

UNWELL
THE POPLARS OF SOISSONS

Written by
Jessica Wright Buha

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jwbuha@gmail.com

INT. CAVE - NIGHT. SMALL PASSAGEWAY.

THE SOUND OF WATER DRIPPING. EMIL
TRIES TO CALM HIS GASPING BREATHS.

EMIL (in French) Don't light the match if you want to live.
Don't light the match if you want to live.

EMIL'S FRENCH WORDS ARE OVERLAID
WITH HIM SPEAKING IN ENGLISH. WE ARE
HEARING HIS WORDS MAGICALLY
TRANSLATED.

EMIL Don't light the match if you want to life. Don't light the
match if you want to live.

SOFT WOLF GROWL.

EMIL I want to live.

MATCH STRIKE. AN EXHALE OF RELIEF.

EMIL I see their eyes. Startled. For how long? Don't look.

THE LAMP HINGE IS SWUNG OPEN.

EMIL Just light the lamp, quickly...

THE MATCH HITS THE LAMP WICK. IT HISSES
AS IT LIGHTS.

EMIL Now run.

FOOTSTEPS SPLASH DOWN THE SHALLOW
UNDERGROUND CREEK AND ECHO OFF THE

TIGHT STONE PASSAGEWAY. THE WOLVES
HOWLING, FOLLOW.

EMIL It's merely a question of desire. They want to eat me. I
want to remain in one piece. Who will win?

FOOTSTEPS RACE FASTER, SPLASHING,
DOWN THE STREAM.

EMIL Can't outrun the beasts, you fool.
Oh, am I a fool, says I to myself, says I? If it's a fool
who wants to live, then I am a fool.

EMIL IS BREATHING HARD. GASPING FOR
BREATH. HE CAN'T RUN ANYMORE.

EMIL Shut up, fool, and live.

SOMEHOW, THE FOOTSTEPS MANAGE TO
SPEED UP.

SCENE TWO: THE CRYSTAL CAVERN. A
HUGE, ECHOING SPACE. EMIL TUMBLES
INTO THE CAVERN.

EMIL A cavern. Quick, a boulder, yes! Over the entrance...
ehhhg.

EMIL ROLLS A BOULDER OVER THE
PASSAGE ENTRANCE, BLOCKING IT. JUST IN
TIME--THE MUFFLED WOLVES HOWL AND
SCRATCH AT THE BLOCKED ENTRANCE.

EMIL Fie, you foul beasts! It's holding. Lucky thing.

THE WOLVES, HOWLING, RACE AWAY.
SILENCE. THE WATER DRIPS.

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL They've gone to find another way. Walk the perimeter now, block the entrances...

FOOTSTEPS ON THE GRITTY CAVE FLOOR.

EMIL Oh, they'll find my body and laugh. "Who goes into a cave alone?"
But who sees a cave and doesn't go in? Especially when in search of...[my love].
Of something precious.
Here's a crack. This rock should do, eeeeehgh.

EMIL PUSHES ANOTHER ROCK OVER A
CRACK IN THE WALL.

EMIL Am I sealing up my own tomb? There's a pastime, eh?
First, live. All else will follow.
Infernal beasts. They must be mere spirits--I'm far too deep underground for any living creature. But those claws were tearing apart the rock. And those teeth.
Well, so much the better. I hope all the spirits seem as real as those did.

FOOTSTEPS. WATER DRIPS.

EMIL Another entrance, seal it. Eeeh.

EMIL PUSHES ANOTHER BOULDER OVER
ANOTHER CRACK IN THE CAVE WALL.

FOOTSTEPS RACE.

EMIL Yellow crystals like a rose, yes, just like a rose, it's here--over the passageway that leads me out--

FOOTSTEPS RUN ON STONES. FOOTSTEPS SUDDENLY SPLASH IN WATER.

EMIL Ah! Wet again. Well, ah--

EMIL SHAKES WATER OFF HIS BOOTS.

EMIL My apologies, dear crystals. I was mistaken. Though you are beautiful, and shaped just like a rose, I'm afraid I seek a passageway, and not a pond. Now, where is...[the right place]

SILENCE. WATER DRIPS. THE POND RIPPLES.

EMIL Yellow crystals, just like a rose.

WATER DRIPS. THE POND RIPPLES.

EMIL It can't be.
Could it have rained? Oh, *Mon Dieu*.

EMIL SOFTLY ADDS A VERY ELABORATE, COMPLICATED CURSE IN FRENCH. THE POND RIPPLES.

