

IN THE MIDST OF THE FLAMES

JP ROBINSON



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In the Midst of the Flames

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JP ROBINSON

What Readers Are Saying

[In the Shadow of Your Wings] “. . . Robinson’s eclectic array of characters and high-stakes scenarios make for an immersive beginning to a series that will appeal to fans of war dramas.”

—PUBLISHER’S WEEKLY

[Bride Tree] “An enchanting romance woven with espionage, and a power struggle that will keep any historical fan charmed and mesmerized.”—READERS’ FAVORITE

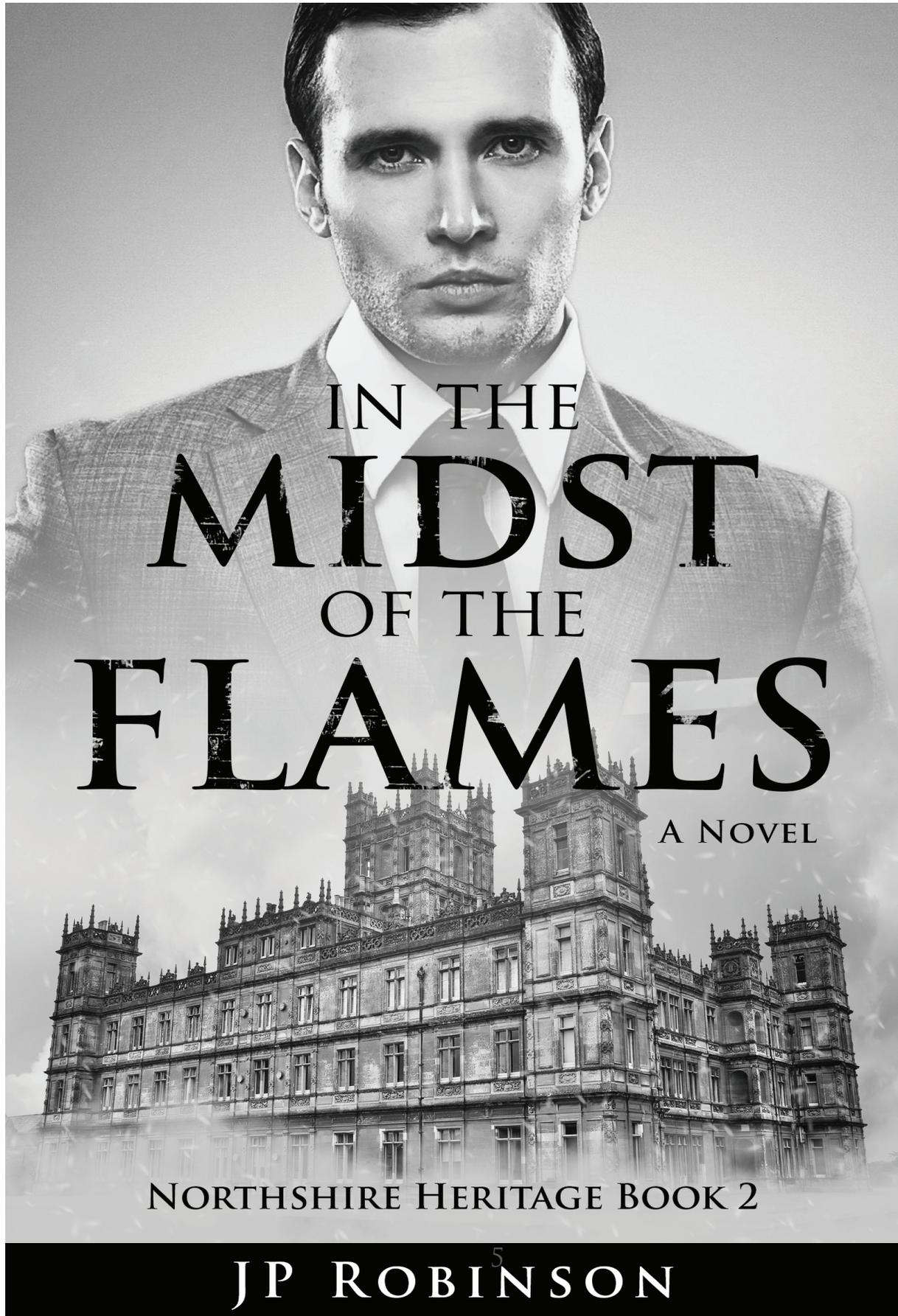
“If there’s one thing I’ve come to expect from Robinson is that he has a non-stop ride packed in his novels.”—A.M. HEATH,
Author of *Ancient Words* series

[In the Shadow of Your Wings] “Wow. This story had characters from every walk of life-in all aspects of that time period. So beautifully written on how their individual stories intertwine. This is a must read for historical fiction lovers.

The author does a perfect job at setting a clear stage for so many stories, characters and their hardships. Absolutely mind blowing how the plot unfolds. Amazing!”—TARA

[In the Shadow of Your Wings] “Fantastic WWI historical fiction book. Fast paced, you won’t want to put this book down. Great story, characters and believable. Looking forward to reading more of the Northshire Heritage series wish they were available now.”—CAROLINE

IN THE MIDST OF THE FLAMES



IN THE
MIDST
OF THE
FLAMES

A NOVEL

NORTHSHIRE HERITAGE BOOK 2

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Dedication

To my sister, Rachel. There comes a time when all God's prodigals return home.

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Cast of Characters

THE BRITISH

The Steele Family

Thomas Steele—head of Northshire Estate and the Bank of England

Malcolm Steele—Thomas's son, Commander of the 7th Battalion, Northumberland Fusiliers

Leila Steele—Malcom's wife, former German spy and heir of Northshire Estate

The Thompson Family

Will Thompson—Malcolm's former friend now in a German POW camp

Eleanor Thompson—Will's wife and military nurse working as a volunteer with the Red Cross

Prominent members of Northshire Staff:

Harold Greyson—butler and Thomas's personal assistant

Jenny Edwards—lady's maid to Leila Steele

Prominent politicians in Whitehall, London

David Lloyd George—Prime Minister of England

Robert Hughes—head of the British Secret Intelligence Service

Earl Curzon—President of the British War Council

Alfred Milner, Bonar Law, Arthur Henderson—members of the British War Council

THE GERMANS

The Meier Family

Burkhard Meier—landowner near Munster, Germany

Adele Meier—Burkhard’s wife, mother of Katja

Katja Meier—daughter of Burkhard and Adele, sister of
Markus (deceased)

The Haber Family

Fritz Haber—scientist, husband of Clara and Charlotte

Clara Haber—deceased wife of Fritz

Hermann Haber—son of Fritz and Clara

MISCELLANEOUS:

Charlotte Nathan—Fritz Haber’s mistress

Werner Jaeger—head of German Foreign Intelligence
(Department 3B)

Nathaniel Leonard—captain of Northshire’s guards

Aengus O’Malley—London-based gang leader and
affiliate of *Sinn Féin*, a militant Irish political party

Karl Schmidt—Fritz Haber’s colleague and friend

Uther Klein—general and regional commander of the
Munster POW camp

Elijah Farrows—Farmer and pastor to Northshire’s tenants

Lt-Colonel James Stewart—Malcolm’s commanding
officer in the British 28th Division

Arthur Hoffman—member of the Swiss Federal Council

General Falkenhayn—the German army’s Chief of Staff

Prologue

Amsterdam, Netherlands. October 1914.

