll head downstairs. Calm everyone and keep them in their beds, for God's sake."

Valset slipped into Marquard's room. Marquard sat in his bed, his back to the door. The flash of the artillery fire transfixed him. Valset gave Marquard a shake, breaking the bedazzlement of the window's view.

"Can you see it?" asked Valset.

Marquard gazed up at his friend.

"What's that?"

"There. You see?"

Valset pointed out a tight grouping of headlamps in the darkness. The source was a small entourage of automobiles rapidly pulling to the front of the manor house on the gravel drive.

"Those flags there, you see them? There on the fender of that staff car..." Valset trailed off.

Marquard's attention was directed to an elegant staff car at the head of the entourage. The automobile led the assembly to a stop. On the front fenders were small metallic placards. Each of them displayed a German crest—a Bavarian eagle and shield. Not quite with Valset, Marquard shook his head.

"What of it? I don't understand."

The sighting was curious, though not extraordinary. An assortment of automobiles frequently visited the manor house. As excitedly as a child, Valset leaned in, his hand cupped to his mouth as if to impart some great secret.

"That crest there—that is the car of Germany's crown prince, Wilhelm."

Marquard was taken aback, unable to entirely process the unprecedented bit of edification.

"Impossible. You must be mistaken. What in God's name would—"

"It is!" Valset cut him off. "It's his entourage, I tell you."

"Ridiculous..."

Curious, the two men spied on a group of plainly garbed soldiers that left the parked vehicles and gathered outside the lead automobile. The outfit loitered, weapons were readied and positions taken up. Several officers of the general staff exited the main vehicle. A single man was escorted out of the staff car and swiftly guided into the house and out of sight.

"Who else could it be?" Valset challenged.

Heard from the hall, Lucia assisted one of the other patients, telling the man that everything would be all right. She promptly entered the lieutenant's room. Lucia caught the two men as they were, curiously staring from the diminutive window. The sound of heavy bombardment pervaded. Shocked to see them seated vulnerably near to the glass, she dashed across the room.

"Get down from there!" she warned. "Really, stay away from the windows."

Caught as they were, the men slinked away obediently. Lucia drew the curtains shut. As she did this, she also noticed the parked cars and hesitated a moment.

"For two soldiers, you should know better," she chided, shooing Valset off Marquard's bed. "Get back to your own room, Corporal, and stay put."

Valset gave a roll of the eyes and scurried out of the lieutenant's room. In the process, Lucia pushed Marquard back down onto the bed, when she noticed he was flush in the face. She checked his forehead.

"Lie back, please. You've a fever! We're too close now, Modest, to permit you to fall ill. You have to rest. Now lie down. We're not going to take any chances with your health..."

Marquard stretched back and let Lucia bring the sheet up. A need for calm silenced him. He tentatively watched her ply over him, seeing to his comfort. In the distance sounded the crackle of artillery.

"Please try to sleep. You're safe here," she said reassuringly. "Don't let this excite you."

Marquard rolled onto his side and leaned upon an elbow, doting on Lucia. She pivoted slowly, possibly to leave.

Sure of himself, he reached up and delicately grasped her arm.

"I'm sorry, this will pass," she said.

He drew her to him gently. She lightly and ineffectually tugged away from him. Lucia made to protest, but not before he could place a tender kiss upon her mouth. Speechless, she snapped back, hovering over Marquard. Her eyes were wide, pensive.

There was a pull at the door. Lucia had time to dart up just at the moment Doctor Gotts entered the lieutenant's room. To catch them together like he had was no surprise to the doctor. He was outright and simply interrupted them, addressing Lucia in an emotionless manner.

"You're needed downstairs. Come this way."



His tone was rigid, commanding. The doctor held the door for Lucia. The girl did as she was told and exited without a glance back. The pair departed from the French lieutenant's company.

Doctor Gotts led Lucia down the hall.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Lucia hesitated and started to gather some folded linens from a nearby cart. Forceful in the way he handled her, Gotts grasped Lucia by the arm and motioned toward the staircase. His grip was painful; she slackened, allowing him control.

"Don't bother with the linen, Lucia. Something important has come up."

"I don't understand."

Lucia allowed the doctor to lead her to the landing halfway down the crooked staircase.

"We have an important visitor," he explained, pausing on the landing.

"Who is it? I noticed there were cars parked in the drive."

"The Crown Prince."

Lucia was astonished by the announcement, though before she was able to respond, the doctor continued.

"He was brought in only a few moments ago." He guided her down to the first floor. "His confidants are speaking with Fiona. They will be briefed on our prisoners."

"Is the Crown Prince injured?"

"Only slightly," replied the doctor. "I've examined him briefly. He's complaining of severe back pain. I believe it's a pinched nerve at the base of his spine—a slight case of sciatica. He'll be fine, but he needs to be tended to." Gotts went on after a brief hesitation. "Now, I needn't remind you how important this is."

"No, of course not."

"You understand—"

"Of course, Doctor."

"Come, then. He's waiting."

In their exit of the staircase onto the main floor, Fiona emerged from a private chamber, leaving the door ajar.

Confined to the plush room, the German staff officers smoked pipes and made themselves comfortable. Fiona blocked the open doorway. She looked past Lucia, speaking directly to Doctor Gotts.

"Once you've made the arrangements with the prince, I'll need your assistance with the patients upstairs."

"What's to happen with them?" asked Gotts.

"They will stay in the infirmary for the time being. A guard will be posted. Under no circumstances are they to visit the grounds or enter the first floor."

The doctor nodded his head in the direction of the German officers. His lack of enthusiasm at their presence was obvious.

"How long will they be staying with us?"

"I haven't been told," Fiona replied. "Not long, I'm sure."

At this, a Bavarian officer stepped up to the open door and abruptly closed it. This put Fiona off. Nonplused, she cut an icy glance at the shut door and the consequent disappearance of the brusque soldier.

"When you're through..." she barked at Gotts from over her shoulder. She stepped backward into the hall, "Come down to the basement."

Doctor Gotts nodded as Fiona made off without further comment. Lucia stood by wordlessly. Gotts escorted her a few doors down.

"Remember whom you are dealing with," he re-emphasized. "It is our privilege to assist him in every way."

Lucia nodded as Gotts rapped on the door.

"Remember your place," he emphasized.

From within, a calm voice directed them to enter.

In the dimly lit room, comfortably seated beside the fireplace on a cushioned divan, was the Crown Prince, Wilhelm. He wore a German officer's uniform no different from the other officers in his entourage. The moment his two guests entered the room he took particular notice of Lucia, who held her eyes respectfully to the ground. His smug glance measured her, satisfied, caressing upwards and downwards, only to linger briefly on her womanly assets. Doctor Gotts made a brief introduction informing the prince that Lucia would be the nurse tending to him. The doctor discreetly turned to Lucia and pointed out a porcelain basin and a few tubs of water heating on the fire beside the divan.

Gotts told Lucia, "I'll return in a few moments." He then addressed the crown prince and quantified, "If I am no longer needed," Gotts bowed graciously, "you will excuse me, sir."

Lucia checked the water. The prince pardoned the doctor with a curt wave. Doctor Gotts quit the secluded room, careful not to make a noise in shutting the door behind him. Lucia's back remained to the prince as she prepared his bath. The prince's gaze followed her, scrutinizing her. When she pivoted, his glance fell away from her only to return when she turned back to ring a steaming wet rag out into the washbasin.

He shifted in his seat, his eyes following the contour of Lucia's bosom, the taper of her waist. Without speaking, he began to mechanically remove his frock. Lucia turned slightly toward him, acknowledging his presumption to undress with a small nod. The prince removed his suspenders and undid his buttoned shirt. Lucia came to him. He raised his arms as she took his shirt off and put it aside. Again, the prince peered lasciviously at Lucia's breasts. He shifted once more, and as Lucia folded the shirt, the prince adjusted himself with his hand and proceeded to unfasten his pants. The crown prince stared hard at her rear end as she bent over. He inhaled deeply.

Lucia turned to him. In a vain way he brought his heavy arms forward and leaned toward her. Lucia reached over him and commenced to wipe his back with the rag. As she did this, the prince placed his hands around her waist. She shifted away and made to turn back to the porcelain basin to ring out the wet rag.

"What's wrong?" the prince inquired.

He held her waist, preventing her from escaping his grip. He moved his hands up to press the sides of her chest.

"It's all right. I won't hurt you," he whispered.

Lucia twisted away, putting her back to him. He rose and brought his hands around her, cupping her breasts. Like this he spun her to face him. Each hand he switched accordingly from her right to left breast. The tips of his thumbs plied her nipples. The ridged face Lucia wore slackened. With a sharp crack she involuntarily slapped the prince's face with an open hand. The prince released Lucia, his mouth agape. He retook his seat, completely taken aback.

Doctor Gotts stepped into the room at this exact moment. Lucia returned to tend to the fire. The prince smirked, his hand on his reddened cheek. He looked

the doctor directly in the eyes and rubbed his chin. The doctor glared at Lucia, who glanced scathingly from the prince to the doctor. She was visibly upset. The doctor's eyes conveyed his helplessness. There was an uncomfortable silence, broken when the prince cleared his throat. Doctor Gotts shot his eyes to the ground in shame and backed out of the room. As he shut the door, the brooding figure of the crown prince rose up from the divan and turn menacingly toward Lucia.

## 89

The warring nightfall and endless dark gave way to a serene and litten morn. An evening plagued by sleeplessness and consternation was cast aside with the arisen sun. The wakeful din of heavy bombardment was driven to the back of the mind by the token of a smiling light. His having just been awakened, lieutenant Marquard sat at the edge of his bed and stretched. The vague impressions and worrisome thoughts that kept him from his much-needed rest were in effect extricated from his memory within the space of a recuperative yawn.

"What time is it?"

"It's early yet."

Lucia yanked open the curtain of the diminutive window set directly above the lieutenant's bed. The tiny room was enveloped in the early morning's glaring light. It was the keenest pleasure to have Lucia usher in the mornings thus. She averted her eyes from his.

"I'll need to remove your sheets," she mentioned off-handedly.

"I hardly slept a wink."

His laconic observance of the night's heavy shelling fell short with her.

"I've fallen behind in the duties which I am expected to perform this morning, lieutenant," she coolly responded, "we'll need to make this fast."

Marquard shook the slumber from his mind and gestured dependently to his crutch.

"Help me, will you?"

Lucia hastened the transferal and aided the lieutenant to stand. The smell of her was sweet, perfumed. It was irregular for her to wear a scent. Once Marquard was settled, Lucia went on with her routine. He remained silent as Lucia concluded her tasks. She shucked the pillowcase and was quick to bundle the dirty sheets together, not bothering to fold them neatly as she usually had, when Marquard noticed that she was trembling.

"What is the matter? You're trembling."

"Nothing."

"You're upset."

"Nothing's the matter. Please!"

Lucia checked her behavior, took a deep breath, and looked him straight in the face. Her eyes were red and swollen.

She was undone, distraught. It had occurred to her to confide in him. In that instance she would have if given the time to properly word her disconcert.

"Is it your brother?" Marquard asked, concerned as to her emotional state. "Lord, you're trembling so. Have you received news from the front?"

"No," Lucia responded, turning away. "It's nothing."

She grabbed clean linen from the pantry and quickly remade the bed. Marquard positioned himself off to the side.

He wished not to impose.

"If you're not comfortable talking about it, I understand."

"No, it's nothing like that!" she snapped sharply.

Marquard stood without further comment. She was closed to the possibility of a confessional. Her arrested emotional state made any mending, at the present moment, impossible. The lieutenant was sensitive to her change and was not about to press the issue. Lucia finished fitting the bed and started for the door.

"You won't be able to visit any other part of the house today," she mentioned over her shoulder.

"What's going on? What of our walk in the garden?"

"It's not allowed. I'm sorry. No one is permitted to leave the infirmary."

Neither spoke further. Lucia stared blankly at Marquard for an uncomfortable duration. The enrapture he felt at her slightest gaze shored up his courage. He was prepared to do anything for her and rose to confront her untoward behavior. She sensed his resolve, countered his effort by turning her back, and took flight through the door. This enfeebled him. It was a tremendous setback, for he recognized in her faraway eyes an unbroachable secret.

## 90

No matter the amount of artificial light to help brighten the infirmary's drawing room, the inclement weather was a damper on the injured spirit. Marquard had positioned himself on a stool near the window. He stared off in thought past the railed balcony that faced the small outcropping of trees. A torrential rain pelted the windowpanes. On the ledge was an unfolded newspaper, the illustrated French publication *Le Petit Journal*. The paper's engraved cover was richly colored and the tattered corners of each of the pages gave it the look of being well read. He gazed blankly at the rain streaking against the windowpanes and the blustery gusts of wetted wind. The young German nurse tapped his shoulder to gain his attention.

"The draft, monsieur," she began in broken French. "You shouldn't be so near to the window."

Marquard waved her away, shaking his head at the annoyance she was making of herself.

"I'll be fine, thank you."

He glanced around the drawing room, which was at the moment too small to handle the dozen or so patients who crowded the infirmary. Near to him, several men were playing cards, a game of whist, while others smoked pipes or read the newspapers. On the sofa a pair of invalids contended with one another over a journal. One of the men was Belgian, the other French. The nurse deserted the lieutenant to address the men's behavior.

"Now then," she was to upstart, "is that any way for two grown men to behave?!"

Valset entered the room from the hallway. He scanned the crowd of polyglot shut-ins and spotted Marquard.

"I have news," Valset said, waving.

"That nurse is a pest," Marquard inserted.

"She's shapely, though. Nice to look at."

"She's a pest."

"I have news."

"Out with it."

"You won't mind, I think."

"What is it?"

"Could I ever really make amends for deserting?" Valset muttered.

"You're digressing."

"Yes, yes. Though it's true."

"I absolve you. Now out with it."

Beating himself up had become an everyday exercise for the corporal. Today was no exception. Valset drew up a chair and made himself comfortable. He reached over Marquard, grabbing *Le Petit Journal*.

"Well?" Marquard asked once more.

"These things are weeks old!" Valset exclaimed, gesturing with the ratty newspaper.

Marquard twisted up his face and waited for Valset, confident he would get to the point when he was ready.

"When the more recent issues come in, maybe you will be permitted to send them to me," continued Valset.

"You're going somewhere?"

Valset glanced past Marquard and eyed the worsening weather.

"My arrangements have been made," he said to the air. "Any day now they'll transfer me to another hospital."

"You won't be placed in an internment camp?"

"Not yet, I hope." Valset leaned in and under his breath said, "I've got them convinced I'm sick." He knocked on his head and screwed up his mouth. "The doctors call it neurasthenia. They say I've battle fatigue." Sitting back, Valset went on, "At any rate, there's been some talk of relocating everyone."

Marquard looked past Valset to the German nurse, who had quelled the argument over the journal and was conversing with Lucia in the middle of the room. The two women spoke lightly into one another's ear. Lucia glanced at Marquard as the nurse whispered something to her. Valset noticed Marquard not paying attention and followed his stare. Lucia broke away from the German nurse and approached the two men. She directed her attention primarily to Marquard.

"You should know that for the next few days I won't be around very much," she informed him. "I've other duties to perform. The doctor will need me to make occasional trips into town. If you don't mind, the other nurses will need your cooperation. It is important that you listen to their orders. Can you try to understand this?"

Valset watched Marquard with interest, observing him closely as he responded to Lucia. The lieutenant was somewhat despondent; every other word she bespoke he acknowledged with a detached nod.

The days passed in quick succession. Left for the most part to his own devices, Marquard sat in stubbornness at his drafty window. The German nurse kept an eye on him from afar. There was a lapse in the rainy weather for a few precious moments. The sun broke through the thick of the stormy clouds to bathe the yard and the drive of the house in a golden light. At that moment,

Marquard spotted Valset in the yard. He was facing the manor house waving his arms, evidently attempting to attract the lieutenant's attention. Marquard caught eye contact with his friend and watched as he waved and smiled awkwardly. It was absurd, his sense of it. The front lawn was off-limits to the patients. How was it that Valset was there? Unsure, Marquard slowly raised his hand.

A drab green tarp-covered lorry, painted on the top and sides with red crosses, pulled around the gravel drive and came to a halt before Valset. A number of orderlies guided several infirmarium patients from the manor house to the back of the lorry. Marquard meekly waved to Valset from the window, saying goodbye for the last time to his dear compatriot. Climbing into the back, Valset sat himself at the opening to be taxied away. He waved one last time to Marquard as the truck stopped at the gate before turning out of the drive and away from the manor house.

## 91

Lieutenant Marquard settled on his stool in the drawing room of the infirmarium. He faced away from the window. The once crowded parlor had grown bare. Unkempt papers collected in heaps upon the worn sofa. An assortment of dilapidated chairs had migrated from the vacant bedchambers and were left at the neglectful whim of the remaining shut-ins. Marquard had effectively isolated himself from his fellow convalescents. Only a few of the more seriously injured patients remained. A flash of lightning drew the lieutenant's attention to the window. Thunder crackled. The storm had redoubled; an unrelenting rain carried on day in and day out. And it showed no sign of lessening. The storm was at the worst that it had been in weeks.

Doctor Gotts entered the untidy room and approached the misanthropic Frenchman. Of the remaining invalids none were more introverted than the lieutenant. Bleak remarks and a dour face were all that resulted from any attempted interaction with him. The way he alienated himself was unhealthy for everyone. Marquard's back was to the doctor.

Gotts spoke without having the courtesy to face his patient.

"The nurse has informed me, Lieutenant, that you refuse to give up your position here at the window."

Marquard scrutinized the doctor in the window's reflection. He did not turn to confront him.

"I see," Gotts assented. "Lucia is in Menin. There have been some new arrangements made for her. I'm certain that you understand... They are not permanent, these arrangements. She's to return to us within a fortnight. Now, if you please," the doctor scolded, "Lieutenant, our sole concern here is with your health. It would be gracious of you to show some consideration to your caregivers and do as you are told."

The news caused Marquard to be despondent. If he were not shut down completely at that juncture, then he soon would be. For the remainder of the time Lucia was away, he solemnly spent his days sulking. Whether it was at his position by the drawing room window on his secluded stool or laid up in the bed of his lodging, the lieutenant wasted himself in a thoroughly dejected state.

The entire day of Lucia's return he spent alone at his window in the drawing room. Evening had encroached and the parlor was dark. His privacy was disturbed by the German nurse; she made a silent entrance, drew a lamp that had no shade—the first thing she did in an attempt to straighten up the drawing room—and commenced to tidy up. The lamp's nude shine was harsh. Marquard blocked the glare with his hand. The nurse was unconcerned that it might nettle her only patient. It served as a distraction, for she overtly avoided eye contact with the French lieutenant. Marquard glanced at her, observing her blankly as she gathered up a few of the loose newspapers scattered about the room.

Though aware of Marquard, she intentionally stared through him and even went so far as to ignore the very presence of him. Before she exited, she made sure to switch off the lamp.

In the sprinkle of the evening's tapered rain, the sound of a car pulling up the gravel drive attracted Marquard's attention. He rose from his stool and curiously peered out the drawing room window. A haze coated the inner pane of glass. The lieutenant wiped it clear with his sleeve. Past the water droplets and the smeared glass he observed Lucia stepping from the passenger side of an expansive automobile. She slammed the weighty door closed behind her. Lucia was dressed fashionably. At her side she carried a small travel bag. The night was silent and impossibly black. There was no sound except for that of the car's tires driving over the gravel and passing away. Lucia did not look back as she hastily entered the country manor.

The storm had long since abated. The calm fall of a light rain sounded rhythmically against the window. Marquard lay conscious in bed; he was having difficulty sleeping soundly. In his discomfort, he rolled over now and again, his eyes shut tight. Above his head through the open window was an occasional flash accompanied by a faint crackle. He fell feebly into the dreadful quiet of a disconcerting dream.

Amidst blackness, the occasional flash of exploded artillery ordinance and the glare of Very lights drenched a vast, war-torn field with short bursts of light. In each illuminated instance a surface of writhing men was revealed. From behind the French line a spotlight ignited. Its beam cut a swath of light on a party of German infantrymen crawling through the French wire. A bell toll sounded, the alarm of which was muffled by the responsive rat-tat-tat of a French machine gun nest. A din commenced and the faint silhouettes of numerous grenades lobed toward the French line were distinguishable for an instant, launched against the night sky as they followed their arched trajectory through the air.

The resultant blast split the night with a shriek. Marquard sat sullen, his back pressed against the trench wall.

Chunks of dirt pelted his helmet. The soil around him quivered from the blow. Sergeant Bonnet scurried over, his head held low and back arched protectively.

"They lie," he roundly announced.

"About what, what is it now?" the French lieutenant countered.

"They lie. We're closer now than ever before."

"Closer to what?"

"Ask him..."

In saying this, Pierre pointed out a pitiful soldier seated across from them in the trench. A broken man huddled in a ball. The soldier covered his face trembling uncontrollably.

"Ask him!" Pierre repeated.

"I don't see the use."

"He knows they lie. He's helped them to do it!"

The cowardly soldier's teeth chattered. Marquard reached out and tugged at the man's sleeve.

"Now then, try to get a hold of yourself soldier."

The disheveled man cut the lieutenant a telling look. For such a blatant show of disrespect Sergeant Bonnet pulled the man up by his collar and goaded him up onto the fire-step.

"Sergeant," Marquard challenged, "what do you think you're doing?"

Through the filth on the man's face Marquard recognized him as the deserter Valset. The shock stopped the lieutenant dead. Pierre was not so perceptive.

"He's one of them! So let'em cry and carry on for the Boche!"

"Good God Pierre, it's Valset you have there!"

Valset shook off Pierre's grip and voluntarily started toward the German line.

"Serves him right, then!" was the sergeant's response.

"Valset!" Marquard beckoned.

Neither man was about to follow the deserter to what was certain death. The French lieutenant was nonplused. He and Sergeant Bonnet stared from behind the safety of the trench. Valset vanished into the dark of night.

It was a dark that seemed to have no end. Atop the parapet, an extinct shell case hung on a post. Explosive bursts rattled the emplacement. In the near distance the flare up of intense machine gun fire commenced. There was a haze like a dense fog, which rolled past the wire unhindered by its vicious barbs. Along the line, an anxious rustle whirred with the movement of men—the sound of a herd startled simultaneously into motion by an impending sense of danger. A steady and hollow clank chimed from the suspended shell case, which swayed listlessly above the French entrenchment. The haze rolled unchecked, a strangulating veil over all it touched. The great unknown of the terrible night ceded the inherent fear it aroused to the horridness of poison gas.

The hours stole away surrendering wars dark mysteries to the glowering clarity of day. Death had cut down every living thing. Yellow dust coated the tortured ground. An uncommon stillness arrested the clarity of the otherwise crisp, clear morning light. The discarded instruments of war, strewn over the churned field, were all stained alike in an anomalous greenish hue. A faint weeping—escaping from an indistinguishable point—was all at once emitted. It was as if the ravaged field itself was overcome with sorrow.

## 92

A soft whimper floated from upon the surface of nothingness. The crying carried through the open window above Marquard's bed and awakened him to the dark of his tiny room. He rolled over and listened, his eyes peeled. A short flash illuminated his room with a stark light, followed closely by a startling crackle. He sat up in his bed, his glance redirected to the open window, singularly drawn to the sound of faint weeping.



Marquard swung his leg out from his bed. He tossed his sheets off and lowered the window a few inches more. A woman's sobs were audible. He listened closely, imagining it to be Lucia who wept. Her distress prompted him to succor her. Marquard threw on some clothes, took his crutch, and slipped out his door and into the infirmary's hallway.

From throughout, a deady quiet pervaded. The cannonade momentarily lapsed. The lieutenant plodded through the dark hall and blindly felt his way down the staircase, finding himself on the main floor of the country manor. It was unrecognizable, the difference astounding. The dwelling had been transformed through utter neglect. In the dim light the ground floor's corridor, which led to the main living area, was in noticeable disarray. The hallway carpet had completely deteriorated, trampled underfoot and worn into the floorboards. The walls, once proudly decked with artwork, were now strangely bare. The odd rectangular areas where various-sized paintings once hung, dark and fresh as the day of their hanging, were in strong contrast to the remainder of timeworn wallpaper.

Marquard crept forward. A derelict scattering of furniture had been left in the middle of the corridor. From within a closed door escaped an unnerving grunt. He skirted the door and continued along the creaky floorboards, wherein the crying grew faint, as it was lost to the substantial strains of popular music. Alerted to the likelihood of his discovery, he hastily encroached upon the room wherefrom the music emitted. A sudden burst of laughter and the slam of a door arrested the lieutenant. He froze in place unsure of what findings were in store for him.

A half-nude woman staggered out into the half-light of the hall. She was slipshod, snorted and stumbled drunkenly straight into Marquard's arms. She was the young German nurse from the infirmary. A smell of sweet liquor reeked on her person. Her ample breasts were red and marred. Marquard had nowhere to go and stood incapacitated. In recognition of the French lieutenant, she smiled broadly, her lipstick smeared across her mouth. There was madness in her eyes. Obliviously, she hung on him a second, her breasts pressed against his chest. She was abhorrent. The nurse, recognizing his disdain, grasped at his crotch and fondled him. The lieutenant was limp. She blurted an incoherent invective affronting Marquard's manliness, snickered, and staggered away. The shambled woman crossed the hall and streamed through the nearby door and into the well-lit room from where the music issued.

Lieutenant Marquard remained motionless, his back pressed against the dilapidated wall. Through the unbarred doorway music and laughter escaped into the corridor. In the room several slovenly dressed German soldiers, drunken and tittering, busied themselves at a game of whist. A half-dressed German officer scooped up the inebriated nurse and wheeled her through the air. On a bed in a corner of the room another woman lay, nude and unconscious, her legs splayed open. The French lieutenant moved on, going unnoticed.

In his entrance to the manor's principal living area the lieutenant was able once more to pick up the faint sound of crying. The parlor was practically emptied of furniture. A long oak table, the only piece of furnishing besides a few broken chairs, was piled with strategic maps and officious looking papers. Nothing remained of the room's former quaintness. At the basement door, prior to turning down another hallway that led to the last few rooms in the house, he was startled by Fiona Faulkner.

She opened the basement door, her back to it and to the lieutenant. In her hands the German woman carried an electronic device, a tin box with vacuum tubes and tiny dials. She walked out slowly, stepped backwards, and entered the main living area. She paid little attention, outside of the caution she took to keep the device steady, and had not spotted the Frenchman, who had backed off into an unlit corner. Though Marquard was not well hidden, he remained unseen.

Where he stood at the corner he had a clear vantage point. He could see straight down the rickety steps that led into the brightly lit basement. From his angle he readably observed an extraordinary array of radio equipment. A heavy static came over the air, broken only momentarily by short bursts of an inaudible mumbling. When Fiona passed, Marquard motioned to leave. There was a sudden clear communiqué, a stream of unmolested military orders spoken in French that traveled over the airwaves. It was inconceivable to the lieutenant that French communications were so easily intercepted. The transmission lasted only momentarily.

Marquard did not dare to move; Fiona placed the device down and rushed past, noisily plodding down to the basement. And there it came—Marquard could clearly hear the voices of French soldiers. He took the opportunity to slip past and out of sight. It amazed him what lengths the enemy would go to achieve an advantage.

Down the hall a ways he halted. One door in particular garnered his attention. Through it he heard the mournful stammer of a woman's weeping. Softly, Marquard knocked. There was silence. Again, he knocked. From within, Lucia meekly responded.

"Who—Who is it?"

Her voice came as a sensation. He reeled at the prospective reunion and pressed against the door to speak through the crack.

"It is I, Modest."

The door Lucia let open. Marquard found himself standing face to face with her. Her eyes were swollen and her jaw trembled involuntarily. Unsuccessfully, she fought back tears. Marquard pressed against the door, which gave way to him. Unmended, her heart lessened in grief when the lieutenant walked into her room. At seeing Lucia so upset, Marquard's eyes in turn welled with compassionate tears. He stammered and found only the strength to embrace her.

"Modest. Oh, Modest!"

Together they fell deeper into the tiny room, the door shutting softly behind them, and sat down on the corner of her bed.

"But, how?" asked Lucia. "Why have you come?"

"Shh... Shh... What has happened? I can't bear to see you like this!"

Lucia attempted to stand. Marquard grasped at her and kept her rooted by his side.

"You must leave this place, Modest!"

"But why?"

She looked longingly at him and uttered, "Oh, dear Modest... I've been such a fool."

She turned away.

"How can I leave?" he asked. "I couldn't stand being without you."

She spun back sharply around, her tears dry. She glared at him firmly.

"You mustn't talk like that. It's important, Modest, so very important that you understand."

"But... I—"

"Please... listen," she pleaded. "Listen carefully. You're being used."

"What? I don't understand."

"You're being exploited, Modest. They wish to coerce you... to... to—"

Lucia became choked with emotion. The presentiment of her flawed nature incited self-loathing. She would not allow herself to falter. Resolve to confess everything to him in that instant renewed her courage.

