| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | F/M, M/M |
| Fandom: | The Man in the High Castle (TV) |
| Relationship: | John Smith/Erich Raeder, John Smith/Helen Smith, Erich Raeder/Existential Angst tbh |
| Character: | John Smith, Erich Raeder, Helen Smith, probably eventually the whole smith family and some assorted nazi lads, OC: Emma Raeder (Erich's Mother), Lawrence Klemm, OC: Obergruppenführer Müller, Alice Adler, Gerry Adler |
| Additional Tags: | Pining, Angst, Hurt/Comfort, the Reich isn't good in any way shape or form, this is a sequel to Of Red Flags and Crimson Banners, Mentions of Death, Mentions of Blood, Romance, could be considered internalized homophobia, probably AU but mostly canon complacent?, nothing too wild just gay nazi's |
| Stats: | Published: 2017-07-03 Updated: 2017-08-03 Chapters: 4/? Words: 11613 |

### The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name

**by** queer_cheer

**Summary**

Sequel to "Of Red Flags and Crimson Banners"

"And while some measure success in medals won and titles received, those aren't the things that matter in the end. What matters then are the moments, dear. Sitting under the stars, breathing in air that tastes like the sea, waking up beside someone and feeling something you dare call love."

Following the attempted assassination of Obergruppenführer John Smith, Erich knows he can't keep pretending that he doesn't love him. The truth has a way of getting out, only now, happiness is illegal and the truth can kill. With talk of an internal conspiracy and the worsening health of those close to both Erich and John, the two must decided who they can trust and who they can't, all while weighing the consequence of being wrong against the fear of being right.

**Notes**
I didn't expect to continue the John/Erich (Jerich?) fic because it was just one of those one-shots based on an ask meme, but a) I will go down with this ship, and b) people seemed to like it! It's also a really fun character study for Erich, who we don't really know too much about as of yet. Hopefully, that'll change in season 3!

Comments and kudos are always appreciated :)

Enjoy! x
Emma Raeder hated silence, and so it came as no surprise that music played quietly from the parlor when Erich returned home.

He felt his way along wall, careful not to knock the hanging portraits to the floor, until he came to the light switch at the end of the hall. Flicking it on, he cast the foyer in a pale white glow and cleared his throat.

“Mother?”

The music paused mid-beat.

“Erich?” She called. “You’re home early.”

“Things didn’t go quite as planned,” He unbuttoned his coat, wincing at the sight of a scarlet stain smeared across the breast. “A friend of mine got hurt.”

He heard movement from the parlor, and then Emma was standing in the doorway, a frail hand clasped tightly around the collar of her rose-pink nightgown. A wisp of grey hair hung in her sunken, yellowed eyes, and with a pang, Erich thought she might’ve looked worse than she had in the morning when he’d left.

Illness was not becoming of a woman who’d lived like she’d lived once, a lifetime ago: Strong-willed, fiercely independent, stubborn as a mule and clever as could be. But time, as it seemed, had taken that all away in the very same way it had taken her husband in war, her daughter in sickness, and her independence in spite.

“Oh,” She pouted. “Pity. Is he alright?”

“The doctors say he’ll make a full recovery,” The corners of Erich’s lips twitched into a half-hearted smile. “I would’ve liked to stay at the hospital a little longer, to make sure. But his wife came by, and staying seemed…inappropriate.”

Lips pursed into a thin, taut line, Emma cocked her head to the side in contemplation.

“A wife wouldn’t be a bad idea, you know,” She smirked at the long, exasperated sigh that came in response.

“Now’s hardly the time to discuss that, Mother,” He dipped into the kitchen and searched the fridge for a beer. “As I’ve always said, I’d like to establish a career first.”

Emma shook her head fondly and sat down at the table.

“You’ve established a career tonight, dear,” She graciously accepted the bottle of water he set in front of her. Eyes falling to the armband wrapped around his bicep, she continued. “A career in service to your country. My son, my Strumbannführer! I can hardly believe it.”

“Yeah,” Bitterly, Erich took a swig of beer. “Nor can I.”

“You don’t seem happy,”

“It isn’t that I’m unhappy,” He assured her, though he didn’t presume she’d believe him. “It’s just that I’ve never expected any of it.”
She reached over and took his hand, offering a knowing smile.

“That’s the thing, dear,” She soothed. “We rarely expect the things that change our lives. They just come, sometimes, and we have to choose what we do with them.”

“One rarely chooses positions in the Reich, Mother,” He ran a hand through his hair, suddenly aware of the press of fatigue in his chest. He was tired in a way that sleep couldn’t fix. "Choice is a luxury of the past."

“Who said I was talking about positions in the Reich?” There was a glint of laughter in her eyes, and apprehension crawled beneath Erich’s skin.

“What are you—"

“There’s more to a man than titles and ranks, Erich,” She sighed not out of discontentment, but rather understanding. “All the pomp and circumstance is a prodigious honor, you know, but what I’m talking about isn’t positions and formalities, but feelings.”

“Feelings?” Erich paused, incredulous. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“Oh, don’t be coy,” She chuckled. “A man of your age, rank, and disposition ought to have no problem finding a willing woman, dear. The fact that you favor seclusion, coupled with a mother’s intuition, has led me to wonder if you’re not interested in the fairer sex at all—”

“Mother!” Erich gaped, mortified. The beer bottle slipped from his hands and shattered at his feet. “It’s treason to even imply such a thing!”

“Come now, Erich,” Tenderly, she cupped his cheek. “You’ve allowed me my secrets. I’ll allow you yours. If I’m mistaken, correct me. But I don’t think I am.”

Emma was met with her son’s reticent silence. She retracted her hand and gave a shrewd, pleased smile.

“What can I say?” She stood, and with the cracking of old, aged joints coupled with a tired sigh, Erich couldn’t help but think that her age was showing more and more by the hour. “You’ve got your father’s looks and your mother’s interest in fine-looking men.”

“Mother!”

“Have you ever considered leaving?” Somber, Emma sipped her water and peered at him from beneath round, silver-rimmed glasses. “Going someplace where you can be happy?”

“I am happy,” And besides, he wanted to add, but didn’t. The only person I’ve ever loved is here.

“And I’m the picture of health,” She scoffed, sardonic. “Truth be told, dear, old age has taught me that life is shorter than you’ll ever imagine.” Her face softened and she leaned in, placing a gaunt hand over Erich’s forearm. “And while some measure success in medals won and titles received, those aren’t the things that matter in the end. What matters then are the moments, dear. Sitting under the stars, breathing in air that tastes like the sea, waking up beside someone and feeling something you dare call love. Don’t let life steal from you the things worth living for.”

Erich stared at her as though he half-expected her to burst into a fit of laughter and declare that the whole thing had been some bad kind of joke, or better yet, that he’d pry his sleep-heavy eyes open to find himself staring at the fan on his ceiling, awakening from some bad kind of dream. But Emma patted his arm and strode back into the parlor without another word, leaving Erich to stew in
his shock as it slowly morphed into wonder.

Music began to play once again. Emma leaned back in the reclining chair, sipping her water in the same way she would’ve once sipped wine.

She looked rather self-satisfied, Erich thought. Of course she was satisfied. She always had to be one step ahead of the rest of the world. In that way, Erich figured she was a little like John.

But, like John, she’d spent so much time one step ahead that she’d started running out of steps to take. Her sickness would get the better of her. It was never a matter of if, but rather a matter of when. Every day, Erich prayed that when was tomorrow; always close enough to promise the end to an unnamed suffering, yet always far enough away to grant him a moment’s selfishness. He wasn’t ready to be alone.

