Dante Garderet

Mr. Palshaw

English IV

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The Mission

Speakers blaring from across the airfield cut the morning silence. It was not the usual air-raid siren that Christophe was used to, but a classical song. He jolted upright, his hands parting his light brown hair, and he opened his eyes to see the rest of his squadron doing the same. The curved, rusty, corrugated iron walls of barracks blocked out most of the noise of the speaker, but the high pitched, trumpeted music made it clear that it was an announcement straight from Berlin.

In his white briefs, Christophe swung his legs over his cot and stood on the dusty wooden floor. There were no windows in the barracks, but the spring light streaming through the poorly sealed door illuminated the dusty, cracked floorboards of the dorm. Some of his squadron mates were still sleeping, but others were sitting on the edge of their wooden-framed cots and pulling at their thin, white bed sheets. As Christophe made his way to his oak locker at the foot of his bed, the door burst open and the morning light pierced his eyes.

“Get up, get up!”

As Christophe’s eyes adjusted, he could see the Lieutenant in the doorway, standing with wide blue eyes and flared nostrils. He clenched his fists at the side of his blue-grey Luftwaffe uniform, wrinkled and stained with sweat.

“All of you, get up! Come outside now! Move it *gottverdammt*!”

The entire squadron hurried barefoot outside onto the wet grass. Right in front of them was the runway, blackened from tire rubber and oil. The smell of gasoline and machine grease saturated the cold air, and on the other side of the runway perched the steel speakers on a grey pole that played the announcement in a booming Bavarian accent.

“*Aus Berlin*: as of this morning, our Fuehrer, Adolf Hitler, is dead. More information to follow shortly.”

The somber music continued playing, but Christophe drowned it out. He stood at the edge of the runway, his tan face and brown eyes still, only thinking one thing: *Is this damn war finally over?* The other pilots looked around, most slack-jawed. A few murmured to themselves, but Christophe immediately locked eyes with Francis, his wingman. His icy blue eyes glared at Christophe and he subtly shook his head. It was the Lieutenant who spoke first in a shaky voice.

“Men, go back to your barracks. Wait there for further instructions. There will be no flights today.”

Save for a few birds singing in the trees behind the buildings, the walk back was silent. The faded orange windsock at the end of the runway hung down lifelessly, and next to it waited the squadron’s planes, grey Messerschmitt BF-109 fighters with bright yellow noses that distinguished the squadron. Splintered wooden crates of machine-gun ammunition sat on the ground next to the planes, waiting for that day’s mission that would not take place.

As soon as Christophe entered the barracks, he rushed to his locker and reached under his clothes and flight suit to the bottom, finding a picture frame. The frame held a faded black and white photo, and in it was a woman with a beaming smile and shoulder-length, blond hair in a checkered dress. To her side stood two kids, a young girl and a younger boy, both exhibiting sandy blond hair and the woman’s radiant smile. Finally, on the other side of them stood a tall, brown-haired man with a sharp nose and small, pink lips, a man who Christophe vaguely recognized as himself. The picture was inscribed with a date: April 12, 1938. That was one day after he got his draft notice, more than 7 years ago now. He ran his hand over the photo and then put it away, and turned to face his mates.

“So that was it then? ” Gus, one of the younger pilots, asked. “It’s over?” His freckled, white face held wide eyes, and he looked around the room. Gus had arrived two months ago at the base, fresh from the reserves. He pulled at his straight, ironed jacket and scratched his blond, gelled hair.

“It is not over until the Russians or the Americans or British roll into this aerodrome,” Francis immediately retorted. He was leaning on the frame of the door of the barracks and glared at Gus with cold blue eyes. “It will not be over because we are still going to fight.”

Across the room, Christophe spoke in a scratchy voice.

“But Francis – this must be the end. Why else are we fighting? What –“

“We are fighting to protect the *Vaterland*, Christophe. To protect Germany. To overcome the 20 years of humiliation inflicted upon us. How can you want an end to the war at this time?” Francis’s icy blue eyes bore into Christophe, and he clenched his jaw as he ran a hand through his white-blond hair.

