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# Songs for the Nightingale

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*Songs for the Nightingale*

Michael Cotter

Submitted for Completion of the Requirements

For Departmental Honors in English

Bridgewater State University

May 7, 2013

Dr. Joyce Rain Anderson, Thesis Director  
Dr. Stuart Allen, Committee Member  
Dr. Bruce Machart, Committee Member

Dear Reader,

Ahead lies four rough chapters of a World War I fiction novel I have started earlier this semester as part of an ongoing English Honors Thesis project. The following pages represent an inkling of the research I have undertaken to start this project, but more importantly, they record the beginnings of my continual development in understanding that fiction is truly based around *character*. Utilizing the elements of craft I have learned from Bridgewater University's various writing workshops, I submit four individuals that are the product of my imagination and ongoing effort. Like me, they have undergone severe changes and seen multiple draft revisions, but, as Dr. Bruce Machart is fond of saying, I truly believe the writing of this early draft of my novel has cost me more than just the time it took to write – and that is a good thing. Fully conscious of the flaws within, I'm still proud to present these characters for review. When I set out to write this novel (infatuated with the topic through Dr. William Smith's *World War I Poetry* course), I felt there was a story within the millions of lives lost often overlooked in America, which seems to have a deep rooted love affair with the second World War. What better way to tell this story than through the people that experienced this cataclysmic event and what better medium to render these characters realistically than fiction?

I didn't want to just tell the story from one country's perspective, though. What could I say better than Erich Maria Remarque, Dalton Trumbo, Henri Barbusse, or all the other authors with many more years of writing experience behind them and far less years between the actual war's dramatic present and now? I wished to write a story told from all sides of the conflict. A series of limited 3<sup>rd</sup> persons that would form a mosaic depicting the overall suffering and change taking place between 1914 and 1918. I hope that in each chapter, each individual's story, a sense of verisimilitude follows the inner conflict as the external war drives each of these characters together in later chapters. Taken as a whole, I wish the various stories to compose a larger dirge, a threnody, dedicated to the symbolic bird which marked the end of days and the onset of darkness along the trenches. Here are the beginnings of the *Songs for the Nightingale*.

Michael Cotter

2013



**E**rich had just settled into a comfortable position in his chair, stretching his legs out over the vacant leather seat across from him, when the cabin jolted to life, shaking continuously as the train came to a turbulent stop. “Trier. All passengers for Trier,” a voice called, shrill enough to match the whistle announcing the train’s arrival to the Rhine Valley. As passengers filled the hallway, Erich slowly folded the newspaper, which had failed to hold his attention throughout the trip, and laid it on the seat. He returned the tin cigarette case to his vest pocket and took out a tan, folded telegram which had seen the light of his cabin numerous times since he left France the night before. His eyes scanned the creased message as they had done over a hundred times that week.

Mother died STOP Come home immediately STOP Third attempt to reach you STOP

- E

Erich folded the note over, slipping it into his pocket again, as he made his way into the crowded hall. The impersonal brevity of the message did not surprise Erich. The author of the

dispatch, his younger brother Ernst, had always lacked a certain subtlety in dismal situations, but each word did cost money. Still, Erich didn't exactly know what to make of the last line. He imagined Ernst carefully calculating just how to impress a tone of bitterness into an economical five words or less, but then each time he read the telegram, a faint grip of guilt overtook him.

He was supposed to be studying at the University of Copenhagen these last few years, where he assumed the other telegrams were reported undelivered, but the last year found Erich moving from one hotel to the next, all the way down to Paris. Few knew the reason behind his sudden flight from the university, and Erich hoped to keep it that way, his family above all else, but it seemed impossible now. He had long since lost count of the debt he'd amassed in Denmark: clothing, watches, drinks, and parties, all purchased in the good faith of his family name, von Zweigert. A pile of curt letters from various creditors had lined his desk the day he left the university, some mentioning a desire to contact his father's estate directly. Erich planned to be far removed from school before the news traveled south, hoping time would present an opportunity to make some of the money back before his father became involved. He remained at school long enough to see his flat-mate, Christof, return from the long weekend.

"You're leaving?" Christof had asked.

"*Ja*, my mother is very sick and I must go home," Erich said. The lie haunted him now that the notion was true. Erich knew it didn't matter, but he still wished he had said something different that day, anything besides that excuse.

"Well, we're going to miss you," Christof said, shaking his hand. "I hope she feels better by time you get down there. Who's going to buy us all drinks now?"

Erich smiled. "Your family is rich. You will figure something out."

Erich left Christof a considerable amount of his wardrobe, retreating with only two portmanteaux full of vestments. The look on his friend's face as he ran his hand across the hanging fabrics justified Erich's decision to stay another day, but his smile quickly faded as he stepped out into the streets of Copenhagen and thought, *Now what?*

Outside the train, the platform was bustling with activity. Conductors called out names as trunks of luggage were piled one atop another, families reunited under the blanket of steam that hovered around the wooden pillars, and young loves met their sweethearts in hurried embraces, hardly hiding the anticipation that must have accompanied them the entire journey. Erich stood alone amidst the clamor of chatter, mainly German with the occasional greeting in Yiddish cutting through the noise. He lit a cigarette as a sharply dressed train worker waved in his direction.

"We have your luggage over there, Herr von Zweigert."

"That's fine," Erich said, checking his watch. "Leave them be. My man should be here shortly to pick them up." He reached into his pocket for some money when something brushed against his leg.

"Mutti!" A little girl with flowers in her hair ran past Erich to jump into the arms of a pale woman stepping off the train.

"My little *Mädchen*," the woman said, hugging the child close. "How I have missed you."

Erich thought on his own sister, Heike. She was fourteen now, still a child the last time Erich had seen her. He wondered how hard his mother's loss must have been for her. She's really gone, he thought with a pause. The idea had entered his mind many times over the last week, yet somehow Erich always managed to cast it aside, finding something insignificant with which to occupy himself. Frau von Zweigert, *Mother*. The reason he had the chance to pick his own

university in the first place. Without her soft touches and gentle sway over his father, Erich was sure he would be enlisted in the army today. He never thanked her for that, and now Erich was sure he had missed her funeral.

"Everything alright?" the conductor asked.

Erich looked up at the man. "Fine," he said, handing him a mark. "Sorry I'm a little short."

By the time the family's driver appeared a half hour after the train's departure, Erich was out of tobacco. He watched the squat man struggle up the stairs, hat in hand, as he rushed onto the platform.

"I'm so sorry, Meister Erich," he said through breaths. "Your wire said the train was to arrive at one."

"Well, we must have made good time," Erich said. "It's alright, Martin. Get the trunks and we'll be on our way." Erich sauntered over to the car, a deep blue Wanderer with a cloth top, still in the same excellent condition as when he left, though its driver was a little worse for wear. He turned back, watching Martin descend the platform steps with the larger of the two cases straddled on his shoulders. Erich waited.

"Forgive me, where are my manners?" Martin said, now on level ground. Red faced, he bent down to let the trunk slide easily to the ground before opening the single door to the back seat. Erich entered and pulled out the telegram from his pocket again. He sat silent while Martin tied the luggage to the back of the car, stopping every so often to wipe his face with a handkerchief.

As they pulled away from the train station, Erich was surprised to find that nothing had really changed. Four years had seemed like a lifetime and still the Rhine Province appeared as the day he left. Near Bernkastel Martin drew the top down to enjoy the temperate June afternoon, and Erich allowed a moment for his eyes to adjust to the flood of light before examining the sweeping panoramic view of the river town from atop the valley's rim. The Mosel's form still cut the land in the shape of a horseshoe as it continued its journey into France, dividing Bernkastel and its eastern neighbor Kues. The many hamlets were still intact, shielded by their towering church sentinels. The roads still turned in unison with his distant memory of their design. Even the emerald-ochre slopes lining the Mosel had not lost a tint of their brilliance in his absence. The aerial survey of the land was impressive, but Erich could not stop thinking of his brother's telegram.

