

# A ROCKET FOR DIMITRIOS

Ray Nayler

Ray <https://www.raynayler.net> had his debut as a writer of science fiction in the pages of *Asimov's* in 2015 with the story "Mutability." Since then, his work has appeared in the magazine several times, as well as in *Clarkesworld*, *Lightspeed*, *F&SF*, *Nightmare*, and is upcoming in *Analog*. His story "The Ocean Between the Leaves," from the July/August 2019 issue of *Asimov's*, was selected for the *Year's Best Science Fiction, Volume 5*, edited by Neil Clarke. Ray has lived and worked abroad for almost two decades in Russia, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus. He is a Foreign Service Officer and was a Peace Corps Volunteer in Turkmenistan. Ray is currently the Cultural Affairs Officer for the U.S. Embassy in Pristina, Kosovo, where he lives with his wife, their one-year-old daughter and their two rescued street cats (one Tajik, one American). In the author's latest story, Sylvia Aldstatt—first introduced to us in "The Disintegration Loops" (November/December 2019)—now finds death and terror in Istanbul.

Now

"Just hang on, Alvin. We're going to get help."

Alvin was slumped in the passenger seat of the open-top Willys terraplane. Two thousand feet below us, the Black Sea lived up to its name: a sheet of ebony darker than the sky above, its featureless surface relieved only by the scattered flecks of night trawlers and freighters.

The bad stabilizer on the Willys kept pulling its nose down. I had both hands on the wheel and was just fighting to keep it level, glancing over at Alvin.

"Talk to me."

"Okay, I'm talking," Alvin said. In the dull yellow light of the dashboard lights I could see the pain lines at the side of his mouth.

"Where were you hit?"

"Chest. High. Left side. Can I . . . not talk for a while?"

I unfastened my seat belt and leaned over, one hand on the wheel. "I need you to buckle yourself in, Alvin. I know it's hard, but I need you to help me."

Alvin searched for the latchplate. His fingers were clumsy and slow. Finally he came up with it. I dug on the other side of the seat, found the buckle, snapped the belt closed.

"There."

"Safety first," Alvin grinned through bloody teeth.

"Such a comedian. Now I'll do mine."

Then they hit us.

I didn't see them until they were just a few meters away: a black sedan, running lights off. It clipped us high in the rear fender . . . and I was out of the terraplane, falling through space, arms outstretched, toward the black water below.

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### Days Earlier

"You travel with your own private army."

I was balancing a gimlet on the alabaster railing of the villa's balcony, looking out at the Bosphorus. Across the strait, the lights of the city's European side were strung like watchfires between the winding ribbon of black water and Belgrad Forest flowing down from the isthmus' hills. Ferries crossed the water slow as comets hanging in the sky.

I had been gazing out at this view for fifteen minutes now. Alvin was running interference, keeping the Turks attending the diplomatic reception away from me with a stream of banter, drink refills, and war stories. Alvin had played football in high school before the war—linebacker, state champion. He knew how to block. Years in the OSS had translated that footwork and stiff shoulder to subtler techniques. But somehow this one had gotten through.

I didn't turn around right away. He continued:

"During the thousand-year rule of the Byzantine Empire, a view of the Bosphorus was considered so essential to happiness it was illegal to build a home that blocked anyone's window on the strait. The Greek records are filled with lawsuits to this effect. I think it is Istanbul's greatest treasure, this view to the water from nearly everywhere."

Now I did turn around. "It's nice."

He was tall, with an old-fashioned brilliantined hairstyle that made me think of silent film stars. Like all the other men at the party, he was in coat and tails. His bowtie was as immaculate as his well-barbered face and the affected gray streak in his hair.

"As I was saying, Miss Aldstatt—you travel with your own private army."

He gestured at the two MPs taking up space in the balcony's recesses. I wondered if he knew they were just a fraction of the people keeping an eye on me.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Chief Inspector Refik Bayar."

Yeah, he knew. Chief Inspector Bayar, if the briefing from the Consulate was even half accurate, had nets everywhere sifting through the sea of information, sorting the plots and counter-plots and counter-counter-plots from Istanbul to the newly won possessions in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Transoxiana. He was the center of everything in the Istanbul Protectorate's network of informants. Our OSS attaché called him by the nickname everyone in Turkey knew him by: *Balıkçı*—"the Fisherman."

He continued: “I was hoping to get a chance to speak with you before your—performance—tomorrow.”

“Performance? Like a séance, or a magic trick?”

He shook his head. “Perhaps I have insulted you. If so, it was not intentional. My English is . . . imperfect. What I mean is that I would like to give you some background, some helpful context, before you begin to . . .” he struggled to find a word “. . . investigate Mr. Dimitrios Makropoulos.”

“With all due respect . . .” But we were interrupted by a general commotion. The U.S. ambassador’s stretch terraplane had come sweeping in over the Bosphorus, and was making a smooth half-turn in the air before beginning its descent, its landing lights playing across the villa’s marble terrace. Below, white-gloved Marines snapped to attention, unflinching as the terraplane lowered itself to the ground no more than a few meters from them.

I left my half-empty gimlet on the balcony rail and walked inside. Chief Inspector Bayar followed, but Alvin intervened, taking my arm with a disarming grin directed at the Fisherman. “I see you’ve met our national treasure,” he said. “You’ll excuse me, but I’ve got to borrow her for a minute or two. Duty calls, you know.”

“What did he want?” Alvin whispered in my ear.

“Didn’t have time to find out.”

The U.S. ambassador was a California Tech scion, one of the hundreds of beneficiaries of the boom in patents and manufacturing that had come after the government began to parcel out discoveries from the saucer crash of ’38 for research by the universities and private companies. His family was in the terraplane and anti-gravity transport end of things—hence his grand entrance in his custom flying car. It was said he had Roosevelt’s ear, too—but I doubted that: I’d had an in-briefing with the ambassador that morning, and he’d struck me as about as much puffed-up, self-important ignorance as you could cram into a suit. Mr. Roosevelt, now well into his seventh term, didn’t seem like the kind of man who would need advice from this particular species of buffoon.

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“So, you’re the girl that talks to dead people,” the ambassador had said as I came into his office that morning.

I noticed he had one of those idiotic gold Roosevelt silhouette pins in his lapel. A badge of loyalty. They weren’t required, but I was beginning to see them crop up more and more among the sycophants of the diplomatic corps.

So, you’re a puffed-up, aging boy whose daddy was smart enough to grab up the saucer patents early, I wanted to say. But I didn’t. I wasn’t feeling combative. I was feeling fragile and tired, struggling to fight off a cold caught on the transatlantic rocket flight. The flight in that tin can might have been under an hour long, but it had been long enough breathing in the germs of my fellow humans for me to come down with something, and afterward I’d spent a day in a guarded room at the Pera Palace Hotel, too miserably congested to see the sights—which had given me nothing to do but stew in my own anxious thoughts about this assignment.

“Sir, I’m a combat veteran of the Second World War and the Afterwar. I was in General Hedy Lamarr’s Technical Corps. I pilot the loops, if that’s what you mean.” Maybe that would help him sort the word “girl” out of his speech.

He didn’t even blink.

“I hear you’re the only one who can do it. Pilot the . . . the loops, as you call them. I hear everyone else who they hooked up to that machine died. That true?”

“I might not be the only one, but it’s too much of a risk for them to find out if there’s anyone else out there who can do it. They tested it on ten of us undergraduates back then, and the other nine died. That put a stop to recruiting, sure enough.”

"How long ago was that, now?"

"I've been in this business over a decade now. Signed up for a trial with the other students, back when I was on the G.I. Bill at Cal. There were lots of psychological and technical studies, and the money was okay: it would buy you a meal or two anyway."

I listened to my own voice. The throwaway tone. Very casual, as if there had been nothing to it, surviving something that had killed all the other students who took the trial with me. I tried not to think of that day at the lab—my hand shaking so badly I could barely light a cigarette, sitting under the cherry tree in the courtyard half-mad, saying my name over and over to myself while the men in white coats ran back and forth. Dead. All of them. Dead. All of them but me. And my head had hurt so bad I couldn't crawl out of bed for two days. But then Alvin had come to see me in the hospital, and offered me the opportunity of a lifetime: to go from struggling undergraduate on the G.I. Bill, trying to make my way in the world, to overpaid specialist in piloting the loops. A great offer, and all I had to risk for it was my life.

I didn't mind: I'd risked my life plenty already. At least with this offer, the pay was good.

That had been the beginning.

"Anyhow," the ambassador said, "I guess that makes you pretty valuable. But I hear you aren't OSS. Refused to join. Government service not good enough for you?" He tossed the phrase off lightly, as if he were joking, but there was an edge to it. *How can we trust someone who won't join the team?*

"I guess you've met Alvin, my handler."

"I have."

"Well, then you can see he's OSS enough for the two of us. I figure with him around there's no need for me to sign up. And anyway I was never much of a joiner."

"But you volunteered for the war. Served in General Lamarr's Technical Corps. Saw action both in the war against the Axis and the Afterwar. The fall of Berlin . . ."

I cut him off. "I was never much for standing by and watching Adolf Hitler and Hideki Tojo murder millions of people, either."

"Fair enough. And I suppose you know what's at stake here."

"What I know is you've got a corpse in a Turkish morgue by the name of Dimitrios Makropoulos. And Alvin tells me you folks think he had a line on the location of another crashed saucer."

"That's right."

"Which is why I'm here: to dig into his brain and see what I can find."

"That's right," he said. "And I don't think I need to tell you what would happen if someone else got the information first. Say, the Russians. What consequences that would have for the balance of power."

*What balance of power?* I wanted to ask. *We own the balance, and we've got the power.*

The ambassador was sweating, and it wasn't hot in the room. At first I thought he was just that kind of froggish, clammy-handed man who sweats a lot, but now I realized he was nervous—really agitated.

"We think our Turkish allies have only agreed to this—uh, interrogation—because they don't believe it will work." He had gotten up and gone to the window, looking out. "If they thought it would work, I don't think they ever would have allowed it."

"Why not?" I leaned back in my chair. "They did pretty well by us, coming in as allies in the last months of the war and then sweeping up most of their old Ottoman holdings in the Balkans, as well as expanding into the Caucasus and Transoxiana to boot. We've been good to them."

I was playing dumb, of course: everyone knows there's nothing more dangerous than an ally. You know where your enemies stand, but your allies are another thing.

Half the time you're too close-up to see what they are doing clearly. And close-up is right where someone can put a knife in your belly.