He kept tomorrow tucked in his pocket, carrying it with him everywhere he went. It was his good luck charm; maybe tomorrow he’ll find a woman that makes his heart beat like John does. Maybe tomorrow he’ll discover just what it is that makes him feel so slightly off, the missing piece to a blank, shapeless puzzle he’d been building all his life. Maybe tomorrow he’ll awake to the knowledge of everything unknown, the answers to all the questions he’d never had the courage to ask.

Maybe tomorrow, Emma Raeder will die with dignity just as she’d wished—in the comfort of her own home, like she’d said when she’d first moved back in with him. That had been her dying wish; to die rather than to be killed by a prick to the back of the hand delivered swiftly and mechanically by the men in white, the angels of death. It wasn’t that she didn’t believe in the ideals of the Reich. In fact, she’d taught Erich everything he’d come to know about what it meant to be loyal to the Greater Good. It was just that she saw death and dying as the natural conclusion to life, and there was nothing natural about the effective combination of morphine, scopolamine, and prussic acid. There was nothing natural about playing God.

Erich mopped up the spilt beer with the towel that hung by the sink. He tossed it in the laundry bin and returned to the parlor to bid his mother goodnight, but to no surprise, the record had ended and Emma slept, her chest rising and falling with every labored breath. Erich pressed a kiss to her temple and made his way up the stairs. They creaked under the weight of his state-issued work-boots, but by the time he’d reached the top, the house was sheathed in silence.

Don’t let life steal from you the things worth living for.

What a strange thing to say! Maybe her sickness had spread to her head. As twisted as it seemed, Erich took a moment’s worth of solace in such an idea as he unbuttoned his shirt. Reality came back quickly, though, as he paused to stare down at the off-colored depressions in his chest. He traced his fingers over the scars, and he swore he could still feel the red-hot, killing burn of metal against cold and clammy skin, and with a sigh, he concluded it was a feeling that would never really go away.

He made his way into the bathroom and ran hot water into the basin, scrubbing his hands as though he hoped to was away the weight of guilt, the memory of blood. Thoughts pulsed in his head to the beat of his too-fast heart, swirling and raging like some sort of cyclone. Why today, he wondered. There were endless better days to come, on which Emma Raeder could’ve approached him with… whatever the hell that was. Madness, maybe? Or maybe, the exact opposite. It didn’t matter. Either way, it hurt.

It hurt, because it faced him with the consideration that he’d so artfully avoided: Maybe today had been Emma’s last tomorrow. She’d always preached that every word had its proper time and its
proper place, and perhaps there was no better time or place than at the cusp of death to address the messy questions of life. Surely she’d seen the news. Every broadcast spoke of the terrorists that made an attempt at the Obergruppenführer’s life. Maybe Emma figured that it, whatever it was, had to be now or never. Maybe she was right.

Erich only stepped away from the sink when the hot water turned cold, and by that time, his fingers were raw and bleeding. He cursed and stalked into the bedroom, not bothering with the lights, and flung himself down into the crisp coolness of fresh sheets. He was only vaguely aware of the time, estimating that it must’ve been nearly midnight. It felt like it’d been nearly midnight for days.

Tomorrow, he decided, he’d go to visit John. And then, maybe he’d go by Helen’s to offer his assistance wherever she felt it could be useful. No matter how dreadful he felt about the whole thing, he knew she must’ve felt somehow worse. Even a fool could see the love in her eyes when she looked at him. It was a love that went beyond the passionate vigor of husband and wife. It was comfortable and familiar and gentle and warm in a way that Erich couldn’t even bring himself to envy, and beyond all else, it was something that he could only ever dream of.
Rain poured down from puffy, agitated clouds and for one terrible moment, Erich was jealous of men like John who were important enough to have personal drivers. And then he remembered who was sequestered in a hospital bed and who was spitting curses at raindrops, and the bitterness faded to gloom.

Pulling into the parking garage, Erich huffed out a muffled shit at the sight of three men standing by his spot, checking the time at their wrists as they watched him pull up ten minutes late. He recognized the officer in front as Major Lawrence Klemm, who just might’ve been his least favorite person in the entire Shutzstaffel. He didn’t have much of a reason for detesting him, but lack of reason never stopped his blood from curdling at the sight of his narrowed eyes, his smug half-smile.

“How has the rain given you trouble, Strumbannführer?” Klemm removed his hat and saluted as Erich climbed out of his car.

“The roads weren’t built for storms,” Erich’s gaze shifted between Klemm and the men standing stiffly at his side. “I feel that they flood much too easily.”

It was small talk, really. For as much as he didn’t favor Klemm’s company, he knew the feeling was mutual, especially after the promotion. John once called it a schoolyard spat, and with a fond laugh, he’d dismissed complaints on either side as evidence of healthy competition. That hadn’t been the terminology Erich would’ve used, and still, as he eyed the curve of Klemm’s tight jaw with suspicion, he knew it wasn’t competition he felt, but apprehension instead.

There was something off about the degree to which Klemm enjoyed his work. It was, at least to Erich’s knowledge, commonplace for men of his rank to do what must be done and little more. It was hard and dirty labor that had a way of leaving marks on the soul and challenging the pull of better judgement, but to Klemm, it was a sport. He likened Semites to head lice and hunted defects in the way one might hunt venison or boar; with great pride and greater dedication.
“Did you hear?” Klemm asked, turning Erich’s attention outward once again. “We’ve received word of the man that made an attempt at the obergruppenführer’s life.”

“The Sematic terrorist?”

Nervous, Klemm shifted his weight from foot to foot.

“That’s what we’ve told the media. We wouldn’t want to alarm, of course.”

“Alarm?” Head cocked, lips pursed, Erich felt his fist clench in his pocket as his stomach dropped to the floor. “I’m afraid I don’t follow.”

“The man was carrying papers that identified him as Oberjunker Roderick Wolf. A low-level grunt, but one of us, nonetheless.”

Erich’s jaw clenched.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

Disbelieving, Erich ran a hand through his hair and sighed, turning to stalk into the building with Klemm and the officers at his back. “Have you ascertained a motive?”

Klemm quickened his pace to keep up.

“Not yet. But the obergruppenführer’s stand-in has advised us to keep Oberjunker Wolf’s status secret from the rest of his unit.”

“He suspects they might be involved?” Erich turned to him, a growing sense of unease gnawing at his gut.

“He hasn’t said. But if I may venture a guess, I’d say he believes that if we fail to announce the treason and consequent death of one of our own men, it will be assumed that he’s being kept in our custody for interrogation.”

“And then,” Erich continued the thought. “They’ll worry he might’ve given names of co-conspirators?”

Klemm offered affirmation in the form of a brisk nod. “I suspect they’ll be advised to come forward with information at a later date. Offered an ultimatum, if you will.”

“It’s a long shot,” The corners of Erich’s lips twitched into a frown. “There are a lot of variables I fear the acting obergruppenführer hasn’t accounted for.”

“It’s our only shot,” Klemm countered. “I can’t say I stand in favor of it, but we’ve hit a dead end.”

Erich stopped in his tracks and turned around without missing a beat. Klemm nearly crashed into him, stopping only inches away, boots squeaking against the floor.

“It’s been all of twelve hours since the obergruppenführer was shot and we’ve already hit a dead end?”

A flicker of agitation passed over Klemm’s tight features, and had it not been for the men standing behind him counting on a degree of professionalism, Erich was half-convinced he might’ve cursed.
“Officers have searched Oberjunker Wolf’s residence and found nothing of concern,” Klemm explained, indignant. “Everyone we’ve spoken with has shown nothing but shock in regards to his treason. They all said the same thing, Strumbannführer: He was a good, promising young man dedicated to guaranteeing the future prosperity of the Reich. We have no reason to suspect him of Resistance activity and therein no identifiable motive for wanting the obergruppenführer dead.”

“And yet, he shot him.” Erich paced. “What could turn a good, promising young man against his own commanding officer? It’s strange.”

