

University of Nevada, Reno

The Veils of War: A Collection

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in
English

by

Kristin E. Holland

Christopher J. Coake/Thesis Advisor

December, 2015

**© by Kristin E. Holland 2015
All Rights Reserved**



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

We recommend that the thesis
prepared under our supervision by

KRISTIN E. HOLLAND

Entitled

The Veils Of War: A Collection

be accepted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Christopher J. Coake, MFA, Advisor

Justin D. Gifford, Ph.D., Committee Member

Neal A. Ferguson, Ph.D., Graduate School Representative

David W. Zeh, Ph.D., Dean, Graduate School

December, 2015

The Veils of War is a collection of short stories, which pull themes and traditions from both the horror and historical fiction genres. Together, these stories portray World War II from different cultural and vocational perspectives around the world. This collection is organized chronologically through the progression of the war. Each story focuses on a different aspect of how the war literally haunts the protagonists, and how their experiences in the war lead them to interact with these hauntings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

THE FERRY HOME.....	1
ZENCHŌ NO KEIJI.....	17
A FALL FROM ABOVE.....	36
HER ASYLUM.....	56
THE VIRTAGE CONNECTION.....	78
BORN OF WAR.....	101

The Ferry Home

White Waltham Airfield, United Kingdom, September 1941

She was 21 and a widow. Strangers and friends often tried to correct her, reminding her she was a *war* widow, that her husband died for something great, that she should be proud. But the distinction did little to console her, and did nothing to encourage pride. The way she saw it, her husband was dead, and the fact he died in action made his death no more special than any other death in the world.

And she was fine. She wished her WAAF bunkmates would stop asking how she was doing. She and Donald hadn't been married that long, really. Four months wasn't enough time to get to know each other as a married couple. And he had been off to war for three of those months. She didn't even know what she was missing. She hadn't had time to be married, to be a wife, to be. . . She was fine.

Their pitying glances were not something she would miss. She had been more than happy when she was transferred to White Waltham Airfield. No one there knew of her recent happenings, and wouldn't have the uncontrollable need to make her feel better. She was three weeks into her new job in the Air Transport Auxiliary, and reveled in the sheer business of the place. The people there were too preoccupied to bother asking about her past or her family. But White Waltham wasn't only good for its newness—she was ferrying three times a week, every week. The skies were her playground, even if the threat of a Luftwaffe attack was still a small possibility.

She felt a sort of pride in her work, not only because she was a female pilot, but because she was doing what her husband never got the chance to do—make it off the runway.

People usually assumed Donald died in the sky because he was a pilot, but the first raid on Detling Airbase just over a year ago took him, and everyone else, by surprise.

Donald's aeroplane was hit while he was trying to take off. She brushed off this fact of honor, too. Many men died that day trying to get off that runway. Even though his career as a pilot was short, she felt more at ease around the airfield's squadrons of Spitfires, Hurricanes, and Lancaster Bombers.

They'd moved their wedding date up several months so they could be married before he left for the RAF in January of 1940. For their month-long honeymoon, they'd stayed in Donald's parent's villa in Upper Belvedere. It was a tense time, thanks to the Blitz, but they were together. For their five-day anniversary, he even ventured to town early in the morning to find a bouquet of flowers. The flower shoppe had been bombed out, so he jumped a fence and perused a nearby field for wild flowers. He should have been more careful, but they more than did the job, and she focused on the thoughtfulness of the gift. The Monday after they returned home, he left for Detling, and on Tuesday, she signed up for the WAAF.

Before he left, she had tried to get Donald to take a good luck charm with him—the locket she'd given him when they were engaged—but he turned her down. "I'd only muck it up if I did," he'd said. Neither of them had ever been the superstitious sort, but now she wondered whether it would have made a difference. She started wearing his locket after she heard the news, even though she felt silly wearing a picture of herself around her neck. It acted as a reminder, but of exactly what, she wasn't sure. Thankfully,

the chain was difficult to see under her regulation drab collared shirt and tie.

* * *

When her daily orders come in, she's surprised to see she's ferrying a Class 2 Spitfire to Manston. She usually ferried the Class 3 twin-engine bombers because only one other person was certified to fly the bigger aeroplanes. She traced the outline of the locket through her shirt. Donald flew Spitfires, but she tried not to associate the two. Before takeoff, the tower signaled her.

"Alice, do you copy? Over," the operator—obviously Ben because of his high-pitched voice—asked on her radio.

"Yes, Ben, go on. Over."

"Looks like rough skies today. We think we have a storm moving in. Over."

"That's a shocker. Over."

"Another day, after all. But this one looks odd. Just thought I'd let you know. Over."

"Thanks, Ben, I'll be on the lookout. Over and out."

Storms were nothing unusual, but with night flying a thing full of surprises, she was glad for the advanced notice. In the darkness of the night, intensified by the civilians keeping their lights out, it was difficult to tell if storms were moving in through the clouds.

Alice inspected her plane with her ground crewman, Paul, before alerting the tower she was ready for takeoff. She drew her hand across the cool skin of the fuselage, walking the length of the plane. She checked the wing ailerons, wheels, and propeller before stepping up onto the wing and sliding back the canopy. She climbed inside and

took her position, with Paul helping her buckle in. After locking down the canopy and checking her instruments, she put on her flight gloves, and signaled to Paul she was ready for the chocks to be removed. He picked them up and gave her a thumbs up before jogging out of the way. After Ben cleared her for takeoff, she turned off the break, started the double-ignition engine, and slowly pushed the throttle forward. The Spitfire accelerated down the grassy runway until she pulled back on the stick, giving the aeroplane its flight. The thrill of takeoff would never get old.

When she hit her cruising altitude, she took turns glancing at her compass and watching the sky for air traffic. She rubbed the locket, turning it in her fingers as she settled into the flight. The enforced radio silence made the trips quiet, but she was happy for the alone time. The flight to Manston usually took less than an hour, but with the turbulence quickly building, she knew her flight would be slightly delayed. A faint flash, then another, appeared in the distance. She tightened her grip on the stick as the first wave of thunder rolled through the cockpit. With only her compass to guide her, she had no way of knowing where the storm ended, but she relaxed into the thunder. Rainstorms, frequent as they were, were a comforting reminder of home, and the ground.

The next flash, brighter, closer, lit up her cockpit. She was getting closer to the storm. When the rain began, it wasn't the usual pitter patter which splashes against the streets, but a bombardment of stinging slugs of water. She realized then why Ben told her the storm looked different than normal. A glint fluttered in the distance, and she squinted to try to make it out.

As it took its shape, she knew it could only be one of two things. She was somewhere over Hollingbourne, not too far from Detling. It could be friendly fighters,

but the RAF had ended stooge patrols months ago. There shouldn't be any other planes in the area. The glint disappeared in the clouds. Alice scanned her field of vision, trying to find it again. When it finally reappeared from the clouds, it was closer. She could make out the marking on its wings—the all-too-familiar black crosses—and knew what it was. Luftwaffe.

She had been told the German airstrikes were over. What was a Messerschmitt doing here? She pulled her Spitfire to a higher altitude, and watched the other plane's flight path. If it was just one Messerschmitt, she could avoid it. When the enemy plane emerged from the cloud bank, it was followed by four others, and for a moment, Alice lost her breath.

The Luftwaffe squadron pulled back and increased their altitude. What if they had seen her? In the Spitfire, enemy planes wouldn't know she was just a ferry, and they wouldn't care. She didn't want to divert from her path if they hadn't seen her yet, but after passing through more clouds, the enemy squadron was right behind her. The lead plane took a shot, its bullets pinging against her left wing. She knew, then, she had to escape. But under ATA regulations, she couldn't deviate from her flight path, no matter the circumstance. She dove, pushing her plane down, hoping to use the clouds as cover.

As she flew from cloud to cloud, she caught glimpses of the enemy planes following close behind. The lead plane fired at her again, and she pulled back on the stick, bringing her plane up. She wasn't sure how long she could avoid them; she'd never had combat training. But she could remember what Donald had said about his own training: no matter what, you stay above the enemy. As she rolled left to avoid more bullets, she saw them. Coming from the north were a squadron of Spitfires. Their

standard Vic formation gave them away instantly.

Alice flew towards them, hoping she could get behind them before the Luftwaffe hit her engine. The other Spitfires looked strange in the storm clouds, their silver frames seemed darker than normal, and their fuselages reflected the clouds like mirrors. But the RAF circles on their wings were unmistakable. She pulled up when she reached them, not wanting to interfere with the battle. She climbed to the altitude ceiling the ATA enforced, staying high to watch the battle, and continue her flight path.

Her Spitfire wasn't equipped with its guns, and her presence would be more of a hinderance than anything. Her hands were sweaty in the gloves, making her grip hot on the stick. She continued East, hoping to get away from the battle zone, but a Messerschmitt spotted her and gave chase. She rolled right, then left, trying to lose the enemy plane, but its turns were more graceful than hers, and it kept a steady distance. She wasn't sure what else to do when more gunfire rang out. She closed her eyes, waiting for the impact, but the gunfire sounded different. It rang out again, and the Messerschmitt behind her exploded into flames, falling into the clouds in a spiral of smoke.

Another Spitfire flew by her, rolling right as it left to rejoin the battle. As it banked, Alice finally got a good look at it: its fuselage was riddle with bullets, and black scorch marks decorated its engine. It couldn't have been damaged that badly so soon in the battle, and the RAF repaired every plane before it was sent back out. What was such a plane doing in the sky?

Alice jumped when bullets suddenly hit her Spitfire. The metallic beats got louder as they scoured her plane until finally hitting the engine. The Spitfire jerked from the impact, ejecting puffs of smoke as a pattering noise filled her ears. Sweat rolled down her

temples and neck, building up an uncomfortable wet coating in her uniform. She didn't know how much longer she could stay in the air, but she was still too far from any airfield to make a forced landing.

As the battle continued below her, she could see the Messerschmitts slowly taken down. Only three remained, and the five Spitfires spun around them, staying high as they fired their guns. One fell into the clouds, then another, leaving only one left. Two Spitfires on its tail fired together, and the Messerschmitt flew to Earth like a comet. Even watching the battle was draining for Alice, making the cockpit feel hot despite the cool storm outside.

The other Spitfires gained altitude around her, rebuilding their Vic formation until their "V" was reformed—with her at its centre. They were guiding her to the airfield, she realized, and she was finally able to take a deep breath, and relax into her seat. The reflection of the clouds kept her from seeing into the other cockpits, but she waved at them anyway, hoping they could see her attempt at thanks before they landed.

She looked at her fuel gauge, remembering her finite amount of fuel. With the maneuvers she pulled during the battle, and how long she'd been in the air, the tank must almost be empty. But the arrow was still pointing at half a tank—just the amount she was supposed to have. But how could that be? Alice sat back and flew the rest of the trip in a daze. Too many strange and frightening things had happened for her to worry about. Her only job was landing the Spitfire.

Seven minutes later, the open fields of Manston appear in the distance, and Alice began to prepare for landing. The other planes began to pull up, and Alice watched as they began to turn around. Why wouldn't they land at Manston? They must be out of

fuel, even if she wasn't. The lead plane was the last to veer off from the formation, pulling left and slowing its speed until it was cruising beside her. Its wings were almost touching her own, and as she looked at the pilot in confusion, she realized who it was.

Donald.

He flipped up his visor and winked, smiling at her before pulling back on his stick, sending his plane in to the sky to join his waiting squadron. Alice felt the tears rolling down her face only because of their heat, and she tried to wipe them away. She was dazed, tired, confused, and heartbroken, but she had to land her plane. She lowered her landing gear and deployed her wing's flaps later than she was trained to, but she still managed to slow to a landing speed by the time her wheels hit the ground. She bounced with the immediate impact of the landing and let the Spitfire role down the runway.

At the end of the runway, she followed the flagger's directions and pulled the spitfire into its new spot near the runway. She fumbled with the canopy, her sweaty fingers slipped on the latch before she was able to get it open. The cool outside air hit her like a wave, and she suddenly felt dizzy. The flagger, Charles, noticed her pale face, and helped her to the ground.

"Are you all right, Alice?" After noticing her wet face, he asked, "What happened up there?"

"Donald," she said.

Charles looked confused, but nodded, and put an arm around her to keep her steady.

"I'm sorry about the plane," she said as he began to lead her away.

"What about it?" he asked.

She turned, and pointed, ready to explain the damage caused by the

Messerschmitts, but there was nothing there. The fuselage, the engine, the wings, all looked as they had when she left White Waltham: perfectly normal.

Her legs failed her, and Charles grabbed her to keep her up. “Let’s get you to sick bay, huh?”

She nodded, but kept her eyes on the sky until they were inside.

* * *

“Now, I want you to stay here with us overnight for observation,” the airfield’s doctor said after examining Alice. “It seems to me like a case of exhaustion. Very common amongst female pilots.”

“Of course, doctor. I must have pushed myself too hard,” Alice said. She had refrained from talking about her experience the night before after the radio operator told her no other planes had been in the area except for hers. She knew if she rambled about what had happened, the doctor would say she was hysterical instead of just exhausted.

“I’m going to recommend to your commander that you don’t fly for a week, all right? You should be ready to fly again after that.” The doctor wasn’t looking at her anymore, already flipping ahead in his clipboard to read about his next patient.

“Sounds good,” she said. She held in her disappointment.

“Make sure you drink your fluids and have a healthy supper. I’ll check on you in the morning to see how you’re doing.”

Alice nodded, but the doctor was already walking away, his face immersed in his clipboard.

She drank her fluids and tried to enjoy the dry, tasteless dinner, but she spent the rest of the evening thinking about what had happened. She tried to decide why Donald

had shown up then, and why she ended up in the middle of a dogfight which never really happened. Or had it happened? She'd heard tales from other pilots about seeing strange things at night, like planes from the last war, or planes which had been listed as missing or shot down, but a whole dogfight?

She reached for her locket, and sat up when she couldn't feel it. She felt around her neck with both hands, but the chain was gone. She jumped out of bed and shook out her nightshirt, then the bedding. After checking her uniform with no luck, she called an attendant over.

"I've lost my locket. I think it might have come off in the Spitfire I ferried in. Could you have someone check it for me?"

"Of course, miss. What color is it?" the attendant asked.

"Silver. The pendant is a heart," Alice said, wondering how many lockets the attendant expected to find.

"I'll see what I can do," the attendant said, and left towards the exit which led outside.

Alice fretted for twenty minutes until the attendant returned with a frown on her face.

"I'm sorry, but we can't find it. I've looked all over the ground, and Charles checked the aeroplane, but there's no sign of it."

Alice nodded, and sat on her bed.

"Will you be all right, miss?"

Alice looked at her, trying to decide whether she would nod or not. The locket had become her crutch. Her reminder of Donald and their brief, but sweet, time together.

What would she do without it? It had always been there for her, even last night during the—But then she thought through the dogfight. She hadn't touched the locket since takeoff. Even before she knew Donald was there, she hadn't needed it to save herself and get through the experience. Was that what Donald had wanted her to realize? Maybe he wasn't just saying goodbye.

“Miss?” The attendant pulled Alice out of her reverie.

“Sorry, yes, I'll be fine.” Alice took a deep breath and smiled. “I don't need it.”

Zenchō no Keiji

Isato Village, Japan, September 1942

The red sun on the horizon was an omen. Of what, he was not sure. Minato had never been a superstitious man—only participating in Bon to appease his sister—and his brief time in the Imperial Navy hadn't changed his mind. Even though his family insisted the offerings to his ancestors would bring him protection, he knew that if he died in battle, there would be no one to greet him with a warrior's welcome, if there would be anything at all. But he had learned as a sailor how to read the skies and the water. It was easy to believe in the weather.

The men in his unit had seemed jittery since they docked near Isato Village in the Minamimuro District. Perhaps it was the rumor that their first mission was quickly approaching, but he had seen more of his fellow sailors rubbing lucky trinkets, praying, or writing letters home, telling their families not to hold on to their belongings. They had seen the long red sunsets, but the traces of conversations he caught were more fearful of things that could not be seen. They seemed fearful of the nearby village, itself. He brushed off their concerns and continued with his duties, keeping his eyes on the water.

Their ship, a destroyer named the *Saigo*, had been docked near the small and traditional town for a month. The other ships in their squadron were docked to their starboard side. The Americans had recently arrived at the Solomon Islands, and their convoy was ready to assist if needed. The Americans were so ill-prepared, so unadapted to the jungle foliage and open beaches, he doubted his small squadron would be needed. But that night, as he stood on the aft deck, watching the final ember traces sink into the ocean, something else appeared on the horizon. It was small, at first, moving so slowly he didn't think it was a ship. But, as it approached, it became the unmistakable shape of an

approaching destroyer. It's sway and rock in the water was unnatural; its signal lights turned off, and signal flags in tatters.

He turned from the strange ship, looking for another sailor. Fujimoto was rolling up a deck hose a few yards away.

"Fujimoto," Minato called, sprinting to him, "You have to see this."

"What?" Fujimoto asked, running back to his spot on the deck.

"There's a ship. It looked injured. It—" He stopped. There was no ship on the horizon. Nothing but water.

"What are you talking about?" The soldier did him the curtsy of scanning the horizon twice, trying to see something on the water. He even leaned over the railing to look into the water beneath them. "I don't see anything."