"And anyway," I said, "I heard the story of a second flying saucer is just a fairy tale. It's been floating around in the ether since the war. Sometimes it's at the bottom of the Pacific, sometimes it's on Mount Ararat along with the woodchips left over from Noah's Ark. Sometimes it's in the Himalayas along with Shangri-La and the Yeti." But if it were true, I thought—if there really were a second saucer out there—it would change everything. The tech we got off that saucer in '38 allowed us to whip the Axis and the Soviets both. Then we ganged up with the "Free German Army," which is what Patton recommissioned the remnants of Hitler's Wehrmacht as, and pushed the Russians back across their border. Not to mention helping Chiang Kai Shek wipe out the Chinese Communists.

We'd kept the world safe for democracy with that saucer tech—and turned millions of people to ash to do it. I know—I helped us do it. Now things were pretty good: Chiang Kai Shek was running most of Asia for us, with his occupying armies in Japan, and Europe was fast becoming a U.N.-run American province. You could fly your terraplane coast to coast along Beacon Chain 50 from San Francisco to Washington D.C. in twenty-four hours, then hop on a rocket at the National Launch Zone, land in Austria in an hour, and get the cancer burned out of your lungs in a Viennese clinic. Then if you were hungry, you could eat at a Howard Johnson's right across from the Opera House.

A world of opportunity, brought to you almost *gratis* by your friendly American overlords. Okay, we don't use the word "overlords"—but Hegemon sounds a bit old-fashioned, too. We just don't talk about it, if we can avoid it.

Turkey had waffled a little too long, and sure—we'd made them pay for it: in the end they had to accept the official name of "Istanbul Protectorate and Associated Territories," with a U.N. monitoring team in Istanbul to make sure they didn't get out of line. The Istanbul Protectorate's title and subject status was their Scarlet Letter—and fair enough, I thought: that's what you get for playing footsie under the table with the Nazis right up until 1943.

But the fact was Turkey, or the Istanbul Protectorate, or whatever you wanted to call it, had benefited from siding with us in the end. After all, even a friend who shows up a little late is still a friend, right? Even if he does have a bit of your enemy's lipstick on his collar. So we'd allowed them to expand into the vacuum the Soviets and the Axis left behind in the confused Eastern edge of Europe, where it tangled into Eurasia—places that were too far away from us, with politics too complicated for us to deal with. We were glad to hand it to them: it was a mess. Better them than us.

And our Security Council allies Britain and France rubber-stamped the decision. The French hesitated for about two days, just to show they weren't our puppets. Smoked a *Gauloise* and walked around being moody, I suppose. Then they caved and signed the resolution like they always did.

But another saucer—well, if the Russians found it, it would change everything. And much as I didn't like the way things were now sometimes, I knew they could get a lot worse if Marshal Zhukov got his hands on the kind of tech we had.

"What makes you think this Dimitrios knew anything about your second saucer?"

"He'd been on our radar a long time. He was at the center of a web of Balkan informants and double agents, criminal gangs, terrorist nationalist movements—the line between all of them is thin out here. He's been a part of every story surrounding the second saucer. His name just kept turning up. If anyone knew, it was him."

"Too bad he wound up bobbing around in the Bosphorus, then."

The ambassador wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. He stared out the window, not turning to look at me.

"That's where you come in, if what they say about you and this machine you operate is true."

"It's true. But it's not always possible to get the answers we are looking for."

"What do you mean?"

"It might not surprise you to know that even with alien technology, fishing around in the brain of a dead person is a tricky business. We're following neural memory pathways—what we call the 'loops'—that disintegrate as we run along them. I might get three, maybe four tries at pulling the information out of his head, maximum. Sometimes I only get one or two tries before the loops fall apart. And then there are distortions: think of your own memories—how clear are they, really? Much of the time, you'll find you don't remember things accurately at all: you just have an image in your head that might be something someone told you about something that happened to you, or that is distorted by a lie you told someone about what happened, or a false memory based on a photograph you saw of yourself. The loops are like that, only worse. These are the memories and thoughts of a dead person, falling apart as we try to glean what we can from them, and getting tangled up with my own thoughts and memories. We say the loops are 'sticky'—they pick up your own fears, your own preconceptions, and wind those up with the subject's."

I could tell he was getting more nervous: he kept opening his mouth like a fish, then closing it again. I decided to calm him down a bit: "Still, Alvin and I've solved murders with the loops, broken up spy rings, retrieved secrets. Sometimes it all comes together."

He mopped his forehead with an expensive looking silk handkerchief that didn't look like it was designed to touch human secretions. "So what you're telling me is bringing you all the way out here might have been useless. That it might have been a waste of time we don't have."

"No, Ambassador. What I'm telling you is that bringing me all the way out here might be of use. It might actually be your only chance to find out what you want to know."

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The ambassador didn't look sweaty or hopeless this evening. This was his forte: glad-handing everyone, back slapping and giving acknowledging head-tilts to acquaintances across the room. He was a dinner party creature—one of that breed of people whose confidence is a public performance—as soon as he is alone, or with just one or two other people, his personality collapses in on itself like a flan in a cupboard.

I stayed long enough after his arrival to let him pump my hand and then told Alvin I was still feeling poorly from the rocket over, and maybe he could have my armed contingent march me back to the Pera Palace so I could keep my strength up for tomorrow.

"You should come along as well," I said. "You look like you could use a little rest."

Alvin shook his head. "Still trying to get the lay of the land here. With things complicated back home, I'm having trouble keeping my factions here straight."

"Complicated?"

Alvin leaned in close enough for me to scent the lime edge of his aftershave. "Word is, she fled the country months ago. They've managed to hush it up for the time being, but the press has finally caught on. The story is about to get out, and that means all hell will break loose. And what's maybe worse is who she took with her."

"Where did she go?"

"Get some rest. You're going to need it."

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They had set the loops up in a wing of a semi-abandoned building near the shore of the Golden Horn. It looked to have once been a factory or research facility. I hadn't

slept well, and I was perhaps still feeling a little off from my cold: all morning, my mind had been full of abstract associations, runaway thoughts. As I stepped into the building my first thought was of how difficult it would be for the archaeologists of some future era to understand anything about us, these people of the twentieth century, the beings who had once lived on Earth and constructed such places, filled with such strange contraptions—iron rails in the ceilings, salt-rusted chains hanging from massive pulleys, huge enameled sinks, walls covered in cracked, clinical white tile. The cement floor bore strange oil and chemical stains.

What had been made or done here? I was contemporary, or nearly so, with the people who had built these things, and I could not even begin to guess. There were ramps outside the building that led down to the Golden Horn itself, but there was nothing nautical about the place.

In the center of the cavernous room the OSS techs had set up my Loop chair, something like a cross between a dentist's chair and a prop from some old mad scientist movie. The massive headset, like an evil version of the hair dryers the old ladies love to hang out under at the salon, was propped on its stand. Thick cables led away from the set and disappeared under a white curtain. It was the same kind of curtain you might find in a hospital room, separating patients in a ward.

Seagulls screamed outside, their voices echoing through the building's broken windows. The air was filled with the rot-salt scent of shoreline. Behind the curtain would be Dimitrios, laid out on his zinc slab, awaiting communion.

I wondered what kind of subject he would be. Would there be only one or two loops, fragments of some of the last things he saw, or would his mind be one of the rare ones, a labyrinth of memories to wander in?

Whichever it was, the sheer cost and risk of transporting the Loop Set from California, the armed guards, and the ambassador's sweaty performance in his office, all spoke to the importance of what I had been brought here to do. Looking at the white curtain with the rubber-sheathed tentacles of connecting wire winding under it, I felt suddenly afraid and helpless. I wanted to back out of there, say I needed another day to rest up. But I knew there wasn't time: Dimitrios was fading with every passing moment.

Besides the white-coated technicians milling around, there was Alvin, who had flown me here in a Willys terraplane that kept dipping its nose due to a stabilizer problem, and the Fisherman.

Chief Inspector Refik Bayar looked as immaculate in the middle of this gloomy techno-industrial barn as he had at the party the night before, though he was now dressed in a military uniform complete with polished Sam Browne belt and riding boots to the knee. As the kind of person who is constantly discovering I have lipstick on my teeth, a popped button giving folks a glimpse of my cleavage, or toilet paper on my shoe, I resent people who look like they come stamped off some assembly line at any hour of the day. They don't impress me: they just make me dislike them and their shallow fastidiousness.

"The chief inspector is here to give you some background on Dimitrios Makropoulos. He won't observe the session."

"I usually just dive right in," I said. "You know that, Alvin."

The chief inspector nodded. "Yes. I'm sorry—this was at my insistence. There are issues of Balkan politics involved that are thorny, and you may not be able to understand without context. I was briefed by your colleague on the normal procedures you follow, but usually you are operating within the context of your own country. Here you are out of your element, so to speak. I would like to be your guide, if you will allow me. To give you just a sketch of who this man was, so you can place his mind in the proper context."

"Fair enough."

He glanced at Alvin questioningly. I sighed. "Yes, I can look at the body without needing smelling salts, Chief Inspector. I've seen a thing or two." *Ashes blowing down a street in Königsberg. Russian tanks exhaling the ashes of their crews when you opened the hatches, Russian planes dropping from the sky, clouds of ashes in their cockpits. The ashes of the people of Berlin drifting in the shade of the lime trees on Unter den Linden.* Ashes I helped make. "I think I have the stomach for it."

Refrigeration bars created a cube of cold around us. In the center of this chilled space, the body was laid out on its enamel slab, naked. The flesh was slightly swollen from its time in the water, the corpse pale and purplish under the glare of the high-powered electric lamps suspended from the room's ceiling. At the body's feet was a neatly folded pile of clothing: underclothes and socks, a salt-stained serge suit that had once been blue, a garish floral tie. The man looked to be about fifty, with a neat moustache meticulously dyed black that stood out, in its absurd immaculateness, from the wreckage of the rest of him. He had a face you pass on the street a thousand times a day, and a balding head he was trying to conceal with a bad comb-over. The mortician had done him the favor of neatly smoothing his hair into place for him in death—a surprising touch of human kindness in this strange setting.

The Fisherman looked down at the corpse of Dimitrios with such raw distaste that, for a moment, it seemed as if he were going to spit on the dead man.

"The man you see on the slab before you is a professional of a kind that is far too common in this part of the world. His type is the true cause of violence and chaos in Europe and Eurasia. He was not a spy. He was not an assassin. He was not a politician. He was not a part of any mafia. No. Instead, he was the connective tissue between all of it. He was the link between all of them—the cowardly politicians, the organized crime interests, the spies, the violent fanatics. His kind is the sinew on which assassinations, political coups, and sabotage rely. He was a middleman. A broker in information and inuendo, an arranger of deals. He knew people, found things, made sure other things were not found. He never risked himself: he allowed others to take the risks. He had no allegiance to any cause: he saw allegiance and causes as pathways to what he wanted. The Serbian nationalist, the Greek heroin-smuggler, the Bolshevik, the Nazi: it was all the same for him. They had ideologies: he had self-interest, and self-interest alone. There are thousands like him: they infest this part of the world like cockroaches in a cheap hotel.