EMIL Perhaps it will drain. Or was it always a pond, and it was dry just for a few hours? Yes, oh *mon dieu*, the path was slick--covered in wet green. You slipped twice, don't you remember?
Can't you remember to not be a fool.

Perhaps I could swim it--hah! The passage was half a kilometer, at least. Perhaps more.
 But there must be another way out. Ah, but the beasts.
 Well.
 Well.
 Nothing to be done, so!
 The choice is clear: perish from the beasts, or perish in this cavern. *Bonne*. Let us sit---

EMIL SITS ON THE GRITTY CAVE FLOOR.

EMIL --And choose a peaceful death next the lamp.

THE WATER DRIPS A GENTLE SONG.

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL Oh, this will be painful. Will I starve?

EMIL What a shame it ends this way. I was going to do great things. (to the CAVE) Hear me, Fate and Fortune! The lot you have given me is not what it should be!

BATS CHIRP OVERHEAD.

EMIL Oh, yes, pray, spare the bats, IT IS I WHO MUST DIE.
 It's a waste. All of it, everything: wasted.
 I'm writing a note. Pin it to my jacket, perhaps.

SNAP OF VALISE BEING OPENED. RUSTLE OF PAPER.

EMIL Ah, I don't have anything thicker?

EMIL RATTLES THE PAPER. IT'S SO THIN.

EMIL

Won't last long in the damp.

But what will.

(writing) To the person who finds me. Greetings. My name is Emil de Tornallier, and I am an inventor and a scientist, so please, PLEASE take my notebooks from my valise and send them to the Collège de Amiens, in France. Send them quickly. If they haven't rotted away. And also, perhaps, dear stranger, you could send me back to...

EMIL CROSSES OUT THE LAST FEW WORDS.

EMIL

Send my body back to the town of Villers-Cotterêts.

Please. I beg you.

You might ask yourself, why take the trouble? Well, to that I say, I would do the same for you. Yes, you, dear stranger. I would look at your body, lying in the dirt, and I would say, "I know what it's like to be alone." I would say, "your loved ones are weeping, and they don't know it yet." I would say, "I will bring them comfort." I would say, "Anything to lessen the pain," and I would pick you up. Perhaps your arms fall off, and I would pick those up as well, and I would say, "let us find the ones you love. May they take comfort seeing you at rest."

WATER DRIPPING

EMIL

(writing) Find me quick before my arms fall off, won't you, dear stranger?

EMIL SETS DOWN HIS PENCIL. HE SIGHS.

EMIL I am alive. That is enough for now. That is the world. But for how long.

THE WATER DRIPS A SONG.

WATER DRIPPING

EMIL I ate my last meal and I didn't enjoy it.
The very last. What was it? A stew at the inn? No, it was a pear. I ate it so quickly, I didn't taste it.
I'm making tea.
(writing) Excuse me, dear stranger, but I must make some tea.

EMIL SETS DOWN THE PAPER AND PENCIL.

EMIL Get all the candles, yes, let's set them here.

SNAP OF A VALISE BEING OPENED. EMIL RUMMAGES THROUGH HIS VALISE. CLICK OF CANDLES BEING SET ON THE GRITTY STONE FLOOR.

EMIL Fill the kettle with water. Yes.

GLUG AS WATER GOES INTO THE KETTLE.

EMIL Is it safe? It's rippling, not stagnant....

EMIL LAUGHS, SUDDENLY.

EMIL Am I afraid it will kill me?
I will never wish for death. That is not my way.
How to suspend it over the flames... let's see...

VALISE IS OPENED.

EMIL Ah, the rope--

EMIL SLIDES THE ROPE OUT OF THE VALISE.

EMIL --soaked in water--

ROPE IS DUNKED IN THE WATER.

EMIL --and tied to the pillars of my church.

ONE END OF THE ROPE IS TIED TO A
STALAGNATE.

EMIL Don't forget to string the kettle on, Emil.

ROPE SCRAPES THE HANDLE OF THE
KETTLE. A SLOSH AS THE KETTLE IS LIFTED
UP ON THE ROPE, AND A SWISH AS THE
ROPE IS TIED OFF ON ANOTHER
STALAGNATE.

EMIL There we are. Boil fast, sweet kettle.

THE CANDLES HISS. WATER DRIPS LIKE A
SOFT SONG.

EMIL I will be found. I will not be forgotten.
For if I am forgotten, then I. Am. Forgotten--my stories,
my feelings, my inventions, and I maintain that, had the
prototype worked, my Racer Thresher would have made
life easier, better, and safer for every man, woman and
child on Earth.
Beside the point. All that matters is my love.
He will be forgotten.