Most unsettling was the note's omission of any detail regarding his father. Erich assumed Herr von Zweigert was the true sponsor behind the message, but the words offered little in the way of suggesting his father's present attitude. What would he say upon Erich's return? He knew his father to be a rough man, entirely capable of showing emotion as long as it was anger and often enough if alcohol was involved. And it frequently was. The owner of an extensive *Weingut* and one of the largest producers of white wine in the region, Otto von Zweigert prided himself on the consistent taste of his product, one that he personally tested most every night. Though he had the means to manage the vineyard from the comforts of his home, there was hardly a day the man didn't put in at least a half day's worth of work in his fields. He often described his children as soft. The coveted *von* of the family name had only existed for four generations and Erich's father believed no amount of bestowed honor excused any man from the manual labor it took to secure such a position in the first place.

Erich shuddered at the thought of discussing his debt. His father had surely heard from his creditors by now. Perhaps his mother's death left no time for Herr von Zweigert to consider an appropriate punishment. The very thought shamed Erich. Would that he were only coming home to play the prodigal son to two parents. His hands frantically searched his pockets for something to hold other than the telegram. Erich tapped Martin on the shoulder. "Do you happen to have any cigarettes?"

"*Nein*, Meister Erich. I quit a few years back."

Erich released a sigh as the *Püppchen* sputtered and racketed past a silver haired matron in a horse-drawn carriage.

Beyond the town, familiar shapes began to emerge from the rolling landscape around the winding road. The muddied faces of field hands looked down from the endless rows of grape vines and wood, eyeing the automobile with quiet curiosity. Erich couldn't help but feel pity for these men and women. Most of his father's employees had never set foot outside the fatherland, let alone the Mosel valley itself. They were bound to the hills of the river as much as the coiled vines to their wooden stakes, their daily movement measured in elevation rather than distal migrations. Their days were long and the work extremely demanding. The inclines of the vineyard were treacherous and it was not uncommon for his father to lose a careless harvester once or twice a year. Erich wondered if they even got a day off for his mother's service.

When the car reached the *Weingut*, atop one of the more modest hills along the river, Erich felt dwarfed in the estate's looming presence. Martin drove past the road leading to the east side of the manor, rounding the stone fountain before stopping in front of the main entrance. The driver opened the door to the back seat before taking one of the cumbersome cases in his tiny, plump hands.

“Welcome home, Meister Erich,” he said with a quick bow of his head.

“*Danke*, Martin,” Erich said, stepping down from the car.

“I will place your *Koffer* in the guest room for you.”

“What happened to my room?” Erich asked.

“Oh,” the driver stopped, as if thinking, “your brother’s room now, I’m afraid.”

“Of course.”

“Your father will be expecting you soon,” Martin said. Erich only nodded.

Inside, a stocky maid descended the stairs, carrying bed sheets under her arms. She stopped when Erich entered the hall. “Meister Erich, you look well. I’m so sorry about your loss,” she said with her eyes fixed on the carpet.

“Good to see you, Hilda,” Eric said, moving into the sitting room. He had no desire to discuss his mother with housekeepers. He brushed his hand against the intricate carvings on the massive cuckoo clock by the door, tracing his finger along the wooden grooves as he used to when he was a child. Everything looked the same, save for a painting of his mother, now hung high over the fireplace. Within its bronze frame, a dark haired woman stood facing the viewer, the train of her gown taking up the lower half of the canvas. She looked contemplative, her mouth rigid and tight, though Erich thought there was a delicacy in her eyes he’d seen many times before. The painting must have been moved from her room, he thought.

“Erich.” He turned as Heike threw her arms around his neck and pulled him close. “I’m so glad your home.”

He took his sister by the hips and gently pushed her back. “Look at you. You’re a grown woman now. Where’s my little sister?” Heike looked nothing like their mother, having blonde hair and blue eyes, like him. Erich looked back over at the painting.

Heike took his hand in hers. “How was the train ride? We weren't expecting you until later. Are you hungry?”

“What happened?” he asked.

“The doctors said it was Tuberculosis,” Heike said, now quiet. “It was so sudden. She asked for you. I told her I had a letter from you from Paris and that you’d be home soon.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Erich, holding his sister close again. “I’m so very sorry. When was the funeral?”

“Three days ago. We waited as long as we could.”

Ernst stood in the doorway, leaning against the massive clock, buttoning his grey military jacket. His dark hair was cut short and combed tight to his head. Erich thought he looked the same as when they’d last seen each other except for the thin brown mustache lining his lip. “Nice of you to visit, brother,” his brother said, staring fiercely at Erich.

Erich continued to hold Heike’s hand. “Ernst, I’m sorry. I was lucky to get your message. I returned to a hotel I’d visited before and they’d just received word. I came as fast as I could.”

“Save it for Father,” Ernst said. “He wants to see you. God knows you’ll need a better excuse than that.” He turned and went down the hall.

Heike squeezed Erich’s hand. “I really am glad you’re home,” she said.

Ten minutes later, Erich sat in the back of the car again as Martin pulled away from the colonnaded entrance to the estate. The roads leading to the vineyard were mostly dirt and stone, only visible from the marks left in the earth through previous drives up the slopes. The Wanderer lurched back and forth as it climbed higher and higher, the *Weingut* shrinking in the distance. Erich gripped the sides of his seat to steady himself, but his head bobbed violently

while Martin steered through the rocky turns and cratered stretches. When they reached a portion of level ground, the car stopped. "I can go no further, Meister Erich. He's just at the top of that climb," said Martin, pulling Erich's door open.

Erich hopped down and began for the hill, taking his time as the ground rose before him at an angle that required careful concentration. Martin waited by the car, pulling out his handkerchief and wiping streaks of dirt from the dark blue doors. As Erich climbed, he could smell the sweet honeyed scent of wet dirt and sun bathed grapes all around him, grabbing a wooden post every so often to regain his balance. His boots were black with mud and the backs of his legs ached by the time he saw his father.

Otto von Zweigert stood at the top of the hill in his shirt sleeves, his cuffs rolled up to his elbows exposing the broad, blonde haired arms that Erich remembered all too well. An older harvester kneeled next to his father, holding the base of a post as Herr von Zweigert pulled at the vine wrapped around the stake. The curled plant released from the wood with a snap as Erich's father ripped the vine away.

"Father."

Herr von Zweigert did not look up. He continued to unravel the vine as Erich approached. "Leave us," he said to the older man. The harvester rose to his feet, knees caked in mud, and nodded at Erich before moving down the hill at a speed Erich could not comprehend.

"So, you have finally come home," his father said, "if only too late."

"Father, I had no idea. Heike's last letter said everyone was fine and I – "

"Do you know why I tore this vine away from its support?" Herr von Zweigert asked, holding the leafy twines up. He now stared directly at Erich, his grey mustache hiding his top lip, sweat gleaming from the top of his balding head.

"*Nein*," said Erich.

"Because I wanted it to grow in a certain direction," his father said. "I tried to train it to the stake. Tended its needs in hopes that it would grow upwards, but this vine decided to resist and now it's dead. A waste of my time and effort."

Erich searched for footing in the uneven ground. "I didn't –"

"She called for you at her last, boy," his father said. "I didn't have the heart to tell her the things I'd learned. You've run up quite the bill at my expense, but she died without knowing."

"*Danke*," Erich said, facing the ground so he didn't falter and to keep from his father's burning gaze. He searched his mind for something to say. "I'm willing to work to pay it all back."

Herr von Zweigert threw his head back and laughed. "Work for it? How?"

"Here, with you. In the vineyard. I'll take over the business like you've always wanted me to, Father."

His father tossed the dead vine aside. "You don't know the first thing about taking care of something, boy. I've raised you too gentle. I won't have you in charge of my slopes. I've just uprooted the last of my problems."

"But I'm your heir. I'm your son," Erich said, his voice rising.

"Are you?" his father asked. "What kind of son misses his own mother's funeral? Galavanting around Europe, probably drinking and consorting with low-lives and whores, ruining the name I've worked so hard to build. You begged and pleaded to go to that college. You can't even finish what you start. I'm glad your mother didn't have to witness what a disgrace her child has become to this family."

Erich felt like his tongue had swollen, filling the back of his throat. His vision began to blur. He could not let his father see him this weak. "If I am not to work alongside you, then what would you do with me?" he asked.

Herr von Zweigert wiped the sweat from his brow and dried his hand on his shirt. "Ernst has just finished cadet school and will be leaving for the military in a couple of weeks. You will be joining him."