“Strange, indeed.”

And then it occurred to Erich that there was one pressing question he’d neglected to ask.

“Tell me: Who is the acting obergruppenführer?”

“A man from Berlin,” Klemm’s nose wrinkled in distaste. “Diederich Müller.” He spat the name, as though he didn’t like the taste it left on his tongue.

“You’re not fond of him?” Erich ventured.

“He’s no John Smith, that’s for sure,” Klemm scoffed. “He’s soft.”

“Soft?”

“You’ll see when you meet him,” Klemm reached into his satchel and retrieved a folder, bearing a flagrant red stamp that demanded confidentiality. “Wolf’s file, for your review.”

“Thank you,” Erich took it, flitting through pages of information he was sure he already knew. “I take it there’s nothing of importance here, though?”

“I couldn’t find anything,” Klemm admitted. “But that doesn’t mean you won’t.”

Erich scoffed, half out of modesty and half out of disbelief.

“You put too much faith in me, Major Klemm.”

“I put no more faith in you than the obergruppenführer does himself,” Klemm paused before the door to the office Erich had come to know as John’s. It would feel strange, he thought, to see someone else sitting at the desk smoking cigarettes. “He thinks highly of you.”

Erich fought back the tinge of red he felt rising in the tips of his ears. He managed a stiff, stone-faced nod. “He’s a good man.”

“And that’s why it’s so vital we find out why Oberjunker Wolf wanted him dead.”

Klemm stepped forward and rapped against the mahogany doorframe, pausing only until a rough, accented voice barked out a gritty, “Enter.”

Klemm stepped inside first. Erich followed behind him, his arm raised in salute. He shot a sideways glance over his shoulder at the officers that had accompanied them silently from the garage, only to find that they’d vanished behind the great sliding doors, leaving Erich and Klemm alone with Obergruppenführer Müller. Somehow, it was disconcerting.

He sat with his back to them, a fat cigar smoking between his fingers. Thin, blonde hair crept around the crown of his head and receded away from the top, and as he turned towards them, his face cast in a cloud of smoke, Erich noticed a thick, pale scar traveling down his face. It spanned
from the prod of his cheekbones to the curve of his jaw, and when he caught Erich’s eye from behind round, gold-framed glasses, Erich shifted his stare to the floor.

“Seig heil,” He and Klemm declared in unison. For the first time, the words didn’t sound quite right.

Müller’s lips twitched into a smile.

“Seil heil,” He stubbed his cigar out in the ashtray to his left. “Strumbannführers Raeder and Klemm, correct?”

“Yes, sir,” Klemm dropped his arm to his side and stood at ease, though the tension in his shoulders was hard to miss. “Regarding the case of Oberjunker Roderick Wolf.”

Müller’s face fell and he let out a contemplative sigh.

“Such a strange case, isn’t it? Strange and, I fear, dangerous.”

“Dangerous, sir?” Erich lifted an eyebrow. “If I may ask…”

“Oberjunker Wolf was a pawn.” He offered them cigarettes from a metal case bearing the Iron Cross. Both declined politely, though frankly, Erich could’ve used a drag. “He was working for someone, there’s no doubt. The only question is who, and I fear that question has an answer we can’t readily anticipate.”

Erich chewed nervously at the inside of his cheek.

“Sir?”

“There’s nothing quite so dangerous as disaffected young men,” Müller stood, his arms tucked behind his back. He paced before the window and stared out at the rainy streets, frowning at the grey clouds stewing high overhead.

“Sir,” Klemm began, sounding anxious. “The difficulty lies within the fact that Wolf didn’t appear to be disaffected at all. Reports show that he performed exceedingly well in every category of service.”

“Now, that’s just the thing,” Müller turned back to him, a knowing smile parting his lips. “Deceit is vital to disaffection. The most disillusioned of our men are adept liars. Men like Wolf play convincing parts until the proper time comes for them to break character. But only so much can be hidden, and only for so long.” His eyes fell to Erich, and it felt as though he was staring through his skin, speaking to parts of him that he couldn’t possibly have known. As gooseflesh rose beneath his satin sleeves, Erich held his head high and refused to let himself waver.

“There is, however, another possibility of which we ought to be wary.” Müller continued, his tone suddenly cryptic and cold. “It’s possible that Oberjunker Wolf was not the ill young fellow we’re assuming he was. It’s possible that he was, in fact, an upstanding citizen of our great Reich, and that the defect is indeed the obergruppenführer himself.”

Eyes wide, Erich felt the air leave his lungs and for a minute, it seemed that there was none left in the room to refill them. He glanced over at Klemm, who met his open-mouthed expression with identical concern.

“Obergruppenführer Müller,” Klemm cleared his throat and shook his head. “We have no reason to suspect--”
“We suspect everyone, Major,” Müller lit another cigar, perching it between his lips. It reminded Erich of something John had said once, though he couldn’t quite remember what, when, or how. “One of two things happened last night: A bad man shot a good one, or vice versa. It is our duty to find out which, to explore each possibility with haste and without personal bias.”

Erich could tell by the tension in Klemm’s shoulders that he hated the notion of John’s treason almost as much as he did. To imply such a thing must’ve been treason in and of itself, and yet that didn’t stop Obergruppenführer Müller from smiling through a cloud of pale grey smoke.

“I’d send officers to speak to Smith, but it might do him well to see a friendly face instead,” Müller sat back down, folding his hands neatly in his lap. He tapped his cigar against the ashtray and paused, raising his stare just enough to meet Erich’s chary gaze. “Strumbannführer Raeder, would you pay the obergruppenführer a visit? He trusts you. Certainly, if there’s anything to reveal, he’ll reveal it.”

Erich nearly gaped. “You wish for me to interrogate the obergruppenführer, sir?”

“Had I not made that clear before?” Müller clicked his teeth. “Yes, Strumbannführer, I wish for you to interrogate John Smith. Artfully, though. With elegance. With tact. If he suspects that you’re suspicious, he won’t tell us anything at all. I’ve heard he’s a clever man, but even clever men let their guards down among proper company. Do you understand?”

Erich wished he could’ve lied his way out of it somehow, but his tongue had tied itself into a knot and all he could do was nod, wordless and miserable.

“Good,” Müller smiled. “Strumbannführer Klemm will look into Oberjunker Wolf’s private life to determine a motive. I expect communication, between both one another and myself. You’ll tell me everything you discover, prompt and honest, without leaving out as much as a misplaced breath, a tensed jaw. It’s imperative that you understand the gravity of this assignment,” He glanced between them, weighing their unease against his lingering stare. “Likewise, it is imperative that this conversation doesn’t leave the room. Should it fall upon the wrong ears, or perhaps even the right ones at the wrong time…” He left the thought open ended, leaving Erich to ruminate on the possibilities, from firing squads to torture chambers with metal walls and bars on the windows. He shuddered.

“Dismissed,” Müller turned away from them again, scanning the pages of a file that Erich instantly recognized as John’s. With a gruff chuckle and the slight inclination tugging at the corners of his lips, Müller shut the folder and tucked it away safely in his desk. How strange, Erich thought. How utterly strange for one obergruppenführer to accuse another! If Müller was wrong, he would be dismissed and likely killed upon John’s return. And if he was right? Erich shook the thought out of his head as quickly as it had come. Impossible. John Smith was a good man. A good, honorable man.

It was only when Klemm nudged him hard in the ribs that Erich remembered to raise his arm in salute and bark out a half-assed, “Seig heil.”

They turned and exited into an empty corridor. The lights looked a little too yellow against decorative, royal red carpet, and the rain tapping at the arched windows sounded almost accusatory in its fervor.

Neither Erich nor Klemm spoke as they stepped into the elevator. Classical music swirled around them, rising in its climactic rapture and then falling in on itself, soft and reminiscent.

