Isabelle Sorente

*The Woman*

*and the Falcon*

ANovel

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JC Lattès

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“The hunger, the cold, the injustice. And then the silence. A long silence, as long as an interminable Russian winter, as stifling as a shroud of snow. Tambov equals silence.”

—Bernard Reumaux in *Tambov, The Camp of the Alsatian and Mosellan Malgré Nous Prisoners of the Russians*.

“Despite the fear that runs through the darkness, despite the overcast sky,

Bird, O my bird, listen here: do not close your wings.”

—Rabindranath Tagore, *The Gardener*.

# I

# **The Attack**

# **(April 2018 – August 1944)**

## **Thomas**

The bird was there, just outside the window, its beak tapping on the pane.

— To-Maa, To-Maa, said the bird.

He straightened up just in time to glimpse the dazzling flash of wings as they fled into the night. His heart beat so hard he thought it would burst through his chest. He reached for it instinctively. But his heart was still there, firmly enclosed in his rib cage. Suddenly, he wanted to cry. He wanted so badly to run after her. Because of course it was her. Who else? Who else would come in the middle of the night? Thomas felt around for the switch on his bedside lamp. Had he dreamed those wings, white like a communion veil and edged with a phosphorescent flash? Or had the falcon really perched on his window ledge before it left again? But these questions were unimportant. She remembered. That was all that mattered.

Thomas reached out to switch on the light. He realized his hand was shaking, almost as if he feared an apparition in his room, something that did not belong there. But the light came on and everything was in order. The large wooden armoire—the armoire made by his grandfather. Recently, Mona had told him it was worth nothing, not even a hundred euros. He had found that hard to believe, but Mona had insisted it was true, that she had a wardrobe of the same kind. She had kept it for her mother and finally wanted to sell it, but the second-hand dealer wasn’t interested. Massive furniture was no longer done; young people preferred a clothes rack they assembled themselves. The large wardrobe was still in its place. The chest in the corner, too. The large bed made of varnished wood, which itself must not be worth much, but where he had dreamed so many dreams. So many dreams. Did the wood remember? Did it erase them? Did it absorb the strangest, most horrible ones until there was nothing left but creaking?

He had dreamed of her before, of course. He dreamed of her from time to time. But this was the first time he’d had such a vivid sense —so cruel—of her presence. As if for an instant, she had been there in the room. And calling out to him.

— To-Maa, To-Maa!

This strange way of speaking his name! If she had been in danger (or dying?), he would have known, wouldn’t he? Had she called on him for help? Or was he the one in danger? Was she trying to warn him?

Now fully awake, Thomas made his way into the bathroom to splash some water on his face. When he turned on the light and noticed his reflection in the mirror, he recoiled.

His eyes sunk curiously into their sockets.

His white hair.

All at once, he remembered he was ninety-one years old.

When he dreamed of her, he was always eighteen. They were both eighteen. *Forever*. Was this the secret of what his doctor called his unusual constitution? You are cut from the rock, my dear Thomas. If all my patients were like you, I’d have to find another line of work. The young doc rattled off these compliments in an enthusiastic voice, like he was marveling at an animal capable of performing feats normally reserved for humans. Tricks like joking, thinking, or taking an interest in current events. Thomas’s hearing was gone, however, the one toll his age had taken. Without his hearing aids, he was nearly deaf. He was aware his price was light compared with other patients this young man treated, or so he said, now. But what seemed to concern this doctor the most was what he kept telling him in a bright (frightened?) tone. “You have your mind intact, Thomas. I tell you, that’s impressive.” The doctor tossed this embarrassed compliment at him each time Thomas answered a question with an acuity he had not expected. “So, Mr. Liéger, what are you reading these days?” “So, you fixed your computer?” “So, you watched a documentary?” This kind and condescending, “So,” as if the young doctor wanted to play the good guy but didn’t really want the old man to answer. Thomas answered anyway, looking him straight in the eye. (He re-read *The Girl Who Played with Fire*. He had added a memory extension to his eight-year-old computer. He’d streamed a documentary about Mongolia.) He was always a little amused by the doctor’s astonishment, as if a man of his age wasn’t supposed to be interested in technology or violent stories. It would have been easy enough for this boy to do a simple calculation and imagine the kinds of things that Thomas would have lived through, to tone down his surprise. But he had no interest. “You’ve got your mind intact, Thomas. I tell you that’s impressive.”