"I thought I saw. . ."

"The water can play tricks this time of night. Don't worry about it." Fujimoto slapped his shoulder before he returned to his hoses.

Minato glanced back out at the empty horizon, wondering why the water would create such a strange mirage, before he returned to his duties.

* * *

Over the next three days, he forgot about the imagined ship, and returned to his routine on night security watch. He navigated around the deck, checking other sailor's positions and shift changes, and finally leaving the ship to survey the dock. It was a dull routine, at best. At their home dock in Osaka, the largest security breach he had faced was a radio officer trying to sneak off the ship to meet his sweetheart. But here, with the small and quiet village offering few, if any, distractions, and being far from the men's

homes, there wasn't much to watch for. Changing ports had brought about more of a sense of war in the men, exacerbated by the rumor of their upcoming departure.

So he circled his security rout, checking and rechecking, from sunset on. Just past two, a strange wake gently lapped against the ship. It was soft, but discernible against the otherwise quiet night. He looked down at the wake, following its path further up the channel. The ripples led to the obtuse shape of the injured ship from before. In the darkness an unsettling shadow rested over its haul, making it difficult to see aboard. It sat at the same distance it had disappeared from when he had tried to show Fujimoto, but now it was slowly moving southwest, away from the dock. He gripped the railing, not breathing, not moving, as he watched its path.

He turned, hoping to find someone to tell about the ship. He jogged to port, knowing an ensign would be leaving his shift any minute. As he rounded a corner, he almost ran into two men.

"Pardon me," he said, "I was just looking for—"

He was silenced with a slap to the face. He put a hand to his cheek, too confused in his haste to understand the reprimand, until he fully saw who he was talking to—
Commander Saito and Lieutenant Ueda.

"Tell me. Why are you the second man today to not salute a passing superior on deck?" the commander asked.

He immediately bowed, fearful of what the next punishment might be for such a mistake. "I apologize, sir. There is no excuse."

"You are right, there is not." Commander Saito glanced in the direction he had come from. "You seemed in a hurry. Why?"

He rose only slightly from his bow, still afraid to look the commander in the eye. He thought about his answer, knowing what would happen if the ship was just another delusion. “I saw a wake in the water, sir. A small one. It seemed strange for the hour and I wished to alert someone.”

The commander nodded. “Very good. You can never be too careful. Lieutenant, tell the bridge immediately and have them scan the water.”

“Yes, sir.” The lieutenant saluted, and Minato made sure to salute him back, finally rising to his normal posture.

“You may return to your post,” said the commander.

“Yes, sir,” he said, this time making sure to appropriately salute the commander.

When the commander saluted back, Minato retreated to where he had seen the ship. When he got back to the railing, the horizon was once again clear. However, as he looked in the water, he could see the final traces of a dissipating wake lapping against the cool sides of the ship.

* * *

Two days later, he had his first shore leave since docking in Isato Village. He wouldn't classify it as actual shore leave, except that he got to go ashore. The men rotated getting two full day or night shifts off, but their ensign liked to assign the twenty-four hour break under official shore leave. He thought the term would encourage high moral. He awoke early—around 1400 hours instead of 1600 hours—in order to enjoy a few hours of light. He tucked his uniform jacket under his arm before leaving his bunk. The nights had been growing colder, and he planned to stay out most of the night. Although he didn't mind life on a ship, he felt a calm relief when his feet stepped on dirt instead of

wood. The sound of his heavy footsteps pounding on the deck's wooden planks sometimes echoed in his mind like a metronome. When he reached the gravel of the narrow road leading to town, he felt like he was a mile away from the ship. Nature again reached his ears, with birds, small animals, leaves, and wild grasses making their carefree, unregulated noises.

He'd been to the small town with men from his unit when their squadron first docked. The villagers weren't like the civilians at home. When they had entered the village, the convoy and its sailors seemed to inspire more trepidation than patriotism. Many of the houses and buildings were traditional, and the main street's market consisted of *yatai* stands instead of shops. It reminded him of summer at his local fish market, only much quieter. The strangest thing to him, though, was the absolute lack of propaganda. In his own neighborhood, the colorful and unnaturally cheerful posters were so abundant, those not tacked down well enough blew through the streets like autumn leaves. But here, in this village, the only posters on the walls were notices or information bulletins, all hand written, and never accompanied by drawings or other such pictures.

None of the village's roads were paved, although the one leading to the dock was mostly covered with gravel. One of the villagers explained this expense was in response to the tide, and water brought in by those coming from port. Thinking of how muddy the dry dirt streets must become with even the slightest rainfall, he was thankful they had allowed the luxury. The villagers also seemed to exclusively wear traditional kimonos, and the one home he had entered was almost devoid of furniture. He doubted any modern comforts could be found in the village. The overflow of tradition reminded him of his parents and the home he had left. He spent the trip back to port trying to forget he'd

thought of them.

Now that he was off for a shift, he wasn't sure what to do. He decided he would at least have dinner in the town, but doubted he'd want to stay there much longer than that. When he entered the market at the south end of town, he looked for a *yatai* where the purveyor didn't look away. Most of them did, averting their eyes or pretending to be busy with a dish. He didn't care whether he had *ikayaki* or *yakisoba*, he just wanted to eat in peace. Towards the end of the stands he found a purveyor who called out his products as he was accustomed to, and for dinner he ended up with a nice bowl of *nikujaga*. The man had what his mother called an "untrustworthy" mustache, but the man was nice enough, and his *nikujaga* was some of the best Minato had ever had. He slurped his soup slowly, enjoying the taste of something which originated outside of the ship's galley.

* * *

He finished his last spoonful of broth and beef as the sun began to set behind the trees. He thanked the purveyor for the good food, hoping to keep a good rapport with the stand should he need to eat dinner in the village again. The purveyor seemed pleased and the two exchanged bows before he set off. He still had the whole night before his leave was over, and he didn't want to go back to his bunk so soon. He walked through the rest of the village, enjoying the quiet its quaintness provided. The few people he passed kept their eyes on the ground.

Evening had turned to the last hints of dusk by the time he finished exploring the village. He stood by the last of the *yatai* at the edge of town; the gravel road branching off to his left, and a narrow dirt road going right.

He approached the *yatai*, whose purveyor, a short, fat, balding man, was closing his

stand. "Excuse me," he said. He waited until the purveyor acknowledged him with a glance. "Do you know where that dirt road leads?"

The purveyor stopped with his tidying. "It follows the water to the abandoned port. But I would not wonder that way at this time of night."

"Why? Are there wild animals here?"

"Animals? No." The purveyor returned to his items, quickly tossing them in an old basket.

"What's wrong with that road, then?"

The purveyor picked up his basket. "I'm sorry, we're closed. Good night." He grabbed the bamboo curtain and drew it across the front of the stand.

Minato heard him scuttle off into the growing darkness.

* * *

Whether the nervous purveyor was superstitious or just worried about soldiers wandering his roads at night, he didn't care. The other option was to return to his bunk, so he easily chose the dirt path. It seemed like any other track along the shore, and he was glad he had ignored the purveyor's skittishness. It was obviously less used than other paths near the village, with grasses and other plants trying to grow through its tan, grainy earth, not trotted upon enough to be dissuaded from appearing there. As the last light of dusk faded to night, he took his small flashlight from its pouch at his belt. It emitted a small beam of light across the ground in front of him. He enjoyed the sounds of the water as it pushed against the beach, creating a soft whir occasionally obstructed by bushes or trees. Until it stopped.

The animals, the grasses, the waves, came to an abrupt halt. He slowed his pace,

emerging slowly from the outcropping of trees blocking his view of the water. Even the winds seemed to stop, submerging him in a silenced world. He continued forward, knowing all of nature wouldn't silence for a wild animal. As he passed the final trees and his view of the water once again opened, he jumped back at the sight. There, in the abandoned port, was the injured ship. It somehow rested only yards from shore; its rusted steel sides rising from the water like a tower above him. It was drenched in strange shadows from the obstructed moonlight; its stern seemingly unending as its dark sides melted into the equal darkness of the night.

He thought of reporting it, of never mentioning it again, but a roaming light caught his eye. In the bridge, a small light waved back and forth until it disappeared deeper into the cabin. It could be a flashlight. Or a lantern. But it was none of his concern. . . unless it was one of the men from his ship. The ship didn't look safe, let alone seaworthy. Whoever was onboard could injure himself, or get the crew in trouble with whoever owned the ship. Even as his sense of duty passed through his mind, urging him forward, his feet did not edge towards the ship until he saw the light reappear in the window.

* * *

The dock's planks creaked and echoed strangely in the otherwise empty night. It was in disrepair—the pilings were covered with barnacles and a sickly-looking algae, while the planks were rickety or missing entirely. He wasn't certain the ship was real until he reached the middle of the dock and found a gangway ready for boarding. Rust was creeping its way through the rivets of the ramp, and it led to the darkened deck of the ship. He couldn't stop now.

He felt himself climbing the gangway before he was sure he wanted to board the

rickety, old ship. When he reached the deck, he glanced to each side. Both directions were swathed in oily blackness. The beam from his flashlight bounced off the humidity quickly building in the air, creating a short but wide glow where it shone. He decided to go towards starboard where he had last seen the moving light. He passed moss covered barrels, circles of rotting rope, and a lifeboat still moored in its station. The disrepair of the ship was unsettling—a sight he thought he'd never see.

He found the ladder to the bridge, but could not see the light by looking up. A deep chill started to build in the air, and he put on his jacket before ascending. He put his flashlight in his mouth and started to carefully climb the squeaking ladder. It shuddered and groaned during his ascent, and he was relieved when he finally reached the bridge. He grabbed his flashlight, ready to shine it around the cabin when it started to flicker. He smacked its frame, hoping to spur the batteries to life, but it only flickered again before dying. He huffed and put it back in its pouch on his belt. He would have to rely on the clouded moonlight. He took a step into the bridge, and was instantly frozen by an icy chill. The depth of the coldness reached his very core, and when he was finally able to exhale, his breath escaped in a small, white puff. He hugged himself for warmth and looked into the dark expanse of the cabin.

There, by the port-side window, was a figure gazing out to sea. A white kimono donned its gauntly frame, and its long inky hair flowed loosely down its back. Its feet never seemed to reach the floor, but he worried more about why he was able to see its features so clearly in the dark. A soft glow radiated from its very being, lighting every facet of its unnatural essence.

A funayūrei? It couldn't be. Spirits of those who died at sea didn't really come

back. They couldn't be vengeful if they weren't real in the first place. His thoughts were interrupted as a soft croaking hum vibrated through the room. It pounded in his chest as it built, growing louder as the figure slowly began to turn around. He couldn't move, couldn't think; frozen by the auric miasma emanating from the figure. As it turned, he could see the figure was wearing a mask. It was like no mask he had seen before. It was white as ivory, but its ghoulish opened mouth and piercing horns were stained a deep vermillion, and its wide, angry eyes were lined with blue, red, and black. It was a mask of vengeance and anger, and it was staring at him.

The *funayūrei* raised a limp hand and pointed at him. The hum began again and the ship began to tremor. The shaking floor jarred his frozen limbs, and he took the chance to turn and run. The only way down was the ladder. He spun onto it, descending as quickly as he could. His right hand missed a rung, and he slid down several bars before he caught his grip. In the moment, he risked glancing up, only to see the *funayūrei* following him, face down, like a serpent. It did not need the rails, but floated above them, turning and twisting its body as it tried to reach him.

He looked away, trying to focus on his descent. When he was five steps away from the deck, he jumped, choosing speed over safety. He landed on the deck with a thud, unable to center his weight. He caught himself on his left foot, which twisted under the force. He gathered himself and ran towards the gangway. His ankle wasn't broken, but it was badly sprained. His ankle twinged and threatened to buckle under every step. He prayed he was outrunning the *funayūrei* as he finally reached the gangway. Maybe crossing water and getting to land would stop the spirit. But the gangway was gone. The deck didn't look like it was even made for a gangway to lower from—its guardrail

welded in place.

He was sure this was where he had climbed aboard. Through the building fog, he could faintly see the dock. It looked further away than before, unreachable. Then the croaking hum returned. The *funayūrei* had reached him. It hovered towards him, its legs invisible below its kimono, with one arm outstretched, a limp hand waiting to grab him. He ran. He ran around the deck, trying to find an unlocked hatch. He didn't want to go deeper into the ship, but he had to find a place to hide. To think.

He finally found an unlocked hatch. He glanced behind himself, but didn't see the spirit. He entered the compartment and closed the hatch, watching from the edge of the port for the spirit. After a few seconds it floated by, looking left and right. It continued on, hopefully believing he was still on the deck. He wanted to sink to the ground and sit for a few moments, but fear of the *funayūrei* returning kept him standing by the port. He tried to remember what his parents had tried to teach him about *obake*. He never paid attention to their rambles about spirits, purgatory, and purification rituals. It wasn't supposed to be real.

* * *

He thought through the different spirits his parents had mentioned, hoping to remember what to do about a *funayūrei*. *Sutras*, avenging its death, laying it to rest. . . those things wouldn't help him here. He rubbed his hands over his arms as a chill passed through him. He stopped as the hum began to fill the dark room. From the corner in front of him, the *Funayūrei* emerged from the depths of the shadow. When it reached its limp hand up, he opened the hatch and ran.

He didn't know where to go, but the hum close behind kept him moving. The hatch

doors leading deeper into the ship opened in front of him, offering their facade of safety. The *funayūrei* could go through walls. Hiding in a room would do him no good. Around him signs of further deterioration began to appear. Rust spread, wood dried and splintered, and glass fogged over and cracked. He slammed closed the next hatch that opened in front of him, and hid behind a group of moss-covered barrels. He tried to breath through his nose to soften the sounds of his breathing. He watched the *funayūrei* through the crack between the barrels. It paused by the hatch he had closed, seeming to contemplate it before passing through.

It would find him again soon. He stood from behind the barrels and leaned over the railing, staring into the water below. Even if his training let him survive the jump, the ship was somehow docked in shallow waters. And would he be safe even if he survived? If it was really an *obake*, and was haunting the place where it died, he didn't know how great of an area it haunted. As he leaned further over the railing, he heard a crack. He jumped back as the railing pushed forward, and a piece broke off, falling into the water. It made a soft *splunk* as it hit the water, and ripples of water spread from its point of impact.

The chill in the air dissipated for a moment as he watched the ripples fade. As they did, the chill returned, and he remembered. Sea *obake* could be repelled by stirring water. It wouldn't purify the spirit, but it would give him a chance to escape. He spun as the hum returned, knowing the *funayūrei* would soon find him. He ran, trying to get to the lifeboat he had seen when he first boarded the ship. He just hoped there was a paddle in the decaying lifeboat.

The lifeboat stations he passed on the starboard side were empty, looking at though the boats had been deployed or had simply fallen when their ropes frayed. He crossed the

bow, able to see the lifeboat hanging in its station on the port side. When he reached the lifeboat, he tugged on its pulley, hoping to lower the lifeboat so he could reach inside. The corroded and rusted pulleys wouldn't budge under his pressure. When he pulled on the rope again, it snapped.

He tossed the piece of rope to the ground and started to climb the railing, holding onto the beams of the station. He grabbed hold of the rim of the lifeboat with one hand and reached under its moth-eaten tarp with his other. As he clawed under the tarp for a paddle, he could hear the ropes supporting the lifeboat begin to fray. He searched frantically as the fibers pulled and tore, slowly breaking apart.

His fingers touched something cylindrical, and he grabbed hold, jumping away from the lifeboat as the ropes snapped. The lifeboat fell into the water below with a hollow splash, quickly filling with murky water and sinking to the seafloor. He finally looked at the weathered paddle in his hands. It was still in one piece—useful enough to do what he needed. He turned to find a place to jump overboard, and was met with the contorted white and red mask of the *funayūrei*.

He tried to back away, but the *funayūrei*'s hand shot out, grabbing his arm. Its grip drilled into his arm like icy nails, freezing his body. He could only watch in terror as the *funayūrei* slowly reached up with its other hand to grab its mask. It pulled the mask away, revealing a blank face. Its snow white emptiness awoke him from his trance, and his pulled away from the *funayūrei* with all his strength. As it lost its grip on him, it emitted a horrible scream, shouting at the heavens, themselves. He took the chance to climb the railing next to the lifeboat's station, not looking back as he jumped.

He tried to stay in the posture the Navy had taught him, staying upright and stiff,

like a board, feet first into the water. He struggled to stay straight and hold onto the paddle, still trying to improve his grip as he hit the cold, still water below. His feet hit the seafloor, jarring his knees, and causing him to gasp and inhale a breath of the salty grimy water. He kicked to the surface, coughing and flailing as he broke the surface.

The *funayūrei* screamed again, and he began paddling to shore, struggling again with the lifeboat's paddle. When he reached the dock, he tried to hoist himself up, but the dock was too high. He threw the paddle onto the dock, and tried again. Once more, he slipped back into the water, the hum now growing from behind. He steadied his foot on a grouping of barnacles attached to the piling. using them as a step, he hoisted himself out of the water, able to grab onto the edge of the dock. He pulled himself up, ignoring the pain of the splinters from the old planks.