"To convince you..." she stammered. With a stiff upper lip she confessed, "I've helped them to do it." Lucia turned from his gaze giving way to her shame and her tears. "I've helped them to do it... Please, you must leave!"

Marquard pulled her to him and responded, "Leave with me."

Lucia wilted, her head turned away refusing him.

"Leave with me, Lucy," Marquard begged.

He took her face in his hands and gently forced her to look at him. His eyes were hard, resistant. She was shaken.

The shared gaze imparted much love and commiseration. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"N—No, I can't."

He kissed her passionately. When they broke their embrace Lucia appeared to have changed. No words were exchanged between the lovers. Only the longing to be with one another was conveyed. Reinvigorated, Lucia grasped Marquard by the hand and rose up from the bed. Without protest, he allowed her to lead him to the window, which she tempestuously opened.

"Come with me," she whispered.

Together they climbed from Lucia's window into the balmy summer night. They pushed their way out through some shrubs. The flashes of heavy bombardment illuminated the horizon. Lucia assisted Marquard to walk.

"How can we possibly make it?" he muttered in hopelessness. "Here..." he fumbled with his crutch, "this is ridiculous."

"Please," said Lucia. "You must try."

Forceful with the crutch, he managed himself toward the front yard of the manor house. Outside of the drone of artillery in the far distance a stillness in the air lent a queer quietude to their escape. Marquard came warily around the corner, sighted a slight movement and dropped down low.

He faced Lucia and whispered. "Don't move."

"What is it?" she responded, also in a whisper.

"Look there!"

On the drive at the front of the manor, lingering beside a staff car, were several German sentries. They stood together, fraternizing, sharing in a packet of cigarettes and leaning lackadaisically against the automobile.

"We won't be able to escape," Marquard murmured.

"Not this way," she agreed. "Through the garden, then."

There was firmness in her tone. Marquard was hardened and stared emptily at Lucia; overwhelmed and discouraged, he was unable to act. She pivoted from him and by example led them along the side of the manor house under the cover of low-lying bushes. The backyard appeared clear. Lucia exited onto the covered porch, beyond which was the manor garden. Marquard closely followed. Unbeknownst to either of them, Doctor Gotts stood silently in the doorway that

led onto the porch, sheathed in darkness. None of the porch's lights were lit, and no light emanated from the windows of the house.

Without stirring from his position he clearly stated, speaking matter-of-factly out into the thin night air, "It's time you should leave."

The doctor's voice cut sharp into the quietude. Lucia and Marquard stopped dead in their tracks. The ambient drone of the bombardment spanned the intervening speechlessness. With a snap, Gotts sparked a self-igniting match and lit a cigarette. He was underdressed—his shirtsleeves rolled, his top button undone, and shirt collar removed. It was not typical of the upright young doctor. He apparently had had an excessive amount to drink. His breath was strong with the smell of alcohol. Lucia spun to face the doctor and slowly withdrew. Marquard moved a few tense steps toward the doctor. Lucia pensively clasped Marquard's arm and kept him back.

"Modest, don't," she whispered.

The doctor turned his back to the two lovers and calmly strode through the open patio door, reentering the manor house. For a brief moment he tarried at the threshold. Lucia recognized his intentions and tugged at Marquard's arm.

"Come on, Modest. Let's go."

The doctor vanished into the house through the open doorway. Marquard backed away with Lucia and escaped with her into the manor house's garden. The stark flashes over the horizon lit their path. Ahead of them, past the line of poplars and beyond a short picket fence lay the countryside lost in the darkness. Lucia had made her mind up. She refused to continue.

She halted at a break in the picket fence where she assisted Marquard in slipping past. Marquard took a few strides forward in his escape before checking behind him. He realized Lucia was no longer with him. He spun about, a few paces from where she stood at the fence. Lucia motioned to retreat from him. Desperate, he understood her intentions.

"No, please!" he pleaded.

"There is no future there for me, Modest," she said as she glanced past him to the open countryside.

"We are each other's future," he beckoned.

Lucia stepped from the fence; she stood on the lawn, her posture a threat to him that she might make a dash for the manor house. Subtly, Marquard edged toward her.

"Listen to me, please," he implored. "Whatever happens, if we are together—"

Tears welled in Lucia's eyes. Her glance fell down to her stomach, wavered, darted back up at Marquard, and settled lastly toward France.

"There's nothing there for us."

"We could be together," Marquard entreated her.

"We cannot be."

Marquard leaned against the fence.

"Lucy, please... not like this."

Lackluster and emotionally drained, Lucia took a few steps backwards. She was resolved, her deliberations ceased.

With difficulty she muttered, "Dear Modest, forgive me, please."

Lucia turned and simply ran from him toward the country manor. There was nothing left of her in the darkness but the resonance of her words. Marquard was overwhelmed, his eyes quickly filled with tears. Her gentle denunciation temporarily immobilized him. He hesitated before forcibly pulling himself away from the fence and retreating, vanishing into the darkness of the balmy night.

The outer edge of awareness, a nugatory sphere was defined here-to-for by the emergence and consequent expansion of a solitary point of light. A discernable speck alit from the null. There was nothing in existence beyond its lighted appearance, the origin of what later developed into a streak of horizontal light, a thin crisp consistent solitary line. For the duration, this particularity served to define an expanse both devisable and extant—an anomalous event to which relevancy itself was the subsequent result.

A remote band of white bound by two black halves, the very existence of which, with its beauty, challenged the bleakness of its surroundings. A staged launch into darkness, a burst of intense light emitted and charged the void with its brilliance. From dark to light the emptiness ceased, replaced in an instant with a perfect clarity, and with it, wakefulness.

Modest Marquard awoke to an irregular sensation and discovered himself in the embrace of a sound at once distinct and familiar to him. It was a din specific to the underground world of the Paris metro. The whole of his person quivered with its intensity. Awareness of himself and his placement became at once apparent to him. The prefect was positioned such that his back lay flattened against the rough, hewn wall of a metro tunnel. The lit carriages of an underground train strobed closely by. He clung with a fierce grip to an unsteady railing near at hand; the train passed within an arm's length and generated a rush of concentrated wind and a deafening noise. The painful screech of the metallic casters grinding over the iron rails and the physical stress of the nearness of the metro train taxed him beyond all endurance.

The circumstances of his predicament he was unable to recollect. The immediacy of the danger Marquard was in refused him the chance to rest on any other thought. A terrible ache stabbed at his inner ear and the wind that buffeted him brought about a vomitous sensation. The perilousness of the situation doubled when his vision blurred with blisters of light and the appearance of stars. The strain his proximity to the train caused him was unbearable, the din excruciating, and he was further endangered when he lost consciousness once more.

The high-pitched reverberation of the subway train merged with the augmented light of the carriage windows. The momentary lapse of intermittent blackness flicked, furthering the prefect's disorientation. And though temporal as his unconsciousness was, the ordeal of his captivity fast-forwarded through his mind. "Forgive me, please," in finality, the echo of Lucia's last words bespoke, "Forgive me, please."

Marquard snapped his eyes open. He reestablished a firm grip on the railing, keeping himself alive. The passing train of cars seemed to be endless. The noise and pressure of the carriages so close in proximity was too much to endure. Finally, the sound of the subway train diminished, a faded reel in the near distance. Marquard rose from the ground having recovered from blacking out onto the tracks. He groaned, nursing his head, and stumbled across the tracks

to an opening fixed fortuitously off to the side of the tunnel. A set of stairs led up and out into the glaring light of a sweltering summer day in the middle of the Invalid's Garden in the city of Paris.

Marquard staggered forward. The bright light prompted him to wince in discomfort. He blocked the sun with his hand and wandered, disoriented. A red kiosk plastered with posters and various notices invited Marquard to lean against it. He supported himself against this public edifice. One poster in particular drew his attention. Marquard stared hard at the colorful advertisement for a play. It depicted a handsome soldier happy to be home from the front; a group of tatter-bare street urchins assembled around him. A gendarme approached Marquard. The policeman, dressed in his traditional red pantaloons and blue tunic, addressed Marquard unsure of his condition.

"Monsieur, le prefect? Inspector Marquard?!"

The man glanced over his shoulder and motioned to a figure quickly closing the short gap between them.

"He is here. I found the inspector," he shouted, waving the man over. "Here, this way!"

The gendarme enlisted the help of Pierre Bonnet, who was out of breath and quite anxious to assist his old friend.

Both he and Marquard were on in years, as much time had elapsed since their soldiering days. Dressed similarly to Marquard, he wore a dark plainly suit, indistinguishable from any other man on the street with the exception of a small card folded into their upper breast pocket, which identified them as French police inspectors.

"What has happened, Modest?"

"He has them..." Marquard weakly trailed off. He never really looked Pierre quite straight in the eyes. It was difficult for him to string his thoughts together. The blood had drained from his face. A terrible pain gripped his abdomen. He reeled.

"Modest, are you all right?"

Pierre supported Marquard by the arm. The prefect's limb was limp. Marquard leaned his back against the kiosk, his weight heavily laid upon it.

"He has gotten the files," Marquard said thinly.

Pierre noticed Marquard was wounded in the side; a reflexive gesture on Marquard's part to protect the area had clued Pierre in. He opened Marquard's jacket and discovered that the white dress shirt he wore was drenched with blood.

"Good Lord! You've been shot!" he exclaimed.

Marquard's legs gave out on him. He fell against the kiosk and passed out cold.

## 94

Prior events had elapsed, resulting in the untimely end of a love reunited after years of separation, an interval full of much sorrow and regret. It marked a loss of youth that was never to be reclaimed. Though even after so many years, a strong attachment, augmented by the lingering sensation of confusion and misunderstanding, remained.

The life of the French Ministry's longtime events coordinator, Henry Vassal, had come to its final juncture. He lay prone, his back propped against the wall of his office suite, and pondered what significance there was to his loss—he had been a good man in the world, a fine father to his children, and though he had erred, a dedicated husband to his loving wife. It was inexplicable that he should die. His mind was not at all inclined to accept it. A chill crept into his limbs and his heart fluttered in the hollow of his chest. His mid-section was a gaping wound. The vivi-red of his blood drenched his person. His legs had given out, and in silence he crumpled to the floor. Beside him the corpse of Cuvée, shot dead, was folded into a clenched ball beside the plaster wall. The pistol he had slain Cuvée with fell benign at Vassal's side.

Over them both, Georges towered; he paced back and forth, his bloodied knife still gripped tightly in his oversized hand. He kicked the pistol away from Vassal.

"Damn it! Goddamn it," spat Georges.

The wall was smeared with Vassal's blood. Where Georges had flicked the light switch, red was in evidence. The events coordinator barely held on to life.

"Where are the files you, goddamned son of a bitch!" Georges threatened with the knife. "I'll cut you up. You... you hear me, you shit?"

Georges spit violently. Vassal rolled over onto his side, dying. The composure he kept in the throws of death was particular to the dignity he intended on setting for himself in passage from this life to the next. Georges swiped the befouled blade through the air, frustrated at what a debacle he found himself in, furthered by the events coordinator's untimely demise. Blind with anger he stormed from his quarry in retreat to the auxiliary room. He beamed straight for the mantle over the fireplace, placed the knife upon the ledge, and obtained a firm grip of the crooked mirror's frame. In a rage he tore it down and threw it against the wall.

There was nowhere to turn for answers. The noise of the pistol shot would undoubtedly attract attention. Georges fumed, it annoyed him so. Swiftly exhausting all options, it was violence to which he reverted. Red in the face, he marched into the suite's corridor and leaned over a dying Vassal, who was bloodletting onto the corridor's floorboards.

"Where is it, you useless shit?" he barked.

Vassal's eyes began to roll back, his face pale. A blackness overcame him.

"No... no you don't." Georges brutally kicked into the coordinator, keeping him conscious. "Where is it? Where did you hide it?"

Vassal faded.

"Come on, talk."

Georges reached down and shook him by the shirt collar. Vassal was gone. Georges threw him down and marched, without his knife, back to the larger of the two offices.

The knife lay on the stripped mantle piece over the fireplace. Georges growled and in a rage hurled furniture around the room. Emery Haskins had materialized at the door to the suite. He tried the handle, entered, and stepped nonchalantly into the corridor. Georges produced a racket in the coordinator's office. Emery centered his attention on the dying man, checking the coordinator for a pulse. Vassal groaned, his eyes fluttering. Cuvée remained where he had been stricken dead. The pistol lay harmlessly to the side. It was no mystery as to what had transpired. Emery had seen enough to deduce that there had been

a debacle. He shook his head in silent mockery and glanced through the open door of the auxiliary room.

From the coordinator's suite Georges was heard to be in the throws of a fit. He snapped a chair across the floorboards, took up the telephone, yanked it from the wall, and hurled it clear across the room. Sweat saturated the collar of his shirt. He seethed, was slow to calm, and spun angrily to leave when he found himself face to face with Emery Haskins. Having thought himself alone, he let out a short snort and flinched back. He straightened himself checking his conduct, betraying his great surprise.

"What are you doing here?" he grumbled.

Haskins stood silent, his hands gathered behind his back. His pallor was of a deadened aspect. The severity of the situation kept Georges in check. He noticed Haskins glance down at his empty hands. The thought reoccurred to him that the ministry's night watchman might have heard the scuffle and subsequent ruckus. Georges motioned with a subdued gesture toward the overturned office.

"We can't find the damn dos-dossiers. The files are nowhere!"

Haskins stood silent.

"He's hidden them," continued Georges. "He shot Cuvée. I hadn't any choice!"

There was no response at all.

"The guard must have heard the shot. We should leave."

He motioned to step past Haskins. In a blur Georges was felled by a decisive thrust through his neck by the broad blade of his own discarded knife. Haskins wielded the weapon with deadly accuracy, severing the artery. In shock, Georges opened his mouth to scream but was oddly silent. A fine mist of blood sprayed outward. The knife protruded from his throat having cleaved his larynx. In no time he crumpled to his knees and collapsed forward onto his face, toppled dead onto the floor.

Haskins approached Vassal, who miraculously remained half-alive. The coordinator groaned, rolling his eyes in recognition of Emery, and pointed to the bathroom.

"There..." He coughed blood and muttered with his last breath, "Secrets."

Haskins stepped over Vassal's corpse, the faint wail of sirens distinguishable in the distance. The bathroom appeared undisturbed. On second glance, the hamper might have been misplaced. He motioned to enter, when a siren sounded loudly on the street below. Emery Haskins regretted leaving empty handed, though he was not about to chance being caught, and retreated from the suite.

## 95

The Department of the Interior had made the decision to bring the incident to the Prefect's attention. What implications might there be deemed from such a sensational murder could cause embarrassment for the ministry and warranted the precaution. The crime itself fell within the jurisdiction of the Paris police department and the Prefect himself was summoned to observe the investigation.

At daybreak, Marquard and Pierre met at the ministry building in the suite of the events coordinator. They peered down at Vassal's body. Each corpse was



covered with a thick tarp once the police had completed a photographic record and prepared a brief summary. No change to the scene was permitted. The blood had dried, lacquering the floorboards.

And furthering discomfiture, there was the intense reek of the victims' defecation. A gendarme guarded the open door in the hall.

"This one is the coordinator," Pierre informed Marquard. He flipped through a few papers on a clipboard before continuing. "Around three o'clock a cleaning lady across the way made a phone call reporting that she saw a gun flash."

"The guard on duty heard nothing?"

"There was a slight disturbance reported-they were changing the guard at the time. Throughout the evening repair work was being done here in the office. What noise there may have been apparently was not enough to arouse suspicion. The night watchman was the first on the scene."

Marquard pointed out Cuvée's body and asked, "And this man, this man here?"

"We don't know. He is unfamiliar to the staff."

The two inspectors marched over to the events coordinator's office where Georges' s corpse lay in a pool of coagulated blood.

"No one's claimed this body either," commented Pierre.

The facts were incomplete; the scene refused to relinquish its secret. Marquard shook his head, doubtful and nonplused, and stepped back out through the office door. Pierre followed.

"What do you suppose they were looking for?" the sleuth in the Prefect queried.

They stared down at the bodies of Vassal and Cuvée.

"The coordinator is privy to information regarding several affluent families here in France. He is in many ways Germany's chief liaison to the French government." Pierre postulated, "He would naturally have kept a dossier on anyone connected to the ministry."

"Upstairs?"

"Yes, there is a file room above us. Though the search mostly went on here in the coordinator's office."

Marquard exhaled deeply, reflected for a moment, and glanced down the hall toward the stairs that lead to the file room. Nothing was reported to have been disturbed in the upper floor. By all accounts the room was not a focal point.

"The office is where our focus should be."

"We have a list of individuals with whom the coordinator had recent correspondence," Pierre remarked and searched through the papers on the clipboard.

Marquard shook his head doubtfully.

"Up until a few weeks ago, he had a secretary." Pierre flipped through the pages, folded a few pages back, and held the clipboard out, reading, "December, January, February, let's see, nope, actually, it's been a couple of months now."

One Lucia Bruegel. I have her address here. She could possibly help to narrow our search."

Marquard straightened. It was evident that something barbed him on the point of the coordinator's secretary. The Prefect immediately recognized the name from his past.

"What's the matter?" asked Pierre. "You know this woman?"

"No, I recognize the name is all, from the war. A coincidence, I'm sure."

He patted his old friend Pierre on the back. The two men turned to leave the events coordinator's suite.

"No doubt—"

The gendarme interrupted, his head protruded through the open door and into the corridor.

"Pardon me, Monsieur le Prefect..."

Marquard stepped to the door and took notice of a plumber waiting in the hall. The gendarme straightened and introduced the man.

"This man has come to work in the office. His name checks with the front desk. Apparently he was not notified."

Haskins waited behind the dutiful gendarme. He remained in the hall facing the suite.

"I'm a plumber, actually," Haskins interjected. "I've come to finish some work for Henri Vassal. I'm sorry, is something the matter? Is this not a good time?"

Marquard moved past the guard and took Haskins aside.

"What's your name, monsieur?"

Haskins hesitated before he responded, "Haskins, Emery Haskins. Is something the matter?"

To ease the shock of the coordinator's death, Marquard consoled, "Monsieur Haskins, I am inspector Modest Marquard. I'm afraid there has been a terrible accident."

"What's happened?"

"I'm very sorry. The events coordinator, Henri Vassal, was killed here in his suite earlier this morning."

Haskins feigned being taken aback in disbelief.

"How can that be?!"

"Were you a friend of Monsieur Vassal?" Marquard inquired.

"Not so much a friend. You say he was murdered?"

"It would appear so."

"That is so very unfortunate."

"Unfortunate indeed."

"Last night, he saw me out. After midnight I think it was. I may have been the last person to see him alive."

"If that's so then expect to be contacted for questioning."

"Anything that might help. It's incredible, to think, the coordinator killed! Who would want to do such a thing?"

"Yes, well, we intend to find out. If you have work to finish, I'm afraid it is going to have to wait."

"Of course. When do you think the first opportunity for me to return will be? The pipes, you understand, haven't been set properly. I only ask because they could rupture, flooding the suite."

"As of yet we haven't given any word," replied Marquard. "We haven't released a statement to the public. I'm sure you understand."

"Completely. When did you think..."

"By noon, I imagine, you might try to return."

Setup advantageously for business in a well-trafficked neighborhood, L' Hôtel du Cheval Noir occupied what once was the illustrious estate of one of King Louis' favorite ministers, a stone's throw from the Seine River on Paris' right bank.

The towers of the cathedral Notre Dame and the rooftops of the ancient Ile de la Cite' opened up across the Pont d'Arcole, that practically emptied onto the hotel's very doorstep.

The small, neat lobby of the hotel was empty most afternoons. No doorman was installed, and only the occasional guest, late to check out, might pass through. At the front counter the hotel's proprietor rifled through the desk, his back turned to the rest of the chamber. Papers were scattered in haphazard piles all across the counter. Marquard interrupted him from his apparent reorganization of the hotel's records.

"Excuse me, monsieur."

The man faced the prefect and at first hardly paid him any attention. His large brown eyes furtively scanned a paper he held before his person. Beak-nosed and preoccupied, there was something miserly about him. Marquard had his credentials clearly displayed.

"Checking out?" the proprietor spoke mechanically not bothering to look up.

His altogether discourteous behavior did not bode over well with the prefect.

"No," Marquard flatly responded. "We are here on state business. You wouldn't happen to be the owner of this establishment, would you, monsieur?" Marquard's officious tone swayed the man.

"Yes, I am." He looked the prefect straight in the eyes, "Elijah Ames. How may I help you?"

"I am Inspector Modest Marquard." He shifted his attention to Pierre, "And this is Inspector Pierre Bonnet."

Pierre smiled and nodded.

Concernedly Ames inquired of Marquard, "How may I help you, inspectors?"

"We have come to pay a visit on one of your tenants, a Mademoiselle Bruegel. Lucia Bruegel. Possibly she is in and would be so kind as to speak with us?"

This bit of information startled Ames; he found it impossible to conceal his apprehension. Marquard mistakenly read the proprietor's reflexive reaction and made an attempt to quell any obvious concerns.

"Now then, Monsieur Ames is it? That's not to suggest she's done anything wrong," Marquard explained. "An accident has befallen a former employer of hers. You understand, we have come merely as a matter of course."

"Yes, I see. I'll call her down."

Marquard stopped Ames as he reached for the desk phone.

"Please. She is in, you say?"

"Yes. She just came in only a few moments ago."

"Allow me to go up, then," suggested Marquard, "if you don't mind."

"All right," Ames allowed. "Room twelve. First floor."

He pointed up.

Marquard turned to Pierre and directed, "Stay down here in the lobby while I go up to the room."

Pierre nodded in concurrence. The prefect commenced with his investigation. Pierre faced the entrance. In the reflection of the glass in the doorframe he distinctly observed Ames study Marquard while the prefect took the stairs.

The proprietor's probing look suggested no more than a petty concern about his lodgers and the inconvenience of having the police brought into his reputable establishment.

The tiny room numbered twelve was furnished for weekly rent. A kitchenette and private bath differentiated the weeklies from the remainder of hotel's dailies. Lucia paced nervously back and forth. She bit her lip against mounting nervousness. The morning paper was laid out on her unmade bed. The paper's headlines read:

#### MINISTRY COORDINATOR FOUND DEAD IN TRIPLE HOMICIDE.

Try as the authorities had to keep the murder from the press, nothing could stay the newspapers from reporting everything, from names of unlikely suspects to undignified accounts by purported eyewitnesses. It was a veritable free-for-all. A special early edition had somehow been produced, quite to the chagrin of the ministry and in the face of the prefect's wishes. Those newspapermen involved in the story's reporting had acted with great speed and felicity. The gentlemen of the press were no doubt enormously pleased with not only the miraculous turnover but also to what depths their profession had been lowered. The whole sordid story, as preposterous and unreliable as it was, only panicked Lucia, and shaking involuntarily, she picked up her room phone and dialed the hotel lobby.

The lobby phone rang, more whirred, and it was Ames who answered.

"Concierge," he announced as he glanced up at Pierre, who remained with his back to the lobby, his shoulder leaned against the glass, staring out into the street.

Lucia spoke into the receiver, "So what's going on? I've been cooped up here all morning. I'm at my wit's end."

Her voice carried.

Pierre glanced over at Ames, who answered Lucia coyly, "All right."

Ames remained behind the counter, his eyes to the floor. The squabbling of a woman's voice was audible from across the room. Pierre kneaded his brow. He turned his attention to the shifty proprietor. Ames felt his stare and looked up smiling uncomfortably.

"All right," he repeated.

"Stop saying that! What do you mean, all right?" she grilled him in a loud, clear voice.

There was dead silence.

"Hello?" Ames attempted.

He heard a knock and a masculine voice, followed by the sound of the receiver as it hit the floor.

"Hello?" Ames petitioned repeatedly and clicked the phone dial several times. "Hello?"

The phone disconnected.

Room twelve's phone receiver lay on its side upon the floor. At the open door Lucia held Marquard in an emotional embrace. After so many years apart, such

a stream of memories overcame them that neither was able to speak. Teary-eyed, she stared up at him. She was so very beautiful to look at. Her bright eyes absorbed him. Engrossed in that which comprised her first great love, she wept.

"Lucia!" he chimed.

Though choked, she managed to blurt out softly, "Modest! I—I had no idea that you were in Paris."

Marquard himself verged on tears and fought to regain his composure. She was so very beautiful to look at.

"Lucia! If I had known," he exclaimed with an open and animated sigh of relief.

"When—" she started.

"How long have you been?" he spoke over her. "I'm sorry."

"No, that's all right."

"No, please. You were saying."

"W-When..." she stammered sweetly. "Oh, I can't even think clearly."

"How long have you been in Paris?"

"Only just this past winter now."

Lucia took a step back in order to gather a good look at the successful, smartly dressed gentleman Marquard had become. His identification was displayed prominently from where it was tucked into the outer breast pocket of his jacket. Lucia eyed it as she guided him into her room.

"And a French police inspector to boot!" she commented over her shoulder.

"Yes. Listen, Lucy, I'm afraid I've come here on business, actually."

Lucia snapped animatedly at a thought, "Now it makes sense." She leaned over the bed and gathered the laid out newspaper together. "I read your name in the papers weeks ago. Yes, I had dismissed it off course. I hadn't any idea whether you had even survived the war." Lucia discarded the paper as she spoke, "I read your name, I remember now.

You are the Paris prefect are you not?"

"Yes. I am an elected official."

"How wonderful for you, Modest!"

"And you? You've been well?"

"Why, yes. How long has it been?"

"A lifetime."

"It has, at that."

"You look beautiful."

"Dear Modest, why have you come? I'm so happy you're here. But why?"

"I'm afraid I've come on business, my dear."

"Let us not allow anything to get in the way of our catching up with one another, though. Shall we?"

"If you could be so kind as to answer a few questions," he gestured, suggesting the bed as a suitable place for them to sit. "When we've finished I would like it very much to catch up. I've so much I wish to tell you."

"Allow me."

Lucia sat on the edge of the bed. The thin mattress bowed under her slight weight. She quieted, listening as she removed a glass ashtray from the bed stand. In it was a packet of cigarettes and a small silver lighter.

"Your name was given to us at the Quai d'Orsay," he went on to explain.

"The Ministry... I see."

She tapped one of the cigarettes before lighting it, the ashtray nuzzled in her lap.

"A coincidence, I too imagined," he said with a laugh. "Your name, of course, I recognized, though I never thought..."

Lucia smiled thinly and placed the cigarette in her mouth; set shallow, where it was clasped in her tautly held lips, the cigarette seemed an inane pleasure.

"Your former employer, Henri Vassal..."

Lucia brought the silver lighter up and struck it. There was no light.

"The Ministry's events coordinator..." Marquard continued.

Before she reattempted to ignite the silver lighter, Lucia nodded, acknowledging that she had once worked with Vassal. Again the lighter failed.

"Lucy, I'm afraid he's been killed."

Frustrated with the inoperable lighter, she shook it vigorously and flicked it several times in quick succession without result. The bite of the flint was enough to cause a spark. There was a strong waft of fluid when the lighter was agitated which suggested that it was functional. Marquard moved silently around to her side. He settled softly beside her on the bed. Lucia gave up on the lighter, jerking the cigarette out of her mouth. Frustrated, her eyes welled. She broke down into tears, collapsing and burrowing her face into Marquard's shoulder. Muffled at his side, she wept.

Through tears she explained, "It was this past winter when I first went to work for Henri Vassal. I should tell you, it was all arranged, our meeting one another. He was unaware, of course. Even up until the end. I don't believe he ever completely understood."

## 98

A thick, powdery snow blanketed the frozen turf in whiteness as a blinding squall trounced the Jardin de Luxembourg.

Vassal quickened his pace, halving his saunter through the winter-bare gardens. He tugged at his scarf, his head kept low against the flurried breeze. The accumulation seemed to lift around his ankles, all the time steadily rising. From across the quad the palace flickered visibly in and out of sight, its gold dome an indistinguishable blur in the white sky.

All of Paris was obscured behind the canopy of falling snow. He rushed for the corner of two intersecting boulevards; the shelter of the overhangs on an unbroken row of buildings was a respite against the unrelenting weather.

Vassal stomped his shoes out in the hall of the events coordinator's suite. At his entrance he removed his scarf and hat and hung his jacket in a nearby closet. The small closet was otherwise completely empty. The coordinator shook off the cold, and from over his shoulder addressed Lucia, who stood stiffly behind him, silent and attentive. His voice was plaintive.

"I wasn't expecting you so soon." He turned to her, red-faced and smiling. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

"A pleasure, I'm sure," she responded.

He reached out to kindly shake with her. She took his hand, started abruptly, and softly cupped her other overtop his to warm him.

"You're so cold!" she exclaimed with surprise.

Vassal grasped her arm with his free hand. It was a friendly, confident gesture. He evaluated her character as being that of the gentle spirited. Their meeting was most favorable, and he welcomed her into the suite.

"I would have cut my luncheon short if I had known," he confided.

"That's all right."

"No, no, it would have been better. That way I would have missed the storm."