And her?

Was she still alive?

He consoled himself with the knowledge that women live longer than men, that they are more resilient. But he wasn’t sure this was a consolation. Life could so cruel for women.

Mona arrived, like she did every day, at exactly noon. She complained, like she did every day, about her aching knees, but what could be done except wait it out with patience? Mona pulled out a blouse she kept hanging in his closet, between his winter jackets and his robe (a gift from his step-daughter that he had never worn). He sometimes wondered whether Mona’s habit of hanging her blouses and a few scarves in his closet was a way of declaring her feelings for him. After all, they saw each other every day for four years. She made his meals. She knew the house by heart. They enjoyed each other’s conversation. And there were three empty bedrooms in his house. If Mona had said she wanted to live here, instead of the little apartment she rented in Saverne, he would have certainly said yes. Like he said yes to Louise once.

But would he make her happy?

Nothing could be less certain.

And besides, Mona was less than sixty-five years old, almost thirty years younger than him. She could have been his daughter. What was she thinking, leaving scarves in his closet and batting her eyelashes every time she looked at him?

— How’s it going today, Thomas?

— I had a funny dream last night.

— What did you dream of? she asked, vigorously scrubbing a bowl from breakfast that Thomas had already washed.

He didn’t understand why she felt the need to rewash his dishes, as if he didn’t know how to clean them. Another prejudice against his age? Or was it because he was a man?

Thomas sighed.

— I had a dream about a bird.

— Not a bad omen, was it?

— No. It was a bird from my youth.

Mona gave him the look of a suspicious wife.

— Your youth?

— Yes. You weren’t born yet.

— And what did it come to announce, this bird? Good news or a catastrophe?

— I don’t know, said Thomas.

The phone rang just as they were sitting down to the table. Mona had gotten into the habit of having lunch with him, except on the days when she used her break to go into town or have lunch with a friend. She gave Thomas a curious glance.

— Let it ring, he said. No one ever calls me at this hour.

It was true. His family only called him on special occasions, on Easter, Christmas and New Year’s. Sometimes, to give him important news. More rarely to check in on him. These calls always happened on Sundays or on holidays, and he missed them if the phone rang while he was out in the forest. He was lucky enough to live in the house where he grew up, in the middle of the Vosges Forest.

The week had just started, and yet the ringing persisted.

— If it’s the window salesman again, I’ll hang up on him, said Mona.

She walked with a surprisingly light step for a woman of her age. It wasn’t the first time Thomas remarked to himself how pretty she was. Mona didn’t have children either. Sometimes he sensed a halo of regret emanating from her round face, despite the blond curls that she touched up each month in a salon in the outskirts of Obernai. Mona lived alone, like him. She had always lived alone, according to what she’d told him. Sometimes, he wondered whether she’d been a secret mistress, abandoned by a married man.

— It’s your niece, said Mona.

He grabbed the receiver so quickly he almost dropped it. How long had it been since he’d talked to Elisabeth? Since last Christmas. She hadn’t called on Easter like she usually did. He had been afraid to bother her and hadn’t dared to call her.

— Elisabeth…how are you? Did you see the sunrise this morning?

He didn’t blame her for calling so rarely. He knew she was busy with work. When she’d called at Christmas, she’d said she had a new office. Her company had moved to the top floor of a building on the banks of the Seine. Elisabeth’s office occupied an entire corner. She could see the sun rise over all of Paris. He’d been so happy for her. Their conversations were rare, but he delighted in talking to her, just as he had when she was a little girl. Elisabeth may now produce documentaries and earn a good living, but in his eyes, she was still the child of long ago. They had always gotten along well. Perhaps because she didn’t really look like the rest of her family. Just like him.