He grabbed the paddle and crawled to the edge of the dock facing the ship. As he dipped the paddle into the water, the *funayūrei* rose from the deck, sweeping over the railing as it flew towards him. He stirred the paddle in the water as fast as he could, chanting the only prayer he remembered. The *funayūrei* started to scream, stopping in its place in the air. It put its hands to its ears, shrieking until it turned and darted back to the ship. The fog began to build, clouding his view of the ship. The shriek built and built. He wanted to cover his own ears but knew he couldn't stop.

He stirred and stirred until a blast of air threw him to the other side of the dock, causing him to drop the paddle in the water. The shrill the shriek had become drifted off into the night air, and the fog began to slowly dissipate. He cautiously stood, his body aching as he stepped forward. As the fog lifted, he was met with a clear view of the empty port. No traces remained of the decaying hulk, or of its tormented *funayūrei*. He

stared into the still, dark water. Barely able to see his own reflection staring back at him.

* * *

The sun was beginning to rise as he slowly made his way back to the village; his sprained ankle and aching body constantly reminded him of his ordeal. His thoughts of the *funayūrei* shook him to his core, and he found himself continually looking over his shoulder. His hair was beginning to dry as he reached the edge of town, but his uniform was still wet to the touch, chilling him further. He stared at the gravel path in front of him, and at the stand of the fat purveyor who had warned him the night before.

He found himself walking to the stand and sitting on one of the stools. He sat, shivering and thinking, until the town began to awaken. He heard the purveyor scuttle to his stand as the other *yatai* owners began to walk the streets. The purveyor opened the bamboo screen and jumped back at the sight of him, letting out a small yelp. The man seemed frightened, then confused.

He put down his basket and sighed. “You saw a boat, didn’t you?” he asked.

Minato nodded. “A ship. A destroyer.”

The purveyor nodded. “The vessel she uses never looks the same. It seems to appear as the ship the viewer expects it to be.”

“She?” He was almost too tired to care, but needed to know.

“Yes. Her name was Oki. A hundred years ago, Oki was engaged to her love, a sailor named Shouta. But he had a wondering eye. On a visit north to relatives, he was introduced to a woman of unimaginable beauty and charm. He returned home only for his belongings. He had a fellow seaman tell Oki he had broken off the engagement once his ship was safely out of port. Heartbroken but disbelieving, she ran to the now abandoned

dock and saw his ship sailing away. She took a fisherman's boat and tried to paddle after her love, but a storm was coming in, and her boat capsized in the open water. Now she haunts these waters, luring lost men to the abandoned port. Once they board her vessel, she removes her mask, her face taking on the appearance of the person the man loves most. When they see that face, they are drawn to her, and she feeds on the soul they willingly give her."

"What can I do?" he asked.

The purveyor rummaged around his stand, placing a small package, neatly wrapped in a colorful handkerchief, on the counter. "These are two *onigiri*. If you throw these in the water from your ship as an offering, she will never haunt you again."

Minato nodded mutely and reached for the change he hoped was still in his soggy pockets.

The purveyor held up a hand. "No charge."

He nodded again, and stood from the stool, tucking the small package in his uniform jacket. He was about to walk away when the purveyor cleared his throat.

"Tell me. How did you escape her? What did you see under her mask?"

"I didn't see anything."

The purveyor's face took on a look of sadness and understanding. He nodded, and Minato began the long walk back to the ship.

* * *

The climb up the gangway was a slow one. He held onto the guardrail for support as he forced his aching body forward. Although there weren't many men on deck in the early morning hours, he garnered glances and whispers from those he passed. The deck

had never seemed so long. He limped to the place at the stern where he had first seen the injured ship. He pulled the package from his jacket and untied the handkerchief's delicate knot. The small triangles of rice seemed to look up at him, promising so much despite their simpleness. He sighed and looked out at the sun lifting just above the horizon, its glow sending its golden rays across the water.

Tossing the onigiri into the ocean would forsake his ideology; the very choices and assumptions he had made in his life. But he thought of the *funayūrei*'s blank face—its pale emptiness and scream of failure—and threw the onigiri overboard into the dark abyss of the ocean. He watched them sink deeper and deeper into the churning blue waves, their fading shapes a promise of better days to come.

A Fall From Above

Rapallo, Italy, September 1943

The colonel started to shake as he read the correspondence. Although the letter looked like the many others he had received during the campaign, his hands danced with a strange sort of tremor, and his face slowly turned red. Dario glanced at his compatriots. The other men didn't seem to notice, but they had never been the brightest bunch of soldiers. They stood around, looking at the trees or the sky, kicking the dirt, or jaw jacking as usual. Dario watched as the colonel quickly regained his composure, locking away the emotions he had let slip, and sent away the messenger.

The colonel slipped the letter deep inside his jacket and stepped in the middle of the throng of men. The men quickly hushed themselves and stepped closer to him.

“Change of plans, men. We'll be heading to Rapallo instead of Milan,” said the colonel.

A few of the men groaned, but quickly straightened their posture and nodded as the colonel stared at them.

“There is to be a conference with our dear friends, the Germans, in a few days. We will prepare for them in Rapallo. I have a manor there where we will host our guests as we plan for the next step in this most precious war.” He ended with a salute, not waiting for his men to salute him back before he turned and called for his car.

As the drab-colored Ballia-1100 pulled up the road, the colonel motioned for Dario to join him. The car took off as soon as Dario closed his door behind him. The retracted canvas convertible top squeaked and jiggled behind them as the car drove down the dry

dirt road.

“I expect you to ensure this conference is carried out perfectly,” the colonel said.

Dario pulled out the small notepad and travel pencil from his jacket. He’d worked with the colonel long enough to learn the value of note taking.

“Have a dinner prepared for three days from now. They have France now—they’re used to the finest food and wine in Europe. I expect perfection. I want rooms prepared for twenty. I don’t know the number of guests, but we will be prepared.”

“Of course, sir,” Dario said, jotting the notes in shorthand.

“The conference will be the next day. Prepare appetizers, drinks, and a sit-in lunch and dinner. Prepare notepads for each place setting, and give them only the best pens.”

“Yes, sir.” A large bump in the road juttied his pen across the paper; the final word ending as an abrupt dark line.

* * *

The trip to the colonel’s Rapallo manor took just under two hours. As the small convoy pulled into the circular gravel drive, Dario got his first look at the manor his colonel enjoyed mentioning. Ever since the colonel inherited the place almost a year ago, he bragged about it more than some people bragged about their children. It was a tall, square building of pinkish brick, and, despite its beautiful facade, was more unsettling than welcoming. Its black roof and window frames were mostly concealed by the dark and leafy foliage of the overgrown trees which had been planted too close to its foundation. The white marble fountain in the middle of the drive had long been dry, but he didn’t know if it was because of water restrictions or neglect.

Dario followed the colonel inside the manor, feeling out of place as his muddy

boots hit the marble floor of the foyer. He followed the colonel through the entrance, by the main staircase, then right down the hallway.

“Our men can stay in the servants quarters. I want the primary bedrooms reserved.”

The colonel paused at the door at the end of the hall. “I’ll be in my office. Leave dinner at the door. I won’t be disturbed.”

“Yes, sir.”

The colonel saluted, retreating into his office before Dario could raise his hand.

He returned to the drive and gave orders to the men who hadn’t already found a job to do. The men scattered, saluting and nodding, but Dario wondered if he would have to correct them later. His men, and even himself, had never received training. They were still learning with every assignment, which thankfully had yet to involve combat.

As he walked back inside, he noticed dark clouds building up in the skies above. He decided to take a self-guided tour and make notes, trying to picture where and how he would ready the drafty home for their important guests. He was surprised when he found the bedrooms, bathrooms, and pantry in pristine condition. The pantry was full, filled with exotic supplies and ingredients he couldn’t even pronounce. The linens were freshly washed and well presented, and even the hallway rugs looked new. The manor seemed freshly lived-in, despite the colonel’s interminable travel schedule.

At 1900 hours, Dario excused himself from the light reverie of the dinner table to retrieve the colonel’s dinner from the kitchen. On the way, he stopped at Vito’s seat and asked him to collect firewood after dinner. The cold house would at least need to be warmed by the time their guests arrived. When he entered the kitchen, the two middle-aged chefs jumped up from their seats on the ground when he entered. He decided to

ignore the deck of cards splayed out on the floor, and the smell of cigar smoke still hanging in the air. The chefs had opened the back door to let out the smell of smoke, and Dario could see the rain he'd noticed before had started.

“Is the colonel’s meal ready yet?”

The head chef grabbed the plate from the top of the stove, turning off the low burner before covering the dish with a pewter plate cover. The dish joined matching silverware and a glass of red wine on a pewter tray. Dario didn’t recognize the dull, silver-toned tableware, but assumed it belonged to the manor. When he picked up the tray, the weight surprised him, and he had to set the tray back on the counter in order to get a better grip. He glared at the chefs when he heard them stifle a chuckle. The two looked away and returned to their card game.

He watched the glass of wine, trying to keep it steady on the bulky tray as he carried it out of the kitchen and down the hall to the colonel’s study. When he reached the study, he had to kneel down before slowly setting the tray on the ground next to the door—the glass of wine all the while threatening to tip over.

Dario allowed himself to stay on the ground for a moment; his tired arms throbbing from the short journey. Life in the family pharmacy had done little to prepare him for the physical demands of the military. As he caught his breath, he heard the colonel shout. He hurried to his feet, ignoring the dizziness from standing so quickly, and put his ear against the door. He raised his hand to the dark wooden door, ready to knock.

“What do you mean, ‘things have changed?’” the colonel shouted.

Dario lowered his hand, but kept his ear against the door.

“I know very well what this means for our country, and I’m telling you, I’m not

going to stop because of a piece of paper. I know you're not going to pull out because of this. I know you're going to rectify the situation, and I want to be part of it. Those idiotic Carabinieri and Emmanuel don't understand what they have done."

Dario held his breath, trying to understand what the colonel was referring to.

"Yes. Yes, I understand. Thank you. Yes, I took my men to my place just outside Rapallo. Send some of your men. We'll discuss your plans then. I assure you, you have my loyalty."

Dario jerked away from the door when he heard the receiver slam into its cradle. He crept away from the door with soft steps. He didn't want to be caught eavesdropping.

He returned to the officer's table, trying to act as jolly as when he had left. He wanted to retreat to his room, but had to retain an air of normalcy around the other men. But what did it mean? It sounded like the colonel had just invited the Germans for the meeting they were already preparing for. If he had lied about the terms of the conference and their reassignment, what had been on the correspondence he received outside of Milan? Something felt off to Dario, but after filling himself with three glasses of the colonel's aged wine, he brushed off the incident. There were a lot of intricacies and procedures he didn't understand about running a war. This was just one of them.

* * *

Later that night, Dario awoke to the sound of the front door slamming shut. A light rain drizzled against his room's small window, and the leaves from the large trees outside whistled in the wind. He sat up in bed, but waited. He was in an old and unfamiliar house, after all. Old houses make sounds. He decided it was his imagination and settled back into bed when pounding footsteps squeaked down the foyer, and raced up the main

staircase.

Dario grumbled to himself and got out of bed, wondering what his men were doing so late at night. He slipped on his robe and pulled on his boots, leaving them untied. He opened his door and followed the dark hallway to the kitchen, where light from the full moon lit the room through its large windows. He continued to the foyer, and jumped when the front door slammed again. He relaxed when he saw it was only ajar, moving in and out of its frame with the wind.

He walked to the door and tried to close it, but it bounced back. The deadbolt had been locked. He huffed at the thought of someone playing a trick. He undid the lock, closed the door, then relocked it before pulling on the doorknob to ensure it was secure. He stopped when he saw the footprints on the floor. Wet, muddy footprints led from the front door to the main staircase, drips of water covering the floor in between them. Dario sighed and rubbed his face. He'd rather be sleeping than reprimanding his men for this foolishness.

He followed the footprints up the stairs to the primary bedrooms. He turned left down the long hallway, rubbing his temples as the muddy steps ran over the colonel's good rugs. They stopped at the end of the hall, abruptly turning into the last room on the left. A soft bang echoed through the door. Dario opened the door and stepped inside, ready to start yelling at the troublesome soldier, but no one was there. On the other side of the room, the large picture window banged against its frame, letting in rain onto its sill and the floor below.

The footsteps lead to the window, then stopped. Dario looked under the bed, and in the empty wardrobe, wondering what kind of trick was being played. As the window beat

against the frame, he suddenly felt cold as the realization flooded his mind. Hoping he was wrong, he walked back to the window and looked to the ground below. There, laying on the muddy ground, with rain pooling and pouring down around him, was Vito.

* * *

Dario stood in the rain, holding an umbrella over the colonel as they stared at the body. It hadn't taken him long to wake everyone, but he couldn't remember how he did it. Now ten of them stood in a semi-circle around the dead soldier, while the other men went to town to fetch the undertaker, or were looking in the shed for a wheelbarrow. They knew they had to get Vito out of the rain and mud, but none of them attempted to move. It wasn't their unit's first death, but it was the first suicide they had encountered.

As the rain fell off the brim of his hat in thin streams, he tried to understand what had happened in Vito's final moments. Suicide, he could understand. But why run through the manor before doing it? He had also seemed fine at dinner. When Dario had asked Vito at dinner to get firewood, he looked like all the other men; laughing, drinking, and eating dinner like he'd never seen food before. Dario never expected such an outwardly happy man to commit such a deed.

When the other men finally arrived with the wheelbarrow, Dario was glad his hands were already full with the colonel's umbrella. When they dropped Vito in the basin of the wheelbarrow, he landed with a sloshy thunk. The mud and rain he'd collected during his time on the ground seemed to pour out of his uniform, collecting at the bottom of the basin. When his head rolled back, revealing upturned pale dead eyes, Dario looked away.

They stayed up the rest of the night, waiting for the undertaker in the cold parlor. The colonel didn't ask for the fireplace to be lit, but he was the only one not drenched by

the rain. Lightning occasionally lit the room, and the rolling thunder offered ambient noise for them to focus on. The only other sound in the room was the sharply ticking mantel clock, and Dario was sure he'd go mad if he had to listen to it any longer.

* * *

By sunrise, the body was gone, and the only remnant of the night before was the pervading silence of the men. The colonel ordered everyone back to work before the undertaker's car was out of the drive.

"There's no time to waste on matters such as these," he had said.

Dario struggled to keep his eyes open, but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep even if he had the chance. He worked like the other men—as if in a trance. The colonel had locked himself away in his office again, and Dario wondered if it was to get away from the upwelling of emotion, or because of the stress of the upcoming meeting. A little after one, there was a knock at the front door. The other men didn't move from what they were doing, leaving Dario to answer. As he walked from the stairway to the foyer, he heard a thud and glass breaking from the study.

This time the men awoke from their reverie and ran with him to the study. The room was empty, but Dario already knew what had made fallen in the sparsely decorated room. He walked to the mantle and knelt by the broken mantle clock. One of its sides had broken off from the impact, and its glass face was shattered. Its small black hands were on the floor a few inches away, the minute hand bent at its center. He was actually glad it was broken, thankful to no longer hear its horrible ticking. The other men started to whisper as he picked up the pieces of glass.

"There was no one in here," Marco said.

“How do you think it fell?” Alex asked.

“You don’t think—” Pietro started to say.

“I don’t want to hear. it. This old place is drafty. It was just too close to the ledge.”

Dario’s statement silenced the men, but as he picked up the clock, it began ticking again, sounding louder than before. Dario dropped it and jumped up, while the other men took a step back.

“Was that a draft, too?” Marco asked.

Dario didn’t respond.

* * *

An hour later, Dario finally remembered the knock at the front door. He didn’t expect to find anyone still there, but checked anyway. He had been right, but he found a pair of wet footprints just outside the door. At first, he was surprised they hadn’t dried, but then he realized the prints were alone. None led to them, and none led away. He told himself it was a trick of the weather, and closed the door.

The rest of the day progressed quietly—with no further distractions, and the men still subdued from the night before. Dario felt prepared, even though the Germans would be arriving in two days. The chefs were well rehearsed in fine meals, the linens had been ready when they arrived, and it took Dario only a few minutes to neatly lay out pads of paper and pens in the meeting room. The only real work left to be done was cleaning the floor and rugs from Vito’s run through the house.

The men worked on the rugs late into the night. The colonel appeared twice to inspect their work, commending them for their quick work. He told them the story of where he had bought the rugs in a nearby town, and how he had selected the colors, but

the men only absently nodded. When the colonel retreated for the night, slapping a few of the men on the back as he went, Dario released the rest of the men to bed.

The men were just bunking down when a pounding knock erupted from the front door. Dario, not yet out of his uniform, opened his door and looked out into the hallway. A few of the other men also peeked into the hallway as the pounding knock continued in patterns of three.

“At this hour?” Marco asked.

The men looked at Dario, not attempting to leave their rooms. He took a deep breath, wondering the same thing. He heard a few of the men follow him from a distance, and hoped the rest of the nation’s troops were braver than his. When he touched the doorknob, the pounding stopped. He threw the door open, and was met with an empty porch. He stepped outside, looking around the poorly lit yard. Despite the continuing rain, this time he found no footprints on the porch.

He was too tired to deal with pranksters, and sent the men back to bed. They were almost to the kitchen when the pounding started again. Dario ran to the door, and opened it. Nothing.

“What if it’s Vito?” Luca asked.