"Father, you can't be serious." Erich's excitement lifted his voice, despite his efforts to remain calm.

"Oh, I am, boy. It's about time you learned some discipline. I've done all I can."

With that, Erich's father returned to his work, staking another post into the earth as Erich stood in silence. He had a long climb down the hill, finding it especially hard to find his footing with his father's words in his head. He was to be enlisted into the army after all. All of his mother's protestations had seemingly died with her. Erich wondered if it was the knowledge of his debt or his mother's passing that prompted this decision in his father's mind. He supposed it didn't really matter. Erich didn't even wait for Martin to open the back door to the *Püppchen*, hopping into the car with his muddy feet. They drove home in silence with only the clatter of the wheels hitting indents in the road filling the air.

Back at the estate, Erich found a tin of tobacco in the main room on the first floor. A maid entered and asked about luncheon, but Erich was not hungry. He sat in front of the fireplace, slowly rolling a cigarette as he looked up at his mother's portrait. The painted eyes seemed to stare back at him, offering a tender look that spoke of compassion and understanding. She always knew what to say, Erich thought, lighting the cigarette. Always knew how to make the

best out of any situation. He inhaled deeply as he sat alone in the room, listening to the soft clicking of the clock gears, wishing paintings could somehow speak.

## 2



**H**is brother hadn't been home a week, yet Ernst thought that he'd had enough of Erich's company for several lifetimes. The von Zweigert estate was easily large enough to avoid contact with its other occupants for most hours of the day, but Ernst would occasionally happen upon a room to find his brother spread across the divan, gazing at a cloud of smoke swirling above him. In such instances, Ernst would make for the table, muttering to himself, saying he left his matches before leaving the room in a hurry. The very sight of Erich made Ernst think on his mother in a way that caused his teeth to grind together.

He hated the way his brother sulked around the estate, dismissing the maids when they brought food. The way he retreated to the guest room every night around sunset, not to be disturbed, moments before his father returned for dinner. He hated the way Heike had taken to sitting outside in the courtyard with Erich every afternoon, listening to the ridiculous stories of his travels. The Champs-Élysées. The Louvre. How wonderful it must have been to parade

around France while Ernst was at home, ordering the maids to replace his mother's bed sheets, once they'd removed her body. He could hear their laughter from his room some days, making it impossible to read, but he refused to close the window. This week had been hot, sweltering at times. The library was always vacant, but why should he be made to feel a stranger in his own house? He'd done everything right, everything that was expected of him.

"Almost done, Meister Ernst," Martin said, wiping the razor on the towel. Ernst had asked for a shave and trim that morning. He liked the way his cheeks felt like velvet afterwards. He looked himself over in the mirror as Martin collected the brushes and scissors.

"I think that will do," Ernst said, turning his face to each side, running his fingers over the tops of his ears. Tonight was important and Ernst wanted to look his best. Herr von Zweigert had invited some of the wealthy men from town to a dinner this evening. Baron von Luft and Colonel Adler. They would be bringing their wives, and above all, Baron von Luft was bringing his daughter. Ernst knew what this meant, and he would not disappoint his father. He was expected to sit near the Fraulein and entertain her with stories from cadet school. If tonight went well, Ernst might see her again and perhaps within the week, he'd have permission to write her when he left for the army. At least there was still one von Zweigert son that was presentable, his father told him days before. Ernst had smiled at this. He met the young Arriane von Luft years ago at a Christmas party hosted by his family. He couldn't remember her face well, but looking in the mirror, he was sure she would be impressed with how he looked, handsome in his military uniform with a fresh haircut and neat mustache. Ernst wiped his face with the towel. He hoped she would be pretty.

Heike walked passed as Ernst entered the hallway. Her blonde curls bounced against her shoulders as she turned and looked Ernst over.

"You look nice," she said. Ernst studied her face. Ever since Erich's arrival, Heike seemed in better spirits, and, the last couple days, Ernst hardly caught a glimpse of her without a smile on her face. It made him sick.

"Where are you off to?" he asked.

"Erich and I were going to go on a walk down to the river," she said, her lips pulling back to reveal the top row of her teeth, "would you like to come?"

"And talk about his grand adventures abroad? *Nein.*"

Heike's smile sunk into a tight lipped expression that reminded Ernst of his mother's face. "He hasn't done anything, Ernst. I don't understand why you are so cold to him."

"Because he hasn't done anything. And he probably never will. It's pathetic. He's older than I am and has nothing to show for it."

"I don't like the way you ignore him," Heike said. "*Mutti* wouldn't have wanted this hostility after she passed." She moved to Ernst and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't touch me," he said, clutching Heike's wrist. "You can walk around here with him, like she never died, but you were there."

Heike struggled at his grip, but Ernst's hand locked around her thin fingers, pulling her close until their faces almost touched. "You're hurting me, Ernst."

"Go ahead. Go laugh with him about how great it is to run around with creditors at your heels. Father will take care of it all in the end. You two are a disgrace to her name. I'm the only one who seems to care that she's gone."

Heike let out a whimper but said nothing, turning from Ernst's gaze.

"Just make sure he actually shows up this time," he said. Ernst released his sister and made for the stairs. There was much to do before the dinner tonight. This evening would be a welcome distraction for the von Zweigert estate.

Ernst found Elsa spreading a white cloth over the massive oak table in the dining room. "I'm going to need my uniform cleaned before the guests arrive," he said to the maid. Elsa assured him everything would be taken care of.

"You look very handsome, Meister Ernst."

"*Danke*, Elsa," he said, sitting down at the head of the table. His father would already be out on the slopes at this hour. "I'll take my breakfast in here before they arrange the room." Ernst lit a cigarette as Elsa left.

He loved the dining room. It was his favorite room in the house. Ernst would sometimes sit alone in the room whether he was hungry or not, in his father's chair only during the day. There was always something to look at. The wall by the main door held a large portrait of Otto von Bismarck, tall and proud in his Prussian uniform, an iron cross pinned to the breast, the face above his golden collar looking solemnly into the distance. Ernst contemplated his facial expression every time he entered the room. What must a man like that worry about? he wondered. Most likely everything, but Ernst bet he wanted for nothing in his life.

Another painting almost hid the entire side wall of the dining room, its colors dark and joyless. Ernst once heard the servants were afraid to even look at the picture, as if its subjects were alive. Ernst studied the face of his grandfather, Ulrich von Zweigert, field marshal and martyr of the Hussar regiment of the Franco-Prussian War. Ernst had never met the man, but he felt he knew him through his father's countless dinnertime stories of his brave charge against the

French artillery. Even today, he thought he'd never tire of such a striking image. Ulrich von Zweigert sat firmly on the deep black horse, looking straight through the painting, his *Totenkopf* dolman blending into the animal, making it hard to tell where man ended and beast began. Ernst gazed at the skull and crossbones insignia across his grandfather's busby. How grand he looked, staring into the dining room as he must have looked upon the guns that claimed his life. Ernst thought a man like that must have never worried over anything.

Ernst finished his cigarette as Elsa returned with tea. Placing the tray before him, the maid turned to leave, but Ernst grabbed her hand. Her wrist was locked in his grip, but he held onto her with a delicacy he had forfeited upstairs with his sister. Her large brown eyes blinked quickly. She was only a few years older than Ernst. Fair, but not exceptionally pretty. He enjoyed her presence though. Sometimes he gave her commands just as an excuse to keep her in the room longer.

"Father is very much expecting tonight to be perfect in every way possible," he said, staring into her eyes. "See that all the glasses are immaculate."

"Of course," Elsa said. "I hear the Fraulein von Luft will be joining?"

"*Ja*, well Father thinks it's time for me to consider my options. As a man, you see."

Elsa nodded. "One of the cooks used to work for the Baron and he said she is a very attractive young girl. I'm sure you will be well suited if it is to be so."

"Is that jealousy I hear, Elsa?" Ernst asked. He lowered his voice. "Afraid no one will sneak down to the servants' quarters to watch you undress anymore?" The image was in his mind as fresh as the day it happened. He could see the curves of Elsa's body under her pinafore before him. Her breasts stood high on her chest, firm and round like the vineyard slopes outside the estate.

"Meister Ernst, please," Elsa said, looking around the room. "You promised we would never speak of that again. I could lose my job if someone overheard."