"We know little about his early days. If he is the Dimitrios we think he is, then he was found abandoned in 1909 in Larissa, Greece. Parents unknown. Mother believed Rumanian. He was adopted by a Greek family, goat herders on the Mani Peninsula, we believe. Their identity is lost. Makropoulos was likely nothing but an alias. He carried papers as a Greek subject when we found him floating—but they were forged.

"We know almost nothing of his life until he was arrested here in Istanbul for the robbery and murder of a *duenne* money lender in 1933, then released due to a lack of evidence after the fig picker that fingered him for the crime was himself found dead in the Elephant Stables Cistern. The fig picker had been garroted and then stabbed for good measure. But not by Dimitrios: he was in our custody at that time. So we had to let him go.

"And he went: he disappeared. Maybe he is the Dimitrios involved in the theft of naval documents in Zagreb for a Croat nationalist faction in 1936, but then again maybe not: that Dimitrios claimed to be a Greek from Izmir. He fit our Dimitrios' description, but who can say? And the rumor is the documents were stolen by the Croats on behalf of France — even more complicated, then. A few months after his arrest there is a violent uprising in the prison, and many of the prisoners escape. Dimitrios is among them.

“There is a drug smuggling ring in the mountains north of Thessaloniki run by a Greek named Dimitrios who is never caught. This is in 1937. Was it him? We believe so—but we cannot be sure. We don’t pick up his trail again with certainty until he is sighted by one of our agents at the Athene Palace hotel in Bucharest. There, we know it is him. Our Dimitrios. Now he’s playing the role of a Greek freighter captain, but what he is really involved in is selling Black Sea naval intelligence to the Nazis via their emissaries in Rumania. This is 1940. We have our eyes on him until 1942, when our services are” — he paused, considering his words — “compromised. We catch a glimpse, perhaps, of him again. The port town of Varna, in fascist Bulgaria. First mate of a salvage vessel. He approaches one of our double agents embedded with the Axis Bulgarian government with information he says will alter the course of the war. This is 1943. The course of the war, by then, is largely unalterable. It took you Americans a few years to crack any of the technology you found on that saucer that crashed in your Western desert, but by 1943, things were much more certain.”

*Ashes, ashes, you all fall down*, I thought. And Turkey wakes up from its semi-Fascist dreams and joins the winning team to make sure it gets a slot in the U.N. But what was Turkey up to before that?

“And then?”

“And then our double agent in Bulgaria is compromised. And shot.”

There was a long beat of silence, with only the seagulls screaming over the Golden Horn to fill it.

“That was over fifteen years ago,” Alvin said.

“Yes. Two lifetimes, for a man like Dimitrios. The war ends. He disappears. Where does he go? His world has changed—where once there was the disarray of the period between World War I and II for him to play in, now there is the Allied Occupation. Does he go East, to places still in flux? The Caucasus? Transoxiana? Mongolia? It seems too far for him. I think perhaps he just puts his head down. It could be he even becomes what he says he was—a sailor, a freighter captain, under an assumed name. Maybe he goes from playing the part to living it. Whatever it is that happens during those years, we don’t hear of his existence again until he tries to contact a double agent of ours at the Russian Consulate. But by the time we share that intelligence with you, as we are obligated to do by our U.N. protectorate status, Dimitrios Makropoulos is face down in the Bosphorus with a jellyfish in his lapel pocket.”

“What was he offering the Russians?” I asked.

The Fisherman grinned. “Your OSS boys know as well as I do. He was offering them a second flying saucer.”

“It’s preposterous, of course,” Alvin said. “But not the kind of thing we can let pass by without checking up on it.”

“By checking up,” the Fisherman said, again with that flash of white teeth, as immaculate as his shirtfront, “Mr. Greenly means dragging priceless equipment and an even more priceless woman halfway around the world to dig into a dead criminal’s brain. Surely, Mr. Greenly, you do not expect us to believe you think the existence of a second saucer ‘preposterous’ if you are willing to make those kinds of investments.”

Alvin shrugged his All-American shoulders. It was easy, with his cornhusker good looks and aw-shucks demeanor, to forget who Alvin was. To forget that the OSS had parachuted Alvin into a shattered, Fascist Yugoslavia in 1942 to help organize Serb resistance. It was hard to imagine the midnight knifings and garrotings he must carry around in the nice-guy bone structure of his skull. It’s hard to imagine a man like Alvin killing someone at all—but I had personally seen him do it, on two separate occasions, and he had not even flinched.

“I guess we just like to be thorough,” Alvin said.

The Fisherman gave a slight bow. "Indeed. As do we—especially in the maintenance of our relationship with our American allies, and in our U.N.-obligated sharing of relevant intelligence with your OSS. We consider this a sacred obligation."

He turned to me. "Ms. Aldstatt, I hope my briefing will be of some assistance in your work here." He gave a slight bow.

"I will take my leave of you, then."

"A sacred obligation," Alvin said once the chief inspector had left, "to be fulfilled only when they see fit. They waited until the Russians had murdered Dimitrios to tell us they had a line on this second flying saucer. They thought his mouth was shut for good, so it was safe to let us in on it. They had no idea we have the tech to pull information out of dead minds. You can bet if they'd known, they would have made sure his body never turned up."

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A hotel lobby. Rust-colored marble walls inlaid with gold-framed mirrors. Chairs and settees covered in raspberry plush surround heavy yellow marble pillars. Clusters of people are talking quietly. There is no band in the lobby, as in most great European hotels, so I can hear the creak of shoe leather, the hum of conversation. A man with a face like a sick greyhound is leaned in to talk to me: I note the red ribbon of a Legion of Honor in the lapel of his coat, the yellowed moustache clinging to a face made fragile with age. Another man, gray-haired and heavy eyed, with a pointed beard, is eyeing me over his Turkish coffee. He is holding a copy of the *Voelkische Beobachter*. I cannot see the date. And I cannot guess the time of year from the light in the lobby: it is all electric. There is not a window to the outside anywhere in this seasonless place.

Pointed beard says to me, leaning in conspiratorially: "You had said you wanted to meet Frau von Coler, and we have arranged it."

The loop winds immediately into another: I am in a salon, filled with gilt chairs arranged at conversational angles. A door is open to the warmth of a summer night. Before me stands a woman with hair the color of bamboo, braided and pinned flat to the back of her head like a Black Forest peasant child's. Moonstone earrings dangling from her ears rhyme with her blondness.

"I cannot tell you how happy I am that the French have declared Paris an open city. Can you imagine having to bomb the Louvre?"

Her perfume has the edge of jasmine in it, but I—Dimitrios—am more interested in the expensive German radio near the most comfortable table in the room. I have been amusing myself by devising ways in which I could steal it and have decided I could pay one of the hotel staff to do it for me.

"I am on my way out," the Frau is saying, "to attend a movie screening at the ministry. A banned French film. I do wish I could invite you, but you know how it is, darling. You are entirely too Greek for a party of Rumanians. They're bound to start asking questions. Couldn't you just give me the information now?"

I am back in the lobby. A man in the uniform of a German general is leaning into me, over his sharp nose and the *Pour le Merite* and *Ritterkraus* military decorations at his throat.

"You can bring this back to your friends, as a sign of my sincerity. Just a tidbit of information: Molotov was unhappy when he was in Berlin in November. Hitler has refused, you see, to recognize Russian claims on Turkey. The Balkans, he says, including Turkey, are a German 'zone of interest.' This has cast a certain cloud over Russian-German relations. Perhaps the presence of several German divisions in Poland and the Balkans will be enough to keep the friendship between Germany and Russia intact," his gray eyes squinted through a nest of fine wrinkles. "But somehow I fear it will not."

“And what of my information?”

He raises a glass of mineral water to his lips. “There is so little time for the speculative, Mr. Makropoulos, in the middle of a war. We have time only for the practical—and barely enough time for that. And even if the research vessel you are asking for was under a flag of convenience, there are risks some find unacceptable. Also they are asking where you came by this information and what evidence you have to back it up. Perhaps there is something you could allow me to see? A map? This might help me to convince them.”

“I’m afraid that’s not part of the bargain,” I say.

I am just a boy, tending goats on the side of a mountain. There is hardly anything here but stone and thistle and sun, but crossing that sun is a biplane tumbling, burning, through the sky. I hear the thump of the plane hitting the ground in the distance—the same sound a sack of flour makes, when tossed from a truck to the pavement.

I am sitting on the floor of a barren, whitewashed little room. A trapezoid of sun through the window lights the page where I am drawing. Now it is not a biplane: it is a rocket. And it is not falling: it is roaring upward into space.

I am in the water. On the horizon, a ship burns. I can hear myself praying.

Then suddenly I am looking at the face of Dimitrios himself.

This is a Dimitrios much younger than the man on the refrigerated slab. He is slender, with a thick head of curly black hair. The mustache that was preposterous on his corpse now seems rather dashing. He is not looking directly at me: he gazes over my shoulder, somewhat absently.

In immaculate King’s English, he says: “Groppi’s in Cairo had a splendid sort of decadence. Morning coffees and éclairs among the silver-spotted, ancient mirrors. The women in their expensive furs, and the men eying one another’s chromium cars. Cairo. A city as old and still as the desert itself. It seemed as if nothing could happen there. The war would never truly start. We blamed the light: the flat white desert light made everything unreal.”

I turn in my seat. The Cairo café is filled with British soldiers chatting over plates delicate and yellowed as slivers of bone.

“They thought I would be useful to them, perhaps. And that was enough. I imagine their intelligence services were stringing along thousands of informants, in those days. Everyone was buying and selling information. The market was flush with it. But this war—it had been declared, but what of that? Still there was no fighting. It was all theory. All a game. The phony war, they would later call it. Hitler and Stalin had divided Poland between them, yes, but what of that? Who cared about the Poles, in the end—who cared enough to die for them?”

“In England they ran advertisements in the paper: ‘At the Royal Victoria Hotel at St. Leonard’s on the Sea, the ballroom and the toilets have been made gas and splinter-proof.’”

He took a sip of his coffee, and now his eyes found mine. (*Mine? What eyes were mine? I was supposed to be him, here in the tangles of his mind . . . what was happening?*) “Of course, in Finland the wolves were already eating well that year. But they invited me to England to tell them my story. It was another world, there: Everyone seemed to be determined to get in one more set of tennis before the storm descended. Cricket on a village pitch. Smoke rising not from burning huts, but chimneys. England, behind her sea barrier, smugly content.”

He took a bite of his éclair. I could even hear the clatter of silverware on plates and tables in the café, the hum of conversation. Someone, in that dead man’s mind, laughed at a clever joke.