“See what I mean?” Klemm muttered after a beat, snorting bitterly. “Soft.”
“I’m not sure that’s the word I’d use,” Erich grumbled. “*Guarded* seems to fit him better.”

“Or just paranoid.” The elevator doors slid open to the parking lot, and Klemm gestured for Erich to exit first. “What do you make of it, Raeder?”

“Frankly, I’m not sure,” Erich ran a tired hand over his jaw. It ached with stiffness and strain. “I’ve known Obergruppenführer Smith for years. My mother attends some sort of gardening club with his wife. She brags about him and how he’s a magnificent father and husband, and it doesn’t make sense to me that he’d have anything to hide. Why would he risk the life he’s made for himself on defection or subversion?”

“It doesn’t sit right with me, either. But orders are orders,” Klemm paused at the door to his car. “Good luck. I hope you don’t find anything worth writing home about.”

Erich gave a humorless laugh. “Same to you, Lawrence. Only I hope you uncover that our Oberjunker Wolf was a fanatical psychopath prone to outbursts of violence and instability.”

Klemm grinned. “Here’s to that.”

It was far from ideal, Erich thought. In fact, it was just as far from ideal as it could get without redefining catastrophe. He didn’t trust Klemm and he sure as hell didn’t trust Müller, but he trusted John Smith with his life, quite literally.

Maybe love had blinded him to character flaws and subtle hints he should’ve picked up on, or maybe it had stolen his objectivity out from under him quicker than he could even realize it was gone. Or maybe he was right. Maybe Müller was wrong, and maybe John was innocent and Wolf was mad.

He sighed. Too many maybes. He never did care for indecision. It was unbecoming of the professional world, he thought, and surely, unbecoming of a man bearing the weight of his rank.

Pulling out of the lot and driving into the rain, Erich wondered for a lingering moment about Emma and her eternal wisdom, and if maybe he’d understand the world as artfully as she did when he was older and unafraid of death. Until then, he figured indecision would just have to do.
Victory Versus Duty; Head Versus Heart

Chapter Summary

John reveals his concerns regarding loyalty and allegiance, and Erich is forced to decide with whom his own loyalties reside: the Reich, or John Smith.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the long wait in between chapters! My computer decided to stop working and consequently, it spent four days in the tech hospital probably just to spite me. But it's back and slightly less temperamental, so here's the next installment! Enjoy Erich's angst.

Comments are much appreciated :)

The last time Erich had been in a hospital, he’d been sure it was the last place he’d ever be. The linoleum floors, the too-white walls, the sterile stink of sanitation combined with the musk of sickness; it all felt like a ghost from a bad dream, lingering on the cusp of sleep and wake. He was far from fond of the surreal reminiscence, and even farther from fond of the reasons that had brought him there in the first place.

There was an armed guard stationed at John’s door. Erich’s first instinct was to feel relieved, but then it occurred to him that, given Müller’s suspicions, the guard might’ve been tasked with keeping John in, rather than keeping danger out. His eyes drifted to the officer’s gun, clasped in a holster at his waist. In the back of his head, he heard the rhythmic crack of bullets slicing through the air, and it took him a moment to remember how to breathe.

The guard saluted as Erich crept into John’s room, wary and unsure of what he’d see. He half-expected a broken man, hurt and frightened, though when he caught sight of John sitting up, awake and attentive with his nose buried in a book, he fondly wondered why he’d ever expected anything less.

“Obergruppenführer,” Erich cleared his throat. “You look…surprisingly well.”

John looked up and startled, but anxiety quickly faded to pleasant surprise.

“Hello, Erich,” He set the book down in his lap and pulled his oversized hospital gown tighter around his bandaged chest. “How are you?”

“How am I?” Erich laughed, disbelieving. “Sir, I ought to be the one asking you that.”

John snorted, and when that boyish half-grin spread across his parted lips, Erich had to look away.

“Oh, I’m fine,” He gave a dismissive wave. “They said the bullet missed everything important. Our Oberjunker Wolf was a rather poor shot, fortunately.”
“That’s very good news, sir. May I?” Erich gestured to the chair sitting by his bed, and without hesitation, John nodded.

“Yes, of course.”

Taking a seat, Erich folded his hands in his lap and sighed.

“I take it you know it was Wolf that shot you? Not the Resistance?”

John’s mouth twitched. “So I’ve been told.”

A sudden surge of hatred burned deep in his chest, and he knew it was meant for Müller. Erich was never one to wonder about the fairytale notions of heaven and hell, but if hell did exist, it was sitting by John’s bedside bearing the knowledge that he was there to cross-examine and suspect. The betrayal of a beloved friend’s trust, the secrecy, the deceit, the forced investigation of a man whose stealth and courage had saved his life two times over, it all felt like a rare kind of perversion.

“I have to apologize, you know,” John cleared his throat, interrupting Erich’s train of thought. “I’m sure you had different expectations of your reception. My presence brought trouble I hadn’t anticipated. I fear it was a lack of foresight on my part.”

“That’s absurd, sir, you had no way of knowing what would happen!” Erich stared at him, incredulous and miserable. “No man can predict the future. We can only do our best to foresee the unknown, Obergruppenführer, and I know you’ve done nothing less.”

“You have too much faith in me, Erich.”

“The faith I have is backed by truth, sir.”

A twitch came again to the corners of John’s mouth, and for the first time, he was rendered speechless. His quick wit, his clever tongue, silenced by what Erich could only assume to be sentiment. It was a stillness he wore well. Erich thought—perhaps inappropriately—that there was something dreadfully striking about the vulnerability flickering like dying candlelight in the green of his eyes, and for as morally wrong, as depraved and wicked as it was, Erich wished he could take him in his arms as he’d dreamed of doing and kiss away the timidity, the self-doubt.

Instead, he shifted in his chair and let out a stale breath. To turn the conversation, he gestured to the book resting in John’s lap.

“What are you reading, sir?”

John looked down at the text with a look that made it seem as though he’d forgotten about it entirely.

“Oh,” He lifted it to reveal an aged, worn cover and a cracked, yellowed spine. “Beowulf. A long-time personal favorite. Are you familiar with it?”

Erich shook his head. Of course he was familiar. Of course he’d read it; it was mandatory material for at least three different classes he’d taken in his youth. But nevertheless, he wanted to hear John discuss it. Part of him thought that maybe, hearing his analysis would reveal some uniquely human side of the resigned, professional man Erich had come to love. That part of him—the foolish, self-indulgent part—dominated over the other that might’ve strived to impress.

“It’s an excellent piece,” John studied the book fondly, and then he turned his attention back to Erich. “It’s thought to be the oldest surviving epic in Old English, written nearly one-thousand
years ago. Interesting, isn’t it? How some stories are powerful enough to survive the trials and tribulations of time.”

“Yes, sir,” Erich smiled without meaning to. “Interesting, indeed.”

“Listen,” John opened the book to a page, dog-eared and bookmarked. He began to read aloud.

“Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part, eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride. For a brief while your strength is in bloom, but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow illness of the sword to lay you low, or a sudden fire or surge of water or jabbing blade of javelin from the air or repellent age. Your piercing eye will dim and darken; and death will arrive, dear warrior, to sweep you away.”

Erich had shut his eyes halfway through John’s reading, and it was only when silence again filled the air that he opened them to find him donning an affectionate smile.

“What do you make of it, Erich?”

“The quote, sir?”

“Yes, the quote.”

“Well,” Erich straightened up and cleared his throat. He wanted to say something clever and insightful—there it was, the part that strived to impress—but his brain had gone fuzzy in the midst of his scrutiny.