He examined Lucia. She wore a casual business dress. Fit flatteringly, the dark tailored suit complemented her lean and attractive figure.

"For next time, if you prefer," he told her, "you may use the suite's closet. It's more convenient than the coat room, which can get quite crowded."

"I'll do that, thank you."

They entered Vassal's office.

"I came here through the Luxembourg Gardens, as I always do," he recounted. "I wasn't halfway when out of the blue I found myself surrounded on all sides by this inescapable blizzard."

Vassal maneuvered around his desk. Outside the window, the snow had lessened significantly. Lucia sat in the chair Vassal had pulled for her as they came in.

"It seems to be lightening up a bit," she observed.

Vassal turned, taking notice, nodded his head and reached into the top drawer of his desk. In the drawer were a pistol and a box of cartridges. Nonchalantly, he pushed them aside, taking out a silver cigarette case. He offered Lucia a cigarette, which she accepted.

"You should know, mademoiselle, I prefer our relationship to be informal," said Vassal. "It's more in my nature."

Once he had removed a cigarette for himself he returned the case to its proper place and leaned over the desk with a large inlaid ebony paperweight lighter to ignite his new secretary's cigarette.

"We should get along, I think," he supposed.

He lit his own cigarette, taking a few seconds to enjoy the first drag from it. Lucia sat up, snapped open the purse she held in her lap and fished through it, producing a small envelope. She opened this envelope and placed a gilded invitation on the desk.

"This is too generous of you. I couldn't possibly accept," she remarked.

Vassal took the invitation and immediately handed it back. She sat inert. Insistent, he shook it in the air.

"Come now," he implored. "This is merely business."

She retook the invitation.

"The Embassy ball this weekend will provide you with an excellent opportunity to understand what happens here,"

he rationalized.

Lucia carefully slipped the gilded invitation back into the envelope.

"To start with," he went on, "you'll meet everyone that I'm involved with. As my secretary you'll be expected to attend my meetings with many of the most distinguished Parisians. I would feel most uncomfortable if there wasn't a chance for me to introduce you. Properly, I mean."

Lucia nodded her head and replaced the envelope in her purse, snapping it shut.

"I see," she hummed. "No, I—I understand."

"Very good. You might have a good time, I hope. We'll have to arrange a tailor to fit you for a dress."

A sudden light streamed through the windows washing the entire room in a bright yellow tinge. Vassal wheeled around to see blue skies. In amazement, he stood to face the window pressing against the pane to get a better look.

"Good Lord!" he said in complete astonishment. "There's not a single cloud. You would think it was a summer day."

The coordinator stood, his arms held wide in a frozen gesture of jubilee. Lucia approached the window, curious to have a look for herself.

"I can't imagine," she murmured in wonderment.

"A squall. We don't get them often this far inland." Vassal beamed at Lucia and proclaimed, "A good sign, though."

Lucia slightly tilted her head, half-smiling, eyeing him. She had not quite understood. It was a characteristic quality of hers that he would later find had grown on him in the most darling of fashions.

"For us, I mean," he clarified. "It's a good sign for us." He restored his observance of the venerable change in climate, his contentment reflected in the window. "You bring the good weather. We're well met."

## 99

Vassal held the door for Lucia, who stepped into the hall with an armful of papers. She had proved so far to be as good a secretary as he could ask for. The swift familiarization she showed to the ridged atmosphere of controllership in the ministry was seamless. The coordinator was impressed with the quick assimilation of Lucia's more privatized experiences to her new administrative duties.

"Come on, now. Let me call a taxicab. It gets dark early during the winter."

She paused in the hallway, "No, no, it's all right, Henri. Thank you." Lucia shifted the papers to her free arm. "I should be going."

"All right, then," conceded Vassal. "Don't forget, tomorrow morning I've arranged for the tailor."

"Thank you again, Henri."

Vassal shook his head and patted her arm.

"Really, it's nothing. Please be careful, Lucia. Good night."

"Good night," she replied in turn.

Vassal softly closed the door as she turned to leave. Lucia exited the ministry through the elegant lobby, a huge rotunda with a raised second level—an open colonnaded mezzanine. A large marble staircase branched off at both ends of the rotunda and led up to the mezzanine. She ambled past the desk at the front manned by a decoratively dressed serviceman. He nodded and wished her a good night. Prior to her exit, Lucia stopped off at the coat check. She handed a small card to the coat man, who returned moments later with her jacket and scarf.

From the busy Boulevard des Invalides, Lucia followed the Pont Alexandre the Third. A wind stiffened, rolling a light dusting of snow over the roofs of the nearby Palais Bourbon and Assemblée Nationale and out onto the street. She kept the papers close and bundled herself up pulling her heavy wool scarf tight against the cold. The bridge led over and into the Right Bank. She paused outside the Petit Palais and lingered on the corner. Ahead of her at a diagonal along the curb an automobile's headlamps flashed. Lucia jumped forward to cross the street and approached the vehicle—a long, elegant automobile. The passenger door swung open for her. Lucia climbed in, escaping the frigid weather.



Lucia settled into the elegant roadster, an American-made Packard—a pearl white 1938 Super 8. It was an extraordinary sight to behold, so out of place was it on the streets of Europe. An immaculately groomed middle-aged man sat in the back. He was one and the same proprietor of L' Hôtel du Cheval Noir; a shrewd businessman of German-Jewish decent, Elijah Ames.

Ames helped Lucia in, reached over her, and closed the door. A motion to the driver indicated his wish to leave. He turned to Lucia and at once got down to business.

"How did it go?"

"Well," Lucia stated.

"Just well?"

Ames offered Lucia a cigarette, which she accepted.

"Very well. Thank you."

Ames lit her cigarette with a match, ignited his own with the same and relaxed into the wide, deeply set leather seat.

From the automobile's passenger-side window Paris streamed by in cold succession.

"It took months to make these arrangements. We're going to need to act quickly," he declared.

"Vassal is perfect. He's having me accompany him to the ball this weekend. His wife and children are in Germany visiting her parents. They won't return until the end of this month."

"Very well, indeed," Ames stated in smug concurrence with Lucia's previous sentiment. A marked solemnity entered into his mien. Ames leaned forward and prematurely snuffed his cigarette out in the built-in ashtray between their seats. "This has got to go well, Lucia," he bespoke in a more severe tone. "I can't emphasize enough—"

"I understand."

"There is pressure from our higher-ups," he went on to explain. "There's been word. The Sicherheitsdienst will have one of their agents investigate our operation."

Lucia, without comment, puffed on her cigarette. The utterance hung in the air. Ames perched rigidly in his seat.

Motionless, he awaited her response.

"I understand," reiterated Lucia.

## 100

Wind-frozen, snow-drifted, and ice-covered, L' Hôtel du Cheval Noir was nestled well in all the charms of the surrounding neighborhood, a wintry cheerful place, the warm orange glow of its windows invitingly alit from within.

Ames escorted Lucia through the front entrance and into the hotel's modest lobby. The pair proceeded to the empty counter. Cuvée exited from the manager's office, leaving the door ajar. He glanced up, having just noticed Ames, and shook his head imperceptibly. The look of him was dreadful. A light sweat had broken upon his upper lip. He was pale and impassive. Ames advanced on the counter. He narrowed his eyes questioningly and stepped past his hired hand through the open door. At Ames' entrance into his office's doorway, Georges emerged and strode aside to allow the hotel's proprietor to

pass. From under his breath, Ames asked news from Georges—the more trusted of his two associates.

Georges shot Ames a hard look, glanced back to the office, and mumbled, "Trouble, boss."

There stood Emery Haskins at an open filing cabinet in the manager's office. Dressed in a dark tailored suit, he was careful not to soil himself with dust while poring over the contents of a folder. As he noticed Ames he removed an entire file, placing it under his arm. Ames entered his office with Lucia in tow. He was incredulous and never welcomed his intrusive visitor. At first, Ames basically ignored Haskins. He politely removed Lucia's coat for her as well as his own and hung them together on a standing coat rack beside his desk.

On her part, Lucia was uncomfortable and to remain standing against the back of the room. Warily, she regarded Emery Haskins, who faced her. He nodded and turned in time to catch Ames as he seated himself at his desk. With an officious step forward Haskins stiffly raised his hand, palm forward and clicked his heels. Ames unenthusiastically returned the gesture, a lazy rendition of the Nazi party salute. Incited, Haskins removed the files from under his arm and slapped them down onto Ames' desk.

"Herr Ames," he stated as he pulled a chair up and seated himself. "Elijah Ames."

Emery Haskins said Ames' first name with certain impertinence. Legs uncrossed, he rigidly positioned himself squarely across the desk from Ames.

"Yes?" Ames answered.

Haskins removed a metallic badge from within his breast pocket, placed it down onto the desk, and slid it in front of Ames.

"In our dealing with one another, you will know me as Emery Haskins."

The badge was more a disc than a badge and was decorated with a Nazi swastika.

"You are here, monsieur, to review our files, is that not so?" Ames broke in.

"I am."

The small warrant disc lay between the two men. Ames was disinclined to touch it; he simply reclined back and gestured defenselessly with his arms. The disc was the embodiment of the Fuhrer's power and granted absolute authority to whoever presented it. It was an archaic device and was more suited to the Middle Ages than to the modern world. Ames smiled emptily and darted his eyes around the room. His glance fell on Lucia and was retarded in its progress, slow to return to where sat his opponent, Emery Haskins.

"Where do we begin?" Ames asked.

"There is the opinion that army intelligence has done an insignificant job in its role of collection," Haskins began, putting emphasis on the word collection.

"Herr Haskins," Ames interjected, "with all due respect, the gathering of sensitive information does not happen overnight. It takes time. You must be patient. I assure you there will be satisfactory results."

Haskins flipped open the folder that he had placed in front of him on Ames' desk. A brisk scan of its contents and he stopped on something, stating aloud.

"The events coordinator, Henri Vassal..." Haskins paused, glancing back up at Ames. "Where are you with this man?"

"He is to be compromised," answered Ames.

Emery pivoted rigidly in his seat to face Lucia. For the first time, he addressed her.

"Are you confident, Fraulein, that he can be swayed?"

"Yes," Lucia answered directly.

"You will report to me on this matter," Haskins instructed.

Ames cut in, taking a firm stand, "No. She is mine. She goes between Vassal and myself only. Nothing will come of this operation if I allow there to be internal problems."

"You are to relinquish control of this operation to me," demanded Emery Haskins.

"I cannot. We are too close. We have worked too hard and risked too much. You must understand, to report to you if necessary is an acceptable risk. As well as to concede information, but to change control this far along will only jeopardize the operation."

After a moment of reflection, Haskins responded coolly and calculatingly, "I'm prepared, Herr Ames, and I'll add it's been recommended—in fact authorized—that I coordinate these collections."

Ames sat pensively, awaiting Haskins' rejoinder. Satisfied with Ames' obedient silence, Haskins continued.

"You may resume as controller for the time being. We will make arrangements for the transfer of any sensitive materials."

Haskins rose from his seat, closing the folder and handing it over to Ames. Ames in return slid the warrant disc across the desk to Emery Haskins.

"I recommend you get this right," Haskins threatened. "A new order has been put into place. There is no room for failure."

Ames stood and saw Emery Haskins to the door. When Haskins passed Lucia in exiting, he acknowledged her with a gesture and a dismissive glance.

"Fraulein," he said.

Ames closed the office door behind Haskins and slowly pivoted to face Lucia. A staleness lingered between them which took several moments to dissipate. Exerted witnesses of unspoken violence, they stood complacent, testifying to the severity of the danger they had narrowly escaped. Ames broke with Lucia, a disbanding of their silence, and stormed over to his desk in a temper.

"Damn Nazis!" he exclaimed and picked up the file from his desk and threw it down, scattering its contents across the desktop. He pointed to Lucia as he vented. "Goddamn Nazis! I've given my life to this business. I've been at this since the Great War. What right does he have coming in here and berating me like that? Him and that band of hooligans he's with. Preparations were made well in advance of the Party's rise to the Chancellery. You don't change these things!

There's a reason why they've worked the way they have all this time. No and no! There's a reason, damn it."

Lucia had distanced herself and seeing that she had shut down, standing near to the door waiting for him to finish, Ames redirected his anger and called for Georges, who promptly stuck his head into the office.

"Georges, get Cuvée and follow up on the errand we've discussed," he commanded.

Responsive, Georges pivoted and motioned to leave.

"And be thorough!" Ames shouted after him one last time. "We can't afford to screw this up."

Vassal bundled himself against the chill and dampness of the wintry air and exited the ministry late in the evening.

With ease in his stride, he skipped down the snowy steps and without concern of slippage drifted out onto the ice-covered sidewalk. Vassal passed through the hub of the city at a spirited pace, as were many Parisians at the close of a busy workday. The city lights were alit along the Left Bank. A gust arose off the icy water of the Seine, the chill of which the coordinator paid no particular notice. Self-occupied, he pushed further along, indiscriminately joining the legions of pedestrians. Careful of his shoes, he traversed a deep puddle and meandered from the curb to cross the street ahead of a crowded trolley car.

A beaten path led through the scarcely populated Jardin de Luxembourg's snow-covered grounds. Any of the park's intended footpaths were long past having been ignored by pedestrians, and the newly stomped course ran directly through the barren trees. The path was trodden down to a few inches of packed ice, and all along the sides were mounds of dirty snow. On a number of occasions Vassal was forced to transgress into the deep snow along the side of the path when blocked by obstructive puddles of icy mud.

At a certain point on the path, where he hesitated to figure out how to cross a particularly nasty flood, the coordinator noticed a masculine figure up ahead of him standing off to the side. The shady figure seemed to have stopped with him, and left to linger, took notice of his being observed. At this moment another individual bumped Vassal, barging past him brusquely without apology. The man did not pause and stepped through the deep puddle, not the least bothered. In the interim, when Vassal turned back to where the inquisitive figure once stood in the distance, he discovered the figure had moved on.

Vassal carefully bypassed the puddle and got himself back on track. In the few fleeting moments of concerted effort that it took to navigate the puddle the individual and the shady figure had inconceivably vanished. Baffled though thinking nothing more of it than it being purely coincidental, Vassal intently continued on his way.

Through the tight empty medieval streets of a quaint outer Parisian quarter, Vassal was able to disregard the neglected sidewalks and stroll in the middle of the lively neighborhood's wet, vacant side streets. Enough traffic passed to afford a tracked path down to the very pavement. On occasion the coordinator was forced to step aside for a vehicle.

With these few exceptions he managed to remain unsullied. A slight incline in the road marked its end. Down a narrow impasse at the corner stood a modest solitary town house. It was a three-story walk-through, red brick-faced with contrasting green patina copper windows and door pane. Vassal removed a set of house keys and entered.

On the furthest corner, Georges and Cuvée espied the coordinator from underneath a neighboring building's overhang. The pair went unseen. Vassal's town house was clearly in sight. The interior lights of the first and second floors turned on in succession. Outside, against the frigid air and ice and rain, the men conversed.

"Don't let that happen again," Georges scolded.

"There was nothing I could do about it."

"You were too close to him."

"He took me by surprise, is all."

"It was sloppy of you."

"Do you think he suspects?" Cuvée asked nervously.

"No. He suspects nothing."

"He got a good look at us."

"He got no such thing! He hasn't the slightest idea. Just don't let it happen again."

The wind worsened. The men remained long enough to observe, one at a time from the bottom floor up, the lights in Vassal's house extinguish.

## 102

The eventide to welcome in the ministry ball was of a crisp, clear-skied godsend. A line of expensive automobiles and horse-driven cabriolets circled the ministry's drive. The candle-lit lane lent a romantic touch to the edifice's front steps.

Men and women of high society, in fine tuxedos and adorned in evening gowns, arrived at the entrance in constant succession. The building's staunch facade had been brilliantly illuminated with electric lights. From the plush interior of an ornamented enamel black cabriolet, Vassal assisted Lucia to exit. A coachman dressed in refined attire swung their door open and invited them to walk up the broad stone steps of the ministry building, where a red carpet led to the building's ornate threshold.

Several couples strolled ahead of the pair. The rank and stature of these ladies and gentlemen of high society made for an extraordinary scene. The ministry's events coordinator and his new secretary followed the unending procession into the lush lobby of the ministry building. The lobby had been completely transformed, bedecked with trappings enough to suffice for the taste of the nobility, into a proper and respectful ballroom. The rotunda was agleam. The flurry of movement and activity enriched and enlivened the grand setting. The newly arrived shuffled to the right and left of the arched staircases and ascended to the vast mezzanine. From there, the privileged couples were entertained by their vantage of the gala below, from where the music and jollity drifted. The orchestra was positioned between the colonnades on the rotunda floor. A lively polonaise played for the coupled populace making their rounds on the dance floor.

Lucia was exquisite, adorned in a beautiful ball gown, sequined and brilliantly shining. On her arms she wore long white gloves. Her hair was trussed low at her neckline in an elegant fashion. At Vassal's side, she made for a perfect match to him in his comely tuxedo. The coordinator was quite pleased and held his companion closely in his arm.

During their ascent of the stairway to the mezzanine, the music momentarily ceased.

"With my wife away people will be sure to talk," he spoke softly into Lucia's ear.

Lucia smirked at the notion. It was enough to tickle her fancy, and to tease she sympathetically rested her head on his padded shoulder.

"Let them think what they want," she answered with a pert smile.

At the couple's arrival to the mezzanine, a waltz erupted from the orchestra. The room was energized. Several of the men, like Vassal himself, wore the Nazi party pin attached to the lapel of their tuxedos. With the exception of a few individuals, there were no uniformed officers. The occasion was strictly a leisurely affair, and as so, each individual in the room was free to socialize. Just ahead of the happy couple, leaning upon the banister and looking out over the rotunda, was one of the few men in uniform. He was an elderly man, and he conversed in an animated way with a lady much younger than himself. Though grey-haired, this gentleman's posture was astonishingly youthful and proud. He was in the decorative uniform of a German army officer. Discreetly, Vassal pointed the old soldier out to Lucia. The events coordinator reclined on the railing to give Lucia an ample view of the elderly man and young woman.

"He is a colonel," he informed her.

Lucia was quite subtle about her observance of them, so much so that Vassal was not certain she was clear as to whom he was speaking.

"Do you see him?"

"I do," she answered.

Lucia shored up to a passing waiter and casually removed two long-stemmed glasses of champagne from his tray.

The brimming crystal shimmered in the bedazzling lights of the decorated hall. She handed a glass to Vassal and lent him her ear.

Encouraged, he thanked her and continued, "He is Germany's emissary to Belgium, a career soldier. Apparently he goes way back, before the war. He is known to have great sympathy for the Belgians. He was very much involved in the war reparations that went to that beleaguered country."

Lucia glanced over. A curl came to her lip. She sipped her glass of champagne and commented, her curiosity peaked by the girl, "And the woman he is with, she could be his daughter, she's so young."

The colonel held the young woman by her slender waist assisting her to lean heavily over the banister in order to wave to a group below. His hands were sure and he was positioned in such a way as to suggest familiarity at handling her. She spun around and strung her arms around the old man's neck, swaying her hips to the music.

"I was just getting to that," Vassal said with a laugh.

Lucia smiled charmingly, "Oh... I see," responding interestedly with a raised eyebrow.

Vassal was tickled by her decorousness. The timing was impeccable. He got in close to whisper.

"She is his niece."

"No, really!" Lucia exclaimed, coolly but surprised

An elderly woman, Madame Zoloff, interrupted the couple. She noticed Vassal, her eyes bright and powdered face grinning. The old woman planted herself before the couple. A finer example of the old aristocracy was not had in all Paris; she, completely done up as she was in an incredibly elaborate gown, reeked of immeasurable wealth. The woman pulled excitedly at Vassal's arm.

"Henri!" she implored. "How have you been, my dear events coordinator?"

Vassal recognized her and bowed graciously.

"Madame Zoloff, it is so very good to see you again."

The illustrious old lady peered with curiosity at Lucia. A wicked folly gleamed where she suspected impropriety.

Vassal was certain to introduce the two women.

"Allow me to introduce you to my new assistant, Mademoiselle Bruegel."

"A pleasure, I'm sure," Lucia said sweetly.

Vassal brought Lucia's attention to Madame.

"Lucia, this is Larisa Zoloff, wife of the late Russian foreign minister, the esteemed author of a distinguished journal and a celebrated laureate, Markel Mikhailovich Zoloff."

Madame Zoloff smiled, bated by Vassal's praise and in politeness replied, "Please, the pleasure's mine, my dear.

Any friend of Henri Vassal—"

At this, a waiter offered a tray to the group, refreshing the circle's beverages.

"Well, as they say, dear..." Madame Zoloff continued, directing her attention to Vassal, "any friend of yours is a friend of mine." She toasted and nudged the coordinator. "Isn't that so, Henri?"

Lucia sipped at her brimming glass and scanned the assembly. The waiter's tray was swiftly unburdened of libations by those around them. The sparkling consignment was a great success. She was drawn away from the coordinator and the foreign minister's widow to the crowd of dignitaries. Henri and Madame Zoloff's voices trailed off. The joyfest attracted Lucia's glance, toward the colonnade and over the banister to the ballroom below, where the gentlemen and ladies were paired. Vassal glanced from Madame Zoloff to Lucia. His new secretary, whom he found himself to regard with more and more affection, leaned against the banister without concern, focused upon the multitudinous charms of the sight below.

The dance floor soon beckoned them both. The coordinator led Lucia through a pleasant waltz. Together they cavorted, enjoying the close company of one another. A foxtrot followed. After a few whirls around the dance floor, they decided to take a breather. While they stood off to the side, Vassal quickly finished off another glass of champagne.

"This has been such a wonderful night. So far this year I can't recall its equal. The ball is a real smash, wouldn't you say?" he unreservedly expressed. "Thank you so very much for accompanying me. I really don't imagine it would have been the same without you."

Lucia was radiant, truly beautiful. Her youth might have passed, yet she remained very much an attractive woman.

Within Vassal's eyes there was a spark. He was overcome by the sudden and uncontrollable impulse to be impetuous.

He grasped Lucia's hand and led her, linking arms. Lucia cheerfully went along with him.

"Where are you taking me, Henri?"

Not to answer lest he lose his nerve, he conducted Lucia to the entrance of the lobby where a gentleman dressed in livery was stationed.

"Monsieur Coordinator, will you need me to call a car?" the gentleman addressed Vassal in a clear voice.

Vassal moved past the man, paying little attention to him. A curt waving of him off was his only condolence.

"Monsieur Vassal," the young gentleman in livery persisted. Vassal shooed the man.

"Monsieur Coordinator, will you need me to call a car?" he pressed once more.

"No, no," Vassal finally replied. "We're only getting some air."

"Monsieur Coordinator, is it not cold? Possibly, madam, I might have your coats procured for you."

The man hurried back, flanked the couple, and blocked the entrance. It was brash of him and rude, though it was his job. Attention to a guest's every need was the only guarantee of recognition in his profession. He stopped Vassal and Lucia dead in their tracks.

"Yes, of course," conceded Vassal. "See to it. Fetch our coats from the closet."

"It shouldn't take more than a moment."

The gentleman adorned in livery bowed and promptly exited the lobby. The exact moment that he stepped away, Vassal rushed Lucia out. Arm in arm, the couple laughingly escaped the ball, traipsing out onto the sidewalk.

"Oh, Henri, how funny you are!" Lucia said, delighted.

Vassal rested heavily against the iron railing of the ministry's steps. He breathed in and held the cool air momentarily before exhaling. Thankful for the moment, he watched his breath, smiling and glancing up at the ministry building. His thoughts drifted as his breath rose away. Lucia remained patiently at his side. She shivered slightly against the chill.

"It is quite cold, isn't it?" Vassal remarked.

He shoved himself off the railing. Lucia pivoted and took a step toward him.

"I don't mind so much," she replied.

"Maybe we should return to the ball."

Lucia retook his arm and drew close to him.

"I'd rather not," she said.

He gazed fondly at her. Behind them on the street a line of carriages lingered at the curb. The drivers guarded the horses, waiting for the ball to depart.

"It is a bit overwhelming, isn't it?"

"A bit," Lucia agreed.

"One begins to forget. I've attended so many of these functions."

He eyed a nearby cabriolet. The closed-off carriage was unoccupied. It was the one and the same carriage in which the couple had arrived. Lucia followed his glance and read his thoughts.

"Shall we, then?"

"Why not?" he supposed.

Vassal motioned to the coachman. He waved him over as he dug in his pocket and brought out a wad of paper cash.

Vassal stepped around the railing with Lucia and handed the driver all of his monies, covering any fare at all, far more than was necessary.

"Take us a few rounds about the Palace Gardens, my good man," he instructed the coachman.

"Yes, monsieur. Right this way, monsieur, madam."

The driver opened the door to the cabriolet and assisted the couple in. Crossing over the traffic, the carriage traveled at a trot parallel to the Palace Gardens. From the furthest lane the couple gazed out onto the expanse of the lawn. Lucia shivered a bit, folding her white, gloved arms close to herself. Vassal courteously removed his tuxedo jacket and placed it around her shoulders.

"Oh, that isn't necessary," she stammered.

"Nonsense. I don't mind. I'm not cold at all. Please, you're welcome to it," insisted Vassal.

He placed his arm behind Lucia as she scooted herself forward, allowing him to drape the jacket over her shoulders.



His face was close to hers. Lucia turned toward him and their noses brushed. Vassal pressed his hand at Lucia's waist.

She drew up closely when suddenly the carriage jarred. Lucia let out a sharp snort. Vassal brought his hand up to the roof, steadying himself as the carriage thumped heavily, up and then down again.

"Good grief!" Vassal exclaimed.

Lucia had to laugh at her sudden effusion. She clumsily sat herself upright in her seat. Vassal withdrew with a good-hearted grin. Of a sudden Lucia alit her hand to her lips to cover an unexpected hiccup.

"Oh, excuse me!"

Again, she hiccupped.

"Really, how silly! I am so-hiccup-Oh!-hiccup-"

With a heartfelt chuckle, Vassal leaned back in his seat and held the stitch that arose in his stomach.

"Don't laugh!—hiccup—"

She demurely covered her mouth with her gloved hand. He held his belly with laughter.

"Honestly, tell me more about the people we met," she vocalized, desperately trying to change the subject.

Vassal regained his composure and sportingly exclaimed, "The things I could tell you..."

Lucia hiccupped, this time more discreetly. Vassal allowed it to pass without comment.

"I should write under a pseudonym in the gossip column. I know all their dirty little secrets."

Lucia laughed at his jest from behind her gloved hand, still held to muffle her hiccups. Vassal smiled firmly and knowingly nodded his head.

"The things I could tell you!"

## 103

Lucia reclined on Vassal's desk, her slender legs tightly crossed. A keen line bisected her uppermost thigh, glimpsed through the slit in her knee-length skirt. She wore a smartly tailored dress, the tapered waist of which followed her form in a most modern fashion. Vassal was seated near to her in his chair, dictating a letter as she took notes on a lined pad she had placed on her lap. The faint smell of the rosewater Lucia used to moisten her hands when handling papers filled the coordinator's nostrils. She bounced her foot, which Vassal blankly gazed at. He trailed off distracted from his thoughts, mesmerized by her shoe, which steadily bobbed up and down dangling from her foot. She stopped shaking her foot and leaned forward.

"Henri?"

Vassal snapped to and glanced up at Lucia.

"Right! Where were we?"

Lucia readied her pen at the top of the notepad. Her foot automatically recommenced its bounce unexpectedly causing her shoe to fly from her foot. The launch of her shoe was a surprise, and straight away she jumped down from the desk. Vassal attempted to grasp the shoe, which sailed straight at him. Having missed, the coordinator swung his chair back and searched for the

vanished shoe beneath the desk. Red with embarrassment, Lucia apologized and squatted down when they were interrupted by the tumult of a group of people entering the hall of the suite.

A vivacious, well-dressed, middle-aged German woman, Madame Vassal, made her entrance into the hall through the front door. Tall in stature, fair-haired, and healthfully robust, she led two young blonde girls into the coordinator's suite. The two girls were her daughters—the youngest being Mimi and her older sister by three years, Kirsten. Madame Vassal jostled a set of keys, noisily placing them into her purse.

"Henri, we're here! Henri!" she called out announcing their arrival. She spurned on her two girls and pushed through Vassal's office door. "Go on, say hello to Papa."

Vassal greeted them, arms held out wide to embrace his children. He squatted down low; the two girls excitedly laughed and, in adoration of their father, clung to his neck. A sincere hug for one and the other child was not without a double kiss to each rosy cheek. He looked up at his wife with a smile, catching her—as he might have expected—glaring at Lucia, who stood beside the desk on one leg busily readjusting her shoe. It was an awkward moment. Madame narrowed her eyes at her husband's pretty, new secretary and darted an accusing glance toward Vassal.