Ernst poured his tea. "There's nothing to worry about," he said, taking a sip from the steaming cup. "You'll still have a job, as long as everything goes well tonight."

Evening came on quicker than Ernst hoped. He stood in front of the mirror, arms outstretched, as Martin brushed his uniform. "Faster, dammit. I can hear them in the hall already," Ernst said. Downstairs, the guests were arranged around the table with the men and women mixed. Heike sat next to Colonel Adler and Arriane next to a space for Ernst. Across the table, Erich was seated next to Baron von Luft with an empty chair between them where his mother should have been and Frau Adler to his left. Frau von Luft was given the end of the table and as usual, Herr von Zweigert sat at the head. Everyone stood as Ernst entered the room. "Please forgive me for being late," he said, eyeing his siblings as he shook hands with the men. At least Erich was here and dressed in a dinner jacket.

"Congratulations, my boy," said Colonel Adler. "I hear you graduated top of your class at Oranienstein."

"*Danke schön*," said Ernst, taking the large man's hand. "It's an honor to finally meet you, Colonel."

The Colonel laughed. "I've been looking forward to meeting Ulrich's grandson for quite some time. You come from a long line of esteemed military men, you know."

Ernst caught his father eyeing him as the Colonel spoke. He thought he could see the hint of a smile under Herr von Zweigert's silver mustache.

"Well, now we can begin," his father said.

Ernst took his seat. Arriane von Luft glanced over as he laid the napkin over his leg. Her long blonde hair sat tight under a pearl bandeau and plumed aigrette, high on her head. Some curls hung free, hiding her ears, giving Ernst the freedom to gaze upon her milky white neck. She looked a grown woman now, tall and fashionable like the ones he'd seen in magazines and about town when he left school.

"It's been a long time, Ernst," she said as butlers moved about, lowering dishes with arrays of wine glasses as they bowed their heads.

"Four years, I believe," he said. Ernst thought his voice sounded strained as he looked at Arriane. He coughed. "You look lovely this evening, Fraulein."

Arriane blushed. "And how your brother has grown. I heard he has been away in Paris? How exciting. I thought he was studying at Copenhagen, though."

Ernst didn't know how to respond. He was soon to be an officer in the Prussian army with a real career in his future. Who cared about some truant?

"*Ja*, I believe he got lost on his way home," said Ernst. "Poor fool."

The next hour the butlers never seemed to stop moving as they hurried in and out of the dining room with various courses under covered pewter. Salmon and spargel, potatoes covered in hollandaise sauce, sauerbraten, and always more Riesling. Ernst watched as Erich refused each glass after his second. Suddenly he's an *Abstinentzler*, Ernst thought. Probably feels guilty about drinking away so much of their father's hard labor. He kept watch on Erich whenever the time called for him to switch talking to Arriane and converse with her mother instead. Ernst found Frau von Luft to be far less interesting than her daughter and much less pleasant to look at. He would turn his head to grab the attention of one of the butlers only to find Arriane suffering some

of the Colonel's loud talk of wartime strategies. Her head would nod politely, but even in the corner of his vision, Ernst could see Arriane's gaze fixed on his brother. Erich was in the middle of telling Baron von Luft about Parisian politics.

"Well, you can't expect much from the French," the Baron said. "Look at the mess they made with that Dreyfus character."

Erich shrugged. "Talk is still popular over there."

"The whole affair was quite a scandal," said the Colonel. "Whether the punishment was too severe or not, treason is a serious issue."

Herr von Zweigert laughed, lifting his empty glass as he nodded towards a butler. "Progressives and radicals. What a farce. A whole country can't go to pieces every time a Jew is accused of a crime, innocent or not."

The Colonel and the Baron seemed to agree. Erich looked down into his plate and said nothing.

"I think it's wonderful you were able to experience another culture that way, Erich," Arriane said. "It must have been lovely."

Ernst almost dropped his fork. What did Arriane see in his brother and why was she so uninterested in him?

Erich looked at his father before answering. "*Ja*, I was especially fond of the French cinema. They have these theaters where –"

Herr von Zweigert laughed again, harder this time. "That's my son, gentlemen. Loves cinema. I spent a fortune on a school in Denmark so he could watch pictures in Paris. I'm sending him to you, Colonel. Do with him what you will." The women at the table exchanged nervous glances.

"Of course," Colonel Adler said. "The army is always in need of healthy young men." He lifted his glass towards Erich.

A feeling of relief passed through Ernst as he took a sip from his glass. The drink passed through his chest, a warm feeling making its way upwards as he set the glass down. His father would say what he was thinking and Arriane would see that there was no need to be polite to Erich for the sake of dining conversation etiquette. Erich stood and dropped his napkin on the plate, excusing himself from the table. Arriane rose from her chair, but Baron von Luft shot her a squinted look and she sat down again.

"You must come up to see the vineyard sometime," Ernst said, accepting another glass of wine.

"Of course," said Arriane, her eyes on her lap. "I look forward to it."

When dinner was over, Ernst said goodnight and lit a cigarette in the dark of the sitting room. The von Lufts had left. He didn't even bother to ask Arriane if he could write to her. It was clear Erich was the one she wanted asking. Ernst ground his teeth so hard he thought the remaining guests would hear him in the hallway. He heard the Colonel and his father speaking just outside. "The boy will be alright, I'll see to it," the Colonel said. Ernst wondered if they were talking about him or Erich. Probably Erich, he thought. Even during the celebration of Ernst's enlistment, everyone seemed more concerned with his damned brother. "Again, I'm so sorry for your loss," he heard the Colonel say. Ernst inhaled and blew the smoke out his nose. Even in the dim light, his mother's portrait stared directly at him. If only she were still alive, this night would have gone much better. The sounds of voices faded in the hallway and Ernst stabbed his cigarette into the ashtray.

Down the hall, Elsa carried a pile of dishes against her chest. Her eyes followed the carpet as she made her way to the kitchen. Erich stopped and put his hand up to the wall, blocking her escape. At least he would get someone's attention tonight.

"How was the dinner?" Elsa asked.

"I need new linens in my room," he said.

"I had them changed this morning, Meister Ernst." Elsa struggled to keep the dishes together as she stood in front of him.

"I didn't ask what you did this morning," he said, taking a half empty wine glass from Elsa's arms. "Be quick about it too." Ernst drained the glass and carefully balanced it on top of the tray. He made his way to the guest room. He felt like his feet carried him there faster than he commanded. Throwing the door open, he found Erich on the bed, reading a book.

"That was some show you made, brother."

Erich turned a page. "Spare me, Ernst. I'm not in the mood."

Ernst clenched his fists. "What exactly are you in the mood for, then? Besides ruining this family's name and my dinner."

His brother closed the book. "Have I wronged you in some way?"

"Arriane," Ernst said, surprised that he was almost yelling. "You have to hold everyone's attention with your little stories, don't you?"

Erich stood. "I was being polite. Answering questions when they came to me. I didn't bring it up."

"Everyone knows what you did. How you owe people money. They feel sorry for you, Erich. They feel sorry for Father because you're his son and they want to be polite." Ernst felt

very warm in his uniform, the wetness on the back of his neck made him feel every move of his collar as he turned his head.

"You're drunk, Ernst," Erich said, nudging him to the door.

He moved out of reach of his brother's hands. "You may find the army less forgiving than him. They don't welcome home deserters."

"We're not at war," Erich said. "Go to bed."

"You better pray we don't see a war," said Ernst as he stepped out into the hall. "I for one wouldn't mind it much. Once I'm an officer, I won't have to be stationed near you."

Erich closed the door.

In his room, Ernst opened all the windows. He's so self-righteous, he thought. Ernst pulled at the collar of his military jacket, ripping a button in his haste. "Damn," he said, looking at himself in the mirror. His face had gone bright red and his dark hair hung loose against his slicked forehead. He never admits when he's wrong. He inspires this sort of hostility in people. Ernst heard a knock at his door. "Come in," he said, unbuttoning his jacket slower this time. Elsa entered with a pile of sheets. She began stripping the bed of its linens. Her dark hair fell loose from the white headpiece. Her locks didn't have the same elegance of Arriane's, but Ernst could not keep his eyes from the strands that lightly brushed her cheeks as she worked. He watched as her hands moved up and down the mattress. He wanted to be on the bed as she smoothed every wrinkle and fold across its surface. He moved towards the door and closed it.