The other men were silent.

“It must be some kids from town. Nothing else for them to do around here,” Dario said.

“What is going on around here?” a voice asked.

They all jumped as the colonel barked behind them.

“Just some kids, sir, trying to play a prank.”

“Then I suggest you return to bed and ignore them,” said the colonel.

They followed orders, but as Dario laid in bed, listening to the relentless pounding on the door, he wondered if any of the other men managed to fall asleep that night.

* * *

The next morning, the men were close to despondent.

“I don’t remember being that persistent when I was a kid,” Marco said, rubbing his red eyes with his palms.

The other men nodded, and Dario tried to believe it really had been children.

Some of the men got back to work on the last of the stained rugs, while two others went to retrieve the firewood Vito never brought back. Dario brought two of the men with him to finish preparing the meeting room. They each carried a tray of glasses on the heavy pewter trays. Dario grabbed one of the double doors, letting his men enter first. He almost ran into their backs when they stopped in the entryway.

“What are you doing?” Dario asked.

Salvo and Alex moved out of the way, revealing the dismantled room. Dario almost dropped his tray when he registered the sight in front of him. The paper had been torn from the pads, and was now strewn across the room. The chairs were thrown about, one on top of the table with a broken leg, and when his men moved again, he found the pens stuck in the back of the door.

“Do we tell the colonel?” Alex asked.

“No. Just fix it,” Dario said.

The three spent the next hour cleaning the room; collecting the loose paper, replacing the chairs, and placing new pads of paper and pens in their proper places. Dario

checked the windows while they worked, but found them all locked. Whoever had destroyed the room either broke in somewhere else in the manor, or the perpetrator was one of their own.

When they finished, Dario had the men start cleaning the meeting room fireplace to prepare it for the next day, and left to get some of the collected wood. He searched the main rooms, but couldn't find any firewood, or the two men he sent to retrieve it.

He stopped Marco on the staircase. "Have you seen Pietro or Luca?"

He shrugged. "They're not back yet. Must be taking their sweet time with that errand."

Dario took a deep breath to calm himself. "Then we'll go hurry them up."

The two searched the thin woods which surrounded the manor to the south. They stepped through the short bushes and tried to avoid the low-hanging branches obscuring the naturally made paths. Not too far from the manor, they found a pile of firewood, neatly collected and stacked.

"Here's the wood. Where'd they go?" Marco asked.

Dario tried to look through the fog created by the cold drizzle, but couldn't see beyond a few yards. It was strange that the two would have stopped so abruptly in the middle of a job. "We'll have to keep looking." He didn't know what he'd do if Luca and Pietro had deserted. He'd never dealt with reprimands beyond the insignificant, and feared the colonel would hold him accountable.

As the path became muddier, they were able to follow the familiar military-grade soleprints further east. They soon found another collection of firewood, but the wood was scattered on the ground, as if dropped. Marco kicked at one of the sticks, rolling it closer

to the others. They continued following the footprints, trying to focus on their path. The water collecting in the footprints suddenly became a rusty red, and before they could slow down, they rounded a growth of bushes, and almost tripped on Pietro's leg. Marco jumped back at the sight, but Dario couldn't move.

Pietro was laying awkwardly on top of Luca, his upturned belly still ejecting streams of blood from the slits left by a wide blade. Below him, Luca was face down in a diluted pool of blood, the gash in his neck visible from his slightly turned head.

"Santo cazzo Madre di Cristo," Marco said. He leaned against a tree to catch himself.

Dario dropped to his knees. He didn't notice the cold mud as it quickly absorbed into his pants, too hot from the wave of heat rolling down his body. He suddenly felt sick. He swallowed the bit of breakfast that came back up, the acid stinging his throat on the way down. "Get the colonel."

Marco must have followed the order, because when Dario finally looked at where Marco had been standing, he was gone. The grotesqueness of the scene never changed, but he stared at his dead men, unable to look away. He watched the streams of blood be slowly carried away with the rain until wet thudding footsteps told him his men had arrived. At least, what was left of them.

Dario stood as they gathered around him, and walked away without a sound. No one stopped him. The men swore under their breaths and removed their hats at the sight. The colonel frowned, staring at his fallen men. As Dario retreated, he heard the colonel ask for the wheelbarrow and the undertaker.

When he stepped out of the tree-line, he found himself behind the manor. He

walked across the patchy grass, heading towards the left of the manor. He looked at the ground, trying to stop the memory of what he'd just seen from flashing across his mind. He was near the corner of the house when he stopped, about to step on a stick. As he looked further in front of him, he saw a bundle of sticks, strewn under one of the manor windows, as if discarded.

The window was slightly ajar, and Dario stepped over the sticks to see which room it was. Beyond the half-raised curtain was a wide oak desk, a few chairs, and a portrait half hidden in shadow. The colonel's office. Looking at the forgotten firewood below the window, Dario thought back to the two bundles he and Marco had found in the woods; one similarly discarded. They thought Vito had abandoned his errand when he decided to commit suicide. Dario tapped the forgotten wood with his foot. Maybe Vito had done his job, after all.

* * *

As Dario rounded the corner to the front of the manor, he paused when he saw a young woman on the porch. The pretty woman was knocking on the front door. Her tan dress and matching hat looked pricy, which seemed out-of-place for the rural area. She knocked again, her small gloved hand making three small raps on the heavy door.

"Excuse me," Dario said, approaching her.

"Oh," she said, looking only a little startled, "I was starting to think no one would answer." She smiled, but the warmth didn't reach her eyes.

Dario returned the smile, but frowned when he studied her clothes more carefully. Pinned to the front of her dress was a gold star. "I don't think you should be here," he said.

She kept her smile. “Don’t worry, I won’t be staying much longer. I’m afraid I left my other glove in the colonel’s office.” She held up her left hand, wiggling her naked fingers.

Dario wondered why her glove was in the colonel’s office, then flushed. “Of course, right this way.” He opened the door for her, hoping to send her on her way before the men reappeared with Luca and Pietro.

“You seem distracted.” Her light voice shook him from his thoughts.

“Oh, its. . .nothing for you to worry about.”

“It’s always a shame when a person doesn’t turn out to be who you thought they were, isn’t it?”

Dario looked at her, confused. “This isn’t about a girl.”

“I know,” she said. Her hint of a smile was gone.

When they reached the office door, Dario knocked before entering, even though he knew the colonel was out in the forest. He felt strange entering the colonel’s private office, but tried to focus on finding the girl’s glove.

He searched the top of the desk and the floor around it before looking at the wide bookshelf.

The girl studied the painting on the opposite wall. “It’s a lovely portrait, isn’t it?” she asked.

He nodded, but continued searching.

“It was always my favorite.”

Dario slid a wooden box off the top of the bookshelf, and opened it. Inside he found the matching glove, but it looked dirty, with flakes of dried mud covering the soft leather.

“Hey, I found it. But it looks—” He turned, holding the glove up to show her, but stopped. She was gone. He glanced around the small room, and was about to leave to find her when the portrait on the wall caught his eye. He looked at it fully for the first time, and saw the same young woman staring back at him, a sad sort of smile on her face. She wore the same tan outfit, but no star adorned her chest.

The box slid from his hand, clattering on the floor. It was impossible. He stared at the portrait, trying not to see the resemblance, but voices from outside the office window startled him, reminding him where he was. The glove in his hand suddenly felt accusing, and he grabbed its box from the floor. He stuffed the glove back in, not taking care to place it in its original position, and slid the box back in its place atop the bookshelf. He tried to close the door quietly and hurried down the hall. He turned the corner, and almost ran into the colonel.

“Oh, sir, uh, pardon me, sir.” Dario tried to continue on, but the colonel caught his elbow.

“What were you doing just now?” His voice was quieter than usual.

“Oh, I . . . just needed to wash up. I’m rather torn apart by what happened to Pietro and Luca. I had to take a moment.”

“I see,” the colonel said, but didn’t release Dario’s elbow.

“Are they, uh, taken care of?” Dario asked, feeling uneasy about the context of his question, and the colonel’s grip on his arm.

“You could call it that.” The colonel released his grip. “I expect a full investigation. Luca and Pietro were blatantly murdered. But I want this done quietly. Nothing scares away Germans like unsolved homicide, and I will not have our meeting disrupted.

Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Dario said. But he didn’t understand any of it.

* * *

Dario had trouble rallying the rest of his men after what had happened, but he couldn’t blame them—he didn’t want to do anything, either. He was supposed to be conducting a murder investigation, but he didn’t know what to do, aside from informing the army, but the colonel wanted it kept quiet until the meeting was over. There was nothing left to do for the meeting, and he found himself wandering the manor. Most of the men returned to their rooms, or found places to sit in silence in the parlor or den. He occasionally saw one or two of them outside the front door, staring out into the gray cover of rain, but they never left the porch.

The upstairs bedrooms were cold, with the manor’s draft exasperated by the weather and the oncoming night. Dario rubbed his arms to fight off the chill, and wondered briefly if the rooms were too cold for their guests. He quickly shrugged it off. He wouldn’t be sending any more of his men out for firewood. As he walked back into the hall, he heard a soft banging. It was a familiar sound, and sent a chill down his spine. He walked towards the noise, his pulse quickening as he neared the back left bedroom. He hoped it wasn’t the window, but as he entered the doorway, he could see the loose window beating against its frame.

He wanted to walk away, to leave the room and its loose window and horrible memory, but he could see the rain dripping in from the exposed sill, collecting onto the floor. He straightened, trying to fool himself with responsibility, and entered the room. When he reached the window, he told himself not to look down, but, as he reached out to

grab the window, his eyes met the ground. The unnatural dent in the soggy ground below was just beginning to form the outline of a body when the door slammed behind him.

Dario jumped and looked at the door. The room was darker without the light from the hallway. He jogged to the door and flicked on the bedroom light before he jiggled and pulled on the doorknob. It wouldn't budge. He checked the lock, twisting it back and forth, but it was already unlocked. He took a step back, trying to understand, when the lights went out.

"You haven't figured it out yet, have you?" a soft voice whispered in his ear. "How sad."

Dario spun around, looking where the voice had come from, but there was nothing behind him. He turned back around to try the door again, only to be inches away from the girl in tan.

"You don't know what he's done," she said.

She stepped backwards, towards the door. As the light from the open window hit her figure, he could see the hole in her chest. The close-range gunshot wound went through the star pinned to her dress, leaving nothing but a gaping hole. She continued stepping back until she disappeared through the door. When her figure was gone, the door clicked and swung open, and the lights returned.

He stepped into the hall, glancing down the corridor before heading for the staircase. He didn't need to ask the girl who she meant, but he needed to know for sure. As he reached the bottom of the staircase, he could hear some of his men quietly talking in the parlor. He stayed close to the staircase, staying out of sight until he reached the kitchen. He searched the counter for a flashlight, finding one by the knives.

Then he was outside. He ran to the woods, where he had found Pietro and Luca earlier that day. They had died for something, and he needed to find what that was. First he started where their bodies had been, but the only thing there was a puddle full of water. Then he remembered the pile of dropped wood. Something there had made the men abandon their errand. Dario jogged through the trees and bushes, trying to avoid the same branches he had walked through before. Eventually he found the scattered wood, and began searching. He checked under bushes and around the wide tree trunks.

He found a fallen branch near some bushes which would have been the perfect piece of firewood, and picked it up, but dropped it again when he saw what was underneath it. Four or five small white bones stuck up from the earth, recently released of dirt by the constant rain. Dario pulled back the bushes and found the rest of the bones. There were two almost intact skeletons by the time he moved all the bushes out of the way. One of them was still partially covered in the remains of a tattered tan dress. Her sternum was broken, missing a piece from its center. The other, taller, skeleton, perhaps a man, had a hole in the front of his skull.

Dario now knew how his colonel had “inherited” the manor. And he killed three of his own men to keep the secret. Dario thought about Vito, his supposed suicide, and the wood abandoned outside the colonel’s office window. Vito hadn’t gone deep enough into the woods to see the bones. He must have overheard something outside the colonel’s office. The girl’s glove was in the office, but it was tucked away in a box. The letter—the reason why they had changed their route, why they were there.

Dario ran back to the manor and entered through the front door. Maybe he could get some of the men to distract the colonel and get him out of his office. But when he got to

the parlor, it was empty. They could all have gone to bed, even though it was only 2200 hours. He didn't have time to wait, and went directly to the colonel's office. He walked softly down the hall, hoping to not alert the colonel to his presence, but as he reached the office, he found its door ajar. The colonel was absent, perhaps on an errand, but his jacket still rested atop his chair.

Remembering where he had last seen the colonel put the letter, he hurried inside the office and started searching the jacket's interior pockets. His fingers finally found the thin paper, and he tore it open. Line by line, he suddenly realized the grave truth the colonel had been hiding from them. The war, for Italy at least, was over. They had surrendered.

The office door began to close, and Dario finally noticed the figure standing in the darkness behind the door. The colonel stepped into the light, his *pugio* dagger glinting in the light. In his other hand he held a box. Dario glanced at the top of the bookshelf, but already knew which box it was. The colonel threw the box on the ground, and the dirty glove fell out as the box tumbled to a rest.

"I don't tolerate traitors," the colonel said.

"You mean your own men?" Dario wanted to step back, but the only thing behind him was a chair and the closed window.

The colonel turned the knife in his hand. "They betrayed me—conducting espionage behind my back."

"Maybe you should try burying the people you *kill*."

"Jews don't deserve burials. They hardly deserve life." The colonel took a step forward. "And now you're betraying me, too. You should have known I would notice you went through my things. But I thought I'd let you find the correspondence. Even you

deserve to know what kind of cowards are running this country.”

Dario tried to back up, but stopped when he hit the chair. The colonel let out a strange ululation and lunged at Dario over the desk. Dario jumped back, falling over the chair and hitting the floor. The colonel lost his grip on the knife as he landed on the desk, and it fell with a pang. Dario grabbed the knife and aimed for the colonel’s heart, but his chest constricted, and his hand shook. The knife came down, and instead lodged in the colonel’s shoulder. The colonel emitted a guttural howl, and as he pulled out the knife, Dario ran.

As he entered the foyer, he caught a glimpse of the girl walking up the stairs, and followed her without a thought. At the top of the stairs, he could hear the colonel catching up behind him. The girl appeared at the end of the hall, and walked into the last room on the left. Dario ran to the room, with the colonel close behind. He stopped at the still-open window, unsure what to do next. The girl was no where to be seen, and the colonel was in the room.

“Stupid of you,” the colonel said, his chest heaving from effort, “to take the same path Vito did.”

As the colonel charged, aiming his knife, Dario closed his eyes until something shoved him hard. He landed on the ground next to the bed, and looked up in time to see the girl disappear. The colonel caught himself on the windowsill and faced Dario, but turned as the girl reappeared behind him.

“You—” He was cut off as the girl shoved him, propelling him out the window.

The girl waited until she heard a thud on the ground below before she walked away, seeming to evaporate before she reached the door.

Her Asylum

Heubach, Germany, November 1944

Klara blamed the Russians for needing to move to Heubach. When she inherited her uncle's country estate before the war, she never planned to move into it. It could be a weekend retreat or a summer home, at best. Even her uncle's visits to the estate had been a rare occurrence. The estate, well kept in its pre-war years, had grand walls and an iron-

gated entry which, despite its rust, overshadowed the repugnant facade of the nearby town.

This small fact became inconsequential when the Russians entered Germany. Her main residence in eastern Bärnau was far too close to the border. She had heard the rumors. The stories about the Russians. The panicky and helpless townsfolk nearby were another concern. They began arriving at the gate in clumps, begging for asylum. What protection they thought they could gain behind a simple gate, she did not know. They were promptly sent away.

When Russian ammunition could be heard over the hill, even she had to flee. As she had told the townsfolk, her estate offered no protection. Her patriotic husband was still off at some local attempt at a battle front—the fool—and what remained of her two sons were the unopened *Sterbebild* which still sat on their father's desk. She should have left earlier, but some ingrained acquiescence to her husband had kept her there longer than she had planned. When she dropped her great-aunt's vase in her haste, it was her husband she blamed.

She had dismissed most of their servants shortly after the start of the war. They deserved to be with their families and she needed to reduce her staff. With her boys—and, eventually, her husband—off fighting, she didn't need as much help as before. Letting go of servants also meant keeping their paychecks. She never knew when the money would be useful. While her family believed in the prowess of their great country, she believed in the unpredictability of war.

She decided to keep the cook, Hilde, and her favorite maid, Ilse. Even with a long education in meal preparation, Klara's dishes were tasteless, at best. She also refused to

take care of such a large house on her own, making the maid nothing short of a necessity. Together, the three women loaded two wagons with food stuffs and the possessions she deemed most valuable. They each packed one suitcase of clothes and spent their final night in Bärnau sewing pouches of jewelry and money inside the clothes they would wear on their trip.

Her family had never stayed at the country estate. The servants and her husband had overseen the moving process, but her husband never spent the night. “Too dusty and moldy for my taste,” he had said. “Perhaps we’ll summer there next year.” Four years later, she shuddered to think of how much dust and mold now inhabited the home. During the long carriage ride to Heubach, she distracted herself from the horrors of the evacuees on the road by keeping her eyes forward and wondering how long it would take the three of them to clean the entire estate.