How it vexed her, the growing effrontery each of her husband's improprieties showed. There had been prior affairs and infidelity, which she had always suspected. On one occasion she was certain of it, a fact of which he was completely unaware. Had he any idea the extent of his wife's knowledge he would have been mortified. She was ashamed for him and had sworn to herself that she would not put up with it should it happen again. Sure of the workings of his wife's mind, Vassal attempted to quell any suspicion by misdirecting her attention. He offhandedly patted his girls' heads and addressed all three of the women in his family.

"How was your trip?"

The coordinator tousled the smaller girl's hair with a fatherly hand and scooped her up onto his knee. The children, as was most always the case, sensed the growing separation between their parents. Nothing of their intuitive knowledge was conscious, only a blameless want of their father's affection mixed with a bit of bitter neediness.

"And how did you enjoy the puff-puff, Mimi? How were Grandmama and Grandpapa?"

"Very well, Papa."

Vassal pulled the eldest girl close with an open arm and smiled brightly at her with his eyes. Before he could speak, she planted an enormous kiss upon his cheek.

"Oh, very well," he sang. "How nice to see you too, Kirsten. Why, you look lovely and warm in your woolen dress.

Have you been watching after your little sister?"

"Yes, Papa."

The younger girl asserted herself by pulling at her father's tie and sharply informed him, "Yes, Papa. Mama says Kirsten should mind after me. We are best of friends, but still, I am old enough to mind myself."

"My word, is that so?" Vassal doted.

He glanced back up at his wife. She had crossed her arms, tapped her foot, and shook her head with fondness.

"I'm a big girl, Papa," Mimi asserted.

"You are at that, Mimi. A very special girl. The most special younger sister in all the world! Isn't that so, Kirsten?"

"I like Mimi fine, Papa," Kirsten answered with considerable thoughtfulness.

Vassal had to laugh at his children's propensity to express themselves openly. Lucia remained apart from the family. She intently observed Vassal and his two girls with a pleasant mix of affection and admiration, though her eyes betrayed a pang of regret at knowing what she was meant to come between. Lucia found it difficult to take her eyes off of them. She was unaware of Madame Vassal, who had redirected her attention to her husband's attractive new hire, watching her and reading her with a feminine instinct that accurately sensed Lucia's doubts. Of knowing surety, Madame Vassal cleared her throat to acquire Lucia's attention, challenging her.

"Mademoiselle Bruegel," Vassal cut in, "this is my wife, Madame Vassal. These two here are my children, Mimi and Kirsten. My wife and the girls have just recently returned from Germany where they spent a week with Madame's parents." He then readdressed his wife and maintained, "Mademoiselle is my new assistant. She has been with me only these last few days."

"A pleasure, Madame Vassal," Lucia said as she stepped forward to take Madame's hand.

Madame Vassal's glare passed directly through Lucia, rudely disregarding her gesture.

"It is such a shame," Madame addressed her husband. "Our trip was cut a week short. With politics the way they are, traveling abroad is becoming a real bother. Mother and father are becoming quite worried. They've suggested that the children would be better off in Germany for the spring."

Lucia politely removed herself from their company, having thoroughly been made unwelcome by Madame Vassal.

## 104

The muffled voices of Madam and Monsieur Vassal carried through the open double doors to the tiny office; Lucia busied herself with the rearrangement of her desk drawers. It was not of necessity, though the busywork had served to preoccupy her mind. Madam had of recent made it a habit to hang around the ministry. The latch to the coordinator's office door clicked and the clear voices of the coordinator and his wife carried into the hall. She caught only a brief glimpse of Vassal and his family exiting. Madame spoke boisterously while her husband saw her and their children out.

"Yes, well not tonight, Henri," she said adamantly.

"I cannot promise."

"You've responsibilities outside of work!"

"These are trying times. A lot is expected of me."

"Tonight will be an exception."

"I can't make any promises."

"You must."

"I'll see what I can do."

"That won't do, Henri. You've your family to think of."

"It is a busy time just now, dear. Try to understand."

"I won't hear it."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Why are you being difficult?"

"I'm not being difficult."

"Then you'll see to it."

"Of course, I don't see any problem."

"If there are things that need to be done," Madame insisted, "have your secretary do them. She can stay late."

"All right, dear. I'll speak with her about it. I will see you and the children tonight."

"Bye-bye, Papa," Mimi offered sweetly.

"Goodbye, Mimi," Vassal replied. "Goodbye."

In the corridor he embraced his wife and children, softly shutting the front door behind them, and withdrew into the suite. After a brief interlude he appeared at the open double door of the smaller of the two offices, leaning on the doorframe. Lucia retrieved a cigarette for herself and offered one to Vassal. He waved his hand politely declining.

"No. Thank you," he shook his head managing a smile.

Lucia lit the cigarette and stepped around her desk, sitting comfortably against it.

"You have a beautiful family, Henri," she muttered.

"Thank you, Lucia. You have to excuse my wife's behavior. She's been disagreeable as of late. Normal stresses, you understand. She's been spending a lot of time away. Just recently she and the children visited her parents in Germany. It was a disappointment that I could not join them."

"I understand."

"No, it's inexcusable," Vassal said through a light laugh and advanced a step further into the room. A glance in the looking glass positioned over the fireplace revealed a graying and aged man tired by the drollery that had become his daily existence. He saw nothing of the good father and generous husband he was.

"Don't," she stated.

"Really, Lucia. You shouldn't be put through that," he reflected shamefully.

"It's all right. I understand, Henri."

"She complains about my work. She wants to believe that somehow it's gotten in the way, that work is to blame for our growing distance from one another."

"I understand."

"Forgive me for being so direct, but there it is."

Lucia approached Vassal.

"You don't have to explain, Henri."

She was detached; she could not help but admire the reflection of the Frenchman's distinguished features in the mirror above the mantle. She saw none of the low self-image Vassal had of himself. He offered up his winningest smile.

Lucia tapped the short length of ash into the fireplace. There was nothing to be forgiven. Vassal took her hand and removed the cigarette. He brought it to his mouth and inhaled.

"And if it weren't for those two beautiful girls..." he started.

"They love their father very much," Lucia interjected.

Vassal was speechless and merely managed a thin smile while he returned Lucia's cigarette to her.

"Thank you for being so understanding, Lucia."

## 105

From the passenger side window of Ames' automobile, Lucia watched the cityscape drift by. The Super-8 tramped its way steadily along the quay of the River Seine. Second-guessing herself, Lucia shifted uncomfortably in her seat as Ames, seated beside her, carried on about his plans for the events coordinator, Henri Vassal. It was impossible for her to overlook Ames' callousness. It was as if he were seeped with an inordinate amount of personal misgivings toward the events coordinator. Even for Elijah Ames, a most despicable opportunist, such malicious behavior repulsed her, challenging her sensibilities and served only to cause doubt to spring within Lucia.

"That's it, then!" Ames exclaimed. "All along we've been gambling on exploiting this weakness that, let me say, it was impossible to be sure of." With his hands he gestured menacingly, turning them together palms down, his fingers spread like talons. "There are plans that have been put into motion, which have been laid down far in advance."

He clawed at the air with his hands and mocked a bird of prey snatching up some imaginary quarry. From the outside as the automobile momentarily idled at an intersection, an iridescent light played across Ames' features. His expression seemed devilishly unreal.

"We're sure to wring every bit of information from him that we'll need."

A droll glint alit in Ames' beady eyes. With a smug laugh, he relaxed into the leather seat. In reflective repose his dither abated. Lucia examined him closely, somewhat mortified.

"I—I'm not so sure," she stammered in an attempt to voice her growing doubts.

"What?! Don't be a fool. When I report the progress we've made—"

"I think he hasn't enough—"

"When we've made him, Haskins will have to back off. There's good reason why he was assigned this case. Oh, they know the importance of what we're doing, all right."

"I'm not sure he has enough to lose. He's quite unhappy, it appears."

"Unhappy? What of it? That's how we want him. The man will be a cinch if you're correct."

"He's quite lethargic."

"What in God's name are you talking about? You've made the observation yourself. He's desperate. His relations with his wife have been cool for far too long. You know as well as I that there's nothing the man wouldn't endure for his children." At this, Ames straightened himself in his familiar, characteristic way. "I don't mean to suggest anything unsavory. I'm a man of principles, you understand. As far as I'm concerned, we only put these people in the situations.

Ultimately, it's up to them to make the right or wrong decisions. But for Haskins, it's not beneath the man to get at Vassal by using his two little girls. And I mean by endangering them, if he had to, Lucia. I thank God we were able to remain in control of this operation."

Lucia discreetly bit her lip and consented to Ames' point. The driver eased the Packard along the curb directly alongside the doormanless entranceway of

L'Hôtel du Cheval Noir. Ames nodded emphatically and re-faced Lucia before exiting.

"If you're ready then."

"Ready?"

There is someone for you to meet," he told her. "These things we speak of are already in motion."

Lucia did not respond. She opened her door and motioned to step out.

Ames held her back saying, "We are as much protecting ourselves as we are protecting our country. You understand that, don't you? There can be no turning back now."

Lucia offered an affirmative stare. Again she readied to leave, and again Ames held her back.

"I understand your misgivings." He had hold of her hand and spoke with a peculiar frankness. "You're a fine woman, Lucia, and a patriot." He pressed her wrist. "What you do for us now will not be forgotten."

When Ames spoke the way he had to Lucia, she was less inclined to follow the pang of her better judgment. A sensitive wrist was a reminder of her place. He had not meant to hurt her, she imagined, lingering at the front counter.

She held her wrist subconsciously, massaging where it was tender. Cuvée greeted the couple's entrance with a somber nod of the head. Ames went around with his and Lucia's jackets, entering the open office. From behind the counter, Cuvée apprised Ames of recent events.

"Georges is sure that the building is being watched." He smiled warmly at Lucia waiting before him, and continued,

"I don't see it, but Georges swears it."

Ames stepped out from the office and joined Lucia.

"Milch is with Georges?" he asked Cuvée.

"They're both upstairs setting up the room."

Cuvée glanced again at Lucia and then turned to file a few papers away into the desk behind the counter. His evident fondness for Lucia, of which she was aware, in no way interfered with Cuvée's duties. The man's affinity for her was childlike and less than threatening. Ames, who knew of the fancy his hired hand had for the woman, guided Lucia by the arm to the staircase.

"We're going up," he told Cuvée. "Call to inform Georges."

"No problem, boss."

Cuvée picked up the front desk phone as the couple began to ascend the staircase. On their way to the hotel's uppermost floor, Ames halted on the stairs to catch Lucia up on the preparations that were being made.

"Georges is with a man in the room we've prepared. The man's name is Dieter Milch. He was educated in America and has traveled to-and-fro from England for some time now."

The pair exited the staircase onto the second floor. Ames hesitated in the hallway; stopping Lucia outside one of several rooms' awkwardly narrow doors. The room placard number read 221. Ames double-checked the hall before continuing in a hushed tone.

"His specialty is photographic surveillance. He'll be working with us for the duration of the operation."

Lucia nodded. Ames rapped on the door. Georges answered, letting them both in. Within the quaint hotel room a bed was situated against the furthest papered-wall and to its side was a mahogany vanity with a large, oval mirror set into it. The wallpaper was an even pattern of lilies of the field between bands of

pale blue. With the exception of a pair of side tables, the room was otherwise unfurnished. Upon the bed lay several leather bags. A couple of the satchels were open and empty, their contents strewn out on the mattress. Amongst several odd-shaped tools and tripods was an array of camera equipment: lenses, films, just the right variety needed for a proper turn at espionage. Georges guided Ames toward an open closet beside the vanity. Lucia hung back. She stood beside the bed and curiously inspected the sundry equipment.

"We're back in here," Georges notified Ames. "This is where he's going to shoot from."

Georges gestured to the oval mirror and ushered Ames to the closet. The pair ducked as they stepped in. Georges gave a dismissive glance to Lucia and disappeared into the closet behind Ames. Left to her own devices, Lucia was drawn to the equipment, reached down, and picked up the camera lens from the bed. It was dark and gleamed emptily in the lamplight. Held as it was in her hands, she summed it as being weighty for its size. As an inquisitive gesture, she turned it over a few times and tossed it gently in the soft of her palms. Dieter Milch approached Lucia, stepping beside her, and reached over to seize the camera lens from her hand.

"Fraulein, if you please, these lenses are extremely delicate," he reproved.

Lucia had not noticed him and was taken off-guard. She straightened up and shuffled a few steps from the bed after ceding the lens to Milch, who returned it to a case on the mattress.

"No harm done," he countered with a shrug.

He had not meant to suggest he was upset; Milch put away the remainder of the equipment, packing up each piece and placing it in its proper place.

"You understand, these pieces are not mine to risk damaging. It wouldn't be a problem otherwise."

Youthful, slim, and handsomely dressed, Dieter Milch seemed to her to be good-natured, as was evident by his clearance of the bed without being put off. He smiled warmly at Lucia and commented, gesturing with a pair of the lenses, which at that moment he held in each of his hands, "Ames has gone to a bit of an extreme with the preparations he's taken, wouldn't you say?"

Lucia was slow to respond. She stood by and blankly observed him. It was fascinating how poised was Milch as he collected his personal effects. Hung upon a nearby chair was a jacket, as well as a small boxy picture camera, slung over the back of the chair by a leather strap.

"Well, yes," she agreed. "He can be quite thorough."

Milch pointed to the picture camera and remarked, "That would usually do the trick. Actually, it's all I ever need."

"Do you mind if I—" Lucia started as she stepped toward the chair.

"No, not at all. It's quite durable, actually."

Lucia carefully picked up the picture camera and held it in her hands. At the top was a tiny viewfinder, into which she peered.

"It's English-made and very reliable. Takes up to three minutes of footage per reel," Milch informed her.

Ames stuck his head out and called for Lucia. A polite turn to Milch and she handed back the prized picture camera. She excused herself. Once in the closet Lucia was surprised to see that the entire surface of the oval mirror, built into the vanity, was in fact two-way, providing a clear view of the room. From within the closet Milch was readily observed gathering the remaining bags from the bed. Within the confines of the concealed room Georges and Ames fidgeted with

a camera set upon a tripod. Lucia steadily studied Ames as he leaned over the camera, peering through the lens.

He nodded satisfactorily at Georges, and clarified to Lucia, "You understand that it's necessary for you to stay at all times in the field of the camera's view." He took a step back away from the camera and continued. "Come over here and have a look for yourself."

Stolidly, Lucia maneuvered past Ames and around the tripod. With an unsteady hand she reached for the instrument. She snapped her hand back impulsively. No one had taken notice. Lucia bent over and peered through the lens. She could clearly see Dieter Milch on the opposite side of the mirror removing the closed camera cases from off the bed and stepping out of the room.

"Be sure there is enough light," instructed Ames. "This needs to happen only once."

From Lucia's vantage point behind the camera, the room appeared to take on a more diminutive aspect, seen as it was through the framing of the camera's lens. The hotel room appeared to be unbearably cramped and suffocating. The flowered wallpaper was far more prominent viewed through the scrutinizing lens. Lucia slowly drew herself up from the camera. With a blank emotionless expression, she rigidly took two steps away from the tripod, staring blankly through the two-way mirror. Georges moved between her and the camera and withdrew from the closet. Ames followed, leaving Lucia on her own. For an extended moment she was immobilized by trepidation. The intelligible glint of what remained of her scruples was wholly eliminated from her glance. Compromising her integrity, she turned her back on her conscience and came to an insensible decision of self-loathing propensity.

## 106

Vassal, with Lucia in tow, climbed the tight staircase from the events coordinator's suite to the file room. The morning was dedicated to resituating the many records. The job was a tedious one and had taken up most of the week. It entailed creating more space, and their time was mostly spent dividing the older documents from the new. Sorted in order of importance and subsequent date, the records were then discarded if obsolete or set aside to be archived at a later date in the ministry's basement. Lucia wore a femininely cut suit, the blazer of which had a broad lapel and was smartly adorned with large cloth buttons. In their arms each carried a stack of papers, which they placed down in a heap at the center of the room the moment they entered.

Metal filing cabinets lined every wall. There was nothing else to the room with the exception of the two large windows recessed into a short, angular ceiling, giving a certain sense of the exterior of the building. From outside, a bright warm light flooded the chamber and a clear blue sky told of an inviting, unseasonably warm winter day. Lucia knelt down, pausing as she flipped through a stack of papers. She gazed out the windows. Vassal was positioned at a filing cabinet with his back to her. His arm stretched backwards toward Lucia, a file held out in midair.

"This way we'll be able to consolidate the newer files."



He stopped at this thought and directed his glance to Lucia, whose attention was diverted and who neglected to grasp the file. The coordinator shook the folder in the air.

"Lucia! Wake up!"

Vassal good-naturedly tossed the file down at her. It hit the floor with a snap. Lucia startled awake and looked up suddenly crooking an innocent smile. Contrastingly, Vassal sat, playfully stone-faced.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Henri," Lucia guiltily conceded as she scooped up the file and opened it. "It's just that it's such a beautiful day."

She was familiar by now with the particulars and knew what was expected of her. Vassal was in the habit of recanting every step. For a time Lucia placated him. Not that this idiosyncrasy aggravated her. On the contrary, she found it endearing. She had ceased encouraging him.

Lucia continued her work. So focused on the task at hand she had not noticed that Vassal had left. On her own, her effort reaped double the reward. She held a number of files in her arms and accidentally let one fall. It was inconsequential, though it brought her out of her absorbed state for the moment. It was easy for her to take in the tiny room at a glance. They had made great progress. The completed files far outweighed the unsorted piles. The work would be done the sooner she got back to it.

Not long after, all that remained of the sorting was the fine-tuning. Lucia stood at the far end of the room leaning over an open cabinet; she flipped through the papers now and again replacing one or removing another. The tiny room had grown hot and stuffy. Lucia had tied her hair in a bun and had removed her blazer. Though it was excusable, she was underdressed in only a blouse and pair of slacks. The underarms and open collar of her top were lightly discolored by sweat. The silver pendant she wore dangled freely. On top of a tall cabinet where she worked was a pile of empty folders. She busied herself and was oblivious to Vassal, who had climbed up to the room and stood in the open doorway, a pile of neatly stacked papers at his feet. In his hands he held two ice-filled glasses brimming with liquor. He watched fondly as Lucia juggled her papers. She closed the bottom drawer with a soft, feminine kick and then rose on her tiptoes at the cabinet beside her to reach for an empty file. Vassal brought one of the glasses to his mouth to take a sip; the ice sloshed attracting Lucia's attention.

"Oh, thank goodness!" she exclaimed with a laugh, smiling gratefully at the drinks. "It's beginning to get stuffy in here."

Lucia stopped what she was doing and slinked over to Vassal, accepting the drink he held out for her.

"How nice of you, Henri."

The couple cheered and drank.

"This shouldn't take too much longer. It's an exquisite day! Maybe if we finish early, we can go for a walk in the park," Vassal suggested.

Lucia looked up from her glass as she took a gulp, smiling with an imperceptible nod. Vassal had another sip himself and placed his glass down. He pulled at his collar and stepped over the stack of papers on the floor in front of him, approaching one of the windows.

"It's unbearable in here," he remarked. "There is such a difference from downstairs."

He arrived at the window and flicked a couple of latches to pull it open. The inside temperature instantly changed.

"That's better," he said, relieved.

A soft breeze trespassed through the opened window. Lucia stepped forward, letting down her bun and tossing her hair. Vassal glanced at her and back to the window. Occupied as Lucia was with her hair, she tripped a little and reached for Vassal's arm.

"Oh, sorry!" she exclaimed.

Vassal swung around with her, keeping hold, his stare locked into hers. Lucia's hair cascaded over her shoulders. A decidedly pleasant fragrance wafted to his nostrils. She balanced on one leg and turned her back as she secured her shoe. Vassal was very close to her. She almost pressed her chest to his. The open collar of her blouse exposed the slightest bit of her sweaty bosom. Vassal glanced down at her. He was overcome by the soft texture of her skin, her elongated neck, the light that played on her hair, her ear with a small diamond earring. He wet his lips as she straightened up and turned back around to face him. She could feel his held breath as she gazed into his longing eyes.

Knowingly, Lucia smiled up at Vassal. A sudden stiff breeze caused the papers stacked on the floor to fly.

"Oh no! Wait!" she yelled excitedly. "No!—Here!—Close the window!"

Lucia went for the papers, then turned to the window, which Vassal had shut tightly, cutting off the breeze.

Together they bent down and scrambled to collect the scattered papers.

"Oh, all that work!" Lucia murmured, distressed.

Vassal straightened a pile and laughed to himself. Lucia, her hand full of pages from an open file, crawled near to him. So engrossed was she that when she spun around, her rear end ended up in Vassal's face. The coordinator whooped with laughter.

"Oh! You men!" she said, vexed at how lackadaisically he took the mess. "There isn't anything funny about this!"

Sitting back on his haunches, Vassal stared playfully down at her bottom and laughed even deeper, a manila folder in his hand. She looked back at him, leaning on an elbow, her shapeliness accentuated by her posture, and smirked as she shook her head.

"You men, you're all alike!"

This put Vassal into a fit of laughter, and in an unchecked instance of harmless, immodest audacity, he swatted her rear end with the stiff folder. After a short pause, his effrontery sent them both into an uproarious laughter. Lucia cheerfully turned around and cut Vassal off, planting a deep kiss on his lips. They parted from one another for an awkward moment. Vassal was completely taken aback. He grasped her arms and drew her close to him. In her hands, held at her sides, Lucia clutched the papers she had collected in tightened fists. Vassal embraced her in an inordinately passionate kiss.

## 107

The couple entered the room previously prepared for their liaison, numbered 221 in L'Hôtel du Cheval Noir. The door shut softly behind them. Lucia modestly guided Vassal by the hand through the dimly lit chamber to the newly made bed. In silence they sat beside one another. Vassal delicately brushed Lucia's hair from over her shoulder with the backside of his hand. He ran his

fingers down to her blouse, pulling the top button and opening her shirt collar. The large cloth buttons adorning her blouse slipped from their fastening easily. Lucia placed both her hands on Vassal's chest and slowly undid his tie. They kissed. Lucia pushed Vassal down onto the bed and paused. She switched on the lamp set upon a nightstand beside the bed. In the soft light she removed her clothing.

From within the closet through the two-way mirror, the camera lens captured every detail of the intimate moment.

The couple seemed miles away, free of any wrongdoing. Vassal sat up slowly. He removed his shirt and shoes, rose up and pressed against Lucia, whose back was to him as she bent to step out of her slacks. He took her chest in his hands and pulled her up to him, kissing her mouth. Lucia turned to face Vassal, still in his embrace. She hurriedly unbuttoned his trousers. Vassal stepped out of his pants and backed Lucia up onto the bed. She lay back and presented herself to him. He kissed her neck and breasts and climbed on top of her.

The lighted oval shape of the two-way mirror was framed by the watchful blackness of the closet. Beyond it in the ill-lit room, the couple made love. The consequence of such impropriety was not so fleeting as the fulfillment the encounter gave and would soon be made all too painfully real. It mattered not, aftermath or no the interim was spent in reminiscence.

Their lovemaking was all Henri Vassal could think of for the remainder of the weekend. Monday morning was mostly spent seated dreamily at his desk. He would have been remiss to avoid work any longer and was intent on catching up on the chores he had neglected. With a lit cigarette balanced on a crystal ashtray and a silver envelope opener ready beside it, Vassal awaited the mail's arrival. He flashed a tight smile up at Lucia, who had just entered the room. She tossed a stack of letters wrapped tight in an elastic band down before him on the desk and shot him a knowing look as she spun around to leave. There was no need for her to be told not to dally. Vassal thanked her glumly.

She waved a hand at him over her shoulder.

"Let my wife in," Vassal told her. "Once she's placed her things in the hall closet."

Lucia nodded pausing at the open door of his office.

Vassal furthered, "She won't be long."

Before he could finish she stepped out into the hall. Vassal took a drag from his cigarette and picked up the bundle of mail and the silver envelope opener. Shaped like a miniature scimitar, Vassal used it to slice through the first piece of mail, removing the contents within-a letter he reclined back to read. His children stepped into the office, interrupting him. Mimi rushed around his desk wherein he set aside the letter, scooped her up, and placed her on his knee.

"Papa, see what I have," Mimi offered, proudly presenting a paper flower, which she playfully tapped at her father's nose. "Look! It's for me!"

Vassal reached up and delicately took the little girl's hand in his, preventing her from further teasing his face with the flower. Kirsten, his eldest daughter, stood before them; she too held a paper flower, the wire stem of which she balanced on the desk.

"Kirsten has one too, though mine is much prettier. Don't you think?" she asked.

"Indeed, Mimi. Both of your flowers are quite beautiful," agreed Vassal.

Madame Vassal entered the room and sat across from her family. It was of little interest, their interaction. And being the routine aspect of their visit she paid no particular notice of her husband's less than enthusiastic handling of their daughters. Was it not enough that they were there to begin with? And preoccupied as she was in the taciturn daily thoughts of a minister's wife, she busily looked through some sort of design portfolio she was carrying.

"Kirsten's is blue," the child persisted. "See—mine is yellow, which makes it better!"

"Stop pestering your father, Mimi," Madame scolded the child indifferently.

"Oh, Mama!"

"How has everything gone, darling?" Vassal inquired.

Vassal picked Mimi off of his knee and placed her down. Mimi gave her father a kiss on the cheek and ran to her mother's side.

"These samples won't do at all," Madame Vassal replied. "Can you believe they intend to decorate the hall with these paper flowers?"

"It's a modern world," Vassal commented.

Vassal took hold of his opener and another piece of mail from his desk.

"A modern world!" Madame scoffed.

The coordinator slashed the paper fold of the plainly envelope and read while he spoke.

"The ministry prefers to do things this way."

He quieted in order to read the new letter; Madame Vassal opened a page from her portfolio, turning the page in fervor. Not nearly enough time elapsed for the coordinator to read the letter when his wife cut in.

"Would you have a look at this?" she exclaimed, presenting the catalogue. "If that is what they intend to be as modern, well, then I don't understand anything at all."

Vassal raised his eyes from his letter and condescended to look at the picture Madame held up.

"No, I don't imagine that would do at all."

With a toss of the letter aside, he had said this last bit disinterestedly, only to placate his wife. Oblivious, both he and she were distracted by other matters involving little of one another. Reaching out, he flipped through the pile of mail and selected a large manila envelope.

"Besides," he went on, "now that you've returned from Germany I'm sure your feedback will be appreciated."

He examined the package before slicing it with the silver envelope opener. Vassal's wife had turned back to her portfolio. His two children were seated together quietly on the floor at their mother's feet. The silver opener was placed onto his desk. Vassal slid out a half dozen glossy black and white photographs of himself and Lucia having intercourse in the room at L'Hôtel du Cheval Noir. Paper-clipped to one of the photos was a handwritten note. Reflexive, in thoughtless concealment, Vassal shoved the photographs back into the envelope and placed them away into the top drawer of his desk. Madame Vassal glanced up at her husband, her attention perked by his sudden movement.

"Do you plan on taking long to go through your correspondence?" she asked. "The children are starved. We've got a table reserved, Henri. They won't hold it long."

Deaf from panic, Vassal remained rooted to his seat, watching his wife's lips forming the words as she nagged him.

"Don't think your correspondence is an acceptable excuse to skip out on our luncheon with Monsieur and Madame LaMonte. They're dear friends and they've bothered to come all the way from Province."

Pearls of sweat gathered on his forehead; steadying himself, Vassal placed his hands palm down onto his desk. A wave of heat flushed his cheeks. He pushed himself back, sliding away from the desk while remaining seated in his chair. He then rose.

"You'll have to excuse my absence for me," he stammered mechanically.

Madame's jaw dropped at her husband's unexpected withdrawal. She was stupefied.

"I am so very sorry, darling, but something has come to my attention." Of a sudden his throat was dry. "Really," he placated her apologetically, having anticipated her most probable reaction, "it's most unfortunately unavoidable. I'm afraid it couldn't possibly wait."

"I don't believe this!" Madame Vassal cried in utter shock.

Madame slapped the portfolio shut and rose from her chair. The two girls stopped what they were doing to stare up at their mother. Madame was about to speak readily exhibiting what impudence had been elicited. Her husband cut her off abruptly in an uncharacteristic enforcement of his will. The rage he displayed was almost untamable. His brow kneeled, Vassal brusquely slammed his palms down hard on the desktop.

"You will do as I say!" he blurted out.

He pointed to her as if the very words he bespoke were vested by the authority of God. Madame Vassal was speechless.

"Do you hear me?" he hollered.

Madame dropped down, retaking her seat. For the first time in her life she was speechless. After a pause, Vassal's youngest daughter, Mimi, broke down into tears.

Lucia stepped out of the small office at the sound of the little girl's cries. At her approach of Vassal's office, Madame stormed out into the hall, her two children grasped tightly in each of her hands. A sternness in her features told of the severity of their argument. Mimi wiped her eyes, holding back tears. Her mother halted and shook her, telling her to behave herself. The group recommenced and passed Lucia, who stood aside. Madame gathered their coats from the hall closet, hurriedly dressed her children, and scooted them out the front door. A glance back and Madame gave Lucia a stern look before intentionally slamming the door shut.