"Meister Ernst," she said, her eyes moving from Ernst to the door.

"Remember when I saw you and you just... let me watch?" he said, removing his jacket and wiping his neck with a clean towel.

Elsa dropped the sheet back on the bed. "Meister Ernst, I must go."

"*Nein*, you will stay."

"I don't want to lose my job," Elsa said, her lip quivered as she spoke.

"I can tell my Father that you've been stealing bottles of wine. He's always thinking that they're going missing." His voice had taken a deep tone that resonated through the silent room.

Elsa took a step forward. "But I'm never down in the cellars. You can ask Hilda."

Ernst laughed. "It doesn't matter. Who do you think he'll believe? You've only been here for five years."

Elsa's brow furrowed. She seemed to be in deep thought. She slowly nodded and Ernst locked his door. He put a cigarette to his lips as he sat in the chair beside the mirror, but didn't light it just yet. There were still plenty of hours before dawn. Ernst von Zweigert would have some gratification this evening in some manner that his brother could not take away.

### 3



At this hour, it was rare to find Aimee in anything besides her pale silk stockings, but tonight she had her longline corset in place and was brushing her hair in front of the mirror long before Monsieur Chevalier's shaky hands found the buttons of his vest. "You are in a hurry?" the gentleman asked. "Not at all," she replied, turning her head from the mirror to meet the question with her eyes. Though she was indeed attempting to influence the man's departure with her actions, Aimee smiled, attempting to match the sincerity in her voice. Her olive eyes locked with his and relayed a truth that more suited the older gentleman's curiosity.

"I need to get home anyway. The wife will have supper on soon," he said, now fully dressed. Aimee let out a long held breath. By now her hair was braided in neat ebony cords, the way she liked, and she was reapplying rouge. Monsieur Chevalier placed the francs on the bureau and cleared his throat. "Let me have one last look at you."

This was the part Aimee enjoyed the best. She stood tall as the Monsieur's eyes traced up and down her body. "You are so beautiful. So young," he said. She turned around, pulling her hair up so he could see the back of her neck. She then spun around and flashed him a look that asked him to stay – to never leave – and her smile promised to love only him. The Monsieur's eyes stayed on Aimee and she felt like she was the only woman in the country at that moment. She laughed as she sat back down. Sometimes Aimee thought there wasn't a stage in all of France worthy of her acting abilities. Other times she wondered if she would ever actually land an audition for a role in the theater. But it didn't matter. The evening crowd was coming in, and she had work to do. With Désirée indisposed, Madame Mercier was counting on Aimee to entertain extra guests this evening, but no one would make any money sitting inside rooms with old men who won't tip well. "Au revoir," she said, as the Monsieur shuffled out the door, "until next week!"

Aimee remained in the room for a few moments, adjusting her dress as she looked herself over in the mirror. She counted the bills three times over, each time expecting there to be a hidden note that would somehow make the last hour of her evening a worthy investment of her time. Finding only the usual amount, she separated the money into the house's take of four francs and her own two before heading out into the hall. Estelle and Liana stood at the top of the staircase, smoking cigarettes as they overlooked the bannisters above the main hall. They both turned as Aimee approached, flashing smiles of crooked white teeth.

"You sure are busy tonight," Liana said. "Isn't that your second round already?"

"*Oui*," said Aimee, "I'm trying out every man in France until I find us all the perfect husbands, loyal and handsome and flush with francs!"

"Hope you don't mind waiting," Estelle said.

They all laughed for a moment and then Aimee wedged herself in between the girls, taking hold of the railing. Men, young and old, poured through the front hall doors, letting a cool July breeze enter the foyer. The warmth of her companions on her bare shoulders made Aimee huddle in closer. Estelle held out her cigarette and Aimee accepted the red stained tip without question. The three girls shared everything: food, clothing, even clients on occasion if the price was fair. Since she had arrived at Madame Mercier's establishment a year earlier, Estelle and Liana had taken a personal interest in Aimee and they were now inseparable. On Sundays, they would all share lunch in the town or catch a midday show at the theater. They still talked about acting and moving to Paris, and Aimee was grateful to have girls her age to talk to about her aspirations, girls who understood her, who didn't share the settled insouciance of the older ladies.

As long as Estelle and Liana were there, living in Péronne at the *Salon de l'avenue des cœurs* was just a passing phase in Aimee's life. And Aimee knew it was so. She wasn't like the other girls. She didn't have the same stories the others told. Heart-wrenching stories of broken families, drunkard fathers, and abusive husbands. They didn't have a choice, they'd say. Aimee was silent whenever they asked about her home.

She grew up in a small farming community not far from Péronne. She thought her family well off compared to their neighbors and she remembered the extra food Papa would bring home every Christmas. She still laughed whenever she thought of the year she gave her younger brother Isaac a kiss as a present, the way he screamed and laughed and flushed red in the face as he wiped his cheek. Aimee also remembered the limp her father would walk with in later years after falling from the loft in the barn, his lips tight as he hobbled down the stairs each morning. The way her mother and father would argue in the kitchen, wondering whether to sell the land or

not. Her father couldn't keep up with the work anymore, she heard him say, and something needed to be done. At sixteen, Aimee overheard her father speaking to her mother upstairs after she'd gone to bed about marrying their daughter to the neighbor's son, Jules, and merging the two farms.

Aimee cried when she heard this. Back then, she spent all her time with René, the baker's son from the village. They would spend afternoons and sometimes evenings along the banks of the river, just the two of them. Aimee loved the way René looked at her. She would dance at the river's edge, reciting lines she'd memorized from books. "You are going to be a famous actress on stage," he would tell her. "I'd come watch you, if I could." Aimee thought she loved this boy and one night they slept in each other's arms in the barn, far from the lights of the house. Aimee was not scared the way her mother said she would be. René was gentle and Aimee never thought twice about what she'd done until she heard her father speaking in a hushed tone that night. She would not marry Jules. She would never see the lights of the stage and feel the warmth of so many eyes upon her if she was to marry him. Sleep was impossible that night. She imagined her life, routine and bleak, a terrible sense of *ennui* gripping her mind as she prepared dinner each night alone in Jules's father's house, while the men labored outside. She would never smell the fresh baked bread on René's shirt again if this happened. Aimee moved to the other side of the room, collecting her clothes. She kissed Isaac on the forehead, careful not to wake him, as she slipped out into the cold morning air.

Two years later, she saw Estelle at a café in Péronne. Estelle sat at the table across from Aimee. Aimee thought Estelle an attractive girl, despite her large nose, and she couldn't help but stare at the relaxed manner in which this girl sat in her chair, smiling as strangers passed by on the street, her legs folded over one another. Everyone who passed seemed infatuated with her.

Young men whispered as they walked by, looking back at Estelle from down the street. Aimee felt invisible in her presence. Estelle noticed her gaze and Aimee turned her eyes down toward her hands. She looked up to find Estelle taking the empty seat across the table, offering her a cigarette. The two exchanged pleasantries over a cup of coffee.

“You’re so beautiful,” Aimee finally said. “People can’t help but stare.”

Estelle smiled, “*Merci beaucoup*, I guess it comes with the business.”

“What business is that?” Aimee asked.

Estelle drew on her cigarette, taking her time before she answered. “I’m sort of like an actress, you could say.”

Aimee’s eyes widened. “Really? Where?”

“Just down the street,” she said. “It’s a salon for gentlemen. I – I entertain them for the evening.”

“Oh,” Aimee said. She had heard her mother speak of women like this when she was younger. She had suspected Estelle might be a *filles de joie* as soon as she saw the unrestrained way in which she carried herself, as well as the stack of francs she had pulled out when their coffee came, but she didn’t want to believe it. Aimee always imagined those women to be widows, old women with no care for their appearance or reputation, having the manners of men. They were not supposed to be young, charming girls with large bright eyes. “Do you get to dance and sing?”

“*Oui*,” Estelle said. “Often enough too, though my voice is not as good as my friend Liana’s.”

Aimee laughed. She told Estelle about her dreams of the stage and her family back home. Something about Estelle told Aimee she could trust her and it felt liberating to talk to someone

her age for the first time in a while. Before they knew it, the sky was darkening and the café owner was pushing a broom around, eyeing the girls with silent indignation. Aimee followed Estelle down the street for a few minutes.