“I think it speaks to the point of greatness, sir,” He began after a moment’s contemplation. “And no matter how great a man is, how strong and how perceptive he comes to be, there is but one thing in life that is constant, inevitable, and certain. And that one thing is death,” With a pang, he thought of Emma, and with another, he thought of the sharpness in his chest and the dire proximity to nothingness. “Death comes to us all; the great, the unexceptional, and everyone in between.”

“Astute analysis,” John chuckled, though in contrast, his jaw had set and his shoulders had grown stiff. “No one in immortal.”

“If I may, sir…”

“You needn’t be so formal,” John said with a tight laugh. “We’re discussing a poem, Erich, not classified documents.”

“Right,” Erich joined him in laughter, and for a moment, he forgot about Müller and Wolf and Klemm and everything felt an inch or so closer to okay. “I’ve found that the preoccupation with death leads to the neglect of life. I’d say I can’t imagine the fear you felt last night, sir, but I can, and I’ve felt it too. Though vigilance is imperative and attention must be paid to the dangers ever present, I urge you to look beyond risk and possibility at the things worth living for, and I hope that you’ll find peace there.”

A stunned silence fell over the room like a thin layer of fog, and for a moment, Erich wondered if he’d said something wrong, if he’d somehow overstepped a boundary he’d grown too comfortable to notice. But then, as a grin split John’s cheeks and he gave Erich a look that made his stomach flutter, he felt his rigidity give way to consolation.

“I should’ve indulged you in literary analysis sooner, Sturmbannführer,” John praised. “I’d never known you were quite so wise.”
The rose-tinted flush to Erich’s cheeks was too conspicuous to go unnoticed, but it only served to widen John’s toothy smirk.

“I don’t want to keep you from work much longer,” John continued. “But there is something rather interesting that I’m surprised you’ve yet to mention.”

Blood curdled in Erich’s veins like spoiled milk every muscle he had strained with unease.

“Sir?”

John still smiled, as though he found something about what he had to say quite amusing.

“I know that the acting obergruppenführer sent you to question me.”

Erich’s jaw dropped before he could stop it. His brain surged with a dozen questions at once and then crashed into a numb, droning static. How could he have known!? The order hadn’t been given all of twenty minutes ago, and yet, as Erich forced himself to look at John, he was just as smug and sure of himself as ever.

“How—”

“It was really just a guess,” John admitted. “But your reaction confirmed what I already expected was true.”

“Obergruppenführer, I—”

“Steady, Erich,” John reached out to give his arm a calming pat. “I would’ve done the same thing, had I been the acting obergruppenführer investigating a case presenting similar challenges. I commend him, whoever he is, on his professional diligence. And you, on your loyalty.” He chuckled wryly. “Tell him I’ve committed no treason.”

Stiffly, Erich gave a sharp, quick nod.

“Thank you, sir. I suspected as much.”

“However,” John’s expression soured. “That doesn’t mean that there isn’t anyone in the Shutzstaffel or Waffen-SS that wants me dead.”

Something turned in Erich’s stomach.

“Do you have any reason to believe that there’s a conspiracy against you?”

“Not exactly,” John absently ran his finger along the edge of his book. He shook his head. “Not yet.”

“Do you think it has anything to do with Heydrich?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

Erich glanced over his shoulder at the door before turning back to John, his voice low and careful.

“There’s a guard outside. Do you know that?”

“Helen told me when she came by this morning.”

“Do you trust him?”
If Erich hadn’t known better, he would’ve wondered if the strange, glossy-eyed look to come across John’s face was something analogous to fear.

“Trust is an earned asset and, given the fact that there’s currently a bullet lodged right about here—” He winced as he tapped his chest. “—I’m apprehensive to give it freely.”

“I’ll take that as a no, then,” Erich offered John a smile meant to reassure. “I don’t blame you, sir.”

He crouched down and lifted the hem of his trousers to reveal a concealed gun strapped just above his boot.

“Erich—”

“Here. Just in case you’re right,” Glancing behind him once again to ensure that no probing eyes presumed to watch, Erich removed the weapon and placed it on top of John’s book. Without missing a beat, John tucked it into his waistband.

“Thank you.”

“You can trust me, sir.”

After a pause, inexplicable in nature and somehow intimate, John nodded.

“I know.” Fondness turned to desperation. “I have to urge you, Erich, to be careful. I can’t assure that you aren’t in danger simply by association.”

In a motion that bordered on proud, Erich lifted his other pant leg to reveal a second masked weapon.

“Thank you, sir, but this time, I’m prepared.”

That, coupled with the knife tucked into the loop of his belt and the state-issued gun hanging at his waist, presented in and of itself enough shock value to pull a hearty laugh from John’s throat.

“You’re prepared for war, Sturmbannführer!”

Erich smirked.

“To be prepared for war is one of the most effective means of preserving peace. Do you know who said that, sir?”

“George Washington.” John beamed as if he was glad he readily knew, all traces of that strange, fear-like emotion gone from his eyes. It was with a huff of silent pride that Erich realized he was the reason for the smile pressed against the obergruppenführer’s lips, for the steadfast sense of security in the shrug of his shoulders.

“A man lost to time, perhaps, but a man who nevertheless established a nation independent of the past from which he belonged. A fitting theme, I believe.”

“I’d drink to that, if only these damned doctors allowed it. You don’t happen to have any whiskey tucked up your sleeve, do you?”

Erich laughed, involuntary and genuine for the first time in ages.

“Sadly, sir, I do not.”
A knock against the doorframe startled the pair into a wide-eyed defensive stance. To Erich’s utmost relief, it was Helen Smith that stood in the threshold.

“Hello, Erich!” She greeted. “What a pleasant surprise.”

Erich removed his hat and smiled.

“It’s my pleasure, Helen, as always.” He paused, uncomfortable and awkward standing between the man he loved and his wife. “I ought to be on my way.”

“Oh, don’t leave on my accord!”

Behind her, a nurse pushed a cart littered with tools that Erich dared to think looked medieval. She stopped in the doorway and looked pleasantly at John.

“Time to change your dressings, Obergruppenführer.”

Petulant, he scowled.

“You doctors are dedicated to ensuring that a man doesn’t get a moment’s rest.”

“Oh, don’t be dramatic,” Helen crossed her arms. “If you’re well enough to carry on, you’re well enough to cooperate.” A loving, good-natured smile pulled at the corners of her cherry-red lips, and in three steps, each punctuated by the click of her high-heeled shoes, she stood by John’s bedside and pressed a kiss to his forehead.

“You look well, honey,” Erich heard her mutter, and he felt like he was interrupting something intimate and deeply private. “I’m glad.”

John’s expression warmed into one of tender, smitten, all-consuming love and for a second, it didn’t look natural. Erich had only ever seen him in a uniform, after all, but once he adjusted to the rawness of John’s own humanity—his biting humor, his stubbornness, his fear—he found it challenging to remember the hard-edged stares or the minced words that had once defined him. He felt himself falling in love all over again, only this time he fell harder, faster, and farther.

“If you’ll step out for a moment, please?”

Erich, buried in lovesick thoughts, had nearly forgotten that the nurse was there at all. It didn’t quite register that she was speaking to him, too, until Helen touched his arm and gestured towards the door.

Wordlessly, he followed her out into the hall.

“It’s easier if there isn’t an audience,” She explained. “John said that the wound dressing is the hardest part.”

Erich winced.

“I don’t doubt it.” He studied her expression and found it unreadable; caught somewhere between concern and affection. “How is he, really? He says he’s fine, but you don’t need me to tell you how he can be.”

And by that, he meant stubborn to the point of absurdity. Valiant to the point of madness. Judging by the way Helen laughed—lightly, fondly, with her fingers toying absently at the pale gold wedding band wrapped around her finger—Erich knew she understood. He felt a twinge of guilt
when he looked at her, and it didn’t take a great deal of thought to determine why.