“They invited me, and they listened, and they nodded and considered. Then they sent me away. Theoretical. Impractical. No proof. The same things the Nazis would

say to me later, in Bucharest. The Brits smuggled me out by merchant ship. Dropped me in Athens. My contact there was a good man and kind to me. I think he believed me: I remember that last day—at the Acropolis, rain streaming from shattered eaves. We had our waterproofs on, of course, and good rubber boots, very English. Very practical. We were quite drunk on *raki*, but I got him back to his hotel all right. I remember his last words to me. He was insensibly drunk, sitting on the edge of his bed as I towed his hair dry:

“Tomorrow, Dimitrios,” he said, “I’m almost sure, if it stops raining, our war will begin.”

\* \* \*

“What else?” Alvin asked. We were sitting in a couple of pseudo-antique chairs in the salon of my room at the Pera Palace. Along with his team, Alvin had meticulously swept the room for bugs. “Tell me exactly what else he said.”

I closed my eyes. “He said, ‘I told them exactly where it was, as had been told to me. As had been shown to me on a map. The wreck had been discovered by a French ship exploring along the Rumanian coast with a Rouquayrol-Denayrouze diving apparatus in 1934. They sketched pictures of it but didn’t know what it was. The captain kept the sketch. I bought it and the map from him in Trabzon in 1939 for a hot meal. He hadn’t put two and two together, but I had: I used to read the stories when I was a boy, reprinted in Greek from the American magazines. The rockets and the ray guns. It was an  $\pi$  —a flying saucer.”

“There has to be more,” Alvin said. “What else did he tell you?”

“Then he smiled across the table at me and said, ‘Come visit me again sometime.’ And snapped his fingers. The loop broke, and I was out.”

Alvin shook his head. “This isn’t the way the loops are supposed to work.”

“No, it isn’t. I’ve never had a conversation with a dead person in the loops before: I am supposed to *be* them, reliving their lives. But this isn’t that: Dimitrios is somehow . . . there. Speaking to me directly.”

“It’s impossible.”

“You know as well as I do we don’t really know the first thing about how the loops are supposed to work. We don’t understand what we’re doing with this tech: we just know the uses it has for us. But you’re right: I’ve never experienced anything like it. Not only are there loops within loops—a whole maze of them inside his head—but somehow he *knows I’m there*. He’s telling me his story himself. And he knocked me out of his own head.”

“Does your head hurt?”

I shrugged. “It always does, after a loop session. But it doesn’t hurt more than when I think about how I have to defend my doctoral dissertation to Professor Freud once we’re back in California.”

“You’re finished with your dissertation?”

“Mostly. Do you think if I was a doctor, our ambassador here would hesitate before calling me ‘girl?’”

Alvin shook his head. “Probably not.”

“I didn’t think so. Look, I’ll take another shot at it tomorrow. For now what I need most is a drink at the hotel bar, some food in my stomach, and a good night’s sleep.”

\* \* \*

I got the first two on the list (four of the first one), but in the middle of the night I found myself bolt upright, staring into the dark in terror, trying to will my eyes to adjust to the darkness faster.

Once they had, the fear got worse: a figure stood in the middle of the room. There was an icy chill in the air, and the ghost of a breeze across my face although I knew the balcony doors, now open, had been closed when I went to sleep.

“Do not be alarmed,” the figure said. “Do not call out to the guards in the hall.” There was a strange modulation to its voice that drained it of inflection. “We simply need to speak, you and I. You may reach over and turn on your lamp.”

I did so. It was hard to make my hand move: fear had locked my muscles. The bedside lamp cast a dim parchment glow into the room.

The person was in a sort of fur-lined jumpsuit, something like a bomber crew’s suit, with a thick belt crowded with canvas and leather pouches that all seemed wired together. I could make out that the figure was a woman. But above the collar, the face was a blur—like the play of sunlight on the eddies of a rocky stream, or leaves shuddering in a breeze. Colors writhed. There was no face. I had to clap my hand over my mouth to stifle the scream that tried to push its way out.

The figure put a gloved hand up.

“It’s just a device. A way of disguising one’s identity. We call it an *abglanz*. It changes the voice, as well.”

“It’s . . . it’s a bit disconcerting.”

“Yes,” the strangely flattened voice said. “I agree. But precautions are necessary. Now . . . I need you to listen to me. Please.”

Half of my mind was thinking of the disintegration pistol in my nightstand. The other half was listening.

“All right.”

“We know what you are looking for. And we’d like to ask you . . . very politely, you see . . . not to find it.”

“You mean—not to do my job. Not to do what I came here for.”

“No—we think you *should* continue to do your job. You should gather as much information from Dimitrios as you can. But in the end, you should pretend to fail.”

“Who is this ‘we’? . . . Maybe you’d like to tell me a bit more about just why I should do something like that for someone who won’t even show me their face.”

The figure was still for a moment. Then they brought a hand up and tapped something at their collar, and the blur streamed away.

“You’re right,” Eleanor Roosevelt said. “This is no way to have a conversation.”

She was wearing a tight-fitting black rubber hood over her head, covering her hair, and pilot’s goggles pushed up on her forehead. Her face was pale, the cheeks red as if windburned. The goggles had left red indentations on her cheekbones and circles around her eyes. She sat on the edge of the bed.

“Anyway, I came here personally, to have a talk with you woman to woman, and then I try to do it through that damned device. What was I thinking? This is better—face to face.”

Once I got over the shock, I said: “Everybody is looking for you. They say FDR didn’t leave the White House for a month, in grief.”

“I’d like to think it was grief, but I think anger is more like it. When I finally left, I was running for my life.”

“Surely FDR would never hurt you.”

Mrs. Roosevelt smiled sadly at me. “I hope you are right. But regardless, there are men around him who are very determined to hurt me. I’m not sure how much he would be able to do to stop them—or if he would even try, at this point. There is so much bitterness between us now. Even before I decided to leave—for years before, it was clear that Franklin and I had grown apart, built too much scar tissue up over the years. Especially since the Japanese internment. I fought hard against him over that. And I had to fight him more and more, over everything afterward: the suppressions at Manzanar, the way he tried to put down the Rosie Riots, when women just wanted to keep the jobs they had earned, the treatment of our former allies the Russians in the Afterwar, and now this trumped up trial of Martin Luther King, Jr.”

"But he blew up a *church*."

"Dear, there's so much you don't understand. So much is going on behind the curtains of power in Washington. Our country . . ." She paused, considering. She ran the palm of her hand over the fine Pera Palace sheets, the densest silk I'd ever slept on. "Our country, ever since the crash of that saucer in '38, has been in danger. Month by month, year by year, it has fallen further and further under the control of paranoid men. They did not start out that way: they started out as practical people, who aimed to use what we found to help stop the Nazis and the Japanese Empire from destroying our world. And they did that: we swept them away. And that gave these men even more power. One would think that our power in the world, our defeat of the evil of the Nazis and the Japanese Empire, would have given us comfort, made us secure, made us determined to build a world where everyone can live in peace. But that isn't what power does. It didn't make us feel more secure. Instead, it has made us all feel more and more paranoid. And most especially, it has made the men who hold the power more paranoid. Once you have power—unstoppable power, such as our country was given, such as they have, you become afraid to lose it. You become certain that anyone *else* who wields it will do it wrong—that only *you* can lead the way. And you begin to rot, inside. I've seen it, eating away at our country." She paused and looked at me. "And eating away at my husband."

I thought of FDR's comforting voice in his fireside chats every week. He didn't seem like a man being eaten away inside by power. He seemed like a man in perfect control.

"What's the alternative? Letting the Russians take over? We saw what they did in Poland. Or letting Germany loose again?"

"That's just it," she said. "There are so many *more* alternatives than that. But we have stopped being able to see other ways of going about things. Fear is a tunnel. Anyone knows this who has been afraid: your peripheral vision shrinks to only what is in front of you, and what is in front of you becomes warped, exaggerated."

Her words brought me back to places I didn't want to go—striding across Operation Overlord beaches melted to glass in which you could see the skeletons of Nazi defenders trapped like flies in amber. Ashes blowing through the Tiergarten.

As if she could sense the images in my head, Eleanor said: "And the things we have done eat away at us. Winning, too, has a terrible cost. It is paid by the soul."

"Yes. Yes. It has a terrible cost," I said. "Every veteran knows that."

"I'm not here to threaten you, Sylvia. Or to frighten you into doing what we ask. I'm appealing to your better nature. What we ask is that, whatever you find in Dimitrios' mind, you tell the OSS you found nothing. That there is no saucer. That Dimitrios was lying: the saucer was never there."

"And then tell you where it is so you can hand it over to the Russians? As much as I might hate some of the things that are going on in America, I still love my country," I said. "And I believe that, even though we have made mistakes, we are good. Good *enough*, anyway. There isn't anyone better out there."

Eleanor Roosevelt stood up. She was in her mid-seventies but moved like a woman of no more than fifty. "No. No. That isn't what I am asking. I don't want you to give up the secrets you find. I want you to tell us nothing at all. We're not looking for the saucer, and the last thing we would want is for the Russians to find it. You are right: they would do the same things with the technology that the Americans have done, only worse. Power would never be safe in Zhukov's hands. Especially after what we did to them. We want peace, not yet another war. But you should know . . ." she was moving to the French doors open on the balcony.

Like a sleepwalker, I stood up and followed her, sensing that there was something she was about to show me. ". . . The Russians are looking for the saucer as well, and

every day you stay here you put your life in jeopardy.”

“There isn’t much I can do about that,” I said. “And the Russians are everywhere anyway. They tried to kill me in my own house a few years ago, all the way out in California.”

“I know.” Eleanor walked through the French doors onto the balcony, and her voice fell to a whisper. “But here in the Istanbul Protectorate, even a friend like Alvin may not be able to save you.”

She clasped my hands in her gloved ones. I could feel the warmth of her, even through the lined leather. I expected to see a terraplane waiting over the balcony rail, idling silently. But the streets and courtyards were empty. The car that must have brought her there was nowhere to be seen.

“Think on what I said, Sylvia. What would we do with more power? How would we use it? What would it do to us?”

And with that, her feet left the ground, and she floated into the sky.

I had to clap my hand over my mouth to contain a gasp that certainly would have woken every sleeper on that side of the building. Two floors above me, she turned and arced up into the night sky, briefly crossing an ascending Moon before I lost sight of her.

\* \* \*

“When you read histories about the fall of countries and empires, there is always some moment historians see—some moment when a country crosses a threshold, a point of no return, and begins its decline. But how would we see such a thing? How would we know if it had already happened or not? What would be the signs we were already living inside a doomed system? Could we see them at all?”

We were in Alvin’s room, in the little seating nook, with a Turkish breakfast laid out in front of us of olives, tomatoes, fresh bread, cheese, jam, honey, butter, hard-boiled eggs, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and their powerful coffee sludge accented slightly with cardamom. But Alvin wasn’t eating: on his placemat was a listening device he had found in his nightstand: a contraption that looked like a chromium, microphone-headed parasite. He was autopsying it with a miniature screwdriver. Now he looked up at me.