“Where do you live?” Estelle asked.

“Over that way,” Aimee pointed. “I’m staying with a couple who lives above a restaurant. They let me sleep in their extra room for taking care of the children while they work and washing the dishes at night.”

“An *au pair*?” Estelle laughed. “You know, if you want, I know a place where you could stay and get a lot of money. A beautiful girl like you.”

Aimee forced a smile. “Oh, no. *Merci*,” she said, not wanting to offend. “I’m just working until I have enough to move to Paris and become an actress,” she said, more to herself than to Estelle.

“Come on. There are many different ways in which we women must learn to act,” Estelle said, “it couldn’t hurt to learn a few things and go to Paris a bit more prepared. Come meet Madame Mercier and if it seems like something you don’t want to do, you can always go back to scrubbing pans.”

Aimee didn’t know what to say. Looking back on this day, she would tell herself that Estelle’s words had persuaded her, but she knew secretly she had been yearning for such an opportunity since she left home. This was exactly what she had left the farm for. A chance to be looked at and to feel desired and loved. If this was a way to advance her ambitions, she was determined to consider Estelle’s offer with careful scrutiny. After all, it would only have to be for a little while. Estelle offered her another cigarette as they walked down the street.

By the end of the week, Aimee walked to where she left Estelle that day. “*Excusez-moi*,” she said to a gentleman on the street. “Do you know where I can find the *Salon de l’avenue des cœurs*?” The man scoffed and pointed to an alleyway behind Aimee. He walked away in a hurry, not saying a word.

The brothel sat nestled between swirls of cinnamon-scented air from a bakery and an abandoned office building, not three blocks from the main square of Péronne. The smell of the street reminded Aimee of René and she smiled the first time she saw the *Maisons Tolérée*. From afar, it could pass as a small hotel, which in fact it had been, as Aimee later learned, before the Prussians demolished the entire town in 1870. Like many establishments, it served as an impromptu hospital following the war and though it was never fully restored to its original design over the next year, the surviving beds had been put to yet another purpose. Each room was afforded some relic of the old *auberge*, though there weren’t enough silk curtains or divans left to furnish them all alike. Some of the rugs still displayed the amber stains of dried blood, but most of them had since been replaced with cheap Savonnerie imitations. Miraculously, the chandelier, with its many glass trinkets, remained unscathed and hung proud and firm above the front hall; a compelling distraction to the various stains along the yellowed walls. Aimee loved the look of the ornate fixture and found it hard to notice anything else when she stood in the foyer.

By day, the façade was lost within the crude patterns of brick and stone that speckled each building along the alley, but every evening, the brothel would emerge from obscurity with the glow of the red lamp above its entrance, a glare that reached to either end of the street. On particularly windy nights, the lamp would rattle within its bronze sconce to an arrhythmic beat, casting flickers of crimson light upon the alley. The sight would grow fondly familiar to Aimee.

As the men gathered, Aimee followed the other girls into the lounge on the first floor. The roar of the chatter promised a busy and profitable evening, and the Madame was moving from one table to the next, her slouching cheeks pulled back in a permanent smile, commending the older gentlemen on their selections and introducing girls to the younger, reluctant men. The tables were filled with various parties, laughing and ordering drinks. Some girls sat upon the laps of the men at one table as they whispered in their ears. The girls looked at each other and giggled. Everyone seemed absorbed in the smoky celebratory air of the bar, until Aimee noticed the peculiar gentleman in the corner.

Braced against a wall, the man stood alone, far from any of the tables. He took quick, short draws from his pipe and issued the smoke from the corner of his mouth, while his hands searched furiously within his vest. He seemed to find what he was searching for, but made no move to rejoin any party, continuing his smoking while his hands sought another preoccupation. Aimee stared at this stranger, fixed on the oddity of his withdrawal from the crowd. Suddenly, he looked up directly at Aimee and their eyes met for a second. She had never seen this man before, but something about the way he looked at her made her cold all over, even amidst the heat of so many bodies. Aimee shuddered as if the piercing glare could be felt on her skin from across the room. She moved to rejoin Estelle and Liana by the bar. Aimee wanted to ask them if they'd ever seen the man in the corner before, but Madame Mercier pushed through the crowd, her face heavy with makeup, and beckoned the girls away. "Ah, my loves! I need the three of you to follow me." The stranger had disappeared as Aimee left the bar.

She led them back to the main hall, where other girls were already lining up along the rim of the staircase. On busy nights like this, the girls would assemble in such a fashion as to make

the choice easier for the men still coming in the doors. Liana compared it to shopping at the market, where all the best produce was on display and the customer only need to point out their preference to the grocer. Aimee usually fared well at such expositions, which she took as true confirmation of her beauty, but since her time at the brothel, Aimee was always picked quickly, just never the first. Each time the Madame called for a line up, she hoped it would be her night. Joining the other girls on the wall, she assumed her best smile and prepared for a quick selection but her grin slowly faded as the stranger from the lounge entered the foyer and merged into the crowd of men. When the Madame asked the gentlemen to move to the other side of the hall as to allow access to the door, Aimee watched as the stranger moved several steps to the front of the line in the confusion. One by one, the men in front of the stranger made their choices. Elyse, Camille, and Marion were picked first as usual. Aimee hated that they were always chosen over her, but a part of her wanted to be left when the strange gentleman made his choice. Something about him scared her, the way his eyes fixed on her. He didn't look with the same want of comfort like her usual clientele. She wondered where he came from and she wished to find out. When the chosen girls left the line, Aimee moved in closer to the remaining women. Nothing entices a man like that which he cannot have, she thought. Her eyes moved to the ceiling, focusing on anything except the stranger's curious stare.

The chandelier held her attention as it swung slightly back and forth from the vibrations upstairs. It swung from its base in short arcs the way her father's watch dangled from his fingers the morning he took her fishing for the first time, years before his fall. It had been a half hour before she was dressed, but he insisted that they could still make good time if they hurried. Aimee could barely see in the dark and she had to take wide waddling steps to keep from falling out of the extra pair of boots he gave her. "Hurry, *ma canard!*" he said, handing her a worm.

Aimee gagged as the slender body slided over her palm. Little girls do not play with worms, she had told him. "Come now, *ma mie*," her Papa said, "we all have to do things in life that are unpleasant here and there. Especially if we want to eat." It was the earliest Aimee had ever been awake and she remembered thinking she'd never seen so many stars in her life.

She could see them now, makeshift constellations, as the glass fragments of the chandelier strew lights over the walls like the many grains of salt over the fish she and her father shared for breakfast that day.

"Aimee." Madame Mercier called, "This gentleman has picked you for the evening." Aimee's eyes fell on her evening's charge. It was the stranger. She smiled. Now in the light of the hall, Aimee could see details of the man absent before in the dim smoky lounge. A thin handsome man with angular cheek bones that stuck out above his bristly jaw. His hair was parted down the middle and gleamed under the chandelier like it was just slapped with pomade. His clothes did little to complement his looks. The vest was torn and fraying at its ends and the white shirt underneath had visible stains of perspiration beneath the arms. Aimee noticed the manner in which he squirmed about while Madame Mercier was talking to him. He held his hat at his belt level, continuously switching it from his left hand to his right.

"Aimee is a good girl," the Madame said, "one of my best. She will see that you are taken care of."

The man only nodded. Aimee sensed that perhaps he didn't speak fluent French. She sighed, but forced a smile as she had done a hundred times before and took his hand in hers. Immediately, Aimee's senses were affronted by the fetor of the man, now in such close proximity. Her eyes stung and she could taste hay, fertilizer and manure on the back of her tongue. She recognized the stench from the pig farms back home. Suddenly, she regretted her

role in influencing his decision. His palm was glossed with sweat and she bit her lip to keep it from trembling. Aimee had a hard time keeping her hand around his. She struggled to keep hold as her hand slid down his moist fingers. “Care to buy me an *aperitif*?” she asked. The man said nothing and shook his head. Aimee turned and stared wide-eyed at her friends. Estelle only winked.