“He’s okay. He really is as tough as he pretends to be, most of the time.” She smiled. “Mainly, he’s just agitated that he can’t come home yet.” Her eyes flickered to the guard positioned by the door, and Erich noticed a shift in her expression.

It was subtle, and had he not felt the same apprehension that set Helen’s jaw, he might’ve missed it. The sudden rigidity came with a spark of raw, red-hot animosity, and as Erich traced her glare, he wondered what could possibly change her demeanor so swiftly. Had John told her the same things he’d told him; stories of conspiracy, tales of corruption? Or was there something else? It was impossible to tell.

The moment passed with such hurry that Erich wondered if he’d imagined the whole thing. Helen turned her attention back to him, wearing the same wide, red grin she’d donned seconds before.

“How’s your mother?”

Erich paused. “My mother?”

“Yes, Emma!” Helen gushed. “I haven’t seen her at Garden Club in ages. I’ve been meaning to ask her about her Snapdragons. They grow in such exotic colors.”

It felt like someone had plunged cold, sterile hands into Erich’s chest and squeezed his heart until it burst. He hadn’t wondered about Emma all day, but the moment Helen mentioned her, she was all he could think of. Was she alright? Was he wrong to leave her alone with old records and dusty tapes while he ran around New York pretending to be important?

He cleared his throat. “My mother is well, thank you.” It was funny, in a humorless kind of way, how easy lying had become. “She’s felt under the weather for the past weeks, but fortunately, I believe she’s on the mend.”

“That’s good to hear,” Helen grinned. “Do give her my regards.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The silence that came was awkward simply because it was unfamiliar. Erich knew Helen only as the woman in the photographs that sat atop John’s desk, and yet there was something profound about the way she commanded the world around her with no more than a delicate smile and the click of designer heels. In a different world, a different life, he thought they might’ve been friends.

“How are you?”

Helen blinked, as if the question had taken her by surprise. It took Erich by surprise, too, and it came from his own mouth. It felt like the only thing there was left to say, and awkward as it was, it beat out silence.

“You and the kids, I mean,” He explained. “It mustn’t be easy.”

Helen’s smile sagged.

“No,” She tucked her hands into the pocket of her pale blue pea coat. “It’s difficult for them, seeing their father hurt. They’re scared, too, of everything that’s happened. And trying to be everywhere at once, to manage everything John usually manages...you’re right. It isn’t easy.”

“How can I help?” Erich asked automatically, without paying it much thought. It wasn’t that it
seemed like the right thing to say. It seemed like the only thing to say.

With an uncomfortable laugh, Helen shook her head.

“That’s sweet of you, Erich, but I couldn’t ask—”

“After everything the obergruppenführer has done for me, I insist.” Erich smiled kindly. “It would be my honor to help in any way that I can.”

A warm, heartened smile and a firm, appreciative nod eased away any nerves Erich had felt. He worried it might’ve been inappropriate to offer, but then again, it would’ve been inappropriate to not offer. He spoke to her not as her husband’s aide, but as her distant friend’s son, and for a moment, he didn’t feel the tug of anxiety plaguing the pit of his stomach.

“Why don’t you come by for dinner tomorrow? Say, six o’clock?” Helen offered. “Having someone else around might make the kids feel a little safer.”

“I would be delighted.”

“Why don’t you bring Emma, if she’s feeling up to it?”

Anxiety returned, stronger and deeper and crueler than before. Trying his best not to let it show, Erich forced a smile that felt more like a grimace than anything else.

“I’ll be sure to extend the invitation to her,” He nodded, stiff and brisk. “Thank you, Helen.”

The nurse emerged from the room with her cart, and though Erich did his best not to look, he caught sight of a bloody bandage poking out of a receptacle sitting amid medical tools of all shapes and sizes. He traced Helen’s stare in towards John, whose face had grown a shade or two paler in the time they’d been in the hall.

“I should be leaving,” He glanced at his watch without bothering to read the time. “Obergruppenführer Müller is expecting me.”

Understanding, Helen nodded and gave his shoulder a light squeeze.

“Thanks for stopping by. It’s reassuring to know that John has friends out there,” She glanced at the guard and shook her head. Clearly, she knew at the very least that it was not, in fact, Resistance terrorists behind the attack. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

Erich nodded.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“Thank you,” With one hand against the doorway and the other tucked tightly in her pocket, Helen paused in the threshold and turned to Erich. “I really appreciate it, Erich. John will, too.” She paused, as though she was tasting her words and weighing them carefully against Erich’s sudden inhibition. “Emma raised a fine boy.”

Tension returned to his jaw. Again, it ached. An invisible force pressed its balled-up fist right into his gut. He swallowed the growing agony and mustered up all the energy he had left to turn his grief into something that resembled pride. “As I said,” He grit out. “It’s my pleasure.”

He stood, unmoving, as Helen spared him a side-eyed smile and returned to John’s bedside. The rational side of Erich’s brain, as small as it might’ve been, told him that it wasn’t appropriate to
linger, no matter how badly he wished he could.

As he strode towards the exit, he felt incomplete. It was a strange thing to feel, considering how much he’d managed to accomplish. Every time John smiled at him, it felt like a deep and personal victory. But he’d found that victory and duty rarely allowed themselves to intercede. His duty had been to John and only John back before he’d taken three bullets and, consequently, a promotion. But with the newness of his rank, the foreignness of Sturmbannführer against his lips, he’d pledged himself to the Reich. And now, it seemed, there existed a part of the Reich that wanted John dead.
Lawrence Klemm was not a patient man.

He hadn’t climbed through the ranks in a dog-eat-dog kind of world by being patient. Patience was a sign of the weak, the feeble, the stagnate; telling of hard heads and soft hearts, as the obergruppenführer once said. Patience was the mask worn by the wolves masquerading as sheep, but only fools trusted patience. A patient man was a man with a secret that didn’t mind to wait.

It had taken him blood, sweat, tears, sacrifice, grit, and grime—not patience—to make the rank of Major by the age that he was; It took his father nearly twice as long. Twice as long to do half as much, he thought with a wash of pride that was perhaps…inappropriate. But then again, perhaps it wasn’t. Commander Anton Klemm never smiled in the fifty-seven years it had taken him to die, and by then, he seemed to have had made it his mission to suck the happiness clean out of the air around him. He was, at best, a cold and staunch man. A bitter man. A patient man. A fool. With his death came the release from a once-endless misery, marked by the woes of a man that Klemm swore was incapable of loving anything aside from the power he claimed and the money it put in his pocket.

In some ways, he thought, the late Commander Anton Klemm bore a striking likeness to Obergruppenführer Smith. Only, the obergruppenführer possessed something that made him pointedly likable. He was charismatic in a way that was entirely accidental; no matter how he puffed his chest and squared his shoulders and set his jaw, there was no concealing the distinct and unmissable charm that had, without a doubt, saved his life more than once.

But charm couldn’t stop a bullet, and not even Obergruppenführer Smith could talk his way out of trouble with the Reich. Klemm just hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

Raeder’s car pulled into the lot, tired slushing through deep puddles. Klemm let out a long, slow breath.

“Where have you been?” He accused, approaching the sedan while its engine still idled. “Müller’s livid.”

Somehow, Erich didn’t seem phased.

“I don’t see why,” He remarked. “I was only doing what he asked me to do.”

“For forty-five minutes?”

“Yes, Lawrence. For forty-five minutes,” Erich climbed out of the car and stalked towards the elevator, Klemm in tow. “Calculate in travel time between points A and B, and the math has it that I’ve only spent downwards of twenty minutes speaking with the obergruppenführer.”

Klemm stifled a groan. “Should you choose to employ Obergruppenführer Müller’s math skills, by all means, do it. But don’t invite me to your funeral.”
“Theatrics,” Erich spat. “What did you find out about Oberjunker Wolf?”