Suddenly, he had the impression that he could hear someone crying (was his hearing aid amplifying the sound?).

— Is everything OK?

— Thomas…could I come to your house?

He repeated her word, not sure he had heard correctly.

— You want to come to my house? Here?

— Would that be OK?

— Yes, of course.

If he could keep his voice from trembling too much, she wouldn’t perceive his astonishment.

— Of course, Thomas repeated. When would you like to come by?

— I don’t want to just stop by. I’d like to stay a whole week. Maybe more. I wouldn’t be alone, Vina would be with me.

Elisabeth had a daughter. He knew that, though he had never met her. Vina had grown up in the US. She was already eight when her mother returned to France and must be fourteen today. Elisabeth talked about her every time she called. Vina was a well-behaved young girl, from what she’d told him, did well in school. In the drawer of his nightstand, he should still have the birth announcement, the picture of a sleeping baby with black and curiously shiny hair. Vina. A young girl. People of Elisabeth’s generation would say: a teenager.

— Did you tell your father? he asked, his voice concerned.

— No, Tom, she said, in an irritated tone that reminded him of that little girl from long ago. I didn’t. I’m a bit old for that.

— Alright. When do you think you’ll come? The month of July is much nicer than August here, especially for walking in the forest.

Again, he thought he heard someone crying.

— I was thinking about the end of the week.

With this, his thoughts began to race. Something strange was going on. Something serious enough that she was running away with her daughter. Should he ask her for details? Should he act like everything was fine?

Elisabeth’s voice suddenly seemed to come from a far-off place:

— If it won’t work, you can tell me. I will understand. Thomas, it’s my fault, I shouldn’t have. . .

Such distress in her voice! Such weariness.

*Like the ones who, without warning, fell in the snow and didn’t get back up.*

Thomas straightened his shoulders and tightened his hand on the receiver, as if he was gripping his niece’s wrist to pull her to her feet.

— It’s fine, Elisabeth. I’ll be glad to see both of you. Don’t worry. My house is big, but I am not taking care of everything alone. Mona and I will be ready and waiting.

He asked her the exact date of her arrival, Saturday, Sunday? She didn’t know yet. She promised to call again the next day. He didn’t venture to say, “kisses and hugs,” or try other pleasantries, and she hung up.

— So, your niece is going to visit? asked Mona.

He explained that, in fact, Elisabeth was his great-niece, the daughter of his nephew, Alexandre. When she’d been younger, she’d visited each summer with her family. Then they’d visited less often. Eventually, his ties with his nephew had gone slack, and Thomas hadn’t tried to tighten them. But he’d always loved his great-niece.

— She’s coming to the house with her daughter, Vina.

He said the name Vina like he’d heard it hundreds of times, but in fact, it was the first time he’d said it out loud.

### ELISABETH

Elisabeth stared at her phone’s screen for a long time, as if to make certain the conversation was over, that her great-uncle could no longer hear her. She had called him Tom, like she had in the old days, when she’d looked up to him and asked for stories. As a child, she had adored him. Tom had something that the other adults—her father, her mother—hadn’t had. Something magical. A little unsettling, too, but Tom’s kindness meant people were never uneasy around him (especially an intrepid girl like Elisabeth). His hollow cheeks and his clear, narrow eyes gave his face, from certain angles, the look of an animal (but one tamed by her, sweet with her). What impressed the small Elisabeth the most was the way he stood. He was already a head taller than the other adults, and he stood so straight it made him even taller. When he stopped, motionless, in the middle of a path, to listen for a crack, a footstep, the beating of a wing, it was like a magnificent tree had grown up in that instant. Murmuring: don’t you hear it? Don’t you see it? But no matter how hard she had tried, she couldn’t hear it, couldn’t see what he was trying to show her, or she saw it too late, as the robin flew away, or the deer’s antler suddenly disappeared.