“Did you sleep all right, Sylvia?”

“I slept just fine.”

He gave me that disarming, cornhusker-at-a-weenie-roast grin of his. “Because it sounds like you were having some weird dreams. Personally, I try to never dream of politics: too complicated. Gives me heartburn.”

“I slept just fine, I said. When was the last time you swept my room for listening devices?”

“Just before you turned in. You’re clean. I found this one here in my room at around the same time.”

“Russian?”

“Can’t tell. I’ve never quite seen anything like it. I’ll have to send it to the girls and boys back at the lab.”

“Then stop fiddling with it and eat your breakfast. When do we head over?”

Alvin shrugged. “Half an hour or so. The Fisherman is going to give us a ride. I imagine it’s another opportunity for him to try to weasel information from us, but at least it means we won’t have to drive that government-issued jalopy, so I accepted.”

I thought of Eleanor Roosevelt, floating effortlessly off the balcony. *Or we could just fly there under our own power. What other technology is being kept from me?*

Alvin tossed the bug onto his neatly made bed. *Who makes their own bed in hotel rooms?* “Okay,” he said, taking a sip of his orange juice and tearing off a hunk of

bread, which he proceeded to slather with butter and honey, "I'll bite. You were talking about points of no return, thresholds. Is there a point at which a country has gone too far in one direction to turn back? My answer is, I don't think it works like that. I think those moments only exist in retrospect. They're made up by historians who are trying to make it all make sense so they can teach it or write a book about it. I think the truth is, none of it makes sense at all. And we all just muddle along until some catastrophe comes along and changes the order of things. Until that happens, it's up to people to do what they can to do the right thing."

"You think we're doing the right thing?"

"For now? We're doing the best we can."

\* \* \*

I am just a boy, tending goats on the side of a mountain. There is nothing here but stone and thistle and sun, but crossing that sun is a biplane tumbling, burning, through the sky. I hear the thump of the plane hitting the ground in the distance—the same sound a sack of flour makes, tossed from a truck to the pavement.

I want to run to where I saw the plane go down. I want to see what has happened, what has intruded into my little world, but I know I cannot: I must tend the goats. If something happens to them, it will be my fault.

I am trapped in my world—this rocky peninsula, these goats, the rocks and sun and thistles. I will never get out of here.

Groppi's again. Cairo: outside, a muezzin calls the faithful. Spotted sunlight on the decaying mirrors and gold leaf. The shepherd boy sits across from me, in his much-mended sweater, a smear of éclair cream at the side of his mouth.

"I often wondered," he says, "What would have happened to me if it were not for that plane. You see, after that moment, nothing was the same. I had never fully known there was a world beyond my world, beyond the rocks, the sun and the goats, my adopted parents and the whitewashed village houses. Then the plane came, tearing a hole in the sky. And from that moment, I knew I could leave that place. I knew I could leave, and I would do anything at all to do it. It was as if I had seen Icarus fall from the air, and in that moment realized there are gods in the world, just beyond the horizon—and heroes, and great deeds. Through the hole the plane tore in my world, I saw a greater world."

Now he was the young man Dimitrios, slender, with his thick head of curly black hair and the dashing, carefully trimmed moustache. He gazed over my shoulder with eyes focused on the track of his own past. "It would not be long before I managed to stow away on a grain ship. And not much longer before I killed my first man, in Athens, and fled to Turkey."

Groppi's is beginning to collapse. Yesterday there were British officers eating meals, chatting with one another. Now some of the men no longer have faces you can focus on. In the spotted mirrors the tables are warped and empty. I look down at the floor—it is translucent: sand melted to glass. The skeletons of diners are trapped inside it, coffee cups raised halfway to their death's-head grins.

"Pay attention!" Dimitrios slams his fist on the table.

"Please," I say, "Just tell me where the saucer is. There isn't time."

"I have a story to tell!"

"I want to listen, Dimitrios. I do. But we don't have time."

Outside, a hundred biplanes tumble, burning, through the Cairo sky.

*We blamed the light: the flat white desert light made everything unreal.*

\* \* \*

That morning, as we arced above the Bosphorus in the Fisherman's touring terraplane, he'd pointed out building cranes along the harbors of Karakoy. "We are a city of the past, but we are building a future here as well. It is not easy. Every shovel-load

of earth we overturn here is filled with history: fragments of Greek amphorae and Roman swords, the anchor stones of Byzantine ships, slivered goblets of Venetian glass, Ottoman prayer beads. We must be cautious. We must collect these bits of the past for the museums. But we are making progress, despite this. We are building a future. In Karakoy and along the hills of Beyoglu we are constructing an institute to rival any in the world. A city within the city, a center of research and knowledge. Education, you see, will be our way out. We have stagnated too long, trapped on the edge of Europe, waiting at the door. We have much to do to catch up with you. But we will catch up.

“For our people, even the sight of a terraplane—something you now take for granted as just basic transportation—is still something to wonder at. There are only a few here, all imported. We build nothing of the kind ourselves. The people travel like peasants, still, on the ground by foot, or by ferry and noisy streetcar. But we have a vision of Istanbul as the center of the world again, as it once was.”

We had expected the Fisherman to pry, but he hardly seemed interested. He spoke instead of his city’s future as the terraplane made its final rotation for landing. “I am an Istanbuli, you see: this city has been my family’s home for as long as anyone can remember. It is her blood that runs in my veins—Turkish, Roman, Greek. Perhaps even Thracian. You see the flag?”

We were stepping from the car. Seagulls hovered in an offshore wind over the dock, as if suspended by wires, black eyes staring. The crimson flag with its crescent moon and star flapped from a pole in front of the warehouse, below the blue rectangle of the United Nations. “They say the star and moon emblem on our flag is a Muslim symbol, or they say it is a vision of Osman, but they are wrong. The crescent moon and star were printed on the first coins minted in Greek Byzantium. The symbol belongs to Hecate, the goddess of crossroads and entranceways. She was protectress of this city, the crossroads of the world, the entrance to the Black Sea. She held a torch in each hand to push back the darkness. She was also the goddess of witchcraft and sorcery, and of the ghosts of the dead.”

He nodded to me. The wind had blown loose several locks of his brilliantined hair, and they stood up, sharp as the quills of a porcupine. “Appropriate to your task here, yes? Hecate will watch over you in your work, if you make her an offering. Every day my countrymen worship her moon and star, thinking our flag is a symbol of something it is not. But we true Istanbulis know: Hecate protects the city still, and every Istanbul street is her shrine.”

All I could think of was Eleanor Roosevelt’s silhouette drifting across the moon. If that wasn’t witchcraft, I don’t know what would qualify.

\* \* \*

“Nobody ever listened. And that is why they never found it.” Dimitrios scowls. Groppi’s is gone: we are on the deck of a ship, rolling heavily in a storm. “And now you don’t listen.”

“No. I want to. I want to listen, Dimitrios.”

He leans over the rail, and points:

“If you look closely, you can see it. There. Look *into* the water. Not far beneath the surface.”

And I do see it: a darker oval, distorted by the waves, like the shadow of a cloud on the sea.

“They thought it was just another shipwreck. And it is—but this ship has crossed an ocean vaster than any other.”

I turn to his rain-lashed face. I want to ask him where we are. The coordinates. Latitude and longitude. Are we near the shore? We must be. I want to look out for some sort of landmark. But I do not. I look at his face. He is looking at mine.

"They put the knife in my back. I never heard them. I was on the dock, looking out on the water of the Bosphorus. There was a wind, and a bit of rain carried in it."

"Who? Who did it?"

"I never saw," he says. This Dimitrios is older—not quite as old as the man on the slab, but closing in on his own death. I can see every detail of his skin, roughened by his time as a boy among the thistles and stone, tending the goats of his adopted family. Skin made porous by a thousand nights blurred by ouzo and hashish in the *rembetiko* dens of Athens and Thessaloniki. There is a scar on his eyelid, a nick that creates a gap in his dark eyelashes where they never grew again. I can see the droplets of spray on his cheeks, and the piebald stubble left by a razor drawn unevenly across his jaw. Behind him, a thousand biplanes are twisting slowly through a featureless, gunmetal sky. Or are they rockets? Yes. They are rockets.

*A trapezoid of sun through the window lights the page where I am drawing. Now it is not a biplane: it is a rocket. And it is not falling: it is roaring upward into space.*

We are running out of time. "I felt the knife," he says. "I felt him working it from side to side. A professional, making sure he found something vital. And then I was in the water."

"Who were you there to meet?"

He looks up at the sky. "I see them too—the rockets. Tearing holes in what is left of this world. You want to tell me we don't have much time. You want to hurry me along. Nobody will ever hear my story."

"The loops are beginning to collapse," I say. "They decay, like magnetic tape played too many times. They distort, flake, and fragment. It all falls apart. We don't understand this technology that allows me to be here with you—we've just gleaned enough to use it. But I know I don't have long to speak to you."

"I know," says Dimitrios. "I know what I am. A dead man. I know my Virgil: '*This is the realm of shadows, sleep and drowsy night.*' I know. '*The tides hold me now, and the stormwinds roll my body down the shore.*' It was one of the only books on the shelf of my family's home. I read it so many times. I know the kingdom of the dead when I see it."

He looked up at the sky. "But I can hold them back a bit, perhaps. Now that someone is listening at last. Come tomorrow."

"There may not be a tomorrow," I say. "Sometimes . . ."

"No. Come tomorrow. I will be here, waiting for you."

\* \* \*

*"So it is with grief in my heart and a sense of deep, personal anguish that I must come before you, the American people, tonight. I struggled a long time in considering whether to speak of these things. I battled with myself. I am, as you know, a deeply private man. And perhaps all men are private. There is an impulse in any man to keep his personal woes to himself: to nurse them alone, in the dark, where they cannot be seen. I, too, feel this impulse to hold my pain close, to nurse it alone behind a locked door. I still feel it. Yet I cannot obey it. This is the burden of public life: a burden I have never felt quite so close to my heart as I do now. I have a duty to you. I must keep always before me the knowledge of the position I have been entrusted with by you—a position of great power, yes, but of even greater responsibility. It is a responsibility not only to lead, but to protect."*

In my hotel room, Alvin was leaning against the fancy Pera Palace wallpaper with a highball glass in his hand. I was laid out on the bed, head wrapped in a cold towel. President Roosevelt's voice on the radio had an intimacy to it, as it always did, an immediacy that made it feel as if he was in the room with us, there in Istanbul, speaking to us and us alone.

