

Clair De Lune

Prelude

The piano's melody lingered in the small cottage like a ghost. Haunting, fragile, and fleeting. Isabelle sat at the bench, her fingers gliding over the keys, playing the sisters' shared lullaby. She didn't miss the discordant note; her hands trembled too much to perfect the piece. Her music was no longer for her. It was for Elise, her dear older sister, whose heartache she felt like a shadow pressing against her ribs.

Elise stood at the window, gazing at the blackened forest beyond their garden. She ran her thumb over her chipped wedding ring, her gaze fixed on the horizon. The low rumble of artillery came closer with every dawn.

"The trees are singing," Isabelle murmured

Elise turned. "What nonsense is that?"

"They hum when the wind rushes through them," Isabelle said. Her voice faltered as if testing the idea aloud. "Even when the world burns, they sing." Elise smiled faintly, her expression not quite reaching her eyes. "You were always my little dreamer."

Dreaming had been Isabelle's refuge. Now it felt like an insult in a world stripped of color; fiction in a nonfiction world. Still, she couldn't help believing that hope mattered, even in her Nazi-occupied France.

The sisters had once shared everything: joy, music, and a future. But war had carved them apart, almost as cold as winter split the branches of their woods. Elise's marriage to Jean-Paul, a resistance fighter, had hardened her into steel. Isabelle, too fearful to fight, played piano at German soirees in exchange for rations.

"I must go, *ma chère sœur*," Elise murmured.

“Leave?” Isabelle’s fingers froze on the keys. “Why? Where?”

“The *Maquis* needs me,” Elise responded, her words sour. “The network is thinning, more camps...” She faltered, unspoken horrors of camps suffocating her voice.

“No,” Isabelle whispered. “Please, Elise. Stay.”

But Elise’s mind was already made.

Adagio

The bitter night when Elise slipped away, Isabelle didn’t follow; she couldn’t.

Instead, she spent the next morning in a German home, playing a mournful melody on the piano. The Germans loved it, Franz in particular. He was a soldier with soft hazel eyes who lingered after every soiree to compliment her playing.

She secretly enjoyed his presence, the way he gently folded himself into her fragile world, apologetic yet complicit. He’d often ask questions about her music, her family, even her childhood scar. A sonata in a world gone deaf.

One evening, Franz lingered as guests filed out. He discreetly handed her a folded napkin stuffed with cheese and rationed bread. Isabelle looked at him inquisitively.

“For your sister,” he murmured, shifting his gaze away.

Isabelle flinched, her stomach knotting. “You don’t know what you’re speaking of, *monsieur*,” she replied hastily, stuffing the napkin in the hidden pocket of her tunic.

“Maybe I don’t.” His voice low, every crease in his face filled with exhaustion, cutting the conversation short as an officer waved him over.

She stared at his back, mouth agape, as he walked away with her secret.

Molto Agitato

Months passed, and secret meetings between the two sisters in the forest became infrequent. They spoke in hushed tones, huddling together with a single match lit between them.

“I’ve met a kind German officer, Elise,” whispered Isabelle, an undertone of excitement in her voice.

Elise’s eyes widened, recognizing the faint blush in her sister’s cheeks. “You’re a fool!” She snapped. “You think he’s different? Isabelle, you cannot fall in love with someone’s petals and not their roots; you won’t know what to do when autumn comes around.”

Isabelle hesitated.

“The only thing that matters now is survival. Not love, Isabelle. Survival.”

Muted Requiem

Winter arrived, and with it, hunger. Isabelle began wearing her sister’s old clothes beneath her own as firewood became scarce.

Her days blurred together.

No breakfast.

Line up for rations.

Go home.

Entertain Germans.

Sleep.

It was all Isabelle could do. She hadn't seen her sister in months, her heart growing fragile day by day. Franz no longer lingered after soirees. The piano became her only constant, a metronome in a collapsing world. But even it began to demand more than she could give. The officers now watched her with predatory silence. Requests escalated. A low-cut dress. A smile, eye contact. Their gazes were like wrong notes she couldn't correct, no matter how much she practiced.

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Sforzando

There was a pounding at her door. Isabelle rose from the piano, Winter had not been kind to her. Rations were thinning, and so was she. She couldn't help but smile. *Elise is home.*

As she opened the door, she was met with a hulking, brawny man, clad in his uniform, rifle slung over his shoulder. Isabelle nearly fell to the floor as he grabbed her, forcing her to her feet.

“Falling for me already, *ma petite fille*?” He sneered in broken French.

She kept her head down, “I’m sorry, *monsieur*; how may I help you?”

He pushed past her, smirking, “Yes, yes, this will do.” He muttered before turning back to Isabelle, flashing her a golden tooth, “I will board this home, *mademoiselle.*”

Isabelle could no longer keep herself on her feet.

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Agitato

Three months.

Three months had passed since the brutish general, Alwin, had begun boarding in Isabelle's home. Every night, Isabelle lit a precious candle, praying for Elise to stay away, to protect her sister from the man.

One evening, Alwin returned, drunk, with two thick cuts of filet mignon wrapped in newspaper.

“Cook,” he slurred. Isabelle gasped as she unwrapped the paper. He took a long swig from his flask. “You’ll eat with me tonight, *ma biche*.” Isabelle winced at his broken French, the pet names getting worse by the day. “I cannot eat such a delicacy” she immediately closed her mouth as his eyes began to narrow.

“*Merci*,” she whispered, preparing the meat.

She continued to cook. A shiver ran down her spine as she noticed him staring at every curve, even under the countless layers she was wearing.