“In thirty seconds, you will die.” The hammer of the black Luger slid in place with an unfeeling *click*. He pressed the gun hard against her forehead. “Now”—his voice was as unfeeling as the metal that bit into her flesh—“tell me what you know.”

Leila Durand squirmed, twisting her bound wrists, as she glared at the small but powerfully built bearded madman, whose black-gloved hands peeked out of the sleeve of an equally dark greatcoat. His clothes were that of a businessman—a starched white shirt, a black suit that was just visible beneath his coat, and a solid black necktie. But the hard glare in his eyes and the pressure of the gun against her forehead left no room for doubt. This man would kill her.

Give. She again wrenched her wrists hard, ignoring the pain. They were bound behind a straight-backed chair, plaited together by knots of coarse rope that cut into her skin. Chains, wrapped around her chest and arms, held her immobile.

I'm trapped.

He grinned at her, the whites of his teeth at odds with the darkness that cascaded from his hooded eyes. She tried to ignore the wild galloping of her heart and focused on the circumstances that had brought her here—wherever *here* was. All she knew was that she was in some hole in the ground in neutral Amsterdam with a maniac who meant to kill her.

Unless, of course, she spilled her guts.

After two years of clandestine field operations for the German government, Leila had been ordered to return to Antwerp for

an intense two-week training session. This was to be expected, given the recent outbreak of the Great War.

Her instructor was none other than the formidable Elsbeth Schragmüeller. Two days ago, Elsbeth had sent her to shadow a British agent in Amsterdam who was to meet a contact at a shipping house.

The man had held a brief conversation with a newspaper correspondent—an Allied spy no doubt—and Leila had managed to get close enough to hear most of his conversation while remaining unseen.

Elated by her initial success, Leila had slipped off into the growing gloom and headed toward the train depot where she would catch the last train across the border. But her trip back to the *Kriegsnachrichtenstelle*, or espionage training school in Antwerp, had been cut short as a group of men materialized out of the darkness and blocked her path on the deserted street.

A quick glance in the dim light around confirmed that escape was impossible. The high walls of Amsterdam's dikes rose on both sides. She had whirled around, only to see four men rushing toward her from behind, weapons drawn. Heart sinking, she had raised both hands in surrender. There was no sense dying here.

After jerking a black hood over her head, they had dragged her into some sort of abandoned warehouse then, sometime during the night, she had been roughly thrown into the small confines of this windowless tomb.

Who were those men? Gritting her teeth, Leila strained again at the bonds. She had eluded death in the street only to die in a cellar. Questions hummed in the back of her mind like whining mosquitoes. *Who is he? British? French?*

Leila gave herself a stern mental shake. Right now she had to figure out how to get out of this mess. The questions she could shelve off for another time. *If there is another time.* A single candle blazed on a wooden table, transforming her abductor's face into a contorted mask of demonic frenzy.

"I'll only ask one more time." He drew back his hand and slammed the butt of his semiautomatic pistol against the side of her face. "What did you hear?"

Leila's head whipped to one side as the metal connected with her skin. For a moment, the candle seemed to wink out. She blinked rapidly, knowing that if she lost consciousness now, she would never wake up.

"N-nothing." Her breath came in short, ragged bursts. The pain was blinding. "I don't know what you're talking about."

She looked up at him, ignoring the throbbing in her skull. "I told you. I'm just a student. That's all. A student."

He dropped into a crouch, teeth bared. "Do you take me for a fool?" He raised the gun and pulled the trigger.

Pft!

The bullet sped by her neck and bit into the chair, sending splinters of wood into the air. A silencer had absorbed most of the sound, but she could swear that the pounding of her heart would've drowned out the noise of the shot anyway.

"The next one will be in your eye." He laid a gloved finger on his pursed lips. "The right one, I think."

Leaping forward, her captor grabbed her hair with his left hand. Leila cried out as he jerked her head backward.

"Tell me!" His shout made her ears ring.

Tears leaked out of her eyes.

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I won't. He won't break me.

She shook her head as she gasped out the words. "I . . . don't know . . . anything!"

He slammed his fist onto the chair, and, with a growl, tossed the gun onto the table then withdrew a wicked-looking knife.

She stared, wide-eyed and chest heaving as he twirled it around in his hand. "W-what are you doing?"

He threw her a wolfish grin. "I'm going to cut off one of your ears. Do you have a preference?"

"N-no, no!" She writhed in the chair, desperate now. Her mind whirled. *Is information worth such a price?* She wavered but then a spark of rebellion surged in her, rising above the throbbing pain and fear.

"Then tell me what I want to know." He placed the edge of the knife against the fleshy part of her right ear. "Tell me." The knife bit into her skin and she felt a fiery finger of pain then the slow drip of a trickle of blood.

"I can't!" She was gasping now and soaked with sweat. Her bladder felt like it would burst at any moment. "Nothing. I've nothing to tell, I swear it."

"You're lying!" He pressed in deeper, the edge of his knife cutting into her pale skin.

A ragged scream ripped out of her throat. *I won't . . . give . . . in!*

"Nothing!" The cords of her neck bulged as her wails filled the room. "Nothing . . . to say."

He fell silent then eased the pressure off her ear and withdrew.

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Sobbing, Leila trembled in the chair, watching his every move with wide eyes. He straightened, pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket, and wiped her blood off the edge of the blade.

She knew from the slight sting on the right side of her head that he had cut her, but not deeply. *God . . . oh God.*

With a terse nod, he strode over to the far wall then pulled on a cord. Electric light flooded the room, making her wince.

“Open your eyes, Leila Durand.”

Hesitating at first, she obeyed, licking her lips.

He leaned casually against a wooden table with his arms folded across his chest. Her eyes darted to the gun and knife which rested on the table near the flickering candle.

“I am General Werner Jaäger, head of His Imperial Majesty Kaiser Wilhelm II’s Foreign Espionage unit called Department 3B.”

She gaped at him. “You’re . . . ”

“I am your commanding officer.” A thin smile played about his lips.