Curious about the commotion, Lucia stuck her head into the coordinator's office. The event warranted the intrusion where her prying might otherwise not belong. She caught Vassal seated at his desk, poring over the photos and reading the small note that was attached.

"Is everything all right, Henri? Your wife has just left with the children. I—"

Vassal looked up nervously at Lucia. His brow was sweaty and he was visibly shaken. It was a shock to see him in such a state; Lucia was drawn toward him out of concern and reached out to him in sympathy.

"Henri, what's going on? Are you all right?"

In an unexpected movement, Vassal flinched from her and crumbled, folding his head into his arms on his desk. He was powerless to keep from breaking down. Soft sobs choked an attempt to explain. Lucia moved around to his chair, squatted down, and took his hands in an attempt to comfort him.

"Henri, whatever it is, we'll get through it. I'll be here for you. Whatever is going on..."

Anguished, Vassal lifted his eyes to hers. He tried his best to smile, squeezed Lucia's hand, of a sudden broke away and presented the envelope. She studied the photographs it contained without the utterance of a single word. Sapped of energy, Lucia let the sordid photos slip to the floor. She slumped, any will to resist gone from her body. Helpless, she remained rooted to the floor, staring up at Vassal. The coordinator was stymied, dumbfounded at his desktop.

"What do we do?" she asked weakly.

Vassal turned to her. He gathered himself together and regained his composure. The note—which he did not share with Lucia—he held in a tight grasp.

"I'm being blackmailed," he stated with brevity.

"By who?"

"I don't know. They've asked for you specifically."

"They asked for me?!" she wondered, troubled. "But why? I don't understand."

"Lucia, they intend to drag us down together if we don't do as they say."

"But what do they want?"

"Sensitive and private information on some of the most privileged and powerful people in France."

"You can't do that!"

"I'm told to hand the photos over to you... to have you take them down to the ministry's lobby where you are to make contact with a man."

"Henri, I don't know if I can do that."

"Lucia, you must," he indelicately instructed. "I'm sorry, but there isn't a choice."

"What if we were to go to the authorities?"

"No, I must comply. I have my children to think of, my marriage, my reputation. You must do this for me. For you."

Neither of us will be safe if we chose to take any action against these sorts of people."

Lucia lingered at Vassal's chair. She gazed desperately at him, convincingly dependant upon his discretion.

"Do as I say, Lucia," he pleaded. "Trust in me and we'll get out of this together."

## 108

"I'm to bring them the files, Henri."

Lucia outlined all she had been through. In no way had she been harmed. She was told to act in accordance with a plan that made little sense to either of them at the time.

"They want that we'll never discuss it...that we go on with our work as if nothing were different."

"Will you be safe?" Vassal was in desperate need of her reassurance.

"Yes," Lucia replied. "It will be done in a very public place. I was told not to allow you to know where. They were very specific. They are threatening me as well."

"They threatened you?"

"Yes, Henri. I—I was."

"What did they say? Were they—"

"No. Henri, it's not like that—"

"You're protecting me, then. The less I know, the better."

"What am I to do? I'm in love with you!"

"Have we any other choice? Is there some other way?"

"No, Henri. This is my fault. I brought you into this."

"That isn't so. Not at all. It is I who am responsible. I am to blame for all this."

"Stop, Henri. What does it matter? We'll do as they say. What choice have we?"

It was a convincing act she had put on for the events coordinator. Nothing could have been easier for her than to have waltzed through the ministry's lobby past the liveried guards and down the stone steps to where Ames' automobile, the Super-8, was parked along side the curb on the opposite side of the street. Lucia escaped a wintry rain—the envelope containing the elicited photographs bundled securely in her arms—and seated herself in the back of the elegant roadster. The wind had risen and the sky turned dark. Between scattered clouds the sun had made several failed attempts to shine throughout the course of the day. Ames pulled her door shut and motioned to his driver, indicating for him to take the vehicle around the block.

At no point was Lucia hesitant, as if the whole enterprise were rehearsed. Ames and Lucia were driven in comfort down a wide bustling Parisian boulevard. All around, a bristling rain carried by a stiff wind threw the bare trees and assaulted pedestrians bundled against the chill, hurried to-and-fro in an attempt to get out from the sudden storm. Lucia handed over the manila envelope to Ames, who placed it at his feet.

"He is convinced," she said coldly.

"Very well," was Ames' satisfactory response.

"What is next?"

"The drop—"

"You mean for me to pass the material then."

Ames nodded his head and interpreted his plan for her.

"We've prearranged a secure location to drop off the files. In order to make the exchange with Haskins without intervention, he has requested it's to be done once every week."

Pensive, Lucia cued her acknowledgment. She listened carefully to Ames' instructions.

"We've discussed it and we believe it is in our best interest if you were to make the weekly drops."

Lucia did not bat an eye. She instantly responded in an even and clear tone.

"Where will the drops be made?"

The Super-8 jerked to a stop. The rain whined pelting the automobile unrelentingly. Through her window Lucia could see the ministry at the corner and across the street. Ames leaned over Lucia and swung her door open.

"Each week, when you have the files you'll bring them to me here, where you shall be conveyed to the Champs des Mars. It is there that you shall make the drop. It will always be this same place and in the same way. This has to be regimented. You are to wait at the foot of the tower. Do not go up. It is there where you will make a personal exchange, at the foot of the tower. The drop is

not a location. Haskins was specific. You will exchange in person, in public. Do you understand?"

## 109

At her exit of the ministry Lucia darted across the street under a livid blue December sky. Tucked securely under her arm were the sensitive materials in a satchel. As was denoted, she climbed into the Super-8 parked at the corner and was driven away.

The brief junket through the sanded streets of the neighborhood led to where the drops were to take place. The elegant automobile pulled into a narrow impasse across from the expansive tree-lined grass quad of the Champs des Mars. The quad extended for several hundred meters, laid out at the foot of France's grandest of monuments, the Eiffel Tower. A sunnier, more brilliant day could not possibly have been asked for. If not for the absorptive crispness of the wintry air, the park would have surely been crowded with a throng of sightseers. Albeit, a good-sized group of well-bundled school children and an odd number of idlers had shown regardless of the persistent chill.

Unaccompanied, Lucia exited the roadster. She wore a pair of dark sunglasses with a spruce hat cocked on her head coweled by a colorful scarf. A cloth satchel contained the documents, which she shouldered, securely tucked close to her side. The blind alley was equal in length to the width of the broad-lane boulevard. She crossed the grass quad and positioned herself below the tower. Liken to being under a great bridge or railway terminal, the tower rose indeniably.

The structure was secured by four girtered legs, which spanned far overhead, a vast clearing of tens of meters.

In the tower's shadow beneath the cavitous underpinning of the structure's modernist expanse, Lucia waited. The chill of the shade was in keen difference to the radiance of the winter sun. She loitered in an area of swathed light. Near to her, the group of school children gathered, forming a queue for their teacher. The proximity of the noisy youngsters and what confines the tower bore overcrowded her; Lucia stepped to a railing close at hand and leaned beside a number of observation telescopes. Several sightseers were milling about. One in particular, a thick-necked American man wearing a casual, colorfully adorned shirt beneath a heavy jacket, stood at one of the posts. He noticed Lucia, raised a brow and let fall an approving glance over the apparatus, taking in her attractiveness. Her back to him, Lucia stood unaware of the man's interest. She assumed a casual aplomb, awaiting the contact to spot her.

Parked down the narrow impasse, Ames' white roadster was in clear sight of the window of a room several stories up in a building adjacent to the park's entrance. From this window, Emery Haskins held its curtain slightly agape, observing Ames' idle automobile. The high vantage provided Haskins a gracious view of the park. In his hands was a pair of binoculars. He glanced through them, where from under the tower he was able to distinguish the diminutive figure of Lucia waiting and being approached by the American tourist.

"Pardon moi. Parlez-vous Anglais?"

Lucia turned; it was the American man who addressed her. His French was nominal.



"Parlez-vous Anglais?" he repeated.

Annoyed, Lucia curtly waved the man off, rudely indicating that she did not speak English.

"Je suis désolée," the man persisted in his imperfect French. "I'm so sorry, mademoiselle. Could I trouble you for just a moment, please?"

Lucia wheeled around, fully intending to brush him off.

"I'm waiting for my fiancé, if you don't mind, monsieur," she answered.

"Not at all, mademoiselle. You'll have to excuse me, but," pointing to her bag, he indicated to the contents, "if I'm not at all mistaken, you have particularly sensitive papers in your possession, which I believe you've been instructed to pass to me."

Taken aback, Lucia hesitated, not sure what she should do. Quick on his toes, the American man offered his hand to Lucia and introduced himself.

"The name is Hale. James Corbin-Hale. And you are Lucia Bruegel, if I am not mistaken?"

Dumbfounded, Lucia shook the American man's hand. As she did, he nonchalantly slipped the satchel from her shoulder and maneuvered behind her to help her to remove it.

"We'll meet like this in the future," he told her. "No differently."

A couple of red-pantalooned gendarmes ambled past. Hale shut his mouth and stepped around Lucia, casually taking her by the arm. They strolled in the opposite direction as the gendarmes. When the two lawmen passed them by, they did not take notice of the odd match the couple made. Hale turned back to Lucia and inconspicuously continued their conversation where he had been forced to leave off.

"Like this, you understand."

Lucia acknowledged him with a nod.

"And always with me," he elaborated further. "Never pass anything to anyone else. There will be no exceptions.

Under no circumstances will you ever pass anything to anyone else."

Haskins had a perfect view of the Super-8 from the upper window of the building set adjacent to the Champs des Mars. At Lucia's return, he watched Ames swing the weighty passenger side door open for her from within. Emery could see them clearly from his vantage. It was sufficient that he knew the drop had been complete. He released the curtain and backed away from the window.

## 110

Together in the events coordinator's office, Vassal and Lucia worked in silence. The coordinator was distant. He had hardly spoken the entire morning. He pored through an open file, which Lucia had placed before him on his cluttered desk. Unmovable, she waited for some response, planted firmly before him. Her face was flushed; Lucia's aspect made her appear as if she were having a hard time holding something back. Vassal noticed her and read her posture exactly. He broke their silence.

"There are things at this moment I find to be distracting to me." He was calm to a fault. "Please try to understand, I have a lot on my mind, Lucia."

"I'm under an enormous amount of stress as well, Henri," she responded in kind.

"I understand that. I don't mean to seem insensitive."

Vassal sensed Lucia growing hysterical. She was yet to cry but was at the very edge. He rose from his desk and took her in his arms.

"Don't be upset with me," he comforted.

The couple embraced. Over Lucia's shoulder, Vassal bit his lip. In an attempt to quell his emotions he sank his head low, pressing his face into Lucia's neck. Softly, he began to weep. Lucia turned to him. With a free hand she wiped the tears that flowed down his cheek.

"Now, Henri—"

In between sobs Vassal explained, "I'm sorry. You shouldn't see me this way."

"No, Henri—" she consoled him.

"I would like it if I were stronger."

"You are strong, Henri."

Tears welled within Lucia's eyes. The condition was flagged by the sudden physiological change in her irises from hazel to a crisp, watery blue. She was forced to pinch herself at her side with her free hand in order to fight back the tears.

"Madame Vassal has chosen to leave me," Vassal continued through his sobs. "She will take the children—my two beautiful girls. They are to spend the remainder of the winter in Germany with their grandparents while my wife and I finalize a divorce."

"What? Oh no, I'm so sorry," Lucia uttered in sincerity.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. After Christmas, in time for the new year."

Vassal was lost in his misery and broke down. He could no longer commiserate with his tried conscience. He fervently embraced Lucia, his only source of assurance. She was, as always, receptive and rubbed his back so as to console him.

"Henri, I'm so sorry. Everything will be all right."

Vassal soon gathered himself to tend to his duties. An early conference had distracted his thoughts. Later in the day, he helped Lucia to put on her coat and scarf. It was time for her to make what was fast becoming an ordinary occurrence.

"The weather has only worsened since this morning. Are you certain they intend to meet you?" he asked, concerned.

Lucia spun at Vassal and kissed him warmly.

"You are too kind, Henri. I'll be safe, I promise."

"Have they treated you respectfully?" In posing this sensitive question, Vassal grew angered at the very notion. "I won't have it—"

"They have," she immediately responded. "It's strange, really, how comfortable they try to keep me. It's very routine. I'm beginning to grow accustomed to it, actually. And only this past week, they—"

"Well, this won't last forever," he interjected protectively. "These past couple of weeks, we've about given them everything we can."

Thoughtful of his concerns, Lucia embraced Vassal before turning to leave. She pulled open the suite's entryway door and said goodbye.

"One moment—" he stopped, holding her back.

"Yes, Henri?"

She correctly read in Vassal's unsteady glance a vulnerable yet compulsory desire to speak his heart.

"What's the matter, Henri?"

Vassal smiled tautly and comforted her as he fixed her scarf.

"Thank you for this morning. I—"

"It's nothing, Henri," Lucia answered. "I'm here if you need to talk."

"Thank you. Have the remainder of the day for yourself."

"Won't I see you tonight?"

"No, not tonight, Lucia."

At that moment the phone within the suite rang.

"I hope you can understand," he continued. "I'm sorry. We'll talk in the morning."

Vassal turned toward the phone but not before Lucia motioned to head down the hall.

"I'll get it," she announced.

"No, let me," Vassal argued, holding her back. "It's all right. You shouldn't keep them waiting."

He politely shooed her away and closed the door softly behind her. The telephone rang several more times before the coordinator made up his mind to answer. Vassal lifted the receiver.

"Hello?" He paused and listened. "This is," he answered. "Yes, like you said." He listened further. "At this very moment... I understand." Vassal hesitated, becoming agitated. "Here? But, shouldn't we—I see. No, of course... Yes, I understand."

On the opposite line was Emery Haskins. He stood at the upper window in the building set adjacent to the Champs des Mars. The curtain was left only partly drawn. In his hands he held the receiver. The thin band of exterior light, free to escape into the room, sufficiently lit the diminutive space. Once the line disconnected, Haskins set the receiver onto the cradle, placed the telephone down on the window ledge, and fully drew the curtain shut.

## 111

Lucia hesitated outside Vassal's office door. In her hands she juggled a cardboard box full of office paper and a stapler.

Through the closed door, she could overhear Vassal as he argued with his wife.

"Please don't resist me on this!" he contended with a raised voice. "It's important. Think of the children. It's Christmas, for God's sake. My parents will be there, as well as my sister and her family. Please don't do this to me."

Madame sat across from Vassal stubbornly entrenched in a seat before the coordinator's desk.

"Fine, Henri," she resigned. "But that woman better not be there! I refuse to spend Christmas Eve with her."

"She has plans. She won't be there."

Not much more needed to be said; Lucia pivoted in place, quickened past the coordinator's door, and entered the receptionist's office. A moment later Vassal stepped from his office and courteously escorted his wife into the hallway.

He said goodbye with a tight kiss to her cheek.

Lucia listened while Madame was led from the suite. She waited at her desk for Vassal to return. She could hear him pause at her door, not entering, only lingering for a moment before he gathered his courage. For Lucia, the

coordinator's actions had been easy for her to anticipate, and this moment was no exception. When Vassal finally entered the room, his expression, and as he spoke, the severity of his tone was all too telling of his intentions. The notion of him breaking with her, she had prepared herself for. It had long been characterized by his gradual distancing from her in the few weeks since their liaison. Anything even slightly resembling the very nearness to one another they had not long ago shared was no more.

He began by transgressing, "Lucia, about what has happened..."

Lucia responded diffidently to this; she steadily glanced up at Vassal. The glint indicative of the beauty in Lucia's bright eyes went lackluster. She was both calm and collected.

"Yes, Henri?" She bespoke.

"With us, I mean," he stammered. "I, well. I want you to understand, it's not that—Don't think I feel any differently about you. I've been distant, I know. It's just... you have to try to understand."

Lucia regarded Vassal's inarticulate pronouncement blankly. He had not any need to second-guess her. Her calmness was evident enough in itself. She listened, stilted and unemotional. Nothing he could say could dissuade her.

She was unresponsive, staring. Vassal took a step closer to her desk. He rummaged in his pockets and found a packet of cigarettes, which he offered to Lucia. It was an inane token. She declined. He removed a cigarette, stuck it in his mouth and continued with his paltry excuses.

"I mean, we're both adults." He spoke through tensed lips, the cigarette held nimbly. "We know what we want. And we know what's best. We've gotten ourselves into enough trouble as it is."

Vassal never actually lit the cigarette. He merely kept it ready while he spoke.

"Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I appreciate all the long hours that you've put in these past few days. Everything you've done. You deserve a break. I owe it to you. Lets give our selves a little space. We've both got the week off. I think it is best if we didn't see each other until New Year's."

He removed the cigarette from his mouth and waited for some response, which Lucia failed to give him.

Emboldened by her silence, Vassal pressed his one-sided argument.

"Let us say by then, possibly, our difficulties may have played themselves out."

"Nothing's going to play itself out, Henri," Lucia noted with absolute directness. To remain the victim any longer was an affront to her dignity. She was stern. A slave to her womanly pride, she was at once embroiled by Vassal's contemptuous behavior. "I refuse to have a staged conversation with you about this. There is no discussion, it was over before it began. Any choice you've made is bound to be weak."

"What's come over you? I can't believe you'd say that. This is not going to happen this way. I'll not have a quarrel with you, Lucia. I'm sorry, but that's how things are going to be."

"I don't want to quarrel with you, Henri. I'm trying to talk some sense into you. Heaven knows how you ever got these ideas into your head, though not confronting this problem will only make it worse."

Vassal was uninterested in what Lucia had to say.

"I am sorry, but that is how things are going to be. There is nothing else that needs to be said about it."

"Please reconsider," she implored, her argument falling on deaf ears.

"Now, if you're quite done in here, I'd like to close the office up a bit early," he said with indifference.

Vassal received an icy stare.

"You're welcome to gather your things when you're ready and leave, if you wish," he summated.

Vassal turned his back to Lucia and walked out of her office, closing the double door behind him.

## 112

A perfect powdering of snow dusted the city of Paris in time for the holidays. The festooned and bedecked gas lamps that lined the brick sidewalks alit the large and airy flakes—a perfect addition to the charmed and glib atmosphere—an enchanting precursor for the throngs of merrymakers window-shopping in anticipation of Christmas.

Contented and happily together holiday shopping with his wife and children, Vassal strolled down the storefront-lined sidewalk. He lagged a few paces behind his family speaking in a carefree tone to his brother-in-law—an older, well-bred gentleman, Monsieur Carbot. Ahead of the two of them, Madame Vassal was in vehement conversation with an older, well-dressed woman—Madame Carbot, Vassal's sister. On the march, just a few paces ahead of the adults, were the two girls, Mimi and Kirsten. The sisters excitedly paraded before the brightly lit and inviting shop windows. Mimi repeatedly sang the first and only verse of *Dans Cette Étable* that she knew by heart while she excitedly eyed all the many prospective gifts on display.

*Dans cette étable,  
Que Jésus est charmant!  
Qu'il est aimable,  
Dans son abaissement!  
Que d'attraits à la foi!  
Tous les palais des rois  
N'ont rien de comparable  
Aux beautés que je vois  
Dans cette étable.*

[In this stable,  
How sweet is Jesus!  
How lovable he is,  
In his subservience!  
Such appeals to faith!  
All kings' palaces  
Have nothing comparable  
To the beauties that I see  
In this stable.]

Kirsten stopped to give her little sister a boost up to the waist-high ledge of a bustling toyshop's front display. The window was aglow with an hospitable warmth. Mimi playfully pressed her face to the glass and giggled.

"It's cold!" she exclaimed.

She pushed against her older sister and breathed heavily onto the frosty windowpane of the shop display.

"Can you see better?" Kirsten asked.

"No, I can only see my breath. The window is cold."

With a mittened hand Mimi wiped the window to clear a spot where her breath had fogged the glass. Again, she giggled and muffled her laughter with her hand while her parents passed them by on the sidewalk, seemingly not to take any notice of the girls' horseplay.

From behind a display in the toy store, Lucia espied Vassal and his family. In the crowded shop, half-concealed, she went unnoticed. She remained stock-still staring out onto the sidewalk when she inadvertently made eye contact with Mimi. Lucia could hear Madame Vassal's voice muffled behind the glass, calling to her daughters.

"Mimi! Kirsten! Let's go! Don't make Papa wait."

Vassal approached his darling children. He motioned kindly, indifferent to his wife's scolding. His mood was grand and he was not about to let anything spoil it. Kindly and fatherly he knelt down to scoop up Mimi.

"That's all right," he soothed her.

He held the little girl on his knee and propped her up to get a better look at the display.

"What have we here?" he hummed.

Mimi excitedly turned to face her father, her cheeks rosy from the chill.

"Papa, that lady-"

On display was a row of porcelain dolls. Glass-eyed, they gazed out beautifully—a beguiling treat to a little girl like Mimi. One doll in particular stood out, a lovely lady in the most exquisite and regal of gowns. Vassal was drawn to this one and singled the doll out to his youngest daughter.

"That one there? Oh, she is beautiful, isn't she?"

Mimi wheeled back around, following her father's finger. To the little girl, this small doll that her father mistakenly pointed out was, of a sudden, to her the most wondrous thing in all the world. Her glance for an instant wandered into the store momentarily in search of Lucia, who had disappeared. All but forgotten, Mimi's excitable gaze fixed dreamily onto the porcelain doll.

"Yes, Papa," she agreed, charmed and mesmerized. "She is so very beautiful."

## 113

Lucia passed the lower windows outside Vassal's home. On the ground floor of the modest town house, Vassal was celebrating Christmas Eve with his family: his wife and daughters, his sister, and his brother-in-law. The coordinator stood atop a stool set before the Christmas tree. In his hands he managed a small ornament—a ceramic angel dusted with glitter. Once he had placed the figurine he descended and took a few steps back to scrutinize his hanging. In the background, soft festive music played on a phonograph.

"Very well. Very well, indeed," he pronounced, quite satisfied with his effort.

Mimi rushed up to him with a length of trimming and pulled at his pant leg, getting her father's attention.

"Place it high. Place it high, Papa!" she exclaimed with excitement.

Madame Vassal and Madame Carbot entered together from an adjoining room and set a punch bowl down on a table near the sofa. Vassal had ascended the stool and got on his tiptoes to satisfy his daughter. The waft of a feast escaped the open door and was savored by the gentlemen and children.

"Is it time yet, Mama?" Mimi asked in anticipation.

A stern shake of Madame's finger was the only answer the little girl received.

"Yes, is it time yet dear," Vassal seconded, careful not to fall from the stool.

Madame was not amused and excused herself from the living room to tend to the roast in the kitchen.

"It is a handsome tree, Henri," Madame Carbot warmly commented. She was ever-so-proud of her younger brother's caring and fatherliness. Prior to exiting the room she turned to Kirsten, who was seated with Monsieur Carbot selecting ornaments from a box on the sofa and suggested, "Kirsten, why don't you come and help your aunt and your mother with the roast. You're a big girl now. We could use your assistance in the kitchen."

Kirsten left Monsieur Carbot totting an ornament she had carefully selected.

"This one next. It should do just fine," she said in way of excusing herself.

The little girl smiled and curtsied before excitedly following her aunt and mother into the kitchen. Mimi watched her father, transfixed by his balancing act on the stool.

"Higher up, Papa! Higher up!"

Seated, Monsieur Carbot commented thoughtfully on Vassal's precarious duties.

"You know Henri, you look as if you've missed your calling as a trapeze artist."

Vassal laughingly placed the trimming far up at the top when the front buzzer rang out announcing an unexpected arrival.

"Who could that be?" he asked aloud and climbed down from the tree, "We're not expecting anyone." Vassal headed for the front door.

"Your parents maybe?"

"No they won't be able to make it until tomorrow."

Monsieur Carbot pulled the curtain and spotted an upset Lucia outside on the porch, waiting at the door. He discreetly rose from the sofa and ambled across the room toward the phonograph. Vassal sensed that his brother-in-law had tensed. Nonchalantly, Monsieur Carbot flipped through some records. He drew Mimi's attention to the many decorative covers and pulled her aside.

"Come, Mimi. Help me to find some nice music to play next."

From within the kitchen Madame Vassal shouted out to the living room, "Henri, who is that at the door?"

Vassal flipped on the porch light and opened the door, shocked to find Lucia. She was bundled; her arms crossed half hugging herself against the cold. He stepped out onto the stoop. It was evident, judging by the coordinator's lackluster and stiff posture, that Lucia was unwelcome. Vassal partially closed the door behind him. The look in Lucia's eyes was telling of trouble. Vassal took her by the arm. His glance was unwavering.

"What is it, Lucia? Why are you here? What's happened? Why are you crying?"

Upset, she was only able to stammer. She moved close to Vassal, delving for sympathy and comfort. To him she confided though he remained distant, her elbow held transitorily, keeping her at a respectful distance from himself.

"I—I only—if you could only..." she stumbled over her words. "If you could only listen for a moment, Henri."

Once Vassal had double-checked, peering through the narrow crack in the front door to confirm their privacy, was he to respond.

"All right, but please make it quick. You know how upsetting this could be for my wife. As it is, I haven't a clue how to explain—"

"Give me only a moment, Henri," she interjected. "Please."

To Vassal's surprise, Lucia was hysterical. She spoke in short erratic sentences. What she was able to convey was only half-coherent.

"I—I don't know what to do. New Year's Day. They say—they say they want a drop done. On New Year's Day. What should we do?"

Vassal ran his hand over his face and made a concerted effort to control his nerves. He attempted to make sense out of what was being said.

"Why couldn't this wait?" he said strongly, in utter frustration.

These words elicit a negative response from Lucia, bidding him to change his approach.

"We'll talk about it soon." He immediately corrected himself. "Better yet, I'll pay a call on you at the hotel, the day after Christmas. We'll discuss it then, all right?"

Mimi was attracted by the muffled and urgent voices that emanated from the opposite side of the door. For an instant the little girl's uncle's attention was diverted. She darted over to the home's entrance in curiosity. Her indiscretion drew her uncle's disapproval.

He swung around and yelled after her, "No, Mimi! Come back here!"

Vassal stared gravely at his young daughter as she quickly opened the door on him and Lucia. She froze in her tracks, aware that she had erred. Monsieur Carbot delicately pulled her back. He made eye contact with Lucia and then Vassal. Knowingly, he excused himself and the girl and shut the door retreating back into the house.

At the sight of his daughter Lucia became apologetic, "I'm sorry, Henri. I didn't..."

"Why couldn't you handle this in a better way?" an irate Vassal snapped at her. "You have to go, Lucia. I'm sorry. You're going to have to handle this alone. I'll call you tomorrow."

Breaking down in tears, Lucia bewailed her misgivings and refused to leave.

"I can't do this alone!" she sobbed, weeping and desperately clinging to Vassal's arm. "Please, you won't abandon me! I can't do this. Please, Henri. Without you, Henri, I won't be able to bear this alone!"

In an attempt to control the situation, which had quickly gotten out of hand, Vassal held Lucia momentarily, appeasing her unchecked emotions.

"I won't abandon you, Lucia," he promised in a whisper. "I just need time to settle these arrangements." Vassal glanced back and tilted his head toward the house, indicating his meaning. "Let me do this the right way," he pleaded.

Lucia stiffened her resolve and, subjugated, stepped back from Vassal, her head held low.

"I'm so ashamed, Henri. You must be disgusted with me."

"Of course not. Don't do that to yourself." He took her hand and went on. "Please be patient with me. Wait until after the holidays. I'll call you tomorrow. We'll meet and deal with this together." Vassal released Lucia's hand, stepped back, and lightly pushed the door in, withdrawing into his home. "I promise," he said through the door. "Try to enjoy your Christmas."



Lucia forced herself to smile. Her lips quivered as she also backed away.

"I'm sorry, Henri. It was insensitive to have bothered you."

"Of course not. Don't—"

She ruefully distanced herself from Vassal and wheeled away before he was able to close the door.

"Have a Merry Christmas, Henri," she said over her shoulder as she leapt from the porch.

Lucia wandered aimlessly through the still of the night amidst the streets of one of the many unobtrusive Parisian quarters. A vicinity of innumerable tight, narrow passages that merged and intersected at oblique angles was, in its complexity, exemplified by the broad, elusive expanse of the wintry sky suspended overhead.

Out of a strange curiosity Lucia stopped before a shoe shop's display window. She stared past her reflection in the glass and scanned the presentation. In after thought, she dreamily idled, caught in a sort of daze, beside herself in woe.

With her eyes alit, she gradually focused back to the surface of the glass where once more she was confronted by her stark reflection. On this occurrence, Lucia appeared different. She was able to see herself, youthful, as she was during the war so many years ago. The nostalgic thought provoked by this clear vision—when she had tended Marquard through his convalescence in occupied Belgium—was a painful memory for her. She sighed fretfully, her eyes welling with tears.