Christophe didn’t respond and sat silently on the edge of his cot. They had flown together since the beginning of the war, and he knew Francis better than anyone else. His family had been killed by Allied bombers in Dresden; Francis would never agree with him.

The pilots waited for two days around the airbase with little information. Gus was certain that Germany was going to surrender, and talked constantly about going back to see his mother.

“My mother told me she just had a baby!” Gus said to Christophe. “I’ve got a brand new sister waiting for me at home!”

“It’s not over yet, Gus,” Christophe cautioned.

But though he tried to hide it, a smile crept on the edges of Christophe’s dry lips. He carried his photograph in his pocket, looking at it every day. *It will be soon,* he thought.

On the morning of the third day, Christophe woke to the sound of train brakes squealing against cold steel, and his squadron stepped outside to see a tall, uniformed officer disembark from the coal-black train at the other end of the runway and walk briskly to their barracks. His grey slacks were ironed and tucked into shiny black boots, and he wore a peaked cap marked with a gold Imperial Eagle over his fair, white face. He pulled out a faded leather journal also stamped with the Imperial Eagle and began to read names, mostly of the younger pilots. The officer told them that they were going to be leaving for home. More and more of the pilots packed their brown duffel bags and left throughout the day. By the afternoon, only Christophe, Gus, and Francis were left, and finally, Christophe’s name was called. He beamed, but as he went to collect his bag the officer turned.

“Christophe, Francis, Gus. I am happy to inform you that you will not be leaving yet. You have been selected to carry out the mission of protecting the Reich’s headquarters from bombers. Congratulations on this assignment!”

Francis shot up from his seat by his bed and shook the officer's hand, thanking him, as Gus and Christophe stood still, looking at the officer. A lump formed in Christophe’s throat and his heart plummeted.

“But that is suicide,” Gus stuttered. His face was drained of color. “I mean, there are hundreds of American bombers there. We’ll be shot dow—”

“That is an order. Report to *hauptquartier* this afternoon for your briefing.” The officer stood tall and clicked his shiny black boots as he turned to leave the barracks.

Christophe didn’t believe it. Germany was bound to surrender soon. His mind went blank. This must be a mistake.

The briefing was a blur to Christophe. His red eyes prevented him from seeing the officer’s white lines on the chalkboard board at the front of the room that told of the bombers and fighters they needed to look out for. Gus was sitting on a wooden bench next to Christophe, and across the small briefing room sat Francis, taking notes on a piece of scrap paper.

 “This is suicide,” Gus whispered. “Don’t you agree? I shouldn’t be doing this. I should be meeting my baby sister.”

Christophe nodded, his legs rapidly tapping the floor.

“I agree, Gus. We should not be going on this mission.” But as the briefing ended, Christophe knew there was no way out; tomorrow, he would be going on his last mission.

The planes rested with their black rubber tires compressed on the tarmac. Their skinny, dihedral wings protruded from the grey fuselage, and the bright yellow noses reflected the morning light. Christophe and Gus walked in their blue-gray flight suits, their yellow life jackets and brown headsets hanging from their hands, wires and tubes dangling and almost dragging on the tarmac.

As Christophe reached his plane, he saw the scratches that embedded themselves in the grey camouflage and the tape that corded his plane, attempting to mask holes in the fuselage. He hoisted himself over the wing and into the cramped cockpit and took out his photo from his pocket. Wedging it in between the black altimeter dial and the fuel gauge so that it would not move, he pressed his fingers to his lips, and then touched the photo. Francis, who already had his propellor spinning, crackled over the radio.

 “Christophe, Gus, let’s go. Get your engines on now.”

 Christophe flicked the master switch, and the engine coughed and started spinning. In a guttural growl, the propeller began turning and spat black smoke from the exhaust. He released the brake and taxied along the runway, and when he got to the front he opened the throttle all the way. The growl turned into a thunder and the plane lurched forward on its two front wheels, barreling down the black airstrip until it floated off the ground.