“B-but—”

He held up a hand, forestalling the swarm of questions that hummed in her mind. Or was that ringing sound her battered head?

“Elsbeth, cut her bonds.”

Footsteps sounded behind her and, after a brief moment, the ropes, then the chains, slackened, and fell. Leila rose and turned, rubbing her chafed wrists.

“*Fraülein?*”

“Well done, Leila.” Her teacher nodded, the corners of her thin lips turning upward. “Well done indeed.”

General Jaäger stood upright, clasping his hands behind his back. Keeping a wary eye on him, Leila retreated behind the chair.

“Don’t worry, the test is over.” Jaäger stood still. “Elsbeth spoke well of you and it appears her judgment was correct.”

Leila’s fingers probed the wound behind her ear. The flow of blood had stopped. “Test?”

“I wanted to see if you would break under interrogation.” He motioned toward the table. “What I saw is . . . encouraging. The British aren’t as ruthless with captured female spies as I can be. If you won’t break under my interrogation tactics . . .”

Her eyes widened as the implications of his words sank in. Shadowing the supposed Englishman, her abduction, imprisonment, and torture—it had all been an elaborate scheme to see how much torture she could endure.

“But why?”

The papers in the Netherlands were full of advertisements posted by both the Germans and British soliciting informants and espionage agents. It was difficult to believe that all prospective recruits were subjected to such brutality.

General Jaäger rocked back on his heels, his eyes probing her battered face. At length, he reached inside his pocket and pulled out a sealed envelope.

“Your orders are here, written in code. Read them. Memorize them. Burn them.”

She took the envelope and slipped it into the pocket of her wrinkled skirt. “I will.”

“There is something else.” Werner came closer, and this time she held her ground. He nodded his tacit approval, his eyes shifting to Elsbeth’s impassive face then back to Leila.

“What I am about to say is *not* written in your orders.” He drew a cigar from his pocket, lit it, and inhaled deeply before speaking again. “In the event that the Fatherland loses this war, the kaiser has ordered me to develop a contingency plan. It is called *Herkules*. To execute this operation, I will need to have agents already in place, ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

She furrowed a brow, trying to think past the pounding in her skull. “That is what this was all about?”

“Precisely.” He drew again on his cigar. “If *Herkules* is carried out, it will end European civilization as we know it.”

Releasing his breath in a cloud of smoke he said, “When the heads of all our enemies gather together to sign a peace treaty, you and the other agents will follow specific directions. All non-German heads of state will be assassinated in one blow.”

A chill ran through her. “All?”

“All.” His eyes probed hers. “Germany will take advantage of the ensuing chaos and will seize control of France and England in a final bid for power. Leaderless, the nations will fall at our feet. Now, I am certain you understand the need for my little experiment.” He gestured toward her ear.

“I-I do.” She had been right. Ordinary agents were not subjected to this level of interrogation. Gingerly, Leila touched her ear again. An odd sense of pride swelled within her. It was an honor to have been chosen. *And I did not give in.*

Jaäger sniffed. “Elsbeth will see to your wounds.” He gently touched her cheek. “When they have healed, you will depart for Great Britain and the home of Sir Thomas Steele.”

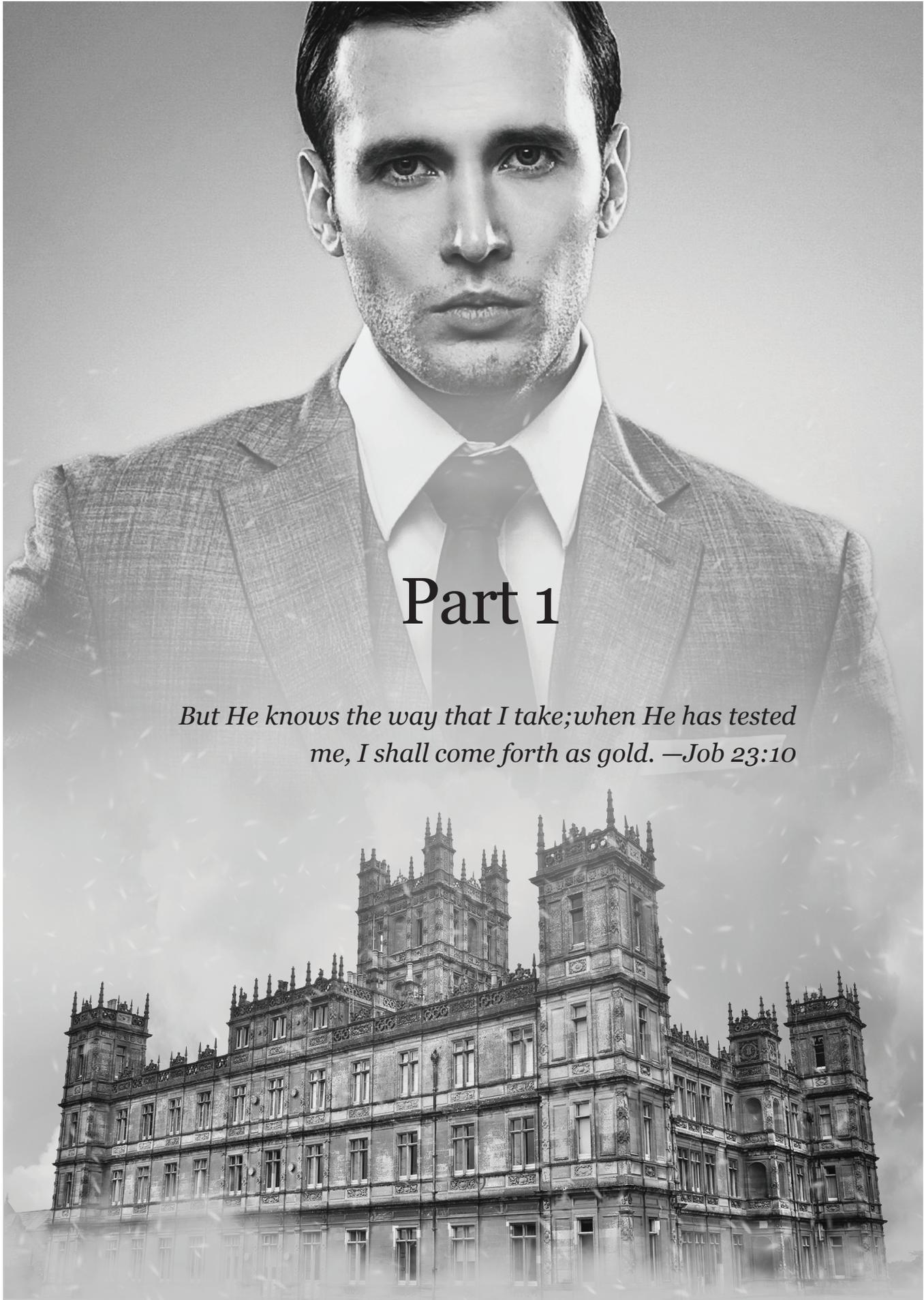
He tossed the still-burning cigar onto the floor and ground it underfoot with the heel of his black boot. “If you do not wish to be a part of *Herkules*, speak now and I will end your life mercifully.”