They arrived in Heubach in the middle of the night. With the estate in sight, they urged their tired horses quickly up the main road to the estate. The crunch of the estate’s small dark gravel was strangely comforting—a sign she would finally be able to relax. The road had made Klara cautious, so they unloaded both carts before retiring to the house. The women retired to their rooms after the horses were stabled. When Klara pulled back the covers, the sheets released a cloud of dust which hung in the air and agitated her nose. She was too tired to change the bedding, but her husband had been right—the house was far too dusty.

* * *

Three hours after their arrival, Klara learned why her uncle never stayed at his summer home. Despite her exhaustion, she awoke at four in the morning to a whistle.

Faint, as though a tea kettle was beginning to boil. Then, from the end of the hall, she could hear the antiqued doorknobs jerked back and forth, one by one. Each exactly two times. As the rattling came closer, she heard the doors shudder in their frames. She looked at her own door—still unlocked, the oversized deadbolt still ominously in its vertical position. The vacant rooms were still locked. What if it was looking for an unlocked room? *Her room?*

Klara hurried out of bed, almost tripping on the comforter. She ran to the door as the rattling raced down the hallway. She turned the key, jumping back as her doorknob shook. After two attempts to turn the knob, the rattling moved on. She slowly sank to the floor and listened as the rattling sounded down the rest of the hallway. Ilse and Hilde's room was across the hall. What if their door was unlocked? She stayed still and clutched her nightgown as the rattling made its way down the other side of the hall.

She was still on the floor when the sun rose, sending filtered rays of light through the old fashioned lace curtains. Thankfully, either Ilse or Hilde must have locked their door, but even after the rattling had finished its run of the hallway doors, she couldn't make herself return to bed. The horror, the confusion, the implication, of what had happened kept her more than awake. With the return of the light, she felt secure enough to stand, but feared entering the hallway.

"Ma'am?" Ilse asked from her room. Her voice was more timid than usual, and strained to reach across the hall. "Ma'am? Are you . . .there?"

"Ma'am, are you all right? We're coming out," said Hilde.

Klara gathered herself the best she could and unlocked her door. She opened the door, but hesitated to step outside the threshold. "Yes, I'm fine."

Ilse and Hilde also remained inside their room.

“Oh, that was just awful last night, wasn’t it? What was it? I’m so glad we locked our door,” said Ilse.

Hilde crossed her arms and glanced up the hallway. “We worried about you, Ma’am. But when it passed your door, we figured it left you be.”

“I just thank the Lord you two had your door locked. That was very lucky of you.”

“I always lock my door, Ma’am. I have seven brothers.” Hilde took another glance down the hall before stepping out of the doorway. “It seems like it’s gone. I’ll start breakfast, then.”

“I, I better start on the laundry.” Ilse placed one foot into the hallway, waiting for anything to happen. When it didn’t, she quickly curtsied and retreated to the stairs.

* * *

Now Klara wondered whether she was really safer here than at her Bärnau home. Although Ilse and Hilde had stayed mostly quiet about the matter, she was certain they wondered the same thing. Their hushed voices stopped whenever she entered the room. On her suggestion, after breakfast the three moved a second bed into her larger room. They at least felt safer at the thought of staying together at night, even if numbers didn’t matter. She hoped they would be safe as long as they kept the doors locked, but she also feared it would get worse.

The Russians had been getting ever closer to Heubach. On the road they had never seemed too far behind, but she never thought they’d make it this far west. Her secluded safe haven was falling apart with every explosion. From the house’s position above the town, she could see the flashes of light, the blackened holes in the ground, and,

eventually, the first units of soldiers marching into town.

She stood on the front porch, arms folded to protect herself against the chill of the wind. She thought the violence would end when the soldiers entered the town. Maybe a sort of invasive calm would hang over them. But she was wrong. She put a hand on the banister as the ground shook from another explosion, and watched as a shop in town erupted into flames. She could hear faint screams, and saw the specks of people running around the streets. There didn't seem to be any tactic to the destruction—only the effect of shock and awe. Perhaps all countries did this. She only hoped hers could do it better.

The next day the destruction seemed to come to an end, at least from her vantage point on the porch. She rubbed her eyes, trying to keep her vision from blurring. Last night the rattling came back. Not long after the clock struck four, the whistling signaled the start of the rattling, and the rattling circled the hallway, looking for a way in. She didn't know, exactly, what it was, but it was there. Even when the sun came up, and the women cautiously exited their room, she could still feel it. The neglected home still had an air of menace, and causeless noises plagued the house. She felt safest on the porch, away from the heaviness of the house. Watching the town succumb to the enemy was easier than staying inside.

Tightly packed squares of men marched around the town, entering and exiting buildings, slowly ensuring their control. The soldiers would soon find their way to her estate, and the small rusted gate would not keep them out. She'd traded one prison for another, and now she was trapped in a strange town and a terror of a house.

* * *

A pounding knock at the front door interrupted their dinner. The three women

stayed still at the table, hoping the intruder would believe the house vacant. But the knock came again.

“Open up. We know you there,” a deep Russian accent said.

Ilse gasped and Hilde stood, keeping her hands on her silverware. They looked at Klara for guidance.

“We’ll have to answer.”

Ilse slowly stood. “Yes, Ma’am.” She walked to the foyer with unsteady steps. She glanced back before unlocking the door and opening it. “May I help you?” Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Klara walked up behind the maid in time to see the taller of the soldiers give an approving glance at her maid’s figure. When he reached her face, he frowned and turned his attention to Klara. “You are lady of the house?”

“What can I do for you?” She saw the pair of soldiers smile at her wording.

“We assigned here.”

“What?” Ilse asked before she could stop herself.

Klara tried not to glare at the maid.

“We stay here,” the taller soldier said slowly, as if to be clearer. “Heubach has surrendered to us. You are in Russian land now.” He gave a small bow, as if his statement was an honor to the house, or a gift. “Our commander sent us ahead to inspect the home. He and some more will come stay here also.”

Ilse’s complexion had turned ashen, and her grip on the door was turning her knuckles white.

“Well,” Klara said, “Then you better come in. We were just sitting down to dinner.”

The soldiers smiled and stepped into the house.

“Won’t you wipe your feet, please?”

The soldiers seemed puzzled, then the shorter one pointed to the porch. They politely stepped back outside and stomped their boots before following her into the house.

“Thank you. Come, eat.” Klara almost smiled as the pair’s posture straightened with pride. Boys will always be boys.

* * *

The women tried to clear their plates from the table, but the soldiers, Leonid and Alexei, insisted they stay. Hilde served them dishes full of whatever leftovers she had, but they didn’t seem to mind the contents. They devoured their meals like hungry wolves, only pausing to drink the cellar’s collection of old wine. The word of the night was “more.” Klara didn’t have much alcohol on the premises, but she knew whatever she had would quickly be consumed by the soldiers. They gave most of their unwanted attentions to the young maid. Klara and Hilde were too old for them to bother with, not to mention the cook was almost larger than they were. Klara felt bad for the maid, but knew it couldn’t be helped.

When Ilse tried to clear their dishes, Alexei pulled her onto his lap and held her down. When she tried to escape, he pushed his wine glass against her lips until she took a sip. When she coughed at the sting of the alcohol, the soldiers laughed. Trying to find an excuse to get the maid away from the men, Klara approached them and crossed her arms.

“This is how you do your work? Sitting with men? Drinking? I told you to clear the table. Clear it now or you’re fired.”

The soldiers laughed again, and Alexei allowed Ilse to stand. He slapped her bottom as she collected his plates. Klara stood there, watching Ilse until the dishes were cleared. The men also watched the maid, and drank their wine. She followed Ilse into the kitchen when the table was clean. That excuse wouldn't work forever.

"Thank you, Ma'am," Ilse said as she placed the last dishes next to the sink.

"Don't thank me yet."

Klara didn't usually clean the dishes, but tonight she made an exception and joined her staff at the sink. They could hear the soldiers singing in the other room.

"Do we tell them about the doors?" Ilse asked.

"That's up to you, Ma'am. But I prefer we leave them be," Hilde said without looking up.

"I'm not sure yet," Klara said, "I suppose I'll come up with something to tell them when I show them their rooms."

Ilse paused in her washing. "Oh, I haven't cleaned their rooms yet."

Hilde huffed. "Our room isn't clean, either. They can't expect much from free lodging."

* * *

At two in the morning, the men were finally ready to be taken to their rooms, with a little prodding from Klara. They were easier to convince once they'd had more than their fill of wine. She made sure to take them to the opposite end of the hall from her own room. She didn't trust the drunken soldiers. They had been mostly civil after dinner, but these Russians could change in an instant.

"These are your rooms," Klara said, pointing to the two at the end of the hall. I'm

afraid they're not very clean. I've only just arrived here, myself."

"Not to worry, *Moya ledi*," said Alexei.

"Yes. We used to sleeping on ground. Any bed is nice," Leonid said.

"I'm glad to hear that," she said. She fought with herself, conflicted between hostess and mother. "But, well, we had some intruders here last night. You may want to lock your doors, in case they come back."

The soldiers laughed.

"Thank you for concern. We will be fine," said Leonid.

Alexei took her hand and gave it a small pat. "Do not worry. We will protect you."

The statement did not reassure her, but she smiled anyway and excused herself.

She was almost to her own room when she heard a scuffle coming from the stairs. She hurried down the hallway to find Alexei trying to pull Ilse towards his room. He seemed momentarily humored by her resistance and was smiling, saying something to her in his native tongue. Ilse's free hand was gripping the bannister, and her face was flushed. Before Klara could intervene, Hilde appeared behind Ilse.

Hilde put a hand on Ilse's shoulder. "It is late. Time to go to sleep."

Alexei glared at Hilde, and then at Ilse before he finally released the maid's arm. He returned to his room, still muttering his own tongue. The women waited until his door slammed shut.

Hilde patted the frightened maid on the shoulder.

"Are you all right?" Klara asked.

A red mark was appearing on Ilse's arm. "I'm fine. I'm . . . fine." Her body and voice were shaking.

“Let’s get you to bed. We’ll just have to be more careful around them.”

As they led the maid to their room, Klara heard her whisper, “Maybe we shouldn’t have warned them.”

She agreed.

* * *

At four in the morning, Klara was still awake. Hilde and Ilse had somehow managed to fall asleep, but they awoke as soon as the rattling began.

“Is it back?” Ilse asked.

They waited as the rattling came closer and closer to their door. Their own doorknob shook, and Ilse covered her mouth. But, after two shakes, the rattle moved on, now heading towards the soldiers’ rooms.

Ilse lowered her hands to her chest. “Do you think they locked their doors?”

They held their breaths as the rattling reached the end of the hall.

At first it was silent. Deafening, almost unnatural, as the rattling stopped prematurely. Then Leonid’s muffled scream reached through the walls. Furniture fell, and strange bangs and thuds joined the screams. Klara tried to cover her ears, but the sounds, impossibly loud, passed though her hands. Ilse tried to hide her face in Hilde’s soft shoulder, and the cook stared, unblinking, towards the sounds.

They heard Alexei shout for his comrade, but his door soon slammed shut. A gunshot, then another, interrupted the thunder of noise. Then Alexei’s screams replaced those of his fellow soldier’s. The whistle, usually gradual and soft, erupted like the shriek of a harpy, and the women cringed and covered their ears at the noxious sound.

Then it was gone. A horrible heavy silence filled the empty space, and Ilse began to

weep.

* * *

When the sun finally rose, Klara felt sick. Ilse's tears had dried, but her red eyes stood out strangely against her pale face. Hilde looked like a widow at a funeral, and Klara had torn the hem of her nightgown in her worrying. The rose pink material was fraying from the tear, pulling away from the delicate lace hem.

She felt the same type of sickness she'd felt when her sons' letters stopped coming—when her husband wouldn't reassure her it was just difficult to send mail during a war. They all feared what awaited them down the hall.

But she was the lady of the house. She had to take responsibility for her property, her servants, and her guests—to whatever degree they were still there. She stood and stared at the maid and the cook until they joined her. When she unlocked their door, the click of metal was more like a thud.

The other end of the hall was lit with contorted rectangles of sunlight escaping through the open guest room doors. As they walked forward, the sounds of their footsteps on the thin hallway rugs disturbed the silence. At the entry of Leonid's room, they paused, afraid to be the first to look in. Klara couldn't stand to wait—she needed to know. She looked in the doorway, and was met with nothing.

The bedding was disturbed, a nightstand knocked over, the armoire on its side, but no soldier. The maid and cook followed her into the room.

“There's nothing here,” Hilde said.

Klara tried to nod.

They both turned when Ilse gasped. She pointed at the hardwood floors. There,

etched deep into the grain, were two sets of scratch lines leading out of the room.

Hilde uttered a prayer under her breath. "It dragged him out."

The women followed the scratches out of the room, and into the hallway. They seemed to stop at the floor molding, but continued above it, up the wall. The marks finally ended at the ceiling, meeting a grotesque water-stain. It looked wet enough to drip, but the drops never came, they only seemed to build up at its center, ready to release dark brown liquid onto the floor beneath.

In Alexei's room, they found less signs of struggle, but two bullet holes perforated the middle and top of the door.

At first Klara thought she felt responsible for the soldiers, but it turned into something more like relief. The house had done her a favor.

"We have to leave here," Hilde said. "We'll be safer on the streets than in this horrid place."

"Please, Ma'am," said Ilse.

Before Klara could reply, there was a knock at the front door.

"Those soldiers told us there'd be more," said Ilse.

Somehow the notion was not upsetting. "Get these rooms cleaned up. We can't have them seeing this. Put more rugs on the floor to cover the scratches. I'll answer the door, myself. Hilde, go down to the cellar and throw some wine bottles on the floor. I think our guests robbed us."

The women ran back to their room and donned their robes before they went their separate ways. There was another knock as Klara came down the stairs.

"Coming," she said, "Coming." She tried to smooth her hair back in place before

she opened the door.

On her porch stood five soldiers and some kind of commander.

The commander took a step forward and nodded a greeting. "I am sure you knew of our arrival. We will be staying with you until further notice." His German was impeccable, which only unsettled her.

"Yes, of course, come in," she said, backing out of their way.

"Where are Alexei and Leonid?" asked the commander, glancing around her unkempt foyer.

"They, well, I was hoping you knew, sir. They scared us to death last night, firing their guns like they did. And it seems they've taken two cases of my best wine. My servants are cleaning up the mess now, so the house is in order for your stay."

The commander's face reddened, and one of his associates whispered in his ear. "And you say they fired their guns at you?"

"No, sir, just at their bedroom door."

"I need to see the damages."

She nodded and led them upstairs, showing them the bullet holes in the walls and the disturbed furniture. Ilse was conspicuously missing during the tour. Klara then led them to the cellar, where a scene of painfully shattered french wine was just being sopped up by the cook. As Klara turned to lead the men back to the foyer, she saw one of them sneak a bottle under his jacket. The commander saw the action, too, but said nothing.

Back in the foyer, the commander talked to his soldiers in their language, occasionally looking at her, then the soldiers left the house.

"Although uncharacteristic of my men, we may have a case of desertion. Their

actions are unacceptable, and I personally apologize,” he said without looking at her. Pulling on his riding gloves, he continued, “Have our rooms and supper ready by this evening.”

“Will you be staying. . .all night?”

He gave her a bitter glance. “What did you expect us to do?”

She looked down. “How many of you shall I prepare for?”

“Six of us tonight. But that could change.” He gave her one more glance before he walked to the door.

The enemy was on her doorstep, and she had no power to turn them away. But did she want to?

* * *

“How many of them are staying here tonight?” Ilse asked.

“None, if I can help it,” said Hilde. “We’ve got to warn them, Ma’am.”

“I already tried. They wouldn’t listen to me. And what do you think they’ll do to us if we tell them they’ll die here?” Klara asked.

“I still want to leave, myself,” said Hilde.

“What do you think they’ll do if they don’t find us here tonight? We’ll make them dinner, get them their rooms, then sneak out when they fall asleep. Then we never have to stay here again. We’ll be gone by morning.”

Ilse and Hilde looked at each other, neither completely convinced.

“How many are coming tonight?” asked Hilde.

“Six,” Klara said, “But the commander said more might join them.”

“Then I’ll prepare a feast. I’m sure they’ll eat anything I lay out.”

“We’ll help you,” Klara said.

The maid stayed silent.

* * *

They prepared most of their food stores, only leaving enough for them to take when they fled. While the meal was cooking, Klara and Ilse packed three travel bags and loaded them in the two carriages, and laid out their travel clothes to change into after dinner.

The men began to arrive after seven. At first they were men she hadn’t seen earlier in the day, but then a few familiar faces sat at the dining room table. When the commander finally reappeared, there were already eight men at her table.

“Let’s hope that’s the last of them,” said Hilde.

The commander caught Klara’s eye and signaled her over. She obeyed cautiously, still unsure of his hard face and skittish eyes. She flinched when he reached for his gun, but his hand continued to his pocket, and he swiftly pulled out a folded envelope. He handed it to her with his still gloved hand. She hesitated to open it.

“In there you will find proper restitution for the damages to your household, and for the lost wine. We were unable to find the deserters today, but, I assure you, they will be appropriately punished when they are found. They did a great disservice to the hospitality you have offered.”