He must have changed, thought Elisabeth, even if his voice had stayed the same. His hearing, so keen he could detect the presence of a doe from a rustle of leaves, he must have lost that. She felt silly, checking for the second time that their conversation was really over, for fear of him overhearing her

Then, she checked to make sure the door to her office was securely locked.

Through the bay window, she cast a glance over the banks of the Seine. This endless view over the south of Paris, this view that presented itself like a panoramic gift to the director of Nonfiction Productions, the independent production office that had raised investigative documentaries to the level of hit series (with the audience) and auteur films (in terms of recognition), and had even, the year before, bought out a specialized TV channel. Thanks to her choices. Thanks to her relentless energy. Thanks to her love for the directors, for their cameras, their business plans, and their technical contracts, thanks to her love, and their love, of remote places and of dangerous, secret, threatened images.

And at the source of this love was her love for Georges.

They hadn’t just been happy. She had been the happiest woman in the world for eight years. The happiest woman in the world. It seemed so hard to believe. But she had won the title without even realizing it. Eight years in a row.

When Georges died, she didn’t have time to be sad. She had been worried, so terribly worried for Vina, that she had moved through the stages of grief—there were seven according to what everyone kept telling her—like she was traveling down an icy road covered in fog. She thought about nothing but inching forward. Like she was in danger of falling. Like she was barely injured. Like she was moving to the cadence of a drum beating out a rhythm of action words: move, go, bounce back, set out, win, a stable life, a happy life, despite everything, a life that let her daughter to laugh again. And she had succeeded. They’d returned to France. She had found an apartment and enrolled Vina in school. She had filed the charter for her production company on the first day of school, just after dropping off Vina and watching, with tears in her eyes, Vina’s little hand waving as the children disappeared, neatly paired up, two by two, at the end of the corridor.

She had even paid for sessions with a psychologist. Was it because she had been afraid something would go wrong with Vina? Because she’d always suspected that one day or another, her mistakes would catch up with her and something would go awry? No. Of course not. Because losing your father and moving to another country is a lot for a child. That’s what Elisabeth had said to the shrink she had consulted, alone the first time, then with Vina, before letting her eight-year-old daughter go without her after three sessions. She had trusted this elegant woman, who looked like Holly Hunter in *The Piano Lesson*, despite her old-fashioned hairstyle. Elisabeth didn’t understand why women kept their hair long after forty. They were of the same generation. Elisabeth had felt an immediate connection with her. She had even dared, in that first session with Doctor Mancini—because Holly Hunter was a psychiatrist, in addition to being a psychoanalyst and a child psychologist—to discuss the subject that was troubling her.

She did not want to reduce her daughter to the story of her birth. Because Vina was more than the story of her birth. Vina was a little girl who had lost her father and left the United States to return to France. “I’d appreciate you not reducing her to her origins.” Had she dared to say this to Dr. Mancini, to speak to her so brutally? It’s possible, but memories can be deceiving. Vina visited the office of Dr. Mancini every Wednesday for a year. She had cried for her father. She had cried in her mother’s arms. And then she had made a friend at school, then another. And then she’d made friends in middle school. For Vina had entered middle school at the age of nine (and a half, Elisabeth had specified to the principal, to reassure her). This had been one of the unintended consequences of the sessions with Dr. Mancini, a diagnosis that Elisabeth had never anticipated or asked for. She wasn’t one of those mothers who attached an undue importance to grades, maybe because Vina had always had good marks when they lived in San Francisco. When they arrived in France, Vina’s grades had become unusually outstanding. Vina never scored fewer than nineteen out of twenty, even in gymnastics, Elisabeth remarked with a pride she was a bit ashamed of. (Did she think intelligence was incompatible with physical accomplishment? Or that physical rigor was incompatible with femininity? Did she think something was *abnormal*?) Vina was advanced for her age, confirmed Dr. Mancini, Vina was gifted. When she was sure her daughter could not see her, Elisabeth observed her with fascination. Her black hair neatly tied back in a ponytail, she leaned over her desk, a desk from Ikea that they’d spent an entire Sunday putting together.