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Werner jerked his head toward the chair. “What you saw is only the beginning of what I will do to you if you betray me.”

Leila lifted her chin and stood with shoulders straight and chest thrust forward. “You’ve seen me prove my loyalty to the Fatherland, General.” She fixed her green eyes upon his unblinking stare. “I will not fail you.”

IN THE MIDST OF THE FLAMES



Part 1

But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold. —Job 23:10

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Chapter 1

March 1917. German Military Headquarters at Castle Pless.

Fritz Haber, renowned scientist and mastermind behind the development of Germany's chemical weapons, skulked down the hall of Castle Pless, the historic site of headquarters for military operations on the Western Front. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he hunched his shoulders, eyes darting around with each step. Haber had one wish, one which all his scientific endeavors had failed to produce—to become invisible.

But achieving invisibility was not his only failure—far from it. Each *click* made by the heels of his black boots on the castle's tiled hallway reverberated in his skull, hammering two words over and over through his mind with a ferocity that made him cringe.

You failed.

Failure. The word summarized his life.

With a shudder, he glanced around again. Once he would have found the notion ludicrous. The very thought that the great Fritz Haber could fail at anything was simply preposterous. *You failed.* But it was true. Failure was all around him, in everything he did.

His eyes failed to grasp the archaic beauty that surrounded him, missing the arched doorways, vibrant tapestries, and mounted heads of various types of wildlife that decorated the

castle walls. He failed to notice the obvious awe on the faces of the crowds that lined the hallway, applauding as he stalked passed them.

Only one image burned before his eyes, obscuring all else from view. It was a haunting memory of the fateful night on which his life had plummeted into ignominy. He saw afresh his wife's bloody corpse prostrate on the stained grass. His gun was held between her slack fingers as though he himself had killed her. Perhaps, in a sense, he had.

Haber had pioneered the age of chemical warfare, seeking to add more glory to his already illustrious name. Fearing that Clara's scientific genius would eclipse his own, he had shut his wife out of the project. He had mistaken her for a rival instead of seeing her as a partner. In retaliation, she had tried to thwart his greatest contribution to humanity. Science had been his god and he, Fritz Haber, had sacrificed everything upon the altar of his deity.

But his sacrifice had been in vain.

Clara had committed suicide after finding him in the arms of her rival, the siren named Charlotte Nathan. It was Clara's final act of desperation, her ultimate plea for him to abandon the selfish road he had chosen.

Haber bunched his fists against his temples as a memory of his blood-stained hands flitted through his skull.

Failed. His marriage had been a disaster.

He lurched forward.

His son, Hermann, had been the first to arrive at his mother's side. Clara had died in his arms.

Fritz slammed his eyelids shut. As a father, he was nothing short of a disappointment.

"Herr Haber."

He jerked to a halt, his eyelids flickering open. General Paul Hindenburg stood before him, arm raised in a stiff salute.

Fritz swallowed. “Yes?” It was a question, as though he was not sure of his identity. But he wasn’t. Not anymore. Could the *real* Fritz Haber have fallen so low?

How art thou fallen, oh Lucifer. Like the archangel, pride in his abilities had engineered his downfall.

The general lowered his arm. “His Imperial Majesty, Kaiser Wilhelm II, desires your presence. He is about to meet with Chief of Staff Falkenhayn.”

Haber removed the rounded *pince-nez* from his eyes. Here was the evidence of his greatest failure. “The kaiser.”

He had promised Germany’s monarch a quick victory with his celebrated poisonous cloud of gas. While his new weapon had eliminated thousands of the enemy, the war dragged on. French scientists had developed gas masks and even gas weapons of their own to counter the devastation he had unleashed.

Just as Clara predicted.

To others he was still a hero, but when he stared into the mirror with glazed eyes, Fritz Haber saw nothing but a shadow of the man he had once been. When he had received the kaiser’s summons, ordering him to Castle Pless, he knew that the time had come to pay for his failure.

“Are you ready?” Hindenburg motioned toward the looming doorway.

Wiping his glasses, Haber put them back on his face. “I am ready.”

Ready to account for his empty promises. Ready to be disgraced. He could expect nothing else. In the kaiser’s Germany there was no mercy, only justice. And he was as guilty as any

man could be. Whatever punishment the kaiser planned to inflict, he was ready.

General Erich Falkenhayn, chief of Military Staff, bolted out of his chair as the door to his office flew open.

“Who dares—” The words died on his lips as Germany’s emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, swept into the room, flanked by Falkenhayn’s rival, Paul Hindenburg, and the chemist, Fritz Haber.

“Your Imperial Majesty.” Falkenhayn bowed deeply—a gesture that the emperor did not acknowledge.

Distancing himself from the others, Wilhelm, a tall, gray-haired, boar of a man, stumped around Falkenhayn’s desk while keeping one hand on a long, black walking stick and eyeballing his general in silence.

Falkenhayn knew that the kaiser’s deformed left arm was virtually useless, but he made a conscious effort to keep his gaze from wandering toward the man’s congenital defect, focusing instead on the string of medals that decorated the kaiser’s chest.

The sharp upturned corners of the emperor’s moustache bristled as he leaned over the desk. “I am not pleased, General Falkenhayn. Not pleased at all.” He slammed his walking stick onto the wooden surface before him.

Falkenhayn’s face burned as he moved to the front of his desk and sank into a hard, wooden chair. He had the sinking feeling he was about to be disciplined like an unruly student and, as such, he played for time. “Is there something specific you wished to discuss, Your Majesty?”

Wilhelm barked out a dry laugh. “Something specific? No need to play at the fool, General; you already are one.” He

straightened with an exasperated sigh. “I never wanted this war. You and the other generals forced my hand.”

The kaiser mimicked Falkenhayn in a falsetto tone. “‘For the glory of the Fatherland,’ you said. ‘Our destiny is to conquer’ you said. Well, where is all this *glory* now?” His blue eyes drilled into the Chief of Staff’s skull. “Where is it?”

As if on cue, Paul Hindenburg stepped forward, offering a newspaper to Falkenhayn who glared at him then let his gaze fall to the paper.

BERLIN STARVES!

Falkenhayn’s eyes rolled from the headline to the photographs of long breadlines. “T-this is typical, my Kaiser. War produces suffering both for those in the field and for the home defenders.” Shrugging, he glanced up at his sovereign. “My strategy of maintaining a strong offense on the Western Front and a passive approach in Russia is sound.” He glared at his rival, Hindenburg, again. “Despite whatever fabricated criticisms you may have heard.”