Up the carpeted stairs and to the left they went, until the din of the foyer dwindled to a murmur within the yellowed walls. As she closed the door, she took shallow breaths, but it took all the talents Estelle and Liana taught her to keep from gagging on the smell of his company. She coughed as she tried to regain her composure, sitting on the bed with her hand to her throat. Breathing deeply, she looked over the man again. He was handsome, she thought. He said nothing as he stood in front of her. She could do this she told herself. She would just need a bath afterwards. Aimee thought about what her father said as she moved to open a window.

"Come on," she said, "take that vest off."

The stranger stood in front of the bed. He ignored the request as he surveyed the room.

“The vest?” she said. The man shook his head. Aimee shrugged her shoulders. “It’s your hour, Monsieur.”

“You begin,” he said.

“Oh, so you do know French?” Aimee asked.

“Enough. Begin,” he said.

Aimee stood and began undressing as the man locked the door and began emptying his pockets and unbuttoning his vest. He placed a thin black object on the bureau, a small book, perhaps a journal. Loose pages were folded and tucked away under the clasp holding the jacket shut. Aimee watched as he covered the book with his vest. A gun swung loosely in a leather

holster around the man's chest. Aimee stopped untying her corset, watching him unbuckle the straps. The stranger's eyes turned towards Aimee. "Continue," he said. Aimee felt a rush of excitement at the sight of the gun. She'd never seen one before. Who was this man?

A knock on the door startled Aimee as she freed the laced knot around her back. The stranger looked from the door to Aimee. He pressed a finger to his lips as his other hand rested on the pistol's grip. His brow was slicked with sweat as the knocking continued.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Aimee asked.

"Quiet," the man said through gritted teeth.

"Pardon... Aimee?" the voice on the other side said. "It's me, Camille." Was she through already? Aimee wondered. Her voice sounded higher than usual. "I left my wristlet in this room, could I come in?"

Aimee moved toward the door. "It's just Camille," she said.

"*Nein! Nein, Schlampe!*" she heard. "*Öffnest sie nicht!*"

She saw the way the man crouched in the corner of the room, his back to the wall, sweat dripping from his chin as he cursed Aimee in words she didn't understand. Aimee unlocked the door, swinging it open enough to shield the man from view and found Camille standing in the doorway, her face pink from the evening's flow of liquor. Her left dress strap hung loose around her shoulder. Aimee could see the man who had chosen Camille standing behind her with one hand on Camille, a pistol in the other.

"We know you're in there," Camille's man said. "Come out nice and slow, you *boche*."

Aimee walked backwards towards the bureau as the man pushed Camille forward into the room, just in front of the door. Aimee let out a sob, fearing what was about to happen. Her hands

felt the stranger's vest and her fingers closed around the book beneath, gripping until her fingers ached.

The bullet ripped through the door with a splintering crack that forced Aimee's eyes shut. A warm mist of blood sprayed her face and when she opened her eyes again, Camille lay crumpled on the ground, both straps of her dress now free from her shoulders as the hole in her neck discharged spurts of blood over the cheap rug. The man from the hall now rounded the door and Aimee heard three gunshots, but without thinking, she was running through the hall. Down the stairs her feet took her as men from the foyer charged passed her. She scrambled out the door into the cool evening air.

For the next hour, the brothel bellowed with the sounds of screams and hurried conversation as men and women ran in and out of the building. He was dead, Aimee heard. She thought of Camille. The way their eyes met right before it happened. Aimee felt like this was somehow her fault, like she made the stranger choose her during the line-up. Aimee sat outside across the street as the brothel blazed with excitement. She spoke to no one, not even Estelle and Liana when they found her, still clutching the little black book in her hands. She hadn't even noticed it until she made it outside. She unhooked the clasp and flipped through the pages. Not knowing what to do, she sat and studied the contents. Tiny sketches of railroads with French town names next to them took up most of the contents. A few pages had drawings of maps and tiny, detailed scribbling along the margins, all in German. She unfolded a loose page and saw a pencil drawing of a railcar with the word "*Kriegszeit*" at the top. Aimee closed the book.

A tall man appeared in the doorway of the brothel minutes later. He said something to the Madame that Aimee couldn't hear before descending the stairs. As he walked across the street, Aimee noticed he was very handsome and smooth faced for an older gentleman. He had deep set eyes and a well groomed mustache. The array of pins and medals across his blue jacket spoke of an authority that gave Aimee a sense of comfort. Her shoulders relaxed as he spoke.

“I hear you were in the room when it happened, Mademoiselle?” he said.

Aimee said nothing, handing him the black book. The man accepted the journal, eyeing Aimee in silence. He rifled through the pages, nodding every so often.

“*Oui... Oui,*” he said to himself. “Very good.” The gentleman reached into his pocket and withdrew a handkerchief. He nodded towards Aimee.

“Are you alright, Mademoiselle? Do you need a doctor? I can have someone see you.”

“No,” Aimee said, watching glimmers of red light fill the alley as a breeze shook the sconce above the doorway. “I don't want to be seen right now.”

## 4



The photographer had just unfolded the tripod when Belikov returned with the horse. A satiny black Orlov-Rostopchin that trotted with a dignified air like it knew how much the farm's owner had just charged for its rental. An outrageous price for a few hours, but even Belikov was struck by the animal's graceful stature. He had handed the money over, then, to the farmer's delight, fished within his coat for a few extra rubles.

Near St. Petersburg, only a few clouds hung in the distance beyond the stretch of cupolas and spires intersecting the skyline. Belikov gauged by the direction of the wind that it would be some time before they cast their shadows upon the city. It was a splendid day for a picture, but Belikov was less concerned with the aestheticism of the scene so much as its lighting. He had organized pictures like this every few months for the last four years and had been assured by every photographer that weather was always the most important factor. As he rode the horse through the gates of the palace courtyard, an August breeze followed him inside, rustling the

interior trees into a gentle sway that promised the men their hats would stay neatly on their heads that morning.

Belikov dismounted and looked the stallion over. Wonderful creature, he thought. A half ton of brute force and bravery atop towers of muscle and hoof. Its needs basic, its manner simple. So much easier to navigate than council assemblies, palace balls, and fussy courtiers. Belikov marched the horse past the circle of ministers awaiting the Tsar and his son to appear. The photographer fumbled with the accordion-shaped head of the camera as Belikov approached.

“How soon can we be ready?”

The photographer looked up, his eyes fixed on the horse. He pushed the round glasses that kept falling off his nose back into place. “Very soon, sir. What a magnificent animal. A fine specimen. May I touch it?”

Belikov walked the stallion past the tripod. “It’s just a horse. See that you’re ready by time they arrive. I don’t want to be out here all day.”

The small group of the Tsar’s cabinet watched Belikov lead the horse to a stretch of grass along the western wall. They laughed loudly amongst themselves, smoking cigarettes and slapping each other on the shoulders.

“Ah, the farm hand returns.”

“*Da*, little Vyacheslav is sick and the emperor sends the next best man for the job. Belikov should sure know his way around a horse; he’s been wearing the bridle for his Majesty long enough.”

The group roared, the medals on their blue jackets clinking together as they shook with amusement. Belikov continued straight ahead. He pulled the reins tight, bringing the horse’s

dished face down to his own. Brushing the bowed neck with the back of his hand, he turned towards the men.

“Someone has to get things done around here,” he said to the horse.

An hour later, the Tsar emerged from the palace. The raucous courtyard fell silent as Nicholas II descended the stone steps. Like the group of men who now stood at attention, the Tsar wore his ceremonial naval jacket, yet his uniform bore golden epaulettes at the shoulders, rows of dazzling chains and medals atop a brilliant red sash, and a pair of immaculate white gloves. Behind the head of the Romanov family trailed a miniature version of him, the Tsarevich, Alexei Nikolaevich. Dressed in much simpler attire than his father, the ten-year-old heir apparent mimicked his father’s confident gait, adjusting his sailor’s cap every few steps. Alexei’s eyes widened at the sight of the horse. The Tsar gave him a quick nod and the child broke his royal posture, racing into the field as he held his hat to his head.

Alexei was Nicholas’ youngest child, the first son after four daughters. Belikov would never forget the day he first laid eyes upon the boy. The palace seemed eerily still as he ascended the steps to the second floor. He had not expected any public celebration upon his return from Odessa. War with Japan had been a disaster, but still, Belikov found something troubling in the silence of the foyer. Where was the usual clatter of plates and glasses as servants cleared the dining room of its most recent meal? Where were the cries of children as they ran through the halls, pursued by a playful minister with his arms in front of him, growling attempts at bear noises?