Lucia lingered motionless for a short term. A hand to her belly reigned in her pitched emotions. She quit her tears, self-loathing entreated her to a sudden strength. Sternly, she wiped her face and rigidly shook herself out of her trance, successfully chasing away the ghostly visage and pushing aside what little remained of her persistent conscience.

Lucia turned to leave taken aback at finding herself caught in a heavy snowfall. She hesitated before proceeding from the curb to cross the street. A fleeting check over her shoulder and a glance toward the shop window revealed her true self spitefully reflected back at her in the glass, a woman weathered by regret. A thought to Marquard once more brought her to grief, and she found her harrowing conscience still to persist at her. Lucia imperceptibly jarred herself out of her daze. To wrestle with her emotions in this way was too much for her and she hurried across the street. Lucia disappeared down the snow-blanketed sidewalk, enveloped within the thick accumulation of the storm. Paris was lost behind an impassive snowfall.

## 114

There was nothing Lucia could gain from harking back to a time in her life when the string of bad choices she had made destroyed her spirit to live, and the very thought of their consequence would only cause her anguish and doubt.

Yet she had. And the young French lieutenant, Modest Marquard, though a constant and painful reminder for her of what could have been, was also a source of great measure. For when she loved for the rest of her life, she loved only ever in paled comparison to how utterly she was in love with him. It was

for this reason that she forced those bittersweet reflections from her mind, chasing away her better self and with it any conscionable moments of doubt.

Hardened by this self-imposed detachment, she followed through with the final phase of Ames' elaborate plan to exploit the events coordinator's weaknesses. Little did she know the complete turn around all of them were about to go through.

"I don't like us being here like this," Vassal considered.

He led Lucia out into the corridor. She stuffed a parcel snugly into her satchel, which she in turn secured over a shoulder.

"If you're at all unsure about this, Henri—" she started.

Vassal gave Lucia an assertive nod and said reassuringly, "Not at all. It's just inordinate, our being here when most of the ministry is closed. Handle this per usual. I think it best if I stick around for a while. Phone afterward, all right?"

We'll discuss things New Year's Eve, like I promised."

All that was required in way of a response was the smile Lucia granted Vassal. She retreated down the corridor.

Vassal remained at the door and waited as Lucia entered the far stairwell. Before departing, she glanced over her shoulder. Disinclined to continue, she held the door ajar from down the corridor. Vassal remained rooted in the open doorway. He waved lightly, encouraging her along. In concealment of her apprehension, she waved goodbye and closed the stairwell's heavy door behind her.

A step out under the bright, clear sky, and Lucia exited the main entryway of the practically vacant ministry building. Politely, she held the door for one of the ministry's few employees who were working during the holiday. The French ministry was officially closed from Christmas to New Year. Still, a few of the offices were permitted to remain open as a courtesy to the various departments in order for them to meet deadlines before the year's end.

Lucia made a swift descent of the ministry steps, mingling with the pedestrians on the sidewalk. Georges and Cuvée were situated off to the side. It was Georges who grabbed her attention first. With a steady look and nondescript gesture of his hand, he signaled to Lucia to disregard their presence. Lucia carried on, though she doubtfully glanced back.

Georges had already started up the steps leading to the ministry's entrance. Cuvée, following close behind him, caught Lucia's glance, and in an uncharacteristically indignant manner reiterated Georges' previous gesture indicating that she go on. Subordinate, she followed orders, ignored the presence of the two men, crossed the street, and entered Ames' automobile, parked in observance of her instructions, set directly across from the ministry building.

The second she was seated beside Ames, she inquired about Georges and Cuvée and the abnormality of their presence outside the ministry building.

"Why are Georges and Cuvée—"

"Is everything in order?"

"Yes, but Georges—"

"Don't worry about Georges," Ames interrupted her before she was able to finish. "Focus on the task at hand. It's inordinate, Haskins having us do the drop today."

Lucia gave Ames a queer look, a sort of mock-smile with her eyes.

"What?" asked Ames.

"It's nothing, really. It's just the word inordinate."

"What about it?"

"Well, it's just, Vassal used that word only a few moments ago," she replied, puzzled.

Ames nodded, not quite following Lucia's meaning.

"How's that?" Ames questioned.

"Inordinate. Isn't it strange? Everyone seems to be getting a bad feeling about this one."

Georges stopped at the top of the French ministry's steps and wheeled around to face the street. As Cuvée joined him, he spotted Ames' car driving off. For a moment, the two men blocked the entryway.

"What was it again that he said?" Cuvée asked.

He was interrupted by Georges, who shoved him aside, keeping him from obstructing the path of a gentleman climbing up the stairs toward the entrance.

"Watch yourself!" exclaimed Georges.

Cuvée was put off and stepped aside, giving the stranger a sharp look.

"How are we to handle this?" Cuvée pressed shooting the businessman a untoward glare.

"Stop fretting about it," chided Georges.

James Corbin-Hale, unknown to either of the men, smiled completely unaffected by Cuvée's glance. Appropriately attired for collared-work at the ministry, Hale politely pardoned himself and entered the building unmolested.

## 115

Perched far up on the upper floor of the adjacent building, Emery closely observed Lucia. Satchel at her side she reluctantly delayed her exit of Ames' automobile. The Super 8 was parked in its routine position at the dead end of the impasse below. Lucia remained for a moment, half in and half out of the rear passenger side door. After the exchange of a few words, she secured the canvas satchel she held under her arm and proceeded with the drop. Ames settled in for the short wait while Lucia ran her errand. His driver turned to him from the front seat.

"I'm stepping out for a smoke," he announced.

"Sure," replied Ames. "Just make it quick."

In the brisk cold the driver strode roughly twenty paces ahead of the Packard. He smoked a thin filtered cigarette on the corner where the end street met the boulevard. The winter bare park of the Champ des Mar spread out in a long narrow tract, terminating at the foot of the Eiffel Tower and the Seine River. The tower was the most prominent structure, dwarfing the neighboring buildings, rising and firmly rooted in the Parisian soil-the crux of France.

From under the tremendous weight of the tower's expanse, Lucia awaited the drop. James Corbin-Hale, owing to his presence at the foreign ministry, was nowhere in sight. Lucia readjusted the shouldered satchel and stepped near the lift that led to the observation deck. Here, she stood, her back to the ironwork, with a broad view of the quad. Several folks meandered objectively, sightseers mostly; a passing gendarme forced a smile at Lucia, who inconspicuously acted as if she were waiting for the lift. When it arrived, the lift operator within pulled aside the folding gate and noticed Lucia.

He asked if she would care to take the lift, which she declined. Idly, he stepped out and checked his watch. Lucia moved away in the opposite direction. The gendarme had long passed.

The moments lagged. With the driver's return to the parked automobile came an exasperated question, arising from Ames directed facetiously to the air.

"What's taking her so damn long?"

"It's quiet out there—"

"Something's not right."

It was a feeling the driver shared and being restless himself, with a check back on his passenger, he attempted to placate the uneasy presentiment.

"It's pretty quiet. There were hardly any people about."

Ames stared out from the passenger window and ordered the driver to turn over the engine.

"Keep it idling."

The unobstructed view of the adjacent building's upper window allowed for Ames' automobile to be at all times in plain sight. Emery Haskins was not present at the window. Down below, a puff of black smoke escaped from the exhaust at the sound of the Super 8's powerful engine catching.

At the foot of the tower and from the opposite direction of his previous approach, the singular gendarme paced past Lucia. In passing he smiled sheepishly at the beautiful woman that he recognized, having seen her there before, thinking possibly she took a break from work like so many Parisians. As usual, she smiled demurely and turned away.

A wait of ten minutes lapsed. The situation had grown uncomfortable and thinking better of it, Lucia decidedly retreated. Without hesitation, she headed down the path away from the tower and through the park toward Ames' automobile. Close to the outer perimeter's black iron fence and near to one of several of the public park's open gates stood Emery Haskins. Lucia had not the chance to turn away; he bound forward and took her by the arm. She wrestled her arm from his grip.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing," she fretted.

Haskins reaffirmed his handhold and doubly grasped her so as to ensure that he not lose his hold again. He advised Lucia to remain quiet, guiding her assertively by her elbow. He led her onto the dead grass under a large, naked maple tree. They were isolated, though still in the open.

"What's happening?" she interrogated him fretfully. "Where's Hale?"

Haskins did not reply. He shoved Lucia hard against the ancient trunk and reached for the satchel tucked securely beneath her arm.

"Get off of me!" she cried, although remaining motionless. "Where is Hale? I'm not to pass anything to anyone else under any circumstance."

Her words were empty; the satchel loosened and slipped from her shoulder. Though spoken with impunity, her inaction contradicted her meaning. She did not refuse Haskins physically. She only refuted him verbally.

"Let go, goddamnit!"

Lucia allowed Haskins to force the satchel from her. She glanced expectantly toward Ames' automobile. Emery gnashed his teeth and threatened under his breath. The reason for his deviation from the plan was thinly veiled. He kept the conversation concise and to the point.

"Why is he protecting you?"

"What? Who?" Lucia demanded.

"The files are incomplete," Haskins accused dryly. "There are aspects that are being withheld. This isn't a game. In places, the information has been fabricated."

Lucia's glance wandered away from Haskins. The angry words he spoke fell into a void. He gave her a stiff shake to keep her with him.

"If Ames won't get to the bottom of this, I will," he threatened. With a violent gesture, he pointed his finger up at her face and snapped it down nudging her in the chest. "If Ames doesn't get me the files..."

The point was made; Haskins withdrew, his threat hung ruefully unfinished. In her helplessness, Lucia turned to face the ancient trunk and vainly sheltered herself from Haskins' threatening veracity.

Ames straightened upon sighting Lucia's return, opening the passenger side door.

"Here she comes," he muttered to the driver.

Lucia settled into the car. Ames immediately noticed her reddened complexion.

"You look upset," he confronted her. "Lucia, what happened out there?"

While the driver pulled the automobile out, Lucia rifled through a few bottles of liquor set into the back seat—a sort of mini bar.

"Haskins..." she grumbled, flustered and distracted.

Shaken, she grabbed a glass and filled it halfway with liquor.

"Lucia, now calm down," Ames said as he took the bottle from her unsteady hands. "Tell me what's happened."

Lucia threw back the liquor and swallowed it off before she continued. Ames waited patiently for her.

"Haskins cornered me. He claims the files are incomplete, that you are withholding information from him."

Ames sat back after he replaced the bottle to the mini bar. Lucia saw in him not an inkling of shock or surprise.

"Elijah, is it true? Are you?" she pressed.

Ames gestured with his hand, giving her a terse reply.

"No. In fact, for some time now, Haskins has been in contact with Vassal."

"Why?" Lucia asked in shock. "Vassal? I don't understand. The files? He said—"

"Vassal hasn't given Haskins what he wants. That is the reason he is threatening us... There's something he doesn't know," Ames clarified, nodding to himself. Lucia remained patient, listening.

"We've been keeping a close eye on Vassal," he continued. "Haskins has been playing from both ends. You see, he thinks he's smart." Ames shook his head and faced Lucia. Unworried, he reassured her by saying, "This is an old game, Lucia. There's nothing for you to worry about. I've been doing this sort of thing since before he was born. You do your part and you'll get through this."

## 116

Vassal stood leaning on the sill of his office window. Outside, a fresh snow fell in clumps from the sky. Beside the coordinator, Lucia finished a quick cigarette, snuffed it in a crystal ashtray readied at her side and tossed the seared butt into the fireplace.

Without turning to her, Vassal commented, "You'd think the winter would never end, the way it keeps snowing."

Scattered upon his oak desk were numerous loose papers. All along the wall, a number of built-in shelves had been cleared. Books and personal effects were arranged in an orderly fashion upon the floor. Vassal stepped wide around his desk and strode past Lucia. He hesitated at the door prior to his exit. Lucia was oblivious to his movement. Attentive only in that his withdrawal propelled her from being idle to readdressing work. Vassal remained watchful of her as she scooped up a few things from the hardwood floor. His mood was reflective, comfortable. Indifferent to his stare, Lucia carried on as she was, her body attractively folded as she squatted. He found himself very much so drawn to her.

"Was there anything I could bring back for you?" he chanced with a closed smile.

"No, but thanks, Henri," she said as she organized the few things and quickly returned them to the vacant shelves.

Vassal lingered in the doorway. She placed the items conscientiously, crossed her arms, and stepped back. "What do you think?" she asked, pleased.

"That's fine. Are you sure I couldn't pick you up something for lunch?"

"No, really, don't worry about me," she replied. "I'm all right. I had a little something earlier, it'll suffice. Take care of whatever you have to, Henri. I'll be right here."

A fond look around the room, and Vassal approvingly nodded with an assertive smile.

"It'll be nice, I think, to make these changes."

"Change is good, Henri," Lucia concluded and turned to see Vassal out.

The coordinator would return shortly. In the midst of rearranging Vassal's office, Lucia had come across a folder of loose papers. The interim passed in busied work. The folder seemed lost or misplaced in the shuffle. Not certain of the papers content, Lucia pored over them. She was distracted and caught unaware by Vassal, who swooped open his office door, laden with an armload of provisions.

"I brought us lunch," he announced, noticing Lucia. "What are you doing?"

Taken aback guiltily, Lucia let a few of the papers fall, which landed at Vassal's feet. He passed the food to her and relinquished her of the pilfered folder. Vassal squatted down to collect the papers, instantly recognizing them.

"What's this?" he asked, shocked.

Lucia placed the bagged lunch on the coordinator's desk. In an attempt to cover for herself, she cautiously returned Vassal's question with an indirect question of her own.

"Did you want to find a place to keep these papers?" she asked feigning innocence. "I found them lying about."

As a liar Henry Vassal had few equals. An accurate measure in lacking probity was had of Lucia's improvised attempt at misdirection. The coordinator's ire reaction let over to composure. Vassal calmly bunched the loose papers together and returned them to the folder, which he had violently snatched from Lucia's hands.

"Lying about?"

"Henri, have you been completely honest with me?"

"Have you?" Vassal asked in return.

"I don't know what to say to that."

She feigned being upset, wheeled around, and faced the newly arranged shelves.

"I feel so lost and impossibly caught up in all this," she proceeded helplessly.

The shelves were arranged in a most satisfactory fashion. Particular attention was paid to the gallery of opulently framed photographs of the coordinator with dignitary and notables, men such as the French president Albert Lebrun, Authors, Henry Charriere, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the French poet, Louis Aragon, Film actors of the likes of Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, the French dramatist, Marcel Pagnol, The American film director Billy Wilder, and the American aviator Charles Limburg. Yet of those many effigies it was the simple pictures of Vassal with his two children and loving wife that were treated most precious and given the greatest regard.

"Listen," Vassal uttered tenderly. "I have to tell you something. It's important you know. Maybe I should have been more honest with you, Lucia. I don't know. But I thought it better to leave you out of it."

"What's happening? I don't understand."

"I want you to know that I intend to protect you."

"How?"

"Not long after we made our first drop, I was approached by the British O.S.S," he told her.

"The British?"

"They know everything. And in order for me not to be held liable, in lieu of the knowledge that sensitive materials have been divulged, they tell me a foreign government or agency, such as British intelligence, has to act for me as intermediary."

"I don't understand."

"In that way I am able to claim immunity. You see, if I willingly corroborate with the British, the French authorities would recognize me as having asylum. That way I could get out of this predicament and at the same time, I wouldn't be held liable," he explained.

"I really don't know about this." The frustration she displayed lessened with the brief summarizing of his plans. "It's all so fast. I'm afraid, Henri."

"There's no need. Don't think I'd leave you out of this."

"Leave me out?"

"Don't think so."

"No, Henri, not at all."

"I've made special arrangements," he divulged further. "Not everything in the information we're passing is accurate. I've altered some things. The authorities want the missing files, but I've held out on them until the time that they would guarantee the protection of my family."

"The divorce," Lucia said, putting the pieces together.

"That's why I needed time. They arranged for my wife and I to have an apparent separation. In that way, my family could leave for Germany."

Vassal was seemingly distracted. "If they are able..." His glance fell away and a lack of words accompanied his wandering thought. "I... They—"

"But that isn't all," Lucia managed, bringing him back to the subject at hand.

"No, it isn't," he agreed. "And I've made it clear to the British that they won't see anything without first having you as far removed as possible from danger."

Heavy snowfall provided an excuse to leave work early. Vassal had himself suggested it. Upon her dismissal, Lucia informed Ames of Haskins' disruptive scheme. It was obvious that the event coordinator's supposed meeting with

British intelligence was nothing more than a hoax. Emery Haskins had duped Vassal into handing over the remainder of the files. By these means Haskins himself was overstepping Ames' operation. It was an affront to Ames effort. Not everything Vassal divulged was foreseeable. That the coordinator was intent on protecting Lucia came as unexpected.

Lucia was all that stood in Haskins way, which explained his untoward behavior during the most recent exchange.

Lucia ran through each point, Vassal's impunity, Haskins' blame, her own compromise, and in her mind she prepared herself for the encounter that she was to have with Ames while traversing the Seine through the snow. It was comprised of hers and of Ames' discourse in the backseat of his roadster on a corner crowded with taxicabs near to Le Petit Palais, wherein she divulged the coordinator's plans.

"Vassal thinks he's playing smart. Haskins has convinced him that he is with British intelligence, though Vassal won't put anything up until Haskins can guarantee my safety. It's all a rouse. Haskins' only interest is in ferreting out the missing files. What he doesn't know is that we're on to him."

"Well, if he thinks he's going to compromise our operation, he's got another thing coming," Ames threatened.

"What do you intend to do, Elijah?"

"Don't worry yourself. I have plans for Haskins."

## 117

From throughout, a snow was freshly laid on the frozen grounds of the Luxembourg Gardens. The powdery snow quickly reclaimed any footpaths made by previous pedestrians. Accumulated in excess of the foot curbs by early evening, the storm had significantly hampered those commuters intending to make it home in a timely manner after work. Many of the working class people had apparently made the wise choice to leave their various jobs early, for, by the time Vassal pushed himself past a sheet of deathly chilling wind and into the barren gardens, it was long since dark and the area was almost completely devoid of any living beings.

He trudged across the open quad. The wind picked up. Vassal held his head low against the chill. Despite the bitter wind in his face, Vassal was aware of a figure, possibly of a man, who stood not far ahead. Bundled against the chill with a cigarette in his mouth, his lingering made Vassal uneasy. Cautioned by the odd visage, the coordinator intentionally chose an alternate path. In doing so, he managed to bypass the figure by a dozen or so meters. His taking of this new route placed Vassal onto an un-tread track. In passing, the coordinator's eyes met the man's, which gleamed in a state of fixed recognition. Unknown to Vassal, it was Georges who stood ahead of him on the path. And when Vassal altered his path, Georges was quick to keep in pace with him.

Not sure of the man's intentions, nor even certain he was not himself being paranoid, Vassal pushed on. The wind had worsened and the blistering chill thrown into his face compelled Vassal to look straight down and push stubbornly forward. Against a sudden drift of snow, Vassal hesitated. He turned his body away from the piercing cold and found himself confronted by Georges, not far from him on a parallel path. At the stark realization that Georges had



also come to a stand still, being that it was not a coincidence, his instinct took control. Choking down his terror, Vassal pressed himself against the wall of wind. He evaluated the lay of the land in a single scrutinizing glance and with the taking of a deep breath bounded through a clearing.

The unexpected bolt gained him ground on Georges, who immediately pursued him. Vassal left behind him a path of cleaved snow as he pushed on, when he spotted a second man, who materialized ahead of him. Lions on the African plains will ferret out their prey in much the same way. It was the last thought the coordinator had before cursing himself.

"Damn—"

Vassal was trapped.

"Keep it together," he stammered, choking down the lump in his throat. And in wild desperation, feeling Georges close at his heels, he cut to the side. With the sharp turn, he fell deep into a drift of powdery snow, well up to his waist. In an instant, Georges and Cuvée were on top of him. The two men pulled the events coordinator up and dragged him from the drift. Vassal fought futilely against his assailants; too struggle proved useless and he was dragged by the two men through the snow.

"Unhand me, brutes!" the coordinator asserted.

"Shut up, ya louse!" Cuvée barked.

"Let go of me!"

"Give it up, you son of a bitch!" Georges yelled. "Don't make it worse for yourself."

Georges kicked Vassal hard as Cuvée dragged him. With Georges' landing his kick, Cuvée lost the grip he had on Vassal's coat, and fell forward giving Vassal a chance to spring up. In an instant, Georges was back on top of the coordinator, holding his face down in the blustery snow. Vassal let out a cry, his face reddened from the chill. Georges held him by the hair at the back of his head. The cry was sharp and high. Georges scooped up a handful of snow and stuffed it into Vassal's face, cutting his cry short.

"Shut up your mouth!" he demanded. "Take that, you shit!" he further shoveled snow into the face of the coordinator, "How do you like that, you goddamn shit!"

Cuvée caught up to the men, he slipped again and fell to a knee. In a furor, Georges whipped Vassal around like a rag doll and dragged him bodily through the powdery snow. He led him over to a tree, tossing him down hard against the trunk. Georges took Vassal by the ears and smacked his head firmly against the gnarly trunk with unchecked violence.

"You shit! Damn it!"

"I have nothing!" Vassal managed.

"You damned shit. You shit, damn it!" Georges ranted. "You're gonna give us what we want. You understand?"

Vassal, tears streaming down his cheeks, stammered complacently, nodding. Georges kept a firm grip on him and stared him hard in the face. The enormous pain brought about by the blow to the back of the coordinator's head caused him to momentarily black out. Cuvée caught up and took Georges by the shoulder.

"Come on! Let's not drag this out," Cuvée advised.

Georges released his grip on Vassal and gave him one last hard slap with his gloved hand across the face. It was a finalizing blow.

"You'll be sure to remember us when you wake," George spat.

The anger in him boiled over. He seethed.

"Georges!" Cuvee cautioned and shrank from their dirty piece of work.

Georges followed without further word.

Vassal was slow to come too; his assailants had long vanished. He was incapable of rising, frozen with fear and humiliation. The coordinator's mind raced with anguish; left to fret over the shame and indignity at his having been so brutalized the coordinator sank helplessly into the stinging snow and wept in short, hyperventilating gasps.

## 118

The office windows of the coordinator's suit had been drawn and locked shut. From within the fireplace, the reddened glow of burning stacks of paper emanated through the void of the darkened room. Vassal and Lucia were in conversation at the door. Vassal had the look of a desperate man. His eyes were wild and darted skittishly over Lucia's face. He clasped Lucia's hand.

"It can be like it used to be," he prostrated.

"No." She maintained and made an attempt to leave.

He rebuffed, "It could-"

"Nothing good will come of it," she sternly stated, dissuading his advance.

Vassal grasped her hand and implored, "There's nothing to fear. They don't know-"

She withdrew her hand from his and reared from him.

"They know." Lucia turned away from the coordinator, "I've told them," she spoke cruelly, out of anger, from over her shoulder.

"You've what?!" Vassal cried.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her around. The look in his eyes had hardened. Lucia stood fast.

"Let go, Henry!"

"Lucia, what did you do?" he asked fretfully.

"I have told them. They threatened me."

"No, Lucia! How could you do that?"

"You brought this upon yourself, Henri."

With a harsh shrug, she threw off Vassal's grip. He clenched his fists.

"I trusted you, Lucia!" he blurted. "I did this for you!"

"For me!" Sneering at him in disgust, Lucia venomously retorted, "Your acting so selfless really is repulsive, Henri."

"There's nothing you do that you don't do without thinking of yourself first!"

Vassal had heard enough; she had hurt him to the very core. He lashed out in frustration and slapped Lucia with an open hand. Stupefied, Lucia turned away in angry silence and stormed out of the office. Vassal himself was shocked at what he had done and remained in place.

The events Lucia related to Marquard were as damning a testimony as they were a culmination to her guilt ridden life. She was seated upon the edge of her bed within the small chamber she kept in L' Hôtel du Cheval Noir. She held a hand to her cheek where Vassal had struck her so many months ago. Marquard remained beside her throughout the recanting of events, her free hand held in his.

She explained as he patiently listened, "Ames was given the order to back off directly from Berlin. But he wouldn't let it go. He couldn't. He said he had plans for Haskins—blackmail."

At this, Lucia rose from the mattress. Marquard remained seated. Her back was to him. He was overcome with a disconcerted sensation, as if the whole of the room were in a void, suddenly having become enveloped by an almost tangible silence. Silence so intense it was a sound unto itself.

A sudden ringing gorged the prefect's inner ear. A whiteness engulfed his presence of mind. When the brightness and pain abated the couple were no longer indoors. Marquard recognized their new surroundings as being the garden of the country manor in Belgium. It was on the night of his escape. There were white flashes on the horizon. At the fence, Lucia stood, youthful and beautiful. There were tears in her eyes as she turned from Marquard to reface the house.

The temporal change of place from past to present came inexplicably over the couple's reality. A warp in the fabric of their shared memories flickered before their very eyes. Marquard's mind swelled with the colored thoughts of his past.

"Wait for me," he muttered.

"I'll wait for you," Lucia beckoned.

Lucia refaced Marquard, who had remained seated, for now the couple had returned to Lucia's chamber, no longer lost in a remembrance of the past. Lucia was youthful, as she was so many years ago on that very night. She brought her hands to her stomach. She was in full term, pregnant. The gesture was reclusive and withdrawn.

No real logic was Marquard able to find so as to explain the discord of both time and space that he was experiencing. He wanted to speak, yet was unable; made an attempt to stand and was incapable. A weighty dormancy disabled his effort; the languorousness he found inhibited movement yet breaking with all reason Lucia was unaffected.

She explained, "Ames was too involved. He felt his position was forced."

Marquard was speechless, hardly able to move at all.

"If there were another way," she trailed off. "But it was too late. Everything was too late. There was the child. The humiliation. I was so ashamed."

The youthfulness of Lucia and the words she uttered cut to Marquard's core. He was completely overwhelmed. He checked his surroundings and glanced away from Lucia. His eyes roamed around the room and then settled down to himself.

## 119

Marquard was enveloped in the stark whiteness of outdoor light. He stood well over his ankles in the running water of a riverbed. The awkward thought of how cold and crystalline the water was flashed through his mind. His mouth was made parched. He was of two minds as to cupping his hands and drinking. The summer had been hard on the river and its waters ran shallow. From the forested slope of an embankment came a shout, emanating directly above and behind him.

"Halt! Halt!" a man hollered.

Marquard wheeled around to face the tenor of the jolting voice. His eyes searched the river's bank.

"Halt!" the voice cried once more.

Marquard shot a confused look up at the ridge.

There came whiteness and with it passage to where Marquard's conveyance had originated. Seated listening from the bed, Marquard looked up at where Lucia stood. She now was himself, as he was in 1916—healthy, youthful, dressed gallantly in the uniform of a French infantryman.

"You understand, Ames couldn't allow himself to be humiliated," the young infantryman said. "Everything was too far along. It only meant waiting for Haskins, being patient, for months if necessary. Waiting for Vassal, for the timing to be right, when Ames would force Haskins to make a trade."

Marquard checked down at himself, seated at the edge of the bed, unsure of the surreality that went on around him.

He glanced up to find he was now himself, standing in Lucia's place as he was in 1916—in the uniform of a French soldier. It was disconcerting and he was made faint. Before him, remained himself seated on the bed. The aged Marquard was now the one doing the speaking.

"Modest, there's nothing I wouldn't have sacrificed," he said emphatically to his youthful self.

Marquard concentrated on this visage of himself, the only anchor he had to reality. In entirety the episode was detached of all reason. It was quite impossible what he was experiencing.

"I would have given my life to have been with you, but I was so ashamed," the aged Marquard continued. "How could you have forgiven me?"

The recollection of an event he was not present at, he could not have been present for, flashed through the prefect's mind. A newborn's first precious screams pierced the air. A nurse rushed out of a room with a bowl of filthy water.

Inside that room a painful labor had ended. The child's cries abated, on a bed, a youthful Lucia was handed her newborn baby. The child was calmed by its mother's touch. Lucia cuddled the new life in her arms, holding the baby close to her chest.

The white reclaimed Marquard's presence of mind. He stood in his youthful uniformed place. On the bed he was not seated. Instead, an infant lay peacefully in his place. Marquard glanced down at himself. The buttons of his pressed tunic shown a polished copper, he fingered the topmost loosening his collar. And upon checking back up, discovered that he was set in the infant's place. Lucia was standing overtop of him. She reached down to scoop him lovingly into her arms.

Whiteness overtook Lucia's embrace. Marquard was well over his ankles in the running water of the riverbed.

Confused, he checked about himself. The water ran shallow beneath him. The forest stood in absolute, unnerving stillness. His head spun and mouth was dry. He smacked his lips. There was intense silence, inexplicably shattered by a tumultuous explosion, the intensity of which literally cleaved the ridge above him.

Lucia was positioned at the foot of her bed standing before Marquard in the comfortable light of the room. It was Lucia for certain. And she looked Marquard over closely. The prefect's color had been drawn from his face.

Alarmed at his sudden change of state, Lucia checked to make sure Marquard was all right.