“The fact remains, Falkenhayn, that we have been at war for over two years!” The kaiser looked over Falkenhayn’s shoulder to scowl at the chemist. “Despite *Herr* Haber’s breakthrough with the poisonous cloud of gas, Germany is no closer to victory now than we were *before* we lost the better part of two million men.”

Falkenhayn shook his head. “War was the only option, Your Majesty. I-it was the only path to the glory your family name deserves!”

“So you’ve said before.” Wilhelm spoke through clenched teeth. “But I fail to see how liquidating my own army will ensure my kingdom’s greatness.”

At this, Hindenburg stepped into the conversation. “The Russians have grown weaker, but they are still a powerful enemy.

If the Americans break their neutrality and join the fight, we may not win this war.”

“I have just returned from the Western Front.” Falkenhayn pushed himself out of the chair, right hand bunched into a fist. “We crushed the British at the Somme last autumn. The morale of the army is high, my Kaiser.”

“Morale does not win wars, General. Or haven’t you noticed that?” Wilhelm sucked in a deep breath, held it, then released it slowly. “I have convened this meeting to discuss preparations for all possibilities.”

Bile rose in the back of Falkenhayn’s throat as he stared into the older man’s eyes. “You cannot mean . . . ?”

“I mean that I will do whatever it takes to ensure my empire survives this global catastrophe.” The kaiser’s gaze shifted from one man to the other. “We will prepare to initialize Project *Herkules* unless the course of this war shifts in our favor.”

Falkenhayn stiffened. “*Herkules?*”

Hindenburg nodded, face grim. “*Ja*. It may be the only way of snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. If all else fails, *Herkules* will paralyze the governments of Europe while giving us the chance to launch a new, unexpected offensive.”

The kaiser’s voice filled the silence that followed this analysis. “My son, Prince Wilhelm, is now thirty-five years of age. If we fail in this endeavor, gentlemen, he will have nothing to rule when I die. The people are hungry, the people are angry. We need a quick end to this war to ensure that my kingdom survives.”

Turning, he crooked a finger at Fritz Haber. “Come, *Herr* Haber.”

The chemist shuffled forward and bowed. “Your Majesty.” He spoke with the rasping wheeze of a man approaching the grave.

“You promised a swift victory with the help of your cloud of gas, *Herr* Haber, yet all I see are dead German soldiers and starving civilians.” Wilhelm shrugged. “Your efforts in Galicia have been commendable, true, but still . . . no victory.”

Haber hung his head. “I will not ask for clemency, Your Imperial Majesty. I do not deserve it. I only ask for a few days to set my house in order before I am executed.”

Silence filled the room. At length, Wilhelm cleared his throat. “You have not failed, *Herr* Haber, at least not utterly. You are considered a hero by many.”

Retrieving his cane, he limped around the desk. “Besides, to kill the greatest mind in Germany would be to destroy the man who carries the key to *Herkules* success. No. Gas is the ultimate weapon, but its implementation must be precise. It is through *Herkules* that you will redeem yourself.”

Haber’s bald head glistened as he bobbed it downward once more “I am . . . grateful for your continued trust.” He looked up, licking his lips. “My colleague, Karl Schmidt, and I will do everything in our power to produce whatever your Majesty desires.”

Wilhelm thumped his walking stick twice against his palm. “What I desire? I want another gas that can be used against our enemies. I want an antidote that will save the lives of any Germans present when this weapon is unleashed. Is this possible?”

Straightening in a slow motion, as though he were in pain, Haber met the kaiser’s gaze. “There was a time when I would have said that I could do anything. That time is past.” He removed his *pince-nez* and continued. “However, there are certain molecules that, if manipulated, may help us succeed. I will need time. Time in my laboratory with my colleague.”

Wilhelm motioned to Hindenburg. “See that he gets it and whatever else he needs.”

Falkenhayn narrowed his eyes. The kaiser should have spoken to him instead of his subordinate. “There is a problem. General Jaäger believed there was a traitor on *Herr* Haber’s team.”

“I understood that was taken care of.” Hindenburg cocked his head to one side.

“Yes, well—” Falkenhayn was careful to avoid looking at Haber. The man had no idea that his wife had been executed to save his life and also upon suspicion that she was an agent of Great Britain. He believed it to be suicide and no one present was about to reveal the truth. He chose his words carefully. “Apparently we were mistaken. The possibility exists that the British have turned a member of Haber’s team.”

The kaiser shrugged. “His team is not working on this project. It is just himself and his colleague, *Herr* . . . ?”

“Schmidt.” Haber spoke up. “Karl Schmidt.”

“You trust this man?”

“Oh, yes.” Haber nodded while stepping forward. “His loyalty to the Fatherland is beyond question.”

“Then, General Falkenhayn,” the kaiser said turning toward him, “we do *not* have a problem.”

Falkenhayn went rigid. Unleashing *Herkules* was a mistake, one they all would regret. “B-but to initialize *Herkules* we must know where the Allies will demand we sign a treaty of surrender.”

Cradling his deformed left arm in his right, Wilhelm strode over to the other side of the massive room. A painting, dubbed the *Proclamation of the German Empire*, stood in prominent relief against the surface’s cream paint. In the painting, the gilded walls of the Hall of Mirrors of the French palace at Versailles rose around a group of German officials who celebrated a recent

victory over France with swords plunging into the air. Defeated French officials looked on with downcast eyes as the German conquerors established their obvious supremacy.

“You know there is something about the French that I admire.” Wilhelm cocked his head to one side.

Falkenhayn slid closer. “What is that, Your Majesty?”

Wilhelm kept his eyes on the tabloid. “They neither forget nor forgive. It makes them almost predictable.” He gestured toward the painting. “A century before this day, Napoleon Bonaparte crushed our armies. Here, in France’s celebrated Hall of Mirrors, we took our revenge.” He turned to his Chief of Staff. “Now, if you were French and obsessed by a ridiculous sense of honor, where would you insist a peace treaty be signed?”

“At Versailles?” Falkenhayn blinked. It made sense. It made perfect sense. But *Herkules* was a diabolical plan, one that would stain Germany’s honor to time immemorial. It would unhinge the governments of Europe if not the entire world. Only the individuals in this room even knew of its existence. “It will take time to initialize *Herkules*, my Kaiser and”—he dropped his gaze to the floor—“there is a problem.”

Wilhelm made a growling noise in the back of his throat. “I do not wish to hear of any more problems, General.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty, but I must speak. You will recall that Department 3B,” Falkenhayn said, straightening as he spoke, “the division that oversees European espionage, has come under my control.”