Klara suddenly felt cold, but shook it away. “Thank you,” she said.

He gave a stiff bow before joining his men.

* * *

Ilse and Hilde stayed in the kitchen as much as possible, their disapproval and

heightened nerves keeping them uncharacteristically silent. Klara ignored their reactions. She kept the men's glasses full, chatting with them the best she could. Many of the men didn't know German, or at least didn't know it as well as the other soldiers had. They spent a lot of time using their hands to weakly gesture their meaning, or the German-speaking men acted as interpreters. When one of the younger men pinched her backside, she, in turn, pinched his cheek and called him "her boy." The men's degrading laughter kept other intruding touches away, and gave the boy a rosy blush.

After dinner, they quickly washed the dishes to keep up their routine in front of the soldiers. At the first chance, they retreated to their room. On their way upstairs, Klara told the soldiers her doctor prohibited her from drinking, and gave them permission to use her cellar as they wished. This unsurprisingly pleased the soldiers, and distracted them. When the women finally reached their room, it was just past one.

In the safety of their room, they changed into their travel clothes, and put their robes on top of the clothes. If they were interrupted by any soldiers, hopefully their intoxicated vision wouldn't see past the nightclothes. Then came the horrible waiting. They had less than three hours to leave the house, but had yet to hear the soldiers retire to their rooms. The commander had retired directly after eating, leaving his men free without orders or concern.

A little after two, a few of the men began to bunk down for the night. The women tried to count the footsteps, but a few of the men made return trips downstairs. The unsteady count continued until after three, and the women began to fear if they would have to leave while the men were still awake downstairs.

The final soldier entered his room at 3:47.

“I think that’s nine,” Hilde said.

“I lost count,” said Ilse.

The women waited two more minutes to ensure the final soldier planned to stay in his room before they tied their robes and prepared to flee. Klara slowly turned the doorknob, trying to keep the old metal quiet. They crept down the hall, and hugged the side of the stairs as they slowly descended. At the foot of the stairs, they paused. The living room, though now filled with empty bottles, stains, and cigar butts, was devoid of soldiers. She motioned for them to continue, and led them past the living room to the foyer. She opened the door and slipped out onto the dark porch. The cook followed closely behind her.

“Hey!”

The women jumped at the deep Russian voice, and Klara and Hilde plastered themselves against the house’s splintering siding.

“Стоп!” The Russian voice approached the door, and they heard Ilse yelp. She hadn’t made it onto the porch. Klara and Hilde looked through the window, barely able to see inside through the grime and low lighting. One of the soldiers had the maid by the arm and was waving a mostly empty bottle of wine at her. Another soldier soon emerged from the cellar stairs, joining the first in harassing the maid.

They hadn’t thought about the cellar.

“What do we do?” asked Hilde.

Klara couldn’t see the face of the living room clock, but knew it was almost four.

“We have to get them out here.”

“The soldiers?”

“They won’t let her go. We have to get them to come out here.”

The soldiers were pushing Ilse onto the couch, still interrogating her in muffled Russian, and putting down their wine bottles.

“Come on,” Klara said.

Hilde followed her down the porch steps and down the drive, where a thicket of wild bushes clustered the fence.

“Get behind the bushes.” Klara left the cook and returned to the base of the steps.

“Help, help,” she said, keeping her voice low enough to not wake the whole house.

“Please, help.”

She was about to call again when the front door opened. One of the soldiers stepped on the porch, but didn’t seem rushed to action.

“What wrong?” he asked from the porch.

“There’s a man out here. He tried to grab me.” She pretended to be out of breath. “I think it’s one of your missing men.”

The soldier muttered and called in the house. He argued with the other soldier until he was joined on the porch. “Which way?”

“He ran down the drive,” she said, pointing.

They took off at a lazy sprint, footsteps crunching on the driveway’s gravel, and still arguing with each other.

Klara ran up the stairs, but met Ilse at the door. Her robe was torn, and her travel jacket ripped open. She put a hand to her disheveled hair, but didn’t attempt to fix it.

Klara tried to ignore the ravaged look on her bruised face.

“Come on,” Klara said, grabbing the maid’s hand and pulling her away from the

house.

* * *

When they met Hilde at the thicket of bushes, the whistle started. Although it started at its usual slow drone, it was already loud enough to hear outside the house. Then the first scream erupted from its core. Klara pushed the women into the bushes as crunching gravel quickly came towards them. The soldiers, now running their fastest speed, took the steps two at a time and entered the house, yelling for their comrades. Klara tried not to see the door close behind them after they were inside.

The women untangled themselves from the bushes and ran to the barn. The horses, eyes flashing and shivering legs dancing, were difficult to harness. Hilde and Ilse's carriage was the first out of the barn, with Klara's following close behind. None of them looked back as they followed the driveway to the gate, preciously forced open by the Russians. They didn't stop until the first glow of light bathed the grassy hills in rays of red and yellow light.

The Virtage Connection

Virtage, Belgium, June 1944

Bullets and cries rang out over the burning city as the German army descended upon the citizens they had peacefully lived with only days before. The small Belgian city of Virtage had been “liberated” in the beginning of August by the German army and had become subjected to its whims and frequent raids. Running through the dirty streets, Litzle covered her head with her hands as a window broke above her.

As she hurried inside what was left of her apartment, she wished many things: that the Belgian and Allied army hadn’t arrived three days ago to “re-liberate” Virtage, that the German commanders hadn’t been so quick to assume the mass confusion and barrage of the Allies had been planned by the citizens, and that she had moved to Britain with her sister four years earlier. She gasped and braced herself against the stairway as another series of AA strikes aimed for the Allied Spitfires, causing the building to shake with each firing and the occasional “landing” of hit targets. This was not the adventure she had envisioned herself taking. This was not the life she had expected.

Litzle hurried up the stairway to her place on the long forgotten top floor. She had

learned through trial and error that the Germans weren't very fond of climbing three flights of stairs to look for civilians to shoot, although the height didn't assure safety. Her apartment had already been looted and half burned, making it a safe place to be, or so Litzle hoped. Reaching the fourth floor, she quickly closed the door behind her, wishing that the lock still worked.

As another series of rapid single shots began ringing down the street, she curled up into the corner next to the door and covered her ears, trying to block out the images of her friends and neighbors facing the firing squad. She had seen over and over on the first day of the mass confusion brought by the "re-liberalization" that being caught by the Germans meant looting, death, or worse. Litzle shuddered at the thought and clamped her hands tighter over her ears.

She had run out of her meager rations the night before, although her hunger had been dampened by the sounds of battle and fear that raged outside. Her early-morning search for more supplies was interrupted when two soldiers thought they heard footsteps. They hadn't been hers, thankfully, but the baker they had rounded up instead sent Litzle hurrying back to her shelter.

When the sound of bullets lulled into a momentary reprieve, Litzle slowly removed her hands from her ears and circled her arms around her knees, letting out a slow breath. She had told herself before leaving her room that morning that she would have to try to escape the city if she kept failing to get enough supplies. There was nothing left of the town; her assumptions had been confirmed when she had gone out on her search.

Over half of the city was destroyed at least, and the distant sounds of barrages and aircraft meant that the battle between the Allies and Germans was still raging just a few

miles away. Her duties to the White Brigade was diminishing just as rapidly, with her fellow volunteers and the people they had yet to smuggle out being killed or trying to make a run for it on their own. She had to try to escape before the whole town was leveled. It had to be soon, she decided, while her resolve was still high, or else wait in the burned-out apartment for her turn to face the firing squad.

* * *

Litzle stepped lightly over to the small dingy window as she heard a change in the artillery fire outside. It sounded closer, louder, more sporadic. Something was different. The dark of the night obscured whatever was happening just past the town. If she could gather a guess, Litzle hoped the Allies were making headway. She hadn't seen or heard the routine of firing squads for the past day and a half and she hoped it meant an end to the horrible violence. Shattering glass switched Litzle's attention away from dark of the distance and down to the street below. The street lamps had long been broken, the victims of games of "toss" played by the German soldiers. The only lights the city had left were from the frequent fires of various things burning or from the brief showers of light from the moon.

More glass shattered below her, the last of the downstairs windows not to be broken earlier. She could faintly make out the shapes of several soldiers throwing something into the now broken window below. She held her breath, hoping it hadn't been what she thought it was. She jumped as a loud bang erupted from the house across the street, smoke blew out the lower windows as a fire that had already been burning grew, licking the outside of the window frames and empty doorway.

The mass confusion across the street distracted Litzle from her concerns about her

own building. But the loud rattling bang brought it back to her attention. The building shook to its foundation and Litzle fell to the floor, failing to catch herself properly and rolling over, grasping her now probably fractured left radius. She had been right. The Germans were using grenades on the buildings. They had used some grenades earlier during their “liberation” to try to demolish a deserted building. They had sunken the first floor interior but failed to take down the whole thing. They had ended up, instead, with light punishment from a nearby superior officer for wasting so many grenades. After, of course, the officer had watched the fun unfold.

Litzle stood, bracing herself against the windowsill as another grenade went off on the other side of the building. Unlike the building the Germans had failed to bring down earlier, she knew that her building was far less secure, already structurally unsound from years of pre-war and recent mistreatment. Her door had swung open and loosened from its top hinge from the last blast. Looking through the doorway, she saw a German soldier she hadn't even known was staying in the room across from her make a break for the hallway, fear etched onto his face. His overenthusiastic fellow soldiers outside hadn't even bothered to check if the apartment was clear of their own kind.

Litzle jumped and looked away as a deep creaking sound was followed by the collapsing of the German's doorway and hall ceiling. She tried to make out the body of the man through the dust and debris but couldn't see any trace of him. After a moment she thought she heard a soft groan from the pile of lumber and plaster. Maybe he was still alive. Litzle gathered herself and made a step away from the window only to drop to the floor as another part of the building down the hall collapsed. Another grenade. When the rumbling again subsided, she took a breath and jumped to her feet, running for the door.

* * *

Richard dropped to the ground as a barrage landed behind him to his right. Short bursts of yells and screams were drowned out by the return fire. Dirt rained down on him before he scurried to get out of the target zone, keeping his M-1 Garand aimed straight while being followed by members of his platoon. The skirmish had lasted since evening fell the day before and light was just starting to peak over the horizon. The German fire was fading for the first time since the Allies had arrived four days before. The Allies were finally pushing them back. Richard took little notice that he was about to step into the muddy and barren meadow that had served as the midline of the battle for the past three days.

There were no cheers around Richard as the meadow was entirely captured and placed behind the Allies' line. The soldiers knew better than to let their guard down just because they had secured a small pile of dirt. Richard looked up as a Spitfire roared by; one of the last in the area after they had given the Allies enough room to encroach upon the enemy line. An object just past the mud of the meadow caught the toe of Richard's boot and he had to pause to right himself. Looking down, he saw it was just the body of another dead German soldier. He started jogging again to catch up to the rest of his men, immediately righting his M-1 rifle and aiming for the shrinking figures of the enemy. The last German tank was struggling to keep pace with the quickly retreating troops. Richard saw that a tread was off-balance and seemingly bent. Small wafts of smoke were emanating from the hatch and the front gun.

He lowered his rifle, seeing that the chaos of no commands coming from the German leadership and the encroachment of the almost-intact Allied forces had created a

panicked mass exodus. “Come on, men, hurry it up. Let’s not keep these bastards waiting,” Richard called over the rumble of Allied tanks and frequent bursts of rifle fire.

“Right behind ya, Nurse. That sounds plenty good to me,” sergeant Miller said as he jogged past Richard. “Ya better hurry up or I won’t leave any Germans for ya.”

Three weeks in triage at the beginning of the war had qualified Richard as a walking medical unit to his regiment. Richard smiled, carefully jumping over another German body as he quickened his pace to keep up with the sergeant, the morning light starting to brighten the outline of the small city.

* * *

Richard flinched as his thick army boot made a sudden *crunch* in the damp upturned earth that was once a street. Looking down, he saw that he had only stepped on the glass from a picture frame. He felt a hand pat him on the shoulder and looked over to see one of the men from his regiment offer him a grim smile. It had taken five days to liberate Virtage, and, as all the Allied soldiers had discovered, it took five days too many. Richard’s division had arrived in the city half a day after the first wave of Allied soldiers, covering and securing the battle zone before entering the town. It hadn’t taken long for the grim word to travel past the city limits that the Germans had begun to destroy the city in a panic as their line was pushed back, taking the remnants of the city down with them.

Several hours after the Allies had first secured Virtage, Richard and the other soldiers were taking their first steps into the city they had seemingly failed to defend. The Belgian troops had instantly taken up with making proper graves for their kinsmen, or, if they were from Virtage, were still running around the streets, calling out the names of their loved ones. Richard took out his small notebook and jotted down his first

impressions of the foreign city he had fought to “protect.” They were bleak.

Looking around, he could see that a few of the building fires were still being put out and the dirty puddles that littered the ground had difficulty reflecting the early morning sun. From the battlefield, the city had looked intact, secure. A few plumes of smoke had littered the air, but Richard had pictured a slightly battle-torn city with people cheering them on in the streets as the Allies arrived. This was different. This was nothingness.

Hearing shouts from some of his regiment, he slid his notepad back into his pocket and hurried down a side street until he came to a mostly destroyed apartment. It was the worst he had seen in the city. A red cloth tied to the doorknob of the broken door signified that the building was an “enter at your own risk” classification. As he carefully walked through the debris inside the entrance of the apartment, he could hear his men moving rubble. The smell hit him first, making him cover his nose and mouth.

Like the rest of the city, it smelled of smoke, but the unfiltered air in the apartment was much more potent and ash still floated in the air. Somehow the smell of dirty earth had also found its way into the apartment accompanied by the distinctive smell of decomposing bodies. In the dimly lit space, Richard could barely make out a partially sunken staircase and the remains of what used to be a supporting wall just beyond the ground level of the staircase. Releasing his hand from his face, he jogged to the staircase and began to climb it, but paused as he heard the third step splinter beneath him.

“I’d be careful, if I were you. This building’s not gonna last long,” called one of the men.

Richard knew the face, but had a hard time placing the name of the soldier four

steps above him, maybe Barnes? Shaking his head, he carefully navigated his way to the collapsed section of the stairs and started clearing more of the rubble.

“We found five bodies in here,” Barnes answered Richard’s unasked question. “Two under that felled wall over there and one in this miserable heap, two more still in their bed if you can imagine that. The Belge’s are upstairs in another rubble area looking for more. We found some German-issue rifles and corked grenades in one of the bedroom closets downstairs. We’re trying to clear the building to make sure nothing blows when this place finally goes.”

Richard nodded, but doubted the man saw the action.

“Hey, we’ve got a live one up ‘ere!” a soldier called out from the top of the landing.

“Looks like you’re up, Nurse,” one of Richard’s bunk mates called out.

Richard hurried around the rubble and soldiers as he made his way precariously up the fractured stairs to the second-floor landing.

“Over ‘ere, Nurse,” the soldier, Davie, gestured to Richard to follow him a short distance off of the landing and into a small room. “We found ‘er under a big part of the wall, there. We had a hard time gettin’ it off of ‘er. She don’t look so good, Nurse, but she’s breathing.”

Richard navigated around the remnants of the ceiling that were now in a heap on the floor and kneeled by the woman’s side, gesturing for the soldiers to stand back. Her burgundy dress, probably once bright with color, was covered in dust and in tatters. Her worn black shoes looked like they belonged in an office, and he couldn’t help but wonder what her job had been before the war. He brushed some of her dusty brunette hair off of her face and checked her neck for a pulse. It was weak.

Richard tried to ignore the dirt and bruises that covered her young thin face. She was breathing, but it was shallow and slow. He felt her ribs, finding several broken, before he felt around her left shoulder and neck. The muscle was stiff and swollen and she seemed to wince at the touch, if she moved at all. Looking down, he saw that her lower left arm was also broken. "This isn't good. How long as she been here?" he asked the soldiers around him. He removed his white cotton shirt and pressed it on a large deep gash spanning her thigh, trying to stop the bleeding.

Davie asked the Bulgarians in their native language about the girl, but Richard didn't need a translator to understand the shrugging and shaking heads.

"What's wrong with 'er?" Davie asked.

Richard pressed against the sides of the girl's abdomen with his free hand. "She's bleeding internally and externally. Judging by her color and the bulging in her neck, her spleen is probably ruptured, too. Depending on how long she's been here, she's already gone."

"We've got a medic on the way," said Davie.

Richard shook his head. The girl's breathing was already fading and what was left of the color on her face was turning ashen. Richard started as she opened her eyes.

She gasped, trying to catch her breath. Pointing out the doorway to the next room, she whispered with a heavy accent, "There, a man. Hurt."

Richard looked at Davie, not needing to make an order for him to hurry out of the room, calling for help to clear the rubble off of the man. "We'll take care of him, don't worry. Try to save your strength."

The young woman tried to smile, but coughed, her whole body shaking from the

action.

“Hey, hold on. The medic will be here soon. Just stay with me, all right?”

She coughed again, her face losing the last of its color, leaving only a look of pain.

He grabbed her arm, keeping his fingers on her wrist to keep track of her pulse.

“Stay with me. You can make it.”

Looking at him, almost sad, almost thankful, she raised an unsteady arm to her necklace and yanked it off. She tried to hand it to Richard, but her arm collapsed halfway to Richard’s hand.