How many times had Vina studied at this desk? Alone or with her friend Juliette, even last month, preparing their presentation on Victor Hugo.

At this memory, Elisabeth started to cry, or rather gasp, as if she’d swallowed something the wrong way. She hiccupped for exactly three minutes, and then the hiccup-sob stopped. This sob dated back to Georges’ death. When she’d had to invent a new life for them. Assure. Advance. Advance. Whenever sadness overcame her—the lack of a man in her bed, the absence of a shoulder to rest her head on—she allowed herself ten minutes of tears, no more. She had too much to do. She couldn’t let herself go under. Not with a daughter who was only eight years old. Cry as hard as you want, but for just ten minutes. This worked well enough at first. She would sob, moaning like an animal, sometimes screaming in pain, when she was sure no one could hear her (locked in her room in the morning, while Vina was at school). And at the end of ten minutes, she picked up where she’d left off. Little by little, her tears dried faster, like her brain anticipated the end of the allotted time by a few seconds. By the end of a month, she only cried for three minutes, and frankly, that was fine with her, considering all she had to do, so three minutes became the new authorized duration of sadness. Now tears weren’t even flowing anymore. Only that little hiccup remained. Today, she would have liked to cry for hours. She would have liked to cry until nightfall, locked in her office, and keep sobbing, watching the passers-by, tiny black shapes, out of reach, crossing and uncrossing the street.

But all she could do was emit this ridiculous hiccup that doesn’t even last as long as an answering machine message.

When Dr. Mancini had abandoned them—that’s how it felt to Elisabeth, an abandonment, by this woman, this reassuring presence in their lives, this good fairy that watched over them—when Dr. Mancini had officially “finished her work with Vina,” she had requested to meet Elisabeth alone, like she had the first time. What she had said. . . oh those words! What good they’d done! Like a benediction. To the point that Elisabeth saw herself kissing Holly Hunter’s hands, imagining it so vividly she had blushed. “Vina isn’t just a very gifted child. She’s a happy and balanced girl. No doubt because she’s so very loved,” Dr. Mancini had said, and her lovely smile had wrinkled her thin face. “Everything will be fine, Elisabeth, rest assured. Truly. Sure, Vina will ask existential questions. She’s already asking: Where do I come from? Why am I alive? These are the questions that haunt us our whole lives, and they’re especially intense for children like her.” Dr. Mancini had cleared her throat, “I mean precocious children.” Dr. Mancini preferred the term precocious, or even gifted, over bloodcurdling acronyms like GT or HA. “Vina is armed, fully armed, to face the fundamental human questions. Her energy and curiosity are undeniable psychic forces. And above all, she loves you deeply. Vina has a profound love for life.” Then Holly Hunter had stared directly at her, her benevolent smile unwavering, “Vina is young. I’m not worried about her. If I may, Elisabeth, I’m concerned about you. You advance and advance like a good soldier. But do you want to go on like this your whole life?” Elisabeth had responded honestly that yes, her way of life suited her perfectly. Dr. Mancini raised her eyebrows with a smile. She’d said she would always be there if Vina needed her. The two women shook hands. And they never saw each other again.

Dr. Mancini’s benediction had worked. It had worked for three years. Until Vina turned thirteen. Then fourteen. And then it became clear that Holly Hunter had been wrong about everything.

Vina did not have a profound love for life.

Vina had threatened one of her classmates. With a box cutter.

The disciplinary council meeting was today, and Elisabeth had to be at the school in less than an hour.