The flight took two hours to reach the bombers. As Christophe got closer, his legs began shaking, but he forced them down on the floor. He looked at his photo, and then back to the horizon, just as hundreds of brown dots appeared glimmering in the clouds below them. White streams of condensation belched from the dots, marking them as American B-17 bombers. Smaller silver dots circled them through the clouds, swarms of deadly P-51 Mustang fighters.

“There’s hundreds of them!” Gus stammered over the intercom. “This is crazy.”

Christophe muttered to himself. “This is crazy.”

“It’s not crazy,” Francis spoke firmly. “It’s our duty.”

He pushed his fighter out in front and began a steep dive. As Christophe and Gus followed behind, yellow sparks of tracer gunfire erupted from the American bombers, tracking the three lone planes as they progressed towards the flock. The engines of the BF-109s whined as the dive angle increased, but the whiz of incoming bullets cut through their drone. Black smoke stained the sky, bursts of flak that threw shrapnel in all directions and rattled the fighters. The roar of the engines blended with the booming of the flak, creating a cacophony that drowned out any communication in Christophe’s headset.

“*Scheisse!”* shouted Gus into the radio. “It’s too damn much! I’m going around!” He peeled through a grey cloud of anti-aircraft smoke, and just as he lined up behind a bomber Christophe saw a school American fighters glimmer like sardines, turning toward Gus. From their silver wings spewed orange bursts of 50 caliber gunfire which engulfed Gus’s plane. The orange bursts erupted into yellow flames that licked Gus’s wings.

“Gus, pull up!” Christophe shouted into the radio. There was no response, but as Christophe dipped under the clouds he saw Gus’s grey fighter spiraling down, burning bright yellow with dark smoke billowing from the cockpit. It’s right wing broke off and the plane dropped through the clouds towards the ground. Christophe pulled up on the stick and forced his plane up above the bombers. His hyperventilation condensed on the inside of his oxygen mask, and he couldn’t tell whether he was shaking because of the engine vibration or his nerves.

“I can’t do this, Francis,” Christophe said. He looked at the photo perched between his instruments. “This is suicide.”

Francis circled around from his attack run and leveled off with Christophe. Through his smudged cockpit, Christophe saw Francis’s face, covered by headset and mask, with only his icy blue eyes staring at him.

“If you turn back now, that is treason,” Francis said. His blue eyes still bore into Christophe as he shook his head. “You will be shot. We have to complete this mission, Chris. I know you. I know you can do it.”

The drone of the fighter’s engine echoed through the cockpit. Christophe looked at his photo trembling from the vibration and looked at his leg trembling on the ground. The bombers pushed on below them, not changing course. Black smoke still hung in the air from Gus’s plane.

“I can’t do this Francis.”

“Chris, I’m warning you. I will be forced to take act— “

Christophe ripped off his headset. He peeled his plane back from Francis’s and turned away from the fleet, opening the throttle and lurching forward. His heart pounded in his chest, and his heavy breathing condensed in the cold air. He pulled back on his stick and jammed the elevators in their highest position, rocketing up through the clouds as his altimeter wound up. 10,000 feet. 12,000 feet. Christophe leveled off and squeezed his trembling hands on the worn wooden handle of his control stick.

BOOM.

A blast jolted his plane and his engine began coughing oil. It stained the glass in front and the altimeter began unwinding. Frantically, Christophe checked his control stick and looked to his right wing, peppered with holes that held flaps of loose, grey metal skin.

BOOM.

The glass cockpit shattered and shards slit Christophe’s cheek. Blood streaked down his face and pooled on his thighs and in his metal seat, drying sanguine from the cold air. Christophe was able to look in his cracked mirror above the control panel just long enough to see a grey plane with a bright yellow nose on his tail, all guns firing. In the cockpit was a pilot with icy blue eyes.