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL

How his face looked when he laughed. When he looked back and smiled, on the last day. His black curls falling over one eye. And then he tucked his hair back under his cap, with that sweeping motion he'd do. Like before he kissed me.

And then he was gone.

(in French) Impossible.

EMIL TAKES UP THE PAPER AND PENCIL
AGAIN.

EMIL

(writing) As dear as you are to me, dear stranger, I wish you were someone else. Pray, take no offense, but there is a man who cannot be forgotten, and I can't help but wish, dear stranger, that he is the one who finds me, who moves my hair out of my sightless eyes, who touches my cheek, who remembers what it was like when it was warm. Who thinks, "You were everything to me. What happens now?"

He was in my brigade in *la Grande Armée*. We met at camp--he was trying to fix a bent flintlock on his musket, and he had the whole thing taken apart--just a mess.

So I asked if he needed help, and he said yes. So I snapped it all in place, no problem. Took but a moment. But he was so grateful.

His name was André.

He'd cook for me at camp. He's take our rations, biscuits and salt pork, and chop and crumble and simmer and fry and then, like magic, there was a meal. We'd eat it with a tree stump as our table. He could make home out of nothing.

He were here, and then he was gone.

It was near the town of Soissons. The battle was normal on my side, They sent my regiment to guard the

north road—I heard the cannons in the distance, and I thought, "yes, fight well against those motherless Prussian fools. I will stand on this road and guard it from the crows."

André could always tell the difference between the French cannons and the Prussians ones. I never could. So, after pacing on an empty road until nightfall, we marched back to camp.

Mine was the first regiment back—not uncommon. I went back to my tent and started repairing a rip in my coat—delicate work, crouched over the candle. I was startled when I heard my tent flap open, but I smiled as I turned. I thought it was him.

But it was someone else. "Lost a lot of men for France," he said, and left.

You know dear stranger, why I am so far from home? I am searching for him. For André.

I have traveled here, yes, so the *Collège* thinks, to investigate the mineral deposits of America. But I heard there is a place, in America, five days journey past the mountains, where the ones you have lost are found.

They walk, they speak. They live.

Well, one had to try, I suppose.

EMIL SETS DOWN HIS PENCIL.

EMIL Now, what. Fold it...

EMIL FOLDS THE PAPER.

EMIL Make a tiny tear,

EMIL TEARS THE PAPER.

EMIL ...and poke it over a waistcoat button.

RUSTLE OF PAPER AS EMIL ATTACHES THE
PAPER TO A BUTTON.

EMIL There. That should hold.
Water's almost ready. Find that tea.

EMIL RUMMAGES THROUGH HIS VALISE.

EMIL Maybe, after my tea. I'll try again. Walk down the
stream, picking paths at random. Walk til I collapse or
get torn apart by the beasts.
Ah, here's the tea.

THE TIN OF TEA IS SET ON THE GROUND.

EMIL I will try. Anything to live. Anything for the chance to see
him again.
I will try like André tried. When the cannons started, and
the muskets started ringing out, and his regiment was
pushed back, he ran to the high ground, that grove of
poplar trees on the hill. Poplars and their damned thin
trunks. Not enough to protect him. But he tried. He tried
to live, to see me again.
And to those who say they saw him go into the river, to
try to stop the Prussians singlehandedly? No.
Impossible.
That soldier who went into the river was a fool--a poor,
hopeless fool who forgot how sweet life was. André
would never...[die for nothing]
He wasn't a fool. He loved me.

WATER DRIPS FROM THE STALACTITES IN A
SOFT SONG.

WATER DRIPPING

THE WATER SOFTLY BOILS. THE KETTLE LID
RATTLES. A TINY HISS OF STEAM.

EMIL Boiling at last. And now, the tea.

THE TEA TIN IS OPENED

EMIL How many teaspoons are we doing? Two? Do two!
The last two.

SCRAPE OF SPOON IN THE TEA TIN. SOFT
SPRINKLE OF TEA INTO THE POT.

EMIL His mother thinks he's still alive. I remember her at his
funeral, banging her fist on the empty coffin. "I need
proof" she said. "Where is the proof?"
I don't need proof.

THE LID OF THE KETTLE IS PUT BACK ON.

EMIL If he were alive, he would have found me.
So he died. And I know--I know, with all my heart--he
did not go in the river. He died in the poplars.

THE KETTLE STEAM SUDDENLY SOUNDS A
HARSH NOTE.