*“One of the things I have a responsibility to protect you from is rumor, and the panic that it brings. And so I come to you today, and lay before you the details of my personal grief, and our national grief. Eleanor Roosevelt, my wife and the closest person to my heart, my companion of decades, has betrayed me. In doing so, she has betrayed us all. She has fled the country to an undisclosed location, taking with her a handful of others who have lost their way. These are people who have lost faith in our nation, and I fear they now seek to undermine and destroy what has been built with the labor of millions.”*

I tried to sit up, but that just made it seem as if the vibrations in my skull would cause it to shatter. I lay still.

*“I must be as honest with you—the nation that placed its faith in me—as I can. This group includes General Hedy Lamarr and others who were close to the top echelons of the military and other structures of our state. Moreover, they did not leave empty handed, but instead stole secrets, taking with them technology that, in the wrong hands, presents dangers even to the security of our nation.”*

Alvin was gazing into his highball glass, squinting at the ice as if he could scry the future from its patterns.

*“I know what it is to doubt. I know what it is to be shaken by history, and by the terrible duties of office. I know the sacrifices we must make in the face of necessity, just as millions of my countrymen know those sacrifices and the scars they can leave on the soul. But unlike Mrs. Roosevelt and her fellow travelers, I have not lost faith in America. We are going to win. We will, and must, prevail over the remaining evils in this world, just as we fought the three evils of Nazism, Communism, and Imperialism, barely distinguishable from one another in their desires to sink mankind into a pit of subservience to totalitarian masters.*

*“We must remain vigilant. We must remain united as never before. We must remain determined in our resolve to see a better world, where the only rule is that of the law, and only democracy decides the fate of our fellow man.*

*“These dragons we have fought and are still fighting never die: when their heads are struck off, they sink underground. There, they wind their poisonous roots wherever there are men and women who seek to exploit their fellow human beings.*

*“For this reason, we must dig even in our own soil, searching for the poisonous roots of exploitation and fear, destroying them before their fruits see the sun. Therefore, it is with a heavy heart that I proclaim the following: Wherever Eleanor Roosevelt and her cabal of traitors are in the world, they will not be safe. There will be no shelter for them, or for anyone who seeks to damage or destroy these United States. Any ally who gives them safe harbor will at once become an enemy. Any enemy who seeks to use them against us will face the full wrath of our United States.*

*“I know that, wherever they are, they will be listening to these words. I call upon them to return to our shores and face the justice of our courts. They have no other choice: if they remain abroad, it is not the justice of our legal institutions they will face, but rather the full weight of American power, determined to protect what we have built at great sacrifice in lives and treasure.”*

Alvin shut the radio off. “How is your head? Any better?”

“Not after that.”

“I’ll get you another cold towel.”

“Sounds good. While you are at it, would you mind fixing the general trajectory of our nation?”

I heard Alvin scoff in the bathroom, even over the sound of water running in the sink. He came out and set to work unwrapping the cold towel on my head and replacing it with a new one, with all the care of a nurse in a field hospital.

“That seems a bit above my rank and pay grade. How about instead, I try to take

care of the things I can take care of. Like you." He checked my pulse. "Your heart is steady, Sylvia, but I'm worried about you: the loops are hard on you. I think you should take a few days off, get some rest."

"You know I can't do that. There won't be anything left of Dimitrios in a few days. As it is, there may not be anything left of him tomorrow."

"I know it," Alvin said. "But I want you to know that it's all right to call this off. It's all right not to go back in."

"Is the OSS worried about breaking its toy? I'm sure if you ran enough tests you could find another pilot for the loops. I'm just a contractor, after all."

Maybe Alvin's face reddened slightly, or maybe it was just my imagination: even after years of working together, his emotions were difficult for me to gauge: they were like shadows under water—I could only sense the vaguest outline of a form, without having the slightest idea what it was. Like the saucer beneath the surface of the Black Sea—a shape anyone could see if they looked, but which meant nothing unless you knew what it was.

"You might be 'just a contractor' since you refused our invitation to join up, but you're my contractor, and I'm concerned about your well-being."

"Alvin, I bet in a past life you were an excellent lion tamer in the circus. I bet you went around after the show and petted all your kitties and made sure they were well fed and brushed their manes and the furry little tufts on their tails and everything."

"You say the darnedest things, Sylvia. Have you asked Professor Freud for a few private sessions, not related to your thesis?"

"Very funny. Did you sweep my cage for bugs like a good little boy?"

"It's all neat and tidy."

"Then go on back to your place. Your lion needs its rest. Big performance tomorrow."

After Alvin retreated I lay in the dark with my thoughts loosed around me: A tangle of impressions from that day's loop session, knotted up with my regrets about the way I treated Alvin. He was the closest thing I had to a friend in the world, but I wanted to slap his face all the time, to scream at him. He seemed, thinking of him there in the dark, to represent everything I hated about the OSS: this idiotic, lock-step patriotism that wouldn't allow them to see our country was coming apart around us.

But was there something I wasn't seeing? Was he holding something back from me? If there was, he hid it too well behind his mask of stoicism. Alvin kept everything locked away inside. Was it a skill he'd learned in Nebraska, on the football field? Or later, in Yugoslavia?

Dimitrios. Dimitrios. The informant, the rake, the man-of-the-world come up with a will and a knife from the dockside *rembetiko* bars of Piraeus. The curly haired, handsome murderer with his dashing moustache, who inside was just a goatherd from a land of stone and thistle. Who now was just a broken, middle-aged man with a combover and a dyed moustache, loose with flab, dead on an enamel table. Dimitrios of many faces.

For years, nobody had listened to him. Why had they started listening now? And why not just pay him for his information and be done with it? Who had killed him, and why? And why kill him in such a way others would find out about it? There were ways to do it without sending a message—to make a man disappear.

*Like we made the Berliners disappear . . .*

Stop.

*Like we made the Red Army disappear . . .*

Stop.

*Like we made everyone in Tokyo disappear . . .*

Stop stop stop.

Finally I had to turn on the light. That voice rarely came to me in the light. Rarely.

I got up, brushed my teeth again, paced the floor.

*Like we made the Chinese Communists disappear . . .*

Stop.

I went out onto the balcony. My head felt better in the cool misty air. The slight tang of salt helped, the moan of a foghorn out on the water pulled my mind elsewhere.

"I need a drink," I said to nobody.

Maybe I thought Eleanor Roosevelt would float down out of the sky and bring me one.

She didn't.

I looked over the balcony rail. For a moment, the street below was translucent: sand melted to glass. Istanbul's history floated inside it like meat in aspic: fragments of Greek and Roman columns, the prow of a Venetian ship, cannonballs and helmets. And the skeletons of a thousand years.

I shook my head. That made the images go away, but started the pain, left over from the loop session, back up.

I had just decided to go down to the bar and have that drink I needed when it happened.

Even later, I would find it difficult to describe: it was as if time . . . smeared. As if for a moment everything lengthened in duration, then suddenly shifted to a quickness beyond comprehension. There was a flash of light. This was combined with a concussive wave—a thick layer of air, as if the molecules had suddenly drawn close, changing state to something near liquid. The wave pulled me up almost to the level of the balcony rail, and then slammed me against the wall of the hotel.

\* \* \*

When I came to, Alvin was crouched over me, repeatedly snapping his fingers in front of my face.

"Please stop doing that."

"Good, you're awake. Can you move your hands and feet? Try for me."

"Seems I can."

"Can you stand? We need to go."

"Where?"

"To the consulate. We're gathering there. They've barricaded the street. There's been an attack."

"On us?"

Alvin was leading me into the room, steadying me with an arm around my waist. My head hurt a bit, but otherwise I seemed to be all right. Then I saw the Fisherman, standing in the middle of the room. His hair was tousled, as if he had just gotten out of bed or been in a fight. His tie was askew, and his coat was torn at the shoulder seam.

"No," he said. "On us."

"What?"

"An explosion. In Karakoy near the docks."

"Who . . ."

"We aren't sure yet. But I have been tasked with getting you to your consulate. That is my priority. Please come with me."

I glanced at Alvin. He nodded.

Outside, the street glittered with shattered glass. Two Turks in business suits holding submachine guns of the prewar type scanned the street.

All around us, dogs were barking and howling. The Istanbul night was full of their voices, as if the explosion had transformed half the city's inhabitants into canines.

"Dogs are Hecate's sacred animal," the Fisherman said. "Perhaps they have awoken to protect their city."

The submachine gun-toting guards flanked us as we made the short walk from the Pera Palace to the U.S. Consulate. Besides the cacophony of dogs and the shattered glass under our shoes, the street was silent. Faces half-hidden by curtains watched our progress from behind the cracked glass of their windows. At one point one of our guards fired his gun into the air in warning to someone I did not see. I had forgotten how deafening one of those things was up close.

The consulate's steps and street level windows were being sandbagged by a squad of GIs. Guards with the latest iteration of the death-ray long-gun watched the street. The building blazed with light and activity. Searchlights on the roof prowled the neighborhood's façades. I watched as a Willys carved an arc toward the rooftop-landing pad. Two armored vans blocked road access from either direction.

"I'll leave you here," the Fisherman said. "And wish you well. It looks like you are in capable hands, and I have much to attend to."

As the Fisherman strode off with his heavies, an OSS clerk came up to Alvin and muttered something, leaning in close. All I heard was "asset."

Alvin turned to me. "I'm sorry about all of this, Sylvia. I want to say that in advance. But we need you right now. And it looks like it's going to be a long night."

"And me in my carcoat and my worst dress, without any lipstick. I feel so under-dressed."

"Be a good soldier."

"Contractor, you mean."

"Be a good *mercenary* soldier, then."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that. I wouldn't mind having that one on my calling card."

\* \* \*

Dimitrios' body was laid out on a sheet-covered table that had been manhandled in from somewhere and placed squarely in the middle of the room. It was the same room where I'd met with the ambassador a few days before. Its formal, fake-antique velvet-and-gilt furniture had been shoved aside. Steel shutters blanked the windows.

They had brought in the refrigerator bars as well: the place was an icebox, just a few degrees above freezing. The techs had Dimitrios wired up and ready. His carefully trimmed and dyed moustache peeked absurdly out from underneath the loop apparatus. A second sheet mercifully covered the lower half of his body.

My own apparatus was on its stand, but they hadn't brought my chair: instead, they had one of the silly Louis Qinzé chairs set up for me.

People were moving in and out of the room from other parts of the building—diplomats in rumpled suits, GIs and OSS khakis, until Alvin said, "Shut that door and post a guard. Nobody comes in."

"But the ambassador . . ." Someone protested from the corridor.

"Especially not that jackass." Alvin slammed the door shut himself.

"That was out of character."

"It's been a long day." Alvin clapped his hands to get the techs' attention. "I need all of you out of here for a few minutes. Go wait in the corridor. I'll get you when we're ready to start."