“What of it?” Wilhelm tossed his walking stick to Hindenburg, who snatched it out of the air in a smooth motion, then turned back to him.

Falkenhayn followed the interaction with a furrowed brow. *Something is not right*. Clearing his throat, he continued.

“The division’s head, General Werner Jaäger, has been in Britain for over a year seeking a rogue agent—a woman named Leila Steele.”

“Stop wasting my time, Falkenhayn.” Kaiser Wilhelm folded his arms across his chest. “Get to the point.”

“Y-yes, my liege. The fact is, this woman is more dangerous than any of us could have predicted. I received a report last August from two of our agents in Britain in which they stated they were treating General Jaäger for a severe gunshot wound. I assume he was hurt in his attempt to silence her.”

“Since August? Seven months to recover from a little scratch?” Wilhelm spun on his heel. “Did you not inform him I demanded he return to Berlin?” The question was again directed at Hindenburg.

Falkenhayn recoiled. This blatant disregard for hierarchy could not be tolerated any longer. “Majesty, I—”

Wilhelm cut him off with a glare then turned back to Hindenburg. “If you sent for General Jaäger, then why isn’t he here?”

“I *am* here, my Kaiser.”

Eight eyes swung in unison toward the back of the room where a series of seven black alabaster statues, that honored German iconic figures, lined the rear wall. The dim light cast by the electric lamps had not permitted Falkenhayn to see that an eighth figure was among them. Or perhaps he had been too flustered by the kaiser’s sudden approach to notice. But Werner had been in place *before* the kaiser entered the room. The realization that he had been the unwitting object of Jaäger’s scrutiny for at least the past thirty minutes made the hair rise on the back of his neck.

“General Jaäger.” Falkenhayn forced a tight smile. “You are—”

“Alive.” Jaäger separated himself from the shadows and came forward. A black suit covered a white, slim-fitting shirt that was open at the neck. His hair, black and flecked with silver, was neatly combed and a thin, well-trimmed peppered beard formed a neat square around his mouth.

Jaäger stepped forward with a slight limp then bowed low before the kaiser. “Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Tell me this, General. Why is it that, after more than a year of searching, you are unable to destroy a product of your own making?”

Werner’s black eyes did not leave the kaiser’s face. “I am not a man to make excuses.”

“I have not asked for any!” The monarch pounded the floor with his cane.

Werner’s voice was as smooth as silk and was barely above a whisper. “Leila Durand killed my son. She is alive because fate has been kinder to her than it has to me. The only reason that I am here instead of on her trail is because I was summoned. As we speak, I am laying a trap for her that cannot fail.” His gaze slid to Hindenburg. “I will kill her.”

An uneasy silence filled the room then Falkenhayn cleared his throat. This was his chance to distance himself from the political fiasco unfolding around him. Perhaps, if he could convince the monarch that it was Jaäger who was at fault, he could regain the kaiser’s trust. “May I point out, my liege, that Leila Durand is one of the few agents who know of *Herkules*.”

The kaiser pivoted toward him, lips curled in a feral snarl. “Imbecile! You shared that kind of information with a traitor?”

Falkenhayn recoiled. “S-she had been vetted by the best and given clearance for this task.” He dropped to one knee. “How could so intricate a plan be executed without already having

agents in the field?” He thrust a shaking finger at Werner. “I acted upon General Jaëger’s recommendation.”

“Get up. What is done cannot be undone.” Wilhelm shifted his withering gaze to Werner. “We cannot risk sending any men into Britain to clean up General Jaëger’s mistake.”

Werner dipped his head. “The mistake, my liege, would be to enact *Herkules* at all. It is a reckless plan, guaranteed to fail.”

“Explain yourself, General.” Hindenburg moved forward to stand next to the kaiser.

“Leila Durand is no fool.” Werner’s face was impassive. “For two years before the start of the war she succeeded at missions where others had failed. Before briefing her on *Herkules*, I had her abducted and taken to a cellar in Amsterdam. After a day with no food or water, I tested her to the limits.” A muscle twitched in his jaw. “She never broke.”

Falkenhayn pushed himself upright, sensing an opportunity to redeem his place in the kaiser’s favor. “Obviously your methods are outdated, General. Her loyalty has been turned. Thanks to you, we now have a rogue agent free on the loose and she is armed with crippling information.”

“It was not her courage we lost.” Werner pinned him with his obsidian stare. “It was her heart. It was the one possibility that none could have foreseen—that of a spy falling in love with her target.”

Wilhelm flung his arms out in an exasperated gesture. “Yes, well, the loss of her heart doesn’t do us much good, now does it?”

Haber coughed. “Majesty, we could proceed by simply changing the name of the operation. Even if this . . . Leila came across the term, she would not know what it means.”

“A good suggestion.” The kaiser tapped his pursed lips with his finger. “Very good. What do you propose?”

A spasm crossed Haber's face and he dropped his gaze to the white tiles below. "I would suggest *Hubris*, your Majesty."

"The fatal pride that precedes defeat." Wilhelm barked out a sharp laugh then brandished a fist. "It is perfect. The arrogance of my British cousins led to this war. The pride of the nations who aligned themselves against us prolonged it. In one blow, they will all fall at our feet."

He turned back to the painting of Versailles on the wall. "We have no time to waste. *Hubris* may be our key to victory."

"My liege." Werner limped forward. "Changing the name does not alter the fact that Leila knows what the plan entails."

"Then you, General Jaëger, must see that she dies." The emperor drew himself to his full height. "Even if the British suspect foul play, when they see our men in the same room with their leaders, their fears will be laid to rest. An attack on this scale is unprecedented and is therefore impossible to my unimaginative cousins. Besides, turncoats are always held in suspicion. The British will have difficulty believing a woman who betrayed her own people. What is to prevent her from lying to them?"

"And of our agents in the field?" Falkenhayn spoke again. "Anyone involved only knows the name *Herkules*. It would be difficult at best to inform them that it is the same mission under a different name."

"Hindenburg will find a way." Wilhelm turned to the pasty-faced cretin. "Can this be accomplished, General?"

Hindenburg bowed low. "Consider it done, Excellency."

"Ah!" A grin slid over the kaiser's mustachioed face. "The perfect answer." The smile faded as quickly as it had appeared as his censoring glare rolled from Haber to Jaëger. "This is an opportunity for you both to redeem yourselves. *Herr* Haber will

develop an antidote that immunizes our men from a gas attack while you, General Jaeger, will destroy your own creation. Do not return to the Fatherland until the girl is dead.”

“I understand, my Kaiser.”

Wilhelm raised a warning finger. “Fail me again, General Jaeger, and not only will you die, but your name will die as well.”

“My name?” Werner frowned.