Isabelle carefully set Alwin’s plate in front of him and perched at the edge of her seat at the end of the table, her mouth watering at the sight of meat in front of her. The dinner went on quietly, with occasional cutlery scraping a plate or water being poured.

The silence broke. “You have a sister, yes?” Alwin asked.

Isabelle’s fork paused.

“Yes, *monsieur*,” she said.

“Where is she?” he questioned, taking a long swig from his flask.

“She ran...to Switzerland, I believe. I haven’t heard from her in months.” Isabelle responded, half lying.

Alwin’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “Switzerland?” he grumbled before shrugging.

The continued silence at dinner felt like a wrong note held too long.

As dinner finished, Alwin retired to his room and Isabelle to hers. Hours passed as her thoughts engulfed her. *Did he know? What if he tracks her down? What if-*

Her thoughts were interrupted as Alwin burst into her room, clearly intoxicated. Isabelle shot up from bed, “*Monsieur*, are you well?–” She was unable to finish her question before Alwin forced their lips together; sour liquor lingered on his lips.

Isabelle stayed still, wincing as he forced himself in.

Into her country.

Into her home.

Into her body.

Her body became an instrument out of tune, strings snapped, soundless in protest. He left her broken, mute, and bleeding on the staff lines of a life that was no longer hers.

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Diminuendo

Winter passed by with a torturous, slow speed.

And with it came spring.

Isabelle waited since sunrise for her rations, only to be handed a single roll of stiff bread.

As she stumbled home, a shadowed figure caught her eye.

She fumbled with her keys before finally opening her front door.

“Isabelle,” a croak came from the kitchen.

Her eyes widened with horror.

“Isabelle,” the figure came into view, “It’s me, Elise, it’s your sister.” Her voice was hardly above a choked whisper.

“What are you doing here?” Isabelle hissed, her eyes darting at the window.

“The resistance-” Her eyes widened as Isabelle dragged her to the shed and began yanking at a small trap door. “You must stay here, Elise,” she whispered, “Until you have a place to go.” Her voice was firm.

Elise, surprised by her sister’s hardened demeanor, “Stay here?” Isabelle looked at her with now hardened eyes. Elise’s eyes filled with grief and understanding for her sister. “Stay safe, *ma chere*,” she whispered.

Three days passed. Isabelle’s fingers trembled each time she turned the key to the shed.

Crescendo

It happened too quickly.

The notes from Isabelle’s last piano piece still echoed in her mind as the boots approached, discordant, like a shattered chord. Alwin shouting, Isabelle shoving Elise into the closet before rushing back to her piano. The front door crashed open with a sound like a cymbal smashing against the rhythm of their lives.

“Isabelle,” Alwin barked, gun drawn. “You’re harboring a traitor.”

Isabelle’s heart was pounding like a drum. “No, sir, I-”

“You knew,” he sneered at Isabelle. “Switzerland? You little lying whore.”

Franz stepped out from behind Alwin; Isabelle’s eyes widened. “You...” she faltered.

Franz lowered his gaze, regretful. “Isabelle, this cause is too great.”

Isabelle noticed the dip in his voice, “Franz, you’re lying—”

She squeezed her eyes shut, *his petals*.

A pause. Then Alwin struck her across the cheek with the butt of his rifle. Notes rang in her head.

Elise was dragged out of the closet, bruised and breathless. As the sisters were thrown into the truck, the piano was left behind, still, the music inside it silenced.

“I’m sorry, Isabelle,” Franz whispered, throwing the truck one last glance.

Elise reached for Isabelle, and their fingers found each other; they held on.

As if refusing to let the music die out.

Rallentando

The camp was a world without sound. No birdsong, no lullabies. Just the rhythm of boots and hunger. Isabelle worked in laundry, her hands raw, her stomach round with a child no one dared mention. At night, she hummed a lullaby to herself, the tune she’d made for Elise. Sometimes, other women would lean in, eyes closed, letting the melody warm them for a moment.

She thought of Elise, remembering how her dear sister was torn away from her, shoved away to another camp. Isabelle could only pray for her safety.

When liberation came, it was chaos.

Gunfire, shouting, crying.

Isabelle collapsed on the cold floor, her body heavy and worn from the life forming. Her screams echoed beneath stained glass windows like a crescendo of a requiem she never meant to compose.

When she awoke in a cot, blood soaked between her legs, her eyes hazy. A shadow, now, pressed against her aching ribs.

She reached for something, for someone beside her.

But there was no hand to hold.

Only a crumpled piece of music remained in her hand.

Only a soft memory of music played in her mind.

As she took her last, fleeting breath.

Clair de Lune

Months after the war ended, Elise wandered through the remnants of the world, bones of homes, fields where music had once bloomed. In her pocket, a crumpled piece of sheet music, the last lullaby.

Elise had found Isabelle's name on the list in Paris.

A survivor.

Marked with an asterisk.

Child lost in labor.

The grief hollowed her.

She stood outside a bombed-out church one afternoon, trying to decipher the sheet music. Inside, a girl sang, her voice echoing through the broken stone. Elise stepped in, frozen. The melody was unmistakable.

It was their lullaby.

The girl was no older than five. An older woman, a Red Cross worker, noticed Elise's paled face.

"Her name is Clair." The woman gazed at the child. "We don't know where she learned it."

"My little dreamer," Elise whispered. *Could it be?*

And in that ruined church, amid the echoes of war and dust, two voices wove a harmony once broken.

The trees, too, sang on.

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Finale - End