One they were gone he pulled a chair up next to mine. He still seemed mostly composed, but I could see blotches of reddened skin creeping above his collar, and I knew if I took his pulse it would be racing. "Look, Sylvia—things here are falling apart. That explosion in Karakoy—we don't know what it was, or who did it. The Russians? Maybe. Serbian or Albanian nationalists? Also a possibility. But there is more going on. The relationship between the United States and Turkey is fraying as well: FDR thinks the Turks are harboring Mrs. Roosevelt and the group of scientists and military who left with her."

"What does the OSS think?"

“We think they may be right. And that changes things. We think we’re not just dealing with the Russians as adversaries anymore: we think the Istanbul Protectorate is after that tech as well.”

“If it exists.”

Alvin nodded. “Yes. If it exists. If it exists, it’s going to throw everything out of balance, no matter who gets it. If the Russians get hold of it, sooner or later it’ll be war again. If the Protectorate gets a hold of it, it’s anybody’s guess what they’ll do.”

*And if we get hold of it? And it makes us twice as powerful as we are? What then? What does that do to the balance?*

“Maybe the Turks will do something good with it,” I suggested.

Alvin looked at me as if I had said, “Maybe dragonflies are inventing a cure for the common cold in a secret flying laboratory.”

He blinked. “I never know when you’re joking.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Look—what I’m saying is: I don’t think we are going to be safe here much longer. We stole Dimitrios’ body, and the Turks are going to be furious when they find out. Alignments are falling apart, and believe me—in this part of the world, every reshuffle of alignments means violence. Anything could happen: the Albanians and the Serbs could read the cooling off in American-Turkish relations as an opportunity, and sow chaos. Maybe they already have, and that’s what the explosion was all about. The Russians could also exploit the opportunity: we know they’ve been smuggling weapons to the Georgians, trying to destabilize the Caucasus. Anything could happen, and it could happen tonight. So I want you to take one more shot at getting the location of that saucer, and then I’m taking you out of here. We’ve got a Willys on the roof waiting. We’re going to fly out and link up with a submarine on the Black Sea, then take you out underwater to the U.N. base in Batumi.”

“Seems like a lot of trouble to go through for little ol’ me. What could the Turks or the Russians possibly want from me so badly?”

“What’s in your head. Or what will be, after your next run through the loops.”

“Well, this has all gotten much more exciting. I assume you’ll be buying me a new wardrobe on the OSS dime, since all my luggage is back at the Pera Palace?”

“We’ll make sure that’s taken care of, with a few of the latest styles thrown in to boot.” I even got a little laugh out of him. “Anyway, it’s not our first scrape, Sylvia. We’ll get out of this all right.”

\* \* \*

Gropi’s again. Dusk has seeped into the room. Pink sunset glows in the rotting mirrors. The marble-topped tables glimmer like lunar disks in the gloaming. Dimitrios sits across from me, his face barely visible. Then a match scratches, opening a trench of light in the gloom. The match flickers, goes out, replaced by the red comet of Dimitrios’ cigarette.

“I would often sit here in the evenings, in the darkness. In those days in Cairo, the café staff would delay turning on the lights until the last possible moment. I would be waiting, sometimes, for a contact. Or simply lingering over a cup of tea. Romantic, yes? I walked like a spider along the strands of information, testing here and there for a vibration. I dealt in rumors. Everything from tank advances to jilted Alexandrian mistresses. I fooled myself into thinking I had something they needed. That I was the one who *would always* have something that someone *needed*. And the saucer was my bait. The rumors, you see, had begun already in 1939: rumors that the American had found something out in the desert. That turned what I had—the map, and the sketches—into a commodity. And so I would tease out the line, keeping it like the ring a jeweler keeps in his safe, the final snare for customers who have grown bored with everything in his display. I tried to sell it to the British—in Cairo, and then in

London. I tried to sell it to the Nazis in Bucharest. I tried to sell it to the agents in Varna. I tried to find it myself—I glimpsed it, beneath the water—but our ship was torpedoed by the Russians. I barely escaped with my life.”

When he drags on his cigarette, his face appears like a blood moon from behind a cloud, then fades back into the darkness.

“Everywhere, the war outpaced me. And then the war was over, and my network was shattered. I found other work—the familiar things I had engaged in before: moving the things that are needed from one country to another. Illegal but necessary commodities. Still I had my map and my sketches, but now I was living hand to mouth. Contacts were harder to come by. I tried the Americans, but they ignored me. I tried the Turks. They played with me a while: meetings, telephone calls. But in the end, they said they weren’t interested. So I went to the Russians. They agreed to meet, on a dock on the Bosphorus. I should have known. How many thousands of us have been tossed, stabbed or shot or strangled, into those waters? Our skulls must cover the floor of the Bosphorus like a mosaic.

“They came early. Ten minutes before. I had just checked my watch when they put the knife in me. There was a wind, and a bit of rain carried in it. And then darkness.”

He pauses. “You are listening. Finally.”

“I said I would.”

“Are you listening just to get what you came for? Or out of mercy?”

“Both,” I say. And it is true.

Dimitrios nods. “You know, all those years, I fooled myself. I thought I was in control. That I had escaped it.”

“Escaped what?” I can hear everything in the café, as if I were there: the clink of glasses being cleared by a waiter. Outside a hawker cries his wares. The tobacco of Dimitrios’ cigarette purrs in the dark. But I can see the mirrors and their gilt frames through his face: he is drifting away.

“The cave.”

He drags on the cigarette, and it catches fire, the coal kindling to a blaze, a bolt of heat, and we are elsewhere. A hard-packed dirt floor, stone walls crawling with the weak light of a small fire. The cave is filled with the sound of rain. And within the rain I can hear the sound, as well, of howling.

“The wolves separated me from my goats,” Dimitrios whispers to me. His whisper comes from nowhere at all. He is here, as a boy, wrapped in a goatskin cloak, staring into the fire, but he does not speak from this version of himself. “There must have been hundreds of them. It had been a long winter. Endless, on that pile of gravel we called a home. They were starved. They stalked us for hours. I fled when they attacked. As I ran I could hear the goats screaming in fear and anguish. Such a human sound. And when they had finished with my flock, the wolves came for me. Tracked me up the mountain. They circled the cave all night. Sometimes one would appear at the cave mouth. There!”

The boy turns and throws a stone at something—just a flash of gray, like darkness clipped away for a moment from the night behind. I see the boy’s face: the terror in it, the loneliness. Snot and dirt are smeared across his cheeks. He has been crying for hours: his face is swollen and red. I want to put my arms around him, but I am afraid the loop will tear: I can sense it is thin, now, and fragile as a tissue membrane. I am very still.

“That is what it was like. All night. I went mad from fear. Truly mad from it: I was insane, babbling to myself, crying. Sometimes I would sing—lullabies I remembered, half-forgotten. Songs I had heard on the radio. Anything to pull my mind away from what was out there.

“An hour or so after dawn, they went away. I crawled out of the cave into a gray sky.

But the truth is . . . I never left the cave. From that day forward, I was always in the cave. I herded the goats in the seasons to come but always in fear of the wolves that would return for me. In certainty that they would return. And when I saw the plane, burning in the sky, come from *somewhere else*, I thought I had found a way out of the cave. I was certain of it: I could leave this cursed peninsula and leave the fear behind.

“But I left, and instead of staying behind, the fear stayed with me. And the loneliness. I never stopped being alone, or afraid, or hunted. My whole life. Only now will I leave those feelings behind. But before I go, I want to ask you for something.”

The boy leans toward me, and whispers in my ear.

“Yes,” I say. “I can do this for you. I promise.”

Then the boy is gone. It is just me in the cave, and the dying fire, and the shadows on the wall. And lying on the goatskin cloak, the map.

\* \* \*

Gunfire. Gasoline bombs. The ozone-sulfur smell of a discharged death ray. There was a haze of smoke in the room. Alvin was leaning over me.

“You are awake. Good. We have to get out of here. Can you walk?”

“I think so.” But I stumbled at first, still hazy, still not completely there.

“We need to move quickly,” Alvin said. “Everything is falling apart.”

“Wait. I need you to do something.”

I told him.

“Done,” he said. “Although there will be a political price to pay.”

He turned to one of the OSS khakis, a guy little more than a kid, jug-eared and scared, with a pistol drawn. He gave him the instructions. The khaki nodded. “I’ll get a squad together. We’ll get a van to the roof.”

I hesitated a moment.

“He’ll get it done,” Alvin said. “Now we have to get you out of here. Did you get it?”

I tap my temple.

Alvin grinned. “You’re really something.”

“I notice you don’t say what.”

We headed up the stairs. The corridors, too, were filling with smoke.

“What happened?”

“Mob outside. A rumor is making the rounds that FDR is going to bring sanctions against the Istanbul Protectorate for harboring the fugitives. Another rumor is spreading that the explosion in Karakoy was an American attack. Protesters started to gather around the consulate. Someone in the crowd threw a Molotov cocktail, and one of our men fired into the crowd. We think the protesters may have been encouraged by the government—some of our guys saw a couple of their intelligence agents in the crowd, maybe undercover stirring up trouble. But we can’t say for sure. What’s certain is the crowd is swelling, and some have guns. We got the ambassador out fifteen minutes ago. Our direct line to the government has been cut, and things are getting out of hand. If you hadn’t woken up when you did, I would have pulled you out in about ten more seconds.”

On the roof GIs and OSS khakis were shouting directions to one another. Spotters with radios at each corner of the building were directing fire. I could hear chanting down below, and ragged gunshots—different calibers. A gasoline bomb hit the building with a glassy splash.

We climbed into the Willys. “Of course, the government here will deny they had any part of this. By that time, the consulate will be burned to the ground. They’ll just shrug their shoulders at the U.N. emergency session and say it was a bunch of patriots that got out of hand. You buckled in? Hang on.”

Alvin swung the Willys up in a wide arc, pushing the nose up steeply into the smoke-filled sky. I fought the Gs. As our arc carried us upward I saw the building

and crowd below, blurred by a haze of smoke. It was impossible to say where the battle lines were, who was fighting who, who was winning or losing. It was all just a smear of haze, with patches of fire inside. The sound of bullets was like distant firecrackers, and just as meaningless.

Then we were out over the Bosphorus, heading toward the Black Sea.

The Willys was open-topped. It was the same jalopy we had been assigned before: its canvas roof was broken, and its stabilizer was bad, so it kept bucking and having to be corrected. We were up around two thousand feet. Small, low-hanging clouds misted across us and scattered the rays of our running lights back into our eyes.

"So you got it," Alvin said. "He gave it to you, after all."

"He did. In the end. For a promise."

"A strange request. But I suppose money doesn't mean much to him anymore."

"No."

I could tell Alvin was expecting me to say something smart, but I said nothing. I wasn't feeling like banter. In fact, nothing seemed funny anymore. Some part of me was still back there in that cave, hearing the wolves in the rain and the choked-back sobs of that little orphaned Rumanian-Greek shepherd boy, that foundling that would come out of the cave carrying all his horror and fear and anger with him—that foundling boy who would become a murderer, a drug trafficker, a thief and purveyor of secrets. The boy who would grasp at power and meaning again and again, only to see it turn to something no more substantial than the clouds that wisped across our faces, or the shadows on the stone walls of the cave he could never leave behind him.