Richard bowed his head and heard the other soldiers slowly, silently, leave the room. He sighed and took a moment to say a quick prayer before he reached to see what she had wanted to give him. Taking the thin necklace from her still-warm hand, he turned the gold lettering of the pendant over in his palm and read aloud the delicately printed name. “Liztle.”

“Oy, Nurse,” Davie called out. “This guy’s still alive.”

Richard stood and tucked the necklace into his cargo pant’s pocket. Frowning and glancing at the young girl one last time before he rushed to the next room. He knelt beside the freshly uncovered man, and helped Davie roll him over.

“Blazes, it’s a German.” Davie rubbed a hand across his forehead. “Why the hell would she want us to save this sorry fool?”

Richard ignored the comments, trying to let his brief medical training take over. It was barely working. “Tell that medic we still need him. And to hurry up, will ya?”

Davie left, his feet making not-too-quick thuds on the wooden floor.

Richard felt for broken bones and ruptures, trying not to be distracted by the fact

that he was helping a man who had probably been shooting at him a few days ago. He let out a quick breath, wondering why that poor girl had tried to save someone who had wanted to hurt her.

More thuds emanated from the floor as the medic made his way to kneel next to Richard, followed by two soldiers carrying a stretcher. “What’s his status?” the medic asked, doing a quick once-over of the German before guiding Richard away. If he was bothered by the fact that his patient was the enemy, he didn’t show it.

“Broken leg and a few fingers and a large gash in the right shoulder. Maybe a few cracked ribs. I’m not sure about anything internal,” Richard said as the German was transferred to the stretcher and secured by a single strap around the waist.

“We’ll take care of him. Be careful in here.” The medic followed the soldiers as they carefully hoisted the stretcher and slowly made their way down the stairs.

Richard let out a deep breath and looked towards the girl’s room. She had saved that German soldier. Why?

“We’ll take care of her, Nurse. You worry about clearing the rest of the rooms. We’ve gotta finish up in here.” Davie gave him a soft slap on the back and gestured for two Belgians to follow him.

Richard made his way to the bottom floor and started at the back of the building. He didn’t want to see her being carried out.

* * *

The crumbling walls and debris-littered floor worried him, and he chose his steps carefully to avoid larger pieces of plaster and exposed nails. He chose a south-facing room—its door already ajar—and walked inside. A large hole in the south wall let in a

soft breeze and the putrid smell from the city street. The rubble from the hole in the wall sat awkwardly on top of an odd-shaped lump, and Richard sighed. He approached the rubble and began to unload the pieces of wall.

He began to see a dark green coat and the balding head of a middle-aged man. At least it wasn't another soldier. He lifted the last of the rubble covering the man and was about to turn him over when the ground began to shake. He ran to the hole, looking around outside for the source. He began to hear shouts when a hand shoved him outside. He turned, confused, but jumped back as the roof above the deceased man began to crumble. He ran further back to the street, and watched as the south side of the building slowly crumbled under its own weight.

Its light brown and red bricks tumbled from its edges, falling like confetti. A cloud of dust burst from the foundation, and he turned away, shielding his eyes in his elbow. The force rushed over him, knocking him back. The shouts from the street started up again before the dust settled. He ran back towards the building, trying to rub the granules of dust from his burning eyes. He started uncovering the rubble where the hole in the wall had been. Whoever had shoved him out hadn't made it out behind him.

Another soldier ran up to him. "What are you doing? We need to evacuate before the hole thing goes down."

He didn't stop throwing rubble. "Someone's in here. They got me out."

The soldier grabbed his arm. "No one else was in there. I was in the hall right behind you. Now let's go."

Richard let the soldier pull him away, but he couldn't believe him. Someone had saved him. He was sure.

They made it to the street as another section of the building crumbled to the ground. Soldiers raced around him, trying to organize, save, and evacuate. He watched the space where the hole had been for a moment longer before he joined the frenzy.

* * *

A few days later, he was still clearing buildings with his unit. They searched for civilians who were hurt or still in hiding, and helped to move bodies outside for burial. They were in the north of the city, asked to clear a particularly foul-smelling small apartment. The building looked as though it had been in bad shape before the war, and some of the men wondered at how it had lasted so long. Thankfully it only had three floors, and had a small number of apartments compared to the other buildings they had entered.

In the second apartment, they found a family of five face-down on the ground with gunshots to the back of their heads. This was a normal sight, but one of the men began to shake when he had to pry the first body from the floor—the blood from their wound having glued their head to the floor. The men finished their job in silence and with little eye contact. They found more bodies across the hall, and an apparent suicide on the second floor.

While they finished the second floor, Richard walked to the door to the third-floor staircase. He put his hand on the doorknob, and a chill ran down his spine.

“Don’t,” a female voice whispered.

He turned around, but only saw two of his men approaching him from down the hall. He shrugged it off. The job was starting to get to him. He reached for the door again and felt a hand grasp his arm. He jumped from the contact and tuned again, but there was

still no one behind him.

“What’s wrong, Nurse?” Davie asked.

Richard looked at his arm, then at the door. “I think something’s wrong with the door.”

“Why’s that?” Davie asked. When he reached for the door, Richard pulled his arm away. “Jesus, Rick. You think it’s rigged or somethin’?”

“There’s something wrong. I know it.”

Davie nodded and slowly turned the door knob. He opened it about an inch and turned on his flashlight. He shined the light through the crack, looking in the stairwell. He stopped when he saw the other side of the doorknob. “Shit. Get the EODs over here. There’s a trigger wire on the doorknob. The staircase is set to blow.”

As the EOD team disassembled the homemade bomb, Davie slapped Richard on the shoulder. “Good thing you figured out that wire. These civilians and their god-damn booby traps are gettin’ on my nerves. Didn’t they know the fool things could kill anyone?”

Richard smiled, but was deep in thought. He hadn’t known about the rig. How could he? Someone saved him, and he had a feeling it was the same person who had saved him from the red-tagged building. Someone was looking out for him, and even though it was confusing and seemed impossible, he was grateful.

* * *

Richard and a section of his unit were making their way to the least-affected west side of the city. They were bringing supplies to the newest first-aid station located on what had been the main thoroughfare of the city. They reached the nearly empty tent at

0800 hours, greeting the medical staff. Richard was handing one of his satchels to a doctor when a gun shot rang out in the street. Richard and his men raced into the street, raising their own weapons.

Two men wearing torn suits and carrying German military issue duffle bags emerged from what had been one of the wealthier apartments on the avenue. One of them turned, firing back into the building once more, before they ran into the street.

“Drop your guns,” Howard said, aiming his weapon.

The two men fired at Richard’s unit before running up the street.

Russell grunted, and Richard saw a thin stream of red running down his right arm. Richard’s men fired back, striking one man, felling him. The other turned down an alley. Two men stayed with the first gunman, while Richard, Davie, and Howard ran after the other man. When they turned down the alley, they were met with a dead end. Halfway down, they found an open door leading into another building. It looked as though it had been kicked in, resting on its top hinge with a slight sway.

They entered the dark building, keeping their guns raised. Beyond the threshold, they paused, listening for footsteps. They heard nothing, and decided to split up. Richard went to the right, following a wide, dark hallway. Many of the rooms were missing doors, and the first two he entered were almost devoid of furniture. He checked each room, looking in closets and washrooms, and tried to ignore the state of the building.

Although the apartment was in one of the wealthier neighborhoods, it held no air of comfort or luxury. Strange stains, puddles, and holes in the walls only heightened his discomfort, and he had yet to find any tenants. The next room had a door, and Richard quickly pushed it open, trying to stay out of the doorway. He glanced inside, but didn’t

see anyone in the small apartment. A lone davenport sat in the middle of the room. As Richard walked towards it, he saw a large red stain dried on the cushions, leading down the front to another stain on the floor.

Richard turned when he heard the door slam and aimed his gun at the door, but no one was there. He hurried to the door and tried to open it. It was stuck. He jiggled the broken lock, then the doorknob, before trying to force the door open. He stopped when a cool breeze passed through him, chilling him like ice.

“Don’t,” a female voice said.

Richard spun, looking around the room, but couldn’t see anyone. “What?”

“Don’t fire your gun.” The warm voice and accent were familiar, but Richard couldn’t place it.

The voice seemed to come from all around him, echoing through his ears. His voice caught in his throat as he tried to place the sound, but there was nothing in the room except for the stained couch.

The breeze stopped, and the door opened. Richard tried to think through what had just happened until he heard footsteps pounding on the staircase above him, and a shout. He ran from the room and followed the long hallway to the staircase. He could still hear shouts and running as he climbed the staircase, taking two steps at a time. He followed the shouts to a back room, arriving to find two men in a scuffle on the floor. The only window in the room was boarded up, robbing the room of light, save for a few narrow beams escaping from the cracks in the boards.

He aimed his gun, trying to decide which figure was the robber. His men were wearing their uniforms, and only one man wore a hat. He aimed at the hat-less man,

ready to pull the trigger until he noticed another figure in the room. A woman stood by the window—a thin ray of light highlighting her outline. Her brunette hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders, but her burgundy dress was torn and faded. She looked like. . .but it couldn't be.

Remembering the voice's warning, he threw his gun over his shoulder and joined the scuffle. He pulled on the hat-less man, drawing him away.

“What are you doing?” the man asked. “Get *him*.”

Richard released the man, realizing it was Davie, and drew his gun as the other man ran for the door. Richard fired, hitting the man in the back. The man fell to the floor with a dry *thunk*.

“Jesus, Nurse. Think you could shout out before acting next time? I could have told you I was me,” Davie said as they jogged to the man on the floor.

Richard flipped the man over and felt for a pulse, only feeling a faint beat.

Footsteps rushed to the doorway, but Howard slowed down when he saw the figure on the floor.

“Get a medic. He ain't dead yet,” Davie said.

Howard nodded, and his footsteps pounded back down the hallway.

“Damn bastard caught me off guard downstairs. Hit me in the head when I turned a corner. I got a shot off and tackled him and got his gun, but the bastard got my hat when he tried to slam my head into the wall.” Davie bent down and grabbed his hat from the robber's head. He smacked it against his thigh and brushed off the brim with his hand. “I'm going to have to get this washed,” he said, before putting it back on his head. He spat on the floor and shook his head. “Of all the things we have to deal with, I've got a

Nat-zie wearing my hat.”

* * *

Richard thought about the woman he had seen by the window. He knew she hadn't been there when he arrived, and she wasn't there after he stopped the robber. Could she be the voice he had been hearing? He didn't recognize the voice, but there was something about the woman at the window. She looked like the woman he had lost—Litzle—but how could she still be there? And why was she following him around?

He and his unit were still dealing with the aftermath of the apparent robbery. Once the second robber was taken to the medical tent, Richard and his men joined the others at the building the robbers had targeted. Inside they found the most carnage they had seen since the war had officially ended. It wasn't nearly as bad as any of them had seen, but the civilian attack unnerved some of the men. It seemed so unnecessary to them, even though any loss of life was unnecessary.

Five people had been shot during the robbery, two fatally. From what the tenants said, Richard gathered that the two robbers were local deserters desperate for supplies and money. The first tenant to fight back was an elderly man who apparently cared about his possessions more than anything, and paid for it. After that, the robbers panicked and started shooting at anyone they saw as they fled. The other deceased victim was an older woman who had gotten in their way as they fled.

There was no documenting of the actual crime to be done—they weren't police, after all—but because of the lack of resources, Richard's unit was back to clearing bodies. Richard and Davie were tasked with bringing the robbers' duffle bags to return the stolen items. There wasn't much order to that process either, and the two ended up

emptying the bags on the floor, entrusting the tenants to take back only what was theirs. Richard asked one of the women to help him identify what belonged to the old man, so he could at least put the items back in the man's apartment.

The woman reluctantly agreed, and he was surprised when there were only two items—a silver candelabra, and an old signet ring. He thanked the woman and grabbed the items. When he entered the old man's apartment, he was surprised to find it as space as the other apartments he had seen. There was a bit more furniture than he was used to—a whole four pieces—but otherwise there wasn't much to take. There was a rickety end table on the side wall. Its surface was dusty except for a circle in its middle.

Richard placed the candelabra in its spot on the table, and decided to leave the ring on the table, as well. When he turned to leave, his pants pocket caught on the bent handle of the end table's drawer, tearing open. Richard was about to examine the damage when he heard a soft *clink* on the hard-wood floor. Shining faintly on the ground was a necklace. Its cursive "L" stood out against the dark color of the floor, and Richard realized why Litzle had been following him.

A small hand appeared, delicately grabbing the necklace. Richard jumped back as Litzle formed in front of him, stooping down to retrieve her necklace. When she stood, she smiled at him, her eyes warm and happy despite their slight transparency.

She reached her hand out, offering him the necklace. "You should be more careful not to drop things people give you."

His voice caught in his throat and he held out a shaky arm, accepting the necklace back. "You-you're sure you don't want it?"

She shook her head.

“But then you’ll have to follow me around.”

She smiled. “I’ve always wanted to go on an adventure.”

Footsteps approached the room, and Davie knocked on the doorframe. “Hey, you put those things away yet? We’ve still got a lot of cleaning to do, ya know.”

“Yeah, I just—” Richard looked back at Litzle, but she was gone.

* * *

Richard divided the rest of his time in Virtage between working in one of the medical tents stitching up the many holes, cuts, and slashes that adorned both civilians and soldiers alike, going on routs around the city, or helping to dig proper graves. After losing, and regaining, Litzle, he couldn’t think about any body the same way, be it friend or foe. The German they had rescued—no, that Litzle had rescued—had managed to survive surgery and was recuperating nicely. The medic had applauded Richard and his men for acting so quickly. The soldier wouldn’t have made it if he’d been under that rubble any longer. Richard still had the question of why in his head, but found himself repeatedly seeing a life as a life, even though there weren’t that many injured Germans to be found, mostly just dead ones.

The time Richard spent helping the Belgians to bury the dead civilians and the soldiers lost in the skirmish was constantly interrupted. Whenever they came across the body of a German, it took some convincing from Richard to get his fellow soldiers to do the enemy an honor and bury them properly. After even more convincing, the Belgians would break off the lower half of the stamped metal ovals of the Germans’ dog-tags and, if they still had them, Richard would also take their *soldbach* identification papers. Unsure what to do with the tags and papers, the Belgians at the makeshift city office

threw all of the items in large boxes and tossed them in the corner somewhere. Richard was content with that end, though, because at least he had done what was most important for those souls that had been lost on the battlefield or in the city.

* * *

“We’ve got another one for you, Nurse. She fell through a floorboard that collapsed under her. She acts like she’s all right, but there’s a pretty big gash in her leg.”

Richard cut the thread of the stitch he had just finished on his most recent patient and nodded to another medic who led the man away. “Bring her on over.” Richard turned and walked to the lopsided wooden counter to gather a sterile needle and some new thread. When he reached for the roll of gauze, it rolled off the counter and under one of the tables. When he bent over to see where it went, he was greeted with a pair of dusty legs and worn shoes. He stood up, and Litzle smiled at him, offering the lost gauze. He smiled back at her and mouthed a “thank you.” She nodded and winked before dissipating into the air.

Richard tried to put a normal smile on his face and greeted the patient with a few of the Belgian words he had picked up during his time in Virtage. Asking her where it hurt, he began cleaning up her leg wound and applying a low dose of the mild anesthetic he had available. He caught eyes with Litzle when she reappeared in the far corner of the room. She waved him on, and he continued fixing up the patient’s leg. Life was certainly an adventure, especially with on of the dead as a companion.

Born of War

Leyte, Philippines, December 1944

Andy Garrett didn't try to shield his body as he walked through the ammunition fire. The smiling and bloodstained Japanese platoon in front of him was his only concern. This would be it; he would settle his score, avenge his brothers—avenge Jimmy—and he would die doing it. But only after he personally ripped that Jap commander's heart from his chest and squeezed it until the life dripped away through his fingers. A grenade exploded just to his right, and as dirt, mud, and plant matter splattered against him, he saw flashes of the torn-apart bodies of his fallen brothers. Missing arms, missing legs, a split skull—all covered in tattered HBT, dark brown earth, and blood brighter than he thought it would be.

Garrett stopped a few feet away from the Japanese Commander, Harada, whose smile was too wide for his face, and his impeccable uniform decorated with American blood. Garrett clenched his teeth, ignoring the pain from his infected second molar, and reached for the service pistol attached to his belt. Harada followed Garrett's hand with his eyes and, as Garrett grabbed the handle, Harada laughed. His laugh grew until it revealed both rows of his too-white teeth. As Garrett began to pull the pistol from its holster, Harada smiled.

"Are you all right?" Harada asked.

Garrett paused, his finger flexing on the trigger. "What?"

"Sergeant, are you all right?" Harada's lips moved but the voice was—

** * **

"Sergeant, answer me."

Garrett blinked and Harada was gone. In his place was Captain Newell. As the haze of the splintered New Guinea jungle faded away, the tents of the Leyte field depot

replaced it. “Sir?”

“Son, have you taken up sleepwalking?” The captain was frowning, but his raised eyebrow meant he was either amused or very annoyed.

“I—” Garrett clenched his hand and looked down as the pistol’s handle gave way under his grip. It wasn’t his pistol. It was the flap of the tent.