“It is only because of your past record of exceptional service to the nation that you are still alive, General Jaeger. If you fail in this simple task, history will bear no record of your existence. Your name will be stricken from our military records. Your son is dead, you have no family. Nothing to show you ever lived. You have six months to finish this. Do not fail me.”

Werner blanched. “I understand,” he said again. This time, Falkenhayn thought he detected a slight quaver in his voice.

Wilhelm’s eyes probed his face for a long moment, then he turned to Falkenhayn. “Unfortunately, my *former* Chief of Staff, a monarch’s clemency can only extend so far.”

Falkenhayn’s mouth went dry. “Former?”

“General Hindenburg is your replacement.” Wilhelm gestured toward the beaming fool. “Give him what he needs, then pack your bags and get out.”

“M-my bags, Your Majesty?”

The monarch shoved his way past him but looked back at the door. “You have cost me two million soldiers, Falkenhayn. Two million.” His eyes narrowed. “Like the French, I never forgive . . . and I *never* forget.”

Chapter 2

March 1917. Berlin, Germany, Dahlem suburbs.

Fritz skulked through the busy streets of his hometown, his shoulders hunched, and black top hat pulled down over his brow. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his dark coat, sinking into its protective embrace. The warmth of spring had yet to reach Germany, and Fritz was grateful for the chilly air that allowed him to cover his identity with both coat and hat, affording him the blessing of anonymity. But he did not wish to escape his neighbors as much as he did his memories.

Berlin was a painful place, full of ghosts that taunted him from the shadows. His eyes rolled over the square through which he shuffled. Here, Clara had rallied the pacifists of Berlin, calling them to protest his use of chlorine gas as a weapon. He hurriedly crossed the square and turned down an empty street. The heels of his shoes clicked against the hard stones below and Fritz slowed his pace as he approached a snow-covered area, lined off by a black chain-link fence. He stared in mute despondency at the ghostlike tombstones then dropped heavily onto a bench.

Here, Clara was buried. At least her ashes were.

Sweat trickled down his neck despite the frigid air. How many times had he wronged this woman? Would she have killed

herself had he been more attentive? His brow furrowed. Then again, how many times had she slandered his name, turning their private quarrels into a public feud?

He sucked in a deep breath. This was not the time to look back. A new challenge had presented itself in the form of the kaiser's request. He was to develop a synthetic compound that could act as an antidote to gas poisoning.

Haber absently removed his hat to wipe the sweat from his bald head. *But how can it be done?*

"Fritz? Fritz Haber?"

He froze, recognizing the lilting voice that made his blood run as cold as the snow-littered ground. Oddly enough, there was a time that voice had turned his blood into fire. Slowly, he shifted toward the woman who had been his accomplice in sin.

She took a few steps forward then faltered. "I . . . it's been over a year since I've seen you. How are you, Fritz?"

With a soft sigh, Fritz took in the sight of Charlotte Nathan. A fashionable black hat adorned her dark hair. A bright blue top brought a splash of color to her beautifully pale cheeks and graceful neck and a long black skirt fell to her black boots. Her eyes glowed with a warmth that touched him, even as he shrank within himself at her approach. In her hands she held several wrapped parcels. Germany was suffering the ravaging effects of war, but it seemed that even hunger bowed to the beauty of this woman.

Fritz rose and made a slight bow. "It is good to see you again, Ms. Nathan."

She arched a quizzical eyebrow, gliding over the snow toward him. "Ms. Nathan?" She lowered her voice. "For you, I am Charlotte. *Only* Charlotte. Or have you forgotten?"

Fritz looked away, a lump rising in his throat. “No . . . Charlotte. That is the problem. I have not forgotten.” He turned toward the cemetery. “I cannot forget my guilt, m-my stubborn pride. It became my god, you see. And I offered my wife as a sacrifice.”

Charlotte laid a warm, gentle hand upon his arm, turning him toward her. “Don’t think like that Fritz. You and I, we love each other, *ja?* We always have. What happened with Clara . . . that’s not your fault. I don’t blame you, no one does. All that matters is that we love each other.”

Haber pulled the *pince-nez* from his nose and wiped his tearing eyes. “Love?” He scoffed. “Charlotte, you must understand that I am a scientist. Unless something can be proven, it does not exist. What we call *love* cannot be measured; it cannot be quantified or analyzed. Love is simply the metaphysical combination of random hormones that produce chemical reactions. We interpret this as emotion when it is nothing more than an ordinary, biological process that leads to human reproduction!”

With a grunt, Fritz rammed the *pince-nez* back onto his nose.

“Are you quite finished?” Charlotte tilted her head to one side, mouth upturned in an incomprehensible smile.

He shoved his hat back on his head. “What do you mean?”

Instead of answering, she let the packages fall to the ground, leaned forward, and pulled him into a passionate kiss. She held him close for several long moments and, at the warmth of her embrace, Fritz felt the ice in his heart begin to thaw.

At length, Charlotte pulled away. “I won’t quibble about the details of love, Fritz. The fact is that you need me. And I need you. I need you to get out of this slump that you’re in and reach for the stars.”

Impetuously, she kissed him again, kissed him as though her life depended upon the passion of this moment. This time it was Haber who broke away first, breathless and confused.

“Glory is waiting for you, Fritz. Waiting for us.”

Glory. Something stirred within him, an old hunger that had lain dormant for many long months. He closed his eyes, afraid to surrender to its siren call. “No, Charlotte. I am a changed man. Clara’s death has—”

“Clara’s death has made a way for us to be together.” Charlotte held him at arm’s length and he opened his eyes.

“What are you saying?”

“Can’t you see?” She gestured toward the graveyard. “All that held you back is now gone. You’re free to be the man you’ve always dreamed of becoming.”

Her voice softened, and she laid her forehead against his own. “I’m also free, Fritz. Free to . . . become your wife.”

“My what?” Fritz jerked back as though he had been scalded by a hot iron.

Smoothly, Charlotte pulled him back toward her, intertwining her fingers with his own. “Think, my love. Your son, Hermann, needs a mother, and you, well,” she said with a wink, “*you* need a woman.”

Haber stood as still as a stone, his mind reeling under the barrage of emotions that Charlotte had so easily unleashed. To his shame, he had fallen for her charms before. She knew how to manipulate his weaknesses. But he had to admit that her words, though unexpected, made sense. He put no faith in love, but logic dictated that he bring a female into his home to help him raise his teenage son.

He gnawed at the inside of his lower lip. As she insinuated, nature itself mandated that he find a wife. If not Charlotte . . . then who? *Still* . . .

“Normally it is the man who proposes to the woman.” He shifted uncomfortably.

“When has our relationship ever been normal, Fritz?”

There he had to agree. “All the same, I will need time to think it over.” He dipped his head, stood abruptly, and held out his hand. “In the meanwhile, walk with me.”