“Remarkably little,” Klemm admitted awkwardly. “The archives offered little to no assistance, and speaking with his unit mates only affirmed what we already knew to be true: Wolf was, for all intents and purposes, entirely run-of-the-mill. Not exceptionally patriotic, but not exceptionally radical. He came from a family of factory workers and farmers. Full Aryan, too. He was average to a fault, Raeder.”

“And the obergruppenführer is anything but,” Erich sighed, sounding almost wistful. Klemm lifted an eyebrow and cocked his head to the side.

“What do you mean? What did you find out?”

“Nothing revolutionary,” Erich dug around in his pocket for a stray cigarette after pitching an empty box into the trash. He thought about John’s aching suspicion, and then of Müller’s burning glare, and somehow, he didn’t feel inclined to disclose every aspect of the conversation. Some things, he mused, are better left undiscussed. “He had the suspicion that I was there to interrogate him.”

Klemm snorted. “He’s omniscient, that man.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it,” Erich shook his head. “But he assured me that he’s got nothing to hide, and surely, no secret worth dying for.”

“And you believe him?”

“Have I any reason not to?”

Klemm shrugged. “I don’t suppose so. But he was shot for a reason. That remains as truth, Raeder.”

“Could it have been envy?” Erich proposed, desperate to shift the blame away from John. The talk felt dangerous, though he couldn’t quite fathom why. “A young man—disheartened and painfully unremarkable—seeks greatness, as most men do, and so he shoots Obergruppenführer Smith and goes down in infamy for killing the highest ranking Nazi official west of Berlin.”

“But why now?” Klemm inclined against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest in a gesture of what he hoped looked like dominance. Raeder was smart, he’d give him that. Maybe even more than smart. But that didn’t detract from the fact that his theory, as good as it was, had holes. And then, something clicked; something that he’d read over with glossy, tired eyes and had very nearly forgotten. “Grief, perhaps?”

“Grief?” Erich paused, holding a half-smoked cigarette butt between two yellowed fingers. “Why?”

“His uncle died recently. Dr. Gerry Adler. The doctor’s wife is a loon; she’s been calling the office for a week insisting that he was murdered,” Klemm paused. “Preposterous, isn’t it?”

Erich’s eyes narrowed. “What do you think that has to do with Obergruppenführer Smith? I attended the funeral—my mother is a friend of Alice Adler’s—and Smith delivered the eulogy. You can’t possible think—”

“No,” Klemm paused before the door to Müller’s office. “Of course I don’t think that. But as of yet, I’m afraid I don’t know. Mrs. Adler demanded an autopsy, but they say the body was cremated nevertheless, against her consent.”
Erich crossed his arms. “An accident,” he declared, unwilling to consider the alternative. “A mix-up. A lack of communication. Lazy work, perhaps, but surely, not murder.”

“Let’s hope so,” Klemm muttered, and as he knocked hard against the door, Erich was sure it was unease that tightened Klemm’s hand into a fist.

The doors swung open to Müller, his ruddy, scarred face flushed with the smoke of a cigar. Yellowed, pin-prick eyes narrowed into slits at the sight of the officers, and after a tense moment’s silence, he growled out, “You’re late.”

The indignant pout to Müller’s lower lip tempted Erich to defend himself, but the three-star rank glaring from the side of his military blacks convinced him otherwise. Instead, he clenched his teeth and grit out, “My deepest apologize, Sir. The interrogation did not go as planned.”

Müller let out a snort, beckoned for the pair to enter, and turned his attention to Klemm.

“What’s your excuse?”

Klemm’s jaw went slack and he stammered out, “Sir, I was waiting to converse with Sturmbannführer Raeder before--”

Müller held up his hand and Klemm fell silent. Embarrassed, Klemm tucked his hands into the pockets of his trousers and shifted his weight from heel to heel. It was with a tinge of spite that Erich fought back the urge to snort; they were hardly feuding schoolboys, and yet he could hardly deny the amusement he felt at the sight of Lawrence Klemm made to feel as small as the gnats he caught between claps.

“Regardless,” Müller continued. “Don’t make it a habit, boys.”

There was something condescending about the way Müller addressed them, and though Erich knew damn well that superiority and subordination came alongside chain of command, he couldn’t help but feel a burn of dislike fester in his gut.

“Yes, sir.”

“I fear there was very little to report,” Klemm shuffled closer to Müller’s desk. “Although we have a theory--”

“Theories don’t build empires,” Müller drawled. “Theories lead men down paths that ultimately do little more than waste time.”

Klemm swallowed hard. Erich was beginning to feel for him.

“Yes, Obergruppenführer.”

Müller turned to face Erich.

“And you, Sturmbannführer?” He tapped his fingers absently against a closed file. Erich’s eyes dropped down to it, and he recognized it again as John Smith’s. “I hope you had more success than Major Klemm.”

“No, sir,” Erich answered, instinctive. He didn’t like Klemm, but damn, he liked him better than Müller! “I can only assure you that Obergruppenführer Smith has not committed treason of any sort.”
He told you that?"

Erich paused. "Yes, sir."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

Silence, thick as molasses, rang dully in Erich’s ears. Klemm looked over at him, expectant and knowing all at once. The blood froze in Erich’s veins, and for a minute, he swore he felt as cold as death itself.

It wasn’t a hard question, but the answer—the true answer—was much more difficult. Naturally, he knew he had to lie. But Müller had the kind of stare that could turn a man to ash and the gun sitting at his waist suddenly looked a lot more menacing than it had moments ago.

"Do you have a tongue?" Müller slammed his hand down against his desk. Erich and Klemm started, inching automatically closer towards one another. For a pause, they stood as allies against a common enemy, and then that enemy became their commanding officer and they straightened, shoulders squared, eyes ahead.

"My apologies, sir," Erich cleared his throat. "I haven’t any reason not to believe Obergruppenführer Smith. I know him as an honorable man.” He thought of the conspiracies John had mentioned, and he shuddered. “A brave man. I owe him my life twice over.”

Müller sat back, lips pursed into a tight line.

"Your mistake, Sturmbannführer, is indebting yourself to a man rather than to the idea that’s built our great nation,” He inclined back, face shadowed in the light of his desk lamp. "Men are mortal. Men can fall into decadence and depravity faster than the rain falls from the sky. But ideas?" He shook his head. “Ideas transcend the balance of the righteous and the wicked. Ideas, Sturmbannführer, are eternal. Is that clear?"

Gooseflesh crawled across Erich’s arms, beneath his uniform, and the air between himself and his commander seemed to thicken and chill.

"Yes, sir."

"Good,” Müller growled. I want you to worm closer to him, your dear Obergruppenführer Smith. Even honorable, brave men have secrets, Sturmbannführer. No man of virtue is without his vice.”

Erich didn’t know where the sudden insubordination came from, or why it decided to come when it did, but regardless of its origin, it was with unruly defiance that he asked, “What of you, sir? What of your vice?"

Wide-eyed, Klemm broke form to stare Erich down as if he half-expected lightening to shatter the window and strike him dead. Erich instantly wished he hadn’t said it; he didn’t regret it, per se, but some things were better kept as thoughts that die someplace between the brain and the mouth.

Müller leaned forward, hands folded neatly atop the file. His lips curled into a mirthless smile. Dangerous, Erich thought. There was nothing more dangerous than a man that smiled upon anger.

“...You forget with whom you’re speaking,” Müller rasped. “I urge you to take caution with your
words from this point onward. Else, there will be consequences that I fear you won’t enjoy.”

Caught between embarrassment and disbelief, Erich nodded stiffly.

“Yes, sir. My apologies.”

He didn’t mean it. Müller knew that, but command wasn’t about meaning. That was one of the first things Erich had learned as a soldier.