She had put her head down, between her crossed arms, on the big glass table where she held production meetings every Monday morning. It took effort, a superhuman effort, for her to sit up. She adjusted her blouse and glanced in a pocket mirror to see how she looked. She saw, looking back, a woman of forty-four whose eyes were not red, whose mascara had not run, and she wondered, why can’t I cry anymore? I am no longer capable of crying! Elisabeth looked at herself, a woman who had kept her narrow waist, the flexible body of her youth, like time was content to graze her without really touching her, and she threw the mirror away from her, hoping it would hit the wide window across from her desk, making a crack in the glass, then another, then a third, until the picture window, criss-crossed and crazed like lace, would shatter with a crash.

Ah ha ha (like Vina said in her texts. Maman: did you have a good day, my dear? Vina: Ah ha ha).

The mirror landed silently on the carpet.

As she crossed the corridor that led to the elevators, she passed in front of the glass-walled offices of the producers and their teams. Elisabeth gave a brief wave, as she did every day. Everyone returned her smile, except Denis, who came out of his office and caught up with her, just as the elevator arrived.

— Is everything alright? he asked, in a low voice.

— Not really. I’m on my way to the disciplinary council meeting.

Denis looked at her with warmth. She knew what this look meant. Friendship. The friendship that had bound them since. . . as they grew older, she thought to herself. . .

— I’m here, you know," said Denis.

— I know.

— As for the vacation time, it’s totally possible. We can plan for that. We’ll just have to do some occasional long-distance check-ins. I’ll find something to tell the rest of the team, so they don’t worry.

— Thanks. I’ll call you tonight.

As she left the building, Elisabeth passed two production assistants, Camille and Emma. She made a point of honor out of knowing the names of all her collaborators, even though there were now nearly fifty. The two young girls were taking a cigarette break and turned toward her simultaneously, “Hello, Elisabeth!”

“Hi, Camille, hi Emma, how are you?”

The older of the two stared at her for a moment. Her eyes, outlined in kohl, gave her the look of a cheeky cat. “We’re fine, and you?”

“Great, thanks.” She thought she saw the glint of a mocking look in the girls’ eyes. As if they had seen through her. We know who you are, Elisabeth Liéger. You have the feminine vibe with your name-brand clothes and your girlish figure, but you are NOT a real woman. You are missing something. You will always be missing something.

Elisabeth squared her shoulders and spoke to them with her biggest smile, “Have a nice afternoon,” and walked quickly away.

### FALK

Gliding, gliding in the air, above the men advancing in the valley.

They are too exhausted and afraid to see him, fleeing the Red Army in a westerly direction, crossing the countryside of Bessarabia, retreating in a forced march into a valley bordered by pines and oaks. The falcon hovers over them. He counts them, about thirty men, as obscure at this distance as a column of insects. With his eye and its double fovea he observes the armored car in which the wounded lie on stretchers. He delights in the rush of air on his speckled feathers. Vast sky! Vast sky!

Gliding. Flying. Breathing.

Invisible to the eyes of men.

Only one of them lifted his head.

Thomas shuddered as he met the Oberleutnant's gaze. No doubt he was about to pull out his P38 and fell the bird in midair. The Oberleutnant was the kind of man who liked to shoot things in midair, to see them fall, bloody, at his feet, mouth, chest, or crotch. Instead, the Oberleutnant smiled at him. Thomas shivered under his (German) uniform jacket. He had never seen the Oberleutnant smile, but now his face beamed with wonder as he stared up into the sky, watching the bird of prey’s aerial spiral. Thomas immediately turned to Alex. He wanted his brother to see the falcon. Now that the bird, on its spiral descent, approached the trees, he could tell by its size that it was a falcon. But when Thomas leaned over to his brother, who was marching forward, looking straight ahead, by the time he opened his mouth, he heard something whistle in his ear. He thought it was a bullet. He thought the Oberleutnant had shot him. He thought he had died in a valley in Bessarabia, between two hills covered with pine trees, their needles yellow with gunpowder, thousands of miles from his home. And he didn't mind. In fact, he felt overcome by a tremendous happiness. He felt himself hovering above the treetops, when a shock brought him abruptly back to earth.