He helped her gather her parcels then turned toward his home.

“Where are we going?” Charlotte slipped her hand in his.

“I do not know. Perhaps nowhere.” Haber shrugged then slanted her a glance. “Or, perhaps, we are going toward the future. Time alone will tell.”

Later that evening, Charlotte padded down the hallway toward Fritz’s study, her black coat draped over her arm. After taking lunch, they had spent the afternoon discussing the events of the past year. Fritz had gone abroad, seeking consolation by burying himself in morbid plans of gas attacks. He had also attended several symposiums where, to his horror, he had been shunned by various members of the scientific international community who considered his creation of the poisonous cloud an act of murder. Guilt over Clara’s death coupled with the loss of his reputation had nearly broken the wretched man’s mind.

As soon as his son, Hermann, had returned from school, Fritz had escaped to the sanctuary of his lab. Charlotte had chosen to hide her irritation at his absence and had devoted the rest of her day to getting reacquainted with Hermann. Now that evening had come, it was time for her to go home, but she would not

leave without putting herself once more at the forefront of the scientist's enigmatic mind.

Charlotte did not need to ask directions to his office from the servants who scurried out of her way like rats before a feline predator. A smile tugged at her lips. She rather liked the comparison. Like a cat, she toyed with her prey—Fritz. He was the man into which she longed to sink her claws. Not for his looks of course, but for the prestige that he offered. No matter what delusions the international community held, when Germany won the war, the world would bow at the feet of the man whose intellect had sent tens of thousands to their graves. And she would be right at his side.

Charlotte scoffed as she passed a photograph of Clara that still hung on the wall. "When I move in, you'll be the first thing to go."

Clara. The petulant fool had not known how to handle her husband. Fritz's ego demanded praise and Clara had failed to give him that adulation. Despite his earlier grief-induced confession, Charlotte knew that science was not Fritz's god. That place was reserved only for himself. She was prepared to be his most ardent worshipper for as long as it suited her purpose.

In return, her husband would lay wealth, power, and honor at her feet. Her social circles would pay homage to the man who ushered in a new age of German superiority. Fritz had known the scorn of a woman who had chosen to be his rival. Charlotte would show him the support of a woman who wanted to be his wife.

A cunning smile slipped over her mouth as she counted off the days since her last cycle. Timing was everything. The cat knew this. The most opportune moment had to be identified before pouncing. That is, if one really wanted the prize.

She rapped lightly on the door of his study. “Fritz darling?” He was inside, she could hear him muttering incoherent formulas. The man had been in a daze all day, babbling about some impossible task that the kaiser had given him.

“Fritz?” She knocked again, twice, then stepped back as the white door swung open.

He blinked at her as though he had forgotten she existed. “Charlotte?”

“May I come in?” Leaning forward on her tiptoes, she kissed the thin lips beneath his cropped mustache. He had lost weight and his bald scalp glistened with a sheen of sweat. Apparently, his work for the kaiser was not going well. “Let me in, my love. Problems shared are problems solved.”

He hesitated, making the pasty skin of his sagging face jiggle as he scratched his right cheek. She knew at once that he was thinking of his wife.

“Fritz.” Charlotte laid a gentle hand on his chest. “I’m not your rival. I’m the woman who loves you. Please?”

He hesitated again, then with a slow nod, he stepped aside.

Charlotte clucked her tongue as she entered the large room. Papers littered the ground. Moldy, half-eaten sandwiches lay discarded on his worktable while incomprehensible writing scrawled across a dark blackboard. She was about to lay her coat on his worktable but thought better of it at the last moment.

“How do you even think in here?” She crinkled her nose.

With a shrug, he said, “I know it seems like a mess but it’s actually a very systematic method of organization.”

She took a deep breath, stifling her urge to throw everything in the trash. *Timing, Charlotte.*

“Right. So, the kaiser wants you to develop a . . . what is it again?”

“A-an antidote to a gas attack.” Fritz wrung his hands together. “It’s impossible! How can I take life and save it at the same time?”

She frowned. This wasn’t like the man she had once known. He still hadn’t come fully back to his old self. “Things are only impossible because we haven’t done them yet.”

“You don’t understand. It is *impossible* to develop an antidote to gas.” Haber’s shoulders drooped. “Once inhaled the body reacts immediately.”

“No, no, my love.” She cupped his face in her hands and made him look into her eyes. “You mustn’t think like that. You can . . . you *will* do this.”

Gently prying her fingers from his face, he held them in his own. “You are good to me, Charlotte.”

“Now, think back to the moment you discovered how to turn chlorine gas into a weapon. You once told me that it took months of failure before you succeeded.” She stepped back, gingerly wiping her fingers on a discarded napkin. “What did you do differently?”

He turned to his board and sketched unintelligible symbols. “I switched from one element to another then burned—”

“Burned?” She tilted her head to one side. “Does burning something change its . . .” She faltered, gesturing helplessly. “I don’t know, it’s shape?”

“I must remember that you are not a scientist. Forgive me.”

She pursed her lips. “What if you were to burn something you’ve already made? Would that do anything?”

“Well, no, I—” The words died on Haber’s tongue. He gaped at her, then blinked several times.

“Burn?” He whirled toward the blackboard, chalk in hand and scrabbled at the surface like a madman. “Burn!”

“Burn nitrogen.”

She caught only fragments of his mumbles.

“Muscles, poison used . . . Greeks, no Egyptians . . . invert the formula . . .”

Haber sucked in his breath and stepped back from the board. “Charlotte!” He pivoted toward her, eyes round. “It might work.”

Her eyebrows hiked together. “What might work?”

“Y-your words. They made me think.” He rattled off a convoluted scientific explanation, concluding with, “it just might give me an antidote!”

“You’ve done it?” A surge of adrenaline coursed through her veins. She was as thrilled by the animated energy that suddenly pulsed from him as the fact that he may have stumbled across the answer to his chemical problem. “You’ve actually done it?”

Turning back to the board, he stood with shoulders back and legs spread apart. “Nothing is impossible. Nothing!”

Charlotte gazed at the back of his rounded shoulders for several moments before easing toward the door. *This* was the man she remembered. *This* was the man she needed. For the moment he was lost in the arms of molecules, poison, and death but soon—perhaps in a few days or even a few weeks—he would lose himself in her arms. And then, everything she had always wanted, everything she had been denied as a child would be hers. *Timing.*

“Good night, Fritz.” She slung her overcoat around her shoulders. He did not reply. Tossing her head, Charlotte shut the door, leaving him to bask alone in the rays of self-importance that surely shone upon his mind. Tonight, Fritz would climb back on the altar of his pride. This small discovery made him secure in the knowledge that he could not fail. *Soon.* Her lips curved in a victorious smile. *Soon he will be ready to rule.*

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