“Investigate him,” He stubbed out his cigar, turning to Klemm. “And you; keep looking into Oberjunker Wolf. We’re missing a piece of a very dangerous puzzle, boys.”

Erich’s eyes fell to the folder and curiosity steeped in his chest. John’s file was thicker than any files he’d seen before. Granted, John was a senior officer and the petty green-coats Erich would typically review hadn’t the years, experience, or clearance that John had managed to secure. But there was something telling about the way Müller held onto it as if the moment he let go, it would fly away into the wrong hands, or perhaps worse, the right ones.

Stiffly, Klemm saluted and turned on his heels, Erich in tow. The moment they reached the corridor and the doors slipped shut, Klemm turned to Erich in blatant disbelief.

“Are you fucking insane?”

Defensive, Erich’s eyes narrowed.

“How is it that you can’t see what’s going on, here?”

“Ah, yes,” mocked Klemm with whispered ferocity. “I forgot; you’ve been a ranking officer for all of three days and you’re already omniscient, all-seeing! How could I have neglected to realize that you, Erich Raeder, are the personification of Divine Providence!?”

Teeth grit, Erich tugged Klemm’s sleeve and pulled him out of the flow of foot traffic, and in doing so, out of sight from the camera positioned above Müller’s door.

“He’s sending us running in circles, Lawrence. You can’t possibly believe that Müller thinks there’s merit in chasing dead ends.”

“Müller thinks there’s merit in understanding why Smith was shot!”

Erich held his index finger up against his lips, nodding towards the hallway, suddenly roaming with officers. Once they’d passed, Erich whispered, “Smith suspects collusion.”

Deadpan, Klemm crossed his arms, lower lip jutting out into a contemplative pout.

“And you suspect that Müller’s--”

“I don’t know,” Erich interrupted. “But you said it yourself; you don’t care for him.”

Klemm let out a humorless laugh.

“That doesn’t mean I think he’s planning to assassinate anyone! Dear God, Raeder, you’ve been reading too much Conan-Doyle!”

Erich snorted. “If you’re content to chase your tail in circles while your commander—your friend—fears for his life, by all means, chase away. But he saved my life, Lawrence,” Erich faced away, worrying that if Klemm looked at him closely enough, he might see through everything. “He’s
asked me to look into it, and I will. I owe him that much, don’t I?"

A hand fell against Erich’s shoulder, and by the time he realized that it belonged to Klemm, his fingers were already halfway to his gun.

“If you’re wrong,” Klemm warned. “You’ll ruin your career.”

Erich shrugged him away. “There are more important things than a career, Lawrence.”

“Such as?”

Erich’s eyes flickered briefly to Klemm’s left hand—his dominant hand—to find that there was, in fact, a vacancy at the base of his third finger where one might expect to see a ring. Maybe he understood what it was to be lonely. Maybe he understood what it was to fear happiness, to fear love, the priceless thing that came at much too high a cost. Though he sincerely doubted it, Erich couldn’t help but notice the way Klemm seemed different than he’d been in the morning when he’d waited for his car in the lot. For as far as Erich didn’t trust him, he knew that John did, and of all the things that John Smith was known to be, wrong had never been one of them.

“Such as loyalty,” Erich murmured. “What Müller said—about being loyal to an idea—I don’t think he’s entirely correct. Ideas have the tendency to become a means to an end.”

Groaning, Klemm ran a tired hand over his face.

“Talking to you makes me feel like I need a drink.”

“Ideas don’t die for each other in war,” Erich continued. “Men do.”

“You know,” Klemm changed the subject, and Erich figured it was probably intentional. “Don’t you think it’s possible that he’s just…scared?”

“What?”

“Obergruppenführer Smith. Someone just tried to kill him for the second time in a month. You talk of loyalty and ideas and conspiracies, but personally, I think you think too much.” A flicker of amusement passed across Klemm’s face, but it fell as quickly as it had come. “It’s an uneasy thing, being shot.” Klemm laced his fingers over his stomach, wincing.

Erich hadn’t known him when he’d taken a bullet right to the gut. He was new—not yet even John’s aide, let alone an officer bearing a high enough rank to be in-the-know about certain things. But words had the tendency to sink through the ranks, eventually reaching every ear that would listen. He never did get the full story, and in truth, he didn’t need it. A bullet is a bullet no matter how it got there.

With a flinch, Erich tapped his chest. “Says the pot to the kettle.”

“And so you know,” Klemm began. “You know that it isn’t unlikely that the whole thing is the product of the obergruppenführer’s fear.”

“John Smith isn’t inclined to idle worry, Lawrence.”

“Isn’t ever man who faced death inclined to idle worry?” Klemm gestured to Erich’s ankle. “I know you carry spare weaponry. It’s evident in your stride.”

Erich’s eyes widened.
“My stride?” He repeated, incredulous, and then let out a breath suspended in shock. “Perceptive, aren’t we?”

“You know I’m right.”

“Nevertheless,” Erich turned his back to him. “If I’m wrong about Smith and Müller, you’re right: my career is over. But if I’m right and I do nothing and someone ends up dead, that’s a demon I’ll be forced to live with for the rest of my life, Lawrence.” He cleared his throat, which felt suddenly full. “A career is much easier to rebuild than a life is to restore.”

Klemm gave him a look that he couldn’t quite read, although he didn’t peg it as a look of distaste. Their situation was strange in many ways, he mused, from the faith Müller put in them, two rather low-ranking officers—one from the Shutstaffel and one from the Waffen-SS—to uncover the mystery behind the shooting of a three-star general, to the unlikely trust they formed over the mutual dislike of a scar-faced German. Nothing quite added up, and yet everything felt only slightly off-center, just enough to feel like a bad dream.

Major Klemm cleared his throat.

“So what do we do?”

A toothy smile caught Klemm by surprise. He’d never really seen Erich Raeder show much of any emotion. He was one of those soldiers; the kind with a stick shoved so far up their ass that you could practically see it when they spoke. But maybe he was wrong about him. His talk-back to Müller was as remarkable as it was wicked, and his nobility, his willingness to risk himself for someone else, was a trait Klemm feared had been lost to the chain of command. Though he’d sooner die than admit it, Raeder had rendered him impressed.

“We play Müller’s game and we keep this to ourselves,” Erich gestured to the cameras positioned just out of view. “I’m going to look into Müller and Smith. See if there’s any reason for the two to be at ends.”

Klemm’s eyes narrowed.

“How do you presume to do that?”

“Carefully.”

“Care to elaborate?”

Erich thought of the file Müller kept tucked away, and an idea struck him. He turned to Klemm, cheeks flushed, and said, “I’ll tell you if I succeed.”

“And if you don’t?”

“Don’t let them play Der Gute Kamerad at my funeral.”

“Theatrics,” Klemm mimicked, though his face had gone pale.

Erich chortled. “I wish.”

Klemm swallowed hard and shifted his weight from foot to foot, wondering how exactly he’d gotten himself stuck in the quick-sand that was Raeder’s madness. He’d come to fear lunacy, as it was the mark of a dead man walking, an invitation for a needle in the back of the hand or an oxygen mask that breathed a colorless, odorless demise. But in spite of it all, he didn’t fear Raeder.
In the right light, he made idiocy look like courage, and madness, like guts.

“I’ll call Mrs. Adler, I suppose,” He said. “It doesn’t seem like there’s much else to do at this point.”

Erich’s brows knit in confusion. “Why?”

“She’s Wolf’s aunt. Have you forgotten that already?” Klemm scoffed. “And no one’s paid her a visit yet on the assumption that she’s gone mad.”

Silently, Erich nodded.

“Try not to get yourself killed,” Klemm gave Erich’s shoulder a pat and turned away. “I’ll keep you updated.”

“Likewise,” Erich folded his arms. “Good luck, Lawrence.”

“And to you,” Klemm replied. “You’ll need it.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!