EMIL Did you not like that, sweet kettle? It's true. He died in
the poplars.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL It's true!

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL It says "no." What do you know about the poplars in Soissons? You're just a kettle, my friend.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Now it says it's not a kettle. Oh André, if only you-- [could see this].

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Yes?

KETTLE STEAM

WATER DRIPS. THE CANDLES HISS UNDER
THE POT.

EMIL André?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL André!

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Have I found you?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Yes?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Make a note. (writing) Yes is middle C. Yes, I knew I'd find you. You wanted to be found.

KETTLE STEAM

Yes!

EMIL

I saw the cave, and I thought, maybe, going below would be best. There's sense in that, surely--more likely below than above.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL

Some might say, Emil, he is in France! He died in the poplars.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL

You died in the poplars. A farmer buried you. Perhaps.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL

No?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL

No. (writing) No is D. Shame. The grove of poplars was a beautiful place. I had hoped it was there.
So! If not in the poplars, then you died in the field.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL

Not the field. Was it on the road?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL

Mon dieu, this is difficult.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL What does that mean? Not in the trees, not in the field,
not on the road.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL But that's impossible

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL The river.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL But that's not true.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL You you didn't die in the river. They said you did, but
they were mistaken.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL They were wrong! You'd never have been so foolish.

THE KETTLE STEAM ATTEMPTS TO EXPLAIN
ITSELF, AND GETS CARRIED AWAY. A VERY
LONG, VERY COMPLICATED SONG.

EMIL André, that was madness. You were completely
exposed to the Prussian muskets. No cover.

THE KETTLE STEAM CONTINUES TO TRY
AND EXPLAIN ITSELF.

EMIL *Mon dieu.* Of course you were killed, André. How dare
you go into the river.

THE KETTLE STEAM ANXIOUSLY SPUTTERS,
AND TRIES TO EXPLAIN ITSELF.

EMIL No, no--if you're trying to explain, then stop. There was not a blade of grass to protect you--you were completely exposed.

THE KETTLE STEAM KEEPS TRYING TO
EXPLAIN ITSELF IN A VERY COMPLICATED
SONG.

EMIL You know Benoît survived--remember Benoît? Benoît! And he is an idiot with nothing. He had nothing to come back to. No one laughed with he came home. No one clutched him and sobbed. Oh, why did you go in the river.

KETTLE STEAM, SPUTTERING FEEBLY, IS
RUNNING OUT OF EXCUSES.

EMIL André, you could have lived!

KETTLE STEAM BECOMES EXASPERATED. "I
HAD TO! FOR FRANCE!"

EMIL I suppose you are giving me excuses. Know they are nonsense.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Yes, I said nonsense!

KETTLE STEAM

THE KETTLE STEAM SINGS A FEW BARS OF
LA MARSEILLAISE

EMIL Oh, you sing *La Marseillaise*? So you went into the river for France? Is that it?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL SPITS.

EMIL That's what I say.

SHOCKED SILENCE. PERHAPS THERE'S
SOME AGITATED RATTLING OF THE KETTLE
LID?

EMIL What is France but a bit of dirt.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL It is nothing.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL I say again, it's nothing.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL It is nothing. You are everything.
Tell me you think the same about me. Tell me this is true.
Tell me you did everything to live.

THE KETTLE STEAM HAS MORE ELABORATE
MUSICAL EXCUSES.

EMIL I don't know what you're saying.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL I loved you, André.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Yes? Is that what those notes mean? Love?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL No. I loved you. I'm the one desperate to find you, to see you, to hold you, and they said go to America, he's there, search for him there, and now I will die in a cave. With my... ooof.

EMIL LAYS DOWN.

EMIL Back lying on the wet stones. Alone. Looking up at the rocks. How far away is the sun?

THE KETTLE STEAM STARTS TO ANSWER.

EMIL Don't answer that, André.

THE KETTLE STEAM IS SILENT.

EMIL I thought I'd die seeing the sky.
At least I, unlike you, André, had the courtesy to ensure my loved ones had a body to weep over. The letter to the dear stranger who finds me is right here, they will not miss it--
Oh, *mon dieu*, it's in French. What are the odds that they can read it?

EMIL CAN'T DECIDE WHETHER TO LAUGH OR CRY. HE DOES A LITTLE OF BOTH.

EMIL Oh, it's humorous.
 Oh, I thought I would do great things.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Hush, André. I have laid down to die. Don't disturb me.

KETTLE STEAM

THE KETTLE STEAM SINGS A JAUNTY
RHYTHM.