"Modest, are you breathing?"

With a start, Marquard glanced back up at her. He had only drifted. His eyes alit with recognition. He imperceptibly shook himself out and nodded in response.

"You say this man, Haskins, the German operative—"

"Emery Haskins," Lucia clarified.

"Emery Haskins. You say he was at the ministry, in Vassal's office?"

"That's correct. Though I had no idea they planned to murder Henri. I would have never gone along with it. You believe me, don't you, Modest?"

"Yes," he comforted her, "Of course, Lucia," and redirected, "Emery Haskins, you say?"

"Yes. Why?"

"There was a plumber this morning," Marquard deciphered. "He gave his name. It might have been—"

"Modest!" Lucia cried in shock. "He was dressed as a plumber!"

Marquard rose and took a stance, ready to act.

"Stay here, Lucia, and wait for me."

He snatched the phone from off the floor and checked the receiver.

"What is it, Modest? What is it you are planning on doing?"

Marquard repeatedly clicked the disconnect button. After a short pause he turned to Lucia.

"It's dead, there's nothing," he said. "The phone is dead. I'm going down."

Lucia wavered. Marquard hung up the telephone and sat her down. In her face there was to be shown an intense wanting of his reassurance. He kissed her tenderly, almost thoughtlessly. The motion was automatic, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Taken aback, her eyes beamed at him. For a moment she no longer fretted. A peaceful turn came to her lips. She was blissfully contented.

"Wait for me. I'll return here for you," he promised.

"Yes. I'll wait. I'll wait for you, Modest."

Marquard hurried down the stairs and was met by Pierre. Upon his entrance into the tiny lobby the prefect immediately recognized that the front counter was unmanned. He motioned mutely toward the front desk. Pierre read his expression.

"He left in a hurry only a few minutes after you went up. Should I have stopped him?"

The proprietor, Ames' disappearance was of little consequence. Marquard glanced away from Pierre and looked back toward the stairs to Lucia's room.

"No, of course not," replied Marquard.

"What's happened with the woman? Was she—"

Marquard was driven and led Pierre out. He spoke very matter of factually, was not at all concealing from Pierre his strong feelings for this woman whom he had not seen for the better part of his life.

"She'll be fine. I told her to remain in her room." Marquard paused to reflect and then went on. "She's as beautiful as I remembered."

"She is, then?" Pierre asked, in disbelief.

He deserved the truth. Marquard stopped Pierre on the front steps outside the inn.

"Yes. It is Lucia," he confirmed. "You know, I'm still in love with her, Pierre. It's funny, so many years have passed...How is that? What is it within us that allows for such irreproachable devotion to something as intangible as a memory? A memory that has always been for me nothing more than an unobtainable glimpse of the love of my youth.

Yet, my heart has been so utterly stolen that upon seeing her face again, it's given me a lightness of being which completely overwhelms me. I hadn't felt that, not since I'd been with her some twenty years ago."

Shocked at his friend's confessional, Pierre sentimentally grasped Marquard's arm, a chumming gesture done smilingly, proudly and with understanding.

"If I'd known you were so close to the woman...I had no idea," Pierre said in a sort of awe.

"We didn't see each other again. Not until this very day. Oh, I tried to find her, of course, after the war but it wasn't meant to be. It was unfortunate, like so many."

"I'm sorry, my friend," Pierre offered his consolation. "I had no idea."

## 120

Marquard ascended the steps of the French ministry building by twos. The summer sun blazed overhead. Pierre followed close behind the prefect. On each of the inspectors' jacket's upper pocket, identification badges were worn, which Marquard gestured to as the men entered, passing a ministry guard. Pierre removed a handkerchief and patted the sweat from his forehead.

"This heat is unbearable," he grumbled.

For a moment Marquard tarried with Pierre where the foyer opened onto the coolness of the tiled lobby floor. The low aspect of the entranceway's flat ceiling expanded dramatically upwards to the domed heights of the rotunda. In a distracted manner Marquard adjusted his friend's tie.

"When I get up there, I'll call down," he instructed as he checked his wristwatch. "It's only eleven now."

Pierre glanced over at the main door where the uniformed guard was stationed. At the entranceway desk there was a telephone. A straightforward plan archetypal of his thinking came to Pierre.

"I can call from here if I see him."

"You're certain, Pierre, that you remember him?"

"Certain."

"Be discreet. I don't want to chase this guy away," Marquard warned. "The gendarme stationed upstairs is all the help I should need. When Haskins enters, call up to me and wait."

Outside the suite of the events coordinator, Emery Haskins spoke with the gendarme, unaware of the presence of the two inspectors, or that his identity had been compromised. He confidently presented his papers. The guard checked against an itinerary he held on a clipboard.

"It says here to admit you at noon, monsieur," the gendarme related, pointing to the sheet of paper.

"Yes," Haskins agreed. "Noon, though if it were at all possible for me to finish up here... I mean, if I weren't in the way... I was hoping to lunch early."

There was nothing to signal trouble and double-checking the list, the gendarme consented, "You were here earlier this morning. I don't see a problem. Go on, then."

Without saying another word, Haskins entered the suite with his tools. The gendarme remained outside the door.

The bloodstains had since darkened on the wall and floorboards. Haskins paused to check the auxiliary office at its open double door. On the floor, the shattered mirror lay scattered below the mantle. He paused for a brief moment entranced by the minute reflection of his diminutive form imprisoned in each of the many shards. Haskins placed his tools aside and proceeded down the corridor. When he passed the open bathroom, he immediately noticed the hamper that Vassal had slid over to obstruct the opening in the wall.

The object had been hastily positioned by the coordinator and looked to be out of place. Haskins had fashioned the hole the previous evening and was aware that the hamper concealed it. No one else had bothered to notice or to check the crawlspace. He pulled the hamper aside and stuck his head into the dark opening. There was not enough light to make his way. He withdrew to retrieve his toolbox and returned with a large nickel flashlight. Haskins then entered between the walls.

The intense beam of the flashlight shone down the narrow crawlspace. It quickly became evident to Haskins where Vassal had disturbed the inner wall. For at that point in the brick wall where the coordinator had placed the dossier, the white powder of plaster had been strewn upon the ground.

At the prefect's approach of the coordinator's suite, the gendarme, stationed in the hallway, straightened to attention.

The man took a quick glance down at his clipboard, and then turned to peer through the open door of the events coordinator's suite.

"You there! Gendarme! This morning—" Marquard announced stiffly.

"Inspector!" the gendarme exclaimed, having been so inopportunistly addressed.

Marquard took the man aside.

"This morning..."

"Yes, inspector—"

Marquard cut him off, "Do you recall the plumber I made arrangements with?"

"Yes, Inspector... I—" the nervous gendarme stammered. He motioned with the clipboard and attempted to explain.

"Monsieur le prefect, I know it was a bit early to admit him... the list says noon."

Marquard snatched the clipboard from the man's hands and briskly interjected.

"When you do see him, be sure he's admitted. I'll be inside."

"Yes, I have already—"

In handing the clipboard back, Marquard added, cutting the gendarme short, "He must be unaware that I'm inside."

The gendarme made an attempt to speak up but was unable to get a word in edgewise. "Know this man could be armed and dangerous. He's suspected of being a German operative, and I intend to incarcerate him."

"He's in the suite, Inspector," the gendarme clarified. "I've just admitted him."

"What's that you say?" Marquard contended, taken aback.

"I let him in the suite only a moment ago," the gendarme reiterated at once.

"Good Lord!" Marquard motioned to enter the suite and cried, "Why didn't you inform me immediately?!"

"I had tried, Inspector—" the gendarme innocently attempted to answer.

"There's no time," Marquard interjected assertively. "Follow me. And cautious!"

Marquard strode forward. The metallic swish of the gendarme's removal of his saber from its scabbard, which hung at his waist, heralded his readiness. The gendarme entered the suite after the prefect.

The two men halted at their initial entrance into the corridor, listening for Haskins. There was no one in sight.

Marquard was tentative and worried about Haskins' probable reaction to being barged in on. The gendarme glanced about and formulated a strategy.

"Call out to him," he suggested.

"What's that you say?"

"Call to him."

"Yes." Marquard raised his voice and called out, "Monsieur plumbier!"

The men listened. There was no response.

"Stay put!" Marquard instructed the gendarme.

The circumstances called for decisive action. Marquard proceeded to the left, up the staircase to the file room, which he found empty, clamored back down, and indicated for the gendarme to remain guarding the room's only exit.

The prefect carried on ahead. He stuck his head in the bathroom, sighted the opening, thought nothing of it, and continued down the corridor. In passing, he did not pay particular notice of the toolbox. He checked the auxiliary office, made sure it was clear, and moved on to the door of the events coordinator's office. Extremely cautious, fully expecting Haskins, Marquard pushed the door.

"Hello?" he heralded.

The door swung open and Marquard took a step into the spacious office. A quick glance revealed the room to be unoccupied. The flash of a thought crossed over his face. His hair rose at the back of his neck. The prefect turned and launched urgently down the corridor.

"Check the bathroom!" he shouted to the gendarme. "He's not anywhere else! The other rooms are—"

Marquard bolted from the suite and was struck agog, confronted by a startling predicament. The gendarme was positioned down the hall. He blocked the suite's door and faced the prefect, his saber drawn; unbeknownst to the gendarme, from behind his back, Haskins in silence closed, the heavy flashlight brandished in his hands. At the moment Marquard spotted Haskins, likewise Haskins noticed Marquard. In that same instant, Marquard's harrowing expression conveyed the pending danger to the gendarme.

The gendarme wheeled around on his heels, his teeth gritted and his weapon striking. With a whoosh, the saber flashed, grating against the walls of the tight corridor and threw up a cloud of plaster dust. He struck at Haskins, bearing down on him with a high, decisive arch. Like the club of a cave man, Haskins clumsily swung the nickel-plated flashlight. The defensive maneuver saved him from the gendarme's blow. The thick steel-blue blade bit ferociously into the handle of the flashlight and glanced away setting off a spray of platinum sparks.

Marquard came to the gendarme's assistance just as the man recanted his thwarted attack. The saber lashed. The prefect was forced to withdraw. The gendarme struck once more, swinging horizontally at Haskins, who jumped



back away from the angry curved blade that lodged markedly into the doorframe of the entranceway with a thud.

The odds had worsened for Haskins. And beating a retreat, he vanished around the corner. Marquard and the gendarme pursued him where he seemed to lead them, up the stairwell to the file room. When the two men took the corner, they spotted Haskins disappear beneath the staircase and down the crawlspace. Marquard barred the gendarme.

"I'll follow," Marquard voiced. "Go around and cut him off at the bathroom."

The two men separated. Marquard entered the dark space. Ahead of him, Haskins scrambled out of the hole spilling into the bathroom. Marquard worked his way as fast as he could. From throughout the inner walls he could hear the din of a fierce struggle. There was a grunt and then silence. Marquard exploded into the bathroom.

The gendarme lay prone on the floor. A lump on his forehead was his reward for losing the upper hand. He fumbled a bit and struggled to get to his feet.

"I didn't see him coming," the stunned gendarme mumbled. He regained his balance. "Careful, he has a carbine."

"You're all right?"

The gendarme nodded and pointed into the hallway.

"He ran toward the coordinator's office."

Marquard jetted from the bathroom and entered the corridor. He hurried to the office where he discovered Haskins clamoring onto the windowsill behind Vassal's desk. In Haskins' hand he clasped a revolver. The great French windows were swung open and a brilliant white light flooded the room. Haskins glanced back toward Marquard then propelled himself from the second story window.

The prefect froze where he stood, listening for the resultant thud. Instead, a woman's scream carried from outside.

Marquard followed Haskins' path, leaning against the sill. A leafy tree stood a few meters from the open window. Its trunk was out of sight of the window. The tree was little more than a sapling and bent to catch Haskins' weight.

Marquard watched the daring do of his opponent, his laudable scramble down the branches to safety and subsequent landing heavily upon the ground. Haskins glanced to the window with a calculated look upon his face prior to his escape across the busy Boulevard des Invalids. He entered the street unconcerned for his safety. A torrent of honks erupted from the automobiles cut short by his senseless crossing.

There was no way to pursue save to follow suit. Marquard pulled himself up onto the windowsill, tensed himself, judged the distance to the nearby tree, and prepared to lunge. In a huff the gendarme entered the room spotting the prefect poised and ready to jump. With a leap of faith, Marquard cast himself to the whims of chance. Miraculously, he caught heavy enough of a branch and slid down to the ground.

The feat was drastic and fearing the worst, the loyal gendarme set upon the window, not sure of what he might find, letting out a sigh of relief upon sighting the prefect in chase of Haskins. The faithful gendarme turned and hurried from the suite.

Marquard dodged the slowed street traffic limping hard on his lame leg. He fell behind Haskins, who pushed his way through a crowd gathered on the sidewalk outside the gardens of the Hotel des Invalids. With a stiff shove, Haskins slipped past an entrance in the iron fence, crossing into the Invalids

garden. Marquard was not far behind, though due to his hampered dash he lost a significant amount of ground.

In the wake of Haskins' thrust, the distance before Marquard was made clear. The movement in the street had come to a halt, and the pedestrians on the sidewalk stood agog as the lame prefect charged headlong through the opening Haskins inadvertently left for him.

Haskins bolted straight across the gardens and hurriedly entered a metro station at the precise moment a train disembarked. From up the steep staircase, a throng of commuters crowded the entrance that led to the subterranean train platform. Forcing his way, Haskins descended, was detained at the overwrought turnstiles, and finally reached the platform, though not before missing the train.

There was no way to rescind the decision to enter the subway station. His pursuer had caught up. And upon sighting the inspector, Haskins immediately took action to avoid him, following the underground platform to where it terminated at the tunnel access. Desperation had grip of his better judgment and Haskins threw himself down to the tracks and plunged into the darkness. Without any other choice barring that of consenting to defeat, Marquard resolutely followed, setting himself down off of the platform elevated a meter above the rails.

Weary of the threat Haskins posed, the prefect headed down the tunnel and with trepidation cautiously pursued. The single-tracked tunnel that ran great distances beneath the compacted earth and peopled buildings and harried streets of the city of Paris was eerily silent. A tomb-like darkness pervaded, broken momentarily by ventilation shafts set into the domed, brick ceiling. From overhead, streams of diffused light filtered into the tunnel dotting a path straight ahead for the two men to follow.

Haskins came to a junction. The footfall of Marquard heralded that the lawman was close behind. The single tunnel was split down the middle. To his right the live track continued where the trains were in continuous use, and to his left, blocked effectively by a broad barrier, was an extant line, one apparently no longer in use. He clamored over the obstacle. Roughly two meters in height and extending the entire width of the tunnel, it took several moments before Haskins, spent from the chase, was able to heave himself over and continue down the alternate line.

Stamina was the single most attributable asset the prefect possessed. And it was an exploitable advantage he had over his tiring quarry. Marquard arrived at the tunnel junction full with determination. There was no indication as to which direction Haskins had gone. Though Marquard's decision ultimately was not based on any observation, rather it was made when he heard a train's rumble and sighted the lights of a train's approach, emergent from the darkness.

Marquard scrambled to scale the barrier. He struggled with his lame leg and barely straddled the barrier in time.

The train bore down on the prefect. The white sparks of the casters grinding against the rails caught the glint of his eyes as he glanced fearfully backward and bodily threw himself to safety on the opposite side of the barrier. A shot of acute pain ignited his lame leg. Marquard pulled himself up with a grunt and adjusted his prosthetic calf and foot at the knee. His face, as he winced in the harsh disgorged light of the passing train, momentarily shown matured with age.

Weakened, he leaned doubled, his hands upon his knees. The last of the train passed in the distance. The harsh clatter terminated and a shower of sparks fell like talc slowly and softly onto the tracks from the hanging electric cable where the Parisian subway trains fed.

There was an unaccountable silence. Ahead of him, the alternate tunnel was as black as pitch. No motion was perceivable. Marquard shook out his fatigue and gathered himself together before pushing on. The rumble and din of the underworld was restored. He was skeptical as to the new direction he had been forced to take and doubtful of where Haskins was. Breaching into the darkness and feeling his way blindly along the tunnel wall, Marquard's determination provided him with the strength to transverse the empty void.

It was not long before the tunnel came to a gradual bend, where Marquard discerned a dim glow—a faint, obscure light which strengthened where the bend opened onto a brightly lit area. An inoperable metro train was stationed within the tunnel, raised upon concrete blocks in apparent disrepair. A number of intense spotlights were fixed upon the double car-length of the paneled exterior of the metro car.

Of newly roused purpose Marquard closed, taking in the entire scene before him and quickly calculating the plausible dangers such an obstacle might present if not careful. Before him, the end car had an open vestibule door.

From within there emitted a loud groan. On the floor of the car lay a metro worker coming to from a blow to the head.

Marquard bounded into the car and assisted the man to his feet, inquiring, "Where is he?"

"He went through there," the worker replied.

The man protectively clutched the back of his head and pointed toward the rear of the train. Marquard motioned to enter. The metro worker held him back.

"I'm not sure," he said, doubtful of himself. "I might have blacked out."

"Are you alone?" asked Marquard.

"No. At the front there's another guy."

The prefect forced his way through the ill-lit train and emerged onto the vestibule prepared to enter the front-most car. Through the interior of the car's windows he saw two men. One was a workman dressed in stained overalls, and the other, Haskins. The two men struggled outside the train. The workman reeled back from a blow delivered by the butt of Haskins' revolver. He held his hands up in supplication.

Marquard advanced into the front-most car. The vestibule door grated. From the tunnel, Haskins glanced into the train to where Marquard had noisily entered. He and the prefect paired off. Neither man moved a muscle. The moment lingered, an impasse that the flimsy walls and hazy glass of the train insufficiently kept in check when measured against what vexation each man's stare imparted.

Haskins leveled his arm and pointed the revolver at the prefect. The motion was a slow one, strained to the point of delusiveness. With a thunderous clap and an explosive crash, the firearm released a single missile, which hammered through the window and tore past, narrowly missing Marquard's head. The interior of the car was showered with shards of glass. The prefect flattened down to the floorboards. No shots followed. He made his way, bent double, to the train's side door with the sound of Haskins' footfall in his ear, clattering over the metro tracks' solid struts in full flight.

Marquard's unyielding fealty to duty allowed him to be unbound by any sense of self-preservation. He recklessly ignored Haskins' very serious warning, fully suspecting the shot was intentionally miss-aimed, and erupted defenselessly from the car's side exit. In stubbornness, he pressed the pursuit disregarding all consequence.

Upon the prefect's immediate exit, a second shot rang out. The bullet splintered into pieces from where it impacted with the side of the train car. The lead tore at Marquard's coat, slicing his forearm. Marquard flinched back, certain that his adversary now intended to kill him. That last bullet was not to be mistaken for another warning shot. Still, with Haskins plunging into the darkness of the tunnel, the inspector took the risky chance in following.

In the darkness, he could hear Haskins clopping ahead and breathing heavily, breaking the silence of the empty, seemingly endless tunnel. Haskins shot inaccurately over his shoulder. There was a blinding flash discharged from the nozzle of his revolver. The rapport cracked loudly throughout.

The intense rumble of a metro train greeted the two men at a bend. From the definitive point where the alternate tunnel terminated, a train emerged onto the live line. The two lines intersected. Across the way, recessed into the opposite wall, was an exit stairwell. Haskins, in a reckless attempt, leapt across the tracks. For an instant his person was engulfed in the harsh glare of the subway train's lights. He cleared to the other side, safely out of the way of the passing train. The prefect, in dogged pursuit and with so much momentum—knowing he was without any hope of making it across the stretch of track before the train—was forced to veer off to the side and come to a standstill.

The tunnel passage was inescapably tight. Marquard had barely enough room, positioned such that his back lay flattened against the rough, hewn wall of the metro tunnel. The lit carriages of the underground train strobed uncomfortably near. He clung with a fierce grip to an unsteady railing near at hand; the train passed within an arm's length and generated a rush of concentrated wind and a deafening noise. The painful screech of the metallic casters over the iron rails and the physical stress of the nearness of the metro train taxed him beyond all endurance. The pressure of the train and the strong, turbulent air it generated pressed against Marquard. The train passed within inches of his body.

## 121

Marquard broke his kiss with Lucia.

"Wait for me," he said. "I'll return here for you."

For a moment she no longer fretted. A peaceful turn came to her lips. She was blissfully contented.

"Yes, I'll wait," she promised.

He drew away from her, his eyes remaining closed. The moment lingered. When he reopened them, he and Lucia were no longer confined to her bedchamber.

The country manor was situated in the dark beyond the garden. A faint glow issued from the house's porch. The countryside of Belgium was a beleaguered battlefield, and the heavens thundered and flashed with heavy bombardment.

The quiet, irregular glimmer of the porch light, in contrast to the flickering sky, drew his glance for a moment away from Lucia.

"That's curious. What is that point of light?" she postulated.

Lucia, youthful and clothed in her white nurse's uniform, strode toward the incandescence. Her movement bade him to come after her. He motioned forward.

"Don't move," he cautioned.

Lucia whirled round, "The light won't harm us."

She faced away from the manor house. It was not to Marquard that she endeavored. It was toward France. Lucia, in the full term of her pregnancy, stood barefoot in the grass.

"Come with me."

She stared at the horizon. "There's nothing there for me, Modest."

"There could be," Marquard contested.

"I'll wait for you," Lucia said.

A voice arose from the direction of the house.

Lucia drifted from him repeating her farewell, "I'll wait for you. I'll wait for you..."

The heartening phrase reverberated in his mind.

"I'll wait for you. I'll wait for you."

The lieutenant made his way to the French line in the dark, hearing Lucia's words repeatedly in his head. They were all he had to cling to for strength. Impeded by his lame leg, he was certain to be caught or worse. He had no plan save to push forward; only the thought of Lucia and her desire to see him free impelled Marquard to carry on.

The landscape had changed significantly from the last time he was outside the manor house. Great strife and warring had altered the appearance of it all. It took some time for him to regain his bearings. He quickly realized that the French had made significant advances through the German lines. The tract of land that divided the farmland of Memel from the rearmost trench works of the German line served now as a salient defensively bulging out into the French front. Much confusion reigned, brought about by the constant bombardments and heavy troop movement. There was no specific danger of shellfire where the manor house was situated. On the contrary, a ridge secured the entire region and served as a focal point for Marquard. Beyond the ridge lay the German trenches, a very real obstacle he could not possibly supplant on his own.

The Belgium people had no love for their German occupiers and would certainly help if the risk were not too high.

The lieutenant was dressed only in his hospital garb. That he was a soldier at all was not immediately apparent, and that he spoke no German was not a problem, for in the south of Belgium, French was commonly heard.

Providence granted him an encounter with a few performers of a gypsy circus troop. The small assembly, part of a larger troop, had been traveling to Lille where they intended to consolidate and entertain the troops for a fortnight. Prior to regrouping, the German troops had unjustly commandeered the majority of their carts and baggage. The train depot in Lille was where they were to meet up with the rest of their troop when that unfortunate circumstance befell them.

The band of performers consisted of a pair of Hungarian acrobats, several avaricious dwarves, a good-natured clown called Frites, and the circus manager. A rough-and-ready type, the manager, who went by the name

Lohengrin, did not at all conceal his indignation at the Germans for jeopardizing their livelihood.

"And after all we've done for those scoundrels. Oh, it's too much! Entertaining them louses for potatoes. Putting up with their wily soldiering ways. Risking our necks for a cause we do not believe in."

"In France we'll be met with some appreciation, at least," the clown interrupted.

Frites had been the one to discover the Frenchman skulking about on his lame leg in the early hours of the morning.

The clown mistook the lieutenant for a Belgian farmer. In the crespulent light, the Frenchman's crutch appeared to be a hoe and his bent aspect that of an elderly man, and as such Frites addressed Marquard in French most familiarly.

"I quite startled you," the clown inferred. "You're fortunate to have run into us."

"Really!" Lohengrin interjected. "What were you expecting? You'd be killed for sure if you attempted to cross the German line. Even if you had succeeded and miraculously made your way across no man's land, your own people would have most probably mistaken you for one of the enemy and machine gunned you outside your own wire."

"That doesn't matter now," the clown corrected. "You'll pass for one of our troop. An injured acrobat, perhaps."

"How do you intend to get into France?" asked Marquard.

"Let me show you something," the circus manager bade and brought the lieutenant to a single-axle cart, the sort peasants used to gather firewood and such. Beneath a canvas tarp, hidden amongst a few parcels and some baggage, was a lead box. No larger than a tin milk crate, it was the object of enormous reverence.

"What I am about to show you will guarantee our passage into France."

"What is it?"

"It's everything," Lohengrin proclaimed, unlatching the sides of the box. "We came across it while in Roulers."

Inside was the golden effigy of a lion head—a spoil of the Roulers museum. "It is a treasure from the pyramids of Egypt, a priceless Object d'Art. Our ticket out from this miserable place."

Lohengrin closed the box and concealed it beneath the canvas tarp. Frites removed a greatcoat from the tarp and offered it to Marquard.

"Take this and rest a while. You must be exhausted from your ordeal."

"Thank you."

"We'll wake you when it's time to leave."

That evening, a German artillery battery was emplaced beyond the ridge, forcing the troop to make adjustments to their well-laid plans. They roused Marquard from a short-lived though decidedly deep and restful sleep. A great influx of long-range enemy shelling made remaining in the region enormously hazardous. Decidedly, the troop migrated further south. A fever soon came over the French lieutenant. His newfound friends, realizing he was not fit to travel, unanimously agreed to unburden themselves of him at the first opportunity.

Of the three dwarfs, who made for poor traveling companions, one-Dolph, the brashest of them—was vocal, complaining at every step and most notably voting against taking in the French soldier.

"Let us leave him behind. What good can come from taking him on?"

The acrobats reeled at the suggestion. Frites the clown, no friend to the dwarf, gave the tiny stocky man a stiff kick in the pants.

"It'd be just like you, you twerp!"

"What of it, fool?"

"You and your kind have done nothing to help at all. You sit up in the cart mostly, griping and slowing us down."

Dolph barreled up and stomped at Frites' feet, grabbing and pulling at him. Lohengrin separated the two, upbraiding the clown.

"Leave him be! We're in this together." And turning to the dwarf emphasized, "Together! You hear me? And that includes him." The circus manager pointed to Marquard lying unconscious in the cart.

"He's just dead weight," Dolph fumed.

Frites struck his fist out at the dwarf, knocking him in the face. Dolph spit at the clown in frustration, accidentally spraying Lohengrin.

"Enough," the manager growled, swatting the dwarf away unintentionally knocking the little man off his feet. "Now then, if you're finished, let's make do the best we can. Next town over we see what we can do."

Frites was appeased. Silenced for the moment, the dwarf stewed, climbing into the cart with his two companions and joining the burdensome French soldier. The troop continued on its way.

Under the cover of dark, they made good time. Unknown to Lohengrin, the lion head they so relied on for their safe passage had become the object of the dwarf's infatuation. Greedily, his stubby fingers felt the box's edges in the dark.

Frites cut innumerable looks Dolph's way, not trusting him or his friends for a second. The dwarf recognized in the clown an adversary and expressed as much when he turned to his companions.

"That dirty clown," he schemed. "We'd be better off if he'd mind his own business."

Marquard floated in and out of consciousness. He groaned, drenched in sweat and delirious with fever.

"And if this one keeps moaning," Dolph venomously added, "we're bound to get caught before we can nab the head."

Uneven ground forced the dwarfs from their comfortable place in the cart. The hard march through a crater-pocked field was difficult for everyone. The dwarfs' short legs and stocky builds came in handy on more than one occasion; there was no loose earth or deep furrow that with their help the troop could not overcome. Their shared trial had made equals of them all. Frites, even, found it within himself to forget their differences and lighten up a little on the dwarf.

"Not bad. I can't say we could have made it without you."

It was a short-lived reprieve. What comradery the troop felt ended as suddenly as it had started when Lohengrin discovered that the lion head was missing.

"What's that?" Frites asked in disbelief.

Lohengrin tore through the contents of the cart. Marquard, wakeful though delirious, managed to climb down.

"Did you see anything?" the circus manager asked of the French soldier.

The sickly lieutenant shook his head in despondence.

"What do we do?" Frites fretted.

"Someone's taken it," the dwarf roundly accused.

It was a supposition too unthinkable to be seriously considered by anyone with any sense, though the situation being what it was, was completely devoid of reason.

"Taken it? And what? We don't even know where we are," Lohengrin retorted.

"The dwarf's buried it," Frites accused. "He knows these parts. He's put it in the ground and intends to dig it up after the war."

What was being said was less than unlikely. It was ludicrous. The dwarf flung back an accusation as recklessly and unwarranted.

"You! You can't pin this one on me! You buried it."

"Liar!" Frites howled and launched himself at Dolph. "Liar! Liar! Liar!"

The little man crumbled to the earth under the wild thrashing of the mad clown. Lohengrin grabbed the dwarf's companions by the collars and picked them up off the ground.