The falcon was sitting on his shoulder.

The raptor’s talons pierced the jacket of his (German) uniform. Thomas didn’t dare make a move from the pain or turn his head. He saw his reflection in Alex’s pupils. He thought he read fear in the faces of the (German) soldiers. Dread and fear and fascination. It was the first time Thomas had inspired these feelings in his brother or in the men of his division.

For a moment, everyone seemed to have forgotten where they were. In the Pruth valley, south of Kishinev, retreating in a forced march toward the west. Everyone looked at Thomas and the gyrfalcon on his shoulder as if the bird was a kind of god who’d come and chosen him, just him, among all the others. Some of the (German) soldiers smiled at him. Thomas would have liked to return their smiles. They were Germans, yes, but they were his comrades, for now, because they were the same age, because he had seen in their eyes thoughts similar to his own. What are we doing here? When will this nightmare end? But he didn’t smile, because he knew the slightest flinch would be enough to frighten the raptor whose talons were tearing his sleeve and gouging his shoulder. Stay, thought Thomas, trying hard not to tremble, stay with me. Save me, please! Carry me far away from here!

As the bird dug deeper into his flesh, Thomas held back a cry. A white feather, speckled with silver, swept across his face, and the falcon flew away.

And again, they were exhausted soldiers in enemy country, as if the god, who had chosen them for a moment, had changed his mind and abandoned them.

The Oberleutnant marched straight towards Thomas.

— Do you want to explain that to me?

— Animals have always loved my brother, Oberleutnant ! It’s not his fault. Even when we were kids, the dogs ate from his hand.

The officer stared at Alex.

— Am I talking to you?

— No, Oberleutnant.

— Then repeat after me: If I speak for no reason, I’ll soon wind up dead.

Thomas often relived this moment in dreams. He heard his brother repeat once, twice, he had counted seven times, the Oberleutnant’s accursed phrase. *If I speak for no reason, I’ll soon wind up dead.* The phrase entered his sleep like a ghostly standard, bearing memories, wrapping around his waist and chest.

The Oberleutnant turned toward Thomas:

— Can you explain to me why that bird perched on your shoulder?

— I think it was lost. It must have been young. It still had red markings on its feathers.

— Do you think this falcon was tame?

— I don’t know, Oberleutnant.

He thought it had come from heaven. But no wild bird, of its own free will, alights on the shoulder of a man. Thomas immediately guessed what the Oberleutnant feared, as his proud face, now without a trace of wonder, was frozen like that of a statue. *The avenging angels. The angels knew what they’ve done.* A tamed falcon lost. Raised by the Mongols. Thomas had never seen any Mongols, but he’d heard the Germans talk about them several times, especially the instructors, in the first few months of their forced incorporation. The Russians were cruel, they said, but of all the Soviet combatants, the Mongols were the worst. It was rumored that they cut off their prisoners’ noses and hands. Some said they bled men like pigs.

The Oberleutnant ordered his men back into marching formation. They would bivouac a little further on, at the forest’s edge.

Two hours later, while the exhausted soldiers prepared for the night, Thomas made his first adult decision—if an adult decision is one that makes you feel alone, silent, and calm. He would flee. If he stayed here, the Oberleutnant would kill him. He would be killed for bringing misfortune on the company, for having been chosen by the falcon.

The Oberleutnant would have wanted to be chosen.

For this, he would kill Thomas.

He and Alex had to escape that same night.

Thomas wakes up in the middle of the night. He thinks: If survivors do not speak, it’s because they have seen other colors, colors that don’t exist in the ordinary world. Colors that can only be imagined by those who have already seen them. Then he remembers that his great-niece and her daughter are coming to visit in five days, and he has to buy new sheets. And towels. The wood of the bed creaks as if to voice its assent, and this creaking comforts him, calls him back into the heat of his room, where the radiator is always running at the hottest temperature. And Thomas falls back to sleep.