"He had wanted to be a part of something. To be solid, important, permanent. And then in the end, all he had wanted was . . ."

After a long beat of silence between us, Alvin said, "Did he mark the crash site as being 5.6 miles east of Gura Portitei, on an underwater shoal about 12 meters below the surface at low tide? Is that right?"

I could see the details of the map in my mind perfectly, as if I were unrolling it right there in front of me. "Yes. How did you know?"

Alvin looked over at me. His hands went tight around the wheel. "God dammit." It was the first time I had ever heard him swear. "I was hoping you would say it was another location. Anything but that one."

"Why?"

"Because that's the information we had as well. But the saucer isn't there anymore. The OSS sent a ship out. There were drag marks all over the bottom. You could see the outline of where the saucer had been. Someone had gotten there before us and salvaged it."

The shot sounded like the crack of a whip in the cold air. Alvin bucked forward, a spray of blood across the Willys's windscreen.

Training took over. The muscle memory of the OSS Defensive Measures Class was what saved us—a class I had hated every minute of, resented being forced by Alvin to take. Now I couldn't have been more thankful. In one smooth motion I unbuckled my belt and moved over, sweeping Alvin's legs off the pedals. The Willys began to arc left, but I steadied the wheel with one hand, and unbuckled Alvin's seatbelt.

"Can you get over to the passenger side by sliding behind me? I need to take over."

"I think I can manage."

"Okay. Once you're over, I can get us both buckled in."

We were losing altitude, but as Alvin slid over, groaning in pain, I managed to get a toe on the stabilizer and bring the nose up, leveling us off.

"Just hang on, Alvin. We're going to get help."

\* \* \*

Now

I was out of the terraplane, falling through space, arms outstretched, toward the black water below.

It was as if the entire world had receded behind sheets of glass, with only the sound of the wind rushing past my ears. Even the cold was something distant, unimportant. It was a feeling I was familiar with: I had experienced it several times during the war, when the Germans shelled our station, or during an air attack. It was a merciful trick of the mind: how could you die—really, truly die—in a world so remote and unreal? I squeezed my eyes shut, awaiting the impact.

And then something was around me, cold and slick with condensation, and my momentum slowed. I struggled with this thing in the air, made of a leathery bat-wing chill. I thrashed at it like a drowning woman fighting my rescuer. I could smell the ozone-sulfur stench of a fired death-ray. Then I felt hands on my wrists. A voice said, “Calm. Be calm, soldier. Be still.”

It was a voice I recognized. We were rotating slowly downward, at no more than the speed of an elevator. Then we were hovering in the air.

“Are you hurt?”

“N-no,” I stammered. How was I alive? All I could think of was the black water, rising toward me. I had accepted it—death. And it had not come. Not yet.

Below me, I saw the black sedan that had struck our terraplane. It was spiraling downward, belly-up, toward black water. Bolts of green light danced across its shattered anti-grav unit. I knew what would be inside: nothing but ashes.

Above me was our Willys, righted now, curving toward us in a careful arc.

As it approached, I saw that Alvin was unconscious in the passenger seat. Eleanor Roosevelt was behind the wheel, fighting with the bad stabilizer as I had. General Hedy Lamarr settled me gently into the Willys’ back seat. The two women were in similar leather, fur-lined flight suits, their faces half-hidden by goggles, their hair concealed under hoods. General Lamarr reached into a pack at her waist, and then tore open Alvin’s shirt and began injecting his wound with the clotter—the alien tech that had saved so many of our soldiers’ lives in the war. “The bullet passed all the way through his body,” she said. “That’s good: at least we can be reasonably sure it didn’t bounce around inside him. Once I am done, this will stabilize him, and seal the wound, keeping him from tension pneumothorax. But he won’t last long without real care. You need to get to your submarine.”

“How did you . . .” I stopped myself from completing the foolish question. “I don’t know the coordinates of the submarine. Alvin had them.”

Mrs. Roosevelt began punching the numbers into the terraplane’s beacon system. “Thank goodness you have friends, dear, watching over you. I hope you’ll remember that. Who your friends are. I hope you’ll keep our secret. As you can see, we are keeping our end of the bargain.”

General Lamarr was working on the entrance wound in Alvin’s back.

“When did you find it?” I said. “The saucer? You and the Turks? And are they *‘who my friends are’*? A country that sent its men to kill me and burn our consulate down just to keep their secret?”

Mrs. Roosevelt’s face went tight. “It’s not the country that sent those men. And it’s not us. It’s—complicated. Factions exist, here as everywhere. Disagreements. But we just kept them from killing you both, child. Isn’t that enough proof of our intent?”

“Tell that to Dimitrios.”

“Him, we could not save. But he is hardly the kind of man worth worrying about, dear. He was never out for anything but his own advantage. And it was decided he

was a man whose information could be bought, but not his silence.”

“Who gets to decide that?”

Eleanor lifted her goggles and turned around to look at me.

“Who gets to decide that? Why, people like Alvin do, dear. There are people like him on every side of any conflict: smart, and determined, and loyal, and patriotic to the very end. Theirs is no fake patriotism either: It is the real thing. The kind of love for country that gives you the strength to do what is necessary for the good of your nation. Even when those things are distasteful to you.”

I could hear the Fisherman's voice in my head: *We are building a future. In Karakoy and along the hills of Beyoglu we are constructing an institute to rival any in the world. A city within the city, a center of research and knowledge. Education, you see, will be our way out. We have stagnated too long, trapped on the edge of Europe, waiting at the door.*

I thought of the little shepherd boy, crouched in terror beside his flickering fire, his face swollen from tears.

*Tell that to Dimitrios.*

“So a little bit of murder is all right, so long as you get what you want.”

“Don't be naïve,” General Lamarr hissed. “We're struggling with the same things here as we were back in the U.S.: men willing to tear the world apart, so long as they can rule it. But at least here we have a chance of turning the tide. Here we have allies in the government who want what we want. A world of peace and knowledge, not never-ending war. But none of us was born yesterday: some killing is necessary to stop injustice. You should know that, soldier: you were with our corps in the war.”

*Ashes drifting through the Tiergarten.*

“I'm not a soldier anymore. You can stop calling me that.”

General Lamarr had finished injecting the clotter. She looked up at me. “You're fooling yourself, Sylvia Aldstatt, if you think you are not a soldier. If you fight, you are a soldier. It doesn't matter if you don't understand whose side you are really on, or who is right and who is wrong—in fact, that is the fate of every soldier: to die without knowing whether it was all worth it.”

“My country, right or wrong,” I quoted.

Alvin groaned. I didn't like the look of his face in the yellow lights of the instrument panel.

“That's not the full quote,” Mrs. Roosevelt said. “It was Senator Schurz who said it best, and the quote is ‘My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.’ And that is what we are trying to do—whether you believe us or not. Now go,” Eleanor said. “Save your friend.”

“Good luck,” I said. “Tell the Fisherman I hope it works out. I really do. I think we'd all like to see a better world.”

They floated up out of the Willys, and I banked for the beacon that would take us to our submarine, and home.

“And in the meantime,” I said, thinking of the explosion on the docks at Karakoy—that strange wave of smeared time that I now understood could only be one thing—“be careful with what you found: try not to blow yourselves up with it—again.”

\* \* \*

### Two months later

The thirty-story rocket was a blinding mirror in the desert sun, its polished steel too bright to look at directly. The concrete launch pad was a wavering sheet of heat mirage, the surface of a sea. The rocket techs crawling around the base of the rocket's

fins seemed to be walking on the waves.

A figure in blue Space Agency coveralls approached across the glassy, distorted surface.

"I've been told the OSS has a package for delivery to Mars," the woman said. "And instructions on what is to be done with it."

Alvin leaned against the Willys, his bloodshot eyes masked by aviator sunglasses, trying to look casual. I knew it was taking most of his strength to just remain standing. I'd told him he didn't have to come, but he'd said he wouldn't miss it.

"Here is the package." I held the sealed stainless-steel cylinder out to her. "And the instructions are these: it is to be buried as close to the foot of Olympus Mons as possible."

"No marker?"

"No marker."

She nodded. "I'll see to it that it's done. Are you going to stick around to watch the launch?"

"We'll watch it from the window of the hospital. My partner here tripped over his own shoelaces and bumped himself, so he's not allowed out of his bed for more than a few hours at a time."

Alvin smiled weakly. "It hurts when I laugh, so thank God she isn't funny."

That evening we both sat by the window in Alvin's hospital room and watched as the rocket rose from behind the mesa in the twilight, a lengthening arrow of fire toward space.

"The squad barely got him into the van, you know, before the consulate building came down. It was a close thing."

"It was worth it," I said. "He kept his end of the bargain. He earned it."

"In the end, his information was useful. It at least confirmed for us that it was the Turks, and not the Russians: one of our informants said they had intercepted his information when he was trying to sell it in Axis Bulgaria. They broke into his rooms and photographed the maps, the sketches, everything. They had it all for years, gathering dust—filed it away, ignored along with all the other wartime fairy tales. It wasn't until he showed up in Istanbul trying to sell the same story, fifteen years later, that they started thinking it might be real. They went and salvaged it—and then shut his mouth forever. Now they've got it, and it's going to be a different world—one in which we'll emerge weaker than we were before."

*Maybe that's for the best*, I wanted to say. I didn't.

The rocket reflected in his irises, Alvin continued: "They say they'll only use the tech for peaceful purposes. They're invoking all kinds of legal arguments about why the salvage was legitimate: international waters, old marine salvage laws, and on and on. Gumming up the wheels of the international courts. It's all moot anyway. We don't have many options. Short of starting another war, all we can do is complain to the U.N. Security Council and stomp our feet and demand they turn the saucer over—which, of course, they won't. They know our hand is weak."

"Which leaves us where?"

"Weaker, like I said. But it's not the end of the world. If you ask me, we'll just learn to live with the new reality and push for some treaties on peaceful use."

"At least someone finally believed Dimitrios' story," I said. "That's something. But it cost him his life."

"First criminal to be buried on Mars," Alvin said. "That's something, too."

I thought of the little boy in the cave, whispering in my ear. "I always dreamed of rockets. Of space. Of getting out. But I never could. Not even out of this cave. At least let my ashes escape. It's all I ask. Don't leave me trapped on this world."

"Dimitrios was more than just a criminal," I said. "And before he was that, he was just a lonely little boy."

The streak of fire lengthened, approaching the upper atmosphere. Above the mesa the rocket's trail had already begun to dissipate into the sunset clouds.

Soon enough there would be no trace of it at all.