EMIL You want me to dance?

KETTLE STEAM

THE KETTLE STEAM SINGS A JAUNTY
RHYTHM.

EMIL Ah, you are a pest. All right, I will stand.

EMIL STANDS.

KETTLE STEAM

THE KETTLE STEAM SINGS A JAUNTY
RHYTHM.

EMIL You want me to... walk?

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL WALKS.

EMIL All right, I will walk towards this stone wall.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL And smash my head in--oh. There's a crack.

KETTLE STEAM

THE KETTLE STEAM SINGS A JAUNTY
RHYTHM.

EMIL You want me to go in. André, I cannot fit through here.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Oh, *mon dieu*.

THE KETTLE STEAM SINGS A JAUNTY
RHYTHM.

EMIL Ehhhgh!

EMIL SQUEEZES THROUGH THE CRACK.

EMIL Where does it lead--ah.

THE STONE ROOM HE'S IN IS VERY SMALL. A
POND SHIMMERS AGAINST A WALL.

EMIL A tiny flooded room. I understand. There's no way out.
It's final.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL André, if I try to swim my way out, I will drown. It's much
too far.

KETTLE STEAM

EMIL Yes, I know, you want me to try. I'm not as strong as you think I am. Or as brave, or as... anything I would not have died for France.

THE HISSING SONG OF STEAM FADES.
SILENCE. NOTHING BUT DRIPPING DROPS
AND THE GENTLY RIPPLING WATER OF THE
UNDERGROUND POND.

EMIL Water's all burned off. *Mon dieu.*

THE WATER GENTLY DRIPS. THE SOUND OF
THE DRIPPING WATER SLOWLY BECOMES
THE JAUNTY, ENCOURAGING SONG OF THE
KETTLE. THE SONG SURROUNDS EMIL.

EMIL (singing the melody of the water) Do-do. Do-do.
Maybe I should try.
I should.

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL Just try, Emil.

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL Go in, quickly! All at once, or you won't.

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL WADES IN.

EMIL Oh, it's cold. Ah. My notes! Ruined. Too late. But life!
But what of my life?

THE WATER RUSTLES AROUND HIM--
SOMEHOW THE TONES OF THE RUSTLING
WATER ECHOES THE ENCOURAGING SONG
OF THE STEAM.

EMIL Ah. Ah, *mon dieu*, I don't want to die.
Then swim, you fool!

DRIPPING WATER

EMIL Ahhh...!

EMIL DUCKS UNDER. WATER EVERYWHERE.
RUSH OF WATER. BUBBLES TRILL AROUND
HIS EARS.

EMIL EMERGES FROM THE WATER. WATER
RIPPLES AROUND HIM. A DISTANT BIRD
SONG.

EMIL Light. I see light.

HE SPLASHES OUT OF THE POOL PROPER
AND INTO A SMALL TRICKLING STREAM.

EMIL There.

EMIL SCRAMBLES DOWN THE PATH OF THE
STREAM TOWARDS THE MOUTH OF THE
CAVE.

EMIL There. Go, go, don't slip, you fool, don't drown now, the
sun--

HE RUNS. THE WORLD FLOODS IN
THROUGH THE MOUTH OF THE CAVE.

BIRDS. IT'S MID-MORNING IN JUNE. EMIL'S
SPLASHING FOOTSTEPS CHANGE TO SOFT
GRASS. THE STREAM FALLS INTO A
TRICKLING WATERFALL AT THE MOUTH OF
THE CAVE.

EMIL André, the sun. The birds are singing. Oh, André.
You can't be gone, André, you have to see this beautiful
place.
I don't deserve it without you. I don't deserve this place,
this beautiful place. The sun. The trees are so green. I
feel warm again, André.
Oh, André. How are you gone.

THE WATERFALL TRICKLES SOFTLY

BIRDS

EMIL I can't. I can't go.
There can't be beauty without you. André, there can't.

BIRDS

EMIL No.

BIRDS

EMIL No.

BIRDS

EMIL Love.
I loved you, and I never said it.

BIRDS

EMIL And now you want me to try. The lover who never said
 he loved you.

WATERFALL

EMIL But that was you. Always telling me, "Emil, don't
 dawdle! Emil, there's more to see! Emil, come on!

WATERFALL

EMIL Walk with me.

WATERFALL

EMIL Yes.

THE WATER SINGS . THE BIRDS SING THE
WIND, WHISTLING RUSTLES THE SUMMER
LEAVES, AND THE LEAVES SING

END.