"What have you done with it?" he bellowed, shaking the dwarfs violently.

Dolph began to weep. His cries were a stifled whimpering. It was a pathetic sound, replete with all the sorrow of frustrated innocence. Lohengrin got a grip of his senses. Marquard was ashen, weak, and near the bottom of what strength he had left. Frites stumbled back from the fallen dwarf. The pair of acrobats had hidden themselves behind the cart. Dolph's tears brought everyone back from the brink of madness.

"It's lost, then," the clown ventured.

Lohengrin stood dumbfounded, the dwarf's two companions still held aloft.

"Put them down," Marquard thinly demanded.

The circus manager set the little men down on the ground. Frites kneeled by Dolph petting his head. Tears welled in the sad clown's eyes.

"It's okay. I'm sorry. There, there. It's lost, then, back in the mud and filth."

"We'll need to forget it," was all Marquard had to say on the subject.

Lohengrin supported the French lieutenant under the arm and lifted him into the cart. The orange glow of a new dawn succored the tortured landscape with its warmth.

"It's near light. The town is not far. If you don't get proper rest, you won't make it."

The remainder of Marquard's conveyance in the company's handcart was arduous and restless. He was aware that he had come down with a fever and concurred with their assessment. Along the route they took southward, the village of La Louvière billeted German troops. The stamina established in the village was familiar to every man that traveled the line and was favored for the reason that the tavern's proprietor, Andreas, was also the postmaster of the village. A soldier on leave could arrange for his mail and send monies to his loved ones, hassle-free.

Andreas was a tightrope walker before the war and had invested in his tavern after a terrible fall resulting in the loss of sight in one eye forced him to retire. A Belgian patriot and a cripple, he was sympathetic to the French lieutenant's plight. The North Sea was key to smuggling anyone and everything in and out of German-occupied Belgium. Fine champagne was Andreas' specialty. He transported cases of it to Lille from Ostend, where his contacts operated without any interference from the interim government. The necessary arrangements needed to successfully transport the French lieutenant were initiated in a prompt and expository manor. He left nothing to chance, going over the minutest detail with Marquard.



The troop made their brief farewells and the Frenchman departed. It was not until Ostend that his new guardians deviated from the plan. At their entrance to the city the group encountered trouble during a routine inspection at a military checkpoint. One of the men the French lieutenant traveled with was a deserter, ranked a corporal in the German infantry. A soldier at the checkpoint had served with the man and recognized him. The two men had not gotten along at the front, and an altercation one night while on patrol led to a fierce rivalry between them. This unexpected encounter sparked panic in the deserter. A stronger individual might have kept his calm—though that was not the case with this man. Fear at the thought of capture brought out in him the very cowardice responsible for his actions on the night of his desertion. This selfish impulse now showed itself again and put those who trusted in him at risk. Upon contact with this soldier who could single him out, the shameful wretch attempted to make a run for it and was shot dead on the spot.

The Germans detained the remainder of the men in the group. Due to the Allied offensive, few German troops were available to facilitate prisoners and even less to maintain facilities to sequester them. A sense of urgency of these larger issues was the determinate factor that led to the group's release. It was a Godsend. That they were let go on the basis of their papers alone and without further scrutiny was an extraordinary development. Fate, it seemed, was determined for Marquard to have a safe return and that those around him might benefit from his fortunate circumstance.

The initial plan designated that they split up. It was an aspect of the original outline that the group's detainment had adversely affected. It was now most important to remain together and seek immediate passage from Belgium. The risk of failure had greatly increased, though it was essential that they leave without further delay.

An opera company from Antwerp, whose director was a close associate of Andreas', was scheduled to depart by ship from Belgium to Sweden on that very night. The group of men posed as longshoremen and as such assisted in the loading of the Belgian frigate, aptly named the CARTE BLANCHE. On one of the last loads, they were all smuggled aboard and nothing more was said about it. The CARTE BLANCHE set sail at first light the next morning after rough seas and strong winds kept her at port for the entirety of the night. To travel in the day greatly increased the chance of boarding and inspection of the ship's crew and cargo by the German warships in the area. The prolonged anxiousness to escape tested Marquard's limits. His fever raged. His companions set a place for the French lieutenant below decks in the ship's hold.

The long hours of the journey across the North Sea passed without rest. The vessel was battered by the most violent of storms. Great alarm arose on several occasions, and the thought of disaster was foremost on each and everyone's mind. A surreptitious approach of Sweden's ragged coastline put the ship and her crew at great peril.

Toward dusk Marquard awoke to a jostle. Unbeknownst to him, the CARTE BLANCHE had run aground. The initial impact was not alarming. The sensation of the contact with the sandbar was one of a listless rise; the sound of the frigate running aground was eclipsed by the contiguous stress to the wooden hull. Though Marquard was aware of a problem, it was not until the CARTE BLANCHE heeled that the extent of the calamity was evident. The burdensome crates in the cargo hold shifted in conjunction with the fierce sideways motion,

throwing Marquard bodily. Under the strain of its own weight, the aft mast broke loose from its mooring and dislodged from the sole of the craft.

The situation grew desperate. A gap opened in the side of the vessel letting in a wash of seawater. In the same instant, the forceful blow of a wave freed the CARTE BLANCHE from the sandbar and washed her out into a deep current.

The surge of water forced Marquard from the vacuum of the hull. The Frenchman shut his eyes and took a final deep breath of air. He drifted ever downward, cleared the foundering vessel, and sank for what seemed an eternity. His chest burned until the sensation of sinking ceased. His feet touched bottom and he opened his lungs to the ocean.

## 122

Marquard awoke with a fierce fever in a private room of a modern hospital. He scuttled his sheets in a throw of wakefulness. An enfilade of white light emphasized the uneven surface of the bed linens, in softness and subtlety a contrast to the tile floor and smooth, plastered walls. The room's only window stood open; the glare of a slate sky caused the prefect to wince. Pierre was seated beside the bed and arose to aid his longstanding friend.

"Easy, Modest,"

"Pierre, what's happened?"

"Take it easy. Lie back."

"Where am I?" Marquard asked, confused.

"You've been admitted to the hospital, Modest," his friend consoled him. "Everything is going to be all right."

"What's happened?"

The light streamed across the prefect's face. It pained his eyes and triggered a headache. Ill-at-ease, Marquard sat back on his elbow and blocked the glare with his hand.

"You need to rest."

Pierre reached over the bed and let down the blinds.

"Why am I here?"

"Do you recall anything?"

"Is there water?"

"In a moment. Can you remember anything?"

"We've duties—"

"Duty will have to wait. You're injured. The doctor wants that you should rest."

"What's happened, Pierre?"

"You've been shot. Now, lie back."

Marquard grunted and held his side. He had been bandaged where he was wounded. Pierre stood and retrieved a glass half full of water from the desk at the prefect's bedside.

"It's not serious," Pierre assured him. "Only caught you there in the side, lucky thing." He reseated himself and passed the glass to his friend.

"Thank you."

The prefect had not experienced such thirst since the war. Dry-mouthed, he greedily drank, swallowing down nearly all the water in a single gulp.

"Where's Lucia?" At the thought of her, Marquard became of a sudden uneasy.

Pierre took the water and set it aside. "Now, there's no use in your getting excited."

"Pierre, is Lucia safe?"

"You must rest. Leave things to me."

Marquard had had enough of restiveness, "Is she safe?"

"We're not sure."

"Where is she?!"

"We don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? I told her to stay put."

"Listen, Modest, you were only brought in yesterday. We lost Haskins. They sent a few men around to the hotel, L'

Hôtel du Cheval Noir."

"And?" Marquard demanded the rest.

"She wasn't there, Modest. I'm sorry. I've been by your side all night waiting for you to wake. We know she's desperate. They're bound to get sloppy. As soon as she resurfaces—if you have an idea as to where she might be..."

"Lucia is not safe," Marquard muttered.

The notion that Lucia was in trouble because of him—she must have waited as long as possible for his return, and possibly her waiting had even compromised her safety—frustrated Marquard to no end. In a flare-up of anguish and show of his distemper, he swung his leg out of the bed. His prosthetic limb had been removed and was set aside with the remainder of his dress clothes. Pierre prostrated, advising against his leaving.

"We have to be patient. To act hasty might compromise her."

"I've already compromised her, Pierre!"

With a grunt, Marquard reeled forward. Pierre kept him steady.

"My old friend..." Pierre whispered.

Marquard glanced up at Pierre. The two men looked hard at one another. All of Pierre's deep most concerns, his fraternal loyalty to a friend of some twenty years, concurrently were imparted in the severity of his stare.

"My old friend. What will you have me do? I am, as always, here to serve you the best and only way I know how."

## 123

The Super 8 had been parked in its usual place; its chrome grill faced toward the egress to the impasse adjacent to the Champ des Mars. From directly across the boulevard, Dieter Milch approached. His dress was plainly and his demeanor dour. The passenger door swung open from within, an invitation for him to enter.

Ames was seated in back and held the door for Milch. Up front, his driver quietly waited, mindfully keeping to himself. Milch sat, greeted by an open folder that Ames handed directly to him. With a nod, Milch acknowledged Ames' offering and flipped through it in familiar silence, removing several large glossy photographs. The pictures were of Emery Haskins. They exposed him fraternizing with Henri Vassal outside both Vassal's home and the ministry. In one of the photos, the two men shook hands as they exchanged a package.

The photographs were recognizable to Milch, having taken them himself over the course of the last few weeks.

Ames caught eye contact with his driver and indicated for him to exit the vehicle. The driver snatched a packet of cigarettes out of the glove compartment and absconded the driver's seat without a word, neglecting to shut the automobile's door the entire way. The latch only partly caught and the interior light remained on.

"This son of a bitch tries to play from both ends," Ames remarked to Milch. "Well, all he's gonna get from it is both his hands empty."

Milch sat quietly. A satisfied, conceited smirk turned up the corner of Ames' lips. Milch waited diligently for his orders. Ames sat back and drank a scotch before passing a small satchel to Milch, who used it to secure the folder.

Inside the satchel were several rolls of film.

"Before you make the delivery, be sure you have the files," Ames instructed. "There's no second chance for this."

"Who is it that I'm looking for?" asked Milch.

"Go to the foot of the tower and wait by the observation post. You should be approached by a man."

In concurrence with his orders, Milch slid from the bench seat and exited the automobile, leaving Ames behind in the void of the automobile's roomy interior. A heavy wind stirred and forced itself against the glass. A whistle escaped where the driver's door was slightly ajar. Ames began to fidget in his seat, watching Milch closely through the windshield, stepping around the front bumper and heading for the park. His expression softened now that he was alone.

An apprehensive lackaday appearance took over the once hard, commanding mask he wore for his underling, Milch.

Ames leaned into the firmness of the leather seat, rattling the bottles set in the bar beside him. A clear tinkle bade him to reach for the scotch. The bottle teetered in Ames' unsteady hands. A tremble, he poured himself a second glass.

After placing the bottle back with the others that were stocked in the liquor stand, he downed half the drink. The volatile liquid burned his throat. Ames relaxed into the seat and removed a handkerchief from the inside breast pocket of his suit jacket and patted his forehead. Up ahead, he could see Milch at the corner, passing the driver, who stood smoking a cigarette. Neither man acknowledged the other. After finishing the half-empty glass, Ames replaced it.

Hearing approaching footfall, he glanced up suddenly; it was Lucia advancing quickly on the parked car. Her aspect was alarming. She was huddled over in an agitated state. Her approach was definite. Ames opened the passenger door for her and greeted her harassingly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here?"

Not having slept the whole night, Lucia's overall appearance was exhausted and disheveled. She was under enormous stress, the under of her eyes were dark from crying, and she could only manage to stammer as she took her familiar seat beside Ames.

"I—I didn't know where to go. What was I to do, Elijah?" she asked sheepishly.

Coolly, Ames addressed her, "Tell me now, Lucia, what did you talk about with the police?"

"Nothing really," Lucia lied, wary of Ames.

Unconvinced, Ames looked away from her, his hands raised in a gesture of disgust.

"I swear. Elijah, I swear I said nothing," she insisted. "They don't know anything."

"I can't trust you, Lucia."

"Why?" she exclaimed, taken aback.

"I know the way they operate. I don't blame you," Ames calmly stated, "but I'm forced to assume they've put you in an uncomfortable position."

"No."

"Yes. I'm afraid I've only this one recourse."

"I don't understand."

"You've been compromised."

"That's not so. You know you can trust me. They don't know anything!"

"I can't trust you, Lucia."

"They just asked some questions about Vassal. I swear, Elijah, that's all they asked," she persisted. "They know nothing of our operation."

Ames nodded his head pitifully, and of a sudden, became more congenial.

"All right, Lucia."

"I swear to you," Lucia reiterated.

Ames reached into a flap built into the back of the front seat. Lucia tensed visibly. He removed a small manila envelope and handed it to her without comment.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Just open it."

Inside, Lucia discovered several bank notes, each in various forms of foreign currency—all together, a decent amount of monies. Also inside was a train ticket to Belgium.

"I thought you might attempt something like this."

"What is this?"

"Take it," Ames told her. "Do what is right. Things are about to get bad."

To emphasize the point of this last foreboding sentence, Ames pulled a nickel-plated revolver from his coat pocket.

Lucia seized up. She stared hard at the weapon.

"Take it and leave."

The weapon was not held threateningly.

"I don't know how to thank you, Elijah," she stated calmly.

Ames mechanically checked the revolver for ammunition as he spoke.

He replied in a half-dead tone, "Do what is right, Lucia, and get as far away from all of this as you can. Try and give what is left of your life some meaning. We've both wasted so much and for what? Nothing. All along we've been led to believe in lies." He glanced up at Lucia and maintained without averting his eyes, "Our lives have changed without our ever knowing why, when what we were led to sacrifice so much for, and had cause to suffer so unconscionably for, is no more."

A changeable weather was in store for the duration of the afternoon. With haste in his step, Milch accessed the foot of the Eiffel Tower. A score of

sightseers milled beneath the expanse of girders on the trampled quad, shielded from the wind and waiting in anticipation for the occasional break of the noonday sun. Little school children, passersby, and tourists, gathered in the vicinity of a number of handcarts, scattered hither thither, where an assortment of bric-a-brac was on sale by merchants. All Milch passed, oblivious to the humdrum quaintness of it all, stopping at the observation telescopes, where Hale, who was seated on a public bench, sighted him.

Hale rose up and stepped toward Milch, a brown leather attaché case in hand. Milch was quick to notice Hale's approach and had the inkling that he was his man. He nodded in acknowledgement when Hale joined him. Hale spoke casually in English and stepped forward to address Milch with a mock question, as if he were just another stranger, very matter-of-factly, almost too well acted.

"Pardon me, Mister. You're with our tour group, is that not right?"

For a moment, Milch was doubtful of his own assumption and responded in kind with an even intonation.

"Sorry, no, I'm afraid not."

Milch's English was perfect. There was no sign of a foreign accent.

"I wasn't told you were an American," Hale remarked, observant of this fact and fooled into believing they had a shared nationality.

Hale's response showed him to be at the same time as astonished at Milch's English as he was clearly uninformed as to whom he was meeting with. It was in the frankness of his remark, something of an unguarded quality about it, that revealed his position. Obviously, he was being sent on an errand-and little more-and therefore handled the exchange casually. Quick to catch on to Hale's meaning, Milch desisted with his play-acting.

"My mother is American," he answered. "I was educated back in the States."

"Where about?" asked Hale.

"Princeton."

"I have a close friend who attends college there. He studies physics."

"It's a fine university," Milch acknowledged.

"You weren't enrolled?"

"No. I left the United States before college."

Hale patted Milch, friendly-like, on the shoulder and turned with him to face the tower.

"It seems we're all between one thing or another these days. Wouldn't you agree?" Hale queried.

Milch took Hale's lead and joined him in stepping beneath the tower. He was inattentive as to how it rose steadfast into the slate skies.

"It would appear so." In saying this, Milch glanced down at the briefcase Hale carried and continued, "We have a job to do, as I understand it."

"Yes, we have."

The two men held off their trade. They took up a position at the gate for the lift that serviced to the top of the tower.

Hale conducted the entire enterprise. He brought Milch to the elevator and took control of the conversation. He was far too calm and wavered at the grated lift. It was enough to make anyone uneasy. Milch suspiciously observed a slight bulge at the front of the linen blazer Hale wore. These two adversaries standing side by side acted congenial enough. At roughly the same height and build, no advantage could be levied to either.

"We'll do this at the top, then. Have you ever been?" Hale offered with a lively gesture of the attaché case to the lift.

"No," Milch responded.

Milch followed the lift's descent. Hale took a long, coveting look at the satchel Milch had received from Ames.

"It's an incredible view," Hale remarked, not breaking his stare.

"Here's the elevator now," Milch offered.

Hale glanced away and searched upward watching for the descending lift. At its approach he shifted his weight and reached to open the gate. Over his shoulder he caught Milch eyeing him uncomfortably. Hale froze and turned to him reassuringly.

"My apologies if I seem anxious. After this, I've got a train to catch," Hale added as he disengaged from the gate, set the attaché case to the ground, and reached into his jacket pocket. He produced a train ticket to illustrate his point.

"The express, bound for Vienna and then on to Warsaw."

"They're still running the trains through Czecho-Slovakia?" asked Milch.

"Like nothing's different. See for yourself," replied Hale in handing the ticket over to Milch kindly.

The ticket was for a first class compartment, booked several days in advance and bore the trademark of a French railway company. The lift arrived and Hale smiled. He turned his back and pulled open the gate to the lift. Milch recognized that the ticket, which he was so flatly presented, was what had formed the bulge at the front of Hale's blazer.

## 125

At the curbed sidewalk of the boulevard, Ames' driver enjoyed a smoke, his back to the traffic and the low iron fence that encircled the Champ des Mars. Ames' automobile languished in the distance. The Eiffel Tower loomed behind him, a massive backdrop likened to something of a picture postcard image. The orb of the sun withdrew behind a heavy cloud and the skies overhead darkened. The picturesque quality of the park scene quickly faded. The driver's glance followed a young attractive Parisian girl. The freshness of her spry adolescence sweetened the remainder of his cigarette. She was dressed in a bright summer dress and ambled past from the opposite side of the street. He savored the last drag. In that moment of distraction, after having tossed down the butt, Emery Haskins confronted him.

The danger Haskins posed the driver recognized straight away. He stammered backing off, reluctant to make any sudden move. The man edged toward the automobile. Haskins, unlike the driver, was not so unsure. In his hand he brandished a pistol, steely grey, held openly at his side. In Haskins' eyes was a look of determination, one of dangerous resolve.

Ames' driver backed away. It was clear to him that he was not the intended target. It was Ames whom Haskins was gunning after. He stared through the driver. An unspoken understanding came between the two men. The driver wheeled around and sprinted, not away, but dutifully toward the automobile conspicuously parked down the side street.

The driver ran for everything he was worth, fully expecting to be shot in the back as a reward for his loyalty to Ames.

Breathless, he ran without a word as if his calling out a warning might insight Haskins' wrathful intentions.

The automobile, parked a distance of several strides down the impasse, seemed to take a century to get within reach. With so much momentum, the driver stopped himself against the hood and frantically carried himself around to the driver's side. He glimpsed Ames leaning forward. The woman beside him sat perfectly still, her eyes wide and searching. The driver fumbled to pull the handle; the window across from him-that of the front passenger door-exploded inward, abutted against the crack of a gun blast.

Ames' automobile sat vulnerably within the impasse, the front end askew. Haskins strategically positioned himself, quickly flanking around to the side. He held the pistol level, aimed steady at the shattered passenger side window of the Super 8. He mechanically advanced forward. In clear sight, the driver ducked down below the roof, entering the stricken vehicle. Inside was a flurry of movement. At the first volley, which hammered through the rear passenger side window, Ames went into a wild frenzy. He shoved Lucia back, his revolver pointed toward the shattered glass.

"Get the engine started!" he shouted to his loyal driver, who had managed to slip inside and get down low in the front seat.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," the man fretted.

He hastily inserted the key into the ignition. The driver, lying down lengthwise, depressed the clutch and pumped the gas. The engine failed to catch.

"Get it started," Ames shrieked. "Get us the hell out of here!"

Lucia had a tight grip of the envelope Ames had given her. She attempted to stuff it into the purse in her lap. She cowered, her back flat against the plush leather seat, reeling out of the line of sight. Outside, there was a flicker of movement, for an instant discernable through the rear windshield of the automobile.

"Come on!" yelled Ames. "Get us moving!"

A rasping escaped the automobile's electric starter. The driver frantically reattempted to turnover the Packert's engine, but to no avail.

The flicker of movement prompted Ames to turn his attention to the rear of the automobile. Spooked by the activity, he swung the revolver past Lucia to the back window. This action initiated an evasive response from her, rearing back in an attempt to avoid the nozzle of the weapon. Lucia's impulsive reaction was to swat at the gun with her purse.

"No, Elijah!" she reproached.

The smell of pollutant gas vapor pervaded the interior of the Super 8. An effort to turn the car engine over once again was unsuccessful. There was only the hollow grinding of the starter. There were two overlapping shots, a simultaneous flash and smoke followed by the rear window of the automobile crumbling into the car. The events were muddled, the actions indistinguishable. Lucia let out a cry. Ames moaned deeply, pushing his back hard against the passenger seat. He twisted his trunk in a queer movement and reared forcefully, sliding into the passenger door. His head hit the triangular end window hard enough to crack the glass.

With a jerk Lucia flailed, bringing up her purse. The surface of the purse was blackened and marred. She stared at it in astonishment then glanced up at Ames. A shot to the chest paralyzed him. Stiffly, he leaned back unable to move.



His face wore an expression of harrowing bewilderment. He struggled for breath. In his watery eyes, there was still a glint of recognition. He gasped, fighting for his life, staring not into Lucia's face, rather at her abdomen.

In the front seat, the driver, uninjured, turned and stared down at Lucia. His eyes were wide and staring. Lucia's glance fell from Ames to the smoking revolver he held. Then finally her glance lowered to her own person. Ames' shot found Lucia in her stomach. She realized her life was in immediate jeopardy. Instinct took control of her. She dropped the purse to the floorboards, winced in pain and scrambled from the backseat. She threw open the rear door and tumbled out onto the asphalt.

Lucia fell flat to the ground, her strength all but drained. It was confusing to her how weak she was and how quickly her strength had diminished. Try as she might, she was not able to boost herself up. She was merely able to drag herself some distance away from the automobile before she utterly collapsed.

A final shot rang out from within the automobile.

## 126

Milch was prepared to step into the lift after Hale, when the initial identifiable rapport of gunfire sounded. What civility and polite posturing there existed between them quickly evaporated. Hale had heard the unmistakable sound and glanced up. Milch turned sharply toward the single blast, his ears perked. Both men remained motionless. Hale was within the lift, Milch at its threshold minding the gate.

The shot had escaped the attention of the tourists and school children. The carefree life below the tower monument carried on normally. For Milch and Hale, however, a convergency of their not entirely dissimilar lives was to come at the signal of this single gunshot and due to uncontrollable circumstances end on anything but a carefree note.

Milch glanced deftly back at Hale through the intermittent silence. He squandered the opportune moment he had to react to the admonishing toll of the first gunshot. A volley of cracks erupted. The shots were clearly identifiable. A resultant burst of nervous energy came in congruence over both men. Hale was first to react with a knee-jerk immediacy. He went for his blazer pocket in what was an attempt to extract a weapon. Milch responded in kind following Hale's brash reach into his coat. Unthinkingly, he charged headlong into the lift, retarding Hale's attempt at pulling a pistol concealed within his coat pocket.

"Don't!" Hale huffed, recoiling from Milch.

There was no turning back. Milch caught a glimpse of gunmetal.

"I don't want this," he espoused.

The men grappled deeper into the elevator. It was a weapon for absolute certain, and Hale was determined to use it.

Any hesitance on his part to do so would be counterintuitive. Only one man was going to walk away from this death match with his life.

"Get off!" Hale fumed.

"Give that here—" Milch demanded.

In a flurry of violent movement, Hale was able to jerk out a small caliber vest pocket pistol.

"You—No you don't!" Hale gritted.

Milch brought his weight down. The men's hands covered the pistol. Hale wrenched a hand free and grasped Milch by the hair. A firm yank removed a tuft at the roots.

"Get off of it—" Hale persisted.

Milch had gained the advantage. Hale reaffirmed his hold and aggressively struggled to wrestle control of the tiny weapon. The pistol, in the hands of Hale, Milch shoved downward and twisted back, the nozzle pressed against Hale's abdomen. Hale tensed. A single deafening shot escaped from within the confined space of the grounded lift. Fire erupted from the weapon's nozzle. The shot rang out through the open gate and echoed out onto the quad.

Hale's vest pocket pistol hit the floor. For a moment Milch supported the dead man's weight. His heart beat hard in his chest, a thump strong enough for the both of them. He let go and watched Hale slip to the ground. There was no blood. The train ticket lay at Milch's feet. A fleeting of seconds passed, his palpitations lessened, and he regained control of his senses. In Hale's inside coat pocket was a wallet, which Milch snatched, calculating. He gathered up the ticket at the same time, flipped open the wallet, and removed what paper cash was inside as well as Hale's travel papers. In opening them he was struck by his resemblance to Hale's identification photo. The two men's ages were close enough, height and weight not at all dissimilar. The name read: James Corbin-Hale.

## 127

In an inane attempt, Lucia tried to pull herself up. She struggled to the point of blacking out, crumbling to the asphalt.

In a rending motion, she twisted, struggling to turn herself over onto her back, where she remained in a supplicative position. She laid still, her arms at her sides. She appeared as if in shock. Only the occasional shallow breath she took revealed that there was still life in her. Lucia lay sedate in desperate circumstance, dying. She was in all appearance beyond reprieve. She soundly, calmly awaited Marquard's arrival.

"Modest... Modest... I—I..." she stammered deliriously.

Her words were choked—there was no way for her to know he would come. All the same she expected him, and tears welled in her eyes. They passed over her temples trickling down to her ears. They tickled her almost. She stared upward. Overhead, the sky had a muddled slight evenness. It was devoid of comfort. She slid her hands to the wound in her abdomen, and coddling herself like this, she waited.

From throughout, there was the patter of hurried footsteps. The sound of a commotion was centered on Ames' automobile. There were shouts and Ames' driver's voice, unsteady and stammering fitfully.

"H-He, he shot the, the woman!" the driver confessed. "It—It was accidental. She wasn't supposed to be here."

Near to Lucia a heavy footfall grinded upon the loose asphalt. Lucia remained still. A short distance from where she lay, Marquard froze, slow to respond.

He stumbled forward, "Lord God!" he cried, sinking to the ground.

His voice, so familiar to her and always a reassurance, invigorated Lucia. She dug deep for strength, opened her eyes, and reared forward.

"Don't, Lucia," he said, stilling her.

To see her prone and helpless pained him, for he felt he was to blame and resented himself for having failed her.

Pale-faced, Marquard knelt down at Lucia's side and took her in his arms. He cuddled her tenderly.

"Modest," Lucia whispered weakly.

"Lucia. Try to keep still."

It was necessary he know the extent of her injury and prying her hands from her wound, Marquard immediately ascertained the severity of the gunshot. It was a terrible wound. He could not bear to look and glanced away. His eyes welled instantly with tears. Lucia brought her hand to Marquard's face. She directed his eyes back to hers.

"Modest, I want you to know..."

Her voice was soft, unforced. She found it merciful of death to allow her these last peaceful words with the only man she had ever loved.

"...there is something you must know."

"Don't talk," he mustered the resolve to say.

He choked back his tears and put forward his best face.

"No, Modest, listen... I am so sorry. I—"

"Don't. I love you, Lucia. You don't have to..."

"Please. Can you forgive me, Modest?"

"There is nothing to forgive. You've done nothing wrong. I'm sorry I wasn't here. You needed me."

She quickly faded.

"Modest, I—"

"I love you. I have always loved you. There is nothing to forgive. You must believe that, Lucia."

With a light stammer, Lucia weakly interjected, "And... and I you." There was little of her left, "I love you, Modest. I always have. I'm sorry."

"Know that if I could have been here... forgive me, Lucia."

Lucia thinly smiled and murmured, "And I you, Modest."

She was no longer with him. The glint in Lucia's eyes had burned out. Only a blank, peaceful stare was locked on her face conveying a knowing and tranquil expression. She was in death as in life impervious to any indignation. In Marquard's arms, Lucia fell away, passing on with the precious knowledge that she lived to renew her only love.

Pierre advanced on the couple. Lucia was clearly dead. Not wanting to disturb his friend's grief, he only shortly informed Marquard that they were needed at the tower where more gunshots had been reported. From the prefect there came no immediate response. Respectfully, Pierre withdrew. An imperceptible nod permitted his leave. Marquard sat on the asphalt, Lucia cradled in his lap. Firmly, he embraced her, weeping reservedly. He leaned his head back to take a breath. Overhead was a filthy grey sky. From drizzle, a heavy rain suddenly began to fall.

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