A shriek rang through the hallway, breaking the silence, as Belikov reached the top step. He followed the noise to a bedroom where, outstretched on the bed, the little Tsarevich lay surrounded by a group of physicians, eyeing each other in silence as the child howled in agony.

A doctor knelt close to the boy, pulling at wraps of bandages around the joints of his short arms. At the end of the bed, Nicolas' wife, Alexandra, sat facing her son, her eyes red with tears. The Tsar stood by the window, overlooking the courtyard. His hand was on his hip, the other smoothing his curled mustache over and over. Belikov ran to the bed. Alexei's limbs were covered in bruises, purpled and swollen. The little boy's chest heaved as the doctor held his arm in place. A pattern of red and black marks colored the child's ribcage. The shape of a handprint, Belikov thought.

"What has happened?" he asked, pulling one of the doctors from the bed.

"Sir, I must ask you to leave," the man said, pushing him back toward the door.

Belikov waited outside the room, smoking his pipe in confusion, until the Tsar left the bedroom, closing the door slowly behind him.

"It's good to see you, old friend," the Tsar said.

Belikov only nodded. He drew from his pipe as he turned toward the muffled sounds of pain coming from the other side of the door.

"It's a blood condition," the Tsar said. Belikov disliked the faraway look in his eyes as he spoke. "He bleeds from the inside."

"Can't anything be done?" Belikov asked. "All those doctors."

"They seem as lost as I am," the Tsar said, placing a hand on Belikov's shoulder. "No one can know, you understand? We've had enough problems at home with the revolts. This will surely be seen as a sign of the dynasty's weakness."

Belikov looked straight into Nicolas' eyes. "I am home now, cousin. We will do all we can."

Belikov was among the select circle of court officials who knew the truth, and he cherished the opportunity to keep that detail a secret. Every so often, a picture was staged to show Alexei participating in some sort of recreational outdoor activity. The boy would appear to live a normal life, no matter the cost. Today would be the first day the boy sat a full-sized horse.

Outside the palace, the Tsar walked with quiet reservation, nodding to the members of court gathered for the picture. He stopped, standing next to Belikov, and the two of them watched Alexei circle the horse in wonder.

“Thank you again for retrieving the animal,” the Tsar said. “I don’t exactly trust anyone else.”

“Nor should you,” Belikov said, stroking his greying beard with one hand. “The owner had no questions. I paid him not to.”

The Tsar nodded and turned towards the group of men who had resumed their laughter. “I hope this errand did not wound your... pride.”

Belikov left his eyes on Alexei and the stallion. “The only pride I take is in serving the Empire, cousin.”

The Belikovs were a royal family, if only connected to the Romanovs through a distant marriage of small importance. Belikov never missed an opportunity to use the familiar label in the Tsar's presence, and was pleased to find that the Tsar showed no sign of disapproval, even amidst members of court. Belikov cared for the royal family as if it was his own. He remembered the day he learned of Alexei’s birth, years ago off the coast of the Black Sea.

“We have all been named honorary godfathers,” he shouted to his crew the afternoon the cable reached his warship, “of the new Tsarevich, Alexei Nikolaevich Romanov.” A cheer rose

up from the deck as Belikov's Lieutenant called for vodka from below. The sky was a deep purple and apricot shade as Belikov retreated to his cabin. He sat in his private quarters with his thoughts back in St. Petersburg and his hands around a bottle. He wished he could have seen the Emperor's face as he heard the news. Belikov had no children of his own. He and his wife had made several attempts to start a family, but to no avail. Sitting in the cabin, feeling the motions of the waves, or perhaps the onset of the drink, Belikov laughed aloud. Finally, a son, he thought.

Belikov remembered packing his pipe and leaving his room to take in what daylight was left of that evening. He found a sailor against the rails, scanning the sea through binoculars. "Let me see," Belikov said to the young man. Even in the fading light, tiny black specks could be seen against the horizon. "Go and join the others," he said. He could think of no reason to keep watch of the Japanese ships so many miles away. Not tonight. Tonight he would allow the men some distraction. The blockade would keep his ship in port, anchored near Odessa, unable to join the other fleets in the Pacific, yet Belikov would not take the bait. If he wanted to see Alexei, he would need to be patient and keep the men's morale up.

"I think it's happening, Commodore," the Lieutenant said early one morning. Belikov stirred in his bunk. His temples throbbed as he sat up, smoothing the part in his hair. The past months had seen less and less food as the blockade continued and Belikov woke most mornings with a sore head and a burning sensation in his chest.

"Already? Don't these peasants ever sleep?"

"Sir, the supply ship came early. Most of them are out on the deck already."

"*Ahuyet' bliatz,*" Belikov said, searching under his pillow until he found a flask. "Gather your men and be on the deck in five minutes. And tell the cooks to get all the bread and sour milk they have left and begin making as much soup as we can spare."

The Lieutenant did not move. Belikov waited until he finally spoke. "Sir, they outnumber the officers and –"

"Do I have to do everything, Yury? Go. I'll show them how it is."

As the Lieutenant left, Belikov tilted the flask back until it was empty before he buttoned up his coat and picked his hat up off the corner of the bed. Outside the cabin, the wind sprayed his boots with salt water as he approached the railing overlooking a crowd of shivering men in the early morning chill. He'd heard last week's reports of the revolt aboard the ship *Potemkin*, officers thrown overboard and left floating in watery clouds of their own blood. Belikov had no intention of joining them.

"What is the meaning of this assembly?" Belikov asked.

"The meat's rotten is what it is! Infested with maggots," a voice said below, "You can't expect men to eat this!"

"A minor setback, gentleman," Belikov said, "If you'll all go below, there will be *Tyurya*. Double helpings for all."

"Fuck that! We want meat. It's been weeks."

"*Da!* Dogs are treated better than this!" another voice said.

"Dogs?" Belikov said, "All I see in this lot are sea rats. Filthy stowaways with no sense of loyalty, who congregate in the night on his Emperor's deck. Where is your shame?"

"Let him eat nothing but stale bread for months then," a new voice said. As the other sailors agreed in disjointed chants, the Lieutenant's men emerged from beneath the deck, rifles in hand, drawn over the crowd.

"This is not up for debate," Belikov said, "There will be no mutiny today. You will all eat your soup - a privilege I allow you all, don't forget - or you can take your grievances with our menu with you into the sea. The choice is yours, gentlemen." Belikov turned toward his cabin, but stopped to look the crowd over again. "And an additional ration of food all week for anyone who gives me the names of those responsible for this gathering."

His offer produced a name, Markov Grechko. Grechko produced three more names. Belikov insisted they use his own cabin as an interrogation room. It took over twenty buckets of salt water to wash the floors when they had finished. Belikov watched in silence as the four sailors were all swallowed into the icy black depths. He would make it back to St. Petersburg, even if his entire crew did not.

"Come now, Alyosha," Belikov said, lifting Alexei onto the horse. He straightened the blue bandana around the child's neck and placed the reins into the boy's hands.

"Will I really get to ride it, Uncle?" Alexei asked.

"*Niet*, child," Belikov said, "but we must make it look like you can."

Alexei shifted in the saddle and stared at the stallion's glossy mane. "Why?" he asked.

"Because," Belikov said and then stopped as if thinking, "You will be a powerful man like your father someday and power comes from appearances, not strength. This horse could knock you down and crush you in an instant if it wanted to, but it won't. You know why?"

"*Niet*," the boy said, his eyes fully on Belikov now.

"Because you hold the reins, little one, and this horse has been raised by the whip. It doesn't matter how large or strong this horse gets, in the back of its mind it wants to be told what to do. It's in its nature. As long as you pull the reins, the horse will follow because it remembers what happens if it does not."

Alexei laughed. "Will I get my own horse when I'm older?"

Belikov set the child's boots into the stirrups. "*Da*, Alexei. Someday."

The photographer stood behind the camera, waiting, as Belikov returned to the Tsar's side. Alexei looked over at his father, then Belikov.

"You look like a real Emperor," the photographer said, taking the picture.