“You with me, sergeant? Or do I need to take you to a medic?”

“No, sir.”

Captain Newell clasped his hands behind his back and rocked on his heels. “I’ll take your word for it this time, but I can’t have my men sleepwalking through an active war zone. You understand me?”

“Understood, Sir.”

* * *

Garrett ducked behind the thin trunk of a coconut palm and braced his M-16 as machine gun fire *rat-a-tatted* all around. His squad found their own palm trunks, tangled ground foliage, and anything else tall enough to hopefully hide their exact location as they took turns returning fire with the enemy troops. He jerked back as bark shattered off the trunk and flew into his face. Cuts from the bark stung his cheek and neck, but his vision seemed fine. At the next pause of ammunition fire, he turned and fired into the dark jungle until he reached the end of his clip.

A grenade detonated near the end of his line, and Garrett fell to the ground, followed by a layer of mud and roots. He stayed on the ground as the high-pitched wail in his ears slowly subsided. When he remembered which way was up and the wail became quieter ringing, he stood and reclaimed his place behind the trunk. The men closest to

him were also collecting themselves, shaking their heads to quiet the ringing and refocus their vision, but three were still on the ground; two were screaming. Behind the enemy's tree line he could see the backs of the men already running and the bobbing heads of the other soldiers hurrying to collect their equipment.

“They’re backing off. Advance the line. Don’t let them set up again,” Garrett said.

His squad started running, but some were huddled around the three men on the ground. Garrett jogged to them, keeping his head low in case of residual fire. He knelt by the closest injured soldier, the silent one, and could see red and tufts of hair sticking up through the hole in his helmet. The grass beneath him was slowly changing color. He pointed at a private, who was checking for a pulse. “You, get a medic. The rest of you, keep moving.”

Two medics were already on their way and followed the private back through the bushes to the injured men. Garrett stood as one of the medics also started to feel for a pulse. The other medic began to pull out supplies for the screaming soldier, who was clutching where his right hand should be. The third soldier, curled up on his side, had become silent, probably passed out from shock. Garrett walked to him and rolled him over, wondering if he should try to wake him up or check for a pulse. He jumped back as the soldier’s face became visible. “No.”

Jimmy stared back at him, his face halfheartedly painted with mud camouflage as it had been the day he died. Jimmy’s lips moved as he tried to form words. “Why?” His voice was raspy and hallow. “Why are *you* alive?”

Garrett stepped back, shaking his head, unable to apologize. A branch snapped somewhere to his right and he aimed his gun, reflexes forcing him to look away from

Jimmy. A figure walked out from behind the palms a few yards away and smiled. Harada.

* * *

Garrett was back in New Guinea, once again trapped in his own memory. The plants, ground, and sky shifted into the all too familiar scene. He knew what would happen—how this moment would play out.

He and his men ran through the dense jungle after the Japanese soldiers who had not been at the base the Allies had captured only minutes ago. Their orders were to capture the remaining Japanese soldiers or stop them. Their primary target, the elusive Japanese commander, Harada, had not been at the base. Garrett stopped as they entered a small clearing. "Take cover!" His warning was too late and bullets rushed out from behind the palms and vines, taking out man after man. Garrett couldn't see the enemy well enough through the foliage and camouflage, but he could make out the white of their smiles. A few American soldiers were able to escape the clearing and returned fire. They advanced as the Japanese began to run out of ammunition.

Garrett's diminished troop passed the clearing and paused as they reached the bodies of the Japanese soldiers. Jimmy lowered his gun and began to say something. Garrett looked over in time to see a bullet pass through Jimmy's helmet. Jimmy fell to the ground, his gun making more noise upon landing than his body did. Garrett followed the direction of the bullet to a Japanese soldier standing tall amongst his fallen comrades. The soldier lowered his gun to reveal the dark sashes which adorned his otherwise ordinary uniform. It was the commander, Harada. Garrett raised his gun and aimed as the commander gave a broad smile.

* * *

The New Guinea jungle melted into Leyte's battle zone as Harada's smile turned into a tormented frown. Garrett's finger paused on the trigger. Harada looked disheveled—his uniform torn in strange places, and his face dusty and pale. His face did not ooze contempt and evil, but now seemed almost disappointed. The anguish in his eyes startled Garrett. It was only a trick. It had to be. Garrett re-aimed and started to pull the trigger until a hand landed on his shoulder. He whirled around but lowered his gun as he recognized the medic.

“What are you doing? There's no one there. The whole line's moved up,” said the medic.

Garrett looked back at the jungle, but Harada was gone. “I thought I saw someone.” Remembering Jimmy, he looked at the soldier who was still unconscious on the ground. Jimmy's face was gone, replaced with the features of some other soldier.

“Just get out of here. Watch out for what you aim at until you get to your men.” The medic knelt by the soldier who wasn't Jimmy and began tending to his leg.

Garrett clenched his teeth, grinding them as the pain from his molar flared in his mouth. When Jimmy's face didn't come back, Garrett ran to join his men.

* * *

Rain was pouring down again. Garrett and his men were trying to pass the time under the cover of their wall-less tent as they waited for orders from General MacArthur to secure the last part of Leyte. Several of the men were writing letters home or playing cards. Private Williams had his back to the group, probably writing in his journal again despite the Army's orders not to in case they were captured. But Garrett was too tired and too hot to reprimand the private. Instead, he tapped at the canteen attached to his belt. Its

hollow echo was almost as demoralizing as an airstrike.

Sporadic gunfire interrupted Garrett's thoughts, and his platoon ran to the sound, grabbing their guns on the way. They followed the hollers and gunfire to the north side of the camp—the side closest to the jungle. The island was almost under Allied control, but the Japanese troops refused to surrender and hid in the jungle.

When Garrett got to the scene, there were several men on the ground grasping at bullet wounds and others firing into the jungle with no clear target.

“Come on,” Garrett said as he charged into the jungle. He heard his men follow him through the brush. He could hear the cracking of twigs and crunch of dried leaves in front of him scattering into several directions. He waved some men in each direction and had a few follow him as he continued forward.

The swinging leaves and vines betrayed the direction of the Japanese soldiers, and Garrett and his men caught up with them in minutes. A private stopped to aim and hit one in the shoulder. The soldier stumbled but continued to run. Garrett and his other men also took shots, hitting the remaining soldiers. A few fell to the ground, but two were still running. Two privates stayed behind to check the injured Japanese soldiers while the other men ran after the fugitives. Garrett's group aimed and fired again, but the soldiers would not stop. One of the Japanese soldiers turned and fired, hitting a private in his left side. He fell to his knees, gasping in pain as he held his hands over the wound. Jimmy never got the chance to hold his wound.

* * *

He was in New Guinea again. Garrett ran with his men through the dense jungle after the fleeing Japanese soldiers. Garrett stopped as they entered a small clearing.

“Take cover!”

Bullets rushed out from behind the palms and vines but missed as the Americans ducked out of the clearing. Garrett couldn't see the enemy well enough through the foliage and camouflage, but he could make out the white of their smiles. The Americans returned fire and advanced as the Japanese began to run out of ammunition.

Garrett's troop passed the clearing and paused as they reached the bodies of the Japanese soldiers. Jimmy lowered his gun and began to say something. Garrett watched as a bullet passed through Jimmy's helmet. Jimmy fell to the ground and Garrett followed the direction of the bullet to a Japanese soldier. The soldier lowered his gun, revealing the bold dark sashes of a commander. Garrett aimed his gun as Harada looked at the bodies around his feet. He looked back at Garrett, his uniform suddenly tattered and worn, his face dirtied. His smile was missing.

Garrett shook himself out of his memory and focused on the enemy soldier that had just shot his private. The soldier looked at Garrett and smiled before running. It was the missing smile. Harada's smile. Harada was still trying to kill his men—he knew it. Even through the pouring rain he could never mistake that smile.

Garrett kept running and heard his other man, Roberts, follow him a moment later. Garrett fired without slowing his pace, his wrenching grip on the gun keeping it steady. Sweat fell into his eyes, stinging them as he tried to brush it away while continuing to fire. Roberts joined him, emptying his clip. One Japanese soldier fell with a wet thud as the disguised Harada slowed to a crooked walk before dropping to his knees, clutching his arm. Roberts checked the first man for signs of life but Garrett walked to the one on his knees. Harada didn't turn around as Garrett put his gun to Harada's head.

“You shot my soldier,” Garrett said, pushing the gun deeper into Harada’s head.

“You shot my other men. You shot Jimmy. You—you killed my friend.”

“Sir?” Roberts asked. “We’re supposed to take them back to—”

A shot silenced Roberts, and the Japanese soldier fell forward to the ground. Garrett let more sweat fall into his eyes as he pulled the trigger again. And again. And again.

“*Sir!*”

Garrett ignored the private and fired again, only to hear an empty click. Garrett hit his gun, hoping it had only jammed. *Click. Click. Click, click, click, click, click, click.* Garrett threw his empty gun to the ground and rolled Harada over with his foot. It wasn’t Harada, but an ordinary enemy soldier. Garrett kicked the soldier’s body, and then the ground, splashing up mud and water before he faced Roberts. He clenched his jaw as Roberts shrunk away from him.

“Sir?”

“Is that one dead?” Garrett asked, nodding at the other soldier.

“Y-yes, sir.”

“Then let’s go.”

* * *

“I’m going to have to ask you to spend a few days in sick bay. You understand that, don’t you?” Captain Newell leaned on his makeshift desk in the operations tent, staring, expressionless, at Garrett.

Garrett stood in front of the captain’s desk; his arms taut at his side. “Yes, sir.”

“Two incidents like that can mean a serious problem, and puts my other men at risk. I’m admitting you to the 91st Field Hospital at Sogod Bay. Our company is moving

to the bay tomorrow to join Captain Shea's men before we head west. You're staying there until you're declared fit for active duty. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir."

As Garrett packed his gear and helped strike camp, he tried to ignore the sideways glances from his squad. They had stopped openly talking in front of him and were formal with their replies when forced to answer him. Garrett threw down the rope and grabbed at the tent fabric, trying to pull it down in one jerk. His men should be blaming Harada for what happened—for forcing Garrett to protect his men so actively. The fabric collapsed with a soft sigh, and Garrett walked away to find some water for his canteen as the other soldiers looked on.

The sky was darkening by the time Garrett's company arrived at the field depot in Sogod Bay. The rain had ceased for the moment, but the soldier's uniforms still held beads of water, and the ground was littered with soupy puddles. Even though the squish and suck of the ground betrayed every footstep from several yards away, Garrett couldn't erase the feeling that they had been followed to Sogod Bay. Leaves and vines moved in the distance, eyes peered out from the bushes, and Garrett was sure he could hear the *clicks* and *snaps* from the checking of magazines and chambering of rounds.

No one else noticed. The other men continued their quiet jokes and light conversation or kept their eyes on the path. Garrett had the company stop once, about halfway into their trek, because of the footsteps in the forest. Three men ventured into the jungle to check for Japs while the rest of the unit aimed their guns and cleared the path to allow the Jeeps an easier escape down the makeshift supply road. No one was there. Garrett tried to assure Captain Newell that the enemy had only escaped and must be

nearby, waiting, but the Captain frowned, raised an eyebrow, and ordered the company forward, asking only for extra vigilance.

The Sogod Bay field depot was an active place, even at night. Doctors and nurses continually changed shifts, and supplies were transported from the bay to Jeeps, trucks, or the different hospital tents. Garrett was not able to bunk in any of the hospital tents, as they were already over capacity. Instead, he helped to pitch his unit's mobile bunk and tried to ignore the way they studied him. He knew they had been followed. The Japs had only gotten away; they were just waiting for the right time to strike. Just like New Guinea.

A light rain started up sometime in the early morning and splattered through the open tent flap onto Garrett's pants. The walking traffic outside had abated about an hour earlier, causing Garrett to look outside whenever sudden footsteps would squelch across the depot. He kept his semi-automatic in its place at his side instead of stripping down for the night, waiting for the inevitable strike from the enemy. Garrett tried to stay awake and keep watch through the open tent flaps, but he kept falling asleep—only waking up whenever his head fell forward into his chest.

* * *

Garrett's squad ran through the New Guinea jungle, firing at the backs of the Japanese soldiers until they cornered the enemy at the edge of a small clearing. The Japanese stopped running and took what cover they could, making a front before returning meager fire. Garrett advanced his line as the enemy began to fall—easy targets in the clearing. He couldn't see the enemy's faces well through their painted camouflage, but he could make out the white of their smiles. Or was it the white of their bandanas

showing from under their helmets?

* * *

The sun had yet to light up the horizon when a throng of footsteps rushed by Garrett's tent, spraying water onto his pants, and jarring him from his sleep. He jumped to his feet and ran outside the tent, catching a glimpse of the fleeing figures before they disappeared behind the surgical tent. "Japs, Japs!" Garrett said. His voice caught in his throat as he ran after the figures, stopping him from giving a clearer warning. As he ran, he could hear his men shouting behind him, waking the rest of the depot as they gathered their guns.

Garrett slid to a stop as he rounded the back of the surgical tent. A man stood in front of him a few yards away, his back to Garrett. Garrett drew his gun as the man turned around. Harada smiled and clasped his arms behind his back.

"Where are they?" Garrett asked. The other soldiers had disappeared, already infiltrating the depot.

Harada laughed, and, for a moment, looked like Captain Newell.

Garrett spun around as footsteps approached him from behind. It was the Jap soldiers. He couldn't see their faces in the dark and the rain, but he knew it was them.

"*Sergeant*," Harada said in perfect english.

Garrett turned again, gun shaking as he tried to decide where to shoot first. The Japanese soldiers were closing in around him. He couldn't decide—his strange dreams had begun to confuse him. He couldn't remember if his men had killed the New Guinea Japanese or if the Japanese had killed his men. But they had killed Jimmy. *Harada* had killed Jimmy. And they were back.

When Harada reached for the gun at his side, Garrett fired.

Garrett saw the bullet tear through Harada's shoulder before he heard another gunshot and felt a searing pain in his abdomen. As he fell to his knees, the Japanese soldiers became his men, then the Japanese again. He looked at Harada, only caring that he had finally avenged Jimmy, but saw only Captain Newell on the ground, clutching his bleeding shoulder. Garrett collapsed to the ground as the pain became numbness, and he tried to clear his increasingly blurry vision. A figure walked up next to Captain Newell.

Garrett followed the green pants and white shirt adorned with dark sashes to Harada's ashen face. As Garrett tried to focus, he saw the look of deep sorrow only a father who'd lost his child could express. And Harada looked tired; so tired. He took slow steps towards Garrett, his scuffed boots unable to displace the puddles forming in the mud, and stopped by his side. Up close, Garrett could see the tears in Harada's stained uniform and the bullet holes in his chest, legs, and forehead.

This was not the Harada Garrett remembered. Not the bloodthirsty man who had killed his friend. But then he remembered.

* * *

His squad cornered the enemy in a clearing, already knowing they would take no prisoners. They already had enough of those. The Japanese soldiers tried to fight back, but were low on ammunition and decent cover. The squad advanced, wanting to get closer shots as the enemy began to fall. He didn't object when one of his men began to purposely hit limbs to avoid a quick killing blow. Garrett couldn't help but smile at the man's enthusiasm. Only Jimmy stayed a few paces behind. He had stopped firing when the battle became one-sided.

They walked up to the bodies on the ground and shot them a few more times, and then again, perhaps to make sure they were dead. Jimmy was pale as he stared down at the battered bodies, his fingers shaking slightly as he held on to his M-16. He looked up and started to say something when a bullet passed through his helmet.

Garret followed the path of the bullet to a Japanese soldier standing a few yards away, his shaking gun still aimed at where Jimmy had been standing. The soldier's eyes traced the ground as he took in what was left of his men. His arm dropped to his side, revealing the dark sashes of a commander. Garret aimed his gun, and, with a grunt of a yell, began firing at the commander. He walked towards the commander even after he hit the ground, unable to stop firing. He stood over the body and shot in every place he could, trying to make the commander look like his hometown's famous swiss cheese.

"Sergeant, Sergeant, stop. Stop!" one of his men said.

Garrett turned but kept his gun aimed at the commander's body.

"We need to get Jimmy out of here. We need a medic," his man said.

"Why?" Garrett blinked, and tears traced their way down his face. "He's dead."

"But he's still breathing."

Garrett abandoned his revenge on the commander, and his squad carried Jimmy back to the captured Japanese base. A medic did what he could as the Jeep raced to the surgical tent on the beach. Garrett sat outside the tent as the surgery dragged on into the night.

When the surgeon finally walked out to talk to Garrett, his body was stiff and unreassuring. "I was able to stabilize the private, but he's fallen into a coma. There isn't much else I can do for him here. I'm transporting him to the Army hospital in Brisbane. I

don't know how fast he'll recover, but I can assure you his time with the Alamo Force is over."

Garret accompanied Jimmy to the B-26 taking him to Brisbane and tucked his favorite Life issue under his blanket. As Jimmy was rolled up the ramp, he opened his eyes for a moment and looked at Garrett, as if to tell him he would be all right.

* * *

Warm tears traced their way down Garrett's face as he came out of his memories, and his illusions faded away around him. Harada nodded with tired knowing, and held out his hand. Garrett smiled and accepted the offer.